

THE PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF DEATH IN AFRICA: THE ANALYSIS OF OWAN PEOPLE OF EDO NORTH, NIGERIA

Agbuku O. Friday

Abstract

There is plenty to speculate about the phenomenon of death. In this context, this paper re-examines the concept of death in contemporary African societies. It critically analyses the meaning and significance of death in relation to human life. This paper examined the Owan people and their concept of death, and to further raise questions like, does death brings to finality the process of life? Is there other life to live somewhere after death? Does the human soul live on eternally? That is, is the human soul immortal and are there lessons of philosophical importance to be learnt from the conception of death in Owan world-view? These and others are what formed the thrust of this paper while a logical conclusion is drawn against the backdrop of the metaphysical relevance of Owan's understanding of death.

Key words: Owan Language, Death, Burial, Ancestors.

Introduction

The life cycle of man starts from the cradle, that is birth to grave. In the traditional African setting, the landmarks in this life cycle are birth, marriage and death. Each of these stages is considered crucial and is therefore marked by considerable ritual and ceremony, which shed much light on African religious ideas and practices.

Birth therefore, becomes the first stage of a new generation, and the rites of birth are religiously performed in order to make the child a corporate and social being (Mbiti 1969:110). Initiation rites for instance make the initiators responsible and active members of the society. These initiation rites are referred to as '*ekwuee*' or '*otu*' by the Owan people. Another significant stage is marriage (*Iriokhuo*); this makes man a creative and reproductive being, linking him with both the departed and the generation to come. The final stage of the human being is death (*Uu*), which is the inevitable end, of his life. In many African societies like the Owan people, death is the most disrupting phenomenon in human existence. As a mysterious phenomenon, death stands between the human being's world and the spirits world, which is between the concrete or visible and the metaphysical or invisible entities.

A Concise Historical Background of the Owan People

The Owan people of Nigeria are found in Edo North District of the present Edo State, very close to Ondo State. The word *Owan* or *Onwan* was coined from the original word *Owanbua*. *Owanbua* was the name of a notable daughter of Eghomi of Uvbiato

village, which is presently known as Uhonmora village in Ora clan (Oyakhire1979:14). Tradition has it that Owanbua married at Otuo village but she did not have any children. When she eventually died, her burial ground (grave) incidentally became a stream that flowed from Otuo, through villages in Owan before joining the *Ule River*, which eventually emptied into *River Ose*.

Owanland is bounded in the West by Ondo State and in the South by Ovia North East, Esan West and Uhonwmode Local Government Areas. In the East, it is bounded by Etsako West Local Government Area. Owan peoples presently occupy two Local Government Areas; Owan East and Owan West, with Afuze-Emai and Sabongidda-Ora as their headquarters respectively. They speak the same language called *Owan language* with very slight different bit easy understanding. They are predominantly farmers with some in secondary and tertiary activities and some in teaching profession.

The Theme of Death in Owan Traditional Thought

The term death is one of the central themes of existentialism, which many existential and religious scholars perceived as antithetical to a meaningful human existence.

To the Owan people, death is referred to as *Uu*, (Alamu2006:312) that is the separation from this human world to the unknown or spirit world, that exists beyond the physical. Before death, when a human being is seriously ill, the relatives do all within their power to make sure he gets better. This they do by either visiting a witch doctor or inviting the witch doctor to the family house of the ill person. The invited sorcerers will speak on what must have caused the illness. After which he will recommend the appropriate sacrifice for be performed in order for the ill person to be performed in order to be well again. The questions that loom at this juncture are, what do the Owan people called *Uu* – death? What is the cause of death in Owan thought? The response to these questions will form the next aspect of this paper.

Death, to the Owan people is construed to mean that which terminate human being's continued (physical) existence. This could also mean the rendering of death as a final cessation of the vital functions such as the heart, the brain, the liver, and lung (Igbafen2006:92). Death is believed to have taken place according to the Owan, the moment *eti* – soul, leaves *egbe* – body, while the *egbe* decomposes, the *eti* transcend into the abode of the spirits. Whenever someone dies, the Owan people have differing interpretations, depending on the circumstances surrounding the death. For example, when somebody that is of childbearing age dies without a child (especially male child) such is reported to have died a bad death. This is the case because there is no room for continuity. Whereas, when someone who has a child (especially male) dies, such is reported as a good death. However, these categories of persons are seen to have died like the former but there is hope for continuity or immortality. When someone that is seriously ill suffered severely before he/she died, he/she has left suffering *eson* or has gone to rest *ofietia*. This, according to Izibili (2006:164) is used for “those who have suffered for a long time as a result of neglect or illness”. While for the persons that died at ripe or very

old age, have gone to sleep or have gone home, which in Owan language is *ibaba yoa*.

Some of the fundamental questions that loom large based on the Owan people's understanding and interpretation of death are; is death the final aspect of human existence? Does life continue after death? Does the soul survive after death, if yes does it live on eternity? What are the philosophical lessons that should be learnt from the conception of death? Are there any importance attached to death? The explication of these vital and unavoidable questions raised above shall be the next point of elucidation.

Owan Perspective on the Causes of Death

The fear of death is a universal phenomenon. This fear of death amounts to the major reason traditional African societies attributes almost all death particularly death of young people to a cause. This cause, of human death is thought to have external factors, making it both natural and unnatural (p.165).

In Africa conception, the commonest cause of death is believed to be witchcraft, sorcery and magic. This attitude of attributing death to the magical action of an enemy is the mark of the Africans. This is the case because there are hardly any natural deaths among the Owan people, even among the very old. As Udo (2002:182) put it; “Among the very old people I come in contact with, one hears frequent complaints that their enemies have maimed their legs and rendered it impossible for them to move about”.

However, to be candid, even the very old among the Owan people seldom dies a natural death. Even when this is possible, what is explicitly heard in Owan and other African communities whenever death strikes is, “the enemy has done his worst!” Thus, death is usually thought of as being brought by someone or something outside the individual. Even if death is caused by known diseases or by clear accidents, Africans (Owan inclusive) believe that such diseases and accident have befallen the victim due to the machination, malevolent and maleficent agent.

The Owan people like other African societies are full of suspicion. This explore the reason the urge to know, to establish the cause or causes of death whenever someone dies, which invariably leads to the consultation of diviners and other traditional specialists.

Categories of Death in Owan Traditional Thought

It might interest you to know that it is not every death that connotes, pain, evil, absurdity, meaninglessness or tragedy for the Owan people. The consequence of this is that the phenomenon of death has a classification within the context of Owan existential or traditional discourse. Thus, there are two main categories of death namely “a good or meaningless death” and “a bad or evil death”. Among the traditional Owan, it is believed that death comes at the end of life, which is when man's life plans have been fulfilled.

To them, life is a “home call” of a kind, which every mortal must answer at a ripe

age. In Owan thought system, the death of a human person that has attained a reasonable age with grown up children to give him a befitting burial does not attract “sympathy”, sense of tragedy or absurdity. It is for this reason, according to Igbafen that “the Owan do not mourn the death of an elderly person” (p.94). Their belief is that the old man has gone home, better still; the death of an elderly person is natural. Bad death or premature death is such that happens when an under aged person dies right in the eyes of the parents. This kind of death is however, considered to be a tragedy, especially if the dead has no child to do the funeral rites. According to the Owan people's metaphysical interpretation and explanation; since the deceased has no child to do the funeral rites, he cannot have a place in the ancestral world or spirit home. An Owan scholar, Atafu explicitly described this phenomenon viz;

Adult who are married with children are given befitting burials, unmarried people and people without children are buried without ceremony. In fact infants are not buried in the house but their dead bodies are thrown away into the evil grove – *ugbo iseku* specifically set aside for such. The dead infant bodies are left exposed as preys to jackass and wild animals prowling by night. Such children that die prematurely are known as *ivbi iseku* (pp.16-17).

Consequent from the above, the Owan people perceive death as a normal feature of genuine living as well as a tragedy. It becomes a welcome phenomenon when a person is of age and has fulfilled all the expectations of societal socio-cultural values, such as child bearing, ripe age, and reasonable achievement (Igbafen, p.95). In whatever way, death in Owan cultural framework assumes a tragedy or absurdity, when a young person who is perceived “unqualified” for ancestral home dies. The death of such person is perceived as evil because it renders the deceased's existences purposeless.

Another kind of bad death in Owan thought system is suicide, *ohoa*. Suicide (either by hanging or drinking of deadly substance), is a serious crime frowned at by the generality of Owan people, because they consider it as a defeatist approach to existence itself. Persons who died by suicide are usually buried in the evil groove (*ugbo-iseku*), with no form of elaborate or mini burial rite.

The simple fact is, the dead ought to be buried ones it occurs. However, this is not always the case in African communities. The way and place a person dies determine how and where the deceased should be buried. For instance, a drowned person's burial place is the bank of the river, ones the corpse is found. While someone confirmed to have been killed by a shrine or an idol, through mysterious attack, the priest of such shrine/idol dictate where the corpse of the deceased should be buried. The question that may come to mind at this point is; is there any importance attached to death and burial in Owan perspective? This question becomes necessary because, our understanding of the importance of death as perceived by the Owan people of Edo State, Nigeria will in no small way helps to appreciate their conception of death.

A significant belief among the Owan people is that death is inevitable. This means

that death signifies a “debt” which all mortals must pay. This according to Igbafen, “is variously rendered for example in the following *Iuleha* (one of the clans in Owan) aphorisms; *Aimie olokhau* meaning, “there is nobody who will not die”, *Uu yedere* meaning, “death does not give notice”, *Ododogho mu Uu ye* meaning, “everybody is carrying death on his or her head” (pp.93-94). However, the acceptance of death as an inevitable event in human existence has both moral and social importance to Owan people. One of its moral importances includes; showing the futility of the human world and all it has to offer. In this respect, it portrays that human beings came to life empty handed and will finally return the same way after death, as expressed in the Owan aphorism stated above. This in a way teaches the moral lesson against greed and covetousness. Death also plays the significant role as organizer of time. The concept of 'time till death' becomes a very vital point for an individual trying to organize his/her existence. This point recaptures the popular parlance in Owan land that *eghei muza khe uan* oso meaning, “Time waits for no one”.

Death also fulfils social function knowing that its rituals bring family members together as no other occasion (except a family wedding) is likely to do. It can also help to give some meaning to the deceased itself by emphasizing the meaning of existence/life of the person who has died. Therefore, death should be conceived as a normal inevitable part of existence, not to be avoided, but can be manipulated from the Owan point of view. The question that loom is; can death be manipulated or controlled? The Owan traditional thought system explicitly states that death is an event, which could take anyone irrespective of position, sex or race, (p.93).

In whatever way, unlike the some human societies, which perceive death as that which cannot be controlled, the traditional Owan believe that death could be manipulated to the extent that it can be deferred or transferred from one person to another. This is possible by the use of charms and amulets. Among the people of Ilea Clan in Owan West Local Government Area, for example the charm or amulet used in such practice is according to Abiodun Atafo called, *Odelo*. In his inflection he said;

Odelo is a native medicine used in those days to change or transfer illness from one sickman to another who was visibly a healthy man. It is also used to transfer the impending death of one man to another. Hence in those days, healthy people rarely visited sick people who were on their death beds, for fear that illness could be transferred to them. *Odelo* could also be used to transfer a problem from one person to another. (p.28).

The quotation above negates the view that Owan people believe that death can be completely avoided. Rather, the Owan strongly believe that death is inevitable.

The Significance of Burial Rites in Owan Traditional Thought

It is true that when a person dies, he or she ought to be buried. However, in Owan thought system, there is usually no hurry to bury the elderly people and chiefs, except infants and young persons who have not attained the age of *Iovbode* (age grade), even when the deceased has children (Agbuku2019:436).

Immediately after death, as it relates to person without problems enumerated above in this discussion, the junior age grade sole have the responsibility of digging the grave. The digging of the grave is done either in one of the rooms in the deceased house (if the deceased has one) or in any of the children's house (if the children have any) if not, the digging of the grave would be in the family's compound. It is expedient to noted, there are two consensual systematize pattern of funeral rites in Owan. The first is about the elderly as earlier stated, and the second is the persons who have reached the age of *Iovbode* (persons who have done their age grade rites), which the Owan people referred to as *ozo* meaning, the untitled/ordinary people, and the other form of funeral concerns the kings or high chiefs. The funeral rites of an *Oba*/King or a senior chief is usually an elaborate ceremony, which normally lasted for four days or more depending on the financial capability of the children, while those of the non-title people are held for two days.

Before the dead are buried in Owan, two or more members of the deceased family who must be male and have observed all age grade rites, properly washes this corpse. Thereafter, they would wear the cloth that the first child of the deceased sews on the corpse before putting it inside the casket (p.439).

In most communities in Owan land, it is a common practice that before interment, the dead is usually fed with pounded yam of very small portion (prepared by one of the deceased's daughters), not through the mouth but the legs. A person who has been initiated into age grade institution too does the feeding but the person must be junior to the deceased. The question that may come to bare at now is, what is the traditional significance of the feeding of the dead? This feeding in Owan traditional thought is a symbolic burial rite because, to them, it is a way of giving strength to the deceased as he/she journeys to the spirit or unknown world (p.440). When this is done, the corpse is interred with a proper announcement, which is often done by means of native guns or cannons loaded with locally made gunpowder referred to in Owan as *osisi ekhe* and *owewe* in some communities. The shooting of native guns or cannons in Owan belief is that it vibrates and creates awareness to the spirits or ancestral world that a qualified ancestor is on a metaphysical journey to the spirit abode. The question that may come to mind at this juncture is, what is the essence or significance of burial rites? Burial rites in Owan traditional thought, helps to 'receive', and gain 'invite back' the departed from the ancestral world to the human world. This belief give them the impression that the departed is not really dead, but a living-dead, which can be reached, contacted or invited back to human existence.

This aspect of Owan traditional thought does not favour the unmarried and those that married without children. This would mean to the Owan that the unmarried and those that married without children are in effect conquered by death. Thus, the hope of coming back to the general family circle is lost completely.

Therefore, the significance of final burial rites among the Owan people is held sacrosanct for many reasons. Foremost, final burial is some time referred to as showing the deceased, the route, which simply means that if these final rites are not carefully done, the dead will not get to its destination. Where the soul will find rest and then take up the responsibility of an ancestor who cares about the people he left behind in the human world. It is as a result of this, that there abound many and often complicated ceremonies connected with death, burials/funerals, inheritance, the ancestors (the living-dead), the spirit world and a host of others.

Death is the last of the rites of passage that human beings have to go through on earth. Therefore, death is something that concerns everybody (mortals), partly because sooner or later, everyone personally faces it and partly because it brings loss and sorrow to every family and community. This amount to one of the reasons why rituals connected with the dead are usually elaborate but meaningful to Owan people.

Critical Evaluation

From the discussion so far, it is apparent that the Owan people have a kind of mystical link with their departed. This link is demonstrated through traditional prayers, libation, and offering/sacrifice.

The idea of the living-dead as vehemently maintained by Owan people simply help to affirm their position on the extension of existence beyond this disappointing world. The ancestor (living-dead), acts as intermediary between the human beings and God (gods), or between the human beings and importantly more distant forefathers. The common belief among the Owan people is that after death, the human being present himself before the creator (God), and gives an account of his earthly existence.

A reflection on the Owan belief on the cause of death especially the malevolent spirit, which they assumed to be the living-dead is obscure. It is our considered opinion that although people cause them to die, however, there is little evidence of the belief that they actually cause death. If a family feels that its living-dead (ancestors) are dissatisfied, it immediately takes measure to harmonize the situation so as to avoid its deterioration to the point of death.

Another aspect of this discourse that leaves much to be desired is the place of sacrifices in the prevention of death caused perhaps by witches and wizards. The question that arises is to whom exactly are such sacrifices offered? This question is worth noting considering the fact that even the witches and wizards to whom sacrifices are supposedly offered to, also offer sacrifice, therefore, both the supposed 'innocents' and the 'guilty' offer sacrifices all for the fear of death.

The conception of death by the Owan people seems to have demystified death that they know the most probable cause of it and thus, guide against it religious in order that the world of torment and agony will not be the people's portion. The elaborate nature of the burial rites leaves room for a conclusion that may sound difficult to accept, but it is the truth; that to a large extent, it seems that contemporary Owan people value the dead more than the living. The reason is that Owan people in earliest days have no link with

embalmmnt, excess wake keep and the exposition of corpse for all and sundry including children. This aspect is fast diminishing African ways of life.

Concluding Remarks

We have in the cause of this paper carried out a philosophical examination of death among the Owan people of Edo North, Nigeria, as well as a critical evaluation of the discourse. We shall on this note, draw the conclusion.

It is true that death is a metaphysical phenomenon, which no human being can ever avoid. This is the situation because it transcends this physical existence (world), which is not distinct from the Owan concept of death. The believe that death is a necessary transition from a known world to another (the unknown) has remain overtime. In addition, for this unknown world to be a place of comfort, preparations ought to be made in the world of experience starting from when one is alive, to end in death (funeral rites).

In addition, death is perceived as that phenomenon that equates both the poor and the rich. This is so because, like most African societies or cultural groups, the Owan hold the belief that death is an event which could take anyone, irrespective of position, sex or race (Igbafenp.93). This consciousness of death's inevitability puts every average Owan person in check. Death is concealed of as a departure and not a complete annihilation of person. In this regard, the human being only moves on to join the company of the departed and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, while the spirit (*eti*) moves on to the other state of existence.

Conclusively, all societies should return to the core traditional way of viewing dying, death and the observing of burial rites. In traditional Owan societies, burial ceremonies were truly soberly, that when someone dies, the whole village mourned him for days. Today rude and upsetting culture have crept into African communities, even the poor families now go borrowing (instead of sorrowing) to buy cows and to lavish on vanities during burial ceremonies of loved ones that were never cared for while alive. Unlettered and school dropouts get paid to do dangerous acrobatics on their rented taxi, motorcycles to ushers hearse (Ayo2002:23). If all the suggestions discussed in this paper are considered, then will the dead be buried in an atmosphere that would be favourable to both the deceased and the living.

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