


Article

Is There Any Evidence for Hell in the *Ifá* Literary Corpus?

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Abstract: Recent scholarship on *Yorùbá* theology that has tried to model it after the Abrahamic monotheisms as the distinction between *Ọrun rere* (Heaven) and *Ọrun àpáàdì* (Hell) is now replete but has not, before now, commanded critical scrutiny. Specifically, the works of Ogunnade, Odebolu, Shittu and Odeyemi have argued for a *Yorùbá* notion of Hell even when there is no evidence for such in the theology and traditional practices of the peoples. The aim of this research, then, is to correct this unreliable and uncharitable misrepresentation of *Yorùbá* theology. To achieve this aim, this research employs the *Kawaida* methodology, which thrives on reason and tradition. In reinforcing its stance, this study relies on the sacred ritual archive of the *Yorùbá*, which is the *Ifá* corpus, to establish the absence of any form of *Ọrun àpáàdì*, as a place of eternal anguish and suffering for evil doers among the *Yorùbá*.

Keywords: Abrahamic monotheisms; *Ifá* literary corpus; *Kawaida*; *Ọrun àpáàdì*; *Yorùbá* theology

1. Introduction

I wish to, in this research, correct the uncharitable misrepresentations and errors concerning the notion of Hell, which have extended to *Yorùbá* theology from some African scholars in recent times. Upon a careful examination of the peoples' ritual archive, which is the *Ifá* corpus, there is no evidence of Hell as a place of eternal anguish and agony for those who embraced the ways of the adversary, the deceiver, Devil/Satan, as against the will of the higher deity among the *Yorùbá*, whose name is *Olódùmarè*. In a theology where there is no entity that approximates the Biblical and *Quranic* Satan/Devil, who is eternally antagonistic of *Olódùmarè*, it is important to be careful in making inference pertaining to the idea of Hell as *Ọrun àpáàdì*. Although there are efforts such as those of Laguda (2013), Bewaji (1998), Fayemi (2013), Balogun (2009), Dasaolu and Ofuasia (2019), Akande and Ofuasia (2021), and Ofuasia (2021, 2022a) that show that the notion of a Satan/Devil in *Yorùbá* theology is non-existent via conceptual decolonization of *Èṣù* (a deity erroneously passed as Satan/Devil following the translation of the English Bible into *Yorùbá* by the late Samuel Ajayi Crowther), it is surprising that some other scholars have not only admitted a Devil/Satan equivalent in *Yorùbá* theology but have also moved on to discuss the idea of Hell, which automatically invites one to assume the existence of an entity who is antagonistic toward humans and lures them into sin and eventually Hell. This outlook or approach is gravid in the works of several scholars whose intention is to reduce *Yorùbá* theology to any of their preferred Abrahamic monotheisms. I will, for my present discussion, limit my assessment to four of them: Ogunnade (2006), Odebolu (2016), Shittu (2006), and Odeyemi (2019). This research therefore seeks to engage each of these scholars independently, and uncover the distortions and misrepresentations inherent in their works, as well as why the idea of Hell, or *Ọrun àpáàdì*, has no place in *Yorùbá* theology.

For the task at hand, it is important to state from the outset that there are three parts. The first focuses on the works of scholars who have argued that *Yorùbá* theology has a version of Hell just parallel to those in the Abrahamic monotheisms/faiths. Here, the justifications for each of Ogunnade (2006), Odebolu (2016), Shittu (2006), and Odeyemi (2019) for the notion of Hell or *Ọrun àpáàdì* in *Yorùbá* theology will be critically assessed. In part



Citation: Ofuasia, Emmanuel. 2023. Is There Any Evidence for Hell in the *Ifá* Literary Corpus? *Religions* 14: 1416. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111416>

Academic Editors: Ethan Leong Yee and Luis Cordeiro Rodrigues

Received: 8 October 2023

Revised: 7 November 2023

Accepted: 7 November 2023

Published: 12 November 2023



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two, I first contend with the main kernel of *Yorùbá* theology before turning to argue against these scholars using instances from the *Ifá* corpus and scholars who had written before these “pro-Hell intellectuals” to show that the idea of *Ọrun àpáàdì* is alien to *Yorùbá* theology. This part will show, among other things, that the *Ifá* corpus lacks the notion of Hell as well as the Devil/Satan whose sole effort is to lure humans to Hell with “It”. The third part is the conclusion of this research.

2. The Notion of Hell or *Ọrun àpáàdì* in Contemporary *Yorùbá* Semantics

There is hardly any research discussing the idea of Hell in *Yorùbá* that does not invoke the Abrahamic monotheisms for reinforcement. More so, one of the two points that should be kept in mind in this part of this paper is how “borrowed words” (mostly from Arabic) with their semantics into *Yorùbá* may be held accountable regarding the notion that *Yorùbá* theology endorses the idea of Hell. The second point concerns the efforts to seek equivalents in beliefs and thought systems of the Abrahamic monotheisms in *Yorùbá* theology. Inherently, the aim is to show that the latter is theologically subordinate to the former.

Commencing with Segun Odeyemi (2019), it is helpful to understand the pre-conceived notion or outlook pertaining to his belief that *Yorùbá* theology is nothing but a foundation for the thriving of the Gospel of Christ. From the outset of his paper, he reveals that his aim is to consider how *Yorùbá* theology and Christianity overlap. One of the themes that commanded his attention in his research is the one pertaining to Heaven and Hell—the focus of the present research. On this note, Odeyemi (2019, p. 534) explains: “As in Christian belief, YTR, believes in Heaven (*Orun rere*—good heaven) and hell (*Orun apaadi*—hell of potsherd). One qualifies for either place based on how well one lived while on earth”. Although this claim occupies a central place in his assessment, there was no effort to ponder if the ritual archive of the peoples, the *Ifá* corpus, has a provision for such. Since his goal is to draw parallels between *Yorùbá* theology and Christian theology, the latter seems to have an overriding influence over his perception of the former. For instance, when the former provides a glimpse of reincarnation owing to bad character or incompleteness of earthly tasks, the author does not even mention reincarnation once throughout his treatise. The aftermath, then, is that, what Odeyemi (2019) has done is to use Christian theology to provide an understanding of *Yorùbá* theology. So, if the idea of Hell is present in the former, then it must be present in the latter, too. This is nothing but an incorrect presentation of *Yorùbá* theology of the former, as will be shown in the part two of this research. For the moment, I will move to the proposal of Odebolu (2016), whose thesis seems to be in consonance with that of Odeyemi (2019).

Odebolu (2016), in his effort to show why the notion of Hell as *Ọrun àpáàdì* features in *Yorùbá* theology, argues: “Many societies in Africa do not believe much in reward and punishment, after death, but the Yoruba and others believe in a judgment by God after death. They believe that the good ancestors will go to *orun rere* (good heaven) while the bad ones will go to *orun apaadi* (hell)”. Having said this, Odebolu (2016, p. 7) then concludes:

The ancestors also need to have the family clan and tribe preserved so that they will not be forgotten. So children are given names that recognize dead parents, such as Babátúndé, Ìyábòdédé, Yétúndé and Yéwándé. This shows that there is a belief in partial re-incarnation among the people. The wicked ones, according to Yoruba belief, may be returned to be created as trees or any other objects.

While Odebolu (2016) recognizes that *Yorùbá* theology endorses reincarnation, he fails to articulate the conditions under which such ancestors and “dead parents” are not judged and quickly put in either of Heaven or Hell, but quick to reincarnate. Clearly, Odebolu (2016) has failed to offer a reliable articulation of the basis of a *Yorùbá* deceased being thrown to Hell. Incidentally the first time the concepts “Hell” and “re-incarnation” appeared in his article is the last paragraph before the conclusion. The implication, then, is that his analysis fails to determine whether or not *Yorùbá* theology, through the *Ifá* corpus, endorses any element of Hell. Such an outlook is present in the research of Ogunade (2006).

Raymond Ogunade (2006), just like the scholars whose works have been explored before now, no doubt is *seemingly* steeped in Yorùbá theology. If this were not the case, he would not have argued that:

The Yoruba look forward to old age with a lot of confidence, satisfaction and excitement because of its proximity to the abode of the spirits and *orun rere* (good heaven). Those who live their old age wickedly naturally go to *orun apaadi* (heaven of potsherds or hell). Death does not put an end to the human life according to Yoruba eschatology (Ogunade 2006, p. 27).

Again, what may be noticed in the foregoing excerpt is the emphasis on the outlook that those who lived bad or immoral lives until their death will go to Hell or *Orun àpáàdì*. However, there is an anti-thesis clearly revealed in that excerpt. If death does not put an end to human life, why ought human life be limited by the notion of an *Orun àpáàdì*, where life is full of pain, agony, and discomfort, *eternally*? Ogunade (2006) responds that those who lead a good life prior to death will become ancestors. However, those who did not will evolve as “bad elders” and confined to *Orun àpáàdì*. Just like those scholars whose proposals had been examined before now, Ogunade (2006) has been unable to provide a justification from the *Ifá* corpus, the ritual archive of Yorùbá theology, for why such “condemnation” is preponderant.

Upon retrospection, it is worth mentioning that each of the works that have been critically assessed in the foregoing paragraphs reveals that there is no clear explanation of how the notion of *Orun àpáàdì* as Hell with its juxtaposition with *Orun rere* (Heaven) in Yorùbá theology emerged in Yorùbá linguistics. This is, however, not the case with Shittu (2006), whose research surpasses those engaged in the preceding paragraphs. Shittu provides a commendable account over how Arabic terms, borrowed by Yorùbá linguistics, can be helpful for understanding the origin and evolution of *Orun àpáàdì* in Yorùbá linguistics.

Shittu (2006) argues that the Arabic language, with *Al-Qur'an*, plays a central role in the semantics of concepts that were hitherto alien to Yorùbá. Shittu sees *Al-Qur'an* as an eye opener, giving the impression that unless one reads *Al-Qur'an*, the eyes are not open. If this were not the case, he would not have stated from the opening pages of the work: “the *Qur'an*, an ‘eye opener’ an illuminating light and original source of the branches of knowledge. It is really in existence to withstand the test of time” (Shittu 2006, p. 145). His major aim in his paper is to demonstrate that *Al-Qur'an* is highly influential in the formation of Yorùbá semantics: “This study will also reveal that not only in Arabic language that the *Qur'an* is believed to represent the highest linguistic and semantic achievement but also in Yoruba language if it is critically studied” (Shittu 2006, p. 145). Again, Shittu posits that the Yorùbá owe their language to the Arabs. This implies the wrong outlook that before meeting the Arabs and Islam, the language was not yet systematized. On this note, Shittu (2006) not only indicates how some Yorùbá words emerged from Arabic words, but also uncovered the pre-*Qur'anic* and post-*Qur'anic* semantics of these words. Regarding the one that concerns this research, *Orun àpáàdì*, Shittu (2006, p. 150) connects its Arabic equivalent to *Al-Nar* (*Qur.* 111: 3), which means fire, and fire in Yorùbá is *ina*. He goes on to say that the word *àpáàdì*, in its pre-*Qur'anic* semantics, depicts “a piece of pot made from the clay burnt in the fire, but also had suffered from the fire and even when broken into pieces, it will be used to collect fire to support other pots on the fire”. However, with the influence of the *Qur'an*, this usage soon metamorphosed into Hellfire, the eternal abode of non-believers.

From the linguistic analysis undertaken thus far, there is no doubt that the concept of *Orun àpáàdì* as a place of eternal torment and agony had no place among the Yorùbá until they encountered the Abrahamic faiths. Secondly, it is arguable that the Yorùbá *ina* is a derivative of the *Qur'anic Al-Nar*, when efforts have been made by Eyebira Olomu (2007), who identifies an ancient Egyptian connection with Yorùbá linguistics. In his analysis, the Yorùbá *ina* parallels the ancient Egyptian *unas*, which means lake of fire/fire. In the next part, I will turn to consider how the Yorùbá, before the unfortunate corruption of their linguistics by Abrahamic monotheisms, viewed the cosmic world.

3. Ifá Corpus on the Idea of *Ọrun àpáàdì*

My overriding aim in this part of this paper is to demonstrate that the notion of Hell, with its widespread usage among the *Yorùbá*, is not supported by the peoples' metaphysics and their compendium of deep philosophic thoughts—the *Ifá* literary corpus. However, before going far, it is pertinent to say a few things concerning the *Kawaida* methodology and how it will be used in this research. The methodology is recommended by Maulana Karenga, and for him, *Kawaida* demands that everything should be based on reason and tradition. By tradition, what is meant is that any intellectual endeavor about the Africans must be conducted in a way that a clear line between what one is saying they said vis-à-vis what they actually said. Although what they actually said need not be the final court of appeal or seen as conclusive, it should serve, among other things, as a basis for the avoidance of distortion and misrepresentation. By undertaking this research to investigate the place of *Ọrun àpáàdì* in the *Ifá* orature, the present research is in line with tradition as commanded by the *Kawaida* methodology. One, however, needs to exercise some caution concerning “reason” in *Kawaida*!

Kawaida does not employ “reason” in the Western derivative sense of *logos*. This is because such a construction fails to capture the philosophic thoughts of the African. To be sure, Jonathan Chimakonam (2019, p. 17) has shown how *logos*, “in its fluid, charming and changing nature could be a philosophical sham. The inspiration behind its philosophical adoption and usage appears to be the fabled philosopher’s stone of the alchemist that can do everything including turning all metals into gold”. Chimakonam’s description of *logos* in the Western sense may also be seen as connected to the fact that it is deeply affiliated to classical bivalent logic which is grossly inadequate for understanding the African reality (Chimakonam 2019). Perhaps it is due to the use of the inappropriate language with its underlying system of logic for understanding key African concepts that has led to the misrepresentations in the works of the “pro-Hell intellectuals” whose ideas were assessed in the last section. Nevertheless, *logos*, as captured in *Kawaida* agrees with Chimakonam’s conviction on logic.

From another parlance, the “logocentric” character of reason has been found to be limited because of its over-confidence that language can reflect the world given the assumption that the origin of every word is inherent in the structure of reality (Butler 2002, p. 17). Reason, as used therefore, in *Kawaida*, focuses on moral reasoning as a means of keeping the Africa tradition vibrant and relevant rather than “existing in footnotes as gatherers of data and as intellectual subjects needed to supply information about African objects” (Falola 2018, p. 913). Karenga (1999, p. iv), while speaking on the overriding nature of the *Kawaida* methodology, argues:

Tradition is our foundation, our cultural grounding, and reason, especially moral reasoning, is a form of engagement that aids us in our ongoing efforts to understand and practice tradition in new and expanded ways to keep it as a living, vibrant and rich source of the best of human thought and practice.

With the methodology that girds this inquiry succinctly discussed, it is important to provide a brief exposition of the main features of *Yorùbá* theology. The *Yorùbá* are presently in the south-west region of Nigeria, although they spread as far as Benin Republic and Togo (Oyeshile 2021). Some of them have maintained a distinct identity in the Americas following the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as they can be found in Brazil, Cuba, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Although the *Yorùbá* have always pondered over what the world was like before the arrival of *Olódùmarè*, God, who is only directly accessible to the divinities and not any human, the *Yorùbá* provided a limited God. *Olódùmarè* is a kind of God who relies on its deities. For some of these deities it is not clear that they are the products of *Olódùmarè*'s creation because they possess knowledge and, in some cases, assisted *Olódùmarè*'s quest to become immortal. As a way of making this more lucid, Bolaji Idowu (1962, p. 44) provides a commentary of a verse in *Odù Oyèkú Méjì* that “. . . Olodumare Himself sought the means of immortality. In consequence, he was told to make some sacrifices to provide

Himself with a large piece of white cloth. When the necessary rite had been performed, the white cloth was spread over Him so that He was completely covered. From that time, He became immortal". The following questions are then, not misplaced: Who/what told *Olódùmarè* about the elixir for immortality? Who/what ensured the necessary rites and rituals were performed? Who/what manufactured the white cloth? Who/what spread the white cloth over *Olódùmarè*? Clearly, it cannot be the *Olódùmarè* that sought the elixir for immortality (Ofuasia 2022b). What this means is that from the beginning, *Olódùmarè* was not eternal. This suggests that there was a point that immortality bothered *Olódùmarè*, such that *Olódùmarè* had to request the assistance of the deities. Nevertheless, it needs to be hinted that the "existence of Olodumare is not geotactic, nor is it dependent upon any human whim. This, perhaps, explains why no elaborate arguments or proofs are thought necessary for the existence of God in Yoruba religion" (Bewaji 2007, p. 369). The *Yorùbá* are not the only people who take the existence of God as de facto. Samuel Imbo (2004) has also demonstrated that the same also holds for the *Acoli*.

Immediately after *Olódùmarè* are the divinities. There are about 460 of them, but prominent among them are *Èṣù* *Ọbàtálá* *Ọrúnmilá*, *Àjàlá*. Due to the joint efforts of some of them with the instructions provided by *Olódùmarè*, the world emerged out of pre-existing materials. In other words, the theology of the *Yorùbá* favors *creatio ex materia* over *creatio ex nihilo*, since the world was fashioned out of pre-existing materials (Idowu 1962). After the divinities, the next are the spirits. They are divided into two: malevolent and benevolent. After the spirits are the ancestors before magic and medicine (Mbiti 1969).

Yorùbá theology, based on the emphasis on the belief in *Olódùmarè*, has been labeled as monotheistic. Idowu (1962) calls it "diffused monotheism". Omotade Adegbindin (2011) labels it as monotheism, just as Adebowale Akintola (1999). However, I have argued elsewhere against these proposals and offered that the system is panentheistic (see Ofuasia 2020, 2022b). This is because panentheism moves beyond the belief in one God, but emphasizes an immanent God, in this case, *Olódùmarè*. Panentheism is the outlook that God is part of the world, since the events in the world affect God and God also has unique aims and actions (Lawhead 2002). This contrasts with pantheism, which simply says that the God and the world are one and the same. The panentheistic expression of *Yorùbá* theology is based on my conviction that the people perceive God to be immanent since, as I will show shortly, Heaven and earth are two aspects of the same reality. It is on this basis that I have also indicated that the theology in recent times displays more affinity with process theology than the Abrahamic monotheisms (see Ofuasia 2019). This is underscored by the position of Alfred N. Whitehead concerning the immanent nature of God in process theology: "it is true to say that God creates the world, as that the world creates God" (Whitehead 1978, p. 343). In panentheism, "there is no transcendence of God, above and beyond the world" (Ofuasia 2015, p. 67).

Yorùbá theology, I must add, has been negatively portrayed by Islam and Christianity. Whereas the latter have their sacred literature, which they use to organize the beliefs, this cannot be said of *Yorùbá* theology, since it is not possible to have the entire 256 signatures of the *Ifá* orature as a text. More so, those who specialize in *Ifá* must memorize it (Abimbola 1973). It is precisely for these reasons that the *Ifá* corpus has not been documented as a sacred text. Although it is possible to think that modernity may have affected the religion one way or the other, its primary doctrine and the places of *Olódùmarè*, the divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic, and medicine are still held onto. In addition, a *Yorùbá* Christian or Muslim uses her/his knowledge of *Yorùbá* theology to make sense of her/his Christianity or Islam. This is because the average *Yorùbá* is already familiar with the realities of spirits and deities such that s/he uses her/his "new faiths" to derogate *Yorùbá* theology, which they perceive as demonic and archaic. Pentecostalism is particularly guilty of this outlook, since it is conceived "as a form of African Christianity which offers a form of Christianity that fits well with African sensibilities and which acknowledges the validity of traditional African beliefs in witches, spirits, ancestors, while at the same time providing a way to break from them" (Freeman 2012, p. 12).

At this juncture, a critic may object to my analysis by pointing out that much of what has evolved as *Yorùbá* theology is influenced by the Abrahamic faiths. The implication of this thought is that the idea of Hell, too, must be one of such influences. First, it is one thing for the Abrahamic faiths to influence *Yorùbá* theology; however, it is another for *Yorùbá* theology to retain its distinct or core beliefs. My point is that much as there are some areas of influences, there are other crucial aspects, such as pouring of libation in honor of ancestors, divination, and sacrifices, that have not been influenced. Second, the Abrahamic faiths endorse an outlook that, after death, punishment in the afterlife follows. Irrespective of the influence the Abrahamic faiths impress on *Yorùbá* theology, it has not succeeded in eroding the beliefs in reincarnation and ancestorhood that are central to *Yorùbá* theology. Third, the fact that these beliefs and practices in *Yorùbá* theology have been in practice from ancient to modern times, in spite of the presence and influence of the Abrahamic faiths, is an indication that some elements of *Yorùbá* theology are not affected by the Abrahamic faiths. Although the idea of Hell is now popular in *Yorùbá* society, following the influence of the Abrahamic faiths, it is not endorsed in the *Ifá* corpus, the compendium of *Yorùbá* theology. With the brief exposition of the nature of *Yorùbá* theology and its place in contemporary times, I now turn to show why and how the notion of Hell has no place in their belief system contra those that find the idea of Hell in the peoples' thought system.

I should commence my counter-arguments against the scholars assessed in the preceding part of this paper with the understanding that the *Yorùbá* hold dearly to two planes of existence—*Ọrun* (spiritual abode) and *Ayé* (physical world) (Oyelakin 2013). According to the tradition of the *Yorùbá*, there is a never-ending binary relationship between these two planes of existence (Ofuasia 2019, p. 73). Whereas *Ayé* came to be following the creative efforts of the *Ọrìṣàs* (subordinate deities) and *Olódùmarè* (the higher deity), *Ọrun* is their main residence (Oyelakin 2013, p. 87). John Mbiti (1969, p. 97), whilst speaking in this connection, tenders that these two planes of existence are so complementary that they “dovetail and intermingle into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, to draw the distinction or separate them”. On a related note, Margaret Drewal (1992, p. 14), while explaining the nature of the two planes, stresses that *Ọrun* and *Ayé* possess a complementary interaction, which, from “a cosmic conception is visualized either as a spherical gourd [calabash], whose upper and lower hemispheres fit tightly together, or as a divination tray with a raised figured border enclosing a flat central surface”. This reveals that the ancient *Yorùbá* has never bothered about a place of eternal damnation or Hell. They have not made any distinction between *Ọrun rere* and *Ọrun àpáàdì*. In fact, these two “qualifiers”—“*rere*” and “*àpáàdì*”—of *Ọrun* are creations of the influences of the *Qur'anic* and Biblical linguistics, which are not in accord with *Yorùbá* tradition. These are some of the inputs of European missionaries and Arabic scholars. These inputs are not exclusive to the *Yorùbá* society but other parts of Africa:

If God has a name, then the task of the missionary is that of finding out what the equivalent name is in the African languages. . .the missionaries did not carry out the lengthy and systematic studies in the African languages concerned to find out what true beliefs of the Africans where. They were simply looking for a local confirmation of their cherished preconceptions (Imbo 2004, p. 369).

That *Ọrun* and *Ayé* are complementary does not foreclose a boundary. According to the *Yorùbá* ritual archive, this boundary is *bódè*, a river. Furthermore, upon a careful exploration of some relevant verses of the *Ifá* orature, there is no evidence of *Ọrun àpáàdì* therein. In line with reason and tradition, as indicated in *Kawaida*, I will invoke some passages where the word “*Ọrun*” is used, to see if even the ideas of *Ọrun rere* and *Ọrun àpáàdì* suffice. I commence with a verse emanating from *Odù Èjì Ogbe* with a translation into English from *Yorùbá*:

Ọjò tí a bí ara la dá omi

Ọj ọ́ tí a dá omi la dá ẹ̀jẹ̀

Ọj ọ́ tí a d' ẹ̀jẹ̀ la da gbogbo ara

A dífá fún ọkàn
A bì fún ẹmí
A dífá fún orí inú
A bì fún ọpọl ọ̀
Àwọn merẹ̀ẹ̀run ti ọ̀run bọ̀ wáyé¹

The day that the body was created so was water
The day that water was created, so was blood
The day that blood was created, so was the whole body
Performed Ifá divination for heart
And likewise for the self
Performed Ifá divination for the inner head
And likewise for the brain
*When the four of them were coming from **heaven** to the world*

The use of Heaven in that verse from *Odù Èjì Ogbe* illustrates that ọ̀run is not simply a place reserved from human souls but for entities such as the brain, water, head, self, and body. The verse does not state whether or not they were emerging from either of *Ọ̀run rere* or *Ọ̀run àpáàdì* based on a deed in a previous life. Another even more interesting verse is located in *Odù Ọ̀túúrúpọ̀n*, where both humans and the malevolent forces are said to reside in Heaven and journey into the earth with some firm resolutions as to how they will lead their earthly lives:

...A díá fún eníyàn,
A bù f'énìyàn,
Àwọn méjèèjì n t' ikọ̀lé ọ̀run bọ̀ wáyé.
Wọ̀n ní kí àwọn méjèèjì ó rúbọ
Eníyàn ní bí òùn bá dé'lé ayé,
Òun ó máa ba ti gbogbo eníyàn jé ni.
Énìyàn náà ní bí òùn b dé'lé ayé tán,
Ohun tí ó bá wu òun ní òun ó máa se.
Kò rú.
Ìgbà tí àwọn méjèèjì dé'lé ayé tán,
Lo ba di pe bí eníyàn bá bí mọ̀ sílẹ̀ tán,
Eníyàn ó pa á.
Gbogbo nnkan tí eníyàn ní,
Ni àwọn eníyàn mbàá jé...²
...Divination was held for the malevolent forces
Same for humans
*As both descended from **heaven to earth***
Both of them were asked to offer sacrifice
The malevolent forces swore that on reaching the earth,
He would be destroying the lots of humans,
Humans, too, vowed that, on reaching the earth,
They will be do as they please
Both refused to offer sacrifice.
The two reached the earth and,

*Whenever humans gave birth to a child,
The malevolent forces would kill it
All the things that humans laboured for
Were all destroyed by the malevolent forces...*

The conviction of scholars such as Mbiti (1969) and Drewal (1992) concerning the complementary relation between *Orun* and *Ayé* is underscored in the foregoing verse. A critic may at this juncture wonder why malevolent forces would reside in Heaven but not Hell. An easy answer to that question is that *Yorùbá* theology is based on the complementary relationship of evil and good as the two creative elements that struggle to give life its meaning. This tension between seemingly opposite realities is not novel to the *Yorùbá*, but goes as far back as ancient Egypt, since the struggle between opposites:

...is found both in the Hermopolitan and Helopolitan systems which had opposites as partners in the creation process. The pair of pre-creation deities of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad balanced its male and female principles in Nun and Naunet, Huh and Hauhet, Kuk and Kauket, Amun and Amaunet. Such was also the case with the creation gods of the Heliopolitan system: Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nephthys. Opposites are also manifested in the characteristics of the creating gods Shu and Tefnut. Shu is characterized as male. Tefnut is characterized as female. The one is dynamic, the other is static (Onyewuenyi 1993, p. 211).

The tension between these seemingly opposite variables accounts for balance (Obi 2017). In a similar vein, Christopher Nwodo (2004, p. 15) adds that, for the African, "...the element of balance by virtue of which the relationship of the two terms of duality is complementary rather than contrary". As a way of reinforcing the outlook that, for the *Yorùbá*, existence is an aftermath of the creative struggle between two opposite forces, there is a chant by diviners during rituals or sacrifice that attests to the belief that the "road" to Heaven is lined by the two opposite forces:

*Ibà irunmale ojùkòtún
Ibà igbamale ojùkòsì
Ibà ọ̀tà-lé-ń-irún Irúnmale
Ti o já àtàri ọ̀nà orun gbangba*

Praise to the 400 deities of the right hand (the benevolent)

Praise to the 200 deities of the left hand (the malevolent)

Praise to the 460 deities

Who line the very road of heaven (Idowu 1962, p. 67 bold emphasis mine)

One would have expected the number of divinities in the first and second line to add up to 600 in the third. It is however interesting that the number of divinities in *Yorùbá* pantheon is a subject of debate. However, in the foregoing, 1, 060 divinities are praised. An important point to be noticed from the *Ifá* verses cited thus far is that *Orun* is *Orun*. There is no effort made by the *Yorùbá* progenitors or ancestors to distinguish it using the qualifiers *rere* and *àpáàdi*. This is because they lack a basis for a place of eternal bliss or eternal condemnation, as implied in the popular Heaven and Hell, respectively. More so, instead of emphasizing the metamorphosis of a person's soul to Heaven or Hell after physical death, the *Yorùbá* have always favored two options: ancestorhood or reincarnation. The former is for those who had done good deeds and led a good life with worthy character, whereas the latter is for those found to be deficient or who need to return to complete the "cosmic assignment" that they had not concluded; as a result, names such as Babátúndé (father has returned), Ìyábòdé (mother has returned), and Yéwándé (mother has returned to seek me) are popular among the *Yorùbá*.

Aside from the belief in reincarnation as a way of coming back into the world after living a previous life, the *Yorùbá* also believe in the concept of children possessed by some malevolent spirits or ancestral mates that torment their mothers by dying in infancy to return and be birthed by the same mother again. This phenomenon is called *àbikú*. I will not dwell much on them, as poems from Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clarke have already done justice to this phenomenon. My point, however, is that the beliefs and practices associated with the phenomenon again testify to the lack of a place called Hell to which souls are reposed after being judged. To be sure, the notion of a Last Day on which God will judge humanity based on their deeds also has no place in *Yorùbá*. All efforts to portray the theology to possess these elements are nothing but efforts at seeking the equivalents of the beliefs and practices central to the Abrahamic monotheisms (Imbo 2004). Lastly, the notion that there is a Devil/Satan in *Yorùbá* theology that is working against the will of God, *Olódùmarè* has also be shown to be implausible (Ofuasia 2022a). In a nutshell, Hell has no place in *Yorùbá* theology.

4. Conclusions

My aim in this paper is to correct the misrepresentation and distortion of *Yorùbá* theology in which contemporary scholars are making concerted efforts to inject concepts such as Hell into the system. I have critically assessed the works of Ogunade (2006), Odebolu (2016), Shittu (2006), and Odeyemi (2019) as instances of this distortion. Upon a careful analysis of *Yorùbá* theology and a foray into their ritual archives via *Ifá* orature, I have succeeded in demonstrating that the idea of Hell or the Day of Judgment, where the souls of the corrupt are condemned eternally, is absent among the *Yorùbá*. My exploration of their theology and *Ifá* literary corpus has served this end.

Funding: There is no funding information for this publication.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: There is no data availability statement for this research.

Acknowledgments: The author is immensely grateful for the assistance offered by the academic editors: Ethan Leong Yee and Luis Cordeiro Rodrigues toward making this publication open access. The constructive criticisms received from the team of reviewers toward strengthening the paper must also be mentioned. I thank the reviewers for their keen eyes and criticisms that allowed for an improved outcome.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no potential conflict of interests for this research.

Notes

¹ This verse was chanted to me by the *Ifá* priest, Semiu Shokunbi, during a session with him in his Agege residence in Lagos on 13 August 2023

² This verse, too, like the previous one, was chanted to me by an *Ifá* priest, Semiu Shokunbi, during a session with him in his Agege residence in Lagos on 13 August 2023

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