

# A BEFITTING LIVING OR BURIAL: PERSPECTIVES OF LIFE AND DEATH IN IGBO ONOTOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

*Man, from primordial times has been preoccupied with the search for the meaning of ultimate reality - life and death. He has continued in the quest to find meaning to his reality in order to be able to properly situate his existence. From the ancient period to this age, the debate concerning the goal of life and death has raged. The Cyrenaics, for instance, believe that the ultimate goal of life is pleasure. Aristotle in a similar way holds that the end of life is eudaimonia - happiness. According to the Cynics, good living entails living a moral life. As opinions and worldviews differ on the meaning of life, so has there been a divergent view on the concept of death. While some believe life is transitory, others like the Epicureans are of the opinion that death is the ultimate end of man. In Igbo Cosmo-ontology, like other African societies, the concept of life and death has been approached from their gamuts of meaning. The Igbo people hold dearly the sacrosanctity of life. Life is respected and protected. Ndi Igbo believe that life is like a journey, like a market place (uwa bu ahia) where everyone leaves after business transactions. At the end of one's life journey on earth, one joins the ancestors in the great beyond. However, there are criteria necessary if one must be accorded a befitting burial which serves as the gateway to joining the cult of ancestors. While ndi Igbo revere body of a deceased family member, such respect is accorded to those who have lived a good life, married with kids and also died at a ripe old age without suffering from strange diseases like leprosy or swollen stomach before death. It is based on these Igbo worldview regarding life and death that the research questions: what is good living in Igbo ontology? What does death mean for ndi Igbo? What is the correlation between good living and a befitting burial? How does a befitting living or burial affect believe in reincarnation?, is anchored. In the bid to do justice to the above research questions, we shall employ the hermeneutic and analytic methods for adequate interpretation and critical analysis of such concepts for proper understanding.*

**Keywords:** Beffiting living, Death, Befitting burial, Ancestorship, Reincarnation and Igbo Society.

## INTRODUCTION

The search for the meaning of life and death pervades historical evolution of thought.

Man has continued to question the essence of living, the goal of life and death. These consist in man's effort to give meaning to his existence. In African society, different cultures at various eras have approached life and death from their gamut of meanings.

There are many and often complicated ceremonies connected with life and death, burial, funeral, inheritance, the living-dead, the world of the departed, the visit of the living dead to their human families, reincarnation and survival of the soul. In Igbo society, the sacrosanctity of life is highly revered. Life is considered the highest good; hence anything that would lead to loss of life is practically avoided. Life is a whole, an entity, a compendium, a mystery and encyclopedia of its own. Life is a continuum, such that we are either, dead, living, existing or moribund. Life is also transitory. "Once conceived, we are old enough to die. After the day of our conception, we await the day of our death," (Ezeokafor, 2017:6). Life is a journey at the end of which we return to where we came from. *?nw?* (death) is a respecter of nobody hence Igbo say that *?nw? ama ézè* (death knows no king), *?nw? ama dike*, *?nw? ama onyeukwu* amongst other expressions in regard to death. Death occurs at different ages of life, place and circumstances. No amount of carefulness can save one from the cold hands of death. Little wonder Igbo has the adage: *a z?ta nd? e dobere ?nw?*. The Igbo African society believes that the way a man lives his life while on earth determines how and where he will be buried.

Death is, on its own, a necessary end, a path everyone must travel. Death is one of the most universal and mysterious experience. Death is sorrowful, yet, it is also important. In Igbo ontology, death is not a complete annihilation of a person, because he moves on to join his ancestors. The Bishop of Awka Diocese, His Lordship Most Rev. Paulinus C. Ezeokafor (2017:8), states that "Even though this transformation does not break all ties of friendship with the deceased's friends and relatives, it brings about a definite change in the mode and manner of their relationship". "Death is something that concerns everybody partly because sooner or later everyone personally faces it and partly because it's brings loss and sorrow to every family and community" Mbiti (1967)<sup>2</sup> opines. The Igbo traditional societies like other cultures in the universe have confronted death in their attempt to philosophically give meaning to their experience. The Igbo like the majority of the human race, refuses to accept death as the finality of man. According to the Igbo, death is a continuation of life, man should not just disappear. According to Igbo tradition, the dead continue to live in the memory and activities of the community. Their position in the land of the dead determines how well they had lived and how well their progeny had discharged their duties towards them, by according them a befitting burial. In Igbo traditional society, the society is the centre of existence. In the world of the dead, the dead exist for the society. They must continue to bid well for the community by granting it favorable auspices from the gods.

Even when the dead don't make it into the coming of the ancestors, they don't just disappear. They hang around the community, causing great nuisance to the immediate family and the community at large. When an Igbo man dies, he does not desire to be united to any god in any heaven or to be punished by any demon in a hell fire; his being is essentially defined as being with the community. In the words of Mbiti, (1967:158)<sup>3</sup>

"death is a monster before whom, man is utterly helpless". Relatives watch a person die and they cannot help him escape death. It is an individual affair in which nobody else can interfere or intervene." This paper examines the concept of death, and befitting living or burial in Igbo ontology and also to show that death only occur because there is life and it is only a living person ( being) that can experience death.

### **THE CONCEPT OF DEATH**

Death is one of the most fundamental, universal and mysterious of man's experience. It is a respecter of nobody, age or place. It is painful, sorrowful yet an experience that no man can escape. Philosophers, scholars and different cultures have approached the concept of death from different perspective. While some conceive death as the finality, the ultimate end of man, others see it as a continuum, as a transition from the physical world to another world. According to Plato, life is the coming together of the body and soul where the soul is a prisoner in the body. The soul, at death, is liberated and continues to live in the world of forms where real things exist. Plato's conception of death portrays it as a good thing by means of which the soul becomes free. Like his teacher, Socrates, who hoped to philosophize with the gods after death, Plato believes that death is not the absolute end of man. Contrary to Plato's view, Aristotle maintains that death is the end of everything. While everything possesses a soul and body, death brings an end to them all. At death, both the body and soul disintegrates and each returns to its source.

Heidegger (1962:294) sees death as "the possibility of the absolute impossibility of the Dasein". For him, death is the most personal of man's experiences. Whereas man (Dasein) is full of possibilities, death extinguishes man's transcendental abilities. In other words, death puts an end to whatever man could become. Unlike some cultures where death is seen to be a painful experience, Heidegger seems to be indifferent to the feelings of people at the death of a beloved one. Death, according to Sartre, is an area of one's facticity where one exercises and expresses his freedom and authenticity. Advocating for freedom, he insists that one can choose whatever one wants as that defines ones essence and authentic existence. He maintains one can as well choose to die - end one's life. Sartre, like Heidegger, sees death as something fundamentally personal.

Philosophers and non-philosophers have attempted to elucidate the concept of death with little success. Mason (2015) holds that philosophers and non-philosophers stand on a level of equality with respect to death. There is no expert on death, for there is nothing to know about it. Not even those who study the death process have an edge on the rest of us. We are all equals in thinking about death, and we all begin and end thinking about it from a position of ignorance. Corroborating the views of Heidegger, Mason (2015) posits that "Death means the end of my future. However, as long as I am alive, I will be living toward that possibility of no longer having possibilities". Death puts an end to all human possibilities.

The Concept of death has also eluded a definite description in the field of medicine and/or science. Biologically, death is the cessation of organic functioning of the body. The clinical definition of death was limited to the absence of heartbeat and respiration. However, advancement in medical technology has led to modifications in the definition of death. According to the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine, Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1981:4), death is the "irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions, or irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem". According to Gire (2014), there are other eight criteria that must be met in order for one to be declared dead. He encapsulates it thus:

Established alongside this definition are eight criteria, all of which must be met before a person is declared dead: absence of spontaneous response to any stimuli; completely unresponsive to even the most painful stimuli; lack of spontaneous respiration for at least one hour; absence of postural activity, swallowing, yawning, or vocalizing; no eye movements, blinking, or pupil responses; a flat electroencephalogram (EEG) for at least 10 minutes; a total absence of motor reflexes; and that there ought not to be any change in the above criteria if tested again after 24 hours. This definition not only represents a largely Western conception of death, but is also a basically medical definition of the concept" (Gireh, 2014:3-4).

The understanding and conception of death varies across cultures and religions. For the Buddhists, death is the absence of consciousness. Consciousness is that by which the animation of the body is possible. Without consciousness, the body cannot function; hence to die is to lose consciousness.

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy in accordance with Luper, holds that death is life's ending.<sup>8</sup> Many African societies entertain the belief that death is a transformation from this life to another life. Man's journey continues even after death. In the words of Mbiti (1975:112-3), people refer to death or dying as returning home, going away, answering the summons, saying yes to death, disappearing, departing, ceasing to eat, ceasing to breathe, sinking, fighting a losing battle, refusing food, rejecting people, sleeping, taking one away, saying goodbye, shutting the eyes, being broken up, being snatched away, being taken away, being called away, joining the forefathers, becoming God's property etc.<sup>9</sup> These words show that death is not a complete destruction of the individual. Life goes on beyond the grave. Therefore, people combine their sorrow over the death of someone with the belief that it is not the end, and that the departed continues to live in the hereafter (which is actually the real home). People's conception of death greatly influences how they live their lives. People, who

believe that there is life after death and how one's life determines one's fate after death, are likely to live an upright life.

### **THE IGBO PEOPLE OF NIGERIA**

In order to properly appreciate the perception of life and death in Igbo ontology, it would be important to shed light on who the Igbo people are. The Igbo ethnic group is one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Igbos are found in the tropical rainforest of southeastern part of Nigeria. In the present day Nigeria, Igbo people occupy dominantly five out of the thirty-six States of the federation, namely; Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi states. Ndi Igbo are found in the southernmost part of Nigeria in Rivers state and cross River state. They can also be found in the west of Nigeria in Delta state. To the north, the Ndi Igbo appear in Benue state and Kogi state, Mwakikagile (2006) asserts.<sup>15</sup>

According to Afigbo (1975), the Igbos, like any other group of people are anxious to discover their origin and reconstruct how they came to be where they are... their experience under colonialism and since Nigeria's independence have emphasized for them the reality of their group identity which they want to anchor into authenticated history.<sup>16</sup> Onwuejiogwu (1996:81) holds that the traditional history of origin of a given people forms part of their thought system, belief and social life. There are many dialects of the Igbo language, the central Igbo is understood by all Igbo speaking communities.<sup>17</sup> The variation in the language clearly indicates that Ndi Igbo are not of a single origin. There must have been immigration and contacts with other people which clearly shaped the Igbo language. However, scholars are of the view that the Igbo custom is dominant, hence it continued to be the defining culture even in Igbo communities, when there are clear historical evidence of mixture with non-Igbo people. This is largely the case among western Igbos. Despite the Ediod influence, the culture is distinctly Igbo, Kalu (2017) opines.<sup>18</sup>

The Igbo experienced the transatlantic slave trade, which was so traumatic for the Ndi Igbo because Igbo concept of slave trade differed radically from the western concept of slave trade. In Igbo community a slave is not required to do more work than any other person in the community, in fact, a slave can equally own a slave of his own and people are rarely slaves for life, Olaudah (1837) holds.<sup>19</sup> Ndi Igbo suffered a lot of upheavals with the introduction of Christianity and the warrant chief system which led to loss of lives of dissenting voices. The experience of colonialism in Igbo nation led to the loss of identity of the Igbo as a distinct nation. The Igbos became subsumed in Nigeria which equally disrupted the Igbo traditional way of life.

For people in pre-colonial Igbo land, things were either done for or against them. For example the birth of twins was a phenomenon not understood by the Igbo and as such was against them - a sign that the gods were angry. To have a set of twins was a curse,

an abomination. As such, these innocent children were instantly put to death or abandoned to die in the evil forest. The same fate befell anyone who suffered an unexplainable affliction and contagious disease like leprosy, small pox, tuberculosis or any disease that caused the body to waste or distend. People who suffered these diseases were cast away to die alone in the evil forest without any transitional rites.

### **BEFITTING LIVING IN IGBO CULTURE**

Life is a mystery. Life, like moral is certainly a problematic subject and much of its problems arise from differences in definition, wrong concepts and attitude to life. Life is a whole, an entity, a compendium, a mystery and encyclopedia of its own. Life is the principle or the source of the activities associated with growth, nutrition, reproduction, breathing, thought. It is manifested through some forms of activities. Life is a continuum, such that we are either; dead, living, existing or moribund. But there are varieties of ways of living our lives. It is within these varieties, that we stamp 'self' destroy or better it. Ndi Igbo believe that life is a precious and sacred gift from God (Chi ukwu). A traditional Igbo man at the breaking of kola nut appreciates and thanks God for the gift of life, prays for long life in good health. The Igbo perception of life is portrayed in the names that the Igbo bear such as Ndubuisi (life is the first of all things), Ndukaku (life is greater than wealth), Ndubueze (life is king). All these names express the priority and premium placed on life by nd? Igbo. The value of life is never equated with anything else, not even wealth.

The sacrosanctity of life is held by the Igbo with both hands hence, any form of deliberate destruction of life is abhorred in Igbo land. Ndi Igbo believe that one should not destroy life that one cannot give. This is why according to Anetoh (2017:63), "it is taboo to destroy the life of an unborn child. Any form of abortion is reprehensible in Igbo land. The unborn child is already part of the living. He went further to say that:

Any form of destruction of life is an abomination in Igbo land. Thus, suicide, murder, euthanasia etc are not morally permissible. In most places in Igbo land, a person who commits suicide is not given a decent burial. This is because of the fact that one has no right to take away one's life, and this stems from the fact that life is sacred (Ibid., p. 63).

In Igbo ontology, living a good life entails living a highly moral life. One must not soil one's hand in evil. To live a good life is to live an honest life devoid of lies and deceit. The communalistic nature of traditional Igbo people makes it pertinent that one must live a complementary life within the context of accepted social norms and values. In Igbo culture an individual is a member of the community and living a good and ethical life speaks of the community and not only the individual. The Igbo maintain that *ezi aha ka ego* (good name is better than wealth).

To live a good life one must also show solidarity and empathy towards one's neighbours. The Igbo believe that a tree does not make a forest hence, one needs the other. The other (*ibe*) is seen as one's half or part. African world, before the disruptive inauguration of western colonialism was a society built on very clearly defined and articulated values. The values were merged in such a way as to provide internal cohesion and stability in the interaction and in the daily lives of the people, especially as it concerns the fraternal living of the Igbo society in particular. Communal living abhors the practice of individualism. The life of the traditional Igbo societies was that of the communal participation otherwise called "communalism" and this is exemplified in the mutual relationship found in the community. It symbolizes the "we" concept that is dominant in the minds of traditional Igbo people.

The interest of African Igbo society is to live a communal life, a life devoid of individualism, a life of togetherness for the co-operative existence of all. Communalism in African Igbo view presumes a collective way of living. Communalism is the sociopolitical theory that upholds the priority of community over individual. The need for fraternal living is of undeniable importance. This is what is called the "the idea of common spirit". The need to live together as family is seen as part and parcel of Igbo existential statuses. The individual in Igbo society has meaning only in the context of the community. Mbiti (1970:108), emphasizing the communalistic lifestyle of the African state that "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am". A befitting life for the Igbo is a life lived within the community of people, in righteousness and honesty, and in conformity with the social values, norms and customs, with strict observance and avoidance of what is considered an abomination or taboo. The death of an upright person, especially at a ripe old age, is considered a good death and is followed by a befitting burial characterized by a lot of eating, drinking, dancing and merrymaking amidst the pain of death.

Nevertheless, the concept of befitting living asides the general understanding of good living as already established with respect to Igbo communalist ideology implies, connotes and embodies the quality of life and attention given to one, also emphasising the level of care, respect and love one enjoys while alive especially from the loved ones and members of the family. Befitting living embraces the beauty of ones' happiness and fulfilment towards the end of earthly existence. Needless to say that the greatest need of any man is always manifest at those moments of weakness due to old age either by way of sickness, material challenges, physical disability, loneliness and regrets (likely unfulfilled dreams, mistakes, etc.). It is at this point by which one is confronted with such challenges such that it is practically impossible to do anything for himself but solely depending on the help and solidarity of others. Solidarity from friends and well wishers but more explicitly help from children. These challenges makes one to be a dependent irrespective of his age. Life is beautiful when such an individual enjoys the benevolence of his children strengthening his weakness and brighting his paths at this moment of struggle. Whatever that is offered at this stage of life, call it the stage of debility can make life a befitting one.

## DEATH IN IGBO ONTOLOGY

According to Ogbonna (2009), in African Igbo society, the individual can only be defined in relation to others.<sup>26</sup> In Igbo culture, one does not exist for himself. He exists for the community. That is why in Igbo ontology, death is essentially a continuum. In Igbo ontology, a person is made up of body and spirit (soul). The body and soul have to be joined together to make a living person. It is not known exactly when the soul joins the body. But some people believe that this takes place when the husband and wife sleep together at the conception of the child to be. However, it is thought, that the soul joins the body sometime before birth or shortly after birth Mbiti (1975:118) holds.<sup>27</sup>

According to Nwala (1985), death implies merely dissolution of the flesh and not the end of life.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the grief at the death of a man is usually because of the sense of loss of his physical presence. In fact, the institution of burial among the Igbo is very elaborate and it illustrates much that is found in philosophy of life. For instance, their belief in an unending existence in the next life leads to elaborate burial rites to ensure an honorable place for the dead in the spirit world. A typical burial ceremony in Igbo culture embraces a variety of functions and rituals to be mediated by the sons, kinsmen (umunna), age grades and secret societies.

In Igbo ontology, death is recognized as the point when the spirit separates from the body. Because the spirit is closely associated with breathing, people know that the spirit has gone when the person stops breathing. Even though the spirit leaves the body, the spirit still lingers on around the body or homestead until the right burial rites are performed to send the spirit off and let him join other spirits (his ancestors). It is equally believed that even if the body remains behind, the spirit is still distinguishable by more or less the same features as it had when the person lived. So in Igbo ontology the spirit does not lose the identity it had when it was a living person. This is why Ndi Igbo strongly believe that death is not the end of human life. A person continues to exist in the hereafter. And this continuation of life beyond death is recognized through a very widespread practice of remembering the dead.

Death in Igbo culture is not a complete annihilation of a person because he moves on to join his ancestors, and continues to live his life as an ancestor if only he meets up with the requirement, or he will become *akalogheri*, that is, the state of not been accepted by neither the living nor the dead. Ndi Igbo believe that life is like a pilgrimage: that the real home is the hereafter, since one does not depart from there, but rather continues to live in the hereafter. Most Rev. Ezeokafor (2017) holds that even though death is a transformation, it brings about change in the nature of relationship between the deceased and friends and relatives. Death, not as many scholars conceived it, not the finality of man but like life, is a journey to another world, the world of the ancestors.

However, death in Igbo culture could be divided into *Ezi onwu* (good death) and *onwu ojoo* (bad death). *Ezi onwu* (good death) is when a man dies a natural death, by living a good (ethical) life and being accorded a befitting burial while *onwu ojoo* (bad death) is when a man dies through accident or disease like leprosy, tuberculosis, swollen

stomach, small pox etc. A bad death is abhorred in Igbo culture. In the traditional Igbo worldview, a dead man has a right to a decent burial. Anetoh (2017:63), citing Nze (2007:623), states that:

A dead man has a right in Igbo culture; he is entitled to a fairly comprehensive burial rites. The living is obliged to accord him their last respect and glorification. The dead expect and often demand and enforce the fulfillment of this obligation. Failure on the part of the living to award this deserved price induces harassment of the living by the dead (Nze, 2007, qtd. by Anetoh, 2017:63).

However, this right is accorded only to those who led good lives or who died what is considered a good death (*nw? Ihi*).

### **BURIAL RITES IN IGBOLAND**

*kwá mmad?/ozu* (funeral ceremony), while it captures the importance placed on the body of the deceased is quite essential in Igbo culture. It is intended to restore the breach in human relationship as well as making whole the living relatives who are assumed to have been made unclean by the deceased body. According to Most Rev. Ezeokafor (2017:33), burial has:

The connotation of restoring the breach in human relationship caused by death and the relationship between human beings and the spirit-world. The restoration of this will ensure that the dead reach the ancestral home peacefully and do not haunt the living. It is believed that, unless these rites are fully completed, some of which could last for over a year, the funeral is not successful and the spirit of the dead will continue to roam aimlessly as dangerous spirits referred to as *akalogheli* (2017:33).

The Igbo traditional society believe that burial or burying a loved one or a family member is the best thing or normal thing, a family can do for their dead ones. Because according to Igbo tradition, when a man receives a proper burial, he moves on to join his ancestors, if and only if he lived a good and proper life while on earth. According to Izunwa (2016:127)<sup>20</sup> funeral ceremony appears to cover the entire vistas of the various rites, rituals and observances, whether socio-religious or psychological, which function to accompany the deceased to the world beyond, the burial ceremonies appear specified and limited to the actual symbolic observance that is immediately connected with interment, that is, of the ritual acts linked with committing the dead to the mother earth. In the words of Izunwa, when burial is done in Igbo land, they compose of a whole lot of symbolic rituals comprising acts from the living members of the human society while establishing in the beyond a company with ancestors.<sup>21</sup> From there, a new kind of relationship or some form of spiritual communion with the living can be re-arranged. The workability of this circularity depends, according to Metuh (1987:252) on the

functionality of the burial rituals. It is widely believed by the Igbo that where a burial ceremony is unbefittingly organized, the spirit of the dead person becomes unsettled and hover around and will continually hunt the living.<sup>22</sup> Kalu (1979:15) asserts that once a person is improperly buried, the spirit of the dead person would be unhappy and probably return as an evil spirit for vengeance. A person who is not properly buried becomes what I termed *akalogheri*, a state of rejection by both the living and the dead. A dead person without a befitting burial, Ndi Igbo believe, is not accepted into the abode of the ancestors nor does he partake in anything in the great beyond. The spirit of such person turns to a malevolent spirit that torments the family members until he is accorded his rights, a befitting burial. Most often, the organisation of another burial is always the best remedy to such infernal onslaught.<sup>23</sup> Izunwa (2016:129) holds that the Igbo view death as a movement from the "here" to another similar in character, with the possibility of a return to "here".<sup>24</sup>

A befitting burial is a prerequisite for joining the great beyond; hence the premium Igbo people place on it. In Igbo traditional society, the type and quality of burial that is accorded to a person depend on how well he lived his life and the type of death that followed. Metuh (1987:133) says that, in Igbo community, a person who died naturally as in ripe old age is called *onwu chi*, that is a person who lived a good life, married with children and did not die within a solemn festivity nor die of strange disease. Anybody who dies outside this set criteria for good death, is said to have met a bad death *ajo onwu*.<sup>25</sup> The burial rites of a person who died naturally and led a good life is richly celebrated, carried out with a mixed feeling of sadness for having to miss his or her presence, jokes, love etc.

Such burial are usually with a lot of eating, drinking, dancing and cultural displays. The burial of a person who met a bad death, (*ajo onwu*) such as suicide, leprosy, tuberculosis, swollen stomach (*otoro*) etc. are usually low key and in some communities in Igbo land, they are usually thrown into the evil forest since it is a taboo to bury such corpse. Ndi Igbo believe that death is not a complete annihilation of a person, because he will continue to live in the hereafter. In some part of Igbo land, people are buried with their belongings such as money, tools, ornaments, bead, foodstuffs, spears, arrows etc which will be placed on the grave afterwards. Formerly, in some places, servants and wives of kings and other rich people were also buried with the body. The belief behind this custom is that the departed needs weapons to defend himself along the way to the next world, or food to eat on the journey, wives and servants to keep him company when he reaches there and property to use so that he would not arrive empty-handed or remain poor.

## **ANCESTORSHIP**

In Igbo traditional society, not every man that dies becomes an ancestor. Ndi Igbo believe that ancestorship is not meant for every person that dies especially when a man didn't lead a good life while on earth. According to Igbo tradition, for one to be called an ancestor, one must reach the following requirements:

- i. One must live a good (ethical) life while on earth,
- ii. One must attain ripe age (must not die young),
- iii. One must be given a proper and befitting burial,
- iv. One must not die from a contagious disease like small pox, tuberculosis, leprosy etc.

According to Ebo (2019:24), those who died before ripe age are not considered to have made it into the comity of the ancestors. They simply disappear from existence. They are neither punished nor rewarded. Neither are they required to transmigrate in any form.<sup>29</sup> In his words, death of a youth is a sad event in the community. No father in the traditional Igbo society wishes to bury his son or daughter. In such situation, they are not required to see the corpse. Not all who died at ripe age are qualified to enter the comity of the ancestors. The dead must have lived faithfully to the ethical dictates of the community. The ancestors are akin to saints in Christendom. They are role models to be imitated by their family members and the community at large. Those who lived unethically become wandering spirits *akalogheri*, who are neither welcome among the living nor among the ancestors. They are said to dwell in the wilderness, away from the rest of the community. Their spirit are said to be restless because they are not committed to the comity of the ancestors.

Among the Igbos, certain disease such as leprosy and swollen stomach (*otoro*) are viewed as bad omens from the gods. People who die from such disease are deemed unworthy of admittance into the comity of ancestors, even when they had lived an ethical live. The community however does not designate their spirit as *akalogheri*. They are viewed as unfortunate. They just disappear.

In Igbo traditional society, even when a man dies at ripe age, after leading an exemplary life, if he is not accorded a befitting and proper burial, he is not worthy of admittance into the comity of ancestors. This requirement has made traditional Igbo burial very expensive. Which means, the higher the Social status of the dead the more expensive the burial. The more the title, the more elaborate the rituals will be at death. If the dead person's progeny are not able to meet up with these requirements, the dead person will not qualify to enter the comity of ancestors. Their spirit will now become *akalogheri* and hover around the family, causing bad omens among them until the dead person is given a befitting burial and committed to the comity of ancestors.

## **REINCARNATION IN IGBO TRADITION**

While the surviving relatives remember the departed, the spirit more or less left a personal continuation of life, and become what we call the living dead. People regard it as being much like a human being although it is dead. If it appears to members of the family, they will say that they saw so and so, up to that point it has not lost its personal name and identity. During this period which may last up to four or even five generations, it is possible for something of the features and personality of such a spirit ( the living dead) to be noticed in a newly born child. Then people would say that so and so has

come back, has returned or has been reborn. The child may be given the name of that deceased person or people may make sacrifices and offerings to express joy and gratitude. This idea of partial rebirth is called reincarnation.

According to Ebo (2019:24), Ndi Igbo believe that their ancestors come back to them in the form of newborns.<sup>30</sup> Ndi Igbo do not believe that the newborn is the same person as the ancestor. They recognize the newborn as a brand new person with a unique identity. However, the newborn is a reincarnation of an ancestor, and the newborn is viewed to be under the influence of the ancestors. As the child grows older, Ndi Igbo look out for the traces of the personality of the ancestors in question in the attitude of the child. This phenomenon can be viewed like the seed. Although the planted seed is manifested in the new seed it yields, the new seed is not said to be that very seed that was planted. Yet, there are always attributes of the planted seed in the new seed. So is the concept of reincarnation among the Igbos.

In Igbo ontology, the ancestor does not leave the comity of ancestors at reincarnation while reincarnating among the living. The ancestor continues to dwell in the comity of ancestors from where he will intercede for the family he has left among the living. He continues to perform the important task of watching out for his family against the spiritual harm. Reincarnation of an ancestor is not limited to only one newborn. An ancestor may reincarnate in more than one newborn.

The dead who did not qualify to be committed to the comity of ancestors cannot reincarnate. Among the Igbos, only the dead who have been fully committed to the comity of ancestors have the power to reincarnate.

### **REMEMBERING THE DEAD IN IGBO CULTURE**

The Igbo African societies believe that death is not the end of human life. A person continues to exist in the hereafter. This continuation of life beyond death is recognized through the widespread practice of remembering the departed. There are four ways of remembering the dead (i) food and drink for the dead (ii) consultation and rituals (iii) naming the dead in prayers (iv) naming children after the dead.

i. Food and drink for the dead: In Igbo African society, the heads of families pour out beer, water etc on the ground for the spirit of the family. They may also put bits of food on the ground for the same purpose. In the traditional Igbo society, there are often family shrines in the homestead or behind the houses, set apart for remembering the departed. Kola nuts, beer and other food items are placed, with words to effect that the food is being given to those who have departed; sometimes their names are being mentioned.

ii. Consultation and rituals: In Igbo culture, another way of remembering the departed is to consult them through a medicine man or the diviner, when a major family decision is about to be made or when there is a major illness. During family rituals and

ceremonies, such that mark the birth and initiation of children, the departed are often remembered in a definite way.

iii. Naming the dead in prayers: In Igbo culture, it is important to mention the names of the departed relatives when one is praying to God. These departed members of the family are believed to relay the prayers to God.

iv. children after the dead: The departed can also be remembered by naming children after them, especially if their features have been inherited by those children. Sometimes, sacrifices and offerings are made to the departed in order to honour them and appreciate them for returning to us in human body.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the words of Epicurus, death need not bother anyone because only a living person has sensation either of pain or of pleasure. After death there is no sensation, since the atoms that make up bodies and minds come apart. There is no longer this particular body or mind but only a number of distinct atoms that return, as it were, to the primeval inventory of matter to continue the cycle of new formations. Death should be a welcome development in Igbo culture because; it is a mystery all men must face one day. In Igbo society, death is not a complete annihilation of a person, because he moves to join his ancestors and continue to live his life in the hereafter. Befitting burial is one of the qualifications a dead person needs to be made ancestors. This is why Ndi Igbo are cautious of how and where a dead person is buried. A dead person is not readily forgotten, they are always remembered by their family members. In Igbo communities, the heads of the families pour out drinks and water on the ground for the spirits of the family. There are shrines in the homestead or behind the houses, set apart for remembering the departed. Kolanuts, drinks and other food items are placed or poured out to them on daily basis or occasionally to remember them.

The grave is the seal of everything, even if a person survives and continues to exist in the next world, there is an accelerated rhythm from death through the state of personal immortality (as the living dead) to the state of collective immortality (as ordinary spirits). This final 'beat' of the rhythm may or may not have an end. However, there is nothing to hope for, since death is the destiny for everybody; though older people do not seem to fear, and may even long for 'death' from this to the next world. The dead person does not grow spiritually towards or like God, though some may act as intermediaries between men and God or may have more power and knowledge than human beings. Such is the anthropocentric view of the destiny of man, as far as Igbo traditional African concepts are concerned, death is death and is the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual from Mankind to spirit hood. Death is the end of real and complete man. Finally, having understood death as a continuum and a befitting burial as a gateway to the after life, our argument is; attention must be given to one while alive especially at the dark hours of one's existence to enhance quality and healthy living. A lot of effort must be made to enlighten the minds of our young

ones towards their poor mentally and attitude in taking care of their aged parents, denying them the opportunity of reaping the fruits of their labour only to give them a befitting burial after death. It makes no sense when you say "The celebration of life" because you want to show your flamboyant burial knowing fully well that the deceased in question died with the denial of such benevolence while alive. Life cannot be celebrated alone by the virtue of the number of years lived but by the quality of life and fulfilment one enjoyed. To whatever extent the befitting burial is important to ensure a free passage of the deceased to the after life, greater it is a befitting living for the deceased to die a happy death.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

It will be stating the obvious to say that while death brings about pain and sorrow, burial has been trivialized just as it has become a show of one's or family's affluence. As Prof. Pita Ejiofor (1985:88) remarks, "Except for the immediate relations, death is no more a source of sorrow, but an opportunity for conspicuous consumption". Most Rev.

Ezeokafor (2017:20) laments that:

Beginning from the time of death to the conclusion of the funeral ceremonies, bereaved families engage in mundane, flamboyant, and wasteful practices and ceremonies, largely in a bid to meet up with demands made on them by the society and those they lay on themselves. Therefore, burial and funeral ceremonies have become a multi-million Naira project, such that many families unable to meet up with the demands do borrow or sell some of their property and real estates. Some postpone the burials and funeral to such a time they are able to finance the huge bills that may accompany the funeral ceremonies (Ezeokafor, 2017:20).

It has degenerated to the ugly situation that many young people neglect their aged parents in the villages while they enjoy life in the city; and upon death (of their parents), return to give them magnificent burial. It is against this worrisome development that this paper makes the following recommendations.

1. Haven seen that Igbo traditional burials are becoming more and more expensive, thereby making family members who could not afford the richly and elaborated burial ceremony for their dead ones, to neglect and abandon them in the mortuary and also allowing their bodies to stay in mortuary more than three months all in the name of gathering money to throw a richly and satisfactory burial. Hence, the idea of expensive burials should be discouraged.
2. It is also recommended that Ndi Igbo should understand that giving someone a befitting richly burial is super good, but we should equally pay more attention in giving them food and taking care of them while they are still alive than a richly and elaborated burial, when it was obvious that the person died because of hunger and lack of care.

3. Worthy of note is the fact that life and death are polar concepts because human being can speculate on the origin of life and death but may not be certain about it. It may not be possible for human reason to understand life as a whole. It is suggested that less emphasis be placed on the origin and nature of death, but rather to accept it as the fundamental reality of human existence that brings to an end man's earthly struggles and possibilities.

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