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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF *OCHE OLA MU* – THE CONCEPT OF THE HUMAN PERSON FROM AN IDOMA PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of the obvious parallels across African beliefs, traditions, and rituals, it is essential to consider each African people individually in relation to the others. This is the most effective method for avoiding broad generalizations and treating everyone with the same superior viewpoint. With this in mind, this study revisits the concept of the human person from an Idoma perspective, which, in contrast to the vast amounts of material available in most African perspectives, has received little attention. Due to a lack of literature on the Idoma's perspective on the subject, interviews were used in gathering details. The footnotes contain useful information.

INTRODUCTION

¹From the Adoka point of view, this research examines the numerous components of the human person and how they all function together to maintain the human person's well-being.

¹ We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Late Mr David Ukah, whose individual efforts made this research possible. We appreciate him connecting us with Adoka natives for interviews and acting as an interpreter. Mr. Ukah not only took the time to spell Idoma words correctly, but he also took the time to explain in detail certain complex terms that needed to be clarified. We thank Papa Samuel Odugbo, Prince Adukwu, Mrs. RoselinejatoOmaga, Emmanuel Omaga, and many others for their contributions to this effort through interviews. Professor Jacob KehindeAyantayo, who was the first to approve this research proposal and proofread and supervised the first manuscript, is also thanked.



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First and foremost, who are the Adoka people? The Adoka people are Idomas who live in Adoka, an Idoma village in Benue State's Otupko Local Government, Nigeria. They are known as Idomas because they speak the Idoma dialect.

Idoma is one of the ten largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, and the second largest in Benue State (the Tivs being the largest), where it occupies an area of about 13,015 kilometers covering nine big Local Government areas: Ado, Okpokwu, Ogbadibo, Agatu, Apa, Otupko, Ohimini, Obi and Oju. With Otupko as the main town, the Idoma land is bounded on the North by the Benue River; with Tiv on the West; Nsukkah and Abakaliki respectively on the south; the Igala people of Kogi South, an inland, about 72 kilometres east of the confluence with the Niger River².

As previously indicated, the Idomas' language is Idoma. According to Oduma-Aboh, the Kwa language family has a diverse range of dialects, which he divides into five categories:

”the central or Otupko dialect spoken in Otupko, Adoka, Ugboju, Oglewu and Onyangede districts; the Igumele dialect spoken in Igumale and Agila districts; the Agatu dialect spoken in Agatu and Ochekwu districts; and the Okpoga dialect spoken in Okpoga district, (it is closer to the Igumale – Agila dialect, but not the same), and the Western dialect spoken in Otukpa and other districts in Ogbadibo”

However, due of the immensity of the Adoka and a lack of funds, this article is confined to AdokaIcho (Ai-Ode), AdokaEhaje (Ai-Enyikwole), and AdokaNenche (Entepka)³.

Ocheola mu (Human Person)

The descriptive concept of a person in African traditional thought, according to Kwasi Wiredu, is concerned with critical analyses of the constituent parts: the physical (tangible and visible) and non-physical (intangible or invisible) parts of the human person, as well as their relationship and significance in the scheme of things⁴. The human person is defined by Africans as an integrated totality made up of a unity of disparate parts, with the body serving as the "outer person" and several other invisible and intangible elements serving as the "inner person"⁵. This is in stark contrast to Hindu rigid dualism, which sees the soul as trapped or at best imprisoned in the body, with man's primary goal being to free it⁶; or the Greek viewpoint, in which the body, mind, and spirit all appear to exist and function independently⁷.

The Idoma word *Oyayi*⁸, which roughly translates as "life," has multiple meanings. Idomas translate it as "being alive" or "one's reason for existing". Generally, the term refers to a person's mentality, attitude, life goal, and

²Oduma-Aboh, S. O. (2015). *The Symbolic Death of Monarchs in the Process of Installation in the Idoma Land: a paradigm for fighting Corruption in Nigeria*. Global Journal of Human Social Science. Vol.15. Global Journals Inc. (USA). Pdf.

³ Ibid. The Idoma land has four main divisions: Okpokwu, Oju, Ado and Otupko, the largest.

⁴Onah, G. I. (2000). *The Universal and the Particular in Wiredu's Philosophy of Human Nature*, in Olusegun Oladipo (ed), *The Third Way in African: Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu*, Ibadan, Nigeria. Hope Publications, p.74. In Akan nay African traditional thinking, Wiredu has two primary approaches to the concept of man. The descriptive is the first type, while the normative is the second. The descriptive displays the human person's ontological state, while the normative reveals his or her social status. Thus, by the latter approach, he meant that personhood is something that is gained via the internalization and commitment to the society's social ideals, rather than something that is given to you at birth. In other words, a person is someone who has achieved the status of being a responsible member of their community, not simply any human being.

⁵Idowu, B. (1994). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. Wazobia, N. Y., p.170. He goes over Yoruba conceptions and definitions of human nature and person, as well as the Yoruba concept of predestination and its connection to the human individual's postmortem fate. See Chapters 13 and 14 for more information.

⁶Teresia, M. H. (2005). *Afterlife: African Concepts*. Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved July 10, 2019. 11:12pm.

⁷Palmer, T. P. (2013). *Theology of the Old Testament*. Published by African Christian Textbooks, Plateau State Nigeria. p. 39. Using Hebrew etymological words for the numerous constituents of a person, he studies the human being. *Basar* is the human, frail, mortal flesh that yearns for God despite its vulnerability to sin. The soul, or *Nephesh*, refers to a person's life or the person themselves. The psychological reality dwelling in man, the seat of all faculties, desires, and emotions, is referred to as *Ruach*, the spirit, the intangible part of man. The human heart is referred to as *Lebab*. See pages 35 to 41 for more information.

⁸ When used as a noun, *Oyayi* denotes life, and when used as a verb, it means *being alive*.

social interaction, as well as their attitude toward things and occurrences. Idomas regard life as an unfettered and holy gift. They believe that only God has the authority to give or take life, and hence consider self- or other-murder to be a terrible sin.

This is the reason a large number of Idoma stories admonish and advise against looking down on the physically handicapped or financially disadvantaged. These myths teach that God's creative power cannot be disputed. Everything he creates is shaped to live and serve his needs. On this point, some of our responders believe that, rather than one's circumstances, what matters most in life is one's state of being alive. Thus, regardless of whether a person was morally upright or not, their lives are highly significant.

Although the aforementioned perception implies that the sacredness of life takes precedence over the manner in which it is lived, it does not imply that the Idomas promote an unethical way of life. The reason being that evil people cause harm in the society and inflict curses upon themselves and their families. Actually, the Adoka's tradition sees no logical explanations for immoral deeds, regardless of the circumstances one finds themselves in. The Adokas argue that one's ability to commit or choose between right and wrong is linked to one's mind (Odoh) and selfish desires, rather than any other circumstance, pleasant or unpleasant.

Idomas also believe that living a virtuous life gives oneself, one's family, and society as a whole respect, repute, and blessings. They claim that decent people live longer, enjoy more success in all aspects of life, produce better offspring, and have direct access to the afterlife when they die. Nonetheless, they argue that leading a moral life (Oye-olohi) is a question of choice, because everyone has the option to choose between doing good (odo-olohi) and doing evil (odo-bobi).

The Idoma tradition rejects the concept of predestination because Idomas do not believe that man's actions or inactions are predestined before birth. Many of our respondents believe that one's life pattern is a direct or indirect result of their personal acts or inactions. This means that if one's free will is misused, they are both responsible and liable. This explains why, despite the fact that dreadful people (ache bobi) rarely live long, they are humiliated and refused admittance into the ancestral world when they die in most Idoma legends.

In the Idoma perspective, *Oyaye* (life), *Okpaye* (body), *Alekwu* (spirit), *Oowu* (breath), *Oyie* (blood), *Odoh* (thinking), and *Ogigi*(shadow) are some of the components of *Ocheola mu* (the human person). *Okpaye* refers to all of the body's physical components. It is both tangible and visible, and its existence is dependent on the intangible components of an *Ocheola mu*. The breath (Oowu) is linked to the spirit, *Alekwu*, in the Idoma worldview, and is regarded to be the foundation for one's existence. Its presence or absence from the *Okpaye*(body) determines whether or not one lives. Our sources corroborated this, claiming that *Oowu* is closely linked to God and that God breathed it into *Ocheola mu* after it was created⁹.

Alekwu (Spirit)

The *Alekwu* is not only unseen and ethereal, but also a manifestation of *Owoicho* (God) in man. This statement expresses the truth that man's existence is dependent on God and that he cannot exist without Him. Regardless of whether one's spirit (*Alekwu*) is guiding them through life or not, it is up to the individual to accept or reject what their *Alekwu* has to say. As such, no one can blame their misfortunes or mistakes on God or their *Alekwu*. Evil is the outcome of one's own life (*Oyaye*), not one's spirit (*Alekwu*).

It is worth noting that the *Alekwu* is timeless. It cannot perish. After death, it departs from the physical body to rejoin the spirit world. Death has no effect on the *alekwu's* connection to the physical human realm from which it had vanished. This is due to *Alekwu's* form of being everywhere and knowing everything. This form gives

⁹ This corresponds to the Genesis creation story, in which God created man from the dust of the earth and breathed life into his nostrils, transforming him into a living entity. It's worth noting that in Idoma, *Oowu* means "wind" and is interchangeable with *Alekwu* (spirit). *Oowu-bobi*, for example, means "a nasty spirit," whereas *Oowu-olohi* means "a good spirit." The same is true for *Alekwu*. *Alekwu-bohi* (evil spirits) and *Alekwu-olohi* (good spirits) exist (good spirits). While *Alekwu* appears to be a catch-all phrase for all spirits (good and bad), it is especially associated with the ancestors. *Aje* - ancestors are often referred to as the spirit of the kindred group. All of the body parts work together as a unit. They are intertwined.

The *Alekwu*, in particular, is a life-giver. It is linked to breathing (Oowu). It's similar to how you can't see your breath. When one's breathing stops, it departs the body. When it departs, a person is merely physically dead. Their bodies decompose and they perish. They, on the other hand, are not lost. Their *Alekwu* is still alive. It is a part of both the human and *Alekwu* worlds.

them the ability to protect loved ones from harm as well as inspire and motivate them to fulfill their life's ambitions.

As a whole, the African metaphysics finds a strong bond between spirits and little infants, spirits and the sick, and spirits and the elderly (Mbiti, 1969)¹⁰. In support of this, Ushehas this to say:

"Childhood, like old age, constitutes an intermediary or transitory stage, a period of progress, while the child tries to free himself/herself from the control of the other world; the old man/woman prepares to return there"¹¹.

This idea is also evident in the Idoma viewpoint, which believes that decent elderly people and innocent small children serve as *Alekwu*-human bridges. This is because the *Alekwu* tends to appear to these people in dreams and in person to communicate their sentiments about certain family circumstances. For Instance, the *Alekwu* may choose to disclose hidden realities about a family's traumas, such as the causes and solutions to recurring terminal sickness, abrupt death, business failure, and so on. Family feuds are also often typically resolved by the *Alekwu*, who point out evil family members, whom they frequently attack after a series of rejected warnings.

One's *Alekwu* starts the long process of preparing to enter the spirit (*Alekwu*) realm days before death. It may pay visits to distant relatives to check on their well-being and, at the very least, have one final talk with them before departing from the human world. In these circumstances, it is widely believed that the *Alekwu* comes no closer to the people it encounters, and it always seems rushed as it exchanges pleasantries with them without allowing them to get any closer either, let alone touch it. This is particularly true for terminally ill patients who are described as "sitting ambiguously between the worlds of the living and the dead." When their *Alekwu* are touched by anything, the ill person is healed and brought back to life. It is said that that sick person will resent those who push them out of the spirit realm's peace.

During this time, the *Alekwu* may cause disputes and struggles in the spirit realm. It could be well-received or scorned. It may be told to come back to life right away. This occurs when a person's death poses a bigger risk to their family. The loss of a family's breadwinner is likely to ruin the future of their children and dependents, as well as generate family feuds over his or her riches. Such death could as well cause their surviving spouse (s) to be denied their inheritance and sent away with nothing with which to begin a new life. This happens when a family believes that a spouse (woman) turned their husbands against them while they were still living by blocking them from supporting the family, that spouse may be referred to as the witch who turned their husbands against them (the husband's family). She will be extremely frustrated after her husband passes away¹².

Based on the aforementioned factors and the possibility that a spouse may misuse or squander her husband's fortune on reckless living at the price or neglect of her obligation towards her children and extended family may compel the need for the *Alekwu* to come back to life. In order to avert any of these possibilities, the ancestors of the *Alekwu* world will push the sick individual to be magically healed.

It is obvious from all of these submissions that the Idomas and other Africans share a similar sense of body and spirit. *Ara*¹³ among the Yorubas, *Aru*¹⁴ among the Igbos, and *Nipadua*¹⁵ among the Akans are all names for the body. Bolaji Idowu refers to it as the "outer body" because it is real, observable, and limited. The body decays and is gone permanently once one ceases breathing and the spirit leaves the body. Even so, because of its

¹⁰Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *Introduction to African Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Press, p. 151 – 7.

¹¹Ushe, M. N. (2010). *The Mortgage Culture of Tiv Death and Burial Rite*, Makurdi: Vast Publisher.

¹² The Idomas, like other African customs, are patriarchal in nature. In the Idoma tradition, a woman's death does not cause as many problems as a man's.

¹³Oyeshile, O.A. (2006). *The Physical and Non-physical in Yoruba Concept of the Person*. *Philosophia De Sellentt*, Vol. 35, p. 157. All of the other Yoruba body parts were obtained from Oyeshile.

¹⁴Ozumba, G.O. (2004). *African Traditional Metaphysics*. *Quodlibet Journal*. Vol. 6, No.3, July to September. Retrieved July 30, 2019, 12:34am, from <http://www.quodlibet.net>. The definition of *Chi* and *Inmuo* were sourced from Ozumba.

¹⁵Appiah, K. A. (2004). *Akan and Euro-American Concepts of the Person*, in Lee M. Brown (ed), *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 28. Appiah was utilized to get all of the other Akan terms.

fundamental relationship to the "inner person" - one's spirit, the body is treated with utmost respect and given proper burial at death, because the inner person (the spirit) cannot ascend to the spirit realm without that.

The *Alekwu* (inner self) appears to be the Yoruba *Emi*, Igbo *Inmuo*, and Akan *Okra*. They are eternal parts of man, given to him directly by God even before he was born, to function as a link between God and man and as a manifestation of God's nature in man. When a person dies, this part is able to depart from the body and continue to live.

On the contrary, the Akan's *Okra* is not identical to the others. Despite its interpretation as the "bearer of human destiny" or, as Gyekye phrased it, "the embodiment or transmitter of the individual's fate"¹⁶, the *Okra* is definitely what the Yorubas refer to as *Ori* (the inner head), which according to SegunGbadegesinis "... the bearer of a person's fate as well as the determinant of a personality"¹⁷. It is what the Igbos refers to as *Chi* - a fate that cannot be changed no matter what.

In addition to the *Okpaye*, *Alekwu*, and *Oowu*¹⁸, Idomas, however, emphasize the importance of other bodily parts for the *Ocheolamu*'s (human person) well-being. The *Oyie* (the blood) is one of these components. It is thought to be an efficacious element - an embodiment of life. Thus, "new blood" in Idoma refers to both the 'newly born' and to "life" itself, which Africans traditionally regard as sacred. This explains why blood sacrifice is not considered bad in most African societies. Some African communities still tolerate human sacrifices, despite the fact that animals have been employed as substitutes over time. The Adokas, in contrast, despise human sacrifice. One of our sources indicates that if someone kills another person, "their blood" will seek out the killers and exact revenge. In this situation, the blood is figuratively depicted as the spirit.

More so, blood covenants are commonplace in most African traditions. They are designed to compel entire dedication to arrangements or agreements, whether they are for marriage or something else. To demonstrate that these agreements are sacred, blood covenants are used to seal all such agreements, particularly where confidence is not assured. The participants will cut their fingers and lick each other's blood before swearing oaths that contain blessings and curses on those who keep or violate the promise. Breaking such covenants ruins one's life. Because Idomas prohibit people from making such a pact, it is frequently done behind closed doors.

Ogigi, the shadow, is another important part of the Idomas' definition of man. It is known as the representative of a person's personality soul, which follows him/her around wherever he/she goes. It is thought to be God's eyes or a warning to man that God is watching everything he does because it follows him around at all times.

Between one's *Ogigi* and themselves, there is a significant spiritual connection, such that if charmed, the body will be affected. That is why Idomas take a number of precautions to guarantee that the wicked do not harm one's *Ogigi*. One of such precautions is to ensure that when two persons walk together, no one is allowed to cross through the center of their path. Also, one of our sources stated that they were taught as children not to let anyone walk over their *Ogigi* (shadows).

Similarly, the *Odoh*¹⁹ (mind) is also regarded among the Idomas as an important component of the body. It is the repository of knowledge, as well as the seat of thoughts and emotions. Everything a person does stems from their *Odoh*, which is always under their control and can be restrained from becoming overly wild. Choosing what is good or wrong is a personal decision, despite the fact that the *Odoh* is always the focus of all reflections.

¹⁶Gyekye, K. (1998). *The Akan Concept of a Person*, in Richard A. Wright (ed), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, p. 19.

¹⁷Gbadegesin, S. (2004). *An Outline of a Theory of Destiny*, in Lee M. Brown (ed), *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 53.

¹⁸S.K. Olaleye calls the

¹⁹ On the one side, *Odoh* represents the mind, while on the other, the human heart (*Otu*). It is susceptible to forebodings of doom. When someone is about to be killed or defrauded, their *Odoh* often alerts them to what is about to happen. If one acts quickly and is saved, they will tell their companions, "My mind did not agree with/allow me to..." especially if they had learned later of the evil about to emerge. On the other side, like *Odobobi*, *Otubobi* sees no need to do well. It never forgets and is always looking for new ways to harm even the calmest of people. A wicked person is one who has an evil heart.

It's worth noting that dead persons are thought to have no shadow in some cultures. The shadow is said to depart one's body in the same way that the spirit does when one dies. On the other hand, some people believe that some spirits only appear as shadows once they arrive at a location, unless they choose to expose themselves to the people they chose.

The thoughts of one's *Odo* are also under one's control. Allowing bad or evil(*Odoibobi*) to reside in one's *Odo*hall of the time corrupts it, and so represents a person as evil, implying that they have evil minds (*Odoibobi*).

Finally, all of these ontological conceptions describe life as an eternal cycle in the Idoma traditional worldview. It presents life as a complex whole that progresses from birth to death, and then from death to rebirth, with the body parts structurally fixed toward that purpose. This is in line with the African view of the human individual in general.

Conclusion

The numerous components that make up the human individual were examined from the Adoka people's traditional worldview in this article. The article highlighted the importance and diverse functions of each constituent part, as well as the unity that exists among these parts in ensuring the human person's well-being. Despite the fact that the Adoka's unique perspective on the subject is similar to that of other African peoples, the article went further into aspects of the human person that had received less attention in earlier research. The African perspective on blood, mind, and human shadow are among them. The article went on to explain the importance of the spirit both while one is alive and when one is dead, as well as the relationship between the spirit and the actual human body.

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