METAPHORIC ASSOCIATIONS AND THE CONCEPTION OF DEATH: ANALYSIS OF A YORUBA WORLD VIEW

BY

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In studying the Yoruba conception of death, we have come to view scholarship as requiring more than the mere collection of rituals, proverbs and myths, the more so since collected Yoruba beliefs about death indicate that binary oppositions are an essential component of their structure. They particularly emphasize the connection of death with the market and of life with the home. This pattern places these beliefs at the centre of Yoruba culture: death is not just an act commissioned by God. There are symbolic formulations which give coherence to a particular image of death. Illustrative of this is the mystery which surrounds the origin of Death (Ikú). There is a conception of its beginning recorded by Idowu in the following myth:

Ikú's mother was killed
In Èjìgbò-èmekùn market:
Ikú heard it in the house,
Ikú screeched like the agon of Iloye
Ikú rang out like an arawó's egg;
He made cobras his spurs,
He made boas his shoes,
He made scorpions his girdle;
Ikú fell upon the Locust Bean Tree,
The Locust Bean Tree fell prone to the ground;
Ikú fell upon the White Silk Cotton Tree,
The White Silk Cotton Tree fell prone to the ground.2

An image of a nurturant death is raised in this myth, which Idowu has dismissed as "not the orthodox belief of the Yoruba about the origin of Death." He could not understand the idea of Death as not responsible for death and consequently dismissed the significance of native metaphors and opted for the more seemingly Christian or Western-influenced philosophy that construes Death as a lieutenant of the Supreme God, Olódúmarè. However, we think
that adequate treatment of the above myth requires a recognition of the crucial distinction between market and home, a polar opposition which in the myth is indicative of consensus and conflict. This opposition is expressive of the union of cosmology and intellect that is evident in such Yoruba proverbs as:

_Ayé lojá, órun ni ilé_
(The world is a market, heaven is home)

_Bi Ikú ilé kò pa ni, ti òde kò le pani_
(If the Death at home does not kill, the one outside the home is powerless to do so).

There may be metaphysical conception of death, but it is also viewed in social terms in the association of Death or the after life with the home. In our view, the polar opposition of home-market constitutes a fundamental paradigm from which the assumptions that death at home is more powerful than death outside and that death is connected to the market are derived. In this paper, it is assumed that the social structure gives rise to the world of symbols. The understanding of the symbolic system must then depend on the examination of the social system from which the symbols are created. Our study is based upon a number of Yoruba proverbs and myths collected in field trips from August 1985 to July 1986. The collection illuminates our central concern: the attempt to reveal an indigenous conception of death with its attendant ramifications for the construction of social order. In pursuing this objective, we do not intend to look at the various events concerned with dying and burial ceremonies. Rather, our interest is in a thought system in which metaphoric associations give coherence to the meaning of death.

Metaphor "states the equivalence between terms taken from separate semantic domains." Edmonson once stated that the scientific study of metaphors should be the concern of folklorists. Since then the influence of Fernandez, Levi-Strauss and Merten and Schwartz has been considerable in the development of the comparative analysis of cultural materials. Merten and Schwartz have pointed out that metaphors guide conceptual distinctions in ordinary conversation. Metaphors constitute a symbolic process by which individuals in conversation attempt to develop variant interpretations of events. The emergence and interpretation of metaphors are mediated by the self-images of the participants. In the conceptual process, metaphors serve to mediate the ‘switching’