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Rethinking the notion of immortality in Yoruba mythology and its impact on peaceful co-existence and social harmony in Southwest, Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines the idea of immortality of the soul in Yoruba mythological account, considering the positive impact of the phenomenon on peaceful co-existence and harmonious living among the indigenous people of southwestern Nigeria. It further lucidly argues for African origin of the widespread Western conception of immortality and contends that the Yoruba conception of this notion is native or original with them. The paper, which employed critical-analytical method, upholds that the Yoruba belief in immortality is inextricably connected to indigenous ethical principles and values, which is uppermost in the self-interest of its believers. It establishes that immortality and peaceful coexistence are intertwined concepts in Yoruba cosmology rooted in several interconnected cultural beliefs and spiritual practices linked with ancestral continuity. The paper navigates the critique of personal immortality by providing a demythological interpretation of the concept that not only promotes harmony and balance within an individual, community, and the environment, but also ensures continuity of cultural values and traditions, and guides decision-making and actions for a long-term impact on character development, ethical living and peaceful corporate existence. The paper therefore concludes that the concept of immortality in Yoruba philosophy is not merely a speculative metaphysical claim about life after death, but its existential significance lies in its ethical impacts on social relations, particularly in terms of enhancing peaceful co-existence and harmonious relationship among the indigenous people in the region.

Keywords: Immortality, Myth, Peaceful Co-existence, Social Harmony, Southwest

Introduction

The immortality of the soul constitutes both a religious and philosophical conviction, and indeed a metaphysical inquiry that has persistently challenged human understanding for millennia.[2]From ancient times to the contemporary period, the nature and ultimate fate of the human soul have persisted as philosophically indeterminate questions, generating diverse interpretations informed by cultural traditions, theological perspectives, and existential reflection. Humanity's enduring engagement with this question reveals a tension between the empirical limits of human knowledge and the intuitive longing to transcend finitude. Despite sustained intellectual efforts, the

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boundary separating the spatio-temporal realm from any presumed transcendent order remains epistemically obscure. Consequently, immortality continues to function as both a deeply contested philosophical problem and a resilient existential belief. While many traditions sustain confidence in some form of post-mortem continuity, others maintain a strict naturalistic position, arguing that human existence terminates at death and that claims of an afterlife lack empirical or scientific justification. Within this dialectic, belief in immortality often rests on metaphysical hope, moral intuition, or faith rather than demonstrable certainty, thereby preserving the debate as one of philosophy's most enduring and unresolved questions.[3]

Immortality is the belief that the conscious essence of the human person, commonly described as the soul or spirit, is capable of persisting beyond the dissolution of the physical body.[4] It implies that personal identity is not wholly reducible to material existence but possesses an incorruptible and enduring dimension. Thus conceived, immortality signifies the continuation of being after bodily death, a notion affirmed in diverse ways within mystical traditions and major religious systems such as Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion, even though their doctrinal interpretations differ significantly. Conceptually, immortality must be distinguished from transmigration of the soul, which posits a transfer of the deceased's essence into another human or non-human form,[5] and from reincarnation, the doctrine that the soul repeatedly assumes new bodily embodiments.[6] While these ideas are distinct, both transmigration and reincarnation logically presuppose some form of the soul's persistence beyond death.

Belief in the immortality of the soul appears as a cross-cultural and historically pervasive phenomenon, extending beyond so-called "higher" religions to societies at varied stages of intellectual and cultural development. Although philosophical history records persistent debates between proponents and skeptics, rendering immortality a contested metaphysical thesis, its enduring presence in human thought suggests that it addresses fundamental existential concerns about identity, meaning, and destiny. Consequently, regardless of one's evaluative stance, the concept of immortality remains a significant subject of philosophical inquiry that cannot be dismissed without overlooking a central dimension of humanity's reflective self-understanding. The persistent decline in global life expectancy has, paradoxically, intensified humanity's existential longing for a reality that transcends mortality. Such longing finds expression in

[3]Antony Garrard Newton Flew. "Can A Man Witness His Own Funeral?"*Hibbert Journal* (1956), 242-250; Ian Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 82; P. O. Bodunrin. Alogicality of Immortality, *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 4 no.2, (1975), 39-42; Clarence Darrow. The Myth of Immortality, *The Forum*, 1978.
[4] James Frazer, *The Belief in Immortality* (Cambridge: Trinity College, 1968).
[5]Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 2002), 74.
[6]Joseph Awolalu and Pius Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press Ltd, 1979); UkpongEtuk, *Religion and Cultural Identity* (Ibadan: Hope Press, 2002), 102-129

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the cultural practice of deifying the dead, a phenomenon that implicitly affirms belief in the enduring nature of the human soul. Any philosophical account of deification, therefore, must begin with an examination of the broader metaphysical conviction that personal existence is not exhausted by bodily death. Historically, this conviction appears to emerge from reflective engagement with both inward experiences, such as dreams, visions, and altered states of consciousness, and outward encounters with the rhythms of life and death. Yet human responses to the idea of immortality are far from uniform. Some societies and individuals remain primarily oriented toward the immediacy of worldly existence, treating speculations about an afterlife with relative indifference. Others, however, have cultivated a profound preoccupation with post-mortem existence, elevating the hope for eternal fulfillment above the transient pleasures of temporal life and thereby reconfiguring ethical priorities and existential aspirations.[7]

Within Yoruba philosophical discourse, prominent scholars including Idowu, Abimbola, Makinde, Gbadegesin, Awolalu and Dopamu have offered nuanced analyses of human ontology.[8] While a general consensus affirms a dual constitution of the person the material body (*ara*) and a vital spiritual principle (*emi*), significant debates persist regarding the precise structure of human existence. The concept of *ori*, often understood as an inner spiritual consciousness or bearer of destiny, occupies a central place in these discussions, shaping notions of individuality, moral responsibility, and life purpose.[9] Some thinkers advocate a dualistic model of body and soul, whereas others propose a tripartite framework encompassing body, soul, and *ori*.[10] Idowu emphasizes the creative agency of Olodumare in the formation of humanity, while Abimbola foregrounds a more collaborative cosmology involving divine intermediaries.[11] Despite these interpretive differences, their collective scholarship illuminates the depth of Yoruba metaphysical reflection on personhood.

Against this philosophical background, the present study seeks to interrogate the concept of immortality within Yoruba thought and to examine how such metaphysical assumptions may inform ideals of peaceful coexistence and social harmony in contemporary Southwest Nigeria.

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[7]James. G. Frazer,*The Belief in Immortality* (Cambridge: Trinity College, 1968).
[8]Kanu Ikechukwu et al.,"The Human Person in Yoruba Culture and Philosophy", *AMAMHIE Journal of Applied Philosophy,* 15 no.1 (2017)
[9]SegunGbadegesin, "The Yoruba Conception of a Person and its Implication on Fatalism, Determinism and Human Destiny", *Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, 4 no. 1-2 (1983): 61-78
[10]Kola Abimbola, *The Yoruba Concept of Human Personality* (Birmigham: Iroko, 2006)
[11]Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Press, 1962),169-174
Wande Abimbola" The Yoruba Concept of Human Personality". *In La Notion De Personne en Afrique Noire*
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Historical Reflection on African Origins of the Concept of Immortality

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul, often credited to Plato and later integrated into Christian theology, may have deeper African antecedents.[12] This is because historical arguments suggest that this doctrine did not originate with the Greeks themselves but was inherited from earlier Egyptian thought. Classical sources such as Herodotus (fifth century BC) indicate that the Egyptians were among the earliest proponents of the soul's immortality, a view subsequently appropriated within Greek philosophical discourse as though it were indigenous to their own intellectual tradition.[13] Greek thinkers, including Socrates, conceptualized death as the separation of an indestructible soul from the body, yet the historical genealogy of this idea remains philosophically contested.[14] Comparative scholarship, notably that of Charles de Brosses (1709-1777), raises the possibility that broader African religious traditions, including those of West Africa, may have informed Greek metaphysical thought, thereby challenging narratives that situate the origins of soul–body dualism exclusively within Hellenic philosophy.[15]

Within the Western canon, Plato articulated a decisive ontological distinction between body and soul, later systematized by Descartes' substance dualism[16] and further explored by Augustine's theological reflections.[17] However, Plato's intellectual indebtedness to Pythagoras, whose engagement with Egyptian traditions is well documented, suggests that Greek dualism may represent a philosophical reformulation of earlier African metaphysical insights. Moreover, the presence of sophisticated beliefs concerning immortality and spiritual continuity among sub-Saharan African societies, such as the Yoruba, complicates linear accounts of intellectual transmission. In the absence of clear historical evidence of direct contact, these similarities may indicate either independent parallel developments or lost networks of intercultural exchange.[18]

Consequently, the philosophical history of immortality is better interpreted not as a linear Greek invention, but as an intellectual outcome shaped by complex intercultural exchanges between African and Mediterranean civilizations. Whether Egyptian and sub-Saharan traditions influenced one another or emerged independently, African metaphysical systems remain central to the genealogy of soul-body dualism. Recognizing this broader intellectual landscape not only repositions Africa within global philosophical history but also

[12] John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 124
[13]Moses Makinde, "Immortality of the Soul and Yoruba Conception of Seven Heavens (OrunMeje)," *Journal of Cultures and Ideas*, 4 no.1 (1983): 31.
[14] ibid
[15]Innocent Onyewuenyi, *African Origin of Greek Philosophy* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 1994); The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 6, 15th Edition (1997).
[16] Rene Descartes. *Key Philosophical Writings* (Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 139-147.
[17] Moses Makinde, (1983): 31
[18] Ibid

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underscores the dynamic processes of borrowing, adaptation, and reinterpretation through which metaphysical concepts evolve across cultures.[19]

Yoruba Mythological Account of Immortality of the Soul

In the Yoruba belief system, the notion of immortality, often articulated through mythic narratives, is inseparable from indigenous ethical ideals and the sense of moral responsibility that structures communal life and personal aspiration.[20] The Yoruba analysis of personhood ultimately converges on a metaphysical affirmation of the soul's continuity beyond physical existence.[21] In this framework, the human person (*eniyan*) is conceived as a composite reality, constituted by both material and spiritual dimensions. While the term "man" may denote the visible, tangible body, the true locus of human identity is located in the animating spiritual principle or personality-soul, regarded as the enduring essence of the individual.

Central to this anthropology is *ara*, the corporeal aspect of human existence. *Ara* signifies the physico-material body through which individuals engage with and respond to the empirical world. It functions as the vehicle of action, perception, and interaction within the physical environment, yet it does not exhaust the meaning of personhood. Rather, in Yoruba metaphysical reflection, the body serves as the outward manifestation of deeper spiritual realities that ground the idea of immortality and the continuity of personal existence beyond the limits of bodily life. *Ara* (the corporeal body) functions as the temporal dwelling place of the other constituents of personhood. It is the visible "house" that accommodates the spiritual elements during earthly existence; yet at death it is *ara* that is interred and allowed to decay, signifying the transient nature of material embodiment in contrast to the enduring dimensions of the self.

Emi, often translated as soul or vital principle, represents the animating breath of life, the spiritual force that confers consciousness, personality, and vitality upon the human being. It is regarded simultaneously as divine breath, imperishable essence, and the seat of personal identity.[22] Within Yoruba thought, the cessation of breath signals the departure of *emi*, underscoring its intimate link with life itself. This vital spirit is believed to originate from Olodumare, the Supreme Being, whose creative act endows each individual with

[19]Peter Bodunrin. "The Question of African Philosophy" C. S. Momoh (ed.), *Substance of African Philosophy* (Auchi: APP Publications, 1989), 44.
[20] Moses Oke. "Self Interest as the Ground of Moral Obligation". *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy. Special Issue: Ethics and African Societies*, 1 no. 2 (1988): 90-99 Wande Abimbola" The Yoruba Concept of Human Personality". *In La Notion De PersonneenAfrique Noire*
Colloques International de Centre National de la RechercheScientifique, NO 544, (1971): 73-89.
[21]Alfred Udugowomen (ed.). "Traditional African Solution to the Problem of Personal Immortality" *Footmarks on African Philosophy* (Lagos: O.O. Press, 2002), 76.
[22]John Lucas,*The Religion of the Yoruba* (Lagos: CMS Bookshop, 1948), 246-250. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Press, 1962), 169-174. Joseph Awolalu and Pius Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press Limited, 1979), 253-254.

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authentic humanity. Closely related to *emi* is *ori*, the "inner head" (*oriinu*), a metaphysical principle symbolized by the physical head but transcending mere biological function. While the physical head houses the intellect, *oriinu*is conceived as the locus of destiny, individuality, and spiritual guidance, accompanying the person through pre-existence, birth, earthly life, death, and eventual return to the divine source. Some scholars interpret *ori* as the deepest essence of personhood, even identifying it with the personality-soul, yet many Yoruba interpretations privilege *emi* as the primary bearer of immortality, since the soul is believed capable of assuming a different *ori* in subsequent cycles of existence.[23]

The Yoruba conception of immortality is encapsulated in the term *aiku*, denoting the imperishable nature of the soul. *Emi*, as a spiritual reality created by Olodumare, participates in this immortality, while Olodumare himself is revered as *Oba aiku*-the Immortal King. The divine breath infused into the lifeless body renders humanity a living soul and signifies the enduring presence of the sacred within human existence. Consequently, although *ara* returns to dust, *emi* is understood to persist beyond death, either as a spiritual presence or through processes associated with rebirth and familial continuity. This belief is reflected in culturally significant names such as *Babatunde* ("the father returns") and *Iyabo* or *Yetunde* ("the motherreturns"),[24] which express the conviction that the essential qualities of departed ancestors may reappear in newborns, suggesting a continuity of identity that transcends the boundaries of a single bodily life.[25]

Within Yoruba metaphysical anthropology, *emi* (the soul) is conceived as the animating principle that imparts life to *ara* (the body), while *ori* (the inner head) governs destiny and the unfolding of personal existence. As the "offspring" of Olodumare (*omo Olodumare*), *emi* derives its immortality from its divine origin and ultimately returns to its source after death. In contrast, *ara*, being bound to the material order, remains on earth and undergoes dissolution, a distinction that explains the possibility of assuming different bodily forms in subsequent cycles of existence.[26]*Ori*, although symbolized by the physical head, performs a metaphysical function that transcends corporeality; it is believed to depart the body at death and return to the spiritual realm where it was originally fashioned, awaiting potential reassignment in another existential cycle. Consequently, both *emi* and *ori*are understood as autonomous metaphysical realities capable of existing independently of the perishable body. Since Ajala, the divine moulder of *ori*, is said to dwell in the abode of Olodumare, it follows that *ori*, like *emi*, ultimately returns to the divine domain. This framework also allows for the ethical interpretation of destiny: an individual burdened by an unfortunate *ori* in one life may hope to choose a more favourable one in another, a sentiment captured in the proverbial aspiration to select a better *ori* in a future return. Thus, Yoruba thought privileges *emi* and *ori*

[23]Wande Abimbola, "The Yoruba Conception of Human Personality", BolajiIdowu, *Olodumare*
[24]Moses Makinde, "Immortality of the Soul and The Yoruba Theory of Seven Heavens", 40.
[25]Moses. A. Makinde "An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Examples". *Reality and Meaning*, 7 (1984): 192
[26]Wande Abimbola, *Ijinle Ohun Enu Ifa (ApaKinni) (*Ibadan: University Press, 2006), 16.

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as the enduring foundations of personality, in contrast to *ara*, which is subject to decay.[27]

Yoruba cosmology further suggests a hierarchical sequence in the creation of the human person. The physical body, fashioned from clay by Orisanla, is said to precede the infusion of *emi*, which Olodumare imparts as divine breath. This order of creation underscores the supremacy of Olodumare and highlights the mysterious character of the soul's origin, distinct from both the material body and the metaphysical *ori* shaped by Ajala. While *ara* derives from physical substance and is therefore vulnerable to destruction, *emi* remains beyond the reach of material dissolution precisely because it is not fashioned from earthly matter but bestowed as a sacred breath whose mechanism lies beyond human comprehension.[28] In this mytho-philosophical schema, the precedence of bodily formation before the bestowal of life serves to affirm the ultimate authority of Olodumare and to accentuate the profound mystery surrounding the soul — an immortal spiritual endowment that sustains human existence yet transcends the limits of physical reality. In Yoruba metaphysical thought, *emi* shares in the spiritual nature of Olodumare and is therefore conceived as enigmatic, transcendent, and incapable of destruction. It is not merely an abstract essence but the living spiritual principle that animates the body, a sacred participation in divine vitality that grounds the notion of immortality. Because *emi* originates from Olodumare, its permanence reflects the enduring character of the divine itself, situating human existence within a continuum that surpasses material finitude.[29]

Narratives within Yoruba tradition further embody this philosophical outlook through accounts of individuals believed to continue their existence beyond physical death, appearing in distant places, forming relationships, and participating in social life. Such stories are less empirical claims than symbolic affirmations of a metaphysical conviction that personal identity is not exhausted by bodily demise. They express a worldview in which the boundaries between the visible and invisible realms remain permeable, and where the persistence of the soul sustains the possibility of continued existence beyond the limits of ordinary human perception. In Yoruba philosophical reflection, the persistence of the soul after death is evidenced in subtle and often indirect ways. Those who encounter a deceased person seemingly alive are typically unaware of that person's prior death, while confirmation comes from the reactions of those who know the truth, or, in some cases, from tangible evidence such as the grave. Such occurrences underscore a metaphysical conviction that the soul's existence transcends corporeal limits. This belief is further reinforced through dreams and visions, in which the deceased communicate guidance or

[27]Moses A. Makinde, ibid
[28]Wande Abimbola, *An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976), 117
[29]SegunGbadegesin, "The Yoruba Conception of a Person and its Implication on Fatalism, Determinism and Human Destiny", *Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, 4 no. 1-2 (1983): 61-78; Moses. A. Makinde "An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Examples". *Reality and Meaning*, 7 (1984): 192

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instruction to the living.[30] When such phenomena are interpreted through divinatory systems, rituals or offerings may be prescribed to honor the deceased, reflecting a cosmology in which ancestral spirits - the *"living-dead"* - maintain ongoing interaction with the temporal world. The Yoruba envision the afterlife as an extension and refinement of earthly existence.[31] The moral quality of one's earthly life is believed to shape the conditions of the hereafter, such that virtuous individuals enjoy a continuation of communal fellowship, freed from the labors, sorrows, and limitations that define mortal life. In this sense, the afterlife is conceived not as a starkly alien realm but as a metaphysical prolongation of social and familial existence, a domain where enduring bonds with kith and kin persist and the spiritual dimensions of personality, embodied in *emi* and *ori*, continue to flourish beyond the decay of the physical body.[32]

A Critique of Personal Immortality

The debate among scholars over this controversial concept lingers on. Plato (429-347BC) argues in favour of the belief in the immortality of the soul. For him, the soul is immortal, pre-existent in its disembodied state before birth and the natural abode of soul is the world of ideas (transcendental world) where it first existed without the body and where it goes back after the dissolution of the body in the pure blissful contemplation of ideas.[33] St. Augustine contends that man is a rational soul using mortal or earthly body. For him, man is an immaterial substance, which is superior to the body and the fact that the soul is eternal, immutable, immaterial and indestructible justifies the soul to be immortal.[34] Thomas Aquinas defends immortality with the argument that if immortality were not possible, God would not have implanted in man a natural desire for it. God would not incite man to passionately desire what is impossible and the fact that God has implanted a natural desire for immortality, we can safely conclude that it is a reality.[35]Abimbola avers that the soul is imperishable and indestructible element of man and thus immortal.[36]Idowu asserts that the justification of immortality is based on the presence of ancestral cult. For him, the specific belief of the Yoruba about those who depart from the world is that once they have entered after life, they remain there and there the survivors and their descendants can keep unbroken relationship with them, especially if they have been good persons while on earth. The deceased continue to remain in full life and vigour in the hereafter.[37]

Aristotle (384-322BC) implicitly denies immortality by his conception of man. According to him, since the body and soul are mutually dependent and

[30]Joseph Awolalu and Pius Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press Limited, 1979), 273.
[31]John S. Mbiti, *The Concept of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), P. 230
[32]Joseph Awolalu and Pius Dopamu, 274
[33]Plato, *The Republic, Book X* (New York: Dover Publication Inc, 2000), 274
[34] St Augustine, in Joann Evang. quoted byCopleston, *History of Philosophy*, 2 (1) (New York: Image Books, 1962): 93.
[35] Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica 1a, 75, 6, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 2, 79
[36]Wande Abimbola" The Yoruba Concept of Human Personality". 1971
[37]Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Press, 1962),169-174

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inseparable, the possibility of the soul existing after death without the body is unintelligible.[38] Epicurus explicitly holds that there is no life after death. For him, since the soul is a material substance, it dissolves at death and perishes with the death of the body.[39] For him, since the soul is a material substance, it dissolves at death and perishes with the death of the body. Hume (1711-1776) denies immortality by contending that there is no entity in man called soul distinct from the sense of perception.[40] Russell (1872-1970) explicitly debunks the possibility of life after death. Like Hume, he also denies the reality of a soul as a substance distinct from the bodily organs and which could be contrasted with the body.[41] Both Flew and Ramsey deny analytically the possibility of life after death since death for them is the end of life.[42]Darrow firmly disputes and dismisses the notion of immortality, arguing that it is untenable in light of scientific evidence and modern technological advancement.[43] However, William James and Avicenna vehemently argue for immortality of the soul and maintain that that the soul does not die with the death of the body and is absolutely incorruptible.[44] Unamuno maintains that the concept of immortality cannot be proved or disproved but what is certain is that man naturally desires it, but whether or not we shall have it is uncertain.[45]

The question as to whether or not the belief in immortality rest on mistakes is answered by philosophers in terms of a critical exposure or analysis of what is taken to be essential pre suppositions underlying the notion of immortality. These suppositions refer to issues, which are not necessarily religious such as its universality, survival of death, the problem of identity, the relation between mind and body, possibility of disembodies existence and so on. It is such issues that one finds given prominence in philosophical discussion. These are threads of connection between the concept of immortality and these presuppositions. It is the belief of some philosophers that if these threads are broken, the concept of immortality collapses.[46]

The widespread argument that the universality nature of the idea of immortality is a strong reason for its acceptance involves a fallacy of appealing to popularity (*argumentum ad populum*), because the majority can be wrong. The strength of the argument relies on numbers (i.e. the claim is true because many people believe it) rather than evidence. It is pertinent to note that the

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[38] Joseph I. Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited), 112
[39] Epicurus, quoted in Great Traditions in Ethics, edited by Albert Dennis and Peter Freud. New York: D. Van Nostrand Company (1975): 67.
[40] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Middlesex: Pelican Classics, 1969).
[41]Betrand Russell, *Why I am Not A Christian* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), 70
[42] Antony Garrard Newton Flew. "Can A Man Witness His Own Funeral?"*Hibbert Journal* (1956), 242-250; Ian Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 82
[43] Clarence Darrow, *Myth of Immortality*. The Forum (1978).
[44] William James, *Science and Immortality: A positive Report.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 52-63
[45] Miguel De Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1954), 67.
[46]Peter. O. Bodunrin, "Alogicality of Immortality". *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 4 no. 2, (1975): 38-42; Clarence Darrow, *Myth of Immortality*. The Forum (1978). Peter. O. Bo

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popularity of a belief does not necessarily determine its truth or validity. There was an epoch in human history when it was widely believed that "the earth is flat" and that "the sun revolves around the earth" which was absolutely false in spite of its universal acceptability. Therefore, since it is an irrefutable fact that the principle of the majority is not an assurance of the truthfulness of a belief or rightness of an action as a whole group may be mistaken, it follows that the universal acceptability of the idea of immortality does not make it to be necessarily true.

Furthermore, the hypothesis of immortality can be defended only if it can be shown that what is said to survive is the same person we used to know. It is a conceptual truth that a person has a material body, it is equally a conceptual truth that a person has at most only one material body and once this body is annihilated we do not have the person. Since the hypothesis of immortality entails the doctrine of disembodied existence (that the person survives death), it therefore has inherent conceptual difficulties. This is because a person cannot be reduced to his/her consciousness, nor to physical characteristics. Persons are the sorts of entities to which mental and physical activities can be attributed, as the physical and the psychological criteria are inextricably, mutually dependent. There cannot be a dichotomy between them, but the notion of immortality requires us to introduce the dichotomy. To be able to claim that a person survives his death, it ought to be possible to determine whether or not the person who survives death is the same person that we used to know before his death. However, the dissolution of the body after death and the claim of immortality of the soul make personal identity of a human person an insurmountable philosophical problem while the belief in immortality runs into difficulties because it cannot be logically justified.[47]

It seems that one assumption behind that survival after death is a possibility death is thought of as an event in one's life. However, if death is to be construed as an event, it is always an event for spectators and never for participants. The truth is that death is not part of any man's experience. As Wittgenstein said, "death is not an event in life; we do not live to experience death". This is because a person's death is not an event in this world for him, but the end of the world. Death is not an experience, but the end of all experiences, and one cannot experience the end of experience. Death means the end of life. Therefore, the phrase "life after death" seems meaningless.[48]

A Demythological Interpretation

The possibility of construing immortality as an unverifiable and unfalsifiable metaphysical idea lures us into a redefinition of the concept, which will result in a demythological interpretation. Firstly, in African thought, personal immortality associated with the "acts of remembrance" performed by members of a particular family on behalf of a departed member of a particular family is remembered by throwing portions of food, pouring out libation and carrying out messages or related instruction when he appears in dreams and visions

dunrin, "Alogicality of Immortality". *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 4 no. 2, (1975): 38-42

[48] Antony Flew, "Can A Man Witness His Own Funeral?", 1956

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through a medium. By carrying out such an external acts, it is assumed that although the grave has physically separated the dead person from the living members of the family, he is alive in a way. Such a person is called "living-dead' in traditional African thought.[49] The living-dead is a person who, though physically dead, is nevertheless living in the memories of those who knew him, especially his children and relations. So long as he is remembered by those who had unlimited relationship with him, he is in a state of personal immortality. It is therefore the members of his family who keep him going. "The personal immortality of living-dead is for all practices purposes dependent on his progenies".[50] Besides, some people who become famous and revered by virtue of feat and contributions to human development or suffering for the sake of humanity linger in the memory of people and thus enjoy immortality through the power of remembrance.

Secondly, personal immortality consists in the act of procreation. This explains the significance attached to marriage in African societies. There is a certain age at which human race is desirous of procreation and this is the mystery of man and woman, which is a divine things, for conception and generation are a principle of immortality in the mortal creature.[51] Thus, the universal love and interest in their offspring is for the sake of immortality. A man that has no people to put him in remembrance after death is regarded as nobody and easily sink into oblivion. It therefore behooves every mature African to get married as soon as practicable. Even after marriage, if he has no child or has only female children, he has the tendency to get another wife to raise male children for him. For the Africans, therefore, procreation is the absolute way of ensuring that a person is not cut-off from personal immortality. The mortal nature is seeking as far as possible to be everlasting and immortal: and this is only to be attained by generations, because the new is always left in the place of the old. Thus, for Africans, no matter how wealthy or famous a person may be, if he has on children to survive him, he has missed the goal of human existence. Hence, having children ensures interminable life here on earth. So the solution to the problem or demythological interpretation of personal immortality "is self perpetuation through one's children and grand children and so on".[52]

Impact of the Notion of Immortality on Peaceful Co-existence and Social Harmony in Yorubaland.

Among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria, immortality and peaceful coexistence are intertwined concepts rooted in their several interconnected cultural beliefs and spiritual practices linked with ancestral continuity.[53] The belief is that individuals live on through their descendants, contributions, and memories, fostering a sense of responsibility to maintain harmony. In Yoruba classical thought, immortality often relates to the idea of transcending mortal limits,

[49]Bayo Fajemilua, *Mystical Attributes and Philosophy of Obafemi Awolowo* (Akure: Floce Publishers, 1988), 108-109.
[50] John. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969),102.
[51] Plato, *Symposium and Phaedrus* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), 29-31.
[52] J. S. Mbiti, 1969, p.266
[53]Wande Abimbola, "Iwapele: The Concept of Good Character in Ifa Literary Corpus" in WandeAbimbola (ed.) *Yoruba Oral Literature* (Ibadan: University Press. 1975).

achieving a state of being that surpasses the confines of time. It is associated with the belief that the soul lives on, and the continuation of one's legacy through descendants, community, and ancestral reverence .[54] Peaceful co-existence is fostered through *omoluabi* (being of good character), which emphasizes virtues like respect, kindness, and fairness as essentials for a well-ordered society,[55] and rooted in *iwapele* (gentleness, calmness), which guides personal and social conduct, reverence for others, nature, and the divine with a view to promoting communal peace and social harmony. Thus, Yoruba culture stresses harmony with community, ancestors, and *Orisas* (deities) and the concept of *iwapele* aligns with "Ubuntu" (humanity towards others), which prioritizes community welfare and treatment of others with kindness in order to enhance balance, peaceful co-existence, continuity, and collective harmony .[56]

In Yoruba philosophy, the linkage between immortality and peace can be explained through the concept of *Ase* (life force or vital energy) pervading the universe, enabling being and becoming, existence and change. *Ase*flows through all things, connecting individuals to ancestors, community, and the divine. Immortality is tied to the continuity of *ase* because one's actions, legacy, and impact on others sustain this energy.[57] Peaceful coexistence ("*iwapele*") ensures *ase's* balance, fostering harmony within oneself, community, and the cosmos and therefore benefitting individuals and community. When individuals cultivate inner peace and contribute to collective harmony, they align with the eternal flow of *ase,* achieving a form of immortality through their enduring influence. *Ase* is dynamic, requiring balance and harmony to flow freely. In daily life, it influences decision-making (considering impact on self, others, and the environment), relationships (cultivating respect, empathy, and kindness), and spiritual practices of honouring, and *Eledumare* (Supreme Being),*Orisas* (deities) *and* ancestors.[58]

In the Yoruba cosmological framework, the notions of *ajobi* and *ajogbe* occupy significant conceptual space in structuring social relations.[59]*Ajobi* denotes consanguinity, referring to both lineal and collateral ties grounded in blood, ancestry, and birth, whereas *ajogbe* signifies co-residentiality, that is, the sharing of a common or adjacent dwelling irrespective of biological kinship. Consequently, *alajobi* represents a metaphysical bond of familiarity that unites individuals through a perceived common descent or ancestral affiliation, while *alajogbe* expresses a spatio-temporal connection among persons who coexist within the same physical environment despite lacking genealogical ties.From a

[54]Babatunde. Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (University of Washington Press, 1997).
[55]Olusola Olanipekun, "Omoluabi: Re-thinking the Concept of Virtue in Yoruba Culture and Moral System" *Pan-African Journal,* 12 no. 1 (2017).
[56]Wande Abimbola, "Iwapele", (1975).
[57]Toyin Falola, *Yoruba Metaphysics: Spirituality and Supernaturality* (Ohio University Press, 2025).
[58]Oluwatoyin Adepoju, "Between Metaphysics, Rationality, Spirituality and Supernaturality in Endogenous Yoruba Thought: Rethinking the Opening Concepts of Toyin Falola's Yoruba Metaphysics: Spirituality and Supernaturality", (2025), https://groups.goggle.com/g/usaafricadialogue/c/jd9R1ao6k6k
[59]Akinsola Akiwowo, "Ajobi and Ajogbe: Variations on the Theme Sociation", *Inaugural Lecture Series,* University of Ife 46. (1983).

sociological perspective, these categories generate distinct normative patterns of human association and interaction. *Alajobi* sustains a principle of necessary unity, emphasizing enduring relational obligations that transcend spatial and temporal proximity. In contrast, *alajogbe* reflects a contingent form of unity, one that arises primarily from shared residence and may dissolve when such proximity ceases. In Yoruba social philosophy, the primacy accorded to *alajobi* subsumes the relational possibilities of *alajogbe*, reinforcing a worldview in which individuals perceive one another as members of an extended moral community. This strong commitment to the cosmology of *alajobi* encourages cooperative interaction, mutual responsibility, and ultimately contributes to the maintenance of peaceful coexistence in Southwestern Nigerian society.[60]

Immortality (*aiku*) in Yoruba thought impacts peaceful coexistence by fostering a sense of responsibility and interconnectedness. The Yoruba believe that individuals are connected to ancestors and future generations and that actions and deeds have consequences beyond one's lifetime. This belief encourages respect for others and community, kindness and fairness in interactions and consideration for the environment and nature. The understanding that one's legacy lives on promotes harmony and balance, motivating individuals to contribute positively to their community. Thus, the Yoruba worldview delves into Yoruba metaphysics and ethics, highlighting the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds, and the importance of living in harmony with nature and others. The concepts of immortality and peaceful coexistence are crucial among the Yoruba as they not only enhance a sense of obligation and interconnectedness with ancestors, community, and future generations, but also encourages respect, kindness, and fairness in interactions. Besides, they promote harmony and balance within an individual, community, and the environment, ensures continuity of cultural values and traditions, and guides decision-making and actions for a long-term impact on character development, ethical living and corporate existence.

Conclusion

In rethinking the notion of immortality within Yoruba mythology, it becomes evident that the doctrine is not merely a speculative metaphysical claim about life after death but a moral framework that shapes human conduct and communal responsibility. The enduring relationship between *emi*, *ori*, and *ara* situates the individual within a continuum that links the visible world to the ancestral realm, thereby reinforcing ethical accountability beyond temporal existence. By grounding personhood in a spiritual ontology that survives bodily dissolution, Yoruba thought encourages a consciousness of consequence, where actions are measured not only by immediate outcomes but also by their lasting implications for destiny, lineage, and communal memory. Immortality, therefore, functions as a philosophical principle that binds metaphysics to ethics, transforming belief into a regulative ideal for social behaviour.

[60]Roland Badru, "The Epistemology and Logic of Ethnic Conflict Within the Modern African State and the Concept of Alajobi in Yoruba Cosmology" *Dynamics of Peace Process* (Ilorin:Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies, University of Ilorin, 2010), 256-257.

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Furthermore, the idea of the "living-dead" and the expectation of continued fellowship with ancestors cultivate a worldview that privileges harmony, respect, and reciprocity within society. When individuals perceive themselves as participants in an unbroken spiritual community, the values of compassion, justice, and peaceful coexistence acquire deeper existential significance. Rethinking immortality in this context reveals its potential as a cultural resource for addressing contemporary social tensions in Southwest Nigeria, offering a framework that integrates spiritual meaning with ethical practice. Ultimately, Yoruba mythology presents immortality not as an escape from the world but as a philosophical vision that nurtures communal solidarity, moral restraint, and the pursuit of social harmony across generations.

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