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## METAPHORIC ASSOCIATIONS AND THE CONCEPTION OF DEATH: ANALYSIS OF A YORUBA WORLD VIEW

BY

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In studying the Yoruba conception of death, we have come to view scholarship as requiring more than the mere collection of rituals, proverbs and myths, the more so since collected Yoruba beliefs about death indicate that binary oppositions are an essential component of their structure.<sup>1</sup> They particularly emphasize the connection of death with the market and of life with the home. This pattern places these beliefs at the centre of Yoruba culture: death is not just an act commissioned by God. There are symbolic formulations which give coherence to a particular image of death. Illustrative of this is the mystery which surrounds the origin of Death (*Ikú*). There is a conception of its beginning recorded by Idowu in the following myth:

Ikú's mother was killed  
In Èjìgbò-mẹkùn market:  
Ikú heard it in the house,  
Ikú screeched like the agon of Iloye  
Ikú rang out like an arawo's egg;  
He made cobras his spurs,  
He made boas his shoes,  
He made scorpions his girdle;  
Ikú fell upon the Locust Bean Tree,  
The Locust Bean Tree fell prone to the ground;  
Ikú fell upon the White Silk Cotton Tree,  
The White Silk Cotton Tree fell prone to the ground.<sup>2</sup>

An image of a nurturant death is raised in this myth, which Idowu has dismissed as “not the orthodox belief of the Yoruba about the origin of Death.”<sup>3</sup> He could not understand the idea of Death as not responsible for death and consequently dismissed the significance of native metaphors and opted for the more seemingly Christian or Western-influenced philosophy that construes Death as a lieutenant of the Supreme God, *Olódumarè*. However, we think

that adequate treatment of the above myth requires a recognition of the crucial distinction between market and home, a polar opposition which in the myth is indicative of consensus and conflict. This opposition is expressive of the union of cosmology and intellect that is evident in such Yoruba proverbs as:

*Ayé lojà, òrun ni ilé*

(The world is a market, heaven is home)

*Bí Ikú ilé kò pa ni, ti òde kò le pani*

(If the Death at home does not kill, the one outside the home is powerless to do so).

There may be metaphysical conception of death, but it is also viewed in social terms in the association of Death or the after life with the home. In our view, the polar opposition of home-market constitutes a fundamental paradigm from which the assumptions that death at home is more powerful than death outside and that death is connected to the market are derived. In this paper, it is assumed that the social structure gives rise to the world of symbols.<sup>4</sup> The understanding of the symbolic system must then depend on the examination of the social system from which the symbols are created. Our study is based upon a number of Yoruba proverbs and myths collected in field trips from August 1985 to July 1986. The collection illuminates our central concern: the attempt to reveal an indigenous conception of death with its attendant ramifications for the construction of social order. In pursuing this objective, we do not intend to look at the various events concerned with dying and burial ceremonies. Rather, our interest is in a thought system in which metaphoric associations give coherence to the meaning of death.

Metaphor “states the equivalence between terms taken from separate semantic domains.”<sup>5</sup> Edmonson once stated that the scientific study of metaphors should be the concern of folklorists.<sup>6</sup> Since then the influence of Fernandez,<sup>7</sup> Levi-Strauss<sup>8</sup> and Merten and Schwartz<sup>9</sup> has been considerable in the development of the comparative analysis of cultural materials. Merten and Schwartz have pointed out that metaphors guide conceptual distinctions in ordinary conversation. Metaphors constitute a symbolic process by which individuals in conversation attempt to develop variant interpretations of events. The emergence and interpretation of metaphors are mediated by the self-images of the participants. In the conceptual process, metaphors serve to mediate the ‘switching’

between the material and the moral which characterizes sacred/profane activities.

Basically, metaphors can be said to constitute the “this” of “that” and the “that” of “this”, with the personality of the interpreter mediating in this process. The understanding of metaphors thus involves the identification of three basic units: two terms from separate domains and a synthesis of the two. When, for instance, the Yoruba say there is an “*Ikú ilé*” (“death at home”) and distinguish this from “*Ikú òde*” (“death outside”) they allude to two separate terms, “*Ilé*” (home) and “*Òde*” (outside). The common focus and the third unit is *Ikú* (death). The more one talks of this focus, the less the capacity to affirm the significance of the constituting units. Yet, this common focus is but an abstraction of features of the units.

#### *Death and Social Transformation*

A particular myth which is said to explain the origin of *Egúngún*, the Yoruba ancestral cult, reveals death’s connection to the market in this way:<sup>10</sup> Death (*Ikú*) and his followers regularly invaded life long ago. Every fourth day they came from heaven to *Ojà Ifẹ* (Ifẹ market), where they killed as many people as they could with the staff that Death had given them. Eventually, most of the inhabitants of Ifẹ were destroyed, and those who remained cried to *Láfogído* who was then *Oòni*, to *Oòduà*, *Òrìsànlá*, *Òrìsà Ijùgbè*, *Òrìsà Aláṣe* and all the *Òrìsà* to save them. But the *Òrìsà* could do nothing to drive these spirits away. Finally, *Amáyégún* (“one who straightens the world”) promised to save them. He bought coloured cloths which he sewed into a costume which completely covered his body. The arms of the costume were made to fit his fingers, and the legs of the costumes were cut to fit the toes. He sacrificed a ram, a cock and three whips (*isán*) in making the costume.

Then he called the people to him. First, he put his left foot into the leg of the costume which came up to the knee. Then he showed it to the people and they began to sing: “come and see the foot, a fine secret.” He put his right leg into the costume and extended it so that the people could see. They repeated the song. He put his left arm and then his right arm into the costume. Each time they sang “come and see the hand, a fine secret.” Finally, he put on the gown which covered his face and his entire body.

He took off the costume and stored it away in his room. Since he knew that Death would come again the next day, he went to the *Qòni* and promised he would save the people on the morrow. In the morning *Amáyégún* and his followers who did not wear costumes, went to *Ojà Ifẹ* and hid in the buttresses of large trees. Soon the townspeople began to come to the market, and not long afterwards, Death and his followers descended on them, killing them with their staff. *Amáyégún* came out from his hiding place, crying in the low guttural voice of *Egúngún*, ‘‘Khao, Khoo’’. Death and his followers dropped their staff and fled in terror. *Amáyégún* and his followers picked up the staff and pursued them. As they overtook them, they struck them on the head until they all fell. Since that time Death and his followers have never returned to *Ifẹ*.

We must hasten to add that in the Yoruba world view, Death (*Ikú*) is different from being dead (*Òkú*). The former is a causal agent which brings about the latter. The ‘‘Òkú’’ is a dead human being which, if elderly, can come back as *Egúngún*, an ancestor. The *Ikú* is a spirit; it does not die. And for those who are apt to compare and contrast the character of *Ikú* with Western religious symbols, the staff mentioned in the myth above symbolizes power over human affairs. With the staff, *Ikú* brings about fundamental changes in human society and symbolically brings about the creation of a new one.

Of course, there are several Yoruba myths that reveal *Ikú* as having a staff.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in the indigenous framework, the staff would only have drawn its meaning in a conceptual field in which market and home have relevance. From this viewpoint, we suggest that *Amáyégún*, by carrying a staff, is a symbolic transformation of death. The staff which he had, being one of the material possessions of *Ikú*, represents a symbol of the power to change the social order in the market.

In fact, a semantic analysis of the word *Amáyégún* reveals a polysyllabic structure of ‘‘*mu*’’ (take or cause to happen), ‘‘*ayé*’’ (earth/world) and ‘‘*gún*’’ (straightens out). But in order to clarify the use of these verbal concepts, we note that in reporting about death, the Yoruba say ‘‘*Ikú mú un lọ*’’, death took him away. It is presupposed that death is a visitor to the world, the latter being denoted as the market in the aphorism ‘‘*Ayé lojà, òrun ni ilé*’’.

From another perspective, the Yoruba may report a death as ‘‘*Ikú pa á*’’, the phrase ‘‘*pa á*’’ substituting for ‘‘*mú un*’’. The verb

“*pa*” appears in such expressions as “*pàyídà*” (change this), “*padà*” (returns), “*pàlò*” (tell a riddle) and “*pa ilẹ̀ mọ̀*” (clear the floor). What is hinted at is not the idea of distance or abode but change to an orderly state of conduct or situation. Indeed, the power of changing a situation is attributed to both *Ikú* and *Amáyégún*. The latter revealed himself as no less of a transformative personality than *Ikú* when he changed costume, hid in the buttress of a big tree and spoke in a guttural language which the Yoruba would associate with “*Ará Ọrun*”, heavenly bodies.

*Amáyégún*, like *ikú*, is a symbol of power. How both came to have their power is no mystery, but is evident in the conceptual correspondences between the two. Their differences are complementary:

<i>Amáyégún</i>	<i>Ikú</i>
Restored order to the status quo	Changed the status quo
With costume (invisibility)	Without costume (visibility)
Earth Market ( <i>Ayẹ̀</i> )	Heaven ( <i>Ilẹ̀</i> )

Both represent possibilities that could be brought about by factors which affect the order-disorder equilibrium.

A clearer view of the root of Death’s power in human affairs is presented in the Yoruba beliefs about kingship. The king is greeted as “*Ikú bábá yẹ̀yẹ̀*”, “the *Ikú* that lives”. A king never dies. Rather, the transition is announced as “*Ọba Wàjà*” (“the king has gone upstairs”) or “*Ọba gbésẹ̀*” (the king has shifted position or base”). While no doubt there may be physical change, as for instance moving upstairs, yet spiritually the king is not dead. As a matter of fact, to the belief that the king’s spiritual power is eternal is added such other belief as that a king should not see a dead person, and that no corpse should be carried across the palace grounds. Both situations would cause the king’s death, or have a disruptive effect on public order. The suggestion is that the person who died has a ritual potency that can destroy the power which the king symbolizes.

In the patrilineal Yoruba society, the palace of the king is often located near a market and close to an intersection. It is frequently heavily fortified and so physically separate from the market and the rest of the world. The symbol of the king’s authority is a staff; the crown which he wears merely indicates descent from *Odùduwà*, the founder of the Yoruba race. When these, and other correspondences are taken into view, it is to be noted that, like *Ikú*, the

king is linked with the market and paradoxically separated from it. Both are powerful individuals, are conceived as male figures, and are regarded as spirits. Neither of them ever dies.

Therefore, it is the relationship of *Ikú* and *Amáyégún* (who is equivalent to the king) to the market that the source of their strength lies. That this is so is clarified in the following relationships that emerge from the myth of *Amáyégún*:

market was disorderly	human beings cannot provide	Death is powerful
	provide any solution	
people die when death	<i>Amáyégún</i> changed into costume	Man has power
Death and followers ran	<i>Amáyégún</i> gave chase	Order is restored

Death is associated with disorder of a predominantly female sector, the market. As a male figure, it enters the market so as to restore order. It is a male order because in Yoruba society the women dominate the market while men are in control of the palace and home. Only by controlling the market is the male power all encompassing.

The patrilineal society offers women few public roles as political figures; it is only in the market that they may exert authority. The difference between home and market can hence be attributed to the social positions of the sexes. Such a difference is described in the myth as a contrast of chaos and order. Death disturbs the market; it would like order to exist which does not favour the women's dominance. And it was when *Amáyégún* discovered this intention to subjugate the economy to the political order of men that he decided to meet Death on the same platform by changing into costume. He thus pretended to be an ally of Death, a male figure.

The formula on which the relationship of Death (or *Amáyégún*) and the market therefore rests concerns the power relations between the sexes, especially the wish by men to remain dominant and the resistance of women toward this. That is, the home and market are in principle organized around power relations—death represents the importance of the home, and women the significance of the market. A woman's dominance in the home would be inimical to social order as would a male's dominance in the market. The rest of our account is limited to elaborating the organizing principles of ideas about home and market in so far as these relate to the power that death has in the Yoruba world view.

*The Spatial Organization of the Home and Market*

There are four principal classes of people in traditional Yoruba society: the king, the chiefs, the ordinary people and the slaves. The King and many of the ordinary citizens as well as the chiefs can appropriate the labour of the slaves for the purpose of becoming wealthy. Indeed, the size of a household is proportional not only to the number of kin the household leader has but also the number of slaves. Those with larger numbers of slaves have larger compounds, often delimited from others by a thick wall.

Yet, for all classes of people, a house is a place of rest. It is a place to which individuals retire after a day's labour on the farm planting and harvesting, in the forest hunting animals or in the market transacting business. Workers are reminded that "*Ilé ni àbò ìsìmi oko*", "the home is the resting place after work on the farm." The same idea of home is extended to human transitions, as in the following funeral dirge:

When you get home, greet the people in the house for me.  
 When you are on the road, be lighthearted.  
 When you get to heaven, make it a good place.  
 Greet my daddy for me.  
 Greet my mummy for me.  
 Do not eat the millipede and the earthworm.  
 Eat only what they eat in heaven.

The home is where individuals seek solace from life's vicissitudes. Such a home can be an "*ahéré*", a small one-room, grass-thatched or mud brick building on the farm, or an "*ilé*", comprising a group of buildings within a defined, usually inherited property. In local terminology, *ilé* belongs to a housing genre that includes *ibùgbé*, a place where one rests and makes a living. Those who share the same *ibùgbé* can include *ebi* (kin) or *alájogbé* (fellow tenants). The "*ebi*" are, of course, usually also *alájogbé*, depending on the extent to which their kinship relation is coterminous with residential space.<sup>12</sup> In which case, on a broader note, the entire Yoruba people occupying the southwestern portion of Nigeria and claiming descent from *Odùduwà*—as the father of the race—would be loosely classified as *alájogbé*.

*Ibùgbé* in Yorubaland are of various sizes. The settlements can be classified according to the size of their population, the services rendered therein and the duration of stay of the inhabitants. For instance, "*ilú olójà*" is a service town where settlers and buyers

from different settlements convene for the purpose of economic exchange. It is usually bigger than an “*abùlé*”, which comprises few buildings and rarely has a political leader higher than a household head. Yet, the buildings in an “*abùlé*” are fewer than those in an “*iletò*”. The entire community is often a conglomeration of several “*agbo ilé*” (compounds). The compound is a rectangular structure enclosing an open space in the middle. A verandah, which opens on to the quadrangle, runs right round to compound and, unlike the rooms behind it, is not divided by any partition so as to enable inmates to walk from one end of the compound to the other under cover.<sup>13</sup> In Yoruba society, the head of the compound is male. He presides over a corporate group that owns the land on which the compound stands, the farms on which economic wealth depends, as well as intangible property such as titles.

The word “*ilé*” can refer either to the whole compound or to a housing unit within it. The term “*agbo ilé*” would also cover the entire compound, but usually *ilé* suffices. Competition and rivalry between members of the house is not tolerated, although it inevitably occurs. When conflict is detected, the *Baálé* (head of the household) quickly convenes a meeting of the elders to try to resolve it. The decision of the elders is binding on any member of the lineage. The home is symbolically akin to a nurturant mother: members must be well catered for, disciplined, and protected.

The Yoruba view of their homes/houses is incorporated in a number of proverbs, including the following:

*Ilé tí a fì یتۆ mọ, یتۆ ní yóó wó o*

(A house constructed with saliva would be destroyed by dew).

*Báyí lá á se ní ilé wa, èwò ibòmùl/ibòmíràn*

(Approved practices in some homes are taboos in others).

*Ilé ní a ní wò kí a tóó somọ lórúko*

(A child is named according to the circumstances of his home).

*Ilé baba omọ kí í ba omọ léyù*

(A child is never scared of the situation in his father’s house).

*Tí a bá sọkò lójà ará ilé یتۆ ní í bá*

(A stone thrown into a market gathering invariably hits a member of one’s house).

*A kí í sùn ní ilé یتۆ ní kí a fì grùn rọ*

(One never sleeps in his house and wakes up with a broken neck).

The data we have conveys the idea that a home guarantees security, sets up standards of morality, and is instrumental to the construction of self-identity. And in terms of its social prescriptions to residents and the methods of its socialization process, the house

in Yorubaland must confer a specific identity distinctive in terms of kinship relationships which stipulate the recognition of and caring for one's kin.

A home, in fact, is more than a physical construction; it generates in its occupants a sense of power as it guarantees an unassailable sense of protection against danger. Indeed, as the Yoruba would say: *“Bí ikú ilé kò pani tòde kò lè pani”*, “if a person is not killed by the death at home, such a person can hardly be touched by the death outside the home.” The point is thus made that the home is the most secure base of any individual.

The market, on the other hand, stands for a different conception of order. There are two types of markets in Yorubaland: the “local” and the “district” markets. The former serves only the local inhabitants and are held daily. The latter involves buyers and sellers from neighbouring towns. Walls are never built around markets. All markets, regardless of the size of the settlements in which they are located, sell agricultural products, crafts, medicines and meat.

The local markets are held in daylight or in the evening. These markets are of two types: the “peoples” market and that of the king. The king's market is not presided over or administered by the king. Actually, it is so called because it is situated in front of the king's palace.<sup>14</sup> Some of them are open for public transactions in the evening. They are mostly dominated by women, most of whom sell their husbands' farm or hunting products.

The district markets are held at intervals of four or eight days and the transactions can be shifted between neighbouring towns. The atmosphere of the market, as indeed in any of the local ones, is characterized by friendly jokes, serious and sometimes light-hearted haggling over prices, and the initiation of a variety of strategies to obtain prices which are mutually advantageous to the transacting partners. In the words of one scholar, the market is full of

“good-natured repartee; a rich fund of jokes, an occasional burst of confidence in which intimate matters are disclosed and discussed, advice and prescriptions (are) given for ailments, interest (is) shown by one party in the other's child, (there is) a threatening gesture on the part of the buyer to leave, an indication on the part of the seller that the lowest figure acceptable to her has been passed.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, markets are an arena for socializing where people intermingle, discuss or reminisce on their experiences.

In spatial organization, most Yoruba markets are, as already stated, to be found in the centre of towns, and some are situated close to the kings' palace.<sup>16</sup> Both markets and palaces are located near intersections. This seems to denote power, at least as suggested by the aphorism, "*Oríta méta ni a sin òkú alágbára sí*", "a powerful man is buried in a three-way intersection."

Symbolically, the existence of intersections implies a feeling of heterogeneity; yet, since there is a nexus where the diversity can coexist in a unique whole, it also implies a homogeneity of feelings.<sup>17</sup> An intersection has a centre where all roads meet or diverge; as you approach it several options lie open. Eliade cites the feeling of centredness as a basic religious experience which makes for unity.<sup>18</sup> That is to say, though religious experience is marked by different values and emotions, these differences can still coexist, as when Christians are asked to pray with one spirit. Similarly, the significance of the market is interlinked, in spite of the different intents of buyers and sellers, with people's ritualistic behaviour: they seek some dimension to their lives once their economy is capable of yielding a certain standard of living. The intersection where the market is located is but a physical representation of the nexus of diverse feelings and emotions that characterize market relations. Unlike in the home, the nexus of feelings in a market might not be easily reached. This is because within the period of any market's transactional relations, the various personal identities can, as a result of distractions and of the need to buy from or sell to different people, become multiplied and ramified, and may lose their definite forms. The Yoruba who have noticed this tendency caution in a proverb that "*Eni tí a ní bá ná ojà là á ní wò, a kì i wo ariwo ojà*", "attention is paid to transactional relations and not the market noise."

The point we make is that the differences between *ilé* (home) and *ojà* (market) are, in the long run, complementary. The home can, as the palace, be shielded from realities outside its confines. This is not the case of the market. However, in the home, relationships are fairly strictly regulated; authority is hierarchical from father to children. In the market, relationships are not as clearly regulated; you can sell at any price, and authority is horizontally structured in a negotiation for equal benefits. Also, the women are in control. (There is a saying, "*Ti ará ojà ló sòro, ibà èyin iyàmi ará ojà*" which implies that powerful women like witches are the dominant market

forces. The market, unlike the home, is capable of fostering multiple identities.

To sum up, the relationship of the market both to the home and to *Amáyégún*/Death signifies oppositions that are complementary in the construction of social order. Death disturbs the social order as constructed by women. It is, as a symbol of male authority, an effort in the movement to control women and subordinate their sphere of influence, the economic, to the political order. When “femaleness” is destroyed, then, there is death.

### *Conclusion*

One of the reasons why scholars have not paid a great deal of attention to the symbolic constructs which inform the idea of death is that such may lead to conclusions incompatible with Western notions of God. But, actually, peoples’ ideas and thoughts are rooted in the history of their experience, the nature of their social system, and the material (including the physical) conditions which affect developmental processes. There should hence be variations in notions of and about death, with each society using symbols to speak to experience and to mobilize the psychic and moral commitments that give meaning to normative patterns.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly true of the Yoruba idea of death.

In this paper, we suggest that the symbolic constructions of the Yoruba show that death is analogous to social dislocation. The dynamics of change are dependent, in part, on the need to preserve and extend male authority, aptly symbolized by the home, and of the recognition of the woman’s importance, projected as the market. As we noted, the palace and personal houses are always protected by walls, whereas the markets are not. This demonstrates a concern for the preservation of the home; a concern that does not remove the fact that, ideally, the home and market are complementary. The home is where children are fed with food that is sold and bought in the market. Also, the home is where identity is first created before it becomes multiplied even to the point of non-recognition in the market.

The complementary relationships between home and market may suffer whenever an attempt is made to emphasize one at the expense of the other. Yet, in a patrilineal society where “home” corresponds to male authority and “market” to the female sphere

of influence, the two concepts cannot stand on the same footing: they have to be shielded from one another. Death can only be connected to the market and not to the home. Otherwise, the male would suffer a diminished social importance. And should there be tension between the male and female, it is to be expected that the system would favour the male's interest, the status quo.

It is necessary at this point to respond to the two questions we raised earlier, namely, "why should death at home be more powerful than death outside", and "why should death be connected to the market?" Our understanding of these questions is that death is a metaphor for the social tension between the sexes. It stays at home but acts in the market. It seeks to preserve male authority by manipulating the characteristics peculiar to both the market and the home, especially the concern for developing a unique identity. The Yoruba have expressed this concern by the location of their markets in the precincts of intersections. They have also given expression to a similar concern in situating the palaces, the epitome of male authority, near intersections. Symbolically, a unique identity is desirable for both the home and the market; but only if death will, for the sake of preserving the male identity, kill in the market and not in the home. This would explain why *ikú's* mother died in the market and why *Ikú* reacted as he did to the situation—not killing people but cutting down trees and changing the ecological system.

#### NOTES

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3. E. B. Idowu, op. cit., 187 ff.
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10. See B. Lawal, "The Living Dead: Art and Immortality Among The Yoruba of Nigeria", *Africa* 47, 1977, 50-61.
11. Ayelaagbe, op. cit.
12. See A. Akiwoṣo, *Ajṣbi and Ajṣgbe: Variants On the Theme of Sociation*, Inaugural Lecture, Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 1980
13. N. A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970, 98.
14. B. W. Hodder and V. I. Ukwu, *Markets in West Africa: Studies of Market and Trade Among the Yoruba and Ibo*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1969.
15. Fadipe, op. cit.
16. See G. B. A. Ojo, *Yoruba Culture*, London: University of London Press, 1966 and A. L. Mabogunṣe, *Urbanization in Nigeria*, London: University of London Press, 1968.
17. See J. Hjarpe, "The Symbol of the Centre and its Religious Function in Islam", in H. Biezais (ed), *Religious Symbols and their Functions*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1979, 30-40.
18. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York: Harper & Row, 1957.
19. Merten and Schwartz, op. cit.