THE CONCEPT OF DESTINY AND ITS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS AMONG THE ESANS

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Abstract

Belief in destiny permeates most cultures of the world. The central focus here is the Esan concept of destiny. The work undertakes a conceptual clarification of the concept ‘destiny’. It made a brief exposition of its belief in some other cultures of the world. It then focused principally on the Esan conception. It examined its spheres of influence and the principal sources from which destiny attend mankind. It held that in Esan destiny can affect individual, family or community. It also held that the action of an individual can affect the family or community, vice versa. Thereafter, it expressed the Esan belief that people can play active role in shaping their destiny. It argued that discrimination is inherent in the operation of destiny. It showed how belief in destiny permeates the social life of the people in their daily engagements. It also showed how belief in destiny is at variance with some elemental beliefs and practices among the Esan people and beyond. The work concluded that although a discussion of destiny among the Esan people is not completely bereft of inconsistencies, but when compared with some other conceptions elsewhere, the Esan account seems to be less riddled with contradictions.

Keywords: Destiny, retribution, waiveable consequences, discrimination, incompatibility

Introduction

Before delving into examining the concept of destiny in Esan, it is proper to have a general conceptual clarification. The concept destiny is a metaphysical phenomenon. It pervades almost all cultures in Africa and beyond. It holds that whatever has happened to an individual, whatever is happening to him now, and whatever will become of him in future has been designed to happen that way. “A person’s destiny determines his or her success or failure, personality, luck or ill luck” (Jeffo and Roux 147).

Although the concept destiny may not be synonymous with predetermination, predestination, and fate, it is sometimes best understood when treated hand in hand with these related concepts. R. O. Madu attempts to treat destiny as predestination and fate. For Madu, to be predestined is to be foreordained. This means that whatever events that is happening now or that will happen have already been designed. It may mean an absolute divine decree whereby God resolves and determines what He himself will bring to pass. Most events are fated to occur by some inexorable necessity. This “[f]ate curtails every person’s liberty to act or do as he pleases… There is therefore no shaking off any situation or even changing the course of any event once fate has ordained it” (Madu 123).

He quoted August Dorner as saying that “if any distinction is to be drawn between fate and destiny, it is simply that the latter is the former regarded as operative in particular cases” (Madu 123). According to K. W. Bolle, “the term fate denotes the idea that everything in human life, in society and the world itself takes place according to a set, immutable pattern”. (Bolle 290) At this point, it is necessary also to examine briefly the concepts of fatalism, determinism and karma as they may relate to the concept of destiny.

Fatalism is the doctrine which holds that there is nothing the individual can do that can in any way affect the fate to which he is destined (Durant 399). Determinism holds that every event or every state of affairs is determined by certain factors, in the sense that given those factors, the event must occur or the state of affair must hold. Karma is the aggregate reaction to activities. It is an unwaiveable consequence that inevitably accompanies past actions of the individual. “The Hindu Concept of Destiny is
intricately tied up with their notion of karma… 

Linked with destiny, the law of karma sees man as the product or effect of his past actions…. Man is also a victim of his past actions over which he has no control at the present…. That man is a victim of his destiny has reference to his past only” (Onimhawo and Izibili 41). From the above it is obvious that there is a difference between destiny and karma. Karma is only a reflection of an aspect of destiny. It is the operation of destiny due to the aggregate of the past actions of the individual. With respect to influencing the results of past actions, man is totally incapacitated because the operation of karma is fixed and inexorable. But unlike karma, destiny is not limited to the past only; it extends into the future. Man can influence or change his future destiny with his present efforts. Though some of these concepts examined are not synonymous with and cannot be completely subsumed in destiny, they however represent an aspect of it or its operations depending on the belief of the people concerned.

Beliefs in destiny in some other cultures of the world

According to a Chinese sage Yang Chu, “all that happen in the universe are determined by destiny, in that free will, design or purpose – either of God or man – has no part” (Chai with Chai 115). He continues that efforts has no control over events or else how do we account that it awards discomfort to the sage and success to the impious, humiliation to the wise and high honour to the fool, poverty to the good and wealth to the wicked? On his part Confucius (Chai with Chai 149) presents two conceptions of destiny. In the first place it means the will or decree of Heaven. In the second place it is conceived as something coming naturally and of itself, independent of effort.

This fecklessness of human efforts over events is also expressed by Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce expresses the power of destiny in influencing human affairs with respect to intellectual and scientific investigations. According to him, “[d]ifferent minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion. This activity of thought by which we are carried, not where we wish, but to a foreordained goal, is like the operation of destiny” (Wiener 133, Scheffler 100). Peirce also expresses this with respect to truth. He sees truth as “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate…. The truth… is the fixed limit towards which inquiry tends ……the opinion which would finally result from investigation does not depend on how anybody may actually think” (Scheffler 100). Peirce believes that truth is ideal and absolute. He believes that truth is not relative to time, person or circumstances, but rather, it is foreordained by fate. From this submission of Peirce therefore, destiny is a determinant factor in human affairs and achievement. We shall see more of this later. As we shall see very soon, the Esan conception is at variance with most of the tenets presented above.

Destiny in Esan

The people of Esan inhabit the central part of Edo state, Nigeria. Although the concept destiny may not have exact signification in translation in Esan, the daily life of the people is replete with belief in destiny. This belief in destiny is one of the elemental principles which characterized their lives and activities. Among the Esans destiny may be predestined by God. It may be the result of cosmic consequence. It may also be manipulated by sadistic agents. This is why, for example, sometimes people have rewards incommensurate with their efforts. These will be explained later. But for now let us have a cursory look at the spheres of destiny

Spheres of destiny Destiny is believed to pervade human life and activities. It may be teleological, collective, selective or communitarian in nature. It is teleological if it is designed for a purpose. Destiny is collective if every member of a family or group is attended to by a particular fortune or misfortune. It is communitarian if it attends a whole community. Destiny is termed selective if different people with no ontological commonality come together without having any foreknowledge of the situation to face their allotted destiny at the appointed time.

Among the Esans, destiny may be preordained, ordained or acquired. As preordained, a human being has an allotment, which will determine what that person will be. Whether an individual will be good or bad, rich or poor, the channel to attain those statuses are teleguided. But the ordained and acquired forms enable an individual to play a role in shaping his destiny and those of others. Hence
among the Esans the issue of fatalism –that is, what will be, will be– does not arise.

**Sources of destiny** The concept and operation of destiny is inseparable from the metaphysical notion of causality. There are three principal sources from which destiny attend to mankind: from God, from evil forces and from human agents.

**God:** This is a supernatural source. As the Supreme Being, God is the ultimate controlling principle of the universe. Since the foundation of the world God has foreordained whatever will be. At birth the individual has his *ehi* (guardian angel) who guides him. He is teleguided by his *ehi* in accordance with his fashioned destiny by God.

Awolalu and Dopamu, when writing on the concept of destiny among the Edos hold that it is the *ehi* that chooses or declares man’s destiny, and that offering must be given to him from time to time to attract favour from him. They also hold that the *ehi* can apply to God to take its client so that the *ehi* can go back to his Maker. (Awolalu and Dopamu 165-166). These do not correctly depict the Esan account. It is not the *ehi* that chooses or declares destiny. The *ehi* does not even implement but only monitors what God (*Osenobulua*) legislates or decrees and takes feedback and petitions to God. If offering is given to the *ehi* to attract favour, it means therefore he has dissented from the role assigned him by God to taking bribe, which means therefore that even the angels can take bride. On the contrary, the *ehis* do only what is proper to their nature. The *ehi* is subordinative and will-less, uninfluenced and impartial, objective, and an observer and messenger. They do not need any material thing. And as such they are not deficient in any material thing. They are pure spirit. If offerings and sacrifices are made, they are not for the consumptions of *ehis* (angels) but for either malevolent spirits that can yield to or accept sacrifices in negotiation or to the gods/deities for appeal or appreciation. For the *ehi* to apply to God to take its client is to say it is not only willful but also in negotiation with God for self interest. This will make the *ehi* a malevolent being because he desires the termination of a life which is his prerogative to guide and defend.

**Evil forces:** This is also a supernatural source. Evil forces can efficaciously alter, swap or over-turn a favourable destiny through power from *elimin ebe* (devil). The implacable, sadistic agents can wrought their evil machination through witchcraft, magic, and other diabolic and malevolent channels. If a misfortune incessantly attends to an individual or people, the Esans often say *ebalulu non*, that is, it is what was done, hence the name *ebalulu* (what was done) among the Esans. To rescue an individual from these forces, appeal, dialogue and supplication are not very potent; confrontation is more efficacious. Confrontation is preferred because, it is believed among the people that evil forces hardly yield to other methods because they are inherently evil. One can thus commune with higher forces who, through confrontation with or by causing the death of the evil agents put an end to such evil powers and the attendant unfavourable destiny. For example, an individual that is rescued from a revolving circle of birth, premature death and rebirth is named *Asiazobor*. This means ‘let’s, leave him now’, a depiction of belief in destiny.

Anselm Ekhelar has argued that from African perspective, evil is always the direct or indirect consequences of moral agent or agents. In his understanding of the African perspective, physical evil is the result of “actions that transgress the will of the ancestors and as a result have disrupted the ontological harmony on which all of reality depends, … any evil is a sign of the displeasure of the gods” (Ekhelar 32-40). He also holds that “suffering, even if it is as a result of natural events, is seen as punishment of the gods for the action or omission that has disrupted the ontological balance on which life depends” (Ekhelar 32-40). It can be interpreted from this position that evil and its consequences always result when the balance or harmony in nature is upset.

From the points that were made before now, this Ekhelar’s submission does not correctly depict the Esan account. Physical evil is not always the result of the actions of the moral agent(s); it could also be the result of some sadistic agents among others. Malicious agents can swap or overturn destiny. This means that the good can be afflicted with misfortune. The attendance of misfortune to good people is not a mystery to Esan people. For them apart from being the result of cosmic rectification or the consequences of individual’s action(s), it may also be the result of ill-luck from people who overturn, swap or torpid destiny.
Consequences of the action(s) of the individual:
This is in a sense linked with effort and karma. The individual’s destiny in the present existence is inseparably linked with his past existence and his future state of existence will be affected indispensably by his actions in the present existence. This is reflected in such expression ebakoleane, which means ‘what is sown is what is reaped’. This depicts a belief in the operation of karma. The moment the incarnate of an individual attended with misfortune is identified, the question of why this is happening to him or her is unwarranted. It is a cosmic rectification.

Even in a particular existence, a man with good beginning can have a bad end, vice versa, depending on the kind of actions he had earlier performed in that existence. This influence is not total but partial. It is partial because the cosmic carryover from previous existence is still at play. However, an individual can influence his destiny. He can continuously recount to his ehi, a preferred destiny either for later in life or in the succeeding existence. People continue to recount by supplication to their ehi due to either what they lack or what they admire for onward transmission to God for approval. Hence the Esans often say ebohili non, that is, it is what he requested for or arranged with ehi, and this is reflected in such names as Ebahili, Ebanehita, and Ebatamaehi.

Contrary to what is obtainable among the Yoruba people of Nigeria - that the individual chooses destiny and kneels down to receive it (Gbadagesin 162), in the Esan account, the individual neither chooses destiny nor kneels down to receive it. The belief that the choice of destiny is beyond the individual is depicted in such phrase: asagbonmien, which means, ‘what one comes into the world to encounter’. He has no control over what will be his but once encountered he can influence it. This shows that the existentialists’ idea of thrownness, and their contention that “man has an active role to play in forging his destiny” is in full force among the Esans. The people of Esan confront the problem confronting them in their existential situation. They do not resign to fate. But instead they try against all odds to alter unfavourable ones with both physical and ontological measures. This is summarized in the following expressions among others:

1. Airekpa osenobulua no ose no bulua da re kpa oria, which means, you help God to enable God helps you (or the individual helps God to enable God help him.)
2. Izobo gba azen, which literally means that ‘it is fetish sacrifices that kill witches/wizards’. But denotatively, it means that ‘an individual put machineries in place to set obstacles on the way of the forces that worries him/her or to thwart the efforts of his/her malefactors to enable him/her have relief’;
3. Oria toboze, which means, ‘the individual chooses for himself/herself’.

These correspond respectively to the three principal sources of destiny as explained above. That the individual chooses on his own as used here does not correspond to the Yoruba choosing techniques, rather, as explained above, it means that when one has unfavourable destiny he can supplicate, rectify, placate or confront it depending on the force responsible for this ordeal. The outcome of this exercise is the result of his action. It is in this sense choice is used here.

The Operation of destiny From the above it is obvious that in the Esan scheme of things, the influence and operation of destiny is neither absolute nor final nor fixed. It is also not ideal because there are discriminations in its operations. There are unfavourable and unpalatable consequences in its distribution of burdens and benefits. But because the course of the operation of destiny is not fixed, attempts are made to influence and alter the unfavourable ones for the benefit of the individual or mankind. The fact that in the Esan account destiny is not fixed is predicated on the belief that there is no fixed limit to possibilities. Until the door of death is opened the gate of possibilities is not closed. Even after death, the Esan still believe in some possibilities of shaping the destiny of the deceased. This claim is epitomized in rituals and sacrifices that accompany burials and others offered thereafter in favour of the deceased.

The Esan conception of destiny is both in tune and at variance with the Akan conception as posited by Kwame Gyekye. It agrees with it that “the individual does not choose his destiny” (Gbadagesin 167). But it disagrees with it that destiny is always good and unchangeable. Although it is believed that phenomena events are preordained or ordained, they
are not fatalistic because it is a common practice among the Esan people to make efforts to avert pending doom.

The Esan conception of destiny has both elements of similarities and differences with that of Yang Chu earlier presented. It is dissimilar in the sense that Yang Chu held that neither God nor man has part to play in design or purpose. It is similar in that fortune and misfortune are due to destiny and they are awarded sometimes indiscriminately. The mythologico-religious controversy surrounding Job’s ordeal in his time will not be problem when taken into account that reward and punishment can be indiscriminately distributed even in divine order (Popkin and Stroll xvii-xviii, The Book of Job).

Job was believed to be a good man by the people of his time. In Job’s time the universe was believed to be governed by a just and good God with divine retribution. At that time the rewards of the just and the punishments of the wicked were immediate. Job’s ordeal – suffering and loss of his wealth, including his wives and children - raised doubt in the minds of the people of Job’s time. They concluded that Job was not a just man. But job looking at himself inwardly could not accept this traditional explanatory model as rational to account for his situation. The philosophical mind, like Job, will not also accept this traditional explanatory model. Instead it will raise questions given the contradiction between the accepted mode of explanation and Job’s situation thus: Either job is not just or the universe is not governed by a good and just God or retribution is not divine.

But in Job’s case it was later evident that his ordeal was engineered by devil but only permitted by God circumstantially. In the action of devil we should not expect justice or anything divine. Hence Jobs case is not a divine retribution. Rewards or punishments are not only the outcome of divine retribution. Job’s case will not also be a problem when we realize according to Yang Chu that destiny is indiscriminately awarded even in divine order. The possibility of the award of discomfiture to the sage and success to the impious, humiliation to the wise and high honour to the fool, poverty to the diligent and wealth to the sloth, misfortune to the just and fortune to the unjust does not trouble the Esans as such because for them discrimination is inherent in the operation of destiny. In fact it is this discrimination that makes it destiny.

The Esan conception of destiny has much in common with the idea of fate in Mencius. Mencius upholds the doctrines of both moral determinism and of blind, unalterable and unpredictable fate. He applies the former to collective entities and the latter to individual persons (Chen 495-520). In interpreting Mencius, Ning Chen, puts it that "Moral determinism" is used in the sense that happiness and misery are determined by a moral and personal god (or gods) who oversees human social and ethical conduct, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. According to Ning Chen, moral determinism is suggestive of predictable and changeable fate since one's happiness and misery are related to one's own conduct (Chen 495-520). The notion of "blind fate" refers to a person's fixed lot, which is believed to have been regulated by an impersonal and thus unapproachable power. This power is blind in the sense that it regulates one's fate without any reference to one's social and ethical conduct. Due to this blind, impersonal attribute, it is impossible for one to predict and change one's fate (Chen 495-520). In a resumé “fate” denotes humanity's lot, either mutable or immutable, and either communal or individual. The difference here is that the Esan people do not believe that destiny is immutable.

Social implications

Like some other metaphysical concepts destiny is inseparably linked with the social life of the Esan people in different ways. In Esan scheme of things the individual lives in harmony with others to attract the blessings of the people or sage for a better future. The people conform to social and religious norms to avert calamity both individual and collective to enhance economic prosperity and better future life. Stringent measures are put in place to curtail social misfits. Any act by one man or group of men is capable of reflecting in the life of the whole community. As Anselm Ekhalar puts it,

"every event and experience has its ontological dimension, be it in the life of the individual or in the experience of the community..... since in the concept of the community whatever happens to one happens to all and the guilt of one is the guilt of all.... The bond of life and destiny"
that binds the people into a communal whole ensures that the guilt of one member of the community could translate into the guilt of the entire community. So, as long as there is guilt in any individual member of the community, the consequences of that guilt may manifest on the entire or any segment of the community (Ekhahar 32-40).

This is why stringent measures are put in place to curb excesses and to encourage or ensure moral uprightness to attract blessings to the community. This is also why when the ontological balance or harmony has been disrupted either by one person or group of persons, in most cases, it is the concern of all to expiate the evil to avert doom.

The concept of destiny has some problematic social implications. There is the problem of apparent contradiction between beliefs in destiny and the apportion of responsibility, commendation and blame to human beings for their actions. Jeffo and Reux hold that if a person’s destiny is an imposition it has a serious implication on matters of moral responsibilities and there is no need to hold him responsible for his or her actions if he has no choice in the making of his character and personality (Jeffo and Reux 151). There is also legal consequence. It gives no place to just judicial operations. The reason is that it will be unjust to punish or reform or deter robbers, assassins, kidnappers, and other offenders through any means. This is because their actions and the associated events of their actions are destined both for them and their victims.

Besides, belief in destiny also has socio-political implications. A Chinese sage Mo Tzŭ captures this as follows:

the theory of destiny is not in conformity with the consequences of the future. If the sovereigns believe in destiny, they would be neglectful of their governments. Then the ministers would be neglectful of their official duties; men of their ploughing and farming; women of their weaving and spinning.... As a result, the world would be thrown into confusion.... ...and the people would suffer from lack of clothing and food (Chai with Chai 151).

What this means is that belief in destiny will encourage and lead to political and economic negligence, laziness and idleness with their attendant effects of material insufficiency, deprivation, social chaos and anarchy. This will inevitably hamper political and economic growth and development. In addition to these, the problems of battered administration which characterized all nooks and crannies of administration all-over need not attract any attention and solution because they are what must be. This will lead to a web of social, political and economic crises. And the world will be thrown into confusion. But there is a contradiction of concreteness here. Those who believe in destiny do not align their actions to this belief.

General evaluation of destiny

Belief in destiny both in Esan and elsewhere faces strong opposition. Karl Jaspers in his existential philosophizing opines that man is not a predetermined being, but rather a possible being whose existence depends on his choice. Man does not have a fixed essence determined in advance.

Belief in destiny also faces some strong opposition with the teachings of Pelmanism: the science of life. Pelmanism believes in the possibility of shaping human life positively. It does not believe in the power of destiny in shaping life. Like the Esan concept of destiny, Pelmanism holds that success is not always equiperable with effort and man can command his future. But it disagrees with it that success or failure can be due to destiny. Instead it believes that the power to shape, control and command the future depends on skill, mental attitudes, and a trained good thought process that can give a new outlook on life through thinking (Pelmanism 2-6). As William James puts it in his Principles of psychology, “the greatest discovery of our time is that people can change their lives by changing their attitudes of mind” (Pelmanism 2-6). The interplay between what seems to be discrimination between reward and retribution is not destiny but the interplay of chance, skill and attitude.

That design or purpose has no part in human affairs is also ably demonstrated by Mo Tzŭ in his doctrine of “ Providential retribution”. He denounced determinism, and instead maintained that men could
perfect themselves by their own efforts. He based his arguments for this denial of destiny on social and perceptual experiences. According to him, the theory of destiny is not in accord with the authority of the past; it is not in agreement with experience of the present; and it is not in conformity with the consequences of the future. Added to this reason is his claim that destiny cannot be perceived by the senses (Chai with Chai 151).

There are other problems with the belief in divine retribution in the operation of destiny. One of such problems is the problems of injustice. One of the problems of injustice is: if as a result of this divine retribution people suffers the consequences of their past existence, and their deeds are not made known to them, and if as a result there is no way they will know to enable them make amend, then, invariably, because they do not know and cannot make amend, they will inevitably have it again as cosmic carry over to the next, succeeding existence. Such inexorable suffering melted on them is unjust.

This belief in the doctrine of providential retribution in the operation of destiny is also faced with the problem of discrimination in distribution. Because there is no commensuration in the distribution of fortune and misfortune, success and failure, burden and benefit, long life and short life, and so on, then discrimination is at play in the operation of destiny. If discrimination is at play then this discrimination is injustice in providential arrangement.

There is another set of problem. This is the problem of incompatibility. The belief that destiny is fixed and unwaiveable is incompatible with some common beliefs and practices. One of such problems of incompatibility is that belief in unwaiveable destiny, and its actual operation will make prayers, miracles and magic impossible or irrelevant. Prayers, miracles and magic are believed by many people to be efficacious in changing some course of events - natural or unnatural. But if phenomena events are unwaiveably destined, then magic, miracles and prayers will be ineffective in changing their course of events. Hence, from this position, belief in destiny is fraught with contradictions between common beliefs and actual practices.

One may ask if magic, miracles and prayers, their outcomes, times and places of occurrences are not the result of the operation of destiny? In response to this, although we cannot prove it beyond the level that they are incompatible with our common beliefs and practices, but it does not mean that belief in the operation of destiny is true or justified because it cannot be proved otherwise beyond the level of incompatibility.

There is another problem of incompatibility associated with the belief that destiny is fixed and unwaiveable. If destiny is fixed and unwaiveable, there is the negative consequence that when people are faced with difficulties or problems, there will be no need to put up any effort to put an end to them because it is their lots. But contrary to this expectation, even those who believe that destiny is fixed do not rest when faced with negative, unfavourable occurrences. Rather they attempt to change them. There is thus a contradiction between their belief and actual practice.

Belief of this nature will have harmful effects in the life of the people. It will lead to the problem of inaction. For example, people will have to accept their conditions of oppression, sickness, misfortune, and other myriads of problems helplessly without any attempt to change or influence them for the better. Even when we have a bad government and an oppressive leader, they must be accepted because they are destined. Murderers, assassins, kidnappers, arsonists, embezzlers, rapists, cheats, robbers, and other crime perpetrators need not be blamed or resisted or punished and their victims need not be pitied or assisted because it is their destiny. What must be has come to be, independent of human efforts and choices. Besides we would not bother to improve ourselves because things must turn out to be what they must be. One would wonder the type of world this would be.

Arising from this argument is the fact that unless we are destined to be wicked at a time, and good and simple at another, it is not possible for a wicked person to change his ways or for a good person to suddenly become bad. If this belief in fixed and unwaiveable destiny is real, then it will rule out the possibilities of repentance, reformation, conversion and choice among others.

**Conclusion**

Destiny among the Esans is not a mere conceptual arithmetic. It is not an outcome of logical
construction but an inseparable existential phenomenon, which permeates the religious, socio-cultural and economic life of the people in their day to day lives. As it is obtainable in many cultures, a discussion of destiny among the people of Esan may not be completely bereft of contradictions and inconsistencies. This may be tolerated because as we have seen from the position of Yang Chu, in the operations of destiny there is no consistency with divine plan but discriminations and contradictions. This means inconsistency, discriminations and contradictions are fundamental to the nature of destiny. However, compared with some other conceptions of destiny elsewhere, it is my belief that the Esan conception is less riddled with contradictions.

References


*Pelmanism: The Science of Life*, Introduced by the Registrar, Richard Bell, pp. 2-6.

