

**SIN, PUNISHMENT AND FORGIVENESS IN ANCIENT
GREEK RELIGION: A YORUBA ASSESSMENT**

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks in particular at the special sin of hubris in ancient Greek religious thought. It examines what constitutes hubris and some cases in which hubris has been committed and punished. It demonstrates with examples that hubris is an unforgivable sin in ancient Greek religion and examines the reasons for this concept.

Finally, the paper interprets the operation of hubris in Greek religion from the Yoruba concept of sin (ẹ̀ṣẹ) and its attendant punishment. It concludes that whereas in Greek society the operation of hubris gives the signal that human beings are always plagued with the sense of being victims, in the Yoruba case, sin, punishment and forgiveness have humanistic principles that allow space for choices. The blending of the two concepts however can help in limiting man's depravity and help man to govern himself.

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greeks believed that their lives were gov-

erned by powers beyond their control. Greek mythology ó which is a rich, diverse, and complex blending of religious symbols, national legend, and folk tale ó is the embodiment of the Greek faith and worship. Faith in such powers was not just one facet of life; it was embedded in society and daily existence to such an extent that the Greeks did not even have a word for religion. Commenting on how much religion was an integrated part of the life of the ancient Greek, Garland says:

í we should note that the Greeks, who had a word for most things, didn't have a word for "religion." So the phenomenon is something that the Greeks would have had difficulty in identifying as a distinctive aspect of their lives¹.

The objects of worship for the ancient Greeks were the gods who, though blessed with immortality and gifted with super human strength and wisdom, were unashamedly human in their conducts, since they were after all, first and foremost the ancestors of the human race. Classical mythology is abundant in portraying the treacherous and destructive activities for which Greek deities are so well known.

The world as perceived in Greek ancient religion was an uncomfortable one in which the gods were generally indifferent to human predicament or hostile or vindictive towards mortals. The viciousness of the action of the gods abounds also in Homer. An example were the vicious acts of Poseidon in an attempt to destroy Odysseus on his journey back to Ithaca his homeland from Troy after the war.² Also, Achilles, moved by the spectacle of his broken enemy, King Priam, who pleads for the battered corpse of his son, Hector, blames the gods for man's predicament:

For so the gods have spun the thread of pitiful humanity, that the life of man should be sorrow, while themselves are

exempt from care³.

This sentiment that the gods are indifferent to human welfare, which is a persistent motif in Greek ancient religion, explains how the Greeks conceived of an unforgivable sin ó *hubris*.

HUBRIS AND PUNISHMENT

The Greek word *harmatia*, often translated as ósinö, really meant öfailureö, öfaultö, or öerror of judgementö. In ancient Greek thought, the word ósinö could only be appraised in the context of very serious offences against the divine, which constitute *hubris*. This is arrogance in word or deed or even thought. *Hubris* is generated by *koros* – the complacency of the man who has done too well. *Hubris* is a primal evil: the type of evil within man, which drives him to violate the rights of others, especially the gods, and so it is the sin whose punishment is death⁴. Thus Greek poets warn that it is dangerous to be happy while alive⁵. The sin of *hubris* is the capital sin of self-assertion, punished inexorably by the stern and awful judge typified by Zeus of Greek mythology, who grudges his children their heartsö desires. *Hubris* invites *nemesis*, which is divine punishment. This theme runs through many of the great Greek myths, perhaps because the striving to achieve heroic fame almost inevitably leads to *hubris* and hence to *nemesis*⁶.

The origin of sin in Greek thought is established by Hesiod in two etiological myths which explain how the world became degenerate and evil. He presents the story of öPandoraö to explain the appearance of the external *kakon* (Greek, evil) and the öFive Ages of Manö to explain the appearance of *hubris* (Greek, arrogance), moral evil⁷.

In the öFive Ages of Manö, Hesiod presents a gradual decline in nature and in man from an earthly utopia of the Golden Age to the degeneration and decay of his time. *Hubris* (internal, moral evil which results in someone enforc-

ing his own right through arrogant, haughty behaviour at the expense of a god or fellow-man) was already fully present in the second age ó the Age of Silver. The Age of Silver was already permeated with moral evil, which led to misconduct, through which men criminally destroyed one another. The wars of the Bronze Age, (the third age), and the family feuds of the Iron Age (the fifth age), represent merely a further extension of the same basic pollution.

The Bronze Age is marked by the injustice which divided families and which caused Modesty (*Aidos*) and Indignation at unlawful behaviour (*Nemesis*) to flee. *Aidos* denotes respect for gods, rulers and parents as well as for laws of hospitality, marriage and family, the state and laws of the state. It is a quality that denotes the feeling of respect or reverence which restrains men from behaving incorrectly. *Nemesis* is the feeling of indignation aroused by observing a misdeed. These goddesses thus personify two aspects of moral self-control which can prevent man from committing sin. The former restrains someone from immoral behaviour; the latter represents the moral indignation which a community experiences when observing injustice. The departure of the two goddesses is a sign of the end of moral consciousness in Hesiod's world.

In Greek mythology the sinners who were allotted the worst punishments were those who directly challenged the power of the gods. These ones were even punished in death in Hades (the underworld) in a special place, a deep gulf called Tartarus. One such sinner in Tartarus was Tantalus, who tested the gods' omniscience by serving up the cooked flesh of his son to them at a banquet. As punishment he was afflicted by hunger and thirst in the midst of plenty. Homer thus describes Tantalus in Hades:

And I saw Tantalus too, bearing endless torture.
He stood erect in a pool as the water lapped
his chin ó parched, he tried to drink, but he

could not reach the surface, no, time and again the old man stooped, craving a sip, time and again the water vanished, swallowed down, laying bare the caked black earth at his feet ó some spirit drank it dry. And over his head leafy trees dangled their fruit from high aloft, pomegranates and pears, and apples glowing red, succulent figs and olives swelling sleek and dark, but as soon as the old man would strain to clutch them fast a gust would toss them up to the lowering dark clouds⁸.

The daughters of king Danaus, the Danaids, who were husband-killers, served their own punishment by pouring water into a leaky jar. In Hades, the giant Tityus, who tried to rape Leto (the mother of Apollo), was tied to the ground while vultures fed on his liver. And Sisyphus ó the trickster who chained Death up in a dungeon, so that mortals ceased to die and even cheated death by living twice ó was made to push a huge stone up a steep hill, a stone that every time it neared the summit rolled down again.

A second set of mortals who invited the punishment of the gods in Greek mythology were those who were punished for boasting. An example is the Lydian queen Niobe, who boasted that her twelve sons and daughters were superior to Leto's children, Apollo and Diana (Greek Artemis). For this Niobe was punished with the death of all her children, who were killed by the arrows of the angry god and goddess. The bereaved Niobe kept weeping until she turned to stone⁹. Andromeda was also doomed to punishment, for her mother Cassiopeia had foolishly boasted that Andromeda was more beautiful than the sea nymphs. And so she offended Poseidon who sent a flood and a sea-monster to ravage the shores. So her father the king and her mother the queen were forced to give up Andromeda as a sacrifice to appease the sea god. The hero Perseus, who, while flying

over the coast of Libya, saw the beautiful princess, Andromeda, chained to a rock and menaced by a sea-monster, flew down, slew the monster, rescued the princess and married her¹⁰. Another case in point is Antigone daughter of Laomedon who had boasted of having hair more beautiful than Hera's. Hera turned her locks into serpents. And when the women of Astypalaea proclaimed that their beauty was above Aphrodite's, the goddess caused them to grow cow-horns.

Similarly, Cinyras, king of Cyprus, having boasted about his daughter's beauty, was punished for his act of *hubris*. As punishment, his daughter, Myrrha, was seized by an incestuous desire for her father and with the help of her nurse, she smuggled herself in disguise into his bed. When Cinyras discovered the trick, he tried to kill her, but some friendly deity saved the pregnant Myrrha by transforming her into a myrrh tree; her tears became myrrh, and Adonis was miraculously born from the trunk of the tree:

The child conceived in sin had grown
inside the wood and now was searching
for some way to leave its mother and
thrust forth. The trunk swelled in the
middle with its burdened womb¹¹.

Ovid suggests that Myrrha's incestuous passion was caused by the wrath of Aphrodite.¹²

In another category were those who were punished for challenging the gods by claiming superior skills. One such is Arachne, who claimed to be a better weaver than Athena. The goddess turned her into a spider, to continue spinning and weaving webs in that form.¹³

It was indeed a taboo to brag or boast before the gods either by deed or utterance. Aias, the leader of the Lokrian contingent to Troy and one of the heroes, was rescued by Poseidon from a shipwreck when he set off homeward. But he later boasted that he had escaped by his own effort alone.

Consequently, Poseidon smashed the rock on which he was standing, and got him drowned.

There were others who were punished for offending the gods even accidentally or unknowingly. Actaeon, for instance, while hunting, accidentally stumbled into a glade where Diana and her nymphs were bathing; the offended goddesses turned him into a stag, and he was hunted down and torn to pieces by his own hounds.¹⁴ Teiresias the great, famous Theban seer of Greek tragedy was another who was punished for tactlessness. Teiresias had been both male and female in the course of his life. He was called upon by Zeus and Hera to settle an argument about which sex got greater pleasure from the sexual act. Teiresias replied it was the woman and Hera promptly struck him with blindness. However, Zeus gave him the gift of prophesy as compensation¹⁵. Ixion, King of Lapithae, when invited to dine with the gods, had merely turned his eyes towards Hera, only to be inflamed with irresistible desire. In his madness he even embraced a cloud which Zeus had shaped to resemble Hera. Ixion was chastised for his insolence; he was bound to a fiery wheel which whirled perpetually through the sky¹⁶.

Others were punished for attempting – literally – to rise above their stations in life. One of such was Bellorophon of Corinth, who rode on the winged horse Pegasus and achieved many heroic deeds, including the killing of the monster Chimaera. Then out of overweening pride, he attempted to fly to Olympus (the abode of the gods) on Pegasus' back; but Zeus sent a gadfly to sting the horse, which bucked and threw him to earth, leaving him a crippled outcast.

Icarus was also punished for flying too high. Icarus was the son of Daedalus, who built the labyrinth for King Minos. King Minos imprisoned both Daedalus and Icarus inside the labyrinth, so that they would not be able to reveal the secret of the maze. Daedalus made wings for himself and

his son out of feathers layered and fastened with wax, and so flew out of Crete. Daedalus made it to Sicily, but young Icarus in his exhilaration flew too high. The sun melted the wax of his wings, and he plunged into the sea.¹⁷ Icarus, in ignoring his father's warning not to fly too high, had his wings melted. This precipitated his lethal fall into the sea, which exemplifies a classic example of divine punishment for *hubris*. Miles explains that such myths of heroic flights and falls epitomise the Greek conviction that human beings should keep their feet on the ground and avoid challenging the gods¹⁸. The tale of Icarus can be seen, moreover, as a cautionary one about human beings foolishly trespassing into the gods' realms. This myth is an example of the fulfilment of a human wish in which an adventuresome youth soars through the heavens like Zeus' eagle. It is also a tale of the inevitable consequences when religious and societal laws are broken. Harris and Platzner analyse it thus:

The myth of Icarus combines a form of Freudian wish fulfillment with an archetypal situation in which the human desire to experience near-absolute freedom overpowers even the instinct toward self-preservation¹⁹.

Greek poets describe *hubris* as the kind of excessive pride that blinds the tragic hero to his own limitations, and that leads him to offend the gods and initiate the hero's downfall. In their punishment the heroes experience suffering and the pain take them beyond the barriers of habit, convention and comfortable illusion.

This experience of punishment is needed to ascertain the measure of their heroism. Thus one hears the chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, 'Man must suffer to be wise', and the chorus to Teiresias of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, 'To be wise is to suffer'. Aeschylus opines that the punishment for *hubris* is earned and deserved because the prosperous are so

easily led to commit wicked acts by their prosperity, success and pride:

A man thought the gods deigned not to punish mortals who trampled down the delicacy of things inviolable. That man was wicked. The curse in great daring shines clear; it wrings atonement from those high hearts that drive to evil, from houses blossoming to pride and peril²⁰.

It is this type of pride that stems from prosperity and success that Agamemnon exhibits in stepping upon the crimson carpet laid for him by Clytemnestra as he arrives from the Trojan War. To Grant, ðAgamemnon is acutely aware of the danger when the grandiose carpet is laid for him to tread on: he knows the risk of destruction, yet he is infected and succumbs²¹. Agamemnon falls into this crime probably because of his success in prosecuting the Trojan War. He has succeeded in sacking Troy, in giving Helen back to her rightful husband, Menelaus, and he is back safely in his own palace with Cassandra among the booties of war. In *Aeschylus*, Agamemnon's arrival in his chariots reflects his conceited pride. Moreover he steps on the crimson tapestry, an honour meant for the gods only, and the kind of act associated with Persian tyrants - who were consequently destroyed by the Greeks. By so doing, Agamemnon has considered himself equal to the divine, and at least by intent, has manifested a kind of *hubris* for which he must be punished.

Sophocles' Oedipus, in the well-known *Oedipus Rex*, is also considered guilty as he shows ðfits of *hubris* in over-confident, rash handling²² of the situation and in his insistence on unravelling the mystery attached to the murder of King Laius. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Aphrodite punishes Hippolytus for despising her as a deity and for preferring only Artemis. Aphrodite's explanation in destroying Hip-

polytus is not because of his devotion to Artemis but because those whose pride is stiff-necked against me I lay by the heels²³. Hippolytus pays for his singleness and one-sidedness in utterly denying Aphrodite. In this he is very similar to Glaucus in Greek mythology, who despised Aphrodite's powers and would not allow his mares to breed. Aphrodite caused his mares to bolt and throw him from his chariot during a race, after which they ate him. Hippolytus also recalls the suppliants of Aeschylus. To Aeschylus, the law of Zeus does not tolerate partial adherence and Euripides echoes here that there are laws of nature that demand obedience as well as laws of morality. In going against any of the laws, a person commits *hubris*. To Aeschylus the earlier poet, and to Euripides in this instance, both Aphrodite and Artemis are complementary forces that must be revered, and in Greek thought there would not have been any inconsistency in worshipping both a goddess who embodied sexual abstinence and one who embodied carnal desire. Denying either of them is definitely *hubris*.

Greek religion apparently does not offer any forgiveness for the sin of *hubris*. It is also a sin that cannot go unpunished: A sinful act or hubristic act, even when committed unconsciously taints and must be expiated. Revenge may not come at once, but it will come.²⁴ Many passages in ancient Greek literature also express the belief that *hubris* is a sin for which the gods must exact the price. One such passage is found in Euripides:

The gods are Crafty: they lie in ambush
A long step of time to hunt the unholy.²⁵

Certainly the Greek gods are capricious. They are jealous for their rights and closely control men and events. But men still have room to manoeuvre, for example, Zeus warned that Aegisthus should not take Clytemnestra the wife of Agamenon. Yet, he went ahead and committed adultery

with Clytemnestra and even collaborated with her in killing Agamemnon²⁶. Both Aeschylus in the *ōEumenidesō* and Euripides in the *ōHippolytusō* have demonstrated that man must make conscious efforts to revere the gods. And as Haemon says to Creon, man must apply the divine attributes such as reason, which the gods have bestowed on man to have a comprehensive attitude of reverence to the gods:

Father, the gods implanted reason in men,
the highest of all things that we call our own²⁷.

However, an examination of the available Greek literature shows that the space given to man by the gods to decide one way or another is a very limited one. Aeschylus presents the gods as putting the opportunity to sin before men,²⁸ and if they give way and commit the first sin²⁹ they are helped to their ruin³⁰. It is also possible that the similarity of the gods' appearance to that of mortals confused the ancient Greeks who failed to realize that the resemblance between god and mortal was superficial and the difference in power and intelligence insuperable³¹.

Greek literature also reveals the reason why the gods do not forgive *hubris*. Calypso describes the gods as being jealous of prosperous men.³² Aeschylus also expresses this idea as an ancient and venerable doctrine³³. In Herodotus, Solon, who was celebrated for his wisdom, tells Croesus, king of Lydia, that the gods are envious of human happiness³⁴. Grant, commenting on the idea of jealousy of the gods or divine envy, offers this analysis:

But it was amid the politico-religious anxieties of the post-Homeric age, with its deepening sense of human helplessness, that the jealousy of the gods (later denied by Plato) had become an ever-present oppressive threat. Pindar's ethical system is founded upon it, and the gods of Herodotus are often jealous and disagreeable. Among these

profound mistrusts, creating so great a gulf between gods and men, the heroic self-assertive virtues sometimes seemed hazardous and leading to *hubris*.³⁵

Another way of understanding Greek religion in respect to *hubris* and punishment is through an examination of the Greek concept of justice and punishment. The ancient Greeks believed in the principles of divine justice and punishment as instruments of Zeus. Zeus's justice is called *dike*, which is regarded as the order of the universe. And Zeus's justice can be dispensed on his behalf by other subordinate gods as well as men, for Zeus is believed to be the one who is willing and unwilling.³⁶ The conflict presented in Aeschylus's *Eumenides* clearly demonstrates this paradoxical aspect of Zeus. In this last play of the *Oresteia*, the conflict arises out of the necessity to maintain *dike* (Justice) which the Erinyes execute on behalf of Zeus and the need to find a balance so that the very foundations of social order is not challenged with impunity.

The conflict is between Apollo, who has instructed Orestes to kill his mother, Clytemnestra, in order to avenge the murder of his own father (i.e. Orestes's father, Agamemnon) whom Clytemnestra has killed, and the Erinyes, who are bent on punishing Orestes for his mother's murder.

The bitter conflict is referred to Athena who in turn refers it to a jury of eleven of the wisest Athenians and herself. One would expect that the verdict would be overwhelmingly in favour of Apollo who emphasises that all the responses he has given to men, including the command he gave to Orestes, have come from Zeus,³⁷ but surprisingly the votes are equally shared between Apollo and the Erinyes.

The conflict is only resolved when Athena is able to find the balance in placating the Furies. Athena also claims that she speaks for Zeus from whom her wisdom comes and

ascribes the victory in placating the Erinyes to Zeus. Athena agrees with the Erinyes' plea that fear of the certain punishment which they bring upon the guilty ones must not be removed although she does not approve of the method used by the Erinyes.³⁸ In the acquittal of Orestes and the placation of the Erinyes therefore, wrath, as a means of *dike*, gives place to reason:

Zeus has moved forward from violence and confusion, in which the Erinyes were his unquestioning agents, to arbitrary interference, which angered the Erinyes, and from that to reason and mercy, which angers them still more! It is in this final conciliation that Zeus becomes truly *Teleios*. It remains for men to revere and dread his agents and allies, not now the black-robed Erinyes but the red-robed Eumenides³⁹.

Zeus' or divine justice and punishment can be provoked in many different ways and manners, one of which is boasting and arrogance (*hubris*). Others include committing any form of murder, lying to the gods, competing with the gods in any way, and so on. Jones explains the belief of the Greeks in divine justice and punishment as a result of:

The deepened awareness of human insecurity and helplessness (*amaechania*) which has its religious correlate in the feeling of divine hostility - not in the sense that deity is thought of as evil, but in the sense that an over-mastering power and wisdom forever hold man down, keeping him from rising above his station.⁴⁰

He further interprets the Greek concept of justice and punishment in terms of divine *phthonos* (hostility), which he

equates with the belief that too much of any success incurs a supernatural danger, especially if one brags about it. This is a notion which he says appears in many different cultures and has deep roots in human nature⁴¹. This idea of divine *phthonos* is not expressed in the *Iliad* but is apparent in the *Odyssey*, and it became an oppressive menace, a source or expression of religious anxiety, in late Archaic or early Classical Greece⁴.

Another way of viewing the justice of Greek religion, which can give us a better understanding of it, is to recognise that the Greek gods were mainly concerned with human injustice especially when the mortals impinged upon their dignity as divine beings because in Greek notion the divinities existed primarily not to please or serve humanity, and they intervene in human affairs in order to defend their own interest. The concept of *hubris* and punishment portrays man as having only a helpless place in the order of the universe, and if he claims more than the gods have allotted him, then divine justice requires that he be punished. The gods do not punish men so long as men keep within their proper bounds. However, the flippancy of some hubristic acts, which attract punishment portray the gods as petty and mean and the human element as being without a choice.

SIN AND PUNISHMENT IN YOURBA WORLD-VIEW

Comparing religious concepts such as *ṣinō* from one culture to another might be regarded as a delicate matter. But it is interesting to look at the Greek idea of *hubris* from another culture's perspective. To the Yoruba, the concept of sin is embedded in the word *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀*. The typical rendering of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀* as *ṣinō* in the English language is not adequate because the word is all-encompassing and can be used to denote a wide range of acts, from misdemeanours, to taboos (*ewò*), to fundamental transgressions such as theft and murder. The concept of sin as defined through its being an integral part of the

totality of Yoruba life has corporate, sociological, moral and religious dimensions.

Èsè could mean an offence to a person on a personal and social level. On the moral level, the term èṣṣè can still be applicable to disobedience to the divinities, taboo, sacrilege and apostasy. Idowu points out that the Yoruba word èṣṣè, with its cognate verb se have been used for both òsinò and òoffence.ò⁴³

Idowu and other scholars⁴⁴ have discussed the aptness of translating the word èṣṣè as sin in English and are in agreement that the translation is encompassing as other Yoruba words such as *eṣi* (an accidental error, an unpremeditated mistake), *asi se* (a mistaken deed) *a itò*, (that which is not straight forward) *a iiyè* (that which is not begetting) *eewo* and *òhun* (used in technical sense to denote moral and ethical wrong in its extremity) can be seen as different levels of èṣṣè. Jemiriye summarises the concept of èṣṣè as follows:

To the Yoruba, èṣṣè, spells sorrow, pain, evil, ruin, decay, unpleasant mood, and sometimes death. *Èṣṣe* is negation of the normal festive life of the Yoruba. The Yoruba are noted for dance, smile, play, drink and merry-making. Thus èṣṣè can be defined as negation of the normal Yoruba life in many ways that the people are noted for í it is very difficult to translate èṣṣè as a word into English. *Èṣṣe* is a concept and not just a word. While sin is the nearest equivalent, it is definitely not a culturally comprehensive equivalent.⁴⁵

The origin of sin in Yoruba thought cannot be tied down to a particular story or location. However, an analysis

of oral tradition and some stories in the Ifa corpus relate sin to Olodumare (the Almighty God) who allowed sin to manifest as a contextual sanction and moderator of life for the Yoruba. These stories do not hold Olodumare responsible for the origination of sin. Rather it is the creation of freedom and choice for the creatures, including man, which has given room for sin as a rational choice. And as a regulatory control or reward mechanism against sin, law came into being.

Oral tradition is the principal source for stories about the origin of *ẹ̀sẹ̀*. The first one to be considered here denotes a world that is very similar to that of the Golden Age of Hesiod. This story of peace to struggle for power and supremacy among deities goes thus:

Once upon a time, all the deities were in heaven with the Supreme Being, Olodumare. They all lived in peace and harmony. There was no *ẹ̀sẹ̀*. Then at the right time all the deities were sent to go and live on earth. *Ọ̀runmila* and all the deities arrived at Ile-Ife. All the deities were at peace and Ile-Ife was a paradise on earth. The state of peace continued until a fight for supremacy broke out among the deities. The struggle for power and supremacy among the deities destroyed the peace on earth and since then *ẹ̀sẹ̀* has been many and disorders have become great on the earth⁴⁶.

Here, it is clear that the struggle for power itself is not *ẹ̀sẹ̀*, but it resulted in the phenomenon known as *ẹ̀sẹ̀*.

Other stories relate the origin of *ẹ̀sẹ̀* to human beings. One is about how the last mortal child of *Ọ̀runmila* in the person of Olowo was rude to and disobeyed *Orunmila*, *Orunmila* in anger left the earth and returned to heaven. The

story informs that wherever Orunmila is or whenever his injunctions are obeyed, there is peace and bliss and presents the origin of sin as a result of disrespect, disobedience and arrogance of children to parents and dishonour or arrogance of man to god.

Some other stories make females responsible for *èṣè* in the world. One of these is as follows:

When Olodumare wanted to create the earth, Olodumare created people. Olodumare then asked Orunmila to take charge over the created earth. Then Olodumare created Àje (a powerful witch-like creature). Àje told Orunmila that she will be killing the people for food. Then Orunmila went to Olodumare to complain about Àjé. Olodumare then gave Orunmila the seeds of one tree called *igi – yereke*. Then Orunmila returned to earth from Olodumare along with Àje. The surprise is that after this, Orunmila married Àjé. Orunmila then planted the seeds of *igi yereke* at the back of the house. One day, Àje told Orunmila that they should list their don'ts. Orunmila said, I do not eat *eku* (a type of rabbit), I do not eat *eja* (fish), I do not eat *adiyè didu* (black fowl or black hen), and I do not eat black robust goat. The wife, Àje listened and said nothing. Then one day Orunmila travelled. Àje then took *eku* (rabbit) and cooked it for Orunmila. Orunmila returned, and ate the food, although he knew that it was one of the don'ts that was prepared for

him. At another occasion, Orunmila travelled. Again Aje cooked *ẹja* (fish) for Orunmila. When he came back he ate the food. In the same pattern, Aje cooked all the *donṣts* of Orunmila for him. It was the thought of Aje that the skin and outer look of Orunmila will be spoilt since he disobeys the *donṣts*. But surprisingly Orunmila was looking better and more handsome after taking the *donṣts*.

After a while, Orunmila called Aje and said, *ṁnow your turnṁ*. So when Aje went out, Orunmila took the seeds of the tree that he had planted at the backyard (*igi yereke*) and powdered it. Then he mixed the powder with a drink *ó* palm wine, *ẹ mu*. When Aje returned, Orunmila said, *ṁYou cooked all the donṣts in order to destroy me. Now I have given you your own donṣt.* Aje asked, *ṁWill I now die?* Orunmila answered sarcastically, *ṁof course noṁ*. Since then the world has known that the listed *donṣts* by Orunmila were the special delicacies of Orunmila. So people now give Orunmila, fish, rabbit, hen and goat. Now, the start of wickedness by Aje in killing innocent people and the attempt by Aje to kill or destroy Orunmila is the origin of Ese.⁴⁷

This story shows that *ẹṣẹ* originated from Ajeṁ conscious choice to do evil by killing people and giving the supposedly wrong food to Orunmila. The stories in Yoruba oral tradition about the origin of *ẹṣẹ* posit male, female and divin-

ity (not Olodumare the Supreme Being) as instruments of the break down of mutual trust leading to sin on earth.

The Yoruba do not have the notion of a specific sin against the gods as denoted by the Greek *hubris*, because any breach or failure to adhere to sanctions is sin. Again, they do not have ða rigid distinction between an offence committed against a person or society and one committed against Deity or divinities and spiritsö⁴⁸. Sin is, therefore, doing that which is contrary to the will and directions of Deity. It includes any immoral behaviours, ritual mistakes, any offences against God or man, breach of covenant, breaking of taboos and doing anything regarded as abominable and polluting⁴⁹.

Another difference that can be seen in the operation of *hubris* and sin between the Greek and the Yoruba is that the former has the notion that even thoughts of pride or boasting can be considered as unforgivable acts. More often than not, thoughts do not constitute a sin with the latter; the sin is in the act. It is common, however, as a point of caution, among the Yoruba, to warn someone against evil people, who out of hatred may harm the boastful person. Also warnings against a haughty heart are often given in Yoruba moral maxims because pride may lead to the commission of action(s) tantamount to sin and eventual destruction.

The utterly cruel and merciless punishment attached to the boasting aspect of *hubris* ô such as that of Apollo and Diana killing the twelve children of Niobe because of a boast that these twelve were better looking than the pair of Apollo and Diana ô cannot be conceived by the Yoruba mind. One reason may be because representation of the gods in human forms, shapes and beauty is not as integral an aspect of Yoruba traditional religion as it was of ancient Greek religion. Another reason might be that the Yoruba traditionally do not place much importance on external beauty and good looks as did the ancient Greeks. To the Yoruba, the internal

gift expressed by the term *iwa* (good behaviour) is of a higher importance than *ewa* (physical beauty). Moreover, children are such a prized possession that punishing a parent in such a manner is too painful. The Yoruba believe that sin should be punished, just as did the ancient Greeks in regard of *hubris*. However, in Yoruba thought, sin can have a variety of consequences depending on the gravity of the sin. These can include fines, illness, and expulsion from community, poverty or even death.

As Zeus is the enforcer of justice in Greek religion, so also Olodumare, the supreme all-encompassing God is the absolute force in the punishment of any sin in Yoruba religion. However, a main difference in the performance of this function lies in the fact that in the Greek system of belief, *hubris* cannot be forgiven and the punishment for any act of *hubris* must be exacted, while for the Yoruba, punishment for sin can be appeased by sacrifice. Thus, in the latter system, unlike in the Greek, the divinities who are regarded as intermediaries between man and Olodumare, serve as vehicles for moral instruction. They function in giving directives that lead to forgiveness, which means, in this scenario, a kind of òpaying backö. So the sacrifices are expiatory, restitutionary (for making amends) and propitiatory (to remove sin). The first types may include a full public confession of the sin and restoration of items while the propitiatory act is usually towards the gods⁵⁰.

As a final effort in this paper, it is pertinent to take another look at the operation of *hubris* in ancient Greek society. This has been analysed severally. One such view is that it is a:

Reflection of the tensions, perplexities, Disappointments and fears that plagued ancient Greek society. It is a code of conduct that is uncompromising. In its unflinching insistent of the inevitability of human suffering and ultimate loss.

An examination of these various interpretations of the operation of *hubris* in ancient Greek thought reflects that the universe postulated in Greek myth is one in which human beings are permanently prevented from the divine enjoyment of everlasting life, while the gods possess all the qualities that the Greeks desired. These qualities include eternal youth, unblemished good looks, honour, reputation, irresistible power and the uninhibited assertion of individual selfhood.

Therefore, the ancient Greeks, terrorized by the invincibility of the gods, displayed an ambivalent attitude towards human existence. The sense of always being a victim must have greatly impacted their understanding of the physical, moral and psychological aspects of human life. Thus in the face of the pervasive fatalism the ancient Greeks kept raising questions about the moral order.

Poets, especially Euripides (480-406B.C.), one of the three great Attic tragedians, did not accept the traditional views of religion and morality; rather, they were continually questioning in his plays. Although he invoked the gods in the songs of his choruses, his characters' utterances relating to the gods were frequently very critical. He chose his subjects generally from mythology, yet he was deeply interested in humanity and his themes primarily concern man's suffering and conflict. In his plays *Andromache* and *Ion* the actions of Apollo, the god of music and medicine, are depicted as somehow short of expectation and Euripides frown at them. The *Ion* is full of obvious criticism of the gods:

But I must admonish Phoebus. What ails him? He ravishes girls and betrays them! Begets children by stealth and callously leaves them to die! í When men are wicked, the gods punish them. How then can it be just for you yourselves to flout the laws you have laid

down for men? If the day ever comes ó of course the supposition is absurd ó when you have to make amends to men for your rapings and whorings, you and Poseidon, and Zeus the king of Heaven, you will bankrupt your temples to pay for your sins. You follow your whims without a second thought; that is wicked. One can no longer blame men for imitating the splendid conduct of the gods; blame those who set us the example.⁵²

In his *Madness of Heracles*, the madness is brought upon Heracles by the goddess Hera, who is depicted in the play as quite unreasonable. And when Hera, out of petty jealousy, cruelly destroys Heracles, the question is asked: "To such a god, who would pray?"⁵³. In the *Ion*, as already cited, Ion threatens that if the gods do not mend their ways, they will find their temples empty.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Euripides' modification of legends to suit his purpose and his radical views too advanced for his day made him unpopular in his life time and he was a constant object of attack by comic poets. In Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusea*, a character who sells appurtenances of sacrifice charges that Euripides' plays have spoilt her livelihood by casting doubts on religion.

Burkert points out that even in the face of such criticism as those of Euripides and Xenophanes⁵⁴, the worship of the Greek gods continued for several centuries after:

And yet the most important Greek temples and the most sublime statues of the gods were created generations after Xenophanes. People did continue to pray to these gods. Greek religion was practiced for 800 years after Xenophanes and

disappeared only at the end of the ancient world under massive state pressure.⁵⁵

Burkert rightly opines that one of the principal reasons for the decline and dissolution of ancient religion is its moral weakness.⁵⁶ The failure of the operation of *hubris* in effecting compliance of men is a demonstration of the inadequacies of ancient Greek religion to meet the yearnings of men. The gods were measured by the norms of humanity; so the gods' demand of righteousness from men drew attention to the boundary which separated man from god. Unfortunately, the anthropomorphic concept of the gods by the ancient Greeks could not sustain this boundary. This explains the many criticisms of the gods such as demonstrated in the passage of Euripides' *Ion*, earlier cited.

Since it is a common thought in human societies that the future is weak without the antecedents of the past, what then can be the implication of the absence of concepts such as *hubris* in our world? *Hubris* was not an entirely negative concept. It was a notion that emphasized the need for men to exercise caution and moderation. Even when a leader had achieved success in spite of competitive ambition, he must display the ideal of simplicity, serenity and other qualities of conscious restraint associated with piety to the gods, for the fear of the gods was the beginning of morality. This in itself is a desired quality for human society as is evident in the question which Odysseus was accustomed to ask when he landed on an unknown shore: whether the inhabitants were wanton, wild and not just or hospitable and of a god-fearing mind.⁵⁷

However it was the motive ascribed to the reverence of the gods that constituted a problem. The gods needed to be revered because they constituted a malicious entity of which, man can never be sure and the man who has climbed too high is all the more threatened with destruction. This is the jealousy of the gods.⁵⁸ Moreover mortals

needed help from the gods if they hope to achieve anything, but the gods needed mortals only to give honour. This negative conception of the gods and the very harsh and exacting nature of *hubris*, resulted in the fear that made the ancient Greeks feel that they were trapped in a state of perpetual victimization.

Although the concept of *hubris* in ancient Greek religion is both fatalistic with respect to the punitive consequences of the sinful acts and it is limited to religious offences, while the Yoruba idea of sin is humanistic and has both a religious and secular scope, it is possible for modern man to derive from the moral function of *hubris* if it is combined with the humanistic principles in the operation of *eṣṣe*. These humanistic principles which govern the strategies developed in the Yoruba society in accounting for and the handling of the anomalies of human co-existence have resulted in a cultural code which makes sin and its punishment moral issues in which man is conscious of his place in the larger sphere of human existence, and is able to make conscious decisions that better define his moral and ethical role in society. Then man can arrive at the premise advocated by Athena in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, earlier cited, that though reason and mercy are to be admitted in the dispensation of justice, yet fear is not to be cast out of human society, and justice in its widest sense must be the care of not only the gods but man also.

Finally from both the operation of *hubris* in ancient Greek society and of *eṣṣe* in the Yoruba, it is evident that the universal concepts of sin, punishment and forgiveness, can be positive principles which produce a harmonious state of human co-existence. Despite the scientific and technological advancement of our modern world, we still need to conceive of a cautionary force symbolized by the gods and understand that the sense in which men need the gods is quite different from the sense in which the gods need men, for the gods

do not hold the world in a close maternal embrace; they stand at a distance, í to be viewed from various angles. This accords man, in turn, the freedom to say no or even rebelö⁵⁹.

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