

## REINCARNATION NATURALIZED: A CRITIQUE OF ECHEKWUBE'S THEORY OF REGENERATION

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### **Abstract**

*Reincarnation elicits the notion that the existence of man is beyond the physical life. It emphasizes the possibility of the soul's birth into another body after death. The goal of this work is to critique Echekwube's naturalization of reincarnation as regeneration. The study employs the philosophical method of exposition and critical analysis. The theoretical framework is founded on the theory of Naturalized Metaphysics. This theory is the work of two contemporary philosophers: James Ladyman and Don Ross. They postulated that reality which is the subject matter of Metaphysics can be explained through the employment of scientific methods. The study locates Echekwube's description of reincarnation as biological regeneration within such a theoretical framework. It however shows that the theory does not stay true to the original objective of Metaphysics, which negotiates between two worlds, in the platonic terms, with the first being a reflection of the other. The study presents Echekwube not putting an end to the debate and concludes that Echekwube's usage of reincarnation as regeneration is as a tool for the attainment of global harmony and peaceful co-existence.*

**Keywords:** Reincarnation, Regeneration and Naturalism

**Introduction**

Reincarnation is about the possibility of the human soul existing in another body after its death. According to Stephen Lampe, “Reincarnation is the idea that a human spirit is given the opportunity to come to the earth more than once; on each occasion, it takes on a different human body”<sup>1</sup>. Traditional belief in reincarnation holds that an ancestor could be born into another physical body after the death of the former body. Unlike transmigration, which portrays rebirth of a soul into another body as a consequence of the sins committed in the former life, reincarnation is believed to be an opportunity for an ancestor to commune with families left behind, perhaps, either for good or bad. In transmigration, the rebirth is seen as an opportunity to atone for one’s offences. The enormity of such offences determines the state into which such souls are reborn. It could be reborn in a cat, a plant or in the human person. It depends on the offence. Transmigration is un-African while Reincarnation is African. Reincarnation is different: the soul can only be born into another body; no one child is a monopoly of the ancestral soul of a deceased parent/grandfather; the spirit of a dead father is believed to exist in the ancestral world and at the same time reincarnate in several children on earth. This same spirit is venerated at will. For Ehiakhamen, this ancestral concurrent existence is a philosophical dilemma that remains unsolved in the African philosophical perspective. No matter the irreconcilable issues regarding reincarnation, the living and the living dead surely have something in common<sup>2</sup>. Idowu is right then in saying that, “there seems to be a general belief that communion and communication are possible between those who are alive on earth and the deceased, and that the latter has the power to influence, help or molest the former”<sup>3</sup>. This is the reason the living dead are remembered and venerated. For Mbiti, “...the living dead act as intermediaries between men and God, or between men and important, but more distant, forefathers”<sup>4</sup>. While they are manifested in the real world, they are at the same time venerated in the ancestral world.

In the works of Sophie Oluwole, succinct justification of the reincarnation theory as enshrined by its proponents has been unable

to stand the test of time. The justification of reincarnation is usually based on physical manifestation such as: family resemblance, the *abiku/ogbanje* syndrome and memory transfer. If human family resemblance is a basic for the belief in reincarnation, then we have to rethink since “family resemblance is a phenomenon not restricted to man alone.... The fact that a grandchild resembles a dead ancestor does not therefore constitute conclusive evidence in support of reincarnation”<sup>5</sup>. What about the *abiku/ogbanje syndrome*, which is the cult of born-to-die children. How much of the cult of born to die children do we hear of today? Very rare! For Oluwole:

The point is not that children are no more born with missing fingers or toes. The fact is that the great reduction in infant mortality rates makes the talk of *abiku* almost a piece of nonsense. Improved medical facilities, better health enlightenment programmes have helped many Africans to realize that no specific group of children is born primarily to die young<sup>6</sup>.

The cases of memory transfer among Africans and elsewhere is one that needs special attention. However, the admonition of Oluwole is very apt. Scientists and philosophers must endeavor to establish the possibility of memory transfer. The *modus operandi* of memory transfer under which reincarnation is held to occur must be properly understood<sup>7</sup>. Otherwise, we must be deluded either by a demon or an ancient belief from which we must free ourselves. Generally speaking, Oluwole presents a philosophical admonition for African scholars in their rumination of such concepts as reincarnation and others.

However, Echekwube, rather than embarking on the perennial debate, decided to employ the term as a panacea to global unrest. In doing this, he substituted the concept of regeneration for reincarnation. Many have read Echekwube as attempting to put an end to the great debate on reincarnation. To others, that he denied the reality of the belief in reincarnation. However, this paper presents Echekwube as naturalizing reincarnation for a greater end rather than its current unending perennial problematique.

### **Reincarnation as Regeneration**

In his inaugural lecture at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Anthony Echekwube delivered a soul piecing lecture on “A Metaphysical Analysis of the Concept of Reincarnation: towards Global Harmony and Peace” with a novel perspective. He substituted the term “reincarnation” for “regeneration”. For him, regeneration, derived from generation, a biological term better describes the reality often regarded as reincarnation: “Regeneration is derived from generation which is a biological term for prolongation and multiplication of family group and membership”<sup>8</sup>. It is a term which would wake us from the slumber of the fact of our common ancestry. In another perspective, regeneration “... also connotes a change in spirit, turning from evil to good, a quality which humanity needs today in abundance.”<sup>9</sup> There are majorly two types of regeneration. They are: physical regeneration and moral or spiritual regeneration. For Echekwube, physical regeneration prolongs the numerical strength of human families and is sustained by the clan. Echekwube quoted Kaluto who corroborated his position when he said that:

Science has shown that properties of parents are transmitted to their young ones through genes and this is called reproduction and not reincarnation. For this, I subscribe to Echekwube who sees reincarnation as a regeneration of mankind. This shows that families reproduce their type which continues to surface in subsequent generations<sup>10</sup>.

The second sense of regeneration is a moral or spiritual kind. In this angle, Echekwube argued that humans may choose to be reborn in order to change from their evil ways and behave in a more positive manner. St. Paul is cited as a better example of a moral or spiritual regenerated individual: from being the persecutor to being the persecuted, having been converted or metamorphosed. The application of this theory in the philosophical postulations of Echekwube would better be understood with this extensive excerpt from his 2002 inaugural lecture at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Nigeria. He writes:

The ancestors whose characteristics are extended to their surviving family members facilitate the extension and sustenance of the family tree. This is physical but has a moral and spiritual dimension in the demand that the living be well behaved in order to enjoy the support of their departed but living ancestors. Their role is manifested in the demands of the elders who are representatives that the customs of the society be strongly upheld. The scenario created is that in which our primogenitors who have physically departed this world are spiritually present by the extension of their psychic and spiritual qualities and at the same time in the spiritual abode catering for our well-being... thus our ancestors sustain both the physical and spiritual regeneration of their successors, making their earthly homes stable and progressive.<sup>11</sup>

This means by physical regeneration, an ancestor could be replicated in a grandchild and by spiritual regeneration, an ancestor could also be spiritually present in their grandchildren by the presence of their psychic and spiritual qualities in them. Little wonder then that grandchildren are often seen with the likeness of their primogenitors in physique or in psyche. In which ever case, our primogenitors are biologically able to (perhaps without their knowing) influence our routine life by extending the aforementioned qualities on their grandchildren.

### **The Theory of Naturalization**

The perspective of Echekwube, who views reincarnation as regeneration is perceived as naturalization of that which is considered spiritual. What then is the theory of naturalization? Naturalization is from naturalism, which holds that the method of the natural sciences could be used to study all there is on the grounds that all there is belong to the world of nature<sup>12</sup>. Naturalism is the belief that nature is all that exist; all things supernatural therefore do not exist.

There are variants of naturalism, these include ethical naturalism; which holds Ethics as a *Sui generis* discipline and thereby rejects nonnatural properties, interfering with the domain.

The second is dual; these are metaphysical naturalism and epistemological naturalism. While metaphysical naturalism holds the belief that the universe should be treated as a single sphere without incursions from outside by souls and spirits while epistemological naturalism deals with the methods used to study the objects of Philosophy<sup>13</sup>.

For Arthur C. Danto,

Naturalism in recent usage is a species of philosophical monism according to which, whatever exists or happens is natural in the sense of being susceptible to explanation through methods which although paradigmatically exemplified in the natural sciences are continuous from domain to domain of objects and events. Hence, naturalism is polemically defined as repudiating the view that there exist or could exist any entities or events which lie in principles beyond the scope of scientific explanation<sup>14</sup>.

Naturalism rejects all supernatural propositions which include non-natural values. Proper reading of naturalism unveils its position that mental properties are causally derived from an ontologically dependent system of non-mental properties, powers or things. Put differently, all minds: content, powers and effects of minds are caused by natural phenomena; the supernatural is in fact part of the natural world<sup>15</sup>. Biological naturalism is understood from the purview of the above. According to John Searle, biological naturalism is “the view that mental phenomena such as consciousness and intentionality are natural biological phenomena on a par with growth, digestion or photosynthesis”<sup>16</sup>.

Two things are associated with biological naturalism (1) all mental phenomena from pains, tickles and itches are caused by lower-level neurobiological processes in the brain. (2) Mental phenomena are higher-level features of the brain. This means the brain is a conscious compartment. For Searle consciousness is caused

by the behavior of lower-level element such as neurons even though no single neuron is conscious. Whatever can cause mental phenomena therefore must have such casual powers equivalent to brains<sup>17</sup>. From the foregone, biological naturalism, metaphysical naturalism otherwise known as ontological naturalism, philosophical naturalism and scientific naturalism is a philosophical view that (1) Nature encompasses all that through space and time. (2) Non-physical or quasi-physical substances such as information, ideas, values, etc can be reduced to physical account and subject to the laws of physics and explained through science<sup>18</sup>. It is in this perspective we understand the effort at biologizing Ethics by Philip Kitcher, the effort at naturalising Epistemology by W.V.O, Quine; the effort at naturalising Metaphysics by Don Ross and James Ladyman and; in this purview also, we perceive reincarnation as being naturalized as regeneration by Echekwube.

Kitcher's "Four Ways of Biologizing Ethics" in *Evolution und Ethik* perceives that non-scientific approaches to moral questions are indecisive and uninformed. Hence, he calls for biologizing the ethical project. For him, it is at the domain of socio-biology to address this problematique. In doing this, Kitcher drew a map, which he termed "four ways to biologize Ethic". Since it is the task of socio-biologist to address ethical issues. I propose the following: (1.) They are to explain how people have come to acquire ethical concepts to make judgements about themselves and others, (2). They are to teach us facts about human beings vis-a-vis existing moral principles and other unknown normative principles. (3). They are to explain the meaning of Ethics and answer traditional questions on the objectivity of Ethics. (4). They can lead us to revise our system of ethical principles. This is not far from the effort of W.V.O Quine, who naturalized Epistemology.

For Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized" in *Ontological Relativity and other Essays*, Epistemology should be part of the natural sciences. This way it could be naturalized and its content would be decisive<sup>19</sup>. Quine disagreed with Descartes that we can get from reasoning to certain foundations for knowledge of the natural world. Quine's epistemological project focuses on the empirical study of how human beings develop a theory of the natural world on

the basis of the sensory inputs. Quine's Epistemology is a deviation from Traditional or Classical Epistemology as espoused by Descartes and others before him.

In *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalised* of Don Ross and James Ladyman, a similar project of naturalizing Metaphysics is enacted. They present Analytic Metaphysics as a failure in its pursuit of the objective truth, and argued that it be discontinued. David Hume had earlier called for all unscientific literary endeavors be committed to the flames. The Twentieth Century Vienna Circle with its Verifiability Principle which states that a statement is meaningful only if there is a way to determine its truth. Later on, they were accused of being victims of their own reed. Ross and Ladyman's position are better regarded as "Neo-Positivism". Its aim is the unification of sciences. That is, making coherent sense of the various picture of the world emerging from Physics and Spatial Science. They admonished that Metaphysics should not be based on Philosophers' *apriori* intuitions and common sense.

The question I have asked myself is whether Echekwube borrowed a leap from this theory of naturalism. From all indications, yes! He has looked at reincarnation through the lens of genetics: science. For this singular reason many scholars have disagreed with him. Those who partially agreed with him agree that there are laws of physics which enable us to explain things scientifically; including reincarnation but also to submit contrary to the possible logical conclusion of some scientist the existence of the unmoved mover or the maker of the laws of physics/laws of nature.

### **Critique of Reincarnation as Regeneration**

Echekwube holds that regeneration is a better terminology, which describes the reality of reincarnation to have children, to respect and honor elders and to have a sense of communal living. For him, "...regeneration ....is derived from generation which is a biological term for prolongation and multiplications of family group and membership"<sup>20</sup>. Regeneration is fulfillment of the ancient and ever new command of God to multiply and to make use of the earth according to its ability<sup>21</sup>. Regeneration explains how we come from

God who is the source and summit of all there is; in a special way, it describes how we come from God as the creator of creatures. Regeneration reveals the truth in humanity: we are of the same root irrespective of our color or nationality. Humanity is of the same ancestry. If this is understood, then, there would be a rethink to tribal wars and international unrest as experienced at the moment.

With a firm purpose, Echekwube became the first to publicly employ the term reincarnation as a substitute of regeneration. He was profoundly acclaimed by Oluwole in her work: *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-Head: Issues in African Philosophy*. It is argued here, that the term was used as a tool to remind humanity of a common ancestry and a reason to reason together as a family even though diverse. In doing this, Echekwube gave room to the myriads of problems bedeviling Africa, which could have been curbed if we had seen ourselves as having a common ancestry. This is seen in his thesis statement<sup>22</sup>. Echekwube's reincarnation as regeneration has been supported and opposed by philosophers. Those who have supported his thesis include Sophie Oluwole and Orji Kalu; while those who have openly opposed him are Justina Ehiakhamen.

For those who approved of his thesis, Sophie Oluwole, for example, said: "If one starts by defining reincarnation in the way Echekwube does, then very few philosophers would feel worried about it."<sup>23</sup> Oluwole reveres the position espoused by Echekwube and wished everyone keyed into it. Echekwube himself quoted Orji Kalu to have said of him: "...I subscribe To Echekwube who sees reincarnation as a regeneration of mankind. This shows that families reproduce their type which continues to surface in subsequent generations"<sup>24</sup>.

However, for Justina Ehiakhamen, reincarnation as regeneration is injustice to the long culture and tradition of a people so blessed. In her words, "The concept of regeneration as substitution for reincarnation is somewhat misleading in Esan as the two concepts do not mean one and the same thing; and cannot interchangeably be used. Regeneration does not show the core evidence for and clear understanding of reincarnation"<sup>25</sup>. With concrete evidences to justify reincarnation, Ehiakhamen gave a

critical x-ray of Echekwube's concept of reincarnation as regeneration. One thing is clear, while Echekwube's supporters did so having seen a greater course and reason for the substitution, Ehiakhamen was vehement on the claims of tradition, much of which Oluwole had debunked. While this work appreciates the critical analysis of Ehiakhamen, it unveils a perspective unexpressed in the work of Ehiakhamen. This veiled perspective is the fact that the work of Echekwube did not foreclose the great debate on the reality of reincarnation. Even though Ehiakhamen recognized this fact, her work left it unstressed that Echekwube did not attempt to foreclose the great debate but to employ the term: reincarnation as regeneration to pursue the possibility for global harmony should humanity perceives itself as having a common ancestry.

Echekwube's formulation of reincarnation as regeneration must be appreciated as an attempt to proffer solution to the myriads of problems bedeviling Africa and the world in general. I perceive regeneration also as a palpable explication of the tradition transmitted down to us in the name of reincarnation. Regeneration is a demystification of reincarnation. It presents to us a better understanding especially of the tripartite demonstration of the justification presented by Oluwole in her work: *“Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-Head: Issues in African Philosophy.”* These include as mentioned above: (a. family resemblance, (b. abiku/ogbanje syndrome, and (c. memory transfer. In the first, that is, family resemblance, it was established that it is a biological possibility for likes to beget likes; for parents to give birth to their kinds. This includes the lower animals. The second is the abiku/ogbanje syndrome. This was discussed extensively especially by Oluwole as a prevalent medical condition which with advancement in medical technology has reduced considerably. The belief in the reality of abiku/ogbanje syndrome was so strong that sometimes physical deformities and injuries which were purposely inflicted on these children after they died supposedly reflected in their supposed next coming. For Oluwole, it is very possible for a mother to give birth to a child with same deformities inflicted in the one considered an abiku. For her, “the answer provided by psychologists in Western Europe is that a pregnant woman is usually

so deeply disturbed by both the death and amputation of a part of her baby that the emotional stress is strong enough to create an involvement which is physically capable of affecting the unborn”<sup>26</sup>. This was often the case until society stopped inflicting physical deformities on children born with special health problems; and especially as modern medicine has reduced much of such ailments. The last; that is, memory transfer has never been properly established by adherents of reincarnation. The transfer of memory to another is usually through a rigorous process of learning. But this is far from memory transfer in this context. Adherents of the reincarnation theory have been unable to establish the medium of memory transfer within the human person or between the human persons. It therefore means that until the *modus operandi* of memory transfer is established we hold onto its impossibility.

This naturalized or scientific explication of the theory of reincarnation leaves scholars thinking as to whether an end has been put to the great and perennial debate on reincarnation. I think Echekwube has been unable to silence the reincarnation debate. Yet the truth remains that he directed our minds to the usage of the term in a better light.

### **Conclusion**

The theory of naturalization upholds the usage of scientific lens in addressing whatever exists. Naturalism, in Philosophy, relates scientific method or principles to Philosophy by affirming that all things in the universe including man are natural and knowable. Naturalism holds that our search for scientific knowledge is a possibility because in the universe, there is regularity, unity and wholeness which makes for the objectivity of scientific laws. This has recently been made explicit in different aspects of Philosophy. This is how we have discussed and understood the project of biologizing Ethics, the project of Naturalizing Epistemology, and the project of naturalizing Metaphysics; of Philip Kitcher, W.V.O. Quine, and Don Ross and James Ladyman respectively.

This paper has also delineated Echekwube's concept of reincarnation as regeneration within the parameters of naturalism. For him, “I have opted for regeneration as a substitute for

reincarnation because it is derived from generation which is a biological term for prolongation and multiplication of family group and membership. It satisfies the biological extension of the family<sup>27</sup>. Regeneration in this usage is a project of prolongation which defends the position of Kitcher who sees Ethics as a project and not a final system<sup>28</sup>. Reincarnation as regeneration is a project and not a final system that should be avoided but one that should be considered and reviewed according to scientific rubrics.

### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Stephen Lampe, *The Christian and Reincarnation* (Ibadan: Millenium Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>2</sup>Justina Ehiakhamen, "A Critical Analysis of Echekwube's Concept of Reincarnation as Regeneration" in *Explorations in African Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Echekwube*, ed. Monday Igbafen and Blessing Agidighi, (Ibadan: B Wright Integrated Publishers, 2015), 32.

<sup>3</sup>Idowu, Bolaji. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1973), 179.

<sup>4</sup>John Mbiti. *African Religions & Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1969), 161

<sup>5</sup>Oluwole, Sophie. *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-Head: Issues in African Philosophy*, (Lagos: Excel Publisher, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 46

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 51

<sup>8</sup>Echekwube, Anthony. *A Metaphysical Analysis of the Concept of Reincarnation as Regeneration: Towards Global Harmony and Peace*. Ekpoma: Ambik Press, 2002. Print. P. 32

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 33

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Lacey, Alan. "Naturalism" *The Oxford Guide to Philosophy* (United States: Oxford University press, 2005), P.640

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 640-641

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Danto, "Naturalism" in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edwards Paul, Vol. 5 and 6. New York: McMillian publishing co., inc. And the free press, 1967),p. 446.

<sup>15</sup> Luke Mastin, "Naturalism". *The Basics of Philosophy*, accessed 10 October, 2016 [http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch\\_naturalism.html](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_naturalism.html)

<sup>16</sup> Searle, John. "Biological Naturalism", in *The Oxford Guide to Philosophy*, Ted Honderich ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Pp. 1996-1997.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.1997

<sup>18</sup>*The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. Vol. 5 and 6.*,s.v. "Naturalism"

<sup>19</sup> Willard, Van Orman Quine. "Epistemology Naturalized" in *Ontological Relativity and other Essays*. (New York: Columbia University press, 1969), P. 17.

<sup>20</sup>Anthony Echekwube, *A Metaphysical Analysis of the Concept of Reincarnation as Regeneration: Towards Global Harmony and Peace* (Ekpoma: Ambik Press, 2002), P. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Bible: Revised Standard Version, Genesis 1:28

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. p.4-5.

<sup>23</sup>Oluwole, Sophie. *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-Head: Issues in African Philosophy*. (Lagos: Excel Publisher, 1992)P.41.

<sup>24</sup> Op cit. p.33

<sup>25</sup>Op cit. Ehiakhamen, "A Critical Analysis of Echekwube's Concept of Reincarnation as Regeneration". P. 36

<sup>26</sup>Op cit. Oluwole. Pp. 46-47.

<sup>27</sup> Op cit. Echekwube, P.32

<sup>28</sup> Philip, Kitcher. "Four Ways of Biologizing Ethics." In *Evolution und Ethik*. E d. Bayertz. London: Reclaim, 1993. 14

March, 2016. Web.< <http://joelvelasco.net/teaching/167win10/kitcher%20%20four%20ways%20of%20biologicizin%20ethics.pdf> p. 13