

THE CONCEPT OF EVIL IN YORUBA AND IGBO THOUGHTS: SOME COMPARISONS

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Abstract: There is relatively little or no known cross-cultural critical comparison of perspectives on the concept and problem of evil in metaphysics literatures in African cultural philosophies. This article aims to attempt such theoretical exercise within the contexts of the Yoruba and Igbo metaphysical thoughts on the concept and existence of evil. This paper establishes that the meaning of the problem of evil as widely known in Western philosophy is not different from what obtains in Yoruba and Igbo thoughts. However, such lack of contrasting conceptual polemics does not translate in an absence of substantive differences in the metaphysical viewpoints on the actual existence of evil in Yoruba and Igbo cultural philosophies. Unlike in the Western philosophical tradition where the logical problem of evil is perennial, in both Yoruba and Igbo ontologies, such a logical problem of evil does not exist. The findings of the paper further show that while Yoruba ontology simply exonerates God from being responsible for evil on secular grounds, the understanding of evil in Igbo thought is complicatedly ambiguous, straddling between religion and secularism. In the light of the Yoruba and Igbo views on evil, the paper concludes that the devastating argument on the reality of evil, which has been largely taken as a necessary antithesis to the cogency of God's existence, may after all deserve some rethinking.

KEY WORDS: Evil, Africa, Igbo, Yoruba, Cultural Philosophy.

Introduction

The problem of evil remains the most potent attack on religion, especially on the existence of God. In philosophical discourse, this problem is understood as being a

consequence of the contradictions involved in the infinite characteristics of God such as being all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving. The problem of evil, which presupposes that the co-existence of evil and God is unlikely or impossible, states that given the reality of evil in the world, it is either the case that God does not exist or there is an equally powerful force in charge of evil.

There is no doubt that the problem of evil has gained serious attention in Western philosophical and theological discourses. However, in the African philosophical context, the debate on the philosophical problem of evil is just emerging, despite some uniquely interesting trends and perspectives within the diverse cultural philosophies in Africa. For example, in both Yoruba and Igbo philosophy, as well as in the Akan philosophical context, it is a given that the problem of evil is a substantive philosophical problem only within the Western conception of evil and that such a problem does not hold much weight when situated within the African notion of evil.¹ Thus far in the literature on the African perspectives on the problem of evil, little is known on the real and possible similarities and dissimilarities on the notion of evil in African cultures and whether or not such an understanding allows for a solution of the philosophical problem of evil either in the popularly known sense or in a new form.

This paper is an attempt at such a comparative understanding of the problem of evil in African cultural contexts. Such a philosophical comparison is important for giving directions to cross-cultural comparison of thoughts in African philosophy, which is yet in the making. Beyond the immediate imports for the growth of African philosophy, such comparison would avoid the false suppositions about a general African viewpoint on a conceptual matter or belief, especially as it concerns the notion of evil and the

¹ Some of the recent works on the philosophical problem of evil within the African philosophical traditions such as the Yoruba, the Igbo and the Akan include; J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969; G.S. Sogolo, 1983. *Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press; K. Gyekye, 1987. *An essay on African Philosophical Thought; the Akan Conceptual Scheme*. London: Cambridge University Press; E. O. Oduwole, 2007. "The Dialectics of Ire (goodness) and Ibi (evilness): An African Understanding of the Philosophical Problem of Evil." *Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 36 (1); O. A. Balogun, 2009. "The nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional African thought: Further reflections on the problem of evil", *Lumina*, vol. 20, No. 2; A. K. Fayemi, (2012) "Philosophical problem of Evil: Response to E. O. Oduwole." *Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 41 (1).

philosophical problem of evil in bringing such philosophical comparison into focus, this paper shall focus its discussion on the Yoruba and Igbo viewpoints.²

African Conception of evil: The Yoruba Example

Evil in general is “any experience that is injurious, painful, hurtful, regretful or calamitous [such that]... impedes or obstructs the achievement of goals, ideas, happiness or general well-being.”³ According to the Yoruba-African worldview, “the essence of evil...consists in doing harm to others.”⁴ Evil does not necessarily have a religious connotation. Such a perspective tends to be different from the Western conception of evil that identifies, for the most part, the religious agency of evil. In the Yoruba-African context, evil is a matter of morality and has little or nothing to do with religion.⁵ Therefore, the argument that heaps the blame of evil on God does not hold water with the Africans. Like the Yoruba, Placid Tempels, while reflecting on the notion of evil in the Bantu society, notes that “the performance of evil act or its avoidance is chiefly derived not from the world beyond or from gods.”⁶ Tempels state that the Bantu idea of evil or good is based on man’s reasoning and not on religion; it does not rely on a power over and above man, but it rather depends entirely on man.

Witchcraft is a form of evil recognized by the Africans. Witchcraft is seen as “the employment of mystical forces to harm one’s neighbor.”⁷ This force is a typical example of evil but in the view of Sophie Oluwole, witchcraft power is the power that somebody can use to affect another person or make someone else do what s/he wants without consent or awareness of the other. Oluwole does not mean that witchcraft is evil or necessarily evil; it only becomes evil when the person decides to use such powers

² The Yorubas and the Igbos are African ethnic groups dominant in the Southwestern and southeastern parts of Nigeria, respectively, though they can be found in sizable numbers across the different regions of the world.

³ Fayemi, A. K. op.cit. p.2.

⁴ Oluwole, S. B. 1978. “On the Existence of Witches”, in *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*. V11. (1 & 2), 20-35.

⁵ The various distinctions among the typologies of evil such as natural, spiritual, moral, social, psychological, and intellectual evils are rarely made among the Yoruba. This point is also advanced in Akinseye, F. A. 2005. *The Problem of Evil: Philosophical and Religious Approaches*, Ago- Iwoye: NASR.

⁶ This quotation is culled from Mbiti, J. S. 1969. *African Religious and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann. p.22.

⁷ Mbiti, op.cit. p. 27.

negatively. This further strengthens the assertion that evil is done by human agents and all blames should be directed to man and not God. J.S Mbiti also supports Oluwole in the mystical and witchcraft aspect by stating that:

Mystical power is neither good nor evil in itself: but when used maliciously by some individuals, it is experienced as evil. This view makes evil an independent and external object which, however, cannot act on its own but must be employed by human or spiritual agents. People here become incarnations of evil power.⁸

Many African societies maintain that God is not responsible for the creation of evil nor should He be blamed for it in any degree or circumstance. In religions such as Christianity and Islam, God is believed to have created the world *ex nihilo*, and He is responsible for everything in it both at creation and cumulatively after creation. God, in these religions, is seen as all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful. But the question of where evil comes from is not and should not be a rejection of God's attributes.

In the Yoruba-African context, evil is understood as originating from or associated with spiritual beings other than God. Part of this cosmological explanation is a personification of evil itself. According to Mbiti, the Vugusu tribe says that there is an evil divinity which God created good but later turned against God and began to do evil. The Vugusu is the northernmost sub-tribe of the Abularia, living on the Kenya side. This evil divinity is assisted by evil spirits and all evil now comes from that lot. The Iteso people of eastern Uganda and western Kenya, for example, cite Edeke as a god or spirit who brings death, epidemics and other calamities. They use the name of the god to refer to the calamities themselves; Edeke then is the embodiment of evil itself. The Yoruba worldview believes that evil does not emanate from one source but from various supernatural forces known as the 'Ajogun'; these forces are about two hundred, scattered around the cosmos. These factors are all separate and distinct entities, and as such are responsible for a specific type of evil. The Ajogun have eight warlords: Iku (Death), Arun (Disease), Ofo (Loss), Egba (Paralysis), Oran (Big Trouble), Epe (Curse), Ewon (Imprisonment) and Ese (Afflictions). Therefore, we can safely assume that the Yoruba's conception of evil is multi-dimensional. The Yoruba philosophy asserts that

⁸ Ibid.

the “concept of good makes no sense independently of a concept of evil to contrast it with.”⁹ It suggests that there can be no such thing as a good world unless we understand the meaning of evil, hence the study of Ajogun and its warlords.

This view of the Yoruba-African absolves God of any complicity in the problem of evil and pushes the tray of blame to humans. Such view also narrows the use and meaning of the concept of evil. What Christians, for example, refer to as ‘sin’, or ‘evil’ is better expressed in the Yoruba-African context of ‘wrongdoing’, ‘badness’ or ‘destruction of life’. This does not mean that the more abstract religious-embedded notions of sin and evil are non-existent in Yoruba culture. It only means that the moral perspective of evil is more dominant and quite pragmatic.

In such cultural understanding, evil is always attached to a wrong-doer, and ultimately a wrong-doer is a human person, except in natural catastrophe. In cases of natural disaster like earthquake, it can be argued that most natural disasters happen as a result of man’s earlier actions, having an imprint of man’s actions; the depletion of the ozone layer is an example. The sense here is that evil does not and cannot exist in the human experience except as perceived in people. It is people who are evil or sinful, whether or not they aided or not by invisible and natural forces. Even when it is claimed that invisible forces cause humans to do evil, it is because such people actually entertain bad intentions, utter bad words or engage in wrong deeds. They are therefore incarnations of evil powers or forces and not God.

The above understanding of evil has implications for the old philosophical problem of evil. Given the Yoruba notion of evil, it is arguable that it absolves God of any complicity in the problem of evil and negates the Western conception that heaps the blame on a supernatural entity. To further buttress the African perspective that God has nothing to do with evil, some African societies like the Akamba and the Herero believe that there is no need to offer sacrifice to God. They hold that God is so kind-hearted and good; therefore, he cannot harm his creations. It is however still believed that they would need to always sacrifice to God whenever they feel punished by him for their misdeeds. This naturalistic explanation of evil does not in any way negate the popular perception that Africans are incurably religious. It is a testament to their belief in the

⁹ Bolaji, Idowu. 1962. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, London: Longman. p. 63.

existence of a supernatural being, an explanation for the existence of evil and the vindication that the existence of God contradicts the existence of God and vice versa. The point in the foregoing Yoruba notion of evil is that it is distinct from its Western counterpart. While the Western notion to a large extent juxtaposes the existence of evil with the existence of God, and considers the former as a veritable negation of the latter, the Yoruba-African view separates the existence of evil from the existence of God. The Western notion asserts that a good, powerful and all-knowing God cannot exist with evil; whereas the Yoruba-African asserts that evil is entirely a human doing and God should be absolved from the blame. While the Westerners treated evil as an abstract term, the Yoruba-Africans are more pragmatic in their concept of evil. The tendency to separate kinds of evil (just as it is in St. Augustine) is nearly absent, as the Yoruba regard all evils as one, all coming out of man's discretion and actions. Therefore, the Yoruba-African notion of evil is the placement of both the existence and eradication of evil firmly on the shoulders of man.

On another note, Yoruba philosophy takes 'Esu' as the progenitor of evil because he works through chaos. It has been argued that while it is true that Esu is capable of doing evil, it does not mean that Esu is an evil being like the way Satan is perceived in Christian thought. Esu is known or conceived to be one of the three primordial divinities which had always existed with Olodumare, the Yoruba highest deity, as a minister in the theocratic governance of the universe. Esu can be said to be the Yoruba version of Hades. The other two divinities are 'Ifa' and 'Obatala'. Esu, contemporarily known as evil, is traditionally regarded as the special relation officer between heaven and earth; the inspector-general or the universal police who regularly reports to the high deity on the deeds of other divinities and men. Some Yoruba scholars such as N.A. Fadipe and P.A. Dopamu argued that Esu "cannot be equated with the biblical Satan, especially Satan of the New Testament"¹⁰ because he is not absolutely malevolent as he is also benevolent.

According to Kola Abimbola,

Esu is not all evil being. He is a neutral element in the sense that he is neither good nor bad. He is simply the mediator between all

¹⁰ Awolalu, J.O. and Dopamu, P.A. 1979. *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Onibonoje Press. p. 78.

entities and forces on both sides of the right and left divide..... Esu has the ability to make the sacrifices offered to Olodumare to be unacceptable. This suggests that Esu can alter or work in favor of any man depending on the consideration given to him along the line. This explains why it is always advised that whatever sacrifices are offered, the portion of Esu must be set aside.¹¹

From the foregoing, we can infer the following; (i) God is not the progenitor of evil in Yoruba thought; (ii) human actions make evil a necessity; (iii) Esu is not the same with the Biblical Satan. Esu, which is seen as the symbol of evil, has been cleared not to be evil thoroughly and, unlike Satan, he is not a rival of Olodumare (God) but works in tandem with him to ensure peace and order in the universe. A lot of attention has been given to Esu just to show that while he may be held responsible for the occurrence of evil, he is still capable of doing good. In fact, when human beings want to perpetrate evil against other human beings, Esu is required by Olodumare to wreak havoc upon potential evil doers. For the Yoruba, evil is as real and necessary as existence itself, hence their famous saying “tibi tire la da ile aye” (the world is created with both good and evil). The existence of evil and good is necessary and does not negate the existence of a supernatural entity. The Yorubas hold the belief “that the operation of the world is predicated on the dialectics of goodness (ire) and evil (ibi).”¹² In Yoruba worldview, there are different kinds of evil but they are all caused by humans and these people are called ‘Onise ibi’ (evil workers or evil doers) and human beings can do evil both naturally and supernaturally (reminiscent of witchcraft earlier discussed).

Moreover, the Yoruba do make a distinction between the African God and the Christian God in order to show the logical co-existence of the former with evil. This is another dimension to the notion of evil according to the Yoruba folklore, but it clearly shows a distinction to the Western notion of evil. The Yorubas do not deny the existence of evil and they do not believe in using superfluous arguments to counter the existence of evil. It could be argued that there is a dialectical and not diametrical relationship between goodness and evilness in Yoruba thought. For example, Esu of the Yoruba is not

¹¹ Abimbola, Kola. 1982. *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*, Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers. p. 27.

¹² *Ibid* p. 31.

conceived as diametrically opposed to God (Olodumare). This is because the attributes of Olodumare are actually different from the attributes of the Western European Christian God. Indeed, for the Yoruba, no single entity can be held responsible for the occurrence of evil. a fundamental question to ask at this point is whether the concept of evil in Yoruba thought is largely shared by other African cultural groups. In order to answer this question, the Igbo perspective shall be explored.

The Igbo notion of evil

The metaphysical problem of evil, despite being a perennial problem in Western philosophy, can be meaningfully discussed within the Igbo cosmological thought. The Igbos have attempted to discuss how the presence of evil can be reconciled with the attributes of Chi-Ukwu (the ultimate spirit). Such an attempt has divided Igbo philosophers into three major camps, namely: the Igbo cosmological optimistic view; Personal God and destiny view; and middle course view. The first view states that man is solely accountable for the evil in the world; the second speaks of personal god and destiny, while the final camp combines the two views together and includes some spirits as responsible for the evil in the world. But it still begs the question how all these can be explained in the face of an almighty and benevolent God, Chi-Ukwu. We shall explain the three broad views briefly and the conclusions that could be drawn there from.

(a) Igbo cosmological optimistic view

According to this view, God as 'Okike' (creator) is essentially good in himself and that his creation is intrinsically good: evil is something external to it in the sense that evil is the consequences of some moral evil committed by man. The upholders of this view point to the myths of God's withdrawal, proverbs and other cultural expressions as traditional grounds for insisting on this view. Nwala, for example, stated that:

There is a belief in a created universe which is controlled by creator, Chukwu-Okike. Man is in the centre of this creation. He is endowed with freedom and its attendant responsibility. There is belief in the unity among beings, belief in the original cosmic (universal) harmony and order which unfortunately the action of the human

being upsets (in this case as in the Bible story the woman starts confusion).¹³

For the likes of Igbo scholars such as Nwala, evil is the function of man himself, who is at the center of God's creation. Man is therefore responsible for every evil that happens in this world because of his actions and mode of being in the Igbo world. This view consolidates the African notion of evil that God can never be the proximate cause of evil in the world. Although man is responsible for the evil in the world, remotely, God causes it, not as evil as such but in the sense that out of the good man causes, evil comes as part of it. However, it has been argued that this view dissociates God from the problem, clings to the assumptions of the goodness of God and keeps quiet about the supposed power of God, which He could have used to stop evil if he truly wanted it.

(b) Personal god and destiny view

According to this view, evil is not linked directly to man but with the personal god of each man. That personal god chooses man's destiny package at the moment the individual is born into the world. This view states that each person's personal god and destiny are responsible and accountable for both avoidable and unavoidable evils and mistakes in life. The belief here is that the Supreme being assigns a personal god (Chi) to an individual, whose Chi in turn brings to man all his good and sometimes bad fortunes as well as poverty and sickness by choosing the destiny on which one's lot depends to such a degree that every good and bad thing are attributed to it and also blamed for individual's mistakes in life. To buttress this view, they even point to names such as Nkechinyere (lot given by personal god); Chibueze (personal god makes and unmakes one); Chibuoke (personal makes one famous) etc. Some Igbo proverbs also support his view like "Ebe onye dalu ka Chi ya kwatulu ya" which means "where a person falls there his personal god pushed him down".

Despite the criticism of the ambiguity or the equivocal nature of the concept of Chi, the traditional Igbo believe that God does not commit evil against his creation. They also believe that any misfortune or evil suffered by man is interpreted as punishment for the misbehavior of man or his kin in his present or previous life. This holds because the Igbos believe that the actions of men have consequences whether in this life or the next

¹³ Nwala, T. U. 1985. *Igbo Philosophy*, Lagos: Lantern Books. p. 16.

and also not only on those who commit them but on those who live after them. The importance of this view lies in the fact that it “sees evil in the world in such a way that it does not detract from the goodness and omnipotence of the Divinity.”¹⁴ God in this view transcends the moral and the ontological orders and understands Him as the ultimate source and guarantor without any of His essential characteristics being compromised.

(c) The middle course view

According to this view, personal god and destiny of humans together with some other known and unknown spirits, particularly some spirits who specialize in mischief making, are originators of evil in the world. Many modern Igbo scholars support this view and conceive evil in the world as being contingent upon the actions of man and the spirits, once again absolving God of any involvement or blame in the problem of evil. For Okafor, “the apparent evil in the world and imperfection in the world are not intrinsic. They are rather the negation of the perfect cosmic order usually caused by the actions of men and of the spirits.”¹⁵

Edeh, on his own part, asserts that God cannot be the proximate cause of evil and blamed man and the spirits for the existence of evil. He said: “.....judging from our treatment of the causes of evil... the three proximate causes of evil are the evil spirits, the element gods and human beings.”¹⁶

This view does not sacrifice or detract from the goodness and omnipotence of God. God is still considered as the Supreme Good, all-powerful and the cause of all things which are good in themselves. The point here is that even if God is spoken of to be the remote cause of evil in the sense that he created the proximate causes of evil, but it must not be in the sense that he caused evil as such. Rather it will be constructed in the sense that because of the good he created, evil comes as a necessary part of it.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p. 22.

¹⁵ Okafor, F. U. 1992. *Igbo Philosophy of Law*, Enugu: Fourth Dimensional Publishing co. Ltd. p. 53.

¹⁶ Edeh, Emmanuel. 1985. *Towards Igbo Metaphysics*, Chicago: Loyola University Press. p. 40.

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From the following discussion, it may be asked whether the Igbo and the Yoruba conceptions of evil are fundamentally different or are both supportive of a unique African understanding of evil that dissolves the aged philosophical problem of evil in western philosophy.

The concept of evil in Yoruba and Igbo thoughts: Some Comparisons

There is a common thread in the Yoruba and Igbo intellectual thoughts despite some evident distinctions in their perspectives on the notion of evil. It is a fact that they absolve God of any blame for the existence of evil. There is the obvious attempt to show that the presence of evil in the world has nothing to do with God and everything to do with man. Looking at the Yoruba notion of evil, it is deducible that the Yorubas do not perceive evil as a strong case for the rejection of God and that also evil is a product of man's actions. Furthermore, they deviate entirely from the western view that God has an antithesis in the case of Satan as they regard Esu (Satan) not as a force against God but with God (Olodumare). This position is also supported by the Igbos who in their cosmological optimistic view equally absolves God of any wrongdoing or involvement in the existence of evil. This is one of the similarities that connect the Yoruba and Igbo thoughts on the notion of evil.

Also, both the Yoruba and the Igbo agree on the fact that while God is responsible for everything or occurrence in the universe, the presence of evil has nothing to do with God. Although, they both addressed this fact differently, they still conclude on the same note. While the Yorubas may cite punishment as the reason why God allows evil to be meted out to some people, the Igbos argue that those we perceive as good people and are not worthy to experience evil are experiencing evil because they must have erred in their previous lifetime and are only serving the punishment of previous deeds. This position can be seen in the personal god and destiny view of the Igbo notion of evil as well as in the Yoruba notion of evil.

Despite taking diverse routes in discussing the notion of evil, these two philosophical thoughts echoed the views of the majority of Africans. In emphasizing that evil is unavoidably present in the world as a result of man's actions, they both stress that evil has nothing to do with God and does not discredit the existence of God. While the presence of evil is a major factor when discussing the existence of God in western

tradition, it is not a strong point when discussing the existence of God in the African context. In fact, for the Africans, that God exists is not up for debate (it is a fact, according to them, that He exists). What only seems to be controversial is how to explain without contradictions God's involvement or non-involvement in the existence of evil.

Conclusion

Thus far, this paper has conceptually and comparatively explored the notion of evil in Yoruba and Igbo African perspectives. The paper has been able to differentiate between some African notions of evil and a popular Western understanding of evil. One major point in the two African cultural perspectives discussed is that Africans do not perceive the existence of evil as a sufficient reason to discredit the existence of God. Their conception of God is quite different from the Judeo-Christian conception. Both the Yoruba and the Igbo viewpoints absolve God of certain blames on the existence of evil in the world. In both intellectual traditions, one finds that evil's existence rests firmly on the shoulders of man. Conclusively, given the foregoing Yoruba and Igbo views on evil, the devastating argument of the reality of evil serving the role of a necessary antithesis of the cogency of God's existence may, after all, deserve some rethinking.