

Ire and Ibi: The Yorùbá Concepts of Good and Bad*

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Introduction

Like with many other cultures of the world, there is no doubt that morality was an important aspect of the intangible culture among the Yoruba of the pre-colonial era. As with other parts of our culture, the moral aspect has suffered deterioration, and the young generation is losing touch with one of the most valuable treasures of our indigenous custom, encapsulated in the concept of *omólúàbí* (the ideal Yoruba moral personality). This paper is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of Yoruba ethics by examining the concepts of *ire* (good) and *ibi* (bad) which are germane to it.

The paper is divided into two major parts. In the first, explore the etymologies and meanings of *ire*, *ibi* and other related lexical items. Since the study is about value judgement, “right” and “wrong” are treated as part and parcel of good and bad because that which is good is generally considered right,

while that which is bad is similarly generally considered wrong. It should, however, be noted that this stance is taken only for the sake of convenience as a thing may be considered right or wrong according to the standard on which it is premised. In the second part, we attempt a critical discussion of some *Yorùbá* concepts about *ire* and *ibi*. To achieve these objectives, we depend largely on *òwe* (proverbs), stories from *ẹsẹ ifá* (*ifá* divination verses) and folktales. It is generally believed that these oral genres, among others, contain the wisdom, knowledge and beliefs of the Yoruba. In addition to written documents,¹ two *babaláwo* (*Ifá* priests)² were consulted and interviewed in gathering data for the study. Although we have not lost sight of historical and dialectal contexts, our etymological study is mainly from derivational perspective.

1.0 *Ire, Ibi* and their Synonyms

Ire (good) and *ibi* (bad) are opposites. *Ire* is usually considered positive, and *ibi* negative. In our examination of the etymology and meaning of the words and their surrogates, we will take into account their structure and meaning. In the discourse that follows, *ire* and its synonyms are examined before *ibi* and its synonyms.



1.1.0. *Ire* and Its Synonyms

The synonyms of *ire* we intend to examine here include *rere*, *oore*, *dídára*, *sísunwòn*, *títònà*, *tító*, *òtító*, *ètó*, *gbígbún*, *òdodo*, *funfun* and *imólẹ̀*. They are, however, subdivided into five for ease of discourse premised on structural and semantic affinities.

1.1.1 *Ire, Rere* and *Oore*

A cursory look at the first set of three lexical items shows that the morpheme {re} is common to all of them. It looks as if it is this root morpheme that confers the meaning of goodness on the words. Although in modern Standard *Yorùbá* (SY) usage, the morpheme has lost its meaning, one cannot but suspect that it is the same morpheme that is found in *ère* (sculpture), as sculpture is a reference-point in describing aesthetic goodness (beauty). The following proverbs attest to this: “*Bí a bá kú là á dèrè, ènìyàn kò sunwòn láàyè*” (It is at death that one becomes a sculpture, (that is, one’s worth/good quality is realized), one is not considered good when alive) and “*Bí ọmọ ẹni bá dára, èrè là á fí í wé*” (when one’s child is good, s/he is likened to a sculpture).

The three nouns, *ire*, *rere* and *oore*, can be predicated to the verb *ṣe* (to do) to give us the meaning “do good”. This shows

that they are actually synonymous. But the possibility of little differences in their meanings and syntactic functions are apparent. *Ire* is the generic name for good. It is today used in some literate circles as general greetings for wishing people well. (Greetings: “*Ire o!*” (Wishing you well!) Response: “*Ire kànkà/kòndù/gbàngbà!!*” (Wishing you well in a very big way!) *Rere* is often used as a qualifier, hence ‘*owó rere*’ (good money), ‘*omọ rere*’ (good child), ‘*iṣé rere*’ (good work). *Oore* usually denotes acts of good deeds or kindness and would not normally function as a qualifier, except perhaps in special usages. Other shades of meaning these words may have include kindness, blessing, benevolence, and the like.

1.1.2 *Dídára, Sísunwọ̀n*

Dídára (goodness/ that which is good) is derived from the verb-nominal *dára* through partial repetition. Awobuluyi’s (2008:137) suggestion that *dára* can be broken down to *dá* + *ara* and that the morphological operation is made possible by the phrase “*dá ara yá*”, (get well/ be encouraged) does not sound very convincing from a purely semantic point of view. There is, nevertheless, no doubt that the word structure suggests that it is derived from a verb-nominal collocation, but the process might have been lost in history as there is no known semantic



congruity between the suggested individual morphemic components of the word and the word as a whole. *Dára* is often used in reference to that which is aesthetically good, pleasant and satisfying. It, therefore, suggests the meaning beautiful. Apart from *dídára*, another nominal derivative of *dára* through full repetition is *dáradára* (also *dáadáa*, very good, when the consonant ‘r’ is elided).

Sunwòn (good) is a synonym of *dára*. Its known short forms are *siàn* and *sàn/sòn*. In some eastern Yorùbá dialects (EY), such as Oñdó, Òwò and Ào, *sàn/sòn* is used in daily greetings. In Oñdó dialect, for example, the response to the greeting “*Kéè tii?*” (SY: “*Báwo ni?*”), “How is it?” is “*Ó sàni!*”, (SY: “*Dáadáa ni!*”). “It’s well!” or just “Good!”. *Sunwòn* is a verb-nominal, but its morphological components may be difficult to determine because of long usage and lack of written records. It is, perhaps, a combination of the verb *sùn or sun* (to target) and the noun *ìwòn* (standard/ scale). If this is so, at least from the perspective of the meaning of its combined morphemes, the whole word would literally mean that which meets up the targeted standard or which measures up to standard. Such a thing, whatever it may be, will be considered adequate and, therefore, good. Further search into dialectal variants of the verbal component may yield better fruits in

determining the accurate morphology of the word. As an example of the literary usage of *sunwòn*, Adébáyò *Fálétí*, a foremost Yorùbá literate poet, wrote in his narrative poem, titled “Şaşorẹ”, based on a story from *ifá* literary corpus:

Ibi tórí mi yíi yòò bá gbè sunwòn
Kẹsẹ mi ó dákun sìn mí débẹ kedere
(Ọlatunji, 1982:35)

Where my ‘inner head’ will prosper (be good/excell)
(ie. Where I will meet with favour and good luck)
May my legs take me there safely

1.1.3 *Tító, Òtító/Òótó, Ètó, Gígún and Òdodo*

Tító, *òótó* and *ètó* are derived from the verb *tó* (straight/durable). From the Yorùbá perspective, that which is straight is good and desirable. Hence, it is often lamented that “*igi tí ó bá tó kì í pé nígbó*” (The straight tree does not last in the forest). Straight tree is a metaphor for a good person in the saying. *Tító* is derived through a partial reduplication of *tó* and *òtító* by prefixing ‘ò’ to it. At this level, however, *òtító* assumes the meaning truth. Although no more considered figurative in contemporary SY usage, *òtító* must have been derived in history through a metaphoric process. Literally, *òtító* means *èyí tí ó tó* (that which is straight). When used in reference to behavioural traits, it first and foremost means straightforwardness, which



implies being truthful. This is a good character trait that is morally right, acceptable and encouraged in society. *Ètọ́* (that which is right) is derived by prefixing *è-* to *tọ́*. It assumes the meaning of individual's right in statements, such as “*ètọ́ Adédayọ ni oyè náà*” (the chieftaincy is Adédayọ's by right).

Gígún is derived from the verbal root *gún* (to be straight and smooth). It is usually modified by *régé* (*gún/ gígún régé*) to indicate the extent. It is discussed here because its semantic range intersects with *tító*. The area of intersection is in their denoting straightness. They fall apart in that durability which *tító* covers semantically is not covered by *gígún*, and smoothness covered by *gígún* is not covered by *tító*. They both are virtuous traits among the Yorùbá.

Òdodo is considered here because it is a synonym of *òtító* (truth). Like other synonyms considered, *òdodo* looks like a nominalisation derived through the prefixation of ‘ò’ to the reduplication of ‘do’, although neither the componential meaning of ‘do’ nor its duplicated form, *‘dodo’ is known to speakers of SY today. It is instructive to note that this is not totally like *rere* which has a similar form. Even though the meaning of ‘re’ is no more known in SY, its surviving derived form ‘*rere*’ means good, as explained above. It is not impossible

that clues to the meaning of ‘do’ can be found in dialects of Yorùbá or related languages.

A person who is truthful is regarded in Yorùbá as *olódodo* (*oní* + *òdodo*). The following Ifá song where *òtító* and *òdodo* are semantically coupled is a clear proof of their synonymity:

<i>Ò bá sòtító</i>	It’s better you say the truth
<i>Ká le ríjà ẹ gbè</i>	So that we may be able support your course
<i>Ò bá sòtító</i>	It’s better you say the truth
<i>Ká le ríjà ẹ gbè</i>	So that we may be able support your course
<i>Olórùn n bẹ léyìn àṣòdodo</i>	God supports the truthful one.

In the song, the person encouraged to say the truth (*sọ òtító*), in the first and third lines, becomes the *aṣòdodo* (truthful one) supported by God in the fifth line. Hence *òtító* and *òdodo* are equivalent, that is synonyms. *Òdodo* is a crucial characteristic trait of an *omólúwàbí*. Its semantic scope includes chastity, love, sincerity and prudence.

1.1.4 *Tònà, Títònà*

All good deeds and events are generally regarded as right, *ohun tí ó tònà* (that which is right) among the Yorùbá. *Tònà* is a verb-nominal derived from the fusion of *tò* (to follow) and *ònà* (the path/ the road). *Tònà* literally means to follow the path/road. It is, however, usually used in daily parlance to mean the right



course or just that which is right. *Ó tònà*, therefore means “It is right”. *Títònà* is a nominal derivative of it by partial reduplication, and it also means that which is right.

1.1.5 *Funfun* and *Ìmólẹ̀*

Funfun, is derived from the verbal root morpheme (*fun/fún*) (to be white) through full repetition. It is the same morphemic root that we have in *ẹfun* (chalk). The high-toned allomorph is found in syntactic constructions like *Ó fún bí ẹgbòn òwú, Ẹfúnṣetan*. *Funfun* denotes white colour in general, but it also connotes purity, holiness, plainness, truth and sincerity, all of which are ethically considered good virtues among the Yorùbá. White is used in Yorùbá traditional religion as a symbol of those concepts. Priests and priestesses of *Ọbàtálá* (the Yorùbá arch-divinity and god of purity) and many aquatic deities are usually clad in white as a symbol of purity and holiness, which they stand for. Another name for *funfun* is *àlà*, hence a white cloth may be called *aṣọ funfun* or *aṣọ àlà*. Adétóyèṣe Adéníjì, in one of our discussions with him, said, “*Otító ló funfun báláú, tó sì ṣe àgbà ohun gbogbo*” (Truth is sparkling white, and superior to all things). He has by this statement also confirmed the symbolism of the colour white for *òtító*.

Like *funfun*, *ìmólẹ̀* (light, brightness) is also symbolic of *òtító*, *òdodo* and therefore *ire*. *Ìmólẹ̀* is derived by the prefixation of ‘ì’ to *mólẹ̀*, which is, in turn, a verb-nominal combination of *mọ́* (to be bright, clear, clean) and *ilẹ̀* (ground/ place). It means that which lightens/ brightens up a place. The Yorùbá usually use *ìmólẹ̀* idiomatically to mean revealing the truth about a situation when they say “*tan ìmólẹ̀ sí ọ̀rọ̀ náà*” (enlighten us about the situation). It is also a common saying that *Bímólẹ̀ bá wọlé, òkùnkùn á paradà* (light dispels darkness). This implies that truth will always expose lies. A narrative from the *Ògbèbàrà* chapter of *ifá*, titled “*Itànşán oòrùn yóó fì ọ̀ hàn*” illustrates this. It tells the story of how the light from the sun rays that passes through a hole in the roof of a house was used as an instrument of revealing the truth about the mysterious murder of *Mólẹyọ̀* many years after the crime had been committed (Yémiítàn and Ògúndélé, 1970:1-7).³

1.2.0 “*Ibi*” and its Synonyms

Ibi is the opposite of *ire*, *búburú*; its variant *burúkú* is the opposite of *dídára*. *Wọ́*, *gbun*, *wíwọ́* and *gbígbun* are the antonyms of *tọ́* and *tító*, while *irọ́*, *èké/ èdé* are opposites of *òótọ́* and *òdodo*. *Dúdú* and *òkùnkùn* are also opposites of *funfun* or *ààlà* and *ìmólẹ̀*. Our concern here is the examination of the



meaning and derivation of the word *ibi* and its synonyms listed above that are opposites of *ire* and its synonyms already treated in the last section. It should be noted that the opposites of all the words treated earlier can be derived, like some other words in *Yorùbá*, through the prefixation of negators like ‘àì-‘ and ‘kò-‘, some of which are considered below.

1.2.1 *Ibi, Búburú and Burúkú*

A morphological analysis of *ibi*, *búburú* and *burúkú* is difficult apparently because of long usage. One suspects however that the morpheme (bi)/(bu) is the verbal morphemic root that confers the meaning badness on the word. *Ibi* is derived by prefixing ‘i’ to the root morpheme {bi} and *búburú* from the partial repetition of the verb-nominal *burú*, which is suspected to be a derivation from *bu* + *irú* (Awobuluyi 2008:135). If *irú* means ‘type’ or ‘kind’ and *bu* ‘to be bad’, then *burú* should mean bad type/ kind. The partial duplication of this gives us *búburú* (badness/ the fact of being bad). *Burúkú*, on the other hand, is derived from the combination of *burú* and *kú*, which means to die. It is figuratively used here to indicate extremity or a sense of finality. *Burúkú*, from this perspective, means exceedingly or totally bad, that is, irreparably bad. However, when the state of ‘badness’ is to be exaggerated, it may be

reduplicated to give *burúkúburúkú*. *Àídára* (not good) is another word used as synonym for these sets of words. It is derived by prefixing the negator ‘àì’ to *dára*.

1.2.2 *Wíwó, Gbígbun and Àitọ́/ Kò-tọ́*

The first two words are derived from the verb *wó* (bent, curved, irregular, crooked) and *gbun* (dented, uneven) through partial repetition. They both have the meaning of that which is not straight. These usages can be illustrated with the following sayings:

Amúkùn-ún, ẹ̀rù ẹ̀ wọ́, ó ní òkè lẹ́ n wò, ẹ̀ kò wo isàlẹ́.

(Paraphrase: When the knock-knee’s attention was drawn to the fact that the load on her/his head is bent, s/he asked her/his interlocutors not to pay attention only to the load on her/his head but also to look down at her/his feet).

Ènìyàn ló sọgbá dọgbun, igbá ò gbun lóko.

(It is human beings that reconfigured the shape of the calabash, the calabash was not uneven on the farm).

Àitọ́ and *kò-tọ́* mean that which is not right. They are derivatives of the verbal root *tọ́* through the prefixation of the negators ‘àì-’ and ‘kò-’. Literally they mean that which is not straight/ durable. Their meaning of ‘wrongness’ is a figurative one premised on that of lack of straightness/durability. By implication, a person



of crooked character, that is, who is not consistently straightforward in his behaviour is considered a misfit in the society and, therefore, is a bad character not worthy of emulation.

1.2.3 Àìtònà, Kùnà, Kíkùnà

If rightness is *títònà*, then wrongness is *àìtònà* or *kò-tònà* (that which is not right). Another word that one may want to consider as the opposite of *tònà* from which *títònà* is derived is *kùnà*, which is usually used for ‘to fail’. *Kíkùnà* will, therefore, mean failure. According to Awobuluyi (2008), *kùnà* is derived through the contraction of the verb *kù* (to remain/not enough) and the noun *ònà* (path/ road/ way). The literal meaning of this is that of a path or course that is inadequate or insufficient, that is, that does not measure up to standard (...*kù káàtó*). It is the same verb in *kùnà* that we have in *kùtà* and *kù káàtó*, referred to above.

When failure is due to natural conditions, it is not considered a grave moral issue. It is seen as a bad experience for which all will rally round the affected to lift her or him up. But when failure is due to a behavioural flaw, it is generally frowned at, properly reprovèd, punished and corrected as appropriate.

1.2.4 *Iró* and *Èké/ Èdé*

Iró and *èké* are common everyday usages, while *èdé* seems to be a specialised usage in the *Ifá* literary corpus⁴. They are both derived nominals through prefixation of ‘i’ to *ró* (twist/bend) and ‘è’ to *ké* (cut) and *dé* (cover) respectively. Literally, *iró* can be said to mean that which is twisted or bent; *èké*, that which is cut short; and *èdé*, that which is covered up. All can be said to mean ‘lie’ and ‘deception’ (*itànjẹ/ẹtàn*) or ‘untruthfulness’ (*àìṣòótọ*). All are regarded in Yorùbá ethics as bad. A little distinction may, however, be made between *iró* and *èké/èdé*. *Iró* refers mainly to spoken lies. This is what is understood by *Ó pa iró*, (He told a lie), but “**Ó pa èké/èdé*” is ungrammatical. *Èké* and *èdé*, refer to acts of deception and untruthfulness in general; hence, the two nouns are usually predicated to the verb *ṣe* (to do); hence, we have “... *ṣe èké/èdé*”. It should be noted that “*...*ṣe iró*” ungrammatical. As *èké* and *èdé* are acted lies, so also is *iró* spoken deception. Since speech is a human action, the semantic scope of *èké* and *èdé* covers that of *iró*.

1.2.5 *Dúdú* (Black/Dark) and *Òkùnkùn* (Darkness)

Dúdú denotes the colour black in Yorùbá. It is derived from the verbal morphemic root (*dú*) (to be black/ dark) through



full repetition. It is evident in derived nominals such as *adúlójú* and *adúmáadán*. It is the same root morpheme found in *èédú* (that which is black/ charcoal). The root morpheme of *òkùnkùn* (darkness) is the verb *kùn* (to be dark). The verb is, however, used today in the restricted context of “*òkùnkùn kùn*” (It is dark). This is reflected in the following proverb: *Òkùnkùn kì í kùn kónínú má mọnú* (Darkness will never be so thick that one will not know one’s mind/ It will not be so dark to the extent that one will not be able to know one’s thought [that is, to think]) (Olowookere, 2004:102). To form *òkùnkùn*, the verb *kùn* is duplicated and then prefixed by ‘ò’. *Dúdú* and *òkùnkùn* are figuratively used to refer to evil and bad in everyday parlance among the Yorùbá today. The following Yorùbá sayings confirm this: *Ó fì èjẹ̀ dúdú sínú, ó tutó funfun jáde*, (S/he conceals the dark blood within her/himself and spits out the white saliva) and *Èni tó bá mọ̀ṣe òkùnkùn kó má ṣe dá òṣùpá lóró* (S/he who knows the havoc that can be perpetrated in the darkness should not inflict pain on/hamper the moon). The ‘black’ blood in the first saying connotes bad thoughts, while the white saliva connotes good thoughts, which are hypocritical. In the second saying, the moon as the symbol of light is figuratively used to refer to someone capable of influencing a situation positively but

who is being discouraged or disturbed by another person in one way or the other.

2.0 Yorùbá Concepts about “good” and “bad”

In this part, we examine some Yorùbá thoughts about goodness and badness. The concepts examined include that of the binarism of *tibitire* (evil-and-good) and those expressed in sayings such as *oore ló pé, ìkà kò pé* (good deeds are beneficial, bad deeds/ wickedness are not); *ayé kọ òtító* (people of the world reject the truth), and the place of *àìgbọ̀ràn* (disobedience) in the incurring of *ibi*.

2.1 Tibitire

The Yorùbá believe that “*Ohun tí kò dára, kò lórúkọ méjì, kò dára náà nì*” (“What is not good has no other name, it is just not good”). This tends to suggest that there are some things that are clearly bad, and there is no argument about their being bad. This can also be said to be true for “goodness”. That is, there are some things that are clearly good. Whenever the above saying is at play, the opposing meanings of the words *ire* and *ibi* are clearly in focus. The Yorùbá however also believe in the co-existence of the two lexical items; hence, they say “*Tibitire la dálé ayé*” (This world is created with/ to contain good and bad) and “*Tibitire jọ ñ rìn ni*” (Good and evil walk together, that is,



co-exist). The implication of the first saying is that man, in most cases, will have a taste of the two factors as far as s/he is in this world. The idea of *jíjòrìn* (co-existing, complementary) in the second one implies that one and the same situation, factor, personality or entity has inherent potential for manifesting good (positive) and bad (negative). This is further confirmed by the following sayings:

1. *Ire n bẹ nínú ibi; ibi n bẹ nínú ire*, (Goodness is contained in badness; badness is contained in goodness).
2. *kò sí adára má nìi sùgbón/ kù síbìkan*, (There is no good person without a flaw).
3. *Kò sí adára má burú, kò sì sí aburú má dara*, (There is no good person without bad traits and there is no bad person without good traits).
4. *Ọmọ burúkú lójó tirẹ lótò* (A bad child has her/his special day [that is, when s/he can be beneficial to one]).
5. *Nínú ikòkò dúdú lẹkọ funfun gbé n jáde*, (The white pap-/corn-meal is a product of the black pot).
6. *Adánilóro agbára ló fì kọni*, (S/he who inflicts pain on one teaches one how to be strong).

7. *Nínú òfî, nínú òláà, lomọ páhdòrọ ñ gbó sí,* (It is within the frequent to and from movement that the sausage fruit gets ripe).
8. *Ìkòkò tí yód jata idí rẹ á gbóná,* (The pot that will eat the stew will have to be heated).
9. *Eni tí kò bá lè şe bí aláàrù lÓyìngbò, kò lè şe bí Adégbọrọ lÓjàaba,* (S/he who cannot behave like a porter at Òyìngbò Market cannot behave like Adégbọrọ [the rich merchant] at the King's market).

The first four pithy sayings clearly show that there is no absolute good or bad thing. The remaining five teach that things or circumstances that may be considered painful or bad are most often prelude to pleasant and good situations. The important message from these opposing, yet complementing views, is that there is no absolute goodness, and there is no absolute badness. Context is a major determining factor of what is good or what is bad. From this pragmatic perspective, the concept of absolute badness and goodness inferred from the saying “*Ohun tí kò dára, kò lórúkọ méjì, kò dára náà nì*” (“what is not good has no other name, it is just not good”) must be taken as ideational, which are extreme cases and very rare.



2.2 *Ayé Kòótó*

Òótó (truth), although regarded by the Yorùbá as that which is right (*ohun tó tó/tònà*) and, therefore, a good and desirable virtue, is believed to be bitter; hence, they say *òtító korò*. This, it should be noted, agrees with the complementary concept of *tibitire*. The Yoruba usually say of the person who is told the truth but rejects it that “*ara rẹ kọ otító*” (He rejects/does not like the truth). On a general note, it is usually said that *ayé kòótó* (The world/the people of the world reject/do not like the truth). The context is that of the people who are toeing the wrong line, which ironically seem to be beneficial to them. When they are rightly advised, told the truth and are expected to change their ways, they naturally do not wish to change because of the benefit they think they are deriving. From the Yorùbá perspective, it seems there are many people in this category in the society than those who, within the same context, will immediately listen to correction and change; hence, the following:

Ayé fẹ̀ràn okùnkùn ju imọ̀lẹ̀ lọ
 (The world loves darkness more than light)
Olóòtó tí ń bẹ̀ láyẹ̀ ò pógun
Şikàşikà ibẹ̀ wọ̀n ò mọ̀ níwọ̀n egbẹ̀fà
 (Adetoyeşe Adeniji; oral interview)

Honest people in the world are not up to twenty

The wicked ones there are very well more than a hundred and twenty thousand.

Those who tell the truth are often usually unloved, despised and victimised by the bad eggs of the society. The Yorùbá always say *Olóòtọ́ ilú nìkà ilú* (The truthful/honest person of the community is usually considered wicked) and *olóòtọ́ kùí léní*, that is, the person who tells the truth (honest one) is most of the time not loved. This is brought out clearly in the following excerpt from an Ifá verse *Òtúrá Méjì*:

*Òtító dọ́jà, ó kùtà
Owó ñlánílá là á rẹ̀ké
Báráyé bá rí onírọ́
Wọ̀n a téní ẹ̀wẹ̀lẹ́ fún un.*

(Adetoyeşe Adeniji; oral interview)

Truth on being displayed in the market (as a ware)
Was not appreciated (bought by no one)
Deceit is highly valued
When humans see a liar
They role a long red carpet for him/her

This social attitude is exploited by many of politicians, swindlers and others who would always tell lies to deceive and dupe the gullible ones.

The Yorùbá believe that evil is hatched in the mind of the wicked one, and it is often difficult for the recipient to decipher it. They say:



Oníkùn ló mòkà
Ajẹun ló mowó rẹẹ pòn lá.

(It is the wicked that knows the evil he is hatching
It is the eater who knows how to lick her/his
fingers.)

Awọ félé bonú kò jé ká ríkùn aṣebi

(The thin skin which covers the stomach prevents
us from seeing the wicked mind).

They also believe that such evil people can be investigated and studied so that they could be avoided if they could not be curtailed. Hence the following expressions:

Atimòwà ènìyàn ló ṣòro, bí ko ṣeé sún mó, yòò ṣeé rí sá.

(It is knowing a person's attitude that is difficult, if s/he is not accessible, s/he can be avoided) (Bello-Olowookere, 2004:32)

BÓlórún bá ti fòtá ẹni hannì, kò lèe pani mó

If God has revealed one's enemy to one, s/he can no more kill one.

Why the exposed enemy will not be able to harm one any more is that one will be able to avoid him/her or incapacitate him/her in one way or the other.

2.3 Oore ló pé, ìkà kò pé

In spite of the view that evil is predominant in the society, the *Yorùbá* encourage good values. Children are taught

to do good right from infancy, in the pre-colonial traditional set-up, directly through parental everyday practical examples and instructions, and through a lot of moral lessons which they are taught during moonlight storytelling sessions, in which an elderly woman or man acts as the narrator. The moonlight story telling may be seen as a sort of semi-formal method of moral instruction to the young ones in which they are still malleable. The stories are fantastic, of animal and plant kingdoms. Literary and playful methods appropriate for infants and children are employed in narrating them, to inculcate morality. The story of *Ìjàpá*, Tortoise, is common among such tales. *Ìjàpá* the trickster character who perpetrates all kinds of bad/evil acts such as covetousness, stealing, pride, laziness, lying, treachery, debauchery, deceit among others (Babalọlá,1973). Nemesis always catches up with *Ìjàpá* and so the young ones are taught that such bad behaviours and evil acts always lead to regrets, and that they should not follow his bad examples. Where and when *Ìjàpá* goes scot-free, the lesson is then located in the deeds and actions of the other character(s) in the story. Apart from the trend of the plot and the resolution of its conflict, there is also usually a formula for summarizing each story that draws out clearly the specific lessons in it (Ògúndèjì, 1991:26 – 27; 2009: 79 - 82).



There are several proverbs, pithy sayings and *Ifá* verses that also encourage good behaviours. They include:

1. *Àṣegbé kan kò sí àṣepamọ́ nìkan ló wà*
(There is no going scot-free [for a crime committed]; the punishment can only be delayed for some time), (Bello-Olówóókéré, 2004:30)
2. *Aṣesílẹ̀ ni àbọ̀-wá-bá*
(It is what one does before-hand that one meets later) (Bello-Olowookere, 2004:30)
3. *Èni tí ó ń ṣe rere, kó múra sí rere*
Ènìyàn tó ń ṣekà, kó múra síkà
Àtoore, àtikà, kan kì í gbé
(Let s/he who does good continue doing good, let s/he who does bad continue doing bad. The two shall be adequately rewarded).
4. *Bírọ́ bá ń lọ lógún ọdún*
Ọjọ́ kan ṣoṣo lòtító ó bá a
(Though lie has travelled ahead for twenty years, truth will catch up with it in just one day).
5. *Àgbà tó gbèèbù ikà*
Orí ọmọ rẹ̀ ni yóò hù lé
(The elder that planted seedlings of evil shall harvest them on his children).
6. *Bí abéré bí abéré, là á ṣéké Ọjọ́ tó bá tó ọkọ rọ ní*
pani
(It is in bits like the little needle that one tells lies. It kills one when it is enough to mould a hoe).

7. *Ìkà á kà oníkà*
Rere á bá ẹnì rere
(Evil will meet up with the wicked; the good person will reap goodness).

Apart from these proverbs similar ideas are also found in Ifá divination verses that encourage virtuous deeds and discourage vices. According to Olúwaṣegun Ògúndélé, a verse in the *odù òsẹ̀bìrẹ̀tẹ̀*, for example, tells the story of how Òkété, Ikún and Òkéré (all types of rodents) are dealing treacherously, going behind him to steal Òrúnmìlà's goods. Òrúnmìlà consulted divination, and he was asked to get three dogs which were put in different strategic positions. After the dogs had been strategically positioned, they caught the three bad friends red-handed and killed them. So they reaped, adequately, the reward of the evil they had done.

According to Yémiítàn and Ògúndélé (1970), another Ifá verse from *odù ògbèbàrà* narrates the story of Bójúrí, the *oba* (king), who killed Mọ̀lẹ̀yọ̀, the beautiful wife of a poor man, because she refused to marry him. Although nobody saw him, the secret was revealed many years after when the same *Oba* Bójúrí married Ẹ̀sankìígbé, the young daughter of Mọ̀lẹ̀yọ̀. Before Mọ̀lẹ̀yọ̀ died, she predicted that the rays of the sun would expose Bójúrí. This happened one day when Ẹ̀sankìígbé was



servicing him his food and the rays of the sun from a hole on the roof shone on the water he was to drink and reflected on his face. This reminded him of Mọleyò's prediction, and he started laughing at the seeming folly of Mọleyò until Ẹsankìgbé requested to know the cause of the laughter. He told her the story. Ẹsankìgbé later recounted it to his own father, who reported to the council of chiefs. On investigation, the council, finding the case to be true, brought the *ọba* to book before Ògún shrine and ensured that justice was done. The *ọba* was executed as a criminal at Ògún shrine.

2.4 The Role of Àìgbọ̀ràn in Incurring Ibi

Although the Yorùbá believe that one may suffer unduly from the wickedness of the evil ones, they maintain that one will finally be vindicated. This is how they encourage the good person to endure the hardship of injustice meted out on her/him. Most of the time, such good people, suffering unduly, are vindicated and the proverb *Bíró bá ń lọ lógún ọdún ọjó kan ọso lòtító ó bá a* (Although lie has travelled ahead for twenty years, truth will catch up with it in just one day) is confirmed.

Such is the story of Aṣooremáṣikà in Ọdúnjọ's play *Agbàlówómérìí: Baálẹ̀ Jòntolo* who suffers unduly in the hand of Baálẹ̀ Àgbákànmí (a. k. a. Agbàlówómérìí) but is ultimately

handsomely rewarded when he helps a dying poor man. Before the poor man dies, he gives Aṣooremáṣìkà a tattered magic mat and a clay oil-lamp with which he and his hunter friend Àdìgún gain access to ancient riches locked up in the trunk of a huge tree in the sacred forest. When the *baàlè* learns about Aṣooremáṣìkà's fortune, he forces Aṣooremáṣìkà and his friend to take him and some others to the forest. He connives with some others to kill the two friends. As fate would have it, he is the one who perishes in the forest with his wicked associates. Later when Akéjù, the heir to the stool of the *baálè*, wants to continue victimising Aṣooremáṣìkà, accusing him of killing his father, Chief Akogun leads a civil protest on behalf of Aṣooremáṣìkà. Àkèjù is rejected and Aṣooremáṣìkà is installed the new *baàlè*

Many stories like this abound in Yorùbá folktales and Ifá verses. Those who are honest and are being victimised are advised not to change their ways; they are encouraged with sayings such as the ones treated in the last subsections, assuring them that they will certainly be vindicated. There are, however, those who through disobedience and other carefree attitudes bring evils upon themselves. In Yorùbá folktales, Ìjàpá, who would always disobey social norms usually, finds himself in trouble (Babalolá, 1973). In Ifá divinatory verses, it is usually



disobedience against divinatory injunctions about the sacrifices to perform that often leads to regret. Of such characters, it is usually said,

Ó pawo lékèé	He called the diviner a liar
Ó p Èṣù lólè	He called Èṣù a thief
Ó wòrun yànyànyàn	He looked up to heaven with disdain
Bí ẹnì tí kò ní kú mó	As if he would never die
Ó kọtí ọgbọin sẹbọ	He turned deaf ears to sacrificial instructions

Such characters usually end up in serious regret.

An *Ògúndá Méjì* verse of the *ifá* literary corpus tells the story of *Èkùn*, Leopard, who refused to offer sacrifices so that he might succeed in his hunting expeditions. He boastfully depended upon his hunting skills. Èṣù, the trickster god, in an attempt to teach him a lesson, played tricks on him. He was not able to kill any game despite several attempts, until he obeyed the sacrificial instructions (Abimbola, 1977:102-104). In an *Òtúrabàrà* verse of *ifá*, the story is also told of Òsayìn who was asked to offer three cocks and six hundred and thirty hens so that he might not lose his voice. In defiance, he offers only one cock. This is why Òsanyìn speaks with a very tiny voice till today (Bascom, 1969:434-436).

3.0 Conclusion

In this paper, the synonyms of *ire* (good) and *ibi* (bad) have been examined as background to examining the Yoruba concepts of *tibtire*; *ayé kòótó*; *ire ló pé*, *ìkà kò pé* and the role of *àìgbòrà̀n* in incurring evil. The existence of many alternative lexical items for discussing the issues of good and bad among the Yoruba shows that the concepts are deeply entrenched among them. The assurance of a long tradition of deep thinking on the issues of good and bad among the Yoruba can be garnered from the etymological study of the relevant lexical item treated above. That the component morphemes of many of the words and their meanings have been lost in history due to long usage is a pointer to this. As suggested earlier, it is by investigating Yorùbá dialects and other related languages that we may be able to discover some of the lost forms and meanings of relevant expressions that can help us further understand the concepts behind them. For example, if one bears in mind the fact that the Yoruba and Edo are historically related, one cannot but wonder whether the morpheme (*do*), in the name and greetings of Edo-Bini and its dialects, has any relationship with the morpheme (*do*) in *òdodo*. Historical linguists and dialectologists are, no doubt, needed to investigate this and such others in order



to build upon a recent monumental effort of Professor Oládalé Awóbùlúyì (2008), which we have found very useful.

The examination of some ideas about good and bad also shows that the Yoruba have deep thoughts about these moral issues. There is no doubt that Yoruba morality, as encapsulated in the concept of *omólúàbí*, is a pragmatic one. This is necessarily so because the traditional Yoruba society that produced it was essentially non-literate. The complexity of the binary ideology of *tibitire* is a clear pointer to the fact that there is a type of critical thinking about the moral norms and dictums that guide this oral society. That the Yoruba are of the view that some issues are clearly bad and, by implication, others are clearly good (absolute goodness and absolute badness) as pointed out above should not necessarily be seen as contradictory to their *tibitire* relativist view. Rather, it should be considered as a rich accommodationist view that combines the two perspectives on a continuum, with the two absolutes at both ends and other contextually defined relative situations appropriately positioned in the middle.

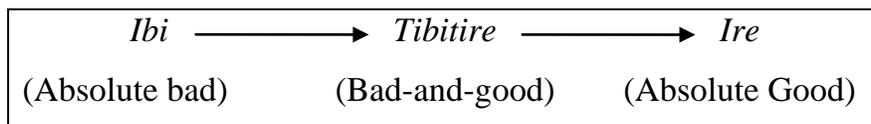


Fig 1: Accommodationist continuum of absolute ‘ibi’, ‘tibitire’ and ‘ire’

As the many illustrations provided have revealed, the moral principles and ideas of the Yoruba are richly encoded in oral poetic verses, songs and stories (including ritual drama performances) used every day and on special occasions. For all these rich traditions of indigenous knowledge and ethical norms not to be washed away under the turrents of modernity and globalisation, there is a need to take urgent steps to make them available to the up-and-coming generation. This can be done by documenting and storing/preserving them in modern media (print and electronic), which are readily assessible to younger generation. Finally, the introduction of these indigenous cultural materials into school curricula at all levels is also very important.⁵

End Notes

* This is the revised version of a paper presented at the 2008 Conference of the Bioethics Society of Nigeria

1. For the written documents consulted, please see the list of works cited below
2. The two Ifá priests consulted are Adétóyèṣe Àjàní Adéníji of Ìwó, whom we interviewed several times; and Olúwaṣégun Samuel Ògúndélé, a student in the



Department of Linguistics and African Languages,
University of Ìbàdàn, Ìbàdàn.

3. A summary of the story is given under subsection 2.3 of this article.
4. Information about the word *èdé* and its meaning was supplied by *awo* Adétóyèṣe Adéníjì.
5. The Yoruba Council of Elders organized a seminar on the concept of *omólúàbí* and education in Yoruba land between 19 and 20 October, 2006 at the June 12 Cultural Centre, Kútò, Abéòkúta, Ogun State. The proceedings of the seminar have been published as a book (Ògúndèjì and Àkàngbé, 2009).

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