

## Suicide in Yoruba Ontology

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**ABSTRACT:** *Suicide is generally regarded as all cases of death resulting from action taken by the victim themselves, and with the intention and prospect of killing oneself. The cause is frequently attributed to psychological disorders, substance abuse, shame, guilty, rejection, loss, and loneliness, death of a loved one, emotional trauma, serious physical illness, and unemployment or money problems. In this paper, the researcher studies the problem of suicide from Yoruba perspective. Yoruba is a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. The paper interrogates Yoruba concept of death, the quality of death through suicide and suicide among the Yoruba. For the Yoruba, when it comes to the issue of autonomy and competence as regards deciding on suicide, they would metaphorically claim that 'bose wuni lase imole eni' (one determines one's faith the way one deems fit) drawing from the cultural construct of the Yoruba worldview that celebrate suicide in avoidance of shame- iku ya j'esin- a principle of dignity in dying. This understanding of suicide from an Yoruba perspective is believed will help enhance the value of human life and thus save the world from being plunged into a silent crisis of the value of life.*

**KEYWORDS:** Africa, Autonomy, Honor, ignominy, Suicide, Ontology, Victim, Yoruba

## INTRODUCTION

In recent times, suicide among youths and adults has been on the increase in Nigeria. In a place where taking one's life is seen more as a taboo rather than curse, the option to end one's life is becoming a worrisome trend, especially with reoccurring cases of suicide both in the rural and urban centers. Gonsalves (1986) defined suicide as "the direct killing of oneself on one's own authority". Halbwachs (1930) further defines it as "all those cases of death resulting from action taken by the victim themselves, and with the intention and prospect of killing oneself". Most contemporary definitions of suicide rely on two elements, namely a precise outcome (death) and a prerequisite (the intention or wish to die) (Wasserman & Wasserman, 2009).

The perception of suicide is highly varied between the cultures, religions, legal and social systems of the world. It is considered a sin or immoral act in many religions, and a crime to commit suicide in some countries. On the other hand, some cultures have viewed it as an honorable way to exit certain shameful or hopeless situations. This calls for the need to ask fundamental questions about death, raising questions about the extent to which we are and should be free to direct our lives and our deaths. These questions include; is suicide a right judgment on life and on those who live it? Could suicide be rational and rationally chosen? Could it be the product of fully autonomous choice?

## CAUSES OF SUICIDE

The World Health Organization (WHO) discovered that, an average of 3,000 people commit suicide daily all over the world and for every person who completes a suicide, 20 or more may attempt to end their lives making it the third leading cause of death among the youth and adult in the world. WHO lists a couple of different factors that lead to suicide: psychological disorders, substance abuse and living condition. The latter can be divided into three categories: financial and work/school related problems; interpersonal problems such as loneliness, death of a loved one and abuse, illness factors like HIV/Aids, feeling intimidated, tyrannized, creates extreme fear, emptiness and feeling void of creativity.

In 1897, Emile Durkheim, the French Sociologist in his seminal work on suicide, linked high rates of suicide in societies to breakdown of social norms, values and lack of moral standard, using the now famous term "state of anomie" to describe such a state of affairs. Many who make a suicide attempt are seeking relief from feeling ashamed, guilty, or like a burden to others, feeling like a victim, feelings of rejection, loss, or loneliness, death of a loved one, dependence on drugs or alcohol, emotional trauma, serious physical illness, unemployment or money problems.

## YORUBA CONCEPT OF DEATH

In Nigeria, Yoruba refers to a group of cultures linked by a common language. A group that inhabit the South- Western part of Nigeria, bounded by the Niger River and the eastern parts of Benin Republic, formerly Dahomey, and the western part of Togo. Death according to the Yorubas is inevitable, *awaye iku kosi, orun nikan lare mabo* (nobody has ever come to this world without retuning to heaven). We shall all died one day but whoever goes to heaven will not return that is the reason why we should endeavor to work hard here on earth so as to achieve our goals before the bell is done. According to Idowu (1962), the common Yoruba belief is that death is a creation of 'Olodumare' the creator, he was made for the purpose of recalling any person whose time on earth is fulfilled. Thus death is the inevitable lot of every person who comes into the world. Mbiti (1980) sees death as a process, which removes a person gradually from the physical existence on earth and the period after death within which the departed is remembered by relatives and friends who knew him.

Opoku (1978) throws more light by stating that death is not the end of life, but a transition from this world to the land of the spirits. Death does not sever family connections, but the dead become ancestors. Rosalind Hackett (1989) also confirms this view of death among the Efiks of Calabar. From the foregoing, a picture of the African concept of death emerges as follows: Death is a creation of God, made for the purpose of removing people from the earth when their time is up (Idowu, 1962). It happens gradually, starting from the time of one's departure from the earth physically, to the time when the last person who knew him physically, dies off (Mbiti 1980). Death is a transition which involves transformation from the physical into the spiritual as the dead continue to live as ancestors (Opoku, 1978). So death is natural and compulsory for every human being.

## THE QUALITY OF DEATH THROUGH SUICIDE

In Yoruba ontology, there is a distinction between good and bad death. A person who reached old age and attained a life of accomplishment before dying is believed to have died a good death. Thus old age is a *condition sine qua non* for good death. The accomplishments of the person should include marriage, begotten children which gives the person in question the opportunity to participate in life circle, accomplished through reincarnation. At death such a person joins the ancestors, though after the full funeral rites that ushers the person into the world of the ancestors. Death at an old age is regarded as a blessing and is celebrated with feasting. When a person dies young, for the Yoruba it is a bad death. Thus they are not given full funeral rites. There is no happiness accompanying the burial. It is worst when a person commits suicide. There is no fitting funeral ceremony for someone who commits suicide, even at an old age. No one is allowed to cry or weep publicly for the deceased. There is no cooking or drinking. Finally, cleansing ceremonies are performed by the deceased's family so that such an evil will not happen again. The elders would offer sacrifices for peace in the land and for the extinction of such thought from the land. It is seen as the most evil thing a person can do. It is referred to as an abomination and as a sin against the earth. Thus, in the case of suicide, not only loved ones are offended, the divine is involved.

For the Yoruba, suicide is not accepted in any form and at any age as a solution to any problem regardless of the complexities of life. This is anchored on the resilient character of the Yoruba paradigm. According to Elebuibon, a Yoruba icon, "Yoruba do not support suicide. Their belief is that if somebody commits suicide, they will be punished in the hereafter. They also believe that suicides would not be allowed passage into heaven rather, their souls would just be wandering until their naturally appointed time comes" (Falade, 2013). This punishment also takes the form of not being able to be reincarnated, another belief in the Yoruba faith.

## SUICIDE AMONG THE YORUBA

Suicide has been reflected in Yoruba thought as *iku ya j'esin* (death is preferable to shame, dishonor and indignity). According to Lare-Abass (2010), the consideration of dignity played a significant role in the choice of suicide by the individual concerned. That an individual chooses death (*iku*) means he or she considered it to be a better option than shame (*esin*). The desire to preserve personal dignity in the face of impending shame is a major factor that moves some individual to commit suicide. Here, death (*iku*) is conceived as a better option than shame (*esin*). Death is preferable due to the harrowing circumstances of life where the individual concerned did not wish to compromise his honour or where he discovered that he is approaching public ridicule. Mazrui (1965) explains further the Yoruba rationale for suicide when he wrote, "suicide becomes respectable when the life which it ends had at once aspired to great heights and is now descended to such depths" (p. 30). Lanre-Abass (2010) avers that such a life in essence lacks quality and value, devoid of the features of a good life and thus not worth living. John Broome (2006) explains that when we say that a life is worth living, we are referring to the life's personal value and not its general value. The Yoruba describe such a life as worth living: *aye alaafia, irorun ati idera* (a healthy life devoid of pain and suffering) and not a life that is generally better not lived than lived (*aye inira, irora ati aini alaafia*).

Sometimes, dignity of a person may be more important than the need to preserve life especially when all measure to prevent suffering failed then each competent person has a right to decide for him/her selves that his or her life should end. For the Yoruba, when it comes to the issue of autonomy and competence as regards deciding on suicide, they would metaphorically claim that *bose wuni lase imole eni* (one determines one's faith the way one deems fit). This understanding of life creates room for suicide. The desire (which sometimes bordered on duty) to preserve personal and family honor in the face of impending ignominy has being the major factor that moved many of these individual to commit suicide. Far from being 'victims', they made the most of disadvantageous situations and turned such around to earn for themselves sympathy in death instead of the original ridicule that would have been their lot.

Joel Feinberg argues that competent adults should not be legally prohibited from killing themselves: It would be an indignity to force . . . others to die against their will, but an equal indignity to force him to remain alive, against his will. Human dignity is not possible without the acknowledgement of personal sovereignty. (Feinberg, 1986, p. 354) To Feinberg, human dignity requires the right to commit suicide. Even if we think that someone is making the "wrong" decision to commit suicide, in the sense that the decision is contrary to his own interests, we should not use coercion to prevent his death: Why should a person be permitted to implement a "wrong" or "unreasonable" decision to die? The only answer possible is simply that it is his decision and his life, and that the choice falls within the domain of his morally inviolate personal sovereignty. (Feinberg, 1986, p. 361) Since death is among the most significant events of human life, one has the right to make "a momentous personal decision, such as the timing and manner of one's death" (Dworkin et al., 1996/1998, p. 434). For a person faced with the fear of public ridicule, here called 'ignominy' can kill themselves to save their face.

Another crucial point in this theory is the collectivity of honor. This applies to social groups such as families, lineages and kin groups. Within such groups, an act of dishonor by a single member will affect all others just as a single member could bask in the honor of the group. Thus, where status is ascribed by birth, 'honor derives not only from individual reputation but from antecedence'. (Rivers, 1973) Mbiti (1970) has classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual when he wrote, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). The community, according to Pantaleon(1994), therefore gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community. Thus in the Yoruba land, no one can stand in an isolation, all are member of a community; to be is to belong, and when one ceases to belong, the path towards annihilation is opened wide. According to Azeez (2005), "When the sense of belonging is lost, mutual trust betrayed, we-feeling is destroyed and kinship bond broken, then the individual sees no meaning in living. In the Yoruba society, everybody is somebody; everyone has commitment towards the other, and shares in the experience of the other. The community gives each person belongingness and cultural identity for self-fulfillment and social security. The fear of tarnishing collective honor can cause an individual who found him or her selves at a cross road to commit suicide to save the community from disgrace.

Whatever is the case, it makes sense to assume that in societies where honor is highly prized, people would be afraid of conducts that are dishonorable. As to the specific value placed on honor

in particular societies, only empirical studies will bear this out. And in heterogeneous societies where many groups prescribe criteria for attaining honor, honor thus becomes a contested category. (John 2005) Moreover, as honor is emphasized in particular societies, the idea of equality in dignity for all men becomes more remote because some would certainly enjoy more honor than others.

Where a leader (or anybody for that matter) was not requested to die by tradition and had not been officially rejected but found himself in dire straits and deep dilemma, suicide could offer a means of escape, as in 'saving' him the dishonorable task of doing what will tarnish the image of his community. And where a dishonorable act had already been committed, suicide also helped in face saving – of relieving one from the consequences of such conduct, or could even be restitutive. Thus considerations of honor and ignominy, either directly or indirectly were always lurking at the heart of many suicides, especially in high profile cases in Yoruba land. It is therefore clear that what was at stake was more than individual honor. The individuals involved were interested in maintaining their own personal dignity as well as the name of their family/lineage. To them, it was better to die than face ignominy. A good name in Yoruba land did not necessarily mean moral rectitude. The individuals that committed suicide were neither morally better nor worse than other people in the community. They only bowed out when they discovered that their 'music' had ended.

## CONCLUSION

We discovered that, despite the fact that Yoruba as a tribe in Nigeria is against the idea of suicide to the extent that they believe that such a person would be punished in the hereafter and that he or she would not be allowed a passage into heaven and their soul would be wandering until their appointed time comes, yet; Yoruba still lay emphasis on the whole idea of dying with dignity taking into account the philosophical discourse of autonomy and competence. Yoruba conception of dying with dignity (*iku ya j' esin*) further justify allowing a competent person to decide the course of his or her life including his death. This view notes that suicide provides an escape from suffering in certain circumstances, though usually irrational but a genuine, albeit severe, solution to real problems – a line of last resort that can legitimately be taken when the alternative is considered worse.

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