

**INNOCENT ONYEWUENYI’S “PHILOSOPHICAL RE-APPRAISAL OF  
THE AFRICAN BELIEF IN REINCARNATION”: A CONVERSATIONAL  
STUDY**

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**Abstract**

Reincarnation has received substantial treatment in African philosophy. The dominant view of African scholars and researchers on the subject is that it is a belief that prevails in African culture. The task of this paper is to revisit Innocent Onyewuenyi’s “philosophical reappraisal” of this African belief. Onyewuenyi’s position is that the African communion with ancestors and their influence on their living descendant’s has been incorrectly labeled “reincarnation” by Western anthropologists. But whereas Onyewuenyi portrays the problem as being one of *semantics*, I shall in this paper argue that the challenge of explaining African cultural phenomenon is one of *hermeneutics*. The question is a question of hermeneutics, because its focus is not on whether ancestors are metaphysical entities, but rather on what they *mean* within African existence. The paper adopts the conversational method of African philosophy endorsed by the Conversational School of Philosophy. It aims to show how conversationalism as a procedure of philosophical discourse plays out within the context of its specific canons. In the final analysis the paper promotes the thesis that there is not a belief in reincarnation in African culture strictly speaking, but a belief in the *regeneration of life*. For the African, life is not cyclical, it is rather eternal.

**Keywords:** Innocent Onyewuenyi, reincarnation, conversationalism, hermeneutics, African metaphysics, living-dead, regeneration of life.

**Introduction**

The approach of this paper is conversational. Technically, it is possible for philosophers to adopt several styles or procedures in a specific work. In this present effort I am going to engage Innocent Onyewuenyi in a “Conversation”. Conversational thinking is the new approach to philosophical inquiry articulated by Jonathan O. Chimakonam. In inaugurating the conversational school of African Philosophy and its method of conversationalism, Chimakonam explains thus:

To converse or hold a conversation literally means to have an informal exchange of ideas or information. Here, we employ the term in a slightly more technical sense. Philosophical conversation for us is not a mere informal exchange of ideas or a simple informal dialogue between two interlocutors; it is rather a strictly formal intellectual exercise propelled by philosophical reasoning in which critical and rigorous questioning creatively unveils new concepts from old ones. (CHIMAKONAM 2015<sup>a</sup>, 19)

Furthermore he clarifies that.

By conversational philosophy we mean that type of philosophical engagement between individual thinkers with one another, on phenomenological issues of concern, or on one another's thoughts where thoughts are unfolded from concepts or from concepts of concepts. Conversational philosophy is therefore more than a dialogue; it is an encounter between proponents and opponents, or a proponent and an opponent engaged in contestations and protestations of ideas and thoughts. (CHIMAKONAM 2015<sup>a</sup>, 20)

It must be noted that in characterizing conversationalism, not all philosophic engagements qualify as conversational thinking. Any discourse in African philosophy or African studies can only be said to be an essay in conversational thinking if it is guided by the canons of conversational philosophy<sup>1</sup>. It is a rule-guided encounter between proponents (Nwa-nsa) and opponents (Nwa-nju), engaged in protestations and contestations of thoughts in place and in space (CHIMAKONAM 2015<sup>b</sup>). In the present context I represent the Nwa-nju engaged in conversation with Innocent Onyewuenyi, the Nwa-nsa. It need not be gainsaid that the greatest compliment one can pay a philosopher and any scholar for that matter is to criticize his work. It is my hope that Nwa-nsa Innocent Onyewuenyi will join the fray in further extending the conversations on the idea of reincarnation in African philosophy. Indeed, it was Nwa-nsa who first requested this conversation, because in concluding the work, which is the subject of our discourse, Onyewuenyi submits as follows:

Instead of saying that a newborn child is a 'reincarnate' of an ancestor, we should rather say that he is the "vital influence" or the "life-share" or "personal ray", or "living-perpetuation" of the ancestor. If these suggested terminologies seem inadequate to the reader, I invite him to suggest an alternative, so that with the benefit of his collaboration, we can approach more nearly to perfection and exactitude. (1996, 44)

Onyewuenyi's article entitled "African Belief in Reincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal" first appeared in the *International Philosophical Quarterly* (I.P.Q) volume 22, 1982. Its republished version appeared in 1996 and presents the discourse in thirteen sub-sections, in forty-five pages. For our purposes, I shall apply my

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<sup>1</sup> The canons of conversationalism as articulated by Chimakonam (2015) are eight and interconnected. They include: critical conversation, transformative indigenization, noetic africanization, moderate decolonization, constructive modernization, non-veneration of authorities, checking perverse dialogue and theoretic interrogation. Part of the aim of this work is to show how conversationalism as a procedure plays out within the context of these canons.

preferred styles in the interrogation of Onyewuenyi's thoughts in each of the thirteen sub-sections.

### **The Preface: The Motivation and Justification of Onyewuenyi's Effort**

Onyewuenyi's article was apparently ground-breaking when it appeared in the United States in 1982. According to the author many African scholars/researchers studying in Europe or America at the time based their projects and researches on this paper (1996, x). But because many African Universities and Libraries do not subscribe to the I.P.Q, scholars in Africa could hardly access the article. The topic concerns reincarnation.

Onyewuenyi laments the "unfortunate" situation where "educated" Africans, from reading the works of Western anthropologists, ethnologists and administrators, have internalized and accepted that Africans believe in reincarnation. These erroneous belief affects their lives, informs some of their actions and practices, and they teach and preach it.

He contends that such scholars have been misled. He laments, "This is an example of how abjectly a people can be caused to become complicit in their own degradation, by accepting uncritically a foreign imposition and thereby undermining their cultural identity (1996, x). Onyewuenyi's thesis is clearly stated thus:

The term "reincarnation" is not an African word. It has a definite meaning in the English language but its adoption to make concrete and real what otherwise is abstract and immaterial, namely-cultural concept of Africans in connection with the 'return' of the dead forebears in the newly-born-is grossly erroneous and misleading. It is as incorrect to say that Africans believe in reincarnation as it is to hold that African religion is ancestor-worship. (1996, x)

The topic indeed holds worldwide interest, but of course in the way Onyewuenyi has contextualized it, it really should concern Africa and African scholars intimately, because they are the ones whose cultural concept regarding their ancestors' influence on their living descendants, has been incorrectly labeled "reincarnation" by Western anthropologists and administrators. That is, if Onyewuenyi is correct.

Onyewuenyi was encouraged and motivated to republish the essay in Africa in its present form as part of his contributions to the African struggle for mental liberation from "the shackles of cultural imprisonment and distortions imposed on them by the misrepresentations of Western scholars" (1996, x-xi).

Is Onyewuenyi correct? It would be pre-mature to judge from these prefatory submissions of his, but it is clear upon analysis that Onyewuenyi is making too many propositional claims simultaneously thus compounding complications for what may have been a simpler or less complex problem of contemporary African Philosophy. Let us call the "problem" before us "the question of reincarnation in contemporary African Philosophy".

In the way Onyewuenyi contextualizes or formulates the problem, he simultaneously raises semantic, metaphysical, ideological, psychological and ethno-

philosophical dimensions of the problem. We shall see whether he succeeds to address those perspectives which he perhaps unwittingly has raised. At the conversational level, it is apparent that Nwa-nsa's prefatory reflections have provided the direction that Nwa-nju must engage, in the necessary critical conversation and theoretic interrogation<sup>2</sup>. All the other elements of conversationalism will manifest as the conversation ensues.

### **The Introduction: The Objectives of Onyewuenyi's Effort**

The aims and objectives of Onyewuenyi's effort are highlighted in the introductory section of the essay. These are clearly and expressly stated as follows:

- (i) This paper is an attempt to apply philosophical investigation and reflection on African belief in reincarnation which I regard as an unreflective common man's view; (1996, 13)
- (ii) It is an attempt to discover the inherent inconsistencies in such a belief (1996, 13)
- (iii) It is also to redefine the African concept of reincarnation in line with African ontology or theory of being, so that the term "reincarnation"... may be given appropriate meaning or be dropped entirely. (1996, 13)

Part of the strategy Onyewuenyi adopts to enable him accomplish his set objectives is to, first, consider and determine what constitutes the task of philosophy. On this point Onyewuenyi submits that:

The task of philosophy is not to throw the common man's view into the dustbin mainly because it is unreflective. Philosophical investigation and reflection is supposed to discover and find out the inherent difficulties in the common man's view, redefine, refine and remodel them. (1996, 13)

For Onyewuenyi, belief in reincarnation for an African is an "unreflective common man's view". At the analytical level, with regards to the task of philosophy, I am in agreement with Onyewuenyi, because, indeed, in philosophy, we learn to identify and think carefully about our most basic concepts, ideas, beliefs and theories. We look behind our everyday "common man" concerns to examine the systems and structures which support our thinking and beliefs, and which ordinarily we take for granted, so as to test their soundness and veracity.

At the conversational level, Nwa-nju observes that one of the sources that Nwa-nsa made reference to was John S. Mbiti's famous book [African Religions and Philosophy] (1969). A reading of that book reveals that Mbiti is convinced that one of the important pillars of traditional African religions is a belief in reincarnation and transmigration of souls (MBITI 1969, 85, 118, 120, 133, 149, 164, 183). Throughout

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<sup>2</sup> Critical conversation and theoretic interrogation are essential canons of conversationalism

Nwa-nsa's philosophical reappraisal of the belief in reincarnation there is no point where he specifically takes on Mbiti in view of refining, redefining or remodeling his (Mbiti's) supposedly 'erroneous' views.

Nwa-nsa's second strategy is the attempt to compare the structure and syntax of an European language with that of an African language. In considering only one example—the word 'God' in the English language and its translation in the Yoruba—is it sufficient and justified for Nwa-nsa to conclude that "[F]or in African Language words cannot become stereotyped a priori in their meaning but are constantly being reinterpreted and charged with new meaning"? (1996, 13).

What is suggested here is that there is instability in the syntax, vocabulary and structure of African languages. This cannot be true of all African languages, and there are numerous languages and dialects in Africa. It may be true of the Yoruba language which Nwa-nsa applies in illustration, but definitely not true of all African languages. On this matter of African languages Nwa-nsa cannot speak for Africa, and Yoruba cannot be the African model if as it is suggested the language lacks stability in its syntax, vocabulary and structure.

Such instability is what gives rise to the multiple problems of ambiguity, opacity, indeterminacy and fallacies which characterize our use of words and undermine focused argumentations and discourse. As G. O. Ozumba has noted, in philosophy of language, we insist that, "for words, sentences to have meaning (semantics), they must follow rules (syntax), pronounced correctly (phonetics) and must have a definite sense and reference" (18). Ozumba says that "the end of philosophy of language is to ensure clarity, distinctness and cogency in our picture of reality through language" (18). This is also the goal of Analytic Philosophy.

However, to close the introductory sub-section Onyewuenyi makes submission to the effect that:

"Reincarnation" is an European word which conveys a definite constant concept. It would be erroneous, therefore, to limit African interpretations of concepts which explain the vital influences of the dead forebears on the living, and for which there are no proper translations in English languages, to the stable concept of reincarnation. It is as incorrect to say that Africans believe in reincarnation as it is to say that African religion is animism... (1996, 14)

But what is this thing called reincarnation? That is the concern of Onyewuenyi in the following sub-section.

### **What is Reincarnation?: Onyewuenyi's Conceptual Clarification**

In conceptualizing "reincarnation" Onyewuenyi proceeds by tracing the etymology of the word. The word is derived from two Latin words: *re* meaning "again", and *incarnare* meaning "to enter into the body" (1996, 16). Onyewuenyi makes no effort to analyze this etymological insight further. But what is suggested here is that *something* enters the body again. What it is, the etymology of the word does not

inform. It is like defining philosophy by the etymology of the word. The word is derived from two Greek words: *Philo* meaning “love”, and *Sophia* meaning “wisdom”. Philosophy is then understood as the “love of wisdom”. But does philosophy defined as “love of wisdom” reveal anything significant about the nature and character of philosophy? Well, perhaps, little. Come to think of it, is the phrase “to enter the body again” synonymous with reincarnation? If the answer to this interrogative is in the affirmative, so when a person who is healed of a malady is re-afflicted by the same malady can we say reincarnation has taken place? No!

However, Onyewuenyi proffers a definition of reincarnation. He states: “It is simply the theory that when the soul separates from the body at death, it informs another body for another span of earthly life” (1996, 16). This is the classical understanding of the concept of reincarnation and extant literature on the subject affirm this conception. However, it must be noted that the reference to *soul* is in respect to *human* soul, a person’s soul. To incarnate is usually in respect of human persons, whose souls after death, return into this world to live again in a new body and continue his or her earthly existence. Analytically, I have no objections to Onyewuenyi’s position in this regard.

But it must be pointed out that if this is the classic conception of reincarnation then Onyewuenyi may have to rethink his view that reincarnation conveys a definite, constant and stable concept (1996, 14). It does not. That is the reason different cultures view its details differently. In fact, that is the reason reincarnation has different variations. Onyewuenyi, acknowledges this fact when he states that, “It has different variations like metempsychosis or transmigration of souls where the soul of a person informs an animal or tree. The soul may enter its human tenement from the ghost realm, the tree world or the animal kingdom” (1996, 16). At the conversational level Nwa-nsa will have to engage further on these variations of reincarnation. Which is the bone of contention: reincarnation, metempsychosis or transmigration? Where lies the stability or the definiteness of meaning of the concept of “reincarnation” Nwa-nsa imputed? In the next sub-section Onyewuenyi is concerned with “Instances of Belief in Reincarnation”.

### **Instances of Belief in Reincarnation: Onyewuenyi’s Global Examples**

Onyewuenyi’s aim in this sub-section is to establish the point that “belief in reincarnation is attested to by all known world cultures”. I have pointed out earlier that different cultures view its details differently. Onyewuenyi employs several illustrations, beginning with Pythagoras of Samos who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C and founded a Philosophico-religious society. He believed in the *transmigration* of souls or in “being born again.” He taught his followers to abstain from animal flesh on the grounds that there was a kinship between men and animals, and “for fear that the soul of one’s friend might be inhabiting the body of some animal killed for the table” (1996, 16-17).

This is a specific reference to the variant of reincarnation that is also known as transmigration of the soul. From this description of the Pythagorean attitude, what

is also suggested is that the Pythagoreans also subscribed to a belief in metempsychosis. Metempsychosis has been explained as referring to “a process of changing a person’s soul at will in order to acquire the characteristics of the preferred object (or animal) that the new soul represents” (OJONG 2009, 117).

The Greeks and the Western world also sustain a belief in reincarnation and as Onyewuenyi explains, “body-soul dualism is a datum” (1996, 17). According to him:

Every living human being is made up of body and soul, the material and the spiritual. When death strikes, the soul leaves the body and either incarnates another body or goes to the house of Hades to receive reward or punishment for its actions an earth. (1996, 17)

This is to say that European culture ancient and contemporary expresses some belief in reincarnation.

Onyewuenyi also informs us that the “Christian New Testament records instances of Jewish belief in reincarnation” (1996, 17). Several biblical stories affirm this fact. Likewise among the Hindu’s and a great part of the Oriental world the fact remains that reincarnation is a theory of life accepted without question. It is known in Hinduism as *samsara*, (EDET 2012, 10). Done with exposing the pervasive extent of the belief globally, Onyewuenyi’s next task is to examine how the belief functions in the African setting.

### **African Belief in Reincarnation: Onyewuenyi’s “Common Man’s Unreflective Views”**

African cultures tend to accept the belief in reincarnation as a “fact, and it is Onyewuenyi’s task in this section to give some instances of this “common man’s unreflective views on reincarnation”, and also consider the “reasons” usually given to justify or confirm the belief. Onyewuenyi specifically draws examples from his Igbo culture with which he is familiar. According to Onyewuenyi, the Igbo word for reincarnation is *Ilọ uwa*, which means “a return to the world” (1996, 20). The Igbo convince themselves that a person returning to the world, to life after death, exhibits concrete signs of his former person in the form of bodily marks, discernible character and personality traits and the ability even to remember events in a previous life. In such cases, the Igbo speak of *mbulu Ụta Ụwa* (The marks of reincarnation) (ASOUZU 2004<sup>a</sup>, 169).

Furthermore, the Igbo consider the occurrence of child geniuses or prodigies, translated in Igbo as *ebibi uwa*, with their preincarnation intellectual and physical acquisitions as proof for their belief in reincarnation. According to Onyewuenyi, the Igbo explain that such geniuses in their previous lives may have suffered in various ways owing to a lack of those qualities and talents which they now exhibit. Hence, in their new life, having obtained parentage and body through which the acquired genius can now be expressed, they display these quite early in

life. The Igbo describe such children as “being older than their ages” (20). Another attempt at explaining child prodigies is that the child is a reincarnate of a deceased intelligent, crafty and successful person from his lineage.

There is also the practice of child-naming after specific ancestors. At birth, babies are carefully examined to identify any resemblances they bear to past parents. Sometimes an oracle is consulted to know who has “come back”. The first name of the child indicates this: “Father has come back”, or “mother has returned.” The Yoruba call the child who is born immediately after the death of his grandfather ‘Babatunde’ = father has returned, and the girl ‘Yetunde’ = mother has returned. The Igbo give names such as ‘Nne-Nna’ = the mother of her father; “Nna-Nna = the father of his father; Nne-ji = my brother/sister,; - Nna-ji = my half- brother/half-sister. None of these names is repeated in the same family because they specify the return of specific ancestors. Invariably people pay to the child the same reverence they were accustomed to paying to the deceased grandparent (1996, 22-23).

Finally, to drive home the point of the need for a philosophical investigation and reappraisal of African belief in reincarnation and its attendant inconsistencies, Onyewuenyi gives us the benefit of an intimate personal family experience in 1946. As he narrates:

My father’s aunt, who loved him very dearly, was sick, suffering from cough. Naturally my father took very good care of her, calling in one native doctor after another to treat the ailment. The woman’s own children and our other relatives were not as involved as my father in looking after her. When it became clear that she was going to die, she made her will. She willed many stocks of yams and domestic animals, cash crops, and farmlands to her children and other relatives. She gave nothing to my father. Since she loved my father so much and did not include him in her will, the talk began to spread that she would reincarnate into my family. (1996, 21)

Onyewuenyi continues the narration:

When the woman died, a surgery was performed to remove the “bag of cough” so that she would be free of this deadly malady in her next life. The chest was stitched back. The curious thing happened!! When my mother had a baby-girl months after this woman’s death, the marks of the stitches appeared on the child’s chest and can be seen to this day. For the villagers no further proof was needed to prove that my sister is a reincarnate of my father’s aunt. To this day, the children of that deceased woman call my sister Nne = mother. (1996, 21-22)

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Interesting! But Onyewuenyi adds a rider: “It will be pertinent, for the purpose of this paper, to note that my mother was already pregnant before my father’s auntie died and that my father’s uncle also regards one of his own daughters as a reincarnate of the same woman” (1996, 22).



Onyewuenyi (Nwa-nsa) considers the above noted instances to be “non-philosophical data of African culture,” the raw material which requires “philosophical reflection and analysis” in order “to find out their inherent difficulties, redefine, refine and remodel them” (1996, 23). The above is the way Onyewuenyi defines his task.

For me (Nwa-nju) what is striking in the above narratives is not so much the rational ambiguities that arise or the difficulty and doubt that may be raised with regard to the possibility or otherwise of such phenomena as to the profundity of the thoughts which are full of purpose and meaning. It is this *meaning* which has to be unraveled. This constitutes the core of the conversation between Nwa-nsa and Nwa-nju. In the following section Onyewuenyi considers “After-Life: Inconsistencies of Belief in Reincarnation,” and the conversation begins to gather momentum.

### **After-Life: Inconsistencies of Belief in Reincarnation- Onyewuenyi Identifies the “Paradox of African Belief in Reincarnation”.**

Onyewuenyi offers four considerations towards supporting the thesis that “the African is a firm believer in life after death, i.e. the existence of the individual in an incorporeal, yet real form, in a life beyond” (1996, 24). The Igbo call it “Ala-Muo”, the Yorubas call it “Ehin-iwa”. First is the idea of a “decent burial” or “proper” burial of the dead in African cultural practice and the related practice of what has been (erroneously) described as “ancestor worship”. Funeral rites are carefully carried out to grant the soul of the deceased perfect rest in the spirit world. According to Onyewuenyi:

From the spirit world, the ancestors who are now released from the restraints imposed by this earth, and who are possessors of limitless potentialities can exploit these for the benefit or to the detriment of those who still live on earth. Hence survivors pay respect and acts of recognition to these ancestors in order to be favoured. (1996, 24)

Onyewuenyi draws support from Bolaji Idowu’s (1962<sup>a</sup>) account of the Yoruba experience./Idowu writes that:

The deceased... still remain the father and mother which they were before their death, capable of exercising their parental functions, though now in a more powerful and unhampered way, over the survivors. The Yoruba say still “Baba-mi” (my father) or “Iya-mi” (my mother), when they speak of their deceased parents. Although they speak of bringing the spirit of the deceased into the house, they rarely say that “I am going to speak to the ‘spirit’ of my father”, what they say is “I am going to speak to my father”. (1962<sup>a</sup>, 192)

The point here is that the individuality of the deceased father or another is recognized as existing in the spirit world from where it maintains unbroken family relationship with the living off-spring. Onyewuenyi urges us to consider secondly that Africans

recognize as individuals even ancestors whose names cannot be remembered any longer. The recently deceased ancestors are requested to transmit the family prayers and acts of respectful recognition to the unknown ancestors (1996, 25).

He draws further support from Mbiti to make the point of the individual existence of ancestors in the spirit world, from where they perform their roles as guardians and protectors of families and communal traditions and ethics. Mbiti writes, as Onyewuenyi quotes:

The living-dead know and have interest in what is going on in the family. When they appear, which is generally to the oldest members of the household, they are recognized by name as “so and so”, they inquire about family affairs and may even warn of impending danger or rebuke those who failed to follow their special instructions. They are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. (1996, 108)

Finally, Onyewuenyi makes reference to his family personal experience (reported earlier) as yet another example of African recognition of the individual permanent existence of the dead in the spirit world. According to him, the behavior of the children of his father’s aunt is indicative as follows:

Despite the fact that they call my sister “Nne” (mother) whenever they see her, they still render traditional ancestral filial duties to their deceased mother who still retains her role as their mother. They know too well that if they do not render these filial duties, it would amount to a repudiation of natural dependence which may bring about untold hardship to themselves. (1996, 25)

The above background provides basis for the critical questions which Onyewuenyi canvasses and which must be addressed: How can Africans sincerely and truly believe in reincarnation while at the same time recognizing the personal individual existence in the spirit world of the ancestors who are believed to have reincarnated? What do they really mean by reincarnation? Could they mean reincarnation in the classical sense?

According to Onyewuenyi, he appreciates the logic in the Pythagorean variant of the theory of reincarnation whereby when the soul of a deceased person informs another body or animal or tree, it does not exist any longer in the spirit world. He also appreciates the Jewish and Hindu variants which apparently uphold the principle of contradiction which states that a thing cannot both be and not-be at the same time, in the same manner. They maintain that at death the soul separates from the body and has a bodiless immaterial existence until such a time as it puts on a new garb of flesh. At one particular time the soul or spirit is either in the spirit world or in a corporeal residence. Therefore the African context presents a seeming paradox which Idowu aptly captures in connection with the Yoruba thus:

In the first place it is believed that in spite of this reincarnation, the deceased continue to live in After-life. Those who are still in the world can have communion with them, and they are there with all their ancestral qualities unimpaired. Secondly, it is believed that they do reincarnate, not only in one grandchild or great grandchild, but also in several contemporary grand children or great grand children, who are brothers and sisters and cousins, aunts and nephews, uncle and nieces, ad infinitum. (1962, 194)

The challenge then is how to resolve this paradox. Idowu proposes a possible solution by stating that, “in African belief, there is no reincarnation in the classical sense. One can only speak of partial or, more precisely, apparent reincarnation, if the word must be used at all” (IDOWU<sup>b</sup> 1973, 187). Idowu also explains further that the specific belief of the Yoruba about those who depart from this world is that once they have entered After-life, they remain, and there the survivors and their children after them can keep un-broken intercourse with them, especially if they have been good persons while on earth and were ripe for death when they did.

There are several other attempts at the resolution of the dilemma; and Onyewuenyi mentions that of the Nupe tribe of Nigeria who theorize that each person has two souls; after death one of the souls goes and resides permanently with the Maker, while the other one reincarnates. Onyewuenyi perfunctorily dismisses this solution. He says, “it is too simplistic to warrant much discussion. Suffice it to say that it contradicts the concept of personality and personal identity” (29). Let me also add that for some people like Mbiti, the resolution is that it is not the dead person perse (the person qua person) who reincarnates, but his characteristics that are re-born in the new child. Nwa-nju will attempt to resolve this paradox subsequently. But what is Nwa-nsa’s position?

Nwa-nsa’s position is that a proper understanding of “African Metaphysics” holds the solution to the “paradox of African belief in reincarnation”. But he ventures to submit that “following the meaning of reincarnation in the classical sense, it is no solution at all to say that there is “partial” or “apparent” reincarnation. I rather share his (Idowu’s) view that “the word must (not) be used at all” (29) Here Nwa-nsa postulates the paradox as a semantic problem, but he resorts in the following subsections to find the solution in “African metaphysics’ and “African ontology”.

### **African Metaphysics: Onyewuenyi’s Solution to the Paradox**

In this section Onyewuenyi promotes the idea of an “African metaphysics” which “perfect understanding of” will decide whether Africans believe in reincarnation or not; and if really the word must be used at all. He believes that there is a difference between African and Western metaphysics. Metaphysics is conceived as the study of “being” or the study of reality. Thus, each culture’s understanding of what “being” or “reality” is, is relative to that culture. Onyewuenyi believes that, that is the basis for calling a Philosophy European, Asian, Indian, or African. According to him, “Granted that the themes dealt with in philosophy are universal, yet the treatment of

any universal theme is relative to a people, coloured by their conception of life in which everything around them becomes meaningful” (31 – 32).

To validate his assertion that there is a difference between Western metaphysics or ontology<sup>3</sup> and African metaphysics, Onyewuenyi relies on Placide Tempels a French missionary who worked and researched the Bantus and postulated that,

Christian thought in the West having adopted the terminology of Greek philosophy and, perhaps under its influence, has defined this reality common to all beings, or, as one should perhaps say, being as such: ‘The reality that is’, ‘what is’. Its metaphysics has most generally been based upon a fundamentally *static* conception of being. (TEMPELS 1969, 50)

Having said this about Western metaphysics, Tempels continued, “Herein is to be seen the fundamental difference between western thought and that of Bantu and other primitive people... we hold a static conception of “being”, they, a dynamic” (1996, 51). Tempels also introduced the idea of “Force” as constituting the ultimate character of being in African metaphysics<sup>4</sup> or ontology.

Many scholars of African philosophy, and Onyewuenyi is obviously convinced, take it for granted that African ontology can be designated correctly, *without further qualification* as *force* or *dynamic ontology*. This unfortunate development rests on an inaccurate analysis or a lack of proper understanding of the

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<sup>3</sup> Many writers tend to consider metaphysics and ontology as synonymous. Some do not and therefore distinguish between metaphysics and ontology. The former is an attempt to explain the whole of reality (beings) in an all embracing speculative system. Ontology literally means the science of being or the study of being as being. The term was coined by scholastic writers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Some philosophers (for example, Christian Wolf) used it as a synonym for metaphysics. In this century Martin Heidegger whose whole philosophy was focused on Being as distinct from beings revived the use of this term and saw himself primarily as an ontologist, a phenomenological ontologist. He tells us in his book *An introduction to Metaphysics* that the coinage of the word “ontology” in the 17<sup>th</sup> century marked the development of the doctrine of Being into a branch of philosophy, a branch which endeavours “to make being manifest itself.” (1). Apparently Professor Innocent Onyewuenyi takes ontology to be synonymous or perhaps, the core of metaphysics and inseparable from it.

<sup>4</sup> There is also a problem with the whole idea of “African Metaphysics”, considering the concern and function of metaphysics as a branch of philosophical inquiry. In the 2013 DAKAM’s PHILHIST 2013 History of Philosophy Conference, hosted at the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul, Turkey between November 8-9, 2013, I addressed this question of the possibility of “African metaphysics”.<sup>4</sup> In my presentation entitled “Metaphysics, Contemporary African Philosophy and Ethnocentric Commitment”, I argued the position that the term “African metaphysics” appears absurd and awkward. I contended that the expression amounts to nonsensical verbiage, and cannot make sense in the way that “African logic”, “African epistemology”, “African ethics” or “African political philosophy” as branches or compartments of African philosophy do. I maintained that, in the same way, that it is absurd to talk of “African physics” or African death”, or African moon” it is nonsensical to talk of “African metaphysics.” I proposed that what we should correctly talk about is not “African Metaphysics”, but rather “metaphysics in African philosophy” or the “African approach or approaches to metaphysics”. Or we may talk about “models of metaphysics in African philosophy”.<sup>See</sup> the proceedings of the conference published as “Interactions in the History of Philosophy.” Edited by Efe Duyan and Ayse Gungor; Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul - Turkey November 2013. Pp 122-124

currents of thought on ontological phenomena including reincarnation, in African philosophy. Onyewuenyi is apparently unaware of the fact that,

The sharp debate Tempels' work had unleashed right from the day of its publication till date, and the enormous rejection the hypothesis has witnessed, especially by a new group of "Scientific, individualistic, African" philosophers, testify to the "non – African" acceptance of the Tempelsian hypothesis. (IROEGBU 1995, 290)

Innocent Asouzu continues to lament the consequences of the "Tempelsian damage" upon African philosophy. (see ASOUZU<sup>b</sup> 2007, 180-195).

All said, Nwa-nsa is convinced that it is the 'perfect understanding of African ontology especially as to its *dynamic* nature of "being" that will decide whether Africans believe in reincarnation or not; and if really the word must be used at all" (1996, 32).

At this point Nwa-nsa is already carrying the intellectual baggage of what I shall call the "Semantic Challenge of the African belief in Reincarnation", which he is yet to unloose. But here again he has taken up the burden of the ontological character of the "paradox of the African belief in reincarnation", which he believes is resolved by an understanding of the "dynamic character of the African concept of Being". This is his concern in the following section.

### **Dynamic Character of the African Concept of Being: The Onyewuenyian Tempelsian Mimicry**

At the onset Onyewuenyi had chided 'educated' Africans for reading the works of Western anthropologists, ethnologists and administrators and unreflectingly and uncritically imbibing, internalizing and accepting some of their enoneous views, which have been imposed on Africans and thereby undermining African cultural identity. But it is on such non-African (Western) views that Onyewuenyi anchors his understanding of the dynamic character of the African concept of Being: The views of Placid Tempels in his work on [Bantu Philosophy] (1969). I have already pointed out the criticism and rejection of this work of Tempels by a majority of current African scholars. It is on this work that Nwa-nsa relies.

In that work Tempels' provocative thesis was explicit: The West can conceive the transcendental notion of 'being' by separating it from its attribute, 'Force', but the Bantu (the African) cannot. Further he advanced the thesis which locates the fundamental difference between Western thought (ontology) and that of the Bantu and other primitive people as the Western being *static* and the African *dynamic*. Onyewuenyi accepts this thesis hook, line and sinker, without reservation and without any further qualifications.

In his discussion of the "dynamic character of the African concept of being", Onyewuenyi adopts a verbatim quote of Tempels and states that:

The essence or nature of anything is conceived by the African as “force”. It is not even correct to say that ‘being’ in the African thought has the necessary element or quality of force. The precision of their concept of being will not be attained if their notion of being is expressed as “being is that which *possesses* force”. Rather, “the concept of force is inseparable from the definition of ‘being’. There is no idea among Bantu of ‘being’ divorced from the idea of ‘Force’. Without the element ‘force’, ‘being’ cannot be conceived... force is the nature of being, force is being; being is force. (ONYEWUENYI, 33; TEMPELS, 37)

Onyewuenyi does not analyze the passage. We are left in the dark about the meaning, nature and character of “force” and the extent of its dynamism in constituting the African concept of ‘being’. However Onyewuenyi adds that, “For Africans there is a clear distinction and essential difference between different forces or inner realities of beings, just as there are differences between categories of material visible things” (1996, 33). To round off this section Onyewuenyi again relies on a verbatim quote of Tempels to make the point that:

When you say in terms of western philosophy, that beings are differentiated by their essences or nature; Africans say that forces differ in their essences or nature. There is the divine force, terrestrial or celestial forces, human forces and vegetable and even mineral forces. (ONYEWUENYI, 33; TEMPELS, 58)

Finally, Onyewuenyi adds that:

In addition to different categories of forces, Africans maintain that these forces follow a hierarchical order such that God precedes the spirits; then come the founding fathers and the living-dead, according to the order of primogeniture; then the living according to their rank in terms of seniority. (1996, 34)

My problem with Nwa-nsa here is that he neglects to get into any personal, critical or analytic interpretation of the Tempelsian concept of “Force”, thus leaving the term in its obscurity. He fails too, to show clearly the “dynamic character of the African concept of being”, which was his task in this section. In any case, how can “Bantu Philosophy”, pass for “African philosophy” or “Bantu ontology” pass for “African ontology”? The Bantu are just one specific group of African people.

Methodologically, “Bantu philosophy” is not African. Its material content may be African, but Tempels account cannot be accepted as an authentic description of “African metaphysics” or ontology. Come to think of it, is the word “force” a Bantu or African term? And to single out only one element (a foreign term) that summarizes the totality of a people’s concept of reality is ludicrous. Again, where lies the dynamic character of the African concept of being, even if we follow Tempels and Onyewuenyi? Although they tell us that the Bantu (African) notion of being is dynamic they go on to reduce this notion to something that is *fixed*. Or how

else do we interpret the claim that for the African, “force is being, being is force”. One wonders how a thing that is “dynamic” can be reduced to a fixed idea such that “being is force”. If the notion of being can be reduced to such a fixed idea as *force*; it then means that it is a static immovable idea<sup>5</sup> Nwa –nsa’s mimicry of Tempels suggests that we are dealing with a static character of African ontology and not a dynamic one.

Nwa-nsa now carries the burdens of the “Semantic challenge of the African belief in reincarnation” and the “ontological character of the paradox of the African belief in reincarnation.” The burdens are heavy, thus in the section that follows Nwa-nsa seeks to show how the belief in reincarnation operates within the framework of Western ontology, in view of comparing this, in a later section with how the belief operates within the framework of African ontology.

### **Belief in Reincarnation in the Framework of Western Ontology: Onyewuenyi’s Explanation for how Reincarnation is Possible on this Framework**

In this section, by addressing the question, “how does Western metaphysics consider the entity man as a being?” Onyewuenyi seeks to tackle the problem of the ontological challenge which generates the paradox of reincarnation in African philosophy. He has to do this by comparing the belief in reincarnation in the framework of Western ontology and the belief in reincarnation within the framework of African ontology.

In Western ontology the notion of being is polarized between “substance” and “accidents” as its categories. “Substance” is the term used to signify the essential nature or primary being of things. Conjoined with substance is the notion of “accidents”, which are predicable features of the essence or substance of a being. “Accidents” may change, disappear, perish while substance remains the same always. It is static, constant. What is the primary being or essence in man? Onyewuenyi tells us that, “According to Western ontology man is made up of substance and accidents; the substance is the soul or spirit; the accident is the body or matter” (35). Western tradition generally holds this as a metaphysical (ontological) postulate. In the Cartesian tradition, man is a mind-body dualism. The body as an accident may change, depreciate, cease at death and rot, but the substance – the mind, soul, spirit – the reality that is (for man) persists and subsists. In the Christian tradition, the imperishable soul goes to either heaven or hell, depending on how it conducted its operations during its earthly existence. This bifurcation of being into categories of substance and accidents, and man into body and spirit or soul is the

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<sup>5</sup> This is an adaptation of Innocent Asouzu’s criticism of Placid Tempels in Asouzu, Innocent I. *Ibuanyidanda. New Complementary Ontology Beyond world – Immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Impositions*; 2007. Litrerlag, Zurich, paperback. P. 183.

basis of the belief in reincarnation in Western ontology. For believers in reincarnation –understood classically as the soul of a deceased person taking a new body for another span of earthly life-, this substance of man, because it is static, singular and unitary in nature, when once it informs a new body whether human, animal or tree, it ceases to exist in the spirit world. There is no further respect accorded it in the spirit-world, but acts of recognition and respect are accorded it in its new bodily abode (ONYEWUENYI 1996, 36).

Considering this background provided by Onyewuenyi, the answer to the question “Is reincarnation possible within the framework of Western ontology?”, will be provided in the affirmative because an ontology that polarizes the notion of being by considering substance and accidents, a person’s body and soul as static and exclusivist categories leaves no other direction. Onyewuenyi posits that African ontology presents a different perspective which makes reincarnation impossible within its framework. This is his concern in the following section.

It must be noted though, by way of *conversation*, that this model of Western ontology which Nwa-nsa believes expresses the general outlook of Western ontology is just one approach to metaphysics in Western philosophy, which is directly linked to Aristotle’s metaphysics, and extended by Descartes mind-body dualism. Nwa-nju does not see how Aristotle’s metaphysics or Descartes’ dualism can constitute the whole of “Western ontology”, even if these have been influential in determining the course of metaphysics in Western Philosophy. They are just specific approaches or models of the Western philosophical venture in ontology. Nwa-nsa is a trained philosopher. He knows that among the earlier Western tradition, single items had been postulated as the underlying substratum or essence of being – water by Thales, fire by Heraclitus and air by Anaximenes. Nwa-nsa knows that for Plato reality is in the ideal world of permanent *forms* and that for the Scholastics God explains causatively all created beings in their ultimate foundations. Nwa-nsa will recall the Hegelian Geist (spirit) as the explanatory category of every reality evolving to the utmost: philosophy itself; and that for Heidegger the soil that supplies the nourishment for every part of the tree of being is *Sein* (Being). The subject of reincarnation can still be interpreted from the perspective of any of these metaphysical orientations in Western Philosophy. The point made here is that Nwa-nsa did not present us with the basis of the belief in reincarnation on the framework of a comprehensive Western ontology, but from the narrow, limited Aristotelian or Cartesian frame. In the section that follows, Onyewuenyi seeks to show how reincarnation is impossible in the framework of African ontology and thus possibly resolve the paradox of reincarnation in African Philosophy.

## 91 Reincarnation Impossible in the Framework of African Ontology: The Tempelsian Mimicry Continues

In this section Onyewuenyi’s purpose is vitiated by his uncritical absolute reliance on Placide Tempels work on [Bantu Philosophy]. I have earlier highlighted that the work received severe criticisms, and sometimes outright rejection among African



Scholars. Placide Tempels made deductions from a study of the Luba of Congo specifically to conclusions about the Bantu generally. One wonders how that specific, narrow, limited research can constitute a comprehensive narration or understanding of “African ontology” which warrants Onyewuenyi to embrace as authentically expressive of “African ontology”. Here Nwa-nsa has slipped into what I describe as the “pit of unanimism in African Philosophy.” The term “Unanimism” is defined by Paulin Hountondji as “the illusion that all men and women in (African) societies speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues” (HOUNTONDJI 1966, xviii). The term captures the tendency of ethnophilosophers to infer that their analysis of a specific African culture’s beliefs captured beliefs essential to all African Cultures.<sup>6</sup> A key objection to unanimism is simply that it is unable to account for other narratives within the diversity of beliefs present in African cultures.

However let us see how Nwa-nsa carries on with the Tempelsian mindset. Onyewuenyi informs that flowing from the African concept of being as “force” and its dynamic nature, in the category of visible beings the Africans distinguish that which perceived by the senses and the “thing in itself” namely, the inner nature or “force” of the thing whether man, animal, or tree. According to Onyewuenyi:

When a person dies, the traditional African does not say that the “soul” of the dead has gone to the spirit-world. It is not the “soul” or “part of man” that has gone to the world of the spirits but the whole man though not in a visible but invisible state. (1996, 37)

To further buttress the point above, Onyewuenyi relies on Tempels explanation:

What lives on after death is not called by the Bantu by a term indicating part of man. I have always heard their elders speak of “the man himself” “himself”, or it is ‘the little man” who was formerly hidden behind the perceptible manifestation of the man; or *muntu* which at death has left the living...*Muntu* signifies vital force endowed with intelligence and will. (ONYEWUENYI 37; TEMPELS, 55)

The point here is that the dichotomy of the soul and body is not applicable such that at death, the soul separates and inhabits another body. Rather “the man” still exists as this person in a spiritual invisible form. His bodily energy goes but his vital force persists and waxes stronger and stronger ontologically.

The Tempelsian-Onyewuenyian account has it that in line with the hierarchy of “forces”, the dead ancestors assume an enhanced vital superiority of intelligence and will over the living, because they have gained deeper knowledge of the forces of nature, and because of the ontological relationship existing among members of the clan, they interact with the living. What interacts with the living is “the man himself” who is now essentially “force” (ONYEWUENYI 1996, 38).

Now, vital force grows and/or weakens through the interaction of forces. A person is “really dead” when his vital force is totally diminished or extinguished. Due to their pre occupation with immortality and deathlessness, the ancestors are concerned with the increase of their and their descendants’ vital force for the well-being and continuity of the clan. One of the ways of increasing the ancestor’s vital force is by sacrifices and prayers from the living descendants. Hence, the wish of Africans to have many children who will offer sacrifices to them after death (ONYEWUENYI 1996, 38-39).

By an inverse movement the “force” of the ancestor flows into the sacrifices and into the community which he embodies and the living receive the “strengthening influence” of the ancestor. It is suggested in this view that “the whole weight of an extinct race lies on the dead... for they have for the whole time of their infinite deathlessness, missed the goal of their existence, that is, *to perpetuate themselves through reproduction* in the living person” (JAHN 1961, 109; ONYEWUENYI, 39).

Onyewuenyi submits that it is this “*perpetuation of themselves through reproduction*” “that is mistakenly referred to as “reincarnation.” It is rather the “life giving will” or “vital influence” or “secretion of vital power” of the ancestor on his living descendants. This is understandable because the ancestor who is now pure dynamic force can influence and effect many births in his clan without emptying his personality. For Onyewuenyi, this explains Idowu’s “partial or more precisely apparent reincarnation”. But Onyewuenyi insists: “Reincarnation cannot be partial or apparent. Either it is or is not”, (1996, 39) and Tempels corroborates: “The dead are esteemed, only to the extent to which they increase and perpetuate their vital force in their progeny” (1969, 46).

According to Onyewuenyi:

The vital force of an ancestor is comparable to the sun, which is not diminished by the number and extent of its rays. The sun is present in its rays and heats and brightens through its rays; yet, the rays of the sun singly or together are not the sun. In the same way the “vital force” which is the being of the ancestor can be present in one or several of the living members of his clan through his life-giving will or vital influence, without its being diminished or truncated. Just as the sun is the causal agent of heat, so is the ancestor a causal agent of his descendants who are below him in the ontological hierarchy. This vital influence is subordinate and distinct from the creative influence which is the domain of God. (1996, 40)

Tempels clarifies this point thus:

Man is not the first or creative cause of life, but he sustains and adds to the life of the forces which he finds below him within his ontological hierarchy. And man, in Bantu thought, although in a more circumscribed sense than God, is also a causal force of life. (1996, 29)

Following the Tempelsian-Onyewuenyian logic, this is the philosophical basis for the African claim that a certain ancestor has been ‘reborn’ in one or several living members of the same clan. What the Africans mean by “return” or “rebirth” cannot be translated as “reincarnation” because for them the child or children are not identified with the dead, since the birth of the little one (s) in no wise puts an end to the existence of the deceased ancestor in the spirit-world.

This becomes clearer still when one realizes that Africans do not hold that conception is caused by the spirit of the ancestor. The biological conception of the child results from the concurrent act of God and the parents. The influence of the ancestor, which has been called “reincarnation”, comes later on. As Tempels insists, “it is the human being, who already possesses life in the womb of his mother (by divine influence), who finds himself under the vital, the ontological influence of a predestined ancestor or of a spirit” (1996, 111). By this explication Onyewuenyi seeks to resolve the “paradox” which Idowu’s narration of the belief among the Yoruba that deceased persons do “reincarnate” in their grand children and still continue to live in After-life generated. The dynamic nature of the “being” of the deceased, the theory of ontological hierarchy and interaction of forces in “African metaphysics” explain how the deceased ancestor can be in the spirit-world and yet his presence is felt in the land of the living.

I find this Tempelsian interpretation of Bantu ontological thought pattern and practice which Onyewuenyi believes captures the general pattern of ontological thought pattern and practice of all African cultures quite intriguing. But I have earlier cautioned about this ethnocentric inspired assumption that there is a way of thinking congenial to all traditional African societies; an assumption that induces the mind to see Africans only from the perspective of a collective, ignoring specific cultural differences and nuances. Against this background, it is very pertinent to emphasize with Innocent Asouzu that “what many (like Onyewuenyi) see as the general worldview of traditional Africans, and by implication that of Africans in general, cannot be characterized as *dynamic* or *force* without qualification” (2007<sup>b</sup>, 181):

However, the Tempelsian-Onyewuenyian analysis does not offer any concrete metaphysical or verifiable guarantees. The absurdities and inconsistencies of the belief in reincarnation make many reject the phenomenon of identity of tribal marks, souvenirs or character traits on genetic, socio-cultural and pensive-psychological impressions that occupy peoples’ minds and wishes (IROEGBU 1995, 82). But it sure does resolve the *ontological* dilemma leading to the “paradox of the belief in reincarnation in African philosophy”, but in doing so Onyewuenyi accentuates the *semantic* dilemma in properly characterizing the nature of the

phenomenon of reincarnation. Granted that “reincarnation” in its classical connotation is impossible within the framework of African ontology as Onyewuenyi posits, why do African languages have a translation for the word? Nwa-nsa Onyewuenyi himself tells us that “the Igbo word for “reincarnation” is “*Ilọ uwa*”, which means “a return to the world” (1996, 20). Then again, without adequate analysis the Tempelsian- Onyewuenyian explication throws up “force”, “vital force”, life giving will’, ‘vital influence’, ‘vital power’ all in effort to characterize the dynamism of “being” in African ontological thought. Nwa-nsa needs to tell us, are these expressions from the Bantu language or any African language whatsoever? It is convenient for Nwa-nsa to, at this point, throw up the challenge of “the language of accommodation.” This is his concern in the following section.

### **The Language of Accommodation: Onyewuenyi and the Semantic Quagmire**

The concept of “reincarnation” has generated a “semantic dilemma” in African philosophy. This leads Onyewuenyi to a semantic quagmire. Onyewuenyi in his effort to resolve this quagmire argues that “reincarnation” is a “language of accommodation” employed by Western anthropologists and churchmen to make “concrete and real what is abstract and immaterial” namely, the cultural concept of Africans in connection with the “return” or “rebirth” of ancestors in their living descendants. Here he is relying on Walter Lipmann who introduced the idea in his book [The Public Philosophy]. Lipmann had observed that “men have been laboring with the problem of how to make concrete and real what is abstract and immaterial ever since the Greek philosophers began to feel the need to accommodate the popular Homeric religion to the advance of science” (1963, 131). The idea of “reincarnation” was postulated as a somewhat “working definition” used to cloak realities which were incomprehensible to these Western anthropologists and churchmen who engaged in the research of African realities.

According to Onyewuenyi, the term “reincarnation” used to describe the cultural concept of Africans in connection with the “return” or “rebirth” of ancestors in their living descendants is as misleading as term like “ancestor worship,” “polytheism,” “animism,” etc., applied to African religions by early European anthropologists (1996, 42). Consequently, the use of these erroneous appellations to describe African cultural phenomena need to be reconsidered, corrected or updated. Sadly though, Nwa-nsa does not succeed in resolving the “semantic challenge or dilemma of the African belief in reincarnation” and the attendant quagmire, because in the concluding section of the essay, he leaves us in deeper conceptual confusion.

### **Onyewuenyi’s Conclusion: Further Conceptual Confusion**

5 Onyewuenyi opines that limits must be set, beyond which the language of  
9 accommodation should not be employed. According to him, use of language of  
8 accommodation should not be made when there is a sharp diversity of belief which,  
6 if obliterated might cause a vital threat to a culture. Onyewuenyi insists that:

The imposition of the “belief in reincarnation” on Africans has undermined African cultural identity in that their cultural respect to their ancestors, which are tokens of fellowship, hospitality, and family continuity, are misconstrued as belief in reincarnation. The situation becomes more disturbing when “educated” Africans are in the forefront in “imposing” the concepts of reincarnation on Africans. (1996, 44)

If “reincarnation” is a misleading translation that has a different sense in describing the specific African cultural thinking and belief, and mind you, African languages have a translation for the word, as Onyewuenyi himself admits, then what alternative term or concept does he recommend?

Onyewuenyi recommends that:

Other terminologies such as “vital influence,” “life strengthening,” “personal ray,” “vital participation” should be used in place of “reincarnation”. Instead of saying that a newborn child is a “reincarnate” of an ancestor, we should rather say that he is the “vital influence” or the “life share” or “personal ray,” or “living perpetuation” of the ancestor. (1996, 44)

But here again Nwa-nsa must realize that he has fallen into the trap of “the language of accommodation” which is that he unsuccessfully labors to make “concrete and real what is abstract and immaterial” and leaves us in deeper conceptual confusion. Nwa-nsa seems to realize that he has not adequately addressed the problem, especially from its semantic or conceptual perspective, hence his invitation:

If these suggested terminologies seem inadequate to the reader, I invite him to suggest an alternative, so that with the benefit of his collaboration, we can approach more nearly to perfection and exactitude. (1996, 44-45)

Nwa-nsa leaves us in deeper semantic dilemma because he fails to provide a specific concept that would capture the concept Ilo-uwa.

### **My Conclusion: An Acceptance of Nwa-nsa’s Invitation**

To a limited extent, I concur with Onyewuenyi. In my view there is not a belief in reincarnation strictly or classically speaking, in African culture. But whereas Onyewuenyi portrays the problem as being one of *semantics*, or of *ontology* or *metaphysics*, and one of *ethnocentric commitment*, I believe that the idea of reincarnation as an explanatory model for the African is an attempt at offering insightful answer to the perennial problem of man’s search for immortality, *the perpetuation of life*. Thus in my view, the challenge of explaining that African cultural phenomenon is one of *hermeneutics*. Not *Semantic*. Not *ethnocentric bias*. Not even *metaphysics* or *ontology*.

Hermeneutics, basically, is an approach that is concerned with interpretation of texts, ideas, social and cultural categories in a bid to understand the meaning as regards the life experience of the person or people concerned (AKPAN 2009, 76). Onyewuanyi completely ignores this hermeneutic approach in his reappraisal. A resolution of the challenge requires focus not on whether ancestors are metaphysical entities, but rather on what they mean within African existence. To my mind, life for the African is the perpetuation of individual and communal existential possibilities, the possibility of life is never ending. Life is not cyclical but is eternal.

Space constraints would not permit me to develop in any extensive manner my “complementary theory of life and death in African thought” based on my formulation of a principle of regeneration which finds expression in the statement “*as long as I live, my father lives, and because I live, my primordial ancestors live*”<sup>7</sup> which I am working on presently. The position I am advancing on that account is that for the African, the dead belongs to the living as much as the living belongs to the dead. Without any metaphysical or functional guarantees, the dead becomes for the living, ancestors or the living-dead. The living-dead are alive because their works, their words, earn a life in the words and works of those still capable to live death. It is the African complementary mode of thought which makes it possible to co-join the idea of an eternal transcendent space with the idea of corporeality to arrive at an idea of the living-dead, land of spirits or the ancestors. This idea is in turn re-projected to the real world of space and time, but with all the attendant concatenation of ideas of the material and immaterial.

One other aim of this paper was to show how conversationalism as a method or procedure of philosophical discourse plays out within the context of its canons and it is my believe and hope that, that aim has been adequately discharged and the procedure of conversationalism better understood in its practice. All said, I have maintained here that Nwa-nsa’s “philosophical reappraisal” of the African belief in reincarnation is flawed on several accounts and I believe the merits and the conversational reconstruction of the flaws are apparent.

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