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A Philosophical Position Of Suicide In The Political Development Of Old Oyo Empire

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ABSTRACT

The challenge in the philosophical understanding of 'suicide' is aptly a rarely researched aspect of Yoruba social history. The recent conscious of the concept depicts an anti-social behaviour which the society disapproved, while the pre-colonial understanding of it paints an honour and heroic move often made not only by the Alaafins but as well as other well-respected individuals in the society. However, the key to accepting the position of suicide hides in the Yorubas' general understanding of death as well as their multilayered history of their traditional political leaders and military heritage. This paper opines that the philosophy behind the concept of suicide in Old Oyo Empire is motivated by the heroic understanding of death as well as a power play. This paper, however, stresses the role in which this belief has helped grow and negatively affect the empire. The research will however assist in understanding the philosophy of suicide in the state formation and growth of the old Oyo Empire. The work relied on both primary and secondary sources. It employed both descriptive and analytic methods in analyzing the data used for the study.

KEYWORDS: Suicide, Philosophical History, Oyo Empire, and Political Development

Introductory Discourse

Suicide and Honour are composite concepts that have to do with esteem, respectability and reputation. According to Julian Pitt-Rivers,

> honour is the value of a person in his own eyes but also in the eyes of the society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his right to pride. (Julian, 1966: 21)

Suicide is generally regarded as an anti-social behaviour and of which society disapproves. That is why sociologists and psychologists, among other experts, have taken it upon themselves to account for the incidence of suicide in many societies. However, most of the modern theories of suicide do not emphasize the idea of 'heroic suicide'; the idea aptly accepted in African History before the coming of the white man. Epitomizing this 'genre' of suicide are the high profile, politically motivated suicides in early pre-colonial Yoruba history.

In order to have a good grasp of Yoruba attitude to political suicide, it is imperative to briefly discuss the Yoruba cosmology and their beliefs about death. The Yoruba conceived the cosmos as consisting of two distinct but yet inseparable realms – *aye* (the visible world of the living) and *orun* (the spiritual and invisible domain of the ancestors, gods and spirits). (Drewal, et al, 1966) The two realms were closely connected in the sense that the inhabitants of *orun* regularly involved themselves in human affairs. Thus a typical Yoruba community was not just perceived as a geographical entity with clearly defined boundaries and with a web of horizontal networks of kinship/familial relationships.

Instead, it was also seen as a transcendental continuum, which stretched back into the past to include the dead, represented by the ancestors, and at the same time anticipated the future world of the yet unborn. These three elements: the dead, the living and the unborn always featured prominently in Yoruba traditional discourses on life.

Therefore, death was not seen as the end of life. It was a means of crossing to the other side. It was a "dematerialization of the vital breath or soul, a transformation from earthly to spiritual existence … where the dematerialized soul may choose to stay forever … [or] make periodic returns to earth through reincarnation". (Lawal, 1977) This belief in an afterlife and in reincarnation assured the Yoruba of immortality. It is therefore within this belief system that the idea of burying valuables, slaves and asking other notable personalities to die with a departed king and accompany him to *orun* becomes understandable. Perhaps, the cultural practice which best demonstrates the Yoruba belief in immortality is that of the *egungun* (masquerade). An *egungun* "is believed to be the spirit of a deceased person who has returned from … (the abode of the ancestors) to visit his people. Hence he is called *ara orun* (visitor from *orun*)". (Dopamu, 2004) The *egungun* cult was controlled by men who made visible the ancestral spirits and commanded their power. Spirits of the departed were thus celebrated in the annual *egungun* festival and were consulted from time to time by members of their family. It is also interesting to note that while the Yoruba frowned against suicide among ordinary people and stigmatized the relations of the affected person, they valorized the practice among the elite whenever it occurred within the context of a political contest or as a ritual obligation.

Much of the discussion that follows in this section is based on Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas*, being the most authoritative narrative of pre-colonial Yoruba history. (Johnson, 1966) The examples cited here are from the Old Oyo Kingdom, not necessarily because Oyo practice approximated what obtained in other Yoruba-speaking areas, but because Johnson's *History* was essentially "Oyo-centric" and also because Ibadan, by the mid-nineteenth century appeared closer to Oyo in terms of language and 'culture' than to other Yoruba towns.

There were two types of high profile suicides in Oyo, and both were considered 'honorable' if promptly effected. (Johnson, 1966: 55) The first was actually ritual suicide and it involved important state officials and titleholders (some of whom were part of royalty). These individuals had to die either on the accession of a new king or on his demise. The biological mother of the king-elect, for instance, was officially asked to 'go to sleep' immediately her son was called to be king. (Johnson, 1966: 63) This was necessary so that "there will be no occasion to violate any filial duty imperative on a son who is at the same time the king … [and whose] majesty must be supreme". (Johnson, 1966: 49) Upon her death, an official mother was appointed for the king. Again, the

Crown Prince and a host of other title-holders had to commit suicide on the death of the king in order to accompany him to the hereafter. These individuals were called *abobaku* (one who dies with the king).

This tradition, apart from its ritual symbolism also had very strong political undertones. All the important titleholders that were customarily required to die with the king were those closest to him and who had the freest access to his person. To make their lives dependent on the king's was thus designed to ensure his safety. And since they all knew their lives would end whenever the king died, they took great care to protect him from premature death. And, as a sort of 'compensation' all these titleholders enjoyed a lot of privileges during the king's lifetime and could get away with very serious misdeeds.

The most important of these functionaries was the *Aremo* (Crown Prince) who was required to die with the King as from the eighteenth century because it was suspected that some *Aremo* before 1730 had been committing patricide to hasten their own succession. (Johnson, 1966: 59)

Between 1730 and 1758, the primogeniture rule was abolished in Oyo and successive *Aremo*s ruled with their fathers, enjoyed tremendous powers and privileges, and were required to die with them. The *Alaafin* was then succeeded by any of his remaining male descendants approved by the *Oyomesi* (Council of chiefs). (Law, 1971)

The second type of suicide was politically motivated and was 'imposed', either directly or indirectly on public figures. The direct demand came in the form of political rejection issued to the king. A ruling *Alaafin* could be rejected by his chiefs (the *Oyomesi*) for tyranny, wickedness or as a result of political intrigues or power struggles.

This rejection was communicated to him by the *Bashorun* (Prime Minister) who presented the king with an empty calabash, or one containing parrots eggs, with the pronouncement 'the gods reject you, the earth rejects you, the people reject you'. (Afolayan, 1998: 32) The only option for the king after receiving this message was to commit suicide. In the seventeenth century, nine *Alaafin* were thus removed. This practice continued into the eighteenth century, culminating in the internal struggle between the *Alaafin* and the *Bashorun*, which destabilized the empire in the second half of the century. As a form of political control, the *Alaafin* also had the right to request any titleholder to commit suicide. (Law: 1971: 21) Moreover, one of the Oyomesi, the *Samu* was also designated an *abobaku*, but despite all these measures, it appeared the *Oyomesi* (Council of Chiefs) used this prerogative more often than the *Alaafin* did. (Law, 1966: 189)

'Indirect' pressures for death could be presented by harrowing circumstances of life where the individual concerned did not wish to compromise his honor or where he felt he was approaching a situation of public ridicule. Johnson narrates the story of the head chief of Apomu (*Baale* Apomu) who committed suicide when Oyo decided to attack his town during the reign of *Alaafin* Aole (1789-1796). (Johnson, 1966: 189 There was also the case of *Alaafin* Agboluaje who committed suicide when asked by the 'overmighty' *Bashorun* Gaha (his Prime Minister) to attack one Chief Elewi-Odo, who was his personal friend. (Johnson, 1966: 180)

THE PLACE OF SUICIDE IN OLD OYO EMPIRE AND YORUBA'S POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Yoruba kingdoms maintained an orderly and unified political system which is still in effect till today. A Yoruba kingdom (e.g., the Oyo kingdom) was made up of a headquarters (i.e., Olu-Ilu) and other local towns and villages. However, its political administration consisted of a central level and subordinate units. The central level was headed by the Oba (king) and assisted by a handful of chiefs and other political figures in the administration of the kingdom, while the subordinate units, headed by Baales, concentrated only on the administration of the towns and villages in the kingdom. Like the Oba, the Baale also had a group of chiefs that assisted him in his area of jurisdiction. (Osadola, 2019)

However, the Baale of each town and village is entitled to pay annual homage (isakole) to the Oba at the central level. Baale literarily denotes 'Father of the land' in Yoruba tradition, they are mainly viceroys and do not wear the crown as they are affiliates and their towns are tributary to neighbouring Oba. Oba is a Yoruba term for King; an Oba is the monarchical head of government in ancient Yorubaland. Some Obas ruled supreme over their kingdoms and subjects with unchecked powers while some had checks and balances like the great Old Oyo Empire (OOE), some have their powers checked as a result of their tributary status to Old Oyo Empire. Their titles vary amongst clans in Yorubaland, for example, the Oba of Oyo is called 'Alaafin of Oyo' (Man of the palace at Oyo), some Obas' titles are attributes to their land, examples are Oluwo of Iwo, Osolo of Isolo and so forth. (Johnson, 1921)Any erring Baale can be relieved of his post or sanctioned to certain punishment respective of his offence since all Baales were responsible to the Oba at the central level, but this must have the consent of some offices in the administration. The Yoruba political administration had a decentralized structure, i.e. power was constitutionally shared among all political levels/sections of the kingdom ranging from the highest to the lowest unit, unlike the Hausa political system which was highly centralized. (Osadola, 2019)

The Yoruba political administration was also based on the ultimate principle of 'check and balance' which implies that each of the administrative levels can check, challenge or nullify actions of other levels irrespective of their administrative hierarchy, for example, in the political system of the Oyo empire, the Oyomesi (the 7 hereditary kingmakers headed by Basorun) and the Are-Ona-Kakanfo (head of the army) acted as checks to the Alaafin who can be deposed by being presented an empty calabash or parrot's egg if found incompetent or guilty of impeachable crimes, for example, Are-Ona-Kakanfo Afonja, with the help of some of the Oyomesi, presented an empty calabash to Alaafin Aole signifying his rejection as the king which was to be followed by his suicide. (Akinjogbin, and Ayandele, 1980) However, it can be safely concluded that the Yoruba political system had a semblance to the modern federal system of government. (Atanda, 1980)

Of all the kingdoms and empires in Yorubaland, the Oyo political system was the most popular and outstanding as it was able to influence issues in other kingdoms like Ijebu, Ife, Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin) and so on. Below is the political-administrative structure of the Oyo Empire. (Osadola, 2019) The Alaafin was seen as the political head of the Empire. The Oyomesi chose him. (Balogun, 1985) It was claimed that he could only appear three times a year in public and that was only during some important festivals. The Alaafin is the supreme head of all the kings and princes of the Yoruba nation, as he is the direct lineal descendant and successor of the reputed founder of the nation. The succession as above said is by election from amongst the members of the royal family, of the one considered as the most worthy, age and nearness to the throne being taken into

consideration. It might also be mentioned in passing that the feelings and acceptance of the denizens of the harem towards the king-elect are often privately ascertained and assured of previously. (Akintoye, 1971)

In the earliest days, the eldest son naturally succeeded the father, and in order to be educated in all the duties of the kingship which must one day devolve upon him, he was often associated more or less with the father in performing important duties and thereby he often performed royal functions, and thus gradually he practically reigned with his father under the title of Aremo (the heir apparent) having his official residence near the palace; but as the age grew corrupt, the Aremo often exercised sway quite as much as or more than the King himself, especially in the course of a long reign, when age has rendered the monarch feeble. (Afolayan, 1998) They had equal powers of life and death over the King's subjects, and there are some cases on record of the Aremo being strongly suspected of terminating the father's life, of attaining full powers at once. It was therefore made law and part of the constitution that as the Aremo reigned with his father, he must also die with him. (Osadola, 2019)

The main gateway to the palace being closed at the demise of the King, a private opening is made for him in the outer wall through which he goes in and out of his temporary residence. (Osadola, 2019) During this time he remains strictly in private, learning and practising the style and deportment of a King, and the details of the essential duties and functions of his office. During this period he is dressed in black, and is entitled to use a "cap of the state" called "Ori-ko-gbe-ofo." (The head may not remain uncovered). The Basorun at this time conducts the affairs of state. (Johnson, 1921)

The Osorun or Iba Osorun (Basorun, i.e., the lord that performs the "Oran ") may be regarded as the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the kingdom and something more. He is not only the president of the council, but his power and influence are immeasurably more significant than those of the others put together. His is the chief voice in the election of a King, and although the King as supreme is vested with absolute power, yet that power must be exercised within the limit of the unwritten constitution, but if he is ultra-tyrannical and withal unconstitutional and unacceptable to the nation it is the Basorun's prerogative as the mouthpiece of the people to move his rejection as a King in which case His Majesty has no alternative but to take poison and die. (Atanda, 1980) As the next to the Alaafin in authority and power, he often performs the duties of a King. He takes precedence of all provincial kings and princes. There were times in the history of the nation when the Basoruns were more potent than the Alaafin himself. During the long course of history there have been several alliances between the two families so that, in the older line of Basoruns at any rate, the blood of the royal family also runs in their veins. (Osadola, 2019)

Several points of similarity may be noted between the Alaafin and his Basorun. The Alaafin is Oba (a king), the Basorun is Iba (a lord). The Alaafin's wives are called Ayaba, the Basorun's Ayinba. They are similarly clothed, carrying their heads bare and shaven, and their headbands used as belts; but the Ayinbas are not equally avoided by men as the Ayabas are.

The Iba Osorun has Igbis to his palace as well, but a limited number; those of the Alaafin being unlimited. Igbis are a royal attendant who sees to the welfare of the royal house or prominent

personalities in the old Oyo empire. He too has several Ilaris as a king, but they must be created for him by the Alaafin. (Johnson, 1921)

The Alaafin has his crown, his throne, his Ejigba round his neck. The Osorun has a specially made coronet of his own, a uniquely ornamented skin called the Wabi on which he sits, and a string of beads around his neck also like the Ejigba. (Osadola, 2018) At the major festivals of the Alaafin, the Basorun also has minor festivals to observe in conjunction and has his part to play at the central observance also. When the Alaafin reigns long and peacefully enough to celebrate the Bebe, a festival akin to the royal jubilee, the Basorun must follow with the Owark. But it is a peculiarity of the Basorun's children that the boys are never circumcised. (Biobaku, 1973)

Although the title is hereditary in the same family yet it is within the King's power to change the line of succession when necessity demands that course. Thus the whole unwritten constitution of the Yorubas seems to be a system of checks and counter-checks, and it has, on the whole, worked well for the country. There have been five different families of the Basorun line, each one with its distinctive cognomen. The first and oldest belonged to the family totem of Ogun (the god of war) and have for appellatives Moro, Maso, Mawu, Maja, Ogun. This was the original line contemporary with the earliest Kings. It covered the reign of 18 Kings and ended with Basorun Yamba, in the reign of King Ojigi. (Atanda, 1980)

With the long lease of power and influence enjoyed by this family, it became as wealthy and great as, or even greater than, the sovereign himself, especially as some of the Basoruns outlived two or three successive Kings. Therefore King Gberu the successor of Ojigi transferred the succession to his friend Jambu of another line, whose appellatives were Maja Maro. This line embraced the reign of seven Kings and ended with Asamu in Abiodun's reign. The third began with Alobitoki in Aole's reign, having the appellatives of Maja Majo of the totem of Agan. (Osadola, 2019)

Are-Ona Kankanfo was the head of the army. Oyo had for long maintained a strong army that had been used in winning different wars. It was claimed that if the military should suffer any defeat, the Are-ona-kankanfo was to commit suicide or go on exile. (Afolayan, 1998)

Next in importance to the Oyo Mesi and of a rank below them are the Esos or guardians of the kingdom. These constitute the noblemen of the second class. They also are addressed as "Iba." It is a military title, not necessarily hereditary. It is the reward of merit alone, and none but tried, and proven soldiers are selected for that rank. (Adeoye, 1980)

First and foremost amongst them and apart by himself stands the Kakanfo, an Eso of the Esos. Then the 70 captains of the guard, ten of whom are under each of the seven councillors. Each wears an Akoro (or coronet) and carries in his hand no weapon, but a baton or staff of war known as The Invincible. (Atanda, 1980)

So much is this title thought of by military men and others and so great is the enthusiasm it inspires, that even the children and grandchildren of an Eso hold themselves bound to maintain the spirit and honour of their sires. The Eso is above everything else noble in act and deed.

"Emi omo Eso " (me born of an Eso) is a proud phrase generally used even to this day by any of their descendants to show their scorn for anything mean or low, or their contempt for any difficulty, danger, or even death itself. (Biobaku, 1973)

Kakanfos are generally very stubborn and obstinate. They have all been more or less troublesome, due, it is supposed, to the effect of the ingredients they were inoculated with. In war, they carry no weapon but a baton known as the "King's invincible staff." It is generally understood that they are to give way to no one not even to the King, their master. Hence Kakanfos are never created in the capital but in any other town in the kingdom. (Ijagbemi, 1973)

There can be but one Kakanfo at a time. By virtue of his office, he is to go to war once in 3 years to whatever place the King named, and, dead or alive, to return home a victor, or be brought home a corpse within three months. (Osadola, 2019)

Place of Honour in Suicide

In the first type of political suicide identified as ritual suicide, the titleholders required to die often sees it as an official duty to their land and so concealed their personal distress at having to die. Clothed in their best, they gave lavish feasts and gifts to people amidst funeral dirges and even supervised the digging of their own graves and the making of coffins. After putting their houses in order, they retired to their inner chambers and went 'to sleep'. They were subsequently given befitting burials according to their ranks. Although their relatives mourned their exit, they were at the same time proud of their conduct. However, if it happened that the poison taken by the person expected to die did not quickly take effect (probably due to previous medicinal fortifications – *ajesara*), close relatives had a duty of 'finishing off' the chief either by strangling or some other means before sunset to preserve the honor of the family. (Johnson, 1966: 398) Such homicide was not considered as manslaughter or murder. In fact, it was presented, in the interest of the family, as suicide properly and promptly committed.

The idea of refusing to die as expected in a ritual suicide was simply unfathomable to the people. Many issues – of personal dignity, of family or group honor, and of communal equilibrium and spiritual wholesomeness – were hinged upon that death. To refuse to accompany a king to *orun* after a life of enjoyment, privileges and immunities with him was seen as a great betrayal, and a social disservice, which might portend grave consequences for the community. It also bordered on dishonor and ignominy, not only for the individual concerned, but also for his entire family, compound or lineage since many of the *abobaku* titles were hereditary. However, if any of the *abobaku* refused to commit suicide as expected and thus had to be executed, Johnson reports that "his carcass will be treated like that of a common felon and his house pulled down". (Johnson, 1966: 173) That was why close relatives did not hesitate to 'dispatch' such faint-hearted' individuals, in order to save their family from indelible disgrace. What is at stake here is thus beyond the individual. To die with the king as a titleholder was therefore considered honorable for the individual concerned and for his family. The individual concerned also anticipated a life of continued privileges and enjoyment as a royal consort in the afterlife.

Rejected kings who valiantly committed suicide were treated honorably and accorded decent and public funerals because they exited bravely without resistance. On the other hand, for a king to insist on living after having been rejected was also considered disgraceful and ignominious.

Nobody anticipated such an existence. The only record of this in Oyo traditions is that of *Alaafin* Karan, who challenged the right of the *Oyomesi* to reject him. He was subsequently killed in an insurrection. (Law, 1977: 77) Thus according to Ali Mazrui, "suicide becomes respectable when the life which it ends [had] at once aspired to great heights and [is now] descended to such depths". (Mazrui, 1965: 11) Where a leader (or anybody for that matter) was not requested to die by tradition and had not been officially rejected but found himself in dire straits and deep dilemma, suicide could offer a means of escape, as in 'saving' him the dishonorable task of attacking a loyal friend. And where a dishonorable act had already been committed, suicide also helped in face saving – of relieving one from the consequences of such conduct, or could even be restitutive. Thus considerations of honor and ignominy, either directly or indirectly were always lurking at the heart of many suicides, especially in high profile cases in pre-nineteenth century Oyo.

CONCLUSION

Naturally, each kingdom developed different mechanism for dealing with its individual problems, so that it would be futile to postulate any "model" constitution for a Yoruba kingdom. On the other hand, with the notable exception of the new states of the 19th century, the main features of government – the town, the sacred Oba at its center, the hierarchy of hereditary chiefs and priests with their jealously guarded responsibilities — remained constant. This form of government was not confined to the capital, but was repeated throughout the kingdom, every town forming a microcosm of the central government. The place of the crowned Oba was taken by a less ruler, generally entitled to wear only a simple crown or coronet (called 'Akoro' in Oyo) or a cap of office. Usually these rulers were chosen like the greater Oba by kingmakers from royal houses and presented for approval to the Oba of the kingdom, while in some cases the latter nominated the provincial rulers (Smith, 1969: 117).

Just like the purpose of suicide in Old Oyo Empire, Obas are still removed from office for non-performance in this era i.e. the case of Oba Samuel Aderiyi Adara of the Ode-Ekiti community of Ekiti State in Nigeria, who was dethroned for non-performance. Hence, suicide philosophically represented the rejection of the Oba by the people as well as the gods. However, individuals who committed suicide in Old Oyo Empire found honour in it rather than the humiliation they might be subjected to by the people and gods. Rather, it might also be a means of saving their people from a foreseen calamity or wrath from the gods.

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