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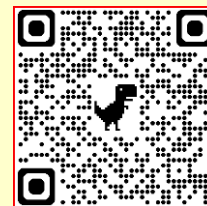
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## The Interconnectedness of Life, Death, and the Afterlife in African Cosmologies

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### ABSTRACT

*This article investigates the African cosmological notions of life, death, and life after death, presenting a perspective fundamentally different from Western binary understandings. In African thought, death is not viewed as a final cessation but as a natural transition of the spirit and essence from the visible to the invisible realm, joining the community of ancestors. This understanding posits death as an "interruption" of earthly dwelling rather than a termination, emphasizing the continuous spiritual connection between the living and the deceased. The article highlights the African worldview's concept of three distinct yet interdependent phases of selfhood: spiritual selfhood preceding conception, social or experiential selfhood during earthly life, and ancestral selfhood following death. These phases are not isolated but exist in a collaborative and collective manner, underscoring the interconnectedness of individual existence within the broader cosmic cycle. Death is thus understood as a transformative transition into ancestral selfhood, where the deceased become part of the "living dead," actively participating in and influencing the affairs of the living. This perspective emphasizes a unitary conception of reality where life and death coexist harmoniously, with death marking the start of another stage of being and a form of collective immortality. The article concludes by highlighting that while reincarnation is a related concept, the African understanding of life after death primarily emphasizes the continuous presence, remembrance, and reverence of the spirits of the deceased, who remain vital members of the community across realms.*

### Introduction

In the vast and diverse landscape of global philosophical and religious thought, the concepts of life, death, and what lies beyond have occupied a central position, shaping human understanding of existence and purpose. While Western perspectives often frame death as a definitive and often fearful endpoint, distinct from the realm of the living, many African cosmologies offer a profoundly different and more integrated understanding. This article researches into the rich and varied African cosmological notions of life, death, and life after death, examining how these concepts are interwoven into a continuous and dynamic cycle of being.

Moving beyond a binary understanding of existence, African thought often views death not as an annihilation but as a natural and inevitable transition within a larger cosmic shade. This transition is understood as the movement of the individual's spirit and essence (the 'onye' the 'mmadu' as a unity of 'Obi' (soul), 'ahu' (body), and 'Mmuo' (Spirit) in Igbo tradition) (Onwuatuegwu, 2010) from the visible, material world to an invisible, spiritual realm, where they join the revered community of ancestors. This perspective fundamentally reshapes the meaning of death, transforming it from an end into a crucial stage in the ongoing journey of the individual and the collective. As noted by Mbiti (1969), "death is not a destruction of life, but a departure".

This investigation will illuminate the interconnectedness inherent in African worldviews, where the spiritual and material realms are not seen as separate but as dynamically interacting, interpenetrating, intermingling and inter-permeating forces. We will examine the concept of death as an "interruption" rather than a "termination" of earthly dwelling, highlighting the enduring spiritual presence of the deceased in the affairs of the living (Ogugua, 2003). Furthermore, the article will delve into the tripartite understanding of selfhood within the African life cycle: the spiritual selfhood preceding birth, the social or experiential selfhood of earthly life, and the ancestral selfhood that follows death. In understanding these distinct yet interdependent phases, we gain insight into the African belief that life experiences, including death, are not isolated events but integral components of a continuous and collaborative existence. Wiredu (1996) emphasizes this continuity, stating that "the dead are not completely lost to the living; they continue to influence the affairs of the living".

Definitely, this article aims to provide a comprehensive introduction to the African cosmological perspective on life, death, and the vibrant reality of life after death. Through the exploration of the notions of ancestral presence, the continuity of communication between realms, and the understanding of death as a transformative transition rather than an end, we can appreciate the depth and philosophical sophistication of African thought regarding the fundamental mysteries of existence. This journey into African cosmology offers a compelling alternative to Western paradigms, revealing a worldview where death is not the silence of the void but a doorway to a new and vital form of being within the ever-unfolding cosmic dance.

## Literature Review

The exploration of African cosmological perspectives on life, death, and the afterlife is a rich and complex field, drawing upon diverse anthropological, theological, philosophical, and historical sources. This literature review aims to synthesize key scholarly contributions that illuminate the various understandings of existence and transition prevalent across various African cultures. The focus is on works that challenge Western binary interpretations of death and highlight the enduring significance of ancestral continuities.

Early anthropological studies, while sometimes marred by colonial biases, provided initial insights into African beliefs surrounding death and the spirit world. Works by figures like E.E. Evans-Pritchard such as "Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande" offered detailed ethnographic accounts of specific cultural practices and beliefs related to death, mourning, and the role of spirits, though often within functionalist frameworks that may have underplayed the deeper philosophical underpinnings (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). Similarly, Meyer Fortes' work on the Tallensi, precisely "The Dynamics of Clanship Among the Tallensi" explored the intricate relationship between kinship, ritual, and the veneration of ancestors (Fortes, 1945).

More recent scholarship has moved towards more refined and insider perspectives. John S. Mbiti in his book "African Religions and Philosophy" is a foundational figure in this field, offering a comprehensive overview of African religious thought. Mbiti's work is particularly significant for introducing the concept of the "living dead," emphasizing that death is not a complete break but a transition into a state of active participation in the lives of the living. He highlights the importance of remembrance and ritual in maintaining the connection between the living and the ancestors, thus challenging the Western notion of a definitive end to existence

at death (Mbiti, 1969).

Building on Mbiti's work, scholars like Laurenti Magesa in his work "African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life" delve deeper into the ethical and philosophical dimensions of African cosmologies. Magesa emphasizes the concept of "abundant life" as the ultimate goal, a state that encompasses both the living and the ancestral realms. He underscores the communal nature of existence and the vital role of ancestors in ensuring the well-being and continuity of the community (Magesa, 1997).

The concept of "interruption" rather than "termination" of earthly dwelling is a recurring theme in the literature, particularly in analyses of death rituals and burial practices. Works by scholars such as Kwame Gyekye in "An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme" explores the philosophical underpinnings of these practices, arguing that they reflect a worldview where the spirit is seen as distinct from but connected to the physical body. Gyekye's work on Akan philosophy, for instance, sheds light on the belief in the "okra" (soul or spirit) and its journey after death (Gyekye, 1987).

The tripartite understanding of selfhood – spiritual, social, and ancestral – is another key concept explored in the literature. Scholars like V.Y. Mudimbe in "The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge" have critically examined the historical and philosophical frameworks used to understand African thought (Mudimbe, 1988), while works focusing on specific cultures, such as those on Yoruba philosophy, detail the concepts of "ori" (head or destiny) and the complex relationship between the living, the ancestors, and the divine. These studies highlight the fluid and interconnected nature of identity across different realms of existence.

Furthermore, the literature addresses the distinction between the concept of the "living dead" and reincarnation. While reincarnation exists in some African traditions, the emphasis in the literature is often on the enduring presence and influence of the ancestral spirits who remain connected to their descendants and the community. Scholars like Emmanuel Martey in "African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation" explores the theological implications of these beliefs, particularly in the context of Christian-African dialogue, highlighting the points of convergence and divergence between African traditional religions and imported faiths (Martey, 1993). More contemporary scholarship continues to explore the dynamic nature of these beliefs in the face of globalization and social change. Researchers are examining how traditional beliefs are being adapted and reinterpreted in urban settings and among diaspora communities. This includes studies on the role of rituals, storytelling, and artistic expressions in maintaining ancestral connections (Mbiti, 1969). Scholars like John Mbiti have extensively documented the persistence and adaptation of African religious and philosophical systems in contemporary contexts, highlighting how traditional practices are maintained and reinterpreted in new environments (Mbiti, 1969). Similarly, others have explored the role of cultural practices, such as rituals and storytelling, in preserving ancestral links among diaspora communities, demonstrating the resilience of these beliefs despite geographical displacement (Gyekye, 1995).

In summary, the literature on African cosmologies regarding life, death, and ancestral continuities presents a compelling narrative of a worldview where existence is seen as a continuous flow rather than a linear progression with a definitive end. Key themes include the transformative nature of death, the vital role of ancestors as the "living dead," the interconnectedness of the living and the spiritual

realms, and the communal nature of existence (Tempels, 1959). Placide Tempels' seminal work, *Bantu Philosophy*, was instrumental in articulating these concepts, emphasizing the dynamic and interconnected nature of being in African thought (Tempels, 1959). This body of work collectively challenges Western assumptions about death and provides a rich framework for understanding the enduring significance of ancestral heritage in African thought and practice. Future research can further explore the diversity of these beliefs across the continent and the ways in which they continue to evolve in contemporary society.

### **Death as an Interruption and not an Annihilation of Earthly Life**

Within the rich fabric of African thought, the concepts of life, death, and what transpires after death are interwoven into a holistic and dynamic cosmology. Unlike Western perspectives that often view death as a stark and definitive end, African worldviews understand it as a natural transition, a movement from one state of being to another within a continuous cosmic cycle. The human person as a union of soul and body, at death, is transformed or translated into a spirit being (Onwuatuegwu, 2021). This understanding is deeply rooted in the belief that the spirit and essence of a person are not annihilated upon death but rather migrate to a spiritual realm, joining the community of ancestors. Hence, Onwuatuegwu in the above line of thought posits that death is the natural transition whereby the spirit and the essence of personhood is not destroyed or terminated but migrated to dwell in the realm of the spirits with the ancestors, thereby transiting from the visible to the invisible or spiritual ontology (Onwuatuegwu, 2022).

This transition from the visible, material world to the invisible, spiritual ontology is known as death. Consequently, for many Africans, death is not the termination of earthly existence but rather an interruption of one's earthly dwelling (Onwuatuegwu, 2010). The individual being of an African is intrinsically linked to this spiritual connectedness with the world of the living dead, recognizing their ongoing presence and influence in the affairs of the living. This profound sense of interconnectedness underscores a fundamental tenet of African cosmology: the unity of reality, where the spiritual and material realms are not seen as separate but as harmonious and interdependent forces.

### **Three Phases of Selfhood**

Central to the understanding of death as an Interruption of earthly dwelling is the African worldview's articulation of three distinct phases of selfhood within the cycle of a human being's life (Onwuatuegwu, 2022). These phases, while distinct, are not isolated or autonomous but rather exist in an interdependent and interrelated manner, coexisting collaboratively and collectively. To comprehend a particular selfhood, one must consider its relational connectedness to other forces of cosmic life. Life experiences and developmental phases, including death, are thus understood not as separate events but as integral parts of a continuous process.

The first phase of selfhood is the "spiritual selfhood". This phase is believed to have its inception prior to the conception of the person, beginning within the ancestral spirits. This notion allows for the possibility of reincarnation, where the essence of ancestral spirits can be reborn into new life. This initial phase highlights the pre-existence of the individual's spiritual essence, linking them directly to the ancestral lineage and the broader spiritual realm.

The second phase is the "social or experiential selfhood". This phase commences at conception, marking the beginning of the individual's earthly journey. It encompasses the introduction of a newly born

child into the immediate community and extends throughout their life until death. This phase is characterized by the individual's interactions, experiences, and development within the social and material world. It is the realm of lived experience, shaped by relationships, cultural practices, and the challenges and joys of earthly existence.

The third and final phase is the "ancestral selfhood". This phase follows upon the demise of a person, upon the occurrence of death (Nsamenang, 2006). When someone dies, they are believed to transcend to the spirit world, joining the company of the living dead or ancestors. These ancestors are not merely historical figures but are understood to actively participate in the lives of the living. They are revered for their wisdom, protection, and guidance, and are considered vital members of the community, albeit in a different ontological state.

These three selfhoods, though distinct in their manifestation and location within the cosmic cycle, are fundamentally interconnected. The spiritual selfhood provides the initial essence, the social selfhood allows for earthly experience and community engagement, and the ancestral selfhood represents a continuation of being in a spiritual form, maintaining a dynamic relationship with the living. This interdependence means that a person's life and death are not solely individual events but are deeply embedded within the collective experience and the ongoing flow of cosmic life. This understanding of interconnectedness and the flow of life is a central theme in many African philosophical and religious systems (Mbiti, 1969).

The transition to ancestral selfhood signifies a movement to a state of collective immortality. The deceased enters a community of spirits, the living dead, where they continue to exist and engage in relationships within the world of animated beings. The communication and connectedness between the living and the living dead are considered continuous and unbreakable (Mbiti, 1969). Indigenous Africans and their communities believe that the deceased still live in the ontology of the spirit realm with other invisible and intangible beings, actively participating in an evolving state of existence (Tempels, 1959). This concept highlights the belief in a dynamic afterlife where ancestors remain involved in the lives of the living.

### **Unitary Conception of Reality**

Following the African unitary conception of reality, death and life are not considered as two separate, opposing phases. Instead, there is a harmonious and interdependent coexistence between these two life forces. Dying is not viewed as an end but as a transcendence into further processes of development, inseparable from the stages of life development. African cosmology posits dying as a remarkable transition into a distinct phase of being, a shift in form and location within the continuous flow of existence. This perspective is deeply ingrained in many African worldviews, where the boundaries between the living and the dead are permeable and fluid (Mbiti, 1969).

From a cosmological and ontological perspective in African philosophy, death does not imply the termination of life. It simply marks the beginning of another stage of being (Tempels, 1959). While the concept of reincarnation exists and allows for the continuation of the life process in some traditions, the African understanding of life after death should not be solely misunderstood as a return to their families in the form of their descendants. The life after death, as posited, emphasizes distinct forms of remembering, reverencing, and acknowledging the continuous and unending presence of the spirits of the dead. These spiritual beings, recognized

as the living dead, maintain a vital connection with the living, influencing their lives and ensuring the continuity of the community across generations and realms of existence (Mbiti, 1969). This perspective highlights a profound understanding of life as a perpetual cycle, where death is merely a doorway to another form of being within an interconnected and dynamic cosmos.

### Evaluation and Conclusion

In conclusion, this exploration of African cosmological notions of life, death, and life after death reveals a profound and integrated understanding of existence that stands in stark contrast to Western paradigms. Far from being a fearful or definitive end, death in many African worldviews is a transformative transition, a natural and necessary step in the continuous journey of the individual and the collective (Mbiti, 1969). The concept of death as an "interruption" rather than a "termination" of earthly dwelling underscores the enduring presence of the spiritual self, which moves to the invisible realm to join the revered community of ancestors (Tempels, 1959).

This understanding is intrinsically linked to the tripartite concept of selfhood – spiritual, social, and ancestral – which highlights the interconnectedness and continuity of being across different phases of existence. The transition to ancestral selfhood is not a descent into oblivion but an elevation to a position of influence and continued participation in the affairs of the living. The ancestors, as the "living dead," remain integral members of the community, providing guidance, protection, and a link to the spiritual realm (Mbiti, 1969).

The African perspective on life after death is not solely focused on individual salvation or transcendence but emphasizes the collective and collaborative nature of existence. The remembrance, reverence, and continued interaction with the ancestors are vital components of maintaining social order, cultural continuity, and spiritual well-being (Mbiti, 1969). While the concept of reincarnation exists in some African traditions, the primary emphasis in the understanding of life after death lies in the enduring presence and influence of the ancestral spirits within the community.

Finally, investigating into African cosmologies on life, death, and ancestral continuities offers a valuable and enriching perspective on fundamental human questions. It challenges us to move beyond a binary understanding of life and death and to consider a worldview where the spiritual and material realms are dynamically intertwined, and where death is not the silence of the void but a vibrant and vital stage in the ongoing cosmic dance. This understanding provides a powerful framework for navigating the complexities of existence, emphasizing the enduring bonds between the living and the dead and the profound significance of ancestral heritage in shaping the present and the future.

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