

## Retributive Justice in Yoruba Beliefs, Culture, Verbal Arts and Literary Works

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### Abstract

*Writers write within self and their culture. Literature hinges its stories mostly on a tripod of love, religion and politics but one idea that has gained universal traction in Literature is retributive justice. Karma as an idea has been the preoccupation of many world writers. The paper explains what retributive justice is, its history and position in religion and how it is reflected in Yoruba beliefs and culture. It then examines how retributive justice serves as theme and background in Literature. The paper then examines the reflection of contemporary situations that reflect retributive justice at work through Yoruba verbal arts and selected literary works. It concludes by highlighting the fact there is a relationship between the Yoruba worldview and contemporary events when it comes to retributive justice.*

**Keywords:** Retributive justice, Nigerian writing, Yoruba beliefs, karma, poetic justice.

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God's justice does not permit him to forgive a person their sin without retributive justice being served. So, on this view, the sin of a person must be punished; it cannot remain unpunished. Let us call this the strong divine justice claim –  
Crisp, 2003

### Introduction

There is an issue worrisome to human beings and it is the concept of retributive justice, (Sterba (1977), Day (1978), Oldenquist (1988) and Crisp (2003). A concept found in many world cultures and in Nigerian cultures. Nigerian cultures and groups in their traditions have sayings, injunctions and beliefs about recompense and the act of getting paid for one's actions. However, the advent of religions like Islam and Christianity, the overriding Western civilisation, greater

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urbanisation, modernity and the present overbearing globalisation is fast destroying these beliefs and traditions. As they are destroyed, the societal planks and pillars made to maintain communities became destroyed in the cities and rural areas through modernity. This led to the belief that one is not answerable to any one thereby creating situations where responsibility for one's action is rejected. However, despite the above, many people believe that there is something in human beings' make-up that makes them to hate injustice and believe in recompense as a scholar explains:

It must be said; some sound moral insight must lie behind the conception of retributive justice. Otherwise how is it possible to explain its stubborn hold on the convictions of so many rational persons? To regard it in all cases as a rationalisation of vindictiveness, as the vestigial remains of a primitive emotional response, is to assume flagrant moral myopia on the part of a great many eminent defenders of the retributive view ... May not the demand for appropriate requital of good and evil be primarily an expression of the very profound human belief in the goodness of equitable distribution? (Garvin, 1945, p.273-274)

The above however, is not the only reason for the existence of retributive justice. One may ask, if there are no consequences for our actions, if we are free to do anything we like, then, what are the justifications for the World Wars I & II? The demonization of Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Chairman Mao, Stalin, Abacha and others like them? The war in Serbia? The Jewish genocide and the various genocides of the world? And the wars in Darfur, Afghanistan, the pursuit of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan with the Talibans in Swat Valley or Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers, in Yemen and Boko Haram in Nigeria? A concept that seems to explain and answer some of the questions above is retributive justice. What is retributive justice? Why do we have retributive justice? How has the concept been treated in religions? What do cultural groups think about retributive justice? How is retributive justice interrogated and processed in Yoruba culture? What tools are used by Yoruba people in reminding themselves and re-orientating their society about retributive justice? Does retributive justice help in giving meaning to the understanding

of this world and existence? These questions and others are what we will be trying to find answers to in this essay.

### **Retributive Justice: An Attempt at Definition**

The concept retributive justice consists of two words, ‘retributive’ and ‘justice’. In defining the word retributive, Day asserts, “the English word ‘to retribute’ is derived from the Latin verb *retribuere* and means the same as it does, viz. ‘to give back’” (Day, 1978, p. 500.) Using the above definition as template, one can say that retributive justice means what we have to pay back or have a right to expect as recompense for what we have done before, either now or in the future. Built within this notion is a “reference to the past, to some previous occurrence which in itself requires a subsequent adjustment”. (Garvin, 1945, p.271.) Retributive justice is sometimes taken to mean divine justice or karmic justice. Divine justice is believed to be unbending, incorruptible, consistent and constant. Karmic justice is derived from the Hindu and Buddhist belief in Karma. Gautama, Buddhism founder on the eve of his enlightenment, “saw the cyclical birth, death and rebirth of all living beings everywhere and recalled innumerable past lives, others and his own and linked this knowledge with a direct understanding of the process of karma” (Johnson and McGee, 1991, p.90.) Explaining and defining karma further, a scholar gives comparisons that:

You can compare Karma to a cosmic clock with every gear perfectly meshed. You can compare it to a super- computer keeping track of every action in creation. You can compare it to an eternal judge weighing the good and bad results of every thought and deed. In truth the whole system- universe, brain, lower self, higher self, Atman, God is bound together by Karma’s invisible force. The Law of Karma, which underlies every Eastern belief system, holds that none of us can escape paying our debts (Chopra, 2006, p. 72)

If all the above are true, and there is retributive justice or recompense for one’s action in this life or the next to come, the questions to ask are: What are the beliefs of the Yorùbá about retributive justice? Are their beliefs in any way different from others? How are these beliefs reflected in their songs, proverbs, folktales and maybe written literary works? We will be trying to answer these questions in this paper’s next section.

### **Retributive Justice in Yorùbá Beliefs, Culture, Oral Literature and Literary works**

The Yorùbá believe in good behaviour, character and good actions, hence the development and veneration of the Omolúábí concept, (See Awoniyi, 1975, Onabanjo and Omitola, 2006 and Tejumaiye, 2007). It is their contention that good works lead to heaven and that evil activities lead to a contrary heaven. The relationship between heaven and earth is reflected in their saying that “Bí won tí n sé l’ayé, ni won n se l’òrun” (How it is done in the world, is how it is done in heaven). This saying implores Yorùbá to behave well while alive. The Yorùbá’s belief in òrun (heaven) is in conjunction with their belief in ilè (earth or ground), and ayé (world). Ilè is the Mother Earth that is called ‘Ilè ògéré afokóyerí, alápò ikà (Earth who shaves her head with a hoe, the wickedness bag owner). Ayé is the world we are in and to the Yorùbá; it is a temporary place, a transient existence and a marketplace hence the saying “Aye loja, òrun n’ile, bó pé titi gbogbo wá n re’lé” (The world is a marketplace and no matter how long, we will all go back home). Òrun (Heaven) is the final home and home to Olórun (Heaven’s owner), who is also known as Elédùmarè, Olodumare, Eleda, Aseda and Adeda. Olorun is the Creator of all creatures, deities, things and human beings. (See Idowu, 1991) He can be ‘considered as the God of destiny’ (Bascom, 1969, p.79.) Olórun lives in the sky or heaven and he is the Sky God and there is no image or picture that can represent him. In Yoruba belief system, all creatures and objects owe their existence to the Sky God, and these include both benevolent and malevolent spirits, among which are ajogun, èniyàn, eníyán, eborá and the witches and wizards (àjé and osó).

The Yorùbá also believe that every creature will go back to orun (heaven) one day and give account of their actions to Olórun (God). The Yorùbá believe in two types of heaven, “orun rere (good heaven) and orun buburu or orun buruku (bad heaven) or orun apadi (heaven of potsherd)” (Bascom, 1969, p.71) and also that every individual consists of “eda, iponrin (the ancestral guardian soul), emi (the breath) and Òjiji (shadow). The guardian soul is associated

with the individual's head (Orí), his destiny and with the belief in reincarnation" (p.71). To them it is possible to see one's shadow, hear and feel one's breath but no one, hears, feels or sees the ancestral guardian soul while the individual is alive' (pg.71). After death the individual's three souls will go to heaven and on reaching heaven:

The ancestral guardian soul gives an account of all the good and bad deeds done on earth, just as a man on earth is heard in court and Olórun judges his case. If a man has been good and kind on earth his souls are sent to the 'good heaven'; but if he has been cruel or wicked and guilty of murder or theft, of beating or poisoning others or of injuring them through magic or slander, he is condemned to the 'bad heaven' (orun buburu, òrun buruku) as punishment. There are two heavens, both located in the same part of the universe, where evil deeds are punished, and earthly wrongs are righted. (Bascom, 1969, p.75)

Bascom explained that the word òrun in Yoruba language is used to mean sky or the after world a place, which is near Olórun, the Sky God, and a place that is beyond the sky. The Yorùbá like Christian, Muslim and other religious believers believe that in good heaven (òrun rere) the air is fresh, good and beautiful. Its alternate 'the bad heaven' or 'heaven of potsherds (òrun àpádi) is where 'the cruel people are beaten and made to walk and work in the midday sun' (Bascom, p.76). They are not allowed to eat what those in good heaven eat and the buildings they live in are different from that of those in good heaven. The notion of how heaven looks like to the Yoruba led to their having songs to explain this. These songs and others serve as vehicles of transmitting the concept of retribution and retributive justice in Yoruba culture. There are many songs that the Yoruba people use in describing retribution, retributive justice and its impacts, effects and results on the individual, community and society. We will look at some of these songs and attempt analyses of the songs in the next section of this paper.

### **Yoruba Songs As Vehicles of Retribution and Retributive Justice**

The concept of heaven and allocation of people to the various types of heaven as a result of their activities while on earth generated the following Yoruba orin arò (dirge)

Bó ba dé 'lé, ko kíí'lé  
Bó ba d'óna ,ko k'ònà  
Bo ba d'orun, ko s'orun re

Ma jokun, ma je 'kolo  
 Ohun won ba n je l'orun ni o ba won je  
 Ma ba won k'ole onimo l'orun  
 Ma ma ba won gb'orun apadi  
 (When you reach home greet them at home  
 When you reach the road greet them on the road  
 When you reach heaven do well in heaven  
 Do not eat millipedes nor eat earthworms  
 Whatever they are eating in heaven you should eat  
 Don't build thatch house in heaven  
 And don't live in bad heaven of potsherd)

The above dirge explains a lot of other Yoruba beliefs and convictions about what happens after death. The dirge explains that some people do not eat what others eat in good heaven but do eat what the living do not eat like earthworms and millipedes in bad heaven as a result of their activities while on earth. The same dirge also discusses how the outcasts are accommodated in heaven, thatch houses instead of well-built houses. These songs and sayings are meant as warning to individuals to not only think of this world alone but also think about their end and where they intend to spend their eternity. There are some others songs in this manner that are used for admonitions. Some of these songs include a song that serves as a reminder of one's journey to the after world and the consequences of the individual's actions in afterlife is the song below. The song asks everyone to remember the last day.

E sa ma se iranti ojo kan  
 E sa ma se iranti ojo kan  
 Ta o f'aye sile  
 Ta o lo sibi mimo  
 E sa ma se ranti ojo kan  
 (Keep one day in remembrance  
 Keep one day in remembrance  
 The day we will leave the world  
 And we will go to the holy place  
 Keep one day in remembrance)

One other song that reflects retributive justice and which depicts the end of man and judgement day is:

Wa beru re ni bode  
 Wa b'eru re ni bode  
 Ole o ni gbe  
 Wa b'eru re ni bode  
 (You will meet your load at Heavens gate.  
 You will meet your load at Heavens gate  
 Thieves won't steal it.)

This song likens all human activities and actions, which the individual put together, like a load or a luggage. According to the song, every act or action of the individual is like an item that piles up waiting for its owner at the gate. To the Yoruba people, after death we will go through a gate into afterlife; just like the Biblical Pearl gate. Here we will meet our baggage and will have to carry it into heaven to be judged by our “works”. The song above explains that no thief will carry it away and it is what you have piled up that you will carry into afterlife. So, any action either evil or good will be waiting for the doer at the gate. To buttress this perception of reaping and sowing, the Yoruba people also have another song that vividly gives the picture of sowing and reaping. The song Ení d'eru l'eru n to ... (Ashes will follow the ashes thrower) is a song that talked about a man's action following him. It goes like this:

Eni d'eru l'eru n to  
 Elete l'ete n ye  
 Hun hun o inu elede  
 Inu re ni n gbe  
 (Ashes will always follow its thrower  
 Treachery is understandable to the treacherous  
 Grunting is the pig's nature  
 And grunting's meaning  
 Is only known to the pig.)

The song above explains what happens throw ashes a by-product of fire into the air. The light nature of the ashes makes it to be blown away by the wind. However, the ashes is not blown away from the thrower instead it follows the thrower of the ashes. To the Yoruba, this reflects the fact that whatever one does, such must come back to the person, and the way ashes follow the thrower. These songs and others like them, serve as warnings to individuals and are meant

to make them look critically at what they are doing, saying and their activities here on earth. All the above underscores the strong belief in cosmic retribution among the Yorúbás. This makes them to believe that human actions always have repercussions that can be negative or positive. In the following section of this paper, I will be analysing how Yoruba beliefs in retributive justice is reflected in their oral literature and literary works. Here are some selected examples.

Yoruba Oral literature and Literary works as reflections of retribution and retributive justice

Proverbs to the Yoruba and other peoples of the world are tools of transmitting wisdom, perceptions, observations and insights from generation to generation. Chinua Achebe's postulation that "proverbs are the oil with which we eat words" and the Yoruba proverb that, "Owe l'esin oro, bi oro ba sonu; owe laa fi waa" (Proverbs are the horses of words, if words are lost, it is proverbs that we use in finding it.) surmise the importance of proverbs to human beings hence its existence in all human cultures. Proverbs are "pithy truths" (Kurien, 1998,p.S2), and "nonliteral language" (Katz & Ferretti, 2001, p.193). Proverbs for Owomoyela, (2004,p.2) are "incisive in propositioning, terse in formulation and deduced for close observation of life, life forms and their characteristics and habits, the environment and natural phenomena and sober reflection on these." Proverbs have been part of human existence and culture since the beginnings of time and are ubiquitous in all human societies and cultures (Adewoye, 1987; Ferretti, Schwint, & Katz, 2006; Hussein, 2005; Odebunmi, 2006; Pasichiniuk, 1999). Proverbs' functions include:

Mirroring the culture, affording members of the society a means of psychological and emotional release through the venting otherwise prohibited expressions, aiding in education and socialisation; and... maintaining conformity to accepted patterns while also validating institutions, attitudes and beliefs.



Proverbs are also ‘aesthetic’ and use “all of the devices we commonly associate with poetry in English: meter, binary construction and balanced phrasing, rhyme, assonance and alliteration, conciseness, metaphor and occasional inverted word order and unusual construction” (Abrahams, 1972, p.119). Examples of these proverbs include:

1. Iyán ogún odún a máa jó ni l’ówó felifeli (Twenty year old pounded yam will still burn one’s fingers)
2. Omode bu Iroko, o b’aju weyin, ko mo pe ojo kan ko ni Oluwere n pa ni. (A child abuses the Iroko tree spirit and looks back at the tree, he thinks it is the same day that the Iroko spirit- Olúwéré- kills)
3. Eni y’agbe s’ona lati lo oja, a pade esinsin ni pada ‘bo oja. (He who defecates on the path to the market while going, will come back to meet flies on his way back from the market)

Analyses of the above proverbs

1. Pounded yam is a delicacy among Yoruba people and it is made from cooking and pounding it. When prepared fresh, it will not last beyond forty-eight hours before getting spoilt. What this proverb is saying however is contrary the shelf life of pounded yam. What the saying means is that a twenty-year-old pounded yam will still be hot and burn a person’s fingers. The meaning of this proverb is at the literal and symbolic levels. On the literal level, it means that pounded yam no matter the time it was prepared would still burn one’s fingers. So, what the proverb is claiming if taken literally is impossibility. However, at the symbolic and connotative level, it means that any act from an individual is still a fresh issue no matter the passage of time. What this means when it comes to retribution and retributive justice is the fact that no matter the passage of time, an individual will reap whatever he has sown.
2. This proverb explains the fact recompense does not come in a day. The narrative in this proverb is that a child – immature and not an old person with experience- abuses the Iroko tree and looks back expecting the consequences of his abuse. The Yoruba believe that the Iroko

tree- *Milicia excelsa* or African Teak- is the habitat of a spirit called Oluwere and that this spirit figure can reward a worshipper or punish someone who makes the spirit figure angry or abuses him. This is the reason for sacrifices –ebo- being put at the foot of the Iroko tree. The sacrifices are for supplication to the spirit living within the Iroko tree. So, when the child abuses the spirit within the Iroko tree, he expects recompense immediately. The first half of the proverb- “o boju weyin” – that he looks back expecting the spirit to come after him is countered with the second half which completes the proverb that, - “o ro pe ojo kan l’Oluwere n pa ni” meaning the child thinks the spirit kills one the same day one commits the offence. However, this half explains that the spirit does not kill in a day. This means the that the Iroko spirit being will still avenge the slight but it will be in the future, most likely when the child would have forgotten the offence. In relation to retribution, the proverb is saying that recompense will come later but not an immediate action for every action a person put into motion. No matter an individual’s deed- good or bad- recompense comes later and in multiples in the future. Whatever you do, you will get the comeuppance one day in the future when you must have forgotten your action.

3. This proverb still confirms the Yoruba people’s belief that whatever one does; one will receive a reward for it. The person who defecates on the path to the market will surely meet houseflies on his way from the market because houseflies and dragonflies love faeces. What the proverb is trying to point out, as a warning proverb is that there is cause and effect in life. What one does will give birth to another act and whatever one does there will always be repayment. Meeting the flies on the way back is like a way of announcing and making public a private act. The person who defecates performed a private act but the flies announce the effects of this act publicly. The Yoruba also caution a person about his act by letting him know that there are no private that will be made public one day, hence the saying, “Àsegbé kan kò sí, àsepamó ló wà” (There is no unrequited action, what exists as secret action will become open and known one day).

The Yoruba have verbal arts. By their nature, they are observations gleaned from natural environment and then turned into words, which are believed to have the ability of coming true the moment they are uttered. As one Yoruba scholar explains:

The Yoruba word for verbal art is *eré* and the term for verbal artists is *àwon òsèré* or *àwon eléré*. Yoruba verbal art, although rooted in the tradition of oralness, is a dynamic art; it blends old themes and sayings with modern thoughts and usages. Today Yoruba verbal art is being used to convey twentieth century thoughts and concepts. Thus, for example *ewì* (modern poetry) and *ofò* (incantations) find uses in commercial advertisements and in propaganda of all kinds. (Olajubu, 1978, p. 677)

The Yoruba verbal art genres include, “*Àyájó, èpè, ofò, ògèdè, àse, dadakuàda, àpàlà, sákàrà, wéré, wákà, ijálá, èsà, or iwí, irèmòjé, iyèré ifá, Sàngó pípè, olele, rárà and jùjú*” (Olajubu, 1978, p.678-680). The Yoruba’s penchant for wise sayings, proverbs and axioms led to their educating and warning her members against infelicities through verbal arts. This aspect of verbal art- incantation- seriously warns people of Yoruba extraction about the negative impacts of wicked and callous acts on the individual and the repercussions of such wicked acts. In addition, some of these incantations are part of spiritual preparations or medicine made to send back the bad acts of adversary to such enemies. The following examples are in this category and they surmise some of the critical core of Yoruba beliefs about retribution and retributive justice.

1. *Owo ti ògèdè ba gbe, ara re ni fi lu.* (The hands that the banana raise, it will use in beating itself)
2. *Arigi segi to ba se ‘gi tan, ori ara re ni o fi ru.* (The arigisegi insect, when it packs its load will always carry it by itself.)
3. *Bi igbin ba bi, igba aya re ni o fi ko, bi ahun ba bi, a fi aya re kò.* (When the African giant snail vomits, it will pack it with its chest, whatever the tortoise regurgitates, it will clear it with his chest.)

### **Analyses of the Above Incantations**

1. The leaves of the banana (*Musa acuminata*) when it becomes dry will always rest on the banana or plantain trunk. This observation led to the above incantation. When the banana leaves are fresh, they stand upright and point to the sky. The moment they become withered and dry; they always rest on the banana's trunk. The Yoruba with these saying cautions individual about their actions. Their actions are likened to the banana tree leaves that when they are fresh are upright but when withered dropped to beat the banana trunk. All human actions, this incantation explains will always return to the doer.

2. There is an insect in Yorubaland called Arígísegi (Wood carrier). The insect will always arrange small pieces of wood into a load. After gathering the little pieces of wood, it will then wrap them around itself and move them along with his body. The import of this saying is that no matter the load or evil acts packed by an individual, the individual will always carry such load by himself. When this is applied to behaviour and actions, the incantation above confirms the justification of retribution and retributive justice.

3. The giant African snail (*Achatina fulica*) and the tortoise (*Testudinidae*) crawl on the ground. If they vomit or regurgitate their food or wastes, they will clear such with their chests. This is because as they crawl, they will crawl over what they vomit. The kernel of this incantation is that they always clear even the wastes from their bodies. When we interrogate the connotation of the saying, it explains the fact that whether good or evil, any action of the individual is likened to the body wastes of both snail and tortoise which the doer of the action will come to pick the consequences up. This saying is used in Yorubaland as a form of admonition for evildoers

All the above proverbs and incantations bring out the fact that within Yoruba culture and beliefs, there are warnings and admonitions against evil acts and wicked actions. The songs, various sayings, proverbs and other Yoruba verbal art forms are full of warnings (ikilo) about recompense and the existence of a place of account for souls. There are other sayings that

buttress the idea of retributive justice in Yoruba thoughts. The sayings that are used in everyday activities serve as reminders in making the individual cautious in whatever he does. A saying like, ‘ A se si’le, l’abo wa bá, Ení su s’ona oja, a b’esinsin l’abo Oja (It is what one has done that one will come to meet. One who defecates on the road to the market will come back to meet flies) not only warn but also they are good examples of causality and its effects in the life of an individual. The strong belief in cosmic retribution and retributive justice is reflected in the belief that an individual is not expected to avenge any bad deed done to him. Instead he is to take consolation in the fact that, ‘ Olorun o bimo, a mo o bi esan, Esan si lakobi Olorun’ (Almighty God does not have a child, but he gave birth to retribution and retribution is his first born). This in a way is a confirmation of the fact that the Yoruba as a group believe in retribution and retributive justice. Using happenings, events, and observations of natural situations they draw inferences to warn individuals, communities, and society to desist from evil acts and actions.

### **Retribution and Retributive Justice in Some Literary Works with Yoruba Background**

These strong beliefs in cosmic retribution do serve as the planks in storytelling and in written works of Literature with Yoruba background. In the story “Grief Highway” a story in Femi Adedina’s collection Boomerang for example, Justice Da’Costa because of loneliness arising out of his wife’s loss ignored his son and that affected boy so adversely that he was asked to repeat classes. This was not the only negative effect of the Judge’s loneliness; the other was the Judge becoming an extreme interpreter of law untinged by human compassion. Both actions in turn led to his being made to pay. Though he managed to stem his son’s academic failure and moral decline, he later paid the price in the loss of his son for not tempering justice with mercy in the Tokunbo Souza’s case although the two events are not obviously connected in the sense of a clear causal relation. However, in *Wetin you carry?* another short story in the

collection, one sees God's strict standard and the Yorùbás' belief in cosmic retribution coming to play in Inspector Andrew Okundaye's life. He lost his son for deviating once from his code of honesty and compassion and descending to the depths of robbing a dead person. His payment was the loss of his son and the loss of his reputation. This belief in cosmic retribution is meant to keep the Yoruba society and community from turning into a 'dog eat dog society'. The idea though, is not dissimilar to the Hinduism's idea of Karma.

In the play *Once upon an Elephant* written by Bosede Ademilua-Afolayan, the issues of retribution and retributive justice were reflected. Serubawon, the Chief Priest, the Head of the Afobajes' (Kingmakers) and the biological father of the new King, Ajanaku Olayiwonu did everything possible to make his legitimate son but who is an illegitimate heir to the throne to become the king. Serubawon did not stop at the perversion of the societal rules and regulations alone but went on to prepare him for turning him into an immortal through the various rituals he took him through. Some of the Afobajes warned him but he refused as the excerpt below show:

OGUNDELE: What other bath does he need after the rites we have performed?

SERUBAWON: That aspect involves only me. You may not bother as such.

ODEJIMI: He asked what rite, not the person involved (Silence.) I hope it is not what I am thinking, Serubawon.

SERUBAWON: How can I know what you are thinking?

ODEJIMI: Olubori rites of course.

OGUNDELE: But it can't be that one.

SERUBAWON: Is there any better way to prepare a mortal to represent his ancestors?

OGUNDELE: What?

ODEJIMI: But you can't do that.

OGUNDELE: You should have at least asked us.

SERUBAWON: What difference will my telling you have made?

ODEJIMI: Answer his question, Serubawon.

SERUBAWON: What difference will that make, I ask again? The rest is just a few steps away. I can only urge both of you to stand by me. The young man is more prepared for this task than I had initially thought. Quite strong-willed and confident.

ODEJIMI: Do you know the meaning of what you are giving the young man?

OGUNDELE: Do you even know exactly what you are turning him into with these rituals?  
(Ademilua-Afolayan, (2015). Once upon an elephant.p.13-14)

After Ajanaku became king he became a tyrant and in order to complete one of the demands of the rituals he was put through, he had to sleep with a virgin. He slept with Serubawon's daughter and according to Iya Agba:

IYA AGBA: How can you be so wicked? Ijedodo has no cure. It feeds on the blood of the virgin to keep whoever has done it alive, while that virgin dies a slow and painful death! (Once upon an elephant. (OUAE) p. 74)

This led to the regret Serubawon expressed towards the end of the play when he asserted that:

SERUBAWON: You should have allowed him. You should have allowed that boy to strike me dead because I deserve it! Desola's life ebbs away. There is no cure for her condition and you know that Fadeke! (OUAE, p.75)

At the end of the play, Serubawon hanged himself on the Iroko tree thereby reaping what he sowed. These strong Yoruba beliefs about recompense for whatever actions, speech or activities the individual carries out in his life serve as background for many literary writings as the above literary works show. Themes are the building blocks of Literature while language is the plastering of the blocks to beautify. Themes have always propelled literary works, because one of the writer's first intrapersonal communication act is to have an idea, he/she is passionate and involved in enough to write about. Without an idea/s the writer's message becomes not only flat but also untenable because he doesn't have what to say or the treatment, he wants to give his message. Retributive justice has been a constant theme in Literature the same way it is reflected in real life. In contemporary world, retribution and retributive justice are daily reflected in individual, communities and nation's actions. The next section of this paper explores this to show the effect of retributive justice and retribution on humanity.

### **Retributive Justice in Contemporary Times And Society**

Retributive justice manifestations in contemporary time and the present world not only confirm Yorùbá belief in cosmic retribution but makes it clear that it is something universal and that is part of human nature and examples abound. The present global warming and its consequences show that human beings are ‘reaping what they have sowed’. Floods are becoming rampant in areas that had never been flooded in history, the North pole ice cap is melting, snows are falling where they have never fell and drought is setting in places where there had always been more than enough rains. The present global economic meltdown is another example of global cosmic retribution. The greedy activities of a few bankers, businessmen, speculators, policy makers and politicians have not only push world economy into a tailspin but had led to pensioners losing their savings, millions losing their houses, billions losing their jobs and a forecast of economic sufferings yet to come all over the world. The hardest hit are the masses whom we can say did not partake in the greed on the Wall Street or other places wherever financiers because of ‘their personal greed cooked the meal that they are forcing the entire world to eat now’. This however would not be true because if the masses had voted in right people who are just and believes in what is right, there may have been honest and good policies passed that would have checked the financiers and businessmen. In the area of international politics and diplomacy, it is pointed out that what happened in Iraq, Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda and the United States of America is as a result of what USA had done before. References are made to the propping up of late Saddam Hussein during the Iraq and Iran war and that he was their instrument then against Iran but which now turned against them so also the Talibans and Osama Bin Laden, were US instruments against the then Soviet Union in Afghanistan who had now turned against their masters after the Afghan war.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examines the issue of retributive justice and retribution in Yoruba beliefs, culture and literary works. It defines the concept of retributive justice, traces its history and its position



in religion. The paper then explores the concepts of retributive justice and retribution in Yoruba beliefs, culture and in selected literary works. It analysed examples from Yoruba proverbs, verbal arts and songs. The paper then concludes by discussing the reflection of the two concepts in the postmodern world. The importance of the idea of cosmic retribution or retributive justice makes it an important one to write about most especially in this post-modernist, technologically inundated age. Within it is embedded warning for all that what we are doing right or wrong will always come back to us like the boomerang and that the effects may not only affect us alone but other that we love or who may not even be related to us. Short stories written on this theme serve as tools of informing humanity about what we need to do or not do in order to not only live well but also develop a better world for our offspring. There can never be a free lunch because someone has to pay and as present world events have shown we are all paying for the folly and greed of a few. This is why writings on retributive justice still remain germane and relevant till the end of time. The summation of all of these is that retributive justice and retribution are wired into humanity's DNA and no matter the action a nation, an individual or a society takes, the comeuppance or the consequences of such action will like the boomerang always return to the sender. Like a wag once quips, "Karma is a bitch".

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