

## OMOLÚÀBÍ AS A CULTURAL REFLECTION OF YORUBA VALUE SYSTEM

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**Abstract:** The concept of “Omólúàbí”, embedded in the Yoruba moral framework is one that extends beyond linguistic conception and finds expression in a practical framework that exemplifies the art of being human. Omólúàbí, a socio-cultural idea that reflects the moral milieu of the Yoruba, encapsulates a profound ethos deeply embedded in the Yoruba cultural value system and is widely regarded as an ethical model among the Yoruba. However, this integral concept that defines the personality of an individual in the Yoruba worldview is on the decline in the contemporary age. Using the conceptual analysis and expository methods, this paper takes a cursory look at the concept of Omólúàbí and the moral value system in Yoruba existential ontology. This paper argues that Omólúàbí takes a central place in the existential system that embodies the Yoruba value network.

**Keywords:** ethics, value, human existence, Omoluabi, Yoruba culture.

### Introduction

Indigenous Yoruba moral system revolves around character and character traits much more as it aims to analyse actions, as well as motives of a moral agent. The predominantly accepted character model among the Yoruba is Omólúàbí. The virtues of Omólúàbí manifested in *Ìwá* (character) are such that promote co-operation, solidarity, and interdependence of all interests towards common goal and harmonious relationship. Omólúàbí of the Yoruba worldview can be seen as a humanistic and existentialist philosophical orientation that seeks to promote collective interest, goodwill, harmony, and peaceful coexistence.

The paper attempts to take a cursory look at the concept of Omólúàbí and the moral value system in the Yoruba tradition. The virtues of Omólúàbí manifested in human characters (*iwa*) are such that enhance co-operation, trust, solidarity, and interdependence of all interests towards achieving a common goal and harmonious relationship. This paper aims to revive the dying culture of Omólúàbí people and attempts to make it a global norm. The paper is divided into four sections: introduction, etymology of Omólúàbí, the principles of Omólúàbí, cultural and philosophical underpinnings of Omólúàbí, and the globalization of Omólúàbí as a moral framework.

### Etymology and Meaning of Omólúàbí in Yoruba Culture

The term Omólúàbí according to Adeniji-Neill (2011, 13) etymologically is a fusion of the expression *omo-olu-iwa-bi* meaning “a person born, nurtured, and trained by someone with good character” that is *olu iwa* (chief of character) or the child begotten of *Oniwa*, that is, *oni-iwa* (owner or possessor of character). The concept is an adjectival phrase from five syllables *Omo+ti+Olu+iwa+bi* which literally means *Omo*—“a child”, *Olu-Iwa* meaning “Master of *iwa*” (character), *bi* meaning “born”.

When translated in uniformity, Omolúàbí means “the child begotten by the chief of iwa”. Omolúàbí is thus an epitome of excellence in character (Fayemi 2009, 54).

The most probable source of the Omolúàbí expression has been identified to be the *odu ifa* (divinatory verses) which are the Yoruba philosophical literary corpus with a binary system of 256 (two hundred and fifty-six) chapters. In the *Odu* corpus, according to Ogbe Egunda, Orunmila once sought the means of success in life and was told that the only way was for him to marry Iwa (character or good character). Orunmila married Iwa accordingly, became very successful, and Iwa herself became the mother of numerous children (Idowu 1962, 155):

E wa w’omo Iwa berebe o, E wa w’omo Iwa berebe o, Iwa gbe dani, Iwa pon s’ehin, E wa w’omo Iwa berebe o. (Idowu 1962, 155)

Come and behold the countless children of Iwa, Come and behold the countless children of Iwa, Iwa carries (children) in (her) arms, Iwa carries (children) on (her) back, Come and behold the countless children of Iwa.

Purportedly, the Omolúàbí is not a ready-made product depicting that one is not born an Omolúàbí but the traits are being instilled in a child through the process of internalization. The point being alluded to here is that the Omolúàbí is essentially not an innate concept but one that is imbibed through upbringing and habit. It does not mean that man is born intrinsically bad but, as Idowu (Idowu, 1962, 155) points out, the sense of right and wrong by the decree of God has always been part of human nature. Therefore, it only requires good upbringing, admonition, correction, and instruction to be able to attain the Omolúàbí standard. This learning process does not cease although it is expected that at certain times there are some profound mores of the community that a child should have been inducted into or that one should have been exposed to either directly by the immediate family members and the extended family or indirectly by members of the community. An Omolúàbí learns from personal mistakes or shortcomings of others (Fadipe 2012, 41). He/She takes warning or rebuke with an open heart and words of gratitude since such admonition is necessary to make them a better person in the society and to enable them to evade unforeseen calamities harmful to themselves or/and others (Ajadi 2012, 30).

The concept of Omolúàbí thus connotes a man that has been trained to behave properly by emulating good qualities and virtues at all time and by observing the various shortcomings of others with a resolution of not running into such kind of misdeeds. The Omoluwabi is an individual who consciously exercises self-control and moderates their natural drives, impulses, and inclinations. The Omolúàbí can also be referred to as “a good man”, “a man of good and impeccable character”, “a man with a high moral background”, “a morally upright person” or “an embodiment of morality and virtue” (Fadipe 2012, 32). An Omolúàbí is not egoistic but altruistic. Although human beings are naturally egoistic, the Omolúàbí has been able to overcome the egoistic instinct through training and re-orientation thus becoming altruistic and putting the interest of others before their own (Adeniji-Neill 2011, 15).

To summarise, Omolúàbí fosters a dynamic, positive, pleasant, and rewarding human relation. It is both a people-centred and a personality-propelled philosophy that helps to advance the collective vision of a people. A child that is raised in an Omolúàbí community enjoys close parental attention, love and discipline and undergoes a process of focused systemic socialization and cultural integration through internalization of core cultural values, ethics, and mores. They possess a predictable, psychologically integrated personality consciously guided by the *iwa-pele* codes that constitute the core values of Omolúàbí (Dasyuva 2016, 75).

**Foundational Principles of Omoluwabi Good Character (*Iwa rere*):** This is the foundation of the Omolúàbí concept. A person with good character is honest, just, and trustworthy. In Yoruba culture, character is the most important quality that defines a person. This value is so deeply ingrained that the Yoruba often say, “*Iwa l’ewa*” (Character is beauty). **Integrity:** It is one of the defining characteristics of Omolúàbí. An individual regarded as Omolúàbí must be one that displays integrity at all times, is transparent in their dealings and can be trusted at all times. Truth and reliability are essential qualities that contribute to the well-being of society. The significant worth vested in integrity is exemplified by the Yoruba adage “*beeni, ko je beeni*” (yes should always be yes). **Respect (*Iteriba*):** Respect for others,

especially elders, is definitive of an Omolúàbí for the Yoruba. Respect is a moral act, and together with virtue, it exemplifies good character and comprises the core values in Yoruba culture. Hence, the Yoruba say “*aibowo f’agba ni ko je ki aye gun*” (lack of respect for elders destroys orderliness in the world). In the Yoruba moral code, respect is not just a social courtesy but a moral obligation.

**Humility (Irele):** Humility fosters an environment where individuals are approachable and open to learning from. Hence, the Yoruba say “*iwa Irele ni agba iwa*” (humility is a great virtue). It is within the context that Ayigun (2022, 27) argued that “among the Yoruba, humility is widely regarded as a virtue that defines an individual and promotes mutual co-existence among individuals in the society (Ayigun 2022, 27).

**Diligence and Hard Work (Isé):** The Yoruba value hard work and diligence, seeing it as a path to personal and communal success. There are numerous pithy sayings of the Yoruba that extol the ideal diligence. One of these sayings is “*isé lóògun ise*” (hardwork is the antidote to poverty). An Omolúàbí is seen to be industrious, committed to hardwork and striving to achieve excellence in their endeavours.

**Communal Responsibility (Ajoṣepo):** The Yoruba value a strong sense of community. An Omolúàbí is someone who contributes positively to the community, takes responsibility for his actions and others’ welfare whilst also ensuring the collective good. This communal spirit is vital in maintaining social cohesion and ensuring that everyone thrives together (Ajayi and Akintoye 2006, 41). Unsurprisingly, the Yoruba say that “*ajoji owo kan, o gbe’ru d’ori*” (a tree does not make a forest). In brief, Omolúàbí encourages a sense of responsibility towards oneself, one’s family and the broader community. This involves actively participating in communal affairs, contributing to the welfare of others and being accountable for one’s actions (Ogundeji and Adeniji, 2009).

**Compassion:** An integral cornerstone of the Omolúàbí framework is kindness. Yoruba appreciate acts of compassion and kindness to others as this exemplifies humanness and helps to a sense of communal appreciation and well-being.

**Patience and Endurance (Suuru):** For the Yoruba, “*suuru ni baba iwa*” (patience is the greatest of all virtues) demonstrates the high value they place on patience as key to being considered a responsible individual. Patience and endurance helps an individual to cultivate restraint, even when angry, breeds contentment, extols the virtue of hardwork and generally, exemplifies integrity and character; all important traits of an Omolúàbí.

Be that as it may, Omolúàbí is not just an abstract concept, it is woven into the fabric of daily life in Yoruba communities. From the way individuals greet each other to the customs surrounding family and community gatherings, the principles of Omolúàbí guide social interactions and relationship.

#### ***The Ethical Concept of Omolúàbí***

In the vibrant tapestry of Yoruba culture, one of the fundamental pillars that hold society together is the ethical concept of Omoluabi. It is grounded in the Yoruba people’s rich history, traditions, and values (Ogundeji and Adeniji 2009:29). Omolúàbí encapsulates a set of principles that guide individuals towards a life of moral uprightness, integrity, and social responsibility (Bamikole 2007, 46). The term Omolúàbí portrays higher level of a person with high moral character. Essentially, Omolúàbí embodies the idea of an individual who exhibits virtuous qualities, encompassing life well lived. The ethical formulations of the notion of Omolúàbí extends beyond individual morality, but behooves a communal responsibility to uphold societal virtues. The concept finds expression in the communal nature of the Yoruba society, espousing a moral framework wherein individual actions reverberate within the larger societal framework (Bosede 2019, 15). This ethical perspective provides a unique approach to understanding the inextricable connection between individual action and social cohesion (Fadipe 2012, 27).

The concept of Omolúàbí is an indigenous one that denotes the idea of morality, moral being, and ideal character acceptable to the philosophical tradition of the Yoruba people (Ajadi 2012, 26). The ideas of Omolúàbí are relevant to date, both in oral tradition and in theoretical form, such as proverbs, myths, folklore and the moonlight tales. Omolúàbí from the Odu ifa corpus signifies the basis of societal ethics and norms. It is a psycho-cultural underpinning of values and guiding principles of all human struggles and conditions. The Ifa literary corpus posits the following lines for Omoluabi:

Iwa nikan l'osoro o;  
 Iwa nikan l'osoro  
 Orikan ki buru l'otu Ife,  
 Iwa nikan l'osoro o.  
 Character is all that is requisite  
 Character is all that is requisite  
 There is no destiny that is forbidden in Ife  
 Character is all that is requisite. (Abimbola 1977, 156)

Omólúàbí as a value system allows for preferences and freedom; it encompasses high regard for honour and integrity. Omólúàbí is a Yoruba conception of being a person of high moral standard coupled with good human character (Baruwa 2024, 7). That is, a life that contributes positive qualities promulgated in cultural value such as respect and reference to elders, honesty with integrity, kindness and opulence, generosity with empathy and, above all, live responsively. This is to say that Omólúàbí is a person of honour who believes in hard work and also respects the rights of others (Ajadi 2012, 26). Thence, Omólúàbí portrays an “ideal being”. An integral ethical underpinning of Omólúàbí is moral absolutism. Moral absolutism in Yoruba culture suggests that certain actions are inherently right or wrong, regardless of circumstances. The Omólúàbí is expected to adhere to these moral absolutes, such as honesty, respect for others, and fairness. For instance, truth-telling (ooto) is a fundamental principle that is not subject to negotiation. Thus, Omólúàbí connotes moral absolutism.

Furthermore, the concept of Omólúàbí resonates virtue ethics. Without doubt, virtue ethics is character-based because virtue is emphasized to play a central role in understanding morality and Omólúàbí is regarded as a repository of character. Within the scope of virtue ethics, a moral agent should live virtuously and exhibit a virtuous character; this is exhibited by an Omólúàbí who is expected to be an exemplifier of good character. Hence, Omólúàbí can be said to resonate virtue ethics. It embodies virtues such as good character, patience, bravery which are cultivated through continuous socialization (Banjo and Adebayo 2023, 57).

Ethical relationalism in Yoruba culture portends that relationship with others shape moral obligations and expectations. The Omólúàbí is guided by the belief that ethical behavior is not just about adhering to prescribed rules, but rather, it is about nurturing positive, moral relationships with friends, relatives, and the wider community (Banjo and Adebayo 2023, 58). Ethical relationalism, an offshoot of communal participation presupposes that the well-being of the community is prioritized over individual desires. Thus, the Omólúàbí behaves responsibly, knowing that their attitudes and actions affect not just themselves but the entire community.

### **The Philosophical Dimensions of Omoluabi**

Upon cursory analysis, it will be discovered that the concept of Omólúàbí in the Yoruba culture extends beyond the realm of ethics. The epitome of moral absolutism possesses profound philosophical dimensions that shape the worldview and the values of the Yoruba people.

At its core, Omólúàbí reflects a holistic web of connection wherein the individual is an integral part of a larger whole: the community, the environment, and the universe at large. This inextricable connection is fundamentally reminiscent of communalism, which constantly reveals that the well-being of the individual is intricately linked to the well-being of the community and vice versa (Oyebade, Azenabor and Shotunde 2018, 172). The Yoruba people, through the lens of Omoluabi posit that ethical living and virtuous conduct are not just individual moral codes but essential for maintaining balance within the larger social tapestry (Baruwa 2024, 43).

One key philosophical dimension of Omólúàbí is the emphasis on the belief that individuals possess intrinsic dignity and value. Thence, Omólúàbí foreshows respect and regard for others. Another philosophical dimension of Omólúàbí is its pragmatic antecedent. The concept of Omólúàbí is a theory that grew out of practice. It is pragmatic and is therefore significant for practical life. In Yorubaland, one

is called an Omolúàbí for their excellent moral disposition which is developed over time. In this work, an Omoluabi refers to a person in whom all the thinkable virtues of the Yoruba race are cited (Oyekanmi 2025, 10234). Its practical purpose is found in human striving for perfection in private and public conduct. The concept stands as model, specimen, or standard for any man to emulate. The philosophy behind this principle is that man can always stand for what is good and pursue goodness all the time.

Furthermore, the philosophical dimensions of Omolúàbí find expression in the concept of leadership. The Yoruba people cherish service, accountability, and the well-being of the community as ideals of leadership (Awojobi 2014, 154). These ideals are epitomized by an Omolúàbí and ultimately, an Omolúàbí will lead with integrity, respect for others, love, a sense of responsibility, and empathy. The philosophical dimensions of Omolúàbí show that the concept is not just a set of moral guidelines but a comprehensive worldview that shapes the identity and the values of the Yoruba people as a collective whole.

### **Omolúàbí in the Global Context**

The concept of Omolúàbí as the paragon of ethical personhood is a rich typology derived from the rich tapestry of socio-cultural heritage of the Yoruba people. This moral typology transcends geographical boundaries to offer a profound ethical paradigm with global impact. This concept, rooted in the Yoruba traditional set of virtues such as honesty, integrity, charity, vivacity, modesty, tolerance, truthfulness, self-discipline, and brotherliness, encapsulates a universal framework for ethical living. Therefore, Omolúàbí finds suitable expression in a global context.

### **Universal Ethical Principles**

Omolúàbí is a compendium of ethical principles that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. Virtues such as respect for others, humility, integrity and responsibility are moral elements that resonate within all cultural groups and peoples universally. Thus, the universal applicability of Omolúàbí's ethical principles provides a foundation for shared values.

### **Global Citizenship**

Omolúàbí promotes a vision of global citizenship, wherein individuals from diverse backgrounds recognize their interconnectedness with the broader human community. In an era where global challenges demand concerted efforts, the principles of Omolúàbí encourage a sense of responsibility not only to one's immediate community but to humanity at large. This implies that Omolúàbí can help foster a global perspective that exceeds national borders and builds a network of shared ethos that reverberates beyond cultural and geopolitical differences.

### **Dignity**

One of the ethical implications of the cultivation of virtues that embody Omolúàbí is respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all beings. This cardinal ethical attitude aligns seamlessly with the principles of human rights. In a world where human rights violations persist, the concept of Omolúàbí serves as a feasible model for the establishment of societies that uphold the fundamental rights and dignity of every person, irrespective of cultural or national affiliations. Thence, Omolúàbí becomes a powerful advocate for social justice on the global stage.

### **Adaptability and Cultural Resilience**

In a dynamic world of unending possibilities, Omolúàbí showcases the adaptability and resilience of cultural values, demonstrating how traditional concepts can remain relevant in the face of evolving global dynamics.

### **Building Bridges Across Differences**

Omolúàbí fosters connections and understanding among people with diverse cultural backgrounds, promoting values that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries.

## Conclusion

In unraveling the enigma of Omoluabi, one discovers a moral framework that transcends cultural boundaries, offering profound insights into ethics and ethical life. Without doubt, the concept of Omolúàbí beckons us to reflect on the moral life and its broader societal implications. The ethical underpinnings and dimensions of Omolúàbí reveal a tapestry of principles that reflect the Yoruba people's deep commitment to moral integrity, communal well-being, and ethical life. These principles are not just abstract ideals but lived practices that shape the everyday lives of individuals and communities. In summary, the Yoruba ethical paragon, Omolúàbí, offers a model of ethical behavior that is holistic, inclusive, and deeply rooted in virtues and values.

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