

**THE ASTROPHYSICAL COSMOLOGY OF DEATH IN AFRICAN
ABORIGINAL MYTHOLOGY: THE CHURCH AND IGBO RELIGIOUS VIEWS
AT CROSSROADS**

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Abstract

The Astrophysical cosmology of death in African Aboriginal Mythology is that the dead does not gravitate to his/her destination (spirit world of relations) until his/her second burial rites are performed. The process of growth and development within ATR is perceived as an ongoing manifestation of life, which is rooted in African eschatology. This indicates that ATR incorporates the belief that human existence persists beyond physical death as one of its fundamental principles. An examination of the African religious belief system shows mortality does not signify the cessation of existence nor does it terminate the human experience. This symbolic and often metaphorical concept has formed an intersection of paths between the Christian and African traditional adherents. However, the exceptions of giving normal burial rites to deceased persons in Igbo worldview are governed chiefly by considerations of birth, rank and cause of death. Death resulting from obnoxious and strange diseases is disposed off quickly at Ajo-Ofia (evil forest) without any traditional burial rites. This traditional measure or ritual event in Igbo cosmology is at metaphysical crossroads with the Christian perception of death which is the separation from God and immortality of the soul. However, blending this varying cosmology of death between the church and Igbo/African traditional system has formed the thrust of this study. As qualitative research, the researchers adopted the primary and secondary sources of data collection and culture area approach for data analysis. The researchers, however, recommends an integration of Igbo traditional and Christian religious beliefs in analyzing the astrophysical cosmology of death through mutual dialogue of synthesis and hybridization of the good elements of each of the culture rather than using extreme acts of mutual extinction.

Keywords: Astrophysical, Cosmology, Death, Mythology, Crossroads

Introduction

Death in both Christian and Igbo traditional belief is regarded simply as the passing away of a human being from worldly existence to the spirit world. However, the general belief in Igbo cosmology is that the dead does not gravitate to his/her destination (spirit world of relations) until his/her second burial rites are performed. This is informed by the extravagant burial rites thrown by the close and dear relations of the deceased person. This position is affirmed by Nwogu (2018) who reported that Igbo People honour her dead relatives by of burial and second burial (*ikwa ozu*) rites. These are of prime importance in the lives of the Igbo people and the honour given to a titled-man is at variance with that of a non-titled man in both burial and second burial rites. Speaking about the pain and uncertainty of death, Manning (2019) argues that the concept of the end of life evokes fear because of its inherent novelty, as individuals are confronted with an unfamiliar experience and the uncertainty surrounding the destination of their existence. When an individual is afflicted with an illness, the process of dying may involve the experience of physical pain and impairment. Under optimal conditions, individuals may encounter situations where they are unable to participate in fundamental physical tasks that were previously assumed to be effortless, or confront a decline in cognitive abilities (p. 1).

Several scholars from different fields of study have defined death from their perspectives. Tomasini (2017) argues that 'Biological death can be understood as: a final event, an absolute state (being dead), and part of the dying process'. Arnet (1973) sees death as the cessation of biological functions resulting in the permanent cessation of life. Physical death refers to the cessation of life and the separation of the corporeal and spiritual components. This refers to the disintegration of the human biotic community (pp. 221-222). Vine (1948) characterizes death as the termination of the biotic entity known as 'man', resulting in the disintegration of its constituent parts. The constituents of human existence can be broadly categorized into three main components: the body, *centrum vitae* and spirit. The body, which is a composite of hylic units, is dependent on the presence of *centrum vitae* and spirit for its sustenance. In the absence of these vital components, the body undergoes a gradual or rapid breakdown into various hylic units, which subsequently become part of the natural cycle of decay and renewal. The spirit, on the other hand, is afforded the opportunity to gain experience and exercise its volition within this continuum. Upon completion of this stage, the spirit progresses to the next phase of its existence (Vine, 1948).

Moreover, the African perspective on death posits that it represents the separation of the soul from the physical body. Abbah (2010) asserts that among Africans, there exists a belief that the soul and body are inseparable while the body is still alive. According to

him, the occurrence of separation is exclusively posthumous. The deduction made here is that apart from the corporeal aspect of an individual, the loss of a vital faculty or endowment required for sustenance results in the complete loss of the individual as a composite of both material and immaterial components, which cannot be restored to their original state. Cyprian (2012) argues that African traditional religious belief holds the perspective that the origin and ultimate fate of human beings are interconnected. According to Cyprian (2012), the commencement represents a derivative of antecedent being, while the termination denotes the inception of a distinct domain of existence.

From whatever perspective one approaches it, death is a mysterious reality that is certain in human existence, though humans battle with its unpredictability and inevitability. This unpredictability and inevitability of death fascinate and frighten the broad range of humanity. There is an ingrained denial of the gruesomeness and finality of death. Despite its ambiguity, it is a phenomenon, conceived differently depending on cultural, ideological, or idiosyncratic orientation. In the medical world, death is defined as a cessation of breath and heartbeat whereas as a philosophical reality, death is seen as the cessation of the integrated functioning of the human organism. In short, death from whatever perspective is hard and challenging project. This study is an attempt to understand death and afterlife according to the African traditional world view and how it relates to the Biblical and Christian traditions.

The African Understanding of Death and Afterlife

Death in the African world view is considered part and parcel of being in harmony with the principle of life, nature and God. Death is one of the essential rites of passage in the African mind and it is understood as a transition which involves transformation from the physical existence into the spiritual as the departed are considered to continue their existence in the ancestral world. Death is a transition from this earthly manner of being to the spiritual realm. In Africa, the reality of life does not terminate with death; death is not considered the end of life. With death, life takes a different form of existence which is in no way opposed to the previous form neither is it totally detached from it. This idea is in resonance with what Gehman (1989) says about the life after death thus: "Wherever the living dead are, their abode is modeled after the pattern of the living. There is no division of the dead on the basis of character. Apart from witches and outcasts, all the living-dead, good and bad, live together in the world of spirits. The understanding of death is manifested in many narratives and mythical stories of different African societies. Many African myths describe the origin, meaning and purpose of death. In most of them death is conceived as something that came as a result of some mistake (Mbiti, 1975). Death was not supposed to be a part of human life. The blame for it is laid on some animal, on

people or on some spirits (Zahan, 1979). In general death is not considered as a natural event but tends to be seen as 'caused' by some external forces such as witches, spirits or curse (Mbiti, 1975, Gehman, 1989).

Death happens gradually, starting from the time of one's departure from the earth physically, to the time when the last person who knows the person physically dies off. Accordingly, death is an inevitable lot of every person who comes into the world and it removes people from the world after a specific time. As Kirwen (2008) clearly puts it thus; "death is an inevitable event in the personal history of every living person..." (p.8). Though inevitable, death does not terminate human existence, but is a moment of passage to the afterlife. According to Mbiti (1975), "death is a process which removes a person gradually from the sasa period of existence to the zamani. After the physical death, the individual continues to exist in the sasa period and does not immediately disappear from it; he is remembered by relatives and friends who knew him in this life and who has survived him" (p. 24). For Mbiti, the sasa period means the time of physical existence on earth and the period after death within which the departed is remembered by relatives and friends who know him. When the last of these survivors die off, the departed now enters the zamani which is complete death. The deceased then, equipped with food and weapons, has a journey to make before he arrives to the hereafter.

Necessarily connected with the concept of death in the African world view is therefore the notion of afterlife. This is informed by the rituals done to facilitate the passage of the dead person between this world and the next one. If those rituals were not performed properly, it was believed that the deceased person would become angry and punish the living. After the burial some rituals could be performed to restore order, such as sharing a meal, shaving or a sexual intercourse. In the afterlife, the dead are not cut off from the living, for they may reveal themselves in dreams or appear to the living relations in different forms. As such in the African mindset, after death human person continues to live on as a spirit. The network of relationships that characterizes human existence is not interrupted (Mbiti, 1975). Gehman (1989) summarizes it saying that "death is a necessary door through which the living passes in order to take up the inevitable role as the living dead. Death is transition to the final destiny of all men and women". Mbiti (1975) affirms that "life goes on beyond the grave" (p. 119). Taylor (2001) endorses such a view claiming that "Those who are dead are never gone: they are in the thickening shadow... they are in the wood that groans they are in the fire that is dying... they are in the forest, they are in the house, the dead are not dead". One of the ways of ensuring the continual living of the departed members is through naming children after the departed member of the family. While the departed person is remembered by name, he is not really dead: he is alive, and such a person is a living dead. A living dead is still considered as a member of

the family. He is in the state of personal immortality (Mbiti, 1969). It can help the family and the community in times of trouble and it can also cause trouble if certain rituals have not been performed properly or if there are some violations of community laws. It remains in such a status for about four to five generation during which he can partially be reincarnated in a new born child. After that period, when nobody among the living remembers him by naming children after him or pouring libations, it becomes a ghost of an unknown person. A spirit becomes 'it' and enters the state of collective immortality. It is one of the many spirits who lost their humanness. Such spirits are usually feared by people (Mbiti, 1975). This notion of personal immortality in Africa explains why marriage is such an important institution in Africa. In order for the departed to remain alive, children have to be born who will bear their names; otherwise, the departed will simply vanish out of human existence. That is why marriage in Africa is a duty. It is through procreation among the spirits, the ancestors create a special category on their own. They are those who have died long ago, have lived exemplary life and who fulfilled all social and religious duties as understood by their community. Because of their good life they are remembered by the living (Gehman, 1989, Magesa, 1997).

To become an ancestor is the best one can expect after death. Although death is inevitable and integral reality of human life in the African cultural context, it is not always a desirable thing because the life here on earth is at the center of human existence as such incomparable with any other form of existence. Indeed, for Africans, life on earth was of crucial importance. Death and life after death were seen as unavoidable, but not looked forward to. This world was the best place people could live in. The greatest expectation one would have after death was to continue to participate in the life of the community. A person, who lived a good moral life, went through all rites of passage, died at the old age of natural causes, and could expect to become an ancestor, to be asked to intercede on behalf of the community and to expect to be partially reincarnated through the naming process. Morally bad people such as witches, sorcerers, criminals and those who died in a 'bad way' –through suicide or a certain sickness, could not become ancestors because their evil would be perpetuated through the naming process. When a person dies, he is slowly forgotten, with the exception of great ancestors. Nkemnkia (1999) says that "the necessary condition to remain always alive and present in the memory of the living is to lead a good and virtuous life. What each African fears most is to be forgotten by the living ones, the parents and the human race" (p. 119). According to Mbiti (1969), the moment of death is the beginning of the process of forgetting about the dead person. In his own words, he says that "Man is ontologically destined to lose his humanness but gain his full spiritness: and there is no general evolution of devolution beyond this point. God is beyond and in African concepts there is neither hope nor possibility that the soul would

attain a share in the divinity of God (p. 163) ...Death is death and the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual form from mankind to spirithood” (p. 165).

Biblical/Christian Understanding of Death and After Life

In the Bible, the reality of life does not terminate with death. Death is not considered as end of life. There is a great sense of life that survives in the biblical tradition. The Biblical - Christian view of the afterlife has as its foundation the teaching, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Within the context of Christianity, numerous scriptural passages address the concept of physical death, which refers to the termination of life in the physical body. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus distinguishes between the death of the physical body and the death that involves both the body and the soul. Specifically, he advises his followers not to fear those who are capable of killing the body but lack the power to harm the soul. Instead, he urges them to fear God, who possesses the ability to destroy both the body and the soul in hell. The Christian perspective regards death as the separation of the body and soul, as stated in Ecclesiastes 12:7. This passage elucidates that the human body will ultimately return to the earth's dust, while the breath of life will revert to its divine source. The apostle James espouses a view of death as the division of the body and spirit, stating that 'For just as the (human) body without the spirit is dead...' (James 2:26). This passage focuses on the phenomenon of mortality, which is commonly observed or encountered in physical manifestation. The notion that life and death are distinct states of existence is a prevalent concept in scriptural teachings. It is important to note that the cessation of life does not signify the end of existence. According to Erickson (2001), death is a mere transition to an alternative mode of existence, and should not be misconstrued as a state of extinction, as is sometimes believed.

Moltmann (1996) places significant emphasis on the concept of spiritual and eternal death as a corollary to the cessation of physical life. The term 'spiritual death' refers to the state of being disconnected from God, while 'eternal death' signifies a permanent state of separation from God, wherein an individual remains in a state of sinfulness for all eternity. The scriptural perspective regards spiritual deadness as a state characterized by an inability to respond or engage with matters of a spiritual nature, or a total and complete insensitivity to such stimuli (Berkhof, 1949). Carr (2023) explains that the Apostle Paul's intention in Ephesians 2:1-2 is to show that the individuals who are lost possess a state of existence within this world. Such individuals inhabit, traverse, experience affection within, express amusement within, and pursue gratification inside this environment; nonetheless, they remain devoid of vitality despite their existence. Such individuals, Carr

(2023) argues, are not perceived as being disconnected from society, but rather, they are perceived as being disconnected from a divine entity - the Almighty God. These individuals are unable to visually and physically perceive, comprehend, intuit or independently access the presence of the Almighty God. They lack any form of spiritual vitality. Similarly, Myers (2023) argues that Apostle John's emphasis on the second death in Revelation 21:8 pertained to the concept of eternal death. From his viewpoint, the individuals in question will be consigned to the lake that is characterized by combustion and sulfuric emissions commonly referred to as the second death. Myers (2023) argues further that in Revelation 20:6, the Apostle John asserts that individuals who participate in the first resurrection are deemed blessed and holy. This is in contrast to the second death, which entails eternal separation from God. It is noteworthy that the lake of fire holds no power or authority over those who partake in the first resurrection. Additionally, such individuals are designated as priests of God and of Christ, and are expected to reign with him for a period of one thousand years (p. 3). Ilomo (2021) opines that the implications drawn from Revelation 20:6 suggest that the second death, commonly referred to as the eternal death, is distinguished by an interminable duration of punishment, agony, lamentation and separation from the divine presence. The consummation pertains to the state of the individual who is spiritually deceased during the moment of physical demise and serves as the ultimate affirmation thereof.

Achieving a Point of Convergence between the Bible and the African Traditional Beliefs

Both the Christianity and ATR eschatologists agree to a large extent on physical death, which is cessation of life in our physical body. They all see death as transition to the next world. They also agree that the human being has an abrupt time to finish his or her work on earth. The idea of judgment, as expressed by both religions, has been the crown and capstone of their eschatological teachings. Both have agreed that after death, a person's soul and spirit continue in a state of conscious existence between death and resurrection. Mbiti (1969) emphasizes the communal and life-affirming aspects of ATRs, highlighting their focus on maintaining harmonious relationships with the spiritual realm and the community; while Idowu (1971) emphasizes the ethical and communal dimensions of ATRs, underscoring their emphasis on maintaining balance and social cohesion rather than on eternal punishment. Olupona (2016) on his part highlights the dynamic and diverse nature of ATRs, emphasizing their emphasis on ancestral reverence, rituals, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spiritual world. These scholars, among others, have shed light on the nuanced and multifaceted nature of ATRs, challenging the portrayal of these religions as emphasizing eternal punishment.

From the findings above, the researchers believe that there is a basic agreement about what life after death stands for in Christianity and ATR. Generalizing, one notices that both religions are in unison that life after death exists because life here on earth is not seen as an end of someone's existence. Life continues beyond physical death. The ancestors play an important role in that concept because their status was the best one could hope for after death. They are also involved in the community by helping people as intercessors. Being a good person in this life by behaving according to moral values of a community was important because it ensured the status of ancestors after death. The researchers noticed a divergent view in the description of the quality of life after death in the Christian and African religious viewpoints. The researchers believe that the bone of contention here is the impact of Christian beliefs about life after death that intermingled with the traditional understanding of life after death. The notion of life after death played an important role in the overall system of beliefs of African Traditional Religion. It affirmed the inner coherence of African religious worldview whereby man was its center in the life on earth and remained also its prominent figure after death as an ancestor as one's life on earth was defined through his belonging to a community. As an ancestor, one continued to be useful to the community as an intercessor, because he remained a part of that community, even as a dead person. The communitarian aspect of African worldview continued even after death. The ancestors, within this concept of life after death, made communication between people and God possible because it was believed that ancestors were closer to God.

It is however, evident from the information given that the understanding of life after death was crucial in the context of African view about the cyclic nature of life. Only life after death conceived not as the end, but rather as a passage to a new stage, with its notion of partial reincarnation through the naming process, could ensure that there was no logical contradiction with Christians and ATR concerning this particular aspect; Again, it is very clear from what we have seen that life after death and its understanding had a lot of implications for the maintenance of social order in the community. It was advantageous to one to be a morally behaving person because of what he was to gain after his death. Hence, both, the community and individuals were benefitting from such a concept. It is quite certain that procreation was crucial in order to become an ancestor. Hence, the notion of life after death ensured the physical as well as religious survival of the community through the religious meaning attached to bearing children. As such it was providing a kind of counterbalance to the prominent importance of community in the African worldview.

Conclusion

It can be asserted that within the framework of ATR and Christian belief systems, the concept of an afterlife is firmly upheld, thereby signifying that the cessation of human existence is not synonymous with death. One crucial inquiry that necessitates exploration is the manner in which an individual persists beyond death, given the eventual decay and decomposition of the physical body. In the perspectives of the Christian and ATR, it is widely accepted that individuals transition into a spiritual existence upon death. However, the ATR believes that death serves as a barrier between the realm of human beings and the realm of spirits, as well as between the visible and invisible worlds. This divergent position marks a transitional phase that separates the physical and spiritual planes of existence in the Christian perception of death. Death is a significant rite of passage in the African culture and religion and as such it is treated with a lot of sensitivity and respect. Both the Christian and African religions consider death as ultimately part of the harmony of nature which is a departure not a complete annihilation of a person but merely a passing into another state of existence. It is a threshold of human life towards acquiring the existence in the invisible world. In conclusion, several distinct differences and similarities emerge: Christians believe in a final judgment where individuals will be resurrected and face God's judgment. The righteous will enter eternal life in heaven, while the unrighteous will face eternal separation from God in hell. ATR views the afterlife as a continuation of life, where individuals join the realm of the ancestors. The emphasis is on maintaining a harmonious relationship with ancestors and spirits rather than a judgment-based system.

The focus is on ancestral spirits, who play a significant role in the afterlife and are venerated for their guidance and protection. Christians believe in salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and his redemptive work on the cross. Salvation is seen as the means to eternal life and reconciliation with God. ATR's emphasis is on communal well-being and maintaining harmony with the spiritual realm through rituals, offerings and veneration of ancestors. The focus is less on individual salvation and more on community welfare. Above all, the point of divergence is that the notion of resurrection is found only in Christianity while in ATR it is not so pronounced. The second coming of Christ is an idea found only in Christianity and not in ATR. The above comparisons are comprehensive, and both Christianity and ATR have a wide range of beliefs and customs across sects, ethnicities and regions. These factors may affect each tradition's eschatology. Both religions agree that current choices determine a person's fate and eternal state. Immoral people are exiled from God. Virtuous people will enjoy eternal life in the divine presence. Virtues and vices will be rewarded or punished.

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