

Traditional Igbo Concepts of Death, Burial, Ancestors and Reincarnation: An Exposition

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Remigius Mmadubugwu OBIORA

Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Email: remigius.obiora@unn.edu.ng

ORCID: 0009-0009-9841-591X

Abstract

It is biological for every living thing to experience death, but not all living things face death with the intensity of grief and pain as man does. The unavailability and inevitability of death generate fear and anxiety in man. In the Igbo worldview, just like many other cultures in Africa, death is conceived as a necessity which ensures continuity of life, a beginning of new life, a separation from the community of the living, a union with the living dead known as the ancestors, an initiation of the spirit into the ancestral fold and a sign of human finitude. It is within this context that the Igbo see death as 'going to the spiritual home' with the possibility of reincarnation. From this perspective, death is seen as a change of existence (life) and not an end of existence. Death for the Igbo is an essential and integral part of life which has positive value in the life of man. This study exposes and examines the notion of death in the Igbo traditional worldview. It x-rays the types of death and the belief in death as a necessary end, commencement of another life, death as separation, as union, as initiation, death as a sign of human finitude and the idea of ancestors and reincarnation. I argue that the Igbo conception of death alleviates the morbid fear of death and anxiety in man since death could be a transition to a higher ontological status. I will deploy the expository, analytic and hermeneutic methods in this work.

Keywords: Death, Ancestors, Reincarnation, Burial, Separation

Introduction

Who are the Igbo?

It is pertinent to give a brief narrative about who the Igbo are before delving properly into their conception of death. The Igbo people are one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, alongside numerous other ethnic communities. They are part of the African population, and their language, Igbo, belongs to the *Kwa* language family spoken across parts of West and Central Africa. The Igbo language is characterized by a wide range of dialects. Geographically, Igboland extends from the equatorial rainforest region in the south to the savanna belt in the North. According to T. Uzodimma Nwala (2010), the traditional homeland of the Igbo spans both the Eastern and Western sides of the River Niger. On the Western side, it includes sections of Aboh, Asaba, and Agbor divisions in present-day Delta State. On the Eastern side, it encompasses the whole of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States, as well as parts of Ogoja in Cross River State and portions of the Ahodda and Port Harcourt divisions in Rivers State. The Igbo are indigenous to these territories rather than being migrant settlers. This position is

based on the belief that they have historically occupied and maintained these lands as their ancestral homeland.

What is Death (Onwu) in Igbo Traditional World View?

The irony of death is that those who have experienced it cannot talk about it and those talking about it have not experienced it. Chukwuelobe (1998, 11) argues that, “among the Igbo, the phenomenon of death produces a feeling of rupture and alienation from life in the physical realm”. Nevertheless, death is often understood from a positive angle, particularly when it occurs at an advanced age, as it awakens an enduring inner longing in the individual to reunite with the ancestors. Kanu (2014, 8) explains that, “even though Africans generally perceive death as a passage into the ancestral world, this understanding does not eliminate its mysterious nature”. Similarly, Edeh (1985, 75) asserts that for the Igbo, “death does not signify finality but rather a transition, despite the intense mourning, sorrow, and prolonged expressions of sympathy shown toward the deceased”. At death, the individual is believed to be reborn into another form of existence in the spiritual realm, which differs fundamentally from life in the physical world. Although death removes a person from the family and community and interrupts the rhythm of life and social interaction, it is nonetheless interpreted as a return “home” to the spiritual domain (CHUKWUELOBE 1998, 11). Within this framework, Mbiti (1969) observes that certain expressions associated with death suggest that the deceased is going “home,” implying that earthly life is comparable to a pilgrimage. True “home” is located in the hereafter, from which one does not depart. Mr. Charles Achebe, a distinguished traditional Igbo philosopher, in an interview, further elucidates the Igbo understanding of death as “going home” by likening the world to a marketplace where people gather to conduct business, and once an individual completes his transactions, he returns home. According to him, death is the means through which a person is transferred from the natural world, symbolized by the marketplace, to the spiritual realm, regarded as the authentic home, after completing life’s activities. He further maintains that although death brings sorrow and anguish to the bereaved at the moment of its occurrence, it alone possesses the power to convey the human spirit to the ancestral abode. In this sense, death functions as a bridge connecting the world of the living with the realm of the spirits.

Among the Igbo, death is understood as a unique summons that every human being must inevitably answer, regardless of age, social standing, or economic condition, and this call can only be answered by surrendering one’s physical existence. This belief is clearly expressed in the Igbo saying *Onwu bu ugwo onye o buna ga akwu*, which literally conveys the idea that death is a debt owed by everyone. Consequently, death is viewed as an existential reality that confronts every individual personally at a moment predetermined by *Chi-ukwu* (Supreme Being). Given that death claims both the young and the old, the wealthy and the poor, as well as the healthy and the sick, the Igbo maintain that death does not discriminate (*onwu aso anya, onwu ama eze*). These expressions reflect the communal conviction that death is unavoidable. This understanding is also embedded in personal names that articulate death as necessary and impartial, such as *onwudi* (death is unavoidable), *onwuasoanya* (death is no respecter of

personality), onwuatuegwu (death does not fear), and onwueriego (death does not take bribe). The deep sense of death's inevitability renders both the dying and their relatives powerless, prompting them, in their plea to death, to give their children names such as onwubiko (death have mercy), onwuegbuchuna (death do not kill prematurely), onwuseluaka (death withdraw), onwu chekwuo (death wait further), and onwughalu (death forgive). These names portray death as an unavoidable menace to human existence, which is regarded as the most valuable possession of human beings (KANU 2014, 8).

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that within the traditional Igbo worldview, death is perceived as a necessary reality. Consistent with this understanding, Chukwuelobe (1998, 11) maintains that death, for the Igbo, is not merely a dramatic event in human existence but also an essential aspect of life itself. He further describes death as "a debt which remains continually outstanding" in the life of every individual. This unpaid debt is conceived as a burdensome weight that strips the human person of power and from which no one can extricate oneself. Consequently, death is regarded as both inevitable and certain.

Death as a beginning of another life

The Igbo understand death as the commencement of a new form of existence. This understanding reflects their cosmological outlook, in which dualism occupies a central place within the Igbo worldview. The people hold that uwa (the universe) is structured into two closely connected realms: the invisible or spiritual realm, ala mmuo, and the visible or human realm, ala mmadu. According to this belief system, the human person exists either in the visible world as a physical being or in the invisible world as a spiritual entity. This dualistic conception of reality leads the Igbo to interpret death as a passage from life in the human world to a more genuine and authentic existence in the spiritual realm. Life in the spirit world is regarded as the ultimate form of life because the human spirit, while in the spirit world, possesses both the capacity and the potential to reincarnate (ilo uwa).

Within Igbo thought, death is therefore viewed as the possible beginning of another level of existence. The affirmation of life in the spirit world underscores a profound relationship and continuous interaction between the human world and the spiritual realm. In support of this perspective, Chukwuelobe (1998) observes that the human and spirit worlds are interwoven. Expanding on this view, Chinua Achebe (1958, 28) notes that, "the world of the living is closely connected to the realm of the ancestors, with constant movement between the two, particularly during festivals and at the death of an elderly person, since an old man is believed to be nearer to the ancestors". From birth, a person's life is seen as a sequence of rites of passage that progressively draws him closer to the ancestral world.

On the basis of this perceived interconnection between the physical and spiritual realms, the Igbo maintain that death does not signify the final end of human existence but rather represents a transition—another beginning that is paradoxically regarded as the first beginning (CHUKWUELOE 1998). Pantaleon Iroegbu (1994, 139), in his interpretation of death as the start of another life, describes death as "a bridge that exposes the human body to decay while liberating the spirit to exist, function, and operate fully in its proper capacity within the

spiritual world”. In this new mode of existence inaugurated by death, John Mbiti (1969, 159) explains that the spirit is described as the “living-dead,” dead in the physical sense yet alive in the spirit world (ala mmuo). Life in the spiritual realm thus constitutes another state of existence initiated by death—distinct from, yet connected to, life in the physical world. When a person dies, he is believed to be reborn into a mode of life entirely different from his former earthly existence, as exemplified by the ancestors. In agreement with this understanding, Iheanacho Metuonu (2010) contends that the Igbo conceive death as a phase of existence in life which makes for human person’s ultimate authenticity. For the Igbo, death is the logical end of birth and commencement of another life.

Death as Separation

Metuonu (2010, 126) maintains that within Igbo belief, “every individual dies a death that is uniquely his or her own”. No one is able to escape the experience of personal death, nor can anyone die on behalf of or share in the death of another. Despite this undeniable reality, a good death in traditional Igbo society is understood as a loss that affects not only the immediate family of the deceased but the entire community. Consequently, the community collectively identifies with the bereaved family and participates in mourning. This practice stems from the Igbo self-understanding as brothers and sisters who coexist within a communal setting, united by shared values, aspirations, and objectives. Such communal living fosters strong interpersonal bonds characterized by mutual assistance and a high degree of interdependence (AFRYKA MOJA 2014). Individuals who perform distinctive and positive roles are therefore considered highly significant within society. In this intricate network of social relationships, the unique contributions of each person complement those of others and are invaluable to the community. It is precisely this bond of communalism, solidarity, and complementarity that death disrupts whenever it occurs, leaving behind a void that cannot be replaced, since every human being is unique (ALEXANDER I. ABASILI 2002).

Owing to this irreplaceable absence, the Igbo interpret death as a form of separation. When a person who has made meaningful contributions to the lives of others dies, the loss is perceived as a separation not only from the family but also from the wider community. Thus, death is understood as the severance of the individual first from the family and subsequently from the community, of which the family constitutes the core. It is within this context of separation that the Igbo mourn intensely the passing of one who has experienced a good death, even though such a death is believed to represent a peaceful and desirable transition to the ancestral home. The conception of death as separation is not unique to the Igbo but reflects a broader African worldview. Mbiti (1969, 159) succinctly captures this paradoxical understanding by observing that “death is viewed simultaneously as separation and not as annihilation: the deceased is abruptly detached from human society, yet the corporate community continues to hold on to him”.

Death as a Union

Among the Igbo, a good death is believed to elevate the human person into a more profound and meaningful mode of existence as a living-dead or an ancestor. For this reason, everyone aspires to a good death, since it assures the attainment of the fullness of being and the ultimate realization of life as an ancestor within the

ancestral realm (METUONU 1991). This transformation, which results from the passage of the human spirit from the physical body to the ancestral home, is understood as an act of union between the spirit of the deceased and the ancestors. Through a good death, the human spirit is guaranteed reunion with the ancestral community. Consequently, at the occurrence of a good death, the Igbo express this belief by saying *o nakwurugo nnanna anyi ha*, meaning that the person has gone to join or unite with the forefathers (ancestors). For the Igbo, a proper transition namely, a good death, which occurs when the spirit of the deceased joins the living-dead (ancestors) in safeguarding, guiding, and influencing the family and the wider community. From this standpoint, good death is interpreted as an act of union. Thus, death is simultaneously understood as separation and union. Within this framework, Chukwuelobe (1998) contends that death, for the Igbo, generates, on the one hand, a feeling of alienation and disruption and, on the other hand, an intense longing to be reunited with one's ancestors. Death is therefore perceived as a journey to the spirit land (*ala mmuo*). In a similar vein, Mbiti (1969, 157) explains that death is regarded as "a departure rather than total annihilation of the person, since the deceased proceeds to join the community of those who have departed, with the principal change being the decay of the physical body while the spirit enters another mode of existence". This understanding of death as departure aligns with the Igbo conception of death as separation, because the loss of a family member results in physical absence and the breakdown of interpersonal relationships between the deceased and both the family and the community. At the same time, the movement of the human spirit to join the company of the departed, as described by Mbiti, is what the Igbo interpret as union.

Death as Initiation

In traditional Igbo thought, death is understood as an unavoidable existential human reality marked by the separation of *mmuo* (spirit) from the body. At the moment this separation occurs, a new form of existence immediately begins. The transition between life in the natural world and life in the spirit world is effected through a mystical process. This process is identified by the Igbo as a form of mystical initiation through which the spirit of the deceased is ushered into the ancestral community. At *ume-ikpeazu* (last breath), there is a sudden, sharp, and rapid separation of *mmuo* (spirit) from *ahu* (body). At that precise moment, death is believed to occur, and simultaneously, a mystical initiation rite is understood to take place, admitting the spirit of the deceased into the spirit world and ultimately into the ancestral fold.

Further clarifying the Igbo interpretation of death as an initiatory phenomenon, Chukwuelobe (1998, 14) observes that various existential stages lie between life and death. According to him, "the different initiation rites encountered throughout human life in Igbo culture involve a symbolic experience of dying and rising into a renewed form of existence". In this sense, initiation itself is perceived as a symbolic death (CHUKWUELOBE 1998). Consequently, any transition from one mode of being to another necessarily involves a symbolic act of dying. For the Igbo, initiation rituals ultimately point toward the supreme and authentic initiation known as *ONWU* (death), which ushers the human person into ultimate life. Although death brings the end and dissolution of mundane human existence, it simultaneously inaugurates a higher form of life of supreme value.

This belief instills hope and significantly diminishes the fear of death among the people. In a similar vein, Iroegbu (1994, 134) concisely maintains that “the inevitable reality of death, while terminating earthly life, marks the beginning of the initiation of the human person into another realm of existence”.

Death as a Sign of Human Finitude

For the Igbo, the certainty of death serves as a clear indication of the limited nature of human existence. Within the Igbo thought system, the concept of human finitude is best understood through the relationship between the human person and *ala* (earth), since human existence is deeply rooted in and connected to the earth. The people hold that the human person is essentially dust or sand—that is, earth (*mmadu bu aja*). This belief implies that the human body is formed from the dust of the earth and, consequently, that the human person belongs to the earth (*ala nwe mmadu*), such that whatever originates from the earth ultimately returns to it. In this regard, Chukwuelobe (1998) explains that the relationship between the human person and the earth generates a sense of dependence that underlies the Igbo notion of belongingness to *ala*. From the Igbo perspective, everything associated with the earth is by nature finite, marked by a cycle of coming into existence and passing out of it. Human life, being bound to the earth, therefore constitutes an expression of finitude. This is evident in the fact that the human person exists within the limits of the earth and, after a period of time, inevitably dies. Consequently, death, understood as the human person’s exit from existence, stands as a definitive sign of human finitude.

Death and Dying

In traditional Igbo thought, death is regarded as a subjective reality because of its intensely personal character. It represents the strongest expression of individual uniqueness. The subjectivity of death is an unquestionable fact, since no one can undergo the death of another person in addition to his own. Even in situations where an individual chooses to die in place of someone else, the death experienced remains his own; only the circumstances surrounding that death may resemble those that could have led to another person’s death. In other words, deliberately dying in a situation that might have resulted in someone else’s death does not amount to dying that person’s death, because that individual would still be subject to death and would inevitably face his own death under different circumstances. Metuonu (1991, 125) explains that “the Igbo understanding of the living-dead acknowledges death as a strictly personal act that no one can undertake on behalf of another”. In line with this, the Igbo notion of the living-dead further emphasizes that because death arises from one’s subjectivity, it belongs uniquely to the individual. Thus, every person, in a particular and exclusive manner, experiences his own death, and no one can ultimately evade dying his own.

For the Igbo, the belief that every individual dies his own death at a time appointed by his *chi* (destiny god) does not imply that a person experiences his own death in the same way he experiences bodily illness. As a human being, one cannot experience death in the manner one experiences physical pain or sickness. Rather, it is the spirit that departs from the body at death that undergoes the experience of separation. The physical changes brought about by death in the body

of the deceased are perceived only by others and not by the dead person himself; nevertheless, it is the deceased alone who truly undergoes his own death.

The process of dying is outwardly observed by others, while the person who is dying is also consciously aware of his own dying process. This explains why, in many instances, the dying person seeks to speak with individuals or groups who are dear to him about matters he considers important for those he is about to leave behind. In some cases, particularly among the elderly, the dying person is heard speaking to invisible beings believed to be ancestors. Such individuals often express a deep longing to reunite with their ancestors by saying *achoro m ilakwuru ndi nna nna m ha* (I want to go home to meet with my forefathers). Expressions of this nature strongly suggest a continuing connection between the living and the dead. For the Igbo, dying is therefore an objective process that is experienced both by the individual who is dying and by those around him. Human insight into the mysterious reality of death, within this worldview, is derived primarily from the experience of dying itself.

Forms of Death in Igbo Worldview

Natural or Good Death (Onwu Chi)

In traditional Igbo society, a good death is understood as the culmination of a morally upright and socially approved life. Such a life involves conformity to communal norms and values, reaching an advanced age, and being survived by children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. A good death is also associated with dying during the harvest season, when food is abundant, and at a time when there is peace within the community free from war or inter-communal conflict so that members of the extended family can come together harmoniously to perform the appropriate burial and funeral rites (METUONU 1991). When death occurs at a ripe old age after a socially acceptable life, it is regarded as a blessing, and the accompanying burial and funeral ceremonies are marked by elaborate celebrations. The responsibility of ensuring a proper burial rests with the children of the deceased, as this facilitates his passage into the ancestral home. In this worldview, a good life necessarily leads to a good death, and living in accordance with the customs and traditions of the land with the expectation of attaining a good death and gaining entry into the ancestral fold for the continuity of life is described as authentic life. Metuonu (1991, 126) asserts that “the death of a person who lived a good life is perceived as a transitional stage of existence that affirms human authenticity”.

Within Igbo culture, death is categorized in various ways. Death occurring at an old age after a virtuous life is regarded as natural death (*onwu chi*) and is considered a blessing both to the deceased and to the surviving family members. This form of death is also known as happy death (*onwu anuri*), because it is believed that the family would have benefited from the wisdom and experience of the deceased before his passing. Cosmos O. Obiego (1984, 187), in his discussion of the Igbo understanding of natural death, observes that, “the death of an elderly man is a moment of joy rather than grief, since the more advanced a person’s age, the more acceptable his death becomes”. The peaceful death of an elderly man blessed with many children is therefore celebrated as a recognition of his life’s accomplishments.

In this context, funeral ceremonies are interpreted as occasions for celebration rather than mourning (*Onwu anuri o bughi onwu ariri*). This perspective significantly reduces the sorrow associated with death, making it more bearable, because it is believed that the deceased has fulfilled the destiny allotted to him by the Supreme Being through his *chi* (EDWIN UDOYE 2011).

Udoe (2011, 97) further explains that *onwu chi* (natural death) is understood in Igbo thought as “a complete release from the limitations of old age and physical weakness into a renewed mode of existence among the ancestors”. Through the performance of the required funeral rituals and ceremonies, the deceased, now transformed, is formally welcomed into the spirit world to join the ancestral community. This belief is reinforced by the sacrifices and prayers continually offered to the ancestors by the living members of the family, grounded in the conviction that although the individual is physically dead, he remains alive in another form.

Shameful or Disgraceful Death (Onwu Ifele)

Death that results from the violation of oaths or the commission of abominable acts (taboos) is regarded in traditional Igbo society as not merely bad but profoundly shameful for the deceased and a source of disgrace for the immediate and extended family. In Igbo communities, the death of a criminal is classified as a shameful death and is described as *ikpa mmadu* (the secret elimination of a human person). In some instances, such offenders are taken out of the village at night to remote locations, such as the forest or other isolated areas, where they are executed. Similarly, the death of an individual who had been banished or socially ostracized is considered a disgraceful death (*ino n' isu wee nwu*). Under such circumstances, the community may only take part in the burial rites after the required traditional rituals have been performed to purify and remove the stain of disgrace from the situation (UDOYE 2011).

Furthermore, a person who, at the point of death, openly confesses (*isa na onu*) his crimes, wicked acts, and the harm inflicted on members of the community is perceived as having died a shameful death. Such public confession not only brings dishonor upon the dying individual and his family but also invites derogatory comments from the community toward the deceased. Within the Igbo traditional belief system, shameful or disgraceful death is classified as a bad death, primarily because it is believed to be the outcome of a life that was socially unacceptable. The Igbo hold that an individual who dies in shame or disgrace is denied entry into the ancestral fold. Consequently, in Igbo discussions of death, such as in this study, the focus is placed largely on the concept of good death, which holds profound importance within Igbo culture and tradition.

Bad Death (Onwu Ojoo)

In Igbo traditional thought, a clear distinction is made between shameful or disgraceful death and bad death. Bad death (*onwu ojoo*) is considered more distressing than shameful or disgraceful death, largely because those who die shamefully are believed to have brought such deaths upon themselves through their manner of living (UDOYE 2011). By contrast, *onwu ojoo* often befalls individuals whose lives held promise and expectation. The death of a vibrant young man, a newly married man who has just begun to establish his own

household, or a woman who dies during childbirth is commonly classified as *onwu ojoo*. Such deaths are deeply painful because they shatter communal hopes and expectations. It is believed that individuals who die in this manner have not yet fulfilled their earthly purpose and should, ideally, have been permitted by death to complete the destiny allotted to them by the Supreme Being through their *Chi* (destiny spirit).

Achebe (1958) maintains that suicide is likewise regarded as a form of bad death within the traditional Igbo belief system. In such cases, the deceased is denied normal burial and funeral rites; instead, the body is disposed of in the evil forest, and neither full burial nor funeral ceremonies are performed. This practice is intended to prevent attracting the anger of the gods, since suicide is understood as *nso ani* (a sin against the earth) or *alu* (an abomination). In Igbo cosmology, no offence is seen as purely a violation against humanity alone; every sin against the land is simultaneously regarded as an offence against the gods, particularly *Ani*, the earth goddess. Kalu (2014) argues that ritual appeasement of the gods is necessary before such a deceased person can be buried.

It is important to note, however, that not all bad deaths result from socially unacceptable behavior. Some deaths are described as bad primarily because of the profound grief and sorrow they generate. Examples include the death of a youth, or that of a woman, especially a young woman, during childbirth. Death resulting from an accident is also categorized as bad death, based on the belief that the deceased was not adequately prepared for the journey back home (death). The Igbo treat such deaths with great care and restraint and often avoid discussing them openly because of the intensity of pain they evoke among the bereaved. Since individuals who die in these circumstances did not commit any abominable acts during their lifetime, they are admitted into the ancestral fold; however, they are not invoked or venerated during ancestral worship. In essence, while they are acknowledged as ancestors, they are not directly referenced in ritual practices.

Burial (*Ikwa Ozu*) in Igbo Traditional Thought System

The exposition of traditional Igbo burial rites and ceremonies provides a broad insight into the foundational elements of Igbo cosmology and ontology. According to Nwala (2010, 9), “these rites serve as a practical expression of the people’s fundamental beliefs about the universe, life, existence, death, the relationship between the natural and supernatural realms, the hierarchy of beings, ethical principles, and the moral foundations of their social values”. Among the Igbo, there is a widely held belief that the performance of appropriate burial rites enables the spirit of the deceased to attain peaceful rest among the ancestors. Consequently, the successful transition of the spirit to the spirit world is believed to depend largely on the quality and appropriateness of the burial rites accorded to the deceased.

In traditional Igbo burial practices, individuals are interred according to their age, social or religious standing, and level of economic achievement. As a result, burial rites assume diverse forms, with slight variations across the different local communities that make up Igbo society. The location of burial, the specific

sites chosen, and the materials used vary from person to person, largely determined by the roles and contributions the individual made to the community during his or her lifetime. Distinctions are also made between the burial rites of men and women, the young and the elderly, untitled individuals and titled persons, a *dibia* (medicine man), and a chief priest of a deity (*Eze mmuo*). Children are often buried in concealed locations, usually at night or in the early hours before dawn. In certain cases, they may be buried in the evil forest, depending on the circumstances surrounding their birth or on beliefs that evil spirits were responsible for their death. The death of a young man is generally perceived as a calamity and a bad omen for both the immediate family and the wider community. Consequently, youths are buried far from their family compounds to prevent their spirits from reincarnating within the family, based on the belief that they lacked the maturity of character required for ancestral reincarnation. Honorable reincarnation is reserved for ancestors, those who lived exemplary lives and typically died at a ripe age. Individuals who died as a result of violating oaths or taboos may also be buried in the evil forest, with additional rituals performed to avert possible misfortune or calamity for the family and the community (NKEM 2001).

Within the hierarchy of burial rites in traditional Igbo culture, an untitled and ordinary man is buried with little or no valuable items to accompany him to the spirit world and is interred in front of his house. In contrast, the body of a simple mother is traditionally returned to her father's house for burial, where she is laid to rest in a suitable location within her family compound. "This practice reflects the Igbo conception of marriage and bride price, emphasizing that women are given in marriage to join their husbands in founding a new household rather than being purchased through the payment of dowry" (NKEM 2001, 97). In contemporary practice, however, this custom has largely changed. Instead of returning the body to her natal home, members of the deceased woman's family visit her husband's house on the final day of the funeral to collect personal items such as her wrapper, broom, or kitchen knife, which symbolically replace her body, while she is buried in her husband's compound.

The burial of a chief priest of a deity (*Eze Nmuo*), a medicine man (*Dibia Ogwu*), a diviner (*Dibia Afa*), a wealthy titled man (*ogaranya*), or an elder (*okenye*) is typically extensive and ceremonious. In this regard, Nwala (2010) explains that when a man dies especially at an advanced age, having married, raised children, and attained notable economic and social success it is essential that he be given a befitting burial. Such rites ensure his well-being in the spirit world and facilitate his smooth reincarnation in another life. Individuals of this status may be buried either inside or behind their houses, symbolizing their transition into ancestorhood. The corpse is often interred with numerous personal possessions, and several animals, each carrying symbolic significance in Igbo culture, are sacrificed. Some of these animals are consumed in honor of the deceased, while others are buried alongside him. Burials of this nature involve multiple stages of funeral ceremonies designed to display the cultural stature and economic prominence of the deceased and to formally admit him into the ancestral community of his forebears in the spirit world. Similarly, the burial of a titled woman is conducted with great dignity and respect in accordance with Igbo burial

traditions. She is buried in her family of origin, among other esteemed women whose achievements are celebrated, within a communal compound designated for collective gatherings and remembrance.

Funeral Rites

The funeral rites are a continuation of the rituals for the dead in Igbo culture. This is not necessarily celebrated immediately after burial rites; however, it is regarded as a rite of incorporation, through it the dead are fully welcomed and given their rightful positions in the ancestral world. The living dead who have not been accorded the necessary funeral rites are believed to be always furious with the living members of the family for failing to carry out the rites. The funeral rites must be performed first of all for all those who died before the deceased.

Ancestors (*Ndi iché*)

In traditional Igbo society, elders within the primogeniture system are accorded profound respect and reverence, a status that is further elevated after their death when they are believed to have entered the spirit world (*ala mmuo*) to dwell with the ancestors (*ndi iché*). Ancestors occupy a place of great importance in Igbo cosmology and are frequently consulted at crucial moments to offer guidance to their descendants and to intercede with the divinities on their behalf for protection and well-being. Ancestors are understood as individuals who lived exemplary lives, fulfilling the moral, social, and religious obligations of their communities, and whose memories continue to be honored by both family and community. As spirits (*mmuo*), ancestors are believed to possess enhanced powers that place them above human beings. They communicate with the living through divination, possession, and dreams, and are capable of granting blessings in times of distress or punishing acts of injustice within the community. In describing the nature and functions of ancestors among the Igbo, Nwala (2010) explains that ancestors are also known as *ndi nwe ala* (owners of the land) and serve as intermediaries between their living descendants and the deities. They are believed to protect their living relatives and to intervene on their behalf during sickness or adversity, as reflected in the common Igbo supplication to a deceased father: *nná anyi ekwela ka íhe a mee m* (our father, do not allow this to happen to me).

Among the Igbo, it is generally believed that death does not sever the bond between the deceased and the living, as the departed continue to exist within the family. This belief is evident in the Igbo understanding and interaction with ancestors, which Mbiti (1969, 159) describes as the “living-dead.” For the Igbo, the dead remain close to the living, and continuous interaction is maintained through rituals of ancestral worship. Life is perceived as cyclical: from birth to death in the physical world, from death to life in the ancestral or spirit world, and from life in the ancestral realm back to physical existence through reincarnation. Metu (1991) affirms that human beings continue to exist in one form or another after death, and that those who lived good lives, died good deaths (*onwu chí*) and died natural death at a ripe old age proceed to the spirit land.

To be recognized as an ancestor implies that one lived a full bodily life in the physical world, exerted positive influence on one's family and community, and received burial rites in accordance with traditional prescriptions. Ancestors are therefore understood as the spirits of those who, during their lifetime, significantly embodied the values and aspirations of their society. Individuals whose achievements were limited to a particular family or lineage are revered mainly within that group, while those whose contributions benefited the entire community are honored more broadly. Ancestors are also characterized as individuals who never committed any abominable act against the land or community that would require ritual appeasement by the gods or other ancestors (ABANUKA 2004).

The Igbo classify ancestors into three main categories. First are those who died at an advanced age, since longevity is regarded as one of the blessings bestowed by *Chukwu* (Supreme Being) upon those who strictly observe the traditions and laws of the community. Also included among the ancestors are certain vigorous young men who died prematurely but performed extraordinary and demanding tasks for the benefit of the community, such as achieving victory in a justified intercommunity war, an accomplishment considered a source of communal pride.

The third category consists of anonymous ancestors, individuals who did not make remarkable contributions to their families or the wider community but also did not cause serious harm or disruption. This group constitutes the largest segment of the ancestral community, and although their names are not specifically invoked during sacrifices and libations, they are nonetheless believed to receive their share.

Ancestors are regarded as mediators between *Chukwu* (Supreme Being), other deities, and *mmadu* (human beings), owing to their position within the ontological hierarchy of beings. In this hierarchy, ancestors occupy a level above human beings both animate and inanimate but below the deities, who in turn are subordinate to the Supreme Being, the creator of the universe. Ancestors are believed to be immortal, and by virtue of this immortality, they are considered more powerful than ordinary humans. Consequently, they are thought capable of imposing themselves during conception in the womb and reincarnating without forfeiting their status in the spirit world.

Reincarnation (Ilo Uwa)

The concept of reincarnation is derived from two Latin words: *re*, meaning "again," and *incarnare*, meaning "to enter into the body" (ONYENWENYI 1996, 16). Reincarnation therefore refers to the process through which certain departed members of the family or community namely, ancestors who dwell in the spirit world (*ala mmuo*) are believed to mystically, yet concretely, impress their personality traits upon newborn children from the womb. This process does not replace the child's individuality nor does it extinguish the child's unique and developing personality. According to Onyenwenyi (1996, 20), reincarnation is the belief that "when the soul or spirit separates from the body at death, it subsequently informs another body for a new period of earthly existence". It signifies the embodied continuation of a deceased person after departing from the physical world. A. N. Ekwunife (1999, 33) further explains that, "by virtue of the enhanced powers of the ancestors, the spirit of the dead is capable of exerting

influence more appropriately described as mystical influence on the unborn child”. This influence neither undermines the personal identity of the child before or after birth nor diminishes the spiritual status of the deceased ancestor who reincarnates from the spirit world. The child retains complete freedom and the full potential to fulfill the mission destined for him by his *chi* (destiny spirit).

The Igbo understanding of reincarnation is best explained through two central concepts: *inua*, *ilua* or *ino uwa*, (two different Igbo dialects meaning reincarnation) and the *ogbanje* phenomenon (child born to die). Both involve a form of re-embodied existence of the spirit after it has lived in a human body and departed from it in the physical world. Reincarnation is generally viewed as a positive and beneficial phenomenon because it is believed that only ancestors who lived good lives, died good deaths, and received the prescribed burial rites in accordance with tradition are capable of reincarnating. Consequently, “the notions of living well and dying well are clearly articulated within the Igbo traditional belief in reincarnation” (EMMANUEL ONWU 2002, 34).

This belief carries significant moral and ethical implications, as it fosters strong and enduring motivation for upright living among individuals who aspire to authentic existence, that is, living well in order to die well. Belief in reincarnation reassures the Igbo that adherence to the injunctions of the Supreme Being, the deities, and the ancestors, as expressed through customs and traditions, is not futile. In contrast, the *ogbanje* phenomenon is regarded as negative because it brings grief and suffering to families and is therefore highly undesirable. The *ogbanje* dimension involves the repeated cycle of birth and death, whereby a child or children continually reincarnate and die within the same family. Onwu (2002) notes that it is the responsibility of the diviner (*dibia afa*), through divination, to identify the spirit associated with the newborn child. However, it is considered taboo in Igbo culture to classify the *ogbanje* phenomenon as reincarnation in the true ancestral sense. This is because genuine reincarnation is believed to originate from the ancestral world, implying that the spirit must reside in the ancestral realm before reincarnating. Since the *ogbanje* spirit does not sojourn in the ancestral world, its repeated appearance cannot be regarded as reincarnation.

It is therefore important to emphasize that, within authentic Igbo traditional thought, the *ogbanje* phenomenon is not considered *ilo uwa* (reincarnation). Reincarnation is perceived as a blessing bestowed by *Chukwu* (Supreme Being) upon both the reincarnating ancestor and the family into which the ancestor returns. As such, it is a desirable occurrence. Conversely, the *ogbanje* phenomenon, characterized by the continual return and death of children, causes pain and sorrow and is viewed as a bad omen. For this reason, it cannot be equated with reincarnation, which symbolizes honor, continuity, and blessing.

The Igbo notion of reincarnation reflects their belief in the immortality and superiority of the spiritual component of the human person (*mmuo*). Their understanding of life after death and the cyclical nature of existence finds deeper meaning in this belief. In support of this view, Onwu (2002, 36) asserts that “there is life after death, and that the most practical way of affirming its significance is through belief in reincarnation, evidenced by physical resemblance, character traits, and oracular revelations, all of which suggest that the dead continue to exist somewhere beyond the physical world”.

For the Igbo, reincarnation is a reality because the element that separates from the body at death is immaterial and immortal. However, if material components of the human person are used to define the immortal element, or if attributes that emerge from the harmonious union of spirit and body are elevated to represent the immortal element in its entirety, the concept of reincarnation loses its coherence and cannot be sustained within the framework of Igbo traditional thought.

Philosophical and Eschatological Dimensions

For a proper appreciation of a people's belief in life after death, it is essential to examine their philosophical understanding of death. Among the Igbo, "death is perceived as the commencement of another form of life, an initiation into a different realm of existence, and a form of union, all of which underscore their belief in the continuity of life" (METUONU 1991, 126). Life, in Igbo thought, is understood as cyclical and processual. Central to this conception of life as an ongoing reality that transcends immediate physical existence is the belief in the "living dead." The living dead are those who lived morally upright lives in the physical world, died good deaths, and were accorded proper funeral and burial rites in accordance with Igbo tradition, thereby gaining admission into the ancestral fold in the spirit world. Within the Igbo ontological hierarchy of beings, these living dead are identified as ancestors (*Ndi iche*).

A sound understanding of the Igbo hierarchy of beings is therefore vital to grasping their conception of life after death. In this hierarchy, *Chukwu* (the Supreme or Great Being) occupies the highest position. Beneath the Supreme Being are the major and minor divinities (*chi*). Directly below the divinities are the ancestors (*Ndi iche*), followed by human beings (*mmadu*), who occupy a lower position in accordance with the principle of primogeniture. Animate and inanimate beings (*ife*) are situated at the base of the hierarchy (EGBEKE AJA 2001). These beings interact dynamically within the ontological order. There is also a corresponding hierarchy within the spirit realm, in which ancestral spirits are positioned below ordinary spirits or minor divinities, who in turn are subordinate to the major divinities, with the Great Spirit (*Chi ukwu*) at the apex. This structured spiritual order constitutes what the Igbo refer to as the spirit world (*ala mmuo*). It is within this hierarchy that life after death unfolds, as the ancestral fold—home of the living dead—is located there. For the Igbo, dwelling eternally in the ancestral fold represents the highest aspiration and is viewed as the reward for a life well lived in the physical world.

This belief instils vigor, hope, and moral resolve in the human person, encouraging individuals to live good lives and die good deaths. Consequently, the Igbo worldview affirms a strong interconnection between life in the physical world, death, and life after death. A good life leads to a good death and joy in the hereafter, while a bad life results in a bad death and suffering in the afterlife, particularly in *ala umu agbala* (the world of evil spirits). This interconnectedness reinforces the Igbo belief that life is a continuous and unending process (Nwala 1985). Such a worldview carries significant moral and ethical implications, motivating individuals to live just and socially acceptable lives in order to gain admission into the ancestral home.

The inevitability of death in Igbo thought creates a heightened sense of anticipation that encourages constant preparation for its eventual occurrence. Death is understood as a gateway to authentic and ultimate existence through ancestral status in the spirit world. This belief empowers the Igbo to confront and overcome the fear and anxiety commonly associated with death. Elderly persons and those approaching death are believed to experience certain presentiments and symbolic indications that signify initiation into death, reflecting the various ontological possibilities of dying. Within this belief system, the Igbo readily accept both the inevitability and unpredictability of death.

Certain phenomena in Igbo tradition are believed to signal the imminence of death. These anticipatory signs evoke strong presentiments and may include the appearance or cry of specific animals or birds, such as the owl, which is traditionally associated with impending death. Similarly, the appearance of a comet or shooting star is believed to herald the death of a king or noble figure. Such signs give rise to the Igbo expression *onwu amaeze* (death knows no king), emphasizing the belief that death does not discriminate on the basis of status or personality but is a universal human experience (CHUKWUELOBE 1998). Death, therefore, is recognized as an inevitable existential reality.

Initiation (*ikpobata*), meaning “letting-in,” occupies a central place in Igbo tradition and is celebrated at various stages of life. Each initiation rite has its own distinctive process, symbolizing death and rebirth into a new phase of existence. Initiation thus instills a sense of symbolic dying and renewal. Common initiation rites among the Igbo include naming ceremonies (*igu aha*) in infancy, age-grade (*ogbo*) initiation at puberty, and induction into the masquerade cult (*otu mmanwu*) in adulthood. The initiation into the masquerade cult, in particular, vividly symbolizes death as a transition marked by dying and rising to a new form of life, thereby highlighting the close relationship between death and initiation.

For the Igbo, death itself is understood as an act of initiation, since it marks the transition from physical existence into the ancestral fold, where a new mode of life begins. Through anticipation of death, individuals are believed to transcend themselves, overcoming fear and anxiety by living morally upright lives. It is within this framework that one attains authentic life and becomes an authentic being, progressing toward ultimate authenticity.

Underlying presentiment and initiation in Igbo life is a deep concern for preparedness and anticipation of death. These generate an ontological awareness of death that individuals confront by striving to live socially acceptable lives. The dynamic interplay between life and death, shaped by anticipation, enables the Igbo to prepare courageously for death. Thus, within the Igbo worldview, life and death are revealed as inseparable dimensions of human existence.

The performance of burial and funeral rites according to Igbo tradition instills in the Igbo a profound awareness of eternal return. Eschatological signs and symbols are deeply embedded in these rites, fostering a perception of “*the other beginning*” that is, the advent of new life. This eschatological perspective motivates individuals to live authentically, striving toward ultimate human fulfillment. By emphasizing continuity and renewal, it also prepares the Igbo for the inevitability of death, reducing the intense fear and anxiety commonly associated with mortality. Central to Igbo eschatology is the concept of “*the other*

beginning,” which manifests through practices of ancestorship and reincarnation (CHUKWUELOBE 1998).

In Igbo thought, man is regarded as a sacred being, and consequently, burial and funeral rites are observed with utmost reverence, reflecting the eschatological understanding of eternal return. Such rites imbue death with meaning, framing it not as a terminal event but as a necessary and legitimate passage in the continuity of life. However, in contemporary times, there is a noticeable shift away from this traditional perception. Many Igbo now conduct burial and funeral ceremonies with little or no eschatological awareness or sense of sacredness, treating death more as an end than as part of an ongoing life cycle. This detachment from the traditional worldview has diminished the preparedness for death among many Igbo, resulting in heightened fear and anxiety surrounding mortality.

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