

## **A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF DEATH IN ESAN CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

*This study is a metaphysical inquiry into the phenomenon of death in Esan culture. It begins by exposing the Esan understanding of death and how it constitutes mystery. It argues that in Esan, the question of 'the why of death' just like 'the why of life' and 'the why of birth', philosophically speaking, does not admit any satisfactorily answer. Thereafter, the study discussed the Esan conception of the causes of death. It examined the epistemological and logical status of some of these causal beliefs among the Esan people and with reference to some other cultures. It argues that although some claims to afterlife seem rational and convincing; any claim to knowledge of absolute certainty of the hereafter is epistemologically suspicious since there is no valid epistemic intersection of this world and the assumed world after. Although the Esan do not conceive any contradiction in their beliefs in afterlife and reincarnation, but logically speaking, such belief suffers logical infelicity since it defies the logical laws of thought. However, the study also argues that just like any affirmation, any denial of certain knowledge of afterlife experience conversely rests on logical fallacy of 'argumentum ad ignorantiam'. It concludes that death and the belief in life after death have practical moral implications on the living. In the course of inquiry, the engagement attempts simultaneously, an*

*excursion into comparative discourse with some other cultures.*

**Keywords:** Esan, Phenomenon of death, Mystery, Causes of death, Afterlife, Philosophical implications.

### **Introduction**

This study is about death, its causes and philosophical implications in Esan culture. Esan is one of the three major ethnic groups in Edo state Nigeria. The word 'Esan' refers to the person, the people, the culture, the land and the geography of Esan. Fundamentally, the concept of death is a metaphysical phenomenon among the people of Esan. It is an event which must occur in one's life without waiver. It is also a game which does not admit any replay. The people of Esan, like humans beings in other cultures, have the insatiable instinct of survival. This is why they are perplexed with the mystery and inevitability of death and its final precedence over material existence. They asked questions about birth, life and death. The Esan answers to the "why of death", just like the answers to "the why of birth" and "the why of life" do not yield any holistic ontological satisfaction; attempted answers are maximally quizzed in fables. The answers, just like the questions themselves open Pandora's Box. Despite these seeming irresolvable puzzles, it is philosophically wise and potent to attempt some intellectual muscle flexing, though not to completely eliminate the bizarre, but at least, to serve as palliative to the inquiring minds with unquenchable thirst for knowledge about these issues at hand. To do this, the study attempts a discussion of the Esan's attitude toward death and the dead, and their understanding of the causes of death. The people's beliefs about death and its causes are subjected to epistemological and logical scrutiny; and despite the limitations, these beliefs influence their moral practice and disposition to both the living and the dead in their daily living. The study adopts expository method as well as the methods of conceptual and critical analyses. We shall begin this analysis with the attempt to understanding the notion of death in Esan.

### **Understanding the Concept of Death in Esan Culture**

Death as a phenomenon is an irreversible cessation of life. In Esan, it “is regarded as a transition from one state of existence to another. It is the last of the rites of passage that a person has to go through on earth (others being birth, puberty, marriage)”.<sup>1</sup> Deaths are believed to be caused. This causality is a constitutive part of Esan ontology. Even for empirical misfortunes, the Esan, just like many other African cultures would believe that they are caused by some agents for some purpose(s). And just like some other cultures too, the Esan people believe that at any stage an individual dies, it is caused for a purpose. This is why death is not only conceived as bad. It also suggests that one ought not to die. Ironically, the Esan people like people in some other cultures also believe that death is inevitable. Death is an unavoidable experience which awaits everyone. It is therefore onerous for everyone to live a good life here and await the next. Although it is an unavoidable phenomenon, the peoples’ belief and attitudes towards death epitomizes their willingness to continue life *ad infinitum*. This desirability reflects the belief that life is good despite its challenges and death is bad. Segun Gbadegesin<sup>2</sup> argues that in some African societies, using the Yoruba as instance, there is no desire to perpetuate all lives *ad infinitum*.

Partly because of the conception that life is good, the Esan people mourn for the dead grievously and strenuously too. Mourning the dead is not premissed on the cessation or forfeiture of benefits derived from the deceased for this would be egoistic, but on feelings. The Esan empathize the dead. His or her absence in the scheme of things, the vacuum which his or her demise created, his uniqueness and irreplaceability make his or her death deeply felt.

Although death is inevitable, people fear death and weep for the dead because of human frailty, fear of the unknown and the agony sometimes exhibited by the dying, and so on. When people see other people die in agony and groaning, they fear the pain of death since it also awaits them. When it comes, no excuse, no appeal, no sympathy is necessary. Despite all the beliefs which they

have about death and the hereafter, epistemologically speaking, no one really knows exactly what lies beyond the physical universe. Indeed, philosophically speaking, for the people, death is a mystery. Why death? This is a question that deserves answers in the course of this study.

### **Death as Mystery**

The Esan question of the “why of death” cannot be satisfactorily answered. Attempted answers are maximally quizzed in fables. Where they are existential, they cannot satisfy any ontological yearning. The attempt to satisfy this yearning requires answers to *the why of birth* and *the why of life?* These, like the first question are also bereft of any satisfactory answer outside religious terrain. It may, therefore, be the case that any attempt to unravel the mysteries of birth, life and death are futile and absurd. Or it may be that human finitude about knowledge and wisdom is incapacitated in unraveling these meanings or answers to these ‘why’ questions.

The wise and the foolish, rich and poor, king and slave, good and evil have death as a common fate awaiting them.

The Boethius question, in his *The Consolation of Philosophy*<sup>3</sup>, regarding why good people suffer and why evil men flourish, is pre-eminent in Esan belief pertaining death. The wise, the good, the strong, the productive may die young while the foolish, evil, weak and counterproductive may die old. This is also a mystery. This mystery is couched in Esan dictum as: *Omon non men bhuunuisseeman*. This literarily translates into ‘a sweet soup is never sufficient for pounded yam’. What this means is that ‘what is beneficial does not last’. The question again is why death? What causes death?

### **Causes of Death In Esan Culture**

The analyses of the ontological sources of death constitute the focal point of this session. In the African traditional understanding and explanation of the causes of death, even when death results from natural causes, such causes are believed to have ontological underpinnings; hence, they are always ascribed with ontological connotation. On this view, such death occurrences are always

attributed to some non-natural causes. This is because, among the Esan people, the belief that there is nothing without a cause has a firm root. No smoke without fire. For example, there are some physical or accidental sources of death such as death resulting from accidental gun discharges, collapsing toilets, falling from palm trees or other trees, and so on. Deaths arising from such occurrences are ascribed with some ontological interpretations. It is only such explanations that remain meaningful and satisfactory among the people. Even when death results from fighting or death by deliberate shooting, it is believed that the killer's sense of reason was distorted or marred to commit such crime, or that his victim was already killed but was only tele-guided for perfection in physical manifestation in the hands of the supposed killer. This is why the Esan would either say: *eba lulu non* – 'it is what has been done', or *oiyiaboabo* – 'it is not ordinary'. This is partly why people abhorred and eschewed physical fight to avoid a person already killed having his predicament fulfilled in their hands. But when this happens, the Esan would say *oikayukhe*, which means 'he was dead already'.

Ontologically, deaths arise from different sources, which among others, include both malevolent and benevolent agents and beings such as:

**Witches and Wizards:** Witchcraft or wizardry is a concrete phenomenon in Esan cosmology; it is a constitutive part of her discursive universe. Witches and wizards are believed to operate mysteriously at night in coven where they convene, make decision and perfect their plans, and the consequences of which manifest in concrete reality. They are also believed to cause some deaths in Esan through the use of evil magic. They prey on human beings for meal or kill them to thwart their foreseen outstanding and exemplary destiny, or as a revenge or punishment to their relatives, or on account of the victim due to malice. The belief in witchcraft and their evil machinations is not limited to Esan people; it is a pervasive belief in Africa and beyond. While writing about Africa, Orubu submits that:

[i]t is believed that witches and wizards can “contribute” fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters to the coven feasts as demanded. It has been suggested (*or rather, speculated – mine*) that for coven members to get promoted in the hierarchy, they must, as a rule “contribute” a soul for the witch festival.... Thus, when a person dies, no matter how old he may be, it is believed that a witch or wizard is responsible<sup>4</sup>

**Diabolic Persons:** The existence of diabolic persons seems to be a characteristic phenomenon of almost all existing community in Esan. They are usually very few in numbers, and found among the male folks mainly. In most cases, they are wretched but dreaded member in the community. The source of their power remains a mystery. Diabolic persons can mysteriously cause death of both innocent people and those whom they believe trespass their boundary. They may also be hired by those who do not have the power to do so, for the same purpose. They are malevolent like witches and wizards. Apart from causing death, witches and wizards, and diabolic persons can inflict pains and injuries on their victims and swap or downturn their destinies. While some of these effects can be counteracted, some cannot. They attack their victims with magic, juju and through manipulation of nature. Like the Esan, the Yoruba and Ibibio peoples of Nigeria, among others, believe that magic powers can be used to harm an individual and also to cause his death. Magic manipulations are powerful and potent and are often used or procured by medicine men to achieve evil effects. “Magical preparations may be placed on the door steps of an intended victim. Similarly, such preparations may be sprayed on his or her garments to achieve the desired results”.<sup>5</sup> They may also be spread on the footpath of the intended victim or sprayed on air and specifically teleguided to him for intended purpose. According to Orubu, “[i]t is also believed that dogs, snakes, and rats may be sent to bite and to inflict death on a person. Even lightening may be sent to strike down an enemy”.<sup>6</sup> Other measures can be adopted. In any

case, some rituals are performed so that the deceased can avenge his death.

**Evil Consequences:** Death may also occur as a result of the evil deed(s) of the individual, to restore the disharmony which his sinful act(s) distorts in the ontological balance in the community or elsewhere. Such sinful acts include adultery, incest, murder, contempt of deities and some other acts that are considered sacrilegious and desecrating in the community. In this case, the Esan people would say *ebo lulu gbo ole*, or *ole tobolegbegbole* which means, 'it is what he did that killed him' or 'he killed himself'. Death may also occur as a result of ontological evil of relatives particularly of parents and of the entire community.

**Deities:** Deities are also believed to be responsible for some deaths. Similar to the point just analysed, the death of an individual may result from the vengeance of deities due to either the wrongdoings of the individual, his family or his community. When such death does not result on account of the sin of the individual, an appeasement is made to the deities for forgiveness to prevent other occurrences. Even when it results on the account of the deceased, appeasement can still be made to waive off the consequences for him in the hereafter and to insure other member of the family or community, as the case may be, from committing such crime. The duty of the deities is multi-directional. It is not only to enforce vengeance; they also protect. Just like in most African communities, the deities are believed:

to protect all the people in the locality. It also takes vengeance on evil doers for offences and crimes committed in secret. People may swear by the deity. In fact, individuals may be tried before the deities for various offences. It may thus be invoked to find out the guilty party. It is believed that the local deities do their work by causing the death of offenders<sup>7</sup>

Such deities in Esan, among the litany of others include *idigun*, *ukhuekhie*, *omonruare*, *obiemenandedion*. When offence is detected before death, appeasements are made; and when accepted the deity concerned may relent in anger and abort vengeance. Whether in Esan or elsewhere, some deities are believed to be more lenient or more temperamental than others.

The justices of deities can sometimes be perverted to reflect public expectation. This is very common with extra ordinary means of arbitration and vindication, where ordinary human knowledge is defective, such as in the indictment of witchcraft or wizardry, diabolism, blatant denial in the ordinary judicial system, and so on. Such cases are referred to, and tried by priests of sasswood, *osunene*, *alamonka*, *itan*, shrines, as well as native doctors and so on. These supernatural judicial means can be manipulated and when not manipulated has no guarantee for true justice. So while the guilty can sometimes be acquitted, the innocent can be penalized with capital or near capital punishment.<sup>8</sup> However these practices are not very common in Esan.

The justices of deities can also be manipulated sometimes by malicious priests for pecuniary gains. Though, not in Esanland, the attainables in the shrine of the *Arochukwuoracle* in Iboland popularly named the *long juju* by the British (because it pointed vertically to heaven) are typical examples of perversion of justice by human beings in the name of deities.<sup>9</sup> Here, it was dispensation, not of justice, but of injustice. When cases are brought before this shrine, the priests do accept bribe from the offenders to distort justice. After accepting bribe from the guilty person, the innocent person is led through an underground tunnel from the shrine to the coast to be sold as slave. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson explain how the Arochukwu oracle as a religious institution became perverted by the desire to capture and sell slaves. They write that:

[t]he oracle was widely believed to speak for a prominent deity in the region respected by the major local ethnic groups, the Ijaw, the Ibibio, and the Igbo. The oracle was approached to settle disputes and adjudicate on disagreements. Plaintiffs who traveled to Arochukwu to face the oracle had to descend from

the town into a gorge of the Cross River, where the oracle was housed in a tall cave, the front of which was lined with human skulls. The priests of the oracle, in league with the Aro slavers and merchants, would dispense the decision of the oracle. Often this involved people being “swallowed” by the oracle, which actually meant that once they had passed through the cave, they were lead away down the Cross River and to the waiting ships of the Europeans.<sup>10</sup>

This knowledge was not in public space. Then the priests slaughter a cock and sprinkle the blood on a white cloth to show the relatives of the actual innocent person that he or she was the offender and for that reason the gods has taken his or her blood, that is, has killed him or her. This nefarious activity was discovered when slave trade was abolished. Those who were purportedly claimed to be killed by the gods returned home to tell their experiences. It is not impossible that these priests have been killing innocent persons in the pretext of dispensation of justice by the gods before they devised the above described mean as an additional source of lucrative business in the shrine.

The Arochukwu oracle was no doubt the most powerful oracular cult and the most dreadful institution in Iboland and its environs. It is believed to have the ability to identify wizards, witches and poisoners, among other powers.<sup>11</sup> The people of Aro who were deeply feared because of the oracle manipulated the scenario to enhance their economic powers. According to Ossai and Odunsi, they:

lured and sold into slavery unwary persons who came to consult the oracle. More often than not the Aropeople create situations which necessitated consultation of the oracle. Suspects who were hurried to the oracle to have their innocence or guilt established would mysteriously disappear. The Aro

also used the oracle as a means of blackmailing wealthy persons and dispossessing them of their wealth.<sup>12</sup>

It is for the gruesome elements contain in the cult that the government suppressed it. In fact, a British expedition was eventually launched to attack the shrine in 1902. The preceding depicts that the supposed justices of the gods may sometimes be the reflections of the whims and caprices of the priests of such gods, just as the acclaimed supposed temperaments of the gods are sometimes the reflections of the actual temperaments of the priests of such gods.

**Spirits:** Spirits of the dead are also believed to cause some deaths. Their influence is mostly limited to the family they departed from. However their influence may extend beyond their family to wherever the cause of their death is. Maximally, such influences are predicated on vengeance. They may have felt offended or unjustly treated or killed by person(s) while they were alive. They may also feel offended for not being properly buried when they died, not accorded befitting burial, or for delay in second burial. They may also be aggrieved when sacrifices are not made to establish or maintain ontological relationship to exact their relevance. Ancestors may also cause death; but their actions are not malevolent. Such actions are attempts to forestall impending calamities to befall a people as a result of omission or misdeed which can generate ontological disharmony with the ancestors and the totality of reality.

**God:** God is believed to cause some deaths particularly of those who are old. When an old person dies, the Esan people often say God has called him or her. In their language, they would say *edolegbale*. This means 'his days are completed'. They say he has gone home to rest. This may suggest that this world is not a permanent home or that it is a place of toil and turmoil. Although there is terrific fear of death, there seems to be an exemption of those who are very old, and who probably have children that are also growing old. They would wish to die before their children begin to die of old age in their own

eyes. The prayer of every Esan person is that his or her children should not die before them. They would also want to join the ancestors. Another probable reason is that if their children continue to die one after the other before them, not only that they will feel so bad about it, they will have no child(ren) to accord them befitting burial; and that would diminish their relevance in the ancestral realm. In addition, they may die a bad death. Very importantly, they may be indicted of killing their children or using them to elongate their life span. In this case, the Esan will say *o roomon du uhonmon*, which mean, “he has used his child to buy or replace his head”, that is, to elongate his life span.

This is why when such old people die it is often believed that their death is natural. Natural death is the only death caused and ordained by God; and it is the death of the aged. Such deaths are least grieved and well celebrated. Since they are natural, most cultures call it good death. Although they are believed to be natural in Esan, but in the deeper yearnings of the people, it is caused by some agent(s) for a purpose; and the principal purpose is to prevent him or her from eating the fruits of his or her labour, that is, from enjoying being taken care of by his or her children. Such opposing beliefs invalidate the idea of a good death.

From the foregoing, it is evident that these beliefs concerning the causes of death are not limited to Esan people; they are predominant in most other African cultures. The causes of death<sup>13</sup> among the Igede people of Benue state in Nigeria do not have significant difference from the Esan account. In fact, it is significant replication of it. The replica in belief in most African cultures does not pertain only to causes of death but also to other beliefs about death and some other African spheres of life. However, the contemporary norm has diverged significantly from the traditional norm about some of these beliefs.

### **Epistemological Concerns**

The belief in immortality or at least in life of some kind hereafter seems to be ingrained in human consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Literally,

immortality means freedom from death.<sup>15</sup> What this belief means is that death is not the end of human being. It would seem difficult to find any human culture or race, even among the most primitive that is without some ideas of an afterlife, which is taken for granted and as certain. For example, the Esan and many other societies believe concretely either in reincarnation or in the ancestral world or both.

There is the strong cosmological belief among the Esan people that after death, the deceased transit into another life. There is also the cosmological belief in reincarnation. The contemporary mind that is critical will conceive this as contradiction. But for the traditional mind there is no contradiction at all, since contradiction only exists where people do not understand the connection between concepts or phenomena. Although we shall not go into unending epistemological quizzing here, however, it suffices to ask and answer in a fair detail the questions: How do we know about afterlife and reincarnation? Can both beliefs constitute knowledge? Can there be any epistemic validity for any or both. Since the dead cannot come back after a time to tell their experiences or the attainable in the world beyond the present, then what is the source of our knowledge claim about death experience, the dead and afterlife?

Orubu's work<sup>16</sup> gave some instances that may tend to sustain afterlife experiences. He writes about some recent scientific research findings which support the existence of life after death. Medical and psychological research findings indicate that there is something in human being which survives physical death. The investigation by Moody<sup>17</sup> concerns those who have experienced the first stage of death and thereafter come back to life. This is near death experience. The reports of the experiences by Moody's respondents were very lucid. They knew all the events which surrounded them, including the attempts to revive them, extra-terrestrial experiences and when they came back into their bodies.

Theodore Schick and Lewis Vaughn write that near death experience is one of the many "extraordinary things that thousands of people experience, believe in, and change their lives because of".<sup>18</sup> According to them, hundreds of people who were near death have told of blissful experiences in the beyond. Although their reports vary, certain details keep recurring. In each case, their

experiences do not seem like dream or fantasy; it seems vividly real. Many who have had such experiences hold that such experiences are undeniable proof of life after death. Sometimes, some face the difficulty of finding human words adequate enough to describe their experiences of unearthly episodes. Nevertheless the experiences affect their lives profoundly, especially their views about death and its relationship to life.<sup>19</sup> Moody argues that since there was so great similarity in their reports, these reports must reflect reality.<sup>20</sup> Near death experience seems to be the most impressive evidence that we can survive the death of our physical bodies. Although our physical body will certainly die,<sup>21</sup> but this does not mean we cannot survive death. The fact that the examinations of near death experiences in some parts of the world do not have essential differences from the reports in other parts, laid credence to the credibility of its claim of life after death.

Similar experiences abound in Esan and other African societies. Those who were already dead, such as parents, grandparents, other relatives, deities and unknown but describable benefactors, prevent the dying from going beyond a point and they then return back to their physical bodies. In addition, mountains, rivers, ditches, and other obstacles are reported to have obstructed their way. There are claims of physical manifestations of the spirits of the dead to the living, especially to their relatives. They sometimes pass unknown information that conforms to reality upon investigation or confirmation. There are also claims of dead persons who left to where they are unknown to begin another physical life on earth. They may get married and have children. When peradventure they are seen and recognized by those who knew them before they died, they disappear and relocate to another place where they are unknown. Sometimes too, upon persistence or pressure from spouse or children to visit their place of origin, they can lead them half way, but very close to enable them locate their home and then disengage. Maximally, it is believed that these are those whose actual time of death was not yet.

Psychologists also found out that under hypnotic regressions, some individuals reported that they have lived before some year ago in distant places. They also tell their career. Investigations confirm such information. The investigation conducted by Wambach,<sup>22</sup> using a wide range of subjects of over 500, indicate that subjects have lived and died many years before coming to this present life. Michael Shallo<sup>23</sup> argued that the human soul is not annihilated at death. He based his arguments on proof from the moral law, the sanctity and justice of God, man's desire of perfect happiness, and the universal judgement of mankind. Relying on these arguments Michael Shallo settles for the reality of another life.

In addition to these, the fact that we dream when we are sleeping, and this dream state is another plane of existence, suggests that there could be another plane of existence at death (a long sleep), and that it is not annihilation that awaits the human being at death. Since, philosophically speaking, we do not fully comprehend all the circumstances of dream and dream state (a reality which we have personally and directly experienced during sleep), more so we cannot, at this stage, understand all the circumstances of afterlife experience which we have not yet experienced.

Although some claims to afterlife seems rational and convincing, epistemologically speaking all sources of knowledge is suspect. Even the sources of knowledge that are most philosophically scrutinized, dependable, and reckoned with such as rationalism and empiricism are diametrically opposed on claims, beliefs and methods. If this is so, other sources of claims to knowledge such as intuition, revelation, introspection, authority, necromancy, clairvoyance and so on, will be fraught with more controversies and contradictions, and thus more suspects. The situation is worse when phenomena about which claims are made are not only beyond the physical, but are matters that are completely removed from terrestrial terrain, material existence and human experience such as the attainable in afterlife.

This suggests that the supposed knowledge claims to afterlife and its experiences can be countered. Some of the evidence we have had are not death experiences but near death experiences.

Some are stories about the manifestations of spirits of the dead, belief in reincarnation and hypnotic regression.<sup>24</sup> No one had really died to return to tell the true nature of life there, if there is. There seems to be a chasm such that once one is here, he cannot be there, and cannot know what lies after death. Conversely, once one is dead, he cannot come back to relate with the living, at least physically, about what exactly lies beyond the physical universe. This interactive limitation seems to be forever set between the living and the dead. This means that there is no valid epistemological intersection of the assumed two worlds. The preceding argument seems reasonable because of the possibility of epistemic perversion. For example, regarding near death experiences, one can ask: if death actually occurs, will these experiences continue? How are we sure they are not mirages of death just like a mistaken pool of water that is not there when we get to the point?

For instance, Theodore Schick and Lewis Vaughn<sup>25</sup> hold that, although researchers generally agree that people do experience such things, but whether their experiences show that they literally leave their bodies and enter another world is another question. Moody was convinced that near death experiencers do have a glimpse of the beyond, a brief passage into a whole other reality, but Schick's and Vaughn's concern is: whether such a belief is justified. They argued that "a claim is justified if it is beyond a reasonable doubt, and it is beyond a reasonable doubt if it provides the best explanation of something".<sup>26</sup> Since the evidence from near death experiences does not provide the best explanation, it does not establish the belief in life after death beyond reasonable doubt. This mental wrangling by Schick and Vaughn may signify the danger of reducing reality to logic and epistemological justification. But speaking realistically, reality is beyond these.

Part of the counterarguments for immortality is that some thought of the notion of disembodied existence as meaningless. According to Michael Scriven,<sup>27</sup> the belief in personal immortality through the survival of a spirit or soul conceived as the essence of personality clearly serves important functions in the psychic

economy of many people. This makes death seem less frightful, morality more meaningful and life more significant. But speaking uneconomically very little can be said about the truth of this claim. If the belief in personal immortality is divorce from the belief in a divine man-centered creation and redemption, it becomes unintelligible. This belief can slope into the claim that all animals and even plants survive death. Speaking realistically, this is a fantasy, unsupportable claim and is contrary to evidence. Scriven submitted further that:

[f]ascinating though the literature of survival research is, then, it does not provide us with anything more than a thorough education about the experimental investigation of allegedly supernatural phenomena. And there is no other source of evidence to support belief in our survival of bodily death. We die, and then we rot; and that is the only reward or retribution for our life as a whole that we shall ever receive. The meaning of man's existence lies within his life and not beyond the grave.<sup>28</sup>

But Helen Buss Mitchell tends to mediate this argument and suspends categorical judgement about it. According to her, “[c]ompelling as the account of life after death may be, we currently have no way of verifying their truth by means of controlled experiment”.<sup>29</sup> She argues that near death experience accounts do not establish life after death empirically – that is, through the scientific method of objective data gathering and hypothesis testing. There is simply no evidence for it. Looking at it from the other perspective, by listening to accounts of near death experiences, it is also clear that these people feel that they know what they experienced. “Children make particularly compelling witnesses because they tell of their experiences so matter-of-factly”.<sup>30</sup>

To argue against immortality or life after death because it has not been proven to be true is to lean on fallacy of argument from ignorance, since it has not been proven to be false either. To reduce its authenticity to empirical verification is like saying that the debates over the truth or falsity of **X** being the friend or president of

**Y**, the availability or otherwise of network services in a place, the rightness or wrongness of abortion, whether it is good to do good and avoid evil, among others, are to be verified only by subjecting them to laboratory analyses. This makes nonsense of value, truth and reality. The over confidence in this empirical sort of a thing is misleading. It poses as if empirical verifiability is the panacea to fathom all reality. For example, some centuries ago any claim to the present state of communication development will be regarded as an abuse of common sense, an empirical *cum* verification nullity. Today, here we are. A piece of information can go round the world in a minute. You can talk to anybody anywhere in the world without public address system and without any connecting wires. You can write a letter or make a write-up and another will receive it in a second or seconds anywhere in the world. This is the present state of information technology, which probably scientists or empiricists would have denied some centuries ago for non-verifiability. Perhaps, some hundreds of years to come scientists or empiricists may by laboratory analysis confirm immortality or life after death. We shall not go beyond this stage here, since, to do so, will imply overindulgence in discussing afterlife with respect to the scope of this topic of discourse. We shall now turn our attention to knowledge claim of the pain of dying.

Part of the reasons people fear death is the pain, which is believed people experience in dying. But how do we know that dying is a painful experience? We may think we know this because, we see the dying agonizing. From his demeanour, we can infer that he is in pain. Therefore, when we see many people dying with similar demeanour, we infer that dying generally is a painful experience. How do we know for sure from their observable manifestations that dying is painful? This raises the problem of *other minds* in Philosophy of Mind. How do we know what is in the minds of others? Do their demeanours, facial and other expressions grant any legitimacy for valid inference? If it does, does this inference depict any truth? But we can answer that since we see  $\Psi$  in **A–C** for them to become  $\kappa$ , we can be sure that for **D–Z** to

become  $\Psi$  they must experience  $\Psi$ . Put plainly, since we have seen people expressing signs of pain when dying then it means that dying is painful.

But this reasoning pattern is inductive; and it is common-place knowledge that induction can be dubious. The fact that people's expressions give the impression that they are in pain when dying does not give the guarantee that dying is inherently painful. Has there not been a single instance of dying which did not manifest pain? Put differently, has anybody not died without pain? If anyone did, then the sweeping statement that the act of dying is painful is unsupported with such contrary evidence. The dying may actually be expressing the pains of fear of death- a sense of leaving the world, a psychological rather than physiological pain of dying.

The beliefs in afterlife and reincarnation, whether in Esan or elsewhere also raised the problem of personal identity in philosophy of mind. Is the reincarnated individual still the same person in ancestral domain? Is the reincarnate and ancestor the same person with the deceased? What justify these? This is a problem.

### **The Logical Flaws**

The Esan belief in afterlife and reincarnation, as it is anywhere, is subject to logical error. It defies the logical laws of thought, that is, the principles of identity, exclude middle and non-contradiction. Is it possible for the deceased to be in ancestral world and reincarnate at the same time? The problem is more than that. Logically speaking, what is the source of the assumed inference that the deceased is somewhere or is not anywhere beyond the grave after death? There is the claim that "[t]he abode of the dead has no clearly defined geographical location".<sup>31</sup> Those who reject life after death on this ground may claim that since the geographical terrain or abode of the dead has not or cannot be discovered, then, it does not exist, because for them, to exist, is to be in a place. The challenge here is that such claimers have not discovered all there is in the material universe. If this is the case, then, they ought not to think of a must discovery of realities outside the universe, and in spiritual matter at that. In whichever way, any claim made so far in this section commits the logical fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, that is, the fallacy of

argument from ignorance.<sup>32</sup> Since fallacy is involved the argument cannot be logically valid. The affirmation and denial of knowledge claim about another plane of existence and of the abode of the deceased are both logical gibberish, an invalid assumption that is beyond demonstration. This is because, in logic, there is a specific pattern of occurrence such that given **A** then **B**. It will be a logical inconsistency or contradiction for **B** not to be when **A**. This is why the claims made about knowledge and experience concerning afterlife in the preceding session do not pass the test of logic.

### **Moral Import of Death in Esan Culture**

The consciousness that death is a debt which we must inevitably pay, enhances moral and social order to some extent. The Esan person believes that he or she will die one day. He also believes in life after death. These have tremendous moral signification for the Esan people. The realization of the existential fact that we will die one day makes people to be kind to one another. It makes them to live sincerely and abide by the golden rule. Their indoctrinated beliefs that *ebunuleleimienobhanoghuuholo*—‘whatever the mouth eats must without fail, worry the anus’ -, that the evil that men do lives after them, and that a good name is better than riches make them shun evil.<sup>33</sup> They therefore lead good lives so that:

1. Their good deeds and name will be echoed after their death.
2. They will live long.
3. They can join the ancestors.
4. They can leave good legacy.
5. They can attract befitting burial which is the prelude to joining the ancestors.
6. And very importantly, people will treat their progeny well when they are no longer alive.

Another way death inform moral behavior among Esan people is that the sight of a dying person bring people to the realization of their own situation: that they too will be in that situation one day. This then makes them sober when they see somebody dying. It

redirects their focus and attitude morally toward the sick, the suffering, the poor, the dying and the dead. It enhances their senses of solidarity toward others as co-potential victims of death.

### **Conclusion**

Skepticism can be raised about claims to knowledge and experience of afterlife. But this does not eliminate the possibility of afterlife and its knowledge and experience. A Hindu philosopher Nikhilananda<sup>34</sup> puts it that “experiences of after death cannot be demonstrated by reason”. He also puts it that “the doctrine of rebirth is more probable than improbable”. Reality is not all about passing the test of logics and epistemological rigour. What *isis* and what *is not* is not independent of intellectual rigour.

The beliefs which the Esan people have about death help in organizing their individual and community lives meaningfully. But the contemporary norm has diverged significantly from the traditional norm about some of these beliefs. It has perverted it. This has impaired their moral and social conception that enhanced the proper functioning of traditional community life. In contemporary time, people’s attitudes do not show that they will die. But this does not mean they will not die. And this does not exempt them from moral and social responsibilities. What it means is that they are morally callous and insensitive and are thus not using their present to shape their future.

### **ENDNOTES**

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