



WESTERN EXISTENTIALIST THEMES IN INDIGENOUS YORUBA THOUGHT

Abidemi Israel OGUNYOMI & Emmanuel Adetokunbo OGUNDELE

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Augustine University

abidemi.ogunyomi@augustineuniversity.edu.ng; adetokunbo.ogundele@augustineuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

Existentialism as an intellectual movement is often exclusively attributed to the Western world due to the fact that it sprang in the Nineteenth/Twentieth Century as a remarkable interjection in the historical stream of Western Philosophy. However, the ascription of the sole monopoly of this field of philosophy to the Western world impresses a parochial understanding of it. This is because all affairs of human beings, irrespective of whether or not they are Westerners, revolves around issues that are of enormous existential significance. Besides, some recurrent themes in Existentialism are observable in the thought systems of other cultural civilizations all over the world. For example, in Yoruba thought, there are those notable themes such as freedom, death, choice, responsibility, and so on, that are of pure existentialist value. Using the method of using the method of comparative analysis, therefore, we attempt in this paper to discuss some of those themes and explore their existential imports, in the light of their conceptions in Western Existentialism, focusing specifically on the themes of essence and existence, death and authenticity.

Keywords: Existentialism, Existentialist Themes, Yoruba Thought System

Introduction

This paper discusses some existentialist themes in Yoruba thought system thereby deconstructing the seemingly enduring impression that only the Western thought systems enjoy the sole monopoly of this field of philosophy while other cultural civilizations are oblivious of it. For instance, defining existentialism, F. H. Heinemann avers that it (existentialism) represents one of the essential forms of West European Philosophy in the age of European collapse, identifying German, French and Italian traditions.¹ While it is true that existentialism as a philosophical movement was popularized and attracted a wide scholarly attention in the 19th Century in the West, it is not untrue that traces of existentialist thinking are observable in other thought systems apart from the three: German, French and Italian traditions, identified by Heinemann. This is because objects of existentialist investigations are present in other cultural civilizations.

From the vantage point of various Western conception of the term, it may be a bit difficult to give a precise definition of existentialism. That is, a definition that distinctly marks it out like idealism or materialism as a school of thought in philosophy. This is because of the divergence in the views and religious convictions of its notable advocates such as Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger,

¹ F. H. Heinemann, 1958. *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*. Harper and Brothers Publishers: New York. P. 3.



Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and the rest of them. Notwithstanding, there are some basic characteristics which the advocates of existentialism have in common in spite of their different ideological orientation. The first is that their point of philosophizing begins with man, not with nature. The second is that they place more emphasis on the subjective and not the objective dimension of human beings. The third is that they assign a role to man as an initiator of action and centre of feeling.² From all these, we may safely define existentialism as a philosophical tradition that concerns itself with the human conditions and experiences in the world. This definition further reinforces our initial claim that other cultural civilizations other than the West are also not ignorant of existentialism. The reason is clear and simple: not only the westerners are human beings. Following from this, other thought systems too have certain fundamental human experiences which existentialism as a philosophical movement so desires to investigate and understand.

A Brief Survey of the Development of Existentialism

There are two major views on the development of Western existentialism. First, it is understood to be a movement that started with Kierkegaard, whose philosophy itself is a revolt against the prevalent idealism and rationalism of philosophers like Fredrick Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and others. These idealist-rationalists distanced themselves from the situations of human beings and their practical experiences in the world. Besides, too much emphasis was placed on the objective while the subjective was ignored. Consequently, Kierkegaard considered it necessary to draw the attention of the intellectuals of his period to the fact that the subjective dimension of man which they so despised and ignored, was as important as the objective dimension to which they dedicated their whole attention. As a result, Kierkegaard's philosophical irrationalism arose in order to give credence to the subjective aspect of man. Hence, he is regarded as the father of existentialism. Hegel's abstract objectivity and systematization ignores the importance, uniqueness and the individuality of human person. Kierkegaard rejects this objectivity, replacing it with subjectivity.³ This subjectivity assigns an active role to human beings in the drama of life contrary to the passive role that Hegelian idealism and the rationalist philosophers assign to human beings.

Secondly, Western existentialism can be explained as a philosophical tradition that developed from Husserl's Phenomenology. Phenomenology, however, is a movement that developed within the Continental Europe, particularly in Germany and France. While phenomenology recommends that we explore phenomena more subjectively from within our human experience, existentialism adopts phenomenology's subjective approach and further develops practical issues of human experience, such as making choices and personal commitments.⁴ Apart from making choices and personal commitments or responsibility, there are some other important existentialist concerns such as essence, death, absurdity, anguish, freedom authenticity and inauthenticity. All these themes border on the experiential circumstances of human beings and the decisions they have to

² John Macquarrie, 1972. *Existentialism*. USA: Corpus Instrumentorum, Inc. pp. 1-3.

³ Joseph I. Omoregbe, 1991. *A Simplified History of Philosophy*. Nigeria: Joja Press Limited. p.155.

⁴ Stumpf, E. S. & Fiester, J. 2003. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. London: Kenneth King, 7th edition. p.450.



make in order to make existence meaningful as much as possible for themselves. However, our task in this paper is to explore some existentialist concerns in Yoruba Culture. This paper therefore focuses mainly on existence and essence, death and authenticity.

Yoruba Thought and Its Existential Significance

The Yoruba constitute one of the major ethnic nationalities in West Africa. They inhabit south-west Nigeria which comprises Osun State, Oyo State, Ekiti State, Lagos State, Ondo State and Ogun State. However, some of them constitute the majority in North-Central states like: Kwara and Kogi States in Nigeria. They can also be found in places like Benin, Togo and Brazil, and so on.⁵

Being part of life as human beings, Yoruba people have some existentialist perspectives about the human situations and conditions in existence. Since existentialism is a philosophy of life and human conditions, they also have their explanations on the various existentialist themes such as freedom, authenticity, essence and death.

The existentialism of Yoruba culture is strongly connected with their ontology and metaphysics. For the Yoruba, to understand the human conditions or situations in existence, we must first understand his personality and his personality cannot be understood without understanding his composition. In other words, what a human being or human person is made up of is an important factor in the explanation of his existential conditions. This is because the composition of a human person has a strong implication for his existence. There is a tripartite understanding of the human personality in the Yoruba ontology. There is the Ori (the inner head), Ara (the body) and emi (the soul or spirit).⁶ These three elements determine the human personalities and their existentialist conditions. They will be discussed more extensively as we delve into the Yoruba perspective on the various themes in existentialism.

Yoruba Thought on Existence and Essence: The Idea of Predestination

Some of the central themes in western existentialism are essence and existence. These themes also have direct implications for the themes of freedom, choice and responsibility. In western existentialism, choice is central to human nature. However, this view rests significantly on Sartre's assertion that existence precedes essence, which is usually considered as the central motto of the existentialists.⁷ The meaning of this is that one must exist before one become. This is well pronounced, especially in the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre. It throws all the beliefs about destination, determinism, predetermination or predestination away as outright nonsense. For the

⁵ Bolatito Lanre-Abass, 2010. "Suicide and Human Dignity: An African Perspective." *Humanity & Social Sciences Journal*, Vol. 5, (1), p.57.

⁶ Akin Makinde, 2010. "An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Example" in: *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press. p.110.

⁷ Olatunji Oyeshile, 2005. *Reconciling the Self with the Other: An Existentialist Perspective on the Management of Ethnic Conflicts in Africa*. Ibadan: Hope publications. p.27.



existentialists, human beings find ourselves in the world into which they were thrown without being consulted. In other words, human beings are just thrown into the world haphazardly or abandoned like Heidegger would say. Man is a being-in-the-world, where he must find possibilities and purpose.⁸ This is the fact of our existence. Be that as it may, existentialists contend that it is the duty of human beings to create or propel their essence in order to give themselves a meaningful direction and purpose in existence. However, while noting that human beings have the duty to find purpose or direction for themselves in existence, existentialists maintain that their choices come with corresponding responsibilities which they must also bear. In other words, while human beings are free to make their choices in the world, this ability to make choices comes with inescapable responsibilities.

Western existentialists' idea of freedom gives birth to their emphasis on responsibility. Since human beings are free to make choices in the world, they are responsible for the type of choices they make for themselves. In the words of Sartre for instance, human beings are condemned to be free.⁹ The freedom to make choices without the influence of other people is what the existentialists refer to as authenticity.

Contrary to the western existentialist claim that existence precedes essence, in Yoruba existentialist thought, the thesis that essence precedes existence is prevalent. In other words, for the Yoruba people, one becomes before one exists. In fact, existence is just a practical demonstration of what one already is. This thesis is deeply rooted in their belief in predetermination and predestination. For the Yoruba people, existence is like living out an already propelled or determined life. That is, in existence, one merely unfolds what has been wound up as destiny prior to one's existence.

Basically, in Yoruba ontology, there is a tripartite explanation of human personality. A human person is made up of Ori (inner head), Emi (soul/spirit), and Ara (body). The Ori has a dual character, in the first place, it refers to the physical head as part of the body, in another sense, it refers to a nonphysical 'inner head' or 'bearer of destiny'. Ara is the physical body. It is destructible at death. Emi refers to the soul or spirit. It is indestructible and it outlives the human body after death.

These elements are created respectively by different deities. This is because of the hierarchical order in Yoruba world of reality. Osanla is a lesser deity, which is responsible for the creation of the body; Ajala is also a lesser deity responsible for the creation of the inner head (which is the bearer of destiny); while Olodumare is the supreme deity responsible for the creation of the soul or mind. According to Makinde, after the molding of human beings by Osanlan he passes the

⁸ Frederick Copleston, 2003. *A History of Philosophy Vol. 11: Logical Positivism and Existentialism*. Latest Edition. London: Continuum International Publishing Group. P. 179.

⁹ Stumpf, E. S. & Fiester, J. 2003. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. pp. 464-465.



lifeless figures to Olodumare, who gives them the emi or soul, which is a vital force. The created human beings therefore move to the house of Ajala, who gives them Ori or inner heads.¹⁰

The inner head, is the bearer of destiny and it is what determines one's fate in existence. Whatever one becomes in existence is what has already been wound up in one's inner head prior to one's existence in the world of experience. There are however conflicting account on how individual human persons obtain this inner head. This has generated several arguments about freedom and determinism in the choice of Ori. According to Gbadegesin,

The ori is, as it were, the 'case' in which individual destinies are wound up. Each newly created being picks up her preferred 'case' without knowing what is stored there. But whatever is stored therein will determine the life-course of the individual in the world. It is thus the Ori so chosen that, as the bearer of the individual's destiny, determines her personality.¹¹

Abimbola also shares the above view with Gbadegesin. Like Gbadegesin, Abimbola argues that there is no freedom in the choice of Ori. Destiny does not change and neither can it be altered. With one's unknown choice of good or bad Ori, one is destined or doomed to success or failure in life.¹² However, Makinde posits that the human condition is not entirely doomed to one's chosen destiny as one can still offer sacrifices to the ancestors or one's Ori for the necessary amendments.¹³ This, he calls 'soft-determinism' as against strict determinism or determinism proper. Whether soft or strict, however, determinism is determinism.

This is in a sharp contrast with the existentialist claim that existence precedes essence. The case for predetermination and predestination is unequivocal in the Yoruba ontology. This strongly presupposes that essence precedes existence. One, by choosing one's Ori, has, in the effect, chosen one's essence. One merely goes into the world after the choice of essence to unfold the essence which one has chosen in existence. What makes the matter more problematic is that one has no idea of the kind of destiny that is wound up in the inner head which one chooses. For this reason, that "choice" so to say, is not a free choice.

The implication of this is that human beings are not free to determine their fates in existence, unless they appeal like Makinde argues, through sacrifices to the ancestors for necessary amendments in

¹⁰ Akin Makinde, 2010. "An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Example" in: *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*. p.104.

¹¹ Segun Gbadegesin, 1991. "Eniyan: The Yoruba Concept of a Person" in: *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. New York: Peter Lang. pp. 36-37.

¹² Wande Abimbola, 1976. *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press. pp. 113-132; Wande Abimbola, 2015. *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa*. Ibadan: University Press Plc. pp. 147 -170.

¹³ Akin Makinde, 2010. "A Philosophical Analysis of the Yoruba Concept of Ori and Human Destiny" in: *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press. pp.128-132.



the course of their existence. This is, for instance, contrary to Sartre's claim that we are condemned to be free. Predetermination is incompatible with freedom since it connotes the idea of purpose. For the Yoruba, human beings are not just thrown into the world haphazardly or abandoned like Heidegger claims. They are in the world to fulfil some definite purposes, which can also be described as their essence. Existence is just like a reveler of predetermined essences of individuals. It is not the case that individuals exist to create their essences as the western existentialists contend. This is evident in such Yoruba proverb as: *Bi a ti waye pe a o ri laa ri, oyeye o ni ye kadara lai-lai!* That is "We merely become what we are to be in existence, nothing alters fate!"

Yoruba Existentialist Thought on Death: Reincarnation and Immortality in Perspective

Another important theme in existentialism is death. Western existentialists offer different perspectives on the theme of death. Atheistic existentialists see human beings as finite beings. Death is regarded as the end of individuals especially by the atheistic existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. Its awareness on the one hand, makes it imperative for human beings to live an authentic life, knowing that life is finite and that existence is limited. In fact, the awareness of one's own death for Heidegger, is what gives meaning to one's existence as a being in the world.¹⁴ In addition, Heidegger contends that Dasein is a "being-towards-death," describing death as a phenomenon which Dasein anticipates and towards which it behaves.¹⁵

On the other hand, the awareness of death evokes the feeling of anguish, absurdity, nothingness, and meaninglessness of life in individuals. This is because of its inexplicable nature and the helplessness of man to find rational explanation and meaning to the puzzles and problems of existence. This is what Albert Camus describes as absurdity. The awareness of death as a limitation to human existence has been designated by different words such as nothingness, anxiety, and despair, and so on; by the existentialists. Sartre says that nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm.¹⁶ Western existentialists contend that death is as absurd as birth. While the consent of one is not sought before birth, death marks the wiping away of one's consciousness and existence, again without one's consent. For this reason, it is considered to be a witness to the absurdity of human existence.¹⁷

In Yoruba existentialist thought, however, death (Iku) is a real phenomenon in existence. It is a constant reality that one has to grapple with. In other words, one cannot escape death. It is a debt that must be paid. This is evident in such proverbs as: *Oku n sunkun Oku* meaning "the dead mourns

¹⁴ Hoffman, P. 1993. "Death, Time, History: Division II of Being and Time" in: *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. USA: Cambridge University Press. p.196.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, 1953. *Existence and Being*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company. P. 56; Joseph Omoregbe, 2021. *Phenomenology: The Methodology of Philosophical Investigation*. Abeokuta: Hopasst Concept. P. 28; Maurice Friedman, (ed) 1999. *The World of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*. New York: Humanities Books. Pp. 144-145.

¹⁶ Stumpf, E. S. & Fiester, J. 2003. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. p.465.

¹⁷ T. Z. Lavine. 1984. *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophical Quest*. Bantam Books: Toronto. pp. 331-332.



the dead”, *a wa’ye ma ku kan ko si*, meaning “no one in existence will escape death” and *gbogbo wa la dagbada Iku*, meaning “we all have sown a garment of death”.

Unlike the western existentialists, however, death is seen in Yoruba thought as a transition. This rests heavily on the belief of the Yoruba in reincarnation and immortality of the soul. The soul is believed to outlive the body after death and it lives on in the transcendental world. This, nonetheless, depends on the age of the deceased. The death of a young person comes with serious mourning among the Yoruba. It is also believed that such persons will reincarnate to fulfill destiny.

If an elderly person dies, the person merely joins the ancestors in the transcendental world. In other words, such a person lives on with the group of the dead. Death is not, in this wise, seen as an end but as a continuity of existence in the nonphysical world. This non-physical world, however, has a direct connection with the physical world. This, again, is predicated on the hierarchical order in the Yoruba world of reality. An elderly person that dies automatically joins the league of ancestors, to which the other people on earth offer sacrifices and libations when they are confronted with problems. This view is well expounded in the works of Akin Makinde, Ifeanyi Menkiti and Segun Gbadegesin. The Akan culture in Ghana also shares this belief. This is well captured in the works of Kwame Gyekye, and Kwasi Wiredu.¹⁸

While western existentialists see death as a limitation to human existence, the awareness of which gives meaning to human existence on the one hand and provokes anxiety and despair on the other, Yoruba existentialism sees death as a mere transition and continuity of existence in the transcendental world. This, as discussed before, rests heavily on their belief in the immortality of soul and reincarnation.

Yoruba Existentialist Thought on Authenticity: The Individual and the Community:

While western existentialists emphasize subjectivity and individuality in order for a person or ‘the self’ to attain authenticity, Yoruba existentialist thought perceives individualism and subjectivism as something injurious to authenticity. The reason for this is not far-fetched: the traditional Yoruba system is basically communistic in nature. Due to the fact that individuals are born into the community, they are necessarily part of the community right from infancy to adulthood. In fact, it is the community that nurtures and shapes the reasoning and character of the individuals in it. This is predicated on the popular saying by John Mbiti: “I am because we are, since we are, therefore I am”,¹⁹ which is extensively analyzed in Ifeanyi Menkiti’s *Person and Community in African Thought*. Segun Gbadegesin also discusses it extensively. For Gbadegesin, individuals are incorporated into the community right from birth. Babies are delivered into waiting hands of co-wives and elders, who see to their proper upbringing. Children are named according to the

¹⁸ See Ifeanyi Menkiti 1997. “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought” in Wright, R. (ed.) *African Philosophy: An Introduction*. pp. 174-175. See also Kwasi Wiredu 1992. “Death and the Afterlife in African Culture” in Wiredu, K and Gyekye, K. (eds.) *Person and Community: Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change*. pp. 137-140.

¹⁹ Ifeanyi Menkiti, 1997. “Person and Community in African Thought” in: Wright, R. (ed.) *African Philosophy: An introduction*. Third Edition. Aba: Vitalis Books. P. 171.



circumstances of their birth and the family profession. Elders consult the oracle for the kind of work which the children have been destined for and they make sure they nurture them until they become “what they are to be”. This passes through a strong system of socialization which begins from the family and extends to the community.²⁰ According to Gbadegesin therefore,

The process of socialization begins in the family and the household compound and eventually extends into the larger community, where the child is further exposed to the virtues of communal life. Here, children witness the selfless efforts of others to uplift the community. They gain firsthand experience of how adults contribute to children's welfare, how women and men work on farms, and how warriors risk their lives to protect the community. Building on their initial exposure within the family environment, they start to see themselves as part of those who should uphold the community's values and, being prepared for this role, they, both individually and collectively, are unlikely to favor individualism. This aligns with the common saying among Africans, "I am because we are; I exist because the community exists." From this, it is clear that individuals in Yoruba culture find their true selves through community and collectivism, thanks to the strong socialization system they are exposed to from an early age. This stands in contrast to existentialism, which emphasizes subjectivism and makes individualism an inevitable idea.

Western existentialists claim that the choices of individuals should not be influenced by the others or by the society. Individual human beings are free to make their choices and live their lives to the fullest without any external influence of the society or other human beings, and each person is responsible for his choice. This is their idea of authenticity. However, they express different views on the theme of authenticity. For Heidegger, authenticity is the awareness and acceptance of one's own death while inauthenticity is trying to deny the fact of one's mortality.²¹ However, for Sartre, authenticity means freedom from the external controls of other people or circumstances. Failure to live a free or uncontrolled life especially if we think we are determined or predetermined is what Sartre refers to as inauthenticity and bad faith.²²

Nonetheless, despite the fact that they emphasize subjectivism, some existentialists still admit that there are roles that individuals need to play in relation to others. For instance, Sartre argues that by choosing for themselves, individuals are in the effect, choosing for others.²³ Martin Buber also

²⁰ Segun Gbadegesin, 1991. “Individuality, Community and the Moral Order” in: *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. New York: Perter Lang. p.63.

²¹ Stumpf, E. S. & Fiester, J. 2003. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. pp.455-456.

²² Kole Jimoh, 2014. *An Introduction to Existentialism, Phenomenology, and Hermeneutics*. Ibadan: Ebony Books. p.72.

²³ Olatunji Oyeshile, 2005. *Reconciling the Self with the Other: An Existentialist Perspective on the Management of Ethnic Conflicts in Africa*. p.33



expresses a similar view in his work titled: *I and Thou*. He emphasizes the significance of the others in relation to an individual through I and thou relationship as against “I and it” relationship. Gabriel Marcel also expresses a similar view through the concept of promise and fidelity.²⁴ This is consisted

²⁴ Ibid. pp.37-43.

Bibliography

- Abimbola, W. 2015. *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa*. Ibadan: University Press Plc.
- Abimbola, W. 1976. *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Copleston, F. 2003. *A History of Philosophy Vol. 11: Logical Positivism and Existentialism*. Latest Edition. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Friedman, M. (ed) 1999. *The World of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*. New York: Humanities Books.
- Gbadegesin, S. 1991. “Eniyan: The Yoruba Concept of a Person” in: *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. New York: Perter Lang.
- Heidegger, M. 1953. *Existence and Being*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.
- Heinemann, F. H. 1958. *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*. Harper and Brothers Publishers: New York.
- Hoffman, P. 1993. “Death, Time, History: Division II of Being and Time” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Jimoh, K. A. 2014. *An Introduction to Existentialism, Phenomenology, and Hermeneutics*. Ibadan: Ebony Books.
- Lanre-Abass, B. A. 2010. “Suicide and Human Dignity: An African Perspective.” *Humanity & Social Sciences Journal*, Vol. 5, (1), p.57.
- Lavine T. Z. 1984. *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophical Quest*. Bantam Books: Toronto.
- Macquarrie, J. 1972. *Existentialism*. USA: Corpus Instrumentorum, Inc.
- Makinde, M. A. 2010. “A Philosophical Analysis of the Yoruba Concept of Ori and Human Destiny” in: *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- Menkiti, I. 1997 “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought” in Wright, R. (ed.) *African Philosophy: An Introduction*. Third Edition. Aba: Vitalis Books.
- Omoregbe, J. I. 1991. *A Simplified History of Philosophy*. Nigeria: Joja Press Limited.
- Omoregbe, J. I. 2021. *Phenomenology: The Methodology of Philosophical Investigation*. Abeokuta: Hopasst Concept.
- Oyeshile, O. A. 2005. *Reconciling the Self with the Other: An Existentialist Perspective on the Management of Ethnic Conflicts in Africa*. Ibadan: Hope publications.
- Stumpf, E. S. & Fiester, J. 2003. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. 7th edition. London: Kenneth King.
- Wiredu, K. 1992. “Death and the Afterlife in African Culture” in Wiredu, K and Kyekye, K. (eds.) *Person and Community: Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change*. Ghana: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies.