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The humanity of the foetus: A Yoruba perspective

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The question of when life begins in the foetus remains a serious philosophical debate which cuts across philosophies and philosophers of all intellectual traditions. Principally, the question has led to the evolution of different schools of thought in western bioethics discourse. However, in spite of the numerous responses generated in reaction to the personhood of the foetus, no particular answer has been accepted, that is, none of the answers has addressed the issue adequately, hence the focus of this paper on the Yoruba intellectual tradition. In Yoruba cultural thought, there is a clear conception when the life of the foetus begins, and this conception arguably addresses some of the inadequacies inherent in western perspective on the issue. Therefore, we examine the Yoruba ontological creation theory because it is with a clear knowledge of this that we can appropriately understand the Yoruba conception of when life begins in the foetus. And given this understanding, we argue that the Yoruba conception takes care of the inadequacies inherent in western theories.

Key - words: Foetus, Yoruba, Orisa Nla, western bioethics, humanity, *Emi*, creation.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse on the ontological nature and status of a foetus is one of the perennial issues in philosophical discourse. The most direct fundamental problem generated by this discourse has to do with whether or not abortion should be morally and/or legally acceptable. Overtime, the question of the humanity of the foetus has led to the evolution of divergent views with some abortion and others rejecting it depending on their convictions about the ontological status of a foetus.

In western intellectual tradition, biology knowledge of human reproduction teaches that the mixture of the male spermatozoa and the female ovum produces what is known as zygote (a single fertilized cell); and that the zygote begins the process of cellular division which

results into multi-cell zygote that begins to grow and have shape in the uterus.

In addition, the biology teaches that the fertilized ovum is called a zygote until the implantation process is completed which takes up to two weeks; and then immediately the brain waves are detected, the ovum is then designated as 'embryo' – which is the stage at which the organ system begins noticeable development. Further, the fertilized ovum is formally acknowledged as a foetus from the ninth week of conception - which is the stage at which life begins (Singer, 1981; Gillespie, 1977). One obvious problem with the western intellectual tradition's biology knowledge of reproduction as demonstrated above is that the tradition assumes that

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when life begins in a foetus is determinable. This assumption is greatly responsible for the divide between those that argue for the legalization of abortion and those that frown at it. It is important to note that if it is determinable, there would not be any controversy over the issue of abortion.

Another important problem arising from this western conception is that it fails to incorporate and account for the reality of still-births. That is, the western account on the issue of when life begins in a foetus cannot address the questions of why, how, and what is responsible for still-births. These are two important problems that we strongly believe the Yoruba intellectual tradition adequately and sufficiently address.

YORUBA ONTOLOGICAL CREATION THEORY

A good number of written literatures are available on the Yoruba theory of ontological creation. To mention but a few, we have Bolaji Idowu in his famous book *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, J.O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu's book *West African Traditional Religion*, Akin Makinde's article "An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba example" Segun Gbadegesin's chapter "*Eniyan*: The Yoruba Concept of a Person" in the book *The African Philosophy Reader*, as well as so many others too numerous to mention.

Although, these scholars differ in some respects in their accounts of the ontological status of human nature in Yoruba traditional thought, but common to all these accounts are three principal components that constitute a person. These components are the *Ara* (the human body frame and all physical internal and external organs), the *Emi* (a component which is difficult to identify its english equivalent; however, for convenience and the purpose of this paper, its english equivalent is taking to be "the vital principle of life", that is, that whose presence or absence in a person respectively determines the consciousness or non-consciousness of a person), and finally *ori* (specifically called *ori-inu*, which literally translates as the inner-head, but technically means the personality-soul which is an embodiment of human destiny). These three components, as we earlier posited, feature prominently in all (and any for that matter) accounts of Yoruba conception of human personality, therefore, indicating their very significance in Yoruba worldview of a person.

At this point, let us consider the Yoruba ontological submission on how the three components are incorporated into the human person; in this connection, it is important to emphasize that all scholars that have written in this respect agreed that the moulding of the *Ara* (human body and its organs) is the assigned divine responsibility of the arch-divinity called *Orisa Nla* (one of the primordial divinities in Yoruba pantheon), and

according to the story, *Orisa Nla*, first of all mold the *Ara* after which the *Emiless* (that is, lifeless) body so mold is taking over by *Olodumare* (the supreme deity in Yoruba theology). This aspect of the Yoruba story is appropriately articulated by the following scholars: The physical element of a person is collectively known as *Ara* (body), a creation of *Orisa Nla* (the Yoruba God of creation) who is charge by *Olodumare* (God of Heaven) with the responsibility of molding human beings out of clay. These bodies were molded in different shapes, some of which are characterized by their beauty and some by their ugliness and deformity (Makinde, 2007: 103-104).

And,

Orisa Nla is responsible for molding the beautiful and the ugly, the tall and the short, the albino, the cripple and the deformed (Abimbola, 1971: 69-85)

And,

Eniyan is made by the combined effort of *Olodumare*, the supreme deity, and some subordinates. The body is constructed by *Orisa Nla*, the arch-divinity. The supreme deity then supplies *Emi* which activates the lifeless body (Gbadegesin, 1998: 153).

As we can see, *Orisa Nla* constructs the human body, but the body remains lifeless until *Olodumare* intervenes. It is this intervention by *Olodumare* after the finished body work by *Orisa Nla* that is primary to make the lifeless body to be lifeness, that is, the intervention by *Olodumare* results into the breathing of *Emi* into the lifeless body in order for it to have life. Recall that we translated *Emi* as the vital principle of life, thus, *Emi* is life and *Olodumare* is the giver of this life. Hence one of the numerous names of *Olodumare* is *Elemi* (Owner of life). Elucidating further, this aspect of the story receives attention in the submissions of the following thinkers:

Emi is that which gives life to the whole body...., its presence in, or absence from, the body is known only by the fact that a person is alive or dead..., and it is *Olodumare* alone who puts the *Emi* into man, thus giving him life and being (Idowu, 1962: 179).

And again,

Emi... is the vital principle, the seat of life, and *Olodumare* is the giver of this life, thus the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*) is called *Elemi* (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 181).

Most clearly,

Olodumare... is believed to be responsible for the creation of *Emi* - after *Orisa Nla* has molded all the physical elements... indeed, it could be said that the act of creation by *Olodumare* lies in the process of putting *Emi* into the finished work of *Orisa Nla*. *Emi* is therefore ... a fraction of the divine breath which *Olodumare* puts into every individual in order to make him a proper human being (Abimbola, 1971: 69-85).

And finally,

Emi is regarded by the Yoruba as the basis of

existence. It is the entity which gives life to a person, its presence or absence in a person makes the difference between life and death. It is conceived as that divine element in man which links him directly to God. According to Yoruba world-view, it is *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) who breathes it into the bodies formed by *Orisa Nla* (a primordial divinity) to make them living human beings (Oladipo, 1992: 19).

This ontological creation theory does not stop here, thus, it continues with the next stage of the process associated with what is called *Ori-Inu* (simply *Ori* in some accounts). It is important to note that at this point in the process we already have a conscious person (and not a lifeless being), thus, capable of (some) conscious activities.

Therefore, the story continues: immediately before participating or the coming to participate in living experience, the conscious person moves (consciously rather than bodily) to the house of *Ajala* (who is regarded as the potter of all *Ori-inu* in Yoruba theology), and this would-be sojourner to earth will either choose/given or be affixed (a controversial issue that falls outside our discussion in this paper but most important is that the elected candidates for earthly sojourn must possess it) with his *Ori-Inu*. For clarity and substantiation of this process, the below scholars submit thus,

...while *Orisa Nla* is the maker of *Ara* and *Olodumare* is responsible for the creation of *Emi*..., *Ajala*, "The potter who makes heads" in heaven is responsible for the creation of *Ori* (the inner head). After *Orisa Nla* has molded human being, he passes the lifeless figures to *Olodumare*, who by giving them *Emi*, gives them their...vital life force. The human being so created then moves on to the house of *Ajala* who gives them *Ori* (Abimbola, 1971: 70).

In furtherance of this point,

The creative process of the human being is a combined effort of the Supreme Being and some subordinates, (*Orisa Nla* and *Ajala*), and *Ajala* is the potter of *Ori*. "The idea is that after *emi* has been put in place, the newly created human being proceeds to the next stage - the house of *Ajala* - for the "choice" of an *Ori* (Gbadegesin, 1998: 155).

Though it is quite controversial whether one really chooses *Ori-Inu* in the house of *Ajala*. Some myths have it that it is affixed or allotted unto one while kneeling in the house of *Ajala*. Whatever is the case, the *Ori-Inu* is the bearer of one's destiny and each and every person coming into the world must possess it. The content of one's destiny determines, amongst other things, the individual personality in earthly existence. Given this general exposition of the Yoruba account of human creation story, let us now turn to consider the issue of when life begins in the foetus within the ambit of the story in our next section.

THE FOETUS' HUMANITY: THE YORUBA CONCEPTION

It is a scientific fact that sexual intercourse does not necessarily result into pregnancy even when the spermatozoa of a man and the ovum of his female counterpart are medically proven to be satisfactory active. This is also a long standing truth in Yoruba belief system, for instance, it is a commonly remarked among the Yoruba that "*Olorun ni o n fun Eniyan ni Omo*" (God is the giver of children). On this note, whenever *Olodumare* blesses the union between a man's spermatozoa and a woman's ovum during or after sexual intercourse, the Yoruba will say of a woman that *O ti fe Ara ku* (the woman has conceived) and as a result they will say "*Olorun ti gba Adura*" (God has answered prayer). At this point of conception, the Yoruba will not say "*O ti loyun*" (she is pregnant) because of the stages/processes involve between the moment of conception and the delivering of the baby (for instance *Orisa Nla* may or may not carry out the function of molding the *Ara* of the human person).

Immediately after the blessing of the union of spermatozoa and ovum of the two sexes by *Olodumare*, *Orisa Nla* sets to work, that is, *Orisa Nla* will embark on his assigned duty of constructing the body frame and all other physical organs. It is important to state that this process of body construction takes months ordinarily, however, it also depends on many factors: the availability of metaphysical material needed to carry-out the job, the mood of the *Orisa*, and so on. These reasons partially account for why some conceptions are lost early as a cluster of bloods or other kinds of fluid.

If the project of body construction takes place and completed as desired by *Orisa Nla*, this divinity then reports back to *Olodumare* categorically asserting that he has finished his assignment of body construction. This period is usually regarded as the first trimester of pregnancy to use the scientific term. At this point, *Olodumare* takes over the finished lifeless body from *Orisa Nla*, and on his own volition, either breaths or not breath *Emi* (life) into the constructed body. For some reasons that we may or may not be capable of comprehending, *Olodumare* (being the giver of life) can withhold that divine duty of breathing *Emi* (life) into the lifeless body; at some other point at this stage, *Olodumare* may breath *Emi* (life) into the constructed body and after sometimes (which can be before actual deliverance, at the point of deliverance, or after deliverance) *Olodumare* may withdraw the given life.

Most important, however, is that if *Emi* is withdrawn by *Olodumare* before birth or not given at all, and the human person is delivered as a lifeless body (known medically as still birth), that simply indicates that life does not begin in the foetus. But if the *Emi* is withdrawn in the process of

deliverance or immediately after deliverance, the Yoruba believes that it is here that life begins, only that it is cut short immediately it began. More precisely, the Yoruba hold life to empirically begin from the moment a person is born, make some noise or movements and if this conscious activities stop immediately, that is, if the *Emi* of the new born leaves the body to make it lifeless, the Yoruba strongly believe that this is not 'directly' the handwork of *Olodumare*, rather some causative factors may be responsible. Unambiguously, the Yoruba conception of when the life of a person begins is at the point the person is born as a baby, and he is seen to perform some psychical actions like crying and moving.

The implication of the foregoing is that the question of 'when life begins in the foetus?' does not yield uniform and absolute answer for the Yoruba as it is the case in western intellectual discourse. That is, the answer given to the question 'what is the humanity of the foetus?' is contingent. Hence, for the traditional Yoruba, given credence to their cosmogony, life can neither be categorically said to begin in the foetus either with reference to the point of conception (that is, union of spermatozoa and the ovum) or to brain functioning nor can life be universally said to begin in the foetus with reference to viability. The point at which it begins in different individuals varies in line with the whims and caprices of *Olodumare* who is the giver of life and who gives and takes at will. This understanding can at best be described as 'elastic conception' of the humanity of the foetus.

In the light of the above, to argue that the foetus possesses life (or does not possess life) at some period during development or precisely before birth does not arise in Yoruba belief system; this is so because the function of *Olodumare* in this process is shrouded in mystery. And this is one of the many mysteries that the western intellectual tradition is yet to uncover and refuses to admit as incomprehensible by the human mind, by extension therefore, this also accounts for the many misconceptions in western philosophy regarding when the life of a foetus begins.

In clear statement, the enterprise to determine or argue when the life of a foetus begins (as it is done in western thought) does not arise in Yoruba traditional system of thought as demonstrated above. Hence, the contest of arguments over whether abortion should be morally/legally right or wrong remains a not too serious problem in Yoruba thought. We must note however that the issue of whether Yoruba belief supports abortion or not is entirely a different discourse from this present one, thus by this supposition, it should not be mistaken for any intellectual position concerning Yoruba thought on the issue of abortion.

Furthermore, unambiguous understanding of Western intellectual tradition on this matter of when the life of a

foetus begins show that none of the various and diverse arguments argues or favors at-birth liveness of the foetus, a position that is clearly held by the Yoruba belief system as demonstrated above; in addition to this, none of the western theories on the foetus' humanity gives account of why still-birth occurs in some cases, and the Yoruba account given above adequately takes care of this.

CONCLUSION

From the above, the Yoruba conception of when life begins in the foetus is clearly articulated as whenever *Olodumare* breathed life into the created being by *Orisa Nla*, and that this life can at any point be withdrawn by the benefactor (*Olodumare* being the sole giver and taker of life) from the beneficiary (the would-be person as a foetus). This action of withdrawing life from the foetus by *Olodumare*, as we have shown above, can be necessitated by factors within or without the confine of *Olodumare* but not without the effort and knowledge of *Olodumare*.

Fundamentally, the Yoruba conception of the foetus' humanity raises some difficulties and questions not necessarily of some magnitude raised in western bioethical discourse. While the questions: 'is the foetus a human being/a person?' and 'does the foetus have a right to life?' have preoccupied the attention of western bioethical thinkers, for the Yoruba, these may not necessarily be important as the question: 'what is the humanity of the foetus?'

Thus, it is very clear that the Yoruba conception of when life begins in the foetus takes care of the inadequacies inherent in western conceptions, and by extension addresses some of the controversies generated in western philosophical discourse on the issue.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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