

ONWUDINJO: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING IGBO ADAGE

Egbonu, John Okwuchukwu, Ph.D
St. Albert Institute, Fayit Fadan
Kagoma Kaduna State
okwycare@yahoo.com

Abstract

The certainty of death to every living being and the uncertainty of when death will occur to every living being are an enigma and phenomenon that has bothered human existence. This is because it is possible for humans to speculate and predict human activities and circumstances around but it has been a continuous impossibility for one to predict or state when and how his death will come. This failure and inability of humans to ascertain the full nature and time of death, has made the Igbos to consider death as bad. Bad not as an act, but that which has and still proves human weakness towards understanding and knowing when one will die, thus, leaves human in wonder and awe as to what death really is. Hence, the Igbos sometimes say death (onwu) is bad (ndijo). Is this really true? Since to every beginning there must be an end. If death is really part of human reality, why is it referred to as bad by the Igbos. This we shall consider using critical analysis and examination to know the context the igbos ascribe death as bad, and if really it is bad.

Keywords: Death (onwu), bad (ndinjo), Humans.

Introduction

The reality of death is as part of human characteristics. In fact, it is not out of place to posit that death is part of existence that ceases all functionality of human activities. By this we mean that though death stops human functionality in existence, it is part of

existence. Thus, some human beings count it as bad or refuse as though it is evil. In fact, it seems abominable, if not an abomination for someone to wish another death. This is because what ends human activities on earth is death. Consequently, it becomes a reality that awaits humanity but not based on or determined by the individual.

To this end, we can say that death occurs when it wants to and not when we want. That is why in some cases some people have wished themselves dead or even try or attempting suicide but often times death would not come. But if it eventually happens, it cannot be said categorically that the individual is aware of when he/she died or will die. All these are the circumstances the Igbo in their cultural parlance and language construct informed their notion of death (*onwu*) as bad.

The Igbo notion of '*onwudinjo*' does not call for a first face look at death as an act that is intrinsically bad, it does not provoke literal consideration of death as one crisis, challenge or societal menace that has fallen on humanity, instead it draws our attention to the fact that the reality '*onwu*' has an everlasting thoughts it brings to the person it takes, and the living yet to face such reality.

The Concept *Onwudinjo*

The word *onwudinjo* can be used as a noun and as a verb. It is a noun when it is given to someone as a name. *onwudinjo* could be a name of a place, person. It is been given to always remember and recall event that has occurred or in symbolism to something that has happened. The word *onwu* means death. *Onwu* is the act in which human existence stops in totality. Human ceases to act and function completely. According to Heidegger:

death is the end of Dasein, not as something yet there, or something out there...it is something that stands before us, something impending. Death as the end of Dasein's own possibility: non-relational, certain and as such definitive, not to be outstripped. Death is as Dasein's end, in the being of this entity towards it's end (19).

This reality that is impending and has become a necessary end to man's active existence, is a reality that man cannot explain and say when and how it will happen. Consequently, death becomes that reality that is part of man's existence yet stops man from existing actively.

Onwudinjo in literal translation means death is bad. But the question is, how can death be bad since it is part of man's existence? Hence, it is imperative to note that the igbos do not refer to *onwu* (death) which is now used as a verb to be an act that is bad in itself or bad, instead, the inability of man to understand death and when it comes makes it seem to them as bad. For them, *onwuamaghiegbu* (death does not know how to kill). In fact, this *onwudinjo* shows man's certainty about uncertainty. Man's inability to understand the certainty of reality he/she must pass through. Thus, Mbiti avers "there are no myths in Africa about how death might one day be overcome or removed from the world" (111). The usage of the word *Onwudinjo* therefore, is contextual and serves as an adage. It does not present *onwu* (death) as an evil or bad act in itself.

Characteristics of Onwu (Death)

In understanding this impending reality man must face in his existence, the following are underscored about death.

- Death is universal
- Death is a Necessary end to human active existence
- Death does not discriminate
- Death is inevitable

These qualities explains the phenomenological reality *onwu* does to human existence. Death is one of the characteristics of man. Thus, it is part of existence that ends active existence. Death only ends one's activity and functioning but the burial/burning of the body, ends one's existence on earth. For Onyibor, Marcel:

The phenomenon of death is characterized by the following: it is universal and therefore does not look anyone in the face before striking its murderous blow, and it does not take into account position or race or wealth or age or sex or religion. It is inescapable, there is nothing anybody can do to escape the inevitability of death. Any battle against death is doomed to fail...death is something entirely and instantly fixed in an undetermined future that does not touch us at the present moments; it is always present, potentially interweaving itself with life and threatening it (188-197).

The universality of death demonstrates that it is a reality that happens to all human creatures in this world. It cuts across culture, tribe and country. It is an end that man must face hence, death is a necessary end to man's active existence.

Also, since death is a necessary end to all humans, it does not choose or select. When it is time for such a reality to occur, it does irrespective of who or what such an individual is and represent. Finally, it is a must. It is not negotiable. In fact Barnet, W. further points that "if man has learned to think, no matter what he may think about, he is always thinking of his own death" (45).

Understanding *Onwudinjo*

The use of the igbo adage *onwudinjo* (death is bad), is contextual and circumstantial. *Onwu* (death) in itself is not bad. It is a reality that is part of the characteristics of man's existence. Death is bad as posited by the Igbo adage, presents the effects death brings and leaves on the heart of the living.

The Igbo people in their parlance refer to death as an existing being or personality. According Obioma, Des Obi, "Igbo names and proverbs employ similar expressions that refer to death as though it is some personality or entity. Death is spoken of as a being who arrives, enters and executes, leaving behind

melancholy, sorrow and coldness" (170-197). These sorrow and melancholy death brings with it, makes it appear bad, as such they see it as sad. Thus, the badness of death is in its effects and the vacuum it creates.

Also, man's inability to control and know the underlying enigma of death makes man to live in constant anxiety of when death will come even though such a time is not known to man. This uncertain certainty, sum up to present the bad aspect of death. In Tillich's words, the sting of fear is anxiety, and anxiety strives towards fear. Fear is being afraid of something, a pain, the rejection by a person or group, the loss of something or someone, the moment of dying are the anxieties of man" (39). Therefore, death leaves man in constant anxiety and fear. This fear of what will happen and when it will happen consumes man's thought.

The aspect of death that makes the Igbo adage to present death as bad, is the fact that death comes unexpected. Although man is aware he will die, but he does not and cannot say when he will die. For Heidegger, death "invades my presence, truncates my future and momentalizes my past" (34). In essence, death comes unannounced. It does not give notification of its coming in spite of any plan one has set out to achieve. Often times, death occurs to the younger ones that still appear fresh, healthy and full of energy. In this kind of case, the aged and those around, consider death as taking that which still has future and hope. In situations like this, comments like *onwudinjo* (death is bad), *onwuamagiebu* (death cannot kill) arises. It explains the fear and anxiety humans have in them as it concerns death. Though a necessary end one must face, it is also man's great uncertainty and worry on what lies ahead.

Another factor to the seeming bad view of death, is the fear of what lies ahead. According to Udo, "the uncertainty of what lies beyond" (170), is another circumstance and situation that beclouds the mind of man. Unlike man, a rational being that should be able to say and know that after life I will be going to

this place or that place, is completely unaware of what lies beyond. Humans, though aware of death but cannot say when death will come and where there will be after death. Sometimes, we make predictions based on our religious and cultural beliefs, but can one actually say with certainty that this is what will really be after death? Considering this fear of the aftermath of death, Okpa Michael reiterates “there is a fear of what happens after death. We are forced to ask the question: is there life after death? If there is, do we still know ourselves in the world after?” (35). These questions man ask in order to handle the enigma of death, makes death more transcendental and beyond the logic of human comprehension. Okpa went further to explain that some philosophers cum religion have tried in their teachings and beliefs to say that life after death is possible and that one's soul could be immortalized. But in the really sense of the word, in both physical and transcendental reality, is there certainty and assurance that the immortality of the soul and life after death is as sure as the reality of death that must take place in the life of every living creature?

The notion of death as what cuts short man's existence and his plans for his development and cosmological growth, is what seems bad in the bad igbo adage of *onwudinjo*. Consequently, it shows therefore that even though man knows he must die, he is yet to come to terms that he must die. Death becomes an enemy and a thief that threatens and takes what man ought to preserve and enjoy. This point limits human plans in existence. The power of death and its thoughts, leaves man more human and uncertain. Thus, death should be considered as part of reality. If this is done, then from birth, man would prepare for death. It will help a long way to help man in starting his task on earth with the hope of accomplishing it or die striving to. It will reduce the fear and anxiety we pass through and the notion of death as bad and thief of life will be reconsidered.

Man as a Finite Being (*onye ga nwu*)

The knowledge of man as a being that must die is one that is as

fixed as change that is constant in reality. Hence, death is one characteristic of man that makes the Igbo people to say man is a being that must die (*onye ga nwu*). Consequently, the thought of death should be a thought that awakens our existential drive towards working for and achieving our set out goals whilst we live since no one knows the moment it will come rather than fear and not work in promoting human existence. For Onyibor, “death is the obvious mark of human finitude and temporality” (195).

The nature of being as *onye ga nwu* goes a long way to show that the Igbo people are aware of the finitude of human existence. They are fully informed of man as one will die (*madu ga nwu*), but the impact it creates and the time it comes makes it a reality that hurts the living. As such, Heidegger recommends that “man should develop a positive attitude towards death because he is a being towards death and the awareness of it, is a gateway to authentic existence”. Hence, death should be seen as a reality that happens to humans not as a bad omen but as a passage to another existence.

When death is considered as a reality that shows our mortality and finitude in existence, it will then enable humans have a “clear understanding of death and comprehension of the condition of death and how it can help us have a balanced view of life” (195). It enables human to anticipate and prepare for death even though its time is not predictable by humans. The view *onye ga nwu* becomes a reminder in human consciousness. It points at the mortality of human existence and an affirmation of Sartre's position that “death does not limit human freedom because freedom does encounter this kind of limitation” (540).

Considering human existence as that which is transitional and has end in this world because human must die (*onye ga nwu*), Sartre goes further to say that “death is never that which gives life its meaning, it is on the contrary, that which in principle removes all meaning from life...” (547). This notion of death as

what removes meaning from life is contrary to the position held by the igbos that man must die. The notion of death is that which be considered as one of the characteristics of human existence. In fact, death is the last characteristics of any human being. Hence, instead seeing it as what removes meaning, it should rather be considered as that which reminds man and helps man to act and work bearing in mind, his limited time in this world.

When man constantly ponders on his death, it makes and improves his thoughts and steps in the way and manner he lives. Man's mortality is the core of the Igbo's *onye ga nwu* philosophy. Koestebaum Peter's position reiterates that death is an end we must face as humans and as such, "the person who is aware of death, and the consequent limit of his time on earth will hereby concentrate on essentials. He will not waste time on useless details...recognizing his death; man is prompted to get immediately to the point of life" (136-160).

In essence, the reality of death should foster mutual co-existence in among humans especially as its time of occurrence is not known. Importantly too, death that occur to both young and old alike. It does not have any age bracket in visit. It is in aspects like this, the notion of death as bad comes to play because it should be meant for those who have lived life to old age. But on the contrary, it happens to anyone and at any given time. To strengthen this, Barnes suggests we should all be ready in spite of our age as humans. In his words,

I think we ought to grant that a life without the possibility of temporal unconsciousness and death would be intolerable to contemplate. To be compelled to live forever without all our finite limitations except mortality would be in very truth the hell which terrifies the fundamentalists (438).

Death therefore, should always be that which reminds us of our finitude. It should constantly be a reminder that compels us to live a life for others and a selfless existence that will make our existence a plausible to reality.

Conclusion

Onwudinjo is an Igbo adage that expresses the feelings people pass through when someone close to them dies. It does not present and should not be misinterpreted and misrepresented as an act that is morally bad in itself because death is a necessary end all human and living creatures must face. No doubt, at any time death occurs to humans be it at old age or at a young age, a vacuum is created and someone is made in active to his environment. But *onwu* (death) is a constant reminder of our mortality.

Death which is the last characteristics of humans is not an act that can be judged as morally bad or good as it is a necessity that must happen like other characteristics of humans. Hence, when we conceive death in this like and manner, the erroneous interpretation of *onwu* (death) as what used by the Igbos, will be seen as a proverb that is used to express the feelings of those who have lost someone dear to them. No doubt it does not select nor does it have age range it happens to.

Finally, *onwu* is the only reality that ends reality. It is a reality because it occurs every day in human existence. Like other activity in human existence, so also does death happen to man. Death, therefore, should always be anticipated in the same vein childbirth is anticipated. The inability of humans to understand and classify the power and modus operandi of death should be enough reason for us to constantly remove the fear and anxiety of the consequences of death. Thus, every day of our existence should be seen as a preparation to death because death in itself is not bad or evil.

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