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# Iku ya j'ẹsin: Invitation to Suicide in Yoruba Ontology

Emmanuel Oladipo Ojo  
Siberian Federal University

## ABSTRACT

In Yorubaland, south–western Nigeria, 'ku' means death, 'ya' means better or preferred while 'ẹsin' means ignominy. Thus, the Yoruba construct of 'iku ya j'ẹsin' means 'death is better than (or preferred to) ignominy'. In sharp contrast to what obtains in the highly individualistic Yoruba contemporary society, in traditional and communalistic Yoruba societies, a high premium was placed on honour, integrity, honesty and dignity. Thus, individuals kept their names (orukọ) and those of their families and forbears (orukọ ẹbi) unimpaired and inviolable. Indeed, 'orukọ rere' (good name) was the standard of measurement of an individual's or family's reputation in traditional Yoruba societies hence the construct 'orukọ rere san ju wura' (good name is preferred to wealth). But then, there were occasions when imminent military defeat, severe physical disability, serious health challenges, frustration, despondency, hopelessness and guilt threatened the honour and dignity of individuals, families or communities and prompted them to resort to suicide. This paper argues that the Yoruba construct of 'iku ya j'ẹsin' was an invitation to suicide in Yoruba traditional societies. Although, like any other people, modernization has significantly altered and considerably modified the culture, taste, worldview, traditional values and belief system of the Yoruba; yet, till date, many Yoruba still commit suicide. The question then is: do the Yoruba of south–western Nigeria still commit suicide for the same reasons for which their ancestors and forebears committed suicide?...

*Keywords:* NA

*Classification:* FOR Code: 1699

*Language:* English



London  
Journals Press

LJP Copyright ID: 925623

Print ISSN: 2515-5784

Online ISSN: 2515-5792

London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 17 | Issue 4 | Compilation 1.0

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# Iku ya j'ẹsin: Invitation to Suicide in Yoruba Ontology

Emmanuel Oladipo Ojo

## I. ABSTRACT

*In Yorubaland, south–western Nigeria, ‘ku’ means death, ‘ya’ means better or preferred while ‘ẹsin’ means ignominy. Thus, the Yoruba construct of ‘iku ya j’ẹsin’ means ‘death is better than (or preferred to) ignominy’. In sharp contrast to what obtains in the highly individualistic Yoruba contemporary society, in traditional and communalistic Yoruba societies, a high premium was placed on honour, integrity, honesty and dignity. Thus, individuals kept their names (orukọ) and those of their families and forbears (orukọ ẹbi) unimpaired and inviolable. Indeed, ‘orukọ rere’ (good name) was the standard of measurement of an individual’s or family’s reputation in traditional Yoruba societies hence the construct ‘orukọ rere san ju wura’ (good name is preferred to wealth). But then, there were occasions when imminent military defeat, severe physical disability, serious health challenges, frustration, despondency, hopelessness and guilt threatened the honour and dignity of individuals, families or communities and prompted them to resort to suicide. This paper argues that the Yoruba construct of ‘iku ya j’ẹsin’ was an invitation to suicide in Yoruba traditional societies. Although, like any other people, modernization has significantly altered and considerably modified the culture, taste, worldview, traditional values and belief system of the Yoruba; yet, till date, many Yoruba still commit suicide. The question then is: do the Yoruba of south–western Nigeria still commit suicide for the same reasons for which their ancestors and forebears committed suicide? This paper answers this question. Among others, data for this study included interviews, archival*

*material, records compiled by European explorers, missionaries and colonial officials as well as books and newspapers. The study employed the descriptive and analytical method of data analysis.*

*Author:* (PhD), is of the Department of History and International Studies, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria but he is currently (2017) a visiting scholar at the Department of General History, Institute of Humanities, Siberian Federal University, Krasnoyarsk, Russia.

## II. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

For the purposes of clarity and in-depth analysis, this article is broken into three sections. This introduction and conceptual discourse is followed by a brief analysis of how communalism served as buffer or therapeutic resource against suicide in traditional Yoruba communities. This is followed by a brief examination of how the concept of individualism created the ‘their problem’ (as against the hitherto ‘our problem’) notion and how this has led to astronomical and unprecedented rise in suicide cases in contemporary Yoruba society. This is followed by the conclusion. In its first ever comprehensive report on suicide in 2014, the World Health Organization estimated that one person die by suicide every 40 seconds in the world while there are about 20 million attempted suicides every year. To underline the importance of the Report, entitled “Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative”, it was published in nine major languages – Arabic, English, Finnish, French, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, Chinese and German. According to the Report, one major

predisposing factor to suicide is depression and according to Adeyemi, a Nigerian Professor of Psychiatric, of the 400 million people who suffer from depression worldwide, 12% (48 million) are Nigerians.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore not surprising that in recent times, there has been an unprecedented rise in suicide cases in Nigeria. The most cursory glance at Nigerian newspapers and other occasional publications would confirm this assertion. In its Editorial of 28 August 2015, *This Day* observed that “the rate at which Nigerians commit suicide is becoming alarming. The authorities should address the predisposing factors”. The *Nigerian Pilot* of 7 November 2015 also expressed grave concern over what it described as “increasing wave of suicide cases in Nigeria”. The paper described the phenomenal rise in suicide cases in Nigeria as “worrying and disturbing”. In an article entitled “Taking their own lives: Why are Nigerians committing suicide”? the *Osun Defender* of 10 January 2015 expressed the view that there was need for a critical analysis of the factors that ‘now make many Nigerians to commit suicide’. Indeed, in an article titled “Suicide: A Rising Social Problem”, the *Leadership* of 24 January 2015 wondered why Nigerians now rush to the gallows in large numbers. Although, suicide is a world-wide phenomenon with depression as the primary cause; it is now assuming the status of a pandemic in Nigeria. This study probes and juxtaposes the causes of suicide in traditional and contemporary Yoruba societies.

My working hypothesis in this paper is Farberow’s definition of suicide as “self-initiated and self-inflicted death”.<sup>2</sup> As a historian, my main concern in this study is not with the etymological, sociological, scientific, philosophical, clinical, psychological or anthropological approaches to or

aspects of suicide<sup>3</sup> but the link between the Yoruba construct of *ikú ya j’ẹsin* and self-initiated and self-inflicted death. In effect, the paper deals with the ontological aspect of suicide in Yoruba traditional societies and in contemporary cosmopolitan Yorubaland. The name ‘Yoruba’ applies to the speakers of the Yoruba language whose traditional homeland is south-western Nigeria. They effectively occupy the six south western states of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti while some are found in parts of Kwara and Kogi states.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, the Yoruba in south-western Nigeria numbered 27,511,992, representing about 19.65% of Nigeria’s population.<sup>5</sup> There is also a Yoruba irredenta in the Republics of Togo and Benin separated from their kith and kin in Nigeria by the arbitrary boundaries drawn across the length and breadth of Africa following the 1884/85 Berlin Conference.<sup>6</sup> Of course, a massive Yoruba diaspora, which derived mainly from slavery and failure to return home from holy pilgrimages to Mecca, is found over a wide area stretching from the Senegal to the Nile and from the Caribbeans to Brazil.<sup>7</sup> Raymond Ogunade describes the Yoruba as “highly intelligent,

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed anthropological approach to suicide, see Dorothy Counts “Suicide in Different Ages from a Cross-Cultural Perspective” in A.A. Leenaars (ed.), *Life Span Perspectives of Suicide*, Springer Science+Business Media, New York, 1991, pp 215–228.

<sup>4</sup> Kwara and Kogi States are in the North-Central zone of Nigeria. In the former, the Yoruba constitutes the single largest ethnic group with significant Nupe, Bariba and Fulani inhabitants. The latter is often called the ‘Confluence State’ due to the fact that the confluence of Rivers Niger and Benue occurs there. There are three main ethnic groups in the state – Ebirá, Igala and Okun (Yoruba).

<sup>5</sup> Nigeria Population Commission: 2006 Census Figures, p. 12. Ekiti–2,384,212; Lagos– 9,013,534; Ogun–3,658,098; Ondo–3,441,024; Osun–3,423,535 and Oyo 5,591,589.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1976, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Yoruba religion culture is particularly prevalent in Cuba. See, for example, “Cuba: Yoruba Culture in the Caribbean” at <http://www.dtcuba.com>. This site was accessed on 13 September 2017.

<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian & Nigerian Tribune*, Thursday, 22 October 2015

<sup>2</sup> N.L. Farberow (ed.) “Introduction”, *Suicide in Different Cultures*, Baltimore & London: University Park Press, 1975, p. xii.

enlightened, organized and spiritually minded people...who have a lot of respect for humanity.”<sup>8</sup>

Nothing about suicide is simple – neither its supposedly simple definition nor the deterioration in the thought patterns of suicides are altogether straight-forward or easily discernible. This may have informed the view that “suicide refers not to a single action but more broadly to a great many varied behaviors”.<sup>9</sup> ‘Suicide’ may have derived from the Latin word ‘*suicidium*’ – ‘*sui*’ means ‘self’ and ‘*cidium*’ means ‘killing’ hence the definition of suicide as the killing of oneself.<sup>10</sup> Literature on suicide particularly on the etymological, sociological, scientific, philosophical, clinical or psychological aspects of suicide is diverse and enormous. On the other hand, literature on the cultural aspect of suicide is sparse and thin. Since 1897 when Emile Durkheim published his trailblazer, *Suicide*, quite a great deal of works have been done on all aspects of suicide particularly since 1975 when Farberow (editor) published *Suicide in Different Cultures*. By every standard therefore, one may justifiably assert that suicide is a well-researched phenomenon in some climes. However, a cursory glance at available literature on the content and context of cultural aspect of suicide among the Yoruba and elsewhere reveals that it is grossly understudied. For instance, as extensive, comprehensive and vast as the scholarly works of Shneidman are, they are almost completely devoted to other aspects of suicide to the almost total exclusion of the cultural aspect. With well over two dozen publications on suicide between 1967 and 2008, Shneidman, who, by every standard, qualifies as the father of modern suicide studies, paid little or no attention to the cultural aspect of suicide. Indeed, in his

major work, *Definition of Suicide*,<sup>11</sup> he asserted and defended a psychology-inclined definition of suicide. In his own study, Retterstøl observed that “anyone working on suicide issues will benefit from studying the cultural aspects”.<sup>12</sup> This may have informed Erminia’s position that there was need to pay more attention to the cultural underpinnings of suicide.<sup>13</sup>

Except for a few brisk and passing references to suicide among the Yoruba in extant literature; there are very few studies on the subject as it affects the Yoruba of south western Nigeria. Newspaper articles on suicide are what seem to be prevalent but, for obvious reasons, newspaper articles do not possess the objectivity, importance, intrinsic and academic value of research endeavours. Till date, the most comprehensive study on suicide among the Yoruba of south western Nigeria is probably that of Olomola.<sup>14</sup> In the study, Olomola discusses the strong communal spirit and hospitality that characterised pre-colonial Yoruba societies. According to him, a vast majority of the Yoruba lived out their lives among their kinsmen and relatives usually in large compounds each consisting of numerous families.<sup>15</sup> Olomola’s assertion should not be construed to mean that the Yoruba lived in self-sufficient islands since they actively participated in long distance trade and embraced inter-ethnic marriage.

Retterstøl has identified two types of suicide – social or institutionalized and personal or individual suicide.<sup>16</sup> According to him, the former

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Ogunade, “Spirituality and Human Flourishing Among the Yoruba”, Working Paper, Category A-3, Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, n.d., p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> J.L. McIntosh, *Research on Suicidology: A Bibliography*, Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1985, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?=&suicide>

<sup>11</sup> Edwin S. Shneidman, *Definitions of Suicide*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1985

<sup>12</sup> Nils Retterstøl, “Suicide in a cultural history perspective, part 1 Western culture; attitudes to suicide up to the 19th century” *Norwegian Journal Suicidologi*, no. 2, 1998, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Colucci, Erminia, “The cultural facet of suicidal behaviour: Its importance and neglect”, *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health (AeJAMH)*, 5(3), 2006, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> G.I. Olomola, “Suicide in Yoruba Culture”, *Africa: Revista do Centro de Estudos da USP*, 10, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Retterstøl, “Suicide in a Cultural History Perspective, Part 1”, p. 46.



involve suicides virtually demanded of the individual by society due to the individual's role in a group. This type of suicide has had general recognition in many cultures. Examples include the death of a widow, servant or slave because of the death of the master or lord. Other examples might be found in countries ravaged by famine and privation, where it was expected that the old or sick ones would sacrifice themselves so those who were younger and well would survive. When an old person no longer was able to follow the tribe, he or she would be left behind, either at his or her own initiative or the tribe's. This is the equivalent of what Durkheim calls altruistic suicide.<sup>17</sup> The second category of suicide identified by Retterstøl is what he calls personal or individual suicide – which generally stemmed from insufferable life situation found impossible to resolve through regular means, escape mechanisms, aggression toward others that one feels disappointed by, and not least mental ailments of various kinds. These are the equivalents of Durkheim's anomic or egoistic suicide. The insufferable life situation mentioned above may have informed the submission by Shneidman that suicide is caused by *psychache* which he describes as the "hurt, anguish, soreness, aching, psychological pain in the psyche, the mind – the pain of excessively felt shame, or guilt, or humiliation".<sup>18</sup> Gonsalves defines suicide as "the killing of oneself on one's authority"<sup>19</sup> while Halbawachs describes it as "all those cases of death resulting from action taken by the victim themselves and with the intention and prospect of killing oneself".<sup>20</sup> Thus, the role of 'self' is common to all the definitions and descriptions of suicide.

<sup>17</sup> Emily Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson), The Free Press, 1897, pp. 222–225.

<sup>18</sup> E.S. Shneidman, *Definition of Suicide*. New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1985, p. 202

<sup>19</sup> M.A. Gonsalves, *Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*, London: Merrill, 1986, p. 30

<sup>20</sup> M. Halbawachs, *Lee Causes du Suicide*, Alcon: Paris, 1930, p. 41

There are great convergences and divergences in the perception of suicide by various cultures. For example, while it is considered sinful and immoral in some; it is a crime in others yet in some others, it is a honourable way of exiting from certain insufferable situations. Generally, the Yoruba abhor suicide and express very strong and unwavering disapproval of it except when prescribed for the survival of the society (for instance in the Old Oyo Empire).<sup>21</sup> As far as the Yoruba are concerned, suicide is *ikú buburu*, evil death; *ikú gbigbona*, gory death; *ikú iya*, fatal death or *ikú itiju*, shameful death. Thus, suicides are not given descent burial neither are their relatives permitted to mourn or show any outward or external signs of grief. Indeed, traditional cleansing rites are performed by relatives of suicides to ward off re-occurrence. The Yoruba belief that suicides will be tormented in the hereafter since they are not admittable into God's resting abode. It must be added however that despite their strong disapproval of suicide, the Yoruba extol certain categories of suicide. Herein lies the paradox which this study will examine as it progresses.

*Ikú* and *iye* are antonyms among the Yoruba. Thus, *ku* means to die while *wa laye* or *ni iye* is to be alive although there is a borderline which the Yoruba renders as *wa laye bi eni ti o si* meaning that an individual is neither dead nor alive. This could be as a result of long-standing and debilitating health challenge or deep and unending material poverty both of which could make an individual decide to end his life. In Yorubaland, *aye* denotes several things. It means the cosmos thus *agbaye* means the entire universe; the powers that be particularly dark power as well as the ceremonies, customs and practices of the world. The last interpretation is prevalent among Pentecostal Christians. The Yoruba describe the quality of life an individual lives in one of the following ways – *aye irorun/idera* – a life of ease and comfort; *aye alaaafia* – a life characterized by peace/good health and *aye iya* – life punctuated by

<sup>21</sup> Olomola, p. 53

insufferable conditions or situations either because of the absence of *irorun* or *idera* (material comfort) or *alaafia* (peace or good health) or both. In the above categorization lies the decision and choice to either continue or cease to live. Barring any sudden rupture or upturn (for example loss of job), an individual who lives in *irorun* or *idera* will, in all probability, want to continue to enjoy the comfort and material things at his disposal. Also, the one who has *alaafia* is at peace externally – with other people – and is free from severe ailments and terminal illnesses. In this case, life is sacrosanct and desirous. On the other hand, an individual may have to grapple with *aye iya*. Generally, this means insufferable life situations – a life that is almost completely bereft of material wealth or comfort in which case the individual lacks the basic necessities of life. Sometimes, an individual could describe his life as *aye iya* if he contends with long standing or terminal ailments.

### III. COMMUNALISM AND COLLECTIVISM: THERAPEUTIC RESOURCES AGAINST SUICIDE IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA SOCIETIES

Before the advent of western civilization and culture in Nigeria generally and Yorubaland specifically, a strong sense of brotherhood and hospitality prevailed in the society. Thus, there was a strong communal spirit which engendered the ‘we’ spirit, cooperation, friendship and help. Indeed, there was help every inch of the way in quanta far in excess of what was sometimes required. As Olomola has so pertinently pointed out, since the Yoruba hardly removed themselves from their roots, people never lacked relatives with whom they shared intimate feelings in times of joy and sorrow. This was one of the therapeutic resources available to the Yoruba. As pointed out by Olomola, the Yoruba took care of one another at all times and this unwavering and constant support provided the necessary assurance against problems of old age, unexpected illness and disaster. Indeed, even lepers lived among their

kinsmen, mixed freely with them and raised their children.

Unemployment, which today is one of the major causes of depression and ultimately suicide was unknown in Yoruba traditional communities. No one was unemployed in the largely rural and agrarian communities and everyone enjoyed abundance. No one was left to him/her self and anyone who wore sullen looks was asked what the matter was with him/her and the “verbal ventilations that usually followed helped to assuage his feelings”.<sup>22</sup> Olomola argued further that egoistic suicide – common among individuals who are not properly integrated into the society but are thrown on their own resources and living their lives to their hearts’ contents – was unknown among the Yoruba.<sup>23</sup> Thus, living together in large numbers and looking after individual member’s welfare and happiness insulated traditional Yoruba societies from impulses to suicide. However, Olomola’s claim that anomic suicide – resulting from a feeling of extreme alienation coupled with utter despair and a sense of defeat – prevailed in pre-colonial Yoruba societies appears to contradict all the above and indeed the very thesis of his study.

Moreover, as Ezenwele and Nwadiolor rightly pointed out, before the advent of western culture and civilization, a sense of brotherhood and hospitality prevailed in Africa. This ‘wholesome human relations’ was a leveler and leverage that ensured that every member of the society was captured in wealth generation and distribution.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, living and surviving together was the basis of African traditional societies including those of the Yoruba. Thus, in Yoruba traditional societies, “one is human because of others with others and for others and since we are therefore, I

<sup>22</sup> Olomola, p. 56

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Ezenweke & Kanayo Nwadiolor, “Understanding Human Relations in African Traditional Religious Context in the Face of Globalization: Nigerian Perspectives”, *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, Volume 3, No. 2, 2013

am". For example, the building of a hut or house for a kinsman, especially an old person or one who was relatively poor, was often seen as a collective responsibility that called for the contribution of many. Also, the whole community or kinsmen may mobilize a workforce to the farm of a dead relative or someone who was bereaved or fatally ill. Rees Anderson's story quoted below summarises the 'we' spirit in traditional Yoruba (African) societies:

One day, a western anthropologist went to Africa to study the social behavior of an indigenous tribe. He proposed a game to the children and they willingly agreed to be part of it. He put a basket filled with fruits underneath a tree and told the children that whoever would reach the basket first would win the whole basket and could eat the fruits all by him- or herself. He lined them all up and raised his hand to give the start signal. Ready. Set. Go! The children took each other's hands and started running together. They all reached the basket at the same time. Then they sat down in a big circle and enjoyed the fruits together, laughing and smiling all the time. The anthropologist could not believe what he saw and he asked them why they had waited for each other as one could have taken the whole basket all for him- or herself. The children shook their heads and replied, "Ubuntu, how can one of us be happy if all the others are sad?"<sup>25</sup>

The 'we' spirit described above was a potent buffer against lack, loneliness, depression and suicide in traditional Yoruba societies. Indeed, Yoruba traditional society was so tightly constructed that a puncture from any angle posed a threat to the whole. Obviously the possibility of a member of the type of society described above developing unmanageable depression that could lead to suicide was almost exactly nil. People who committed suicide did so for reasons other than socio-economic or financial trauma.

However, the elaborate therapeutic resources that served as insurance against suicide in Yoruba traditional societies notwithstanding, there were instances of suicide in traditional Yoruba societies. One prominent cause of suicide was

<sup>25</sup> Rees Anderson, "Inside Traditional African Societies: The Absence of Greed", Occasional Papers, No. 22, 2012, p. 3.

*aisan ẹsin* or *aisan ti o gboogun*, incurable disease that brought ridicule and public shame to the sufferer. There was the story of Orogbangba PanamO, a renowned hunter in Ire, a village about 50 kilometers north-west of Ado Ekiti, the capital of Ekiti State, south-west Nigeria. He was reputed for haunting in *igbo ẹran alagbara*, a thick and almost impenetrable forest that was home to very ferocious animals and always killed such animals like lion, tiger, leopard, etc. Indeed, the regularity with which he haunted for and killed such animals earned him the sobriquet *okọ kiniun*, literally husband or master of lion.<sup>26</sup> Yet as brave and famous as Orogbangba was, he often suffered excruciating epileptic seizures particularly in the presence of his guests and friends who always visited him in large numbers to congratulate him on his bravery each time he killed any of the aforementioned animals.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, on a particular occasion in 1901, the seizure was unusually prolonged that Orogbangba sustained unprecedented bruises and injuries. When he eventually recovered, he was quoted to have said "*emi okọ kiniun l'ẹṣiṣi sọ deniyepere*" literally meaning "I, the husband and master of lion am rendered impotent and ridiculed by seizures?"<sup>28</sup> He committed suicide shortly afterwards.

A tradition in Ogbomoso, a city in Oyo State, south-western Nigeria records the story of a couple, Arogbodo Arinloye and Fipatira Arinloye both of who were physically challenged – while the former had only seven fingers on his two toes; the latter had only one ear – but married on the understanding that they would never use their physical disabilities to insult or provoke each other.<sup>29</sup> After about 17 years of marriage and rearing of four children, they broke the 'understanding' between them. According to this

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Adeboloye Ariwalogba, 87, No. 33, Iyeni Quarters, Ire Ekiti, 22 April 2007. This story was confirmed by three other informants.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Jinadu Adubiaro, 88, No. 23, Isiwo Street, Ogbomoso, South-Western Nigeria, 22 February 2007.



tradition, an early morning heavy rainfall swept away Arogbodo's *asọ oogun*, charm cloth, which Fipatira had washed and spread outside to dry the previous day. The former was enraged on learning that his charm cloth, with which he could transform into something other than human and perform certain magical acts, was gone.<sup>30</sup> The couple went in search of the cloth for three days and returned home when it became obvious that they were not likely to find it. From that moment onwards, Arogbodo engaged Fipatira in a 'cold war' which broke into the open when the latter committed yet another error.

Having probably overworked on his farm during the 1912 farming season; Arogbodo fell fatally ill but began to recover after some three months. In his effort to fully recover from his illness, Arogbodo had sought the services of an *Ifa* priest part of whose prescription was Arogbodo's total abstinence from palm oil and warned that the former could suffer a more fatal ailment if he disregarded his instruction. However, a few days after, apparently having forgotten the diviner's instruction, Fipatira added palm oil to her husband's soap and the latter had taken some morsels before realising that the soap contained palm oil, earlier forbidden for him.<sup>31</sup> In annoyance and knowing what fatal fate awaited him, Arogbodo called his wife 'one ear-deaf' who would have remembered the diviner's instruction if she had had two ears.<sup>32</sup> Fipatira reminded Arogbodo of the 'understanding' between them and said but for Arogbodo's incomplete toes, he would have been able to visit her in the kitchen and probably prevented the fatal error. Arogbodo became blind shortly afterwards and two weeks later, he committed suicide. The story went round everywhere in the neighborhood to the extent that many people now referred to Fipatira as *eni to p'okọ rẹ*, she who murdered her husband. To save her face and cease from the torment she bore everywhere she went, Fipatira committed suicide

shortly afterwards.<sup>33</sup> Today, Arogbodo and Fipatira are portrayed as hero and heroine in Ogbomoso tradition. They are referred to as *tọkọtaya to tayọ*, husband and wife who excelled, thus validating Ajisafe's submission that "when a man finds life burdensome, disgraceful, and perilous to him, and consequently commits suicide he is given great credit and honour".<sup>34</sup>

The two instances cited above are cases of individuals who took to suicide as a result of the Yoruba concept of *ikú ya j'ẹsin* – death is preferred to (better than) ignominy. The most horrific case of mass suicide in known history probably occurred in Aramoko, now headquarters of Ekiti West Local Government, about 26 kilometres to Ado-Ekiti, the capital of Ekiti State, south western Nigeria. It would be recalled that following the collapse of the Old Oyo Empire,<sup>35</sup> which, until the close of the eighteenth century, stood out as the most distinguished political achievement of the Yoruba-speaking people; the moral and military leadership of the empire disappeared. The Fulani thereafter made Ilorin a base from where they launched denigrating attacks against the Oyo-Yoruba country. One major consequence of this was that hundreds of thousands of refugees, fleeing from the Ilorin invaders, streamed into Yorubaland. Some of these settled in Ekiti, some in Ijesa, while some moved south-westwards where they founded

<sup>33</sup> This is a very popular story in Ogbomoso as virtually all my informants alluded to it.

<sup>34</sup> K. Ajisafe, *The Laws and Customs of the Yoruba People*, London & Lagos: Rutledge & C.M.S. Bookshop, 1924, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> The Oyo Empire was a large West African empire founded in approximately 1300 C.E and the largest West African empire to exist in present day Yorubaland. It was also the most important and authoritative of all the early Yoruba political entities. Beginning as simply the city of Oyo, it rose to prominence through wealth gained from trade with both its African neighbours as well as European nations such as Spain and Portugal. Because of its wealth and military skill, the Oyo Empire was the most politically important and assertive Yoruba state from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, exercising control not only over other Yoruba states, but also over the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey in present day Benin Republic.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

such towns as Ijaye and Ibadan.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, Ibadan proved the most successful of these refugees' settlements and rapidly grew into a militarised principality. As a result of the atmosphere of insecurity that pervaded the length and breadth of Yorubaland which bore close similarities to that of pre-feudalism Europe which led to the emergence of serfdom and manorialism, citizens willingly offered themselves as subordinates to war chiefs. Each war chief had his own professional army made up of his sons, relatives, captives in war and freeborn youths.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the Ibadan army, an amalgam of several private armies, soon became the overriding power and terror in the whole of Yorubaland.

Having replaced the Old Oyo Empire as the police and defender of the Yoruba country, Ibadan soon embarked on an aggressive expansionist policy such that by 1870, large areas of Ijesa, Igbomina, Ekiti and Akoko had come under the control of Ibadan. After the Ibadan–Ijaye War of 1860–65<sup>38</sup> in which the latter town was destroyed, Ibadan emerged as the greatest single military power in Yorubaland and established an empire that covered the greater parts of what was left of the former territories of the Old Oyo Empire. As part of its constant expansionist agenda, Ibadan armies decided to launch a sudden and potentially destructive military campaign against Aramoko in 1854 but the latter got winds of the planned attack.<sup>39</sup> As pointed out above, by the date of the planned attack, no army in Yorubaland matched

that of Ibadan. The options were therefore very clear to Aramoko – to surrender to Ibadan imperialism without lifting a finger or put up some resistance and be fatally crushed. Both options however had their consequences: while the former may save the community from Ibadan military siege and heavy casualties; it would turn Aramoko into *eru* (slave) of Ibadan with the full implications of that status. On the other hand, an Aramoko–Ibadan military clash would, for the former, be as devastating as the United States' atomic bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War. Yet, Aramoko's military class felt that its honour and integrity were at stake. Consequently, the traditional military class known as *ipaye* summoned all age grades in Aramoko to a meeting and informed them of the planned invasion of the town by Ibadan warriors. The leader of the *ipaye* asked his colleagues if they wanted to become slaves to Ibadan: “*ṣe ẹ fẹ s'ẹru 'Badan?*” Almost with one accord, the *ipaye* sang thus:

*Ipaye ogun gb'ona oko; Ipaye, military defeat is steering us in the face along our farm paths;*  
*Ipaye, ogun gb'ona oja o; Ipaye, military defeat is steering us in the face along our market paths;*  
*K'ogun ba gb'ona oko; If military defeat is steering us in the face along our farm paths;*  
*K'ogun ba gb'ona oja; And military defeat is steering us in the face along our market paths;*  
*Ogun mọ gb'ona ọrun o. There is no threat of military defeat on the way to heaven.*

With one accord, 1,500 *ipayes* and their supporters killed themselves that day. Thereafter, the Ibadan army never contemplated or carried out military campaign against Aramoko. Thus, imminent military defeat was one of the factors that popularised and practicalised the Yoruba construct of *iku ya j'ẹsin* in traditional Yoruba societies.

Another important cause of suicide in Yoruba traditional societies was *ayipada* – a sudden change in fortunes. There were two types: *ayipada si rere* (positive change of fortunes) and *ayipada si buburu* (negative or undesirable

<sup>36</sup> G.O.O. Olomola, “Aduloju of Ado-Ekiti. A Case Study of an Ekiti Warrior Chief of the Nineteenth Century”, Original Essay for the B.A. History, University of Ife, Ile-Ife, June, 1967, pp. 3–4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>38</sup> For an analysis of the causes and course of the Ijaye War, see E.A. Ayandele, *Nigerian Historical Studies*, pp. 50–52. For a comprehensive analysis of all the issues involved in the war, see J.F.A. Ajayi & Robert Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973, Part II, pp. 59–122.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Elegbeleye Sodipo, 89, No. 6, Upetu Street, Aramoko Ekiti, 23 November 2008. Elegbeleye, now late, was a very proficient traditional historian of Aramoko Ekiti. Isola Olomola also confirmed and made reference to this episode.

change of fortunes). An example of the former is when a hitherto poor or unknown person gained wealth and prestige through hard work and became renowned. This is what the Yoruba call *ayipada talaka*. On the other hand, *ayipada olowo* or *ayipada alagbara* is when, for any reason or reasons, a hitherto renowned, wealthy or powerful individual suffered severe setbacks such that his wealth, affluence or influence considerably diminished or completely faded away. This is the context within which the death (by suicide) of a deposed *oba* (king) in Yorubaland should be understood. This is also the context within which the death of Efunsetan Aniwura could best be understood. Efunsetan Aniwura's date of birth remains uncertain, but she must have been born around 1790s. She was the son of an Egba farmer, Ogunrin, a native of Egba Oke-Ona. She rose to become the *Iyalode* of Ibadan. She was probably the first woman to set up a flourishing agrarian economy that employed no fewer than 2000 men and women and probably the richest person in the whole of the Yoruba interior in about the late 1870s but she had no child after several years of marriage. Unfortunately, her only daughter died in 1860 during childbirth. Having lost her only daughter, she probably went into recluse and became suspicious of life and living. She even became an atheist, ignoring all the gods wondering why she should lose her only daughter. She therefore ordered that none of her slaves (workers) must be pregnant or bear children. One of them eventually became pregnant and was subsequently executed on the order of Efunsetan. *Aare* Latoosa, the political head of Ibadan, thereafter ordered that Efunsetan be brought to justice but she poisoned herself by hemlock rather than being humiliated.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed discussion of the life and times of Efunsetan Aniwura, see S.A. Akintoye, *A History of the Yoruba People*, Dakar: Amalion Publishing, 2014.

#### IV. INDIVIDUALISM AND SUICIDE IN YORUBA CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

I am myself; you are yourself; we are two distinct persons, equal persons. What you are, I am. You are a man, and so am I. God created both, and made us separate beings. I am not by nature bound to you, or you to me. Nature does not make your existence depend upon me, or mine to depend upon yours. I cannot walk upon your legs, or you upon mine. I cannot breathe for you, or you for me; I must breathe for myself, and you for yourself. We are distinct persons, and are each equally provided with faculties necessary to our individual existence. In leaving you, I took nothing but what belonged to me, and in no way lessened your means for obtaining an *honest* living. Your faculties remained yours, and mine became useful to their rightful owner<sup>41</sup> – Fredrick Douglass

With the arrival of the missionaries closely followed by the colonial overlords and the subsequent imposition of colonial rule on Africa, different ideologies and philosophies about human relations such as individualism and Marxism came into being. As Olomola has pointed out, constituents of Yoruba culture which conflicted with the Euro-Christian culture of the British were swept away. Modern industrialization gradually set in during and after colonial rule and the attendant increment in geographical and social mobility led to the gradual but steady breakdown of Yoruba communalism and hospitality. Consequently, communalism or collectivism gave way to individualism; the 'we' spirit gave way to egoism; hospitality gave way to meanness and help, which came in quanta far in excess of what was required before, ceased. This bred unemployment and lack of proper integration of the depressed members of the society. Unmanageable depression thus set in.

While not attempting to venture into the debate on philosophical individualism,<sup>42</sup> 'individualism'

<sup>41</sup> Craig Biddle, "Individualism vs. Collectivism: Our Future, Our Choice", *The Objective Standard*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 2012, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Like socialism and communism, individualism is a nineteenth-century concept. For a detailed examination of

in the context of this study refers to moral, political or social concept that stresses human independence and the importance of individual self-reliance and liberty. It opposes most external interference with an individual's choices, whether by society, the state or any other group or institution, and also opposes the view that tradition, religion or any other form of external moral standard should be used to limit an individual's choice of actions. According to Police sources, there were 83 suicide and 17 attempted suicide cases in Nigeria between 1989 and 1994.<sup>43</sup> In recent times however, Nigerians have been inundated with enormous economic/financial stress, pervading poverty and hopelessness. Unemployment has kept skyrocketing beginning from when many multinational corporations and manufacturing firms started relocating from Nigeria to other African countries with relatively stable power supply and economic policies.<sup>44</sup> This resulted into

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the concept, see Steven Lukes, "The Meanings of Individualism". *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (January–March, 1971), pp. 45–66. For another detailed philosophical analysis of its features and forms, see Craig Biddle, pp. 3–17.

<sup>43</sup> Abubakar Momoh, "Youth Culture and *Area Boys* in Lagos" in Attahiru Jega (ed.), *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics Under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*, Uppsala & Kano, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet & The Centre for Research Documentation, 2000, p. 183. It must be pointed out that because of the stigma that is attached to suicide, it is generally under reported in Nigeria.

<sup>44</sup> Nigeria's acute unemployment problem is a consequence of paucity of industries and the neglect of agriculture. Since the discovery of crude oil, successive Nigerian governments had paid mere lip service to the development of agriculture and the diversification of the country's economy. Industries like textiles, shoe, food, tyre, glass, rug, carpet, iron and steel, etc, which would have provided jobs for millions of Nigerians have either folded up or relocated elsewhere. The Nigerian Association of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture, NACCIMA, estimated that in Lagos State alone, more than 9,000 businesses had either shut down or relocated to other countries in the last few years due to harsh operation environment, particularly power related problems. In a clearly conservative estimate, the Association pointed out that Nigeria requires a minimum of 85,000 megawatts (500 megawatts per one million people as against its paltry 3,400 or 20 megawatts per one million people) of electricity

massive job losses and hundreds of thousands of breadwinners suddenly found themselves jobless. Particularly those in age bracket 45–55 years most of who are well educated and skilled but were swept off their desks in the wake of massive retrenchments in the banking and finance sector, the public service, the media and other establishments. Yet, these are the people whose children are in tertiary institutions; whose children are ripe for marriage; who are repaying mortgages on their houses and whose parents depend upon for care and support. Crushing and unbearable life challenges are part of what the Yoruba refer to as *ḡsin* which, in their reckoning, are best terminated by death. It is therefore not surprising that in recent times cases of suicide have been growing in leaps and bounds among the Yoruba and in Nigeria generally.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in his suicide note entitled 'iku ya jesin', an aluminium fabricator who died by suicide in Lagos said he was indebted to too many people hence his decision to commit suicide<sup>46</sup> bearing very close resemblance to that of Glenn and Patricia Scarpelli, the couple who died by suicide because they were unable to cope with what they called their 'financial spiral'<sup>47</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

In Yoruba traditional societies, the communal spirit described in this study ensured that everyone had access to basic necessities of life so the question of *aye iya* in the context of not having food or not finding someone to attend to one's needs, did not arise. Even the barren and men and women whose spouses pre-deceased them received affection, care and support in quanta far in excess of what was needed. But then, *aisan ti o gboogun* or *aisan ḡsin* (incurable disease that brought public shame to the sufferer)

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which the country presently generates to cope with the industrial and commercial needs of the country. See *The Guardian*, 5 April 2014.

<sup>45</sup> For a chronicle of some of these cases, see *The Guardian*, 28 March 2017 & *ThisDay*, 3 April 2017.

<sup>46</sup> *Punch*, 28 March 2012.

<sup>47</sup> *New York Post*, 28 July 2017



and the desire to protect one's integrity and sanctity as shown in the cases mentioned above, led people in traditional Yoruba societies to die by suicide. However, the arrival of the Europeans and the introduction of western concepts and philosophies, particularly the concept of individualism, led to the breakdown of the Yoruba age-long traditions of hospitality and communalism which served as buffers against suicide in traditional Yoruba societies. This led to the neglect of the less privileged and vulnerable members of the society. Since help no longer came the way of the needy as it used to and since individualism expected members of the society to fend for themselves, live on their own resources, manage their circumstances, devise strategies and means of coping with their misfortunes and be guided by their own instincts; cases of suicide increased. A watershed in the number of suicide cases among the Yoruba and Nigerians generally was reached with the unprecedented increase in socio-economic problems, particularly unemployment, dilutive wages and high cost of living beginning from the 1990s. These problems escalated as years passed. Indeed, the current pervasive economic recession, a fallout of successive Nigerian governments' culture of mismanagement, waste and corruption, has rendered several hitherto successful breadwinners persona non grata in their families and society at large because of their inability to meet basic social and financial obligations; and having a cultural construct of *iku ya j'ẹsin*, many of them took to suicide as a route of escaping from life's insufferable situations. Of course, today, because of pervasive moral laxity, except in very few cases, the Yoruba no longer heed the invitation to suicide for the same reasons for which their forebears heeded the call. At any rate, they still see suicide as a route of escape from *ẹsin*, life insufferable situations or ignominy.

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