

PERSONHOOD IN AFRICA AND HINDU THOUGHTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**Muhydeen Adekunle Adedoja**Department of General Studies,
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The aim of this paper is to compare the idea of personhood in African and Hindu thought systems. The notion of personhood is a very controversial concept, which is best clarified within the space of a particular culture. As such, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have a universal conception of personhood across all cultures. This is mainly premised on the argument that different cultures are rooted in different ontologies and metaphysics that shape and influence their belief systems, values, and norms. In Africa, for instance, Yorùbá in particular, the concept of personhood determines the ontological status, belongingness, and identity of an individual in a community. This paper not only considers the structural components of a person, it also examines the normative conceptions of a person from an African perspective. Likewise, a Hindu does not recognize a person as a mere material. As such, its understanding of personhood goes beyond the corporeal entity to an ethico-spiritual personality. This is why a sense of divinity and spirituality is attributed to all human beings in Hindu thought. This paper critically analyses the idea of personhood in African and Hindu thought systems. In spite of the criticisms identified, the research finds that the attainment of personhood is stringent within the Yorùbá and Hindu tradition. As such, the paper posits that to be distinguished from animals, one cannot but aspire to attain the level of personhood that is beyond the ordinary level of human beings.

Keywords: Personhood, Spirituality, Body, Soul, Hindu, Yoruba

Introduction

The idea of personhood is a topical issue that has been discussed in the realm of philosophy and other related disciplines. In fact, many literature have emerged from different scholars across the globe, expatiating and illustrating in one way or the other, the nature of a person in relation to different cultures. This is because to give a definite meaning to personhood, if not impossible, will be a difficult task. In other words, to argue that there is no unanimous viewpoint on the idea of personhood across the globe and even within the same cultural context is an undisputable fact. This is to say, different and divergent accounts have been postulated by different scholars espousing the idea of personhood as it is exemplified in their culture. Personhood has been described as the status of being a person, and it has been distinguished from being a human being. Consequently, while all persons are human beings, not all human beings are persons. This is similar to Wassmann et.al, that "the anthropological perspective on personhood focuses on how different cultures conceptualise being human within a given society and all over the world."¹

In Africa, there are many countries with diverse cultures, among which include Yoruba, Akan, and Bantu, among others. This implies that in Africa, there are divergent viewpoints on what constitutes the idea of personhood. Thus, to consider the idea of personhood from all Africans' viewpoint is an impossible task that is beyond the scope of this paper. As such, to have a nuanced discourse on the idea of personhood in African thought and Hinduism, we shall take Yorùbá as a point of reference to represent African traditional thought.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to engage with and examine the idea of personhood as represented in Hinduism and Yoruba Traditional Thoughts. As a paper in comparative philosophy, we shall employ a comparative methodology to evaluate the Hindus' and Yorùbás' traditional thoughts on the idea of a

person. Some of the issues to be addressed include: What is a person? What is the sole determinant of a person? What, if any, points of convergence and divergence between the Hindu and Yorùbá accounts of a person? We shall start our analysis with the Yoruba conception of a person. However, it is important to ask the question, "Who are the Yorùbás?" This is what we will do in the following section of this paper.

The Idea of Personhood in Yorùbá Thought

The Yoruba culture is one of the dominant cultures in Nigeria. The Yoruba people are mostly dominated in the western part of Nigeria, which includes Oyo, Ogun, Lagos, Osun, Ekiti, and Ondo.² They are also found outside the shores of Nigeria, like in South America, the Caribbean, Brazil, and Cuba.³ Segun Gbadegesin, quoted by Solomon Awe, notes that in Brazil, the *Orisa* tradition of Africans is one of the important cultural relics that still ties the people to their African soil.⁴

There has been much literature in African philosophy on the concept of the human person in the traditional Yorùbá thought system. The Yorùbá conceptions of the human person have both normative and ordinary meaning. In other words, the meaning and the nature of a person in traditional Yorùbá thought goes beyond the scope of Western conception. The Yorùbá translation of a person is *Ènìyàn*. Unlike the western conception of a human person, which is dichotomized into physical and mental structures, or put differently, the mind and the body, to use Descartes' words, the Yorùbá conception of a person added a third element, which is the 'spiritual element' of the human person. As such, unlike the dualistic conception of a person according to Western tradition, the Yorùbá traditional system believes in the 'tripartite conception' of a person. In other words, common among the scholars is the view that the Yorùbá conception of a person is divided into three parts – the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. The question then is: what is the structural component of a human person in the Yorùbá thought system? Scholars like Bolaji Idowu and Moses Makinde opine that man is made up of *ara* (body), *èní* (the life force of a person), and *orí* (inner head).⁵ Gbadegesin identifies the following features in the Yorùbá concept of *ènìyàn*: *ara*, *okàn*, *èní* and *orí*. This is also grouped, according to Olatunji Oyeshile, into physical and nonphysical elements of a human person.⁶

The physical elements of a person are collectively known as *ara* (body). This is the physical part of a human person which is subject to empirical observation and is verified by the senses. The *ara* (body) exists in space and time and it houses the senses, which are also an important part of the body. The *ara* (body) is not a contested issue in Yorùbá cosmology because it is a physical entity which can be touched and verified in space and time. It is described in physical terms like heavy/light, strong/weak, hot/cold, among others.⁷ Other parts of the *ara* (body) include *ifun* (intestine), *opolo* (brain), *okàn* (heart) and so on. The body describes the totality of a being. For instance, *Ara re lo mò* (she knows herself only – she is selfish).⁸ The Yorùbá believe that the *ara* (body) is created by *Òrìsànlá* (the Yorùbá God of creation), who is charged by *Olódùmarè* (God of Heaven) with the responsibility of moulding human beings out of clay.⁹ By implication, the *ara* (body) is a perishable and destructible entity after death because it is made from clay. This is similar to the biblical account of human creation found in Genesis chapter 2.¹⁰ This is a confirmation of the assertion made earlier that there is a similarity between the Yorùbá world view and the Christian world view. However, the Christian view maintains that God is the sole creator of human beings.

Okàn is another element in the structure of a human person. Oladipo contends that *okàn* is one of the integral parts of the *ara* (body), which is nothing but a physical element.¹¹ Gbadegesin, in his own view, agrees with Oladipo that *okàn* (heart) is one of the physical elements present in the human body. However, Gbadegesin further maintains that *okàn* (heart) has a dual character. On the one hand, a physical element is responsible for the circulation of blood. This is similar to the Western view of the *okàn* (heart) as the organ responsible for the pumping and circulation of blood. On the other hand, Gbadegesin notes that the *okàn* is also the source of psychic and emotional reactions.¹² In other words, even though *okàn* is seen as a physical element, it also has a mental dimension that is not physical. For instance, the Yorùbá will say, *ko ni okàn* (he does not have a heart). This usage of *okàn* is not referring

to the physical aspect of *okàn* but to the psychic dimension, which is mental. Thus, can we say that the mind has both physical and mental elements? If *okàn* is the seat of conscious identity, then is it equivalent to the concept of mind in Western view? We shall answer no. If the *okàn* is the same as the mind, then the mind will also be physical at some point and mental at another point. This, however, is contrary to the Western conception of mind. According to Descartes, the mind is a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and also imagines and feels.¹³ As such, the mind is not a physical element as it is essentially mental and does not exist in space and time. Thus, the usage of mind in this sense is not equivalent to the Yorùbá conception of *okàn* (heart). Put differently, is *okàn* the source of human thoughts? If *okàn* (heart) is the source of human thought, what is the place of *opolo*? Gbadegesin asserts that:

Erò as it occurs in *okàn* seems to refer to a wider range of processes than what *opolo* does. These include willing, desiring, wishing, hoping, worrying, believing, etc. When a person is described as an *aláèlókàn* (one with no *okàn*), it means that the person lacks the capacity for endurance. However, there is a class of activities which *opolo* seems to be particularly responsible for: ratiocinative activities.¹⁴

From the above quotation, *okàn* is responsible for thoughts (*erò*). For instance, *kíni èrò e?* Or *kíni ó wà lókàn re* means, what is your thought? *Opolo* on the other hand, is responsible for reasoning activities. The Yorùbá use *okàn* in the following ways: *okàn re ti lo* (He is buried in thought); *o se okàn giri* (he behaved bravely); *o lokàn* (he is brave; he has courage; he has a heart). From the preceding analysis, it shows that while *okàn* is recognised as responsible for blood circulation, it also has an invisible counterpart which is the seat of such conscious activities. Consequently, *okàn* (heart) as an invisible element is the same as the concept of mind in Western thought.

Considering the components of the structure of the human person, *è mí* is also an important integral part of the human person. In fact, without *è mí*, the *ara* (body) is dead and it is as good as a log of wood. The *è mí* is a non-physical element of the human person. As such, it is a divine or spiritual element. We may ask, if the *è mí* (life-giving element) is spiritual, how do we explain its existence or, perhaps, its origin in traditional Yorùbá thought? As mentioned earlier, the *ara* (body) is moulded by *Òrìsàńlá* (arch divinity) and the *è mí* is supplied by *Olódùmarè* which then activates the lifeless body moulded by *Òrìsàńlá* (arch divinity). Thus, the *è mí* is construed as the active principle of life, the life-giving entity put in place by *Olódùmarè* (the supreme deity). This implies that, without *è mí*, the body is lifeless and inactive. Hence, *è mí* has a direct source to *Olódùmarè*, confirming that because *Olódùmarè* is a spiritual being and an imperishable deity, *è mí*, which has a direct origin to *Olódùmarè*, is also spiritual and imperishable. As such, *è mí* disappears from the body at death and it returns back to its source, that is, *Olódùmarè*. Gbadegesin notes that *è mí* is common to all human beings which guarantees existence and activates the lifeless body into consciousness.¹⁵

However, there is a need to distinguish *è mí* from *è é mí* (breath). *È mí* is closely related to *è é mí*. While *è mí* is not physically identifiable, we can physically identify *è é mí* which is construed as a continued manifestation of the presence of *è mí*. *È mí* has an independent existence because it has its origin directly from *Olódùmarè*. Unlike *è mí*, *è é mí* (breath) does not exist independently. As such, its existence is attached to the existence of *è mí*. This further implies that *è mí* is ontologically prior to *è é mí* (breath). In Gbadegesin's words, "once the body is supplied with *è mí* through the divine action of the deity, *ara* (body) now has *è é mí* (breath) and begins to *mí* (breathe)."¹⁶ In his words, Bolaji Idowu describes *è mí* and *è é mí* thus:

*È mí*s closely associated with the breath and the whole mechanism of breathing which are its most expressive manifestation. But although the fact that a man breathes shows that *è mí*s in him, the breath (*è é mí*) is not *è mí* (life). *È mí* is

causative of breath and so it is the “breather”, that which breathes in man.¹⁷

One of the problems of *è mí* in traditional Yorùbá thought is: how can *è mí* be spiritual and at the same time occupy space and time by being embodied in the body (*ara*)? This is not an issue for traditional Yorùbá thinkers. It could be argued that *è mí* is not only invisible to ordinary eyes, but also has the quasi-physical properties that make the idea of it occupying space coherent.¹⁸ However, this may also lead to the problem of identifying *Olódùmarè* as a quasi-physical deity. Thus, the response to the objection may be put in another way that *è mí* since it is a direct force from *Olódùmarè*, has the capability to change form, either physical or spiritual. As such, it will neither be physical nor quasi-physical. In *Ifá* divination poetry, it is noted that *Olódùmarè* sometimes has transactions with human beings. This is not to say that *Olódùmarè* is a physical deity, but that, as the supreme deity, *Olódùmarè* has the power of changeability to change to any form, whether physical or spiritual. In sum, *è mí* as conceived above is a spiritual force injected into the body (*ara*) by *Olódùmarè* which activates the lifeless body into a conscious state and guarantees existence. As such, *è mí* has significance beyond its ontological expression because it makes man’s hopes and aspirations a reality. Consequently, when there is *è mí*, there is hope, but when *è mí* disappears, hope becomes useless and unrealizable.

Orí is another element in the structural component of a person. Like *okàn*, *orí* also has a dual character. In other words, *orí* is both physical on the one hand and non-physical on the other hand. The former talks about the physical *orí* (head), which is vital even in its physical character. The physical head (*orí*) carries all the senses associated with the body. Needless to say, a human being is incomplete without a head (*orí*). Thus, the physical head is also the seat of the *opolo* (brain). Unlike the literary understanding of *orí* (head), the latter is conceived as the bearer of human destiny and the determinant of personality. Traditional Yorùbá thought is more interested in the non-physical element of *orí*. The question that comes forward is how does the *orí* become the bearer of human destiny? The makeup of a human being is grounded in the efforts of some deity. As stated earlier in this paper, the body is moulded by *Òrìsànlá* (arch divinity); the *è mí* is supplied by *Olódùmarè* (Supreme Being) and *orí* is moulded by *Ajàlá* (potter of *orí*). Gbadegesin describes how *orí* comes to be the bearer of human destiny and determinant of personality. In his words:

After *è mí* has been put in place, the newly created human being proceeds to the next stage—the house of *Ajàlá*—for the ‘choice’ of an *orí*. The *orí* is, as it were, the ‘case’ in which individual destinies are wound up. Each newly created being picks up his/her preferred ‘case’ without knowing what is stored there. But whatever is stored therein will determine the life-course of the individual in the world. It is thus the *orí* so chosen that, as the bearer of the individual’s destiny, determines his/her personality.¹⁹

The problem with the traditional Yorùbá account of *orí* (inner head) is that there are different conceptions of how one chooses his *orí* (inner head), or what the Yorùbá calls *orí-inu* (destiny). This gave rise to three models of destiny. The first is the idea that one kneels down to choose the *orí*. This is what the Yorùbá refer to as *àkúnlèyàn* (that which one kneels down to choose). Secondly, there is the conception of destiny as the position in which one kneels down to receive his/her own portion of destiny. Here, the concept of choice is not necessary. In this model, the individual kneels to receive the pre-ordained portion from the creator. This idea of destiny is referred to as *àkúnlègbà* (that which one kneels to receive). Thirdly, there is the conception of destiny, which seems to stand between the aforementioned two. In this model, destiny is affixed to the individual, and also, the identity of the choice-maker is not clear.²⁰ These models mentioned above are different conceptions of how *orí* (inner head), which are dissimilar to one another. The question is, which one accurately represents the Yorùbá concept of *orí*?

Another problem is, how can *orí* (inner head) with the physical body (*ara*) and *è mí* proceed to *Ajala*'s house to pick an *orí*? If the *ara* (body) is a physical element, how come it is possible to choose an *orí* (inner head) before birth? However, it may be responded that the activities of the inner head (*orí-inu*) are spiritual in nature. As such, anything goes at the spiritual level of choosing one's *orí* (inner head). Another problem to note is the concept of choice in choosing one's *orí*. If one truly chooses one's *orí*, then how come one does not remember what he/she chooses on getting to the physical world? One simple response to this is that, when one chooses his *orí* (inner head), Yorùbá believes that he will pass through the river of forgetfulness, and at that point, the person will not remember anything that happens in this spiritual world.²¹ However, Yorùbá belief in the process of choosing *orí* (inner head) is mostly superstitious and not verifiable. As a result, it is difficult to account for with empirical facts.

Although some inconsistencies were identified in the Yorùbá perspectives of *orí-inu* (inner head), the Yorùbá, however, believe that *orí* is the determinant of a person's success or failure. As such, it is the guardian spirit of the person. This is expressed differently in the Yorùbá language, like, *orí mi ma ko ire* (my head, do not reject fortune); *orí mi sinmi de ibi ire* (my head should lead me to my success); *ki orí mi ma se ori-buruku* (my head should not be unfortunate). The above different expressions in the Yorùbá language show the importance of *orí* beyond the physical description of *orí* as head. Needless to say, Yorùbá believe that *orí* (inner head) is more important than the divinities, which is why they advised that sacrifices should be made to appease one's *orí* (inner head). Thus, Yorùbá will say, *orí l'ábábo, a bá f'òrìsà sílè* (we ought to offer sacrifices to our *orí*, laying aside the *òrìsà*'s). Yorùbá also believe that even with a good *orí*, if one does not work and have a good character (*iwarere*), the good *orí* will become a bad *orí*, that is, unfortunate *orí* (*orí-buruku*). Hence, with good character (*iwa omoluabi*), hard work and offering of sacrifices, one's *orí* might be changed.

Another important element in the make-up of human person is *esè* (leg) and *owó* (hand). The Yorùbá believe that *orí* cannot perform its function well without the help of *esè*. Wande Abimbola, as quoted by Makinde, opines that:

The Yorùbá concept of the choice of destiny through *orí* also emphasises the need for hard work to bring to fruition the potentiality for success represented by the choice of a good *orí*. This leads us to believe in *esè* (leg) as an important ingredient of human personality. *Esè* (leg) is regarded by the Yorùbá as a vital part of the human personality make-up, both in a physical and spiritual sense. *Esè*, for the Yorùbá, is the symbol of power and activity. It is therefore an element which enables a man to struggle and function adequately in life so that he may bring to realization whatever has been marked out for him by the choice of *orí*. Like *orí*, *esè* is regarded as an *òrìsà* which must be catered in order to achieve success. Therefore, when a man makes sacrifices to his *orí*, part of the sacrifice is also offered to *esè*.²²

Thus, Kola Abimbola avers that *esè* has a dual character. That is, *esè* (leg) can be conceived as a physical as well as a spiritual or mental entity.²³ The leg is considered physical in the literal meaning of leg (*esè*), while the spiritual aspect concerns the function of *esè* (leg) beyond the physical element. In this sense, *esè* is conceived in the context of strife, hard work, and struggle. It is believed that, for *orí* (inner head) to achieve success, it must be accomplished with the help of *esè* (leg). As such, a person's success or failure is based not only on his choice of *orí* (inner head), but on the use of his *esè* (leg) to achieve a desired fortune. To this extent, it shows that Yorùbá places more emphasis on the choice of *orí* an individual chooses, complemented with the utilization of *esè* (leg). This, however, is a narrow way to describe the success or failure of a man. Of course, we agree with the Yorùbá that hard work, struggle, strife, and good character are key features to the success of a person. Nevertheless, it is not exhaustive. Nigeria as a case study shows that success is not guaranteed with good character, hard work, among others. The point is, the Yorùbá account did not consider the social factor of the environment or

community one belongs to. In short, the influence of the community over the individual in achieving success cannot be underestimated. In a situation where there is bad government, poor leadership, bribery and corruption, insecurity, lack of improved technology, lack of research and training institute, and lack of infrastructural and social facilities among others, the struggle or hard work of an individual may be jeopardized even though he chooses a good *orí* (inner head) and utilizes his *esè* (leg).

Aside the structural components of the human person in traditional Yorùbá thought, another dimension of personhood in traditional Yorùbá thought is the normative conception of the human person, which is predicated on the concept of morality and collectiveness. Yorùbá will say, '*Ki i se èniyàn*' (He is not a person); this is a derogatory remark which judges the moral standing of a human being. This further implies that the Yorùbá accepted some moral precepts which all human persons must abide by as a member of the community. Some of the basic moral precepts which are considered immoral include stealing, killing, sexual misconduct, lying, and so on. Moreover, beyond the morality concept is the role of the community as catalyst and as prescriber of norms. According to Ifeanyi Menkiti:

in order to transform what was initially biologically given into full personhood, the community, of necessity, has to step in, since the individual, himself or herself, cannot carry through the transformation unassisted. But then what are the implications of this idea of a biologically given organism having first to go through a process of social and ritual transformation, so as to attain the full complement of excellences seen as definitive of the person?²⁴

Thus, the above quotation is an indication that the process of personhood is a gradual process which one either successfully attains or fails to attain. In Menkiti's words, "as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse."²⁵ As such, this is premised on the distinction between potentiality and actuality. All human beings have the potential to attain the level of personhood, which is an actuality in itself. Hence, Menkiti conceives of personhood as a journey. Similarly, Gbadegesin opines that "persons are what they are by virtue of what they are designed to be; their character and the communal influence on them. It is a combination of these elements that constitutes human personality."²⁶ However, the problem with the African normative conception of a person is that it overrides individual's freedom in a way that he is compelled to act in accordance with the moral codes of the community. In other words, the individual is only recognised as morally upright if his actions conform to the acceptable morality of the community. But, can the community be right in all moral matters? This question the overdependence of African morality on the community. Although Gbadegesin attempts to rescue the individual from being totally overwhelmed by his community, in his words, "individuals are valued in themselves and as potential contributors to communal survival... it is known that many individuals have the wisdom to guide the community and such people are well respected."²⁷ It is therefore not true that the individual is insignificant in matters of morality. In Africa's view, the relationship between an individual and the community is reciprocal.

In contrast to the Western conception of human personality (that is, the dualistic conception of man), the traditional Yorùbá thought believed in the tripartite conception of man, that is, man is made up of *ara* (body), *èmi* (the life force) and *orí* (inner head).²⁸ However, some scholars, like Gbadegesin and Kola Abimbola, identified a fourth element. On the one hand, the latter identified *esè* (leg) which has a dual character as the fourth element to complement other elements of the human person as mentioned above. The former, on the other hand, added *okàn* (heart) which functions as the physical heart and as the spiritual source of emotion and thought. Moreover, on the problem of the sole determinant of human personality, different views have been advanced by scholars on the nature of the sole determinant of human personality. To critically discuss the nature of this problem is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we are of the view that the complementarities of all the elements together determine what constitutes human personality in Yorùbá thought. In addition to this, we have also examined the

normative conception of the human person in traditional Yorùbá society. This view is beyond the biological conception of personhood grounded on features such as feelings, emotions, thoughts, and consciousness, among others. As a paper in comparative philosophy, the next section of this paper shall discuss the general overview of Hinduism and the Hindu conception of personhood.

The Origin and General Overview of Hinduism

The meaning of the term Hinduism has been misconstrued, most especially from the Western tradition not familiar with the doctrines and traditions of Hinduism. The word Hinduism is traced back to the ancient Persians who pronounced “*Shindhu*” as “Hindu River” in what is now Pakistan was called the “Hindu” by the Persians. In other words, the people who lived in proximity to the *Shindhu* therefore came to be called Hindus.²⁹ Thus, Hinduism is only a corrupt form of *Shindhu*. This suffices to say that the term Hindu emerges as a coincidental word which results from a wrong pronunciation of *Shindhu*. Historically, unlike any other religions like Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, among others, where we can trace their origins to a particular founder, Hinduism cannot be traced back to a particular founder. As a consequence, no historical founder means that there is no firm date for the origin of Hinduism. Thus, it is an open-ended set of beliefs and practices, which, of course, we could say have no founder. Hence, Hinduism is mostly practiced in India, Nepal, and some parts of Western countries like the USA and the United Kingdom, to mention a few.

Hinduism is one of the oldest living religions. Although some scholars have described it not as a religion but as a way of life. This is because Hinduism is not basically concerned with religious content like other sects of religious belief, but rather as a way of life to lead people to liberation, which is one of the ultimate goals of Hinduism. As such, it is thought to have a variety of methods for achieving total liberation (*moska*) and truth for the purification of human life. Similarly, the encyclopaedia of Hinduism contends that the Hindu tradition contains the greatest diversity of any world tradition.³⁰ There is simply no single authority that establishes “orthodox” Hindu beliefs and practices. This is not to say, however, that there are no recognized general characteristics of Hinduism. Even though we do not claim absolute authority in analysing the general characteristics of Hinduism, we shall state some of the key features of Hinduism. To state the key features of Hinduism is not different from the question, who is a Hindu? To answer this question simply, a Hindu is a person who believes and practices the doctrines of Hinduism. Some of the beliefs are: a belief in the divinity of the Vedas; belief in Karma; belief in reincarnation; belief in the circle nature of time; belief in one, all-pervasive supreme reality; belief that all revealed religions are essentially correct; and the belief that a living being is first and foremost a spiritual entity, among others.³¹

As it would be clear from some of the features highlighted above, Hinduism places emphasis on tolerating the different beliefs of others, respecting the multiplicity of truth, and recognizing the diversity of belief and practice. In essence, Hinduism, metaphorically, is described as a “structured diversity”. In James Robinson’s words, “we might think of Hinduism as a rainbow in which all the different colours are represented, but in which each of these colours has a very distinct place in the spectrum.”³²

Hinduism, unlike Christianity and Islam which have an authoritative text, has no single authoritative text. Instead, there are several different collections of texts, all grouped under two main categories: “the *Shruti*” and “the *Smrti*.” The latter, on the one hand, means what is remembered, while the former means what is heard. Needless to say, *Smrti*’s authority is secondary to *Shruti*’s. However, it is the *Smrti* texts that are most popular and widely read by the people. In Hinduism, among the sacred texts are the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Sutras*, and *Bhagavad Gita*. The Vedas is the most sacred and revered texts and have the most wide-ranging authority. The Vedas is divided into four books - Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharvana. The analysis of these books is beyond the scope of this paper. Upanishads do not share the Vedas’ focus on ritual and sacrifice but instead describe a more philosophical and theoretical approach to the practice of Hinduism.³³ The primary emphasis of the Upanishads is that the self (*atman*) is identical to the ultimate ground of reality (*Brahman*), and the person who realizes this sacred truth (through disciplined practice and meditation) finds liberation from the endless cycles of rebirth (*Samsara*).³⁴ *Sutras* contains

rules and regulations about domestic conduct, the duties of householders, ceremonies, and sacraments. Bhagavad Gita is a unique work which is said to be the recorded dialogue between the Incarnation of the Supreme Godhead — Krishna and his friend and disciple Arjuna on a chariot on the field of battle. Because it is the direct teaching of God it comes under the category of Nigama or Veda, and since it is also a manual of spiritual exercises it can also be classified as an Agama. Whatever its classification, it has become one of the most universally popular of all the Hindu Scriptures and has captured the imagination of many western philosophers and theologians.³⁵

The Hindu's understanding of god is beyond the monotheistic and polytheistic forms of beliefs, which restrict the ways to the acquisition of knowledge and truth. As such, Hinduism believes in both monotheistic and polytheistic ways of understanding god. The ultimate reality is the "Brahman" and the question is, who is the ultimate reality that is behind the universe and all the gods? In the Rig Veda, it is referred to as "the One." In the *Purushasukta*, it is given the name "*Purusha*," and in the *Upanishads* it is called "*Brahman*," "the One," and several other names.³⁶

Ideal Hindu life embraces certain goals of human endeavour, firmly based on the principles of duty and properness. This is because human nature is in bondage to ignorance and illusion, and to escape from this, one must live a life according to *Dharma*. Basically, these form the basic four goals of human endeavour, which include: *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Karma* and *Moksha*. *Dharma* is the pursuit of right living, virtue and duty to oneself and society; *Artha* is the pursuit of financial, worldly success and prosperity; *Karma* is the pursuit of recreation, pleasure, aesthetics, sense gratification, the highest form of which is sexual enjoyment and love; and *Moksha* is the liberation from the cycle of reincarnation.³⁷ *Moksha* is the moment at which *Karma* is resolved. As a consequence, if *Karma* is unresolved, a soul is reborn into a new body, and this continues to recycle itself until the soul is purified and liberated. This also boils down to the problem of suffering and evil. The next section of this paper will deal with the idea of personhood in Hinduism.

The Idea of Personhood in Hindu Thought

Hinduism does not recognize a person as a mere material object. As such, its understanding of personhood goes beyond the corporeal entity to an ethical-spiritual personality. This is why a sense of divinity and spirituality is attributed to all human beings in Hindu thought. The idea of personhood in Hinduism is explicitly elaborated in "*Vedas*," one of the sacred texts of Hinduism. Thus, the attainment of personhood brings about a distinction between the real and apparent man. The question is, what is the nature of human personality in Hinduism?

In Hindus' thoughts, man, according to the *Vedas*, is the result of the gods' sacrifice of the divine primordial form of man. Central to the concept of personhood in Hinduism is "*atman*."

The *atman* is the self or soul.³⁸ However, there is a further distinction between the individual self (*jivatman*) and the ultimate self (*paramatman*). Hence, the aim of a human person is to unite their individual self with their ultimate self. Once this is realised, one breaks away from karma and escapes the bondage of further rebirth. This borders on the distinction between the real man and the apparent man mentioned earlier. The *atman* is the real man, as against the apparent man, who is merely made up of body-mind complex constituents. The human person with *atman* (true self) is free, pure, perfect and a conscious spiritual entity. As a consequence, a person without an *atman* (true self) is not different from an animal. The definition of personhood in Hinduism is based on *atman* (soul or true self). However, the self as projected in Hinduism is rejected in Buddhism. This is not to say that there is no concept of personhood in Buddhism. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism defines personhood through psychological facts. However, our concern in this paper is not to discuss personhood in Buddhism.

The apparent man, on the other hand, consists of five sheaths which cover the soul, or *atman*. First, the physical body or the physical sheath, second, the vital sheath or the sheath life-force, third, the mental sheath, fourth, the ego sheath, and finally, the blissful sheath. According to another concept, the real

man, or the conscious soul or *Atman*, has three bodies. On the one hand, the gross physical body; on the other hand, the subtle mental body; and finally, the causal body, made up of pure ignorance. At the time of death, the physical body dies, but the subtle mental body and the causal body remain and, together with the conscious soul or real man, transmigrate to another physical body to be born again. When we are awake, the gross physical body is active. In sleep, when we are dreaming, the physical body is inactive, but the mental body is active. But when we go into deep sleep and do not even see dreams, at that time even the mental body is not active and only the causal body in the form of ignorance remains, covering the pure soul or *Atman*.³⁹ Evidently, the Hindu idea of personhood considered the true self as free from body and mind, free from the five sheaths and free from the three bodies.

Also, on the concept of personhood, *dharma* is important and significant. Like *atman*, *dharma* is also essential to the attainment of personhood in Hinduism. This distinguishes man from animals. Perhaps, we may ask, what is *dharma*? *Dharma*, According to Shankaracharya, is of two types: *pravritti-lakshana* and *nivritti-lakshana*. When one, observing the moral codes of conduct applicable to one's station in life and society performs actions for enjoyment (*karma*) and acquisition of wealth (*artha*), one is said to be following *pravritti dharma*. A time comes, however, when one gets disgusted with sense-enjoyments and the acquisition of wealth and aspires for final emancipation (*moksha*). Then, one embraces what is called *nivritti dharma*, characterized by renunciation of all worldly desires and selfish actions, and resorting to spiritual practice to attain liberation. Man rises from animal to human level by accepting *pravritti dharma*, that is, by observing social injunctions. He ascends to godhood and becomes divine by embracing the *nivritti dharma*. As such, this is possible only when a person attains the level of ultimate reality, which is the highest goal of human personality. As a consequence, without the attainment of *moksha* (liberation) from rebirth, a person is not different from animals, because, the soul of a person at that time is not yet purified.

Hinduism rejects the body-mind dichotomy of the human person, which can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy. This is evident and conspicuous in the work of Plato, Anaxagoras, and Descartes, among others. For the Hindus, the body-mind distinction is a restriction on the human person because, at that, the soul, or self, is not free. As such, it is extremely difficult to consider oneself as a conscious soul free from body and mind, and free from the five coverings or three bodies. The Hindu believes the mind is the source of desires and ambitions and also, the source of their weakness. Through the power of the mind, he can do evil deeds which may cause suffering to himself and others. To conquer the mind, a person must manifest the divinity within himself. By implication, man is divine if he conquers the body and the mind.

It is evident from the above analysis that the concept of human personality in Hinduism is only attainable if a person is spiritually and ethically baptised with the traditions and beliefs in the tenets of Hinduism. As earlier noted, Hinduism has been considered as a way of life rather than concerned with religious practices or observations. The idea of personhood in Hinduism is premised on the concept of self (*atman*). *Atman* (self) defines human personality. However, Buddhism rejects the conception of the human person according to Hinduism. For Buddhists, the conception of personhood is premised on 'psychological fact'. Buddhism believes that all human beings share a set of psychological properties such as self-love, death, hatred, and the will to have a good future. These psychological facts are something to be respected by other persons. To deny the psychological facts is to derail from personhood.

Personhood in Yorùbá and Hindu Thoughts: A Comparative Analysis

The claim that there is an objective description of personhood is far from true. This is because personhood, as discussed above, is peculiar to different cultures and societies. Although there are differences in the conception of personhood as discussed in the Yorùbá thought system and Hinduism, there are evidently some areas of convergence. This is to say that, in spite of divergences, most societies

still agree on some ideas that constitute the nature of personhood. In respect of this, we shall examine some comparisons on the concept of personhood in Yorùbá thought system and Hinduism.

One of the commonalities between Yorùbá and Hinduism on the concept of personhood is that both believe that the physical element of a person is destructible. However, they attached different degrees of importance to the physical element. While some scholars in Yorùbá traditional thought believed that the physical elements of a person, like *ara* (body), are an important element in the structural composition of a person,⁴⁰ Hindus believed that the body is an element that must be conquered to attain the stage of personhood. As such, the body is a constraint on the human person towards liberation (*moksha*). Hence, while the Yorùbá believed that a human person is made up of physical and spiritual elements; Hindu believed that a human person is not a mere material entity but essentially a spiritual entity which must always strive to attain liberation from the material world, which is filled with *maya*, that is, illusion.

Another comparison worth noting is that they believed that the soul is an integral element in the composition of the human personality. The soul is seen as the essence of human life, without which existence is impossible. The soul, in Yorùbá and Hindus' thought, has its source from the ultimate being or reality, albeit, the source or origin of the soul is conceived differently. While the Yorùbá refer to the source as *Olódùmarè*, the giver of *èní* which returns to its source after death, the Hindus believe that the soul returns to its source (Brahman) after it has been purified and liberated from the cycles of rebirth and reincarnation (*samsara*).⁴¹ This means that if the soul is impure, it cannot return to its source. It is important to note that Yorùbá and Hindu believe that the soul is immortal. This is conspicuous in the belief that the soul survives the body after death. Unlike the Yorùbá, who believe that the *èní* (soul) is not the only determinant of human person,⁴² Hindus believe that the soul (*atman*) is the only determinant of human person. This is evident in the teachings of Hinduism that the soul is the sole determinant to liberation because the soul determines whether a person goes through the process of reincarnation or not. By implication, an impure soul continues in the cycle of reincarnation, and a pure soul is liberated and joins the ultimate reality – *Brahman*.

However, one of the divergences worth noting is that while Yorùbá believe in the normative conception of personhood premised on morality and collectiveness, Hindus believe that personhood is attained when one lives according to *dharma*, premised on the renunciation of the material world. One could extrapolate from this that the Hindu conception of personhood tends more toward spirituality and divinity.

Besides, the Yorùbá believe that human destiny (*orí-inu*) is an important determinant of human personality, whereas the Hindu account of personhood does not include the concept of human destiny. Yorùbá, unsurprisingly, believe that human destiny determines human actions and inactions on earth. Put otherwise, human destiny is predetermined in a world beyond the physical realm and it is only manifested on earth. As such, whether or not one becomes successful or unfortunate depends on one's destiny. Human destiny is viewed in three senses: *akunlegba*, *akunleyan*, and *ayanmo*.⁴³ However, the concept of destiny has divided scholars into two camps. There is, on the one hand, an absolutist position and, on the other hand, a liberal position. The latter, which is also referred to as "soft determinism," is maintained supported by scholars like Oladele Balogun, E. O. Oduwole, and Kola Abimbola, among others, contends that humans are free to change their destiny even though it is predetermined.⁴⁴ This is manifested through hard work, good character (*iwarere*), and sacrifices and propitiations. The former, which includes scholars like Wande Abimbola and Bolaji Idowu, among others, argues that human actions are determined and they are not alterable. On the contrary, the Hindu conception of determinism is premised on reincarnation. This means that human actions on earth determine what becomes of their lives after death. As such, whether or not a person comes back to earth either as a lower or higher animal depends on his past life. Consequently, *karma* determines what happens to a person after death. If the life is pure, it will disappear and join the ultimate soul, which is Brahman.

It could also be extrapolated that the concept of reincarnation for Hindus is a way of punishment to pay for evil deeds while on earth. This implies that reincarnation is evil and exists only for an impure soul. Contrary to this, Yorùbá belief in reincarnation is not a way to repay evil deeds. However, it exists in different forms in human existence. Yorùbá believed in three different types of reincarnation. These are *akudaya*, *ipadawaye*, and *abiku*.

Conclusion

This paper has been preoccupied so far with examining the concept of personhood in Yorùbá traditional thoughts and Hinduism. As earlier stated, the concept of personhood is better examined if contextualised within a particular culture. The paper finds out that the concept of personhood as believed in Yorùbá thoughts is different from what is believed in Hinduism. However, the paper identifies some areas of convergence and divergence. Unlike the Western conception of personhood, which is premised on the notion of consciousness, thoughts, and the ability to make decisions, the Yorùbá and the Hindu conception of personhood are beyond the Western view. While the Yorùbá identified the structural composition and the normative conception of the human person, the Hindus identified the ethical-spiritual identity of the human person. The paper pointed to some criticisms of the conception of personhood in Yorùbá traditional thoughts and Hinduism. In spite of the criticisms identified, the fact remains that the attainment of personhood is stringent within the Yorùbá and Hindu tradition. As such, to be distinguished from animals, one cannot but aspire to attain the level of personhood that is beyond the ordinary level of human beings.

Endnotes

¹Wassmann, J., Funke, J. 2013. "Epilogue. Reflections on Personhood and the Theory of Mind". In Wassmann, Trauble, B., J., Funke, J. *Theory of Mind in the Pacific-Reasoning across Cultures*: Winter, Heifberg. 1

² For further reading on the origin of the Yorubas, see Awe, S. K. 2019. "Existential Concerns in Africa: The Yoruba Perspectives of Death and Suicide." *Language, Literature, and Culture*. Vol. 2:2.

³ Awe, S. K. 2019. "Existential Concerns in Africa: The Yoruba Perspectives of Death and Suicide." 42

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵The tripartite conception of human person was commonly held among the Yorùbá scholars. However, scholars like Gbadegesin, Kola Abimbola added a fourth element to the tripartite conception. Thus, for further study on the tripartite view, see, Bolaji, I., 1963. *Olodumare: God in Yorùbá Belief*, London: Macmillan; Makinde, A. K., 1984. "An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yorùbá Example," in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, Vol. 7, No. 3. Canada: University of Toronto. 189-200.

⁶Oyeshile, O. A., 2006. "The Physical and Nonphysical in Yoruba's Concept of the Person" in *International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 35, No. 2. 153-165. See also, "Towards an African Concept of a Person: Person in Yoruba, Akan and Igbo Thoughts" in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 2002.XXXIV/1&2

⁷Gbadegesin, S., 1998. "Èniyàn: The Yorùbá Concept of a Person" in *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings*, (eds.) P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux, Johannesburg: Thomson Publishing. 149

⁸*Ibid.* 150

⁹Makinde, A. K. 200

¹⁰ The biblical account of the human person conceived of a person as both physical and spiritual elements. However, unlike the Yorùbá account, the biblical account pointed to the fact that both the physical and spiritual elements of the human person has its direct origin from God. That is, God created the physical element (*ara*), and the spiritual element (*èmi*)

¹¹Oladipo, O., 1992. "The Yoruba Conception of a Person: An Analytico-Philosophical Study", *International Studies in Philosophy*, XXIV 3.

¹²Gbadegesin, S., 1998. 150

¹³Descartes dichotomized the human person into the physical and the mental. The physical is the body while the mental is the mind. Thus, we have the mind-body distinction. The body on the one hand is extended, occupies space and time and a non-thinking substance. The mind on the other hand is non-extended, not in space and time and it is a thinking substance. To Descartes, the mind is the sole determinant of a person because it is the substance that thinks and as far as he thinks, he exist – *cogito ergo sum*.

¹⁴ Gbadegesin, S., 1998. 152

¹⁵*Ibid.* 157

¹⁶*Ibid.* 153

¹⁷Bolaji, I. 169

¹⁸Gbadegesin, S., 1998. 154

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.* 155

²¹See Gbadegesin, S., 1998. pp. 154-157; Bolaji, I., pp. 173-174; Awolalu, J. O. & Dopamu, P. A., 2005. *West African Tradition Religion*, Ibadan: Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Ltd. 184

²²Makinde, A. K. 208

²³Abimbola, K., 2006. *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*, Birmingham: Iroko. 73

²⁴Menkiti, I. A., 2004. "On the Normative Conception of a Person", *A Companion to African Philosophy*, (ed.) Kwasi Wiredu, USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 326

²⁵Menkiti, I. A., 1984 "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought", *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, Richard Wright (ed.), Lanham, Md: University Press of America. 173

²⁶ Gbadegesin, S. 1998. 228

²⁷Gbedegesin, S. 1991. *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. New York: Peter Lang. 64

²⁸See also Hallen, B and Sodipo, J.O., 1986. *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytical Experiments in African Philosophy*, London: Ethnographical.

²⁹Jones, C.A & Ryan, J.D., 2007. *Encyclopaedia of World Religions: Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, USA: Infobase Publishing. xvii

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Sivaloganathan, K., 2017. *A Brief Introduction to Hinduism*, India: Zorba Books.

³²Robinson, J., 2004. *Hinduism, Religions of the World*, New York: Chelsea House. 11

³³Michaels, A., 2004. *Hinduism: Past and Present*, trans. Barbara Harshav, Princeton: Princeton University Press. 14

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶www.religionfacts.com/hinduism retrieved on 15 February, 2018.

³⁷Sivananda, S. S., 1997. *All About Hinduism*, India: A Divine Life Society Publication. 1-2

³⁸Jones, C.A & Ryan, J.D. 51

³⁹<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/16603/62045/3/12-chapter-5.pdf&ved=2ah>, retrieved on 15 February, 2018.

⁴⁰The Yorùbá believed that creation started from the body (*ara*) before the infusion of *èmi*. As such, the physical element is an important composition of human personality which is also necessary to the level of personhood. In fact, Makinde opines that *ese* (leg) is an indispensable element in human composition and it helps human to achieve success in life. However, Hindus' believed and reject anything that is within the confinement of the physical because physical brings nothing but suffering. As such, Hindus' emphasises on the spiritual and divine attainment for personhood.

⁴¹ This point to the difference between Yorùbá and Hindu on the notion of reincarnation. While the Yorùbá account for different forms of reincarnation, like *Ipada*, *Akudaya* and *Abiku* which are not necessarily a form of suffering, Hindu believed that reincarnation is nothing but suffering and a pure soul returns back to the ultimate reality to have a peaceful rest.

⁴²The Hindu believed that the soul is the sole determinant of human person and defines a person. While in the Yorùbá Culture, the soul is not the only determinant element of a person. Yorùbá identified *ara* (body), *emi* (soul), Ori (inner-head) as the determinant of a human personality. Although, this assertion is contested among the Yorùbá scholar Wande Abimbola opines in one of his books that *ori-inu* is the sole determinant of human personality.

⁴³ The different conceptions of destiny apparent in Yorùbá account of human destiny is construed differently. *Akunlegba* means destiny one knees down to collect; *akunleyan* means destiny one knees down to choose; and *ayanmo* means a fixed destiny. These three conceptions of destiny is commonly held among the Yorùbá people.

⁴⁴For soft determinist arguments, see Balogun, O. A., 2007. "The Concept of Ori and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft Deterministic Interpretation" in *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16(1), pp. 116–130; Oduwole, E.O. 1996. "The Yoruba Concepts of 'Ori' and Human Destiny: A Fatalistic Interpretation" in *Journal of Philosophy and Development* 2(1&2); Abimbola, K., 2006. *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham: Iroko Academic publishers.