



The Problem of Evil in the Yoruba Cultural Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

The problem of evil is a very topical issue in philosophical discourse. Besides the problem of the existence of God, it stands out as the most challenging and important problem in the philosophy of religion. The most philosophical interpretation to this problem has been given by various philosophers. Starting from Socrates who conceived evil as a deviation from the good, In support of this, Plato; a disciple of Socrates also follows the same line of argument that evil is a deviation from the good due to human defect in cognition or intention that leads to mistaking appearance for reality. However, the Yoruba - speaking people of the Western region of Nigeria in West Africa which comprises of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti and Ondo are not left out from this problem. This community is a veritable platform where all kinds of evil forces disrupt the life of the individuals. There are ever aware of this problem. Instead of running away from it, they simply live with it, seeking whatever solutions are possible and accepting with little or no complaints whatever can not be overcome as their lot in life. In addition, it is also believed that Olodumare (that is the Supreme Being) who is the creator, cause and origin of all things is not directly responsible to this problem but rather the lesser gods which include "Esu", "Sango", "Sopona" etc.

Keywords: Evil, Yoruba, Culture, Paradigm, Forces, Africa and Nigeria.

ISTEAMS Cross-Border Conference Proceedings Paper Citation Format

Osaro, O.P. & Onaderu, E.T. (2017): The Problem of Evil In the Yoruba Cultural Paradigm.

Proceedings of the 9th iSTEAMS Multidisciplinary Conference, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra Ghana. Pp 149-154

1. BACKGROUND: AN INTRODUCTION

The problem of evil is a very topical issue in philosophical discourse. An offshoot of the problem of the existence of God, the problem of evil stands out as the most challenging and important problem in the philosophy of religion. The most philosophical interpretation on the problem of evil has been given by various philosophers. Starting from Socrates who conceived evil as the deviation from the good. Plato; a disciple of Socrates also follows the Socratic's view on the problem of evil when he states that evil is a deviation from the good due to human defect in cognition or intention that leads to mistaking appearance for reality. Moreso, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas further buttresses this point that evil is a privation of good (or opposite of good). They are of the opinion that evil is the absence of good. Just Plato would say, there is nothing without its contrary or opposite. He talks of life and death, light and darkness, day and night and so on. The Christian theologies - Augustine and Aquinas seems to see evil as a cross we have to carry during our Sojourn on earth as a result of our imperfection.

However, the Yoruba- speaking people of the Western Region of Nigeria (comprises of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti and Ondo) are not left out from this problem. They perceive evil as suffering. To endure suffering is to be a real man or real woman. This goes to show that evil is a practical phenomenon not a theoretical or philosophical ideology. It is manifested in the daily life of the Yoruba people. In addition to this, it is believed that Olodumare (that is the Supreme Being) who is the creator, cause and origin of all things is the custodian of good and evil in the society which helps to maintain high moral standards. It is also believed that God is not directly responsible for evil, rather the lesser gods and deities such as "Esu", "Sopona" and "Sango" and also the "Aje" (that is the negative people) are responsible for good and evil in the *community*. If you go against the wishes of these gods, you *will* be adequately punished and if you obey them, you will be blessed. Thus, the Yoruba on the problem of evil have actually given a practical and cultural foundations to this problem.



This work will be a philosophical analysis of the problem of evil in Yoruba-world view in comparison to the Western perception. In this case, I would like to take a critical examination of this problem trying to find answer as regard why the Yoruba people perceive evil as a practical phenomenon rather than a theoretical or philosophical concept.

2. THE YORUBA NOTIONS OF EVIL

2.1 The Concept of Evil in Yoruba

The word Evil in Yoruba community have been conceived in various ways and in various manners by the people. Some say, it is 'ibi'-evil, 'buburu' -wickedness, 'aidara'-bad, 'aito'-unrighteousness. According to Inagbor V (2006:12), *the 'ibi' corresponds most closely with the-English word evil.*

While some perceive evil as suffering. To endure suffering is to be a real man or a real woman. It is generally believed that evil is associated with all manners of destruction which exist in the community. Such as physical destructions like the destruction of houses, properties, or personal by lightening or thunder, moral destruction like some certain actions that are morally disapproved like in a situation whereby a person has a sexual affairs with another man's wife and death, disease, loss, paralysis, big trouble curse, imprisonment and affliction which inflict pains on the people.

And as a result of these various perception evil, the Yoruba people always traces it down to the god which includes 'Esu', 'Sopona' etc and not Olodumare - the supernatural God.

It is however believed that all kinds of misfortunes that befall a man can be traced to 'Esu'. To buttress this point, Bolaji Idowu (1962) states that *"there is unmistakable element of evil in 'Esu' and for that reason he has been predominantly associated with things evil".*

It is also seen that every evil tendency and practice in man can be traced to his agency. According to Oyelade E.O. (1997:158), *'when a person commits any deed which results in unpleasantness or harm to himself or his neighbour, the Yoruba immediately say, Èsù L'oti i –"it is 'Esu' that stirred him".*

Based on the above analysis of the conceptions of evil in Yoruba land, you will quite agree with us that evil is not an abstract concept but rather a practical phenomenon which exist in the daily life of the people. They have to live with it for many more years.

3. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AMONG THE YORUBA

The problem of evil so often discussed in western philosophies and Christians theology does not arise in Yoruba concept of Olodumare - the supreme being. For it is when the Supreme Being who is not only all powerful and omniscient but also perfect and all living is postulated that the problem of the existence of evil becomes an intellectual and philosophical hurdle. To the Yoruba people of the western part of Nigeria, the problem of evil is a problem that has been traced to the lesser gods such as 'Esu', 'Sopona', 'Sango' etc, who actually make all kind of destructions in the heart of the people.

According to Bolaji Idowu (1962), he states that the Yoruba believe that *"there is an unmistakable element of evil in 'Esu' and for that reason he has been predominantly associated with things evil. Because of his wickedness he was feared by both humans and divinities".* According to Abanuka B. (1994:104), *"the Yoruba attributed every evil tendency in man to his agency".* For instance, when a man slapped his wife, it is the work of 'Esu', when a man get drunk and break his leg, it is 'Esu' and when a man committed adultery with his brother's wife-surely it is 'Esu'! So all wicked thoughts are given or ascribed to 'Esu'. Even at this, 'Esu' can be pacified when you obey his wishes. Another manifestation of evil in the society is seen in the epidemic caused by 'Sopona', the god of smallpox. To illustrate how dreadful this disease is regarded, the Late Obafemi Awolowo reported the outbreak of an epidemic of small pox in 1920, in his home town, Ikenne. The priests and their devotees had to observe a twenty-one-days purification ceremony to appease 'Sopona'.



However, Wande Abimbola also testified to the problem of evil in Yoruba community when he asserted that the 'Aje'- the witches in other cultures plays an important part in the Yoruba cosmos. They suck human blood, eat human flesh and afflict human being with diseases like impotence, stomach disorders, blood and liver diseases. There are therefore allies to the 'Ajogun' who is also responsible to death, disease, loss, paralysis, big trouble, curse, imprisonment and affliction in the society. More so, it may also interest you to note that Olodumare who is that creator, cause and origin of all things cannot do evil or cause evil. It is part of the attributes of the Supreme Being (in Yoruba words - Olodumare) to be able to utilize all things.

The implications of these attributes of Olodumare is that he is the most powerful Being, the creator, the Wise and importance Judge who exercises inexorable control over all things in the universe.

According to Oyelade E. O. (1997:161), *"the problem of evil fails to arise within the context of Yoruba belief in Olodumare because a being with all the attributes stated above is conceivable as capable of both good and bad. He uses both for the ultimate good governance of the universe. In fact, to say that God does not or cannot do evil is to unnecessarily circumscribe His power"*.

As far as it is rationally possible, it should be stated emphatically that the problem of evil did not, does not and need not arise within Yoruba traditional religion. It is when we look at it from the philosophical circle that this problem makes meaning.

Consequently, an attempt at finding a philosophically acceptable solution to this problem are many and varied. They range from a denial of the existence of God to the denial of the reality of evil. There are other that have attempted to rationalize or explain way this problem by blaming it on man's exercise of his freewill. Viewed from an African perspective, however, the problem of why the innocent suffer, or why there is evil in a world that is supposedly created by an omnipotent and benevolent being is easily understandable.

Based on the discussion on the problem of evil in Yoruba community, it is quite clear that the Yoruba do not see this problem as being emanated from the Supreme Being or Olodumare who is being considered as the creator, cause or origin of all things but rather it is seen as a problem cause by the lesser gods.

4. THE TYPES OF EVIL AMONG THE YORUBA

The Yoruba divines have however tried to classify evil into four types, there are as follows: (A) Physical evil, (B) Moral evil (C) Inflicted evil (D) Predestined evil. I would like to explain two from the above.

(A) Physical Evil

This is the most disturbing manifestation of evil In the Yoruba community. They include the destruction of houses, property of persons by lightening or thunder.

According to Oyelade E.O. (1997:166), *"the Yoruba regard this as the function of 'Sango' historically, a powerful Oyo king who became a divinity after his death. Who now resides in heaven and became in the apt words of Leo fronbenius, "the Hurler of thunderbolt, the Lord of the storms, the God who burns compounds and cities the Render of trees and slayer of men, "cruel and savage"*.

Another manifestation of evil (that is physical or natural evil) is seen in the epidemic caused by 'Sopona', the god of smallpox. To illustrate how dreadful this disease is regarded, by the late Obafemi Awolowo reported the outbreak of an epidemic of smallpox in 1920 in his home town, Ikenne. The priests their devotees had to observe a twenty-one-days purification ceremony to appease Sopona. To further buttress this point, Chief Oluouyide Ogunyemi-Falua claimed that one of the most devastating supernatural powers causing physical disasters is the god of the wind. He controls his messenger, whirlwind and sends him to destroy all the obstacles that stand in his way as he journeys through forests and cities. The main task assigned to him by Olodumare is to transfer plant seeds from place to place, preserving the forestation of the earth. But the god of the wind is also a wise and powerful magician who often took people away and having enslaved them, taught them magical powers. According to Oyelade E.O. (1997:167), *"A powerful Yoruba magician claimed that he spent seven years with the god of the wind (between heaven and earth)"*.



(B) Moral Evil

According to the Yoruba, certain actions are morally approved and others are disapproved, those that are forbidden are taboo. The expression "it is a taboo, it is not done" expresses the belief that if such a taboo is not observed, terrible consequences should be expected. The taboo is in consonance with the expressed injunctions of the deity or the divinities. Usually, these injunctions are made known through divination and the voice of the Oracle. Therefore, the consequence of disobedience is believed to arrive some day when the avenger or other powers begin to act.

According to Oyelade E.O. (1997:161), it is a common saying:

The Avenger will avenge, he cannot but avenge. He who queries will query, he cannot but query. This oracle to Orunmila made him give strict warnings to his male and female children.

The Yoruba believes the Orunmila is the secret agent who discovers all the hidden behaviours of the people and judges justly or accordingly. He is referred to as the retributor who knows and judges the secrets of one's heart. It is expected that a family source of power given by the family divinity is secret and is not to be disclosed to an outsider. Any member of the extended family who is guilty of revealing the secret may be severely punished and ostracized. If two friends enter into an oath of agreement or a covenant, it is tabu to break the covenant. The defaulter is referred to as one who turns the earth upside down. If a person has sexual affairs with another man's wife, he is said to have eaten the tabu. All these unhealthy behaviours are disapproved of not only by the community but they also stir up the anger of the divinities even Olodumare himself.

5. METHODS OF DEALING WITH EVIL IN YORUBA COMMUNITY

Evil as a reality in Yoruba society is seen as a practical phenomenon which is perceived as part and parcel of the people. And as a result of this, the people as well search for preventive methods. These preventive methods are based on the following: (A) Sermonization (B) The Medicineman (C) Sacrifice (D) The King. Three of these would now be explained as follows:

(A) Sermonization Method

This is a kind of preventive method whereby the Ifa poems preached the after effect of evil in the world. According to Oyelade E.O. (1997:164), a popular Ifa lyric is as follows:

Perpetuate no evil in this world for heaven's sake (repeated twice). For when you get to the gate of heaven, you will give account (of your stewardship).

This method is popular during the various religions festivals. The drummers and the musicians emphasize the concept of retribution here on earth and yonder in heaven. The diviners are also preachers of divine retribution. When a medicine man is consulted, he assures the client that the penalty is sure to come as a result of wickedness.

(B) Medicineman

The medicineman is the doctor of traditional African culture endowed by his ancestral spirits with the power of counteracting witchcraft - hence called a witch doctor. It helps the sick and needy who are troubled by witches. They are often called 'babalawo', 'Oloogun' and 'Onisegun' by the Yoruba.

(C) Sacrifice

This is a religious act which involves the rendering of something to a supernatural being or beings. This practice of sacrifice varies from religion to religion but essentially they are similar. It has various intents and purposes. According to Oyelade E.O. (1997:164);

"The belief in the efficacy of traditional sacrifice can be confirmed by the fact that every morning in Ile-Ife, one of the well-known modern societies, you can find in many quarters remnants of sacrifices."



Awolalu further discussed that having observed various sacrificial rites affirms that it is not possible to speak of the purpose of sacrifice. It may be made to propitiate the angry spirit whose land or trees have been destroyed or to substitute for a sick human life, or to seek the support of the divinity for one's community on farm or business or to change an unfortunate situation into an auspicious one.

Offerings may be made to control and prevent the evil machinations of mysterious powers on to implore one's fate divinity to bring good things in life. Or sacrifice may invite the invisible spirits, the ancestor, to partake in the offered food or drink in order that they may be well-disposed to the living. This is a communication between the living and living dead or to express gratitude to spiritual beings for the benefit received from them and in order to fulfill the vow made to their particular divinity who provided for their needs in surprising way. In the Yoruba view of life, sacrifice must be dictated by the oracles. Once the oracle specifies, the result is assured. The oracle, especially Ifa divination is the liason between the enquirer and the divinity in charge. If it is a form of prayers, it is a realized prayer, a shout of victory.

6. CONCLUSION

So far, in this work we have attempted to establish the fact that the Yoruba people in the Western part of Nigeria do not see the problem of evil as an abstract concept but rather a practical phenomenon which is being manifested in the daily life of the Yoruba community. In line with this, the Western world opines that the problem of evil concerned the theists (that is the believer of God or Olodumare) who admit the stark reality of evil in the universe. Some of them are also of the opinion that man is directly responsible for the presence of evil. They believe that at creation, God or Olodumare gave man freewill to choose between good and evil, right and wrong.

Moreso, it has also been argued that the problem of evil (both the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the Western world) is not a problem to be solved. But rather it is considered as an inseparable part of good. Both good and evil always go hand in hand. The one can hardly exist without the other, A well ordered universe or value system must have a sufficient trace of both ideas.

Finally, we therefore established the fact that we have God (that is Olodumare) and antigods (that is the lesser gods like Esu, Sopona, Sango etc) as a permanent feature of the world in which we live, leading to conflict between the forces of good and evil. So, when humans created the idea of God (that is Olodumare) they also at the same time created its negator. God is responsible for the good while the antigods are responsible for the evil in the world. Hence, from a philosophical point of view, it is proper not so much to remove evil as for good to strive as well as the entirety and perfection of the thing - subject.



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