

# **The Concepts of Ori and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation**

OLADELE ABIODUN BALOGUN

*Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria*

## **ABSTRACT**

The debate on the philosophical nature of the beliefs in *Ori* and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought has for sometimes now, been controversial. Several metaphysical interpretations have been given by various African philosophers on the nature and the meaning of *ori* and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought. Some of these interpretations have been in tune with fatalism, predestinationism and hard-determinism. Contrary to these philosophical accounts, the paper establishes that the concepts of *Ori* and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought fit very well into the frame work of soft-determinism. Such a metaphysical interpretation, the paper argues, can help in taking care of the inconsistencies and antimonies associated with the earlier metaphysical interpretations of the Yoruba concept of *Ori*; providing a philosophical justification for punishment and moral responsibility in traditional and contemporary Yoruba society.

*Keywords:* *Ori, destiny, soft-determinism, fatalism and Yoruba.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Yoruba constitute one of the major ethnic groups of modern Nigeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Ekiti, Lagos and a substantial part of Kwara State (Atanda 1980: 1) Besides Nigeria, the Yoruba are also found in sizeable numbers, in South-eastern part of the Republic of Benin, Togo and Dahomey in West Africa, the West-India and South Africa. There is also a thriving Yoruba culture in South America and the Caribbean, especially Brazil and Cuba where the descendants of the unwilling immigrants to the new world have been able to keep their identities and guard their cultural heritage (Gbadegesin 1983: 174). While the Yoruba are dispersed throughout the world, this paper focuses on the Nigerian Yoruba. The reason for this choice is that the ancestral home of the Yoruba is in Nigeria and each of the Yoruba in the Diasporas still traces its origin to this home where the culture thrives best. The Yoruba whether at home or in Diaspora have a unique and distinct cultural life and their lineage can be traced to Oduduwa with Ile-Ife as the cradle of civilization. The traditional Yoruba are associated with various beliefs that cut

across different strata of human existence. Pertinent among such beliefs, are the beliefs in *ori*<sup>1</sup> and human destiny.

There is a well-developed body of literature in Yoruba philosophical studies, which have dealt with the concepts of *ori* and human destiny. The polemics surrounding the meaning, nature, relevance and reality of the dual concepts of *ori* and human destiny have for long instigated philosophical interest. The philosophical problem surrounding *ori* and human destiny in Yoruba thought has nothing much to do with either the meaning or relevance of the knowledge of the concepts. Clearly, there is no controversy on the conceptual meaning and importance of the concepts. The controversy has not even much centered on the metaphysical reality of the traditional Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny. Though, while discussions on their metaphysical reality are not conclusive, and are essentially uncontroversial, many of the philosophical literatures are apparently in agreement on the reality of the belief in *ori* and human destiny among the traditional Yoruba. The problem surrounding the concept of *ori* and human destiny in Yoruba philosophical discussions centers on the philosophical nature and understanding of the concepts.

Such a problem has much to do with the metaphysical interpretations which will be reflective of, consistent and coherent with the traditional Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny. Such works as Wande Abimbola, "The Yoruba concept of Human Personality" (1971), Olusegun Gbadegesin, "Destiny, Personality and the Ultimate Reality of Human Existence: A Yoruba perspective" (1983), M.A. Makinde, "A Philosophical Analysis of the Yoruba Concept of *Ori* and Human Destiny" (1985), O. Oladipo, "Predestination in Yoruba Thought: A Philosopher's Interpretation" (1992), S.A. Ali, "The Yoruba Conception of Destiny: A critical analysis (1995), E. O. Oduwale, "The Yoruba concepts of *Ori* and Human Destiny: A Fatalistic Interpretation" (1996), are pioneers and instances of volumes written on the Concepts of *ori* and human destiny.

While it will be a rewarding intellectual exercise to x-ray their contributions to an understanding of the crucial issues surrounding the concepts of *ori* and human destiny, the paper will in addition, examine their areas of agreement and points of departure. My concern in the paper goes beyond mere analysis of the conceptual puzzles or reviews of literatures on the theme, but to establish and strengthen the argument that the Yoruba are soft-determinists in their understanding of, and belief in the concept of *ori* and human destiny. Though the plausibility of this thesis may first appear absurd and bizarre to critics who had earlier believed or situated the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny within the framework of fatalism and hard-determinism, this type of

---

<sup>1</sup> The Yoruba word, *ori*, literally translated, simply means 'head' (as in the physical head of a human or an animal). However, giving concession to our discussion on destiny (which in Yoruba language means *ori-inu* and translated, inner or spiritual head) in the paper, our contextual usage, meaning and understanding of *ori* throughout the course of the paper should be construed as meaning the spiritual head, which symbolizes human destiny.

metaphysical understanding of the nature of *ori* and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought has been widely applauded and accepted even by many of the pioneering works on the theme. However, while the paper holds a contrary position, it is hoped that upon critical reflections and convincing arguments, such critics will at the end come to terms with the paper's submission that soft determinism is more consistent and coherent with the Yoruba belief in the concepts of *ori* and human destiny than any other metaphysical interpretations.

## 1. A CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPTS OF 'ORI', HUMAN DESTINY, FATALISM AND DETERMINISM

Before delving into a critical exposition of the metaphysical nature of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny, there is need to make explicit, such metaphysical concepts that will subsequently enhance our understanding on the theme. Hence the clarifications of concepts like *ori* human destiny, fatalism and determinism (or predestination). A person in Yoruba thought is according to Hallen and Sodipo (1986: 105) made up of three important elements: *ara* (body), *emi* (life giving element) and *ori* (Spiritual head, which is thought to be responsible for human destiny). In the Yoruba concept of person, *ara* (body) refers to all the tangible elements that make a person both externally and internally such as the brain, kindly, intestine, heart etc. and not just the body frame which houses other constituents of a person. (Balogun 1997: 333). *Emi* (the life giving entity), the Yoruba believe, is an immaterial element that provides the 'animating force' or energy without which a person cannot be said to be living at all, talk less of being conscious (Oladipo 1992: 19). It is according to Bolaji Idowu (1962: 169), "closely associated with the breath and the whole mechanism of breathing which is its most expressive manifestation". In other words, *emi* (the life giving entity) is regarded by the Yoruba as the life-force of a person; its presence or absence in a person makes the difference between life and death<sup>2</sup>. The third element, *Ori* which is of immediate concern to us in this paper, represents the individuality element in a person. *Ori* is the element responsible for a person's personality and represents human destiny. *Ori*, an immaterial entity, otherwise called 'inner-head' is intractably connected with human destiny. It is responsible for the actuality and worth of man in the material world. For the Yoruba, *ori* is believed to be not only the bearer of destiny but also to be the essence of human personality which rules, control and guides the life and activities of the person (Idowu 1962: 170).

---

<sup>2</sup> This is not the occasion for a consideration of a detailed analysis of Yoruba concepts of *ara* (body) and *emi* (life giving entity). The nature of these two human components, including their connections with the mind – body problem in Western Philosophy, is discussed in a separate paper. For further details, see my earlier paper **Balogun, O.A 1998. *The Yoruba Concept of Person: An African Solution to the Traditional Mind Problem*. *Journal of Yoruba Folklore* 1(1): 52-60.**

It is the ancestral guardian soul, having its physical symbolization as the physical head. Given this consideration, *ori* is nothing short of what the Yoruba call *ipin* or *oke-ipori*. As an *ipin* (i.e the individual's lot or portion), the Yoruba believe that every individual has the moral responsibility to protect and be in good terms with his *ori*, in order for one's destiny to come into easy fruition. As *oke-ipori*, *ori* is regarded as an *orisa* (lesser gods) in its own right by the Yoruba<sup>3</sup>. *Ori* is regarded as an individual personal god who caters for individual and personal interest while the *orisa* (lesser gods) exist for the interest of the whole tribe a clan or lineage. For this reason, whatever *ori* does not sanction cannot be given to any person by the *orisa* (lesser gods) or even by *olodumare* (God) himself. *Ori* is therefore an intermediary between each individual and the *orisa* (the lesser gods\divinities) (Abimbola 1971: 76). The *orisa* (divinity) will not attend to any request which has not been sanctioned by a man's *ori*. No *orisa* (divinity) blesses a man without the consent of his *ori* (Ibid: 81).

Hence, *ori* is the element which symbolizes human destiny and the whole of a person's personality. Kola Abimbola (2006: 80) seems to go beyond the views of Hallen and Sodipo, S. Oladipo and Bolaji Idowu in his account of the nature of a person in Yoruba thought, when he added a fourth element, *ese*. Literally translated, *ese* means 'leg', but within the content of human personality, it means "strife", "hard work" or "struggle". According to Abimbola (2006), *ese* introduces the principle of individual effort, strife or struggle before the potentialities encapsulated in one's *ori* can be actualized. As a symbol of power, mobility and activity, *ese* is a vital part of human personality both in the physical and spiritual senses.

Human destiny is the mysterious power believed to control human events. Destiny or predestination is the belief that whatever happens or that will happen in the future has been preordained and happened according to an earlier master plan. It is the belief that every person has his biography written before coming to the world which consequently implies that anything one does is not something done out of free will but something done in fulfillment of preordained history (Oladipo op.cit: 36). Such a belief as this is usually accredited to a divine mind or Supreme Being, who is said to have pre-existentially fixed all the events that, could possibly and would take place in a man's earthly existence.

Let us consider the notion of fatalism. Fatalism is the belief that whatever happens could not have been otherwise. In other words, certain events are such that they cannot but occur no matter what happens. Fatalism by implication does not allow for possible human efforts self criticism and self involvement. As a result, a fatalist views things with an undisturbed mind and has no sense of guilt (no moral responsibility) since everything is not within his control. "What is going to happen will happen", "what ever will be, will be" (Hospers 1981: 322). These slogans of fatalism are not intended as analytic statements; what they

---

<sup>3</sup> As an *orisa* (lesser god), *ori* has its own paraphernalia; the most important of which is a conical material made of leather to which cowries are sown in rows. This material is known as *ipori* and sacrifices are put on it during the process of the propitiation of *ori*.

mean is that the future will be of a certain nature regardless of what we do, and that therefore, there is no point in our trying to do anything about it.

Determinism is simply the thesis that every event, with respect to the past, present and future, has a cause. It is more of a scientific approach, through it; we can predict the outcome of an event if we know the necessary and sufficient causal conditions. In other words, determinism is the view that everything that occurs in the universe must be the effect of a cause, must be produced by, is dependent on, and conditioned by what brought it into existence. Some determinists specify the character of the causes to the events. Others leave open the issue of what kinds and types of things could be the (causes) of events that must have a cause. However, there are two kinds of determinism: hard and soft determinism. The hard determinism does not allow for freedom while soft determinism gives room for freedom (Balogun op.cit: 331). Baron P. Von Holbach is an example of a classic hard-determinist, while Alfred. J. Ayer is a renowned defender of soft-determinism. Holbach denies human freedom and argues that man has no control over his own ideas or decision processes. While man believes that he acts as a free agent anytime he does not see anything that places obstacles to his actions, Holbach (1961: 55) argues, contra such supposed belief, that in whatever way man acts, he will act necessarily, according to the motives by which he shall be determined. Basically, for Ayer (1963) he does not claim that determinism is true. He does claim, however, that it is compatible with human freedom, and that in fact, freedom presupposes determinism. Freedom for him, does not mean uncaused, it means unconstrained. To constrain means to cause, but to cause does not mean to constrain. Ayer means by constraint a condition or circumstance that makes human will and the process of deciding irrelevant to human actions. Thus, for Ayer, an action can be caused, and entailed an explanation of human free will. For actions that have no cause, they are free, in explicable and nothing more than pure accident or chance, whose agents can hardly be held morally responsible.

From the above conceptual clarification, there is the need to perhaps, draw the salient points of difference and relationship among the concepts of fatalism, determinism, indeterminism and predestination. As earlier said hard determinism contradicts the view that human beings are free and supports that all human actions and events in the universe are caused; whether these causes are known or not is a different question. Related to this view of hard determinism is fatalism, which equally agrees that everything that happens has a cause. But such a cause is based on the argument that man does not have the willpower to change the course of events. With the fatalists' slogan – "whatever will be, will be", the point is that the past, present and future actions and events had been fixed and that there is no human effort that can alter them. Unlike the determinists who specify the character of the causes of the events (e.g. psychology, sociology, metaphysics, economics, history, science etc.), the fatalists do not. While certain events (our present actions or choices) do not constitute part of the causal network for the fatalists, in fact, they do for determinists. In the same vein, a fatalist unlike a predestinationist does not have

any theory at all, about whether there is a divine mind or some mysterious power behind the scenes directing the whole show (Nelson 1971: 53). Like wise, a determinist needs not assume that there is a purposive agent or force behind the world that orders things in a definite way. As a determinist, he commits himself only to the belief that for any event or action given certain conditions, such and such must happen. In view of this, we can infer that a predestinationist or fatalist is essentially a determinist. However, a determinist or fatalist is not necessarily a predestinationist. In fact, a determinist or predestinationist need not be a fatalist. An indeterminist or a freewiller believes that human actions are products of pure accident or chance; no cause; no explanation and in fact, no moral responsibility.

## 2. TRADITIONAL YORUBA BELIEF IN *ORI* AND HUMAN DESTINY: THE FATALISTIC AND HARD DETERMINISTIC ACCOUNT

African philosophical discussions on the concepts of *ori* and its connection with human destiny have presented both the greatest opportunities for individual speculation and the greatest difficulties of correct interpretation. The metaphysical nature of the traditional Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny has been interpreted and argued by many scholars to be in harmony with the tenets of fatalism and hard determinism. However, before unfolding the thrust of their argument, there is need to perhaps state the idea of acquisition of *ori* and its metaphysical relevance for human destiny in Yoruba thought system.

There are various myths on the methods of acquisition of *ori* in Yoruba thought. While it will not be exhaustive embarking on an explicit examination of those myths in a paper of this nature, the central salient points shall be outlined. According to the Yoruba, it is believed that before coming into the world, everybody was obliged to go and choose an *ori* from among a large number of *oris* stored in *Ajala's* warehouse. *Ajala*<sup>4</sup>, (a potter) has the duty of molding human heads. The process of human creation is not complete without him. While *Orisanla* (arch-divinity) is understood by the Yoruba to be the maker of *ara* (body), who later passes the lifeless figure to *Olodumare* (Supreme Deity) to put *emi* (life giving entity), *Ajala* is responsible for the creation of *ori*. *Ajala* is a skilled potter, a drunkard, a debtor and an irresponsible and careless creature (Morakinyo 1983: 78). In any case, *Ajala* through his utter carelessness is responsible for molding heads of different shapes and qualities (some are good and many are bad). In the house of *Ajala*, every man makes a choice of his own

---

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that *Ajala*, the entity that moulds *ori*, wields an important status in Yoruba cosmology. However, as explicit in *Ifa* poems and many other ancient Yoruba scriptures, *Ajala* is not an *Orisa* (divinity). This is understandable when one realizes that not all supernatural entities in Yoruba religion are gods, goddesses, *Orisa* or divinities.

*ori*, after which every man coming into the world passes through the water of forgetfulness-*Omi igbagbe*, which is the boundary between heaven and earth. In another myth as accounted by Bolaji Idowu (1962: 173–174) and Morakinyo (1983: 72), the acquisition of one's *ori* is done by kneeling before the high authority *Olodumare* (Supreme Deity), who confers one's portion, that is, what a person would live up to on earth. This type of acquiring 'ori' is referred to as *Ayanmo* (that which is affixed to someone). In all these myths, *Orunmila* (arch-divinity), the founder of *ifa* (oracle) system of divination, is noted to be a witness of man's choice of destiny. Little wonder he is referred to as *Eleri-Ipin* (the witness of destiny) and the only one competent to reveal the type and content of 'ori' chosen by each person.

For a better understanding on the acquisition of *ori*, Bolaji Idowu (Ibid: 173) gives a trimorphous conception of the Yoruba belief in destiny. According to him, the choice of one's destiny could be one of these three ways:

A person may kneel down and choose his destiny, this is called *A kun le yan* (that which is received kneeling). He may kneel down and receive his destiny – that is called *A kun le gba* (that which is received kneeling). Or he may have his destiny affixed on him – for this, Yoruba give the name *Ayanmo* (that which if affixed to one).

Understandably from the above, the Yoruba believe that destiny once chosen by one or conferred is unalterable. In other words, it becomes doubly sealed up such that the earthly existence of the person is an aftermath of the type of *ori* one chose or conferred on one.

From the above, the Yoruba understanding of 'ori' can be conceived in two related senses. It refers to the unconscious self, who makes a free choice of one's life-course before *Ajala* or *Olodumare* (as the case may be); it also refers to that which is chosen – the individual destiny or portion. As the former, *ori* is the personal spirit or guardian ancestor of an individual. As in the latter, the choice so made by *ori* (the personality spirit) is however unknown to the (now conscious) person after he has come into the world. It is thus possible for a person to embark on a project which his *ori* did not choose, that is, for which he is not predestined. Failure is the result of such efforts (Gbadegesin 1983: 183). This underscores the metaphysical relevance of the knowledge of one's nature of *ori*. Hence the need to consult *Orunmila* – the god of divination, in order to determine the nature of one's *ori's* choice and whether or not one is following the right path. The metaphysical relevance of *ori* in connection with human destiny should not escape us. *Ori* is the indicator of one's purpose in life. It has the secret of the deity's plan for one. Olusegun Gbadegesin (Ibid.) puts it right when he observes that "it is like a fore-runner, the pathfinder in the earthly bush". The choice of a good *ori* ensures that the individual concerned would lead a successful and prosperous life on earth, while the choice of a bad *ori* condemns the individual concerned to a life of failure and misfortune. Thus for the Yoruba, a prosperous person is referred to as *olori rere* (one who possesses a good *ori*) while an unfortunate person is personified as *olori buruku* (one who

possesses a bad *ori*). Events in the individuals' personal history are the determinant factors of ascertaining the type of *ori* one is bearing.

Following the above explication of the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny, some scholars have argued that it is analogous to fatalism. Destiny in this sense, signifies that every activities of man on earth has been preordained at the point when man chose his *ipin-ori* (portion or lot) with *Ajala* before coming into the world and therefore cannot be altered no matter what. Arguing within a supposed fatalistic context of the traditional Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny is Wande Abimbola. Abimbola (1976: 115) argues that once a person has chosen his destiny by the selection of an *ori*, it becomes almost impossible to alter it on earth. He rightly points out: "indeed, the gods are not in a position to alter a man's destiny". Citing some excerpts from *ifa* (oracle) divination poetry, Abimbola argues to the effect that in view of the nature of the selection of *ori* in *orun* (spirits abode world), and the consequences of this irrevocable choice for every individual, what will be will be regardless of what ever happen.

Caution needs to be exercised here in not construing Wande Abimbola as a fatalist while there is the temptation of classifying him as one given the above analysis, a further careful consideration of his works will indeed reveal that he is not a fatalist. Even though the choice of *Ori* by a 'child' before birth functions as a causal antecedent that affects the wealth, success and failure of that child after birth, that child is according to Wande Abimbola, nonetheless free to make use of *ebo* (sacrifice) and *ese* to change the outcomes of an *ori* that contains bad fortunes. W. Abimbola is emphatic on the claim that when a man makes sacrifice to his *ori*, which requires freewill, and complements it with the utilization of his *ese*, which involves decisive struggle and hardwork, there is a possibility in change of fortunes. The soft – deterministic inclination of Wande Abimbola becomes clearer when he argues in one of his works, *Iwapele: The concept of Good character in Ifa literary corpus*, that in Yoruba thought, people are held responsible for their own voluntary actions (1975: 399–420). The implication of this is that predeterminism does not remove freewill because the notions of *ebo* (sacrifice), *ese* (strife) and *iwa* (character) are unconstrained exercise of freewill.

In a fatalistic interpretation, Taylor (1983: 52) argues that the fatalistic attitude of submitting to everything that happens as inevitable, to a great extent, fits the Yoruba concept of human destiny. Like Taylor, Bolaji Idowu argues that the Yoruba are incurably fatalistic in their belief in *ori* and human destiny. As he argues the Yoruba are not autonomous agents in their causal explanations of events in their personal history. The important episodes in the life of a typical Yoruba man have been chosen, sealed and extremely difficult to change. Hence, what will be will not but be.

E.O Oduwole (1996: 48) extensively argued for the plausibility of a fatalistic interpretation of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny. While establishing her claims, she noted that for the Yoruba, everybody has got his biography written before coming into he world, such that whatever he does is not done out of freewill but because it has been preordained. Such a belief as

this is expressive of hard-determinism. Arguing further, Oduwole claims that whatever a person does is not as a matter of chance or luck, it is something which has been settled in pre-existence state or by fate. She avers fate to be the guiding force that controls actions which we ordinarily believe to be under man's control or over which man thinks he has a choice. Freedom in other words, is an illusion within the Yoruba causal explanation paradigm. In fact, the so-called act of choice present in the acquisition of 'ori' before coming into the world, argues Oduwole, is not an act of choice. From all indications, the choice of *ori* is forced on man by forces more powerful than himself. Consequently, *ori* the determinant of man's destiny, denies the act of choice, freewill and moral responsibilities (Ibid: 53).

Moreso, Oduwole underscores the supposed avenues by which the Yoruba think destiny can be altered and argued that they are fruitless exercise (Ibid: 49). As she argues, human beings do not naturally want to accept failure. In cases where man finds out via the *ifa* (oracle) priest that he has chosen a bad *ori*; the result of which is failure on earth, he engages in an endless, albeit fruitless, struggle to achieve the impossible – to improve or change his destiny. All such efforts and the whole exercise of changing the destiny, Oduwole claims, are actually a means of fulfilling the destiny. Hence, man has no freewill to do otherwise than destiny has fated him. While strengthening her fatalistic interpretation of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny, Oduwole (Ibid: 50) notes that “such an interpretation relieves one of all tendencies towards both blame and approbation of others. It promises that perfect understanding is possible and removes the temptation to view things in terms of human wickedness and moral responsibility”. Finally, she maintains that a fatalistic interpretation of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny is more consistent with Yoruba belief than any other interpretation (Ibid: 53). This interpretation of the metaphysical nature of *ori* and human destiny in Yoruba thought system as shall be shown shortly is philosophically inadequate and does not represent a correct, coherent and consistent philosophical interpretation, reflective of the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny.

### 3. TOWARDS A SOFT-DETERMINISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE YORUBA CONCEPTS OF 'ORI' AND HUMAN DESTINY

Explicitly established in the above arguments of Taylor Richard, Bolaji Idowu and Egun Oduwole are these salient points: that one's destiny, his future existence or whatever he becomes in life or whatever activities or events that occurred in life are all traceable to the type of destiny his *ori* had chosen for him at creation; that with the Yoruba, the notion of 'chance' or 'freedom' becomes otiose since whatever happens to a person is attributed to the choices, which his *ori* makes. In other words, that once a destiny has been chosen, it becomes doubly sealed and totally impossible to change, even the preternatural forces are

not in position to alter it; and that the Yoruba are hard deterministic and fatalistic in their belief in and conception *ori* and human destiny. There are two fundamental problems with this kind of submission.

First, virtually all Yoruba African philosophers (Olubi Sodipo, Segun Gbadegesin, Moses Makinde, Segun Oladipo, Egun Oduwole, Samuel Ali and amongst others) who have commented on *ori* vis-à-vis the freewill-determinism problem have overlooked a point that is quite clear in the exposition of the two important religious scholars on this issue (i.e, Bolaji Idowu and Wande Abimbola). Indeed, virtually all these Yoruba African philosophers who have written on *ori*, human personality, vis-à-vis freewill cite these two religious scholars, but these philosophers all overlook one point, which is obvious in the writing of these religious scholars: *Ori* is limited to issues of material success (i.e things like wealth, riches and success in one's profession). *Ori* has nothing to do with moral character, and as such it does not affect all of human actions and/or inactions. *Ori* in Yoruba thought is concerned only with issues of material success in life at a general level. Arguably, nowhere in any of the ancient Yoruba scriptures (i.e the *Ifa* literary corpus, *Ijala* and *Iwi*, *Egungun*, and *Esa Egungun*) is there the claim that moral character can be pre-determined by one's earlier choice of *Ori*. Given this critical point that *Ori* is not about moral character, but about issues of prosperous or impoverished destiny, then establishing the case for soft-determinism becomes more resonant with the Yoruba cultural belief. However, before we explore the plausibility of such, let us examine the second prong of the problem.

The second problem has to do with the fatalistic conclusion of some of these scholars, which if carried to its logical conclusion; it will be unjustified to hold a person responsible for his actions since the causes of his actions are external to him and beyond his control. With the fatalistic interpretation of the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny, the practice of performance of character formation becomes otiose, since it is not a product of man's making. Besides, the doctrine of fatalism, rather than promising perfect understanding and removing the temptation of viewing things in terms of human wickedness, as Oduwole argues, it indeed nullifies the efficacy of reason, stifles creativity and spirit of hard-work. But is there a way out of this dilemma? Is the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny rigidly fatalistic and hard-deterministic, or does it appear so merely at the surface level?

A surface look at the Yoruba concept of *ori* will seem to suggest that the Yoruba are incurable fatalists and hard-determinists. Although in theory, the destiny of a person is said to be unaltered because it became doubly sealed after its choice, but in actual sense, it does not seem to be so. Upon a deeper reflection and practical experience, several factors have occasioned an alteration in destiny on earth; either for good or bad. An individual's destiny may be changed for good or for bad. Instances of this abound within the Yoruba cultural milieu. The Yoruba believe in the consultation of the god of divination (*Orunmila*) to know the kind of *ori* one had chosen and to perhaps alter an unfavorable destiny through the help of some spiritual forces and by the

application of the right type of sacrifices. *Ebo* (Sacrifice) among the Yoruba is believed to be capable of influencing human destiny either for good or bad. Sacrifice is a form of communication between the natural and the supernatural realms of the Yoruba cosmos. According to Kola Abimbola (Ibid: 62–63), sacrifice is forgoing, relinquishing or doing without something in the expectation of gaining something else. Among the Yoruba, it is more of food for the gods; a social act; a means of repentance; and, insurance against failure. It is founded on the ideal of mutual exchange or reciprocity between man and the spirits in order to influence or bring about positive changes in man's life. It is for this reason that the Yoruba will say:

*Riru ebo n gbe ni, airu ebo ki gbeniyan*

(making of sacrifice favours one than its utter refusal)

*Ese* is another closely related principle with *ebo* that stresses the possibility of alteration in man's destiny. *Ese*, which is the principle of individual strife and struggle signifies that choosing a good *Ori* is not sufficient without having to struggle and strive for success in life. *Ese* acts like a catalyst to the realization or otherwise of one's destiny.

Besides the above avenues, other agents of possible change in the fulfillment of destiny include evil forces such as witchcraft and some other demonic forces. In addition to factors influencing an alteration in the status of destiny is one's own character. One's act of rashness or impulse behaviour can affect one's destiny for the worse. While an impatient person will run at a faster pace than his *ori*, thereby losing its support, an idle mind will spoil an otherwise prosperous destiny. In all these practical instances, the Yoruba believe that destiny can be altered.

The possibility of altering one's destiny presents some forms of antinomies in Yoruba thought. At one point, it is said that one's destiny is unalterable. At another, it is held that it is alterable through some factors. What do we make of this seeming contradiction? What is suggested is that there does seem confusion in the whole idea of *ori* and its connection with human destiny. However, such puzzles become cleared when we realize that the Yoruba also posit another concept, *afowofa* (the infliction of a problem on oneself or causation of a problem by oneself) as explanation for some of the problems that befall a person.

The Yoruba trace the cause of some events to the individual person who performs the action and not any supernatural force outside of man. Such actions are located in the realm of the natural and are empirically observable. It is for this reason that people are punished for wrongdoing because they are believed to be responsible for their actions. This then suggests that in the analysis of the concepts of *ori* or destiny, The Yoruba falls within the gamut of what is called 'soft-determinism' in metaphysical terms. The nature of *ori* and human destiny in Yoruba belief is neither fatalism in the strict sense of it, nor hard determinism. The Yoruba conception of human destiny is indeed soft-deterministic in nature. Soft determinism here refers to a situation where a person is held responsible for

actions deliberately performed by him while attributing to his 'ori' those whose 'causes' transcend him. This soft-deterministic interpretation of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny is more consistent, correct and coherent with Yoruba belief and cultural practice than any other metaphysical interpretation. A proper look into the traditional Yoruba cosmos and their beliefs in *ori* and human destiny suggests that the Yoruba are better referred to as soft-determinists and not fatalists and hard determinists as some scholars want us to believe. Unlike a fatalist who easily resigns himself to fate with respect to future situations, the Yoruba as soft-determinists are hopefully gratified of being able to help future situations. In the same vein, they are rationally conscious of being held responsible for present actions deliberately preformed by themselves.

Indeed, a soft-deterministic conception of destiny in Yoruba thought is truly reflective of and coherent with the belief of the people on moral responsibility and freedom. It is because of the freedom, morality and responsibility which are accommodated by this conception of destiny that make the alterability of destiny meaningful and consistent. Situating the concept of 'ori' and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought within the framework of soft-determinism can help in taking care of the inconsistencies and problems associated with the fatalistic interpretations of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny. Such problems are occasioned by practical existential experiences of the Yoruba in noting some factors (such as one's action, sacrifices, evil machination etc.) as potent forces in altering one's destiny even when fatalism suggests that the choice of one's *ori* is irrevocable and unalterable. With soft determinism, the possibility of changing an unfavourable destiny; of worshipping the guardian ancestral spirit of hard work; of consciously guiding against other's interception of a favourable destiny, become apparent.

S. Ade Ali (1995: 104), in consonance with this paper's soft-deterministic interpretation of the concepts of *ori* and human destiny argues that the Yoruba conception of destiny is repugnant of harsh words of hard determinism, repudiating fatality and necessity. The temptation to consider the metaphysical nature of the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny in the light of fatalism or hard determinism (as Bolaji Idowu, Richard Taylor, Egun Oduwole, etc have done) is natural; however, incorrect. It is only inexplicable traits of a person either towards evil or good that the Yoruba explain through appeal to destiny. Destiny in this sense signifies an unfreedom act which only implies a transcendental relation that explains the unusual, baffling and untoward complexities of life which must come to pass no matter what (Ibid). Only destiny understood in this sense is analogous to fatalism. Outside this sense, and as it is often the case, the belief in 'ori' and human destiny in Yoruba coheres with the notion of *afowofa* (self causation), where one is held responsible for actions deliberately performed by oneself, while attributing to his *ori* those whose causes transcend him. It is when the effort to rectify a bad destiny or to maintain a good destiny come to a naught that the Yoruba recourse to fate (fatalism).

Instances as these constitute inexplicable events with transcendental causes to the Yoruba. Hence, their easy recourse to fatalistic submissions – *ori buruku ko gbo ose* (a bad *ori* cannot be rectified with soap) (Idowu op. Cit: 182). In view of this therefore, it becomes untenable to narrowly conclude and offer a fatalistic interpretation of the Yoruba concept of *ori* and human destiny based on few instances of inexplicable events, which tend to evade human solution and explanation. Rather, for an inclusive understanding of the concepts of *ori* and human destiny, reflective of true traditional Yoruba cultural beliefs, a soft-deterministic interpretation is inevitable.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Thus far, the discussion in the paper has established that the concepts of *ori* and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought fits very well into the framework of soft-determinism rather than hard-determinism, predestinationism, indeterminism or fatalism. Though in the attempt to offer explanation for some baffling, untoward and inexplicable events, the Yoruba recourse to fatalistic interpretation of destiny. Given the reality of few instances of events as these in the life of the Yoruba, there is the temptation to conclude that the metaphysical nature of *ori* and human destiny in traditional Yoruba is basically fatalistic or hard deterministic. However, upon further critical reflection and overwhelming supporting evidence in Yoruba thought, the paper has shown that such conclusion is exclusive of other salient issues, factors and problems surrounding the concepts of *ori* and human destiny. Hence, an incorrect interpretation. The validity and reality of the concepts of ‘*afowofa*’ (self causation), rewards and punishment, the efficacy of reason, *ebo* (sacrifice), and *ese* (hard work), freedom and moral responsibility; all true of the Yoruba, seem to demand for a more inclusive metaphysical explanation of the nature of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny. It is in this regard that the paper offers and defends soft-determinism as a better alternative causal explanatory paradigm. Though critiques may perhaps want to raise a fundamental question that will vitiate the veracity of our soft-deterministic defense of *ori* and human destiny in Yoruba thought: Are humans really free in issues of material wealth if in Yoruba culture they had no say in the determination of the contents of their *Ori* in *Ajala’s* house? This question is quite important and cannot be ignored. While it is true that there are external constraints at the supernatural realm of the choice of *Ori* at *Ajala’s* house, it is however sacrosanct to note also that at the natural plane, there are various avenues *ebo* (sacrifice), *ese* (hard work), *iwa* (character), and *afowofa* (self-caused) open to man, and which require his freewill in order to (re)shape and (re)influence his chances of chosen destiny (whether good or bad) on earth.

It is for the above reason that we make bold to reaffirm that soft-determinism is more correct, coherent and consistent with the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human

destiny than any other metaphysical interpretation. It is more of a secular orientation in the normative conception of destiny in Yoruba thought. Besides, it creates a situation where one is held responsible for actions deliberately performed by oneself, *afowofa*, while attributing to his destiny those whose causes transcend him.

## REFERENCES

- Abimbola, kola. 2006.  
*Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham: Iroko Academic publishers.
- Abimbola, W. 1971.  
*The Yoruba Concept of Human personality*. **La notion de Personne en Afrique Noire Colloques Internationale de Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique** (544): 69–85.
- 1975 Iwapele: The Concept of Good Character in Ifa Literary Corpus. In: W. Abimbola (ed.), *Yoruba Oral Tradition*, pp. 389–420. Ibadan: University of Ibadan.
- 1976 *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Ali, S.A. 1995.  
*The Yoruba Conception of Destiny: A Critical Analysis*. **Journal of Philosophy and Development** 1&2(1): 100–106.
- Atanda, J.A. 1980.  
*An Introduction to Yoruba History*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Ayer, Alfred, J. 1963.  
Freedom and Necessity. In: A.J. Ayer (ed.), *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 481–486. London: Millan.
- Baron, P. Von Holbach. 1961.  
System of Nature, Ch.2, Vol.1. In: R.E. Ewey et. al. (eds.), *Problems of Ethics*. New York: Macmillan.
- Balogun, O.A. 1997.  
African Beliefs. In: O.O. Odugbemi, A. Adebajo, K.A. Balogun & S.F. Adedoyin (eds.), *Essentials of General Studies*, pp. 330–341. Ago-Iwoye: CESAP.
- Gbadegesin, O. 1983.  
*Destiny, Personality and the Ultimate Reality of Human Existence: A Yoruba Perspective*. A paper presented at the second perennial meeting of the Institute of Ultimate Reality and Meaning in Toronto, Canada, August.
- Hallen, B., Sodipo, J.O. 1986.  
*Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft*. London: Ethnographical.

Hospers, J. 1981.

*An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Idowu, E.B. 1962.

*Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman.

Makinde, M.A. 1985.

*A Philosophical Analysis of the Yoruba Concept of 'Ori' and Human Destiny*. **International Studies in Philosophy** XVII (1): 50–66.

Morakinyo, O. 1983.

*The Yoruba Ayanmo Myth and mental Health-Care in West Africa*. **Journal of Culture and Ideas** 1(1): 68–79.

Nelson, K. 1971.

*Reason and Practice: A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*. New York: Harper and Row.

Oduwole, E.O. (1996).

The Yoruba Concepts of 'Ori' and Human Destiny: A Fatalistic Interpretation. **Journal of Philosophy and Development** 2(1&2): 40–52.

Oladipo, S. 1992.

*Predestination in Yoruba Thought: Philosopher's Interpretation*. **Orita: Journal of Religion** XXIV(1&2): 34–51.

Taylor, R. 1983.

*Metaphysics*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.

**About the author:** *Dr. Oladele Abiodun Balogun* is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria. He specialises In African Philosophy and Philosophy of Education. Currently, he researches into African Legal Culture.