

## Desire, Sin, and Death: Interpreting James 1:14-15 through the Lens of Umobuare Ugberaese's Edo Traditional Folktale

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### Abstract

This paper explores the causal progression of desire to sin, and ultimately death, as presented in the Christian scripture (James 1:14–15) and Umobuare Ugberaese's Edo folktale (*Oria's Mission to Pacify Death*). The objective is to underscore how the Christian and the Edo tradition present a moral sequence in which unrestrained desire initiates a process that results in corruption and ultimately culminates in self-destruction. The paper adopts a qualitative research methodology and is theoretically underpinned by the intercultural contextual hermeneutical framework, which integrates biblical exegesis with insights from African oral tradition. Through comparative thematic analysis, it identifies points of convergence between Christian moral theology and the ethical values embedded in Esan (Edo) indigenous folklore. The paper observes that this causal progression of unrestrained desire into wrongdoings and ultimately, self-destruction, not only highlights the same principle of moral causality in both the Christian and Edo (African) traditions; it also serves as a metaphor for the degenerative nature of human's moral failure. Among the findings of the paper are that, like the scripture to the Christian faithful, African folktales are repositories of African indigenous knowledge. These folktales function as indigenous moral hermeneutics, expressing communal wisdom on self-control, responsibility, and the inevitability of moral consequence. The paper thus concludes that both James 1:14–15 and Edo traditional folktale share a common ethical vision centred on discipline, restraint, and accountability. It recommends that African biblical interpretation should actively engage local narratives and moral traditions. Such engagement can deepen scriptural understanding and contribute to a culturally grounded theology relevant to the moral challenges of contemporary African society.

**Keywords:** African Biblical Hermeneutics, Contextual Hermeneutics, Edo Folktale, James 1:14–15, Moral Philosophy; Umobuare Ugberaese.

### Introduction

The Christian Scripture, in James 1:14-15, presents one of the most profound moral analyses of human temptation. James outlines a moral sequence in which human inordinate desire breeds sin, which, when fully matured, culminates in self-destruction (death). This Jamesian moral anthropology, often captioned as "the Jamesian genealogy of sin" or "anatomy of human fall", is similarly encapsulated in Umobuare Ugberaese's "*Oria's* (man's) Mission to

Pacify Death". This Ugberaese's narrative is an Edo indigenous folktale, in which *Oria*, the lead character, in his quest to pacify death, found himself entangled in the web of his own inordinate lust (desire), which eventually culminated in his untimely death that he so wished to avert. The core goal of this paper is to re-echo the need for a contextual biblical interpretation within African moral frameworks, by demonstrating the shared moral anthropology that cuts across Biblical ethics and the African ethico-religious tradition.

The Jamesian articulation of the causal progression of desire, sin and death reveals a deeply psychological and theological understanding of the nature of evil, leading to the fall of man. Coffman (1999), in his commentary on James, reiterates this, in his comment that, "When man permits his natural desire to dominate his life, he becomes less than a man and sinks to the level of the brute creation, that destroys itself by its actions and inactions". Davids (1982) adds that, "human greed (desire) is the internal impulse that draws humans toward wrongdoing." In this, he emphasises personal responsibility rather than external forces in matters relating to human wrongdoing (sin). The author of James uses the imagery of conception and birth to underscore the gradual development of sin from inward inclination that matures into outward act, culminating in spiritual death. This moral trajectory, as Allison (2013) and Moo note, offers a practical theology of moral discipline, which urges Christians (and humans in general) to confront the inner roots of temptation, before it develops into sinful actions and matures into self-destruction.

This idea of desire (greed, lust, etc.) as the father of self-destruction is similarly articulated in the Edo (African) traditional moral psyche. According to Ikhidero (2023, p 58), the Edo people, for example, emphasise the progressive nature of moral failure. They believe that the individual's inner disposition is inseparable from communal harmony and spiritual order (Ikhidero 2023, p.58). Commenting on the luleha (Edo) perception of 'arhialusi' – cosmic justice, Ikhidero (2023) emphasises that "nothing happens by chance in the African traditional thought system. There is an unerring cosmic law which adjusts effect to cause, on the physical, mental and spiritual planes of being." This is why unchecked desire (often symbolised through greed, envy, or lust) disrupts both personal integrity and collective well-being in African communities

In the Umobuare Ugberaese's Folktale of the Esan (Edo) people, *Oria*, in his effort to pacify death, realised that inordinate desire, greed, and covetousness – *eloisibheminre* is the internal impulse that draws humans toward wrongdoing and subsequently, death. This folktale emphasises, as Bolaji Idowu (1973) affirms, that "among Africans, moral transgression is perceived not merely as an individual act, but as a spiritual and social rupture, which requires restoration through discipline and repentance. Undoubtedly, Umobuare Ugberaese folktale reiterates African belief in the danger of unrestrained desire and the necessity of moral restraint. *Oria's Mission to Pacify Death*, as explained in Umobuare's folktale affirm that moral collapse originates within the heart. This underscores James 1:4-15's perception of desire, sin and death. Both traditions warn that unchecked desire leads inevitably to self-destruction. This convergence reveals a shared ethical logic grounded in the values of responsibility, self-discipline, and communal

harmony. This once again re-echoes the need for contextual biblical interpretation within African moral frameworks.

Despite the intellectually persuasive dialogue between the Jamesian “genealogy of sin” and Umobuare Ugberaese’s “Oria’s Mission to Pacify Death”, existing scholarship has rarely brought them together in a sustained contextual theological analysis. While extensive research regarding Jamesian causal link between desire, sin, and death exists, there remains a critical hermeneutical gap in how these concepts are articulated within the African moral framework, particularly in the narrative structure of the Edo (African) oral tradition. It is specifically the absence of such prior scholarly attention to the Umobuare Ugberaese folktale as an interpretive lens for the Jamesian anatomy of human fall that prompts this contextual biblical interpretation. This paper thus fills this gap by paralleling the Jamesian ethics with the specific “taboos” or “wrong turns” taken by *Oria* (man) in the Umobuare Ugberaese narrative, demonstrating a shared moral anthropology that cut across Christian beliefs and the Edo (African) ethico-religious tradition.

### Statement of the Problem

There have always been many ‘hues and cries’ over the hegemonic Western Biblical interpretive framework that has for decades posed a huge challenge to contemporary Biblical scholarship. African Biblical Scholars, in particular, down the ages, have argued that Biblical hermeneutics anchored only on Eurocentric methodologies have failed to address the unique existential, socio-cultural, and moral realities of the African continent (Bediako 1995, Ukpong 1995, Adamo, 2015, Chukwuka, 2022). This, as Bediako (1995) reiterates, undoubtedly creates a “hermeneutical disconnect” where Biblical text seems alien to the African lived experience. For example, in the present enquiry into the causal link between desire, sin and death as espoused in James 1:4-15, it is observed that without a contextual hermeneutical bridge that explains how this Biblical “birth of death” resonates with the African indigenous perception, the biblical warning would obviously remain an abstract theory rather than a lived social reality to Africans.

By placing *Oria’s Mission to pacify death* in the Umobuare Ugberaese folktale and James 1:4-5 explanation of the ‘genealogy of sin’ in conversation, we move towards a moral framework that is both biblically sound and culturally authentic to the African Christians. This paper thus provides a sustained, intellectually persuasive dialogue between James 1:14–15 and Umobuare Ugberaese’s Edo folktale, “*Oria’s Mission to Pacify Death*”. It demonstrates the existence of a shared moral anthropology that cuts across Christian beliefs and the Edo (African) ethico-religious tradition.

The specific objective of this paper is thus to: (1) examine how this indigenous folktale helps contemporary African readers perceive and internalise James’ warning concerning desire and sin; (2) explore how the biblical text critiques or deepens indigenous moral assumptions; and (3) understand the theological or ethical interpretations that emerge from this intercultural encounter.

## Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative research methodology and is underpinned by a contextual intercultural hermeneutical framework. This approach recognises the epistemic values of both the Christian Scripture and the African oral tradition. This gives room for an interpretative interaction between a biblical text and an African indigenous folktale. Documented folklore on Umobuare Ugberaese's *Oria's Mission to Pacify Death* forms the core primary source of data of the paper. The secondary sources include the Jamesian 'genealogy of sin' in James 1:14-15 and other related literature. It employed a thematic and exegetical analysis of James 1:14-15 using the Greek and the English versions of the New Testament (NT). This is important here because (a) the NT was written primarily in Koine Greek, and (b) Greek grammar and syntax (e.g., participles, aorist tense, aspect, and voice) play a crucial role in understanding the flow and emphasis of NT passages.

The study begins with a contextual reading and literary, exegetical analysis of James 1:14-15. It then gives a brief biography of Umobuare Ugberaese, and a narrative/moral analysis of the Umobuare folktale using African oral literature. The insights from both analyses were placed in dialogue to identify points of convergence, divergence, and complementarity.

## Contextual Intercultural Hermeneutics

Contextual intercultural hermeneutics forms the theoretical foundation of this paper. Hermeneutics is a term derived from the Greek word 'hermeneuo', which means 'to interpret' (Tuesday Adamo, 2015a, 60). It is the science of textual interpretation, and it comprises a wide range of disciplines, which helps to control subjective influences in the study of the Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures" (Chukwuka 2022, as cited in Alli et al. 2025). Contextual intercultural hermeneutics proposes that meaning emerges through constructive engagement between different cultural readings of the biblical text (Ukpong, 1995). It argues that interpretation is never neutral; it is shaped by the social, cultural, economic, and religious context of the reader (De Vries 2016).

African scholars have consistently emphasised the need to relate biblical truth to the lived realities of African people (Mbiti, 1989; Adamo, 2015b; Ukpong, 2000; Alli, Ikhidero & Etukumana, 2025, p.1). Alli et al. (2025), citing Metuh, argue that any theological engagement within the African context must recognise Africans as recipients of faith within their own cultural, religious, and civilizational frameworks. The rise of African Biblical Hermeneutics reflects a response to missionary interpretations that sought to undermine indigenous religious systems. This hermeneutical movement affirms the validity of African worldviews as essential to understanding and applying Scripture meaningfully in African contexts. Historically, African indigenous spirituality and epistemology provided functional responses to everyday challenges such as illness, spiritual conflict, and social disharmony. These practices embodied a holistic worldview that integrated the physical and spiritual dimensions of African life.

### Biblical Scholarship on James 1:14 - 15

The Jamesian anatomy of human fall where desire develops in sin, and sin matures into death (James 1:14-15) has, over the years, received commendable attention in scholarly discourse; mainly for how it distinctively portrayed a moral connection between temptation (desire), wrongdoing (sin), and self-destruction (death). James notes thus:

"But each person is tempted when they are dragged away and enticed by their own **evil desire**. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to **sin**; and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to **death**" (James 1:14-15, NIV).

Ἐκαστος δὲ ἐστὶν πειραζόμενος ὑπὸ τῆς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας ἐξελκόμενος καὶ δελεαζόμενος· εἴτα ἡ ἐπιθυμία συλλαβοῦσα τίκτει ἁμαρτίαν, ἡ δὲ ἁμαρτία ἀποτελεσθεῖσα ἀποκύει θάνατον. (*James 1:14–15, Greek NT*)

Dauids (1982), Johnson (1995) and Moo (2000) note that, in the above biblical text, James presents to us a moral psychology, conveyed through a metaphor of reproductive progression. In other words, it uses the imagery of conception, gestation and birth to portray the internal metamorphosis of human wrongdoing (sin) – from temptation (desire) to self-destruction (death). These Biblical Scholars underscore the fact that man's moral failure results mainly from his interior desire rather than from external influences. It emphasises that humans' moral failure is neither a sudden nor an accidental occurrence, but a deliberate conception that stems from an inward impulse, ἐπιθυμία - *epithymia* (desire). James continued in its metaphor of reproductive progression, that, when evil desire is deliberately entertained and nurtured, it develops into sinful actions. James' theory invariably entails that, rather than looking out for external (albeit) demonic forces to hold accountable for one's wrongful acts, individuals should look inward and acknowledge their role in nurturing their own fall from its embryonic stage (at the point of desire).

### Desire, Sin and Death: A Biblical Conceptual Clarification

The term, desire as Skralovnik (2022) puts it, covers a wide range of human longings, emotions, and cravings. Several words in the New Testament (NT) convey the meaning of desire, the most prominent of which is the term *epithymia* (Kinzer 2019, Cajthaml 2025). Kinzer (2019) explains that *epithymia* literally means an exceptionally strong desire (to set one's heart or soul on something). In many Texts of the NT where the term *epithymia* is used to denote desire, it usually carries a distinctively pejorative connotation. In these contexts, the word refers to works of the flesh such as jealousy, enmity, covetousness and desire for illicit sexual pleasures (Kinzer 2019). This is why it is sometimes translated as "lust" or "passion" (see Romans 1:24, James 1:14-15, Titus 3:3 and 1 Peter 1:14).

Scholars have argued that James situates his teaching at the intersection of Jewish wisdom and broader Mediterranean moral discourse. According to Bauckham (1999) and Allison (2013), the ancient Jewish wisdom traditions often portrayed desire as part of human nature and as a force that can overwhelm the moral agent if not checked. James thus uses the term *epithymia* in relations with desire to imply a disordered craving that undermines virtue; an

unchecked and misdirected passion that leads to self-destruction (Johnson, 1995). This Jamesian perception also aligns with the Greco-Roman moral Stoicism. According to Moo (2000), Stoicism sees the passions (*pathē*) as destabilising forces that must be controlled by reason.

Also, of scholarly concern in the Jamesian moral anthropology is the concept of “sin”. For Owiredu (2021), Sin as a moral and religious concept is generally seen in Biblical parlance as an action or type of behaviour which is believed to break the law of God. Among the Greek NT expressions for sin are: *παράβασις* (*parabasis*), meaning “to step across the line”, *ἀνομία* (*anomia*), meaning “lawlessness”, *ἀδικία* (*adikia*), meaning “unrighteousness”, *ἀπίστια* (*apistia*), meaning “unbelief”, *ἀκαθαρσία* (*akathisia*), meaning “uncleanness”, and *ἁμαρτία* (*hamartia*), meaning “to miss the mark” or “an act of wrongdoing” (Owiredu, 2021).

The Greek term, *ἁμαρτία* (*hamartia*), aligns more with the Jamesian causal link between desire, sin and death. In fact, the word *hamartia* is derived from the verb *hamartano*, which, according to Owiredu (2021), “involves the imagery of the work of an archer missing its target and simultaneously hitting the region outside of that target (which is not supposed to be hit).” In simple terms, therefore, sin (in the context of *hamartia*) can be understood as a wrong action or omission, resulting from a tragic negligence or error that leads to a chain of unfortunate consequences, causing destruction and ultimately death (Owiredu, 2021).

James 1:15 presents sin - *ἁμαρτία* (*hamartia*) not just as a discrete act but as a maturing process. In its metaphor of reproductive progression, James presents sin as having the potential of “growing fully” – *τέλειος* (*apotelesthē*). This suggests the progressive formation of a bad habit. According to Davids (1982), this is an indication of the general belief that moral character is shaped by repeated actions. James 1:14-15 can thus be seen as a warning on the dangers of allowing our initial impulses to develop unchecked.

The ultimate outcome of man’s unchecked desire, according to James, is Death. It is the final stage of the Jamesian metaphoric reproductive progression of human wrongdoing. James 1:14-15’s presentation of “Death” *θάνατος* (*thanatos*), goes beyond the literary physical cessation of life; rather, it metaphorically implies, “the final logical consequence of a process that begins with internal sinful lust (desire), that progresses into active wrongdoing (sin) which culminates in spiritual ruin and estrangement from God (Moo 2000). The Jamesian metaphor is intended to underscore the destructive outcome of human moral failure that begins with internalised desire. Bauckham (1999) reiterates that James 1:14-15 is warning everyone that sin is not simply a momentary lapse but a force with terminal consequences when fully actualised. Allison (2013) affirms that James made the imagery of the process very clear in order to send a message of vigilance to the believing community. Allison’s position underscores the pastoral emphasis of the Jamesian metaphor. It situates James moral psychology of temptation within a broader theological framework that affirms God’s goodness and man’s accountability for his moral choices.

### Exegetical Analysis of James 1:14 - 15

Exegesis is a technical term for interpretation. It is the process of understanding the true message of a text of Scripture (Cahill 2007). The opening clause of James 1:14-15, Ἐκαστος δὲ ἔστιν πειρα - *hekastos de estin peirazomenos* - "but each person is being tempted", presents temptation as an ongoing human reality rather than a sporadic intrusion. According to Moo (2000), the participles *exelkomenos* - "being dragged away" and *deleazomenos* - "being enticed" draw from hunting and fishing imagery, portraying desire as an internal lure that captures the individual. Bauckham (1999) explains that James locates the source of temptation *hypo tēs idias epithymias* - "by one's own desire", emphasising human responsibility rather than external demonic forces.

In verse 15, James develops his metaphor of moral reproductive progression in the aorist participle *syllabousa* ("having conceived"). This, according to Davids (1982), marks the decisive moment when desire is no longer passive but is inwardly embraced. James highlights how this conception produces sin with the term, *tiktei hamartian*, illustrating the emergence of sinful action from disordered inward impulses. The phrase *hē de hamartia apotelestheisa apokyei thanaton* ("and sin, when fully grown, gives birth to death") in James 1:15 culminates the progression. The participle *apotelestheisa* ("when fully grown"), as explained by Allison (2013), depicts sin as developing over time into a mature, destructive force. James' sequence of sinful progression culminating in death underscores the terminal consequence of moral compromise.

From a theological standpoint, the structure of James' anatomy of human fall, from desire to sin, culminating in death, aligns with the Ketuvim (wisdom literature of the Bible) in which the human heart is perceived not merely as the seat of emotions but as the seat of intent and centre of moral agency (Proverbs 4:23; 21:2). In this framework, moral agency is the exercise of the heart's will. Since the heart is the control room for all behaviour, James, in line with the wisdom tradition, rejects the externalisation of causality, as the outward human behaviour is merely a symptom of what has been conceived within.

From an anthropological standpoint, James sees humans as morally vulnerable, yet responsible. For James, humans' internal desire puts significant pressure on him; hence, the progression toward sin is not inevitable. However, the task is placed on man to audit and resist his lures so as to prevent them from developing into sin and eventual death (Johnson, 1995). Here, James advocates vigilance and fidelity to divine wisdom.

### The Edo Religious Landscape

Edo is the name of an influential group of Africans in South-southern Nigeria. Usually identified as the "*Ivbi'edo*" (the children of Edo), they (Edos) comprise the Benin, Esan, and Afenmai speaking people of Edo State (Aluede, Ikhidero, and Uche 2025). Edo people share linguistic similarities, religious beliefs, practices, and traditional, social, and cultural values. According to Oboh and Oboh, Benin is the primordial ethnic group in Edo. Its subgroups are

the Esan, Etsako, Owan, and Akoko-Edo. These subgroups are further subdivided into clans and sub-clans (Oboh and Oboh 2024).

Historical accounts and oral tradition hold that the Edo people trace their ancestral origin to Benin, from where they migrated to their present locations (Egharevba 1968; Okojie 1994, Oboh, and Oboh 2024; Ikhidero, Ewah and Okhifoh, 2025). Thus, the Edo terminology has two references to its meaning. First, it refers specifically to Benin as the foundational route of the people. Second, it is used as a reference name for the people by foundation and migration who share an ancestral link and boundary with Benin (Oboh and Oboh, 2024; Ikhidero et al., 2025).

Traditionally, the Edo worldview is essentially religious. They believe in a Supreme Deity (God) and other divine functionaries that are lesser spirits in relation to the Supreme Being (God). Outside the Traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Edo people, Christianity and Islam are also widely practised in Edo communities. These religions were introduced to the Edo people through foreign influence during historical periods of trade, colonisation, and missionary activity (Aluede and Bello 2016, Aluede and Ikhidero 2025). Despite the influx and influence of Western culture and these foreign religions, the Edo people have continued to maintain and practice their indigenous religious traditions, often alongside Christianity and Islam (Idumwonyi and Ikhidero 2013). This coexistence exemplifies both the resilience of Edo cultural identity and the capacity for inculturation (Graham, 2001; Idumwonyi and Ikhidero, 2013).

The postcolonial socio-religious life of the Edo people, therefore, represents a dynamic interplay between traditional beliefs and global religious influences. It reflects adaptive strategies that preserve communal values, moral norms, and ritual practices while engaging with broader religious systems. The persistence of indigenous traditional beliefs and practices alongside foreign religions underscores the enduring relevance of Edo cosmology in framing ethical conduct, social cohesion, and responses to existential questions (Idumwonyi and Ikhidero 2013).

Sin (*emiṣbe*, *emwinda* or *awa*), in Edo belief, is understood as wrongdoing, taboo or a violation of a divine instruction from ancestors, divinities and the Supreme Being. It usually results in a disruption of harmony between the individual, the community, and the spiritual world. For example, acts such as disrespect to elders, breaking oaths, or ignoring ritual obligations etc. constitutes sin. Sin can invite misfortune, illness, or ancestral displeasure. However, reparation and/or restitution are required for harmony to be restored. Such reparation, which can be obtained through confession, sacrifices, or ritual purification, is often required to restore harmony (Ikhidero, 2023). Unlike the Western notion of sin, as primarily legalistic or guilt-based, Edo sin emphasises social and cosmic balance, highlighting moral responsibility within a broader relational framework.

### **Communal Wisdom in Edo (African) Folklores**

Folklores are traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of a people's culture. According to Bawa, Essobiyou and Likambatien (2023, p.29), "Folklores encompass all knowledge,

understanding, values, assumptions, feelings and beliefs of a people, transmitted in traditional forms by words of mouth or by customary examples. They are the unrecorded tradition of a people as they appear in their popular fictions, customs, beliefs, rituals, superstitions and proverbial sayings.” Folklore also includes a people’s myth, legends, stories, riddles, songs, omens, charms and spells (Bawa et al. 2023, p.29). The most inclusive part of folklore is the folktales. A folktale is a popular tale handed down by oral tradition from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told either about animals or the common folk, to draw attention to their plight, and to teach a moral lesson (Bawa et al. 2023, p.29). Beyond entertainment, folklores serve as a repository of communal moral philosophy. They play a significant role in educating the people, especially the younger ones, about morality, ethics and wisdom. According to Ramohlale, Chauke and Molotja (2024), there is a significant integration of people’s beliefs in their folktales. Through folktales, profound beliefs in the power and influence of divine realities are instilled in a people, particularly the younger generation. This positions folklores (folktales) as a foundational aspect of African spirituality and cultural identity.

For the Edo people, folktales are like the thread that weaves through the fabric of the people’s traditional life. As Simeon Edosomwan (2016, p.91) puts it, “folktales (stories) are to a certain extent the mirror of the Edo life. They reflect what the Edo people do, what they think, how they live and have lived their values, their joy and their sorrows. They are means of articulating man’s (sic) response to his (sic) environment.” By embedding lessons in engaging stories, Edo folktales shape communal understanding of right and wrong, encouraging reflection on human behaviour within social, spiritual, and ecological contexts (Olupona, 2004; Abiodun, 2010). Okpewho (2009) adds that African folklores (folktales) articulate the moral imagination of the African people. They offer lessons on African values, which include virtues that should be adopted and vices to be avoided. Edo (African) stories frequently depict how ethical failures, such as greed, disobedience, or betrayal, invite misfortune, reinforcing the belief in moral causality and social responsibility.

### **Who is Umobuare Ugberaese?**

Chief Umobuarie Igberaese (1912–2001) is a distinguished Edo son of Esan extraction in Edo Central geopolitical zone of present-day Edo state. He remains one of the most significant cultural figures of the Esan people of Nigeria. Umobuarie Igberaese’s life and career were inseparably tied to the traditional *Afan*, an eight-string indigenous musical instrument that combined music, storytelling, and moral instruction. It is important to preliminarily examine his birth and upbringing, his introduction to the *Afan*, and his professional career as an *Afan* exponent, before situating his contributions within the broader context of Esan oral tradition and African cultural heritage. He was famous for playing the *Afan*, and he is considered a pioneering figure in Esan group minstrelsy and entertainment, paving the way for a new movement in the art form.

### Birth and Early Life

Umobuarie was born in 1912 in Iduwele-Ewu, a village in the Esan community of Edo Central Senatorial District (Umobuarie, 1989). The Esan people, an ethnic group in southern Nigeria, derive their name from *Esanfia*, meaning "They have fled," later shortened to Esan (Bradbury 1957). Umobuarie's childhood was steeped in oral traditions, where elders acted as custodians of knowledge, transmitting stories, parables, and proverbs through recitation and performance (Mushengyezi 108). As a boy, Umobuarie often sat with village elders, filling their tobacco pipes and listening to their wisdom. These experiences provided him with a deep understanding of Esan culture and prepared him for his eventual role as custodian of *Afan* music (Umobuarie 1989). His early exposure to oral traditions shaped his worldview and gave him the cultural grounding necessary to elevate *Afan* from a household pastime to a professional art form.

### What is *Afan*?

*Afan*, which is also called *Afalan* in Esan, is an eight-string indigenous musical instrument. In Ake Norborg's comprehensive compilation of musical instruments used by the Edo-speaking people of South-Western Nigeria, He talked about Edo pluriarcs, which include the musical instrument in reference. Of particular note is *Akpata* by Bini and Ishan (Esan), *Efa Umolo* by the Etsako and *Afan* by the Ivbiosakon (Norborg, 1992, p.92). It is important we state categorically that this eight-string chordophone is not called *Akpata* in Esan but *Afan* or *Afalan*. This musical instrument has a unique function in the traditional Edo musical ensembles. It is primarily used by notable minstrels in praise of eminent individuals and as accompaniment to storytelling. Thus, much earlier, Ben-Amos (1975) specifically identified the *Akpata* and *Asologun* (thumb piano) as the musical instrument which Edo narrators and storytellers use to accompany their storytelling art. Below is the photograph of Chief Umoboare Ugberaese's *Afan*.

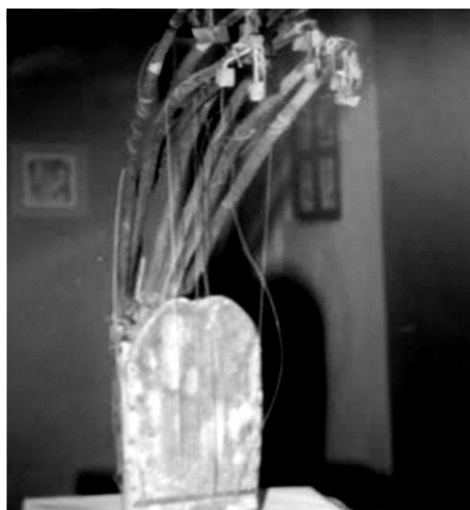


Figure 1: A photograph of Afan

### Upbringing and Introduction to *Afan*

At the age of ten, Umobuarie began learning the *Afan* under the mentorship of Abhuluimen and Omoera, local players, who treated the instrument as leisure rather than a profession (Umobuarie 1989). Unlike his mentors, Umobuarie approached the instrument with seriousness and ambition. His youth gave him the advantage of time, allowing him to dedicate decades to mastering and propagating the art.

The *Afan* was more than an instrument; it was a medium of storytelling, moral instruction, and entertainment. Performances combined music, dance, drama, poetry, and proverbs, often delivered at night to adult audiences. Through *Afan*, Umobuarie learned to weave narratives that taught integrity, propriety, and respect for both God and man. Stories such as *Otono* warned against covetousness and vengeance, while others explored themes of justice, leadership, and community restraint (Umobuarie 1988). His upbringing in a community that valued oral traditions, combined with his early start on the *Afan*, positioned him uniquely to transform the instrument into a professional art form.

### Career and Propagation of *Afan*

Unlike his mentors (Abhuluimen and Omoera), Umobuarie envisioned *Afan* as more than a pastime. He transformed it into a vehicle for professional storytelling, moral instruction, and cultural identity. His early start allowed him to reign for decades, building a reputation that made his name synonymous with the instrument. By travelling widely and performing for diverse audiences, he ensured that *Afan* was not confined to a single village but became a cultural symbol for the entire Esan people. Chief Umobuarie Igberaese's career spanned decades and elevated the *Afan* to legendary status. He was widely regarded as the sole known exponent and propagator of the instrument, a reputation that extended beyond his village to the wider Esan community and eventually across Nigeria (Ajayi Azilomen, qtd. in Umobuarie 1989).

His ensemble, typically composed of four or five elderly men, accompanied him with instruments such as the *egogo* (gong), *ukoise* (gourd rattle), and *agidimo* (thumb piano). His audiences included traditional rulers, elites, business and political classes, and even the police and the military (Umobuarie 1989). Through these performances, *Afan* became a rallying point and a symbol of identity for the Esan people, wherever they gathered. Umobuarie's career evolved alongside technological changes in media. He recorded *Afan* music on gramophone records, later transitioning to audio cassettes. Radio Bendel and other stations regularly featured his music. In 1989, the Nigerian Television Authority produced a documentary on him, further cementing his reputation (Umobuarie 1989).

### *Oria's Mission to Pacify Death: The Umobuare Ugberase's Moral Narrative*

The folktales of Umobuare Ugberase are characteristically performed with unique musical accompaniment serving as preludes, interludes, and postludes. This short but very didactic story starts with a song of appreciation to the *Idumuwele* community of *Ewu*, his host

community, and *Idoa*, his ancestral home. It is important that we mention this part of Umobuare's musicality as not just a show of humility and respect to culture, but also using music to code much information for his audience.

This story is about *Oria* (meaning, "man" in the Esan Language), whose parents, siblings, and nibbling died in quick succession. Out of great fear, he took tubers of yams and palm wine to visit *Uu* (death). While in the home of death, he pleaded passionately that death should not strike him the way all his siblings and nibblings were struck, and today he is forlorn. In his words, he said:

Oh, death, I have come to see you. Look at yams and palm wine. They are your gift items. I am told that it is you who kills every mortal. I have lost all. Everyone close to me is no more. Please, I do not want to die."

Death laughed thunderously and said to him, you are in the wrong place. Looking at *Oria* with pity, and greatly moved in compassion, death told *Oria* that he has no power to truly kill anyone, rather it is *Emianmen* (illness) that kills. *Oria* then took all the gift items and headed to the home of *Emianmen*. In the home of *Emianmen*, *Oria* narrated his predicaments and presented the ultimate plea that he be spared from *Emianmen bi Uu* (illness and death) so that he could live a full life devoid of any premature death. Again, *Emianmen* began to laugh, after which he told *Oria* to go with his gift items to the home of *Ikieegbe* (melancholy).

After listening to *Oria* with rapt attention, *Ikieegbe*, to his utter chagrin, told *Oria* that he has no such powers to strike and kill if the individual is not caught in the web of (inordinate desire and greed). *Ikieegbe* sat *Oria* down and told him that it is almost practically impossible for any mortal to die if he/she is not guilty of *Eloisibhemire* (inordinate desire, greed). At this stage, he was becoming tired of this circumlocutive journey, but having determined *ab initio* to seek the medicine for longevity, he continued his journey as directed. Consequently, *Ikieegbe* advised *Oria* to go to the home of *Eloisibhemire* with his requests. Once again, *Oria* took all his gift items to the home of *Eloisibhemire*, where he was well-received. On hearing the reasons for *Oria's* visit, *Eloisibhemire* praised him for being quite proactive because when a lad makes inquiries from an elder on what killed his father, he does so to avoid it so that what killed his father will also not kill him. *Eloisibhemire* told *Oria* that, as far as he is concerned, he is the great killer, and now that *Oria* was wise enough to approach him in friendship, all will be well for him provided he avoids inordinate desire, greed, and covetousness. And so, the journey of friendship started.

Moments after, *Oria* invited *Eloisibhemire* to his village's festival and *Eloisibhemire* was unable to attend. However, he sent his wife with gift items including wine and smoked fish to his friend's place. Before going on the mission, her husband warned her sternly to respect his friend and whatever requests he makes should not be turned down because *Eloisibhemire* is his good friend. It is said that *Eloisibhemire's* wife was an exceptionally beautiful lady whose hips and breasts were outstanding. This beauty was further compounded by the fact that all the gift items were put on a tray which she carried on her head and her entire body was uncorseted. *Eloisibhemire's* wife arrived at her husband's

friend's place in good time and as the sun was preparing to roost, she indicated interest in going back home and her host demanded that she steps over and go the next day.

At night, *Oria* (in his uncontrolled lust) demanded sex from her friend's wife and she refused. The pressure became too much even up to the point of exerting force and she then allowed it remembering that her husband had demanded utmost loyalty to *Oria*. At day break, *Oria* escorted his friend's wife midway in her journey and came back home. While walking back home, *Oria* started feeling guilty of wrong doing against his friend and his wife- a pain that kept eating him up on daily bases till he took ill and died.

#### Summary and contextual background of the folktale

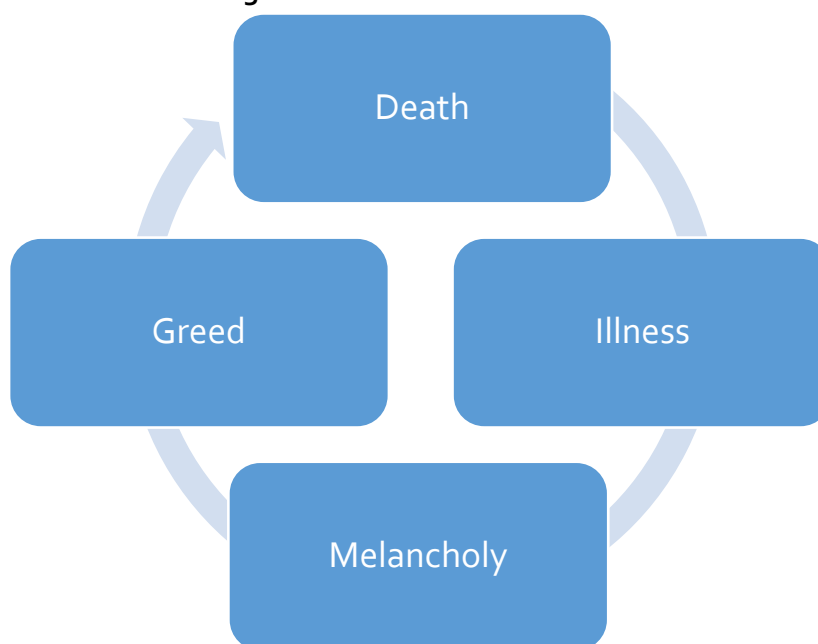


Figure 2: A graphic representation of Umobuare Ugberaese's perception of death causation as captured in his story.

#### Symbolic motifs of desire, temptation, and death in the story.

Umobuare Ugberaese's *Oria's Mission to Pacify Death* is replete with symbolic motifs that reflect the Esan (Edo) perspective of the genealogy of human suffering, as also portrayed in James 1:14-15. According to Prof. Matthew Izibili (Personal Communication, Ekpoma, 2025), this Ugberaese folktale vividly dramatizes man's existential quest to understand the source of mortality, unveiling the moral conditions under which life is preserved or lost. Below is a structured interpretation of the symbolic motifs in the narrative:

1. **The Journey: A Pilgrimage Toward Moral Truth:** This first major motif, is the symbolic journey of *Oria* (Man). He repeatedly moves from one metaphysical being to the other in search of moral clarity within a complex universe. Each entity, *Uu* (Death), *Emiamwẹn* (Illness), *Ikiegbe* (Melancholy), *Ẹloisibheminre* (Desire), represents a dimension of the human condition. *Oria's* pilgrimage towards truth

eventually reveals that: (1) death is not arbitrary, (2) illness is not self-sufficient, (3) melancholy is powerless without desire, and (4) desire is the prime mover of human downfall.

The journey motif underscores the Edo (Esan) indigenous theological/pedagogical pattern. Theologically, it illustrates that spiritual truths are revealed progressively, mainly through self-examination, humility, and perseverance. Pedagogically, it teaches the importance of self-control and moral discipline, the foundation of human longevity. *Oria's* pilgrimage towards truth re-echoes the broader Edo theological traditions in which individuals must confront the reality of their own inner tendencies before finding life and wholeness.

2. **Desire: the symbol of Human Vulnerability:** Ugberaese's folktale portrays desire (*Eloisibhemire*) as not merely a human emotion but as a strong metaphysical principle with the capacity to entrap, destabilize, and ultimately destroy. With this symbolic motif, Ugberaese's folktale illustrates the general Edo belief in the destructive nature of inordinate lust. In fact, the term *Eloisibhemire* depicts an unrestrained greed, lust (desire) for something (... that is not yours), a symbol of man's internal moral weakness that exposes him to destruction. The desire motif is an allegory for the disordering of the self, where individuals, though aware of moral boundaries, succumb to impulses that compromise life's harmony.
3. **Temptation: A Test of Covenant Fidelity:** The temptation motif in the narrative is embodied in *Eloisibhemire's* beautiful wife. Her presence illustrates the moment of moral testing for man, and her extraordinary beauty symbolizes the seductive power of moral transgression. Her physical attractiveness, accentuated by her uncorseted appearance, functions narratively as a test of *Oria's* moral discipline, especially after receiving explicit warnings about maintaining respect and loyalty. *Oria's* invitation for her to stay overnight and his subsequent sexual pressure represent his slide from moral awareness to willful indulgence. The refusal of the wife, followed by her submission due to her husband's instruction, deepens the ethical gravity of *Oria's* act. In this moment, temptation is not accidental but becomes a deliberate confrontation with the forbidden, symbolizing the ease with which humans rationalize unethical choices.  
Theologically, her arrival represents the moment in which a person's covenantal commitments are tested. *Oria* had entered into a friendship with *Eloisibhemire*, a relationship that implies loyalty, trustworthiness, and moral responsibility. By coercing his friend's wife into sexual relations, *Oria* not only succumbs to desire but violates a sacred moral covenant, thereby breaching the communal and spiritual order.
4. **Death: the Consequence of Moral Disharmony:** Although *Oria's* journey begins with the fear of physical extinction, the narrative reframes death as the final outcome of moral corruption. *Uu* (Death) dismisses direct responsibility, redirecting *Oria* to illness, and illness, in turn, attributes lethal power to desire.      Death

thus symbolizes not simply the cessation of life but the ultimate rupture of moral and communal relationships. *Oria's* death is not portrayed as arbitrary; it is self-inflicted through guilt, shame, and psychological torment. His inner anguish, "a pain that kept eating him up on a daily basis until he took ill and died", illustrates the Edo belief that moral wrongdoing disrupts spiritual equilibrium, making the individual susceptible to illness and early death. In this interpretive frame, death is a metaphor for the collapse of moral integrity, reinforcing the cultural axiom that wrongdoing carries existential consequences. The theological implication is that true life is sustained not merely by avoiding supernatural beings but by cultivating righteousness, integrity, and relational fidelity.

5. **The Moral Economy of Relationships:** The betrayal of *Eloisibhemire's* hospitality emphasizes the communal ethic at the heart of Edo thought. Friendships, covenants, and reciprocal relationships are sacred. *Oria's* violation of trust symbolizes the breakdown of moral reciprocity, which the culture understands as tantamount to spiritual suicide. His death, therefore, is not a punishment imposed from outside but the natural outcome of violating communal ethics.

This Umobuare Ugberaese's folktale employs the motifs of desire, temptation, and death to articulate a deeply moral vision of human existence. Desire becomes the moral catalyst for self-destruction; temptation marks the decisive moment of ethical failure; and death symbolizes the final consequence of a life disordered by unchecked impulses. Through the story of *Oria*, the Edo worldview teaches that longevity and well-being are not achieved through rituals alone but through moral discipline, self-restraint, and loyalty to communal values.

### Comparative and Contextual Interpretation of James 1:14-15 and Ugberaese Folktale

Ugberaese's presentation of desire, temptation, and death as interconnected realities that shape human destiny aligns significantly with the biblical depiction of desire, sin, and death, as outlined in James 1:14-15. When set side by side, both narratives reveal a shared anthropological assumption: that moral failure originates not primarily from external forces but from internal dispositions.

In James 1:14-15, the author emphasizes that temptation arises when "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire," and that "when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (New Revised Standard Version, 1989). The lexical imagery, being "dragged away," "enticed," "conceiving," and "birthing", underscores an internal gestation of evil that, when nurtured, results in self-destruction (Allison, 2013). This perspective resonates strongly with the Edo belief articulated by *Eloisibhemire*, in Ugberaese's folktale, who identifies inordinate desire, greed, and covetousness (*Eloisibhemire*) as the true killers of human beings. Both frameworks reject the tendency to blame external metaphysical agents for premature death. Instead, they root destruction in the disordered desires of individuals.

In the Ugberaese's narrative, Death (*Uu*), Illness (*Emianmen*), and Melancholy (*Ikieegbe*) deny responsibility for human demise, ultimately pointing to desire as the source of moral collapse. Similarly, in the biblical tradition, sin is not attributed to God or to an external malevolent force alone; rather, it is internally generated. James's portrayal is consistent with other biblical texts that view desire as a catalyst for moral downfall. For example, Genesis 3:6 shows that Eve's attraction to the forbidden fruit, "a delight to the eyes", precedes her act of disobedience. Likewise, Proverbs 4:23 warns that "from the heart flow the springs of life," signaling that moral outcomes are rooted in internal dispositions. Paul echoes this in Romans 7:7-12, where covetous desire is portrayed as the internal arena in which sin gains power.

Oria's moral failure also mirrors the dynamic described in James. After forming an alliance of trust with *Eloisibheminre*, he encounters a moment of temptation embodied in the exceptional beauty of his friend's wife. His yielding to sexual desire, despite warnings, corresponds to James's notion of being "enticed" by one's own lust. The aftermath is equally parallel: Oria experiences crushing guilt, psychological torment, physical illness, and eventual death. This progression reflects James's conceptual chain: desire → sin → death. In both traditions, death emerges as the logical fruit of moral disorder, not a random occurrence.

Thus, both the Umobuare Ugberaese's folktale of the Edo people and the biblical text converge on a moral anthropology that locates the origin of sin and death in the internal governance of desire. They highlight the necessity of moral discipline, self-control, and fidelity to relational obligations as safeguards for life. The Edo story enriches biblical interpretation by offering an indigenous African hermeneutic that parallels the New Testament's understanding of desire as the root of sin and death.

### Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Umobuare Ugberaese's Edo folktale provides a powerful and indigenous hermeneutical lens for interpreting the moral logic of James 1:14–15. By placing the biblical text and the folktale in dialogue, the research reveals deep convergences in how both traditions conceptualize desire, sin, and death as interconnected processes grounded in human moral agency. James's assertion that individuals are "lured and enticed by their own desire," which then gives birth to sin and ultimately death, finds a striking parallel in the folktale's depiction of *Eloisibheminre*, the embodiment of inordinate desire, greed, and covetousness, as the true destroyer of human life. Both narratives reject external blame and instead foreground the internal, volitional origins of moral failure.

Through Oria's journey, moving from Death to Illness to Melancholy and finally to Desire, the folktale articulates a progressive moral anthropology that culminates in the recognition that unchecked desire is the root of personal and communal breakdown. Oria's fall into temptation through the seduction of his friend's wife mirrors the progression outlined in James: desire conceives sin, and sin, when fully matured, produces death. His eventual demise, born out of psychological anguish and spiritual imbalance, exemplifies death not

merely as a biological event but as the loss of moral integrity, relational trust, and spiritual harmony.

By interpreting James 1:14-15 through this African narrative framework, the study affirms that indigenous wisdom traditions offer robust theological resources for understanding the dynamics of sin and moral consequence. The Edo folktale broadens the interpretive horizon of the biblical text, highlighting that the path to life, whether in Christian or indigenous Edo moral thought, is found in self-discipline, mastery of desire, fidelity to communal ethics, and the pursuit of moral wholeness.

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