

Segun Gbadegesin

African Philosophy

Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities



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ENIYAN: THE YORUBA CONCEPT OF A PERSON

In this chapter, we are concerned with the issue of human existence. I would like to address the question 'what is a person'? Deriving either from introspective reflections or from observations of life, this question is a crucial one which any rational human being is bound to raise at some point. That some traditional thinkers in African cultures must have raised such a question should be obvious from an examination of the traditional conceptual schemes. I will limit myself here to the Yoruba traditional thought, while drawing out similarities and differences through comparison with the Akan conceptual scheme. The reason for this should be obvious. I have an intuitive understanding of the Yoruba language; and this makes it easier for me to investigate the conceptual scheme derived from it. Second, the problem created by generalization for all traditional African societies has been demonstrated by several studies and should be avoided. However, a comparison of the Yoruba and Akan views on these issues is perfectly in order, fortunately because there are philosophical studies of the Akan conceptual schemes on the same subject.¹

The Yoruba word for person is *èniyàn*. However, *èniyàn*, has a normative dimension, as well as an ordinary meaning. Thus it is not unusual, referring to a human being, for an observer to say "Ki i se *èniyàn*" [He/She is not an *èniyàn*]. Such a comment is a judgment of the moral standing of the human being who is thus determined to fall short of what it takes to be recognized as such. I will come back later to the requirements of being, morally speaking, an *èniyàn*. In the language, greater emphasis is placed on this normative dimension of *èniyàn*, perhaps more than is placed on the concept of person in English language. For

now, however, I would like to address the issue of the structural components of the human person.

Among the terms that feature in discussions of the Yoruba concept of *èniyàn*, the following are prominent: *ara*, *okàn*, *èmi*, *orí*, though there is a lot of confusion about what each of these means and what relationship exists among them. One way to avoid or, at least, minimize confusion is not to start with English equivalents of these terms, but rather to describe their usages among the Yoruba and to relate them to each other in terms of their functional interdependencies. Beside helping us to avoid any inadequate prejudgments concerning resemblances between English-language and Yoruba-language philosophical discourses, this approach will also help throw light on the distinctiveness of Yoruba philosophical language.

Ara is the physico-material part of the human being. It includes the external and internal components: flesh, bone, heart, intestine, etc. It is described in physical terms: heavy/light, strong/weak, hot/cold, etc. Of course, sometimes its usage seems to suggest that it refers to the whole of the person, as when it is said: *Ara rẹ lo mọ* [She knows herself only - She is selfish]. In such a usage, however, we can be sure that the intention is to convey the message that the person under reference is judged as having concern for his/her own body - without caring for others or even for his/her own real self. *Imotara-eni-nikan* is the Yoruba word for selfishness. The idea is that a selfish person is more concerned with the well-being of his/her body only [as opposed to the spirit]. This suggests that if human beings were to be concerned with their spirits, they would not be selfish. It is ignorance of what is required for true well-being that makes people selfish. The body is like a case which houses the senses which also constitute its most important elements. It is also the window to the world. Through the senses, a person is acquainted with the external world. There is, indeed, no serious controversy on the nature of the body. It is also significant that the question whether a human person is all body or something else is not seriously raised by typical Yoruba thinkers because it appears too obvious to them that there is more to a person than the body.

However, reference to *ara* as a material frame does not do justice to its conception as the totality of the physical organs. Further, and perhaps resulting from this, because different human beings have different bodily constitution, they naturally adapt differently to different situations. A heavily built person will absorb external pressures differently than a lightly built person. Illness and health are functions of bodily constitution, and this is an important consideration in the traditional diagnosis of illness and counselling. Traditional healers take account of the physico-chemical constituents of the human body.

Internal organs of the body are conceived to have their roles in the proper functioning of the person. For instance, the intestine plays a role in the physical strength of a person. A weak person is described as having only one *ifun* [intestine] or none at all. This is on the basis of an understanding that the intestine has an important role in building strength through its part in the metabolic activity of the body. A weak person is thus one whose intestine is not functioning well or who has none. In the same way, *opolo* is recognized as the life-wire of logical reasoning and ratiocinative activities. Located in the head, *opolo* controls the mental activities of human beings. A person who misbehaves is described as having no *opolo* or whose *opolo* is malfunctioning. The mentally retarded is one whose *opolo* is not complete, the insane is one whose *opolo* is disrupted. *Opolo* is thus a material component and the functions and activities it performs are carried out and recognized on the physical plane. It can also be located in the head and traditional psychiatrists generally identify a disruption in its functioning as a physical cause of mental illness. This, of course, does not rule out their also looking for extra-natural causes for such illness if, after a period of medication based on the theory of physical cause, the patient does not improve.

Okàn is another element in the structure of the human person. In the language, it appears to have a dual character. On the one hand, it is acknowledged as the physical organ responsible for the circulation of blood and it can be thus identified. On the other hand, however, it is also conceived as the source of emotional and psychic reactions.² To encourage a person, one is asked to *Kíí lókàn*

[strengthen her heart]. A person who is easily upset is described as having no *okàn* and when a person is sad, it is said that her *okàn* is disrupted. In this usage, then, it appears that the emotional states of persons are taken as functions of the state of their *okàn*. Is *okàn* then the seat or center of conscious identity equivalent to the English concept of "mind"? This is a difficult question for the reason that the Western concept of mind is itself ambiguous.

If we attend to the non-technical conception of mind, it means "that which feels, perceives, wills, thinks"; or that from which thought originates." This is how the *Webster's New International Dictionary* defines it, reserving the technical sense for "the conscious element in the universe [contrasted with matter]." In the non-technical sense, the mind may be an entity but not necessarily in the Cartesian sense of "that entity whose essence is thought." That which is "the subject of consciousness" may be a material entity. The dictionary does not give any clue as to its nature. On the other hand, the philosophic sense of mind which contrasts it with matter makes it more of an immaterial entity whose essence is thought. Since we are interested here in the question whether the Yoruba language entertains the concept of mind, we should attend to the non-technical sense.³ The question then is whether *okàn* is construed as "that from which thought originates" in the language. This is an especially pertinent question since *okàn* is recognized as a material component of the body. So is it just that *okàn* is a material component whose activities have consequences for the psychic and emotional, and thinking states of a person and is therefore responsible for them? Or is it that beyond the physical and visible *okàn* there is something invisible and perhaps non-physical which is responsible for all forms of conscious identity?⁴

It appears to me that something of the latter is involved. The Yoruba word *okàn* translates as heart. Following the former suggestion, it would mean that the pumping and circulation of blood by the physical heart is construed as so crucial that its results are connected with the state of a person's thoughts and emotions at any point in time, and that, therefore, between *opolo* [brain] and *okàn* [heart], conceived in physical terms, we may account for the mental activities and

emotional states of persons. Though reasonable, I think this is a far-fetched hypothesis for understanding the Yoruba views on the matter. The reason is this. Drawing this kind of connection between the activity and/or state of the physical heart and the mental states of persons requires more than an intuitive understanding and this requires adequate scientific knowledge which is not available to everyone whether Africans or Westerners. This accounts for the non-physical conception of heart in the English language. Thus, after entering a technical zoological definition as "a hollow muscular organ which keeps up the blood circulation", *Webster's New International Dictionary* gives the following, among others: "the heart regarded as the seat of spiritual or conscious life; consciousness, soul, spirit. Hence, a faculty or phase of consciousness or its seat." This suggests that beyond the physical organ, there is a source of conscious identity which is construed to be invisible and more or less spiritual. In Yoruba language, *igboiyà* [bravery], *èrù* [fear], *ifé* [love], *ikóríra* [hate], *ayò* [joy], *ibànújé* [sadness], *ojora* [cowardice] are different manifestations of the state of the person and the *okàn* is identified as the basis for such conditions. A coward is an *alàèlókàn* [a person without a heart]. But this cannot be taken literally as "a person without the physical organ." A stubborn person is *olókàn líle* [a hard-hearted person]. In these cases, the reference is to the state of the person's conscious feelings which is not identified with the functioning of the physical heart. Of course, it may not also be identified with a spiritual entity beyond the physical organ. There is no necessity about such identification and reference to *okàn* in such statements may just be a manner of speaking, a metaphorical twist on language.

Yet, there appears to be a stronger evidence for suggesting that in Yoruba language and thought, *okàn* is conceived as the source of thought, and that therefore it makes sense to speak of something like an invisible source of thought and emotions which is quite distinct from the physical heart. Referring again to *Webster's New International Dictionary's* definition of mind in the non-technical [non-philosophical] sense, mind is "that from which thought originates", "the subject of consciousness", "that which feels, perceives, wills, thinks." Interesting-

ly, Webster's adds the following: "formerly conceived as an entity residing in the individual" which seems to suggest that it is no longer conceived as such. For the technical [philosophical] sense, the following is given: "the conscious element in the universe [in contrast to matter]." If we focus on the non-technical sense, it would appear that mind refers to something which is the source of thought in a broad sense. Since the existence of thought in this sense is recognized in Yoruba language, it would appear that we may indeed locate its source too.

The Yoruba word for thought is *èrò*. To think is to *ronú*; thinking is *irònú*. Etymologically, to *rò* is to stir; and *inú* is the inside. Thus to *ronú* is to stir the inside of a person; and *irònú* is literally stirring the inside. But this does not make sense unless we identify the inside as the receptacle for the various organs and that therefore thought as an activity belongs to the totality of the organs. This runs against the Yoruba view of the matter, and it means that appeal to etymology will not help here. The question *Kíni èrò e?* means "What are your thoughts?", and this compares with *Kíni ó wà lókàn re?* which means, literally, "What is in your *okàn*?" or "What are your thoughts?" This seems to suggest that the seat [or source] of *èrò* [thought] is somewhere close to if not identical with *okàn*. But, as we have seen, *okàn* translates as physical heart; and in view of the Yoruba understanding of the heart as the organ for pumping and circulation of blood, they are not likely to see it as the seat of conscious thought. There would seem therefore to be some other source for such activities, though perhaps closely related to the heart. This is where the postulation of a double nature for the heart appears to make sense. For it appears, from an examination of the language, that while *okàn* [as physical heart] is recognized as responsible for blood circulation, it also has an invisible counterpart which is the seat of such conscious activities. It would seem that this invisible counterpart is the equivalent of the mind in English. This, of course raises a further problem. If *okàn* is thus taken as the seat of thought, what function is performed by *opolo* [brain]? *Erò*, as it occurs in *okàn* seems to refer to a wider range of processes than what the *opolo* does. These include willing, desiring, wishing, hoping, worrying, believing etc. When a person is described as

an *aláèlókàn* [one with no *okàn*], it means that the person lacks the capacity for endurance. However, there is a class of activities which *opolo* seems to be particularly responsible for: ratiocinative activities. Thus a person who is incapable of simple logical reasoning is described as *aláèlópolo* [a person without a brain]. It is a misuse of language to refer to a hard-hearted person as *olópolo lile* [one with a hard brain], just as it is incorrect to describe a mentally sick person as *olókàn dídàrú* [one with a disturbed *okàn*]. Rather, the right description for such a person is *aláèlópolo*. In short, *opolo* seems to be recognized as the source of logical reasoning, while *okàn* is the source of all consciousness and emotional responses.

The fore-going has centered on *ara* and *okàn* as parts of the make-up of the person. *Ara* [body] is physical while *okàn* [heart] seems to have a dual nature with both physical and mentalistic functions. But even if *okàn* is given only a physical meaning, its combination with *ara* still does not exhaust the components of the person. There is *è mí* which is another element different from *ara* and is non-physical. *È mí* has been variously translated as soul, spirit, etc., but I think such translations confuse more than they clarify. The way *è mí* is conceived in the language and by the thinkers is better approached by attending to how it comes into the body, and this cannot be separated from the religious aspect of Yoruba thought on the matter.

Eniyan is made by the combined effort of *Olódùmarè*, the supreme deity, and some subordinates. The body is constructed by *Orisà-nlá*, the arch-divinity. Then the deity supplies *è mí* which activates the lifeless body. *È mí* is thus construed as the active principle of life, the life-giving element put in place by the deity. It is also construed as part of the divine breath. But it is to be distinguished from *è è mí* [breath] which is physically identifiable. *E è mí* is construed as a manifestation of the continued presence of *è mí*. In other words, once the body is supplied with *è mí* through divine action of the deity, *ara* [body] now has *è è mí* [breath] and begins to *mí* [breathe]. The presence of *è mí* ensures that the human body, previously lifeless, now becomes a human being -- a being that exists. Since *è mí* is part of the divine breath, it will continue as the principle of life for a particular human being at the

pleasure of the deity. When it is recalled, the human being ceases to exist. So *èmi* is more of the determinant and guarantor of existence. It is the breathing spirit put in a human body by the deity to turn it into a human being. Having *èmi* thus makes one a child of the deity and therefore as one worthy of protection from harm. Reference to one as an *elèmi* is an indirect warning against being maltreated. It is interesting that this usage is also extended to other creatures including insects, because they are believed to come into being by the creative activity of the deity.

Emí, as the active element of life, is thus a component common to all human beings. It not only activates the body by supplying the means of life and existence, it also guarantees such conscious existence as long as it remains in force. As an affirmation of life, it also brings hope and makes desires realizable. Two claims have been made about the nature of *èmi*: that it is spiritual and that it has an independent existence. Both claims are subject to philosophical dispute. First, it has been contested that *èmi* cannot be spiritual while it at the same time occupies space by being embodied. Second, the question of independent existence is disputed on the ground that it is not an entity but a force and as such cannot have an independent existence. So we must address the question whether *èmi* is conceived as spiritual by the Yoruba, and if so, whether such a conception is incoherent.

Frankly, attending to language alone by attempting to translate "spiritual" into Yoruba is not of much help to the objector. The Yoruba dictionary translates spirit as *èmi*, spiritual as *ti èmi*, matter as *ohunkóhun tí a fi ojú rí, tí a sí fì owó kàn* [i.e. whatever we see with our eyes and touch with our hands], and material as *nkan ti ara* [that which pertains to the body]. Furthermore, however, it seems clear that the Yoruba understand *èmi* as the life wire of human existence. They understand it as a portion of *Olódùmarè*'s divine breath. But since *Olódùmarè* is also understood as spiritual, that portion of this source of being which is given to the human being must also be spiritual. It is also recognized that it is the possession of *èmi* that makes humans children of *Olódùmarè*. It is the logic of the source of *èmi*, therefore, that suggests its nature as spiritual. Unless we deny the

spirituality of *Olódùmarè*, we cannot deny, without inconsistency, the spiritual nature of *è mí*.

Now, we have to address the other question regarding the incoherence of the belief: how can a spirit occupy space and still remain a spirit? It must be remarked that this is not an issue which engaged the attention of the traditional thinker. Yet, I think there are two approaches to the issue. First, we may understand the reference to *è mí* as spiritual as in fact reference to an invisible entity and nothing more than that. The dictionary meanings cited above confirm this. On this showing, it may very well be that *è mí*, as a spiritual entity is only invisible to the ordinary eyes and may contain quasi-physical attributes which make the idea of its occupation of space coherent. Indeed, this is how people understand free spirit [*iwin, òrò*] that feature in fairy tales. Also, the *è mí* of a witch is understood in this way: it can fly away at night to attend meetings with fellow witches. For this to be an adequate resolution of the issue, however, it has to be the case that the spiritual nature of the supreme deity is also understood in such a quasi-physical sense since, as we have noted, *è mí* is a portion of *Olódùmarè*. A second approach is to brush off the apparent inconsistency. On this showing, one may just understand *è mí* as the spiritual entity which, in virtue of this, has the capacity to change forms, unlike a material entity. So it could assume a physical nature when there is need for it and revert to the spiritual nature thereafter. This would make it neither physical nor quasi-physical. It would just be that, in virtue of its spiritual nature [which presumably endows it with the power of changeability], it is capable of changing form. Again, this is how other free spirits are construed. And though *Olódùmarè* is sometimes presented as having transactions with human beings [in *Ifá* divination poetry], this is also understood in terms of the deity's spiritual nature. Indeed the traditionally acknowledged ability of some special human beings to 'see' and "communicate" with spirits does not suggest that such spirits have physical properties since they are supposed to operate beyond ordinary space.

Finally, there is the question of the independent existence of *è mí*. Thus it has been suggested that if *è mí* is like a force injected into the body by the deity, then

it can have no independent existence and should be construed just as a principle or force which activates but which is not itself an entity.⁵ I think this is too far-fetched. As I have remarked above, if we attend to the language, there is a difference between *è mí* and *è é mí*. The latter is identifiable empirically. But when the Yoruba say *Emí wa* [there is *è mí*], they mean more than "there is breath." It is also important to constantly bear in mind the religious aspect of this conception of a person. If the deity is believed to be spiritual and to have an independent existence, what difficulty is there for conceiving the independent existence of an *è mí* outside the bodily frame? Further, if it is the *è mí* that is thought of as activating the human body, there also appears to be no problem conceiving its consciousness outside body. If we do not deny consciousness to the deity, construed as spiritual [and therefore not in bodily existence], then having no body cannot be a basis for denying the consciousness of *è mí* which, again, is just an aspect of the deity.

Orí is another element in the make-up of the human person. *Orí* has a dual character. On the one hand, it refers to the physical head and, given the acknowledged significance of the head vis-a-vis the rest of the body, *orí* is considered very vital even in its physical character. It is the seat of the brain and from what we have observed earlier on about this, its importance cannot be over-emphasized. The postulation of a spiritual *orí* beyond this physical *orí* is in recognition of this. In any case, there is the conception of an *orí* which is recognized as the bearer of the person's destiny as well as the determinant of personality. How does this element come into the picture? Earlier on, I referred to the creative process of the human being as a combined effort of the deity and some subordinates. I mentioned only *Orisà-nlá* as the crafter of the body. The other is *Ajálá*, the 'potter of *orí*.' The idea is that after *è mí* has been put in place, the newly created human being proceeds to the next stage -- the house of *Ajálá* for the 'choice' of an *orí*. The *orí* is, as it were, the 'case' in which individual destinies are wound up. Each newly created being picks up her preferred 'case' without knowing what is stored there. But whatever is stored therein will determine the life-course of the individual in the world. It is

thus the *orí* so chosen that, as the bearer of the individual's destiny, determines her personality.

There are conflicting accounts of the process of the choice of *orí* or, indeed, of its nature. Some accounts indicate that the *orí* itself, as a fully conscious personality-component of the person, kneels down to pick the destiny.⁶ Others, however, suggest that *orí* is chosen by the individual after she is animated by the deity with the supply of *èmi*.⁷ Both seem to be coherent accounts and may be made sense of by appeal to the language. Thus the latter account may be defended on the ground that it is derived from oral tradition as recorded in the Ifa divination poetry. Second, it appears to capture more clearly the idea behind the linguistic expression of the choice of destiny. For in the language, the process is described as the choice of *orí*, and *orí* is construed as an entity in which destiny is encased. That is, it is the *orí* that is chosen. The picture one gets from this latter account is that of numerous *orí*'s with different destinies or portions already wound up in them and the individuals [*ara + èmi*] going to make a choice of any *orí* that appeals to them without knowing the destiny wound up in them. The other account suggests that it is the *orí* itself, as a full personality that kneels down to make the choice of destiny. This does not take into consideration the fact that a personality is not determined before the choice of destiny. It is the destiny or portion that is chosen that forms a personality. On the other hand, one way of reconciling the two positions is to reconstruct the former position which claims that it is the *ara + èmi* that does the choice of *orí*. To do that one may allow that position to grant that what is meant by the choice of *orí* here is that the individual [*ara + èmi*] kneels down before *Olódùmarè* to choose, by verbal declaration, what he or she would be or do in the world. In other words, to choose one's *orí* just means choosing one's destiny. In this case, there is no entity in any form, physical, quasi-physical or spiritual which is picked up by the individual. He or she just speaks the words of destiny and these words are approved by the deity. This looks a lot more coherent. For one thing, it allows us to avoid the problem of how an *orí*, whether physically or quasi-physically construed, can enter into the physical structure of the person to

become part of his/her component. But though it avoids this problem, it raises a number of others. First, it leaves no room for the deity that figures in the Yoruba account, namely *Ajàlá*, the potter of human *orí*. Second, it does not account for the fact that the Yoruba regard *orí* as a spiritual component of personality which is, in fact, raised to the level of a personal divinity. Finally, if *orí*, as understood by the Yoruba, just refers to the words of destiny as declared by individuals, then their constant reference to *orí* in supplications and the offering of sacrifices to it should be judged as a mistake. Yet, the fact remains that if it is a mistake, it is one which a typical Yoruba would rather make. The idea of *orí* as a spiritual component, chosen by the individual and having the power of a guardian and protector over them, seems too deep-rooted in their world-view to be given up.⁸

It is thus the *orí* so chosen, with the destiny wound up in it, that determines the personality of the individual. And though, the *orí* is symbolized by the physical head, it is not identical with it. For the *orí* is construed as the inner- or spiritual head [*orí-iníú*]. And as Abimbola has pointed out "*Orí* is regarded as an individual's personal divinity who caters for their personal interests."⁹ As such, sacrifices are offered unto it. This raises the question whether it is [or should be] regarded also as a component of the human person. I think it should be regarded as a spiritual component of the person. To regard *orí* as a personal divinity is to underscore its primacy vis-a-vis the divinities. This is already indicated by what it means. As the bearer of one's destiny, it has the key to one's future success or failure, in which case it is indeed more important than the divinities. The saying "*orí l' à bá bo, a bá f'òrisà sílè*" [we ought to offer sacrifices to our *orí*, laying aside the *òrisà*'s] is indicative of the importance of a personality-determining element of the individual, *orí* is a spiritual component of her make-up. This way means more to us than the divinities. Therefore, as the personality-determining element of the individual, *orí* is a spiritual component of her make-up. This way of putting the matter should take care of any puzzles that may arise from regarding the *orí* as a constituent of the human being. It may be urged, for instance, that if destiny is the pattern of events that will unfold in a person's life history, how can any constituent of that human personality be said to bear it?¹⁰ The answer to this

is that, as it has been mentioned above, though *orí* is construed as a component of the person, it is also construed as a divinity, in which capacity it is spiritual. It is in this respect that it is said to bear the destiny of the person. Indeed, this is also the meaning of its spiritual nature. If you perform an autopsy on a person, you are not going to be able to locate *orí* in addition to the physical head. So the *orí* that bears destiny is at once the personality component of the person, [in the sense that it determines that personality], as well as a divinity, in which capacity it is more or less the guardian spirit of the person. Another term for it in the language is *enikeji* [the partner or double]. As we have seen above, this compares with the Kalabari concept of *teme*.

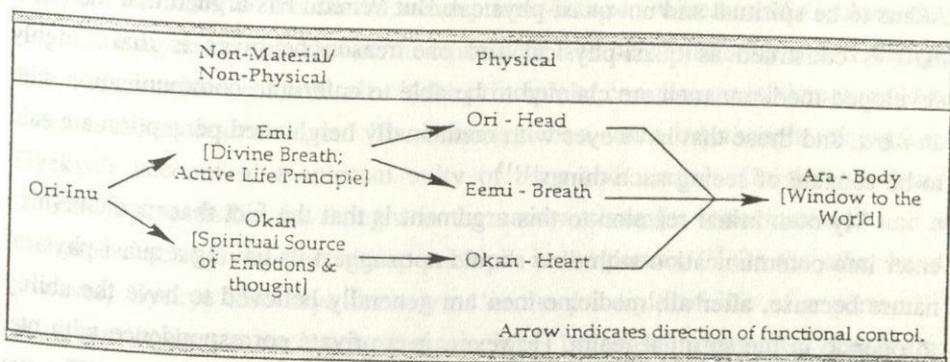
There are other problems with the concept. For instance, if the *ara* is physical body, how can it be available before birth to choose an *orí*? Or if the pre-natal *ara* is not the physical body, is it quasi-physical? Is the *è mí* that is involved in this combination of *ara* and *è mí* spiritual or physical? ¹¹ First, the time frame here is pre-natal. These are activities going on in the spirit world where the divinities and prospective human beings are construed of as engaging in all kinds of relationships and exchanges. In that world, any thing is conceivable! Indeed, it will be recalled that a divinity [*òrìsà-nlá*] is postulated as responsible for moulding the human body. So it could be the physical body that is involved. Also there are images of physical activities presented: the newly formed *ara* with its associated deity-given *è mí* moves to the 'house' of *Ajàlá*, the 'potter of heads' who is responsible for the *orí*. It seems clear, however, that it is a combination of conceptualization and imagination that is brought into play here. On the one hand, there is a conception of a spirit world in which anything can happen. On the other hand, some of those things that can happen there are imagined on the bases of what is experienced in the physical world and are therefore endowed with its attributes. We may choose to impose the idea of a quasi-physical *ara* on this basis, and we may perhaps succeed in making the account look more coherent to us. However, we should note that such a reconstruction may fail to do full justice to the ideas as understood in the language.

We should next address the issue of the relationship between the so-far identified components of the person; *ara*, *okàn*, *èmí*, and *orí*. From what has been said thus far, the following seem clear. First, these components may be grouped into two: physico-material and mental-spiritual. *Ara* belongs to the first, *èmí* to the second, and *orí* and *okàn* have physical and mental aspects. Second, a mentalistic conception of *okàn* is postulated to account for the phenomenon of thought. Perhaps, there is no need for such a postulation but there is no doubt that it exists. We have seen also that it also exists in the ordinary use of the heart in English language. Third, *orí* is also postulated as a spiritual entity [in addition to its meaning as physical head] to account for the phenomenon of destiny. There is no parallel of this postulation in English language, and I consider it the distinctive aspect of the Yoruba concept of a person. Even when *okàn* is postulated to account for the phenomenon of thought, whatever it has to do with this and with the emotional state of a person cannot be separated from the *orí* as the bearer of her destiny. Therefore, *okàn*, as source of conscious thought and emotions, could be regarded as a subsequent [post-natal] expression of the destiny/portion encased pre-natally in the *orí*. This may be cashed out as follows: *orí* determines the personality of the individual. The emotional states, on the other hand, are reflections and good indicators of the personality. *Okàn*, as the source of post-natal consciousness and emotions, therefore only reflects that which had been encased in the *orí* originally. In other words, *okàn* may be regarded as one of the avenues through which destiny unfolds in the post-natal existence of the person.

The symbolic representation of *orí* by the physical head is indeed indicative of how its importance is construed. As the location of *opolo* [brain], the physical head is the seat of intelligence. The introduction of *orí* [inner-head and bearer of destiny] as a spiritual element is to suggest that there is more to what is seen going on, and what is more is the spiritual direction of the *orí*. Hence the idea of currying its favor.

Orí is therefore the determinant of the personality of the individual. The *emi*, as the active life force supplied by the deity, is a common denominator. Though

it guarantees existence and activates the lifeless body into consciousness, it cannot be the basis for identifying persons as individual selves because it is common to all. Further, that *èmi* activates the lifeless body does not make it the locus of conscious identity because an individual may have *èmi* [as an activating life principle] and still not be conscious of her existence as a self. On the other hand, *orí* is identified with each person; it is an essential component of human personality. However, this does not make it the locus of conscious identity. Due to its spiritual dimension, *orí* functions as a remote controller of the person's fundamental activities including thinking; but it is not itself the center or seat of thought. The very thought of appealing to one's *orí* through sacrifice already presupposes the existence of the *orí* which is, in that case, the object of the thought. The subject of conscious identity responsible for the phenomenon of thinking, feeling, willing, desiring, from the Yoruba language is *okàn*, which would seem to correspond to the concept of the mind in English. The relationship, with directions of functional control may be represented as follows:



Comparison with the Akan concept of the person.

The purpose of this comparison is to explore the similarities and differences between the Yoruba and Akan concepts of the person. For the most part, I adopt Kwame Gyekye's analysis of the Akan conception for this purpose with references to Kwasi Wiredu's as necessary.¹² I note also some major disagreements between the two Akan authors.

For the most part, there appears to be more similarities than differences in the two conceptions. The major difference is in the Akan conception of *okra* which is also regarded as the active life principle supplied by the deity, but which is also the bearer of destiny. It will be recalled that in the Yoruba conception *emi*, which is the equivalent of Akan *okra*, is not the bearer of destiny. Something else, *ori* is postulated for that. Furthermore, according to Gyekye, *okra* and *sunsum* [an immaterial entity responsible for thought] constitute a spiritual unity but they are not identical. There is a disagreement between Gyekye and Wiredu on the latter's account of the *okra* as "quasi-physical" and his denial that *okra* is postulated to account for thought. Gyekye's point, which seems to indicate a correspondence between the Yoruba and Akan thinking on the matter is that *okra* is believed by the Akans to be spiritual and not quasi-physical. But Wiredu has argued that the Akan *okra* is construed as quasi-physical and one reason he gives is that "highly developed medicine men are claimed to be able to enter into communication with an *okra*, and those that have eyes with medicinally heightened perception are said to be capable of seeing such things."¹³

My own initial reaction to this argument is that the fact that medicine-men enter into communication with *okra* should not suggest its having a quasi-physical nature because, after all, medicine-men are generally believed to have the ability to operate in the spiritual realm. However, in a private correspondence with me, Wiredu has further clarified his position on the matter. His point is this: "The eye is a sense organ and the concept of seeing is bound up with spatiality. However heightened the powers of an eye may become, if it *sees* something, that thing will

have to be in space. In regard to any claim to see something, it must make sense to ask "Where is it?"¹⁴ He takes this to be a conceptual point. While I understand this conceptual point, it seems to me to miss the crucial point of the dispute which is that the herbalists are, in such contexts, operating outside ordinary space and time and that even stories of para-physical sightings cannot be taken as evidence of a physical existence of the sighted beings. This is what the idea of extra-sensory perception is all about. If the concept of 'seeing' is involved, it is not ordinary seeing and is therefore not bound up with ordinary spatiality. Of course, scientists may deny the reality of such occurrences for the reason that there are no scientific proofs for them, but as Albert Mosley has observed, the "idea that each individual has an aspect of his being that defies description in terms of the classical concepts of space, time, and matter, which is non-physical, but which can nonetheless affect physical manifestations, is an essential metaphysical assumption underlying the beliefs and practices of traditional magic."¹⁵

On the other issue, it seems again that Wiredu's account of thought, which he uses to deny that *okra* is distinguishable from soul, needs to be broadened. While I grant that the concept of soul, as it features in christian and western philosophy is problematic in the context of African thought, it is not clear to me that, on the basis of the shared assumptions between Wiredu and Gyekye, they could not agree on the idea of an equivalence of *okra* and soul. For if thought refers to consciousness, and *okra* is the principle of consciousness, then it could be taken as the equivalent of soul. There seems to be a confusion, though, arising from Gyekye's account of a spiritual unity of *okra* and *sunsum*. On the one hand, *sunsum* is responsible for thought in the narrow sense [as ratiocination]¹⁶ and at the same time it is the "activating principle in the person."¹⁷ On the other hand, however, Gyekye also says that *okra* "is the principle of life of a person."¹⁸ What *sunsum* does as the "activating principle" becomes unclear since *okra* is also regarded as the "principle of life." In the Yoruba conception, *emi* as the activating principle brings the body to conscious existence and [as in the case of the *okra*] its departure from the human being is death. Again from the characterization of the

okra as the bearer of destiny, it would appear that it [and not *sunsum*] should be regarded as the component on which "one's health, worldly power, position, influence, success, etc. would depend."¹⁹ This is how *ori* (as bearer of destiny) is conceived in Yoruba thought. If *sunsum* is "that which thinks, desires, feels",²⁰ then it performs functions similar to that attributed to *okàn* by the Yoruba. But, again, the Yoruba do not regard *okàn* as the determinant of health, worldly power, position, etc. In so far as these various components go, then, the following seems to me to be the picture from this comparison:

1. *Okra* seems the equivalent of *Emí*, but while *okra* is postulated as the bearer of destiny, *emí* is not.
2. *Sunsum* [as that which thinks, feels, etc.] seems the equivalent of Yoruba *okàn*, but while *sunsum* is postulated as the determinant of power, success, wealth, *okàn* is not.
3. *Okra* [in Akan] is postulated as responsible for activities for which the Yoruba postulate two parts [*Emí* and *Orí*].

I want to conclude this section with a few observations on Gyekye's argument to demonstrate the nature of *sunsum* as an immaterial element. To do this, Gyekye examines and attempts to debunk some anthropological accounts of *sunsum*. It is in this exercise that I find some of Gyekye's arguments unconvincing. It may very well be that the anthropologists are wrong in their accounts, but Gyekye's arguments fail to show this, at least in some cases.

The first position that Gyekye takes up is that which characterizes *sunsum* as "something that perishes with the body."²¹ What is interesting here is that Gyekye does not conclude his argument against Danquah. He gives us only one premise in the form of a conditional: "Now, if the *sunsum* perishes along with the body, a physical object, then it follows that it is also something physical or material."²² And he goes on to show that this seems to be Danquah's position. But he does nothing else to show the incorrectness of this position!

Next, Gyekye argues that:

1. The functions or activities attributed to the *sunsum* indicate that it is neither material nor mortal nor derived from the father.²³
 - 1a. *Sunsum* moulds the child's personality [Busia]
 - 1b. *Sunsum* constitutes or determines personality and character of a person [Danquah], etc.
2. Personality involves such characteristics as courage, thoughts, feelings, actions, etc.
3. Such qualities [courage, jealousy, gentleness, forcefulness] are psychological, not sensible.

Therefore:

4. If *sunsum* is what constitutes the basis of an individual's personality, it cannot be a physical thing.

I sympathize with this argument, but it is not convincing to ground the position that a "material conception of *sunsum* is logically impossible." For suppose the function of *sunsum* is the development of personality, nothing prevents it from performing that function as a physical thing. Courage can be connected with a solid constitution of the physical *sunsum* which then strengthens the psyche. To press his point here, I think Gyekye has to rely on how religious concepts filter into the people's understanding of these relationships. Just as I argued in the case of the Yoruba *okàn*, it seems to me that a pure physical concept of *sunsum* is not logically inconceivable even on Gyekye's ground, unless it is argued that *sunsum*, like *okra*, is an aspect of the deity; and since the deity is spirit, *sunsum* must also be spirit. This may, in fact, be Gyekye's argument as the following seem to suggest:

1. Busia and others claim that *sunsum* derives from the father and that it is therefore mortal.
2. But *sunsum* derives from the supreme being.

Therefore:

3. It must be divine and immortal.
4. After all, trees, plants and other objects also have *sunsum*.
5. But if *sunsum* derives from the father these natural objects cannot have it.
6. Therefore *sunsum* does not derive from the father.

This argument could have nailed the point down at premise 3. Gyekye could have simply added that since *sunsum*, following its source, is divine and immortal and must therefore be spiritual too. But Gyekye goes on to premise 4 which suggests that since trees and animals have *sunsum*, it could not derive from the father, apparently because trees and plants do not have fathers. But must trees have human fathers for their *sunsum* to be passed on to them? One would think that the reproductive activities of trees and animals are sufficient to pass on their *sunsum* to their offsprings.

The concept of destiny

As we have seen, the belief in predestination, expressed in the concept of *ori*, seems to suggest that the Yoruba have some anxiety about human helplessness in certain situations. However, it also expresses the people's conviction that human existence has meaning. It suggests, for instance, that human beings are not on a purposeless mission in this world; that they have a mission to fulfill, a message to deliver -- which is the meaning of their existence -- and that this mission has been fully endorsed by the creator. Whatever is [or is not] done by them should therefore be explained by appeal to this original mission. The concept of *ori* expresses this idea.²⁴

However, like most common cultural beliefs, there are a number of philosophical puzzles with this concept.²⁵ First, the relationship between *ori* and the concept of destiny has been variously conceived.²⁶ There is need for clarification. Second, there is a problem with regard to the relationship between the beliefs in predestination, immortality and reincarnation. Third, there is the problem of the

apparent contradiction between the belief in predestination and the attribution of responsibility for actions to human beings. I shall take up these problems in turn.

Orí literally means head as has been seen above. Ordinarily, the physical head, in addition to its other functions, is used to carry things. It is the bearer of goods and commodities. Before the development of machines and vehicles, human portage was the mode of movement. Farm products were carried on heads to market centers or homes. The head therefore served an economic function. But more than this, the head is the location of important parts of the human body: the eyes, regarded by the Yoruba as *oba-ara* [king of the body] is there; so is the brain which controls intelligence and sanity. Perhaps, this special nature of the physical head, suggests to the Yoruba the idea that it must also have a spiritual dimension. Thus, the physical head is believed to symbolize or represent an inner head which is the bearer of a person's destiny and which therefore is the remote controller of one's endeavors in the world. It is this inner head which is referred to as *orí-inú*, or simply, *orí*. Therefore *orí* is not identical with destiny, though it is its bearer.²⁷

Destiny refers to the pre-ordained portion of life wound and sealed up in an *orí*. Human beings have an allotment of this destiny which then determines what they will be in life -- whether a success or a failure. Destiny determines the general course of life, and since *orí* is the receptacle and bearer of destiny it is also regarded as its controller. Hence the idea of appealing to one's *orí* to lead one aright. But how does an actual destiny get affixed to a particular human being? The procedure has been variously conceived, giving rise to three models of destiny. First, there is the idea that the portion gets allocated to individuals as a result of their own "choice" or rather, the "choice" of their own *orí*. Hence the idea of destiny as *àkúnlàyàn* [that which one kneels down to choose]. Second, there is the conception of destiny as the position which is affixed to an individual, not necessarily by his/her own choice. In this model, the individual kneels to receive the pre-ordained portion from the creator. Hence the idea of destiny as *àkúnlègbà* [that which one kneels to receive]. Third, is the conception of destiny which seems to stand between the previous two. In this conception, though there is the idea of

choice, the identity of the choice-maker is not clear -- whether it is the individual or some other being making the choice for him or her. In addition, there is the idea of a fixation of the portion on the individual. This is the idea of destiny as *àyànmá* [an affixed choice].

In all these conceptions, there is a common thread; namely, the fact that the individual is either the choice-maker or the passive receiver or the one for whom the choice is made and affixed. On the other hand, what is chosen -- the portion of life -- is wound up in the *orí* which is its bearer and therefore the object of choice or allocation. There is thus a close relationship between *orí*, the bearer, and *kádàrà* (destiny) the portion of life that is born. This has led to the idea of speaking of *orí* as if it were the portion itself, or as if it had a great deal of influence on shaping the course of the destiny it is supposed to bear. Thus appeals and supplications are made to *orí* to either help win a particular battle, or succeed in a particular endeavor. It is believed that if one's *orí* is against one, there is no question of success. Perhaps, there is a justification for this belief in the efficacy of *orí* to influence the course of destiny. After all, in the three variants of the conception of destiny discussed above, *orí* plays the role of bearer of destiny.

A word should be added here with regard to the question of the choice of destiny as explicitly conceived in one of the variants discussed above. A Yoruba song expresses the idea of choice of *orí* as bearer of destiny thus:

Emi 'ò mo ibi ol'orí nyan orí o
Mbá lò yan t'èmi
Ibi kan náà l'atí nyan orí o
Kádàrà kò papò ni

I do not know where people with good *orí* choose their *orí*,
 I would have gone to choose mine there;
 But no! We choose our *orí* from the same source;
 It's only that our destinies are not identical.

Again, this is a song expressing anguish. But the point that I want to make now is in regard of the element of choice referred to in the song. It has been argued

that, strictly speaking, an individual cannot be said to have chosen a destiny. This is because, for there to be a choice, there has to be adequate information and rational preference; and, as some have argued, none of this is present in the conceptualization of the choice of *orí*.²⁸

Let us look at the problem more closely. The three procedures which have been identified as the manner in which *ori* and destiny get attached to a person are: [i] *àkúnlèyàn* [chosen while kneeling down] [ii] *àkúnlègbà* [received while kneeling down] [iii] *àyànmó* [affixed choice]. Of these, it is clearly the first that suggests the idea of an individual really making a choice. The second clearly does not; since it portrays the idea of an individual receiving the portion by receiving an *ori* [this is the version that agrees with the Akan concept of destiny]. The third also does not clearly represent the individual as making the choice; it may be made by someone else and then affixed to him/her.

If we focus on the first version -- *àkúnlèyàn* -- we may now raise the question whether indeed there is a genuine choice. First, let us have a picture of the individual who is to make the "choice." As we have observed before, the making of the human being is a collective effort of *Olódùmarè*, *Orisà-nlá* and *Ajálá*. *Orisà-nlá* makes the body [complete], after which *Olódùmarè* supplies the *émí* [active life principle - divine breath]. Then, this body plus life-principle, who is now a quasi-conscious individual, moves to the house of *Ajálá* who is the maker of *orí*. The mission is to have his/her portion of life. The individual portions of life are wound up in the various *orí*'s in different shades and colors, some over-burnt, some not properly done. Some of the *orí* look beautiful outside, but inside are full of "worms"! Some of them look ugly, but inside are solid and neat.²⁹ The insides are not accessible to the individual, but the outsides are. So depending on the "taste" of each "body-life principle", that is the quasi-conscious individual, one of the *orí*'s is picked up. After picking it up, the conscious individual is ready to proceed to the gate-keeper of heaven. There the *orí* just picked starts automatically to replay the wound-up information about what its owner will be; after which it is sealed again and the individual proceeds on his/her journey to the earth, on the way

crossing the river of forgetfulness, which makes it impossible to remember what the *ori* had relayed at the gate.

We may now ask: is this a real choice? Obviously, if we are concerned with what is wound up inside the *ori*, the individual does not have an adequate amount of information. However, the question may be raised as to why we should be concerned with what is wound up inside the *ori* if we agree that in the choice of a particular *ori*, the individual makes a choice on the basis of his/her taste. That this turns out to be harboring a bad destiny, it may be urged, does not detract from the fact that *ori*, the bearer of this destiny, was chosen among others. To press this argument, we may be asked to consider the analogous case of a game of lottery. You are presented with fifty-four numbers out of which six will be the winning numbers. On your own, you pick six numbers that appeal to you. Of course, you have no idea which numbers will win. But you prefer the numbers you pick. If this is a blind choice, it remains your choice nonetheless. You did not choose to lose; you chose the numbers which you hoped would win. This may appear to be similar to what goes on in the choice of *ori*. A more similar situation of choice is that of a spouse! Let us assume that we all make our choices on the basis of our tastes after some reflections. But it is also true that in most cases we do not reflect at all or at least not enough. Otherwise, the adage that love is blind may not make sense. Shall we say that in such cases we cannot be said to know every detail about our spouse and have therefore not made a choice in the real sense? Perhaps there are people like these. It may be argued then that the important criteria are consciousness of the alternatives [in the case of destiny, the various *ori*'s] and one's own judgment as to the preferable alternative.

This is an interesting argument, but I do not think that it succeeds without further assumptions. It is true that if one is conscious of what one is choosing, then one cannot complain. And in a sense, it may also be true that the individual at this point that the *èmi* has been implanted is conscious. However, there are problems. First, it is not clear that the concept of taste is applicable here since the personality of a person plays a crucial role in their taste. Yet it is the *ori* itself that determines

the kind of personality a person can have. Therefore they cannot be expected to have a taste before they have made that 'choice' of *orí*. The choice is therefore blind in this respect. Second, it is not the *orí* in itself that is desired, if the concept of desire can even be applied here. Rather it is what is inside it. So, if what is inside is not known and there is no information about it, strictly there can be no choice. In other words, since the real object of choice is the destiny [life-portion] and not just the *orí* [as the carrier], we should expect more information on the former. Perhaps the important point about this concept is that the various destinies represent the various missions to be accomplished in the world, and the messages are to be born by different individuals. The most that can be done is to seal them up in various receptacles which may then be 'chosen' so that [i] there is no question of favoritism and [ii] all the messages get delivered. But if the receptacles -- *orí* as bearers of the destinies -- are 'chosen' on the basis of the 'tastes' of individuals who make the 'choice', whatever is inside should be construed as having been 'chosen'. As should be clear, this way of putting it does not remove the fact of the blindness of the choice of destiny. More important is the fact that the analogy with the game of lottery will not work for one obvious reason. With regard to lottery, an individual may choose not to choose, but this is not the case with destiny. You cannot refuse choosing an *orí* and this makes it a matter of forced choice in addition to its being a blind one.

The second problem I want to address is that of the relationship between beliefs in predestination, immortality and reincarnation. The Yoruba believe that earthly death is not the end of life and that a person who has reached maturity before death will reincarnate in a different form in a later life. This is why dead ancestors are not forgotten and why new born children may get named after a recently dead older member of the family. With respect to the belief in destiny, this raises the question whether the original destiny allotted to the individual governs his/her later life or whether a new portion has to be allotted each time the *emi* is about to reincarnate. There seems to be not much reflection on this problem in traditional thought. The problem is this. In addition to the belief in destiny and reincarnation, there is the belief in divine sanctions in after-life. Thus any

individual who grossly misbehaved while on earth will be punished at death the *èmi* of such a person may be made to inhabit the body of an animal to be a beast of burden in later life.³⁰ In such a situation, the question arises whether the reincarnated *èmi* will be expected to have a new portion (destiny) allotted to him/her or whether such a punishment will have been wound up in the original destiny. If the former is the case, it is quite possible that the new destiny so chosen may be a good one such that the reincarnated *èmi* escape the kind of punishment envisaged for such a wicked life, unless there is a way of teleguiding a reincarnated *emi* to pick the deserved destiny. Here, the idea of *àkúnlègbà* [that which is received while kneeling down] will seem to make sense. In other words, the punishment at one time around, it may have to be imposed as deserved. On the other hand, if the second alternative above is the case -- subsequent punishment or reward for the first life is wound up with the original destiny -- it follows that the individual has no chance of escaping the consequences of the original portion of his/her destiny. This may seem unfair; however, it is not even clear that we should consider subsequent punishment. For the suffering that the person now goes through in a subsequent life has already been included in the portion allotted to her/him originally and it is the original portion for the first life that is responsible for the behavior that warrants the subsequent life's suffering for him/her.

There is, in addition to the above, the problem of the apparent contradiction between a belief in destiny and the practice of attributing responsibility to human agents and the consequent apportioning of praise and blame. If a person is predestined to be a certain sort of person, can we at the same time hold him/her responsible for his/her actions along that direction? The problem is the subject of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, a Yoruba adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The main character of the play, *Odéwálé*, is predestined to kill his father [the King] and marry his mother [the Queen]. This was the voice of the oracle as the child was born and given names. To avoid this unspeakable tragedy the parents were advised to get rid of the child. They did not disagree. He was handed over to the palace messenger to take to the forest and kill. The messenger, on his own initiative, decided against killing him. He gave him to a hunter

a far-away village where he could be raised without interacting with his real parents. However, the theme of an unchangeable destiny continued to sound as the boy grew. One day, he was informed by a soothsayer that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Thinking that he was living with his real parents, he voluntarily decided to leave home to avoid that kind of tragedy befalling him. On his way, he was confronted by a group of people from another village in what looked like a royal tour. They were rude to him to the point of ridiculing his parentage. He was annoyed, drew the sword, and killed the leader of the team, the king. He was his real father. He went on his way until he got to his real place of birth. Meanwhile, the town was thrown into mourning for the loss of their king. They were also troubled by some marauders who took advantage of their being without a king. *Odewale*, the 'stranger' helped them to get rid of the marauders and to get their lives together again. Indeed, he was a symbol of struggle, an optimistic human being who would not resign himself to fate. Hear him:

Crossing seven waters
 I, a son of the tribe of
Ijèkùn Yemoja,
 found my way,
 to this strange land
 of *Kútújè*. I came
 to see suffering,
 and I felt suffering.
 "Get up,
 Get up," I said
 to them; "not to do something
 is to be crippled fast. Up, up,
 all of you;
 to lie down resigned to fate
 is madness.
 Up, up, struggle: the world is
 struggle."³¹

He struggled against destiny. But did he succeed? For a while, it seemed he triumphed. As a reward for his help, he was made King of *Kútújè*. But he had to inherit the former king's widow, who was his real mother. In no time, things began to turn sour for the town. There was famine, pestilence and death. The oracle had to speak and it spoke the unspeakable: the king was married to his mother. Who is to blame? The boy, the parents or the gods? The title of the play gave the answer -- not the gods. Is it then the helpless victims of an unwanted destiny who try their utmost to prevent it? This is the problem.

The tendency is for us to try to make sense of this belief by drawing a distinction between fatalism and predestination on the one hand, and between strong destiny and weak destiny on the other.³² While fatalism [or strong destiny] presents the picture of a cut-and-dried portion of life, predestination (or weak destiny) leaves room for maneuvers within the context of a general allotment of destiny. Thus, an individual destined to be rich cannot fold his/her arms everyday and expect such a destiny to be fulfilled. Also, a person destined to be poor cannot turn things round by using her/his legs and brain, the symbols of industry and intellect. Again, there is the belief that the character of a person may influence the fulfillment of his/her destiny and if this happens, he/she is sure to be held responsible.

Though there is some sense in this reconciliation, it does not seem to me to solve the real problem. Indeed, one would have expected that such factors as character, industry or lack of it, mischief by others, can provide adequate explanation for significant events in a person's life thus diminishing the importance of predestination as an explanatory model.³³ But, apparently, the average Yoruba, like most Africans, is not satisfied with such explanations. After all, such factors may be present in other cases of other persons and different consequences may follow. It is especially in pathetic situations where a person cannot be wholly blamed for his/her misfortune that the Yoruba mind makes a final recourse to explanation in terms of destiny: what is the case is what has to be since it has been so predestined. The difference between fatalism and predestination does not seem to be noticed in practice in such situations.

But these are only grave situations in which a person is known to have tried his/her human best to avoid misfortune. Thus, the poverty of a lazy person is not blamed on destiny, nor is a notorious robber spared punishment on account of destiny. This is where the question "Why hold people responsible?" becomes legitimate. If a lazy person chose a destiny which makes him lazy, is it his/her fault? One way to make sense of this is to suggest that blame or punishment is not imposed by the community on their own; it is already included in the destiny chosen by the lazy person or the robber. That is, in the act of choosing the life of a robber, he/she must have chosen along with it, the punishment that goes with such a way of life. On the other hand, if we go back to the original choice of *ori* which bears the different destinies, and we come to terms with the argument that even if a choice of *ori* may be said to be made, the choice of a particular destiny has not been made, it would seem to follow that the individual cannot also be said to have made a choice of the punishment that goes along with their way of life.

A final problem with regard to this issue of destiny is the question of its changeability. Perhaps if destiny is changeable, then the responsibility belongs to individuals to make efforts to change a bad destiny. If he/she does not make such efforts, then s/he deserves to blame for any lapses. Is this the way the matter is expressed in the language? As we have discussed above, destiny is itself not easily appealed to. It gets into explanations when all else seem to have failed in spite of efforts. Thus a person avoids being killed in an automobile accident involving a mechanical fault only to be killed again when being conveyed to the hospital. How do we explain this but to say that he has been destined to die that way. It was, after all, not his fault. Could it have been changed? This is where the religious belief which feeds the concept of destiny creeps in. Before embarking on any important venture, a person is expected to consult with the god of divination to find out what will be the outcome. If the prediction is terrible, it will usually come with directions as to the kind of sacrifice to offer, and it is believed that a bad destiny may be changed if such a sacrifice is offered. If a person therefore refused to find out what is in store for him/her, or to perform the necessary sacrifice, he/she cannot

blame everything on destiny. This is one way in which it is believed destiny may be changed.

Another means involves the character of the person. A good destiny may become bad as a result of a person's own character. It seems then that destiny expresses only a potentiality which may fail to be realized. This seems to account also for the belief in *esè* [leg] as an important element in human personality.³⁴ *Esè* is the symbol of movement. If a person has a good destiny but is not dynamic the destiny may not come to fruition. So individual destinies express the potentialities of becoming something, of accomplishing a task. If we look at the matter this way the whole problem of responsibility and changeability appears to be resolved. But then the further question that emerges is this: What is the role of the concept of destiny? If character, industry, sacrifice, dynamism are essential to success, why may the concept of destiny not be eliminated? Again, this is the crux of the problem, but one that cannot be resolved easily. While this last point is understood by many Yoruba, they are not prepared to let go the concept of destiny. For, in the final analysis, neither good character nor dynamism nor industry guarantees a success that is not encased in one's destiny.

Comparison with the Akan Conception

The Akan conception of destiny, as presented by Gyekye, seems to avoid these problems, though it has its own. For in that conception, it is not the individual who chooses a destiny. Rather, it is *Onyame*, the Supreme deity, that imposes destiny and the deity always imposes good destiny which is unchangeable. If so, then there is no problem of apportioning blame or responsibility. But, as will be obvious, this hardly resolves the other problems. The following are the essentials of this concept:

1. God imposes destiny.
2. Destiny is always good.
3. Destiny is unchangeable.³⁵

Given these three facts, one then needs to have a way of accounting for the existence of wickedness in Akan society unless Gyekye is going to deny this exists. For if *Onyame* never imposes bad destiny, and destiny is unchangeable, from where do bad things come into the world? For Gyekye, there is no need for anyone to change their destiny since it is good, and "talk of changing destiny really refers to the attempt to better one's condition."³⁶ One may need to do this if one's path is "strewn with failures, either because of his or her own actions, desires, decisions, and intentions or because of the activities of some supposed evil forces."³⁷ What is crucial here is the recognition that [i] there may exist failures [which I suppose is bad, but not included in the message of destiny], and [ii] such failures may be caused by oneself [actions, intentions, desires, etc.] which seem to suggest that such things may cause a change in a good destiny, or [iii] they may be caused by some evil forces. Are these evil forces human or natural? If human, and their nature is to cause misfortune for others, can we say this is their own allotted destiny [in which case, there is bad destiny] or that their allotted good destiny has been thwarted [in which case destiny may be changed]. It appears to me that all three features that Gyekye attribute to the Akan conception of destiny can co-exist without tension only if there is no evil or wickedness in the society. And this appears to me to be contrary to the facts of life. It is also no use treating such evils as accidents, for this begs the question. If the premature death of a decent young man in the hands of a habitual hoodlum is an accident, which is not included in the destiny of either the young man or the hoodlum, the question of what the concept of destiny itself is supposed to account for is yet to be resolved, especially if we also believe in a good destiny which pertains to the key events of a person's life and is unchangeable. Obviously death is a key event just as murder on the part of the hoodlum is.

The Normative Meaning of Eniyan

As can be seen from the foregoing, the concept of destiny is crucial in understanding the thought and practice of Africans in general. I have focused here