

# UAI JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY & CULTURAL STUDIES

## (UAIJMCS)



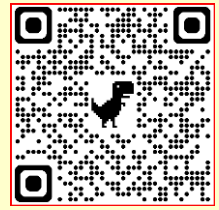
Abbreviated Key Title: UAI J Mult Cul Stu.

ISSN: 3049-2351 (Online)

Journal Homepage: <https://uaipublisher.com/uaijmcs-2/>

Volume- 1 Issue- 2 (March – April) 2025

Frequency: Bimonthly



### Examining the Philosophical and Ethical Implications of the concept of Reincarnation in African Thought.

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#### ABSTRACT

*The concern for human fate afterlife often come with great anxiety. It is a phenomenon in-explainable to all fields of life, including science and philosophy. The concept of reincarnation across certain culture seem to give a sort of the fear of the unknown beyond. The concern here sometimes spurs from the complexity of the physical life of experience. Some religious fanatics often see a recycle of life as a medium through which happiness and joy which were un-attainable in this life could be attained. This is because rewards for good living could be to be a reborn in a new life to fulfil certain destinies one was unable to fulfil in a previous life. The puzzle concerning the idea of reincarnation is as to what extent are there empirically verifiable evidence to back up these claims. Some religious protagonists who are adherents of this view often argue that there is a thin line between science and religion. Thus, religious phenomena ought not to be subjected to the same scrutiny as is scientific phenomena. That, nevertheless, does not imply the absence of evidence to buttress the claims of reincarnation. However, in Africa, there are numerous implications of this belief both on the society and the individual members of the African communities. It is based on this that this paper explores the ethical implication of this belief across African societies as well as what the topic entails to classical studies in philosophical research. It strikes a balance between total elimination and antagonistic view of this concept and advocates for a close examination of phenomena that surround this worldview to ascertain the epistemological denotations thereto it. This paper employs an analytical approach to uncover the various views as related to the phenomenon of reincarnation in Africa, how this phenomenon has shaped the African metaphysical worldview and its philosophical implications to the African experiences.*

**KEY WORDS:** Reincarnation, Ethics, Africa.

## Introduction

The controversial nature of the belief in reincarnation as held across certain cultures like Buddhism in Asia and traditional African society is a topic of concern in philosophical enquiries. While Buddhist concept of reincarnation is anchored on its principle of karma, Africa on a different view holds a view of life cycle that is ancestral in nature where an individual dies and goes to *Ala Mmụọ* and to be reborn into the same family lineage (Ezechi, 2011). This is especially as regards its very implications to human conception of realities. Africa for instance has promising understanding of reincarnation as captured by the Igbo concept of *Ilo uwa*. Reincarnation is accused by modern religion especially Christendom as a human construct that sort to give man relief from the anxiety of death. The complex nature of this idea adds even more to this criticism. *Ilo uwa* for instance supposes that one is reborn into a new body but at the same time dwells in the land of the dead. Which is why a typical Igbo person often pour libation to their ancestors (Ezechi, 2011). Pertinent to note is the fact that there are no unanimous accepted principles of reincarnation across the numerous cultures in traditional African system. However, common among them is the idea of a rebirth and ancestral belief (Ezechi 2011).

However, this belief has tremendous influence on the many stories flying across to give support to the claims, but can they stand philosophical conduct of communities across Africa as people strive to live virtuous life to attain cognition in the land of the dead. Nonetheless, the question of philosophical justifiability of these claims arises. How does Africans come of this idea? Is there any justifiable proof of these idea? Thus, this paper examines the various implications associated to the concept of African reincarnation, paying more attention to its philosophical and ethical undertones. It pays attention to the diverse concept of reincarnation in traditional African societies. It examines diverse cultures across Africa and their perceptions on this view. It goes further to examine how this concept has shaped African worldviews and values.

### What is Reincarnation?

Reincarnation is a prominent concept found in various religious doctrines. It has to do with the teaching of a life cycle that continues after this life of experience. This concept is eminent in Buddhist and African traditional religious beliefs. Its principles promulgate a theory of being reborn into a new form after physical death. Udigwuomen (2004, p. 28) analyzing this concept, defines it as the belief that while human spirit is believed to dwell in the spirit world after death, some of his physical traits are manifested among his grandchildren and close kins. Gasier has more literal view of the concept. He defines reincarnation as coming back or being reborn to earthly life (Geisier, 1989, 630). Reincarnation is distinct from the concept of immortality of soul and transmigration. Immortality of soul has to do with the persistence of identity, memory and consciousness of an individual after death. Transmigration on the other side has to do with the belief that human soul has the capacity of transmigrating into a different body or forms - like animals after death (Udigwuomen 2004, 15). Egbe (1992) defined reincarnation as the rebirth of an individual into the world of experience to pay for his bad deeds until such an individual is perfected. Generally taken, reincarnation has to do with rebirth or being born into the world of experience either for positive or negative reasons. The nature of one's rebirth is different across religious beliefs. Arguing on the notion of rebirth, Udigwuomen (2004) pointed out that the concept is not unique to the African and East Asian thoughts. He argues that there is a trait of reincarnation in western pedagogy. He pointed out that Pythagoras, Plato and Plotinus both believed in the immortality

of the soul. For plato, the soul first lived in the world of forms where there is a perfection of things in themselves. This soul is therefore trapped into the world of experience and enslaved by the human body. Then the soul comes to the realization of the things in the world of forms through the principles of anamnesis (Udigwuomen, 2004, 15). On a second point, he argues that the psychological doctrines of parapsychology and hypnosis supports the fact of being born with the memory of the events of the past. These events often arouse fear and anxiety in the individual. On a personal experience, I have witnessed a woman who does not attend burials due to the fear of the traditional *mkpọ na ani*. She testifies to the fact that the gun was the cause of her death in the previous life. Such psychological and hypnotic testimonies are strong supports to the claims of reincarnation. Thus, in a nutshell, reincarnation is a doctrine that promulgates a continuous life cycle which is in contraposition to the views of some western existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre who saw death as the very end of human existence.

### Distinction between Karma and Reincarnation

Scholars often make sharp contraction between the concept of karma and reincarnation. Some argue that karma is basically a Buddhist concept that advocates for good living and rewards for every human action. Arguing on this, Ajayi avers that:

If we say that it is precisely the responsibility of the Karma theory to convince us that rebirth takes place at all, that there are many Karmic residues, for example, the parallel complaint may be recorded against the physicist who postulates unobservable micro particles (Ajayi, 2021).

Quoting the ideas of Onyewuenyi (1996), Ajayi maintained that in both cases what is to be explained is observable in Onyewuenye's idea of "Reincarnation and Personal Identity." He pointed out that Knowledge, Belief and Justification of the African Conception of Reincarnation involve postulation of unobservable experiences or experiences that beyond concrete explanation. It is based on this that Ajayi maintained that this can be a problem, but we know that technological advances may in time make possible testing of both types of theories, if we build bigger and better microscopes. It is therefore pertinent to note that one of the strongest claims of the traditional African in support of reincarnation is divination. This happens when a child is born. This method also rules out the problem of untestability of Karma and reincarnation.

In Hinduism, the parents of the newborn baby consult a diviner or someone who oversees the deity to ascertain which ancestors have been reborn in the new child. This idea is conceived as "Samsara" which means rebirth or reincarnation. At the point of death, the soul leaves the body to inhabit another body in accordance with Karma. Hence, coming back to this world means one has not yet sufficiently purified oneself from all one's misdeeds; one is not fit to go to Brahman. Due to the complex nature numerous task that await man, the Hindu, believe that one lifetime is too short to accomplish such a task, hence one needs to undergo varieties of rebirth. Our life on earth is a mixture of joy and sorrows. There are indeed many pleasures of life, and many creatures that have a good share of them (Ajayi. 2021).

The crux of the theme of the doctrine of Karma and reincarnation is that whatever you sow you will reap, the law of action and reaction, the law of cause and effect, that is whatever action is done by an individual leaves behind for them joy or sorrow in the future (Ajayi 2021). Thus, when the fruits of these actions are ripe one does not seek forgiveness, the doctrine of Karma rules out the idea of

forgiveness. For the Buddhist, it would be an illusion to sow an ugly fruit and expect to reap a beautiful one. This doctrine promulgates that every evil suffered, there lies a previous evil deed which accounts for it and for which it is retribution. This is same for the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria holds certain misfortune that happens at birth is due to specific punishment for forgotten misdeed in the previous life. Behind every evil suffered, there lay a previous evil deed which accounts for it (Ajayi, 2021).

The law of Karma according to the views of scholars does not allow anybody to suffer innocently; it does not allow anything to happen to a person if he does not deserve it by his previous misdeeds. This is why a Hindu does not complain about anything that happens to him. He does not ask why me? Ajayi while analyzing the views of Omeregbe on the history of the Asians argues that a typical Hindu or Buddhist person knows that he is now reaping what he sowed in the past, either in this present existence or in his previous existence. He knows that he is not suffering innocently or undeservedly, the law of Karma does not allow such a thing to happen, "Karma is inexorable, infallible and unfailing" (Omeregbe, 2004, 138).

The doctrine of Karma is central to Indian philosophical schools of Hinduism. Here there is nothing like freedom, when a man thinks that he freely decides to do certain things he is not aware that certain forces beyond his control made him to take that decision. Ajayi (2021) made a sharp comparison with the philosophies of Spinoza. He pointed out that Spinoza observed that belief in human freedom and claims is due to inadequate knowledge and ignorance. Men think themselves free in as much as they are conscious of their volitions and desires, and because they are ignorant of the cause by which they are led to wish and desires (Ajayi, 2021). Nonetheless, the concept of karma and reincarnation maybe similar in that they both points to the possibility of an afterlife. While reincarnation focuses on rebirth, karma has to do with the consequences of every human actions.

### Traditional African Concept of Reincarnation

Reincarnation is a complex phenomenon across various traditional religion and cultures in Africa. The complexity stems from the fact that there are diverse pedagogies on the concept and how the cycle of life reoccurs. The Akan people of Ghana has distinct process of reincarnation from the Yoruba people of Nigeria. This is noticeable even within the Igbo believes in *Ilọ ụwa* and *ogbanje*. However, this concept to a great extent explains the strong affinity of a typical African man with the world beyond (Ezechi, 2018, 38). Oguejiofor argues that there is an integration of the worldly African community with that of the spirit world. This is why the deceased ancestors are still regarded as part of the family. They are accorded respect before every family gathering. This is because they are believed to be ever present. Thus, sometimes they return to the world of experience through the grand kins. However, this does not imply their absence from the spirit world or implies their total extinction from the spirit world into the world of experience. Quacoopome (1987) has a relative understanding of the spirit world relation with physical world. He explicates this in his view of witchcraft which is relatable to the understanding of an incarnate spirit. Beyond the belief in the reincarnation of ancestors, and akin to it, is the African belief in what the Igbo call *ogbanje*. *Ogbanje* describes children who die at a very hound age only to be reborn again and again (Quacoopome, 1987, 53).

The Yoruba people of Nigeria have the concept of the *abi-kú*, which closely resembles the Igbo *ogbanje*, where children are believed to die young and be reborn. However, the Yoruba have different rituals to prevent the cycle of death, such as using amulets and placing the

child in herbal baths (Oluwole 1995, 42). These shared beliefs across various African societies highlight a common cultural understanding of life, death, and reincarnation. In Yoruba mythology, it is believed that not the entire spirit of the deceased person reincarnates in the newborn but some of his spiritual qualities. This is to buttress the dichotomy of the ancestral spirit which dwell in the world beyond and at the same time is reborn into a new child. According to Azenabor, the Yoruba belief that human beings have three constituents. one of these constituents is transformed into an ancestral spirit after death. The other goes to the spirit world and the last reincarnate into a new child. The author buttress that ancestors are considered those who have completed 14 times of rebirth after which dwells permanently in the land of the spirits (Azenabor, 1996, 365). The *Abiku* in Yoruba myths is a basis for their justification for rebirth. Ajayi (2021) has it that the potentials of the *Abiku* is to be born from womb to womb. He contends that often, the *Abiku* is given a mark by cutting of their nails or deforming of salient parts of their bodies. These marks are said to be noticed in the next child in which the *Abiku* is to reincarnate in. such children often come out with those deformities or marks given to them in their previous lives. The Yoruba concept of reincarnation is felt in the pattern of names they give their children. Children are often named after their grandparents based on the good characters portrayed but those parents when they were alive.

Among the Akan people of Ghana, reincarnation plays central role in their conception of the spiritual and material world. Cosmologically, they believe in the idea of the supreme being known as *Nyame* and a pantheistic god known as the *abosom* who is a lesser god to *Nyame*. They also have ancestral beings referred to *nananom nsamanfo*. This ancestral spirit guides the living. The idea of reincarnation is tied to the idea of the life force called *okra*. *Okra* is said to be the spirit being in man. This being returns to the spirit world to be reborn in the body of a child within the same family or community. Reincarnation in Akan's believe is a reward for virtuous living. These child bearing the spirit of the deceased ancestors exhibit character traits like skills, colours, body structures etc likeable to the deceased person. The intricacy of this theme for the Akan people can be felt in the work of *Molefi* where he advocates for African centered values which includes the spirit of continuity and ancestral returns.

### Reincarnation in Igbo traditional worldview.

Ian Stevenson alluding on the concept of reincarnation among traditional Igbo pointed out that social status holds significant value among the Igbo people, who place great emphasis on improving one's social standing. (Stevenson, 1985, 14). He argues that like many other cultures, a person's status is partly influenced by the family they are born into, the Igbo give less weight to this factor compared to other societies. Quoting Uchendu, he ascertained that the Igbo proverb, "No one knows the womb that bears the chief" (Uchendu 1965, p. 20), illustrates the importance they place on personal achievement when determining a person's status. Key elements that contribute to an individual's status include having a large family, acquiring wealth, and, more recently, obtaining a good education. Leadership qualities are also crucial. A leader seeking to earn status through leadership must be a guide to others, rather than a tyrant. Furthermore, generosity in helping others achieve success brings more status than the selfish pursuit of personal goals. The Igbo also believe in continuous improvement of one's status from one life to the next, with the concept of reincarnation offering comfort to those nearing death who feel their status has not sufficiently improved. This belief links to the Igbo practice of

identifying deceased individuals whose spirits are believed to be reincarnated in babies. Such babies can inherit and build upon the status they had in their previous life. Upon death, the soul or personality is thought to enter a realm of discarnate beings, and three main ideas about this realm are commonly held. Stevenson presented these ideas across the views of certain African intellectuals as thus:

Uchendu on Igbo concept of reincarnation maintained that the first, status remains significant in the discarnate realm, and as Uchendu observes, Igbo people facing death are more concerned about their status in this realm than the fact of dying itself. He maintained that the second view could be seen in the Igbo view that discarnate realm is a joyless limbo from which souls, with few exceptions, are eager to return to earthly life (Uchendu, 1965, 16). Thus, despite life's hardships, they consider terrestrial existence desirable and, unlike Hindus or Buddhists, do not aspire to stop being reborn. Parrinder notes that "the African's attitude is world-affirming, not world-renouncing. The third point stems from the idea the culture of second burial" ceremony which plays important role in the well-being of the discarnate soul, helping it find peace and secure a favorable position for reincarnation. Arinze argues that improper execution of these rites may lead to displeasure from the deceased's spirit and bring misfortune to the negligent descendants (Arinze 1970,17) According to Basden, second burials which take place between a week and a year or more after the first burial, can be expensive, involving animal sacrifices and significant hospitality (Basden 1921, 1966, 121). In the same line of thought, Talbot pointed out that the cost of these rituals is expected to match the deceased's status (Talbot 1926, 493).

The Igbo hold that good conduct in life leads to a higher status both in the discarnate realm after death and in the next incarnation. A wrongdoer who achieves wealth and power through deceit or manipulation may enjoy high status in life but will have a low standing in the discarnate realm. Such an individual might also experience an unfavorable rebirth, possibly as a twin or born feet first conditions that are considered taboo. Their next life may be filled with misfortunes, often described as "bad luck" in Western terms. More severe wrongdoing, such as murder or incest, could result in reincarnation as a nonhuman animal. However, aside from these specific consequences, the Igbo do not believe that moral conduct in one life directly affects the circumstances of another. Unlike Hinduism and Buddhism's complex doctrine of retributive karma, the Igbo believe that the conditions of future lives are primarily influenced by one's relationship with their Chi and by desires expressed before death for an improved existence.

The Igbo belief in reincarnation is intricately linked to their understanding of social status and the continuous cycle of life, death, and rebirth. In other words, reincarnation in Igbo belief system can be summarily put as follows:

**Reincarnation and Social Status:** The Igbo believe that reincarnation offers individuals the opportunity to improve their social standing. Those who die young can return quickly, giving them the chance to continue their quest for a higher status. However, the actions and moral behavior of an individual in previous lives are thought to impact their reincarnation. For example, a wicked person may experience a lower status in their next life, whereas a virtuous one might have more favorable prospects. Furthermore, a person may reincarnate with different traits, such as physical attributes or behavioral patterns, manifested in previous lives.

**Reincarnation of Children:** The Igbo believe that children,

particularly those who die young, may reincarnate, either within the same family or elsewhere. To identify the deceased person a child has reincarnated from, Igbo people use various methods, such as examining birthmarks, consulting oracles, and observing the child's behavior or statements about past lives.

**Ogbanje Children:** A distinct category within Igbo reincarnation beliefs is the ogbanje children who are believed to die young and repeatedly reincarnate within the same family. This phenomenon is considered a curse or affliction, and parents often resort to rituals or consult native doctors to prevent the child from continuing the cycle of death. Ogbanje children are believed to be unwilling to reincarnate and may hide objects as part of a vow to die young.

**Sexual Reincarnation:** The Igbo also hold the belief that reincarnation can involve a change of sex. This is linked to personal desires for different life experiences, such as women wishing to reincarnate as men for greater freedom, or men wishing to reincarnate as women to escape societal responsibilities.

**Rituals and Second Burial:** The second burial ceremony, which takes place sometime after the initial burial, plays a critical role in ensuring the deceased's smooth transition to the spiritual realm and in establishing their status for reincarnation. Proper rites are believed to safeguard the living descendants from misfortune.

### Segments of reincarnation in African perspective

Nwanchor in his essay "conceptualization of Reincarnation in traditional African religion" presented what he called the three forms of reincarnation in the African perspective. These three conceptions encapsulate the mythological nature of African traditional metaphysical perspectives. They include possessions, containment and symbolism (Nwanchor 2021, 74). These explain the deep affinity of a traditional African man to the culture of wealth, belongingness and symbolic values. These factors are explained thus:

#### On Possession

Possession is a form of spiritual beingness especially for temporary indwelling Spirit says (Morris 2006, 22) in his study of the Shaman culture. Analyzing Morris views, nwanchor avers that;

The incarnation or possession of an individual by some spiritual being and not by some vague 'external forces'. According to the culture, the spirit may possess' or control the individual person in several different ways - it may reside in the head, 'ride' the individual as a horse, or a spirit might fully incarnate the person, the person is seized' by the divinity or spirit. He or she then becomes vessel' or 'temple' or the embodiment of the spirit (Nwanchor, 22).

While possession may be related closely with incarnation, the experiences of the two are different. Apart from the different levels of ecstasy or disordered consciousness that may be involved in both, the duration of the supposed indwelling' of spirit seems clearly different. In most cases, spirit-possessions are temporary or occasional in the life of the individual.

To further illustrate the nature of spirit-possession, Nwanchor pointed out Horton view on Kalabari religious life, observes three distinct levels or ways in which human actions are thought to 'bring the gods into the village" (Horton, 1981). According to him, first there is the simple mime, in which a man or woman runs through behaviour that exemplifies the character of a god or illustrates an episode in the god's life. Horton maintained that this perhaps, is the least widely used technique, and is usually subsidiary to the other two. Then there is the masquerade. In this, a man once more mimes



the character and attributes of the god; only now he is covered in clothing and a mask, which also symbolize the god.

Nwanchor maintained lastly that there is possession, in which the god is alleged to come into the man's head and displace the *teme* [that is, spirit] in control of his body (Nwanchor, 74). He pointed out that these kinds of behaviour serve to bring the gods into contact with the human world. But in religious terms, it is the gods that visit men in these modes. The spirit which the player mimics is believed to take control of the players personality, and everything; and so practically communicates with the people through the player as only a medium. Nwanchor still on Horton's views, further explains that anything the player does or say to represent the gods is thought to do so: The key Idea here is summarized in the maxim it is with their names that the gods stay and come'. By name' in this context is implied any word, object, or act which can be taken to symbolize the god- either its name in the literal sense, the Sculpture, the masquerade and its carved head-dress, or the sequence of action by means of which a human being represents it. For all of these, the fact of their presence or occurrence in a given place is enough to secure the presence of the god they refer to (Nwanchor, 74). For Horton, the third level is considered a case of possession. In his observation, the god is believed to take full control of the individual's life, displacing as it were the basic animating principle of his or her body. With reference to masquerading, Horton believes that the god comes to the world of man only in the symbolic way of masking that depicts the god.

Nwanchor, further buttresses the opinions of Enekwe. He argues that in some places, the wearing of mask is thought also to effect a degree of possession (Enekwe, 1987). Enekwe however interprets this kind of spirit possession in psychological terms, noting that the masker seems to be transmogrified into the figure he is representing' (Enekwe, 57). Once the mask is donned out and performing, both the masker and the audience tend to picture only the spirit it depicts and not the human actor. The psychological transformation may also be induced by some ritual performances on the player. According to Enekwe, before a performance, an animal that the particular spirit to be represented likes is usually identified by the *dibja* and sacrificed. Its blood is spilled on the mask to which magical objects and talismans are also attached. In some cases, a life cock is tied to the headpiece of the mask so that it dangles to death during the performance. This is intended to reinforce the power of the mask. When the masker has donned the mask, the *dibja* sprays some magical potion on him, saying incantations (Enekwe, 78). Enekwe maintained that some maskers claim that they are no longer themselves once the magical potion is sprayed on them, while others say that they begin to feel possessed by the spirit of the masquerade as soon as they don the mask.

Basically, the masker no longer does what he wants or goes where he wants. Nwanchor asserts that the masker exhibits unusual energy that necessitates his being controlled with a girdle tied around his waist. He may feel human emotions like hunger, anger, tiredness, pain and fear, but all these feelings are sublimated by the spiritual role he plays. Onunwa speaks of possession in terms of inspiration (Onuwa 1990). His study of spirit and possession in Igbo traditional religion is yoked exclusively to prophecy. Onuwa avers that a deity is believed to speak to the community through ordinary human agents - various categories of diviners, seers, prophets and soothsayers, as well as oracles.

Spirit-possession, properly understood, is believed to entail abnormal personal behaviour being interpreted by other members of a society as evidence that a spirit is controlling the person's action,

probably inhabiting his or her body (Onunwa, 296). According to Nwanchor, there is no clear indication that any abnormality occurred in the lives of the Igbo prophets studied by Onunwa - no ecstasy or the disordering of the prophet's consciousness arising from possible displacement of his or her spirit by the deity (Nwanchor, 75). In almost all the cases he studied, the inspired individual would pick up a metal gong and cry around the village with his or her gotten message. Spirit possession can occur in some societies or cases without obvious manifestation of ecstasy or abnormal behaviour. In this regard the distinction between a possessed person and other inspired votaries or intermediaries cannot be absolute (Lewis, 1986; Morris, 2006), since all involve some level of possession.

According to Nwanchor, spirits generally possess material beings or objects for the purpose of communication. Any person possessed becomes the spirit's agent or medium of manifesting its powers or actions. Sometimes such a person turns a sacred functionary for the spirit, but in some other cases mostly when it involves bad spirit possession, the possessed persons are merely the object of torment by dint of the powers or actions of the spirits manifesting in them. Morris (2006) noted that different kinds of spirits have the power to possess material objects for various purposes good or bad. It follows therefore that ancestral spirits, mythical cultural heroes, ghosts, nature spirits and many other kinds of deities can manifest their being and their activities in the material world order by possessing human beings, animals and various other material objects. Bad spirits also possess human beings, animals and other beings. Put differently, one and the same spirit can possess its objects for good or bad ends. Nwanchor pointed out that a typical Igbo example is the divination spirit, *Agwu*, which can grant creativity or healing powers to the one it possesses, as well as inflict such a one with madness if they should resist the call to its service (Nwanchor, 75).

Speaking on the concept of *Agwu* in Igbo mythology, Nwanchor argues that it is conceived ambivalently as spirit of divination and spirit of confusion. He noted that such ambivalence has been noted as the spirit of *Ekwensu* which is thought to be capable of doing good and depending on the context as promulgated by *Ekwunife*, *Metuh* and *Opata* in their discussions of the traditional Igbo mythology (*Ekwunife*, 1995, *Metuh*, 1999, *Opata*, 2005). According to them, for the traditional Igbo, this ambivalence is not scandalous because to them good and bad are seen as co-existing in the same reality; creativity and destructiveness may be achieved by the same agencies (*Nwoga*, 1984). *Ekwunife* on the other hand sees *Ekwensu* as a mysterious violent force that is perhaps naturally embedded in the nature of every human or spirit being, *Metuh* and *Opata* tend to view it as a deity whose violent spirit when aggravated can possess a man to instigate him to war. *Metuh* observes that this can be very useful during wars and *Ekwensu* is therefore invoked by warriors and head-hunters. A person possessed by *Ekwensu* becomes violent and daring, operating as it were under the control of the spirit of violence. Spirits that are viewed as intrinsically evil do also possess human beings. In ordinary parlance, mad people or those tormented by evil forces are said to be possessed by one demonic spirit or another. The Christian story of the Gerasene demoniac (Matt. 8: 28-34) is a classic example of evil spirit possession or the invasion of human personality by an evil spirit. The Igbo example of a bad spirit is the spirit of witchcraft, which can possess human agents to foment suffering and even death on members of the society (*Ekwunife*, 2011, *Offiong*, 1991, *Quarcoopome*, 1987).

#### On Containment

The concept of spirit embodiment can also occur through a process referred to as containment. Many African cultures believe that spirits

or spiritual forces can be housed within physical objects. Items such as works of art, icons, ceramic pots, gourds, bags, hollowed woods, caves, plates, and caps are often seen as vessels that can contain spiritual energy. In certain regions, individuals with special abilities or those who have gained mastery over specific spirits are thought to domesticate these forces, using them for either harmful or beneficial purposes. For example, Ezechi (2018) explains that the Odenigbo family of Ugwufo Amofiagu Affa is known for their control over the Harmattan wind, Uguru. They store this wind spirit in sealed pots or gourds. The wind is released by slightly opening the pot and directing it in a specific direction, with the extent of the opening determining the strength of the Harmattan. These containers are carefully kept out of reach from children or outsiders, as they are believed to hold the family's power to control the wind. Other African communities, such as the Mafa and Bulabay of northern Cameroon, and the Yungur of northeastern Nigeria, also use pots to trap spirits. When sealed, these pots are thought to preserve the spirits within. For the Yungur people, the pots represent not only the captured spirits but also serve as a source of new life created by the god Leura, according to Hackett.

The process of containing or imbuing physical objects or artworks with spiritual forces varies across cultures. Hackett notes that in Africa, works of art do not inherently possess spiritual power but must undergo an activation process. This often involves ritual sacrifice, which transforms a simple object, such as wood, into a powerful mask or statue. The activation of an object into a vessel for spiritual forces typically requires the intervention of a ritual expert who performs the necessary sacrifices. The diviner first identifies the spirit-force and the appropriate object for it to inhabit.

In broader African societies, the containment of spirits through objects is notably illustrated by the Kongo Minkisi (singular nkisi), or power figures, from the Kongo region of Zaire. Hackett, as cited in Ezechi (2018), explains that these wooden figures contain medicines placed in cavities carved into their heads, bellies, or between their legs. Often, mirrors are used to cover the area where the medicine is inserted. These figures, embodying spiritual forces or medicines, are treated as the physical embodiments of the spirits they contain. They are even referred to as human beings by the people, and they are believed to have the power to extract disease from the sick. This attribution of personhood to objects challenges European notions of the distinction between person and object, as these figures are crafted yet can be invoked to produce desired effects and may influence human behavior. This personification of the nkisi likely contributed to its condemnation as fetishism or idolatry by missionaries (Ezechi, 2018).

### Symbolization

Symbolization is the conscious act of the human imagination to represent spiritual forms in tangible ways. Unlike incarnation, reincarnation, or possession, where the spirit initiates its own embodiment, symbolization and containment are human-driven processes. Symbolization creates signs—sacred objects, music, words, actions, relationships, and other physical gestures—that allow humans to express the beliefs and ideas that shape their worldview. In theological terms, symbols are sacramental signs, as they not only represent the invisible but also make that presence tangible in the physical world for their users.

Humans have an innate tendency to draw analogies between unrelated things, representing one thing with another. As a symbolizing species, humans can transcribe abstract concepts into tangible forms using symbols. Among the Igbo, there is a strong inclination to perceive the invisible through the visible. The apparent

dualism between matter and spirit is reconciled in Igbo traditional religion using symbolism. Like other forms of possession, symbolism provides a means by which spirits can inhabit objects. In this way, artworks, sculptures, and other artistic signs

### The Implications of Reincarnation in African worldviews and Ethical Values

The question of the separability of African mythologies from African mode of thinking and knowing has been of great concern in African philosophy. This is especially due to its ethnocentric nature. Though, the radical African philosophers would attempt the exoneration ethnocentricity from the features of African philosophy by insisting it is a part of the European derogatory projects on Africa initiated by Placid Tempels. However, undeniable is the fact that traditional African way of knowing and questioning is interwoven with the African cultural myths and folklores. It is based on this medium that Africans interpret certain phenomena especially those beyond immediate and physical examination.

Further then is the question of how as the concept of reincarnation added to this symbol of knowing and how it has shaped African style of knowing in respect to the metaphysical and anthropological analysis of man. Reincarnation supposes that physical extinction or death does not guarantee the very end of man. This is to say, the soul becomes an immortal substance or substratum against the Aristotelian physical substratum that remains after every other physical change. Metaphysically, this implies that the physical body is not all that there is about man and the very essence of human existence is not entirely tried to this. This explains the pertinent need for a rebirth to accomplish unfinished task perhaps left in a previous life.

On epistemological perspective, knowing in this context transcends perceptions. This is the very fact why some African traditions that hold the believe in reincarnation often visit the native doctors or consult their deities and shrines to ascertain the reasons behind certain phenomena especially when it has to do with the problem of reincarnation, ogbanje or abiku as there are in Igbo and Yoruba traditional religion. Knowing therefore is not limited to observable facts, though these observations could spur intricate questions which would lead to the consultation of the diviners. However, their explanations are not limited to them, and solutions are often things of a term that extend beyond logical reasoning. This supposes a system of knowing that is anti-skepticism. It does not accommodate scientific and logical accuracy. Arguments leveled against the concept of ogbanje in Igbo mythology for instance is that most of the infants who are the supposed ogbanje are rather sicklers and SS carriers. This is a fact ascertained by medical professionals. The idea of reincarnation also supposes a system of knowing that is based on trust and testimonies. Many of the phenomena surrounding reincarnation are majorly conveyed in testimonies and folklores. This style makes truth exclusive in such a way that it does not limit truth to scientific provable experiments but also testimonies that are based on trusted authorities. These authorities usually elders and aged members of the community, the diviner and the chief priest who have the capacity to interpret phenomena surrounding reincarnation and cases like it.

Reincarnation in African context also promulgate relativism as a method of knowing. This is because even within the African context, different traditional cultures have distinct interpretation of phenomena especially as it relates to afterlife and reincarnation. Relativism which supposes that there are truth relative or exclusive to certain cultures due to contextual experiences becomes a useful method of ascertaining the truth. Just as we saw the dichotomy

between karma and Asian Hindu and Buddhist concept. Reincarnation becomes relative to the Africans though there might be iota of similarities in their principles but the nitty-gritty of the truth are not entirely the same. This is applicable also in the belief in afterlife and the compositions of man. Classical Western philosophy proposes that man is composed mainly of mind and body as in the argument of skeptical existentialist like Heidegger and Sartre. For them, the very end of life is death. However, naïve westernism as in the ancient and medieval thought accept the existence of an immortal soul which exist after death. These philosophies points to the fact as supposed by reincarnation in the African context that truth is encompassing. It could be objective sometimes it could be relative to epochs and cultures based on contextual experiences.

Morally speaking, the principles of reincarnation has shaped African values, conducts and norms. The question of do right and avoid wrongdoing is a common ethical dilemma across human society. However, each society has bases on which they enact social norms. African beliefs in reincarnation add to African strong advocacy to good and moral living in order that one may join the ancestral realm and be reborn into the family. The reason according to Sophie Oluwole is that anyone who engages in actions or activities that are designated taboos in the Yoruba context is punished by the gods and such a person is to die a shameful death. Thus, anyone who is commonly known to have died on account of his wrongdoing might not have any child named after him within the family or community. Such a person would not be remembered as ancestor during divination. It is based on this that every traditional African person strive towards a life of virtue which could be considered in his relationship with people, level of possession and how generous the individual is, his participation in family and communal activities. These gestures shape the values of good living within the African context.

### Evaluation

The puzzling nature of the fate of man afterlife continues to be a topic of concern both within religious perspective and philosophical inquiries. The diverse views across cultures and societies points to the limited nature of human knowledge. Reincarnation within the context of African mythology is far from a strong debate. However, the advocates have strong testimonies build on weak assumptions to back up their claims. This makes it a bit difficult to exterminate their assumptions owing to the fact that truth is dynamic. Philosophical and scientific assumptions do fail quite often.

Nonetheless, many of the assumptions of reincarnation could be as result of ignorance, fear caused by social pressures, environmental limitations and some other factors. Reincarnation could be viewed from an optimistic perspective because of its social effect on the members of the African communities. How it has shaped African values and moral living. Some could say that it is a social construct, its positive effects could be that of orderly living. However, it causes limitations to inquiries if knowledge could base just on folklores and testimonies. It denies the traditional African person the capacity to ascertain the truth of matters beyond succor to mythological interpretations. It is based on this that Africa traditional inquiry is designated ethnocentric. Though, scholars could argue that the problem of reincarnation is not limited to Africa. Thus, such assumptions could be tagged derogatory on Africans worldview. The pertinent thing is that culture is dynamic and evolve. Thus, the contemporary African inquiries have more at advantage to explore the intricacy of certain phenomena like reincarnation within the African context. Technology is at the disposal of the world globally. Thus, technological innovations could be employed to examining the

various claims of reincarnations especially as regards to visual recordings like pictures, videos etc. This could go a long way to ascertain the truth of myths like reincarnation and karma.

### Conclusion

Reincarnation as seen within the context of this paper is central to traditional African religious belief. It is central due to its strong values to communal and ancestral homogeneity. During exploration, we traced reincarnation back to platonic theory of forms and anamnesis, to Asian karma, Atman Brahman, Samsara etc. and down to reincarnation, ogbanje, abiku in African context. This points also to a point of certain objectivism and the dynamic nature of truth and knowledge. They may not be entirely the same, but similarities purveys that there is an intercultural dimension to knowledge. This concept as portrayed by this paper has greatly shaped African worldviews, ethical and moral norm. This paper also pointed out the similarities between reincarnation and karma and how the principles of reincarnation originated even in the ancient western philosophies. It is able to point out how this concept has shaped African worldviews in a holistic manner that is able to capture the physical cum metaphysical dimensions of existence in one phase. Conclusively, it advocates for advanced scientific and technological inquiries to topics of such mythical natures in African traditional pedagogy.

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