

**A Religio-Philosophical Analysis of Freewill and  
Determinism in Relation to the Yoruba Perception  
of *Ori***

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**Abstract**

There is much debate regarding the seeming contradictions and ambivalence in the metaphysical concepts of freewill and determinism. Several interpretations have been given by various African philosophers on what freewill or determinism connote. In this regard, the traditional Yoruba conception of freewill and determinism is replete with contradictions by virtue of their perception of human destiny which is variously chosen by the people. This paper argues that the Yoruba have a two-sided conception of destiny, as something given and unalterable and yet alterable under certain circumstances and conditions. The conception of destiny appears problematic. On the other hand, the Yoruba are regarded as determinist but not fatalist. Thus, it could be argued that the Yoruba could be seen as both freewillers and determinists. It is in this perspective that this paper does a critique

of freewill and determinism in relation to Yoruba perception of Ori using a philosophical methodology. Therefore, the paper offers and defends soft determinism as a better alternative to the causal explanatory paradigm among the Yoruba.

### **Keywords:**

*Ori*, Religio-philosophical Thought, Freewill, Determinism.

### **Introduction**

The subject of free will and determinism has been one of the most intensely fought battles in theology and philosophy from time immemorial. There is little doubt that humans have a perception of choice in our daily lives. It is believed that humans make choices and that they are not mere puppets of either the gods or the blind forces of the universe. However, it has often been argued that freewill does not exist in the strict sense of the term while determinism is also believed not to be practicable in the real sense of the word. In this regard, the issue of freewill and determinism is examined from the perspective of the Yoruba culture with the view to bringing out their understanding of the concept. In addition, the Yoruba concept of *Ori* is examined so as to determine whether they believe in freewill or in determinism.

The concept of *Ori* in Yoruba metaphysical thought has always captivated the interest of many scholars<sup>1</sup>, but its true meaning and nature has always been controversial. *Ori*, an immaterial or spiritual head, can simply be described as the bearer, the ruler and controller of human destiny. While it is true that traditional Yoruba thought fits into hard determinism, it does not deny "freewill" or binary choice.

However, the problem the paper seeks to address is centred on the debate on freewill - determinism concepts in relation to *Ori*

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<sup>1</sup>O. A. Balogun (2007). "The Concepts of *Ori* and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation", in *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16(1): 116–130. See also W. Abimbola, (1971). "The Yoruba Concept of Human personality", in *La notion de Personne en Afrique Noire Colloques Internationale de Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (544): 69–85. O. Oladipo, (1992). "Predestination in Yoruba Thought: A Philosopher's Interpretation" *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* vol. XXIV (1 & 2):37. Gbadegesin, S. (1988) "Eniyan: The Yoruba Concept of a Person" in P.H. Coetzee and A.P. J. Roux (eds). *The African Philosophy: A Reader*. New York: Routledge. p. 158.

in Yoruba thought. In addition to this, scholars are of divided opinion on the operational understanding of freewill and determinism. Some even argued that they are meaningless and non-existent. As such, the following questions become expedient: Is man free to take decisions? Are there no factors propelling certain behaviours or decisions man makes? How free is man? Are there actions that can be carried out under complete freewill? How free is human and how compelling are determined actions in the life or activities or humankind? It is in this perspective that this paper attempts to examine the concept of freewill and determinism with the view to exploring the Yoruba understanding of *Ori* as a metaphysical entity responsible for making choices among the Yoruba.

### The Concept of Freewill

This is described as the power of acting without the constraint of necessity or fate; the ability to act at one's own discretion. Also, it refers to the freedom of humans to make choices that are not determined by prior causes. Freewill has been variously described as the orientation that humans are to be held responsible for their moral choices. It also presupposes the belief that man determines his own behaviour freely and that no causal antecedents can sufficiently account for his action. A person is free to the extent that he or she is free from domination by others and free to make his or own decisions without forcible interference from others<sup>2</sup>.

According to Frankfurt, freewill and moral responsibility is further defined as follows:

The existence of moral judgment is said to imply that man is free to act and is also responsible for his action. Freewill means that there are no constraints that prevent the agent from acting in a manner suitable to him. The notion of responsibility comes in because it is believed that Man is imbued with rationality. So, man is expected to make rational decisions<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>A. Flew (1971). *An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from Plato to Satre*. London: Thames and Hudson.

<sup>3</sup>H. Frankfurt, (1971). "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person" in *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1): 5–20.

He opines that "...if man is free, it means that he has alternative courses of actions from which he can choose. This means that man is morally responsible for any choice he makes"<sup>4</sup>.

## **The Concept of Determinism**

This is the philosophical idea that all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes external to the will. Some philosophers have taken determinism to imply that individual human beings have no free will and cannot be held morally responsible for their actions.

Oftentimes determinism is equated with fatalism and this has caused a lot of misunderstanding among the people. Consequently, Best asserts that:

Determinism is often erroneously equated with fatalism which is the true opposite of free will. Under fatalism the will is ineffectual, no matter how much it struggles, under determinism there is no limit to how effectual the will can be, causality determines the nature of will but does not prevent any action, which is not in violation of physical law. A will is not unfree by virtue of the causal roots of its origin and existence (heredity and environment). Causality creates a will, but does not subject the will to ongoing compulsion. To justify a causeless will on the grounds that a person can choose what he or she does and really wish to choose (wills what is not really willed) is self-contradictory<sup>5</sup>.

However, from both the naturalistic and theistic perspectives, determinism is perceived as "the belief that man's actions are the result of antecedent causes which have been formulated naturalistically and theistically"<sup>6</sup>. He further opines that, "the naturalistic view sees human beings as part of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup>B. Best (2002) *A Cast for Freewill and Determinism*. London: Oxford University Press. p. 111

<sup>6</sup> W. Elwell, (1984). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker. p. 428

machinery of the universe. In such a world, every event, that is, what is happening now is caused by preceding event, which in turn was caused by preceding events, *ad infinitum*<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, determinism is further described as “that position that every event has a cause (including human thoughts and decisions) and is fully governed by the laws of nature”<sup>8</sup>. Humans are therefore, neither free nor responsible for their actions. Thus, determinism is the view that although human beings do possess a will, a faculty used to make decisions and choices, this faculty is under severe influence from outside factors such as one’s background and environment. However, theological determinism is defined as “the idea that, there is a God who determines all that humans will do; either by knowing their actions in advance, via some form of omniscience or by decreeing their actions in advance”<sup>9</sup>.

### Yoruba Notion of Freewill

Labeodan opines that freewill/freedom in Yoruba thought pattern in relation to the concept of *Ori* or *Ayanmo* could rather be contradictory<sup>10</sup>. This is borne out of the fact that one whose destiny is affixed to him or one who received his destiny while kneeling (*Akunleyan*)<sup>11</sup> is not free. So, how do we relate this with those we believe, chose freely? We cannot even say that those who belong to this group did chose freely since they were given no alternatives in the sense that they were not told whether certain heads are good or bad. If this condition had been satisfied by *Orunmila*, if he had given the people alternatives, then one could be said to have had a freewill or free choice. But where nobody knows what he is choosing, the rule of preferential choice has not been satisfied, and to this effect one cannot, properly speaking, be said to be making a choice. From this analysis, it turns out that a choice of *Ori* in heaven is purely a matter of luck. The conclusion we can draw from this is that, an individual’s choice of *Ori* from heaven is not an exercise of free choice.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup>G. Solomon, (1990). *Determinism and Freedom*. London: Epworth Press. p. 226

<sup>9</sup> B. Martin (1989). *The Existentialist Theology*. New York: Bookham Association.

<sup>10</sup>H. Labeodan(2011). “The Problem of Evil, Freewill, Causality Responsibility and the Yoruba Concept of *Ori*: A Synthesis.” *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*. XLIII (2):154.

<sup>11</sup>S. Gbadegesin (1984). Destiny, Personality and the Ultimate Reality of Human Existence: A Yoruba Perspective, *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*. 7:182.

Idowu avers that *Akunleyan*, a destiny that one kneels down and chooses gives a picture of what happens in the pre-existence life. According to Yoruba tradition, the individual ontological “self” is a self – conscious, rational and free “being”. In Yoruba tradition, destiny which the rational self” chooses in heaven becomes an individual’s lot in life. That is why the Yoruba say:

*Akunleyan se oun ni adayeba: A daye tan oju  
nkanni*<sup>12</sup>

*A destiny one kneels down and chooses it is that  
which one finds on getting to the world, but  
when one gets to the world one becomes  
impatient.*

The difference between *akunleyan*, a destiny one kneels down and choose and *akunlegba*, a destiny one kneels down to receives is centred on the words *yan*, choose and *gba* receive. Does an individual ontological “being” chooses his own race, colour, parents, success, and failure in the primordial existence or simply receives them from the Supreme Deity? Be that as it may, what I think our traditional thought wants to convey to us about *akunleyan*, a destiny one kneels down and chooses, is that every individual is responsible for his destiny. In other words, our destinies are in our hands. Whatever we make out of them either good or bad becomes our responsibility.

Yoruba cosmology presents a picture of man, solitary individual, picking his way (aided by his *Ori*, Destiny chosen by himself before coming to the world) between a variety of forces. Granted that the choice of *Ori* in heaven is not a free one; the freedom to do something about your choice exists in life! So once you have made your choice, you are free to make good use of it or mess it up in life. Or, if it was a bad *Ori*, Yoruba belief that man is also free to seek redress by mean of sacrifice or propitiation. Since this can be done, man therefore becomes responsible for whatever he does with his *Ori*. Yoruba are partially freewillers.

## **Yoruba Notion of Determinism**

The concept of causality is very central to Yoruba traditional thought and religion. Every event has a cause. There is no action

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<sup>12</sup>Idowu, E.B. (1996) Op.cit. p.154

without a cause, every event has a cause, and the cause is always an agent or some agent utilizing some forces. The Yoruba believe that a person has had his biography or life history written before he comes into the world (through birth). It is this biography that the person comes to the world to fulfil – as can be seen in the notion of *Ori* (inner head/destiny), which is described variously as *ayanmo* (destiny that is affixed on a person), *akunleyan* (destiny which is chosen while kneeling), and *akunlegba* (destiny which is received while kneeling).

The opinions of Yoruba scholars vary on the issue of determinism and human freedom. Some scholars, for example, Abimbola hold to a rigidly fatalistic interpretation of Determinism/Predestination, thereby suggesting that human freedom is illusory, because not even the god can change *Ori*. *Ori* is said to be the essence of luck and the most important force responsible for human success or failure<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, whatever has not been approved by one's *Ori* cannot be approved by the divinities. Hence the *Ori* is his personal god and is more interested in a person's welfare. So if a person needs anything he must first make his desire known to his *Ori* before any other god, and if a man's *Ori* is not sympathy with his cause, no god will sympathize with him and consequently he will not have the things he wants. The *Ori* that has been selected for an individual in heaven cannot be altered on earth and "indeed the gods themselves are not in a position to change a man's destiny"<sup>14</sup>.

From the above we can see that a fatalistic interpretation of predestination is given in which the individual has no right to exercise any freedom since everything has been sealed by an individual's *Ori*. There is no room for chance in Yoruba metaphysics; the universe is ruled by the principle of causality, and every event is an effect of a cause. According to Balogun, there are two kinds of determinism: hard and soft determinism<sup>15</sup>. The hard determinism does not allow freedom while the soft determinism gives room for freedom.

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<sup>13</sup> W. Abimbola (1975) *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa*. UNESCO. p.189

<sup>14</sup> W. Abimbola (1976) *IFA: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press. p.142.

<sup>15</sup> O.A. Balogun (2007). "The Concept of *Ori* and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation" *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16(1): 116-130.

## **Ori in Relation to Freewill and Determinism among the Yoruba**

It is believed that Yoruba religion has shown convincingly that the people believe in *Ori*<sup>16</sup>. One of the essential elements that make human beings is *Ori*. It is the contention of the people that “*Ori* that comes into the world to fulfil a destiny”. The Yoruba believe that, “*Ori* is closely related to God and it is given to man by God Himself ... “the Source Being” or “the Source from which being originated”<sup>17</sup>. This shows that it is only the Supreme Being that can put *Ori*, the essence of being or the personality-soul into man.” Their views x-ray the Yoruba position that *Ori*’s origin is godly and thereby unpolluted from heaven. Thus, *Ori* is regarded as one of the gods in the Yoruba pantheon and possibly, the greatest god of all<sup>18</sup>. *Ori* is the compass of an individual’s destiny. This is why Dopamu says, “Destiny is the function of *Ori*”.<sup>19</sup>

However, a critical examination of the Yoruba concept of *ori* seems to suggest that the Yoruba are fatalists and hard determinists. Although in theory, the destiny of a person is said to be unaltered because it became doubly sealed after its choice, but in actual sense, it does not seem to be so. Upon a deeper reflection and practical experience, several factors have occasioned an alteration in destiny on earth; either for good or bad. An individual’s destiny may be changed for good or for bad. Instances of this abound within the Yoruba cultural milieu. The Yoruba believe in the consultation of the god of divination (*Orunmila*) to now know the kind of *ori* one had chosen and to perhaps alter an unfavourable destiny through the help of some spiritual forces and by the application of the right type of sacrifices. *Ebo* (Sacrifice) among the Yoruba is believed to be capable of influencing human destiny either for good or bad. Sacrifice is a form of communication between the natural and the supernatural realms of the Yoruba cosmos.

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<sup>16</sup>E.B. Idowu (1996). Op.cit.

<sup>17</sup>J. O. Awolalu & P. A. Dopamu (2005). *West African Traditional Religion* revised edition Nigeria: Macmillan Publications.

<sup>18</sup>W. Abimbola, (1975). *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa*. UNESCO.

<sup>19</sup>P. A. Dopamu (1985). “*The Yoruba Concept of Personality-Soul and Its Relations to Human Acts and Accountability*” being a paper presented at the Assembly of the World Religious at Americana Great Gorge Conference Center, McAfee, New Jersey, November 15-21.



Besides the above avenues, other agents of possible change in the fulfilment of destiny include evil forces such as witchcraft and some other demonic forces. In addition to factors influencing an alteration in the status of destiny is one's own character. One's act of behaviour can affect one's destiny for the worse. In all these instances, the Yoruba believe that destiny can be altered.

The possibility of altering one's destiny presents some forms of antinomies in Yoruba thought. At one point, it is said that one's destiny is unalterable. At another, it is held that it is alterable through some factors. What do we make of this seeming contradiction? What is suggested is that there does seem confusion in the whole idea of *ori* and its connection with human destiny. However, such puzzles become cleared when we realize that the Yoruba also posit another concept, *afowofa* (the infliction of a problem on oneself or causation of a problem by oneself) as explanation for some of the problems that befall a person<sup>20</sup>.

The Yoruba trace the cause of some events to the individual person who performs the action and not any supernatural force outside of man. Such actions are located in the realm of the natural and are empirically observable. It is for this reason that people are punished for wrongdoing because they are believed to be responsible for their actions. This then suggests that in the analysis of the concepts of *ori* or destiny, the Yoruba falls within what is called 'soft determinism'. The nature of *ori* and human destiny in Yoruba belief is neither fatalism the strict sense of it, nor hard determinism. The Yoruba conception of human destiny is indeed soft-deterministic in nature. Soft determinism here refers to a situation where a person is held responsible for actions deliberately performed by him while attributing to his '*ori*' those whose 'cause' transcends him. This soft-deterministic interpretation of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny is more consistent, correct and coherent with Yoruba belief and cultural practice than any other metaphysical interpretation. A proper look into the traditional Yoruba beliefs in *ori* and human destiny suggests that the Yoruba are better referred to as soft-determinists and not hard determinists as some scholars want us to believe.

Indeed, a soft-deterministic conception of destiny in Yoruba thought is truly reflective of and coherent with the belief of the people on moral responsibility and freedom. It is because of the

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<sup>20</sup>O.A. Balogun (2007). "The Concept of Ori and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation" *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16(1):126.

freedom, morality and responsibility which are accommodated by this conception of destiny that make the alterability of destiny meaningful and consistent. Situating the concept of 'ori' and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought within the framework of soft determinism can help in taking care of the inconsistencies and problems associated with the hard-deterministic interpretations of the Yoruba concepts *ori* and human destiny.

### **A Critique of the Yoruba Perception of Freewill and Determinism in Relation to Ori**

Humans have freewill to always do good and/or evil, for if he does not, then he does not have Freewill. To limit man to doing good alone without the possibility of doing evil will as suggested by Flew<sup>21</sup>, is opposed to freedom. However, the level of knowledge, exposure, and admonition guides man's Freewill, which influences his interest, motivation, ambition and taste. Man is free to do either, or both good and evil, but he could be admonished to do good in order to make life comfortable for himself and his community. Thus, God has made man in the form to 'always freely choose the right'. Man must however develop his reasoning capacity under the influence of what is considered as godly morality that aims at peace and development.

The use of 'freewill' 'choice making', decision-making and all sorts are relevant to certain familiar human situation and should not be rejected. This is right, but the act of making those choices, the use of Freewill could be based on ignorance, level of knowledge or intelligence. Even though the use of those terms should be allowed based on 'familiar human situation', *the foundation or the propelling force behind the choices*, Freewill is *the determinant factor*.

Thus, human has Freewill to always do good and/or evil, for 'if he does not, then he does not have Freewill. To limit man to doing good alone without the possibility of doing evil, is opposed to freedom. However, the level of knowledge, exposure, and admonition guides man's Freewill, which influences his interest, motivation, ambition and taste. Human is free to do either, or both good and evil, but he could be admonished to do good in order to make man in the form to 'always freely choose the right'. Humans must, however, develop their reasoning capacity under the

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<sup>21</sup>A. Flew (1966). *The Free Will-Determinism Debate*. London: S.C.M. Press Ltd.

influence of what is considered as godly morality that aims at peace and development and be subject to God's discipline without showing that God is imperfect.

Determinism contains the concept of inevitability and cause. This is considered relevant to this discussion. Every child that will become an adult must pass through a teenage age. Such is inevitable. That is natural. However, many other events considered inevitable in Determinism are ordinary events, which are fully under the control of the individual, based on the level of the acquired knowledge of the individual, and the community of the people concerned.

The Yoruba concept of determinism also uses God as the explanation of every happening i.e. pantheistic in nature. "God gave men freewill" this makes open the possibility of doing evil as well as good. The power to act and not act is given to man but such power is ready predestined to take place by God. In fact, it is the Yoruba traditional belief that there are other extra-terrestrial beings that see to the affairs of the world some are good, some are evil, e.g. deities, divinities, and witches.

Idowu, argued that one's destiny, his future existence or whatever he becomes in life or whatever activities or events that occurred in life are all traceable to the type of destiny his *ori* had chosen for him at creation; that with the Yoruba, the notion of 'chance' or 'freedom' becomes otiose since whatever happens to a person is attributed to the choices, which his *ori* makes<sup>22</sup>. In other words, that once a destiny has been chosen, it becomes doubly sealed and totally impossible to change, even the preternatural forces are not in position to alter it; and that the Yoruba are hard-deterministic and fatalistic in their belief in and conception *ori* and human destiny. There are two fundamental problems with this kind of submission.

Balogun postulates that virtually all Yoruba African philosophers who have commented on *ori* vis-à-vis the freewill-determinism problem have overlooked a point that is quite clear in the exposition of the two important religious scholars on this issue<sup>23</sup> (that is, Bolaji Idowu and Wande Abimbola). Indeed, virtually all these Yoruba African Philosophers who have written on *ori*, human personality, vis-à-vis freewill cite these two religious scholars, but these philosophers all overlook one point, which is obvious in the writing of these religious scholars: *Ori* is limited to

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<sup>22</sup> E.B. Idowu (1996). Op.cit. 187

<sup>23</sup>A.O. Balogun (2007) Op. cit. p. 125

issues of material success (i.e things like wealth, riches and success in one's profession). Ori has nothing to do with moral character, and as such it does not affect all of human actions and/or inactions.

*Ori* in Yoruba thought is concerned only with issues of material success in life at a general level. Arguably, nowhere in any of the ancient Yoruba scriptures (that is, the *Ifa* literary corpus, *Ijala* and *Ewi, Egungun*, and *Esa Egungun*) is there the claim that moral character can be pre-determined by one's earlier choice of *Ori*. Given this critical point that *Ori* is not about moral character, but about issues of prosperous or impoverished destiny, then establishing the case for soft determinism becomes more resonant with the Yoruba cultural belief. However, before we explore the plausibility of such, let us examine the second prank of the problem<sup>24</sup>.

The second problem has to do with the fatalistic conclusion of some of these scholars, which if carried to its logical conclusion; it will be unjustified to hold a person responsible for his actions since the causes of his actions are external to him and beyond his control. With the fatalistic interpretation of the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny, the practice of performance of character formation becomes otiose (unnecessary), since it is not a product of man's making. Besides, the doctrine of fatalism, rather than promising perfect understanding and removing the temptation of viewing things in terms of human wickedness, as Oduwole argues, it indeed nullifies the efficacy of reason, stifles creativity and spirit of hard work. But is there a way out of this dilemma? Is the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny rigidly fatalistic and hard-deterministic, or does it appear so merely at the surface level?

A surface look at the Yoruba concept of *ori* will seem to suggest that the Yoruba are incurable fatalists and hard determinists. Although in theory, the destiny of a person is said to be unaltered because it became doubly sealed after its choice, but in actual sense, it does not seem to be so. Upon a deeper reflection and practical experience, several factors have occasioned an alteration in destiny on earth; either for good or bad. An individual's destiny may be changed for good or for bad. Instances of this abound within the Yoruba cultural milieu. The Yoruba believe in the consultation of the god of divination (*Orunmila*) to know the kind of *ori* one had chosen and to perhaps alter an unfavourable destiny through the help of some spiritual forces and by the application of the right type of sacrifices. *Ebo* (Sacrifice) among the Yoruba is

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<sup>24</sup>A.O. Balogun(2007) op. cit. p.126.

believed to be capable of influencing human destiny either for good or bad. Sacrifice is a form of communication between the natural and the supernatural realms of the Yoruba cosmos.

According to Kola Abimbola, sacrifice is forgoing, relinquishing or doing without something in the expectation of gaining something else<sup>25</sup>. Among the Yoruba, it is more of food for the gods; a social act; a means of repentance; and, insurance against failure. It is founded on the ideal of mutual exchange or reciprocity between man and the spirits in order to influence or bring about positive changes in man's life. It is for this reason that the Yoruba often say:

*Riru ebo nii gbeni, airu ebo kii gbeniyan*<sup>26</sup>  
*Making of sacrifice favours one than its utter refusal*

*Ese* is another closely related principle with *ebo* that stresses the possibility of alteration in man's destiny. *Ese*, which is the principle of individual strife and struggle signifies that choosing a good *Ori* is not sufficient without having to struggle and strive for success in life. *Ese* acts like a catalyst to the realization or otherwise of one's destiny.

Besides the above avenues, other agents of possible change in the fulfilment of destiny include evil forces such as witchcraft and some other demonic forces. In addition to factors influencing an alteration in the status of destiny is one's own character. One's act of rashness or impulse behaviour can affect one's destiny for the worse. While an impatient person will run at a faster pace than his *ori*, thereby losing its support, an idle mind will spoil an otherwise prosperous destiny. In all these practical instances, the Yoruba believe that destiny can be altered.

The possibility of altering one's destiny presents some forms of antinomies in Yoruba thought. At one point, it is said that one's destiny is unalterable. At another, it is held that it is alterable through some factors. What do we make of this seeming contradiction? What is suggested is that there does seem confusion in the whole idea of *ori* and its connection with human destiny. However, such puzzles become cleared when we realize that the Yoruba also posit another concept, *afowofa* (the infliction of a

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<sup>25</sup>Kola Abimbola (2006). *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers.

<sup>26</sup>J.O. Awolalu (1981). *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, London: Longman

problem on oneself or causation of a problem by oneself) as explanation for some of the problems that befall a person.

Balogun observes that Yoruba trace the cause of some events to the individual person who performs the action and not any supernatural force outside of man<sup>27</sup>. Such actions are located in the realm of the natural and are empirically observable. It is for this reason that people are punished for wrongdoing because they are believed to be responsible for their actions. This then suggests that in the analysis of the concepts of *ori* or destiny, The Yoruba falls within the gamut of what is called 'soft-determinism' in metaphysical terms. The nature of *ori* and human destiny in Yoruba belief is neither based on fatalism in the strict sense of it, nor on hard determinism. The Yoruba conception of human destiny is indeed soft-deterministic in nature. Soft determinism here refers to a situation where a person is held responsible for actions deliberately performed by him while attributing to his '*ori*' those whose 'causes' transcend him. This soft-deterministic interpretation of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny is more consistent, correct and coherent with Yoruba belief and cultural practice than any other metaphysical interpretation. A proper look into the traditional Yoruba cosmos and their beliefs in *ori* and human destiny suggests that the Yoruba are better referred to as soft-determinists and not fatalists and hard determinists as some scholars want us to believe<sup>28</sup>. Unlike a fatalist who easily resigns himself to fate with respect to future situations, the Yoruba as soft determinists are hopefully gratified of being able to help future situations. In the same vein, they are rationally conscious of being held responsible for present actions which they deliberately carried out or executed.

Indeed, a soft-deterministic conception of destiny in Yoruba thought is truly reflective of and coherent with the belief of the people on moral responsibility and freedom. It is because of the freedom, morality and responsibility which are accommodated by this conception of destiny that make the alterability of destiny meaningful and consistent. Situating the concept of '*ori*' and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought within the framework of soft determinism can help in taking care of the inconsistencies and problems associated with the fatalistic interpretations of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny. Such problems are occasioned

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<sup>27</sup>A.O. Balogun (2007). Op. cit. p. 126-127.

<sup>28</sup>S. Ade Ali 1995. "The Yoruba Conception of Destiny: A Critical Analysis". *Journal of Philosophy and Development* 1&2(1): 100-106.

by practical existential experiences of the Yoruba in noting some factors (such as one's action, sacrifices, evil machination etc.) as potent forces in altering one's destiny even when fatalism suggests that the choice of one's *ori* is irrevocable and unalterable. With soft determinism, the possibility of changing an unfavourable destiny; of worshipping the guardian ancestral spirit of hard work; of consciously guiding against other's interception of a favourable destiny, become apparent.

Balogun, in consonance with this article's soft-deterministic interpretation of the concepts of *ori* and human destiny argues that the Yoruba conception of destiny is repugnant of harsh words of hard determinism, repudiating fatality and necessity<sup>29</sup>. The temptation to consider the metaphysical nature of the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny in the light of fatalism or hard determinism (as Bolaji Idowu, Richard Taylor<sup>30</sup>, Ebun Oduwole<sup>31</sup>, etc have done) is natural; however, incorrect. It is only inexplicable traits of a person either towards evil or good that the Yoruba explain through appeal to destiny. Destiny in this sense signifies an un-freedom act which only implies a transcendental relation that explains the unusual, baffling and untoward complexities of life which must come to pass no matter what. Only destiny understood in this sense is analogous to fatalism. Outside this sense, and as it is often the case, the belief in '*ori*' and human destiny in Yoruba coheres with the notion of *afowofa* (self-causation), where one is held responsible for actions deliberately performed by oneself, while attributing to his *ori* those whose causes transcend him. It is when the effort to rectify a bad destiny or to maintain a good destiny come to a naught that the Yoruba recourse to fate (fatalism).

The "freedom" in freewill is the glorious ability of our minds to reprogram themselves and to evaluate automatic thoughts and emotions. We all have this ability, and we all choose to utilize it to a greater or lesser degree. The effects of nature, nurture, random events, and past decisions are not eliminated, but can be modified by our ability to project consequences and by our power to influence choices - by our awareness of freewill itself. All of this

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<sup>29</sup>A.O. Balogun (2007) Op. cit. p. 1227-128

<sup>30</sup>H. Richard (2011). "Response to 'Free Will as Advanced Action Control for Human Social Life and Culture'" by Roy F. Baumeister, A. William Crescioni and Jessica L. Alquist". *Neuroethics* 4: 13-16. doi:10.1007/s12152-009-9046-8.

<sup>31</sup>E.O. Oduwole (1996). "The Yoruba Concepts of 'Ori' and Human Destiny: A Fatalistic Interpretation". *Journal of Philosophy and Development* 2(1&2): 40-52.

abstract thinking, projecting and deciding is the product of mechanistic causation, determined but not determinable. It is this freedom that makes us human.

However, in an attempt to offer explanation for some baffling, untoward and inexplicable events, the Yoruba have recourse to fatalistic interpretation of destiny. Given the reality of few instances of events as these in the life of the Yoruba, there is the temptation to conclude that the metaphysical nature of *ori* and human destiny in traditional Yoruba is basically fatalistic or hard-deterministic. However, upon further critical reflection and overwhelming supporting evidence in Yoruba thought, the paper has shown that such conclusion is exclusive of other salient issues, factors and problems surrounding the concepts of *ori* and human destiny. Hence, this has led to an incorrect interpretation. The validity and reality of the concepts of '*afowofa*' (self-causation), rewards and punishment, the efficacy of reason, *ebo* (sacrifice), and *ese* (hard work), freedom and moral responsibility; all true of the Yoruba, seem to demand for a more inclusive metaphysical explanation of the nature of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny.

It is in this regard that the paper offers and defends soft determinism as a better alternative causal explanatory paradigm. Though critiques may perhaps want to raise a fundamental question that will vitiate the veracity of our soft-deterministic defense of *ori* and human destiny in Yoruba thought: Are humans really free in issues of material wealth if in Yoruba culture they had no say in the determination of the contents of their *Ori* in *Ajala's* house? This question is quite important and cannot be ignored. While it is true that there are external constraints or factors at the supernatural realm in the choice of *Ori* at *Ajala's* house, it is however, salient to note also that at the natural plane, there are various avenues *ebo* (sacrifice), *ese* (hard work), *iwa* (character), and *afowofa* (self-caused) open to man, and which require his freewill in order to (re)shape and (re) influence his chances of chosen destiny (whether good or bad) on earth<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup>Makinde, M.A. 1985. "A Philosophical Analysis of the Yoruba Concept of '*Ori*' and Human Destiny". *International Studies in Philosophy*. XVII (1): 50-66.



## **Conclusion**

The most important implication though remains self-determination. We want and need control over our lives. We suffer the consequences of our actions irrespective of whether chosen by freewill or by default, so it makes sense to strive for the exercise of freewill, to make decisions that are likely to bring us closer to optimizing our lives - to set goals and to achieve them. Increased control implies increased personal responsibility for our lives and actions. That is an important aspect of what makes us human. I think it is reasonable to say that the scope of our freewill is a measure of our humanness. We are beings of self-made soul in the sense that we can decide to take charge of this process, or to default and leave it up to random influences to take us where they may. The implicit or explicit recognition and acceptance of freewill is probably the single most important factor determining who we are; it is a factor we have control over. The use of freewill, by its very nature, cannot be enforced by external agents. Society and parents can encourage its use and discourage the lack of responsibility, but each individual has to choose the degree of utilization of one's volitional ability. Proper, internally generated self-esteem carries with it an inherent commitment to the use of freewill. Unfortunately, many current social policies discourage the belief in freewill, undermine personal responsibility, and rely on external pseudo self-esteem rather than the real thing.