

DEATH, REINCARNATION AND ANCESTORHOOD: ISSUES IN AFTER-LIFE IN TRADITIONAL IGBO RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to explore the belief of the Igbo in life after death in relation to time and space. Death in Igbo worldview is seen as a distortion in the rhythm of life; a temporary transition from one phase of existence to another and not the end of it. It is believed that an individual engages in a cycle of births and deaths up to seven times technically referred to as reincarnation before his final rest in the ancestral world. Though, this basic belief of the people has been rejected by forces of social change as fetish and superstitious, the average Igbo is being haunted by practical life experiences which support the reality of the phenomenon. Against this backdrop the paper emerged to prove to the world that the Igbos of Nigeria strongly believes in reincarnation. Phenomenological research method developed by Edmond Husserl which brackets off researcher's bias and assumptions, and concentrates on the detailed description of conscious experience, was used to examine these concepts from Igbo worldview, their attitude to life and death, to salvation and ancestorhood. It was discovered that correct judgment can only come through objective investigation.

KEYWORDS: Reincarnation, Death, Life, Igbo, Ancestor

INTRODUCTION

Ezeudu! He called in his guttural voice. If you had been poor in your last life I would have asked you to be rich when you come again. But you were rich. If you had been a coward, I would have asked you to bring courage. But you were a fearless warrior. If you had died young, I would have asked you to get life. But you lived long. So I shall ask you to come again the way you came before (Achebe; 1958:98).

The destiny of the human soul at death has been the preoccupation of man. This fact is clearly expressed in the above dirge by a masquerade at a funeral of a titled man in Igboland. It offers useful insights to the understanding of life, death and the hereafter in relation to time and space among the Igbo and its implications are far reaching. Firstly, it points to the fact that existence consists in a series of births and deaths (coming and going). Secondly, that one's destiny is a negotiated end in the spirit world before actual birth. Thirdly, that the spirit of the dead hovers around during burial and funeral rites and could be addressed by the living. Fourthly, that burial and funeral ceremonies in Igbo land are largely religious in origin and scope and as such, they reveal the religious, ritual, social and other cultural preoccupations of the people. And fifthly, that the land of the ancestors is not a place of permanent rest in Igbo world view unless one has completed the cycle of reincarnation.

During burial and funeral ceremonies, the conception of the Igbo of a world where activities rotate in a cyclic pattern is reenacted. Amankulo (2002) observes that such view of life which is characteristic of simple society stems from

agricultural activities which constitute the main “occupational pursuit of the people in which the harvest and planting cycles of crops parallel the birth, death and rebirth of man” (p.401).

Thus conceived, burial and funeral ceremonies are occasions for recalling the history and development of the individual from birth to death during which tributes are paid to the ancestors. The life of a man and the activities which take place within it are conceived as cyclical pattern marked by presence, absence and return. Like the agricultural crops a child is born, he grows old; eventually dies and departs for the land of the dead from where he returns again as a new born child.

Therefore, burial and funeral ceremonies in Igbo culture are rites of passage and some dramatic performances which accompany them are visual symbols of the spiritual and social preoccupation of the people and ideals of the community. Each of such performances as alluded to above demonstrates the collective desire of the people for the good things that nourish livingness in human society.

However, this aspect of the people’s culture has been rejected by forces of social change as fetish and superstitious. Christianity as one of the change agents considers the traditional doctrine of the dead a negation of its doctrine of immediate judgment after death and the subsequent life in eternity after the resurrection of the body. But, in spite of its efforts, Christianity has not completely eliminated some traditional beliefs in Igboland because in the opinion of Kalu (2003) the Igbo have woven enduring convictions before the advent of Christianity. Added to this, the average Igbo, majority of whom have become Christians, can pinpoint evidences which support the reality of reincarnation from their practical life experiences. It goes to say that the average Igbo Christian is in dilemma; he confesses faith in the resurrection in spite of his conviction of the fact of reincarnation.

Therefore, the main thrust of this paper is to seek to clarify the knotty issues in life after death to see how that can enrich the Christian’s knowledge of the idea of salvation in Igbo religious culture which will engender dialogue between the two opposing worldviews. Phenomenological research method developed by Edmond Husserl which brackets off researcher’s bias and assumptions, and concentrates on the detailed description of conscious experience, was used in the study to examine the validity of the claim of salvation in Igbo worldview. It was discovered that great and valid truths about salvation are embedded in the symbolisms and pictures which convey the phenomenon.

Igbo Worldview

The worldview of a people is their perception of reality; “it refers to the complex of beings, habits, laws, customs and traditions of a people. Further, it includes the overall picture they have about reality, the universe, life and existence” (Nwala; 1985: 24). It is concerned with the people’s attitude to life, their basic beliefs about the world, how they conceive and understand the universe, reality and the conception of the beings therein.

Consequent upon this, the Igbo according to Iwuagwu (1998) conceive of a three-decker compartment of the universe in relation to space. *Elu-igwe* (the sky), is the abode of the Supreme Being and major divinities excluding the earth goddess *Ala*. *Uwa* (the earth), is where man shares with animals, vegetation and some spirits including the earth goddess, while *Ala mmuo* (the underworld) is inhabited by the ancestors. The three-decker compartment notwithstanding, the Igbo make no rigid demarcation in terms of sphere of interaction of beings. Igbo world is a “one fluid coherent unit in which spirits, men, plants and animals, and the elements are engaged in continuous interaction” Ekwunife (2003:18). Thus, there is no rigid demarcation between the visible and invisible, the spiritual and the material; only the Supreme

Being is placed in a separate ontological order, apart from other spiritual beings who are his subordinates.

Igbo cosmology conceives man as the being in the centre and his relationship with the spirits and cosmic forces as precarious. Thus understood, man, regards himself as the being “who must through rituals maintain equilibrium and harmonious relationship with all the beings, that impinge on his life and being” (Metuh; 1985:4). It is in this sense that the efforts of the Igbo to clear way to success through assistance of deities and ancestors could be appreciated. Ancestors being closest to man enjoy intimate relationship and interaction with the living.

Igbo Attitude to Life and Death

Among the Igbo the supremacy of life over and above other considerations cannot be compromised. It finds expressions in such sayings as *ndu bu isi* (life is supreme), *ndu ka aku* (life is more precious than wealth), *aghara ndu kpa aku onye iro erie* (wealth acquired at the expense of life is enjoyed by the enemy). Hence life is jealously guarded at all cost. Life is so precious and valuable that such things as assassination and ritual killings were unknown except when the gods demanded human sacrifice to avert calamities in the land (Arinze, 1990).

The Igbo do not refute or deny the power of death to destroy life. Ugwu, (2004:56) lends credence to this view he posits that “death is the power that destroys life”. Even though it is a common knowledge/saying among the people that death is inevitable; a kind of debt which every living being must pay, it constitutes the greatest threat to life. Death is viewed as having the ability to dislocate relationships with this present world and transit one to the land beyond. It stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invincible.

However, the traditional Igbo are consoled by the thought of life beyond the grave that is predicated upon good life here on earth. It is entrenched in the people’s view that good life leads to good death and subsequent reward of blissful after life which consists in a cycle of rebirths and deaths. And on the contrary, bad life leads to bad death and the punishment of the soul in a dark void where it wanders aimlessly and would not be allowed to reincarnate. Hence the traditional Igbo strove to live morally good life in order to enjoy eternal bliss in the world of the ancestors and to escape life of misery in the outer darkness called “*ama itire*” (Iwuagwu; 1998).

Paradoxically, this belief is pursued from two angles; first that this world is a permanent place (Onuoha; 1997) and that the hereafter is a continuation of this life. Therefore, the traditional Igbo do not share the Christians’ view that this world is a temporal place or the modern man’s view of the hereafter as a mere fuse or speculation. The Igbo penchant for hard work is predicated upon this belief that every effort has to be made to make life in the here and now worthwhile, *ezi ndu*. Hence, the Igbo attitude to life is world affirming; the notion of enhancing this world for his enjoyment in a cycle of rebirths and deaths before final rest in the land of the ancestors.

In summary, life, whether in the now or in the hereafter for the Igbo constitute a single reality; it is a *continuum* (Mbiti; 1969:161), death being a temporary separation from this life which will be taken up again later.

Reincarnation (Ilua Uwa) in Igbo Religious Life

Reincarnation has been given different interpretation by different scholars and religionists from different historical, cultural and ideological influences. Among the Igbo/African scholars it has been pursued from two models; the traditional physico-cyclic model of interpretation presents reincarnation as a cyclic return of a dead person into a new born child. This model was used by scholars such as Mbiti (1969), Metuh (1987), Idowu (1973), Basden (1982), Onunwa

(1990), Onwubiko (1991) though their interpretations apparently differ. Recently, Ekwunife (2000) developed a mystico-psychic model which represents reincarnation as the exercise of “a mystical influence of the spirit on the body which neither diminishes the status of the dead in the spirit world nor does it destroy or supplant the unique personality and individuality of the new born child” (p.11). This shift from the traditional position argues that the phenomenon under study should be viewed from the religio-cultural context of the people involved and not from its English transliteration. This paper adopts the traditional model.

Reincarnation in Igbo is *ilo-uwa*; a compound of two Igbo words; *ilo* and *uwa*. *Ilo* literarily translates to come back. *Uwa*, is the earth, the world of living humans. Linguistically, when the Igbo say *ilo ta go*, it asks the question; have you returned? Thus, the Igbo refer to *Ilo-Uwa*; as a return to the world from *Ala- muo*, the realms of the spirit world where the ancestors live. Therefore, *ilo uwa*, simply means to come back or to return to the land of the living from the realm of the ancestral spirits. Apparently, the Igbo perception of reincarnation is to return to the visible world from the invisible world. This claim is in tandem with Igbo perception of the Cosmos comprising two intricate co-penetrating worlds of visible and invisible with interacting beings in their various hierarchies. This is what Ekwunife (2000:35-36) alludes to when he argues that “the existence of the two worlds as they impinge on each other in a continuous interaction for the Africans, is not a figment of imagination which modern scientific and technological education can snuff away completely.”

Unequivocally, the Igbo view of reincarnation is part of reality; a fact which proofs abound today, the contact with Western Culture and Christianity, notwithstanding.

It is to the credit of Christianity that it has made some remarkable impact on the religious outlook of the Igbo. However, the enduring conviction of the Igbo on reincarnation leaves much to be desired when examined from the evidence of the experience of prodigy, physical defects at birth noticed in the previous existence, the doctrine of seven rounds in the evolutionary cycles of man (*uwam uwa esaa*), names of children and existence of *ogbanje* (born to die or changeling).

Incidence of child prodigy which is referred to in the local parlance as *ebibi uwa*; whereby a young person exhibits unusual intelligence or skill for his age, is usually cited by the Igbo as one of the proofs of reincarnation (Onyewuenyi;1996). There are indicators in the traditional society that some children exhibit certain acts that are quite incompatible with their age. Usually, people are perplexed at such exhibition of unusual intelligence. Added to this sometimes a child could be in possession of knowledge of event that took place years before his birth. In the traditional society such finds explanation in the reincarnation of a deceased relative who witnessed such events while alive and now have reincarnated in the newborn baby.

Lending credence to this, Stevenson (1985) observes that “they (Africans) try to identify the reincarnated ancestor by means of birth marks, statements a child makes when it began to speak, and behavioural resemblances between that child and the deceased person of whom it is the presumed reincarnation.” It is explained that such people are identified to have existed previously owing to those qualities which they now exhibits. Hence in their new life, having obtained body through which the acquired genius can be expressed, they display these quite early in life. Such children are referred to as being older than their age.

Reappearance of physical defects or scar which a deceased person carried on the body of a new born child is another proof of reincarnation. Studies reveal that some people born with scar or deformity on their body are reincarnations

of relatives who died with those body defect or wound in their previous life. Stevenson (1986) opines that the subject of the Igbo cases showed a high incidence of 68% of birth defects and birth marks said to correspond with wounds on the previous personality. This in a sense shows that marks are used more to indicate incidence of reincarnation in Igbo land and has remained the strongest valid argument for reincarnation.

Naming a child is an important function in Igboland and has transmitted Igbo belief in reincarnation. A child is usually given two names at birth; the first one reflects either the day the child was born or other circumstances surrounding its birth. But the second one according to Basden (1982) is suggested by;

... the display of some characteristic trait or some resemblance, fancied or otherwise, to a deceased member of the family. The Ibo (sic) believes that all children are reincarnations of beings who have already passed through a lifetime in this world; hence a man will point to a little girl and gravely inform you that she is his mother reborn into the world (p.60)

Such names as *Nnedi* (my mother is still living), *Nnamdi* (my father exists), *Nnenna* (the mother of my father), *Onochie* (a replacement), *Nnamani* (my ancestral father), etc point to the fact of reincarnation. The name *Onochie* in particular is usually given to a male child born shortly after the death of its father. The child may not resemble its deceased father but for the fact that it was not born a female, shows that he is a reincarnation of its father who has come back to take his position in the family.

Ogbanje (born to die) is a strong indication of Igbo's belief in reincarnation. Though it is not regarded as such, Stevenson (1985) rightly remarked that the Igbo concept of reincarnation includes belief in a group of souls called "ogbanje" who are born, die after a short while, and are reborn in the same family, often repeatedly. To demonstrate that the trajectory of *Ogbanje* is not a welcome development mutilation of the child's deceased body is carried out as a deterrent. A decision could be taken to cut off one of the toes, or fingers or a part of the ear in order to stop the child from tormenting the mother in its cycle of born to die. Achebe (1958), remarks that some stubborn ones eventually reappears again with the mark on the body. And this goes to confirm the claim by the Igbo that the dead person return to life to continue a new life as a new born baby in the same family.

Among the Igbo, it is common knowledge that life consists in and is well understood to be transmigration of human souls through the seven worlds of being (*uwam uwa esaa*). The expression *uwam ozo* (in my next world) underscores this fact. It is expressed usually in their daily experience, relationships and interactions to convey what one wishes to be in the next world. Women, because of the intimidation and subjugation to inferior status by men in this world wish to come back as men in their next world. Likewise, some weak men desire to come in their next world as women having found male responsibilities tasking. When a child does quite a good turn to an old father or mother he receives the encomium; "*ezi nwam, igakwa abụ nwam na uwam uwa asaa*" – meaning "my good child, you will continue to be my child in my seven worlds of being.

This belief exercises an immense influence in creating the consciousness of the underlying idea to regard the present life as a probationary one, preparatory to another life to come. Each phase of life lived prepares one for the next and the round continues. This to the Igbo is salvation and it is predicated upon decent life.

Igbo Perception of Salvation and Life After Death

Salvation is exclusively a religious term. Ajah, (1981:15), notes that it is "the greatest quest which religion is

supposed to be concerned with". Every religion of the world promises salvation to its adherents and at the same time provides means of attaining it. The Igbo equate attaining salvation with adhering to the norms of the land. In other words salvation to the traditional Igbo is to adhere strictly to that which obtains in the land, *Omenani*. Ajah (1981:15) further explains that "it is for this salvational need that prompts an African traditionalist to be apt in keeping the norms of his land."

Leeuw (1963:47) explains that primarily, life is a cycle, uninterrupted by death if only the correct rites are observed." This implies that life continues in a cycle as long as the requisite ritual performances are observed. On the other hand it is by meeting the requisite celebrations that affords one the opportunity of salvation at death. Ugwu (2004:56) notes that there are four rites upon which salvation is predicated. These are rites of birth, puberty rites, rites of adulthood and death rites each of which is a milestone in the path of salvation. These rites are held in high esteem and meticulous observation of them sums up to help one to achieve the salvation of his soul.

To attain ancestorship is the height of salvation in Igbo religious thought. So then, the efforts of the Igbo traditionalist in observing carefully the norms of the land are aimed at obtaining the blessings of the ancestors and attaining ancestorship when he dies. No wonder, among the Igbo, the highest desire is to maintain harmonious relationship with the multifarious spiritual beings and to join his long departed relatives in the ancestral land at death. To achieve the latter, there are some qualities or characters which must be credited to him before he could be designated as an ancestor. These qualities are discussed below.

First, an individual qualifies as an ancestor by living a decent life (*ezi ndu*) while on earth. It is the good life lived that would help him to develop harmonious relationship with the Supreme Being (*chukwu or chineke*) and the spirits (ancestors) on one hand, and with his fellow human beings on the other hand. This quality of decent life is guided by the norms of the land (*omenani*). Such behaviour as stealing, murder, adultery, poisoning, witchcraft, are prohibited and punished. Punishment is in various forms; deadly diseases like leprosy, miscarriage, protruded stomach at death and even being struck dead by thunder. Decent life helps him to attract the blessing of the ancestors and at the end, die a good death at his old age.

Secondly, marriage is regarded highly in Igbo traditional society. It does not only make one a responsible person, it is "the entrance into life proper" (Leeuw; 1938:195). Marriage qualifies one to attain full humanity. It is the gateway to maturing and responsible adult life. It is through marriage that genuine procreation is established. To refuse to marry is act of wickedness, the refusal to cooperate with *Chineke* in the act of procreation thereby blocking a channel through which a lineage is propagated and sustained. Children are valued because they are needed to continue the family tree; the primary reason for which marriage is instituted. Thus, for a man to remain childless is a curse from the gods whose wrath he has incurred. It is believed that the dead depend on the living for their victuals; they need their children to always remember them with libations and sacrifices. So, it is the soul of the person who left many children behind on earth to keep him supplied with the necessities of after life including the possibility of reincarnation that has really been saved. It is a general notion in African traditional societies that one who is infertile might have at one time or the other in his life time incurred the wrath of the god(s) and such cannot be admitted into the ancestral world.

Thirdly, the nature of one's death is given serious consideration and largely determines burial and funeral rites that would be accorded the deceased. Death is death but what killed one and how one died are of utmost importance in Igbo perception. Death is not natural and is not caused by failure of organs or systems of the body. No death is ordinary

even at old age. It is believed that something not attributed to any biological disorder must be the cause of one's death. So, the gods are consulted whenever death occurs.

It could be attributed to evil done by that person or his father and mother or even his past relations in case of bad death or to one's failure to maintain harmonious relationship with spiritual beings when it is a good death. Bad death denies one the qualification of becoming an ancestor and includes; violent and accidental death, suicide, death of widow or widower still in mourning period, death by leprosy, death of one making confessional statements of diabolic deeds, death of one waiting for the expiration of the date of oath, dying of diseases like madness, swollen abdomen, prolonged diseases and dying young.

Finally, burial rites are very vital to usher one into the ancestral world. Leeuw (1938) observes that befitting burial and mourning do not only functions to relieve the grief of the beloved departed one, but above all it function to assist the soul of the departed transit over the critical point in his journey to the world of ancestors. It is the passport given to the dead man that guarantees his entry into the world beyond. It also functions as a key that unlocks the gate for the dead to enter into the blissful world of the ancestors. It is only when the dead is accorded full burial rites that he will take his place in the company of the ancestors. If this is not properly done or is not done at all, it is believed that his spirit will be hovering outside bringing misfortunes to the surviving relatives until it is done. It is to ensure that no stone is left unturned on the path of the dead relative as he journeyed into the ancestral world that Igbo practice second burial.

In summary, it is a general belief that the journey to the after life is a collective endeavor. An individual plays his part depending on the quality of life he led in this life which includes participating in rites of passage. He depends on the goodwill of those he left behind to scale the final hurdle. With proper burial rites, good people get across but bad people are not allowed at all. In all, the hope of becoming an ancestor at death helps the Igbo to maintain an ordered society.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus far, from the starting point of this essay, the study reveals that the issues of after life in Igbo context contain great truths encapsulated in symbols and pictures. First and foremost they demonstrate the inherent dynamism in African Traditional Religion, a dynamism that is balanced in the tension between continuities and discontinuities in any religion. They re-enforce traditional African awareness and belief in the after life with its spiritual implications

The belief in *Ilo-Uwa* (reincarnation) forms part of the religious, cultural and social aspects of Igbo life. It conveys the truth that salvation encompasses the total man, that personality survives after death, that the total human soul is neither obliterated nor wholly absorbed in the divine but rather remain individual personality capable of rebirths. In this way, the fear of death which subjects man to lifelong bondage is allayed.

On the other hand, the belief in ancestorhood is a fitting climax to the hope of everlasting life. The Igbo notion of the after world is not a place where the dead live a shadowy, strengthless, ghostly and impotent life. Rather, it is a place, where the dead live in renewed vitality, active and influential in human affairs; from where they engage in a cycle of deaths and rebirths. Therefore, the point at issue is this: the symbolisms and the pictures which convey the issues of life after death in Igbo religious culture do not matter. What is important is the truth behind them which can be utilized in the on going dialogue between Christianity and Igbo culture.

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