

IGBO CONCEPT OF REINCARNATION: A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Does reincarnation mean a recycling of human personhood and to what end? It is an overshadowing of the person with a spirit or spirits of ancestors(s) in order to attain fulfilment of and to preserve life. There is always difference of personhood between the newly born and the ancestor. There is also some space for free conscious determination for the new individual. Finally, the passage of time militates strongly against the belief that it is the same person coming back to life. Spiritual patronage is simply the underlying reason for any project of reincarnation.

Keywords: Reincarnation, Personhood, Ancestors, Personal Chi.

Introduction

There was once a pious young man named Tony, who had an equally pious younger brother named Sunday. Both of them loved to live with a pious and prayerful wife of their uncle, Maria. One of the days in the Biafra-Nigerian civil war, a bomb blast caught Sunday down and Tony rushed to help him out not knowing that the explosion had not finished. Tony too became mortally wounded and the two were rushed to the hospital, where Sunday died first and later Tony. Before his death, Tony confessed of seeing Sunday standing with Angels and waiting for him. Immediately after the war, after receiving the Holy Communion on a Sunday, Maria left the Church to the hospital where she gave birth to a boy on the feast day of St Anthony (13th June). The new baby is said to be Tony and Sunday together. This presence of a double has been attested to by some people as this new baby became a grown up. Is this double personality or bi-location or multiple patronages?

So much have been said about reincarnation especially in the last edition of this journal. How can one pull a string of connection and interpretation from all of these scenes of reincarnation saga in order to make a sense in accord with the cultural valuations of the people?

Personhood

This has been a debated issue from time and this has been polarized between the existential and the relational arguments (White, F., 2013) about the essence of a person. The relational include the societal description of what comprises the essence of a person in relation to animals and other creatures while the existential deals with the inherent property or essence of an individual that makes him/her what (s)he is. Plato distinguished between the *Phenomenon* and the *Noumenon*, what is physical and what is spiritual respectively and said that the soul has an

independent existence from the body. Aristotle held the *nous* as distinctive to man, being “the power of responding to universals and meanings, the power of acting with deliberation, with conscious forethought, or acting rationally”, Randall (1960, 68). St Thomas Aquinas (Kretzmann and Stump 1998) and St Augustine (O’Callaghan 2007) maintained that rationality was the distinctive feature of an *Imago Dei*. It is good to note that the Church and of course the Scriptures had held the *Imago Dei* as the distinguishing essence of a person. In an insightful explanation, Pope Benedict the XVI (1990) maintains that humans are “capable of thinking and praying.” (p. 48). Here humans can relate to God, and relate to neighbours through some moral codes and project into the future through free conscious activities.

White (2013) gives us a working definition by a summary of the on-going that:

Personhood manifests the unity of the spiritual and the corporeal in human existence, and thereby is an essential characteristic of the human species. Personhood gives to the human individual a universal worth and an exceptional standing.

Igbo Dualist Worldview

With dualism in the traditional worldview of the Igbo society as a backdrop, a dualist idea of the Supreme Deity becomes a desideratum and at the same time the *fons et origo* of all dualisms in nature. It is a logical conclusion from a system that thinks that everything comes in twos. Igbo worldview favours a dialogical conception, which does not conflict with the other but complement it. According to Aniakor (1973):

When Duru Agwu/Duru Aku, the Chief Diviner at Amauzari in Mbano Division, through whose divination man comes to understand the complicated web of cosmic relationships between him and the gods, looked at the five divination pebbles on his palm, he picked out one, threw it on the ground, picked it up again, examined it and stared into the vacancy in communion with the gods. He said:

<i>ihe di abuo abuo</i>	-	Reality comes in twos
<i>Nwoke na nwanyi</i>	-	Male and Female
<i>Ihe oma na ihe ojoo</i>	-	Good and Evil
<i>Ugbua na Mgbe-Ochie</i>	-	Present and Past
<i>Mmadu na Mmuo</i>	-	People and Spirits
<i>Igwe na Ala</i>	-	Firmament and Earth
<i>Onwu na Ndu</i>	-	Life and Death

In saying this, he penetrated the heart of Igbo ontology (p.6)

The twelfth line refers to the Supreme Deities of Igbo traditional religion, *Ala* and *Igwe/Amadiḡha*. There is no part of Igbo community which does not have a cult of the *Ala* Goddess. However, *Amadiḡha* is often regarded as a withdrawn God by

most African societies, Igbo inclusive. Donovan, (1982) also discovered this from the *Tanganyikans*, where he spent his missionary days. The life and relationship of the two supreme Deities who are the birth-stool of humans and the First Cause of every existent form a prototype of the life and relationship of human couples. The Babylonian epic of creation, the *Enuma Elish* looks similar because *Tiamat* **was killed** by *Marduk* and its body used in creating (heaven and) earth while mixing the earth with the blood of *Qingu* in creating humans. However, the Igbo culture abhors death or exclusivity; it is a culture of life, complementarity and wholeness.

With regards to the Igbo worldview, *Ala* was not killed but it gave birth and held its children herself. It is implicitly necessary that a culture with such worldview will not stop at not considering its **Ultimacy in a two-fold Being**. Little wonder Achebe (1958) referred to this when the missionary preached about the Blessed Trinity and the Igbo community retortedly asked after the wife and claimed that it was logical to have a wife who bore the Son. "You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then." The crowd agreed" (p.147). Some interpreters suggest the existence of gay but that is judgement through the western binoculars; it simply portrays juxtapositioning the Igbo worldview with the nascent foreign religion.

The concept of this two-in-one God is the *fons et origo* of the dualist thoughts since everything comes or emanates from them as the Supreme Being, Chukwu Okike. This Supreme Deity is gleaned from mythical stories as *Amadioha* and *Ala*. These were said to be living their life of conjugality when *Ala* decided to bear children. *Ala* was said to have love for children (humans) and decided she wanted them to be with her. *Amadioha* accepted but receded to the sky and pitched his tent but he often visited *Ala* to fertilize her. *Ala* spread herself out on the waters to form land, where her children would earn their living and still come into her labyrinth womb after death. If *Ala* is not considered as a Supreme Deity, Igbo system of reality is punctured. It means they are not Children of God, Chukwu-abjama, since they are held by lesser gods, supposing *Ala* to be one of the lesser gods.

According to Abanuka's (1990) metaphysical scheming, the place of *Ala* is a step away from the Ultimacy but this is a western infiltration or bias. However, as *Ala* is part of the Supreme Deity and the wife of *Amadioha*, it plays out well to say that the humans arrive at their everlasting homes in an abode of the Being. It is only those who have merited this abode by being just when they lived on earth that can re-incarnate as many times as possible and in multiple instances even at the same period of time.

The Personal Chi

The treatment of *Chi* by Agbasiere (2000) "as a subtle incarnation of both *Chukwu* and *Ala*" (p. 54) speaks volumes about this dualist conception of the Ultimate Principle and also the import of reincarnation. It re-echoes the mythical belief of the emanation of man from the Gods of Ultimate Principle, *Amadioha* and *Ala*. Every morning, one is greeted "**Ị bọla chi?**" which literally means: *Have you*

succeeded in breaking through the darkness to light? This seems to ask if *Amadiḡha*, God of the Sky or Sun has opened one up to a new day on the land, *Ala*. Meanwhile it was believed that every immoral person stood the risk of being visited with thunder by this Supreme God of the sky. There is always an interplay of the characteristics of these Supreme Deities in the life of every woman. The woman has been explained in my book (Ayika, 2012) as a microcosm of the Supreme Goddess of Igbo traditional religion. In the ontic woman is seen the power of motherhood of the ontological Woman, *Ala*. *Ala* is periodically fertilized by *Amadiḡha* for the bearing of humans. (The traditional Igbo myths of human origin talk more of bearing than creating humans). Now, Igbo women are meant to connect with *Ala* by sitting on a hole dug on the earth during their menses, while menses itself is occasioned by the movement in the sky, which spells out months and seasons. Thus the movement of the sun as a sign of *Amadiḡha* and the receptivity of the earth as a sign of the Goddess, *Ala*, gives an individual person his/her unique value. Therefore time makes one different even from one's ancestral reincarnate. This is easily understood since it is not the same parents, same body, same conditions, social amenities, civilization, etc. that a new person is born into. However, *chi* is the life blessing from the Supreme Deities and may not be responsible for reincarnation.

The Ancestors and Reincarnation

When I did an oral interview with one Chief M. Nnebo from *Enuagu Village, Enugwu-Ukwu* on the traditional values of an *Ọzọ* titled man in 1997, I realized an important connecting niche in cosmological formation of the Igbo belief system. Enugwu-Ukwu is the ancestral first son of *Nri* and has a deposit of *Nkpume Onyilenyi*, an oracle for the spiritualization of *Ọfọ* all over the entire Igbo land as it is claimed. When Chief Nnebo was explaining the values of an *Ọzọ* titled man, he averred that the life and death of a just titled man leaves the family with a guarantee of perpetuation of her generation. The dead *Ọzọ* man is said to be part of the moral and life guides of the land known as *Ndiichie*. *Ndiichie* refers to the dead ancestors and not the living ones. Chief Nnebo agrees with Abanuka (1994) that the presence of an *Ichie* in the realm of the Ultimate reality is an insurance for the continuation of life in the family of the said *Ichie* since the ancestors take charge of reincarnation. Therefore there is no duplication of personhood nor is an *Ichie* recycled from the exalted to being mere human. The *Ichie* is rather the fortress of life and refuge for the family, making sure that it keeps surviving. This is true when we recall that the overall concern of a traditional Igbo person is for the perpetuation of life. Something close to this is seen in Jeremiah 35: 19 where the faithful Jehonadab was promised an unfailing faithful seed of his on his stead. *"Therefore, this is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: 'Jehonadab son of Recab will always have descendants who serve me.'"* This scores the sense of reincarnation: getting a seed that has the character of the ancestor to succeed on the stead of the ancestor in order to perpetuate his generation.

The Igbo reincarnation is not so much tied to the activity of the Deity as it is by the ancestor. However, the word to incarnate means taking flesh and this is not the concern of Igbo religion but a Judeo-Christian category. To re-incarnate means that the dead ancestor takes another body from the seed of a conjugal union of any spouse of his choice in his lineage in order to save the lineage from ever being extinct. Now, what re-incarnates is the spirit since *in-carnatio* means embodiment and *carnalis* stands for worldly, body, unspiritual or flesh. Thus this concept of re-incarnation may also be called a re-spiritualization of the body. However, it is not the same body that the spirit takes up again as in necromancy but another fresh body in the lineage and this is the differential line between the personhood of the ancestor and that of the new person. The body alone cannot make a person neither does the spirit alone but a unity of the two. Therefore, re-incarnation is not a duplication of personhood but a spiritual patronage in order to achieve a goal.

Again a recourse to the Bible may buttress the on-going from a Judeo-Christian tradition.

He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.”(Luke 1: 17)

This is a prophecy before the birth of John the Baptist, which Jesus himself confirmed strongly in the passage: “And if you are willing to accept what I say, **he is Elijah**, the one the prophets said would come. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!” (Mat 11: 14-15). It is strong here because the copula verb “**is**” is a powerful indicative that the subject is no different from the object. Put in another form, John the Baptist did not come in **Elijah-like spirit** but in the **spirit of Elijah**. This is the same with the Greek translation:

καὶ	εἰ	Θέλετε	Δέξασθαι	αὐτόν	ἐστίν	Ἠλίας
Kai	ei	Thelete	Dexasthai	autos	estin	Elias
and	If	you are willing	to receive it	He	Is	Elijah

The use of **ἐστίν (estin)** is defined in the online dictionary(2021) as,

the 3rd person single form of the verb marked similar below. Its tense is present (which indicates that the action is in the now), its voice is active (which indicates that the subject *performs* the action, instead of receiving it), and its mood is indicative (which describes a situation that actually is — as opposed to a situation that might be, is wished for, or is commanded to be).

Jesus may have made allusions to the primacy of the spirit in this stance, which also means that it is the spirit of an ancestor that is endowed on the new person and not the body. This can be gleaned from John 6:63 where He maintains that the

spirit gives life and the flesh is worthless. It is the body that is enlivened by the Spirit and this body is under a cause and effect principle and is the basis for individuation. The body is part of our personality and as such John the Baptist, the newly made person has a personality different from that of Elijah, the ancestor.

However, this is not a case of mere possession of the spirit, rather, it is part of the personality of the person. It is not less important to note here that the reason for the spirit of his ancestor, Elias (Elijah) as is seen in the above quotation from the Gospel of Luke is for fidelity and power to work along the lines of Elijah, where he would be dedicatedly steadfast even though he would not be believed by his generation just as Elijah was not believed in. Therefore the present situation or the circumstance of a given period has a direct relation with the ancestral spirit to reincarnate in order to salvage and perpetuate life. Put in another form, the work to be done seems to be the primary determinant here about the spirit of the dead that will reincarnate in order to achieve the desired results.

In the Igbo traditional world, before one is acknowledged as a man, there is always a divination to ascertain the ancestor that reincarnated in the person concerned before he/she embarks on any spiritual journey like the *Mmanwu* and *Ozo* cult. This is so because the reincarnating spirit is expected to lead the initiate protectively through all the spiritual forces that were in control. The Igbo likewise believe in the dominance of the spirit in all things. It is in fact the knowledge of the spiritual power in animates and non-animates (*agwu-nshi*) that makes one a social consultant, a native doctor of the society. It is the power of the spirit that determines the depth of achievement of anybody. That is why sacrifices are made to the spirit of an individual called *Ikenga*, whenever the person embarks on any expedition. When the personal spirit that brought one into the world is great, it connects one to the great spirits that are in-charge of great spiritual gateways to one's great achievements. The world is not a free place but a place one needs great spiritual patronages at one time or another in order to stay alive and achieve a successful end. The Igbo say: *Ekenee m gi, kenekwaa mmuo na-emelu gi ife*. It simply translates: "I greet you and the spirit that works for you." A worthless fellow is one who did not mind the spiritual powers when acting or speaking. The Igbo also say: *Oburoinodu ana gbuo okuko, kama obuima ife a ga-agwa ndi mmuo*, which translates as: "the matter is not to sit down and kill a fowl but knowing what to say to the spirits". Thus the spirits make things happen and an individual connection with them highlights his/her value in the society.

Conclusion

Personhood is a unity of the spirit and corporeal dimensions of humanity. In reincarnation, it is the spiritual dimension of humans that is at play. The passage of time, the shifting of the source of natality and circumstances that engender cultural shifts militate against using the same body. The structures of the body: the genetic, social, psychological and neurological aspects may never be the same in two individuals born at different points in history. Therefore the argument of

reincarnation as a person coming back falls short of the target. Just as the name depicts, it may refer to the spirit of a dead ancestor influencing a body in order to achieve an ultimate target of preservation of life for the lineage.

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