

REINCARNATION AS A METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLE OF EXPLANATION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL THOUGHT: A CRITIQUE.

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ABSTRACT

Reincarnation is a belief taught by many of the World's religions. It is the doctrine of second birth to earthly life. It is held that though the physical body decays at death, the life-force, or soul or spirit reincarnates in another body on earth. It is as if our physical bodies are like a suit of clothes that has to be discarded for a new one when it is worn out. The belief in reincarnation has engaged the attention of great Western philosophers for ages. From Pythagoras through Epicurus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, down to the contemporary period, varying views on reincarnation have been held. The belief in reincarnation also exists in African traditional thought. In this write-up, a critical exegesis of the African idea of reincarnation is our task. Attempt will be made to show whether there is a rational justifiable ground for holding this belief among the Africans. Our particular aim is first to examine the peculiar logic of reincarnation with a view to illuminating understanding of the phenomenon and discovering the value of holding the belief in reincarnation and then mount a rebuttal of the belief.

Meaning of Reincarnation

Reincarnation literally means to come back to earthly life (Geisler, 639). It also means the cycle of successive rebirths (Freeman, 229). It is the belief that while the spirit of the deceased lives in the spiritual world, some of his physical and other traits are manifested in his grandchildren or close relatives (Uduigwomen, 28). For Egbe, reincarnation is the process of rebirth of a person into the world to pay for his bad deeds until such a person is perfected. The newborn baby is sometimes believed to possess some of the essential features of the departed grandfather or elderly relation, and sometimes both are believed to possess more or less similar characteristics. It is believed that the reincarnated person can take on a new destiny especially if things were bad for him in the previous existence (5). The doctrine of reincarnation is sometimes distinguished from the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, which means that the identity, the consciousness or the memory of the individual persists after death (Darrow, 261 – 286). It is also different from the doctrine of transmigration, which is the belief that the soul of the departed assumes a new body of another person, an animal or any other creature.

Although there are many forms of reincarnation, the most common which spring from Hinduism and Buddhism are based on the inviolable law of *Karma*. Under the law of *Karma*, what one sows in this life will certainly be reaped in the next. Every action in this life has a consequence in this life or in the next.

Apart from the Eastern religions, the belief in reincarnation is also dominant in the Western world. About one out of four Americans are said to believe in reincarnation. Although Bible and orthodox Christian belief reject reincarnation, about one in five who attend church regularly also believe in reincarnation (Geisler, 639).

Reincarnation has a long history. The view of many is that the original source of the belief appears to

be the Hindu Vedas. The forms in which it is found in Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism seem to have been derived from these. Some Western forms may have arisen from Greek philosophy without some direct influence from Eastern source, beginning with pythagoreanism. Pythagoras, Plato and Plotinus all believed that the soul or spirit was eternal and could not be destroyed (Geisler, 639).

Several reasons are given to justify the belief in reincarnation. The first reason is based on the general belief in the immortality of the soul. Plato's main reason for believing in immortality of the soul is that he considered the immaterial part of every human being to be indestructible. For him, the soul existed prior to entering the human body, and it continues to exist after we die. If that is the case, then reincarnationists contend that it probably appears in the world in different bodies at various times. The second reason for the belief in reincarnation stems from evidences from psychological research. Past life regression through hypnosis has helped to explain some feelings (e.g. fear, depression, unwantedness) that the patient cannot explain. Although many psychologists and hypnotists who work with past-life recall do not really believe the events recalled by their patients, they use it because it works. Ian Stevenson, a seasoned parapsychologist and researcher of past-life recall, is quoted as saying that,

The idea of reincarnation may contribute to an improved understanding of such diverse matters as: phobias and phobias of childhood; skills not learned in early life; abnormalities of parent-child relationships; vendettas and bellicose nationalism; childhood sexuality and gender identity confusion; birthmarks, congenital deformities and internal diseases; differences between members of monozygotic twin pairs, and abnormal appetites during pregnancy (Geisler, 640).

The third reason for the belief in reincarnation is the need for justice. Many believe that the idea of having more than one chance to live is the most equitable solution. If you live a good life, you get a reward; if you live a bad life, you pay the price. How bad one's *Karma* is determines the proportion of punishment one receives. This explanation removes the need to make God responsible for human suffering.

There are arguments for and against reincarnation. Those who support the belief in reincarnation adduce the following arguments to support their claim. First, there is the argument that in dream we see things we have never known or experienced in real life. It is claimed that such things may have been experienced in past life and now stored in our mind. This stored impression becomes manifested sometimes in dreams or in thought. The conclusion here is that the mind is the storehouse of experiences and thoughts of past lives. Against this argument, it can be contended that it does not convincingly prove the reality of the concept of reincarnation. Dreams are mere extensions of our day-to-day conscious life and activities. Apart from that, it fails to take cognizance of the fact that there are some people who do not dream at all.

The second argument worth discussing is the argument from the experience of coma. Sometimes a person on the threshold of death remains in a state of coma for many days before giving up. Proponents of this argument contend that such a person may be enjoying the body of a King or President but when he understands that he will be forced to accept a lesser body, he resists and insists on remaining in his present body. Therefore, he remains in coma before giving up the ghost. This second argument is simply ridiculous and fantastic. A person in a state of coma is normally unconscious. It has even been discovered that some patients in coma later survive. When they come back to life, they do not tell us stories about how they were willing to take up a lesser body. In any case, he does not experience anything, since he is unconscious.

The last argument often advanced in favour of reincarnation is that of the appearance of ghosts. There are people who claimed to have seen the ghost of departed relatives. Against this, it can be argued that it is difficult to prove that ghosts exist. The claim that it is the souls of wicked people that cannot reincarnate that fall down to become ghosts does not hold water. How many of these ghosts have been seen? There are no ways to prove this. Apart from lack of evidence, this view runs counter to the equally held view that when a wicked man dies, he falls back to the level of animals. The question is – how can a soul of one man be reduced to a ghost and an animal at the same time for the same offence?

The African Belief in Reincarnation

We cannot discuss the African belief in reincarnation without a general idea of the African concepts of death and immortality. In African traditional life, death is believed to be an emancipation from the claws of the restless and problem-ridden world. The world is seen as a temporary abode full of vicissitudes

and iniquities. To those who live a good life to the end, death is a thing of joy. Such people are believed to be heading towards the real home, the spiritual abode, where they become ancestors. For such people, the word 'die' does not apply, but the word 'go'. The belief is that such people have 'gone' for life renewal. When the traditional African speaks of ancestors, he is referring to the spirits of departed parents and grandparents with whom the living members of the family maintain affectionate relationship. People who die bad death are excluded from such privilege. Male ancestors are far more important than female ones. A man has to die well and leave behind children who will give him good burial and keep in touch with him through sacrifice and rituals. Thus, death is not seen as an extinction but as a transition from one life to another. A lot of funeral rites depict the African perception of death as a mere change of abode, like burying the dead with costly jewelries and valuable materials, including living humans, if the deceased is a king. This is to ensure that life continues in afterlife as it is here.

The African belief in afterlife has its root in the belief that man is both a material being and a spiritual being. It is believed that, in addition to the tangible, material component of man there is an intangible, spiritual, indestructible component which outlives the disintegration of the physical frame. This is the soul or spirit. The Yoruba of Nigeria, for instance, refer to the soul as the 'internal head' which guides and controls the life and activities of a person. At death, the body decomposes, while the soul goes back to the Supreme Being who is the source of life. However, the soul has some ways of coming back, the most popular being through reincarnation or being reborn as a grandchild into the family. This is regarded as a thing of joy as it is said that the dead only does so as a result of his love. Names like "Babatunde" (Father has come back) and "Iyabode" (Mother has come back) show that among the Yoruba, reincarnation is believed to be something good people should look forward to, or hope for. The Yoruba concept of reincarnation sounds paradoxical when one remembers that the soul of the deceased lives on in the ancestral world while at the same time it is reincarnated in the human world. This is why some Yorubaologists have argued that the Yoruba subscribe to partial reincarnation. The living are satisfied to see some of the traits of the departed ones being manifested in their new-born children. Children are expected to observe family taboos. A violation of any of the taboos is believed to be visited by certain punishments from the ancestors. Thus, the Yoruba do not consider the issue of reincarnation or afterlife as an idle speculation, but as an axiom of life.

A version of African concept of reincarnation is the myth of 'born-to-die'. This myth is held in many parts of Nigeria. The Yoruba call it "Abiku"; the Igbo call it "Ogbanje"; the Efik call it "Ndem". Those children and adults who are beset with this are believed to come from the world of water spirits. Such people die prematurely and reincarnate. To prove this, some babies are given some marks on their bodies when they die, so they can be easily recognized when they reincarnate. Of course,

some mothers have given birth to babies with those particular marks made earlier on a dead child before burial.

Besides, there have been cases of children born into the family with certain abnormalities which were evidently marked in one of the ancestors of their lineage.

The case of a child who suddenly develops an inherited sickness or disease after some days, weeks, months or years of birth usually calls for intensive investigation into the ancestral lineage in order to ascertain which of the ancestors has come. The victim may eventually die if the particular ancestor is unknown. Medication does not avert this kind of situation. The moment the ancestor is known and certain rituals are performed, the child becomes well and starts functioning normally. To most people, this is not enough to prove that reincarnation is real, whether there are logical supports for it or not.

Reincarnation as a Metaphysical Principle of Explanation In African Traditional Thought

No matter what might have prompted the belief in reincarnation, traditional Africans have used it as a philosophical principle of explanation for many fundamental issues, problems, and mysteries of life. It has, therefore, been a powerful tool in the hands of many traditional philosophers and religious specialists to explain many perplexing and otherwise inexplicable questions of life.

Theoretically, reincarnation seems to tally with the theory of biological or organic evolution, according to which, man has gradually evolved physically, he has also evolved spiritually. And just as it takes a very long time for the human body to evolve into a complex, developed form, man's soul also needs a very long time to evolve into spiritual perfection. As a delicate entity, the soul needs varied schooling in many lives to complete its education and purify itself. Perfection, it is argued, requires more than one life span to be realized.

Furthermore, reincarnation seems to provide answers to the many otherwise inexplicable puzzles of the world, such as the problems of sin and suffering, the unfulfilled lives of those who die prematurely, the prosperity of the wicked and misery of the righteous and the tragic destiny of those with serious physical handicap. Many psychological problems that defy scientific explanation succeed to find explanation in the laws governing reincarnation. For instance, reincarnationists believe that one's gender in a previous existence determines his present sex. The strong desire to be like the opposite sex in dressing and other areas are said to be motivated by subconscious impulses flowing from earlier life's experiences when one was of the opposite sex. Birthmarks on the body of a child are said to be probably due to an accident or injury suffered in a previous life.

The concept of reincarnation also makes meaningful the African belief in life after death. The belief in reincarnation assures the traditional African that his attempt to lead a good life here on earth and observe the societal taboos is not in vain. Death is not the terminus of life. Judgment follows immediately after death. At death one must account for how he made use

of the opportunities given to him while on earth.

The belief in reincarnation among traditional Africans has pragmatic relevance. It provides the reasons for living a good, humble and responsible life and inspires one with a sense of community, brotherhood, direction, honesty and purity of purpose. The ideas of the immortality of the soul, reward for good life and punishment for bad life and the belief that one will give account of his life at the end of one's life on earth, serve as challenges or impetus to live a good life. The belief also helps to check unwholesome immoral acts such as murder, fornication, adultery, incest, homosexuality, lesbianism, quarrels, poisoning, theft and false witness. People strive to live right so as not to incur the wrath of ancestors or deities.

Reincarnation helps to give validity to lineage identity. It assures people of the same lineage of their common origin and destiny and mutual responsibility to one another. People take pride in knowing their lineage and tracing same to genealogy several generations back.

Finally, reincarnation is said to give validity to the marriage institution. Through marriage posterity is ensured. Children are born through marriage and through children, the traditions, customs, mores, norms and history of the people are transmitted to succeeding generations. A marriage in African society is therefore valueless and incomplete if it is childless. Through marriage the crucial challenge posed by death is taken care of. The children who are born are those to preserve the identity of the lineage. A constant flow of such successions gives assurance that the lineage would continue to flourish.

A Critique of The African Belief in Reincarnation

Criticisms have been raised to undermine the African belief in reincarnation. A few are discussed below.

The first is the logical criticism. It has been argued that there is no logical or rationally justifiable ground that concretely establishes the truth of reincarnation without the possibility of being refuted. But then, it can equally be argued that arguments against it do not satisfactorily disprove it. It is a known fact that African communities which subscribe to the belief do have a justification for the belief. The African belief in reincarnation is relevant to African circumstances.

A powerful criticism comes from I. I. Egbe. In his book *Reincarnation?* Egbe argues that the laws of psychics and genetics adequately refute the African belief in reincarnation. He maintains that there are some families which possess psychic powers which parents pass on to their children as gifts. This, to him, controls reincarnation tricks at the village level. For him, a comprehensive statistical account of barren women in Nigeria shows that more than three-quarters of them are patronizers of sorcerers, religious spiritists, criminal mystics and their like, in search of children. Consequently, many of their children are demcnized. The so-called holy waters, oils, concoctions, differently coloured candles, etc. which are recommended for their helpless victims are all demonized. Hence, the

possession of high voltage psychic tendencies become their lot. Those who possess strong psychic tendencies easily attract demons when exposed to a densely demonized place. It is as simple as bright light attracting moths. He refers to Professor Peter Wagner who says that Satan delegates high-ranking members of the hierarchy of evil spirits to control nations, regions, tribes, cities, neighbourhoods, and other social networks. In Africa, these demons best play their studied tricks in the realm of reincarnation to keep Africa perpetually bound. Egbe maintains that the 'Ogbanje' (born-to-die) demons take control of those families with such strong psychic tendencies. Although the child is actually born with the same mark or cut which was given to the former child, the whole thing is purely the tricks and manipulation of the cosmic intelligence. Though it cannot be proved scientifically, yet by the psychic influence upon the mother while under pregnancy, the demons incise or inflict upon the would-be child the same mark or cut, only to be born with such mark. This is not a reincarnation of the dead child. Egbe further avers that these psychic powers transfer hereditary disease or its symptoms as well as marks upon the newly born member of that family, they are guarding. Having accepted this illusive figment or reincarnation by naming the child after the ancestor, the parents, by implication, have also acknowledged the tricks and lordship of Satan. The soldier-demon, having achieved its aim, will speedily remove the said illness from the child. Ironically, the child grows up, the name may be borne for life, or rejected by him, but the demon will do nothing to him, the reason being that his parents had long ago pledged their allegiance and homage on his behalf to the lordship of Satan. Accordingly, though he may not believe in reincarnation, he is under the bond of its power.

Egbe goes further to dismiss the belief in reincarnation from the point of view of genetics. Genetics is the branch of biology concerned with heredity, that is, the way characteristics are passed on from parents to children. The science of genetics has made us to know that most of the characteristics we possess are gotten from lineage genes. To buttress his argument, Egbe refers us to the case of a family which may have a great grandfather who had six fingers on each hand and leg instead of the normal five. Then in the third generation of that lineage, a child is also born with six fingers in each hand and leg, with a very close resemblance to that great-grandfather. For Egbe, this is simply genetic inheritance, not reincarnation. Nor can the genealogical recurrence of a particular disease within a lineage indicate reincarnation. Quite to the contrary, genetic studies have given us the right clue. That is why, in the diagnosis of a psychiatric case, for instance, the historical background of the patient is thoroughly investigated to identify any possible genetic link (Egbe, 4 – 16).

Egbe has also pointed out that reincarnation is deeply rooted in mysticism, just as Darwin's theory of evolution is rooted in mysticism. He maintains that both evolution and reincarnation come from the cosmic base of the Universal Mind – the Devil. Just as the theory of

evolution has received worldwide acceptance and its books have inundated public libraries, reincarnation has received worldwide acceptance and psychic libraries and mystical manifestations adorn its reality and praise. In other words, both theories are unscriptural.

There is the Christian rebuttal of reincarnation. Contrary to the argument of reincarnationists that reincarnation is taught in the Bible, the author wishes to say that reincarnation has no root at all in the bible. Reincarnation is a mystical deceit which has to justify the belief in reincarnation. One of them is the case of the witch of Endor who conjured Samuel at the request of King Saul. But this clearly is not a case of reincarnation. The woman was merely operating with familiar spirits. These are deceptive spirits capable of disguising themselves with faces of people familiar to us. This is why a man can dream of seeing his wife pursuing him with a knife or seeing his late father sitting or talking with him.

What about the case of Elijah versus John the Baptist? It is argued by exponents of reincarnation that the law of *Karma* fell on John the Baptist by being beheaded as Elijah beheaded the about 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Apart from that, some people read the following scriptures and immediately conclude that Elijah reincarnated in John the Baptist.

1. Malachi 4:5 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet ..."
2. Matthew 11:15 "And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was to come".
3. Matthew 17:12 "But I say unto you, that Elias is come already, and they know him not ..."

Exponents of the doctrine of reincarnation misinterpret these and other verses of the Bible to mean that even Christ believed in and taught reincarnation. The view is commonly held among some of the mystical cults such as Rosicrucian AMORC, the lodges, Eckankar, freemasonry, and so on.

Bible is better understood when scripture is compared with scripture. Reading Luke 1:17, one finds the angel of God saying of John the Baptist thus: "And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias ..." That is simply to say that John came in the zeal, power and purpose of God which were first upon Elijah. Comparing the ministries of both persons, one can discern zeal, power and fearlessness in the way they denounced the iniquities of their time. Again, both caused religious revival and reawakening in their time.

It is sometimes said that personal testimony is more authentic than secondary testimony about a person. If this is correct, and I believe it is correct, then John's personal testimony should be able to nail the matter on the head. In John 1:20-23, when asked if he was Elijah, John frankly and flatly testified before his witnesses thus: "I am not". This language is plain enough to refute the baseless claim that Elijah reincarnated in John the Baptist. Evidently, therefore, the forerunnership of John the Baptist has no reincarnation basis and so should not be cited as an example of reincarnation (Egbe, 117). That Elijah will come back to put all things right before the sudden

appearance of Jesus Christ simply means that there will come a chosen messenger who will operate within the same realm of divine guidance, wielding God's dynamic power as Elijah did (Egbe, 119).

It has been observed that reincarnation is a psychic hypothesis aimed at challenging and possibly, uprooting the cream of the Christian tenets of judgment after death, heaven, hell fire, and of God Almighty being in control of procreation and of the universe (Egbe, 5).

It has been argued that the issue of reincarnation is plagued by some serious dualistic overtones. Reincarnation implies that the person is in two worlds simultaneously. He is the departed ancestor living in the spirit world. At the same time he has been re-born or has reincarnated into a new born baby. This would mean that the person has doubled or tripled (Iroegbu, 354). But some people like Mbiti respond that it is not the person qua person but some of his physical features or characteristics that are reborn in the new baby (Mbiti, 164).

Finally, many rational ambiguities are associated with the doctrine of reincarnation. If reincarnation is a literal truism, then there would be a dualism of personal identity or stagnancy in population. Reincarnation does help to explain the resemblance in the past and present personalities. Above all, it expresses the ontological longing of man to continue to live. However, it does not help me here and now because I have no memories whatsoever of any past life either in this life or in the spirit world. My only personality seems to be the one I have now, no more, no less (Iroegbu, 354 - 355).

CONCLUSION

To many traditional Africans who believe in reincarnation, the idea of having more than one chance at life is the most equitable solution to the quest for moral perfection and eternal life. To them it does not matter if reincarnation is real or imagined if it helps them make sense out of their lives. In other words, what matters to them is if it works. To them, *Karma* is just: whatever you sow, that you will reap. If you do bad things you will pay the price and if you do good things, you will get a reward. Punishment is proportionate to how bad one's *Karma* is. Also, the suffering one is going through in present life is justified only if it is the outcome of one's past lives. Obviously, this explanation absolves God from being responsible for suffering. All suffering is explainable in terms of the just outworking of bad deeds in former incarnations. Apart from that, the belief even helps to protect human freedom. God does not compel anyone to believe but rather gives them more time to exercise their freedom. Moreover, moral progress and spiritual growth can only be achieved during successive lifetimes, which will enable the individual enough time to understand the love of God better.

We can safely conclude that although the traditional African belief in reincarnation lacks logical, scientific and Biblical foundations, nevertheless, its explanatory value not only helps to strengthen the faith of those who believe, but also can stimulate further philosophical reflections on and scientific research into the vital issues involved.

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