

THE CONCEPT OF DESTINY IN THE CHANGING WORLD OF AFRICAN UNIVERSE

Dr. James N. Nnoruga*

Abstract

This paper explores the evolving concept of destiny within the African universe, focusing on the interplay between traditional beliefs and contemporary influences. Historically, destiny in African cosmology is deeply intertwined with spiritual, communal, and ancestral elements, shaping individual and collective identities. Traditional African societies often viewed destiny as preordained by supernatural forces, with rituals and cultural practices reinforcing this belief. It initially bears the stamp of a fatalistic or deterministic view of fate. But with the influence of so many factors and various theories of destiny, many analyses and understanding started changing the view of destiny in African thought. Hence, several assumptions about destiny started to dwindle, destiny is no longer a projection into the future, but the issue of choice is included. This paper emphasizes that man and gods cooperate in realizing the destiny of man even when the condition is unchangeable or seems fatalistic. Through a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and religious studies, the paper analyzes the dynamic nature of destiny in the African context. It highlights the resilience and adaptability of African cultural frameworks in integrating new ideas without wholly abandoning traditional values.

INTRODUCTION

It is a belief in the African worldview that every human being born in this world has been destined to live a certain kind of life and fulfill a certain purpose in life in this world. Each individual has in him/her the seed of destiny to actualize because it has been determined and ratified in each human being from the metaphysical world through the metaphysical forces or gods. Some theories expressed or stated the view that no one creates himself/herself and therefore everything was given to human beings to fulfill certain kinds of life by the force that sent him/her. These views were largely held by theories of predestination and determinism, which state that predestination is a theological concept that suggests a higher power or deity has willed all events. In this view, destiny is predetermined and unchangeable, and human actions are guided by divine will, while the theory of determinism states that determinism is a philosophical theory that proposes all events, including human actions, are ultimately determined by causes external to the will (Bargdill, 2006). With this, destiny can never be changed or manipulated by anyone under any condition or situation. These theories mean that destinies are already acquired once born into this material world. On one hand, it means there is no possibility of change in destiny, which also shows that man has no free will. But Adibe (2009) avers that:

A human person has God's creative power that would make him/her to progress in life. Temporary setbacks should not be

interpreted as eternally destined setbacks. God is in control of human life, but allows human persons full control of their freedom of choice. Human persons have absolute control of their choices in life's actions. Success and failure in life endeavors are not predestined. (pp. 108-109).

On the other hand, the theories of existentialism and social constructionism have the belief that human beings are capable of influencing and making choices concerning their destinies. For existentialism emphasizes individual freedom, choice, and responsibility in shaping one's destiny. Existentialists reject the idea of a predetermined fate or external forces governing human existence. According to existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, individuals create their meaning and destiny through their choices and actions, even in the face of an indifferent or absurd universe (Jarret-Kerr, 1957). Also, Social constructionism explains that reality, including concepts like destiny, is socially constructed through shared meanings, norms, and beliefs within a society or culture (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). From this perspective, destiny is not an objective or predetermined reality but is shaped by cultural, social, and historical contexts. Individual destinies are influenced by social structures, institutions, and interactions. Going by these theories, one agrees with these theorists that an individual is largely influenced by the place of his/her birth, social milieu, and organization within his/her cycle of living (Andrews, 2012).

Since the concept of destiny is a metaphysical phenomenon and yet is embodied with choice, it has been a subject of debate by different schools of thought as we have seen above, even the African worldview in itself has been changing due to influences of other worldviews and emerging theories around it. However, its dominant view (that human beings have been destined to be what he is from creation) is shifting ground due to changes or lines of thought by these theorists and influences. Several questions arise from these schools of thought; can destiny be changed or influenced to change? And to what extent can it be changed or influenced? And which part of destiny can be changed or influenced? Can a human being change its destiny given to him/her at creation? If destiny cannot be changed or manipulated, can the gods or metaphysical forces be the architects of sowing the harmful or bad seed of destiny in some human beings to cause mayhem for them and others? To what extent, can one speak of individual or communal destinies? What is the place of human choice with regard to destiny? There are many questions arising from the different thought systems seen above when viewed from the African perspective of destiny.

A search into the African concept of destiny, which is a metaphysical reality, it is expedient to look into some African cultures to see how they view man and his destiny. Again, to see if those

views have changed or still remain in their pristine form, or if does destiny of man unfolds with the passage of time and events, for knowledge about man cannot be a concluded event or issue. At this point, it has to be understood or known that the issue of destiny, in general, is a complex phenomenon because as noticed or indicated above it is a metaphysical and complicated phenomenon understood and explained differently from many traditions of African people and scholars.

Conceptual Analysis of Destiny: African Perspective

Destiny has been defined variously from many angles, but Webster's dictionary (1989) defines it as that which is to happen or has happened to a particular person or thing; lot or fortune; pre-determined, usually inevitable or irresistible course of event; the power or agency which determines the course of events; the power personified in or represented as a goddess. This means that it has already been put or fixed there for man. Man has been viewed to be at the center of the universe from an African worldview. Or going further, many African cultures believe in a cosmic order or divine will that governs the universe. This cosmic order is often associated with a supreme being or force that determines the destinies of individuals and communities. Destiny is seen as part of this cosmic order, with each person having a predetermined path or purpose in life have to fulfill. African scholars again remarked that ancestral beliefs play a significant role in reshaping the concept of destiny in many African cultures. It is believed that ancestors continue to exert influence and guidance over the living, often guiding individuals towards their destined paths in life. Rituals and ceremonies aimed at honoring ancestors and seeking their guidance are common practices in many African societies.

According to Ehusani (1997), Africans have their ontology which is extremely anthropocentric ontology in the sense that everything is seen in terms of its relation to man in the African universe. Mbiti (1975) earlier states that:

African people consider man to be at the center of the universe... He sees the universe in terms of himself and endeavors to live in harmony with it. Even where there is no biological life in an object, African people attribute (mystical) life to it. In order to establish a more direct relationship with the world around them. In this way, the visible and invisible parts of the universe are at man's disposal through physical, mystical, and religious means. (p. 6).

The above quotation is to highlight the importance of destiny in the life of man who is given the power of inter-relations or interactions with other beings in the universe, either to manipulate or

to access its powers and to maintain cosmic order. In the process of manipulating the world, one can ask here, does the world or the universe affects man positively or negatively since the seed of destiny is already planted in man? Or is man finding or looking for compatible ways to live in the universe in which he found himself and in which he is at the center. Even in the scripture, after the creation of the world, the book of Genesis relates that God gave the first man and woman the power to dominate the universe.

It is a general belief that in the African universe that man has a destiny that he received from God, for Africans who later became Christians, or from the gods/forces for African forefathers who lived before the advent of Christianity. Even Opoku (1978) stated that:

There is a general belief among ...African peoples that man has a destiny which he receives from God and which is largely unchangeable. This belief in human destiny on the one hand eloquently expresses the omnipotence of God, which Africans recognize; on the other hand, it acknowledges the limitations of man set by divine providence. (p.100).

Though Opoku sounded like one of the Christian theologians, but one can observe that from the above, it stated that it is from God and it is not changeable which is one of the contentious issues about the destiny of a man and whether it can be changed or influenced in a certain way during the life of man on earth. But the Encyclopedia of African Religion has the view that destiny is not a fatalistic concept and people work to have their destinies prolonged and changed. Here the issue of human choice comes in determining the destiny of man in the African worldview. Ogbujah (2008) stated the view that destiny has more than one meaning. In one meaning:

It is used to designate the issue of 'fate' as in when a promising life is cut off sharply before its time, perhaps by an accident. In another sense, it is used to point at the state of man after death, his finality. As fate, destiny is seen as an absolute inscrutable power to which all living things are subject, and which may be either personified or delineated as impersonal. It is a unity or agency seen as an inevitable necessity controlling all things. Man's experiences show the limited extent to which he is able to mould events to his purposes. His origin and very many experiences of his life are impressed upon him, first as facts beyond his control; and secondly as data upon which he has to exercise his intelligence. These uncontrollable facts constitute human facticity or fate or destiny. (p. 412).

Here we see different meanings or descriptions of destiny as fate and the ability to mold life experiences for man's good. The above definition combines the two aspects of destiny that have

been seen so far, controllable destiny and uncontrollable destiny. Obilor (2018) from his point of view states three forms of destiny, the first form sees destiny as a determined course of action to which one has no control or resistance. This view holds that before one is born, the course of his or her life has been determined and there is nothing one can do to change the destiny. According to Obilor, the fatalist and determinist form this school of thought in which destiny is seen not as a product of the choice one makes, rather choice is a product of our destiny.

The second view or school of thought according to Obilor, states that destiny is a product of choice. This is the view that shows man as the master of his destiny. This means that man chooses what he wants to be when he is born into this world, of course when he has reached the age of reasoning. Hence in today's curriculum in secondary schools in Africa, Nigeria in particular, career days are being organized by the schools for children to choose what they want to be in future through studies and, molding of character. These choices made at any stage in life by man to achieve one's dream means that he is working towards achieving his destiny which he has made for himself. These destinies may be achieved or may not be achieved depending on how the individual concerned worked towards his own choice or molding of his character to achieve his destiny. Again, here the individual has options of destinies to be achieved when one fails; he clings to another until he gets to his destination. So here man is the doer of his deeds and molder of his destiny, through this way, he shapes his destiny. This helps to understand the popular saying that each of us holds his destiny. So, when one hears in Africa that one person has taken his destiny or one person has taken someone's destiny through one means or the other, it is in this context that one can understand such. The question arises here, can someone take another person's good destiny or change the good destiny to a bad one? Obviously, from the analysis above, no one takes the destiny of the other but one can influence the destiny of the other by choice he makes for the other in life. Here the two schools of thought differ from each other, the fatalist or determinist holds that destiny is the initiator of action, which no one can control, while the second school of thought (choice destiny) man is the initiator of his destiny.

The third view according to Obilor (2018) is that destiny is the total mission of any man on earth. Here destiny functions or is seen as the universal restoration of man and the perfection of man. To reach this stage in an African setting man has to go through the process of continual reincarnation or to be with the ancestors or be with God when he dies from a Christian perspective. Here destiny can also be seen or placed under the retribution of Karma which is to be united with Ultimate. This

view of understanding is mostly prevalent among Eastern religions like Shintoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Taoism, or Buddhism. So, from the above, there are different beliefs or understandings of destiny as enumerated by Obilor which is seen or taken by many scholars. So going further, what are the factors that can influence the destiny of an individual in African traditional settings, especially when it concerns the view of the fatalist notion of destiny or seen from retribution of Karma.

On the above issue, some believe that some spirits can change the destiny of an individual. The Water Goddess (*Nne Mmiri*) is believed to change human destiny, and confirm or challenge an individual's life course or destiny. Jell-Bahlsen (2014) states that:

A human being receives his/her life force, *Chi*, from the supreme God, *Chukwu*, the God of destiny, before birth and at that time, also enters a pact about his/her destiny, witnessed and sanctioned by God. Yet, contrary to European-Christian beliefs an individual's destiny is challenged and can be changed, by the supreme mother water goddess. It is believed that the water goddess may even alter the course of one's destiny.... It is believed that the individual crossing the river to enter life on earth, is challenged either by *Nne Mmiri*, or by the earth goddess of the wild bush, *Onabuluwa*. At this point, the human being may either defend his/her destiny, or change its course by forming a pact with the mother water goddess. This pact will not only alter one's life and fate, but also dedicates the individual's life to the goddess as her devotee. (pp. 27-28).

There are other factors apart from spirits as stated above that can influence the destiny of human beings, but another question arises to what extent can the destiny of an individual be influenced? Going further, many tribes in Africa have different notions of destiny in their culture or understanding. For Opoku (1978) the destiny of man is known as *nkrabea* by the *Akan* people which means fate, allotted life, or final lot. For the *Akan* people, it is fixed beforehand and remains unchanged. The Yoruba on the other hand believes that *Olodumare* determines a man's life in the world before he is born. This destiny is called *ipinori*, the *ori's* portion or lot, may be received in one of these three ways. A person may kneel and choose his destiny (*A-kunle-yan*), or he may kneel down and receive his destiny (*A-Kunle-gba*). Or he may have his destiny affixed to him (*A-yan-mo*). In the Igbo tribe of Nigeria, Oguejiofor (1996) asserts that the concept of *Chi* is very fluid. Metuh (1981) sees it as a messenger or minister of God in the creation of an individual. *Chukwu* creates the human person and assigns him a *chi*. It is the *chi* who chooses from many possible alternatives the destiny of the person. So, from the above, we see that the *chi* of a person

is an older person whose destiny is precisely the destiny of the younger person. Here the issue of reincarnation is heavily brought out as a destiny. So, whatever the older person was in the previous life that will be the destiny of the one coming after him/her in the next world.

As noted earlier, certain factors can influence the destiny of an individual whether for good or for bad, it is believed that a person may consult a diviner to have a good destiny maintained or a bad destiny corrected, hence divination in Africa can never stop even in the face of the Christian religion. Opoku (1978) was of the view that evil forces like witchcraft and other demonic powers can also cause harm to a person's destiny and frustrate a happy fate or destiny. Again, a good destiny is not achieved when the individual's character is worthless, which means that a person's act or behavior plays an important role in the realization of his/her good destiny. Apart from the diviners revealing the destiny of an individual, a person's destiny may be revealed or influenced by one heeding the advice of elders. For elders are known to be repositories of communal wisdom. This is why the advice of elders is sought in many matters relating to forefathers and the community who are the link between the dead and the living.

But Onunwa (1990) seems to have a different opinion concerning destiny, for him, it is an enigmatic concept that defies any empirical analysis. He holds that "this metaphysical concept is shrouded in mystery and eludes any coherent logical explanation. It falls within the realm of beliefs and dogma, which are basically not subjected to the scope of empirical analysis" (p. 98). This means for him that it will elude any logical explanation because it borders on a mystery and dogma. However, Adibe (2009) responded to the above issue or position of Onunwa (1990) that human behavior which is used to actualize the destiny of man is verifiable, though the collective acts of God before human birth are not verifiable. So, the fact remains that fixing a decisive destiny of man that he/she would be this or that all through life and that it is a closed issue remains doubtful empirically. It all means that the human person is caged by the gods to be this or that, and thus no matter all effort nothing can change it. This theory of Onunwa (1990) proposes that man is packaged into the earth to be packaged back to the spirit world at death without any active contribution from man. It means whether man is passive or active the determined destiny would come to pass (Adibe, 2009). Hence Adibe went further to explain that theological, sociological, psychological, and economic factors play important roles in the destiny of an individual in the present African worldview and in this age of globalization.

The Changing Face of Destiny in the African World

Just like the culture of any community which is not static but ever-changing, likewise, the understanding of destiny in the African world keeps changing and widening with philosophical thoughts from African scholars, from various religious beliefs that came into the soil of Africa, from technological and intellectual advancement going in the world, from globalization and so on. African world in the early days before the coming of Europeans, encountered no intellectual analysis or challenges about some of its basic beliefs and practices. The destiny of the human person is one of such basic areas the Africans were not challenged initially, but today it is no longer the case, hence on this singular issue of destiny, there are many views by many scholars trying to position the issue of African destiny of man in general with reference to its initial understanding. And this brought about self-awakening and more introspective analysis among the Africans in their quests for beliefs and practices being redefined and take their place in the global practices and recognition.

From the analysis so far, it can be deduced that destiny can be influenced or improved for better or changed, but not in all cases. Oguejiofor (1996) alluded to this fact, that the idea of destiny is associated with the Igbo conception of *chi* and *eke*. A person's *chi* may be that of ill luck, and nothing can change the situation, and a person's *chi* is signed on his palm (*akal'aka* or *akala chi*). The Igbo people are not as deterministic in practice as the concept of *chi* might suggest for there is a way out of every situation. But there are always extrinsic factors considered to be good for man in improving his natural being. That is why the abnormal situations or conditions affecting man adversely are not considered merely as accidental. For example, if in a particular family, the members keep dying of unknown diseases and poverty, many of the African communities will not marry from that family because they will be viewed as those who die without long life and riches. Hence their lineage will be regarded as those who die prematurely and it will be difficult to have their children being married off. But in a situation where they live long lives and are blessed with riches, many families or suitors will be going there for marriage proposals, for it is believed that their lineage lives long and is blessed financially. It is noticed that naturally, the destinies of both families are not the same, but both can be improved in the African world today rather than seeing it from a fatalistic point of view.

So, the whole issue of destiny whether it is ordained by gods or nature, something can always be done. For no one is primarily born to be bad or treated badly from the inception of birth. However,

exceptions can be taken from the scripture where some are born to be blind or lame so that the great work of God can be manifested among the people. Again, the situation whereby one is born as a dwarf person or without legs or hands, they are regarded as ill-luck yet these can be improved in various ways as of today. So, the issue of destiny borders greatly on nature, choice and its improvement, to be a better individual, for all human beings cannot be on the same pedestal or level. So choice is the ability to choose between alternatives and the choosing of choices is done by man or any living things in their day-to-day activities. This is done with the view or aim of improving or enhancing the situation or condition one finds oneself. However, the choice being made can be freely done or determined by another force (Obilor, 2018). This means that whether a free or determined choice is made, action has taken place to address a situation to improve it negatively or positively. It is good to note that destiny and human choice are of opposing sides but in many cultures or traditions of the world, these blend to improve a quality of living. Obilor (2018) states that human choice which is more of an individual action is blended alongside destiny which is perceived to come from the gods. In the whole analysis, choice which is human action is needed to improve the destiny which is from the gods for human beings.

Destiny and choice are always taken together otherwise one may not be realized easily or may not be possible. In everyday life, destiny is always improved in many ways, a woman who did not give birth or cannot be pregnant naturally is helped to do so through so many means today technologically. And giving birth can also take place even after menopause or after a certain age in life, because science has improved the childbearing and care delivery system. Many ill health that were regarded as taboo in the African worldview earlier like smallpox, and leprosy are treated now and are no longer regarded as a bad destiny by the gods. Certain unknown deaths or bad deaths like accidents, being struck by thunder, falling from trees, or dying as a child or youthful death in different families or by individuals are no longer viewed as so, because explanations have been known and conclusions of possible causes are equally known. Equally some generational ill health in some families is no longer seen as their bad destiny because the illness has been identified or diagnosed and cures are easily found. This also spans to every other aspect of the African way of life. With this also, most issues being regarded as ancestral curses in the African worldview are now being put into their proper perspectives and understanding. This has greatly also reduced the calling of priests or pastors for family liberation or *oru ezi na ulo*.

Conclusion

The destiny of a human being cannot be explained fully in one instance, because it is a metaphysical phenomenon but it can be analyzed from the known events that relate to human beings towards unknown events. So, the issue of destiny from the African perspective is an ongoing debate among the African scholars, who are trying to analyze and view it from a metaphysical and philosophical point of view. From the analysis so far, destiny has been seen from different perspectives in conjunction with the human choice being made. Some scholars see destiny and choice to be a Siamese twin because each of them needs the other to improve itself through action to be taken by the human person. This is no more on the level of gods as the cause or originator of destiny as the Igbo people would always say: “*O mere ma chi ekweghi, onye uta atala ya*” (when one has done his/her best and the *chi* (destiny god) decides otherwise, let no one blame him/her). The analysis of destiny is more of being understood as something/phenomenon that can be manipulated or controlled by human beings. For the gods cannot possibly give human beings a destiny that is full of ill luck to punish the individual concerned. Every situation in life is meant to be improved unless the situation was adversely affected by human making at its creation for non-living things or during its formation and birth by human beings.

*** Dr. James N. Nnoruga**

Department of Religion & Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria
Email: jn.nnoruga@unizik.edu.ng

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