

Reincarnation “Iroso” in Esan: A Myth or Reality

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ABSTRACT It is the concern of this paper to examine the concept of ‘iroso’, which means reincarnation among the Esan people of southwestern Nigeria. It becomes necessary to x-ray this happening against the background of such selected phenomenon in African traditional worldview that supposedly makes up the content of African philosophy. The paper came to a conclusion that it is not all events or occurrences that could be explained empirically. Hence, reincarnation should be taken as one of the ways Africans promotes family solidarity and unbroken unity and such be accepted as what Echekwube referred to as ‘regeneration’ theory instead of reincarnation.

INTRODUCTION

The westerners had wondered whether the Africans could think since he was thought not to possess the mind or brain and completely devoid of the reasoning faculty. It is not in doubt however, that African culture has the potentiality of being harnessed in order to develop a philosophy of solidarity, unity, political, religious and economic stability. There exist various understanding of the concept of the soul among different cultures, ethnic groups, and religions. The idea of destiny in African Religion as well as philosophy is the realization of this world in a future time. African religion is a kind of humanism, on which, moving away from man, only to return to him, seizes in the course of its voyage all that is not of men itself, and which surpasses him.

To this end, the thrust of this paper is not to say any thing perhaps entirely new. We want to use this paper to address reincarnation as part of theistic problems on one hand, and on the other hand, to reappraise the earlier positions maintained by African scholars in time past. This is aimed at addressing reincarnation as a belief against the backdrop of mortality or otherwise of the human soul using the Esan people of South - Western Nigeria as a case in point. This task may not be successfully done except first things are done first: clarifying the operational concepts. The paper will be concluded with a note of caution on the emphasis placed on the life here and hereafter so that the world will be a better place for all.

What is “Iroso” Reincarnation?

The word ‘reincarnation’ is un-African. This does not mean that Esan people of South - West-

ern Nigeria for example, do not have an equivalent word for it. It is revealing to know that belief in reincarnation is worldwide and from very ancient times. Millions of peoples of various races and classes have some concept of reincarnation. The concept is so diverse that one could err if one makes hasty generalizations and judgments. In fact, this explains our reason for seeking to study the individual beliefs.

Onyewuyi, (1996) said that the word is derived from two Latin words: *re* = again; and *incarnare* = to enter into the body. Reincarnation is simply the theory that when the soul separates from the body at death, it informs another body for another span of earthly. It has different variations like metempsychosis otherwise called transmigration of souls where the soul of a person informs an animal or tree.

Among the Greeks for example, Echekwube (2002) said that reincarnation is developed around Orphism. This is an ancient religious cult also called the orphic Oracle. The adherents held that the soul, which by its nature is pre-existent survives physical death. It later reincarnates either in human or mammalian body. This cycle of reincarnation continues repeatedly until the vices, which necessitate rebirth are amended. At this time, the soul is supposed to have regained its original innocence and purity. No wonder then Plato (427 -347 BC) also supports the transmigration doctrine. This becomes evident when one considers Plato’s assertion as reported by Conford (1971), thus:

So, since the soul is not destroyed by any evil, either its own or another’s clearly it must be a thing that exists forever, and is consequently immortal... And if it is so there must always be the same number of souls in existence. For if none perishes, their number cannot grow less,

nor yet can it be increased, and then all things would end by being mortal.

In the words of Echekwube (2002), the African would not be pleased to see the life of a family end with the extinction of its members through death. Moreover, it should reflect the ardent desire of the African to obtain support and protection of his ancestors. There is a common denominator and that is that there is a universal belief in the immortality of the soul and the need for clarification of what reincarnation, metempsychosis and survival could mean in areas where emphasis is laid on any of the views so conceived. This will take one back to studying the origin of mankind. This, of course, is not part of this study.

In the context of this discussion, reincarnation is considered as the passage of the soul from one physical body to another one of the same species, even also in lower beasts or objects as in metempsychosis or transmigration. However, we will tie reincarnation in agreement with Echekwube (2002), to the general African belief in the unitary nature of life. The claim that dead ancestors are always influential in the daily lives of the living is strengthened by the belief that ancestors return to their families in their grand children. This is how the family continues to survive and extend.

The central point in the African belief in reincarnation is put thus by Idowu (1962):

The deceased person do reincarnate in their grandchildren and continue to live in After-life...according to this system, one grandchild may not have the monopoly of the ancestral Ori... Yiya omo cannot be taken as establishing a reincarnation in the technical sense. All it appears to establish is the belief in the concrete fact that there are certain dominant characteristics, which keep recurring through births and thus ensuring continuity of the vital existence of the family or clan.

It has been categorized into two: the classical and partial forms of reincarnation. In African belief, there is no reincarnation in the classical sense but partial or more precisely, apparent reincarnation, if the word is to be used at all (Idowu 1962).

THE ESAN PEOPLE AND BELIEF IN REINCARNATION

In Africa in general, and Esan in particular, life and death are from God, both are desirable,

and both constitute the basis for religious feelings and are the conscious formation of philosophical reflection they are intricately inseparable. It is inevitable that life be given, but as soon as it appears, death must follow. Death, following Onimhawo (2004), therefore, is the unavoidable consequence of life. Life has priority over death in terms of time since precedes death. However, what component of life - force in man precedes death? This and other thought provoking questions will be answered when we have briefly elucidate who the Esan people that are used as reference point are.

The origin of Esan people has been well documented in textbooks. The people of Esan occupy an area of about 2987.52 Square Kilometers located on a plateau at the Edo central region of Edo State; a homogenous and highly vibrant people. Esan consist politically of five Local Government Areas of Edo State: (Esan North - East, Esan South - East, Esan - West, Esan - Central and Igueben). Many of the important districts in Edo central, were already in existence as important groups. For example, Uruwa (Irrua), Uronmun (Uromi), Ekuma (Ekpoma), Ubiaza (Ubi-aja), etc. before they were brought together under the name Esan the actual event resulted from the Ewuare's wooing of about 1934. Izibili (2002) posited that they speak the same language Esan with very slight difference but easy to understand. They are prominently farmers and small-scale businessmen and women; while the literate ones are mostly teachers.

Among the Esan people, it is believed that with the demise of the physical body, the guardian spirit returns to God; the shadow disappears; the vital force or vivifying force disappears also, while some Africans like Esan people, says it goes back to God for judgment. The departure of the vivifying (put life into) force or life principle demonstrates that there is no sign of life, the image or manifestation of God left in man, while the physical body decays. What is left is the personality ancestral guardian spirit. This is what reincarnation personality and character stands for.

For the Africans, Esan inclusive, only ancestral spirits can reincarnate, and they may do so in more than one child. This is clearly seen in the personality and character of the new person. This is position has been variously responded to. More recently, Echekwube (2002) posits that reincarnation will bring about global peace

through theory he called 'regeneration' The question that immediately comes to mind is: who is an ancestor? This question becomes very necessary because it will help us to understand who exactly qualifies to reincarnate in the Esan people standpoint. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2000), defined ancestor as a person in your family who lived a long time ago. Within the context of our discussion, there is age range of those to be called ancestors. When an adult male or female dies, there are burial rites that need to be performed so as to ensure the spirit of the dead will be welcome in the spirit world. It takes from the foregoing, it is safe to say that the word ancestors in Esan understanding, does not refer to persons in one's family who died long ago. Infants are not to be called ancestors. The belief in reincarnation is so strong among the Esan speaking people of Edo State so much so that some young people answer names like, *Aba, Ine, Abanokhua*, etc. (father has returned, mother has returned, grand father has returned, and so on). This is simply to establish the fact that life does not end at death. There is life even in the hereafter. It is believed too that there is time frame within which man or woman reincarnates. It is believed that man or woman has the privilege of coming to this world and lives again and again for a period of seven times after which he or she remains permanently in the ancestral world.

THE CONCEPT OF BEING IN AFRICA: THE ESAN STANDPOINT

Africans in general and Esan in particular, conceive the essence or nature of anything, as "force". It will be incorrect to say that 'being' in the African thought has the necessary element or quality of force. The precision of their concept of being, Temples (1969) said will not be attained if their notion of being is expressed, as "being is that which *possesses* force." Rather, "the concept of force is inseparable from the definition of 'being.' There is no idea among Bantu for example, of 'being' divorced from the idea of 'force.' Without the element 'force,' 'being' cannot be conceived.... Force is the nature of being, force is being; being is force"

For Esans as it is for Africans, there is a clear distinction and essential difference between different forces or inner realities of beings, just as there are differences between categories of ma-

terial visible things. When you say in terms of Western philosophy, that beings are differentiated by their essences or nature; Africans say that forces differ in their essences or nature. There is the divine force, terrestrial or celestial forces, human forces, and vegetable even mineral forces. Onyewuenyi (1996) posits that in addition to different categories of forces, Africans maintain that these forces follow a hierarchical order such that God precedes the spirits; then come the founding fathers and the living-dead, according to the order of primogeniture; then the living according to their rank in terms of seniority.

HOW TO KNOW WHO REINCARNATES: ESAN PERSPECTIVE

The culture of a people is usually a reflection of the body of beliefs, and mores expressed in their language, religion, dances, arts and crafts, dress, music, houses, customs, traditions, etc. When a person dies, the traditional Esan as in else where in Africa does not say that the "soul" of the dead has gone to the spirit world. It is not the "soul" or "part of the man/woman" that has gone to the world of the spirits but the whole man though not in a visible but invisible state. The above assertion has been lucidly explained by Tempels (1969), in his research on the Bantu people thus:

What lives on after death, is not called by Bantu by a term indicating part of man. I have always heard their elders speak of 'the man himself,' or it is 'the little man' who was formerly hidden behind the perceptible manifestation of the man; or muntu which at death has left the living,.. Muntu signifies vital force endowed with intelligence and will.

As earlier stated, in Esan, only ancestral spirits can reincarnate; and they may do so in more than one child. This is clearly seen in the personality and character of the new person. It is revealing to know that the belief in reincarnation has some gender connotation. The average Esan woman for example, who believe in reincarnation, would always pray that in her next world God should allow her come as a man. When a child is born into a family, after the naming ceremonies, the parents seek the services of a diviner who has the ability to tell the future. He (diviner) will tell who has reincarnated in the newly born baby. Some times, the baby will be disturbing especially at night either by crying or refusal

to eat. The parents, in an attempt to find solutions to the child's disturbances, consult a diviner for explanations. By so doing, the Esans convince themselves that a child is a reincarnate of a dead ancestor if that child exhibits human features or traits of the li. It becomes however, worrisome when annually in Esan, the eldest man in each family stead calls the kinsmen together to serve the late father; (Ukpe festival). This becomes the case when in the house where this ceremony is taking place, at least one of the children of the celebrant, answers *Abanokhua* (grand father), which means the late father has reincarnated. The question now is who exactly is being honoured. There is what looks like a kind of contradiction here; for if the whole spirit of a dead father is reborn as *Abanokhua* for example, how can it also remain in the ancestral world"? Oluwole (1992) explains that it is the spirit *per se* that remains in that world while features of it are reborn in one or several children. Esan people believe that one can reincarnates up to the number of seven times but not outside the family tree. . If thoroughly understood, there ought not be contradiction at all. The Esan does not hold that the entire spirit.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Man in Africa thought is at the intersection of the terrestrial and celestial coordinators. He sees himself as the synthesis of the cosmos, world, not the hereafter (spirit world). If he has to go to the spirit land, it is only to ensure the survival of his family of which he is a part. But the goal is for him to come back to where he rightly belongs "this world". The sky and other natural phenomena, God, the deities, ancestors, and other spirit forces do not escape his control. The African wants to control and obligate them to come down to him, he commends them. When he tells them to come, they come, and, to depart, they depart. Man is the center of his world, his cosmos.

As earlier stated, in Esan, only ancestral spirits can reincarnate; and they may do so in more than one child. This is perhaps, clearly seen in the personality and character of the new person. The fact that there are resemblances between the newly born and the departed is not a sufficient proof that there is reincarnation. It is a wrong assumption for some to say that the soul reincarnates and takes a new body just like a

man changes his clothes. That is not to say that it is out rightly nonsensical for us to study reincarnation. In the doctrine of reincarnation, following Azenabor's submission, as quoted by Agidigbi (2001), we see how the firm belief in the unity of life eclipses all differences. Note that differences are denied, but they help to attest to the fact that it is not the same person (ancestor) who reincarnate completely in new born babies. are irrelevant. To be added, by this conception we see solidarity and unbroken unity of life, which operate both simult. We will like to pitch tent with Onyewuenyi (1996) in his submission that 'personal ray', living perpetuation', and Echekwube (2002) in his submissions that the word 'reincarnation be substituted with the theory of 'regeneration', 'vital influence', etc. These terms means continuity of a family just as through regeneration for example, the tree retains its kind, the dog retains its kind and the bird begets and retains its kind. If reincarnation is understood in this context among Esan people of Edo State of Nigeria, it will help a great deal to solving the problem of unnecessary expenses the parents of the new born babies are made to contend with on the basis of the diviners' reports. Some times, the reincarnated ancestor would be accused of having done some havoc in their first life; then now that he/she has come again, sacrifices are to be made to appease the gods for mercy. As many that have the orientation [wrong] that what ever mistakes they make now, will be corrected in the next world when they reincarnate, should better face the life they are privilege to have now and live their print in the sand of time. This, if properly understood by Esan people, the much needed development and cry for the messiah - political or social - will be a thing of the past. It is time to be regenerated and not reincarnation!

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