

Yoruba Philosophy as a Quest for Foundational and Ultimate Meaning

A Summation Inspired by the Work of Rowland Abiodun

and

Wole Soyinka

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Abstract

An outline of Yoruba philosophy as a quest for foundational and ultimate meaning, as this philosophy may be perceived through the work of Rowland Abiodun and Wole Soyinka, in correlation with the work of other thinkers within and beyond Yoruba thought, and a summative, poetic reflection by me adapting Abiodun's mapping of Yoruba aesthetics as a guide to living.

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Structure

The essay is in three parts. The discussion of Abiodun's ideas on Yoruba aesthetics constitutes the expository section of the essay. This is complemented by the indented interjections of Soyinka's poetic summations, with an addition by me, on Eshu, a pivotal figure in Yoruba cosmology whom Soyinka's poem does not address, on the significance of orisa-deities-and other ideas in Yoruba cosmology, from his poem in *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*, a poem the simple beauty of which distills Yoruba deity concepts in a few luminous lines.

The Soyinka lines provide an incantatory counterpoint to the linear logic of the exploration of Abiodun's thought, indirectly resonating with the exposition of Abiodun's ideational universe. It thereby possibly amplifies the communicative force of both forms of discourse, a consonance of expressive forms taken further through my concluding, poetic reflections on Abiodun's philosophical synthesis.

My pairing of Abiodun and Soyinka might be subliminally influenced by Barry Hallen's correlation of the ideas of both of them on Yoruba philosophy in "African Sculptures: Interrelating the Verbal and the Visual in Yoruba Aesthetics" in *Philosophy of Sculpture: Historical Problems, Contemporary Approaches*. Ed. Kristin Gjesdal, Fred Rush and Ingvild Torsen, 2021, 93-110.

This essay emerges from my work as editor and publisher of the forthcoming second and expanded edition of Abiodun's *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*, due for publication in November 2021, itself part of a larger project exploring Abiodun's thought as a philosopher in African and global contexts, a project that belongs within my work on various aspects of Yoruba thought.

A Quest for Ultimate Meaning

Obatala fulfills. Purity, love, transparency of heart. Stoical strength.
Luminous truth. Man is imperfect; man strives towards perfection.
Yet even the imperfect may find interior harmony with Nature. Spirit

overcomes blemish – be it of mind or body. Oh, peace that giveth understanding, possess our human heart.

In my quest for the meaning of existence, who we are, why we are here and where we are going, I have come to the conclusion that each person has to find or construct the answers for themselves.

The Strengths and Limitations of Philosophy and Spirituality

I am deeply inspired by Asian, Western, Arab/Persian and African spiritualities and philosophies, from Hinduism to Christianity and Immanuel Kant to Islam and Yoruba spiritualities and thought, among others.

I conclude, however, that they can take one only so far. They represent fragments of a holistic understanding that, even if accessible to humanity, cannot be transmitted from one person to another in a manner that would enable the other person know what the person transmitting knows. What can be transmitted are often ideas, ideas that are limited in their ability to enable others see things as the creator of the idea sees them.

Philosophies and spiritualities are often centred on perspectives on an ultimate reality, an ultimate explanation of the cosmos, an embodiment of its meaning, an integrator of its diversity and dynamism.

These conceptions, however, are no more than ideas that cannot be proven to the satisfaction of most people. At best, their validity may be individually discovered, justified for oneself through means that might not appeal to others or even if they do, do not guarantee the same enlightenment. So, the journey continues, perhaps infinitely, as various religions and philosophies continually present their own perspectives on such ultimacy and how to approach it.

The Ultimate Complementarity of Diverse Philosophies and Spiritualities

The ideas they depict are often profound and very helpful about how to understand existence and how to live. Their perceptions, outside ethnocentric limitations and claims of exclusive knowledge, are often similar. Their perspectives on the human self and on ultimate reality are better understood as complementary rather than as fundamentally divergent.

Yoruba orí theory about the nature of the human being, for example, is better appreciated in its conjunctions with the Igbo chi concept and both better understood in relation to the Edo ehi idea and all these better grasped in consonance with the Akan sumsum and kra ideations.

These African insights are more richly illuminating in relation to the Hindu atman idea, correlations extending across forms of deity, such as Allah, Yahweh, God, Olodumare, Brahman, among others in terms of similarities that are more significant than their differences.

Seek understanding of the signposts of existence. Is knowledge not within and around us? If the Supreme Fount of Thought sought counsel of Orunmila in the hour of crisis, why will you by-pass the seer of signposts, O seeker of knowledge? Wisdom may slumber on the gums of infants; lucky that man who patiently awaits the loosening of infant tongues. Ifa maps the course through shrouded horizons.

Yoruba Philosophy and Spirituality

Rowland Abiodun and Oríkì Theory

Among these systems, one of those that have caught my particular interest is Yoruba philosophy and spirituality, an interest that emerged from reading Wole Soyinka's amazing *Myth, Literature and the African World*, wonderful in its dramatization of awe at the mysterious cosmos enfolding the human being

and the various strategies through which humanity has tried to celebrate and penetrate this mystery, particularly as demonstrated in Yoruba arts and thought.

Another response to Yoruba thought as an engagement with the cosmic context of existence that inspires me is the work of Rowland Abiodun. I have read some of his essays and am studying the reworking and unification of a number of those essays in terms of what may be described as oriki theory in his *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*, 2014.

This theory is further discussed in his autobiographical introduction to the forthcoming 2021 edition of *Yoruba Art and Language*, describing his transition from lived immersion in the expressive contexts represented by Yoruba discourses to his scholarly exploration of them in his essays and books. Oríkì theory may be seen as a theory of discourse, of thought and expression, developed from Yoruba philosophy to explain Yoruba expressive forms, but which may be demonstrable as having significance beyond the Yoruba context.

Abiodun uses the Yoruba term “oríkì,” but not the term “oríkì theory.” Describing his use of the idea as a theory is helpful for appreciating his efforts in employing oriki as a means of unifying Yoruba imaginative expressions. Abdul Karim Bangura develops a similar orientation to Abiodun’s work on oriki in Bangura’s construction of the term “Abiodun Oriki Methodology” in *Falolaism: The Epistemologies and Methodologies of Africana Knowledge*, a striking effort very helpful for appreciating the implications of Abiodun’s construct.

Ogun sets the example: Virtue wears the strangest garb – comradeship in strife, meditation in solitude, the hardy route of self sacrifice...Life is multiple and strange. The death of fear liberates the Will that sets forth where no mind ever trod. Ogun liberates: rise beyond his shadow.

Approaches to Re/Constructing Yoruba Thought

Abiodun may be described as understanding himself as a scholar trying to faithfully reproduce and interpret what he has learnt about Yoruba thought. Soyinka is an imaginative thinker in essays and literature whose work represents more of an individualistic response, a reworking of the cultural material in terms unique to him. His writing is readily appreciable as an expression of his distinctive style of thinking. This unique cognitive style yet aspires to actualize the essence of the cultural forms he is approaching through resonance between his own imaginative and critical dynamism and that suggested by the cultural expressions that inspire him.

How different from each other are the Abiodun and Soyinka orientations, however? Can one arrive at the imaginative intimacy and analytical depth of an Abiodun without the individualistic engagement, the marriage of mind and subject in terms of which Soyinka's work and creativity like his are more often understood?

In fact, are efforts to interpret a philosophy and a spirituality, particularly an oral one developed across more than a thousand years and across different peoples, often speaking different dialects of a language, as with Yoruba, not a largely individualistic exercise within the context of an effort to arrive at commonalities within variations? Is this not so even though the dialects may demonstrate various degrees of mutual intelligibility, as between variants of Yoruba, and significant similarity between various perspectives on what has come to be known as Orisa cosmology?

What factors influence a scholar or writer's choice of subjects from within the available spectrum of possibilities? What considerations shape the interpretation of what is studied? What are the various orientations represented by the translations of the source texts?

Why are Abiodun's choice of subjects within Yoruba thought largely convergent with as well as divergent from those of Babatunde Lawal and both of these

similar to and different from those of Henry John Drewal and these both correlative with as well as different from those of Bolaji Idowu and these divergent from but related to those of Akinwumi Ogundiran, referencing some of my favourite authors across decades of Yoruba Studies, an individualistic selection yet significantly representative of the work of scholars in this field, particularly those writing in English?

The most realistic approach to the reconstruction of oral philosophical traditions might be the tentativeness represented by Chinua Achebe's "Chi in Igbo Cosmology," defined by a cautious sensitivity to the challenge of piecing together disparate perspectives to present a unified whole, a unity that may be seen as more individualistic than representative.

Justice is the mortar that kneads the dwelling-place of man. Can mere brick on brick withstand the bloodied cries of wrong from the aggrieved? No more than dark withstands the flare of lightning, roofs of straw the path of thunderbolts. Sango restores.

Therefore, I approach Abiodun, Soyinka, Lawal, Drewal and other scholars in Yoruba thought as reconstructors rather than as reflectors. I wonder if they may be better understood as shaping perspectives rather than as reflecting those perspectives. May their work be better appreciated as that of people assembling and unifying fragments than as depicting an existing unity?

I puzzle over whether the more relevant image for describing their work might be that of the Yoruba deity Orunmila collecting the scattered remains of the deity Obatala in a calabash. With reference to the work of these thinkers, however, the movement may be seen as going from fragmentation to unity. The Obatala image, on the other hand, is that of the fragmentation of an original unity, fragments then reconstituted into a new unity. On second thought, though, perhaps Yoruba oral traditions oscillate between the implications of these two images, of both fragmentation and unity as existing within the oral tradition.

Various Yoruba thinkers have tried to generate such unity before the advent of writing represented by contemporary scholarship. Such developments are exemplified by the Ifa synthesis described by Thomas Mákanjúṣá Ilésanmí in “The Traditional Theologians and the Practice of Òrìṣà Religion in Yorùbáland.” This synthesis is depicted by Ogundiran in *The Yoruba: A New History*, 2020, as generated by thinkers in the creation of the cultural centrality of Ife in the Yoruba world through the instrument of the Ifa system of knowledge.

Without change, can we grow? The day of birth points to the moment of death. Without pain, what is the value of pleasure? What is life without death to give it urgency? Position yourself with Eshu at the intersections of change. Eshu – the flash that unites the cosmos, the gleam that illuminates being to being, the potential for transformation.

Abiodun’s Multidisciplinary Constitution of Yoruba Aesthetics

Abiodun's synthesis, an approach to Yoruba aesthetics, is particularly powerful in his integration of different arts and different philosophical zones in terms of luminous beauty of expression in both Yoruba and English, exploring some of the richest Yoruba texts I have seen.

Yoruba literature, Yoruba visual and performative arts, dance and dress, cognitive institutions such as Ifá and to a lesser degree Ògbóni, come together in his work in relation to Yoruba metaphysics, ideas about the nature of existence, and Yoruba epistemology, theories of knowledge, a synthesis unified through Yoruba theories of discourse, theories of human expressive and reflective capacity, a synthesis explored in its dramatization within social reality.

Yoruba Thought as a Quest through Space and Time

Studying Yoruba philosophy may be seen as walking with the Yoruba on their journey through space and time, in a quest for the meaning of existence, a quest the fruits of which are expressed in concepts foregrounded by Abiodun's Yoruba *Art and Language* understood as an integrative template for Yoruba thought.

The idea of Yoruba identity as representing a cognitive journey is developed by Ogundiran in *The Yoruba*, in which he maps the environmental and social factors that have shaped this journey, describing the evolving configurations of thought the journey represents.

Ogundiran's account of the coordinates of Yoruba thought, however, are different from the ideational configurations presented here, a difference suggesting the varieties of perspective actualizable through the shaping process in which breadth of ideas may be synchronized in the study of this subject. I discuss Ogundiran's book in the ongoing project accessible at [*Yoruba and African History as a Quest for Meaning: An Exploratory Journey with Akinwumi Ogundiran's The Yoruba: A New History*](#).

Life as Spiral Quest Within a Marketplace Oriented Towards Infinity

The overarching understanding of the quest for meaning represented by Yoruba thought may be seen as provided by the Yoruba proverb, "ayé lojà òrun nilé" "the world, ayé, is a market place, òrun, the zone of ultimate origins, is home," as discussed by Olúwolé Tẹwógboyè Òkẹwándé in "A Semiotic Investigation of the Relations between *Ifá* and Yorùbá Indigenous Markets, Markets Location and Marketing Theories." Identical ideas are also expressed by other African peoples, as indicated by a similar perspective in classical Igbo philosophy, "uwa bu afia," "the world is a market," analyzed by Nkeonye Otakpor in "The World is a Marketplace."

This is a journey of being and becoming which may be seen as a spiral of birth, death and rebirth. The spiral image is adapted by Margaret Thompson Drewal

in describing this journey in "The Ontological Journey" section of her book *Yoruba Ritual*, interpreting the account distilled by her teacher Kolawole Ositola from the Yoruba cognitive institutions Ifá and Ògbóni. A similar perspective is developed by Henry John Drewal in "Yoruba Art and Life as Journeys," in *The Yoruba Artist*, edited by Abiodun, Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton III.

The spiral motif in terms of which Margaret Thomson Drewal characterizes this journey is resonant with a global range of deployments of this and related images as well as with other African examples of their use. These include the Nsibidi symbolism of the spiral from Nigeria's Cross River. This spiral, meaning journey but also suggesting the sun and eternity, is magnificently visualized by Victor Ekpuk, and beautifully described of Ekpuk's reworking of this symbol in the Smithsonian exhibition *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*.

Correlative with this visual and ideational conjunction is the Kongo cosmogram, a spiral or circle indicating the progression of human life across the cycles of terrestrial life, correlated with the rising, ascent and setting of the sun, discussed, among other sources, by Robert Farris Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* and *The Four Moments of the Sun : Kongo Art in Two Worlds* and summed up by the Wikipedia essay on the subject.

In the process of transacting in relationships and values, in the exchange of the fruits of work for the means to sustain body and soul in the motion towards the inevitable departure from Earth that climaxes each incarnation, and the return to Earth to continue the cycle, processes at the centre of which are life in the marketplace that is the world, what insights have been developed by Yoruba thinkers over the centuries?

Soyinka and a Philosophy of Transition

Soyinka responds to the cyclic structure of the Yoruba idea of birth and rebirth in terms of what may be described as a philosophy of transition, in which

change from one state to another is a central source of ultimate meaning. His development of these ideas is more evocative than systematic, worked out through poetic essays and through drama and poetry. This flexibility of expression leaves his orientations open to presentation and adaptation in various ways by those who wish to distill a more carefully structured body of ideas from its imaginative wealth.

Thus, adapting Soyinka, every moment may be seen as a moment of transition, in which one moment is replaced by another, transmuted into a new state, as the human being undergoes transition between states of being in moving from terrestrial to post-terrestrial life and back again, in a continuous cycle.

What is the significance of this motion between states of being? Does it lead to the cultivation of understanding of the meaning of existence through the vicissitudes of life, eventually leading to a summit of awareness that makes further reincarnation unnecessary, as is held in such schools as Hinduism and Buddhism?

Soyinka's works seem to suggest, in contrast, that the process of transmutation itself represents a fountain of meaning illuminating human existence as positioned between a mysterious cosmos and the evocation of this mystery by the material circumstances of existence. Each moment, therefore, may be seen as a passage through what he names "the abyss of transition," an entry into new possibilities of relationship between self and existence that mirrors the larger transition between states of being in moving between terrestrial and post-terrestrial life.

The foregoing, however, is an adaptation of Soyinka rather than a restatement of his thought. Such an adaptation is more useful for this essay as a discussion of philosophy understood as a balance between imaginative evocation and ideational specificity.

This adaptation correlates his essay collection, *Myth, Literature and the African World* with his play, *Death and the King's Horseman* and its introductory essay,

texts in which Soyinka's evocations of cosmic mystery and meaning are particularly powerfully developed.

These contexts are correlated with his exploration of similar perspectives in his autobiographical *The Man Died*, and the more distantly correlative but relatable poetry collection *A Shuttle in the Crypt* and the poem "Idanre."

Mapping Yoruba Philosophy Through Abiodun's Thought

Abiodun's *Yoruba Art and Language* represents another perspective from which the unity of Yoruba thought may be understood. The account of Abiodun's thought that follows is a distillation from Abiodun's book as Abiodun's work is itself a condensation from the larger tradition of Yoruba ideas.

Orí

At the centre of Abiodun's understanding of Yoruba aesthetics is orí, the self as mediator between dimensions, between spirit and matter, time and eternity, the only orisa or deity that can follow its devotee on a distant journey across the seas without turning back, that sea being suggestive of the mysterious dimensions of death and rebirth, as depicted in the iconic, "The Importance of Ori," from Wande Abimbola's *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa* and also accessible at Clive Wake et al's *African Poems*.

Orí is understood as the immortal essence of the self, an identity persisting across incarnations, ensuring the continuity of the self in its movement between dimensions represented by terrestrial and post-terrestrial life.

"Essence, attribute, and quintessence... the uniqueness of persons, animals, and things, their inner eye and ear, their sharpest point and their most alert guide as they navigate through this world and the one beyond," as orí is eloquently summed up by Olabiyi Yai (Review of *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* by Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton, Rowland Abiodun and Allen Wardwell, 1990, in *African Arts*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1992, 20+22+24+26+29. 22).

Abiodun opens the main part of his book with a chapter on *orí*. He does this in the context of an exploration of the sources and potential of human reflective and expressive capacity. This is carried out in relation to the character of consciousness as configured in the *orí* concept. The exploration is conducted through mythic narrative and its resonance in visual art. Superb literature, exquisitely translated and richly interpreted, intersects with striking art to generate a unique exploration of ideas on *orí* within a galaxy of mutually illuminating Yoruba concepts.

Ìwà

At the core of *orí* is the idea of *ìwà*, essence, character, the essential nature of the self, as different from its external expression. *Ìwà* is discussed in chapter eight of the book in relation to the qualities of good art and of a well-developed artist.

Abiodun analyses a conception of beauty in terms of character, *iwa lewa*, which may be rendered as "character is beauty." He explores the correlation of this with an understanding of the essence of an entity, as represented by the same expression, *iwa lewa*, translated as "essential nature is beauty." He examines how this aesthetic/metaphysical convergence is correlative with a conception of the ultimate possibilities of existence, *àìkú parí ìwà*, which may be translated as "immortality is perfect existence."

Aṣọ

The self exists in a social context, suggested in ways of dress, evoked by the Yoruba expression "*èniyàn laṣọ me*," suggesting human relationships as the clothing that dignifies, protects and adorns one. This attitude to the metaphorical implications of clothing is dramatized in the further relationship between clothing and meaning in Yoruba thought, the arts and philosophies of dress explored by Abiodun in chapter five.

Àṣẹ

Suffusing this relationship between self and society is the principle of àṣẹ, life force enabling existence and consciousness, imbuing each existent with unique creative capacity. Àṣẹ is pervasive and yet uniquely embodied by each person. Abiodun engages the idea of àṣẹ and its artistic implications in chapter two.

Àṣẹ may be understood in its cosmic, individual, artistic, biological and cognitive dimensions. Abiodun, Drewal and Pemberton's *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* presents the cosmic, individual, artistic and cognitive aspects of this idea. Babatunde Lawal's "Divinity, Creativity and Humanity in Yoruba Aesthetics" expands upon the cosmic directions of the concept. Abiodun explores its cosmic interpretation and its significance for ritual and focuses on its deployment in the verbal arts as different from the sculptural exemplification of *Yoruba: Nine Centuries*.

The cosmic character of the concept consists in its being depicted as enabling all dynamism of existence, from the motion of the celestial bodies to the creative force of human action. It is understood as individual in being seen as enabling the distinctive creative possibilities of every person. It is described in terms of art in being understood as not only the enabler of artistic creativity but as the outcome of this creativity, not in terms of art creating àṣẹ but in terms of concentrating and directing it towards particular goals and concentrations of presence.

Its cognitive quality consists in its being understood, implicitly, as underlying or enabling consciousness, since consciousness is the source of creative rather than instinctual response to existence. In germs of consciousness, it is may also be described as being seen as a facilitator of further development of consciousness through the stimulation of consciousness through its concentrated presence in nature and human constructs.

Àṣẹ is markedly expressed, in my view, in the capacity of human beings to reproduce themselves through participating in the process through which life is embodied in flesh, a process enabled by the union of men and women, a union and its outcome abstracted by Ògbóni in terms of the relationship between one and two and between two and three.

This suggests a range of values from the biological to the spiritual and their interrelationship, between the explicit and the mysterious. This triadic symbolism is presented by Abiodun on Ògbóni sculpture, in his fifth chapter, on dress, but discussed at greater scope by Babatunde Lawal in "À Yà Gbó, À Yà Tó: New Perspectives on Edan Ògbóni."

This binary unity is also suggested in the Odu Ifá, the organizational structure of the Yoruba origin Ifá system of knowledge. This is a system of mathematical permutations evoking the literary scope that makes Ifá one of the world's most extensive literary systems, as well as a multidisciplinary literary structure integrating spirituality, philosophy and art.

These binary values also ramify in a range of other Yoruba cultural systems as demonstrated by Lawal in "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yoruba Art and Culture." The biological, cognitive and artistic projections of the àṣẹ concept may thereby be seen as unified in Ifá and Ògbóni through the binary and triadic principles as artistic inspirations and as a means of organizing ideas.

These ideas are summed up with particular metaphysical force in their incidental relationship with the Trika philosophy of the 11th century Kashmiri Hindu thinker Abhinavagupta. He opens such works as the *Tantraloka*, the *Tantrasara* and the *Paratrisika Vivarana* with a celebration of the passion between his parents in birthing him. This passionate union is for him a dramatization of that between the cosmic masculine and feminine personalities, Shiva and Shakti, whose union births the cosmos, even as his heart, generated through the passion of his parents, beats in harmony with the cosmic heart.

The Feminine Principle

While recognizing the masculine/feminine unity that enables the persistence of humanity and the sustenance of society, Yoruba philosophy ascribes unique power to the feminine principle in the realm of the hidden creative powers that enable life and its transformation, as biological forces from the man and the woman come together to enable life in the womb in a manner still not fully understood by humanity.

Hence, the feminine is uniquely revered, even within male dominance of the public sphere outside the market, which is controlled by women. This control of the market may be an outcome of historical developments yet is correlative with Yoruba conceptions of the unique enablement of life by women, the incubators of life in the womb as the world represented by the market incubates and births human possibility. Abiodun discusses the feminine principle in Yoruba thought in chapter three.

Honour to the Ancestors. If blood flows in you, tears run, bile courses, if the soft planet of brain pulses with thought and sensing, and earth consumes you in the end, then you, with your ancestors, are one with the fluid elements. If the beast knows what herbs of the forest are his friends, what plea shall man make that boasts superior knowledge, yet knows no empathy with moisture of the air he breathes, the juice of leaves, the sap in his roots to earth, or the waters that nourish his being? Man may speak Oya, Osun, Orisa-Oko...yet mind and spirit encompass more than a mere litany of names. Knowledge is Orisa.

Sùúrù, Ìfarabalè, Ìlutí, Ojú-Inú, Ojú-Ọ̀nà, Tító and Ìmojú-Mọ̀ra

What orientations are vital for cultivating sensitivity to these values? Abiodun's book is a discussion of the intersection of human existence in general with human creativity. My interest in the body of ideas the book constellates is on what it can do for me as a guide to understanding and navigating the universe. The universe understood as a complex of interactions, a structure of values.

I am struck in observing that Abiodun describes the body of ideas he builds as centred in a complex of qualities of personality vital for nurturing the values those ideas represent. Without patience, sùúrù, how will one cultivate discipline and composure, ìfarabalè? Without discipline how will one reach depth of perception, ojú-inú? Without sensitivity to opportunities for learning, ìlutí, good hearing as evocative of cognitive sensitivity, how will one develop breadth and depth of understanding?

Without depth of awareness, how will one construct the configuration of possibility, the design consciousness, *ojú-ṣàṣà*, in terms of which one shapes one's vision? Without a sensitivity to the most profound creative possibilities, how would one approach the divine exemplar in terms of which human being is fashioned, shaping oneself in terms of that ultimate reality, thereby approaching *tító*, the lasting even if ever renewed immortality of value, creative change in tune with the needs of the moment in the context of overarching ideals, *ìmojú-mọ̀ra*, a dynamism directed towards *àìkú parí ìwà*, the deathlessness that consummates existence?"

From the Aesthetics of Material Forms to the Aesthetics of Human Life

This complex of ideas is discussed in chapter eight of *Yoruba Art and Language*, on *ìwà*, of which those qualities are aspects. The relation between the human and the divine these ideas reference is dramatized in chapter one, on *orí*, the self in the context of human reflective and expressive capacity, *òrò*.

Another approach to this idea of human/divine oscillation is provided by Babatunde Lawal in "Divinity, Creativity and Humanity in Yoruba Aesthetics" and in "*Àwòrán*: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art." In the second essay, Lawal examines questions of perception and the transformation of what is perceived into artistic forms. He thereby maps ideas that may be understood in terms of how the artistic process may exemplify the process of shaping one's self and one's life into an ideal radiant with divine illumination.

This possibility of moving from the aesthetics of the fashioning of material forms to the aesthetics of constructing human life is also evoked by Abiodun in his exploration, in his first chapter of *Yoruba Art and Language*, of the divine origin of human reflective and expressive possibilities and their projection in the unity of *orí*, the self as both a terrestrially conditioned and divinely constituted entity.

Oríkì

Suffusing this complex of possibilities is oríkì, human creativity described as “a means... by which Orí as Òrò can descend to the human level and humans can make a spiritual ascent to Orí,” actualizing divine potential in the lived contexts of human experience (*Yoruba Art and Language*, 50).

Oríkì, verbal and visual art as evocator of essence and expression, of iwà, being, identity, character and its development and projection in space and time, is a primary means of exploring and activating the dynamism of existence, making it pervasive across Yoruba expressive forms. It is thereby central to ìtàn, the Yoruba understanding of history, as these ideas are developed by Rowland Abiodun and Karin Barber, building on conceptions foregrounded by Olabiyi Yai. Oríkì as a unifying practice of Yoruba discourse is the unifying idea of the book, first discussed in the introduction.

Orisa preaches Community: found it! This, no honest men will deny: man has failed the world or the world has failed mankind. Then question further: what faiths and realms of values have controlled our earth till now? And next: since *their* gods have failed, may ours not yield forgotten ways that remedy?

Ifá

Integrating this range of ideas is Ifá, a uniquely powerful vehicle for correlating the varied expressions of Yoruba thought. Through the pervasive use of Ifá literature throughout *Yoruba Art and Language*, and the discussion of this cognitive system in chapter four, Ifá is dramatized as a particularly useful means for riding the "horses of discourse" constituting Yoruba culture.

The equestrian metaphor is evoked by the Yoruba understanding of òwe, metaphorical expression, as "ẹ̀şin òrò," steeds of thought and expression. This image suggests both speed and vitality in penetrating into the complexities of

knowing, where thought may have been lost, tangled in a forest of intricacy, enabling the untangling of the entangled, the unraveling of the mysterious, the clarification of the unknown, the mapping of the known and the delineation of the unknown in its boundaries with the known.

This is a process both explicit and implicit, generating illumination through the evocative power of metaphor, image and rhythm, enabling the riding of horses of thought in structures of imaginative expression, with the babalawo, adept in the esoteric knowledge of Ifá, adapting the title of chapter four of Yoruba *Art and Language*.

The Will of man is placed beyond surrender. Without the knowing of Divinity by man, can Deity survive? O hesitant one, Man's conceiving is fathomless: his community will rise beyond the present reaches of the mind. Orisa reveals Destiny as – Self-destination.

The Mansion of Possibilities at the Intersection of Mind and Cosmos

Why do I find these ideas inspiring? I find the concepts explored by Abiodun uplifting because they suggest an effort to make meaning of existence, doing this in a manner that can be approached at various levels of identification, from the intellectual to that of faith. Soyinka's distillations of orisa deity thought project some of humanity's most noble ideas, projecting them as personified in the orisa.

These ideas, those depicted by Soyinka and those highlighted by Abiodun, may be seen as emphasizing human creative capacity within its enablement by its cosmic context. I am also proud these conceptions were developed by my African ancestors, guides to self-anchoring in a world in which my Africanness makes me a person in transit, moving in a global space significantly shaped by Western civilization.

Will I, one day, arrive at the mansion of possibilities where the whys and hows of the cosmic journey will be made clear to me, a mansion shaped of the concentric circles of opon ifa and the geometric configurations of the Hindu Sri

Yantra, two of my favourite symbols of cosmic unity? Will Albert Einstein's cosmos spanning physics and the permutations of ikin, nuts used in Ifa divination in mapping intersections of being and becoming, of past, present and future, converge there?

Is a final, ultimate answer possible, or is it more realistic, like Mazisi Kunene holds in his exposition of Zulu philosophy in *Anthem of the Decades*, that all that is possible are variations on an ultimate truth, variations on ultimacy evoked by the circularity of the calabash, a never-ending motion which yet does not exhaust the depth of the concavity at its centre?

Reflections

On Orí

Who am I?

On Àṣẹ

How can I cultivate creative ways of seeing and doing things?

On Oríkì

How can I create or seek environments, situations, relationships that evoke the best in me as I try to do the same in others?

On Aṣọ

How can I become for others the clothing that protects and beautifies them, in a way that is also good for me?

On Sùúrù

How may I cultivate the patience that accurately measures the distance between desire and fulfillment?

On Ìfarabalè

How can I be poised, sensitive to the body/mind?

On Ojú-Inú

How may I see beyond the obvious, to the utmost possibilities of phenomena?

On Ojú-Ọ̀nà

How may designs of exquisite possibilities unfold before my eyes?

On Ìlutí

How may I hear and know the spoken as well as the unspoken, the visible as well as the invisible, the existent and the not yet existent?

On Ìmojú-Mọ̀ra and Tító

How may I grow in depth of vision and be creatively flexible in application?

On Ifá and Àìkú Parí Ìwà

Through patience and composure, sensitivity and insight, stability and dynamism, orí-inú and orí-òde converge, a depth beyond awareness emerging within thought and sensing, constructing the story of my life, in dialogue with others' stories.

On Àşę Mysticism

The philosopher inspired by the ideas above may proceed to what may be described as Àşę Mysticism, a quest for the essence of existence through engagement with the concept of àşę, described as enabling cosmic and individual existence and consciousness, creativity and change, imbuing each existent with unique creative capacity.

The àşę concept is useful as a means of approaching the universe in terms of its inherent creativity, relating with people in terms of their uniqueness, seeking one's own creative individuality, exploring the question of an ultimate source of identity.

These explorations may be conducted through

the mysticism of beauty, contemplating the beauty of nature and of human creations

the mysticism of consciousness, reflecting on awareness, particularly on one's own sense of awareness, through quiet resting in its presence or reflection on its nature

the mysticism of ideas, reflecting on inspiring ideas and building constructs out of them

the mysticism of action, acting in relation to care for oneself and others within the context of the unknown scope of existence.