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**The Problem of Destiny in Akan and Yoruba  
Traditional Thoughts: A Comparative Analysis of the  
Works of Wiredu, Gyekye and Gbadegesin**

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**Abstract**

Many African scholars have expressed varied thoughts about the concept of a person, specifically about that which constitutes a person in African philosophy. These philosophers include Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye and Segun Gbadegesin. What they have in common, though, is that their ideas on the concept of a person issue largely from the traditional philosophies of some West African peoples. Wiredu and Gyekye reflect on Akan conceptions while Gbadegesin carries out his discussions from the Yoruba cultural perspective. This paper examines the thoughts of these prominent philosophers, with a particular focus on the constitution of the person and the nature of his or her destiny.

**On the Constitution of a Person**

In the philosophy of mind, the ontological questions about a person may be said to revolve around the unity

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or compartmentality of the human being. And, whenever divisibility of the person is suggested, further questions are usually raised about the functions and relationships between the various entities or parts.

The analyses of the concept of a person done by these three philosophers – that is, Wiredu, Gyekye and Gbadegesin – are in several ways enriched by the fact that they are natives of their respective studied cultures as well. They all seem to indicate that as conceived in their individual cultures, a person is constituted by the body and some other entities. A person, then, is held in Akan and Yoruba philosophies to consist broadly of physical (bodily) and extra-bodily entities. In Akan thought, the physical is called *honam* (body) while the extra-bodily in turn consists of two logically distinguishable entities – the *sunsum* (spirit) and *okra* (soul).<sup>1</sup> In Yoruba philosophy, the *ara* (body) is held together with what Gbadegesin regards as a purely non-physical entity (*emi* – the soul) and both *okan* (the heart) and *ori* (the head, ‘inner head’) which he describes as partly physical and partly non-physical.<sup>2</sup> However, in an earlier publication, Gbadegesin suggested that the translation of *emi* as soul was a confusion. There, he defined *emi* only as ‘the active principle of life, the life-giving element put in place by the deity’.<sup>3</sup> This latter classification is similar to Wiredu’s idea of *okra*.<sup>4</sup>

With regard to the nature of the non-bodily aspect in Akan thought, Wiredu and Gyekye tend to

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differ in some respects. For instance, on the basis of some functions attributed by Akan thinkers to the *sunsum* and *ɔkra*, Wiredu suggests that they cannot be spiritual. Yet, they are not entirely physical either. He cites, among others, the belief that highly skilled medicine men can see the *ɔkra* to refer to the *ɔkra* as rather quasi-physical. For, he contends, the *ɔkra* is in this way perceptible to the medicine men. He regards the *sunsum* as quasi-physical too.<sup>5</sup> Now, while his denial of the spirituality of *sunsum* aligns him with Danquah<sup>6</sup>—another Akan philosopher — it is in conflict with Gyekye's position that the *ɔkra* and *sunsum* are completely spiritual.<sup>7</sup>

In the thinking of Gyekye, the attribution of such psychological activities (of a person) as those in dreams to the *sunsum*, and the metaphysical approach deployed by the medicine men in perceiving the *ɔkra* suggest that both *sunsum* and *ɔkra* are spiritual. Interestingly, this controversy on the nature of the person in Akan traditional thought does not involve Wiredu and Gyekye alone but Gbadegesin as well. For instance, Gyekye's subsequent criticism of Danquah and, to some extent, Wiredu that their anti-spiritual stance on *sunsum* is mistaken draws Gbadegesin into the debate.

Gbadegesin suggests that Gyekye does not treat Danquah fairly and satisfactorily because he (Gyekye) does not offer any arguments to justify the position he takes against Danquah. Gbadegesin claims that with the

exception of the single conditional statement with which Danquah is dismissed, Gyekye does ‘nothing’ to confute Danquah’s thesis that *sunsum* has physical attributes and, as a result, perishes.<sup>8</sup> But Gbadegesin’s argument can best be described as confusing. For, he proceeds from this to construct an argument which Gyekye purportedly makes about *sunsum* and is, then, critiqued by him (Gbadegesin). The following argument is the one developed by Gbadegesin:

1. The functions or activities attributed to the *sunsum* indicate that it is neither material nor mortal nor derived from the father.
  - a. *sunsum* moulds the child’s personality (Busia 1954)
  - b. *sunsum* constitutes or determines a person’s personality and character (Danquah 1968) etc.
2. Personality involves such characteristics as courage, thoughts, feelings, actions, etc.
3. Such qualities as (courage, jealousy, gentleness, forcefulness) are psychological, not sensible. Therefore,
4. If *sunsum* is what constitutes an individual’s personality, it cannot be a physical thing.<sup>9</sup>

The above argument is rightly attributable to Gyekye.<sup>10</sup> The puzzle, then, is how Gbadegesin could maintain at the same time that Gyekye manages to construct only the conditional statement to set aside Danquah’s thesis that the *sunsum* is physical. Indeed, Gbadegesin would not

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have been wrong at all if he had claimed that Gyekye's arguments were not convincing as he (Gbadegesin) sometimes attempts to show.<sup>11</sup> But a clear case of inconsistency arises when one suggests the absence of argumentation, only to turn around and purport to analyze the argument which supposedly did not exist.

It must be noted that Gbadegesin's apparent defense of Danquah is not an indication that he submits in every detail to the ideas held by Wiredu and Danquah concerning the Akan person. He appears rather to have problems with Gyekye's approach to the issue of *sunsum*. With regard to their individual cultures, Wiredu and Gbadegesin do not also seem to interpret the immaterial part of the person the same way. For instance, while the two might agree on the rejection of the total spirituality of some constituents of the human person, it cannot be inferred from this that Gbadegesin would necessarily accept Wiredu's view that the life-giving entity – in Yoruba, *emi* – is quasi-physical.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Gbadegesin's idea that certain parts of the body (such as the head and the heart) could form spiritual components of the person would be objectionable to Wiredu. For, Wiredu does not believe in the spirituality of any aspect of the person anyway. The difficulty with which a quasi-physicalist would conceive of anything 'spiritual' in African thought even made Safro Kwame, a quasi-physicalist, to suggest that 'traditional healers' be relieved of contradiction by

barring them from using material objects in their healing activities.<sup>13</sup>

### **Dualism and Destiny**

The belief in African thought in the duality of persons – that is, the physicality and non-physicality of aspects of persons – makes possible belief in such African concepts as destiny and survival of ‘persons’ (that is, their souls). This is due to the belief that the non-physical entity which alone is believed to be capable of existing independently of the body is the subject or basis of these beliefs. Some clarification, though, would have to be made at this stage about the concept of destiny in Yoruba and Akan belief systems. For this purpose and for their dualistic stands, Gbadegesin and Gyekye are accordingly discussed below.

Destiny, in the words of Gbadegesin, is ‘the preordained set of outcomes of life, wound and sealed up in the *ori*’.<sup>14</sup> By its literal translation, *ori* means ‘head’ and, as such, the nature of a person’s destiny is traced by the Yoruba to the head (as in some ‘inner head’). On the contrary, in the Akan culture, *ti* (head) is not associated directly with destiny but with luck.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, the Akan would say:

*Ti bɔne* – (bad luck)

*Woti yɛ* – (you are lucky)

*Woti nyɛ* – (you are not lucky)

Both Yoruba and Akan philosophies seem to share a

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belief in the existence of an immortal soul. By ‘soul’ I imply Gbadegesin’s later translation of *emi* and Gyekye’s understanding of *okra*. However, there are significant variations in their conceptions of the soul, and how it relates to human destiny. First, while in Akan thought, *okra* and *honam* (the body) are complete creations of *Onyankopon* (God), Gbadegesin claims that *Olodumare* (God) created only the *emi* but not *ara* (the body) which was made by some mythical figure called *Obatala*.<sup>16</sup> In another publication, he gives the mythical figure’s name as *Orisa-nla*.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, in Akan thought, *nkrabea* (destiny) is borne by the *okra* which also bears life; but in Yoruba, Gbadegesin suggests, destiny is not borne by the bearer of life *emi* but by *ori* (the ‘inner head’).<sup>18</sup> In spite of this, it is held by both Gyekye and Gbadegesin that destiny has real effect on the life of each person.

The tendency for belief in destiny to be taken to imply a lack of human freedom or the presence of determinism in African philosophy, and the attempt to avoid this implication has made some to propose that African destiny is alterable.<sup>19</sup> However, both Gyekye and Gbadegesin affirm the unalterability of destiny – but for different reasons. For Gyekye, it is not alterable because a destiny given by God cannot change<sup>20</sup> and, for Gbadegesin, there cannot be any real freedom in the concept of destiny itself.<sup>21</sup> In a deeper sense, I must add, Gbadegesin expresses concerns about Gyekye’s

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exposition of destiny, especially in relation to the concept of evil in African thought. Pondering over the dilemma of the possible presence of evil in the lives of people who supposedly must have good destinies, Gbadegesin writes:

The Akan view, as interpreted by Kwame Gyekye, avoids this dilemma. For according to that view, God imposes destiny, and it is always good. The occurrence of evil in the world is then attributed to the existence of wicked people. However, as I have argued in *African Philosophy*, the problem here is that the three theses by Gyekye cannot be consistently maintained. The three theses are: God imposes destiny; destiny is always good; destiny is unalterable. If we add to these theses the obvious fact that there is evil in the Akan community – people die prematurely; natural disasters are real forces that the people contend with – then it becomes clear that one of the three theses must be false. Gyekye admits that the path of a person may be ‘strewn with failures, either because of his or her own actions, desires, decisions, and intentions or because of the activities of some supposed evil forces’. If these evil



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forces are human, then their own apportioned destiny must be bad, which means there is bad destiny. Or if they originally have good destiny, which was changed, then it means that destiny is alterable. If they are natural forces, then again, there is bad destiny.<sup>22</sup>

Even though I do not dispute the logic in Gbadegesin's reasoning, I think his argument would have been more solid if he had taken certain remarks made by Gyekye into account. Indeed as he (Gbadegesin) argues, a contradiction would result anytime one introduces the statement,

‘there is evil in the community’

to the statements,

‘God imposes destiny’

‘destiny is always good’

‘destiny is unalterable’

But, his idea that the presence of failure-inducing forces in the Akan community leads either to the belief in bad destiny or alterable destiny may be wrong. He seems to be going by the normal meaning of destiny given by him and which I mentioned earlier on. Along with that conception comes the usual supposition that destiny encompasses every aspect a person's life. But, in Akan philosophy, this supposition is not necessarily true. Indeed, Gyekye makes this point in the same chapter on which Gbadegesin's critique is based.<sup>23</sup>

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According to Gyekye, Akan destiny (*nkrabea* or *hyεbre*) does not cover all actions taken by a person nor does it include all events in the life of a person. To quote him, ‘not everything that a person does or that happens to him or her represents a page from the “book of destiny”’.<sup>24</sup> Akan destiny only amounts to the determination of ‘the broad outlines of an individual’s mundane life, not the specific details’.<sup>25</sup> Such general areas include occupation and the ‘manner’, ‘place’ and ‘time’ of death of the individual.<sup>26</sup> It follows that in many areas of life, a human being is conceptually free to act and be acted upon or against. Contrary to Gbadegesin’s argument, therefore, if human evil forces (such as witches) cause a person to fail in something, it does not necessarily suggest that the witch or the person has bad destiny. For, the specific activity of life in which the person was made to fail might not be determinable. In this case, secondly, the question of alterability of destiny does not arise because that which is not determined has no place in the destiny of a person, let alone becoming a ground for any talk of alterable destiny.

There are still problems, though, with the Akan belief in the goodness of destiny and the fact that some supposedly determined areas of life do not seem good after all. An example of the latter is the point raised by Gbadegesin about people who through no fault of theirs perish in natural disasters – such as floods and earthquakes.<sup>27</sup> The manner and place of death, as

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Gyekye notes, form part of a person's destiny. And, for anyone who regards death through earthquakes as evil, the question he or she would raise is how the destiny of the victim could still be called good. It would thus appear that there is not always good destiny in the Akan culture. Although this is a fair point to make, Akan philosophy suggests possible ways in which the difficulty could be resolved. One such way is the belief that people who die through accidents and natural disasters (and thus have suffered *atɔfowuo*) do not only have their lives shortened, but also their destinies unfulfilled. Consequently, some Akans believe, such victims are reborn elsewhere so that they would have the opportunity to go through a 'normal' process of death.

Gyekye argues that neither oneself nor any other person knows or could know one's destiny.<sup>28</sup> Akan thinkers, according to him, hold that only *Onyankopɔn* knows the destiny of a person. But, I think, there is also talk in the Akan culture to the contrary. It is suggested sometimes that diviners could lead one to some knowledge of one's destiny. In this regard, someone who is about to consult a diviner may say: *me'kɔhwe mehyɛbrɛ mu* (literally, 'I am going to investigate or look into my destiny'). Usually, such a statement is made by a person when he or she is going through a difficult life or suspects that some force might be behind his or her misfortunes. But as a result of the fundamental belief in the goodness of *nkrabea* (or *hyɛbrɛ*), as already observed

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by Gyekye, the look into one's destiny is done in order to take care of any obstacles that might be hindering the manifestation of one's *nkrabea*.

It might be supposed that since the obstacles to be identified by the diviner are different from *nkrabea* itself, Gyekye's argument that only God can know a person's *nkrabea* is right. For, it would then be thought that the diviner can only know the obstacles but not destiny. But, this is not entirely correct. There seems to be the belief in Akan culture that destiny, good destiny, is not given a person without some accompanied natural tool to aid him or her in life. Thus, the natural tool and its expected output are given concurrently. Consequently, what a person will become in life and the best possible means to become it constitute part of that person's destiny. Even within the broad sense or areas of life which Akan destiny is said to constitute, the question of whether one achieves some relative success in life or not is sometimes portrayed as contingent on one's capacity to identify and harness one's God-given talent or occupation. Human capacities, it is often suggested, differ. This is evident in the Akan saying *nipa nyinaa nse* (humans are not the same) or *nsatiaa nyinaa nye pe* (the fingers are not of equal height/length). In Gyekye's view:

...by stressing the uniqueness and individuality of people, the Akan concept of destiny implies that each individual is

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naturally fitted for a particular sphere of action, and that he or she has capacities and aptitudes for the activities of that sphere. This means that while one does not have a capacity or talent for every conceivable or desirable pursuit, one certainly has capacities for particular pursuits or endeavors ... [Therefore] a series of failures would suggest that he or she might be in the wrong sphere of action and that those talents are therefore misplaced and are consequently being denied the opportunity for their full exercise.<sup>29</sup>

This position of Gyekye's yields interesting implications for our attempts at establishing the possibility of knowing human destiny (by humans) besides the Supreme Being. The implication of the above quotation is that a person who fails to identify and utilize his or her destined talents will most likely not succeed in life, or realize his or her destiny; but will rather experience 'series of failures'. However, since one might seek the help of the diviner to identify the talents, endeavors or pursuits specific to oneself, the logical problem that arises is how the diviner can be entrusted with the giving of direction if he is not presumed to be capable of knowing what talents or pursuits one is cut out for. The belief, therefore, that diviners can give direction and spiritually fortify individuals to succeed in their destined

pursuits suggest that diviners can know or access (significant portions of) the destiny of a person.

### **Quasi-Physicalism and Destiny**

Although Kwasi Wiredu argues that there is, at least, some other entity beside the material body, we have not discussed his views on destiny under the previous section because he does not necessarily fit into our category of a dualist. A dualist is someone who, at least as is normally described of Plato and Descartes, postulates a spiritual component in addition to the bodily criterion of personal identity. Aspects of Gbadegesin's arguments have been discussed in the previous section because of their relevance to dualism. For instance, in some of his writings, he suggests that the bearer of destiny, the *emi*, translates as the soul.

That which Wiredu regards as the bearer of destiny in Akan thought is similar to what Gyekye calls the *ɔkra*. However, unlike Gyekye, Wiredu disputes the reference to the *ɔkra* as the Akan equivalent of the soul. Indeed, he thinks the soul and *ɔkra* are significantly different. For instance, unlike the Platonic soul which is a 'purely immaterial entity', the *ɔkra* is not 'fully subject to spatial constraints'.<sup>30</sup> Another point is that the Platonic soul is considered in Western thought to be the same as the mind; but in the Akan language, according to Wiredu, *ɔkra* is not the mind. The mind is *adwene*.<sup>31</sup> The right description of the nature of *ɔkra*, then, in his view,

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is that it is a quasi-physical entity. Wiredu's thesis, therefore, is referred to as quasi-physicalism. In spite of his rejection of the spirituality of *ɔkra*, Wiredu still regards it as immortal and, most importantly, as the bearer of human destiny.<sup>32</sup> The *ɔkra* and the body (*honam* or *nipadua*) are according to him made by God; so he would confirm a distinction between the Akan and Yoruba conceptions regarding the bringing into being of the human person. The Yoruba 'body', as we have already noted, is made not by God (*Olodumare*).

In a more general discussion of the concept of destiny in the African context, Wiredu draws a distinction between two conceptions of destiny: the cosmological and the pragmatic.<sup>33</sup> In terms of the former, the world and everything it contains are conceived of as determined. Wiredu admits that this, in some sense, may not be that injurious to the notion of human free will because it is part of cosmological predestination that certain actions must lead to certain results. Consequently, a person might be said to be free in deciding which actions to take, knowing the effects he or she prefers to see. Regarding pragmatic predestination, Wiredu suggests that even though 'predestining the future of a human subject may be prejudicial to his or her "free will"', it is not illogical for the person to aspire to a different life (apparently, a better life) 'by dint of hard work and judicious thinking'. Thus, Wiredu observes:

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... this may be the sense of destiny that is operative in the thinking of those Africans who insist that personal effort of the right kind is necessary for the realization of a good destiny, notwithstanding postulating the cosmological (and unalterable) predestining of everything.<sup>34</sup>

Wiredu's analysis underscores the point that in African thought, both determinism and free will are held in some form. The reasonability of the claims for both concepts would, nonetheless, differ from culture to culture or in terms of argumentation or even the non-existence of argument in some cultures. When Wiredu's argument is considered within the Akan framework, however, we realize some similarity between it and our earlier point that destiny, or good destiny, does not go without its specifically required 'personal effort'. Even though a person might generally have a good destiny, his or her ability to realize it and the rate of its achievement would depend not just on the capacity of the person to achieve it – for, there will be no fairness if such a capacity was not inherent in the person – but also on the degree of exploitation of that capacity. This means interestingly that, first, the Akan perspective of destiny conceives of goodness to be in degrees; and secondly, a person can conceivably fail to realize some portion of his or her destiny.

Let me explain: given the belief in the goodness



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of destiny, each individual is potentially a good or important member of the Akan community. But, ‘becoming important in the community’, for example, is too general to constitute the specific destiny of any individual. Thus, to give meaning to the idea that distinct individuals have distinct destinies, we need to step down the notion of generality to the level that a person might be destined for a certain area of human pursuit even if not every action he or she takes in life is determined. This sense of generality is consistent with the aspect of Akan destiny in which a person’s attainment of good life is seen in the light of his or her relative perfection in a specific, predestined area of socially-cherished life. [It is not the aim of this paper to investigate whether the person must attain riches and how, if he or she does, the riches must be used.] Now, this sort of destiny is still but less general, as the person might thus be deemed destined to become, say, a reputable thinker, good traditional leader, or successful farmer. The generality of these destined occupations lies in the possibility that the person’s talents or competences may cover only specific sub-areas of the named occupations.

In any of the named destined pursuits, however, certain attributes (such as hard work, discipline and professional skill) are required of the person for success. And, since a person cannot easily tell which of these he or she is to be, the skill or talent inherent in (or, if fortunate enough, already exhibited by) that person is

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most of the time a pointer to where the person's destined good life lies. Even when the talent is latent, its proper identification is still important to the realization of destiny because of the belief that a good God will not give destiny to a person without the means to realize it. In Akan thought, it is also held that God is caring. For instance, in the maxim *Onyame a ɔbɔɔ 'nifrani no, ɔno ara na ɔbɔɔ nea okuta nepoma* (The God who made the blind man/woman is also the one who made the person who holds the blind man/woman's walking stick), it is not suggested that God made the person blind, although he or she, being human, is a creation of God. Yet God made another human being and a tool (walking stick) to help the blind person move around. It would therefore be odd for a people who believe in such a caring God to contend that God would endow someone with a destiny without Him providing that person with the requisite tool for the realization of the destiny.

But this is where the questions of degree and failure of aspects of destiny come in. It is quite true that having a means to do something does not amount to the actual doing of the thing, nor does it guarantee that the thing will ever be done successfully. So, even when one is aware that one's having of good life depends on the means with which one is equipped, one may feel indifferent or behave in ways that incommode the realization of that good life. It is in this light that many people in the Akan community who supposedly have

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good destinies may not be living well. It is for these same reasons also that a diviner's direction as to which path a person is to follow may not yield the expected outcome in the life of the latter. It follows from this that a person may not realize some aspects of his or her destiny. And, this is not necessarily because the person's destiny is changed, but it is as a result of the person's own character and preferences. Notably, also, it might be because of 'the activities of evil forces' as Gyekye mentions.<sup>35</sup> But this will not necessarily make a case for Gbadegesin who is tempted to argue that there is bad destiny in the Akan culture.<sup>36</sup> Gbadegesin had suggested earlier on that if the evil forces are human, then, their destinies must be bad. However, it is not held in Akan thought that human evil forces – such as witches and sorcerers – are destined to engaged in the evil activities they are associated with. On the contrary, they are believed to engage in them either from their own free will or some form of compulsion sometimes accompanying the evil spirits (*sunsum bɔne*) which are either with or in them. Such evil spirits are not believed to be given to them by God, but are either consciously acquired by the individuals themselves or deliberately transferred to them by some others who already have those spirits.

### **Conclusion**

Our discussion of the concept of a person in African philosophy has been carried out from the points of view of Wiredu, Gyekye and Gbadegesin. In this direction, only their respective views on the ontological sense of 'person' as conceived in Akan and Yoruba thoughts are examined. In terms of constitution, it has been realized that both cultures regard a person in more than bodily terms, suggesting consequently that the non-bodily part existed before the birth of the person and is capable of living independently after the perishing of the body. This part is also that which takes the individual's destiny in its pre-earthly existence and continues to bear it during the individual's life on earth. The crucial question of alterability or not of destiny has also been closely looked into, suggesting ultimately that destiny is not regarded especially in Akan thought as alterable. The paper establishes that Akan destiny (*nkrabea*) does not only smack of a case of degree (in terms of realization of some of its aspects), but also that it admits of the possibility of non-realization of destiny. *Nkrabea*, in this very sense, could thus be understood in respect of potentiality than unavoidable outcomes.

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## Notes:

1. The Akan position which is about to be explained in detail is found in Wiredu (1983) and Gyekye (1995).
2. 2004: 53.
3. 2002: 178.
4. 1983:119.
5. Ibid: 119f.
6. Danquah 1968: 115.
7. 1995: 94.
8. 2002: 184. The said conditional statement is Gyekye's remark that if *sunsum* is 'something physical and material, then [it] perishes along with the body'.
9. Gbadegesin 2002: 184.
10. Gyekye 1995: chapter 6.
11. This point is also made in H. M. Majeed (2012: chapter 6).
12. Wiredu 1983: 119.
13. S. Kwame 2002:348. A full discussion of quasi-materialism itself is carried out in (Majeed 2012).
14. 2004: 53. I must caution that the meaning of *ori* is a subject of contention in Yoruba philosophy. For instance, Adeofe Leke (2004: 69-70) describes it as 'non-corporeal', not partly physical and partly non-physical as claimed by Gbadegesin above.

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15. Gyekye 1995:100 identifies the brain which is in the *ti* as the possible location of the soul.
16. 2004: 53.
17. 2002: 178.
18. 2004: 53.
19. Gyekye cites Sarpong ‘Aspects of Akan Ethics’ in *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* Vol. IV, No. 3, Dec. 1972: 42.
20. Gyekye 1995:116.
21. 2004: 56-7.
22. Ibid: 61.
23. Gyekye 1995: chapter 7.
24. Ibid: 115.
25. Ibid: 114.
26. Ibid: 115.
27. 2004: 60.
28. Gyekye 1995:117.
29. Ibid: 119, my square brackets.
30. Wiredu 1983: 119.
31. Ibid: 120.
32. Ibid.
33. See the chapter ‘Free Will’ in his 1994.
34. Ibid
35. Gyekye 1995: 116.
36. Gbadegesin, 2004: 61.

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