



A critical examination of *Oche Ola Mu* – The concept of the human person from an Idoma perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of the human person from an Idoma perspective, which has, unlike other African cultures, received limited attention in recent years. It examines the various components of the human person, emphasizing the function and significance of each element in promoting overall well-being. It draws on data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with members of Adoka, an Idoma-speaking community in Nigeria.

Keywords:

Oche Ola Mu, Idoma perspective, Human person concept, African cultures, Adoka community, Nigeria, Christian Religious Studies, Well-being components, Semi-structured interviews, Indigenous philosophy.

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Introduction

¹This research explores the different components of a human being from the perspective of the Adoka people. It focuses on how these elements interact to promote the overall well-being of an individual. Specifically, the paper examines the interpretation and functions of the spirit, body, shadow, mind, and blood through an Idoma lens. It focuses on the Idoma people of Adoka, an Idoma-speaking village in Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria.

Idomas are one of the ten largest ethnic groups in Nigeria and the second largest in Benue State, following the Tiv. They inhabit an area of approximately 13,015 square kilometers, which encompasses nine major Local Government Areas: Ado, Okpokwu, Ogbadibo, Agatu, Apa, Otukpo, Ohimini, Obi, and Oju. Otukpo is the main town in Idoma land. This region is bordered to the north by River Benue, to the west by the Tiv people, to the south by the Nsukka and Abakaliki Igbo regions, and to the east by the Igala people of Kogi state. Otukpo is located approximately 72 kilometers inland from the confluence of the Niger River.²

As indicated, the language of the Idomas is Idoma, a Kwa language with a rich history. The Kwa language family includes similar dialects categorized into five distinct groups:

“The central or Otukpo dialect spoken in Otukpo, 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.”³

Due to the vastness of the Adoka and a lack of funds, this paper focuses on AdokaIcho (Ai-Ode), AdokaEhaje (Ai-Enyikwole), and AdokaNenche (Entepka). It employs a semi-structured interview method in generating its data.⁴

Oche ola mu (Human Person)

Generally, Africans define the human person as an integrated totality of a unity of disparate parts, with the body as the "outer person" and several other invisible and intangible elements constituting the "inner person."⁵ This perspective starkly contrasts with the Hindu rigid dualism, which portrays the

¹We acknowledge the contributions of the late Mr. David Ukah, whose dedicated efforts made this research possible. We appreciate his role in connecting us with the Adoka natives for interviews and serving as an interpreter. Mr. Ukah not only took the time to accurately spell Idoma words but also provided detailed explanations of certain complex terms that required clarification. We equally extend our gratitude to Papa Samuel Odugbo, Prince Adukwu, Mrs. Roseline IjatoOmega, Emmanuel Omega, and many others for their valuable contributions through interviews. We also thank Professor Jacob Kehinde Ayantayo, who was the first to approve our research proposal and provided proofreading and supervision for the initial manuscript.

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 (2), 3.

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

⁵Idowu, B. (1994). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. USA: Wazobia, New York, 170. Idowu discussed Yoruba's views on human nature and personhood, as well as the Yoruba concept of predestination and its relation to the individual's fate after death. See Chapters 13 and 14. See, Onah, 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 Honor of Kwasi Wiredu*. Nigeria: Hope Publications, Ibadan, 74. In the Akan traditional thought, Wiredu identified two primary approaches to the concept of the human person. The first is the descriptive approach, which outlines the ontological state of the human person. The second is the normative approach, which reveals an individual's social status. Through the normative perspective, Wiredu argued that personhood is not an inherent quality conferred at birth; rather, it is attained through the internalization and commitment to the social ideals of one's community. In other words, a person is defined as someone who has achieved the status of a responsible member of their community rather than simply being any human being. Palmer, T. P. (2013). "Theology of the Old Testament. Published by African Christian Textbooks, Plateau State Nigeria," 39. Palmer focused on Hebrew etymological words for the numerous constituent parts of a human being. See pages 35 to 41.

soul as trapped or imprisoned within the body and man's primary goal being to free it, or the Greek worldview, in which the body, mind, and spirit all appear to exist and function independently.⁶

The Idoma term *Oyayi*, which roughly translates as "life," encompasses many connotations.⁷ It signifies not merely the state of being alive but also the essence of one's existence. The term encompasses a person's psyche, demeanor, life aspirations, social interactions, and perspectives on phenomena and circumstances. It also connotes the sanctity of life as a divine gift willed and governed by *Owoicho* (God). The Adoka people believe that only God alone holds the prerogative to create and end life. Hence, they regard both suicide and homicide as grievous transgressions.

Due to the sacredness of life, Adoka folktales caution against demeaning or discriminating against individuals based on physical and cognitive disabilities, financial difficulties, or other dehumanizing conditions. These folktales emphasize that God's creative power is unquestionable and that everything he creates is perfect and has a purpose. Some of our interviewees believe that the essence of life lies in existence itself, regardless of one's circumstances. Thus, the Adoka people maintain that every life holds profound worth, irrespective of an individual's ethical conduct.

The idea that the sanctity of life supersedes how it is lived does not imply that the Adoka people condone unethical lifestyles. Their tradition stands against immoral behaviors regardless of any circumstances because engaging in sinful deeds brings suffering not only to oneself but also to one's family and the broader society. Thus, the Adoka people claim that an individual's ability to differentiate between right and wrong is intricately linked to their mind (*Odoh*) and inherent desires rather than being determined by external circumstances, whether advantageous or not adverse.

Like other African cultures, the Adoka people believe that leading a moral life bestows blessings, respect, and a good reputation on oneself, one's family, and society at large. They affirm that individuals who uphold righteousness tend to enjoy a prolonged lifespan, achieve success in various aspects of life, bear virtuous offspring, and gain direct passage to the afterlife upon departing from this world. However, they claim that upholding moral principles, referred to as *Oye-olohi* is usually a matter of individual volition, as each person possesses the free will to choose between virtuous deeds (*odo-olohi*) and malevolent actions (*odo-bobi*). Thus, they place less emphasis on the concept of predestination, given that they do not believe that an individual's fate is purposefully structured or predetermined to negate the place of moral responsibility. Many of our interviewees assert that an individual's life path is a direct or indirect result of their personal choices and actions.

In the Idoma worldview, the human person, referred to as *Oche ola mu*, is composed of several components: *Oyaye* (life), *Okpaye* (body), *Alekwu* (spirit), *Oowu* (breath), *Oyie* (blood), *Odoh* (mind), and *Ogigi* (shadow). *Okpaye* encompasses all the physical aspects of the body. It is both tangible and visible and relies on *Oowu* and *Alekwu*, the key intangible components of *Oche ola mu*, to survive. The *Oowu* (breath) is intangible and invisible. It is linked to the spirit, *Alekwu*, and is vital to being alive. The presence or absence of *Oowu* in the *Okpaye* (body) determines whether a person is alive or not. By extension, *Oowu* is intricately linked to God, who breathed it into *Oche ola mu* at creation.⁸

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

⁷ When used as a noun, *Oyayi* denotes life, and when used as a verb, it means *being alive*.

⁸This corresponds to the Genesis creation story, where God created man from the dust of the earth and breathed life into his nostrils, transforming him into a living being. Interestingly, in Idoma, "*Oowu*" means "wind" and is interchangeably used with "*Alekwu*" (spirit). For instance, "*Oowu-bobi*" refers to "a nasty spirit" or "a bad wind," while "*Oowu-olohi*" means "a good spirit." The same applies to "*Alekwu*," which includes "*Alekwu-bohi*" (evil spirits) and "*Alekwu-olohi*" (good spirits). Although "*Alekwu*" serves as a general term for all spirits (both good and bad), it is particularly associated with ancestors. "*Aje*," is the Idoma term for ancestors. *Aje* refers to the spirits of the kinship group. The "*Alekwu*," in particular, is a life-giver, closely linked to breathing (or "*Oowu*").

Alekwu (Spirit)

The Adoka people conceive the *Alekwu* as both unseen and ethereal, serving as a manifestation of *Owoicho* (God) in man. It embodies not only a life-giving essence but also a defining facet of an individual's personality. Its roles and influences empower one's moral agency and free will, signifying that individuals are personally responsible for their wrongful life choices and cannot attribute blame to their *Alekwu*. Evil is not ascribed to the *Alekwu*; rather, it is perceived as a repercussion of one's life actions and choices (Oyaye), not one's spirit (*Alekwu*).

Similarly, the Adoka people believe that the *Alekwu* is eternal and transcendent. Upon the moment of death, it separates from the mortal body to reunite with the ethereal realm from which it emanated. However, its essence remains tethered to the earthly plane it once inhabited, unfazed by the transition. This essence embodies the ability to be omniscient and omnipresent. This allows the *Alekwu* to stand guard over loved ones, offering protection from adversity and kindling the flames of ambition and purpose within them.

Generally, African metaphysics highlights a profound interconnectedness among spirits, infants, the infirm, and the elderly.⁹ This notion is eloquently articulated by the Nigerian scholar of religion, Ushe Mike Ushe, who notes in his research on the Tiv people of Benue State that:

"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."¹⁰

This perspective aligns with that of the Adoka people, which claims that virtuous elders and innocent young children serve as *Alekwu*-human bridges. The *Alekwu* tends to manifest itself to these individuals in dreams and in person to convey their sentiments regarding specific family circumstances. For example, the *Alekwu* often choose to divulge concealed truths about a family's crises, such as the origins and remedies to recurrent terminal illnesses, sudden deaths, business setbacks, and so forth. Family disputes are also commonly settled by the *Alekwu*, who identify malevolent family members whom it often confronts and attacks after a series of disregarded warnings.

One's *Alekwu* commences the intricate process of preparing for entry into the spirit (*Alekwu*) realm days before their demise. This process frequently entails visits by the would-be *Alekwu* to distant relatives to check their well-being and, at the very least, engage in a final conversation with them before departing the mortal world. Under such circumstances, the Adoka people claim that the *Alekwu* maintains a distance from the individuals it encounters, always appearing hurried as it exchanges pleasantries without allowing any physical closeness or contact. This perception is common among people who are terminally ill, often described as existing between the worlds of the living and the dead. Should their *Alekwu* be touched by anyone when they go visiting, the ailing person mysteriously experiences complete healing. They would, however, hold animosity towards those who brought them back to life from the tranquility of the *Alekwu* realm.

During the preparation for *Alekwu*'s exit from the body, the Adoka people assert that it could provoke disputes and conflicts in the spiritual realm, as some spirits may either accept or reject it. It might be demanded to return to life promptly. This situation arises when an individual's demise presents a significant threat to their family. The loss of the family's breadwinner is likely to undermine the

⁹ Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *Introduction to African Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Press, 151 – 7.

¹⁰ Ushe, M. N. (2010). *The Mortgage Culture of Tiv Death and Burial Rite*. Makurdi: Vast Publisher, 138 – 50.

prospects of their children and dependents, and it may also cause family discord regarding the deceased's wealth. Such a demise could also result in the surviving spouse(s) being deprived of their rightful inheritance and compelled to leave the family with no resources to embark on a fresh chapter in life. This scenario unfolds when a family perceives that a spouse (typically a woman) has alienated their husbands during their lifetime by obstructing their support to 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 away.¹¹

Other factors that may compel a prospective *Alekwu* to return to life include the possibility that their spouse would misuse or squander their wealth on reckless living, neglecting her responsibilities towards their children and extended family. To prevent such scenarios, the ancestors in the *Alekwu* world may cause the sick person to experience mysterious healing and revival.

These submissions confirm that the Adoka people and other African cultures share a similar perception of body and spirit. *Ara* among the Yorubas, *Aru* among the Igbos, and *Nipadua* among the Akans are all terms that represent the mortal human body,¹² which Bolaji Idowu describes as the "outer body" because it is tangible, observable, and finite. It deteriorates and ceases to exist permanently once respiration stops, and the spirit departs it. Due to the outer body's intrinsic connection to the "inner self" - one's spirit, it is revered and accorded a proper burial upon death, as the inner being (the spirit) cannot transition to the spiritual realm without that.

The *Alekwu* (inner self) appears to be the Yorubas' *Emi*, the Igbos' *Inmuo*, and the Akans' *Okra*. As already indicated, it is an eternal aspect of man, bestowed upon him directly by the divine even before their earthly existence. It serves as a conduit between the spirit and human realms, embodying the essence of the divine within man. Upon the cessation of physical life, this intrinsic part separates from the corporeal form and persists beyond mortal existence.

Like the *Alekwu*, the Akans' *Okra* serves as a defining element of one's personality. It is called the "bearer of human destiny" or, as Gyekye puts it, "the embodiment or transmitter of the individual's fate."¹³ The *Okra* distinctly corresponds to what the Yorubas term as *Ori* (the inner head). According to Segun Gbadegesin, *Ori* is "... the bearer of a person's fate as well as the determinant of one's personality."¹⁴ It is what the Igbos refer to as *Chi* - a fate that cannot be changed no matter what. In contrast, the Adoka people do not believe that the *Alekwu* possesses fatalistic and deterministic tendencies that negate moral responsibility or the exercise of free will. Nonetheless, they maintain that it functions as a life essence which does not obstruct or hinder moral decisions, behaviors, and choices.

Other Aspects of an *Oche ola mu*

In addition to the *Okpaye*, *Alekwu*, and *Oowu*, the Adoka people place significant emphasis on various bodily components of the *Oche ola mu* (human person).¹⁵ The Oyie (the blood) stands out among

¹¹The Idomas, like many other African cultures, are patriarchal, and thus, a woman's death typically raises fewer inheritance questions than a man's.

¹²Oyeshile, O.A. (2006). "The Physical and Non-physical in Yoruba Concept of the Person." *Philosophia De Sellentt*, Vol. 35, p. 157. See, Oyeshile, O. A. (2004). "African Traditional Metaphysics." *Quodlibet Journal*, Vol. 6 (3). Retrieved July 30, 2019, 12:34am, <http://www.quodlibet.net>. Oyeshile wrote on the Igbos. Appiah, 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, 28. Appiah wrote on the Akans.

¹³Gyekye, 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.

¹⁴Gbadegesin, 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.

¹⁵S.K. Olaleye calls the

these components. It is perceived as a potent force - a manifestation of vitality and a life-giving element. Thus, "new blood" in the Adokatradition symbolizes both the 'newly born' and life itself. Generally, blood in most African cultures is a very sensitive and efficacious element in critical practices as sacrifices. While some African cultures still practice human sacrifices, the Adokas, in stark contrast, condemn such acts. According to a particular source, if one individual takes the life of another, "their blood" will inevitably pursue the perpetrators for revenge. In this context, blood is metaphorically portrayed as a spirit.

More so, blood covenants are commonplace in most African traditions. They are designed to compel sincere commitment 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 trust 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 the Adoka people prohibit people from making such pacts, they are frequently done in secret.

The *Ogigi*(shadow) is another important part of the Adoka people's perception of the human person. It is known as the representative of a person's *Alekwu*, which follows them around wherever they go. It is thought to be God's eyes or a warning to man that God is watching everything he does because it always follows him around.

Between one's *Ogigi* and oneself, there is a significant spiritual connection, such that if charmed, the body will be affected. That is why Idomas generally take 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 their middle. One of our sources stated that they were taught as children not to let anyone walk over their *Ogigi*(shadows) at night.

The *Odoh*(mind) is also regarded among the Adoka people as an essential component of the body. It is the repository of knowledge as well as the seat of thoughts and emotions.¹⁶ It is believed that 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, even though the *Odoh* is always the focus of all reflections. The thoughts of one's *Odo* are also under one's control. Allowing bad or evil (*Odoibobi*) to reside in one's *Odoh* all the time corrupts it and so represents a person as evil, implying that they have evil minds (*Odoh-bobi*).

These ontological beliefs in the Idoma traditional worldview depict life as an eternal cycle. They illustrate life as a complex entity that progresses from birth to death and from death to rebirth. The body parts are structurally designed to serve this purpose.

Conclusion

The paper focused on the components of the human person from the Adoka-Idoma people's traditional worldview. It highlighted the interpretations and diverse functions of each constituent part and the

¹⁶ 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 would 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 *Odo bobi*, *Otu bobi* 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 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.

unity among these parts in ensuring the human person's well-being. The paper went further into aspects of the human person that had received less attention in earlier research. These include the blood, mind, and shadow. It 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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