

DEATH IN IGBO-AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

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Abstract

The reality of death is known to everyone who is endowed with reason. In spite of the human person's wisdom and technological know-how, death still defies prediction. Everyone dies, and that explains why the Hausa cultural group of Africa would say that 'Mutuwa rigan kowa ne' (death is everyone's shirt). The religious die just as the non-religious; Christians die just as Jews, Muslims and 'pagans' die. The rich and poor, famed and unsung, no matter how powerful and celebrated we are, we cannot escape the power of death. This paper is concerned with exploring the Igbo-African concept of death. "Igbo" is a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. It is referred to as Igbo-African because it is an ethnic group in Africa and relates culturally to other ethnic groups in Africa. Although death is conceived by the Igbo as a transition to the world of the ancestors, it still does not change the fact that it is an enigma. It is thus not surprising that the Igbo would name their child: onwu di njo (death is bad). Onwubuche (death is my worry). Onwubiko (death I implore you). Onwu kam ike (death is more powerful than I am). Onwuasoanya (death is no respecter of persons). Onwuamaeze (death does not recognize a king or a great man). This paper studies the dimensions of the phenomenon of death from an Igbo-African perspective, which sees death not just as the end of life in the present world but the beginning of another in the world of the ancestors who are still living. The living of the dead brings consolation to those who are left behind by the dead.

Keywords: Death, Living-Dead, African, Nigeria, Igbo, Ontology, Ancestors, Life, World.

Introduction

In every culture, death is believed to be an inevitable end. The African believes that he has not come to the earth to live forever but must go back home to his original abode where he belongs: he has come as a sojourner and not as a permanent dweller upon the earth. However, Opoku (1978) avers that the attitude towards death is everywhere ambivalent. Its authority is everywhere felt, the

force of its power unstoppable, always leaving the living in a devastating sorrow. A cursory glance reveals that human beings have put in serious thought to finding out its origin, causes, sources and purpose, all to no avail. It has become a mystery to humans and since it is shrouded in mystery, its knowledge and eradication remains a mirage. Abimbola (1968), in a Yoruba funeral dirge, brings out the picture of death and the African's struggles with it:

*If death had requested for money,
We would have given him money;
If death had requested for meat,
We would have brought ram for him.
We made sacrifices without ceasing
Yet we do not see the medicine
that will prevent death from killing man.
Death has done a wicked thing.
Death has done a wicked thing.*

*Farewell for ever more
Until we meet by the farm paths;
Until we see you in dreams;
Until we hear of you from divination priests
We will never hear of you again in this world
Except when we meet people like you
And remember you.*

It is from this background that Kanu (2012) avers that although death is considered by the African as a transition into the world of the ancestors, it still does not change the fact that it is an enigma. This notwithstanding, this piece has the burden of studying the concept of death among the Igbo people of Nigeria. It employs the historical method of enquiry to help understand the Igbo people of Nigeria as a background to an understanding of their thought on death. It also uses the

expository and critical tools of enquiry to study the dimensions of the Igbo-African concept of death.

Historical-Cultural Root of the Igbo

A fundamental step in our study of Igbo-African perspective on death is the identification of the spatio-cultural horizon of the Igbo cultural space. According to Onuh (1991), by way of definition, "Igbo" is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. There is however an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term 'Igbo'. In the contention of Ekwuru (2009), the difficulty of arriving at a precise etymological and semantic clarity of the word "Igbo" has its trace in the unprecise nature of the history of the Igbo people. For Afigbo (1975a), compared to the state of research as regards origin in relation to other tribes in Nigeria, the Igbo history can without much exaggeration be described as *terra incognita*. However, Afigbo (1975b) further observes that the Igbos are not indifferent to this crisis of identity. Their experience of colonialism, and even the Biafran War has sparked off in them the quest for a historical identity. It is such that Isichei (1976) avers that no historical question arouses more interest among the present day Igbo people than the enquiry "where did the Igbo come from?"

As regards the territorial identity of the Igbos, Uzozie (1991:4) observes that "To date, there is no agreement among ethnographers, missionaries, anthropologists, historians, geographers and politicians on the definition and geographical limits of territory". Ekwuru (2009) states that any attempt to introduce who the Igbo is poses a lot of problems in all aspects of its academic conceptualizations. This notwithstanding, Kanu (2012) describes the Igbo people as a single people even though fragmented and scattered, inhabiting a geographical area stretching from Benin to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta. They speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. Their cultural patterns are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions; they believe in a common Supreme Being known as Chukwu or Chineke. Two theories have emerged in response to the question of the origin of the Igbo. There is, the 'Northern Centre Theory' which, according to Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermatic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the 'Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland'. According to Jones (cited by Isichei 1976), the early migrations of the

proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions.

Geographically speaking, Njoku (1990) posits that Igbo land is located in the South Eastern region of what is known as Nigeria. The southern part of Nigeria exhibits a wide variety of topographical features. It is situated within the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitudes. As a culture area, it is made up of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. According to Uchendu (1965), in its status as an ethnic group, the Igbo share common boundaries with other ethnic groups: eastward, the Yakos and Ibibios; westwards, with the Binis and the Isokos, Warri; northward, with the Igalas, Idomas, and the Tivs, and southward, the Ijaws and Ogonis.

Socio-politically, unlike the other tribes in Nigeria, who evolved a molithic centralized system of government, the Igbo distinguish themselves with a complicated socio-political structure which has been qualified as *republican*. The Igbo ethnic group is divided into clans, each clan is made up of towns; and each town is comprised of villages. The village is the primary social unit constituted of families or kindred. The family is the nucleus of society. Politically, the lineage system is the matrix of the social units or organization and provides grounds for political and religious structures. The traditional concepts of political power and authority is structured and determined by their concept of *umunna* and the membership of the association based on elaborate title system. Economically, Aligwekwe (1991), avers that the traditional Igbo people were sedentary agriculturists. This delimitation of Igbo land as a cultural area, helps to identify the cultural horizon for the study of the Igbo-African concept o death.

The Origin of Death among the Igbo People

Right from the very ancient times, investigating the origin of the world, the national god, the origin of humanity, its place in creation, the deity that governs the land, the temple, the cult, death etc., has been the object of human reflection. The outcome of these investigations is usually articulated and preserved in myths. Thus, myths are the outcome of human attempts to explain historical institutions and developments by appeal to non-historical factors and forces. According Marshall (1988),

The word 'myth' is used to refer to stories that are fictional, and hence, it has come to have a pejorative sense. Traditionally, it refers to invented stories about the gods in which they behave like human beings with

superhuman powers. Closely associated with this sense of the word is its usage to refer to the stories which may accompany and allegedly form the basis of religious rituals. (p. 449)

Obiego (1978) gives a beautiful cosmogonic myth about the origin of death among the Igbo people:

At the beginning of things, when there was nothing, neither man or animals or plants nor heaven nor earth, nothing indeed, nothing was, only one very powerful person was and his name was *Chukwu*. Then he came and created both water below, animals and everything as we see it today. Afterwards, *Chineke* created man, man was the head of all things, but *Chineke* and *Ala* own man. After a long time, death entered the world and began killing men. Men sent a messenger to him asking whether the dead could be restored to life and sent back to their homes. They chose a dog as their messenger. The dog however, did not go straight to him; rather he dallied on the way. The toad had however, overheard the message and he wanted (wished) to punish mankind. He overtook the dog and reached *Chineke* first. He said that he had been sent by men to say that after death, they had no desire at all to return to the world. *Chineke* declared that he would respect men's wishes and when the dog arrived to *Chineke* with the true message, *Chineke* refused to alter his decision. Thus human beings might be born again but cannot return with the same body and the same personality. (p. 30).

It is worth noting, as Abanuka (1999) has observed that the interest of the myth maker is not so much in the coherence of the arguments, as in the thing which he aims to say.

A cursory Glance at Death from Igbo Nomenclature

The names that the Igbos use are usually decked with meaning. These names reveal the Igbo perspective of death. There are times when these names are monumental, that is, if they speak about the present- as regards what has happened or is happening; at other times, such names are prophetic, in the sense that they speak of what will happen in the future. In the names, which the Igbo people give their children, either based on what has happened or is happening or would happen, one can sift the Igbo understanding of death.

There are names that show the Igbo concept of death as an inevitable end:

Onwudi- death is existing;

Onwunyih- death is unavoidable;

Anaezeonwu- can you avoid death?

Although death is a transition to the world of the ancestors, it still brings pain; thus the Igbo has such names:

Onwubualili- death brings sorrow;

Onwudiwe- death is annoying;

Onwudinjo- death is bad;

Onwudiufu- death is painful;

Onwuegbuem- death has killed me;

Onwuemelie- death has conquered;

Onwuegbusinam- death stop killing me;

Onwuegbuchanam- death don't finish me;

When death comes, the victims and relations of the dying are helpless, and thus in prayer, the Igbo name their children:

Onwubiko- death have mercy;

Onwu teaka- death stay far away;

Onwu chekwuo- death wait;

Onwu egbuchuna- death don't kill prematurely;

Onwughalu- death pardon;

Onwu seluaka- death withdraw;

To show that death is not discriminatory, the Igbo would also name their children:

Onwuamaeze- death does not know a king;

Onwuatiegwu- death does not fear;

Onwuasoanya- death does not respect anybody;

Onwueriego- death does not take money;

Because death cannot be stopped or appeased when it visits, it is also referred to as being powerful through such Igbo names:

Onwuaka- death is very great;

Onyekaonwu- who is greater than death;

Onyenyilionwu- who is above death;

Onwumelu- death is responsible;

From the foregoing names used by the Igbo-African, one can say that death is a threat to the Igbo-African who sees life as the highest good.

The Igbo Classification of Death

Among the Igbos of eastern Nigeria, death can be classified into three types: violent death, natural or good death and bad death. There are times when they are discussed as only two types of death, as good and bad death, but for the sake of clarity, they are divided into three types in this piece.

a. Ezigbo Onwu or Onwu Chi (Natural or good death)

A person who reached old ripe age and attained a life of accomplishment before dying is said to have died a good death. They are usually said to have a good personal god, *ezigbo chi* or *chi oma*. This does not mean that the community or family rejoices at the death of such a person, for no death is really good except for the need to make something good out of a bad situation. Thus old age is a *conditio sine qua non* for good death. In such deaths, the diviner is not consulted to tell the cause of the death. The accomplishments of the person who has died a good death should include marriage, begotten children which gives the person in question the opportunity to participate in life circle, accomplished through reincarnation. At death such a person joins the ancestors, though after the full funeral rites that ushers the person into the world of the ancestors. Death at an old age is regarded as a blessing and is celebrated with feasting, and the children of the deceased have the duty to ensure that the deceased is given a befitting burial that would send him to the world of the ancestors. An example of a good death is seen in *Things Fall Apart*, when Ogbuefi Ezeudu died, the people of Umuofia celebrated his death with lots of food, drinking, and dancing. The nine representatives of the ancestral spirits, the *egwugwu*, and various types of masquerades came to pay their last respect. There were gun salutes, the beating of drums and the brandishing and clanging of machetes. He was given a befitting burial because he was one of the oldest men in Umuofia. And because such a person qualifies to be an ancestor and thus to reincarnate, he is approached for help in many life crisis like barrenness among members of the family.

a. Onwu Ojoo (Bad Death)

Those who are considered to have died an *onwu ojoo*, are majorly those who have died of leprosy, small pox, cholera, swollen stomach, swollen body, suicide or killed by an anti-wickedness deity like Amadioha through lightening. Such persons are not given full funeral rites. There is no happiness accompanying such burials. It is worst when a person commits suicide. There is no fitting funeral ceremony for someone who commits suicide, even at an old age. No one is allowed to cry or weep publicly for the deceased. There is no cooking or drinking. Finally, cleansing ceremonies are performed by the deceased's family so that such an evil will not happen again. The elders would offer sacrifices for peace in the land, and for the extinction of such thought and illness from the land. It is seen as the most evil thing a person can do. It is referred to as *alu* an abomination and as *nso ani* a sin against the earth. Thus, in the case of suicide, not only loved ones are offended, the divine is involved, as *Ala* the earth goddess is offended because the land is desecrated.

In the *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1998) brought out the consequence of dying a violent death among the Igbo people. Okonkwo was a great warrior and wrestler, and took the *ozo* title in Umuofia, fought very hard to preserve his tradition and ended up committing suicide, the most horrendous of all offenses against the earth goddess. His clansmen as a result of his crime could neither touch his corpse nor bury him with all the rites due a great warrior and an *ozo* as they did when Ogbuefi Ezeudu died. Rather, the elders would offer sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated ground which Okonkwo had polluted. Achebe recounted the conversation between Obierika, Okonkwo's clansman and friend, and the District Commissioner:

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead.

"Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him," said Obierika. "We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming".

"Why can't you take him down yourselves?" he (i.e. the District Commissioner) asked.

"It is against our custom," said one of the men. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who

commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers".

"Will you bury him like any other man?" asked the Commissioner.

"We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land".

Obierika turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog ..." (pp. 207-208).

To further highlight the seriousness of this kind of death among the Igbos, Ukwu and Ikebudu (2013) explain that if suicide was committed by hanging from a tree, not everyone was permitted to touch or to bring the corpse down from the tree. When the corpse is finally brought down, able-bodied men in the community will cut that tree down, first, as a precaution to prevent another person from committing suicide on the same tree, secondly, because the tree is regarded as an "evil" or "bad" tree.

If suicide was committed inside the house, the house is destroyed along with everything in it to prevent another suicidal attempt by someone else, and the body is taken to an evil forest where it is buried.

If suicide was committed inside a yam barn, all the arms will be destroyed. Little wonder then, a servant who is maltreated by a master may retaliate by committing suicide between the entrance to the animal house and the yam barn. In this case everything would be destroyed in the master's barn and farm house. If the suicide takes place in a farm land, the grave is dug directly under the spot where the victim hangs, so that when the rope is cut, the corpse falls directly into the grave. When suicide is committed by drowning in a well, the well is filled up with sand and closed for ever. This reveals the unpopular place suicide enjoys among the Igbo people.

b. Onwu Ekwensu (Violent Death)

This kind of death is usually the death of a young person who dies from a violent accident or killed for stealing what does not belong to him. Usually those who die

this way are said to have a bad personal god: *ajo Chi*. It is also called *onwu ike* (death that happens by force) or *onwu nnwutu* (to die when one's time has not ripened) or *onwu nkwoobi* (to cut a person's life short). The idea of *onwu ike* is to depict that the person has not yet reached ripe old age. This kind of death is usually believed to be caused by a deity as a punishment for an offence. Normally, when there is a violent death, a diviner is consulted to ascertain what caused the death. The diviner will identify which deity has killed the person. In some Igbo cultures, the property of the deceased is taken to the shrine of the deity. In the case of a child's death, it is called *ogbanje*, the corpse is taken to the forest where it is mutilated with cutlass and sometimes burnt into ashes.

The word *Ekwensu* stands for violence. According to Metuh (1991), *Ekwensu* is the spirit of violence and patron of warriors. Isichie (1969), records that among the Igbos of Asaba, there was a festival called *Ekwensu* festival, and it constituted their major annual feast, during which they displayed their military prowess. The spirit of a person who dies an *onwu ekwensu* is believed not to have accomplished his or her destiny, and as such, the spirit of such a person wanders in the spirit world. Such a spirit cannot reincarnate, but rather it moves around disrupting the lives of the living members of the family. This is not to say that they are totally out of control, the Igbo sends them away through the offering of sacrifices. They are sent to an intermediate state, between the spirit-land and the land of the living where they live frustrated, as wandering and restless spirits; they are referred to as *Akalogeli* (bad spirits). Many of those who die a bad death often have their spirits hovering and causing havoc among the living members of the family or community. These spirits are called variously: *akalogili*, *ofogeli* or *nmuo mkpasa* or *uruchi*- spirit of destruction. In such a case, there are times when the body will be exhumed and the head cut off and buried differently. When the body is not exhumed, chain is used to chain the grave of the diseased to show that the dead person has been chained in the grave and will never come out again to disturb the people.

This is not to say that everyone who dies a violent death becomes a bad spirit. When a person dies *onwu ojoo* or *ike*, and such a person is qualified to receive a befitting burial as a result of his age and achievements, a ritual cleansing could be performed. The ritual is called *Iwenata Ozu* –bringing home the corpse. This allows the person in question to receive a befitting burial, even though he or she has died a bad death. Such a person can become an ancestor after the appropriate rites have been performed.

The Igbo Rites for the Dead

When the Igbo African has struggled with death and death conquers, he turns to the life beyond the present, and to ensure a participation in the life of the ancestors, he performs two rites for the dead to accompany them to the great beyond. These rites for the dead are two in number and they include: burial and funeral rites.

a. Burial Rite

Burial rite is also called *Ime oyiyi ozu*. If it is an infant or a young person who has died, the burial is not delayed, however, the kindred of the child will have to be informed before the burial. There is usually little or no ceremony accompanying such burials. This is based on the fact that it is regarded as a bad death- *ajo onwu*. During the burial of the child, the priest prays: *uwa gi ozo idikwana ka nke a* – in your return to the world, may you never be like this one. If it is a married person that has died, the inlaws of the person in question are formally informed. In some Igbo societies, if it is a man, he is expected to go to the woman's village seven times or walk out and into his house seven times, to register his wish for the woman to return again seven times through reincarnation. Thus the Igbo saying: *uwa m uwa asaa* (my world seven times). The number seven signifies completeness.

As part of the burial rites, the dead is ritually washed *iwu ahu*. The purpose of this rite is to strengthen the diseased as he or she embarks on the journey to the spirit world. In some cultures, if it is a man, the *okpara* (first son) performs the rite, and if the person has no son, a male from the extended family does that. If a woman, the *ada* (first daughter) performs the rite. There are cultures where widows are given the water from the washing of the corpse to drink as a proof of their innocence as regards the death of the man.

After washing, a fowl is strangled and the head cut off. The blood is rubbed on the body of the diseased; the blood is sacrificed to the deities to accompany the dead to the spirit world. The priest does this seven times, going round the body, signifying the journey of the diseased through seven forests and seven hills in the spirit world *ugwu n'asaa na agu n'asaa*, before arriving the land of the spirits. When the ritual washing is over, the body is taken to the grave for burial. If it is suspected that the diseased was killed by someone, sometimes a cutlass could be put in the grave so that he or she can revenge. It is hardly believed among Igbo-Africans that things can happen by chance. According to Aja (2001), the African believes that the world is an ordered universe in which all events are caused and potentially explicable. The African does not just speak of mechanical, chemical and

psychological interactions like his western counterparts; he also speaks of a metaphysical kind of causality, which binds the creator to the creature. There are times when evil people could kill another with charms or witchcraft. There are times when people are killed by particular deities as a result of an abomination they have committed.

The quality of burial rites depends on the status of the person who has died. The burial of a king or a titled man is usually a great celebration. There are places where they are buried seated. There are times when kings are buried with their slaves or human heads are gotten from neighbouring villages and buried with the king. They are believed to go with him to serve him in the next world. Before the covering of the grave words such as *je nko oma* 'go well' are said, signifying that the dead is on a journey. Elders are usually buried in their parlours. If it is a woman, she is buried in her hut or kitchen so that the daughter-in-law, who would be cooking in that kitchen would be giving her warmth. This would strengthen the relationship between the two, and the diseased mother-in-law will in turn bless her from the world of the ancestors. The burial rite is followed by eating and drinking and dancing in honour of the diseased. At this point, masquerades come out and dance. If the date for funeral rite has been fixed it is announced on this day.

b. Funeral Rite

This rite is also called *Ikwa Ozu* (according a befitting burial to the dead person). This usually comes not necessarily immediately after the burial. It is not a second burial as some falsely refer to it, it is rather a continuation of the rites for then dead. It is a rite of incorporation of the diseased into the world of the ancestors- after the rites the diseased is welcomed into the college of ancestors *ndi nnanna*. Although such a person is already living in the world of the ancestors, this rite helps him or her secure her rightful place in the world of the living-dead. This explains why the living dead get angry with the living if they fail to perform this rite. During this ceremony, gunpowder *nkpo n'ani* is fired as a sign of honour. Ekechi (1972), avers that gunpowder has become a significant factor in Igbo burials. As the rite is going on, there is dancing and merry making. In all these, the dead is sent forth: *ka a kwa ya, ka onaruo nke oma*. After the celebration, the whole kindred will go to the market place on the market day to show that they have performed the funeral rites for the diseased. At this time, they receive gifts from friends and well wishers. This is followed by another celebration, but of a low magnitude. It is a kind of thanksgiving. During such funeral rites, care must be taken that funeral rites has

been performed for others who have died before the diseased. For instance, if my father dies, before I perform the funeral rites for him, I must enquire if it has been done for his father. If this is not checked, death will continue to take place in the family. It is in this regard that the Igbo would say *akpukpu anaghi ano n'abia a na-ekpokwasi ya akpukpo ozo* (one ought not to continue to pack dirt upon dirt without removing the first).

These rites for the dead are responsibilities that the living owe the dead. This responsibility is reciprocal. Opoku (1978) describes this dependence thus:

For example, it is the responsibility of the living to perform funeral rites of the dead properly and to give them a fitting burial, and thereafter to offer them sacrifices, food and drink which constitute acts of remembrance and reverence. The dead, on their part, begin to play a larger and more important role in human society in general and in the life of their families in particular because of their increased powers. Their role is to protect, direct, intervene and guide their families, and also to serve as elders of the family. (pp. 135-134).

From the foregoing, it is evident that the dead is not forgotten as soon as he or she is laid under the earth. Sacrifices of food and drink are offered in memory of them.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the Igbo-African concept of death. As a background, it studied the historical-cultural roots of the Igbo, and further, the origin of death, the classification of death by the Igbos. It further studied the nature of death in Igbo-African nomenclature and the rites for the death. And from this study, it is evident that the Igbo does not see death as the end of life, neither does death sever his connection with his family. On the contrary, death extends the family relationship into eternity. The family of the Igbo-African therefore has a supernatural dimension, being made up of both the living and the death. This explains why in every family activity there is a place given to the dead so that they may fulfil their obligations to the family, and things go better for the family when both sides of the world fulfil their obligations faithfully.

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