

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN THE CHANGING WORLD OF AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

Dr. James N. Nnoruga

Department of Religion & Human Relations

NnamdiAzikiwe University Awka, Nigeria

Email: jn.nnoruga@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Death is considered a scary phenomenon among many people in different cultures of Africa and many things are done to prevent it by all means. But finally, it comes when it will come, African interpretation of death and how it occurs are viewed from different perspectives in relation to its rituals and ceremonies being performed by the people of Africa. The conception of death from the pristine era is being eroded daily by the influence of some factors that affect the African worldviews with the advancement of science and technology or put in another way the globalization of the world. These factors changed the view of Africans' conception of death from rigid conception to flexible acceptance of death as yet painful phenomenon. The write-up brought out the changes that are taking place daily in the life of the Africans towards the notion of death when compared to the previous conception of death in Africa. The scholarly African works on this issue from different parts of Africa were carefully studied and their views were synthesized through a philosophical approach. The result of this shows that the conception of death has changed in Africa for good but with some effects on the lives of people in the society.

Keywords: Death, African worldview, fatalism, funeral rites, reincarnation.

Introduction

The notion of death in the African worldview has been a kind of fatalistic view both by the way the Africans think about it and towards its belief concerning its preparation and the process of burial after death. Hence death is dreaded so much among all cultures judging from the world view of different cultures and the fearful names that designate the phenomenon of death. Though death itself is seen as part of life cycle, because of the role it plays in ushering people among the ancestors, which is the dream of any African who departs from this world to join their forefathers. That is why in old age, Africans will always gladly announce that he/she will soon join his/her ancestors. Even the view about how one dies in Africa, is of much importance to Africans because not all deaths are acceptable to Africans especially when it concerns the death of children or certain deaths of ill health and deaths of accident victims like falling from tree or automobile accidents and so on. They are naturally regarded as bad deaths. This is why Achebe (1958) noted that “when a man was afflicted with swelling, he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the evil forest and left there to die” (p. 18).

Whatever is being thought about death in the pristine time by the Africans, is changing fast, this is seen in the burial rites being conducted by the Africans in their different traditions, sequel to these changes, it shows that the notion of death is fast changing in the African worldview. Even the mythology of death in different African traditions clearly shows that events of death or its notions can change judging from the stories behind them. So, these changes may be necessitated by the fact that some concepts especially the ones relating to metaphysical issues have not been

analyzed, compared, or threatened by other higher concepts from other world views relating to the same issue. This is the reason why Oguejiofor (1996) notes that societies that encounter no intellectual threat to their religious beliefs hardly resort to philosophical or metaphysical arguments to prove their assumptions and beliefs. In the same way, a general cursory look shows that the concept of death in the African worldview has not been debated, analyzed, compared, or threatened by any superior arguments or notions towards its earlier assumptions or beliefs. But recently it has been challenged especially now that the majority of worldviews are being influenced and challenged by technological advancement or globalization in general. What is common among African scholars about the concept of death is continuous affirming of the earlier notion of death which is common to most Africans.

One of the earlier notions of the death in African worldview is that most deaths are caused by one thing or the other, either by bad people or by the bad spirits or belief that the person has committed or breached natural law or moral law against the land/gods thereby disrupting the cosmic balance in nature. Hence the gods strike the person for having offended or disrupted the peaceful balance in the land of the dead and the land of the living. So, no death is ordinary in itself, it must have been caused by something else and that is why most of Africans go to diviners to know the cause of the death in a family or in a village where many people died at the same time. This is sometimes done to prevent another death from occurring again in the same family or the same village. However, the death of people who died in ripe old age is celebrated because it is believed that they have joined their ancestors but those who died younger, of abominable diseases, or struck by thunder as the case may be are regarded as a curse which resulted in death. Whatever be the cause of the death, God in the case of old people, or an evil agency in the case of the unexpected death of a young person, death is conceived of as ultimately part of the harmony of nature (Anyanwu, 1981).

So, among other things, this write-up seeks to x-ray the change of attitudes towards death by Africans, and how the influence of other religious traditions concerning death affected the understanding of death today in Africa. Fortunately, this understanding again reshapes the African mentality of death in most places, this is seen in most ritual and burial rites being carried out before, during, and after the death of an individual. For example, some clerics in the Eastern part of Nigeria tried to control the wastage in funeral being experienced in burial ceremonies which Ejiiofor (2002) regarded as funeral pomp, by reducing the cost of burial ceremonies stressing the fact that too much spending on the burial ceremony does not show that the person has joined his ancestor or that the burial went well. Sequel to the above, burial law is being enacted in some states to reduce and guide the process of funeral rites for the dead. Hence the issue of befitting burial is declining among the people in the Eastern part of Nigeria, thereby upholding the befitting living among the people. This has led to the celebration of life rather than death among the people of Africa.

The Notion of Death: African Perspective

The African people like other people in other continents of the world, fear or dread the occurrence of death at any time, and the causes of death are normally searched for especially when the explanation is not visible to members of the family, even when it is visible the intension behind it, is sought by the living members of the family. The Western culture hence turns to the process of autopsy to find out the real cause of death around human beings especially when the cause of death cannot be established easily. A good example of such was the recent pandemic disease called Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) which affected the whole world, and where millions of people were dead, its cause has to be established and measures are taken to curb it. Africans in the

time of their forefathers engaged in divination even when the cause of the death was sensible to the eyes or an autopsy had been carried out. The Africans still seek the metaphysical or internal cause of death because no death is ordinary or happens by chance, for Africans recognized the existence of secret forces (invisible forces) acting or ready to act in the universe like ancestors, divinities, or God Himself (Anyanwu, 1984). Even most myths of death in the African worldview show that death is not ordinary or it is a direct consequence of one thing or the other. The notion of death may differ among Africans just like the myths of death in Africa differ, but death generally remains inevitable and natural (Mbiti, 1969).

In all cultures of the world, death is believed to be an inevitable end; Kanu (2015) states that it has become a mystery to human beings and since it is shrouded in mystery, its knowledge and eradication remain a mirage. Hence it is an enigma, though Africans see it as a transition into the world of their ancestors. So, in the face of death, we are defenceless and weak, because life belongs to God which is the highest gift to human beings. Mbefo (2001) beautifully described the defenceless of man before death in his description of the Igbo attitude to death thus:

Death is seen as the end of all ambition; the *Onwudinjo*. Every effort must be deployed to stave it off or, at least delay its inevitability. This can be done through prayers, *Onwubiko* or through suspension, *Onwuteaka*. Death has no fear, *Onwuatiegwu*, not even of a whole town, as evident in times of pest, *Onwuasomba*. It is no respecter of persons or of rank; it is the leveler, *Onwuasoanya*. Experience shows that every Igbo dies, *Onwuzuruigbo* because not even their best medicine men had even halted its advance, *Onwukadibia*. Not even the might of the brave had survived its attack, *Onwukadike*. To understand it surpasses the power of reason, *Onwudiegwu*, and its fury is simply implacable, *Onwudiwe*. It has always claimed the victory, *Onwuemelie*. (p. 37).

From the above, the author describes the view of Igbo people about death. This is also described from different points of view from different cultures in Africa. This is the reason why Ezenweke (2012) is of the view that death takes a glaring place in the socio-religious life of the African people. It is the end of a physical and less important part of man which is the physical body. So, death is perceived as the beginning of communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life for Africans is to become an ancestor after death. This is why good deaths must be accompanied by proper burials with religious ceremonies. If this is not done, the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to be with his/her ancestors after his/her death, and therefore a danger to those who remain alive. This is the belief of the Africans about death. In the same vein, Mbiti (1969) avered that:

It is clear that people view death paradoxically, it is separation but not annihilation, the dead person is suddenly cut off from the human society, and yet the corporate group clings to him. This is shown through the elaborate funeral rites, as well as other methods of keeping in contact with the departed. (p. 159).

However, Mbiti observed that the majority of African people do not believe in judgment after death and as such do not expect any form of reward in the hereafter unlike the Christian religion whose reward is in heaven. Though Idowu (1962) refers to Yoruba as one of the few exceptions to this issue of reward after death. The Yoruba according to Idowu believe that “all we do on earth, we shall account for kneeling in heaven... and we shall state our case at the feet of God” (p.199). But Mbiti (1969) insisted that we have no concrete evidence of the hereafter being pictured in terms of punishment or reward. For the majority of the African people the hereafter is only a continuation of life more or less as it is in its human form. The above view is in line with Onwubiko (1991) that most African people believe that punishment due to the life lived on earth

is received in this world, so also is the reward. For him, this is why the religion of many African communities is world-affirming.

The African concept of death and its meaning can also be seen or understood from funeral ceremonies done during the burial of any dead person, though not everybody is given a full burial or befitting burial. According to Onwubiko (1991) funeral ceremonies in Africa are elaborate and highly expensive and are relatively celebrated according to the status of the dead person. The basic characteristic of all funeral ceremonies in Africa is that they are believed to determine the place the dead person would enjoy in the spirit world and hope of reincarnation. The dead who do not receive these ceremonies are believed to be in a state of unrest and they wander about disturbing the living beings. Bosah (cited by Onwubiko, 1991) states that the period between a person's death and funeral ceremonies is called in most communities of Africa a period of "*ita Okazi*" the eating of raw *okazi* leaves. *Okazi* is a festive vegetable used during some festivals, the enraged ancestors are believed to be waiting for their relatives beside the leaves of *okazi* who want to enjoy and celebrate without first giving them a befitting burial. Even Nzekwu (1971) explained that the dead yet to take their places in the spirit world are sleeping and hiding under the *okazi* shrub, and that their relatives must liberate and send them home.

However, the notion of death differs greatly among the African people judging from what plays on during the burial and rituals performed for the dead whether he is rich or poor while he/she was alive. Often some animals are symbolically and ritually killed with the hope that they will influence the state of the dead man. Again, the implements of the dead person referring to his profession are buried with him/her with the hope that he/she may need them in the spirit land and may come back with them in his/her reincarnated life. The case of Unoka in "Things Fall Apart" who according to the condition of his death was not given a proper burial or given no funeral at all, for Achebe (1958) relates that when they carried him away, he took with him his flute. This explains further why kings and priests are buried with slaves so that these will continue to run errands for them in the spirit world. Quarcoopome (1987) also stated that:

For this reason, articles such as clothing, sponges, towels, combs, pomades, and in the case of the wealthy or those of royal descent gold trinkets and precious ornaments are put into the coffin. In every case small sum of money and treasured possessions are also put into the coffin to help the dead on the last stage of the journey to the next world. The money is to enable him to cross the river of no return. It is believed that chiefs and lineage heads continue to occupy their position of importance after death. As a result, some people are killed to accompany and serve them in the afterlife. Some of their wives either volunteer to be killed or are forcefully killed to keep the dead chief's company. (p. 127).

In fact, the notion of death in Africa is understood more from the rituals about the burial of the dead, from the status of a dead person, to the second or final burial.

Kinds of Death

The notion of death in Africa can also be understood clearly from the way the Africans clarify deaths. For some authors, different kinds of deaths speak volumes of how the Africans perceive death hence their attitude to it through their rituals and ceremonies. Africans believe most times that evil person or evil spirit is always behind most of the deaths that happen in Africa, hence divination is always sought to determine the real cause of any death. From the above reasons one finds out why many scholars believe that there are three kinds of deaths in Africa, like Metuh (1981), Okafor (1996), Kanu (2015), Muonwe (2021), and many others. They all divide death in

Africa into three kinds namely: devil's death or violent death, bad/shameful death, and natural or good death. But most scholars still divide it more, like some scholars classify the deaths of *Ogbanje* as another kind of death different from the above three kinds of deaths. Some people refer to the death of *Ogbanje* as a violent death because he/she died before his/her time but another condition that qualifies as a violent death to be so is that the person may die in a violent automobile accident, or killed for stealing or falling from the tree and so on. But *Ogbanje* children do not often die this way, they die more through sickness. However, it seems that one must die through any of these kinds of deaths but the natural death is highly preferred by African people (Metuh, 1981).

Violent Death or Devil's Death

This is the death of any young person or aged person when the person suddenly dies violently without any just cause. Most scholars classify violent death as woeful because of its nature especially when it affects the young as they have not accomplished the full course of their lives. Here he/she has not achieved his/her destiny. But what defines this type of death is the fact that someone dies suddenly and violently irrespective of his/her age, unlike natural death among other conditions is to die peacefully or pass away peacefully that is what is regarded as going home. But for violent death, he/she is believed to have been snatched away by the evil spirit and he continues to wander about until he comes back in the next life to complete his/her term of life. There is a ritual for sending them away so that they will not come back again in that form or purpose. They are believed to bring misfortune to the parents and the living. If the evil spirit is the cause of the death, Chukwuelobe (1998) states that some remedies are prescribed to prevent such recurrence. The remedies like offering of bleak sacrifices in which discarded, old, and useless items are used to show the spirit that humans are unhappy.

Bad/Shameful Death

In the olden days, bad or shameful deaths according to Kanu (2015) are those who died of leprosy, smallpox, cholera, swollen stomach, or killed by an anti-wickedness deity like *Amadioha* through lightning. Such people are not given full funeral rites of the dead because there is no happiness accompanying such deaths. Again those who committed suicide are regarded as those who died a bad death even when they are old, no one is allowed to cry for the person who committed suicide, cooking and drinking of any kind are not done rather the priest is called by the family of the deceased to perform cleansing sacrifices so that the evil will not happen again and that the family will not be affected in one way or the other. Hence it is seen in Africa as an abomination and sin against the earth goddess for the land has been desecrated.

Achebe (1958) succinctly showed how one who committed suicide is treated at his/her death, in the life of Okonkwo the great warrior and wrestler of Umuofia in his days, Achebe recorded the conversation between Obierika the friend of Okonkwo, and the District Commissioner as thus:

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling and they stopped. . . . "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 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 suicide will not be buried by his clansmen. That is why we ask your people to bring him down because you are strangers. . . . 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).

Bad death like suicide death is highly abhorred in every culture in Africa and the process of burial differs from place to place, this shows that suicide is not an option in Africa. However, in recent days most communities have tried to bury the person because of the understanding that suicide death may be out of neglect of care by the family or community to the individual concerned.

Natural or Good Death

Many believed that natural death was a blessing from God. As Metuh (1981) stated that it is the subject of constant prayer for Africans in most of their prayers to die a good death in old age. Though it is not a condition for admittance into the company of ancestors in the spirit land which is the hope of the traditional Africans but in one sense it shows that the person is already blessed by the gods for giving him a long life while he was in the world of men. Here proper burial and funeral rites are accorded to the deceased person by the family and relatives, and natural death is seen as going home and not actually dead because the person fulfilled all his/her intentions and destiny while on earth. Again, the rites of passage of death and funeral rites are performed amidst eating, drinking, and other merriments. Achebe (1958) has a good example of the celebration of a good death in some traditions in Africa. He reported that when Ezeudu died the people of Umuofia celebrated his death with lots of food and other merriments. At the funeral, there were gun salutes, the beating of drums, and the clanging of machetes. And various types of masquerades came to perform to pay their last respect to the dead.

Death, Burial and Funeral Rites in the Pristine Age of Africans

It will be a good idea to look into the past to see how burial and funeral rites were done by early traditional Africans and compare it with the practices being done today. This will give a good conception of death in the African worldview as of today. Of course, one will find out that many things have changed a lot for good. Ideally, to understand the conception of death in Africa one has to view or study the burial and the funeral rites in African tradition. This exposes to a great extent the hidden meanings and traditions attached to death in general.

According to Basden (1966), women attend to the corpse as soon as one dies depending on the tradition of the place concerned, like in the Igbo tribe of Nigeria in West Africa, the corpse is washed and stained all over with "*ufie*" (camwood). In some districts, especially the riverine areas where gin is a regular commodity the corpse is sprinkled with the liquor. The body is clothed in the finest garment from the deceased wardrobe and placed in a sitting position in the case of a man, but this position lasts for a few hours, and friends and relatives available will come to pay their last respects to the dead. The women are normally laid flat on the ground but not in all places, for some communities also place the woman in sitting position. When the time has elapsed for this sitting position, the young men put the corpse in grass mats and carry it to the burial ground or his/her grave and bury the corpse. This is for a normal death and its burial.

But there are exceptions to the above, which are governed by considerations of birth, rank in the society, and the cause of the death. For example, in the case of a slave scanty attention and no unnecessary expenses are incurred in carrying out his/her burial rites. No one is accused nor diviner consulted because he/she will still retain the position of slave in the land of the dead. For free-born, the best possible arrangements must be made. The bodies of dead lepers and smallpox

are hurriedly thrown away in the big forest even before they are dead in some cases. This means that their deaths are not regarded as anything, in fact, they are seen as abominations. And those dying as a result of accidents, during childbirth, lunatics, and those being murdered, drowned, or burned are considered as having come to their untimely ends by the instrumentality of the devil. They are buried without delay.

Generally, burial follows within twenty-four hours of death, though not in all cases, because for men of high rank, arrangements are made corresponding to their rank. The announcement of the death of the king takes almost one year or more depending on the tradition of the place in Africa. The underlying idea is that the throne is never vacant for the king is always greeted with long live king. In the case of a woman or daughter married to another town, she is brought back to her original home for burial except if she has grown-up children, they will bury their mother in her own house. It is always the desire of the Africans to die in their locality. In the case of death occurring at a distant place, the brethren will bring the body home for burial at all costs. Some days of mourning are maintained depending on the tradition of the place. Normally the husband or the wife would restrict himself/herself for 28 days or more with shaving of heads as a symbol of grief and bereavement. During these days, friends, in-laws, and relatives visit the house with singing and dancing, drum beating, and consumption of food, gin, and palm wine. These in a bit are done to distract the attention of the bereaved one from the thought of his/her loss and as tradition requires.

The second burial is a day fixed for the festival though this is not done in most places in Africa as of today. This is always costly, according to Basden (1966) heavy debts are incurred in the desire to give the best possible send-off to a dead one. In most traditions, the second burial of a chief, it was a custom to put to death one or more slaves to provide attendant spirits to accompany the chief into the great beyond. For the chief or king must not enter the spirit world unaccompanied by a retinue. He must have his messengers and personal servants and slaves to attend to his needs. After the second burial, the departed spirit finds a home in the land of the ancestors. There are other minor and major ceremonies being performed before, during, and after the burial of an aged person.

The Factors that Influenced the Changing Conception of Death in Africa

The changing nature of culture shows its strength and stability when influenced by factors that either threaten its existence or modify its continuous existence. With the passage of time, the conception of death in the traditional African setting began to change from its original conception to a situation whereby death is seen as part of life in the African setting. The revival of African culture also affects the conception of death in Africa today. Some other factors killed or removed entirely some notions of death as the Africans used to have it or think about it in the pristine ages.

Many factors have influenced the conception of death as it is been conceived today in Africa other than the way it was seen from the earliest times. This modern conception also affected how death is celebrated from burial rituals to social celebrations. However, some burial rituals and some social celebrations are strengthened while some are jettisoned or while some are modified for the convenience of people and for the health of the people. Throwing the dead bodies into the bush openly constituted a great health hazard to the community or people in general, so with the influence of modernism dead bodies are buried in the grave properly, even the criminals or robbers who are killed while in the process of robbery activities are also buried in the grave. The tradition of keeping the corpse overnight with the people also has been a thing of the past in most of the African communities.

Among the influences that modified the conception of death in Africa was the emergence or coming of Christianity and Islamic religions that came into the culture of African people with their missionaries. The Christian missionaries in the first place gathered all the people who were regarded as having died of bad deaths or with bad diseases who had been thrown into the bush for proper burial and curing for their diseases as the case may be. Some they buried properly and those with some bad illness like smallpox, or swollen stomach were treated to become healthy again, In this way they taught the Africans that it is not bad to be ill or suffer from such diseases which Africans regarded as abomination and that some illness can be treated rather than seeing them as punishment from the gods. With this, the death of young people is no longer regarded as a great calamity or abomination, and proper burial is given to them as loved members of the family rather than burying them hurriedly as if they are nobody.

The burial ceremonies in most places or communities take about weeks or more according to tradition of the place in the early times of the African people, efforts have been made to reduce the number of days the burial ceremonies take place in many places. The great pandemic that enveloped the whole world recently in the form of Coronavirus (COVID-19) equally fastened the burial ceremonies across the world. Even though these days people are going back to the funeral pomp that was rejected in the past. People are now going for fitting burials instead of befitting living, Ejiofor (1984) stated that the fitting burial involved a lot of ceremonies and spending in the case of the well-to-do. Cows and goats are killed and gifts of assorted types are given out to people who attended the burial, this of course comes with a lot of eating and drinking for the whole days of burial ceremonies.

Normally the bodies of the dead person are not kept more than twenty-four hours in the olden days before it is buried. But these days the dead bodies are preserved through many means in order to prepare for the burial of the dead person, this may reach up to three or four months some even one year where there is a crisis in the family or the dead body ceased by the government officials for one reason or the other. In the case of royal deaths, the bodies of the chiefs or kings were mummified, and kept for a long time until appropriate arrangements for the burial were completed (Ejiofor, 1984). This makes death in modern times not to be a source of sorrow but an opportunity to show off wealth acquired by families or individuals, and conspicuous consumption after which the family or the individual concerned goes bankrupt.

The burial of kings and chiefs which required human heads or the burying of slaves alive was normally a practice in the earlier times because the Africans believed that their kings must be accompanied to the spirit world for their errands and other needs. But these days or modern times a lot has changed towards such obnoxious notions. No one is treated as a slave nor buried alive in the grave of any king. Hunting of human heads or selling of people as a slave is seen as an abomination. In place of this, the body of the dead is richly dressed, no matter his/her rank, he/she is buried amidst booms of cannons, firing guns in the air, delivering of funeral orations, laying of gardens of wreaths with many people around the family. Though this is lavishly done but it is better than killing of another human being in the name of burial traditions as practiced in the earlier times.

Bad deaths viewed from the earliest conception of death from African worldview by Africans, is no more seen as such, rather all deaths are mostly seen as God's intention to call one through one means or the other. However, this belief does not in any way debar the Africans from consulting the diviners to seek the cause of some deaths that they could not understand its source. The recent COVID-19 pandemic and a magnitude of 7.8 earthquakes in Turkey near the northern border of Syria on February 6, 2023, where many lives were lost may be regarded as bad deaths because

many lives were wasted in a twinkle of an eye, but the Africans in the olden days will still look for spiritual connotations of such deaths because cosmological balance has been breached by the living. Even in the death of little children, they are buried and funeral rites done as for the grown-up people, they are no more thrown away or seen as bad omen or sometimes as *ogbanje* which was obtainable in most parts of Nigeria. One can affirm that the notion of death keeps changing with the changing of African world views even as of today.

Conclusion

One of the negative effects of the changing view of the notion of death among Africans is that belief in different notions of death has divided the African families coupled with the fact that the modern-day preachers harp on these previous notions of death in Africa to deceive people and cause more harm to the families of the African people. While the Africans have tried to balance from the changing view or factors that have influenced their notion of death in the previous years, the modern-day preachers are trying to drag them back to the pristine conception of death and its practices. Another effect of this changing view of the notion of death is that burial ceremonies has led to a significant increase in the cost of burial ceremonies. Modern funerals now involve various expenses that were not traditionally part of the process such as providing burial attire for a large number of relatives and friends, elaborate decorations in the house of the deceased, public announcements in the media, accommodating a large number of people invited and those who are not invited. Ultimately, this shift in the funeral or burial practices reflects a changing cultural and traditional values leading to new and complex expressions of African notion of death in its worldview.

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