



RECONSIDERING THE YORÙBÁ CONCEPT OF *OMOLÚÀBÍ* AND THE PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN THE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT: *Omolúàbí is a generally accepted character model among the Yorùbá people who are dominantly in the West African sub-region. The virtues of Omolúàbí manifested in character (Ìwà) are such that promote cooperation, solidarity, and interdependence of all interests towards a common goal and harmonious and peaceful relationship among the people. Omolúàbí of African ethics via Yorùbá worldview, though not so watertight, is more humanistic and existentialist in orientation, thereby promoting collective interest, goodwill, and peaceful coexistence. It is from this standpoint that the authors argue that the humanistic basis of Omolúàbí morality is more adequate for achieving Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations which aims at peace and justice in the society. This paper is a descriptive presentation of the concept of Omolúàbí. It argues that since culture, religion, and education play pivotal roles in the lives of African people, these roles should be engaged in reviving the Omolúàbí virtues and qualities in people to ensure peaceful coexistence. The presentation concludes that reviving and imbibing the culture of Omolúàbí can serve as a heuristic device for achieving a well-ordered peaceful society.*

KEYWORDS: Character, Morality, Omolúàbí, Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals, Peaceful Co-existence, Society, Yorùbá.



INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (of the United Nations) that are also known as “Global Goals” are the proposal to achieve an improved and better workable or sustainable future for everyone by 2030. According to Akinyetun et al. (2021: 175), these goals “stem from the undeniable need to eradicate poverty, combat inequalities, tackle climate change, and improve the well-being of human beings.” There are seventeen adopted goals. However, these goals are further broken into 169 targets, besides about 230 indicators that have been proposed currently to achieve these targets (Barbier & Burgess, 2017). Goal 16 specifically focuses on the promotion of a peaceful and inclusive society and justice and strong institutions. While this goal is placed as number sixteen in the Sustainable Development Goals, it is not less significant because the plans of the other goals look for invigorating worldwide peace in greater freedom. Arifeen and Semul (2019: 237) remarked that “more than one [goal of the Sustainable Development Goals] touches upon peace in one way or another.” Many stakeholders have been postulating ways to achieve this goal of peaceful co-existence by 2030. The *Omoluàbí* concept is one of those ways. It is a moral concept that is highly valued by the *Yorùbá* people dominantly in the West African sub-region (Oyebade, Azenabor & Shotunde, 2018).

The Conceptual Meaning of “*Omoluàbí*”

Yorùbá people have a long tradition and a cherished culture that must not be allowed to pass into a state of unconsciousness. *Yorùbá* considers the issue of ethics or morality as one of the most essential issues of life for any human being on this planet earth. The concept of *Omoluàbí* is an ethical and cultural concept that is natural to the *Yorùbá* people. *Omoluàbí* refers to the concept of being a person of good character, morality, and virtue. It involves a wide range of positive qualities that are highly cherished in Yoruba culture, like honesty, integrity, respect, kindness, generosity, compassion, empathy, and responsibility. It implies hard work, courage, and respect. An *Omoluàbí* is a person of honour who believes in hard work, respects the rights of others, and gives to the community in deeds and in action. An *Omoluàbí* is a person of integrity (Adeniji-Neill, 2011). An *Omoluàbí* is a person of peace. Azenabor (2022: 65) added, “A person exhibiting *Omoluàbí* compares favourably with Socrates’ ‘Virtuous man’, Plato’s ‘Just Man’, Aristotle’s ‘Great Soul’ and Nietzsche’s ‘Nobleman’.”

The *Omoluàbí* concept is an adjectival *Yorùbá* phrase. Fayemi (2009: 167) gave a more elaborate explanation on the phrase that has the words – “*Omo + ti + Olu-ìwà + bi*” – as its components. Literally translated and taking the components one after another, *omo* means “child”, *ti* means “that”, *Olu-ìwà* means “the chief or master of character”, and *bi* means “born”. When put together, *Omoluàbí* can be translated as “the child that the chief of character born.” One can refer to such a child as an epitome of excellence in character.

An individual can be termed *Omoluàbí* irrespective of the religion the person adheres to. Consequently, some of the characteristics and traits of an *Omoluàbí* are considered virtues in many religions, for example, humility, truth, and honesty. *Omoluàbí* is a variant of *Omoluàbí* broken down into *omo-lua-bi*. Similarly, Oluwole (2007: 12) made a critical thought of the word by subjecting it into a probing analysis in different semantic insight in a bid to reflect the *Yorùbá* moral value of good characters by rendering the phrase *Omoluàbí* as a child whose character takes after..., which is an incomplete sentence. The scholar then searched in a bid to make the sentence a complete one that *omo ti o ni iwà bi tani?* – a child whose character takes after who? The scholar concludes the interrogative analysis by restructuring *Omoluàbí* as “*omo*



ti iwà bí eni ti a ko, ti o si gba eko,” which means an individual acting as someone that is well nurtured and lives according to the precepts of the training received. In summation, the scholar deduced three component clauses which are: 1) *Omọ tí ó ní ‘wà bí* – a person who behaves like..., 2) *Eni tí a kọ* – someone properly nurtured, and 3) *Tí ó si gba ẹ kọ* – and who behaves accordingly (Oluwole, 2007: 13). This suffices, as Akanbi and Jekayinfa (2016: 13) concluded, that “the end of *Yorùbá* traditional education is to make every individual an ‘*Omólúàbí*’. That is why the goal of *Yorùbá* traditional education has always been to foster strong character in the individual and to prepare each person to become a useful member of the community.”

An *Omólúàbí* demonstrates and exhibits the inherent virtue of “*iwà pèlẹ*”. *Ìwà pele* is ultimately the basis of moral conduct in *Yorùbá* culture and a core defining attribute of an *Omólúàbí*. A contrast of *Omólúàbí* is *Omolangidi* that literally means “a-good-for-nothing” child who is not accorded recognition in the society (Ogunlola, 2014: 125). Ogunajo (2021: 337) asserted, “Being an *Omólúàbí* does not depend on wealth or high societal status; in fact, *Yorùbás* will rather not appoint an individual to any post if they possess great wealth but do not show the honourable characters of an *Omólúàbí*.”

Furthermore, in Olanipekun’s (2017: 219) words,

In *Yorùbá* ethics, *iwà* (character/behaviour) is one thing that should not be underemphasized if we really want to have a well-ordered society. Just as we have the moral concepts such as good, bad, right, and wrong in any moral setting or ethical system in the world, so we have *iwà rere* and *iwà búburú* (i.e., good character and bad character) as well as *iwà tótó* and *iwà tí kòtó* (right behaviour and wrong behaviour) in *Yorùbá* ethics or moral system. One of the examples of *iwà rere* (good character) that was mentioned above is *iwà Omólúàbí* (virtuous character).

In addition, Abimbola (1975) opined that *iwà rere* is considered to be the most treasured thing in *Yorùbá* value system.

“*Ìwà*” (Character) in *Yorùbá* Ethos

Character (*Ìwà*) can be defined as the unique feature or quality of a person, group, or thing that distinguishes the person, group, or thing from other persons, groups, or thing. Concerning discourses about the subject of *Ìwà*, Idowu (1962: 154) unveiled that:

To the *Yorùbá*, man’s character is of supreme importance, and it is this which *Olódùmarè* judges. Thus the demands which *Olodumare* lays upon man are purely ethical. Man’s well-being here on earth depends upon his character...therefore, morality is summed up in *Yorùbá* by the word *Ìwà* which can be translated by the English word, character. *Ìwà*, according to the *Yorùbá*, is the stuff that makes life a joy because it is pleasing to God. It is therefore stressed that good character must be the dominant feature of a person’s life. In fact, it is the one thing which distinguishes a person from a brute.

While *iwà* mean character generally, Balogun (2013: 112) opined that “within the *Yorùbá* moral context, there are two types of *iwà* (character): *iwà rere* (good/positive character) and *iwà búburú* /*iwà burúkú* /*iwà ibàjé* (bad/negative character).” Ogunajo (2021: 339) declared, “A person of good character is therefore called *Omólúàbí*.”

Olanipekun (2017) clarified some good virtues of an *Omólúàbí* among the *Yorùbás*: virtues like “*Ìwà rere*” which qualifies good characters that include *inu rere* (having good intentions



towards others), *otito* (being truthful), *akinkanju* (being brave) and *opolo pipe* (exhibiting intelligence). These are in contrast to “*ìwà buburu*” or “*ìwà ibaje*” which qualifies bad characters that include *ìwà buburu* (wicked characters), *ole/imele* (laziness), *iro pipa* (telling lies), *ole jija* (stealing) and *ojukokoro* (covetousness). A person is virtuous and morally upright when he is honest, truthful, not cunning, hardworking, trustworthy, fair and practices equity, respects other individuals, has a sense of integrity, is responsible to given tasks, competent, accountable and tactful.

A vicious person is one who falls short of the components of good character. Such person in the *Yorùbá* moral system is not qualified to be a person. This is because personhood is qualified from the spectrum of how one submits to the moral codes of conduct of the society. Abimbola (1975: 393) proposed “*ìwà* (good character) as the essence of being, and that man’s character is what can be used to characterize his life especially in ethical terms.” A vicious individual is rather seen as a brute, one who only puts on the skin of a person but ideally does not exhibit the characteristics of a person. For this reason, Oyeshile (2007: 87) maintained that “*ìwà* is the determinant of moral personhood as *Ọmọ̀lúàbí* (one who is well-born or morally upright) in *Yorùbá* perspective. For an individual that lacks *Ọmọ̀lúàbí*, the *Yorùbá* sums up that ‘*ki nseniyan; nise lo fawo eniyan bora*’ – he/she is not a human being; he merely assumes the skin of a human being.”

The behaviours exhibited by individuals within the nation are due to the side of character they choose, either good or bad, for character is the sum total of a man’s being. In view of the *Yorùbá*, the knowledge of the importance of good character makes man morally responsible for his actions and intentions. Dzurgba (2014: 114) explained that:

...an action performed by man concurrently is called is a human conduct or a human behaviour because a person does it with a proper knowledge, willingness, personal decision and freedom of choice. He is free either to agree or to refuse to act in a particular way. He is free either to avoid delay, postpone or change an action. Thus, an action which is done under these conditions is a voluntary action. For such an action, a person is held responsible and accountable.

Therefore, it means that no individual becomes corrupt by mistake or without a full knowledge of what is being done and its consequences on the society at large. Individuals become corrupt and perpetrate all sorts of crimes because they choose to exhibit bad characters in place of good characters. For instance, if one by the virtue of his public office siphons public gains for his personal engagements, such an individual cannot say it was a mistake because he is fully aware that the gains belong to the public. Rather, he resolved to *ole jija* (stealing) which is one of the components of bad characters. Exclusively before one will resolve to *ole jija* (stealing), his heart must have also bred *ojukokoro* (covetousness) and *okanjuwa* (greed). This accounts for why many of the Nigerian politicians are thieves. They get into positions just to be on the lookout for how they will satisfy their bellies. They are full of bad characters. Corruption is not limited to politicians alone. It has eaten deep into the blood vessels of many parts of the nation.

Law enforcement agencies that are supposed to make sure that the laws are strictly adhered to are also not free from the shackles of bad characters. Police take bribes on the way and the justice systems receive grants to pardon law breakers. Positions are used to enrich one’s family at the detriment of the public such that the problem of unemployment lingers. Approaching a public office for job placements will pose the question of who you know before you can be considered. Godfatherism is also a highly priced commodity. This is often as qualified as “leg”,



that is, who you know that can fix you into positions without the mutual consent of the public who you should represent by occupying such office/position. *Ìwà ibaje* (bad character) is also not far-seen from the youths. For instance, many youths are lazy: *ole* (laziness). This is why they break into people's homes, carting away with materials that do not belong to them, destroying lives and properties, making both homes and the highways unsafe for people. The efficacy in hard work is no longer appreciated. Youths are on the lookout for painless gain. They want to perform small work but expect huge returns which they will violently seek. They also resort to gangsterism and cultism in place of *ìwà irele* (meekness), they waylay others for their properties and also murder them in an attempt to either cover it up or when they refuse to obey. Education is no longer the focus of the youths, such that the slang "school is a scam" is almost becoming a maxim. Those that are even in school are engaging themselves in various vices ranging from theft, examination malpractices and hooliganism.

With the above, one cannot underestimate the role that character plays in any given society. The life of a nation is in the character of its occupants. If they exhibit bad characters, the nation will experience the adverse consequences of those characters. Awolalu and Dopamu (2005: 234) opined that "the action or conduct of one man within the community can affect the other members for good or for evil. In order to prevent man from becoming rebellious and thus endangering the welfare of the society, there are patterns or codes of behaviour for the individual and the community as a whole." This accounts for why the Nigerian nation is experiencing an all-round deterioration. Bad characters perpetrated by every individual have a lasting effect on not just the individual but the society at large. For instance, a corrupt individual who siphons the public funds that are supposed to be used for public projects, such as to fund education, but diverts it for his own personal gain...the educational sector that should use that fund for its betterment will suffer loss and this will in turn lead to low productivity, thereby causing students to look out for other engagements since schools are poorly managed. Such students will grow morally bankrupt such that they will become a torn in the flesh of the nation. With this, one can say peace, justice and nation building for the Nigerian nation will remain a mere wish and not a reality until everyone strives for moral excellence. This is because whatever is done to get the nation industrialized will be pulled down by the level of moral decadence.

"Ìwà Omolúàbí": A Panacea for Peace and Nation Building

As asserted by Dada (n.d.), "In traditional *Yorùbá* society, character (*ìwà*) constituted an indispensable part of social existence, peace and order, and formed a part of the qualities that a *Yorùbá* person must possess before he or she can be reckoned with in the community. In the face of the adverse consequences of bad character plaguing the Nigerian nation, the quintessential *Omolúàbí* is a therapy for peace and nation building.

"*Omolúàbí*" is not selfish. Unselfishness is a key component of the "*ìwà*" of an "*Omolúàbí*". One who seeks his own gains alone will come to ruin but one who puts the wellbeing of others at heart will be greatly rewarded not just in this world but also in the afterlife by God. If everyone decides to put the good of others in focus, the nation will experience a collective growth. But the nation will dwindle if public goods are shortchanged for personal gains. Beyond being unselfish is the admonition to be kind and generous. This is because the act of selfishness is seen as wickedness and wickedness is not a character of "*Omolúàbí*". So, in this wise, stealing is prohibited. In the *Yorùbá* moral system, both a thief and his/her accomplices are both evil. "*Ìwà rere*" good character preaches that "*eni ti o gbe epo laja ko jale bi eni ti o*



gba a sile” (that is, he/she who picked the oil pitcher from the ceiling is not as guilty of stealing as the person who helped him/her to bring it to the ground level). This is seen as utterly wickedness to the common good of the society. Some persons in the name of godfatherism and thuggery override the vote of the masses to put on the throne thieves who would later siphon public funds for personal gains. In this wise, the maxim, “*eni ti o ba gbin ika ori omo re ni yoo hu le*” suffices that he/she who sows the seed of wickedness, it is on his/her children’s head that it will grow. Children will reap the harvest of suffering. Moreover, “*Ika a to nika, re re a ba eni rere*”: wickedness will follow the wicked and goodness will come to the good. In the midst of nemesis, there will not be space for collective growth. “*Omoluàbí*” is one that is truthful, honest, sincere, and peaceful. “*Omoluàbí*” does not call a black grey; he calls it its real colour. If everyone imbibes this character, the nation will experience peace and a rapid growth. It is prescribed in the principles of “*ìwà*” that “*Otito ki i sina iro ni i fori bogbe*” (that is, truthfulness does not miss; it is dishonesty that goes astray).

Lawuyi (1988:29) opined, “It is part of their beliefs that *iwontun wonsi lo ye omoluàbí* (moderacy should be practised by a virtuous person).” It is “*ìwà Omoluàbí*” to maintain moderacy in the midst of plenty. It is quite understandable that some positions grant one the access to many resources to be managed. If one does not practice moderacy, one will go beyond bounds. Oyebade and Azenabor (2018: 48) corroborated that “The making of an *Omoluàbí* is averse to excesses, in cognizance of the saying that too much of everything is bad.” To be “*Omoluàbí*” is to be of good character all-round which is essentially a necessity for peace and nation building. In relation to peace, Azenabor (2022: 65) further opined that, “The moral import of Omoluabi is in the spirit of its brotherhood, truth, cooperation, sharing, well-being, solidarity, compassion, service, sacrifice, fellowship, truth, sympathy and empathy. It also entails the values of humility, integrity, courage, modesty, moderation and understanding that are necessary for peaceful co-existence and collective well-being.”

CONCLUSION

In the *Yorùbá* moral system, “*ìwà*” (character) cannot be overstated and should never be undermined if the objectives of peace and nation building must be achieved. Whichever class of character that finds predominance in any given society will determine whether the nation will experience peace and development or not. All behaviours have unavoidable consequences. Bad characters breed more adverse aftermaths while good characters create a credible platform for peace and nation building. In the face of stunted development in the Nigerian nation, the *Yorùbá* moral system exemplified in “*ìwà*” potentially possesses a universal application. This is because the exhibition of the “*ìwà Omoluàbí*” will not only benefit the moral actor but other members of the society to which the person belongs. Good character boosts peace and credible nation building. Therefore, these researchers (the authors of this paper) are recommending the re-visiting, re-considering, re-emphasizing, reviving and imbibing of the culture of good character or “*ìwà Omoluàbí*” that embeds all good virtues in the lives of people in the society. This will very likely improve peaceful co-existence in the society thereby making Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations achievable by 2030.



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