

HUMAN CLONING AS THE ANTITHESIS OF AFRICAN-IGBO NOTION OF DEATH AND ANCESTRAL VENERATION

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Abstract

Human cloning is one of the most controversial scientific endeavors facing our world today because it is touching the genesis and core of our being. Cloning is, however, a general term, describing any procedure that produces a precise genetic replica of a biological object, including a deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) sequence, a cell, or an organism. The effect of Human Cloning on African-Igbo notion of death and ancestral veneration is also under attack by this most celebrated biotechnological advancement. The gift of life is divine given to man through the means of procreation. Death as well is not seen as an end in itself but a transition into the great beyond or the joining of one's ancestors in the land of the living dead; in other words, life does not end in death, death is a continuum. Since sex is not involved in the production of clones and African-Igbo believes that sex is the normal means by which new genetic material is introduced during procreation, clones have no choice but to have exactly the same gene as their single parent. In addition to this, we are having exactly two individuals in existence at the same time. It is against this backdrop that this paper will show with analytic method of philosophy that human cloning amounts to the termination of human unique personality. It also destroys the value of death, ancestor ship and ancestor veneration in African ontology.

Keynotes: Human Cloning, Death, Ancestor, Reincarnation, Veneration

INTRODUCTION

The idea that humans might someday be cloned created from a single somatic cell without sexual reproduction moved further away from science fiction and closer to a genuine scientific possibility; with the announcement of the birth of cloned sheep Dolly in February 13, 1997 by Dr. Ian Wilmut, a Scottish scientist, the human race has been once put on the edge of whether to be or not to be. The announcement of the birth of Dolly rekindled the quest for the understanding of the person and its place in the universe and death. The effect of Human Cloning on African-Igbo notion of death and ancestral veneration is not left out in this most celebrated 'technological advancement'. Death in Igbo is not seen as end in itself but a transition into the great beyond or the joining of one's ancestors in the land of the living dead; in other words, life doesn't end in death, life is a continuum. Cloning is, however, a general term, describing any procedure that produces a precise genetic replica of a biological object, including a deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) sequence, a cell, or an organism. Here, however, no sex is involved in the

production of clones; this is strange since African-Igbo believes that sex is the normal means by which new genetic material is introduced during procreation, clones have no choice but to have exactly the same gene as their single parent. Since cloning of a person will mean having exactly two individuals in existence at the same time, what can we now say as regards to the value of a human person? What will happen to the most cherished undividedly unique person we have been since the inception of man? In the case of death in African-Igbo context, who will be taken as the ancestor between the individual and its clone? Who will be venerated? Can death still be seen as death since there will be an absolute replica of the deceased still in existence here on earth? It is against this backdrop will this paper look at Human cloning, African-Igbo notion of death and ancestral veneration.

HUMAN CLONING

As Cloning is generating issues today, so is its origin causing confusions among scholars. The word “clone”, according to Gregory Pence derives from the Greek word “*klone*” or “twig,” referring to the horticultural process whereby a new plant is created asexually by planting a twig in nutrient-filled water. In modern science, “cloning” refers to reproduction of the genetic material of an ancestor-organism without sex.¹ This etymological and technical definition hardly does justice to the emotional weight in popular culture that rides on the word “cloning.” In a bid to disprove the Greek origin of the word ‘cloning’, Joan Haran, Jenny Kitzinger, Maureen McNeil and Kate O’Riordan asserted:

It is worth noting that the practice of using Greek roots in the coinage of terminology can mislead the casual reader as to the antiquity of a term. The word ‘clone’ was not coined until the early twentieth century. In 1903, Herbert J. Webber of the US Department of Agriculture invented the term: ‘to describe a colony or organisms derived asexually from a single progenitor’. Silver points out that Webber’s coinage ‘found quick acceptance among botanists and gained favor among biologists working with cells in culture.’²

Joan Haran *et al* may be biased in their explanation owing to the fact that there is at least one Greek word that out of which one can derive the word ‘cloning’, but be that as it may, the authenticity of the etymology of the concept ‘cloning’ remains questionable.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, scientists had speculated on the nature of the early events in embryonic growth that result in the differentiation of the various cells’ tissues and organs that constitute a mature animal. The cell’s nucleus was known to be the repository of the genetic program that guided development, but the nature of the changes that took place in the nucleus during differentiation was (and to a considerable extent still is) unknown. “The German embryologist August Weismann first theorized that the nucleus of the single cell zygote, i.e., a fertilized egg, must be *totipotent*, that is, it contains all of the information required to direct the development of a complete animal.”³ He also incorrectly

believed that with subsequent cellular and nuclear division, there was a progressive loss of genetic information that resulted in the restriction of developmental potential of the daughter cells. He attempted to demonstrate this experimentally, but inevitably encountered many technical difficulties in an attempt to prove what we now know to be an incorrect hypothesis. August Weismann's idea of *totipotent* which contains *all* of the information (potentials) required to direct the full development of a complete animal, may have been informed by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. The concept of monads which the first editor of Leibniz, Heinrich Kohler called *monadology* was "derived from Greek *he monás* as a unity or single thing; not merely as substances in general but as substances which are simple, and as such have no parts. These alone, he says elsewhere, "have unity and absolute reality".⁴ Going by this definition of monads as simple substances which have no parts and as well are unified and embodied absolute reality as we have seen. If we then take the Weismann's totipotent to mean monads we may not be mistaken since by definition monads consist in themselves unity and absolute reality which invariably contain all that is needed for a full development of a complete animal. We must state here that Leibniz's monads are very important in the discussion of cloning.

In early 1997, February 13th to be precise, Dr. Ian Wilmut, a Scottish scientist, made headlines when he presented Dolly to the world, a sheep that he cloned from a six-year old ewe. The idea that humans might someday be cloned created from a single somatic cell without sexual reproduction became a possibility. This is true and evident owing to the announcement of the birth of Dolly which raised so many questions ranging from the possibility of cloning a human, the status of a cloned person and to the role it will eventually play in African notion of death and ancestral veneration and the place of man in the process of procreation, will form part of the subsequent sections.

AFRICAN-IGBO CONCEPTION OF LIFE

The interrogative of life is most pervading, it is an old interrogative. It covers religious, social, economic, psychological, scientific, cultural and philosophical aspects. It also borders on the purpose of existence. Life is paramount to the African-Igbo, it is a phenomenon not to be compared with anything else because everything we aspire to be begins with conception and eventual existence which is carried along by life itself and ends with life. Life is a gift from God and is revered and protected by every means available by the carrier. Life of every creature is vital but more importantly that of human life. It is sacred. The value of human person is seen in life and not every kind of life but life well lived and examined. The Igbo metaphysics of life is a mixture of meaning of life and meaningful life, unlike the Western conception of life; where life according to some existentialists' philosophers is absurd or meaningless. The twentieth-century philosopher with whom the notion of 'the absurd' is perhaps most closely associated is Albert Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), he said, "the absurd consists in the lack of fit, or congruence, between the rational categories through which we think and the vast universe which eludes all attempts at comprehensive explanation and justification. Our existence, then, is ultimately absurd."⁵ Camus establishes three paths one can take in confronting or trying to escape the harsh reality

of existence; one is through suicide, the second being philosophical suicide and the last is rebellion. Killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it. Philosophical suicide is adhering to a constructed, fictionalized system of beliefs and ideas that serve to delude you from the banality and harsh truth of existence. By rebellion Camus said it is embodied through Absurd Hero. This person recognizes the absurdity of existence yet chooses revolts against this conception and through that being able to defiantly enjoy life. Camus went further to identify three characteristics of an Absurd Hero: that are revolt (we must rebel against existence), freedom (we must be free to do as we please), and diversity (life must consist of a rich plethora of experiences and passion).

Albert Camus last classification of absurdity of existence, Absurd Hero tallies with the Igbo conception of life. This is evident with the names given to Igbo children that have life significance attached to them. Nduibuisi (life is supreme), Ndukaku (Life is greater than wealth) Ndubuaku (life is wealth) Ifeakandu (nothing is greater than life) the list of names which shows how life is valued among the Igbo can continue ad infinitum. Bearing all these in mind, it becomes sacrilegious when one kills another intentionally through either physical or diabolical means. If the suspected murderer is found guilty, he is ostracized by his people for at least two years in which he will not set his feet on the soil of his town and he is not allowed to eat anything from his town. This is down for three reasons. First, the land where the innocent blood was shed is desecrated and requires atonement. Second, the innocent blood spilled or the soul of the person murdered is calling for justice and vengeance and finally, the murderer's life is somehow protected from the anger of those whose relation was killed to avoid seemingly double tragedy. Life is so revered among the Igbo like in other places that suicide is frowned at and seen as abomination. If for any reason one takes his/her own life either by taking deadly portion or by hanging on a tree. The person will not be accorded any form of funeral rite. He will not be buried with either a coffin or a mat; he will be buried by a total stranger showing absolute rejection by his people, nobody will be seen mourning him/her. If the shameful act was committed in a room in the house, the room and every property therein will be taken by the stranger that buried him. The properties are taken forever while the room will be returned to the owner after two years with proper sacrifices and cleansing. Again, if the disgraceful act is done on a farm land, the stranger that buried the *efuluefu* (the useless person as he is seen by virtue of committing suicide) will cultivate the land for two years before the rightful owner enters there to do anything after land cleansing and pacification of *Ala* the earth goddess. Life is not seen as easy among the Igbo, they say *kama ng'anwu kam ndoliwa, uwa bu ndoli ndoli* literally put "instead of dying because of the challenges of the world, let one keep trying for life is all about struggles". So anyone that kills himself is seen as a total failure unto himself, his family and to his community. People will never name their children after such person because his/her life was not good. Such persons can never become ancestors nor have right to reincarnate because it is believed that as he/she is rejected among the living, the living dead will also reject him/her. Of course, talking about

acceptance here is out of place, because all the requisite qualifications are not met by virtue of committing suicide.

THE STATUS OF THE CLONED PERSON IN AFRICAN-IGBO COMMUNITY

The first Western philosophical definition of person came from Boethius, a Roman philosopher and politician. He defines person as “*persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia*” translated as “an individual substance possessing a rational (spiritual) nature.”⁶ Here one can rightly argue that in contrast to the Western notion of person, which centres on the individual, the African notion is community based. In Western culture the individual can assert his own existence. He can live a solitary life, life of noninterference. But in Igbo, the community plays an important role in asserting the personhood of anyone. As Igbo will say “*Nwa bu nwa ora*” which was succinctly captured by Raditlhalo in *The African Philosophy Reader Second Edition* as saying “A child is held to be the property of the community, and it is the community who are going to see to it that the individual child becomes a significant member of the community, an asset to all.”⁷ The status of the person goes beyond individual identity but is attached to the family, clan and the larger community. People are identified with their family and community name not with the individual name. For instance, Okeke is not known as an individual without attaching and identifying Okeke as the son of Onuora from Umudike clan in Oka community. Wherever Okeke is seen, he is seen in connection to his family, clan and community without which he is not a person. The “individual identity is replaced by the social such that the identity of an individual is lost, at least in principle, due to its valuing of collectivity, social conduct, high value of sharing, and social security.”⁸ It is the community which makes the individual what he is, to the extent that without the community, the individual has no existence—a point well made by JS Mbiti in defining the being of an individual in African culture: ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am,’⁹ an alteration of Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. This also informs the Igbo notion of *Umunna wu ibe* (you are among us because we [the community] assert your existence).

According to some Western cultures, existence could mean just having a thought as in the case of Rene Descartes, it could also mean having consciousness or the mere fact that you are aware of your existence as stated by John Locke where a person “is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking”.¹⁰ Thought and awareness of the individual in the world is what matters not the acceptance by the community as found among the Igbo.

The notion of natural kinds in another vein entails objects belonging to a group of objects which have some theoretically important property, or properties, in common. Standard examples of natural kinds include biological species such as rabbits, oaks and whales, chemical elements and compounds such as oxygen, carbon and aluminum, and stuffs such as salt, wool and heat. An object’s membership of a given natural kind bears upon how that object will behave, the properties it can or cannot acquire, and

the types of interaction in which it can figure. “Natural kinds thereby provide a scheme of classification for both science and philosophy to operate upon. Scientists can use such a system to predict, explain and (perhaps) control the behavior of those objects.”¹¹ Knowledge of natural kinds can also provide a basis for inductive and counterfactual scientific reasoning: knowledge about how past members of a natural kind behaved may warrant beliefs about how present or future members of that kind will behave, as well as how hypothetical members of that kind would behave. There is, however, “a metaphysical question: what is a natural kind? Natural kinds are concretely distinguished from arbitrary groups of objects, such as what you had for breakfast.”¹²

Furthermore, we should explain the sense in which different members of a natural kind have a property in common. On one possible account, different members of a natural kind share a universal: they have a property which is literally identical between them. But on a rival account, different members of a kind have a property in common only in the sense that each member bears a certain similarity relation to every other member of the kind. In Aquinas’ world, natural kinds are marked by their essences, which are identified in terms of the characteristic tendencies of the members of the group marked out as that kind of being.¹³ Although Aquinas modifies important aspects of Aristotle’s metaphysics, he adopts Aristotle’s basic framework for understanding essences in the natural world. Aquinas accepts Aristotle’s hylemorphic account of objects; his account of motion, act, and potentiality; and, most importantly for present purposes, his fourfold account of categories.¹⁴ The Aristotelian hylemorphism is dualistic and dualism is not alien to the African-Igbo mind as reality is seen as dualistic-*ala mmadu na ala nmuo*. Okolo said that:

Self as an individual in the African thought, as in many idealistic systems, is a psychophysical being, an incarnate spirit, made up of two principal elements, namely, ‘body’ and ‘soul’, in familiar categories. Thus, in his thorough research of the concept of a person in Akan (Ghana) tradition, Gyekye is certain that ‘the Akans hold a dualistic conception of a person. A person is constituted by two principal substances, one spiritual (immaterial) and the other physical (material)’. Also, among the Igbos of Nigeria, belief in the two principal constituents of the human being, ‘body’ and ‘soul’, is well established in the people’s concept of death.¹⁵

As problematic as it may sound, the idea is held tenaciously by the African-Igbo to explain the concept of person, his lineage which includes paternal and maternal both living and dead without which the person is not qualified and seen to be a full member of the community.

In the Igbo concept of category of beings we have spirits (*ndi mmuo*), human beings (*ndi mmadu*) and things (*ihe*). In the category of spirits, you have the Chukwu (Supreme Being) divinities (mediators) which owe their existence to the Supreme Being and the ancestors follow. Human beings (*ndi mmadu*)

constitute the individuals that make up the members of the community who are recognized according to traceable genealogy of which a clone may not be qualified in the sense that it does not have a father or a mother but rather a product of the laboratories; its birth is asexual. In the category of things (*Ihe*), you have all the inanimate things which are usually seen as raw materials in the hand of both the spirits and human beings. Since the duality of existence in Igbo worldview rotates amongst the living and the living dead. There is no room for bi-conditional existence where two supposed individuals are seen as one in all ramifications. We can only have one Okeke in person and identity in the village at a time but not Okeke and his clone. As the Igbo saying goes, *Ebe ana ekwu okwu ndu ka ana ekwu kwa okwu onwu*, meaning that in the midst of life, there is death also. And the issue of African-Igbo notion of death and ancestral veneration will follow suit in our order of discussion.

AFRICAN-IGBO NOTION OF DEATH AND ANCESTRAL VENERATION

Death as a natural phenomenon is universal to anything that takes breaths of life. Every tribe and every color irrespective of status and position experience death either within or without. It is so real and close to us that people even while alive prepare for it, give instructions on what to do and not to do at the event of their death. It does not come only for the aged or the adult; it can take young and even the unborn. The reality and the density of death made even some powerful ancient Egyptian Pharaohs to prepare and make their burial places in pyramids so vast and adorable to contain them, their wives, children and slaves which will join them to the journey to the great beyond. So many archaeological excavations have shown credence to this and have authenticated the near general belief of almost every tribe about life after death except for the atomists). Epicurus and other ardent atomists:

[Strictly] denies that there is a spiritual, immaterial element in man. All reality is material and so man too is entirely material. As the things of the world are constituted by material atoms and an aggregate of atoms, so too man himself is constituted by atoms, that is, the specific nature of man consists in an aggregate of atoms of soul and an aggregate of atoms of body.¹⁶

If it is actually as the Atomists said, why were some powerful kings buried with their attendants even with their wives; If not to continue their reign in the world beyond and be attended to by their slaves. Death is a key event where the dead is mourned by loved ones and could be celebrated also depending the age and circumstances surrounding the dead by friends and foes alike.

In the ancient Greek world, to Plato man is not a substantial unity of two incomplete substances of body and soul; rather, body and soul have a merely accidental unity. Man is a soul that utilizes a body the way a skipper mans his ship. Body and soul are only accidentally joined and this union is an unfortunate one for the body is the tomb or prison of the soul and the soul languishes there hoping and waiting that one day it will be freed from bondage. This freedom eventually comes on the day of death, which to

Plato still is not the end of existence. To buttress the point Plato in the *Laws* teaches that at death “true and immortal being of each one of us which is called the soul goes on her way to other Gods, before them to give an account”.¹⁷ This may help to throw more light on the Judeo-Christian belief on retribution after death either to hell, heaven or the Roman Catholic purgatorial middle course.

Death in Hinduism is seen as liberation, not an end from the suffering of this illusory life but the process of rebirth which is marked by reincarnation. This frustrating cycle of existence will continue until the one in the cycle has finished dealing with the result of his past life (*karma*) before he finally joins with the Brahman. It was thought according to Karen Armstrong “that a man or a woman would be reborn after death into a new state that would be determined by the quality of their actions (*karma*) in their present life. Bad *karma* would mean that you would be reborn as a slave, an animal or a plant; good *karma* would ensure a better existence next time: you could be reborn as a king or even as a god.”¹⁸

The Igbo strongly believe that worldly death is not the end of life but a transition. It means that a person who has reached ‘maturity’ before death and who also lived a good life, had a good death and was given full burial rites will qualify to become an ancestor and reincarnate in a different form in a later life. Death according to Igbo is not a total annihilation or dissolution of all but the soul (*Mkpulu-obi*) subsists, thus Arinze writes:

When a person dies, his soul or spirit (*Mkpulu-obi*, *mmuo*) wanders till it is received into the blessed company of his forebears on condition that the relations on earth celebrate the full ceremonies. In some places this belief requires also that the person must have been a good man on earth or at least that a cleansing rite be performed over the corpse before burial.¹⁹

The cleansing rite to be performed over the corpse before burial varies from one place to another, in some areas, if a man with wife or wives as the case may be and children dies, a ram must be presented by his first son or his first daughter’s husband in the morning before his burial. The ram will be strangled to death as an indication to the pains and sufferings faced of the deceased while alive. It must be stated here clearly that the Africans are not by any means in support of animal cruelty or abuse. The strangulation is symbolic as it shows the vital force of the deceased. The ram will never be allowed to utter a cry but can only groan as mark of manhood and strength. In this process no woman is allowed in the scene. An egg will be placed on the chest of the deceased to placate him par venture he was aggrieved by any member of his family or his clan and the blood of a local cock positioned inside his eyes to purify his vision so that he can see clearly as he journeys to join his ancestors. This is the first symbol of veneration to the dead and would be ancestor; without which, the spirit of the dead will haunt the living. As this is being done, his immediate relatives are seen talking to the dead (*ibu ebubu*), eulogizing him

in the areas of his life which is worth emulating and also telling him to amend his areas of weaknesses, this is usually done after which the casket will be closed for interment.

The area, place or portion where an individual is buried signifies also whether the corpse is being respected or disrespected. In other words, marked tombs are symbol of veneration and are also seen as sacred place. People that were thrown inside the evil forest due to the type of disease they suffered before death or those that committed suicide and even those that were perceived to have died prematurely are not buried in a choice area not to talk about veneration, they are not even given any form of burial rite or proper burial rite and are not qualified to be ancestors therefore cannot reincarnate. Moreover, those that are buried within their compound especially in frontage facing the entrance door and the rising sun or in a choice place outside their compound “is frequently inspired by such things as ancestral veneration, almost standardly misdescribed as ‘ancestor-worship’²⁰ by Western scholars. In some instances, some people at certain time of the year are seen beside the marked tomb talking to the dead, asking for assistance or even crying. This is a clear indication that the Igbo belief that his ancestors still influence and watch over the compound and people living therein is true. According to Willie F. Page (ed.) in *Encyclopedia of African History and Culture*:

Ancestors are usually recognized individually rather than collectively. A family or clan typically honors their relative in group ceremonies, calling upon that individual to bless them with a good harvest or protect them from a village plague. The living usually communicate(s) with the deceased through prayer or sacrifice. While the deceased are believed to have the power to influence the living, they do not have unlimited powers and can only influence those who recognize them.²¹

These are possible because it is believed that the dead can only come back to the living through reincarnation either as a blessing or a curse depending on the relationship of the dead with the living. “Believers hope that ancestors who are properly honored will bring good fortune to their relatives on earth. On the other hand, some ancestors may become evil spirits who haunt the living, cursing them with disease or natural disaster. In this case, the family must provide the appropriate sacrifices to appease the evil spirit.”²² But in the case where the dead has a clone, his departure will not be seen as death in the first place. And since he has an already replacement here on earth, he is not qualified to become an ancestor so as to be venerated or to talk about being reincarnated. He is lost in his clone.

CONCLUSION

Humanity has always taken great interest in itself. The human faculty of introspection, the urge of an individual to discover more about his essence invariably leads to the inquiry about the human condition and the essence of the human kind as a whole. Such self-reflection is the basis of philosophy and is

present from the earliest historical records. The subject of the human cloning is one of the most discussed and most controversial in modern science and philosophy. But the possibility of human cloning existing and being recognized in African-Igbo communities has raised concerns about the physical, and psychological, identity of the resulting child. In more recent years, the New Natural Lawyers have developed an account of a specifically sexual morality around two claims: first, that marriage is one of the basic human goods, distinct from life or friendship; and second, that the human person is a rational animal, a living organism of the human species. Both claims are implicated in a further claim, that in the good of marriage, couples form a union of persons not just morally or spiritually, but also bodily, in the act of marital intercourse. Because sexual intercourse actualizes a biological function that can only be actualized by the couple together, the couple are, in marital intercourse, literally “one flesh, and this one flesh union is the physical realization of the basic good of marriage.”²³ Cloning came as a result of man’s curiosity and ingenuity. One will not doubt if it is possible to clone a human, the scientists can do that, though with a high degree of uncertainty. That notwithstanding, we should consider our areas of operations, because the issue of cloning amounts to man playing God and as well arrogating himself over and above his creator. It is on this one premise that the modern natural law theorists in line with the Igbo condemn human cloning. On another premise, human cloning destroys the value of death which is one of the qualifications for one to become an ancestor which requires veneration.

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