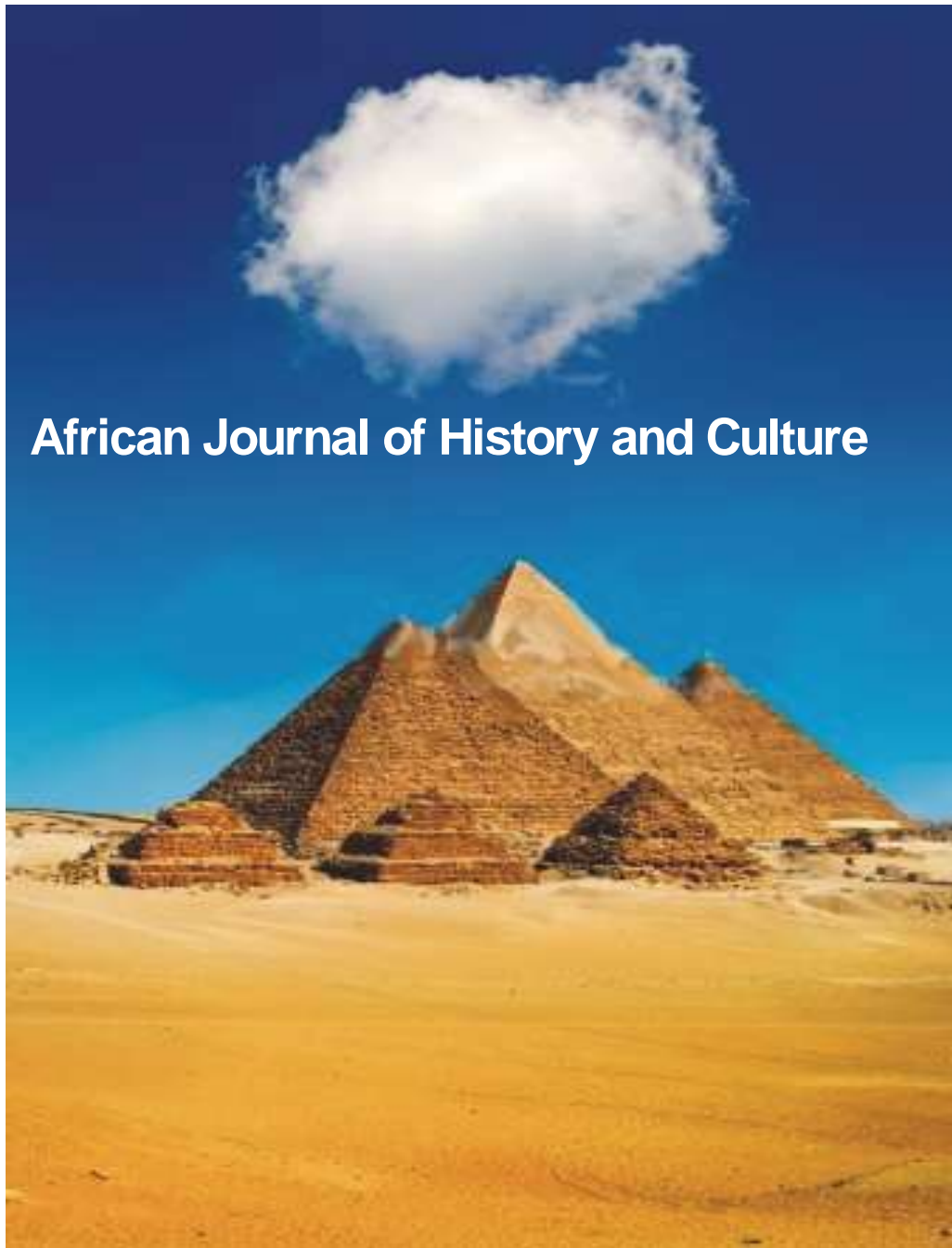


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# **African Journal of History and Culture**

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*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A discourse on the fundamental principles of character in an African moral philosophy**

**Oyebade Oyewole\* and Azenabor Godwin**

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This research attempts to throw light on the indigenous African moral philosophy from the Yorùbá socio-cultural paradigm, espousing the adequacy of its authentic ontological and ethical principles towards sustainable development in the contemporary period. Indigenous African morality revolves around the notion of character and character traits which aim at analyzing actions and motive of a moral agent. Character-ethics approaches moral discourse not on the face value of moral actions; rather, from the broad understanding of the nature of reality and subsisting metaphysical orientation in a socio-cultural experience that shapes the mind and conducts of its individuals. The concept of Omolúàbí suffices as generally accepted character (Ìwà) model among the Yorùbá predominantly in the West African sub-region. An Omolúàbí is a well-rounded good person, exhibiting virtues like moderation, truth, diligence, courage and wisdom among others. Behind these virtues are African ontological and ethical principles that inform the making of an Omolúàbí in the Yorùbá traditional moral setting. The underlining metaphysical orientation accentuates spiritual primacy, duality and complementarity to promote interdependence of all forces and harmonious relationship. In effect, the character of Omolúàbí is such that harmonises interests, promotes the spirit of live and let live, diplomacy and collective well-being in the society. Conceptual analysis and critical evaluative reasoning were employed as the methodology to unravel the potential of the African metaphysical orientation via Yorùbá traditional morality. “The complementarity and symbiotic orientation drawn from the characteristics of Omolúàbí was argued as germane to peaceful coexistence”. Generally, it is our position that the notion of Omolúàbí hinged on authentic African metaphysical orientation will enhance sustainable moral development especially in a pluralistic society.

**Key words:** Morality, character (Ìwà), omolúàbí, duality, African moral philosophy.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ethos of Omolúàbí highlights indigenous morality among the Yorùbá people in western part of sub-Saharan Africa.

The ethos, emerging from the socio-cultural experience of the people is a prism through which materials of

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African ethics are deduced, critically examined and appropriated. In other words, Yorùbá ethos of *Omólúàbí* is a moral philosophy and a strand in African ethics. African ethics, as a core branch of African philosophy, suffers overgeneralisation without specific socio-cultural paradigmatic thought system. Hence, the imperative of culture-specific discourse like Akan ethics, Hausa morality, Igbo ethics and Yorùbá morality among others, all under the discourse of African ethics, and by implication African philosophy. It goes without saying that central to African ethics is the notion of morality, which cascades to character of individuals. Specifically, *Omólúàbí* is an epitome of morality and good character. The model is not unconnected with the Yorùbá world-view and virtues binding on all to live by in a bid to achieve a good society.

Hence, this paper aims to show case the dimension of character-ethics in Yorùbá moral theory that is grounded in the peoples' metaphysical orientation and socio-cultural experience. The indigenous paradigm justifies the position that the notion of ideal character is socio-culturally based. And by extension, the Africans also contribute to universal discussion on character and the making of a good society. It follows that the quest for character development and reengineering should begin by systematically looking inwards for authenticity. We may then ask: of what significance is the indigenous traditional paradigm of *Omólúàbí* to contemporary ethics? The concept though held sway in the ancient period; it is relevant to character development in the contemporary period. However, it is imperative to first distill the metaphysical orientation that backgrounds and justifies the moral tenets among the Yorùbá. This will form the solid ground for the application of *Omólúàbí* tenets towards sustainable character development and harmonious living in the contemporary pluralistic society. We begin by clarifying the central concept of character and its philosophical interpretation to properly situate our discussion.

## CONTEXTUALISING CHARACTER IN AFRICAN ETHICS

Our survey of various African cultures shows that there is hardly an indigenous word for ethics or morality in African languages. Rather, ethics is a bi-product of daily practices among the Africans. Hence, the norm is to deploy certain indigenous words that are synonymous with *character* to mean ethics or morality of the people. For example, character in Igbo language means *agwa*. *Onwe ghi ezi agwa* in Igbo thought system means 'he or she has no morals'. Character for the Twi part of Akan in Ghana is called *suban*. To say "one has no morals or unethical" in Akan is to say *Onni suban*. Hausa in the northern part of Nigeria calls character *hali*. Popular saying among the people is *mugun hali a gare shi* (he or

she has a nasty nature or lacks good character) (Momoh, 2000; Kirk-Greene, 2000).

We should bear in mind that the act of narrowing *ethics* or *morality* to *character* (that is, character-ethics) is not unique to the Africans. For instance, borrowing from Ancient Greek language, Aristotle calls *ethics* the study/science of character (that is, *he ethike*, in Greek) (Aristotle, 1955). Similarly, Islamic moral philosophy beginning from the Medieval period adopts *Akhlaq* (Arabic word for character) to mean ethics. What makes African character-ethics unique is that discourses or statements about morality turn out to be discourses or statements essentially about *character*.

By definition, character is the intrinsic goodness of a person, unfolding in actions that can be described as either good or bad. It is made up of traits, that is to say, a set of stable qualities (virtues) that are within, which influence outward actions. Moral virtues (that is, excellences of character) are the intrinsic qualities and the subject matter of character. They include the general virtues like honesty, courage, diligence, fellow-feeling, empathy, sympathy, humility, justice, temperance and so on. Other virtues of less general status but defined by each community in line with its aspirations include: chastity before marriage, respect for elders, right use of words, mastery of language and use of proverbs among others. It follows from the foregoing that character or consistent demonstration of virtues is the basis upon which a person is described as moral or good fellow and to be lacking in virtues is to be immoral or bad fellow (Omoregbe, 1993).

Specifically, from the broad spectrum of philosophy, character is the pathway to understanding the *being* as well as nature of man, as exhibited in actions that defined morality. In other words, character manifests ones' being. Thus, character underscores both the *existence* and morality of man (Abimbola, 1975). For instance, in Akan and Yorùbá traditional communal thoughts, a good character is synonymous with being a *person*, dubbed as *oye onipa* in Akan and *o s'eniyan* in Yorùbá language. A bad fellow is *Kii s'eniyan* (a mere caricature of person) for the Yorùbá (Idowu, 1962). Therefore, to be moral is conceptually tied to existence or personhood. The concept of existence/being/spirit/life-force/mind belongs to the branch of philosophy called philosophy of mind or metaphysics. In metaphysics, *existence* is the truth or reality of a being/spirit/life-force and consists in its interaction with others in the world (Dagobert, 1971). The sum-total of potentiality, destiny and moral virtues are intertwined with the fact of existence. Only an existing being has aspirations and destiny. Therefore, actuality or the becoming of potentialities in the course of life drives the mode of interaction with other beings/forces/spirits in reality, and it is what delineates the morality and attendant virtues.

Two schools of thought are dominant in metaphysics, namely: Idealism and Materialism. And they are two

parameters of understanding the concept of character vis-à-vis human existence in African philosophy. For the idealists' arm of metaphysics, reality is essentially spiritual or mind denominated. The spiritual is the source of the physical, but both are symbiotic. However, for the purpose of convenience one must be primary (active) while the other is secondary (passive). This explains why Africans believe in the theory of predestination, that is, everything that is to be has already been predetermined. By implication, the concept of character for the idealists is innate and inborn. Therefore, character is permanent and indelible. To buttress the foregoing, an Akan maxim has it that "God created every human being (to be) good" (*Onyame boo obiara yie*). In similar vein, Hausa speaking in northern Nigeria has a popular maxim; "Character is a line drawn on the rock, nobody can erase it" (Kirk-Greene, 2000). The point of emphasis in both sayings is that human character is predetermined by *Ori* (inner-head) and a settled matter (Hallen, 2000). Thus, actions have causes that are outside of the moral agent. In other words, man and his character are mere puppets in the hand of fate or supernatural forces (supernaturalism).

The idealists' interpretation of character raises philosophical question and contains inherent flaws. The position implies predestination and determinism. That is, man is not free to make choice of acting otherwise, because he/she has been programmed to act in a certain way. The view also boxes character and morality into a cul-de-sac; as something that cannot be modified for improvement. Therefore, there is no justification for teaching moral education, holding anyone accountable, punishing crimes and defining moral codes in the society. In a nutshell, the idealist account of *iwà* (character) is inadequate and cannot be a reliable model for moral and societal development. In fact, within the Yoruba thought system, such fatal determinism is rare, as destiny can be modified and bad lot upturned for good through proper ritual and sacrifices.

The materialists' arm of metaphysics gives primacy to matter over mind and the physical sphere of reality over the mystical. For this school, man is essentially flesh and blood with all becomings here acquired and achieved in the world. According to the school, man has no pre-existing, predestined nature or any pre-established harmony pulling the strings of existence. At birth, man is morally neutral and blank. But by nurture man becomes moral. Hence, instead of predestined nature, consistent conducts and actions form the being/nature of the person. It is in the light of the foregoing that character is defined by the Akans in terms of habits, which result from a person's deeds or actions: 'character comes from your actions' (or deeds: *nneyee*) and habit. Yorùbá will also say: *owo eni l'afi n tun iwà eni se* (with one's hand/action are character amended). So far as it goes, character is acquired and can be amended. Consistent expression of action is what makes it habitual. Wrong actions can be addressed with more right ones. It is, therefore, the duty

of every family to groom its wards in the order of communal morality, customs and tradition (Ozumba, 1995).

With such flexibility, moral rectitude is possible and Moral agents can develop sound character. It is in this direction that the symbolism of taboos (*eewo*) and sacrifices (*ebo riru*) are traditional explanatory modules to underscore the significant freedom of man with liberty to amend his destiny among the Yoruba. A moral being exercises his freedom to choose, observing taboos to guide his decision. Even where the taboos are violated, there are consequences, some of which are remedied by mystical sacrifices to appease the gods. Therefore, man is the architect of his fate and morality. And again, morality is for humanistic purpose within the socio-cultural paradigm of the African notion of reality.

However, one will observe that the idealists and materialists' interpretations of character jointly sit in African socio-cultural experience. This is neither erroneous nor self-contradiction. Rather, for the Africans, there is no single entry port into the marketplace. Unlike western *dualism*, African *duality* necessarily harmonises mind and matter; body and soul; subject and object and so on as two codependent sides of the same coin. So, there is hardly a fragmentation of reality into camps of idealism and materialism in the real sense of it because none of the two approaches is complete without the other. Therefore, the idea of predestination/destiny is already ontologically tied to actions to establish character in African philosophy. The inherent ontological duality in relation to character and its development are well expressed in the Yorùbá concept of *Omólúàbí*.

## ETHOS OF *OMÓLÚÀBÍ* IN YORÙBÁ THOUGHT SYSTEM

The concept of *Omólúàbí* is popular among the Yorùbá ethnic group, largely found in West African sub-region. It is an indigenous concept that denotes the idea of morality, moral being or ideal character acceptable to all and tells of the philosophical tradition of the people. Importantly, however, ideas of *Omólúàbí* are till date found in the peoples' oral tradition, especially in forms of proverbs, myths, folk lores, and tales among other symbolic legacies. In *Ifá* literary corpus, *Omólúàbí* is understood as the basis of societal ethics. It must first be said that the Yorùbá are descendants of *Oduduwa* and remain one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa where they are most concentrated. The nation has a population of over 40 million people across the West African sub-region and about 21% of the current Nigerian population (Ajayi and Akintoye, 2006). They are predominantly in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, Ondo, Kwara, Kogi, and Edo States. Indigenous Yorùbá communities are also to be found in neighbouring countries like Republic of Benin, Togo, Ghana and in



South American countries like Brazil, Cuba, and the Caribbean.

As a traditional society without the written culture, surviving original values like the concept of *Omolúàbí* are best gleaned from oral literature. By oral literature, we mean the rich corpora of texts derivable from folklore, proverbs, poems, songs, tales, corpus, etc., are presented in spoken form for the purpose of influencing behaviour in a community (Awoniyi, 1975). In fact, oral literature has proven to be important mnemonic tools through which the entire cultural values, history, beliefs and world-view are preserved and transmitted from one generation to the other. For the Africans, to be is to exist in proverbs, myths, folk tales, music and other media expressing the people's mythology. The following are *Omolúàbí* maxims, proverbs and verses in *Ifa* literary corpus:

#### Maxims on *Omolúàbí*

- (i) *Ìwá l'esin* (character is the ultimate religion) (Abimbola, 1977: 155)
- (ii) *Ìwá l'ewa* (character is a person's beauty)
- (iii) *Ìwá l'óbá awure* (character is the best mystical protections)
- (iv) *Ìwá rere lèsó ènì'òn, ehín funfun lèsó èrin* (Just as white teeth enhance a laugh, so does a good character befit a person) (Abraham, 1970).

#### Proverbs on *Omolúàbí*

- (i) *Abo oro l'a so fun Omolúàbí; to ba de inu e, a d'odindí* (A word is sufficient for the wise)
- (ii) *Omolúàbí kii ta'fa k'o ma wa a* (*Omolúàbí* follows a course to its end)
- (iii) *Ìwà l'òrìsà; báa bá ti hùù ní í fi gbeni* [character is like an *òrìsà* (deity); if we worship well, we get its protection, and if we behave well, we benefit] (Abraham, 1970: 328)
- (iv) *Iponju kii mu Omolúàbí k'o di abese* (*Omolúàbí* betrays no character even in hardship)

#### *Ifa* literary Corpus on *Omolúàbí*

- (i) *Ìwà nikan l'o soro o;*  
*Ìwà nikan l'osoro;*  
*Ori kan ki'buru l'otu lfe;*  
*Ìwà nikan l'o soro o.*

(Character is all that is requisite,  
Character is all that is requisite;  
There is no destiny to be called unhappy in lfe city,  
Character is all that is requisite) (Abimbola, 1977).

- (ii) *Ìwà pele l'ókun aye fi'ro peti l'owo eni.*  
*O da 'fa fun Orunmila.*  
*Ti o nlo fi Ìwà gba okun aiye l'owo okan-le-ni-irinwo imale.*

(Gentle character is that which enables the rope of life to stay unbroken in one's hand.

So, declares the oracle to *Orunmila*.

Who by means of gentle character was going to win the rope of life from the four hundred and one divinities) (Abimbola, 1975).

The foregoing examples from oral literature vividly show how character, dimensioned as *Omolúàbí* and *ìwà*, weaves into the general thought system of the Yorùbá. We see *Omolúàbí* and *ìwà* in connection to religion, godliness, aesthetic value, epistemology, moral values and social justice among others. Subsequent subsections will throw light on these connections.

### THE NOTION OF *ÌWÀ* (CHARACTER) IN YORÙBÁ ETHICS

Central to our discussion on *Omolúàbí* is the notion of *ìwà*, which literally means character. It is not a coincidence that several of the oral literature concentrated on *ìwà* more than *Omolúàbí*. Specifically, there is no *Omolúàbí* without the notion of *ìwà*, because the former is simply an embodiment of the latter, that is, *ìwà* – good character. *Ìwà* (good character) has a homophone, *l-wà* (to exist or existence). *l-wà* emerges from the merger of “l” to the verb “wà” (be/exist) in the Yorùbá language (Abimbola, 1975). Abimbola adds thus, the original meaning of *ìwà* can therefore be interpreted as ‘the fact of being, living or existing’. Thus, when *Ìfá* speaks of *Ire owó, ire omo, ire aikú parí iwà*, the meaning of *ìwà* in that context is the ordinary meaning referred to earlier. It is my impression that the other meaning of *ìwà* (character, moral behaviour) originates from an idiomatic usage of this original lexical meaning. If this is the case, *ìwà* (character) is therefore the essence of being.

In a nutshell, Abimbola (1975) draws two critical senses of character, both of which fits into an aspect of philosophy called ontology (*l-wà*) and morality/ethics (*l-wà*). We can recall that from the ontology of man (*eniyan*), the general fact of existence is distilled paving the way for moral principles that organises personal and communal lives. It therefore appears that, in the final analysis, there is no separation of *l-wà* from *ìwà*, beyond conceptual clarification.

### *l-wà* AS THE FACT OF BEING

*l-wà* literarily means ‘to be’ or ‘to exist’ and connotes the term *existence*. Etymologically, *existence* comes from Latin word *existere*, meaning ‘to emerge’ (Dagobert, 1971). Dagobert's Dictionary of Philosophy defines existence as “the mode of being which consists in interaction with other things” (Ibid). That is, the makeup of

a being is fundamentally tied to its interface and collaboration with other things, animate or inanimate. And it is from the window of its alliance with others that a being emerges or is said 'to exist'. It is, therefore, on this ground that the existentialist philosophers define *being* as being-with-others.

In the African sense generally and among the Yorùbá in particular, the mode of interaction is essentially spiritual. This is so because it is not a mere interaction between being and things (inanimate objects), rather, interpenetration of beings/forces, since everything is alive. For instance, man on daily basis interacts with tree, the soil, water, air, wood, iron, clothe and so on, not as mere objects but as other *forces* upon which human survival depends (Ndubuisi and Okoro, 2005).

Indeed, "man plays a significant role in the mysterious force that keeps the universe going; he is not a parasitic element planted on earth, he is assisted into the ontological dimension of a world which dominates him but also feeds and sustains him" (Ibid). In other words, the assumption is strongly held that everything has a being/force interacting with other forces in a shared existence. Spirits/forces permeate everything and everywhere (Idoniboye, 1973; Okoro, Unpublished). A spiritual counterpart accompanies everything physical. Man, otherwise called human-*being* (*eniyán*), is an aspect of the cosmopolitan beings/forces occupying the totality of reality and it is about his being that we are bothered here.

The concept of duality simply suggests complementarity and symbiosis of opposites, as aspects of a whole. The duality of physical and spiritual dominates Yorùbá tripartite conception of man. Man is basically the composition of *ori* (head); *emi* (spirit/soul) and *ara* (body) (Abimbola, 1988; Hallen, 2000). The trio is necessary conditions for a complete human being (*eniyán*). *Ara* underscores physical being, *emi* is the spiritual, while *ori* is the physico-spiritual duality, composing of physical head (*ori-ita*) and the spiritual/inner head (*ori-inu*). *Ara*/body warehouses both *emi* and *ori*. Physiologically, *ara* is made up flesh (*eran-ara*), blood (*eje*) and bones (*egungun*), all of which are subject to decay at death. And among its components are *ori-ita* (physical head); *owó* (hand) and *ese* (leg) among others. However, they all also have ontological equivalence in Yorùbá metaphysics.

Therefore, *ori* (head) has two different roles it played in the life of our being, namely: *ori-ita* and *ori-inu*, both of which combine as the principle of individuation (Owolabi, 2001). For instance, on one hand, *Ori-ita* is the physical head that houses the human brain (*opoló*) the faculty of memory and intelligence; the eyes (*oju*) for sight and vision; ears (*eti*) for hearing; mouth (*enu*) for speech/nutrition and nose (*imu*) for perceiving.

It goes without saying that the physical head enhances relation with the world and gets the whole body nourished. Besides encapsulating the five senses (except

the sense of touch that runs through the entire body), at least seven of the nine canals in human anatomy are on the head. By implication, *ori-ita* is the centre of gravity of the body and what connects all human beings with the rest of the world. On the other hand, *Ori-inu* (inner head) is the spiritual arm, personal deity and personality soul in Yorùbá thought system (Idowu, 1962).

However, "inner head or inner person is the very essence of personality. It is this *ori* that rules, controls, and guide the 'life' and activity of the person" (Ibid). Indeed, in the traditional religion, it is the essence of personality, being a psychic impalpable force that determines what the person becomes in life. This is similar to the notion of *ehi* (head) in the metaphysics of the Esan people of Edo State and *chi* in Igbo philosophy (Azenabor, 1999; Anyanwu, 1983).

Abimbola (1988) echoes the peoples' assumption in describing *ori-inu* as an aspect of *Olodumare* in every man. Specifically, *Olodumare* is the "one inexhaustive Source of being", that is, the source of life (Idowu, 1962). In essence, this means that ones' divinity begins from his/her *ori* as an aspect of God in all men (1988). This mystical theory of mind (Okoro, 2008), is reinforced by a popular saying: '*ko si Orisa tií da'nií gbe leyin ori eni*' (no deity blesses one without the approval of one's inner-head). In other words, *ori* serves as the intermediary between a person and other deities or forces, either benevolent or malevolent. Therefore, *ori* is the go-between of man connecting the physical world and the unseen world.

Another mystical component of man and often inseparable from *ori-inu* is *emi* (spirit/soul/life-force/mind/psyche) (Okoro, 2017). Abimbola calls it the "vital life-force" (Hallen, 2000). It is the invisible and intangible aspect that gives life to the whole body (Idowu, 1962). In other words, *emi* or spirit is the principle of life that harmonises both the spiritual (inner-head) and the *ara* (body). In African ontology, it is the spark of the divine and the creative life force of the universe itself.

According to Idoniboye (1973), "(spirit) is what gives anything its individuality. In human body it becomes the mind or soul so that the individual mind or soul shares in the collective mind-or-soul-stuff of the universe". It is the life of the body and the "bare fact of the animate existence" without which a person/animal/plant among others is dead and the body disintegrates (Idowu, 1962; Omoregbe, 2001). Though the soul/spirit continues to exist even at death, it returns to the sphere of other souls/life-forces, but as an incomplete being (Ibid). In essence, due to the nature of man, *emi* becomes the connecting point of active and passive spirit/life-force/soul.

Indeed, *emi* that 'negotiates' with other forces, underscores both social and cosmic orders in the universe. Existence necessitates interaction and man by nature is a being-with-others (social order). What stands the Yorùbá out in this case, and of the Africans at large,

is also the fact that man is such a being-with-forces in the cosmos (cosmic order). While man lives and essentially harmonises his/her interest with other human beings (also forces) in the society, he simultaneously lives in the cosmos with other non-human forces, with superior influence than his. For reasons not unconnected with the affinity, every action, either positive or negative, affects all other forces.

For emphasis, interaction between things is extra-physical because it is actually the interaction between two spirits, souls or life-forces, with effects on the whole web. It is important to recall that the non-human forces on the web are either benevolent or malevolent. Therefore, to channel ones' interactions in the direction of good conduct is to stir the good forces, while bad or evil conduct arouses the malevolent ones that reciprocate with evil. A Yorùbá saying on the principle of reciprocal actions depicting the foregoing is: *eni se ire, a ri're; eni se ika, a ri'ka* (to do good is to beget good, and evil comes to its doers).

The foregoing is buttressed by the empirical notion of *owere* (that is, *struggle*) (Abimbola, 1988), with corresponding ontological elements in parts of *ara* (body). These elements include *owo* (hand), *ese* (leg) and *aya* (chest) (Ibid). No matter how good an *ori* is, its potential remains dormant and useless without *ese* and others. *Ese* depicts activity (mobility) or hard work and *owo* (hand) denotes self-help and creativity to actualize what is latent in the *being* (Ibid). In similar vein, *aya* (chest) ontologically stands for association and friendship, because they either make or mar a person in life. Hence, the spiritual nature of man (*ori-inu/emi*) is redundant without the empirical nature depicted in activity, diligence and creativity.

The aspect of spiritual-empiricism highlighted thus underscores the imperative of epistemological notion of '*ogbon*' (wisdom); being the fusion of *imo* (empirical knowledge) and *oye* (transcendental understanding). Popular among the Yorùbá is the saying: *Ogbon lá fi n se ile-aye; Ìwà l'a fi n se ode-orun* (wisdom rules the world as character rules in the unseen world). The maxim affirms duality of the two worlds (physical/social and the spiritual/cosmic) and the imperative of wisdom and character (morality) to navigate through to a happy ending.

After all, *ori kan ki'buru l'otu lfe: iwà nikan l'o soro o* (there is no destiny to be called unhappy/hopeless in life city; character is all that is requisite). We need to bear in mind that *lfe* is for the Yorùbá the headquarters of all mankind or the sacred origin of humankind (Drewal, 1992). Owolabi (2000), notes that *ogbon*, in a sense, depicts capacity to make rational decisions, but it also entails "exposure, experience, bravery and fortitude when the need arises". In other words, it involves adept understanding of the workings of reality, its forces, and how man fits in to explore its mechanisms to his advantage.

## ÌWÁ AS THE MORALITY OF BEING

Drawing from the ontological analysis of *eniyan* (man) and *existence* in traditional Yorùbá thought system remarked earlier in this study, the following assumptions are made: (i) an imperfect world ruled by multiplicity of good and evil forces; (ii) forces influence and are influenced in turn; (iii) man, at the centre of the muddle, is vulnerable and (iv) the prevailing law of reciprocity. It is in the light of these socio-cultural assumptions that Yorùbá hinge morality or appropriate mode of behaviour on the doctrine of *Ìwàpèlé* (cf. Abimbola, 1975; Fayemi, 2009). Doctrine is used as a set of common beliefs that serve as governing principle of life, conducts and order among a people. *Ìwàpèlé* falls into this category in the Yorùbá thought system. Obviously, the doctrine conjoins two words, namely: *Ìwà* (character) and *pèlé* (gentle/mild). Literally and as precise as English lexicon can offer, both add up to mean "mildness of character" (Abraham, 1970). Synonymous terms of *Ìwàpèlé* are *Ìwà* (good character), *Ìwàjéjé* (gentle character), *Ìwàtùtù* (temperate character) and *Ìwà irele* (humble character).

From the earlier discussion, mildness, gentility, temperance and humility all point to a conscious state of mind that implies ontological understanding, with the discipline to exercise caution and self-restraint in all state of affairs. In other words, *Ìwàpèlé* can be defined as a phenomenological disposition to life, based on wisdom and understanding of the workings of reality within the socio-cultural context of the Yorùbá. To now extrapolate, the concept of phenomenology in Heideggerian sense, implies an attitude of patience that allows phenomenon/object of inquiry to manifest itself as it is without preconceived bias or strait jacket colouration (Unah, 2002). It underpins an attitude of letting things be or unfold as they are naturally. In this direction, more than just a veritable tool of investigation, the attitude traditionally holds supreme for instilling order in all strata of life for the Yorùbá thought system. This is because it exercises caution, restraint and patience for *beings* or situations to naturally unfold and be treated accordingly but with care as mark of respect to the spiritual reality that binds the whole. Indeed, the attitude abhors treating phenomena as inconsequential objects or as mere things in nature. Therefore, *Ìwàpèlé* is an attitude of the mind that at every point in time acts with temperance and fellow-feeling, advancing the course of "live and let live" in all affairs of life (Ibid).

Specifically, from the doctrine of *Ìwàpèlé* emerge all the virtues of *Omoluàbí*. It is a character that abhors aggressiveness as mode of relations (Oladipo, 2002). This is so, because *Igba a pèlé kii fo; awo-pèlé kii ya* (the calabash and plate of *pèlé*/caution stays unbroken). In addition, *Ìwàpèlé lókun aye fi n ro peti lowo eni* (second *Ìfá* literary corpus earlier), that is, by gentle character even the strand of life stays unbroken in ones' hand. Recall that African scholars such as Achebe, Anyanwu

and Okoro had earlier submitted that the entire reality is a mystical web, where all forces connect by their strands.

Therefore, it is through *Ìwàpèlè* that an individual feels at home and continues to flourish on the web populated by both the good and evil forces. Abimbola (1975) attests to this when he writes that: the principle of *Ìwàpèlè* to some extent redeems man from the authoritarian and hierarchical structure of the universe and, in any case, provides him with a set of principles with which to regulate his life in order to avoid collision with the supernatural powers and also with his fellow men. Following the aforementioned analysis and exposition of *Ìwàpèlè*, the temperament allows moderation of ones' desires and ambition to align with that of the whole in the shared existence. This way, conflict of interest is moderated both on social and cosmic plain. The assumption basically is for all to live in harmony, which underlines the view that the African notion of reality is holistic. "This is why the Yorùbá regard *Ìwàpèlè* as the most important of all moral values and the greatest attribute of any man" (Ibid). It is, therefore, the fundamental characteristic that is called to question when the concept of *Omólúàbí* arises. It underscores biblical godliness (*Ìwà bi Olorun*), religion itself (*Ìwà l'esin*) and ontological beauty of a man (*Ìwà l'ewa*) (Abraham, 1970). Traditionally, the attitude of mind exhibited in *Ìwàpèlè* manifest and is demonstrated in three ways, namely: (i) mystical sacrifice, (ii) observance of taboos, and (iii) right character. Whereas sacrifice and some taboos appeal to religious sentiment of the people, the notion of character is purely humanistic. Sacrifice or sacrificial offerings (*ebo/ebo-riru*) is a symbolic mode of communication among forces in the universe and involves ritual (Abimbola, 1975).

Mystical sacrifices perform the following functions, namely: (i) to curry favours of intelligent forces (ii) amend a bad situation or *ori/destiny* (purification), (iii) reconciliation via appeasement, (iv) mark of solidarity, act of worship and contractual obligations. Whereas sacrificial offerings deepen the bond between man and cosmic forces, *eewo* (taboos) help man to freely circumnavigate both social and cosmic sphere.

Taboos are simply a set of dos and don'ts that apply to all spheres of life. All things conceivable have their own measures of restriction or drawn lines that a violation upset inner mechanism and the whole balance with dire consequences sometimes. In other words, taboos are the unwritten norms that serve as a moderation of human affairs in the society (Awoniyi, 1975; Oluwole, 1984). In fact, Sobande (1978) identified six categories, namely: religion-specific, taboos discovered by divination, family-specific, well-being, and longevity-specific taboos and those essentially devoted to character or behaviour. While the categories are not unconnected across the board, taboos are moral guides that in essence practically integrate the individual into the whole and vice versa, which is the basic function of traditional education.

Precisely, it is the type of indoctrination that begins from the home and in the long run defines the morality of an individual. The foregoing explains the popular maxim that *Ibi ni bibi ire Omólúàbí* (birth/background is the foundation of being *Omólúàbí*). Family upbringing fundamentally anchored on strict observance of taboos is the common character-moulding attribute expected from all would-be *Omólúàbí*. And because the taboos cut across all strata of life, implying knowledge (*imó*), understanding (*òye*) and the wisdom (*ogbón*), all families and the community, at large, strive to align with the order. Therefore, "nothing mortifies a Yorùbá more than to say that his child is '*àbíikó*' (a child that is born but not taught, that is, a badly brought up child). A child is better *àkóogbà* (a child that is taught but does not learn), where the responsibility is that of the child and not his parents" (Awoniyi, 1975). By the way, good character that aligns with the general social interest and collective well-being is more or less the passport to good life and happiness in the society.

Traditionally, emphasis is on moral behaviour because the society is the larger (informal) school; its education life-long and character, the certificate (Awoniyi, 1975; Ogundeji et al., 2009a&b). For every action or inaction in social interactions is a character put on the line. Thus, good things of life, like wealth, children, houses and influence are secondary and amount to nothing without foundational good character. This is reinforced by the maxim that *Iya kii je Omólúàbí laarin opo eeyan* (an ideal person suffers no misfortune/persecution in a crowd). His or her good conducts that aligns and promote general well-being are assumed to always stand in the person's defense, even in difficult situations. It follows that the ultimate moral principle is for everyone to treat others as he or she would want to be treated (Idowu, 1968; Oluwole, 1984; Azenabor, 2008).

It is clear from earlier mentioned that, the efficacy of mystical sacrifice and observance of some religious-based taboos are supernaturalistic and religious. On the other hand, the notion of *Ìwà* (character) in *Ìwàpèlè* returns all moral powers, freedom and responsibility into the hands of communal beings. While the former serves religious purpose, the latter suits humanistic and rational essence of the Yorùbá socio-cultural experience. Therefore, there is no denying either of the two, because they both administer to the nature of reality of the Africans.

## VIRTUES OF *ÌWÀ* IN *OMÓLÚÀBÍ*

For emphasis, it may then be asked, what are the virtues of *Omólúàbí* inherent in the doctrine of *Ìwàpèlè*? Scholars have identified a handful (Idowu, 1962; Abimbola, 1975; Awoniyi, 1975; Bewaji, 2006; Fayemi, 2009; Yoloye, 2009; Ajadi, 2012). They include the following, namely: (i) *suuru* (patience); (ii) *òwò* (humility/respect); (iii) *òrò-íre* (good/right choice of words); (iv) *otító* (honesty); (v)

*ogbón inú* (intelligence/understanding); (vi) *iwòn-tún-wòn-sì* (moderation), and (vii) *akin* (courage). While the list is longer, these are some basic qualities that stand out the *Omolúàbí*. *Suuru*, synonymous with patience in English lexicon, is central to Yorùbá morality and the sub-foundation of character itself. It is believed that even God, as the embodiment of character in its pure form, has perfect *suuru*. And to make it vivid to the mind's eye, Yorùbá mythology in *Ifá* describes *Suuru* as the first-born of *Olodumare* and in turn, *suuru baba Ìwà* (Patience as the forbear of Character). The concept of *suuru* is akin to the phenomenological temperament of *Ìwàpèlé* that allows objects of knowledge and situations to naturally unfold unimpeded given the complex nature of reality. The corollary is that an *Omolúàbí* is never in haste or aggressive in conduct. It goes with the saying that *àgbà to ni suuru, oun gbogbo lo ni* (all things come to those that wait/patience) and such will hardly regret actions. Therefore, the fundamental virtue is patience, and it is god-like in the African notion of reality.

Implied in virtue of patience is *òwò*, otherwise likened to humility/respect for others. In essence, *òwò* connotes self-respect and respect for others. Mutual reverence defines the mode or relations in all interpersonal relations and often the second virtue missing in every conflict. A popular saying is: '*Ài f'àgbà f'énikan/(Ài b'òwò f'àgbà), ni kò jé ayé ó gún*' (lack of respect for authority/others robs the world of peace) (Awoniyi, 1975). It implies due cognizance of the rights and place of others in the scheme of things, irrespective of age, class, status or station in life (Idowu, 1962). It is infact an attitude of the mind that recognizes life is a shared existence and there is no *one* without the *other* and no *community* without the *individuals*. In the Yorùbá cultural context, *òwò*, otherwise called *ìteriba* (humility) begins with greetings, gratitude, loyalty, hospitality and so on (Awoniyi, 1975). *Òrò-ìre* (right choice of words) similarly defines socialisation and emerging from *inù-ìre* (good heart). Both are fundamental in the demands from all to speak *òrò ijìnlè* (profound words) that succinctly captures an occasion. This is because word/language is collective property of all and discreetly used in conversations with forces, either seen or unseen. Hence, words should be intelligently used. Ideally, words are best spoken with relevant proverbs for brevity. This explains the saying that *abo oro l'a so fun Omolúàbí; to ba de inu e, a d'odindí* (a word is sufficient for the wise). In fact, it is unacceptable to completely lay out an issue leaving nothing for listeners to ponder and make choices (Ajadi, 2012). Again, words are commands that can trigger chain reactions in the unseen. Therefore, it is a demand on *Omolúàbí* to be sagacious with words, as harbinger of peace, harmony or discordance, strife and conflict (Fayemi, 2009).

It follows from the foregoing that spoken words have to be truthful (*òtító/truth*). This is based on the assumption that the weight of command (*àse*) in a person's words is directly proportional to truth. *Odù Èturúpòn-méjì* states

that, "*s'òtító; se rere, s'òtító; se rere; eni s'òtító n'ímalé agbè* (be truthful, do good; be truthful, do good; it is the truthful that the divinities support" (Idowu, 1962). In other words, moral rectitude carries favours of divinities. Given its cosmic and social values, every home teaches its individuals the tenets of integrity, which enhances trust and social acceptance. Popular saying among the Yorùbá people is: *K'aso'ro, k'a ba be ni iyi Omolúàbí* (it is most honourable of *Omolúàbí* to be incontrovertible). It implies that a person whose words cannot be trusted has failed integrity test and does not qualify as an *Omolúàbí*. This is because every false claim is a blemish on character. Thus, *Omolúàbí* is respected by the measure of adept words uttered in truth as facts and received as words of authority. Truth or factual claims are, however, impossible without adequate knowledge and understanding (that is, *ogbón-inu/wisdom*) of the nature of things. Indeed, reality unfolds in profiles demanding a mode of knowledge that is holistic. The sensual or physical is incomplete without the rational or mystical. Events of the present are likewise never disentangled from those of the past and the future. Individuals with such dispositions are called *olopolo pipe* (mentally sound/intelligent fellow). Therefore, a holistic appraisal of issues, in endless search and application of understanding, wisdom, is essential ontological quality of an *Omolúàbí*.

An essential display of wisdom too is the notion of *iwòn-tún-wòn-sì*, that is, moderation. The making of an *Omolúàbí* is averse to excesses, in cognizance of the saying that too much of everything is bad. While *inu-ire* (good heart) demands empathy and doing good always, but too much is counter-productive. *Oore ni'won; ni'won ni'won l'oun gbogbo* (that is, even doing good should be moderate; moderation in everything). In fact, an essential quality among *Ifa* initiates is the mental discipline to be moderate and never over-indulge in any matter (Ilawole, 2006). It implies everything in balance and nothing in excess. This is quite similar to the doctrine of Golden mean in ancient Greek philosophy.

Last but not the least, traditional virtues of *Omolúàbí* is *akin/courage* or *akinkanju/a* courageous fellow. Vicissitudes of life could be quite unsettling and unpredictable. However, *Omolúàbí* has to be courageous to weather it all, and with courage comes fortitude (*ifarada*) to endure. They are two qualities that ensure that the *Omolúàbí* does not betray his principles even in difficulties. After all, *b'emi wa t'a o ku, ire gbogbo ni o s'oju eni* (once there is life, there is hope of all goods things). It takes a lot of courage to endure difficulties, with the assumption that they are temporal events. This virtue opposes escapism, self-condemnation, abandonment and indulgence in vices to circumvent life obstacles. Rather, it is expected of the *Omolúàbí* to pick himself or herself up from adversity and forge ahead. It goes without saying that there is no character, *Ìwàpèlé* or *Omolúàbí* without the full complement of the aforementioned

virtues. And the entire gamut of human development, which has personal and societal dimensions, are dependent on how entrenched the virtues are exhibited in character. The family and society at large, which is the larger beneficiary, help the individuals to cultivate the virtues from cradle to grave (being the lifelong informal school). Product of such form of education is what Wiredu (1995), called the practice of “sympathetic impartiality, which in its most generalised form, is the root of all moral virtues”. Such society in its duty, offers the individual good examples to live by and those to live without in building character that is the essence of education (Awoniyi, 1975; Olatunji, 2011).

In all, it is demanded of everyone to aspire in a chosen field, continuously search for knowledge and apply wisdom, which include moderation in all aspirations, diplomacy and goodwill for others. For emphasis, this begins from home. Properly brought up wards (*Omólúàbí*) ensure a stable home, stable homes in turn enhance a stable and peaceful community, happy communities then makeup secured and developing state and secured states make a happier world. In the final analysis, we see individuals that are committed to self and others remain truthful and empathetic to common course.

The more of such people, otherwise called *Omólúàbí*, a society has the better for its collective happiness, well-being and development (Ojo, 1978).

At the social level, the virtues are the building blocks of communalism and its socio-economic transformations that drive growth and prosperity. For instance, principles of *Omólúàbí* were foundational to the ancient contributory systems known as *àjo* (credit unions) and *egbé Ìfésowápò* (cooperative societies) of traditional communities. Indeed, the cocoa farmers of the old western region Nigeria were able to lead economic transformation and attained global recognition via the model (Ajadi, 2012). These communal contributory systems have been formalised in the various contemporary insurance schemes and credit structures, whose preconditions are three Cs, namely: character, capacity and collateral. Till date, economies of modern states are hinged on the socio-economic tools of insurance schemes and credit systems, essentially anchored on virtues of integrity, trust and cooperation that are fulcrum of Yorùbá moral philosophy. Of significance in the foregoing discussion is the universal essence of our socio-cultural paradigm. The tenets of *Omólúàbí* can as well be found in other cultures and society, with continuous relevance till date (Wiredu, 1995). The applicability of the *Omólúàbí* principles subsists in stimulating individual goals, ambitions and aspirations to conform to that of the community at large. That is, irrespective of age, status and position in the community, all must aim at becoming *Omólúàbí*, with the goal of harmonising with all by contributing positively to collective well-being and vice versa. In line with the

metaphysical orientation, individual contributes to the whole as much as he or she hopes to get in return. It is sufficient to add that most contemporary African states in the post-colonial era are no longer homogenous like our

Yorùbá case study; rather, pluralistic or multicultural in nature. Nonetheless, we make bold to say that in the diversity of the new states lays the strength of the philosophy of integration and morality of the *Omólúàbí*. That is to say, the orientation of complementarity avails a solid ground for cooperation and harmonious living, because everyone ideally contributes to collective good and proportionally served in return. Indeed, no one is left behind as long as good character that aligns with societal values is not in doubt.

Consequently, our indigenous model is an ideal of character development for individuals, state actors and societies at large. The tenets of *Omólúàbí* are principles in character development that entails self-discipline in the quest for actualisation of ambitions, life projects and fulfillment. Akin to the complementarist orientation, the principles are also such that help moderate and align self-interest with that of general well-being in the communal spirit of one for all and all for one. It is also a reminder to state actors and society at large that the state has the primary responsibility to raise individuals in exchange for their loyalty and commitment to collective well-being. Like it was in the traditional setting, it is the duty of the state to train the citizenry, with opportunities for self-expression and maximum use of talents, all channeled to improving the society. With every member finding their rightful place and getting fulfilled, vices of disloyalty and crimes generally are discouraged. Hence, the members can live harmoniously, the society peaceful and its growth sustainable.

## CONCLUSION

One will find evidence of the Yorùbá understanding of reality via the concept of *Omólúàbí*, the place of man in it and appropriate mode of behaviour to achieve his goals and live happily. The inferred expectation is to be *Omólúàbí*, which is logically tied to his existence and moral virtues as demonstrated in the doctrine of *Ìwàpèlé* that begins from family through the society. That way, systematic and thorough-bred individuals would have attained the right understanding of reality, as well as mental discipline to align his/her self-interest with the whole, which has the capacity to influence peaceful coexistence. It establishes a balance between the individual and the community in a humanistic moral setting. And only when private interests align with that of the collective would members be fulfilled and society works towards sustainable development.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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