

***Iwa* (Character) and *Imojuto Omo* (Parenting) among the Yoruba and the Experience of Eli in the Old Testament**

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Abstract

The concept of *iwa* (character) and *imojuto omo* (parenting) among the Yoruba people of Nigeria reflects a deeply ingrained cultural emphasis on moral integrity, discipline, and communal responsibility. This work explains the intersection between Yoruba parenting principles and the biblical narrative of Eli, the passive priest in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 2-4), whose failure to discipline his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, led to their moral decay and divine judgment. Scholars have not much to say on the subject of discussion by comparing the Yoruba epistemology of character formation with Eli's failure to guide his sons morally and physically. Primary and secondary sources were used to elicit information. This work posits the universal themes of accountability, the consequences of permissive parenting and the consequences. Among the Yoruba, there is a popular proverb which says *owo lewa* (character is adornment), depicting the cultural prioritisation of virtue, whereas Eli's experience could mean a cautionary tale about the danger of indifference in moral instruction. As a result of this comparative analysis, this work explains that effective parenting-whether it has to do with the system used by the Yoruba epistemology or the one practised within the context of the bible-requires serious understanding of the concept, strong correction where necessary and the habitual display of *iwa rere* (good character in children).

Key Words: Character, Parenting, Yoruba, Eli, Old Testament

Introduction

Parenting and moral upbringing are fundamental aspects of both Yoruba culture and biblical teachings. The Yoruba concept of *iwa* (character) is deeply tied to *imojuto* (parental guidance), emphasising discipline, respect and communal responsibility. Similarly, the Bible presents numerous narratives on parenting. One of the most striking being the account of Eli, the priest and his failure in raising his sons, Hophni and Phinehas (4:1-22). The work explains the Yoruba philosophy of parenting and character formation in contrast with Eli's experience, revealing critical lessons on discipline, accountability, and societal consequence

Parenting is a fundamental aspect of human societies, shaping the development and well-being of children. It involves the process of nurturing, caring for, and guiding children to become responsible and productive members of society. Parenting practices vary across cultures and historical periods, reflecting the unique values, beliefs, and social structures of each society. Exploring and understanding these cultural differences in parenting can provide valuable insights into the diverse ways in which children are raised and the factors that influence their upbringing. In the comparative analysis of parenting methods in the narratives of Eli and Samuel

in the Old Testament and the *Yoruba* Cultural Society, it is evident that both cultural and religious influences play a significant role in shaping the approach towards parenting.

The etymology of the term parent is from Middle English parent, borrowed from Anglo-Norman parent, Middle French parent, from Latin *parentem*, accusative of *parens*, meaning parent, present participle of *parere*, which means to breed, bring forth (Ben, 2020). The Old Testament, as a foundational text for Judeo-Christian traditions, provides narratives that offer insights into the parenting practices of figures like Eli and Samuel. These stories contribute to the understanding of how parenting was perceived and executed in the ancient Hebrew culture. The narratives not only highlight the responsibilities of parents but also shed light on the spiritual and moral dimensions of parenting within this cultural context.

Similarly, in the *Yoruba* Cultural Society, parenting practices are deeply intertwined with customs, spirituality, and social structures. The term “*obi*” used to refer to parents reflects the cultural specificity of the *Yoruba* people. The *Yoruba* community, predominantly found in southwestern Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, places great importance on the role of parents in shaping the future of their children. The word itself may not carry the same etymological roots as its counterparts in Hebrew, but its cultural significance is integral to the *Yoruba* understanding of family and upbringing.

The cultural and religious influences on parenting methodologies in these two contexts are worth exploring and comparing. Both the Old Testament and the *Yoruba* cultural society emphasise the pivotal role of parents in the development and well-being of children. The notion that parenting is not just about bringing forth a child but also involves the profound responsibility of shaping and steering the child’s future is evident in both cultural narratives. Furthermore, the early initiation of children into their respective cultural and religious contexts is a shared aspect between the Jewish and *Yoruba* communities. In the Jewish community, children are instilled with the belief that they are the covenant people, emphasising the connection between duty towards God and duty towards one’s neighbour. This early exposure to cultural and religious values underscores the importance of instilling a sense of identity and responsibility from a young age.

The comparative analysis of parenting methods in the narratives of Eli and Samuel in the Old Testament and the *Yoruba* Cultural Society provides a comprehensive understanding of how cultural and religious influences shape parenting practices. Exploring these narratives can contribute valuable insights into the diverse ways in which children are raised, emphasising the importance of cultural context and belief systems in the upbringing of individuals in these societies. The task of bringing up children has always been one of the most crucial responsibilities of both the *Yoruba* and Jews. Both start so early with their children. In the Jewish community, right from childhood, the children are made to believe that they are the covenant people and that duty towards God is invariably duty towards one's neighbour.

Jewish Concept of Good Character and Its Implications

The moral values of Judaism all derive from the commandments, or *Mitzvoth*, of the Torah. The Torah is the Hebrew word for the written law of Judaism. The Ten Commandments are the most famous. However, rabbis have traditionally counted 603 more mitzvot. This makes a total of 613 Jewish laws that govern religion, society, and politics. The Torah originated during the lifetime of the prophet Moses, who led the Jews out of Egypt and taught them the laws of God. Near the end of his life, he wrote down all of the laws of God in five books (Payne, 2017).

Jewish people view good and evil differently from Christians. It is rooted in the idea that the behaviour of good or evil is anchored in basic human impulses existing essentially from the creation (Reece, 2017). The Jewish concept of good character, rooted in a rich tapestry of religious and ethical teachings, has a profound impact on the lives of Jewish individuals and the broader community. Central to Judaism is the idea that one's character is of paramount importance in leading a righteous and meaningful life. This concept emphasises the cultivation of virtues and ethical behaviour, aiming to improve oneself and contribute positively to society.

The *yetzer ha-tov*, the good impulse, is basically 'conscience'; it's an inner sense that alerts the person when he/she is considering violating God's law. It warns the person, and it develops around age 12-13 when the young Jewish boy or girl first begins to become an adult. Throughout history, Jewish scholars, rabbis, and philosophers have expounded on the significance of good character, drawing from sacred texts such as the Torah, Talmud, and various ethical works. This dissertation explores the core principles of Jewish ethics, the virtues associated with good character, and the implications of this concept on personal development, interpersonal relationships, and broader societal dynamics.

Yoruba Perspective on Iwa and Imojuto

Among the Yoruba, the family plays a crucial role in shaping the character and personality of a child. As Omosor (2025) rightly noted, parental failure has serious consequences for the individual, family and society. *Iwa* (character) is considered the most significant virtue an individual can possess. The proverb *iwa lewa* (character is beauty) underscores the belief that true worth is found in moral integrity rather than mere physical. Parents are expected to instil good character in their children through discipline (*idagba soke*), moral instruction (*Eko Omoluabi*) on values such as respect (*iteriba*), honesty (*otito* and hard work (*ise sise*), as well as through communal involvement. The Yoruba believe that a child who is not disciplined will bring shame to the family. No wonder, the Yoruba proverb *bi akoba je omotan, a n je omo olote* (If we do not train our child, we will consider the consequences of an unruly child. This necessitates the act of correction (Reece, 2017). The Yoruba believe that parenting is not only the strict responsibility of the parents. It is believed that the act of taking care of a child should be a communal responsibility. It must be stated that, among the Yoruba,

the community has a role to play in instilling morals into a child. That is why the one who is not the biological father of a child can boldly call him *omo mi* (my child).

Yoruba Concept of Good Character and Its Implications

The Yoruba people are an ethnic group predominantly found in southwestern Nigeria, as well as some parts of neighbouring West African countries. The Yoruba culture is deeply rooted in rich traditions, values, and beliefs, including their concept of good character. This concept, often referred to as *the law*, plays a central role in shaping individual behaviour, social interactions, and is referred to as the overall well-being of the community. Hence, this paper explored the Yoruba concept of good character and its implications across various aspects of life.

1. Understanding the Yoruba Concept of Good Character

The Yoruba concept of good character, *Iwa*, is a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses a wide range of virtues and moral principles. At its core, *Iwa* is about exhibiting positive traits, adhering to ethical values, and demonstrating honourable behaviour in all aspects of life. It goes beyond mere actions and delves into the intentions and motivations behind those actions. The Yoruba believe that *Iwa rere lesu eniyan*, that is, good character is the beauty of man. Majasan identifies character training and religious education as the two main objectives of Yoruba education and that other objectives are pursued through the latter. (Reece, 2017)

“*Iwa*” emphasises the importance of virtues such as honesty, integrity, compassion, respect, humility, and generosity. Yoruba culture places a high value on having a good heart and treating others with kindness and fairness. Furthermore, it stresses the significance of self-control and moderation in one's actions, avoiding excess and extremes.

2. The Role of *Iwa* in Personal Development

In Yoruba cultural society, the cultivation of good character is considered an essential aspect of personal development and growth. From a young age, children are taught the importance of *Iwa* and how it impacts their relationships with others and their standing within the community. Elders, parents, and teachers play a crucial role in instilling these values in the younger generation through storytelling, proverbs, and day-to-day interactions. According to Gruenberg, the goal of character development is unchanged to help children become men and women whose conduct is guided by the highest principles and integrity of character. Having good character is seen as a pathway to success and happiness in life. It enhances an individual's reputation and earns them the respect and trust of others. Yoruba people believe that a person with good character will attract positive opportunities and blessings, as it aligns with the natural order of the universe.

3. *Iwa* in Social Interactions and Community Relations

Abayomi states that the usage of refined and socially approved expressions is of paramount importance to the Yoruba value system. The Yoruba are generally pragmatic in their approach to ethics and moral issues. Though certain concepts are shared by both Western and traditional Yoruba ethics, there are basic conceptual differences (Reece, 2017). The Yoruba concept of good character extends beyond personal development and finds its expression in social interactions and community relations. *Iwa* serves as the foundation for building harmonious relationships and cohesive communities. The emphasis on virtues like respect and humility helps in maintaining social order and preventing conflicts.

In Yoruba communities, individuals are expected to uphold *Iwa* in their dealings with others, especially in conflict resolution. A person who demonstrates good character is more likely to be chosen as a mediator in disputes due to their perceived fairness and impartiality. This approach helps in fostering unity and solidarity within the community.

Cultural and Belief Practices

Beyond the social and interpersonal implications, the Yoruba concept of good character holds spiritual significance. In Yoruba, *Iwa* is closely linked to one's destiny or "*ori*." *Ori* is considered the individual's spiritual essence and destiny, and it is believed to be influenced by one's character. Idowu observes that good character produces a good reputation, and their reputation is regarded as "*ala*" (meaning white cloth/clothes) in Yoruba culture. He adds that the Yoruba people will go to the extent of labelling a person who lacks good character as not a normal person. This is to say that such a person fails to act the way *Olodumare* intends for a person to behave. Having good character is believed to align an individual's *ori* with the divine will, resulting in a life of blessings and fulfilment. On the other hand, negative behaviour and actions can lead to a misalignment with one's *ori*, causing obstacles and hardships in life. Therefore, cultivating *Iwa* is not just a social and ethical obligation but also a spiritual path towards self-realisation and connection with the divine.

The Role and Place of the Community in the Process of Child Upbringing

Community plays a crucial role in early childhood education. It involves the connections between children, families, care providers, and local organisations. A strong community provides a supportive and inclusive environment that helps children grow their social-emotional skills and feel a sense of belonging. It also offers access to resources, experiences, and opportunities that improve the quality of care (Oyebanji, 2024)

When it comes to impact on a child's development, it is generally understood that the most important role belongs to the parents. The role of society in child development, i.e., the impact of the environment in which the child is growing up, is also quite significant. The role

and place of the community in the process of child upbringing are of paramount importance for the overall development and well-being of children. While parents are undoubtedly the primary caregivers and educators, the community plays a significant and complementary role in shaping a child's growth and providing a conducive environment for their holistic development.

Community plays an exceptionally important role in a child's development, because the child grows connected to the neighbourhood and the people in it⁷² Child upbringing is a complex and multifaceted process that involves nurturing physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of a child's life. It is a journey that requires not only the love and attention of parents but also the support and involvement of various individuals and institutions within the community.

One of the key ways in which the community impacts child upbringing is through socialisation. As children interact with their peers, teachers, neighbours, and other community members, they learn essential social skills, values, and norms. This socialisation process begins early in life, starting with interactions in preschool and extending throughout the school years and beyond. By engaging with a diverse set of individuals in the community, children learn how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and develop a sense of belonging. (Fatoye, 2024).

Education is another crucial aspect of a child's upbringing that significantly involves the community. While formal education primarily occurs in schools, the community plays a supporting role by providing educational resources, extracurricular activities, and opportunities for hands-on learning. Libraries, museums, after-school programmes, and community centres all contribute to a child's intellectual growth and curiosity. Moreover, teachers and educators are integral members of the community who guide and mentor children, shaping their learning experiences and helping them discover their interests and passions. The possibilities for action of individual children are linked in a complex network to the actions, possibilities for action and ways of thinking of other.

Beyond formal education, the community also offers informal learning opportunities that are equally valuable. Traditional wisdom, cultural practices, and life skills are often passed down from older community members to the younger generation. These teachings contribute to the child's understanding of their heritage, values, and identity, fostering a sense of pride and cultural awareness.

The community's role in child upbringing extends to providing a safe and nurturing environment. A child's physical and emotional well-being are greatly influenced by the surroundings in which they grow up in. A strong sense of community can create a support

network that helps safeguard children from various risks, such as neglect, abuse, and exposure to harmful substances. Furthermore, communities can work together to establish safe recreational spaces, promote healthy lifestyles and address health and nutrition challenges that affect children (Fatoye, 2024).

Mentorship and role modeling within the community have a profound impact on a child's personal development. Children look up to older individuals as role models, and positive examples set by community leaders, elders, and volunteers can shape their values and aspirations. Mentors can provide guidance, encouragement, and motivation, especially during challenging times, helping children build resilience and self-confidence.

According to Popoola, the community also plays a critical role in fostering inclusivity and addressing issues related to diversity and discrimination. A supportive community helps children understand and appreciate differences in culture, race, religion, and abilities. By promoting acceptance and tolerance, the community contributes to creating a more compassionate and empathetic society. Moreover, the community serves as a vital bridge between home and the outside world. As children grow older and become more independent, they venture beyond their immediate family and explore the broader community. Engaging with a diverse range of people and experiences allows children to develop a broader perspective of the world, enriching their understanding and knowledge.

In addition to direct interactions, the community also influences child upbringing through policies and systems. Local governments, institutions, and organisations create a framework that shapes children's lives. Adequate funding and resources allocated to schools and community programs impact the quality of education and services available to children. Well-designed policies can also address issues like child protection, healthcare access, and poverty reduction, further enhancing a child's upbringing. Furthermore, Imudia opines that the community's involvement in child upbringing can help identify early signs of developmental or behavioural challenges. Teachers, neighbours, and community members who interact closely with children may notice signs of distress or difficulties that parents might miss. Early detection and intervention are crucial in addressing such issues and providing necessary support to the child and their family (Imuda 2024).

On a larger scale, the community's collective efforts can influence societal attitudes and norms related to child upbringing. Advocacy and awareness campaigns on children's rights, child protection, and education can lead to positive social change and create a more child-friendly environment. It is essential to recognise that the community's role in child upbringing is not without challenges. In some cases, a lack of resources, social fragmentation, or cultural barriers can hinder community engagement and support. Moreover, not all communities may be equally supportive, and children from marginalised backgrounds may face additional obstacles.

The community plays a central and invaluable role in the process of child upbringing. Beyond the immediate family, the community provides a rich and diverse environment that contributes to a child's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. Socialisation, education, mentorship, and a nurturing environment are among the many ways in which the community impacts a child's growth. By working together to create a supportive and inclusive environment, the community ensures that every child has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.

Conclusion

The Yoruba emphasis on *iwa and imojuto* provides a cultural framework that reinforces the biblical model of responsible parenting. Eli's tragic story serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the danger of lax discipline and moral indifference. Both traditions affirm that effective parenting requires firmness, instruction, and accountability to ensure the moral integrity of future generations. A synthesis of these perspectives offers valuable insights for contemporary parenting, stressing that character formation is indispensable for personal and communal well-being.

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