

Death, continuity, and moral order: A perspective on Yoruba cosmology

Temitope Desmond Francis, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, ORCID: 0009-0007-4021-8265

Abstract

This perspective article examines the moral and cosmological dimensions of death in Yoruba belief systems. Rather than treating mortuary rituals as symbolic reflections of cosmology, this paper argues that these practices actively shape ethical life. They function as processes that construct moral personhood, reinforce communal identity, and sustain social order. Building upon existing ethnographic and interpretive studies, it reinterprets concepts such as *àtúnwáyé* (reincarnation) and the *Egúngún* masquerade as dynamic tenets that translate metaphysical beliefs into lived moral practice. The article also considers how these traditions respond to contemporary forces, including urbanization, religious pluralism, and digital culture, demonstrating that their resilience lies in their adaptability. By framing death as a continuous process rather than a final endpoint, this study highlights Yoruba funerary traditions as a coherent worldview of ethical and cosmological reasoning and contributes to broader understandings of African moral philosophy and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Yoruba cosmology, death and afterlife, ancestor veneration, reincarnation, moral philosophy

Introduction: Cosmology as lived practice

In the Yoruba worldviews, death is not the end but a continuation of life across multiple spheres of existence. It connects the visible and invisible worlds and carries moral weight as much as spiritual significance. Rather than marking an end, death activates a cycle of accountability, memory, and reappearance. The dead never fully disappear. They remain present as ancestors, witnesses, and moral agents who shape how the

living interpret responsibility, kinship, and the meaning of a life well-lived (Balogun, 2009; Akomolafe, 2016)¹

How do Yoruba mortuary rituals function as active processes for producing and sustaining moral personhood? How do these moral and cosmological frameworks adapt to contemporary pressures such as urbanization, religious pluralism, and digital media while maintaining ethical continuity? To address these questions, this article adopts a qualitative, interpretive orientation grounded in a critical rereading of ethnographic, philosophical, and sociological scholarship on Yoruba mortuary practices. It offers a conceptual synthesis that reframes death as a generative moral process within Yoruba cosmology rather than presenting new empirical data. The analysis follows a hermeneutic approach, treating ritual practices as communicative acts through which moral values and cosmological ideas take shape in social life. It engages *Ifá* philosophy, ethnographic accounts of burial and remembrance, and studies of social change in southwestern Nigeria to connect concepts such as *ìwà* (character) and reincarnation to their moral significance.

This understanding aligns with classical anthropological reflections on the generative role of death in social life. Hertz (1960) established that death is seldom treated as a single moment; it unfolds as a social process that requires careful ritual handling to guide the deceased safely from one state of existence to another. For Hertz, the death of a community member strikes at the very foundation of social life, producing a sense of disruption that must be addressed through ritual action. An intermediary period allows the deceased to be gradually separated from the living and incorporated into the ancestral realm, enabling society to symbolically resolve the disruption caused by death. As Bloch and Parry (1982) argue, mortuary rituals transform the potentially disruptive individuality of the dead into a stable ancestral presence linked to renewal and continuity. In the Yoruba context, this process carries a strong moral weight, as ritual reshapes death into a spiritual and ethical resource that sustains communal life.

While much of the existing literature treats these practices as symbolic reflections of cosmology, this article argues that they do more than represent metaphysical ideas. They actively produce moral life. Rituals such as the *Egúngún* masquerade, annual ancestral festivals, and rites of passage into the ancestral realm serve as mechanisms through

¹ This is a perspective article that seeks to critically reinterpret cross-cutting concepts of morality, cosmology, and personhood. A comprehensive historical review of Yoruba studies would, therefore, be beyond its scope. Instead, this contribution focuses on the function of death-related beliefs and their role in producing ethical life. For broader, foundational treatments of these concepts, see Akomolafe (2016), Akin-Otiko (2020), Balogun (2009), Olaye and Okedokun (2022), and Oripeloye and Omigbule (2019).

which communities enact social memory and reinforce ethical expectations (Oripeloye & Omigbule, 2019; Olaiya & Olofinsao, 2022; Olaleye & Okedokun, 2022). Through performance, prayer, and collective participation, metaphysics becomes embedded into everyday social conduct, enacting cosmology rather than simply describing it.

In the *Ifá* tradition, death is understood as a transition within a spiritual cycle governed by ancestral continuity, reincarnation, and moral accountability. Beliefs in *orí* (head) in the concepts of destiny, known in Yoruba language as *orí-inú* (the inner or spiritual head), together with *àtúnwáyé* (reincarnation) and *àkúddàáyà* (spiritual return), affirm the soul's capacity to influence earthly life beyond biological death (Balogun 2007; Olaleye & Okedokun, 2022; Omotosho, 2019; Talabi, 2022). Rather than an adversary, death is seen as a constructive force that enables renewal and deepens the value of human relationships (Awobusuyi, 2022). Funeral rites and ancestral veneration sustain communal identity, while *ìwà* (character) remains the foundation of ethical life, with ancestors and divinities enforcing justice and social harmony (Oyeshile, 2021; Akin-Otiko, 2020; Adedokun & Olanrewaju, 2023; Olayinka, 2021).

These traditions continue to evolve as Yoruba people navigate urban life, religious pluralism, and digital technologies. Online funerals, hybrid rituals, and reinterpretations of ancestral spaces show that resilience lies not in resisting change but in adapting cosmology to new social conditions (Adeboye, 2016; Boge, 2023; Omotosho, 2019). The underlying principle remains consistent, as moral order depends on cosmological order and the dead remain active participants in communal life.

By centering the generative power of death in Yoruba thought, this perspective reframes mortuary practices as living moral philosophy rather than static tradition. It argues that Yoruba conceptions of personhood, accountability, and continuity offer valuable insights into how communities sustain ethical life and collective memory in a rapidly changing world.

The Yoruba and Ifá and their cultural context

The Yoruba constitute one of the most prominent ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa, centered in southwestern Nigeria with indigenous populations extending into Benin and Togo (Agai, 2017). While estimates place the West African population at roughly forty million, the trans-Atlantic slave trade created a vast diaspora across the Americas, establishing vibrant cultural ties that span the Atlantic (Abímbólá, 2005; Baby-Ramírez et al., 2025). Historically organized into sophisticated city-states like the *Old-Òyó* Empire,

the Yoruba developed complex systems of governance characterized by constitutional checks on power, a structural complexity that is mirrored in a cosmology populated by hundreds of divinities (Abímbólá, 2005).

Navigating this cosmos relies on *Ifá*, which functions not merely as a system of divination but as a deep repository of history and philosophy (Bello, 2023). Comprising a vast literary corpus known as *Odù*, *Ifá* encodes the collective wisdom and ethics of the people (Abímbólá, 2005). Priests utilize this oracle to diagnose the spiritual state of an individual and prescribe sacrifice (*ẹ̀bọ*) to restore balance (Olateju, 2025). It is this intricate system that defines the theological framework for the concepts of destiny (*orí*) and character (*ìwà*) that underpin the mortuary practices discussed in this paper (Abímbólá, 2005; Òkékándé, 2020).

The moral architecture of the cosmos

The relationship between the visible world (*ayé*) and the spiritual realm (*òrun*) operates as an ethical framework grounded in *ìwà* (character), the moral foundation of Yoruba philosophy (Oyeshile, 2021). This order is conceived as a tripartite community linking the living, the dead, and the unborn through shared moral obligations. Within this worldview, family ancestors and the *òrìṣà* (deities) function as moral witnesses whose presence ties individual conduct to the stability of the wider cosmos (Oyeshile, 2021; Ushe, 2017).

Yoruba cultural values emphasize collective identity, interdependence, and obligations to kin and ancestors, prioritizing social cohesion while preserving personal autonomy (Eyetsemitan, 2021). Within this framework, ancestral veneration and burial rites function as communal practices that reinforce intergenerational bonds and sustain social order.

This moral order is enacted through ritual, where belief in ancestral presence becomes lived encounter. The *Egúngún* masquerade does not merely commemorate the dead; it materializes their return, reaffirming ancestral authority through performance, sound, and movement, and renewing intergenerational bonds in the process (Olaiya & Olofinṣa, 2022; Olaleye & Okedokun, 2022).

This sense of continuity is sustained through other communicative forms. In Yoruba tradition, interaction between the living and the dead occurs through dreams, visions, symbolic signs, and spiritual awareness, with song regarded as the most accessible medium. In *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*, the *Ìbà Orògùn*, a group of spiritual singers composed of married

women (*obìnrin-ilé*), address the departed melodically, treating them as still present and affirming spiritual continuity despite physical absence (Salami, 2023). Graves within family compounds similarly function as symbolic ritual spaces connecting the material and spiritual worlds, reinforcing ongoing relational ties rather than marking final separation (Omotosho, 2019).

This practice aligns with Merriam's (1964) view of music as a primary form of communication that conveys meaning and emotion to those who understand its language, functioning as a bridge between worlds. Comparable practices appear across Africa, including among the Akan of Ghana and the Basongye of Congo, where music plays a central role in funeral rites and spiritual mediation. Maddrell's (2013) concept of absence-presence captures this dynamic, describing how ritual and material forms actively integrate the dead into everyday social life. Seen this way, Yoruba engagements with the dead reflect an ongoing negotiation between continuity and change, where ancestral presence remains active rather than receding into absence.

Mortuary rituals serve as a central process of moral construction, with the funeral functioning as a public forum for assessing the moral worth of the deceased through eulogies, lineage histories, and acts of generosity (Awobusuyi, 2022; Joseph et al., 2021). Ancestorhood is not automatic; it is earned through a life marked by good *ìwà* (character), fulfilled responsibilities, and meaningful contributions, then confirmed through communal ritual judgment (Talabi, 2022; Oripeloye & Omigbule, 2019). The deaths of children or youths are mourned as tragic interruptions of destiny, while the passing of elders who lived complete moral lives is marked by celebration, ritually transforming them into honored ancestors. This moral memory is sustained through reincarnation and naming practices that link moral resemblance across generations, as well as through symbolic drumming by the *Àyàn*, which marks life transitions and facilitates spiritual and social transformation (Akande, 2019; Oladosu, 2021).

The *Ifá* tradition in Yoruba cosmology provides insights into the afterlife, emphasizing a heaven-like realm over a hell-like domain (Ofuasia, 2023). This concept is central to Yoruba spirituality, particularly within *Ifá* practices. In this context, the afterlife is not merely a passive state, but an extension of earthly life conditioned by one's moral behavior and adherence to prescribed rituals. This belief aligns with the broader Yoruba metaphysical understanding that life is cyclical and that death constitutes a transitional phase rather than a final cessation. As Olaleye and Okedokun (2022) and Akomolafe (2016) explain, death is viewed as a necessary process for the replenishment of life and the redefinition of destiny. It is through death and eventual rebirth that the individual

soul fulfills its cosmic journey. Consequently, *Olódùmarè*, the supreme deity in Yoruba cosmology, embodies both creative and moral authority, playing a crucial role in beliefs about death and the afterlife. As the judge and ultimate source of ethical and moral value, *Olódùmarè* is sometimes likened to the Judeo-Christian God, though distinct in nature (Olanrewaju, 2009; Ogungbemi, 2021). Therefore, death is the moment where the moral life, produced and assessed by the community on earth, is ratified in the spiritual realm. This perspective ensures that the soul's immortality is linked to the community's ethical and social harmony.

Moral memory and cyclical personhood

The Yoruba conception of personhood is not contained by a single lifetime; it is cyclical and profoundly moral. This cycle is actively produced and maintained through concepts of spiritual return, which embed the dead within the ongoing life of the community as active moral agents (Balogun, 2009). Beliefs such as *àtúnwáyé* (reincarnation), *àbíkú* (the return of children who die prematurely), and *àkúdàáyà* (people believed to die in one place and reappear living elsewhere) are not just metaphysical speculations. They are social processes that illustrate a non-linear understanding of time and identity, ensuring that accountability continues beyond the grave (Osadola, 2022; Adegbamigbe, 2022; Salami, 2023; Amoo, 2025).

Reincarnation (*àtúnwáyé*) is a central practice for sustaining this continuity. It has materialized in social practice through naming conventions. Names such as *Babátúndé* (father has returned) or *Yétúndé* (mother has returned) make the abstract belief in return tangible. They affirm the souls continuity and re-inscribe the ancestor's moral legacy onto a new generation, creating a direct link between the character of the deceased and the identity of the newborn. This practice is a form of living memory, a social practice that ensures the dead persist as active moral forces capable of influencing the living (Balogun, 2009; Boge, 2023).

This moral framework sustains social harmony through moral order and retributive justice, with ancestors and divinities understood to reward compliance and punish deviation (Adedokun & Olanrewaju, 2023; Akin-Otiko, 2020). The dead remain active moral agents whose influence on the living is affirmed in everyday expressions such as "the dead pray for the living" and invocations like "may my mother's spirit not sleep" (Boge, 2023). Ancestors are venerated as moral exemplars and intermediaries through whom individuals seek protection and favor. As Uhrin (2025) observes, personal encounters with the dead, through dreams or private prayer, are interpreted within and reinforced

by shared ritual frameworks, creating a continuous cycle between individual experience and collective meaning. Furthermore, Noppe (2020) provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding this dynamic, arguing that death does not sever relationships but subjects them to an enduring journey of reshaping and redefining where bonds are continued rather than broken.

Ritual adaptation and moral resilience

Rites of departure and spiritual practices reflect a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. While death continues to serve as a key lens for expressing Yoruba philosophy and communal values, these practices have evolved in response to shifting cultural contexts influenced by religious pluralism, colonial history, urbanization, and digital media (Adeboye, 2016; Omotosho, 2019). The elements of Christian and Islamic theology have led to adaptations in ritual expression, yet the conceptual core of Yoruba death beliefs centering on continuity, transformation, and spiritual accountability has remained resilient (Awobusuyi, 2022). Yoruba cultural frameworks are continually adapted in response to changing social conditions. Practices surrounding death and dying reveal an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, illustrating how cultural continuity is maintained through adaptation (Oripeloye & Omigbule, 2019).

Historically, Yoruba families buried the dead within the household compound, a custom that reinforced ancestral presence and ritual continuity (Adeboye, 2016). In contemporary contexts, residential graveyards remain common, marked by ornate epitaphs that honor the deceased and affirm their moral standing (Ojo, 2017; Omotosho, 2019). Comparable practices exist among the Ogu people of Badagry, where the Ogbogbo funeral rite blends symbolic objects and performances to facilitate the deceased's journey and maintain contact between the living and the dead (Smith & Anthony, 2015). Grave sites, treated with reverence, often serve as ritual spaces that sustain the relationship between both realms (Ojo, 2017). This practice reflects that there is an unending spiritual interconnection between the dead and the living (Boge, 2023; Oripeloye & Omigbule, 2019). However, Christian missions and colonial authorities introduced church graveyards and public cemeteries, shifting burials away from family homes. Today, urbanization and space limitations further push towards public cemeteries, reflecting evolving cultural and spatial norms (Adeboye, 2016). In retrospect, Omotosho (2019) reveals that in postcolonial Yoruba society, the grave within residential areas has evolved beyond its ancient function and now serves as a tool to overcome modern challenges. Omotosho (2019) further reveals that the placement of cemeteries in reside-

ntial areas serves as a means of navigating modernity among the Ekiti-Yorubas of southwest Nigeria.

This strain between individual memorialization and collective norms also appears in Hamer's (2025) study of the "agency of the dead" in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, where private memorial spaces emerge as ways of preserving the specific identities of loved ones in the face of collective political narratives that tend to obscure personal loss. This adaptability is also evident in the role of art and literature in preserving Yoruba mortuary culture. Olaleye-Oruene (2022) explains traditional forms like *Ère Ìbejì*, carved wooden figures used to honor deceased twins, serve both commemorative and symbolic functions. These figures reflect spiritual beliefs and help sustain the cultural significance of twin births. Mekunda (2019) points out that Yoruba literature, including plays and poetry, provides a space for reflecting on death, the afterlife, and the moral obligations that link the living to the dead. Hence, these artistic expressions reinforce the enduring relevance of the Yoruba worldview while accommodating the realities of a changing world.

Digital platforms show a similar pattern of adaptation. Technologies that enable virtual funeral attendance and online condolences allow diasporic communities to participate in rituals and maintain communal bonds (Boge, 2023). While this shift introduces new challenges, such as the "commodification of grief," it also demonstrates the flexibility of the underlying framework. The essential components, such as ancestral continuity, moral accountability, and communal cohesion, are preserved by adapting the form of the ritual (Omotosho, 2019).

This resilience matters because Yoruba funerals are communal events that reaffirm ancestral honor and social cohesion. Engelke (2019) notes that cosmology is often grounded in material practices, where the washing, burial, and placement of the body provide tangible assurance of the soul's successful transition. In the Yoruba context, high attendance signals respect for both the deceased and the ancestors, reinforcing this material and social validation. Boge (2023) characterizes the final burial ceremony as a crucial forum for reshaping social relationships and emphasizing generational continuity, allowing participants to reconnect with extended kin and old friends. Proper burial is especially significant, as it is believed to secure a peaceful passage for the dead and prevent spiritual disturbances that may affect descendants. Engelke (2019) also frames funeral rites as a form of moral exchange, a view that aligns closely with Yoruba beliefs, where such rites are understood as obligations that sustain the flow of ancestral blessings. Disruptions to these practices, whether through state intervention or modern

pre-ssures, raise concerns about bad deaths and spiritual stagnation, motivating the community's adaptive responses.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an example of this friction. Restrictions on gatherings created a fundamental conflict for Yoruba communities, who view a "befitting" funeral as a requirement for the deceased to transition to the ancestral realm rather than becoming a wandering ghost (Adesoji et al., 2021; Omonisi, 2020). The ban on elaborate rites and communal mourning caused significant psychological distress, leading families to feel they had failed in their final duty. Consequently, mortuaries became overwhelmed as families postponed collecting bodies, hoping to wait for the return of traditional celebrations (Omonisi, 2020). To navigate this, communities adopted a strategy of "low-key" burials, separating the immediate interment from the social celebration, and used remote planning to minimize contact (Adesoji et al., 2021; 581). This adaptation allowed the ritual necessity of burial to proceed while deferring the social aspects until restrictions eased. Hertz's (1960) supports this theoretical position by framing death as a social phenomenon and arguing that mortuary rituals enable society to impart a sense of permanence to individuals, allowing the collective to symbolically prevail over death through shared representation.

Consolatory practices further support this. According to Ehineni (2017), these involve both spoken and physical expressions that help the bereaved adjust to their loss, occurring before, during, and after burial, and including prayers, chants, words of comfort, and promises meant to ease the emotional burden. People also wear black, shout, stomp their feet, or roll on the ground to show shared sorrow. The intensity of mourning depends largely on the age and moral character of the deceased; the death of a young person is perceived as especially painful, while the death of an elder is sometimes received with subdued celebration, acknowledging the completion of a meaningful life (Boge, 2023; Ehineni, 2017). Ehineni refers to this as the pragmeme of accommodation, a socio-pragmatic process through which the bereaved are gradually integrated into their new emotional and social reality.

The risk of ritual disruption, whether triggered by the sudden shock of a pandemic or the pressures of urban life, creates profound anxiety about the spiritual fate of the deceased. Yet despite these challenges, Yoruba communities have shown a resilience that consists of more than just a stubborn adherence to the past. It involves a willingness to adjust the outward form of rituals while protecting their inner purpose. Whether facing the restrictions of a pandemic or the constraints of city living, the community distinguishes between the flexible aspects of ceremony, such as crowd size or location, and the

unchangeable moral obligation to the deceased. Instead of discarding traditional frameworks, Omotosho (2019) observes that they adapt them to preserve core values like ancestral continuity and communal cohesion. This flexibility serves as evidence that these practices are not fragile relics but living processes that continue to shape ethical life by placing cosmological order above a rigid attachment to tradition.

Conclusion: The generative power of death

This paper has argued that Yoruba engagements with death are not merely symbolic reflections of a preexisting cosmology. Instead, they are the primary, active processes through which ethical life is generated, negotiated, and sustained. By reexamining the evidence from ritual performance, the moral assessment of *ìwà*, and the cyclical logic of reincarnation, this perspective shows a system where metaphysics is embedded directly into social conduct. Through the work of the *Egúngún* masquerade, the *Ìbà Orògùn* singers, and the *Àyàn* drummers, Yoruba communities actively enact cosmology, transforming it from a metaphysical idea into a lived experience.

This paper has argued that the community acts as the primary arbiter of morality, using the funeral as a public forum to evaluate how a person lived according to *ìwà*. This communal judgment takes on its full meaning within a cosmological system in which *Olódùmarè* is the final judge and the afterlife in *Ifá* unfolds as a direct extension of one's moral conduct on earth. The flexibility of these practices, evident in responses to urbanization and digital media, further highlights a cultural logic that values its core function of moral enactment over a static form.

Therefore, this perspective reframes Yoruba mortuary traditions not as static beliefs about the afterlife, but as a living moral philosophy for this life. These practices reveal that upright conduct, social responsibility, and remembrance are essential processes for ensuring ancestral continuity and sustaining the ethical framework of the community. This shift is significant for anthropology because it challenges the tendency to treat indigenous beliefs as static traditions rather than living practices. Instead, it reveals them as resilient intellectual systems and ways of thinking that people actively use to navigate the challenges of the present. By approaching these practices as expressions of cultural resilience, this study helps clarify how indigenous African worldviews nurture belonging and uphold moral responsibility across generations. Future research might consider how younger generations, particularly in the diaspora, reinterpret and adapt these traditions within their own social environments.

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Povzetek

Vsebina preglednega članka preučuje moralne in kozmološke razsežnosti smrti znotraj jorubskih sistemov verovanj. Pri tem pogrebne obrede ne obravnava kot simbolne odseve kozmologije, temveč trdi, da pogrebne prakse tvorno oblikujejo etično življenje. To so procesi, ki ustvarjajo moralno osebnost, utrjujejo skupnostno identiteto in ohranjajo družbeni red. Na podlagi obstoječih etnografskih in interpretativnih študij članek na novo obravnava procesa reinkarnacije (àtúnwáyé) in maškarade (Egúngún) ter ju opredeljuje kot dinamična temelja, ki prevajata metafizična prepričanja v živo moralno prakso. Članek pojasnjuje, kako tovrstne tradicije odgovarjajo na sodobne vplive, vključno z urbanizacijo, verskim pluralizmom in digitalno kulturo, ter pokaže, da njihova trdoživost izhaja prav iz njihove prilagodljivosti. S tem ko smrt razume kot neprekinjen proces in ne kot končno točko, raziskava izpostavi jorubske pogrebne tradicije kot sklenjen svetovni nazor etičnega in kozmološkega razmišljanja ter prispeva k širšemu razumevanju afriške moralne filozofije in kulturne kontinuitete.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: jorubska kozmologija, smrt in posmrtno življenje, čaščenje prednikov, reinkarnacija, moralna filozofija

CORRESPONDENCE: Temitope Desmond Francis, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, ul. Michała Oczapowskiego 2, 10-719 Olsztyn, Poland. E-mail: temitope.francis@uwm.edu.pl