

THE HUMAN PERSON IN AFRICAN VS. WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

This article delves into a comparative analysis of the metaphysical concept of the human person in the Yoruba tradition versus Western philosophy. It explores the tripartite nature of the human person in Yoruba culture, consisting of the body (ara), the soul (emi), and the significant element known as the ori (inner head) that influences destiny. The Yoruba view emphasizes predetermined destiny through the ori, in contrast to the body-soul division commonly found in Western thought. Western philosophical perspectives on the human person, influenced by prominent thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, vary from dualistic to monistic views. The document discusses how Western philosophy defines a person based on moral status, self-awareness, values, choices, and the ability to adopt life plans. It also highlights the complexity of the Yoruba view with its inclusion of physical, spiritual, and destiny-related elements, providing rich insights into human existence and the essence of personhood across different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Personhood, Destiny, Dualism, Ethics, Community

Fundamental Considerations

The metaphysical concept of the human person in the Yoruba tradition compared to Western philosophy presents a fascinating contrast between two distinct worldviews. In the Yoruba tradition, the concept of the human person is tripartite, consisting of the body (ara), the soul (emi), and a third element known as the ori (inner head). The ori is particularly significant as it is believed to determine a person's destiny¹. The creation of a person is seen as occurring in stages, with the body being molded by Orisanla, the god of creation; the soul and ori are provided by Olodumare, the supreme deity². This contrasts with the dualistic body-soul division commonly found in Western

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¹ Cfr. M. Akin Makinde, *An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Example*, in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 1984, 7 (3), pp. 189–200.

² Cfr. Anthony, Immaculata Olu & Mike Boni, *The human person in Yoruba culture and philosophy*, in *Researchgate*, Nov. 2021, pp. 327-334.

thought.

Western philosophical concepts of the human person have evolved over time, with various philosophers offering different perspectives. Generally, the Western view has been influenced by the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, who have tended to see a person as either a combination of body and soul (dualism) or as one or the other (monism). A person in the Western philosophical tradition is often defined by their moral status, capacities for self-awareness, values, choices and the ability to adopt life plans. A person in Western philosophy is often defined by their moral status, capacities for self-awareness, values, choices, and the ability to adopt life-plans³.

The Yoruba view is more complex in that it includes not only the physical and spiritual elements but also the aspect of predetermined destiny through the ori. This adds a layer of depth to the understanding of human personality and its connection to the cosmos and fate, which is less emphasized in Western traditions.

Both perspectives offer rich insights into the nature of human existence and the essence of what it means to be a person, reflecting the diverse tapestry of human thought across cultures.

Certainly! The Yoruba and Western views on the human person offer distinct perspectives that reflect their unique cultural and philosophical backgrounds.

Yoruba View Of The Human Person

The Yoruba concept of the human person is holistic and deeply spiritual. It encompasses not just the physical and the spiritual, but also a third element that influences destiny⁴. This tripartite model includes:

- Ara (Body): Molded by Orisanla, the god of creation, the body is the physical vessel.
- Emi (Soul): The soul, which is believed to be given by Olodumare, the supreme deity.
- Ori (Inner Head): A critical spiritual component that determines the person's destiny⁵.

³ C. Taylor, *The concept of a person*, in: *Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge University Press;1985, pp. 97-114.

⁴ Cfr. M. Akin Makinde, *An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Example*, in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 1984, 7 (3), pp. 189–200.

⁵ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

In the Yoruba tradition, Ori plays a central and multifaceted role in the spiritual and philosophical understanding of one's life and destiny. It is considered the most important part of the human soul, the bearer of an individual's destiny and personal god. Here are some key aspects of Ori in Yoruba belief:

1. **Spiritual Intuition and Destiny:** Ori is seen as the embodiment of spiritual intuition and the individual's destiny⁶. It is the reflective spark of human consciousness that guides decisions and actions, leading a person towards their life's purpose.
2. **Divine Essence:** As a metaphysical concept, Ori represents the divine essence within each person⁷. It is the inner wisdom that influences one's character and fate, and it's believed to be crucial for achieving *iwa-pele*, which is a harmonious and balanced character.
3. **Worship and Consultation:** The Yoruba people venerate Ori as a deity, consulting it during times of difficulty and decision-making⁸. It is believed that Ori has the power to bless and shape a person's existence, so showing respect and honor towards Ori is essential for spiritual alignment and well-being.
4. **Guidance in Life:** Ori acts as an inner compass, directing individuals towards fulfilling their destinies⁹. It is thought to accompany devotees on their life journeys, including metaphorical or spiritual sea voyages, symbolizing the journey through life.
5. **Artistic Representation:** In traditional Yoruba visual arts, Ori is often represented by a disproportionately large head in sculptures, symbolizing its importance and the belief that the head contains one's destiny¹⁰.

The concept of Ori is deeply interwoven with the Yoruba understanding of the cosmos and the individual's place within it. It is a unique aspect of Yoruba spirituality that highlights the interconnectedness of intuition, destiny, and the divine.

⁶ Cfr. <https://oldworldgods.com/yoruba/god-ori-in-yoruba-mythology/>

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Cfr. A. Babasehinde, *The concept of Ori in the traditional Yoruba visual representation of human figures*, in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 2007, 16(2), pp. 212–220.

Western View Of The Human Person

Western philosophy, influenced by thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, has traditionally focused on dualism (body and soul) or monism (either body or soul). The Western concept often emphasizes individual properties such as consciousness, rationality, and memory as the basis for defining personhood¹¹. The Western view tends to be more individualistic, with a focus on personal autonomy, moral status and the capacity for self-awareness and rational thought¹².

It often centers around the idea of the human being as the center of reality with all the other aspects of reality serving to fulfill the human person¹³.

Formation of The Human Person

In Yoruba thought, the creation of a person occurs in stages, with the body being formed first, followed by the soul and the ori¹⁴. The ori is particularly significant as it is seen as the individual's personal deity and the determinant of their fate¹⁵.

The formation of the human person in Yoruba culture is deeply rooted in their mythology and religious beliefs. According to Yoruba philosophy, a human person consists of a body, which is physical, and a soul, which is spiritual. The creation involves several deities: Orisanla, the god of creation, is responsible for moulding the body; Ogun, the god of iron, beatifies it; and Olodumare, the supreme deity, provides the soul¹⁶. The Yoruba view a person as part of the community, emphasizing the importance of being dependable and contributing to communal life¹⁷.

¹¹ Cfr. M. Molefe, 2019, *A Conceptual Mapping of Personhood*, In *An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality, and Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15561-2_2 . june 2024.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ D. Nderitu (2020), *The Meaning of Human Person in the African Context*, in Wariboko, N., Falola, T. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of African Social Ethics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham., https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36490-8_6 .april 2024.

¹⁴ Cfr. M. Akin Makinde, *An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Example*, in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 1984, 7 (3), pp. 189–200.

¹⁵ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Cfr. Anthony, Immaculata Olu & Mike Boni, *The human person in Yoruba culture and philosophy*, in *Researchgate*, Nov. 2021, pp. 327-334.

¹⁷ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

In contrast, Western philosophical culture often emphasizes the individual and their rational capabilities. The Cartesian philosophy of René Descartes, encapsulated in the phrase *cogito ergo sum* (i think, therefore i am), highlights the importance of thought and individual existence¹⁸. Western thought also has a dualistic view of the human person, typically dividing the person into body and soul, with a focus on individualism and personal development¹⁹.

These perspectives show a fundamental difference in the understanding of what constitutes a human person, with Yoruba culture focusing on communal integration and spiritual elements, while Western philosophy often prioritizes individual rationality and personal identity. Both views contribute to a rich tapestry of human understanding across different cultures.

Some Basic Points of Comparison

1. Community vs. Individuality: The Yoruba view emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals with their community and the cosmos, while the Western view often highlights individual autonomy and rights.

2. Destiny vs. Autonomy: In Yoruba belief, destiny plays a significant role in shaping a person's life through the *ori*, whereas in Western thought, the focus is more on individual choice and self-determination.

3. Holistic vs. Fragmented: Yoruba philosophy views the person as a whole, with all components working together harmoniously, while Western philosophy sometimes separates the person into distinct parts (e.g., mind vs. body).

Both perspectives provide valuable insights into the nature of personhood and the human condition, each offering a unique lens through which to understand ourselves and our place in the world. If you're interested in exploring specific philosophical texts or concepts within these traditions, I can assist with that as well.

Ethical Views

¹⁸ D. Nderitu , 2020,, *The Meaning of Human Person in the African Context*, in Wariboko, N., Falola, T. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of African Social Ethics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36490-8_6 .april 2024..

¹⁹ Cfr. <https://philosophy.institute/philosophy-of-human-person/> april 2024.

The Yoruba and Western views on the human person have profound implications for ethical considerations, shaping how morality, behavior, and societal norms are perceived and practiced within their respective cultures.

1. Community-Centric Morality: The Yoruba perspective emphasizes communal values and the interconnectedness of individuals within society. Ethical behavior is seen as that which promotes harmony and balance within the community²⁰.

2. Destiny and Responsibility: The concept of Ori in Yoruba thought suggests that individuals have a predetermined destiny, yet they are also responsible for their actions. This duality influences ethical decisions, as one must align actions with their destined path while maintaining communal harmony²¹.

3. Character (Iwa): In Yoruba ethics, good character and moral integrity are paramount. The pursuit of *iwa-pele* (good character) is considered essential for personal and societal well-being²².

4. Individual Rights and Autonomy: Western ethics often prioritize individual rights, autonomy, and the capacity for rational decision-making. Ethical considerations revolve around the protection of these rights and the promotion of individual freedom²³.

5. Approach to Well-being: The Yoruba concept of àlàáfíà (peace and well-being) aligns closely with the biblical concept of shalom, suggesting that well-being is not measured by material possessions but by moral and ethical values²⁴. This contrasts with some Western approaches that may emphasize material success as a component of well-being.

6. Social vs. Individual Development: Yoruba ethics suggest that physical prosperity is enhanced by strong moral values, and development should focus on right living rather than increasing material possessions²⁵. In

²⁰ A. Wole, *Which Way to Shalom? A Theological Exploration of the Yoruba and Western Foundations for Ethics and Development*, in *Conspectus : The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* Vol. 37, No. 1, 2024, pp. 85-95.

²¹ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

²² J. B. Babalola, *The consequentialist foundations of traditional Yoruba Ethics: an Exposition*, in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) New Series*, Vol.5 No.2, December 2013, pp.103-121.

²³ Cfr. <https://www.modishproject.com/western-culture-a>

²⁴ Cfr. A. Wole, *Which Way to Shalom? A Theological Exploration of the Yoruba and Western Foundations for Ethics and Development*, in *Conspectus : The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* Vol. 37, No. 1, 2024, pp. 85-95.

²⁵ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

contrast, Western ethics may support the pursuit of personal success and material wealth as part of individual development.

7. Ethical Foundations: Yoruba proverbs and cultural practices provide a foundation for morality and well-being, emphasizing the importance of character and communal values²⁶. Western ethics, influenced by humanistic and philosophical traditions, often derive ethical foundations from reason and individual rights²⁷.

In summary, the Yoruba view tends to promote a more communal and destiny-oriented approach to ethics, while the Western perspective often emphasizes individualism and rational autonomy. These differing viewpoints influence how each culture approaches moral dilemmas, societal norms, and the concept of well-being. Understanding these differences can foster a more nuanced approach to global ethical discourse and intercultural understanding.

Yoruba Rituals And Ethical Values

Yoruba rituals play a significant role in reinforcing ethical values within the community. These rituals are not just ceremonial; they are deeply embedded with moral teachings and serve as a means to transmit and affirm the community's shared values. Here are some ways in which Yoruba rituals reinforce ethical values:

1. Communal Participation: Many Yoruba rituals require the participation of the entire community, which fosters a sense of unity and collective responsibility. This communal aspect emphasizes the importance of social harmony and cooperation²⁸.
2. Divination Practices: Divination, or Ifá, is a central ritual in Yoruba religion. It serves as a guide for moral and ethical decision-making. Through divination, individuals seek wisdom from the *Ifá* literary corpus, which contains teachings on proper conduct and the consequences of one's actions.
3. Rites of Passage: Rituals marking significant life transitions, such as birth, adulthood, marriage, and death, often include moral lessons. These rites

²⁶ J. B. Babalola, *The consequentialist foundations of traditional Yoruba Ethics: an Exposition*, in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) New Series*, Vol.5 No.2, December 2013, pp.103-121.

²⁷ Cfr. <https://www.modishproject.com/western-culture-am> aprile 2024.

²⁸ J. Isola, *Yorùbá Values and the Environment*, in *Yoruba studies review*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (2018), pp.12-21.

of passage reinforce the community's expectations for ethical behavior at different stages of life²⁹.

4. Festivals and Ceremonies: Yoruba festivals often celebrate deities that embody specific virtues. For example, the worship of Orunmila, the deity of wisdom and knowledge, reinforces the value of wisdom in daily life. Similarly, honoring Ogun, the deity of iron and war, can be a reminder of the importance of courage and justice³⁰.
5. Ancestral Veneration: The Yoruba believe in honoring ancestors, who are seen as guardians of moral values. Rituals dedicated to ancestors serve as a reminder to live up to the standards set by previous generations³¹.
6. Art and Symbolism: Yoruba rituals often involve artistic expressions that symbolize ethical concepts. For instance, the use of masks in rituals can represent the presence of the ancestors and the continuity of moral and ethical teachings across generations³².
7. Ethical Narratives: Many Yoruba rituals include storytelling that imparts moral lessons. These narratives often feature tales of the orishas (deities) and their interactions with humans, highlighting the rewards of virtuous behavior and the repercussions of ethical transgressions³³.

Through these rituals, the Yoruba community instills and reinforces a moral code that guides individual behavior and ensures the well-being of the society as a whole. The rituals serve as a constant reminder of the community's values and the importance of upholding them in everyday life

Conclusion

This article delves into the fundamental considerations of the metaphysical

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ A. Akande, T. Akande, M. Adewuyi, K. A. Williams, (2022). *The Fascinating Legacy of Yoruba Culture, Gods, and the Genesis of Civilization* in Akande, A. (eds) *Handbook of Racism, Xenophobia, and Populism*, Springer Handbooks of Political Science and International Relations, Springer, Cham., https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13559-0_26 26 april 2024.

³¹ John Isola, *Yorùbá Values and the Environment*, in *Yoruba studies review*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (2018), pp.12-21.

³² A. Akande, T. Akande, M. Adewuyi, K. A. Williams, (2022). *The Fascinating Legacy of Yoruba Culture, Gods, and the Genesis of Civilization*. In: Akande, A. (eds) *Handbook of Racism, Xenophobia, and Populism*. Springer Handbooks of Political Science and International Relations. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13559-0_26 26 april 2024,

³³ *Ibidem*.

concept of the human person in the Yoruba tradition compared to Western philosophy. It highlights the tripartite nature of the human person in Yoruba beliefs, consisting of the body (ara), the soul (emi), and the inner head (ori), each playing a unique role in shaping an individual's destiny. In contrast, Western philosophy often depicts the human person as a combination of body and soul or as one or the other, with a focus on individualistic traits like moral status, self-awareness, and rationality.

The Yoruba perspective offers a holistic and spiritually rich view of the human person, emphasizing the interconnectedness of physical, spiritual, and destiny elements. The concept of ori, as the inner head determining destiny, brings depth to the understanding of human personality and its connection to fate and the cosmos. On the other hand, Western philosophy tends to prioritize individual rights, rationality, and autonomy in defining personhood.

The article further explored the formation of the human person in Yoruba culture, rooted in mythology and religious beliefs, where deities play pivotal roles in shaping the body, soul, and destiny of an individual. It contrasts this communal and destiny-oriented approach to Western ethos, which often underscores individualism and rational autonomy. Ethical considerations from both Yoruba and Western perspectives are also examined, highlighting their respective views on morality, ethical behavior, and societal norms. The Yoruba ethics emphasize communal values, destiny, good character, and communal well-being, while Western ethics tend to prioritize individual rights, autonomy, material prosperity, and personal development.

Overall, the article showcases the profound implications of Yoruba and Western views on the human person for ethical considerations, demonstrating how cultural and philosophical differences influence moral discourse, societal values, and ethical practices. In a nutshell, the comparative analysis between Yoruba and Western perspectives on the human person, ethical considerations, and rituals provides insights into the diverse tapestry of human thought across cultures, showcasing the unique philosophical backgrounds and foundational principles that shape these viewpoints on human existence and ethics.