

REINCARNATION IN IGBO COSMOLOGY: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

Chinedu Evaristus Chinweze¹ & Prof. Gladys Ifeoma Udechukwu²

Abstract

Various researchers in Igboland have viewed reincarnation from different approaches, ranging from philosophical and psychological to theological perspectives, at different times. In this study, reincarnation in Igbo cosmology is understood as part of human personality, without which an Igbo man ceases to be complete in the real sense of the word. It is the belief in the coming back of a dead forefather, grandfather, or relative, with his personality found in a newborn child in the family. The objective of this study is to examine Reincarnation in Igbo Cosmology – A Critical Review of the Past and Present. This study collected secondary data through a review of literature from journal articles, textbooks, and internet sources. The study employed content analysis to analyze the data. The study found out that reincarnation is a common belief system among the Igbo people, wherein a dead ancestor is believed to return to their family in the form of a newborn child. It observed that the association of the newborn with a dead ancestor has specific indicators, which may be regarded as evidential realities. These indicators remain with the newborn throughout their adult life and indeed the whole lifespan. The study concluded that in the Igbo cosmology of reincarnation, Igbo people believe that nothing prevents a child from inheriting the qualities, physical marks, or signs of their ancestors or great-grandparents. Thus, this paper recommended that, despite the current views on reincarnation, there is a need to protect and preserve the Igbo traditional belief system. Reincarnation should be considered significant, as it neither diminishes the status of the dead in the Igbo spiritual world nor destroys the status of a newborn child, who should possess complete freedom and possibilities of attaining fulfillment.

Keywords: Reincarnation, Igbo, cosmology.

INTRODUCTION

Igbo cosmology, a system of beliefs that governs the worldview of the Igbo people, is centered around an intricate understanding of life, existence, and the divine. At its core, it encompasses the Igbo perception of the cosmos, the relationship between humanity, the ancestors, and the divine, particularly through the concepts of ancestral spirits and Chi (God) (Abanuka, 1994). This cosmological framework is neither abstract nor purely philosophical but is rather practical, grounded in concrete experiences, and inductive reasoning. The Igbo people engage with their beliefs experientially, developing an understanding of life that is rooted in the tangible and the visible (Eze & Chinelo, 2020). One of the central tenets of Igbo cosmology is the belief in reincarnation.

Reincarnation, in the Igbo worldview, serves as a vital mechanism for linking the visible and invisible realms of existence. It is not merely the process through which the spirit of the deceased returns to the physical world, but also a reflection of the Igbo understanding of justice, divine reward, and the continuity of life. In this context, reincarnation is seen as a divine cycle, whereby the soul of a departed ancestor is reborn into a new body, carrying forward the traits, virtues, and sometimes the challenges of the previous life (Obilor, 1994; Onyewuenyi, 1989). The Igbo view of reincarnation is intricately connected to the concept of Chi, the personal god or destiny that guides an individual's life. Each person's Chi, which is believed to be a manifestation of God, shapes their destiny and is responsible for their life's course. When a person is conceived, their spirit goes before Chukwu (the supreme God) to receive its Chi and

Eke, the spirit of the reincarnating ancestor. This divine appointment determines not only their destiny but also their inherent qualities, which can be traced to their ancestors. The Igbo people thus view reincarnation as an expression of the divine will, where the spirit of an ancestor is reborn in a descendant to carry out unfinished tasks, continue family legacies, or fulfill a divine purpose (Ezenweke, 2012; Eze & Chinelo, 2020).

Reincarnation in Igbo culture is often observed within family structures, with strong emphasis placed on inherited traits—both physical and behavioral—that are passed down from ancestors to descendants. The belief is that children who resemble certain ancestors, either in character, physical features, or mannerisms, are the reincarnations of those ancestors (Isidienu, 2015). In fact, the family is considered the primary social unit in which reincarnation takes place. When there is doubt about the identity of a reincarnated person, diviners (dibia) are consulted to confirm the reincarnation, further cementing the idea that reincarnation is not only a spiritual phenomenon but also a deeply social one (Mbachi, 2019).

This cyclical view of life and death in Igbo cosmology provides a system of continuity and justice. The Igbo believe that justice, in its highest form, is divinely ordained by God. It is not a human construct but a reflection of divine order. The Igbo say that “all other beings are just according to the degree of their proximity to God,” suggesting that justice is inherently tied to divine will (Metuh, 1985). From this perspective, reincarnation is seen as a form of divine justice, where the soul is reborn not merely for the sake of continuity but to fulfill a moral purpose. However, the interpretation and practice of reincarnation in Igbo cosmology have undergone significant shifts, particularly in the context of modernity and the influence of Christianity. Traditional beliefs, including reincarnation, have been challenged by Christian teachings, which assert that after death comes judgment, with no possibility of returning to life on earth (Mbiti, 1969). Christian doctrine rejects the idea of reincarnation, framing death as a final transition, after which souls either ascend to heaven or are condemned to hell. Consequently, the contemporary understanding of reincarnation in Igbo society has been influenced by a blend of traditional beliefs and Christian theology, leading to a tension between the past and present views on life after death (Eneh, 1987).

In recent years, scholars have debated the authenticity and validity of reincarnation within the context of modern thought and scientific inquiry. While some defend reincarnation as an integral part of Igbo spirituality, others argue that it cannot be substantiated by empirical evidence and should be discarded as untenable (Hales, 2001a). In this regard, the study of reincarnation in Igbo cosmology is not only a spiritual or cultural inquiry but also a philosophical and academic one, as it raises fundamental questions about the nature of existence, the afterlife, and the interplay between tradition and modernity (Flew, 1976).

Despite these challenges, it is crucial to recognize that reincarnation, as understood by the Igbo, does not diminish the status of the deceased. Rather, it affirms their continued relevance in the community, with their wisdom, virtues, and moral attributes being passed down through generations. The rebirth of an ancestor's spirit is seen as a form of honor and recognition of their lasting impact on the family and society (Obilor, 1994). Thus, the Igbo cosmology of reincarnation is not merely about the cycle of life and death but also about the transmission of values, moral virtues, and ancestral wisdom (Umeodinka, 2015).

The present study seeks to critically review the concept of reincarnation in Igbo cosmology, focusing on both the past and present. By exploring the historical and contemporary perspectives on reincarnation, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Igbo view the afterlife, the soul's journey, and the relationship between the living and the ancestors. Furthermore, it seeks to examine the implications of this belief system in the face of modernity, religious changes, and the ongoing debates surrounding the validity and relevance of reincarnation in Igbo society today (Ayer, 1956; Asouzu, 2004).

Igbo World View of Cosmology

Cosmology is defined as a branch of physics and metaphysics that deals with the nature of the universe. It involves the study and understanding of the reasons for the universe's existence, encompassing scientific, religious, or philosophical aspects. According to Wayback Machine (2015), cosmology explores the observable universe's origin, large-scale structures, dynamics, and ultimate fate, including the scientific laws governing these phenomena. This discipline is investigated by scientists such as astronomers, physicists, and philosophers, including metaphysicians and philosophers of space, time, and physics.

Igbo Cosmology refers to the worldview of the Igbo people, encompassing both abstract and metaphysical perspectives. It describes how the Igbo perceive and explain their world and the changes in their environment. Metuh (1985) noted that the Igbo recognize only one world inhabited by both visible and invisible beings. Anozia (1968) asserted that the Igbo world, whether visible or invisible, is "real in every sense of the word." Obilor (1994) expanded this understanding by describing the Igbo world as a sacred space where time, space, objects, and persons are interconnected through dynamic interactions between the human community and its spiritual originators.

The Igbo worldview extends to commerce, with each day of the week dedicated to a specific spirit: Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo, repeating in the same order. The Igbo believe in a hierarchical three-step structure of the afterlife: the land of Chukwu (God), the land of non-human spirits like Ana or Ala, and the land of human spirits, particularly ancestors. Obilor (1994) emphasized the importance of three interconnected relationships in Igbo thought—cosmic, social, and religious. These relationships maintain equilibrium in the spiritual and human worlds, with humans bearing responsibility for any disharmony. Disruptions in these relationships, such as natural disasters, epidemics, or unnatural deaths, are attributed to human transgressions like breaking taboos (*nsọ*), committing abominations (*aru*), or sins like sorcery, homicide, suicide, incest, false oaths, and theft.

The Igbo belief in reincarnation aligns with their broader cosmological views. Ekwunife (1999) observed that while reincarnation is common across African societies, the Igbo interpretation differs significantly. The English term "reincarnation" does not fully capture the Igbo experience, which is better expressed in their native language as "*ilọ ụwa*" or "*inyọ ụwa*". Ekwunife (1999) defined this as a process where certain deceased individuals in the spiritual world can mystically but genuinely transfer their personality traits to a newborn without destroying the child's unique identity. This mystical influence, referred to as "*igba agụ nwa*" (divining for a child's companion), is identified through traditional rituals performed by *dibia afa* (Igbo diviners).

For the Igbo, death is not an annihilation but a transition into the community of the living dead. It is a passage to another existence, described as "ina ụlọ" (returning home) or "ila ala mmụọ" (returning to the land of spirits). The dead coexist with the living and are considered those who have completed their earthly work. The just and the wicked do not share the same realm in the afterlife. While the just join the community of ancestors, the wicked are believed to pass into oblivion or reside at the boundary between the living and the dead ("asọba taa ụwa na-agbata mmụọ", as described by Isidienu, 2015).

The Igbo belief in the hereafter underpins their understanding of reincarnation. Obilor (1994) suggested that decisions about who will reincarnate and their qualities are made in the afterlife by the community of ancestors in accordance with Chukwu, who sends the person to earth through birth. The ancestors, part of Chukwu's community, are believed to help the living through their proximity to the divine. The Igbo view reincarnation as a testament to Chukwu's power, reflecting blessings for families through the return of noble or virtuous souls.

For a person to be admitted into the ancestral community, they must have lived a righteous life, achieved old age, founded lineages, and received proper burial rites. These conditions often exclude the poor, invalids, and those who die young. The living strive to win the favor of the ancestors by living morally upright lives, ensuring a reward of good rest among the ancestors. This belief system underscores the interconnectedness of the living, the dead, and the divine in Igbo cosmology.

Conceptual Review of Re-incarnation

Reincarnation is the belief in the rebirth of a person's soul after death. Sarah Dowdey (2017) defined reincarnation as a continuous succession of birth, death, and rebirth, or transmigration, also known as metempsychosis. In religion and philosophy, reincarnation is described as the rebirth of an individual's essence—whether consciousness, mind, soul, or another entity—across one or more successive existences. Nzewi (2001) explained reincarnation as a free-roaming spirit finding its way into the womb of a woman and intruding into a family. Similarly, Eneh (1987) stated that reincarnation refers to any child believed to return repeatedly, only to die again. Onyekwere and Uche (2006) described reincarnation as a phenomenon involving "born-to-die" children who repeatedly enter pregnant women's wombs, are born, and die shortly thereafter.

Amaechi (2013) regarded reincarnation as a belief system that cuts across many religions, including Eastern traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism. Henrik Hellwig (2012) noted that renowned philosophers such as Plato, Hume, and Schopenhauer also discussed reincarnation. Depending on tradition, reincarnated existences may manifest as human, animal, spiritual, or even vegetable forms. While reincarnation is primarily associated with South Asian and East Asian traditions, it also appears in the religious and philosophical thought of ancient Middle Eastern religions, Greek Orphic mysteries, Manichaeism, gnosticism, and modern religious movements like theosophy (Reincarnation Religious Belief, 2017). The idea revolves around the soul returning to the world in a newborn baby, sometimes linked to the law of karma.

Reincarnated children are often perceived as malicious spirits. Onyekwere and Uche (2013) suggested that reincarnated children might repeatedly "visit" a family, causing significant frustration. Eneh (1987) described reincarnation as a wicked spirit taking the form of a beautiful

child. In this view, such children are outwardly appealing but bring pain and disruption to their mothers and families, especially in the extended Igbo family system, which traditionally shares both benefits and burdens. Historically, reincarnated children often died young, typically within the first three years of life, though some lived longer (Eneh, 1987).

The death of a reincarnated child does not elicit grief from the family. Instead, relatives are concerned with how to stop the recurring phenomenon, often treating the child's corpse with disdain (Eneh, 1987). Reincarnated children who survive infancy are believed to grow up to be attractive yet rebellious. Emesi and Akwaeke (2018) described them as "special children" with heightened spiritual endowments. These children may also display prodigious intellectual abilities, marked by natural precocity and insight into human conditions. Chukwudera (2021) expanded on these traits, highlighting that reincarnated individuals often exhibit strange personalities and extraordinary abilities, such as superior intellect.

In terms of social behavior, reincarnated children intersperse sociability with exclusivity, making them difficult to characterize (Chukwudera, 2021). Iwalaiye and Temi (2021) noted that such children are often troublesome and short-tempered, further complicating societal expectations of their behavior. Despite their challenges, reincarnation remains a deeply rooted belief in many cultures, reflecting diverse interpretations across traditions and philosophies.

In Igbo cosmology, the spiritual anatomy of *mmadu* (man) is neither a dichotomy of body and soul nor a trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit. Instead, *mmadu* represents a unity of personality. For example, the Igbo believe that Okeke reincarnates as a complete person (Okeke *no uwa*) and not as an aspect, part, or "mystical influence" of Okeke. The author disagrees with Ekwunife's notion of "mystical influence," arguing that it cannot be reconciled with the Igbo concept of human personality. The Igbo often distinguish between "*ndi mmadu*" (humans) and "*ndi mmuo*" (spirits), both of which are considered persons, where "*ndi*" denotes persons. Therefore, Ekwunife's interpretation of reincarnation as "mystical influence" is viewed as a distortion of the Igbo understanding of man and personal identity.

Onyewuenyi (1989) described reincarnation as the "perpetuation of ancestors through reproduction." He further defined reincarnation as a life-giving will, vital influence, or secretion of vital force. Onyewuenyi saw ancestors as dynamic forces capable of influencing and enabling multiple births within their clan without diminishing their own personality. He compared an ancestor's vital force to the sun, which is not depleted by the number or extent of its rays. Onyewuenyi (1989) emphasized that "just as the sun is the causal agent of heat, so is an ancestor a causal agent for his descendants, who are below him in the ontological hierarchy." He acknowledged that the biological conception of a child results from the combined actions of God and the parents, while the influence of an ancestor, referred to as reincarnation, occurs later. According to Onyewuenyi, it is the human being—who already possesses life in the womb through divine influence—who comes under the vital ontological influence of a predestined ancestor or spirit. However, the author questions whether Onyewuenyi's view accurately represents the Igbo concept of reincarnation. Onyewuenyi's idea of vital force, life-giving will, or secretion of vital power does not fully capture the Igbo understanding of human personality and personal identity. The author argues that Onyewuenyi confuses being (a living creature) with force (a physical action), which exist on different planes of life. While the analogy of the sun's rays being present in its heat and brightness is valid, the rays themselves—individually or collectively—are not the sun. The author maintains that any attempt to view an aspect of man as

representative of the whole distorts the Igbo holistic perspective of man. Thus, Onyewuenyi's interpretation of reincarnation, like Ekwunife's, falls short of providing a true representation of the Igbo understanding of reincarnation.

Comparative Analysis of Igbo Cosmology of Reincarnation in the Time Past and Present

Reincarnation in Igbo culture is a phenomenon where an identifiable personality from the Igbo spiritual world is believed to mysteriously but tangibly transmit their personality traits onto a newborn person. This process does not destroy the unique personality of the new individual nor substitute the reincarnated spirit in their place. Instead, the reincarnated person retains their complete personal identity in the Igbo spiritual world of the dead. By virtue of the power they command as a spirit, they can impress their former traits onto the newborn in a human manner.

The ritual for identifying a reincarnated individual is known in many Igbo communities as "igba agu" (divining for the reincarnated person). Only traditional Igbo diviners (dibia afa) have the authority to declare the name of the reincarnated person through igba afa (divination). Ekwealor (2013) described igba afa as a means of uncovering hidden truths that are beyond the reach of ordinary individuals. Similarly, Ogbuagu, Udemmadu, and Anedo (2012) noted that igba afa provides access to secrets that cannot be uncovered by human efforts alone. Ubesie (2003) viewed it as a method of uncovering secrets between the living and the dead or among living individuals. Additionally, Umeodinka (2015) described igba afa as a means by which the Igbo people illuminate hidden realities, bringing them from obscurity into the light of knowledge.

Reincarnation: A Continuation of Life: The Igbo firmly anchor their belief in reincarnation on experience, often citing the adage that "experience is the best teacher." Reincarnation is a mystical phenomenon in which the dead return to life within their family. This means that the deceased is reborn in the form of a newborn child within the family where they were well-known. It is believed that the dead ancestor is given a second chance to live another cycle of existence within their lineage.

There are observable signs, marks, and other indicators that help identify which deceased family member has reincarnated. These are often corroborated by the diviner (dibia afa). When a child is born, during the igu aha (naming ceremony), the okpala (family head), the father, or both consult the diviner to identify the reincarnated ancestor, as well as their name and nsọ (prohibitions). The child is then given the name of the reincarnated ancestor. However, if no reincarnation is confirmed, the patriarchal grandfather or the eldest man present has the privilege of naming the child. The divination rite that precedes the naming ceremony serves to establish the child's identity, while the naming ceremony formally incorporates them into the community.

Evidence of Reincarnation: The association of the newborn with a deceased ancestor often has observable evidence, which continues into adulthood and throughout the individual's life. For instance, there may be physical resemblances between the newborn and the deceased ancestor believed to have reincarnated in the child (Iroegbu, 1994). Asouzu (2004) noted that individuals returning to life show concrete signs of their former selves, such as body marks, discernible character and personality traits, and even the ability to recall events from a previous life. In Igbo belief, reincarnation is not merely a philosophical or spiritual idea but a lived reality. It is deeply intertwined with family identity, cultural practices, and the community's understanding of life, death, and continuity.

Reasons Igbo Belief on Reincarnation in the Time Past

In Igbo belief, reincarnation is understood as Ilouwa, a term combining "ilo" (returning after a journey) and "uwa" (existence or being). Thus, Ilouwa refers to "coming back into

existence." It signifies a metaphysical repossession of being, manifesting physically after a person attains the status of existence in the invisible spiritual world following physical death.

When a child is born, there is often excitement and curiosity to determine which ancestor has returned in the newborn. This curiosity reflects the deeply ingrained belief in reincarnation, which is embraced for several reasons:

1. Fulfillment of a Desire for Unceasing Existence: Reincarnation aligns with the Igbo people's deep longing for life and the desire for continued communion with deceased family members. Names from earlier Igbo traditions often reflect this reality, emphasizing continuity with the dead. Examples include: Nnenna (father's mother reincarnated), Nnanna (grandfather incarnate), Nnem (my mother, referring to a deceased grandmother). These names imply that the ancestor has returned to life in the newborn to remind the family of their enduring presence. Iroegbu (1996) emphasizes that reincarnation fulfills the need to sustain familial bonds and keep the deceased actively present within the community.

2. Reincarnation as a Reward for Good Living: The Igbo believe that only those who lived virtuous lives reincarnate within their families. Reincarnation serves not only to restore cherished familial ties but also to replicate the good deeds for which the ancestors were known. Abanuka (1994) highlights the significance of ancestors as immortalized individuals who have earned their status through extraordinary deeds, serving as moral role models and imperishable examples of human conduct. Through reincarnation, the living are reminded to cultivate values that ensure a legacy worthy of ancestorhood. This belief underscores the link between moral living and the perpetuation of communal harmony.

3. Reincarnation as a Source of Motivation: Reincarnation provides a framework for incentivizing good behavior. By emulating virtuous ancestors, individuals aspire to achieve immortality and secure a place in the spiritual world of the ancestors. Asouzu (2004) describes reincarnation as the African philosopher's quest for immortality. Life is considered so sacred and valuable that the Igbo strive to grasp it eternally. This longing for immortality is intertwined with the Igbo conceptualization of an eternal transcendental space, where the living and the dead coexist harmoniously. However, Asouzu presents a controversial perspective, suggesting that reincarnation may also occur punitively. In this view, a person could reincarnate as a lower creature due to failure to adhere to moral or contractual obligations with the totality of existence. While this aligns with the Igbo philosophy of justice, it departs from the traditional understanding of reincarnation as a strictly human phenomenon.

4. Reincarnation as a Theological and Philosophical Proof: For Edeh (1999), reincarnation serves as academic proof of the existence of the spiritual world (ani-muo) and as a theological foundation for the Igbo worldview. The Igbo envision a dual existence comprising:

The physical, visible world of humans (anị mmadu)

The spiritual, invisible world of spirits and ancestors (ani-muo)

These two worlds interact, with beings transitioning between them to continue their existence. Reincarnation, as a bridge between these realms, is seen as proof of the invisible world's reality and its profound connection to the physical world.

5. Broader Implications of Reincarnation in Igbo Society: Reincarnation is central to Igbo culture, influencing every facet of existence:

Fulfillment of Relationships: It ensures the continuity of familial bonds and relationships across generations.

Immortality for the Virtuous: Only deserving individuals who lived morally upright lives achieve ancestorhood and reincarnation.

Moral Values: It encourages the cultivation of ethical behavior, contributing to social harmony.

Justice: Reincarnation serves as a reward for good living and a deterrent for immoral conduct.

Social Behavior Modification: By linking reincarnation to moral accountability, it reinforces societal norms and expectations.

Philosophical Discourse: Reincarnation bridges theological and philosophical discussions, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds.

The Dual Nature of Reincarnation (Ilouwa vs. Punitive Reincarnation)

Reincarnation in Igbo cosmology manifests in two forms:

Ilouwa (Positive Reincarnation): This represents the desired form of reincarnation, where the ancestor returns to continue their legacy and maintain familial bonds.

Punitive Reincarnation: In this negative form, an individual who lived immorally may be reincarnated in a way that reflects their failures, such as a vicious cycle of sorrow or as a non-human being. This aligns with the Igbo philosophy of justice and accountability.

Despite its complexity, reincarnation serves as a unifying concept that encapsulates the Igbo quest for immortality, justice, and moral living. It provides a framework for understanding life's purpose, the relationship between the living and the dead, and the enduring interconnectedness of existence. Because this paper cannot do justice to the two without exceeding the required volume, the focus meanwhile will be solely on ilouwa.

Igbo Reincarnation in the Present Time

The clarification of reincarnation in modern Igbo cosmology requires a thematic and reflective understanding that addresses both what reincarnation is and what it is not. Over time, issues unrelated to the core concept have been incorporated into its historical development, often in an attempt to explain, deepen, or embellish its conceptual expansion. References to these extraneous inclusions have been made inconsistently, creating a need for a systematic, coherent, and consistent analysis. To accurately understand reincarnation, it is necessary to remove these encrustations, allowing the phenomenon to assert itself clearly. Reincarnation is not only a philosophical issue but also intersects with theology and mysticism, reflecting its multifaceted relevance.

Reincarnation in Oriental Transcendentalism: In oriental transcendentalism, reincarnation holds a prominent place, serving as a determining and intervening factor in resolving ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas include the conflicts between: Deeds and misdeeds, Right and wrong, Good and evil. Reincarnation addresses how these conflicts influence human life and their implications for the afterlife. Traces of this conception are also present in non-oriental cultures, showing its universal significance.

Philosophical Dimensions: Mind-Body and Soul-Body Interactions: Philosophical discussions about reincarnation often grapple with the mind-body interaction—the relationship between the body and the mind and how they coordinate to enable human activity. When reformulated, this becomes the soul-body interaction, which is at the heart of reincarnation's philosophical challenge.

Can the soul-body relationship be fundamentally grasped in its ontological and materialist aspects? This question is central to understanding reincarnation.

In philosophical psychology, the classical Christian view posits that the soul and body are created simultaneously. This perspective helps uphold the principle of identity by rejecting the

notion of creating multiple identities from the unique soul-body formation that occurs at a specific point in time. This formation respects the laws of thought and the principle of identity.

Scientific Contributions to Understanding Reincarnation: Science also provides insights into reincarnation. For example: Genetics explains the transmission of hereditary characteristics from parents to offspring. This process validates the idea that a newborn inherits traits from their ancestors, which may develop further over time. Developmental processes make these inherited traits more pronounced, aligning the features of the newborn with those of a known ancestor. This creates a "parametric essentialization," where the ancestor's presence is perceived in the reincarnated person.

Darwinism and the Concept of Ancestorhood: Darwinism, despite its inherent theoretical challenges, contributes to the understanding of ancestorhood. Darwin's theory of evolution emphasizes competition, where only the fittest survive. This idea resonates with Igbo cosmology, where ancestorhood is seen as an existential-generational competition that reflects the quality of human life. Ancestorhood represents those who have outperformed others in their generation, embodying the community's ideal for authentic existence. These ancestors serve as: Models of excellence for present and future generations, incentives for cultivating a culture of quality and value-laden human existence.

The Role of Ancestors in Reincarnation: Ancestorhood in Igbo cosmology elevates the standard of human life. Ancestors are seen as individuals who have excelled in life and left behind a legacy of moral and existential significance. They set the bar high for future generations, challenging them to strive for authentic living and contribute to the community's cultural and ethical ideals.

This underscores the deeper implications of reincarnation:

As a philosophical concept, it explores the relationships between soul, body, and identity.

As a cultural framework, it reinforces moral accountability and community values.

As a scientific phenomenon, it finds validation in genetics and development.

By integrating these perspectives, reincarnation emerges as a multidimensional concept that bridges philosophy, theology, science, and mysticism while maintaining its core significance in Igbo cosmology.

Reasons for Igbo Present Disbelief System of Reincarnation

Christians themselves consider the notion of reincarnation as both unrealistic and contradictory to the Christian faith. Their argument is based on the scripture, "It is appointed unto man to die once, and thereafter comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Furthermore, it is argued that after judgment, souls found to have sinned would be condemned to death, while innocent souls would continue their spiritual existence but not return to Earth for another cycle of life. This strand of belief seems to foreclose the idea of reincarnation in the classical sense.

Flew (1976) observed that the evidence presented for reincarnation is a non-repeatable counter-instance that cannot be tested under scientifically controlled conditions. Since claims of reincarnation cannot be validated through laboratory experiments, the best we can do is dismiss reincarnation as untenable. For Ayer (1956), the primary criterion for accepting an alleged reincarnation as true is the possession, by the allegedly reincarnated person, of verified memories of the deceased person—memories that should include facts not available through public knowledge.

Parfit (1984) also positions that we should dismiss the idea of reincarnation due to the lack of evidence required to justify belief in it. His stance is based on the inability of the

reincarnation hypothesis to provide a plausible account of the mind. Onyewuenyi (1996) developed a vital force theory of reincarnation to demonstrate that the Igbo people do not truly believe in reincarnation, even though they think they do. According to this theory, the term reincarnation is primarily a language of accommodation imposed on Africans by Western scholars and anthropologists.

According to the vital force theory, beings are essentially forces, made up of visible and invisible aspects. The invisible aspect of a being is what makes that being what it is. Onyewuenyi calls this invisible aspect the "inner nature" or "force" of a being. The visible and invisible aspects of humans do not imply a dichotomy between body and soul, as is seen in Western ontology. The implication is that when a person dies, their bodily energy vanishes, but their vital force persists and becomes stronger ontologically (Onyewuenyi, 1996).

Vital forces are ontologically graded such that the vital force of the dead occupies a higher ontological hierarchy than that of the living. The dead ancestors, with their enhanced vital force and superiority of intelligence over the living, are able to replicate or perpetuate themselves in the living members of their family. Onyewuenyi suggests that this act of ancestors perpetuating themselves through reproduction has been mistakenly and regrettably called reincarnation. He likened this idea of ancestors' vital force and their perpetuation through reproduction to the paradox of the sun and its rays. In this paradox, the sun is seen as an entity that has rays extending to all corners of the Earth. The sun heats and brightens through its rays, yet the rays, singly or collectively, are not the sun itself in the same way that the vital force of an ancestor can be present in one or several of the living members of his clan through his vital influence, without being diminished or truncated (Onyewuenyi, 1996). He explained that, just as the sun is the causal agent of heat, an ancestor is the causal agent for his descendants, who are below him in the ontological hierarchy.

Hales (2001a, 2001b) rejected the theory of reincarnation on the grounds that experiments should not be accepted unless confirmed by a theory. He argued that the basic problem with reincarnation as a theory of the mind is not the lack of evidence in support of its claims, but that, even in the face of its claims, it falls short of being a well-developed and systematic theory. The implication of this deficiency, he says, is that the epistemic warrant of materialist theories of the mind outweighs the acceptance of reincarnation theory (Hales, 2001b). Hales implied that any theory about a phenomenon should be able to predict the data that would confirm it. The reincarnation theory fails in this regard because it claims that reincarnation is true without explaining why, how, or what the causal factors are. In other words, for Hales, there would be no difficulty in accepting the reincarnation hypothesis if it were empirically testable, falsifiable, and subject to confirming evidence (Hales, 2001a).

The central idea behind reincarnation belief is that a dead person is brought back to life. In this view, the expectation is that the reincarnated person should bear both inward and outward resemblance to the deceased person. However, as Preuss (1989) rightly observes, in most cases, the reincarnated person and the original person are not the same in terms of abilities, emotions, intelligence, socio-economic status, talents, character, dispositions, ideologies, or spirituality. The appearance of birthmarks on the body of a newborn, and often at the exact location where the ancestor had them, is one of the strongest arguments for reincarnation. However, this does not seem to be a good defense when considering the genetic confirmations and social theories of resemblance among relations.

Recommendation

Based on the findings made, this paper recommends that despite the present view of reincarnation, there is a need to protect and preserve the Igbo traditional belief system. Reincarnation should be considered as such, given that it neither diminishes the status of the dead in the Igbo spiritual world nor destroys the status of a newborn child, who should possess complete freedom and the possibility of achieving fulfillment.

Conclusion

This paper critically examined reincarnation within Igbo cosmology, analyzing both traditional and contemporary perspectives. Igbo cosmology is a comprehensive worldview that centers on the relationship between the visible and invisible realms, particularly through ancestral spirits and Chi (God). The Igbo understanding of life, death, and existence is grounded in practical, inductive beliefs, rather than abstract or deductive reasoning. Central to this worldview is the belief that God is the Creator and the ultimate source of justice, with various names—such as Chukwu (the great God) and Chineke (the Creator)—reflecting His divine nature. For the Igbo, justice, rooted in God, is key to the meaningful cycle of reincarnation, where individuals carry forward the virtues and legacies of their ancestors.

Reincarnation in Igbo cosmology is intricately tied to Chi, the personal god assigned to each individual at conception, who governs a person's destiny. The Eke, or spirit of a reincarnating ancestor, imbues the individual with inherited traits. This belief allows for the recognition of reincarnation within family circles, as diviners (*dịbịa afa*) help confirm the reincarnated soul. The Igbo hold that a child inherits not only physical traits but also the virtues or vices of their ancestors, reflected in the phrase *madụ biara uwa* (great-grandchildren resemble their parents or grandparents).

Not minding the foregoing, perceptions of reincarnation in contemporary Igbo society have shifted, influenced by the rise of Christianity and the demand for empirical validation. Christian theology, with its rejection of reincarnation in favor of a single afterlife, contradicts the cyclical nature of reincarnation in Igbo thought. Scholars and theologians argue that reincarnation lacks empirical evidence, which challenges its validity in modern discourse. As a result, the belief in reincarnation is increasingly seen as mythical or superstitious, distancing contemporary views from traditional Igbo spirituality.

In conclusion, this study highlights the disconnect between traditional Igbo beliefs in reincarnation and modern views shaped by scientific and Christian perspectives. While reincarnation remains a core belief for many, its understanding has evolved, reflecting broader shifts in societal, religious, and philosophical values. As the Igbo navigate these changes, their ancestral beliefs continue to coexist with external influences that shape their views on life, death, and the afterlife.

Chinedu Evaristus Chinweze¹

Prof. Gladys Ifeoma Udechukwu²

^{1,2}Department of Igbo, African & Communication Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

¹cc.chinweze@unizik.edu.ng

²gi.udechukwu@unizik.edu.ng

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