

Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil

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INTRODUCTION

In the pioneering works in African religious scholarship by indigenous and Western writers, Idowu, Mbiti, Parinder, Ray, Tempels, and others, have shown that Africans are not so intellectually impoverished as to be lacking in a sophisticated conception of the Supreme Being. Such a Being is recognized and given a premier position or status in their religions. These scholars have also identified some of the attributes of the Supreme Being within the indigenous African religions that they have studied. Some of these attributes have been very similar to those projected in the Christian religious understandings of the Supreme Being--omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, benevolence, divinity, creator, etc.

Their works have provided starting points for further research and discussion, but most students of religions have been wont to ignore this aspect of their worthy contribution to scholarship, and have rather taken their works as definitive and beyond question. Even when contrary views are aired, the pioneering works of these first African theologians, religious scholars, and anthropologists are often cited as authorities to uphold a point of view that was fast losing credibility.

The African, particularly the Yoruba, about whom Idowu, Mbiti and others have written, unarguably, possess a conception of Supreme Deity. In fact, this Supreme Being has many superlative attributes, but the possession of these qualities does not lead to the type of impasse or contradiction that arises within theistic Christian religion; namely, the irreconcilability of the existence of God and evil in the universe. Staying strictly within Yoruba religion, these writers present *Olodumare* as Christian God, Muslim Allah, and *Esu* as Satan or Devil. That this interpretation is wrong and misleading in the consequences it produces is argued here.

OLODUMARE: THE SUPREME BEING AMONG THE YORUBA

Supporting the need for his research into Yoruba beliefs in the Supreme Being, Bolaji Idowu says:

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v2/v2i1a1.pdf>

In all the previous works which have relevance to the religion of the Yoruba, the Deity has been assigned a place which makes Him remote, of little account in the Scheme of things. Very few people who really know the Yoruba can escape the uneasy feeling that there is something inadequate, to say the least, about such a notion; and it is the "uneasy feeling" that led to my investigation of what the Yoruba actually believe about the Deity ¹.

Such a mistaken conception of the Supreme Being among the Yoruba is consonant with the general attitude of the European colonialist who, out of ignorance, derided the culture, custom, religion, political organization, science, commerce, etc., of the so-called "primitive" peoples of the world. Such an attitude easily excuses and justifies their actions in the subjugation and forceful appropriation of the colonies. Surely, a people that supposes the Supreme Being to be a little "higher" than some other being, or puts Him "first among equals" must be inferior to those people who place Deity above and beyond the level of other beings entirely ². Such people need assistance, because

. . . the native says that he enjoys a life of complete idleness and repose, ... and passes his time dozing or sleeping. Since he is too lazy or too indifferent to exercise any control over earthly affairs, man on his side does not waste time in endeavouring to propitiate him, but reserves his worship and sacrifice for more active agents ³.

And, as Parrinder says, in a rather ambivalent way that exhibits his confusion and the dilemma of the foreign theologian scholar:

Polytheists who justify their worship of lesser gods, when pressed, may refer to the remoteness of the sky or at least to the more pressing demands of the other gods. These are nearer to him, more likely to intervene in his life, and easier of access. They might be annoyed if they were neglected in favour of one sole deity. Any priest will say that his god is a son of the Supreme Being, and that God speaks through His sons. But he will argue that he must obtain the favour of all the spirits, and not please one alone, lest the others withdraw their favour or power . . . He is thought to be more remote from human affairs and needs than the other gods which are his sons ⁴.

Further on he says:

On the whole, worship is irregular . . . Apart from occasional ejaculations made before a journey or an undertaking, many people do not seem to give God much place in their life . . . Prayers are offered to Him at any time and place, though generally these are individual prayers ⁵.

Finally, numerous issues of interest arise from these passages. Remarking on them is only to elicit how they have made this and similar studies necessary. First is the idea of *deus incertus* and *deus remotus* of Westermann that it echoes ⁶. Second is the conception of the divinities as the sons of the Supreme Being--an idea imported, (or smuggled as P'Bitek will say), into the conception of the relationship between God and the divinities from Christian religion. From all available data, there is scarcely any suggestion that Olodumare had any sons ⁷. Other divinities are his creations; some have been with him and are still messengers to Him and no one knows or contemplates their origin as such. Finally, the suggestion that God, because of His remoteness, is seldom worshipped or His peace of mind disturbed by unnecessary worries and that He is called everywhere and anywhere and at any time by (wo)men, seems to be an issue of

self-contradiction. In fact, Idowu has pointed out the error in supposing that Olodumare is not worshipped⁸.

Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, and even Parrinder (when the facts cannot be ignored) have the apparent contradictions in their own works, but these errors have persisted inspite, or because, of them⁹. Kato, for example, as recently as 1975, says:

Most of his (Mbiti's) writings concern the basic philosophy of African Theology. The basic premise seems to be the presupposition that African traditional religions are well organized systems. It is assumed that the animist in Africa has not only known God truly, but that he has worshipped him¹⁰.

On the next page he says,

But contradiction is not the worst problem of Mbiti's theology. It is this universalism that poses a threat to Biblical Christianity in Africa. His great enthusiasm in 'Africanizing' Christianity, while done in good faith poses a great threat to the faith which was *once for all* delivered to the saints¹¹.

For Kato, traditional concepts of God in Africa are defective, inferior and unworthy of his Divine Supremacy. Only the gifted Semites of the first century had clear vision. One may ask what about Islam, and other world religions? His response is an obvious derision. He quotes Okite as saying of Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* that:

. . . (the book) reads like a massive research project of St. Anselm's intended to prove that even for Africa, God is that than which nothing greater can be conceive¹².

Now, self-contradiction in a rational being at the level found by Kato is surely inexcusable, but threatening Biblical Christianity as the Pastor is professed to have done is a crime (sin) against his faith. How can any Christian make such a blasphemous comparison or analogy? Thus, his effort fails, as his belated attempt at an anthology aimed at showing African God as a being that which nothing greater can be conceived is doomed *ab initio*. We must wipe out all non-Christian beliefs, religions, cultures, ideas and (projected *ad absurdum*) all non-Christian peoples, to make the earth safe for the second coming of the saviour--unless they repent. The transplantation of Christianity (and Islam) and the Middle Eastern, Arabian culture with its Greco-Roman appendages must be total if humanity in Africa is to see the true light¹³. Only the achievement of this goal would please Kato.

For brevity, one may systematize what has become glaring from the foregoing considerations. In the first place, the most early writers did not credit the African (the Yoruba) with any knowledge of God. Secondly, irrepressible facts have negated such a position, so the scholars now credit Africans (Yoruba) with ideas, concepts, and even, worship--no matter how minimally--of God. The period is that of development attendant upon the awareness created by African scholars steeped in Christian theological persuasion. Thirdly, the dispute then shifted from the ontological issue of the existence of God to people's conception of Him. That is, do these Africans (Yoruba) really have an adequate idea of this *Imago Dei*¹⁴? Where and how are they going to come by it? There is no Mount Sinai or Horeb, no green grazing pasture that spreads limitlessly, only dense forests! So, the revelations they can have must be of lesser divinities related to fertility, huge rocks, and trees! That is the position of Kato and those with similar intellectual pretensions.

Then, the onus has shifted back on the African scholar who has always been in a position of weakness. A colonized people need to struggle on all planes to assert their equal humanity with others. So, they introduced the fourth dimension of intellectual smuggling of their Christian beliefs into the religious terrain of Africa; they Hellenized and clothed the African God in borrowed garbs, as if He had always been nude!

In these attempts, some problems have arisen. This has been so because of the conceptual categories and attributes they have used. In this regard, Kato is right in accusing Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, etc., of Hellenizing African God. While Okot P'Bitek called for demythologizing and dehellenizing the African God, Kato has called for the eradication of African God, as it amounts to total falsehood¹⁵. But these calls have not even considered whether such conceptualizations of the Supreme Being by the writers have been true to the available facts. P'Bitek's work stemmed from nationalism, while Kato's work stemmed from ecumenism. P'Bitek did show that intellectual smuggling is an academic crime that should be purged, but the implication of the cure and the cure itself consists in the elucidation of their mistakes. One of such mistakes was the absence of a clear discussion of the relationship between God (Olodumare) and evil. As Kato says:

Another problem in Mbiti's presentation is the absence of hardly any reference to evil attributed to God in African traditional religions¹⁶.

Now, Kato seems to be saying that Olodumare is partly evil; that is his interpretation of the understanding of evil by Africans. This needs to be subjected to closer examination. It is this and related matters that constitute the point of departure of this essay from the works of Mbiti, Idowu, and others. When the African theologian scholars discuss the attributes of God among the Africans, they ignore the problem of evil. The attributes they ascribe to Olodumare are, according to Idowu, that he is creator, king omnipotent, omniscient, judge, immortal, and holy¹⁷. In another work, Olodumare is unique, real, controller and one¹⁸. According to Mbiti, God (Olodumare) in addition to those attributes listed by Idowu, has other attributes such as transcendence, immanence, self-existence, pre-eminence, greatness, causal powers, immateriality, mysteriousness, unity, eternity, plurality, mercifulness, kindness, love, faithfulness, and goodness¹⁹. All these attributes, when co-present in the Supreme Being to the maximum, generate the problem of evil in any religion. This problem has remained a cancerous one in Judaeo-Christian religion (post Old Testament) and has been the source of truculent atheism, skepticism, and agnosticism. We will briefly examine this problem as it arises in Christian religion and ask whether this problem is equally or even ever present in the Yoruba understanding of God (Olodumare).

THE THEISTIC PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

The theistic problem of evil can be properly appreciated if one apprehends the import of the following passage from Quinn. Of theistic religions, he says:

According to theists, human persons are called upon to worship God. Theists typically hold that their reverence and adoration are the appropriate responses to Him. This view presupposes that God deserves or merits worship. If a being were not worthy of worship, then surely worship directed at such a being would be widely inappropriate. But what features must

a being have to be fitting and deserving object of worship? It seems clear that only a morally perfect being could be worthy of unqualified devotion typical of theistic worship. Moral goodness falling short of perfection might earn a being admiration but never adoration. This is why it is essential to theistic orthodoxy that God be thought of as perfectly good ²⁰.

That Christianity and other theistic religions believe in God is a basic component of these religions. These religions would not have any further significance and would lose their followers and devotion if the God-head is detracted from. As such, affirmation of the existence of a perfect God is a necessity. However, the affirmation of the existence has often sprung from diverse cognitive directions and sources syncretized into an absolute epistemic criterion. To support the position that God exists, some would adduce revelation--that God disclosed Himself in varying degrees appropriate to circumstances to certain people such as Moses, Mohammed, and the writer of Revelations in the Holy Bible; some others will claim knowledge of the numinous by direct intuition from the innermost of their being; some will adduce moral grounds to support such knowledge; some others will use the nature of the cosmos to support their epistemic affirmation, while others yet claim the knowledge by a leap of faith. By whatever method of cognitive discovery God is arrived at within all forms of theism, certain attributes are said to be intrinsic to His nature to deserve the exalted and unparalleled devotion and worship.

While it could be philosophically interesting to critically analyse the validity or otherwise of the various epistemic sources and grounds for the existence of Deity, while atheism and agnosticism, and of course, theism, has been occasioned by this type of philosophical undertaking, this is not of direct relevance to our discussion of the problem of evil. Our concern is with the given-ness of Deity in theism. This given-ness also has certain attributes. It is the consequence of these attributes that brings into focus, against the background of factual and rational experience and contemplation, the problem of evil. Going back to Quinn in his very ingenious and lucid essay quoted from above, one clearly sees the ramifications of the issue. He avers that:

Theists also hold that God created the heavens and the earth. God is, therefore, responsible for at least some of the good and evil in the cosmos of contingent things. Theists cannot avoid grappling with the problem of evil. How could a perfectly good being create a cosmos containing less good than the very best he could have created? And if a being worthy of worship could create the best cosmos he could, is a theist committed to holding that this is the best of all possible worlds ²¹.

Thus, properly understood, the Divine Being, worthy of worship in the great scriptural religions (and here the reference points are Christian and Islam), has been conceptualized in such a way that He has all positive attributes in superlative and unlimited degree, and lacks all negative attributes totally. As the greatest conceivable Being, He is not in want of any positive attribute, or predicate.

But this is what experience seems to contra-indicate. For, if that being, so conceived and not otherwise conceivable, created the inhabited world of humans so organized, then one needs to account for at least the natural disease and evils that have recurrently plagued the universe created by this being. One may leave aside moral, economic, socio-political evils as being

dependent upon man, and as such preventable if man so wills. Formulated minimally, the problem of evil for the theist is this:

If God is omnipotent, omniscient, creator (causa sui or prima causa)

All-loving, all-good, all-merciful, then how can we explain evil?

Does God cause evil?

If God does not cause evil, then who causes it?

Who created this cause of evil?

Was the creator of evil all-knowing, past, present, and future?

Or, is God actually all-good, all-loving and all-powerful but unable to stop evil-- which is patently absurd?

Or, does God not wish to stop evil ²²?

This is the dilemma that the theist has to squarely face! Christianity and other monotheistic religions, conceptualized in this fashion, do not seem to have any easy way of escaping either of the horns of the dilemma or of passing between. If they choose to say that God did not create evil, then it would follow that there either is no evil in the world, which is patently false, unless we redefine our concepts, or that someone else created evil, which means that God did not create everything. Even with this caveat, there would still remain the problem of accounting for who created the creator of evil--or else, evil is self-caused, which is equally unconvincing. If they choose to say that God did not wish to eradicate evil, then it could mean either He lacks the power to do so, or He is sadistic and malevolent, options which are totally unacceptable to the theist. There then seems no way of escaping the problem without either redefining and limiting the attributes of Deity or becoming an atheist, or at least, an agnostic.

The most popular attempt to deal with the problem in Christianity and Islam consists in saying that Lucifer, or Devil, or Satan, who was formerly God's deputy or right-hand angel, is the cause or originator of all evils in the universe. That he used to be a good angel charged with powers second only to that of God, but, that through conceit and conspiracy, he became demonic and totally evil. Thus, although capable of having appearances of temporary goodness, whatever schemes he may conceive are ultimately in the pursuance of his diabolical goals of evil. He is thus the Devil. What a good Christian and Muslim should do then is to bear his/her coat of armour and join God's salvation army and fight against the evil one--Satan, the prince of darkness.

Persuasive and simple as this seems, it cannot escape obvious objections or, at least, rejoinders. If God had been all-knowing and all-good, He would not have created Satan or Lucifer. If, *par impossible*, He did create Satan in error, then it should not have been too difficult for Him to rectify the error and improve or destroy Satan, unless He is not, *contra hypothesis*, all-powerful.

Before going further to consider this problem as it relates to Olodumare among the Yoruba people, it should be emphasized that the problem of evil did not arise within the context of Old Testament religion. There God could and did exercise His powers to suit the ends He designed and desired--which desire is coincident with ultimate up-rightness and justice, even though the justice is from the Jewish perspective. Hence, He caused the destruction of Pharaoh's army and

used an earth tremor to destroy the walls of Jericho, while commanding Saul to utterly slay the Amalekites. There He was the Creator who stood firmly for justice and only forgave the penitent who makes atonement or remission for sins against Him and His chosen people. Nowhere was God regarded in the Old Testament as evil or as a weakling for doing these things that caused people great harm. Even the New Testament episode of sending demons into swine that later perished in the Sea was interpreted by the gossellers as something good--not minding the investment of the owners of the swine who were non-Jews.

On the extra-theological plane, one may ask the relevant epistemic questions as to the source of the knowledge of the creator of evil, Satan or Lucifer. Was it based on eye-witness experience? Was it based on inference derived from such an account? Was it mere speculation from the latter phenomenon of apparently inexplicable natural disasters and human suffering? How are we to fight an enemy about whom in all we know are partisan accounts? How do we even come to the knowledge that Lucifer is the origin of all evil and not just the fall-guy and scape-goat used for the deliberate desires and actions of a Theistic God?

Such questions will surely not be entertained by a committed theistic, yet they are relevant and should not detract from his commitment to his God as it will only further enhance his understanding of his God. I do not see how man is any worse for his knowledge that God is disposed to reward or punish with good or evil, depending on human goodness or evilness as the Old Testament does show.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN YORUBA PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

It is purely an academic issue to start by saying that Yoruba people do have many divinities through which each group approach Olodumare it follows that one cannot speak of a Yoruba traditional religion. Such line of reasoning will only assist in detracting from the crucial task of understanding how the Yoruba conceive of evil before Christianity. As far as it is rationally possible, it should be stated emphatically that the problem of evil did not, does not, and need not arise within Yoruba traditional religion. In fact, this initial axiomatic assertion needs all the emphasis it can elicit; in spite of all efforts to show the contrary, only this conclusion seems the plausible and defensible one.

Olodumare has all the attributes which Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, Dopamu, and other theological scholars have annotated; that is, Olodumare is the origin of the universe and in the language of Anselm, He is the Being that which none greater can be conceived.

Let us consider some of these attributes, particularly those that have generated the dilemma of how to account for evil in Christianity. In this regard, we shall be brief and state the facts as they have been presented by other scholars and as found in Yoruba traditional religion.

(a) Olodumare is the Creator, Cause and Origin of all Things:

Here Idowu says:

. . . we have learnt that the divinities were brought into being by Olodumare and that the work of creating the earth was commissioned by Him. Everything in heaven and on earth owes its origin in Him. In His capacity as Creator He is known as Eleda-- "the Creator", "the Maker".

He is the Origin and Giver of Life, and in that capacity He is called Elemi-- "the Owner of Spirit", or "the Owner of Life" ²³.

The evidence that Olodumare is the creator of everything is displayed in virtually all accounts of the relationship between Olodumare and the Universe. Where He did not directly cause or create, He instructed the divinities to create and He supervised the creation work. So, He created both the good and the bad, the well-formed and the deformed, the rainy season and the drought. Through Him must be sought the cause of all things. And everything there is has a rationale and can be understood and used by the thoughtful and gifted like the herbalists and medicine men.

(b) Olodumare is the Most Powerful Being for Whom Nothing is too Great or too Small, Below or Beyond to Accomplish:

Here the powers of obas, ancestors elders, witches, herbalists, medicine men, divinities, etc., are all derived from Olodumare and are limited and limitable by Him. It is this feature which transmutes in the language of patristic and scholastic church-men into the concept of omnipotence, and this cannot be quarreled with, since the Yoruba obviously believe that all good and bad take their origin from Olodumare ²⁴.

Here, as in the creativity of Olodumare, one should not be surprised that good and evil are all in the control and dispensation of Olodumare. Ultimately, each proper usage or improper usage of such power is subject to Olodumare's final pronouncement of judgement. His ways are such that evil doers never escape punishment.

(c) Olodumare's Knowledge is Incomparable and Hence Has no Equal:

Having avoided the usage of the classical and neo-classical diction of omnipotence, it is also advisable to avoid the nomenclature of omniscience in the description of the over-arching knowledge and wisdom of the Supreme Deity among the Yoruba people. This is not because it has built-in conceptual difficulties and engenders dilemmas. There is no disputing the fact that Olodumare has the greatest knowledge. However, the fact that some things happen "behind His back" or "without His direct awareness" has been borne out in the practical aspects of creation, sustenance, and running of the universe, here, there, and everywhere, including even the domain of Olodumare (Orun or heaven). He has had recourse to the use of Orunmila and Ifa, the wise ones and the means of discerning the situation of things past, present, and future.

This suggestion concerning the limitation of the knowledge of Olodumare might seem to be the one most open to controversy among those too used to the erstwhile tradition originated by Idowu and enhanced by the cross-pollination of religion. Hence, it is pertinent to buttress it with concrete examples from extant materials in Yoruba tradition.

In Idowu's works one finds: (i) the account of how solid earth was created reported the commissioning of some divinities to perform the job, how someone failed and how ultimately the task was completed by others and the report had to be carried back to Olodumare ²⁵. (ii) Olodumare once consulted the oracle to find out about His possible death and we hear this Ifa passage saying:

Korofo, the cult of the underground
Is the one which consulted the oracle about Olodumare
and declared that his death would never be heard of ²⁶.

Another one says:

Olodumare has rubbed His head with bar-wood dust (Iyerosun)
He will never die
(His) whole head is become exceedingly hoary ²⁷.

All these are recorded in Ogbe (O) yeku by Idowu. The English translations provided by him do not seem to be either the most appropriate or the most accurate and faithful. The second line of the first Ifa quoted speaks as if it was not Olodumare that Himself consulted Korofo, the Ifa Priest of the Underground, but Korofo who did the consultation, without any request, about Olodumare. Also, the second one speaks of the oracle as supporting the immortality of Olodumare. However, properly understood, it will be obvious that it was Olodumare who consulted His wise men. In the same vein Okanran Osa says,

The young never hear that cloth is dead
Cloth only wears old to shreds
The old never hear that cloth is dead
Cloth only wears old to shreds
The young never hear that Olodumare is dead
Cloth only wears old to shreds
The old never hear that Olodumare is dead
Cloth only wears old to shreds ²⁸.

Apart from the picturesque and onomatopoeic presentation of the stanza, one must bear in mind a crucial elucidation made by Idowu himself which is of singular importance in the consideration of Olodumare's attributes. He says:

The myth connected with this verse also has it that it was Olodumare Himself who sought the means of immortality. In consequence, he was told to make some sacrifices to provide Himself with a large piece of white cloth. When the necessary rite had been performed, the white cloth was spread over Him so that He was completely covered. From that time He became immortal ²⁹.

Contrary to the earlier misleading translation, one must observe that Idowu was being faithful to his sources in this passage. Here he was able to purge himself of the shackles of Christian ontological categories and theological demands. There are multiple instances relating to the omnipotence, omniscience, and creativeness of Olodumare, but only one more instance will be cited. Thus, Idowu says:

... there is a story which has it that Olodumare Himself was once perplexed over a very important matter. All the other divinities tried but failed to tell Him the reason for His perplexity; only Orunmila succeeded in putting his finger on the source of the trouble...³⁰.

This shows that although Olodumare has the supremacy of wisdom, yet He has endowed a divinity with the task of divining the causes of problems, pronouncing cures or remedies and advising. To mellow the full implications of this fact Idowu then states:

Obviously, this story was formulated to enhance the importance of Orunmila without any realization that it might detract from Olodumare's attributes of "all-wiseness" ³¹.

Obviously, contra Idowu, this fact is neither anathemic to the Yoruba, nor does it present any incongruity in their perception of Olodumare. Also, it does not in any way detract the least bit from the "all-wiseness" of Olodumare. This is because he mistakenly supposes that since Olodumare created Orunmila and his wisdom in the first place, so, tapping from the resources of a created being cannot amount to a reduction in the attribute of the creator. Supporting this point Wande Abimbola suggests:

According to the myths, there were occasions when there being no physical barrier between heaven and earth, Ifa was summoned by Olodumare to use his great wisdom to solve problems for Him ³².

The faithfulness of Abimbola results from the fact that he was concerned with the corpus of Ifa as the embodiment of the wisdom of Olodumare as bequeathed to Orunmila. He was not concerned with a definition of the attributes of Olodumare. Later, he recounts a story of a quarrel between an Ifa priest and Orunmila, and how Olodumare had to ask for both sides to the dispute ³³. The Yoruba do not see anything incongruous in this type of arrangement because justice demands fairness to all concerned in any dispute. Apart from that, "the child is wise, the adult is wise, is the foundation of which Ile-Ife is built", as the Yoruba popular saying goes, and it indicates that nobody should pretend to have all knowledge. We shall return to this and related issues later. For now, let us consider one other attribute of Olodumare, the Supreme Being among the Yoruba people.

(d) Olodumare is the Good Judge:

In Yoruba traditional religion many attributes are coincident in the goodness of Olodumare. These include impartiality of judgement, where a case is brought before Him He listens attentively to both sides. Others are holiness and benevolence. God dispenses justice with compassionate fairness, but He does not brook crookedness or pretentious smartness. As the Supreme King, after His court there is no other court of appeal for redressing wrongs; for this reason He does not take arbitrary decisions that conflict with the dictates of justice ³⁴.

Now, occasionally, because of the limitation of our understanding of God, man may impute judgmental defects or actions to Olodumare, whereas, to the Yoruba, this only underscores the fact that Olodumare is beyond human comprehension. If we had access to all antecedent factors and future events it would be possible to completely understand Olodumare's action. Here only Orunmila has access to this type of knowledge and he uses the knowledge to assist the universe. The inescapability of judgement in Yoruba belief is remarked by Idowu as follows:

Olodumare is the final disposer of all things. He is the Judge. He controls man's destiny and each will receive from Him as he deserves. But here on earth judgement has already begun for every man according to his character . . . it is Olodumare who judges character ³⁵.

And Mbiti says:

In many societies, it is believed that God punishes individuals through illness, misfortune, barrenness or death. The Yoruba consider God to be judge over all, and when misfortune befalls a moral offender, people say, "He is under the lashes of God" ³⁶.

In a discussion of related matters, I wrote:

There is no doubt that God is the most powerful Being and that He has all the superlative attributes one can consider, but the Yoruba do not think that such a being cannot do evil or cause evil. It is part of the attributes of the Supreme Being to be able to utilize all things ³⁷.

The implications of these attributes of Olodumare are that He is the most Powerful Being, the Creator, the Wise and Impartial Judge who exercises inexorable control over all in the universe. The problem of evil fails to arise within the context of Yoruba belief in Olodumare because a being with all the attributes stated above is conceivable as capable of both good and bad. He uses both for the ultimate good governance of the universe ³⁸. In fact, to say that God does not or cannot do evil is to unnecessarily circumscribe His power. In this regard I had earlier stated:

Equally, some of the attributes of Olodumare are diametrically at variance with those of the Christian God. Consequently, some theoretical and doctrinal problems that arise within Christianity do not arise for Africans . . . The sources of evil are God-devised and help to maintain high moral standards. The Christian God is ever-merciful, slow to anger but quick to forgive (in fact He does not desire the death of the sinner but that he repent and be saved), whereas, the Yoruba Olodumare is a morally upright God who metes out justice here on earth and not necessarily in the hereafter where we are not sure anybody will witness and learn from it ³⁹.

All the scholars we have considered have agreed that evil, as such, is not understandable. Nothing is intrinsically evil. We call something evil because it does not favor us or because it causes us distress. We may not know or understand the reason for the event or action, but ultimately it forms part of the overall design of Olodumare. His attributes do not preclude the device and use of evil for the betterment of society. God is the creator. He created everything, both positive and negative. Why? We cannot know. His ways are incomprehensible. God is the most powerful Being, hence, He does and can do anything, including good and evil. It is only natural that the most powerful Being should not suffer any handicap or hindrance, especially in the execution of justice. God is all-wise (omniscient) and knows all things. Ifa aids Him in this regard as the agent He created as the repository of wisdom and knowledge. There is no conflict in saying this. He still remains the overall controller of this being to whom He has entrusted wisdom. This is unlike the Christian God, who after having endowed Satan with powers second only to His own loses control over Satan. Finally, God is Judge; He judges all according to their deserts; He rewards uprightness and punishes evil.

Thus, Olodumare is more akin to the Old Testament Yahweh in his requirement of honesty and uprightness. This ensured law and order in the societies involved. When the Christian God is introduced, it become easy to sin all morning and afternoon and repent in the evening and have all your sins forgiven through a special dispensation of grace. This introduction created room for a permissiveness that has never been witnessed in Yoruba society before. A chasm was created over which no bridge was erected. Hence people swear on the Holy Bible and Holy Q'uran without qualms, while they balk when called upon to do the same for Ogun, Sango, or

some other divinity. They find a convenient, but dubious, excuse in the denigrating, culturally enslaving explanation that swearing by Sango or Ogun is idol worshiping. Making a similar point, about Igbo religion Onuoha says that:

The traditional religion makes no apology for exposing the law of retribution. Every act of immorality disrupts the balance of the ontological order and God has ordained that the law of reciprocal effect should restore this order automatically. This law operates blindly like a reflex or a boomerang. The suffering incurred by every sin must be undergone. God's justice cannot be compromised ⁴⁰. This system of justice prevents crime and criminal tendencies in society.

Questions may arise regarding the purely philosophical issues of how we discern the law ordained by Olodumare and how such a law operates and whether such a divine law is not weaker than a man-made humanistic scheme. One must, however, acknowledge that these academic issues do not bear any direct relation to the problems of communal life. These questions are relevant on the purely academic plane for any theologically based morality, not just traditional moral systems alone. Anyway, what better justification does one need than that anarchism and criminality were rare phenomena in traditional African societies--problems now plaguing so-called civilized societies that embrace theistic religions. This is the fact that some scholars have celebrated in their reference to a good old African past. This is not saying that there were no dark spots in this African past; there were wars and criminal activities, but these were easily controlled. In fact, no one deliberately does evil and gets away with it. Rituals only appease acts of omission or mistakes, mellows the punishment, and is payment for a crime committed in error. If the old system of oath making, swearing, and contractual agreements can be reinstated into the legal system one may witness a better dispensation of justice and a reduction of crime.

Secondly, one finds that the belief in punishment in the world of man enhances good behavior more than one that defers it till a time no one knows. Yoruba believe that those who secretly commit crime suffer secretly in silence. Apart from this, efforts are made to expiate crimes as it blemishes the offender, his family, his age-group, his clan, and his society. Grievous offenses call for death and excommunication, and stigmatize future generations. As unrecorded conventions, they have been more effective than all the legal codes enacted and which operate on the ability of a smart lawyer to pick loop-holes in the system for exploitation.

Finally, when one considers this system and the understanding of Deity, evil, and justice, one finds it really has more rational justification and a more humanitarian basis than the permissiveness that has eroded all norms of decorous behavior in present society. To me it is more reasonable to use the putative existence of a just Deity whose punishment is here and now, or visited on direct offspring (up to the fourth generation, as the Old Testament says) than allow the sinner to go on sinning, hoping that he will (may) one day repent. Thus, the Yoruba attitude to the new dispensation is that before the evil doer is punished in the hereafter, many serious and good things would have been spoiled.

ESU AND OLODUMARE: CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS

The usual understanding and interpretation of Esu is as one of the major divinities among the Yoruba people. According to Idowu:

. . . Esu is primarily a "special relations officer" between heaven and earth, the inspector general who reports regularly to Olodumare on the deeds of the divinities and men, and checks and makes sure reports on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular ⁴¹.

This clearly shows that as a divinity capable of doing his duties as charged by Olodumare, Esu occupies a prominent position among the divinities. He discharges these duties without fear or favor. Thus, Esu is a good minister of God. He is the enforcer who ensures that due reward and punishment ensues on any action. He is, therefore, courted and even bribed. When such overtures fail to mitigate punishment, Esu is then given a bad name.

This has even been more so with the advent of Christianity and Islam. The new religions sought for equivalence of the Devil and Satan and found Esu a convenient one, because all those who force people to do the right things are always unpopular. Idowu, in spite of the above statement, was still compelled to champion the ambivalent understanding of Esu, when he said:

There is an unmistakable element of evil in Esu, and for that reason he has been predominantly associated with evil things. There are those who say that the primary function of Esu in this world is to spoil things. But even so we cannot call him the Devil . . . what element of "evil" there is in Esu can be found also to some degree in most of the other divinities ⁴².

The indecision echoed in this, and in many other passages in Idowu's works, has provided material for much fanciful interpretation and reductionism. Misinterpreted, Dopamu, in his recent book, *Esu: the Invisible Foe of Man*, labored extensively, but, to my mind, unsuccessfully, in spite of the intellectual competence and erudition he displayed, to achieve the much desired Christian and Muslim equivalence of Esu with Satan ⁴³. This tendency was also present to a lesser degree in an earlier work Dopamu co-authored with Awolalu, as they both echoed the Idowu ambivalence regarding Esu in Yoruba religion ⁴⁴. The dissatisfaction which Dopamu had with the mere confusing indecision exhibited in this jointly written book gave way to the outright equivalence of Esu with Satan in his own work. Hence he says:

In Yoruba belief, Esu is often associated with the power of evil referred to by Idowu. And it is in this sense that we shall regard Esu as we go on with our exposition of his figure, nature and character ⁴⁵.

Dopamu's project would have served a dual end if it had succeeded: First, it would have provided an intellectual justification for an initially gratuitous and malicious translation of Esu as the Devil or Satan and the attendant introduction of the problem of evil into an alien cultural and religious environment. Secondly, it would have provided the first accurate treatment of an issue of interest across many disciplinary investigations.

Let us examine his grounds for equating Satan with the Yoruba divinity called Esu. These are: (a) Esu is Satan, because the Christian and Muslim Scriptures say so; (b) the Yoruba people seem to have accepted the equivalence by Christians and Muslims; (c) the Yoruba hold that originally Esu was not intrinsically evil, but he was *disobedient* and *proud* and became the embodiment of evil, always opposing and destroying that which is good; (d) since the Yoruba put the responsibility for all evil and suffering elsewhere instead of with Olodumare, then Esu must be the cause, along with his agents; (e) that since Esu is overwhelmingly versatile and capricious, his evil nature over-shadows his good; (f) Awolalu believes with Idowu that there is an element of evil in Esu. Hence, Dopamu, concludes that Esu is Satan or the Devil of the New Testament--an out and out evil being.

These do not seem to me to be cogent arguments on which to anchor such a critical conclusion as the religious, metaphysical, moral, cultural, and linguistic one that Esu is Satan and, in effect, stand Yoruba tradition on its head. In the first place, that the scriptures translate Satan as Esu does not justify such translation. In the search by the foreign religionists for an appropriate equivalence of Satan, the nearest divinity was latched upon, regardless of differences, and without any advance warning that such a translation is totally arbitrary and one of mere convenience. Many Yoruba words have been similarly translated, leading to the continued commission of the error of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and confusion against which Sodipo and Hallen warned in the first chapter of their seminal book, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft* ⁴⁶. There, following Quine, they argued against unguarded word for word translation of one linguistic term into another because of indeterminacy of meaning between the first and second language.

Secondly, that the Yoruba have accepted the translation provided by these devotees of the new faith does not mean that the translation is accurate; a lie repeated often enough easily takes on a garb of truth. This is more often than not the case since daily the various religious teachers keep drumming it into the ears of the Yoruba that they were wrong *ab initio* in their conception of Esu whereas the scriptures were right. The fear of eternal damnation in hell-fire (also a new phenomenon in the religious terrain of the Yoruba people) ensures silence even in the face of blatant falsehood.

Thirdly, nowhere do we find Esu as being willfully and maliciously disobedient or proud to Olodumare, contrary to the imputation resulting from the Biblical fall from favour of Lucifer. He might have been boastful because he upholds justice without fear or favor, but neither Idowunor Awolalu, nor Dopamu himself, have been able to justify this. The passage to which Dopamu refers in the work of Lijadu shows that, unlike the intractable Satan of the Scriptures, both Olodumare and Orunmila can and have always been able to overpower Esu ⁴⁷. Tradition shows that Esu is an indispensable friend of all the other divinities and an intermediary between Orun and Aye. Where then is the equivalence that the Yoruba Esu is Satan?

Fourthly, we come to a very crucial issue that deserves very careful attention. This concerns the belief ascribed to the Yoruba people by Dopamu that, since the Yoruba believe that God does no evil, it must mean that it is Satan or Esu that is responsible for all evil. As we have repeatedly said, the Yoruba believe that Olodumare can use both good and bad in the process of ensuring justice. In doing so, Esu is instrumental in a large measure. He carries out the will of Olodumare most of the time. He can favor or disfavor one, depending on the moral probity of the individual concerned. If Olodumare ordains a law, if the divinities, the ancestors, the society make laws and someone breaks them, what better officer can enforce the law than the legitimate custodian of the law? This is what Esu does. The absolute polarity of good and evil makes no sense in the understanding of either Esu or Olodumare.

Fifth, the overwhelming versatility of Esu results from the task entrusted to him, while the "capriciousness" attributed to him is based on the fact that one may never know whether one has broken the law or not. It is only when suffering or setback results that the person suspects the contravention of a law. Finally, the fact that someone believes that some element of evil exists in Esu as in other divinities, does not make those other divinities to be all evil, nor does it

make Esu evil. It needs to be emphasized that the Yoruba believe that both good and bad always go hand in hand.

As this essay is primarily concerned with an exposition of Olodumare as believed by the Yoruba people traditionally, the phenomenon of Esu is only of secondary relevance. Because of its link with the problem of evil one may end this section with some cross-reference of materials. Of relevance here is Onuoha's discussion of Igbo religion in related matters. He says:

They do not think to assign a separate ultimate cause to evil since they realize that evil is an imperfection, a not-entity, the absence of good or being. Evil does not require a cause. It is the Christians who have elevated Ekwensu to the rank of anti-God or Satan. Igbo religion has no room for such an "evil incarnate" or devil who does nothing but evil.⁴⁸

Similarly, Mugo Gatheru suggests:

When the missionaries brought the Bible to the Kikuyu, our people understood the Old Testament right away, for many of the customs of the ancient Jews were very much like ours. Like the Hebrew people of old, the Kikuyu are God-fearing people . . . They had no idea, of course, about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, or the devil . . . They had no Devil either⁴⁹.

These passages represent the situation among many traditional African societies. But the influence of faith and the need to explain a phenomenon in a new language has affected the understanding and interpretation of the religion and culture of the Yoruba people. The import of this socially, economically, politically, culturally, etc., as of other influences, has only begun to be felt as acutely as possible in the disintegration of the Nigerian and other African societies. Here, Babayemi's words are extremely relevant. He said:

It is also to be understood that while in Christianity and Islam, there is the structural opposition between God and the devil, that is, the forces of evil constantly confront God's work to destroy it. There is no such structural opposition in the African concept. In fact, the Yoruba Esu could not adequately represent the Christian Devil or the Islamic Satan; Esu in Yoruba is not opposed to God's work . . .⁵⁰.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to show that the imposition of foreign interpretations on Olodumare has created dilemmas which are unresolved, and apparently irresolvable, thereby generating atheism and agnosticism. I also argued that this has led to deleterious social, moral, economic, political, and cultural beliefs. Thus, there is the implicit call to a reappraisal of Yoruba and other African religious traditions and cultural background, but not with a view of going back into the "dark ages", but one of building a humane, law-abiding, responsible society. The discussion of some of the attributes of Olodumare only serves to accentuate the fact that the problem of evil in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is alien to our Yoruba ancestors. The pioneering works of the first African theologians and scholars should be taken as pathfinders and not as the finale of all research and investigation, to be repeatedly parroted as the truth⁵⁰.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London, Longmans, 1962, p. vii.
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3. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. op. cit. p. 140.
4. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, London, SPCK., 1969, p. 23.
5. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, London, SPCK., 1969, p. 24.
6. Ibid. pp. 24-25.
7. D. Westermann, *African and Christianity*, Oxford, University Press, 1937, pp. 65ff.
8. Of all extant material, nowhere is it categorically stated that the Yoruba people believe that Olodumare ever had sons or daughters. In fact, the only material that has suggested that Olodumare has sons is to be found in the work of Dr. M. Akin Makinde. And it must be noted that he was discussing Emi, that is the living aspect of man. Thus he says, "The soul we gives body (ara) its life while ori controls human destiny. Emi is regarded as the offspring of Olodumare (omo Olodumare) which accounts for its spirituality and immortality." This can be found in his article "Immortality of the Soul and the Yoruba Theory of Seven Heavens" in *Journal of Cultures and Ideas*, Vol. 1, No. 1 Dec. 1983, p. 45. The word "offspring" would be better taken to mean not son or daughter, but as meaning "originating from" or "issuing from", because, in another place Makinde speaks of Olodumare breathing life (emi) into the body molded by Orisanla (vide p. 50).
9. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, op. cit., pp 140ff.
10. B. H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, Kenya: Evangel, 1975. p. 56.
11. Ibid. p. 57 (emphasis mine).
12. Ibid. p.70.
13. Ibid. p. 75.
14. Okot P'Bitek has a chapter devoted to the demythologizing and dehellenizing of the African God in his seminal volume titled *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, Kenya, 1970.
15. B. H. Kato, op. cit., pp. 77ff.
16. Ibid. p. 71.
17. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, op. cit. pp. 38-47.
18. E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1973, pp. 149-165.
19. J. S. Mbiti, *Concept of God in Africa*, London, SPCK, 1970, Part One. See also his *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann, 1969, pp. 36-38 and also J.O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan, Onibonoje Press Ltd. 1979, pp. 45-53.
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22. J.A.I. Bewaji, "African Beliefs" in O.Y. Oyeneye and M.O. Soremi (eds) *Nigerian Life and Culture*, OSU, Ago-Iwoye, 1985, pp 343-344.
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24. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, op. cit., pp. 40-41.
25. Ibid. pp. 18ff.
26. Ibid. p. 43.
27. Ibid. p. 44.
28. Ibid. p. 44.
29. Ibid. p. 44.
30. Ibid. p. 77.
31. Ibid. p. 77.
32. Wande Abimbola, *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*, Ibadan, O.U.P. 1976, p.5.
33. Ibid. p. 145. See also p. 107.
34. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare*, op. cit., pp. 40ff.
35. Ibid. p. 42.
36. J. S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, op. cit., p. 77.
37. J.A.I. Bewaji, "Human Knowledge and the Existence of God", in C.S. Momoh et. al. (eds). *Nigerian Studies in Religious Tolerance*, Vol. IV, Lagos, CBAAS/NARETO, John West, 1988, p. 243.
38. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare*, op. cit., p. 76.
39. J.A.I. Bewaji, "African Beliefs" op. cit., p. 343 and p. 345.
40. E. Onuoha, "The Philosophy of Igbo Religion" in C.S.Momoh et al. (eds.), *Nigerian Studies in Religious Tolerance*, Vol. IV. op. cit. p. 384.
41. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare*, op. cit. p. 80.
42. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, op. cit. p. 83.
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44. J.O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan, Onibonoje Press Ltd., 1979, pp. 82-83.
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