
Belief In Life After Death In African Traditional Religion Vis-À-Vis Christian Religion: A Case Study Of Central Sub-cultural Zone Of Igboland

By

CHARLES OKEKE, Ph.D.

*Department of Christian Religious Studies,
Nwafor Orizu College of Education,
Nsugbe
Anambra State, Nigeria*

Abstract

Every religion that is worth being a religion believes in the life after death. African traditional religion is one of the religions of the world that believe that there is life hereafter. Adherents of African traditional religion believe that death is not the end of one's life; it is not annihilation, rather it is transition of life. But is this belief the same as the Christian belief in the life after death? Can we say that there is the concept of eschatology in African traditional religion? Traditional Africans believe in the existence of two worlds, namely visible and invisible worlds. The visible world is occupied by human beings and other elements, while the invisible world is occupied by supernatural beings, namely the Supreme Being (God), deities, spirit-forces and ancestors. The traditional Africans believe that among the spirit-forces are the wicked and benevolent ones. Where one goes after death depends on moral life of the person when he was on earth. And for one to enjoy the life of bliss in the next world one must have the necessary characteristics, and above all, must be accorded a befitting burial after death. This paper is set to explore these factors.

In this comparative study, the researcher will use a culture area approach/method of interpretation. In using culture area approach, we endeavour to locate the place or places where certain things and beliefs are found. It is based on this that the researcher will limit the scope of this study to Igbo of Nigeria, with particular reference to central sub-cultural zone or area of Igboland comprising Awka – Onitsha – Ihiala – Owerri axis. The reason for this delimitation is that the researcher is Igbo, and so, he is at home with the culture and belief of the people. Secondly, the approach is pertinent to avoid falling victim to the error of over-generalization. For instance, a particular practice or belief that obtains in a particular sub-culture area, may not be known at another sub-culture, so that it would be an overgeneralization to say that the particular belief under consideration is a common belief in Igboland.

A brief survey of Igboland is pertinent so as to enable the interesting readers have the scope of the area understudy.

A Brief Survey of Igbo Physical Location and Origin

Geographically viewed, the Igbo people are located in South-eastern Nigeria, approximately between the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitude. Igboland is bounded on the north by Igala and Tiv tribes; on the south by the Ijaw and Ogoni regions; on the east by the Ibibio, Efik and Yoko people; on the west by Bini and Isoko provinces. The climate is completely tropical. The annual temperature is generally 80 ° f, and varies between 5 and 10 ° f.

Igboland has two main seasons: the dry season which begins in November and ends in March, and the wet season which begins late in March and ends early November. There is the much desired *August Break* which is usually a two to three-week rainless period in July/August. The annual rainfall varies from about 105 inches in the south to 60 inches in the north (Forde, 1962).

The origin of the Igbo people is not yet unanimously and conclusively traceable because of lack of documentary records by the Igbo fore-bears. Various writers such as Prof. Onwuejeogwu, an Igbo anthropologist and ethnographer have established that the first Igbo settlers east of the Niger were there before 100 B.C. Some attribute the origin of either the entire or some particular Igbo people to foreign countries or to some ethnic groups in Nigeria. Archdeacon G. T. Basden who worked among the Igbo and studied them in great detail for over thirty years (1900-35) seemed to be of the opinion that either the Igbo are of Semitic (Hebrew) origin, or have in the long past had close affinity with the Hebrews.

Among other things, Basden (1966) declares, "To anybody contemplating residence in Igbo country, particularly those likely to be associated with native Affairs, I would recommend a careful study of Levitical laws. In many ways, the affinity between the native law and the Mosaic system is remarkable" (p. 11).

Belief in Life after Death

The traditional people of the central Igbo believe in life after death. Although the arrival of Christianity modernized the beliefs of the people, it did not essentially revolutionize their basic beliefs. For instance, the people believe that they need to live a moral life on earth by observing both social and religious rules and norms in order to earn a good life after death. The people believe that death is a natural rhythm of life, yet every human death is thought to have some external causes. This is why at any death, the relatives would want to know the cause of the death of their member. They would go to any length to ascertain the 'what' (ness) and not the 'how' (ness) of the death. This includes going to a medicine man for investigation.

It is pertinent to know that among the people of the central Igbo, there is a belief that those who lived good life while on earth and died a natural death, and thereafter, accorded a befitting burial, normally partake in the offerings with their kiths and kin who are still living; those are regarded as ancestors. Arinze (1970) calls them "*Ndi ichie*" (our forefathers) (p. 19). It is believed that the ancestors are much more in active relationship with the living, receiving individually or collectively their sacrifices and homage. It is also believed that the ancestors are able to influence the lives and activities of their relations on earth, hence they can bring fortune or misfortune on them and at the same time protect them against the evil machinations of the wicked people, depending on how the living regard and remember them.

The people believe that the dead has supernatural powers and for this reason, they prepare for death. They do this by ensuring that they live exemplary lives so that when they die, they would be accorded a befitting burial, and so, join the ancestors since these are among the qualities for ancestorship.

The people's world view with regard to life after death is that when a person dies, the person is not actually dead but has gone to the land of bliss to join his ancestors from where they will be interacting, interceding and protecting their families on earth. Arinze (1970) clarifies this thus, "The Igbo family is not made up of only those who are still living in the flesh. The unseen ancestors are part of the family and are very interested in it. This can be said of most African people, but in varying degree. The Igbo invite them to the family meal, for according to Igbo etiquette, it is impolite to refuse another person an invitation to a meal taken in his presence" (p. 19).

The Igbo people believe in life after death, and that explains the reason they accord their dead ones burial rites so as not to be rejected in the spirit world. Traditionalists believe that the spirit of the deceased go to live in another place called the spirit world. Okeke (2012) captures it well. According to him, "The people of the central Igbo believe that after a successful career on earth, one happily gathers with his forefathers in the land of the living-dead and continues the interminable cycle of life. Failure to

carry out all the burial rites on the deceased means that he would be ostracized by his community in the world of the living dead. Thus, he would become a roaming malevolent spirit” (p. 98). This is buttressed by Okafor (1996) as he says, “The Igbo people believe that it is funeral rite that enables the spirit of the dead to reach the spirit land. Without funeral ceremonies, Igbo people believe that the deceased wander the earth restlessly and cause havoc on those responsible” (p. 12).

In some areas of Igboland, immediately somebody dies, there is a wild outburst of wailing in the case of a close relative, and sometimes, it speedily develops into a form of frenzy. The bereaved woman rushes forth from the death chamber beating her breast and runs through the village wailing her loss at the top of her voice. While she does this some villagers will console her by telling her that this world is not good for him, that is, for the deceased, that he has gone to the land of his father from where he will protect them. So they will calm the bereaved woman.

Mbiti (1969) says that “death is a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person.” (p. 158). Furthermore, he submitted that “many Africans believe that their beloved ones who are dead do not actually leave them but hover around and protect them” (p. 158). At this juncture, researcher shall examine the concept of death among the traditional Igbo of central sub-cultural area.

The Concept of Death among Traditional Igbo of Central Sub-cultural Area

With regard to death (*onwu*) the Igbo distinguish three types of death, namely natural death (*onwu chi*), bad/shameful death (*onwu ojoo*) and death brought about by a human agent (*onwu akameru*). Natural death is any death that occurs in ripe age as a natural conclusion to life, or results from sickness judged normally by the traditional society. This is a kind of death every traditional Igbo looks forward to. This kind of death is regarded as a blessing from God and a reward for fidelity to tradition (*omenala*). A person who died as a result of natural death (*onwu chi*) is given a befitting burial with full funeral rites according to Igbo custom and tradition (Okafor, 1996).

Bad/shameful death (*onwu ojoo*) is a death resulting from sickness like the small pox, or distention of the abdomen, or death at specific periods such as women during childbirth (Okafor, 1996). This type of death is regarded as bad death. It is believed to be a punishment from God or the gods for some unexpiated crime such as public or occult, committed by the deceased. This type of death also includes death that results from abortion, drowning, lightning, murder, fire, suicide and so on. The victims of this type of death are not given any burial or funeral. In most cases, they are thrown into the bad bush (*ajọ ofia*).

Death brought about by a human agent (*onwu akameru*) is death caused by human agency like poisoning, deliberate murder, manslaughter or abortion. In some Igboland, this type of death is regarded as *onwu chi* (natural death), if the victim dies at the ripe age, otherwise, it is *onwu ojoo* (*bad death*) and the earth pollution has to be cleansed (Okafor, 1996).

In central Igbo, those who died as a result of bad death and death brought about by human agency are denied burial. Their spirits are believed to wander about restlessly because they are not received in the company of the ancestors.

The questions that need to be examined at this juncture are: Who are the ancestors? What are their roles among the living in the visible world?

The Ancestors

These are Igbo traditional saints who are not really deified; they are rather honoured owing to the position they occupy among the Igbo families. They are the Igbo sons who have lived to a mature age before they died. An ancestor must have been survived by at least one son; must have lived a good moral life according to the reckonings of the people; must have been given a befitting burial ceremony (Okeke,

2012). Metuh (1985) explains that “when a person dies everything must be made possible to ensure that he reaches home, for a person who has died a good death. This is only possible when all the appropriate funeral rites have been completed” (p. 119). However, it is not only the ancestors that are thought to have reached the land of bliss; other men and women, single or married, survived by only female children or by no child at all provided they have lived according to the law and customs of the people and are given befitting funerals, also reach the land of the bliss but are not ancestors. They are spirits who have gone before us. Anusiobi (1975) affirms that “All such people in all their stages are supposed to be various masquerades that roam the towns and villages during different traditional feast. One sees boy masqueraders, girl masqueraders (*agboghọ mmuo*); formidably strong ones representing those who died in their prime of youth and so on” (p. 44).

The ancestors are still regarded as part of the family to which they belonged when they were alive. Now that they are stripped of the body through death, they become freer and more active in helping the members of the family and the towns of their origin. They approach the different kinds of spirits and divinities interested in the affairs of men and enter into communion with them in view of the good of their living kith and kin (Okeke, 2012). Ezenweke (2008) quoting Mbiti (1969) articulated the roles of the ancestors thus:

- Unifying families and people, caring for each other, empowering, blessing, rewarding and inspiring.
- Protecting families and clans from diseases, evil, enemies, even war.
- Mediating between people and the divinity.
- Enforcing discipline in case of the breaking social values.
- Facilitating holistic healing.

To the central Igbo, death is not merely joining the ancestors but a final place of rest where a person stays and forgets all the sufferings of the world. Thus the Igbo say *onye nwuru o zuru ike* (In death one finds rest), *ezumike adighi n'uwa nkea* (there is no rest in this world). For this therefore, rest is a passage of rest.

The Igbo of central zone also regard death as a thing of joy. Apart from *onwu ojo* (bad death) and *onwu akameru* (death resulting from human agents), natural death is longed for, though the people pray for long life during traditional prayers.

Another question that needs to be clarified is: who are these divinities or deities that the ancestors mediate or intercede with on behalf of their living kith and kin?

The Divinities

The Igbo believe in the existence of the divinities and other spirit-forces who are below the Supreme Being (God). In Igbo ontology, there are five categories of spiritual beings according to their hierarchical ranks. They are:

1. The Supreme Being (*Chukwu or Chineke*).
2. The Deities or Divinities (*Mmuo*). These are lesser in rank, below the Supreme Being. They are regarded as ministers, agents, commissioners or messengers of the Supreme Being. They include:
 - *Anyanwu* (the Lord of life and light)
 - *Ala* (the earth goddess, mother of life and queen of morality)
 - *Amadioha* or *Kamalu* or *Igwe* (God's orderly and of instant justice)
 - *Mmuo-mmiri* (the divinely appointed temptress)
 - *Ahajioku* (the lord of agriculture)
 - *Agwu* (the lord of divination and healing).
3. The Spirit-forces (*Arusi* or *Alusi* (depending on the dialect: Owerri and Onitsha dialects respectively))

4. The Ancestors (*Ndị ichie*)
5. Medicine (*ogwu*).

At the hierarchical structure of these beings, man is at the lowest level. For man to survive he must do everything possible not to annoy any of them; he must live a life of balance with them. When any of them is offended by man he must appease the particular divinity he has offended through sacrifice lest he strikes. This is the reason the ancestors intervene by way of mediating between man and spirit; they calm the anger of gods.

These divinities could also be invoked to protect life and property; to punish or even kill one's enemies. They can sometimes act irritably. For instance, *Igwe* or *Amadioha* (God's orderly and of instant justice) expresses power and anger through the thunder bolts and lightening and anybody killed cannot be mourned. His body or corpse will be thrown into the bad bush (*ajọ ofia*).

Okeke (2008) maintains that "calling on all these spirits demonstrates the unity and multiplicity of spiritual beings in the world-view of the Igbo of the central sub-cultural zone. The supremacy and universal lordship of God is not compromised by the belief in other beings that are seen as the emanations of God, his messengers or creatures. God and the spirits are believed to live in one family community in which each has its specific role" (p. 101).

Life after Death in the Christian Context

The advent of the Christian missionaries with their doctrine in the central sub-cultural zone of Igboland has brought a tremendous change in the understanding of life after death among the people. Thus, Christian tradition distinguishes between two types of death, namely spiritual death and natural or biological death. Spiritual death is one living in sin. This type of death brings about eternal alienation from God, if one fails to reconcile with God before the biological death. And in some cases, one who lives in sin is said to be spiritually dead. This type of death is also exemplified by the fall of Adam (Gen. 3:1-13).

Biological death is the end of biological life often described as the separation of soul from the body. This means that the principle of life, which is the soul in human being assumes a different elevation or form. This means that immediately upon his death, man attains a new existence, which is spiritual form, while his body lies in the grave, and decomposes or is cremated.

The Christian message portrays death or dying in Christ as a participation in the boundless, overflow of God's saving power in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. The end of a Christian is not his death but a transformation into a new life.

Paul stresses that Christian death is a desirable event. In fact, a Christian should long to pass through biological death which brings him face to face with Christ, for "we know that when our earthly dwelling, our body here on earth, is destroyed, we may count on a building from God, a heavenly dwelling not built by human hands that lasts forever. Therefore we groan and long to put on this heavenly dwelling, because being clothed we will not be found naked. As long as we are in this tent, we indeed moan our unbearable fate, because we do not want this clothing to be removed from us; we would rather put the other over it, that the mortal body may be absorbed by true life. (2Cor. 5:1-4).

For the Christians, to die is based on the fidelity and promise of Christ, who says, "My sheep listen to my voice and I know them; they follow me and I give them eternal life. They shall never perish and no one will ever steal them from me. My father who has given them to me is greater than anyone and no one can snatch them from the Father's hand. The Father and I are one" (Jn. 10:27-29).

Moreover, while the traditional Igbo of central subcultural zone view eschatological life in the context of joining the ancestors in the land of bliss from where the deceased plays the various intercessory roles, the Christian doctrine distinguishes two types of eschatology, namely individual and general eschatology. Individual eschatology deals with the end of every person, consisting of the four last things, namely death, particular judgment, paradise and hell. General eschatology deals with the end of humankind and the universe, when there will be *parousia*, that is, Christ coming in his glory to judge both the living and the dead; resurrection of the dead, renewal of the world (Okeke, 2014). This understanding of life after death is lacking in African traditional religion.

Furthermore, in Central subcultural zone of Igboland, when a person dies, a ritual of sand casting is done by members of his family and other relations. Each person will cast a small quantity of sand into the grave of the deceased person with shovel. This ritual implies bidding a farewell to him, and it marks the final aspect of burial rites before the commencement of funerals. This ritual of sand casting is very important as other rituals lest the ancestors will deem the burial rite of the deceased person as incomplete. Besides, before the grave is sand-filled, the important objects that will aid the deceased person in his spiritual journey will also be cast into the grave and buried with him. Such objects include cooking utensils with which he will be cooking in the next world, clothes which he will be wearing, money for making purchases among other things that are deemed necessary.

With the advent of Christianity, inculturation which is a meeting point between tradition and Christianity has changed this traditional understanding. Though the deceased is no longer buried with the physical objects, sand casting is still very effective. Today the people of central Igbo are about 95% Christians. These Christians still maintain the ritual of sand casting but with the understanding that one is made out of sand and through sand one will return to one's creator. Again, Christ has redeemed all things in him both human beings and other elements, therefore, sand casting is a way of begging God to redeem the deceased through Christ.

Conclusion

The traditional Igbo of central subcultural zone strongly believe that life exists after death for both the wicked and good people. When a wicked person dies he is not received among the ancestors. This is because after death he would not enjoy the rights and privileges, which must be accorded a good person who lived a good moral life according to the reckonings of the community, survived by at least a son, lived up to ripe age and died a natural death (*onwu chi*).

It is believed that the wicked ones who are now spirits often appear among the living in this world to torment the members of their family, sometimes by stoning them or by causing them havoc. This is because they are not happy in the invisible world, while the good ones enjoy peaceful bliss. Rather than cause havoc they protect their family members. People long for good ones to reincarnate in their family, that is, to be born into their family. This type of reincarnation (repeater) is called *ino uwa*. It is only the ancestors that take this form of reincarnation.

Furthermore, those who died as a result of human agency (*onwu akameru*) like poisoning or accident as well as those who died from bad sickness (*onwu ojoo*) like small pox, or inexplicable diseases are denied burial rites. It is believed that their souls wander about looking for someone to harm. This is because they are not at peace in the next world.

Contributions to Knowledge

Awolalu and Dopamu (1978) adequately stated that "belief in ancestors supplies strong sanctions for public morality. They are guardians of traditional morality. They demand a high sense of respect for the traditional law and custom." In line with this statement, one can observe that ancestors are a powerful force to reckon with in traditional Igbo society; they are dreaded by the traditional Igbo man and woman.

Just as the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, so the fear of annoying the ancestors instills fear, respect and other virtues in human beings. One therefore strives to live a virtuous life, to avoid attracting the punishment of the ancestor.

The ancestors are regarded as guardians and protectors of morality, people are afraid not to annoy them by ensuring that they live the life worthy of emulation. In traditional Igbo society, people abhor lies, abortion, euthanasia, infanticide, terrorism and other forms of life that are inimical to human existence. In those days, people are their brother's keeper, community life is at the paramount, everyone is accepted and valued in the community and life is not just the highest good, it is existence itself. Today the reverse is the case; people tend to live individually, and sanctity of life seems to be of no value; the implication is that people live as if there is no life after death.

Traditional Igbo society like other traditional African societies, abhors atheism; worship of the supernatural beings is a *sine qua non*; no one exempts him/herself from worship, sacrifice or prayer especially community religious exercises. The people see these as obligations. Belief in life after death spurs everyone to moral actions. The contemporary society has turned away from God and man sets himself as the absolute measure of all things (Nwosu, 1986) or debases himself to the point of despair (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 12).

African traditional religion can bequeath the above way of life to the contemporary society.

References

- Anusiobi, H. M. N.(1975). *Igbo religiousness its virtues and limitations in the light of Christianity*. Reome: Teresianum.
- Arinze, F. A.(1975). *Sacrifice in Ibo religion*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Awolalu, J. O. & Dopamu, A. P. (1978). *West African traditional religion*. Ilorin: Onibonoje.
- Basden, G. T. (1966). *Niger Ibos*. London: Frank Case.
- Ezenweke, E. O. (2008). The cult of ancestors: a focal point for prayers in African traditional communities. *Journal of religion and humanities*, 1, 46-60.
- Flannery, A. (Ed.). Vatican II. (1975). *Councilor & post councilor documents*, vol. I & II. New York: Costello.
- Forde, D. & Jones, G. I. (1962). *The Ibo and Ibibio speaking peoples of south-eastern Nigeria*. London: International African Institute.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Whitestable.
- Metuh, E.I. (1985). *African religion in Western conceptual schemes: Studies in Igbo religion*. Ibadan: Clavarianum.
- Nwosu, R. A. (1986). *The church and inter-tribal harmony: A study in Nigerian perspective*. Rome: Lateranensis.
- Okafor, S. (1996). *Death, burial and widowhood in the Catholic diocese of Awka: Guidelines and directories*. Awka: Retreat Pastoral Centre.

Okeke, C. O. (2012). *The dynamics of Igbo traditional prayers in the central sub-cultural zone of Igboland*. Onitsha: St. Stephen's.

Okeke, C. (2014). *The Christian doctrine and belief*. Onitsha: St. Stephen's.