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THE HUMAN SOUL IN YORUBA/IGBO TRADITION AND THE BIBLE

A. O. Peter Ogunboye with Lois Fuller

"Making all things new" includes bringing our worldview into conformity with the biblical worldview. In this article Peter Ogunboye reflects on the traditional world view of the Yoruba and Igbo pertaining to the human soul and then compares this with the biblical perspective. As we enter this new century we need to engage more forcefully with traditional world views and find ways of bringing them into conformity with biblical theology based on the Scripture.

The issue of whether or not human souls exist somewhere in the spirit realm before conception is a major difference between African beliefs and most Christian thought. In Africa, problems like *emere*, *elegbe*, *abiku* or *ogbanje* in Yoruba and Igbo (belief that certain children have agreed in the spirit world before conception to die young) make many people clients of herbalists despite their Christian affiliations. Their views of these problems are traceable to the belief in the pre-existence of the soul. Chinwe Achebe, in her book on the *ogbanje*, says, "More than half of the Nigerian population both educated and illiterate alike, secretly or otherwise consult traditional healers. This is so whether they are church goers or not" (Achebe 1986:3).

The aim of this paper is to provide a systematic approach to this issue which will prove understandable and useful to African

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Christians, and to provide biblically approved solutions to problems relating to the soul.

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE "SOUL"

The Hebrew word for the soul, *nephesh*, and its Greek equivalent, *psyche*, "have a number of shades of meaning and accordingly it is often difficult to translate" (Green 1970:901). The ancient Hebrews "took the soul to be whatever it was in a body which made it alive, made it a living rather than a dead thing. This animating force was believed to reside in the blood" (Shaffer 1968:2). The soul was the non-material part of man, the real person, who thinks and feels and wills, the seat of spiritual and moral qualities.

Theologians do not agree whether the Bible teaches that man is made up of two parts (dichotomist theory) or three parts (trichotomist theory). In the dichotomist theory, man is made up of the material part (body) and the immaterial (soul or spirit). In this theory, soul and spirit are taken to be synonyms or aspects of the same thing. The trichotomist theory, popularized by Watchman Nee, holds that man is made up of body, soul and spirit. The spirit perceives spiritual matters and responds to spiritual forces, while the soul deals only with reason, emotion, and personality.

The creation story in Genesis refers directly to the two aspects of man. God created the body of Adam out of the dust, and breathed into him the breath of life, and the result was a living soul or living being. Here body plus spirit equals soul. Perhaps soul is what binds the body and spirit together.

TRADITIONAL VIEW OF THE COMPOSITION OF HUMAN BEINGS

The Yoruba and Igbo views of the component parts of man are somewhat different. They certainly see man as having a material part (the body) formed from dust (by *Obatala* in Yoruba myth) and an immaterial aspect.

This immaterial aspect is not simple. "Paradoxically, man is one, but the self is multiple" (Metuh 1991:110). Man can exist in his material body or in a spirit body.

In Yoruba thought, the immaterial part of a person consists firstly of *emi* (the life-force which makes him breathe). It is not clearly stated where the *emi* goes after departing from the body at death. The Igbo use the term *obi* (heart) for "a man's life-force, the animating principle which links man with other life-forces in the universe" (Metuh 1991:110-111). The breath can sometimes leave the body in dreams and could also come under the influence of witchcraft. At death, the *obi* leaves the body but it does not survive. Metuh says, "at death, the breath ceases to exist" (Metuh 1987:174).

The second component is the Yoruba term *okan* (heart). For the Yoruba, the heart "is the seat of the emotion and psychic energy" (Idowu 1962:170).

The Yoruba also have something called the *ori* (head). This is the personality soul. The physical head is the symbol of the inner person. God puts the *ori* in man. Before the *ori* is sent into the world, it kneels before God to receive its destiny. The *ori* also functions as a guardian spirit of the person, so sacrifice is made to it. It is the essence of personality, hence it must be kept in good condition so that it may be well with the person, and so that it may favour one.

The Igbo have a similar concept in the *chi*. The *chi* is the destiny-spirit which is believed to be an emanation of the Creator. It is a sort of spirit double or guardian genius associated with the person from the moment of conception. When a person dies, his *chi* goes back to God to give account of his work on earth. A man's abilities, faults or misfortunes are ascribed to his *chi*. When a person reincarnates, he is given a different *chi* by God, with a different kind of destiny in life. A person must achieve his *chi's* destiny in life to be successful. Each individual has his or her own cult where he or she propitiates the *chi*. However, a person who is yet to have a child only shares in the propitiation of his parents' *chi*. One establishes one's own cult after becoming a parent.

The Igbo also have the *eke*, "the spirit of a deceased ancestor who reincarnates in a child. It is assigned to the individual by God at conception. An ancestral guardian can incarnate in several people at the same time" (Metuh 1987:112). Each person has an altar for his *eke* at the family ancestral shrine, where he offers sacrifices to his *eke* for good fortune. The *eke* is the ancestral guardian which links man with his family clan. It is believed to be an ancestral shade incarnate

in each new baby. The baby takes after the *eke* in appearance and/or character. Parents may have to consult a diviner to find out who the *eke* is of a new child because if the child does not follow the regulations of his *eke*, he may fall sick or die. The shadow is associated with the self both in Yoruba and Igbo concepts of human immaterial nature. Among the Yoruba, it is *ojiji*. "The shadow cast by a living human being on a sunny day is a sign of the presence of the self in the living human being" (Metuh 1987:172). When the self leaves the body at death, the shadow ceases to exist, hence the common belief that corpses do not cast shadows. It is believed that certain things can be done against the shadow while the person is alive which will have its effect on the person's body, such as attack with charms. The Igbo shadow spirit (*onyinyo*) in the Igbo view is the visible form of the shadow cast by the human body. It is the shadow-spirit that incarnates in the body and is assigned an ancestral guardian. "He survives after death as an individual person and can in turn become an ancestral guardian" (Metuh 1987:180).

BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

That the disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (Jn 9:2) seems to indicate to some people that the Jews believed in sin before conception. A few Christian theologians (such as Origen) have held to an idea that human souls sinned before conception and therefore were sent into the world to suffer and be cleansed. However, as Hodge says, "It does not pretend to be a scriptural doctrine and therefore cannot be an object of faith" (Hodge 1973:II, 66). Furthermore, it is also said of the theory that "it makes the body something accidental" (Berkhof 1988:197). This is because at first, according to the theory, the soul was without the body. Man is therefore complete without the body if he can exist consciously in a world of pre-existence.

Since the Bible does not speak of the creation of any man before Adam, or of any human apostasy before his fall, we have no biblical basis for believing in the pre-existence of souls.

Among biblical theologians, there are some who believe that as each child is conceived, God creates a new soul *ex nihilo* to go with the conceived body. The soul is not generated or derived from the

parents but created by the immediate agency of God. The Greek and Latin Churches favoured this theory, while the Lutherans and Reformed Churches were divided. Those who support this theory say it shows how Jesus could be conceived of a tainted human being and yet be sinless in his soul. The main difficulty with this theory is how to account for the sinfulness of all other human souls. Does God create the souls sinful? This seems unlikely. Another problem is that Genesis 2:2 says that God rested from creating on the seventh day. No end of the seventh day was mentioned.

The other main Christian theory about the origin of human souls is called traducianism. According to this theory "the souls of men are propagated along with the bodies by generation and are therefore transmitted to the children by the parents" (Hodge 1973:67). This theory accounts for the transmission of the sinful nature, as well as other non-material characteristics by which children resemble parents. It does not, however, explain how Jesus' human nature could be untainted by sin.

Scriptural support for this view includes: 1) God only breathed the breath of life once into the nostrils of man and has given the responsibility of procreation to man since then. When Eve was made, there was no new breath. She got both her soul and her body from Adam. 2) God ceased his work of creation after the sixth day. To say that God keeps creating new souls seems to violate this rest. 3) In Hebrews 7:9-10 (compare Genesis 46:26) it says that Levi was still in the loins of his ancestor Abraham when he met Melchizedek. Whether we accept a creationist view or a traducian view of the origin of the human soul, the fact remains that the biblical view is that human souls originate as entities at conception and not before.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

When considering the origin of the soul from an African perspective, it is best explained and understood under two headings. These are Pre-existence and Reincarnation.

Pre-existence

Belief in the pre-existence of the soul forms the basis for the issue of the soul in African belief. Pre-existence of the soul is best understood in the light of the destiny of man. The Yoruba believe that the *ori* receives the *ipin* (destiny) before a man is born. It kneels before God and chooses or receives the destiny. "The general picture, therefore is of a complete 'person' kneeling before Olodumare to choose or receive" (Idowu 1962:174). Imasogie confirms this by saying, "Before coming to birth, each person, in the form of his personality, chooses a destiny which he desires to actualise on earth" (Imasogie 1985:50). Then the person starts his journey into the world. Some spirits make other agreements before incarnation, such as the *emere* spirits who form a pact among a group of them to all come back to the spirit world quickly without growing old in the world.

The Igbo concept is similar. God (*Chukwu*) gives the *chi* to the individual and that individual enters into an oath agreement with his *chi* about his destiny and what will happen to him in life. On his way to the world, the person has to pass interrogation by two female deities, who may try to influence him to renege on the oath and choose a different life. Both the Yoruba and the Igbo believe that once a person is born, he does not consciously remember about the agreements he made before his birth, but a diviner can reveal them to him. If he is getting into trouble, he may go to find out if he is unlawfully deviating. The *ori* or *chi* still knows about the destiny however, and should guide the person to fulfil it.

The Igbo and Yoruba also believe that God is still creating more human spirits in the spiritual world all the time. These newly created people are later born, although new babies are reincarnations of ancestors. The new baby is somehow a new creation as well as being a reincarnation.

Reincarnation

The concept of reincarnation in African belief is different from the Platonic, Asian or classical view of the transmigration of souls. In Africa belief, "there is no reincarnation in the classical sense. One can only speak of partial or more precisely, apparent reincarnation" (Idowu 1976:187). This is because it is believed that ancestors return

in one or several children in the family. Even when an ancestor returns, he can still be venerated at the ancestor shrine. The soul of the man who reincarnated still has its own individual existence in the spiritual abode while some characteristic traits of him are made manifest in his grandchildren. Only aged, good people who have direct descendants and were properly buried can reincarnate.

We can see from the above that in African belief, the origin of the non-material part of a human being comes from diverse sources, including fresh creation by God (some part of which is in pre-existence), assignment of a guardian spirit by God and reincarnation of an ancestor.

THE DESTINATION OF THE SOUL IN THE BIBLE

Some people hold that the soul ceases to exist altogether at death. This idea is called annihilation. Neither the Bible nor African Traditional Religion accepts this view.

According to the Bible, physical death is a termination of physical life by the separation of body and soul. It only marks the end of our present physical life. The Bible presents three important stages of the soul after physical death. These are the intermediate state, resurrection and eternity. It also presents two important destinations of the soul, which are heaven and hell.

The intermediate state is the state of souls between the time of death and resurrection to judgement. For believers, it seems that their souls immediately enter the presence of the Lord during this time (2 Co 5:1-8) and the wicked enter a place of suffering (Lk 16:23-1 2 Pe 2:9). At the resurrection, both the righteous and the wicked dead will be raised, the former enter heaven proper, and the latter are sent to the eternal lake of fire.

DESTINATION OF THE SOUL IN AFRICAN BELIEF

African belief includes the continuing life of the soul after physical death.

To the Yoruba, natural death occurs when the days of the destiny chosen by the *ori* are complete. A death is only considered natural if the person is very old and does not die in an accident. Death of this

nature is a good thing because it provides the transitional process through which man completes his journey on earth. The aged are aware that they will soon die. They say, "I am going home." It is not a terrible thing, but good and natural.

Burial rites reflect belief in life after death. Some rites provide a way for the spirit of the deceased to join the ancestors in their abode in the spirit world. This is important so that the deceased will not become a homeless ghost troubling the living. There is often a ceremony some time after the burial to send off the spirit of the deceased, who is believed to have been hanging around for a while. Messages are sent to those who died previously through the deceased, and things are put in the grave for him to take along on his journey to that place. Other rites permit a happy reincarnation of the deceased.

There are also rites to establish veneration and communication with the deceased as he now becomes an ancestor with spiritual powers to help and discipline his living relatives. Libations, sacrifices and other feasts and ceremonies are held in their honour regularly. Departed ancestors have a big stake in the continuation of the family since they hope to come back into the world through it by reincarnation. Therefore they are expected to guard the family well-being.

The Yoruba say that the good deceased live in the "good heaven," with God and the divinities, while those who lived evil lives go to the "heaven of potsherd". Not all African traditions make this distinction, though wicked people are usually not regarded as being received by the ancestors. There is no reincarnation for those in the bad heaven or who are not received by the ancestors.

Sometimes women do not become ancestors in the sense of being venerated for blessings. Among the Igbo, only some sections do it. Metuh says that the final end of and the aspiration of every Igbo is to reach the spirit land of his ancestors, to be venerated by his descendants as an ancestor, and eventually to reincarnate (Metuh 1991:120)..

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF PREMATURE DEATH

Generally speaking, the Bible's view is that there are three main reasons for early death. People die young because they are afflicted by enemies, such as the death of the Hebrew babies in Egypt, Ex 1:16, and the death of Job's children, Job 1: 18-19, which was caused by Satan. There are also instances where Jesus performed miracles that reveal the cause of premature death to be the work of demons (eg Mt 17:14-18, where the demon was working to kill the boy). As the scripture says, the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy (Jn 10:10).

Early death can also come as a punishment from God (such as the death of Er and Onan, Ge 38:6-10, and of David's first child by Bathsheba, 2 Sa 12:14) or as a way of rescuing them from greater evils to come if they should live (as revealed in Isa 57:1 and the death of Abijah, son of Jeroboam, in 1 Ki 14:1-18). We can infer from this last case that although God says, "With long life will I satisfy him" (Ps 91:16) that the scripture is not rigid that everybody should live till his old age before fulfilling the will of God for his life. Christ, for example, spent only thirty-three and a half years on earth and was able to fulfil his mission on earth after which he died. Moreover, one should expect to see little children in heaven, for it is not how long one lives that matters but how well such a life is lived in accordance with the will of God.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL BELIEF ABOUT PREMATURE DEATH

In most African cultures, including that of the Yoruba, death at an early age is never seen to be a natural event. Even if the natural cause is obvious, they always ask, "What killed him or her?" They may go to a diviner to find out who is responsible. Usually the oracle names someone who has used sorcery or witchcraft to cause the event or sickness that killed the young person. The person named is often a family member and this leads to a lot of division and suspicion in families. On the other hand, the diviner may reveal that the child or young person was an *abiku*, a child who had covenanted in his pre-existence to die young.

If a person is killed before the time set in his destiny, people believe that such a person appears as a tangible and living ghost in some remote town, where he lives out his normal life-span as a normal person. He cannot be accepted yet into heaven because he has not fulfilled his destiny. If however, he is discovered by someone who knows he is dead, he disappears. The Yoruba call this *akudaya*. Since the person disappears, no one has ever been able to bring concrete proof of this phenomenon to others for verification.

Occasionally it is believed that a person could be killed young by God because of his wickedness. Evidence is in the kind of death a person has. If he dies by suicide, strange accident, or certain diseases such as leprosy, dropsy, smallpox or epilepsy, this is taken as evidence that his death is a punishment from God. Such people are not given full funeral rites and cannot become ancestors (Metuh 1987:137).

The *abiku* (Yoruba) or *ogbanje* (Igbo) are children "born to die". The *abiku* is caused by a kind of spirit called *emere*, which makes a covenant with others of its kind before it enters a pregnant woman, that it will come back to the spirit world early. It causes the child incarnated in the womb to become an *abiku*. Pregnant women are warned against going out in the afternoon when *emere* spirits are believed to be going about looking for someone to enter.

Ogbanje are the equivalent among the Igbo. They are evil spirits of dead children. When they are about to be incarnated, the goddesses at the gate to the world subvert them to choose other destinies than what their chi received. They also have a group loyalty to other *ogbanje* spirits. They die young to the frustration of their relatives.

AFRICAN SOLUTIONS TO PREMATURE DEATH

People use protective "medicine" such as charms, on themselves and their children to try to prevent spiritual enemies from doing harm to young people. Children are warned against kinds of behaviour that make them vulnerable to spiritual as well as physical enemies.

Traditionally, if parents have been losing one baby after another, or if they see strange behaviour which makes them suspect their child has a spirit influence that may take him back to the spirit world early,

they take some action. The case must be properly diagnosed by a diviner, who also gives the treatment for this specific type of child. The treatment is aimed at persuading the child or its spirit mates to allow it to stay in the world or cutting the spirit influence drawing him or her back to the spirit world. The condition cannot be cured, just mitigated.

BIBLICAL SOLUTION TO PREMATURE DEATH

If one wants to avoid early death as a punishment for sin, of course one should seek to live to please God. If God wants to take a person early in life for a good reason, Christians can agree to that. But when early death threatens from the powers of demons or spiritual enemies or forces other than God himself, the Bible has a solution in faith and prayer for God to deliver.

Since the Bible says that "it is appointed unto men to die once", (Heb 9:27) the possibility of a person coming back as another person is ruled out. Likewise, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, that each person will be reunited with his resurrected body, would make it impossible for a person to have more than one body. In Christian thought, the body is not a temporary part of the person, but an eternal part, to be joined again to the immaterial part at the resurrection.

We have also seen that the Bible does not support the idea of the pre-existence of human souls in the spirit world where they can make pacts or take bad decisions about their earthly lives.

The Bible does, however, show that people can be "demonized" by evil spirits. It is not difficult to see that the enemy of our souls has a stake in keeping people deceived about what is really going on in the spirit world by providing the expected manifestations to fit traditionally held theories. Jesus points the way to how we should react. When confronted by people with strange spirit manifestations, he knew that demons were responsible. He cast out the demons and set the people free. In order for people to keep their freedom they need to repent of the sinfulness that makes them vulnerable to demonic attack, find forgiveness in Christ and renewal of life by the Holy Spirit, and if necessary, be delivered of demonic oppression.

A biblical view of the nature of human beings will help African Christians to resist temptations to non-Christian spiritual behaviour such as going to diviners, using charms and making covenants with gods and spirits. Proper diagnosis of spiritual problems will lead to relevant, effective and godly treatment and solutions. Christians will be able to recognize the work of Satan and by prayers and faith in God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, overcome.

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