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SPIRITUALITY AND APPLIED ETHICS: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper provides a philosophical assessment of two institutions and their practices: the institution of traditional medicine and the ethical issues generated by its practice; and, the institution of contemporary African philosophy and the relevance of its practice to African societies. Taking one contemporary African society as an example, I argue that the metaphysical assumptions implicit within the practice of medicine provide new insights into the relationship between morality and religion. These assumptions also provide new guidelines on how to make philosophy more relevant to contemporary African societies.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'ethics' can be used to include *normative ethics*--thought about the basis and justification of moral rules and principles; *meta-ethics*--the meaning of moral terms; *applied ethics*—the nature, content and application of specific moral guidelines; and, *descriptive ethics*--accounts of how people actually behave in situations requiring moral action. Contemporary thinking on ethics in African philosophy is primarily concerned with normative and descriptive ethics.

In fact, much of contemporary scholarship on ethics from an African point of view is preoccupied with the question of whether moral rules and principles arise out of religion (in which case, they are valid because the gods command them), or whether these rules arise out of reason (in which case they derive their validity from some non-religious base). Because these scholars also make claims about the nature of the principles implicit within traditional African societies, much of their work is also on descriptive ethics.

My topic is not this well-worn issue of the basis and justification of moral rules and principles. In fact, I have very little to say about them. My primary concern is with applied ethics. I will examine the question 'what

should I do?' against the background of spirituality in the practice of medicine in contemporary Yorùbá society. I will argue that the issues of applied ethics that arise in Yorùbá culture (traditional and contemporary) are by far more complex than anything ventured by most contemporary African philosophers.

The crux of the matter has to do with the nature of ethics itself. In contemporary Western conceptions of ethics, ethical and moral issues arise within the context of interactions and contact amongst natural beings. That is, issues of ethics come into discussion when we consider the implications of human and/or animal actions vis-à-vis other humans and animals. Let us describe this Westernized conception of ethics as the "this-worldly" approach to ethics.[1] I will argue that in Yorùbá culture (both traditional and contemporary), ethics is a three-way relationship among: (i) natural beings and other natural beings; (ii) natural beings and spiritual beings; and (iii) spiritual beings and other spiritual beings.

MORALITY AND RELIGION

The question of the relationship between morality and religion has preoccupied philosophers since the inception of philosophy. Plato puts this question well: 'Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?' Put in this manner, the question becomes a variant of the age-old 'is-ought' problem. For this Socratic question is really interested in the logical connections between what the gods' will is, and what we ought morally to do. Is there a logically persuasive connection between what the divine will is, and what we as humans ought to do? Does this divine will derive its moral force of appeal from the simple fact that it is willed by the gods? Or is there a logical gap between the is and the ought such that we can derive the moral force of the ought independently of the gods' will?

The question of the role of religion and ethics in African society has been addressed by people with two opposing points of view: those like John Mbiti and Moses Makinde who maintain that morality derives its validity from religion, and those like Segun Gbadegesin, Kwasi Wiredu and Polycarp Ikuenobe who maintain that it does not.[2] Despite the irreconcilable

[1] Actually, this is not entirely accurate. There is a very long tradition of scholarship on the role of spirituality in Western ethics as well! One important scholar of recent times within this tradition is Norbert Rigali (1969, 1975, 1981, 1986). The catch however is that this tradition of excellent scholarship is now generally classified as "Catholic moral theology".

[2] There are many possible variations within each point of view. Any one of the following claims could be upheld: (i) morality and religion are identical, and as such each is logically derivable from each other; (ii) morality and religion are not identical but, *via a process of non-deductive reasoning*, one can argue from religion to morality; (iii) religion is derivable from morality, but not vice versa; (iv) morality is derivable from religion, but not vice

differences between proponents of these two views, implicit in their work is the assumption that (just as in mainstream contemporary Western philosophy) ethics in Africa is about those action-guiding principles on the basis of which individuals within a community (and, of course, the community as a whole in relation to individuals, or in relation to other communities) regulate their conduct with other humans beings (and, of course, with other communities). Morality is primarily a this-worldly affair in which we focus on issues of co-operation, actions, attitudes, emotions, character, etc., vis-à-vis relationships with other sentient human beings and animals.

While I do not deny that ethics is and should be a this-worldly affair, my contention is that, from the Yorùbá perspective, this is a very limited view of ethics. Ethics, in traditional and contemporary Yorùbá society is not just about the nature and quality of interactions between sentient natural beings. In Yorùbá culture, ethics has a supernaturalistic dimension in the sense that moral issues also have to do with the relationship between spiritual beings and humans, and indeed, it also has to do with the relationship amongst spiritual beings.

It is important to be clear on the contrast I want to draw between my views and those of most contemporary African philosophers. My claim is not that philosophers such as Makinde, Gbadegesin, and Ikuenobe accord no role whatsoever to the supernatural world in ethics and morality. In fact, that which distinguishes African ethics from Western ethics is the role of religion in African thought. My claim is that implicit in the work of these African philosophers is the (contemporary) Western conception of ethics as a field in which the primal focus of attention is the relationship amongst natural beings. Morality and ethics are primarily about human conduct within human communities. Ethical questions are raised about those human conducts that affect other humans and other natural beings. In the philosophies of these African philosophers, religion and the spiritual realm are outside of the moral equation in the sense that questions about the proper role of religion in ethics are pertinent only in issues of the source, origin, bases or ultimate justification of moral rules and principles. For these African philosophers, the role of religion and spirituality in African ethics can be encapsulated by the following questions: From whence does ethics derive its moral force of appeal? From God and the gods, or, from the force of reason? A more precise way of putting these questions is to say that much of contemporary African philosophizing on the relationship

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versa, (v) morality and religion are in fact incompatible with each other. These options, of course, do not exhaust all possible options. While I know of no one who maintains option (v), it is sometimes unclear from the discussion what position is been upheld and criticized by these philosophers. As will become apparent later on, based upon an intuitionist view of logic, my own position is (ii).

between ethics and religion is squarely within the domains of normative and descriptive ethics.

My position on the role of religion in the justification of moral rules and principles in Africa can be stated very easily because I do not always accept the law of excluded middle. I do not accept that the question: "do African moral rules and principles derive their validity from the gods, or do the gods command these rules because they are valid?" is exhaustive of all the possible options. When it comes to logic, I am an intuitionist, and, hence, on the issues of the basis of African moral rules and principles, my answer would be: we should not assert the truth of statements of the "P or Q" form when there is no specific justification for P, nor any specific justification for Q. Consequently, within some specified contexts, religion merely supplies prudential and pragmatic justifications for moral conduct. In its prudential or pragmatic functions, religion merely serves as the motivation for moral conduct, thereby encouraging or discouraging conduct. However, in Yorùbá culture, morality does not exist outside of religion in its this-and-other-worldly view of ethics. This is due to the fact that the spiritual and natural planes of existence form the same continuum in Yorùbá culture. In this intuitionist view of the relationship between morality and religion, the middle ground excluded by standard "either ... or" logic is not excluded.

THE SPIRITUAL AND THE NATURAL IN THE YORÙBÁ COSMOS

As with most religions, Yorùbá religion divides the cosmos into two realms of existence: the spiritual world and the natural world.[3] The spiritual world is the abode of supernatural forces such as Olódùmarè (the Yorùbá High God), the Òrìsà (all the Yorùbá divinities), the Ajogun (anti-gods or the malevolent supernatural powers), the Àjẹ́ (who are translated inadequately into English as "witches"), and the ancestors. The natural world is composed of humans, animals and plants. Spiritual beings visit the natural world regularly. And through divination, sacrifice and spirit possession, natural beings can also partake in the spiritual world occasionally. The spiritual and natural worlds are, therefore, interdependent.

At first, the Yorùbá cosmos might appear to be like that of Christianity and Islam. Ọ̀run is somewhat equivalent to heaven, and aye is somewhat equivalent to this world. What is more, Yorùbá theology also has a place in the supernatural world comparable to hell, namely, Ọ̀run-Àpáàdì. Indeed a host of scholars of Yorùbá theology have compared and re-interpreted Yorùbá theological accounts of the cosmos and its inhabitants in such a way that Yorùbá theology is not distinguishable from that of Christianity.

[3] I will be employing Anglo-Christian theology as a comparative frame of reference in my discussion of Yorùbá theology. This is purely for exegetical purposes.

Consider, for instance, the following claims of Bolaji Idowu, one of the most cited scholars on Yorùbá theology:

> The creation of the earth was completed in four days; the fifth day was therefore set apart for the worship of the Deity and for rest.[4] (Idowu, 1962, p. 20.)

> It would seem that when the world began, everyone could travel to heaven and back as he wished and that all could have immediate, direct contact with Olódùmarè. The oral traditions say that heaven was very near to the earth, so near that one could stretch up one's hand and touch it. ... There was a kind of Golden Age, or a Garden-of-Eden period. Then something happened, and a giddy, frustrating, extensive space occurred between heaven and earth. The story of what happened is variously told. One story is that a greedy person helped himself to too much food from the heaven; another that a woman with a dirty hand touched the unsoiled face of heaven. The motif is all one--man sinned against the Lord of Heaven and there was immediately raised a barrier which cut him off from the unrestricted bliss of heaven. The privilege of free intercourse, of man taking the bounty of heaven as he liked, disappeared. (Idowu, 1966, p.22.)

Idowu claims to be describing Yorùbá theology as presented in the Ifá Literary Corpus, the sacred text of Yorùbá religion. Indeed, he quotes extensively from the Ifá Corpus. But unfortunately, to any Ifá priest, Idowu's translations and re-interpretations would be representative of anything but Yorùbá theology.[5]

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[4] This sentence alone shows that Idowu's analysis is not based upon the Yorùbá conceptual scheme. Traditional Yorùbá society operated on a four day week, and as such there is no fifth day that is "set apart for the worship of the Deity". Idowu's view might be based on the fact that priests and priestesses of Yorùbá religion say that they worship their divinities lọ́ọ̀ọ̀rún, i.e., "every fifth day". But "every fifth day" in Yorùbá numerology is actually "every fourth day" in Western numerology! This is because Yorùbá society operates on an inclusive counting system while the Western system is exclusive. For instance, if today is a Monday and we have scheduled a meeting for next Monday, then, from the Western conceptual scheme, one would say our next meeting is in seven days time. But from the Yorùbá conceptual scheme, next Monday is in eight days time because we count the current day as well. So although the traditional Yorùbá priest would say that s/he worships the divinities at least "every fifth day", there is actually no fifth day in the Yorùbá week.

[5] Ifá priests are the custodians of the Ifá Literary Corpus, the sacred text of Yorùbá religion. The Corpus is made up of 256 books called Odù, each having in number from 400 to 600 poems (called ẹsẹ. Although a small number of these poems have been written down, most have not. When written down, the length of each poem ranges from 8 lines to about 20 pages. An Ifá priest has to know about five poems from each of the 256 books. The training of an Ifá priest takes about 15 years of full-time study, and up to 35 years of part-time study. There are thousands of Ifá priests currently practicing in Nigeria.

Consider for instance the first quotation above from Idowu. In a footnote reference to his claims that in Yorùbá theology the Deity created the world in four days, Idowu refers us to page 112 of his book, were we read the following:

> It appears that, originally, the sacred day of each divinity came round every fifth day, and it is possible that the same sacred day was observed for them all. This would be based on the belief that the creation of the earth was completed in four days. There is a saying that *Ifá l'ó l'òni Ifá l'ó l'ọ̀la, Ifá l'ó l'ọ̀túnla, Ifá l'ó ni 'jọ́ mẹ́rin Òrìṣà dá'lé aiyé*-- "To Ifá belongs today, to Ifá belongs tomorrow, to Ifá belongs the day after tomorrow, to Ifá belongs the four days in which the Òrìṣà created the earth".

This so-called saying of Idowu is actually an excerpt from a poem contained within Ògúndá Méjì, which is the ninth book the Ifá Literary Corpus. As some of the theological ideas contained in this poem will become important later on in this paper, I include the full text of the poem.

Ifá-ló-lòní,
Ifá-ló-lọ̀la.
Ifá-ló-lọ̀túnla-pẹ̀lú-ẹ̀.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà-ló-níjọ́-mẹ́rẹ̀èrin-Òòṣà-dá-sílé-ayé.
A dífá fún Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
Níjọ́ tí ajogun gbogbo
Ń kan ilée rẹ̀ lákànyún.
Ikú, Àrùn, Òfò, Ẹ̀gbà, Èṣe,
Gbogbo wọn ní ń yọ́ Ọ̀rúnmìlà á wò.
Wọ́n ń wí pé
Ọjọ́ kan ni àwọn ó pa á.
Ni Ọ̀rúnmìlà bá gbé Òkè Ìpòrí araa rẹ̀ kalẹ̀.
Ó dá Ògúndá Méjì.
Wọ́n ní ẹ́bọ ni ó wáà rú.
Ó sì rú u.
Ìgbà tó rúbọ tán
Ni Òkè Ìpòríi rẹ̀ bá ràtà bò ó mọ́lẹ̀.
Ni Ikú ò bá le è pa á mọ́,
Bẹ́ẹ̀ ni Àrùn ò le è ṣe é mọ́.
Ijó ní ń jó
Ayọ̀ ní ń yọ̀.
Ó ń yin àwọn awoo rẹ̀,
Àwọn awoo rẹ̀ ń yin Ifá.

Outside of Nigeria, Ifá priests are found in significant numbers in Cuba, Benin Republic, Togo, Puerto Rico, and the USA. As we shall see below, Ifá priests are also practitioners of traditional medicine in the parts of the world in which they live.

Ó ya ẹnu kótó,
Orin awo ló bọ́ sí i lẹ́nu.
Ẹsẹ̀ tí ó nà,
Ijó fà á.
Ó ní bẹ́ẹ̀ gẹ́gẹ́
Ni àwọn awo òun ń ṣẹnu rere é pe Ifá:
"Ifá-ló-lòní,
Ifá-ló-lọ̀la.
Ifá-ló-lọ̀túnla-pẹ̀lú-ẹ̀.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà-ló-nijọ́-mẹ́rẹ̀ẹ̀rin-Òòṣà-dá-sílé-ayé.
A dífá fún Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
Níjọ́ tí Ajogun gbogbo
Ń kan ilée rẹ̀ lákànúyn.
Ọjọ́ tÍkú bá ń wá mi í bọ̀ wá,
Ifá, ìwọ̀ ni o ràtà bò mí,
Béwé ńlá ti í ràtà á boori
Bẹ́ri ńlá ti í ràtà á bo yanrìn lódò.
Níjọ́ tÁrùn bá ń wá mi í bọ̀ wá,
Ifá, ìwọ̀ ni o ràtà bò mí,
Béwé ńla ti í ràtà á boori
Bẹ́ri ńla ti í ràtà á bo yanrìn lódò.
Ọjọ́ tÁjogun gbogbo bá ń wá mi í bọ̀ wá,
Ifá, ìwọ̀ ni o ràtà bò mí,
Béwé ńla ti í ràtà á boori
Bẹ́ri ńla ti í ràtà á bo yanrìn lódò.
Ètípọ́n-ọla n í í ràtà á bolẹ̀
Ifá, ìwọ̀ ni o ràtà bò mí,
Béwé ńla ti í ràtà á boori,
Bẹ́ri ńla ti í ràtà á bo yanrìn lódò"

Ifá-is-the-master-of-today,
Ifá-is-the-master-of-tomorrow.
Ifá-is-the-master-of-the-day-after-tomorrow-as-well.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà-is-the-master-of-all-the-four-days-(of-the-week)-established-here- on-earth-by-the-divinities.[6]

[6] These are the lines Idowu interprets as the four days of creation. These are actually praise names of Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the Yorùbá god of wisdom. Every Ifá poem has an eight-part structure (see W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, pp. 43-63). The first part of each poem states the name (or names) of the Ifá priest (or priests--this is because there might be more than one priest involved) who first chanted this poem during a divination. These names are either praise names of Ọ̀rúnmìlà himself, or praise names of priests he trained in the art of divination. Note that these names are meant to be 'secret' names. The real names of these priests are never mentioned in Ifá poems. (See Abímbọ́lá & Hallen (1993), and Abiodun

Ifá divination was performed for Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
On the day that all the malevolent supernatural powers
Were repeatedly haunting his household
Death, Disease, Loss, Paralysis, Affliction
Were all glancing at Ọ̀rúnmìlà
They were saying that
One day they will succeed in killing him
Ọ̀rúnmìlà then set down his divination instruments to consult his Orí.[7]
Ògúndá Méjì was divined.[8]
He was advised to offer sacrifice.
He offered the sacrifice.
After he had completed this sacrifice
His Orí provided protective shielding for him.
Death could no longer kill him,
Nor could Disease afflict him.
He was dancing
He was rejoicing.
He was singing the praises of his Ifá priests,
His Ifá priests were singing the praises of Ifá.[9]
He opened his mouth slightly

(2000), for further explanation of the role of secrecy in Yorùbá culture.) So even when it is Ọ̀rúnmìlà himself who was engaged in the past divination, his praise names are those given in the first part of the poem. Line 12 of the poem suggests that it was Ọ̀rúnmìlà who divined for himself on this occasion. Hence these four lines are better regarded as praise names of Ọ̀rúnmìlà himself.

[7] Each individual has his/her own personal divinity called Orí. Divination in Yorùbá culture is an attempt to make a connection with the spiritual world through one's Orí. Each person's Orí is unique and personal, and it is also one part of the 'soul-complex' in Yorùbá thought. That is, although the Yorùbá divide the person into the body and soul, the soul is made up of various attributes such as: Orí, ẹ̀mí, and ẹsẹ̀. I explain the Yorùbá conception of personhood in detail below.

[8] Ògúndá Méjì is one of the 256 books (Odù) of the Ifá *Literary Corpus*. Hence this phrase means something like this: divination directed him to analyze the situation with a poem from this book of the Yorùbá Holy scriptures.

[9] Lines 22 and 23 are playing on the meaning of the word Ifá. In line 22, Ifá, the god of wisdom is singing the praises of his Ifá priests. But in line 23, Ifá*'s* Ifá priests are singing the praises of the divination process**!** The word "Ifá" has 6 layers of meanings: (i) the god of wisdom; (ii) the divination process; (iii) the entire body of knowledge called *the* Ifá *Literary Corpus*; (iv) any one specific poem from the Corpus; (v) a special herbal mixture or talisman prepared for medicinal purposes--the recipes for these are explicitly stated in some Ifá poems; and (vi) there are some special Ifá poems that function as incantations or powerful words. When uttered, these words *reveal truth* in the sense that whatever they state will come to pass. These Ifá incantations are used mainly for medicinal purposes--for example, reciting one such poem in the appropriate manner "calls out" the venom of certain types of snakes from the human body. These multi-layered meanings for the same word might appear strange and confusing to someone who is not familiar with the Yorùbá conceptual scheme.

Joyous Ifá songs came out of his mouth.
He stretched his legs,
He found himself dancing.
He said this is exactly
How his priests delightfully predicts with Ifá:
"Ifá-is-the-master-of-today,
Ifá-is-the-master-of-tomorrow.
Ifá-is-the-master-of-the-day-after-tomorrow-as-well.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà-is-the-master-of-all-the-four-days-(of-the-week)-established-here-on-earth-by-the-divinities.
Ifá divination was performed for Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
On the day that all the malevolent supernatural powers
Were repeatedly haunting his household
The day Death comes looking for me,
Ifá, spread out and provide shielding for me,
Just as éwé ńlá spreads out to shield oori,[10]
Just as a big river spreads out to shield the sands of its bed
On the day Disease comes looking for me,
Ifá, spread out and provide shielding for me,
Just as éwé ńlá spreads out to shield oori,
Just as a big river spreads out to shield the sands of its bed
The day all the malevolent supernatural forces come looking for me,
Ifá, spread out and provide shielding for me,
Just as éwé ńlá spreads out to shield oori,
Just as a big river spreads out to shield the sands of its bed
It is Ètípọ́n-ọlá[11] *that spreads out to shield the soil,*
Ifá, spread out and provide shielding for me,
Just as éwé ńlá spreads out to shield oori,
Just as a big river spreads out to shield the sands of its bed"

The first thing to note about this poem is that it makes no reference whatsoever to creation of the earth, much less to of days of creation. The

[10] *Ewé* means "leaf" (and/or "leaves"), and *ńlá* means "big". *Oori* (also known as *ẹ̀kọ*) is corn-starch pudding, a very popular meal in Yorùbáland. This pudding is usually wrapped with leaves such as those of the banana, cocoa, *iyá*, or *iran* trees. Because the leaves of these trees are wide or broad, and, as such, can be used to wrap-up the pudding into individual potions, Ifá adopts the generic name "big leaves" from them.

[11] *Ètípọ́n-ọlá* is a shrub that grows on the ground just as grass does. This shrub spreads-out and covers the ground copiously such that the soil is almost invisible to the eye.

only reference to creation here is the number of days within the Yorùbá week. Hence the poem is of very limited relevance to the Yorùbá creation story. The Yorùbá creation stories are contained in other books of the Ifá Literary Corpus, the most important of which are: Ogbèyẹ̀ku, Òtúrúpọ̀ọ́nwọ́nífá, and Èjì Ẹlẹ́mẹrẹ (also known as Ìrẹtẹ̀ Méjì). The phrase: "Ifá l'ó ni 'jọ́ mẹ́rin Òrìṣà dá'lé aiyé" which Idowu has translated as: "To Ifá belongs the four days in which the Òrìsà created the earth", has nothing to do with creation. Rather the phrase means something like: "To Ifá belongs the four days established here on earth by the Òrìṣà".[12]

But Idowu is not alone in the Christianization of Yorùbá theology. In discussing Olódùmarè (also known as Ọlọ́run), the Yorùbá High God, and Ọbàtálá (one of the major divinities of Yorùbá religion), Benjamin Ray also claims that:

> Yorùbá myths say that Ọlọ́run (whose name means "Lord or Owner of the Sky") delegated the task of creating the world to one of his sons, Ọbàtálá. (Ray, 1976, p.53.)

There are many flaws within this one sentence. First, the source of Ray's assertion that Olódùmarè is male is a complete mystery. In all Ifá poems (and other traditional Yorùbá genre such as Ijala and Iwi Egungun), Olódùmarè is gender neutral. The fact of the matter is that, taken all together, Ifá poems suggest that Olódùmarè is, in essence, a spiritual entity; as such, describing Olódùmarè as male (or female) is inappropriate.

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[12] Even this translation follows Idowu's mis-interpretation too closely. A better translation of this phrase is: "Ifá is the master of all the four days (of the week) established here on earth by the divinities". This is a better translation because (bearing in mind that traditional Yorùbá society operated on a four-day week) the Ifá priest is regarded as having access to a hidden knowledge on the basis of which day-to-day life in Yorùbá culture is regulated. The divination process attached to the Ifá *Literary Corpus* accesses this hidden knowledge. This part of the poem is therefore a statement of the overall importance of Ifá in the regulation of day-to-day life. It is also important to note the following curious point: Yorùbá is a language that allows for the contraction two separate words into one. For example, from the two words "ilé" (house) and "ìwé"(book), a new word "iléèwé" can be coined for "school". These contractions can result in different meanings being attributed to words. But this is usually only a problem when a phrase or word is taken out of its original context. This sort of out of context mis-interpretation is at the heart of Idowu's translation. The phrase in question, as rendered by Idowu is "...Òrìṣà dá'lé aiyé [also spelt *ayé*]", which he interprets as "... the Òrìṣà created the earth." Here Idowu has used "dá'lé ayé" which, if taken out of context could be "dá ilé ayé" ("create the earth") instead of "dá silé ayé" ("establish here on earth"). When Ifá priests chant the poem in question (see line 4 of the poem quoted above), the full version of this phrase is often given as: "...Òrìṣà dá silé ayé " (and I have translated this to be "... the Òrìṣà establish here on earth"). Because Idowu has given us the contracted version, "da'le", even a competent Yorùbá speaker who is not given the full context of the phrase (i.e., the Ifá poem from which it is taken) could be misled into thinking the phrase is indeed about the creation of the world!

Since Olódùmarè lacks gender and corporeality, Olódùmarè is better described as an "It."

Second and most importantly, although Ray is quite correct in claiming that the task of creating this world was assigned to Ọbàtálá, he is in error to refer to Ọbàtálá as Olódùmarè's son. Although Ọbàtálá, just as the other gods, is lesser than Olódùmarè, it is quite clear from Ifá poems that three divinities have always co-existed with Olódùmarè. These are Ọbàtálá, Ifá, and Èṣù.

This also means that power relations in the Yorùbá supernatural world are completely different from those in Christian theology. The best way to understand power in the Yorùbá supernatural world is to distinguish between existential and functional hierarchies. In the existential hierarchy, we can identify four levels of chronological/existential superiority:

> Level 1: Olódùmarè, Ọbàtálá, Ifá and Èṣù.
>
> Level 2: The other divinities; the Ajogun (i.e., evil supernatural forces--we can call them anti-gods); the Àjẹ́ (often improperly translated as 'witches').
>
> Level 3: Humans; plants and animals.
>
> Level 4: The ancestors.[13]

In the functional hierarchy, Olódùmarè is undoubtedly supreme as the chief executive. Olódùmarè is the final arbiter in all functional issues in the Yorùbá cosmos. Nonetheless, one should not say of Olódùmarè that: "He is creator" "He is king", "He is Omnipotent", "He is All-wise, All-knowing, All-seeing" (Idowu, 1966, pp.39-41), thereby equating Olódùmarè's role with that of the Christian God.

Olódùmarè in Yorùbá theology cannot be all-knowing because Olódùmarè frequently consults Ifá (i.e., the god of wisdom) for knowledge and advice through divination! Olódùmarè cannot be the creator if by this we mean to suggest that Olódùmarè alone created everything else. As we have seen, Olódùmarè did not create Ọbàtálá, Èṣù and Ifá as these three have always co-existed with Olódùmarè. Moreover, when it comes to the creation of humans and the world, it is quite clear from Ifá poems that there was a division of labor among Olódùmarè, two other divinities, and a third spiritual entity who is not regarded as a divinity. It was Ògún who

[13] The ancestors come after humans because one condition for becoming an ancestor in the Yorùbá cosmos is to have lived a morally worthy life here on earth. Hence one must have lived life as a human before becoming an ancestor. But, if one does not pay careful attention to the details of Yorùbá theology, it is easy to misunderstand the status of the ancestors. This is because within the functional hierarch, the ancestors are above humans (but are placed below the divinities).

fashioned skeletons, Ọbàtálá molded forms and shapes, and Olódùmarè imparted the breath of life. We also have Ajàlá, an entity who is not regarded as a divinity, but who molds the Orí (i.e., "inner-heads") of humans. Orí is the principle of "destiny" in the sense that it embodies each individual's potentialities for success and/or failure on earth.[14]

Moreover, when it comes to day-to-day administration of aye (the natural world) and Ọ̀run (the supernatural world), Olódùmarè has delegated responsibility to the divinities. This is precisely why the Yorùbá do not often pray to Olódùmarè. They do not worship, offer sacrifices, nor build temples for Olódùmarè. Indeed, in terms of the day-to-day administration of the cosmos, Èṣù, who functions as the universal policeman, is the most important divinity.

Scholars such as Bolaji Idowu and Benjamin Ray also give the impression that the Ọ̀run of Yorùbá theology is somewhat equivalent to the heaven of Christian theology. This is not quite so. First of all, Ọ̀run, (often improperly translated as heaven) is divided into two parts: Ọ̀run Òkè (i.e., Ọ̀run above) and Ọ̀run Odò (Ọ̀run below). Only three supernatural entities reside at Ọ̀run Òkè: these are Olódùmarè (the Yorùbá High God), Ọ̀ranmiyàn, and, Ṣàngó (the god of thunder and lightning). Ọ̀run Òkè as the name suggests is located above in the skies, while Ọ̀run Odò is located inside the earth's crust. All the other supernatural entities (ancestors, the other divinities, the Ajogun, etc., including Olódùmarè, who resides in Ọ̀run above) reside at Ọ̀run Odò.

But the differences do not end here. There are also many differences between the Christian and Yorùbá conceptions of evil. All evil in Anglo-Christian theology ultimately derives from one source, Satan. All evil acts, deeds, etc., ultimately result from the fact that Satan has a supernatural ability to overcome, persuade or entice humans into improper conduct. But

[14] The role of Orí in the Yorùbá conception of personhood is often mis-understood. Having been weaned on the staple Western diet of freewill and determinism, many contemporary philosophers of African thought have spilled much unnecessary ink on the question of how the Yorùbá can maintain free will, punishment and reward alongside the conception of 'inner head'. The fact of the matter is that this is all much ado about nothing. Ifá poems make a very clear-cut distinction among Orí (the principle of actualization and *earthly success or failure*), ẹsẹ̀ (the principle of individual strife and struggle), and Ìwà (good character). Most of these philosophers quote various Ifá poems from W. Abímbọ́lá (1968, 1969, 1973). Despite the fact that the poems themselves (and Wande Abímbọ́lá's own expositions) discuss Orí within the context of earthly success and failure, and despite the fact that there is a concept of Ìwà in which freewill is made crystal clear, because Western Anglo-American philosophy makes no distinction between determinism vis-à-vis earthly success and determinism vis-à-vis moral character, Western conceptual schemes are transmitted wholesale into Yorùbá thought! Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, there is an Ifá poem from Èjì Ogbè, the very first book of the Ifá Literary Corpus, in which the distinction between Orí and Ìwà is stated concisely. Unless one can point to situations in which Yorùbá culture punishes people for lack of earthly success and achievement, discussing Orí in relation to moral responsibility and autonomy is misplaced.

in Yorùbá religion, evil does not emanate from one source.[15] Evil emanates from the evil supernatural forces called the Ajogun. There are two hundred plus one of these forces in the cosmos.[16] These forces are all separate and distinct entitles, and as such they are individually responsible for a specific type of evil. The Ajogun have eight warlords: Ikú (death); Àrùn (Disease); Òfò (Loss); Ẹ̀gbà (Paralysis); Ọ̀ràn (Big-trouble); Èpè (Curse); Ẹ̀wọ̀n (Imprisonment); Èṣe (Afflictions). Hence, one can engage in some linguistic license and claim that, while Christian theology has a mono-demonic conception of evil, Yorùbá religion has a poly-demonic conception of evil.[17]

One final point to note about the Yorùbá cosmos is that the Yorùbá do not regard the spiritual world as a place that is so far removed from the natural world that humans can gain access to it only after death. These two realms of existence are interdependent in the sense that there is constant communication between the two worlds. It is because of the constant inter-relationship between these two realms that the Yorùbá poly-demonic conception of evil has much bearing on ethics.

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[15] Actually, a distinction should be made between moral and natural evil. The status of natural evil in Christianity often is not fully explicated. Does natural evil emanate from Satan? In Yorùbá theology, this issue does not arise because evil supernatural forces are associated with both natural and moral evil. Thus, while Ikú (the supernatural force called death), might be responsible for a car accident, another evil force called Omìmì is responsible for earthquakes and earth tremors.

[16] Note that 200+1evil supernatural forces is not the same as 201 supernatural forces**!** The extra 1 is actually the set of all those evil forces that did not originally descend from the supernatural world at the time the natural world was created. In short, the Yorùbá conception of evil contains what we may call a *principle of elasticity* that allows it to incorporate any new force of evil into its pantheon. The principle of elasticity also applies to the divinities who are 400+1 in number.

[17] The full import of the Yorùbá poly-demonic conception of evil is often not appreciated. Elsewhere (K. Abímbọ́lá, 1994) I have relied upon this conception in a discussion of the problem of evil. The focus of my analysis was not the standard problem of evil in relation to the existence of God. Rather I posed an epistemological question about *the rationality of the belief* in God given that moral and natural evil exists in the world. The answer *implicit* in Yorùbá theology seems to be following. We ought to distinguish between *concepts* and *instantiations*. The concept of good makes no sense independently of a concept of evil to contrast good with. In fact, Yorùbá theology suggests that there can be no such thing as a perfectly good world unless we understand the meaning of evil. But a concept need not have instantiations. In the Yorùbá cosmos, instantiations of evil are the handiwork of natural beings (such as humans) and supernatural beings (such as the anti-gods, *Ajogun*, who attacked Ọ̀rúnmìlà in the Ifá poem above). Contemporary Yorùbá society operates on this poly-demonic conception of evil and responsibility. As we shall see below, in Yorùbá culture, the malevolent supernatural being called Àrùn (Disease) *can* be held responsible for disease, just as a human being can be held responsible for an evil act that was up to that person (and not up to a malevolent force). The question, of course then is this: how do we determine when a malevolent force is responsible for an evil act? The answer supplied by Yorùbá theology is: divination. This is precisely why, up till today, all Yorùbá medical practitioners are also diviners

HEALING AND APPLIED ETHICS IN YORÙBÁ CULTURE

What has all this got to do with applied ethics? The answer lies in the fact that, because contemporary African philosophy assumes mistaken accounts of Yorùbá religion like those of Idowu and Ray, the import of the spirituality on day-to-day living is overlooked. This inevitably leads to a situation in which African philosophy has little or no relevance to African societies.

One clear-cut example of this is in the field of medicine. Medicine, whether implicitly or explicitly, assumes a conception of a person. The Yorùbá conception of personhood divides a person into two parts: the body, and the soul. But it further subdivides the soul into three parts: Orí (a personal divinity which functions as the principle of earthly success or failure for each individual); èmí (which is the breath of life); and ęsę̀ (which is the principle of freedom, and which functions as the "will to success"). Despite the fact that many African philosophers have examined the Yorùbá conception of personhood, and despite the fact that the most widely used method of medicine in Yorùbá society today relies upon this conception of personhood, the ethical issues generated by this view are never fully explored.

I will examine ethical issues in traditional medicine by looking at the role of the god called Ṣòǹpòǹnǫ́, and the role of the malevolent force called Àrùn (Disease), in the practice of traditional Yorùbá medicine. As we shall see, Ṣòǹpòǹnǫ́ and Àrùn do not merely play important roles in the conception of illnesses, they also raise important moral issues vis-à-vis the treatment of illnesses and the control of epidemics.

It is customary in contemporary Western cultures to distinguish between traditional and alternative medicine. Contemporary Yorùbá culture also has a comparative distinction, except that the meanings of the two terms are reversed in Yorùbá culture. In the West, traditional medicine nowadays refers to orthodox medicine, which is medicine as practiced by a doctor who has undergone training in a medical school that is approved by the Medical Association. Alternative medicine is a generic term used to describe any other approach that employs principles and methods that are different from those of orthodox medicine. Chinese acupuncture, Indian ayurveda, and the healing aspects of Sufism are all regarded as alternative medicines in the West. In contemporary Yorùbá society, traditional medicine refers to the age-old holistic, non-Western, approach to medicine. By default, what is called traditional medicine in the Western world (i.e., orthodox medicine) becomes alternative medicine in Yorùbá society.[18]

[18] Since the focus of this paper is Yorùbá culture, I will use the dichotomies employed in Yorùbá society. Hence, unless otherwise stated, I will use traditional medicine to refer to

What is significant is the stark contrast between the principles and methods of traditional (Yorùbá) medicine and those of orthodox (Western) medicine. The best way of introducing these differences is to start with a characterization of the differences between orthodox medicine and alternative medicine in Western thought. Orthodox medicine is, by and large, allopathic in the sense that its methodology for the treatment of diseases is based on what may be called the contrary principle: it attempts to treat diseases with chemical agents that produce effects that are contrary, or in opposition, to those of the disease being treated. Moreover, allopathic medicine is also concerned primarily with the elimination of symptoms.

Homeopathic medicine, on the other hand, treats like with like: it employs herbal remedies, which, if given in minute doses, would produce in a healthy person symptoms similar to those of the sick person. Moreover, while allopathic medicine is preoccupied with getting rid of symptoms, homeopathic medicine is also very much concerned with identifying the causes of illness and disease in an effort to restore holistic balance in the biological system. Yorùbá traditional medicine is homeopathic vis-à-vis the two main points above: it is interested in getting rid of symptoms, and it is also interested in identifying and removing the causes of illness. But there is also a spiritual dimension to the treatment offered by the Yorùbá herbalist (called onísègùn).[19] So, in their efforts to restore holistic balance in the patient, the onísègùn will also be interested in finding the spiritual causes of illness (if there are any), just as much as s/he will be interested in restoring spiritual balance in the patient (if necessary).

Restoring spiritual balance is important for two main reasons. First, as already hinted in my earlier discussion of the creation of human beings, in Yorùbá thought the human being is made up of four main components: (i) ara, the body, i.e., the skeleton created by Ògún, and the form molded by

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holistic medicine, and I will use alternative (or orthodox) medicine to refer to medicine as currently practiced by the Western doctor in a standard hospital or clinic.

[19] It is important to note that traditional onísègùn are also Ifá priests and diviners. There are two main interrelated methods of divination in Yorùbá culture: divination with the Ifá Literary Corpus in which there are 256 books, and hundreds of poems within each book; and, the Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún (sixteen cowries) divination system, a system which condenses the 256 books of the Ifá Literary Corpus into sixteen. The traditional onísègùn will be competent in at least one of these two divination systems. I should also point out that there are other traditional methods of divination (for example, kola-nut divination). Also, in contemporary Yorùbá society, there are now many healers whose methods are not based on traditional Yorùbá medicine. These would include: Christian healers who eschew almost all forms of medication and concentrate on the power of prayers and the holy water; and Islamic healers who make use of the power of words derived from the Qur'an. Islamic healers also depend heavily on talismans and amulets. My assertions in this paper apply only to the healing techniques of those healers who derive their methods from traditional Yorùbá conceptions. I should also add, however, that there are some traditional Yorùbá healers who do not divine at all. They are, however, not called onísègùn, they are called adáhunse (a term which means something like "s/he who does it alone").

Ọbàtálá; (ii) ẹ̀mí, that aspect of the soul which is imparted by Olódùmarè. (Since the word ẹ̀mí is also the Yorùbá word for breath, it is quite obvious that the aspect of the soul derived from Olódùmarè is the breath of life.); Orí, the principle of material actualization; and (iv) ẹsẹ̀, which introduces the principle of individual effort, strife or struggle before the potentialities encapsulated in one's Orí can be actualized. Ẹsẹ̀, in short, represents the idea that, ultimately, success is up to the individual. Note that ẹ̀mí, ẹsẹ̀ and Orí are all spiritual. Strictly speaking, one should say that the person has two parts: ara (the body) and the soul complex (ẹ̀mí, Orí and ẹsẹ̀).

Divination is one important means of diagnosis employed by the medical practitioner. In the divination process, the priest establishes a link among the client, the clients Orí, and the god of wisdom, in a series of steps. So as to protect the integrity of the divination act, the priest is not told this complaint until after the divination.[20] After a series of invocations, the priest divines so as to determine the book of the Ifá Literary Corpus to select a poem from. The priest then proceeds to explain and interpret the message of the poem. Although there might be variations in the depth of knowledge the priest brings to bear on his or her interpretation of a poem, every specific poem has a specific message.[21]

If after having divined, the onísègùn determines that the source of disease, illness or affliction is spiritual, then in addition to herbs and medications designed to treat and repair the body, the onísègùn will also prescribe something for spiritual repair. Sacrifice is compulsory after every divination. But the onísègùn's prescription may include incantations and/or Ifá (Ifá here meaning special herbal talismans, the recipes of which are contained in Ifá poems).

Indeed it is precisely because of this that we have the Yorùbá saying: "ẹbọ gíngín, òògun gíngín níí gba aláìkú là." That is, "it is a little bit of sacrifice and a little bit of medications that saves the patient who is not going to die." Moreover, because it is only through divination that a bad or defective Orí can be repaired, one of the praise names of Ọ̀rúnmìlà (the god of wisdom) is: "Baba mi ọ̀mọ̀n tíí to Orí elémèrè kéri elémèrè ọ́ má ba à ṣe fọ́." That is, "my father, the molder who prevents the shattering of the inner-head of the (bad) spirit child by re-molding such heads."

But it is the role of the Ajogun called Àrùn that is most significant for our current discussion. Àrùn has at least three layers meaning in the

[20] Even this is not mandatory. It is not uncommon for clients to choose not to reveal the precise nature of their problems to the diviner. The client might, therefore, decide to listen to the priests chants, and interpretations of the poems chanted, and then ask that the appropriate sacrifice for a particular poem be performed.
[21] See W. Abímbọ́lá 1976 for details of the divination process.

Yorùbá cosmos. First it refers to an anti-god, (i.e., one of the Ajogun's warlords). In Yorùbá theology, the Ajogun are completely evil and as such they have no redeeming virtues whatsoever. The avowed aim of all the Ajogun, including Àrùn, is the complete ruination of mankind. Only sacrifice and special pleading to Èṣù by one's individual Orí can save one from the powers of the Ajogun.

The divinities, including Ọ̀rúnmìlà himself, can be afflicted by the Ajogun. It is precisely because of this that I have given the full version of the Ifá poem above. In this poem, Ọ̀rúnmìlà himself was the subject of the Ajogun's attack, and was saved only by sacrifice. The poem tells us that the principal warlords of the ajogun-- Ikú (Death), Àrùn (Disease), Òfò (Loss), Ẹ̀gbà (Paralysis), Èse (Afflictions), and the other Ajogun--were covertly visiting Ọ̀rúnmìlà's household. This suggests that these anti-gods were attacking Ọ̀rúnmìlà's household in such a way that these calamities, to all intents and purposes, appeared natural. It was only through divination that Ọ̀rúnmìlà was able to diagnose the problems befalling his household as supernatural. He succeeded in restoring balance only after he had performed some sacrifice. It should be noted also that this poem contains some Ifá (i.e., incantations). The last 16 lines of the poem contain incantations, which in conjunction with amulets and talismans function as remedies against evil spirits.

In addition to Àrùn (Disease) as an evil supernatural force, the word "àrùn" also means illness or disease. Àrùn as a biological defect in a human being can be caused by natural causes, or by Àrùn (the malevolent supernatural force). This explains why divination and sacrifice are important in Yorùbá medicine. Just as in the Ifá poem quoted above, it is only through divination that a medical practitioner can determine whether the cause of an illness is natural or supernatural. Illnesses caused by natural causes require herbal and pharmacological remedies. But illnesses caused by supernatural forces require the offering of sacrifice, the use of talismans and amulets, or the recitation of incantations. The practice of medicine in Yorùbá society is, therefore, not merely homeopathic in the sense that it relies only on physical wholeness, it is also interested in spiritual balance.

I will now turn to another clear-cut illustration of this view in practice. This example has to do with Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ in Yorùbá culture. As with the word Ifá and àrùn in Yorùbá culture, Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ has various levels of meaning. At one level, Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ is one of the divinities within the Yorùbá pantheon of 400+1 gods. Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ is the god that brings smallpox, and as such smallpox also goes by the same name in Yorùbá.

In Yorùbá culture the illness called Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ actually includes less serious illnesses such as chicken-pox. So, ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ as an illness in Yorùbá culture is better defined as a family of related illnesses all of which are connected by three factors: the god Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́, the wind, and what is called "hot earth".

Since Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ is the name of the god as well as the name of the illness, people are reluctant to call the god by the name Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ because calling him by that name might be an invitation of both god and illness. So the god is more frequently referred to by the name Ọbalúayé ('lord of the world'). For similar reasons, the illness ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ is also known as illẹ́ẹ́gbóná or ẹgbóná ('hot earth'). The Ifá priest and oníṣègùn Babalọlá Fátóògùn of the town of Ìlobùú in Nigeria explains these connections as follows:

> Whenever Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ comes into the world, he is accompanied by ẹbùrú (spirits) otherwise known as wọ̀rọ̀kọ́. These are the things that cause bad wind (atẹ́gùn búburú). When this wind blows on to anyone this will become Ègbóná (smallpox), the person will become hot and Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ will be coming out of his body. Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ uses a type of arrow known as ọfà Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́. Wherever he shoots his arrow (ọfà) into the air, smallpox will affect the person, or tree, or animal, wherever the wind from the arrow touches. Wọ̀rọ̀kọ́ comes out of the arrow in the form of wind. This is why old men pray that 'evil wind may not beat us' (afẹ́fẹ́ burúkú kò ní fẹ́ lù wá o).
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> Another way Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ affects someone is through the witches (Ìyààmi Àjẹ́). Witches borrow the wind of Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ and fight anyone they want to fight with it. It is as if a man goes to borrow a cutlass (àdá) from another man that the witches borrow the wind from Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́. This is why, if Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ affects anyone and they consult Ifá about it, Ifá may tell them that it is the witches who are fighting against them.
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> Another way Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ affects someone is that there are some men who know about medicine, who can prepare a medicine that they can put in the house of a person they want to fight, so that Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ can affect the person.
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> Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ always visits the world during the months of the dry season. Then he will visit the world (ayé) and also the heaven (Ọ̀run) and he will affect both plants and human beings, so that the plants will shrivel up (ro). (Quoted in Buckley, 1997, pp.100-101.)

Fátóògùn is making some very important connections. First he gives a clear-cut analysis of the spiritual and natural dimensions of the disease called smallpox. In the spiritual dimension, the illness can be caused when the god Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ pays a visit to the world. Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ himself may cause smallpox by firing his arrow. It is also the case that wherever he goes some terrible spirits called wọ̀rọ̀kọ́ accompany him, and cause the ill wind of smallpox. The witches also can cause smallpox, and, indeed, Fátóògùn mentions that smallpox can be caused by biological warfare.

But the question can be asked: why does Ṣòǹpòǹnǹ sometimes seek to infect people with smallpox? There is one myth recounted by A. B. Ellis that attempts to account for this:

> Shan-kpanna [Ṣòǹpòǹnǹ] is old and lame, and is depicted as limping along with the aid of a stick. According to a myth he has a withered leg. One day, when the gods were all assembled at the place of Ọbàtálá, and were dancing and making merry, Shan-kpanna endeavoured to join in the dance, but, owing to his deformity, stumbled, and fell. All the gods and goddesses thereupon burst out laughing, and Shan-kpanna, in revenge, strove to infect them with smallpox, but Ọbàtálá came to the rescue and seizing his spear, drove Shan-kpanna away. From that day Shan-kpanna was forbidden to associate with the other gods, and he became an outcast who has since lived in desolate and uninhabited tracts of country. (Quoted in Buckley, 1997, p.105.)

With this myth, the relationship between Ṣòǹpòǹnǹ and morality becomes clear. Moral conduct in Yorùbá culture is intimately connected with Ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́ (good or gentle character).[22] Ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́ is a conglomeration of principles of moral conduct. These principles are explained in various Ifá poems. The most important of these principles include: ìtẹ́ríba (respect), inú rere (having good mind to other), and otítọ́ (truth). Good character is often simply referred to as iwa (character).

The root meaning of the word ìwà is 'to exist'. Hence Yorùbá culture recognizes the point that questions of moral behavior and conduct arise vis-à-vis issues of co-existence amongst beings. But, as already mentioned, the spiritual world, just as the natural world, is very much part of day-to-day existence in Yorùbá culture. Hence ìwà as the state of existence of spiritual beings engenders ìwà as moral character. In the myth recounted by Ellis, some of the gods and goddesses failed to exhibit ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́ in their conduct. They did not show respect to the old and lame man who also wanted to participate in the merriment. In response to their bad ìwà, Ṣòǹpòǹnǹ himself exhibited an even worse ìwà by threatening to inflict all with smallpox. It was as a result of this bad character that Ṣòǹpòǹnǹ withdrew into the forest, and has since then disliked festivals and merriment of any kind.

Because it is common knowledge in Yorùbá society that Ṣòǹpòǹnǹ dislikes merriment, games, festivals, drumming and dancing are forbidden during outbreaks of smallpox. The Yorùbá generally bury the dead in their extended family compounds. The burial of victims of Ṣòǹpòǹnǹ has, however, always been one of the few exceptions to this. Buckley quotes an oníṣègùn, Awótúndé, on this very point:

[22] See W. Abímbọ́lá (1975).

> When Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ kills a person, no one should rejoice. For if there are any (funeral) celebrations he will be annoyed that despite the evil he has done to these people, they are still happy. He will then affect many other people. God has given Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ such a power that if he kills in anyone's family they must not be angry but must instead be thanking Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ or else he will be angry that people are not aware of the evil that he has done. This is why people usually call Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ "Alápadúpẹ́' ('the owner of kill and thank'). Anyone that Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ kills, we should not say that he died, but rather 'ó yọ̀ lọ' ('he rejoiced and went'), because if it is said that the person died, (ó kú) Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́ will be annoyed that people are calling him a murderer. (Buckley, 1997, p.104.)

Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́'s (i.e., the god's) role in smallpox must therefore be examined against the background of an ongoing cycle of revenge, punishment and vengeance against the descendants of the other gods.[23] This chain of events was started by other spiritual entities when they exhibited ìwà búburú (bad character) by laughing the old man who was trying to make merry.

This cycle of spiritual and natural events has many practical consequences for the treatment and control of smallpox in Yorùbáland. As already mentioned, merriment, dancing, and games are prohibited during outbreaks of smallpox. Sacrifices will be offered to the god in an effort to appease him. Also, the broom called ọwọ̀ is that which is normally used for sweeping the floor in Yorùbá society. This broom, which is made from the mid-ribs of the palm-tree, is also one of the symbols of the god Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́.[24] The use of ọwọ̀ is banned during outbreaks of smallpox.

The foregoing has various sorts of implications for the practice of traditional medicine. Consider, for instance, the health professional/patient relationship. What sorts of duties, responsibilities and rights attach to the roles of the oníṣègùn and the client? Is the oníṣègùn ethically bound to tell the whole truth to the patient even if this might be inimical to a speedy recovery? The Hippocratic oath, which has traditionally been the basis for Western medical ethics, is silent on the issue of truth. In fact, with this oath doctors merely pledge to "apply dietetic measures for the benefit of

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[23] According to various Ifá poems, the cradle of humanity is a town called Ilé-Ifẹ̀, in the South-Western part of Nigeria. According to Yorùbá theology, this was the first settlement established by the 400 plus 1 divinities that created the earth. (In Yorùbá thought, the "plus 1" functions as a principle of elasticity which allows for the addition of new divinities into the Yorùbá pantheon. Hence, this 1 is better regarded as the set of new divinities.) Although not all humans are regarded as descendants of the divinities, individuals can be re-born into the extended family of any divinity. This is one way of interpreting the initiation rites undergone by those who are initiated into the cult of any divinity. Indeed, the Yorùbá name for those who have been initiated into the cult of any divinity is ọmọ-Òòṣà, i.e., "child of the divinity".

[24] Note, however, that when the broom is used as an icon of the god Ṣọ̀npọ̀nnọ́, it is called *safara* as opposed to *ọwọ̀* which is its usual name.

the sick according to [the doctors'] ability and judgment." (Arras, 1995, p.54.) Above all, doctors promise to protect their patients from "harm and injustice". (Arras, 1995, p.54.) Based upon the Hippocratic oath in which protection against harm is paramount, the traditional model of responsibility that emerged within the practice of Western medicine was that of paternalism in which the physician's duty to tell the truth was subordinate to that of not harming the patient. In contrast to paternalism, many have argued that patient autonomy should be the basis of physician-patient relationship. Neither of these models suits the onísègùn-client relationship because even the onísègùn is an interpreter who is decoding or attempting to decipher the message of Ifá.

Consider also the problem of euthanasia. If, after having divined, the message of Ifá is that there is no remedy for the illness (there are, indeed, a handful of poems with this message), and the patient chooses to die, should an onísègùn help the patient commit suicide? If the message of Ifá is clear, isn't the onísègùn morally bound to help alleviate the suffering of the patient? At one level, the answer to this problem seems to be clear, the onísègùn might divine to enquire about what to do. But the onísègùn might also realize that, according to Yorùbá theology, if an individual dies before his or her pre-chosen time here on earth, that person will be sent back at the gates of Òrun. So considering euthanasia requires a consideration of its moral implications on the soul of the patient.

The point then is this: if one does not pay adequate attention to the role of the spiritual realm in the practice of medicine in Yorùbá society, we will not fully understand aspects of medical ethics such as the priest-patient relationship, attitudes to euthanasia, health care policies, etc. Moreover, as already mentioned the spiritual dimensions of divination also have profound methodological implications. For unlike in the Western methods of inquiry, in which secrecy is inimical to the pursuit of truth, secrecy is in fact that which eliminates bias within the divination process.[25] This is precisely why the patient never starts by disclosing the subject of her concern to the diviner.

ANOTHER LEVEL

I began this paper with a brief characterization of the standard philosophical classification of the branches of ethics. As is often the case when one moves too closely with pre-set conceptions, the precise thrust of my arguments about the role of spirituality in Yorùbá culture might be lost (this is especially so if one has been reading this paper with the trained eye of the academic philosopher). Therefore, I will attempt here a re-explanation of the points from a different perspective.

[25] See W. Abímbólá and B. Hallen (1993) for further explanation of the role of secrecy in divination.

Morality is made up of judgmental claims of value vis-à-vis human (and non-human) conduct: it is about what one ought or ought not do in relation to human (and spiritual) conduct. A moral theory, however, is a systematic account of one's morality. One may have a morality without having a moral theory. For instance, one may guide one's conduct by rules and principles such as: "stealing is wrong", "adultery is immoral", "murder is inimical to society", etc., without having a moral theory (i.e., a systematic theoretical framework for explaining why these rules and principles are wrong). Applied ethics is the bridge between morality and moral theory, and it is concerned with the application of a systematic moral theory to human conduct. It is the connection between theory and practice.

The main thrust of my assertions in this paper is that contemporary African philosophy is seriously defective because it fails to provide a critical assessment of the application of traditional African moral theories. Much of contemporary African philosophy is impoverished because it fails to assess the conduct of institutions and individuals on the basis of the moral theories upheld by individuals in contemporary African societies.

My claim is that there is a "group theory of ethics" that is prevalent in contemporary Yorùbá society.[26] This theory of ethics departs radically from

[26] What does it mean to say that a spiritual theory of ethics is prevalent in contemporary Yorùbá society? I have explained this point in some details elsewhere, K. Abímbọ́lá (forthcoming). Re-hashing this explanation would take us too far afield, so a very brief summary will suffice. What I call the *psychology of belief* is at the heart of the matter. Specifically, I think we need to make a distinction between implicit and explicit beliefs. Someone's explicit beliefs are those claims s/he would profess to uphold, while implicit beliefs are those beliefs which we, as onlookers, can decipher from a person's practical conduct. Someone's implicit and explicit beliefs may cohere: that is, the beliefs that a person claims and pro-claims to adopt could be those which are consistent with that person's conduct. But often, implicit and explicit beliefs diverge. Before my claims about the prevalence of the Yorùbá spiritualist theory of morality can be valid, one needs to include those whose implicit beliefs are *consistent* with that theory. The practical effects of this claim of mine can be very easily illustrated. My uncle, Chief Abímbọ́lá Ìrókò, is a practicing oníṣègùn in the town of Ọ̀yọ́ in Nigeria. His clinic is part of our extended family compound, and whenever I am at home in Ọ̀yọ́, I usually spend a lot of time with him. His days begin around 5am when he and his assistant mix and brew various medical herbs. The first patients begin to arrive around 6am and by about 10am when the morning rush diminishes, he might have attended to over 30 patients who have various medical requirements. A substantial part of his diagnoses requires physical examinations and divination with sixteen cowries, and his clientele include many who openly profess to be Christians and Muslims, just as it includes many who claim to be traditionalist. On many occasions when he did not deem it necessary to diagnose with sixteen cowries, many of his clients would specifically request a divination. About 100 meters from our family compound is a Western-style private hospital in which only allopathic medicine is practiced. By 10am when my uncle would have attended to about 30 patients, this private hospital (on a good day) might only have attended to 10 patients. This pattern is the same all over Yorùbáland in Nigeria. Indeed it seems to be the case that in Yorùbá society, most people use the Western-Style hospital only in cases of trauma. This explains why the homeopathic (plus spiritual) approach to the treatment of illnesses is regarded as *traditional* in most African societies. Orthodox Western-style medicine is the *alternative*

much of standard, Western-style philosophy because it is a spiritualist theory of ethics in which moral conduct encompasses spirits within the equation of moral conduct itself. Spiritual beings in this moral theory therefore are somewhat like the lawmakers of most democratic societies: the moral codes which apply to the general populace (in this case the Yorùbá human) also applies to the lawmakers (in this case the divinities).

Of course, the question can be asked: can there be a coherent and consistent group theory of ethics? While answering this question in the affirmative might be problematic for some societies, this is not the case in Yorùbá society, primarily because of the role of the Ifá Literary Corpus in Yorùbá culture. The body of knowledge on the basis of which the spiritual account of morality is based is somewhat fixed in the sense that it arises out of a sacred oral text. At the same time, people do not adopt a close-minded attitude to these texts. The poems of Ifá are not regarded as an inflexible dogmatic creed. Indeed, the whole point of the Ifá 'text' is hermeneutic: it is meant to serve as the basis on which various sorts of advice and counsel that is germane to day-to-day life can be identified. Hence, while parts of the text are fixed, they are at the same time open.

This point requires more explanation. Each poem has eight parts, four of which are compulsory, four of which are non-compulsory. The compulsory parts are compulsory in the sense that when chanted (anywhere in the world), they are chanted in exactly the same way.[27] The non-compulsory parts are non-compulsory in the sense that: (i) a priest might decide not to chant them at all; (ii) a priest might decide to tell these parts in prose; (iii) or, a priest might decide just to give the gist of these parts to the client. But Ifá is also open in yet another sense: it is up to the priest and the client to decide what hermeneutic stance to adopt in relation to the content of the poems. A priest, for example, might adopt a literal interpretation of the poem, in which case s/he might believe that there was in fact a time when the spiritual forces that attacked Òrúnmìlà in the poem recounted above attacked him. The client might decide to adopt a figural interpretation in which the characters in the poem are not regarded as real-life entities, but rather much like the characters of a play.

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reserved for cases requiring urgent treatment. The point of all this should be clear: the Yorùbá person who explicitly claims to be a Christian, a Muslim, or an atheist, but who consults the onísègùn for medical treatment (and who uses/takes the herbal prescriptions in conjunction with the spiritual prescriptions) is implicitly subscribing to the Yorùbá spiritualist view of the world.

[27] William Bascom, who has collected various Ifá poems from priests in Nigeria, Benin Republic, and Cuba observed in surprise that priests in Cuba, who had never had any direct contact with Africa, chanted Ifá poems exactly as they were chanted in Africa. In some parts of the New World, especially in Cuba, the whole extensive structure of the Ifá Literary Corpus (with its 256 books and numerous poems within each book) survived through slavery and into contemporary times.

Whatever interpretation is adopted, the centrality of sacrifice remains constant. As already mentioned, within the Yorùbá cosmos, there are two groups of supernatural forces, the Òrìṣà (i.e., gods) and the malevolent supernatural forces (of which the Ajogun are the most important). These two supernatural forces are locked in an unending cycle of enmity--an antagonism in-between which humans are caught. This is where sacrifice comes in. For it is only those who offer sacrifice to Èṣù (the god who is regarded as the "universal policeman" because of his role as the impartial adjudicator between these two opposing supernatural forces of nature), that will succeed in overcoming the evil of the anti-gods. Sacrifice is, therefore, a strategy for overcoming evil.

It is important to re-iterate a point already made. Evil in Yorùbá theology (and, in traditional and contemporary Yorùbá societies) is concrete in the sense that the anti-gods can manifest themselves as tangible, real, or natural effects. This is precisely why the most important warlords of the Ajogun are Ikú (death); Àrùn (Disease); Òfò (Loss); Ẹgbà (Paralysis); Ọràn (Big-trouble); Èpè (Curse); Ẹwọ̀n (Imprisonment); Èṣe (Afflictions). The consequence of this is that although the Yorùbá distinguish between natural and moral evil, both types of evil can be the handiwork of natural and supernatural beings.

Sacrifice is also the means by which the Yorùbá repent from moral evil. The person who has sinned or committed an anti-social act can only fully indemnify himself by first, changing his ways, and then offering sacrifices to the appropriate god. For example, because the god called Ṣàngó is responsible for punishing thieves and crooks, a thief who has changed her ways can only fully indemnify herself by offering sacrifices to Ṣàngó.

It should be noted that sacrifice is not merely meant for the gods and the anti-gods. Sacrifice in Yorùbá culture is also a social act. This explains why when someone is asked to offer a sacrifice to either a god, an anti-god, or, as redemption for sin, will invite friends and neighbors to a feast. The person will explain the reason why he or she is offering the sacrifice, and his invitees will offer prayers and blessings for that person. In the case of sacrifice as redemption for moral evil, someone who has not truly changed his or her ways is unlikely to receive prayers and blessings from friends and neighbors.

The point then is that in both natural and moral evil, sacrifice performs a similar role: it is a strategy for indemnity, compensation, or salvation. A person who is afflicted by the evil supernatural force called Àrùn (Disease) will only succeed in indemnifying herself by offering sacrifices to Èṣù. A person who has changed his evil ways also concludes his redemption with a sacrifice to Èṣù. In both types of sacrifices, Èṣù will then present the offering to the appropriate supernatural force.

The role of sacrifice in Yorùbá culture, therefore, becomes crystal clear: it is the application of a spiritualist theory of good and evil to particular problems of day-to-day living, namely, those requiring of indemnity from supernatural and moral evil.

CONCLUSIONS: WHICH WAY FORWARD?

While I do not wish to denigrate the importance of normative ethics, meta-ethics, or any other division of ethics, I think applied ethics provides one in-road to making philosophy more relevant to contemporary African societies. Applied ethics has to do with the systematic application of a moral theory to issues of life, death, and day-to-day living. In contemporary Yorùbá culture, there is one such systematic theory prevalent within the practice of medicine. This theory is based on the sacred text of traditional Yorùbá religion, namely the Ifá Literary Corpus. And in this paper, I have provided a preliminary exploration of how this systematic theory can be used to explain and assess one class of human conduct, namely those of health and wholeness.

More work needs to be done, not only on ethical issues of traditional medicine, but also on many other problems of death and living in general, e.g., the moral implications of ancestor worship on ethnicity and warfare; the role of new religions in the now increasing phenomena of "witchcraft" in Africa; and, indeed, the moral implications of institutions of sacred kingship on the existence of two-tier systems of government and power in all African societies.[28] Until we move moral discourse from the level of 'justifications', 'foundations' and 'theorizing' to the level of mundane, day-to-day living, academic Western-style philosophy will be of little relevance to Africa.

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[28] This is a Pandora's box that is best left unopened. But open it, at least in a footnote, we must. About two years ago, Nigeria was once again returned to civil democratic rule. But the age-old traditional political institutions of government and power (i.e., sacred kingship) remain firmly in place. The new Nigerian constitution still does not mesh very well with these traditional institutions. Whilst I do not wish to suggest that contemporary African philosophers are not providing critical assessments of political conduct and institutions (Gbadegesin, 1991, is one good example of critical reflection on contemporary concerns), I think it is fair to say that most philosophers do not view the problem of politics and government as a problem of spirituality and applied ethics. Hence, often, we end up with the same potpourri of irrelevant ideas: socialism; African socialism; negritude; consciencism, etc. A discussion of the moral implications of the existence of these inconsistent institutions on day-to-day living is often left out.

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