
EXPLORING THE METAPHYSICS OF REINCARNATION IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA THOUGHT

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Abstract

Reincarnation, in general, refers to the belief in the continued existence of a human soul following the death of the physical body. This ongoing existence can manifest in another human body, typically that of a newborn, which is commonly referred to as rebirth. Alternatively, the soul may inhabit a non-human form, a process known as transmigration. The Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria subscribe to these two forms of reincarnation, similar to beliefs held by communities in India, China, and various European countries. However, research has identified a unique form of reincarnation specific to Yoruba beliefs, known as "Akudaya," or the Living Wraith. This paper will focus on 'Akudaya' as a distinct type of reincarnation prevalent among the Yoruba ethnic group in southwest Nigeria. What sets 'Akudaya' apart is that the individual believed to be dead continues to exist in a location separate from their original place of residence, without taking on a different body from that which they possessed before death. This study seeks to conduct a metaphysical investigation into the 'Akudaya' form of reincarnation to explore the possibility of existence beyond death.

Keywords: Reincarnation, Death, Akudaya, Rebirth, Transmigration, Metaphysics

Introduction

Some events in the world lie beyond the scope of scientific explanation and can only be understood through metaphysical concepts. One example is the Living Wraith form of reincarnation, known as Akudaya in Yoruba culture. Reincarnation is recognized in Eastern, Western, and African cultural beliefs (Osadola, 2023, p. 27). Among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, different forms of reincarnation exist. One form is known as rebirth, which occurs when a child is born shortly after the death of an elderly family member. The newborn is typically given names such as *Iyabo*, *Yetunde*, or *Yeside* for females, and *Babatunde*, *Babajide*, or *Aderopo* for males. Another form of reincarnation is called transmigration, where it is believed that the soul of a deceased person can inhabit other living beings, such as cats, dogs, or goats (Omoregbe, 2005, p. 7). The Living Wraith, or Akudaya, represents a unique form of reincarnation distinct from these two. This form of reincarnation is characterized by the reincarnate maintaining their previous body and soul. While various scholars have researched to establish the possibility of reincarnation, Akudaya is considered a metaphysical concept that revolves around the belief in the continuous existence of the human body and soul after biological

death.

Although reincarnation is not new, some people struggle to grasp its meaning, while others who understand it may doubt its logical possibility. This paper specifically discusses Akudaya, or the Living Wraith, in Yoruba belief as the transformation or transmigration of a deceased individual into a living being following an untimely death (Salaudeen, 2010). The Yoruba believe that individuals who die prematurely—due to accidents, fire, or serious illness—are granted the opportunity to return to this material world to complete their life cycles. According to this belief, Akudaya figures may go elsewhere to start new families or careers while retaining the same body and soul. While this concept may sound unbelievable, there have been numerous accounts of people encountering deceased loved ones living normally in different locations.

The aim of this work is to affirm the possibility of the Akudaya form of reincarnation and to provide justifications for this belief. The arguments presented will be metaphysical, as the concept of Akudaya transcends scientific explanation. This paper seeks to clarify the understanding of reincarnation within the Yoruba tradition and to explore the logical possibility of an individual's reincarnation. The next section will address reincarnation in general, followed by a section dedicated to a discussion on the Akudaya living wraith.

The Concept of Reincarnation

The New World Encyclopedia traces the origin of the word "reincarnation" to its Latin root, which means "to be made flesh again." In religion and philosophy, reincarnation refers to the belief that a part of a living being survives death and is reborn in a new body. The encyclopedia further explains that the reincarnated individual carries some essence or identity from their past life into their new life. While they may not always be aware of this, in many cases the reincarnate is conscious of their previous identity. For example, in the case of Akudaya, which will be explained in the next section, several eyewitness reports indicate that the reincarnate disappears as soon as someone becomes aware of their continued existence after death.

Umezurike Grace (2017) defines reincarnation as the survival hypothesis that asserts the human personality (or soul) continues to exist in some form or body after the death of the physical body. According to her, reincarnation is the belief that the soul enters a new body, whether human or animal, after death. Corliss Lamont defines reincarnation as "the literal survival of the individual human personality or consciousness for an indefinite period after (physical) death, with its memory and awareness of self-identity essentially intact" (Lamont, 1990, p. 22).

Beliefs about reincarnation vary by culture. Some traditions hold that an individual who dies untimely or violently can transmigrate into another body to continue their earthly existence. In the case of Akudaya, this existence continues in the same old identity and body. In Hinduism and

Buddhism, reincarnation is not limited to untimely deaths; rather, it is a process every soul undergoes until attaining moksha (Omogbe, 2005, p. 7). In its simplest sense, reincarnation in Eastern philosophy and religion means to "live again," which may occur through a rebirth or transmigration of the soul into another body or sometimes the same alleged body. The type of body a soul inhabits is determined by karma, which refers to a cycle of cause and effect. Karma is a significant concept in many Eastern religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. It encompasses both actions and their consequences, acting as the universal spiritual law governing reincarnation (Brown, 2020).

Different Forms of Reincarnation

There are different forms of reincarnation and this section is dedicated to discussing briefly each of them. The first and possibly most populous among them is rebirth.

Rebirth: Similar to other cultures, the Yoruba belief in reincarnation involves being reborn in a new body, representing a brand-new beginning. In this form, Stevenson (2001), as cited by Poonam Sharma and Jim B. Tucker (2004, p. 101), reports that a study conducted on 40 reincarnates revealed they remembered details of their past lives. Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, this type of reincarnation is called 'Atunbi.' The newborn is named according to the deceased's gender: if a male dies and a male child is born, names such as 'Babatunde' or 'Babajide' are given; if a female dies and a female child is born, names like 'Iyabo,' 'Yetunde,' 'Yejide,' or 'Yeside' are used, indicating that the deceased father or mother has returned. Another form of rebirth among the Yoruba is 'Abiku' (born to die), where a child may die shortly after birth or even after some time. After repeated occurrences, the Yoruba place a mark on the child to indicate they might return. In many confirmed instances, the child returns with the same mark and is given a special name such as 'Malomo,' 'Kokumo,' 'Durojaye,' 'Kilanko,' 'Kosoko,' or 'Banjoko' (Akinola, 2014, p. 70). Researchers like Ian Stevenson and William R. Alger have scientifically explored the concept of rebirth as a form of reincarnation and published suggestive evidence.

Transmigration: Transmigration refers to the movement of a soul into another body after death. Unlike rebirth, the soul may not necessarily inhabit a human body in its continued existence. Depending on the behavior or life lived by the deceased, the soul could transmigrate into the body of a cat, tree, dog, or even other forms. In Hinduism and Buddhism, individuals are encouraged to treat all living beings with respect, as they may be reincarnates of loved ones (Bhandari, 1996, pp. 24-25).

Living Wraith (Akudaya): The 'Akudaya' form of reincarnation differs from the previous two types in that the reincarnate does not inhabit a new body but instead retains their previous one, continuing life from where it left off. An 'Akudaya' is often described as a ghost or ghostlike

image of someone, especially one seen shortly before or after their death. This form of reincarnation is common in African cultures.

'Akudaya' The Walking Dead or The Living Wraith

It is a popular belief among the Yoruba that the individual is entitled to the privilege of completing their assigned mission on earth before such will be allowed into heaven to rest. On this note, it was believed that if a person's life is cut short, that is, was suspended before his normal time of death, such person will go to complete his existence in a different place. The continuous existence of the death in a place different from his initial town or city is what is known as, 'Akudaya', the walking dead or the living wraith. An 'Akudaya' seized to exist or disappear once a familiar person of his or her former family, friend or relatives noticed his or her existence (Owoeye, 2016). 'Akudaya' is called *onyeozu*, or *mmuo* in Igbo, In Nupe native language, it is called 'Tsulozhin'. The concept is a fusion of metaphysics and cosmogony (Owoeye, 2016).

The concept of Akudaya has raised several questions that demanded for answers from those who believe in the possibility of such existence. Some of such questions are, how can a body that has been buried and has decayed still be used by the deceased? Will the person know he has lived before in a place and remembered all that happens to him in the previous life? Is the Akudaya going to be a pure spirit or partly spirit and partly human? Going by the words of Sophie Oluwole, we may not have a conclusive proof for the possibility of reincarnation, but there are several eyewitness evidence in its support (Oluwole, 1992). Oluwole further stated that any argument to debunk the possibility of reincarnation will be invalid and those who denied the possibility of reincarnation will be the work to proof to the world why they think it is not possible especially as a metaphysical concept.

Among the several testimonies from people who have seen an 'Akudaya' before, SanusiLafiagi in an article titled the 'Akudaya' Myth: What I Know' he narrated the story of the popular Hajiya Fatima from Ketso who was allegedly killed by a witch known as Nnaputa. She was buried like every other deceased person. Later, she was seen at Gbodoti by some Fulanis and brought back to town to the shock of many who witnessed her burial. Another eyewitness of 'Akudaya' who shared his experience on Facebook said when his younger brother died in 2006 in Osun state, unknown to his girlfriend who was in Lagos, the boy met her at Iyana Ipaja an area in Alimosho Local government in Lagos State according to the reporter, the deceased works at Iyana Ipaja before he fell sick and was taking to his home town. The girlfriend who saw him said he gave her ₦500 and 4 pack of Indomie noodles the lady ate the Indomie but when the lady heard the information about his demise, she could not believe it. She was said to have shown the ₦500 naira he gave her which everybody around saw and the lady promise she will not spend the money. The reporter claims the money was with her till 2010. Posted by Proudly Yorùbá on August 18, 2014.

Sam George, another eyewitness of Akudaya said, when his grandpa was about to die, his mum went to visit him on his sickbed, but he told her to go back to her husband house and she should come back early the next morning. When it's around 5 am the next day the grandpa, who was unable to stand up from the sickbed a day before was seen entering his mum's room. He said, "I saw him though, I was very young, and my mum and my sisters saw him also but we could not talk, instead, our heads were swelling and our body stiffed but we were conscious of what was happening around us. When the spirit left we all concluded that the old man has gone (dead). My mum started running to her dad's house but with surprise, the old man was still alive but still on the bed as he was left yesterday, then my mum raised his head on her laps, the old man prayed for her and other siblings and he gave up.

Apart from these few instances given above from eyewitnesses, People have claimed on several occasions to have seen somebody who is dead in another place far from where such person was living before his death. But according to those with these claims, the person disappears immediately he realized somebody who knows about his death is around and may see him/her. What this translates to is that, the reincarnate though dead but still uses his former body the same way it was before his death. Such people continue their lives from where they stop which includes their age and every other aspect of his life from where he stops at death not to continue afresh as a newborn. And this is where the idea of reincarnation in the western understanding is different from the reincarnation in the Yoruba or African Understanding.

The fact that some individuals who know about a deceased person do not see the reincarnated body raises doubts about the existence of reincarnation in people's minds. Furthermore, such justifications can be easily disproven by other disciplines, especially the sciences. There have been cases where the reincarnated individual was reported to have married in their new life and had children, while the father, who is neither a spirit nor a normal human being, remains absent from the human realm. This idea aligns with the claims made by Salaudeen Abdul-Hakeem, who posited that the 'Akudaya' can belong to either the living or the dead, possessing the ability to appear and disappear between the spiritual and physical realms. It avoids interaction with its former household, has immunity to any form of human harm, and is endowed with supernatural awareness of forthcoming dangers (Salaudeen, 2010).

'Akudaya' and Reincarnation in African Metaphysics

African metaphysics is a branch of African philosophy that explores the existential reality from an African perspective (Etim, 2013, p. 11). According to Etim, the questions posed by Africans and the solutions offered to address these questions constitute what is known as "African Metaphysics." One of the perplexing questions among Africans is the existence of the 'Akudaya,' or Living Wraith. Given the growing interest in reincarnation, it is essential to scrutinize the justifications for this belief. Metaphysically, there have been several occasions where the soul has

been confirmed to transmigrate after death, either by taking a new body or retaining the old body, as in the case of the 'Akudaya.' Plato argued that the soul is eternal, pre-existent, and entirely spiritual. He stated that once the soul enters the body, it becomes impure due to associations with bodily passions, yet still retains some knowledge of its past existence (Salaudeen, 2010).

Historically, scientists have dismissed reincarnation as a myth, claiming it cannot be scientifically proven. However, recent experts have begun to consider it a genuine phenomenon. One prominent scientist, Dr. Ian Stevenson, a former Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, conducted extensive research on reincarnation. He claimed to have documented over 3,000 examples of reincarnation, which he presented to the scientific community. His findings were published in his study titled "Birthmarks and Birth Defects Corresponding to Wounds on Deceased Persons," where he used facial recognition to analyze similarities between claimants and their supposed prior incarnations, while also studying birthmarks (Martin, 2020). Umezurike (2017) noted in his paper, "A Philosophical/Critical Analysis of the Idea of Reincarnation," that reincarnation can be examined through the lens of the mind-body problem and the issue of personal identity in philosophy. He explained that the mind-body problem concerns the relationship between the mind and body, and modern materialists have reduced mental states to physical brain states. According to Umezurike, if this view is followed, reincarnation would be automatically ruled out. He argued that the dualist theory, which posits that the mind is a separate and independent entity from the brain, is a necessary presupposition for the possibility of reincarnation. The problems of personal identity will emerge in discussions regarding the logical feasibility of reincarnation.

The 'Akudaya,' as a form of reincarnation, is as valid as other forms that have been logically and scientifically recognized. The numerous accounts from different individuals who have never met each other, yet have testified to witnessing people who died in one location living in another, serve as evidence supporting the existence of 'Akudaya.' Wale Owoeye (2016) observed that belief in the 'Akudaya' extends beyond the Yoruba people; other tribes in Africa, Asia, and even parts of the Western world have legends, folklore, and tales attesting to the existence of these phantom beings, who are reportedly seen or felt by their relatives or associates after death.

The 'Akudaya' is described as a phenomenon that cannot be verified in the same way scientific truths can be confirmed. This is because, upon realizing that someone knows about its previous death, an 'Akudaya' disappears. However, as Wale Owoeye argues, this does not negate the truth of their existence in Yoruba culture or diminish their significance within the broader scheme of existence. The birth of metaphysics arose from the inability to explain certain phenomena present in the world. Therefore, the existence of 'Akudaya' remains an important aspect to consider.

Conclusion

Drawing from traditional myths of Yoruba society and considering the potential of metaphysics to elucidate phenomena that empirical science cannot explain, I have posited that the concept of 'Akudaya' and other forms of reincarnation are indeed possible. While certain traits observed in newborns—such as sharing birthmarks with the deceased or exhibiting behaviors reminiscent of the departed—can be attributed to hereditary factors, this does not negate the existence of reincarnation. Oluwole provided a compelling example of a five-year-old boy taken to his grandfather's farm by his father. Upon arrival, the boy began to express his dissatisfaction about the perceived negligence of his father and the other children regarding the care of farm tools. Remarkably, despite never having been to a farm before, the boy approached a large dead tree, reached underneath, and unearthed old cutlasses and hoes, the handles of which had been consumed by termites (Oluwole 1992, p. 45). The phenomenon of Akudaya, distinct from mere rebirth, lies beyond the realm of scientific explanation; it is a matter that transcends the physical and is best understood through a metaphysical lens, as it is rooted more in the spiritual than in the material world.

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