



YORUBA PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE: THE PARALLELISM AND INTERCONNECTIVITY

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Abstract

Philosophy in all fields of human endeavour is a set of belief or attitude of life that guides somebody's behaviour. It is a particular set of beliefs resulting from the search for knowledge about life and universe. This paper examines the philosophy of Yoruba race on fundamental issues like religion, home training, cosmology, ethics, technological development and environment. It probes into the scientific principles and the interrelationship between science and Yoruba philosophy people. The presentation emphasizes that Yoruba people philosophy is not only relevant to traditional practices but has also influenced contemporary African philosophy and even global thought. Yoruba philosophy has been applied to areas such as psychology, politics and environmental ethics. The emphasis on holism and the integration of body, mind and spirit complies with modern holistic approaches in psychology and health.

Keywords: Yoruba race, scientific principles, philosophy values, cosmology, harmony.

Introduction

Philosophy is the study of the nature and meaning of the universe and human life. It is defined as a set of beliefs or attitude to life that guides somebody's behaviour. The Yoruba as a race manifests their philosophy in lineage poetry, lullabies, idioms, proverbs and satire to mention a few. Yoruba philosophy is embedded in their culture which is being transmitted to their children through interactions. Culture is broadly divided into two - tangible and intangible. Tangible are the material culture such as tools, weapons, houses, plates, pot, works of arts as well as other forms of visible products of human technology. The intangible are non-materials culture or nonphysical. They are ideological made up of all non-physical abstract human creations which are only discernable by human mind. They include social and political organisation, philosophy, knowledge, language, oral traditions, morality, ethics folklore, mythology, values, norms, customs and wise sayings.

The Yoruba land and people in brief

Yoruba land lies between the parallels 5.86° and 9.22° north and between 5.72° east. Its southern boundary is the Bight of Benin and extends from the eastern limit of Benin Republic on the west to the western border of the kingdom of Benin on the east. In the North by River Niger at about 7.3° N (Fadipe 1970:21)

The ethnic group which has its largest concentration in Nigeria occupies mainly six states in the South-western part of Nigeria. The states are Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Osun and Lagos with large number in Kwara, Kogi and Edo States. For socio-economic reasons Yorubas are found as minorities in other states of Nigeria. They are also available in South America, Ghana, Togo, Benin Republic, Brazil, Cuba and Carribbean island to mention a few. Adeoye (1979:4-5).

Their origin could be traced to many sources but the two main ones are migration from the Eastern part of the world - Arabian country -Mecca and the myth of descendants from sky with chain by their ancestors known as Oduduwa at Ile-Ife which is being referred to as their ancestral home. Adeoye 1979 says:

----- Akanda eda yíí fí ile- ifẹ se ibùjókòò àti amu Yoruba. Ilé-ifẹ

yíí sì nì awọn Yoruba tí fonka kiri sí ìbì tí wọn gbé wà lóníí tí a n pe ní ilẹ káàárò -o-o- jii- re. Adeoye (1979:3)

This mysterious creature settled at Ile-Ife which serves as his base. It is from Ile-Ife that Yoruba dispersed to wherever they are today that could be referred to as Yoruba land.

Fadipe (1970) explained further. It is a fair assumption, therefore that the various divisions of Yoruba shared a common ancestor in not a too remote past, yet by no means as recently as the mythical genealogical trees accepted by the various tribes would make them appear. Fadipe (1970:32)

The Yoruba have various dialect of their language such as Igbomina, Oyo, Ìjèsà, Ègba, Ondo, Awori, Ikale, Ijebu', Ekiti, Yagba, Ìjèsà, to mention a few. They believe in the Supreme - being -Olodumare who they workshop through deities such as Ifa, Sango, Ogun, Obatala to mention a few Adeoye (1979:9) Says:

"Èyà yí je ẹyà tí o gba Olodumare ní oba tí o ga jù gbogbo ọba ló, ọba tí o rinu ròde tí o sì ẹ gbogbo ohun tí o n bẹ laberun-un ayé àti orún"

Alana (2004) describes thus:

The Yorubas believe that God is Olodumare as the creator of the universe, even though in doing this, He delegates orisa-nla (Obatala, the arch-divinity, to carry out some assignmentsOrisa-nla is the only seen as God's agent of creation: God is the real creator, Alana (2004:68)

As earlier mentioned, the Yorubas believe that Olodumare takes the apex position in the political and spiritual administration of heaven and earth.

In the olden days, Yorubas used to live in large compounds comprising relatives such as grandfather, grandmother, father, uncle, brothers, wives etc. hence the adage -" Enikan ní I bímọ ní agbo ilé, igba eniyan ní í wòò". The care/training of a child in a large compound is not for the immediate parents alone but a responsibility of relatives. Fadipe asserts:

The Yoruba is gregarious and sociable life under the conditions which exists in compounds would have been intolerable if ways and means had not been devised for living together in harmony in such a comparatively confined places where large numbers of men and women are thrown together. Fadipe (1979:301)

Yoruba philosophy

Philosophy could be defined as a set of beliefs or attitude of that guides somebody's behaviour. (Hornby 2012:1098) refers to philosophy as a set of beliefs resulting from the search for knowledge about life and universe. Yoruba philosophy could therefore be referred to as a rich and complex system of thought that reflects the cultural, spiritual and intellectual heritage of the Yoruba people. Rooted in their worldview, religious beliefs, ethics and practices, Yoruba philosophy provides a comprehensive understanding of the universe, human existence and society. Unlike Western philosophical transactions that often emphasize abstraction and logic, Yoruba philosophy is deeply intertwined with everyday life, spirituality and practical wisdom.

Core Concepts in Yoruba philosophy

Olodumare is the creator of the universe and the one who maintains its order, harmony and balance.

This conception of God is not related to man alone but rather universal, emphasizing unity and interconnectedness. He is the Alabaalase, ie the one with the ultimate power who has the final to say.

The core concepts in Yoruba philosophy is centered around several key concepts that defines the nature of existence, the universe and humanity within it. These revolves around “Ase” pronounced by Olodumare. Ase reverse to the power or energy that enables individuals to act, create and influence the world, Yoruba cosmology and the structure of the universe, ethics and human nature, spiritual and religion.

Ifa, a method of divination is integral to Yoruba philosophy and cosmology. It serves as a way of interpreting divine messages, providing guidance on life’s questions and decisions. The Ifa system according to Abimbola (1997) reflects the Yoruba belief in predestination and destiny while acknowledging human agency and free will. It is both spiritual and intellectual framework that blends metaphysics with practical decisions.

Yoruba Cosmology and the Structure of the Universe

Yoruba cosmology described a universe where the spiritual and physical realms are in constant interaction. This interconnectedness between the seen and the unseen worlds is a hallmark of Yoruba thought. According to Yoruba thoughts, there are multiple realms of existence include Orun-the spiritual realms and Aye-the physical realm. Orun is the world of the gods, ancestors and spiritual entities hence an adage says “ase di owo baba mi lorun” my ancestors have the final say. The real of Orun is a source of power and guidance for human being. Aye (the physical realm is the world of human beings, animals, plants and natural phenomena. Aye is where individuals experience life, make choice and fulfill their destinies.

Yoruba believe that human beings are sojourners in Aye, Orun is their permanent home-hence the statement “Aye loja, Orun nile”. Aye is market i.e a place of temporary gathering, Orun is their permanent home. They belief that death is the link between Aye and Orun and that human being are going to give account of their deeds on earth at the gate of heaven to their creator hence they say “E ma seka laye tori a o rorun, bi a ba de bode, a o rojo”. Desist from being wicked while alive for each and everyone is going to account for his/her deeds while on earth at the gate of heaven.

The Yorubas believe that Orisa being divine beings present different natural cosmic forces, play an active role in shaping both the natural and spiritual orders. They serve as intermediaries between humanity and Olodumare.

Ethic and Human Nature

In Yoruba philosophy, ethics is not just about moral theory but also aligning oneself with the divine order of the universe. Iwa pele (good character) is one of the most important ethical principles. Adeyemo (2007) notes that Yoruba philosophy emphasizes integrity, humility and respect for others, which are seen as essentials for maintaining harmony in society and the cosmos.

Eto (right, balance, justice) which is another key ethical concept emphasizes the need for equilibrium in personal relationship, society and nature. Yoruba ethics emphasizes the importance of community over individual, highlighting that personal wellbeing is inherently lined to the wellbeing of others and the environment hence they say, “Bi ara ile eni b a n je kokoro arun, bi a ko ba kilo fun un, herehuru re ko ni je ki a sun loru” if your neighbour is attempting to do something bad, it’s better you warn him/her to desist or else the negative affect would affect you too.

Spiritual and Religious Practices

Spirituality is at the heart of Yoruba philosophy, and it is expressed through religious practices, rituals and ceremonies. The Yoruba religion is polytheistic, with a pantheon of gods and spirits, the orisa, who govern various aspects of the natural world. Each Orisa has specific attributes and functions. Ogun is the god of iron and hence of war, Sango is the god of thunder. Both of them hate injustice and punishes the offender if they are invited to intervene in a case. Obatala is the god of purity and holiness, it expects its worshippers to be holy, plain and pure in their undertakings. Individuals often choose a patron orisa that guides their life path. There are some Orisa which are being worshipped locally i.e in a certain restricted area e.g Osun, Oya and Sanponna while Ogun, Ifa, Esu, Obatala (known as Oduduwa in Ife and Ijesa communities) are universally accepted and worshipped in Yoruba land. Fadipe (1970:161).

Rituals and offerings to the Orisa are performed to seek blessings, protection and guidance. The Yorubas believe that human are born with a divine destiny, but their life's journey is shaped by both spiritual forces and their own actions. This reflects a strong belief in free Will combined with a sense of predestination as observed by Ogundowore (2017)

Principles of Science

Science, as a systemic enterprise, is grounded in a set of fundamental principles that govern the processes of inquiry, experimentation and knowledge acquisition. Platt,(2020), Sober (2019), Hume (2021), and Fisher (2020) assert that these principles are what define the scientific method and ensure that scientific knowledge is reliable, verifiable and reproducible. While various fields of science (e.g physics, chemistry and biology) have specific principles the common principles of science remain largely the same across discipline. The principles as narrated by Sober (2019) are nine, they are empiricism, objectivity, falsifiability, reproducibility, causality, testability and hypothesis testing, theory and laws, parsimony and provisionality.

Science has a principle known as theory and law. A scientific theory is a broad explanation for a wide range of phenomena based on extensive empirical evidence, while a scientific law is a statement that describes a consistent relationship observed in nature, often expressed mathematically. While law describe "what happens." Theories attempt to explain 'why' it happens.

Empiricism comes from sensory experiment and observation before reaching conclusion objectivity refers to the principle that scientific knowledge should be free from personal biases emotions and subjective influence this principle is essential for maintaining the integrity of the scientific process and ensuring that findings are universally applicable

Other principle is that of falsifiability which holds that a theory must be testable and capable of being prove false. The principle of reproducibility dictates that scientific experiments and observations should be repeatable by other researchers under the same condition.

Furthermore, the principle of causality emphasizes that establishing cause and effect relationship allow for predictions and the ability to manipulate variables in controlled experiment. In scientific enquiry, a hypothesis must be formulated in such a way that it can be tested through experimentation or observation, this principle is called testability hypothesis testing

The principle of parsimony often refers to as Ockham's Razor posits that when presented with competing hypotheses or theories, the simplest one is usually the best. This principle encourages scientists to avoid unnecessary complexity and instead focus on explanations that are as simple as possible but still account for all observed phenomena.

Science operates under the principle of provisionally, meaning that scientific knowledge is always open to revision in the light of new evidence. Scientific theories are not considered absolute truth but are instead regarded as the base explanations based on current evidence.

The harmony between scientific methods and Yoruba philosophy

While scientific methods and Yoruba philosophy may seem to come from different traditions, they share underlying principles of inquiry, understanding and exploration science as a systematic method of gaining knowledge through observation, experimentation and analysis, is often seen as empirical and objective. In contrast, Yoruba philosophy deeply rooted in spiritual ethical and cosmological through, tends to intertwine the metaphysical with the physical. However, there is a natural synergy between the two in terms of their shared focus on understanding the world holistic and interconnectedness lenses.

Empiricism and Observation

Ogundowore (2017) observed that at the heart of both science and Yoruba philosophy is empiricism - the belief that knowledge is derived from sensory experience and observations. In Yoruba thought, knowledge is often gained through direct interaction with the world, whether through ifá divination (a system based on observing signs and symbols) or the practical knowledge of the environment (e.g through herbalism and agriculture. Yoruba in their saying says "ipa abẹrẹ ni òkún n tọ - ie thread follows needle suit. Through observation, they make remarks such as - "Afẹfẹ lẹlẹ ní se ewé oko laalo laalo / Efuufu lẹlẹ ní se ewé àgbọ́n jiajia"

In both statements, empirical observation is key to making sense of the world.

Holism and Interconnectedness

Yoruba philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness of all aspects of existence including the spiritual, physical and social realms. The Yoruba worldview see "Aṣẹ" as the force that connects all life, governing the harmony between humans, nature and the spiritual world. Similarly, this holistic approach is evident in fields like ecology, where scientist examine the relationship between organism and their environment, or in quantum mechanics, where subatomic particles and forces are studied as part of an interconnected system hence they remarks Bi eye ko ba ni fin eye niran, Oju orun to eye i fo lai fapa kanra. If not for looking for one's trouble, the sky is large enough for birds to spread their wings

without disturbing one and other. The Yoruba concept of balance and harmony in the universe mirrors this holistic framework, promoting an understanding that individual elements cannot be fully understood in isolation Idowu (1996) observe.

Testability and Falsifiability

Falsifiability, central to the scientific method, is present in Yoruba philosophy through the practice of Ifa divination. In ifa, the diviner uses a system of binary choices, interpreting symbols and patterns to answer questions about the present and future. The predictions made are not absolute but subject to verification over time. Similarly, scientific theories are not viewed as absolute truths but as hypothesis that can be tested and falsified. Babalawo would in reciting what Odu says would narrate what would be the consequence of those who obey Ifa by making the required sacrifice and those that refuse.

Causality and Natural Laws

Both science and Yoruba Philosophies seek to understand causality the relationship between cause and effect. In Yoruba thought, the gods or Orisa represent the forces that govern different aspects of the universe (e.g Yemoja, the goddess of the Ocean, or Sango the god of thunder). These divine forces are understood to interact with the natural world causing phenomena positive one like rain, fertility in both human and crop and negatives such as accident, thunderstorm, infertility and death.

Ethics and Responsibility

Yoruba philosophy emphasizes ethical behaviour, especially in relation to citizens rights and duties. These ethical principles stress the importance of community, mutual respect and ecological harmony. Similarly, modern science, particularly fields like environmental science and bioethics, holds that humans have a responsibility to understand and care for the natural world. It is a taboo in Yoruba philosophy for a child to defecate in a brook/river or the riverside, if crab happens to feed on such defecation, the mother of such child would die, all in an effort to keep the source of water clean from contamination.

Provisionality and Revision

Yoruba philosophy embraces the concept of provisional i.e idea that knowledge is open to revision. In the Yoruba worldview, wisdom and understanding grow over time, through life experience and continual learning hence an adage like "Ogbon ọdun yi, were èémí -in- New innovations with time becomes obsolete.

The divination system of Ifá, for instance, evolves with the changing needs and challenges of society, offering guidance that is contextually relevant. Statement like - " Bi oni ti ri, ọla le ma rí bée, lo n mu babalawo difa ojoojumo, ni kí í mú babaláwo difa orọrọrun (Ojú osupa II).

This parallels the scientific principles of provisionality, where science knowledge is always subject to revision. As new data and insights emerge, theories are refined, replaced or abandoned. Both scientific methods and Yoruba philosophy view knowledge as dynamic and evolving, not static or unchangeable.

Health and Healing

The Yoruba have a rich tradition of medical practices, with knowledge of plants, herbs and spiritual healing. While modern medicine is more central on evidence based, practices, there are similarities between ethnobotany (the study of the relationship between people and plants) and traditional Yoruba healing Fajana (2003), Olopade (2014) observes. The Yoruba concepts of a Person, aligning with modern holistic health practices that recognize the mind body connection.

Technology and Innovation

Although Yoruba philosophy is often associated with traditional beliefs, there are also significant contributions to technology and innovation in Yoruba history. Ojo (2000) noted that Oyo Empire was known for its technological advancements, especially in metallurgy. the Yoruba used to produce their farming implements and warfare weapons before the coming of the Europeans. It is interesting to observe that Yoruba thinkers are integrating traditional knowledge with modern technological developments in areas such as medicine and agriculture

Conclusion

The harmony between the scientific method and Yoruba philosophy lies in their shared focus on observation interconnect redness, causality, and ethics while their approaches to knowledge acquisition differs in terms of methodology (empirical experimentation versus metaphysical reflection), both systems emphasize the Importance of understanding the world through holistic, ethical and empirical frameworks: science rely on systematic experimentation and observation Yoruba philosophy emphasizes spiritual and ancestral in sight. Both approaches highlight the importance of balance, value of ongoing learning. By recognizing the complementary strength of both, we can arrive at a richer, more holistic understanding of the world science and Yoruba philosophy can complement one another, offering insights into the natural world, human behaviour, and our place in the universe.

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