



A Critique of Efik Concept of Re-Incarnation

Asukwo, Offiong O and Emmanuel Etta

*Department of Philosophy
University of Calabar*

ABSTRACT

Among the departmentalized worlds of philosophy, reality has no universalized acceptable explanation. Both the Western and the Eastern worlds explain reality differently. So is Africa, and in particular Efik people of Africa. In order to explain reality as it relates to the process of human existence, they brought in the concept of re-incarnation. Re-incarnation as a belief system appears to have an aim but its process is beyond scientific explanation and logical reasoning. This work observes that though the belief in re-incarnation tends to control some societal ills among the Efik people in the past, in this era of enlightenment, there are reliable valid claims that support creation and human existence than re-incarnation.

INTRODUCTION

The belief in re-incarnation has affected the religious life of many nations of the world including Africa as a continent, and Efik as a tribe. This concept has no propounder, yet, is as old as the history of the Efik people. Among the Efiks, this belief has no sacred document but is passed from one generation to another orally, through proverbs, songs, artistic work, names given children, etc. The belief has so permeated the Efik traditional setting in that their religious inclination hangs on it. But the philosophical survey of this belief as practice by the Efiks poses a challenge to the modern minds concerning its authenticity, having known the superstition that goes with it. But then, Efiks have reasons for believing it on moral ground in order to fight moral crimes.

Brief History of Efik People

The question about Efik origin and who they are appears sophisticated nowadays. The arguments are not just traditional history but are now sophisticated stories and hypotheses, discussions and analyses. Hence there is no clear cut answer as to the origin of the Efiks. Due to the very nature of Efik ethno-history, many schools of thought came with diverse views about the origin of the Efiks. Among them are the Akak, who traced the Efiks'

A Critique of Efik Concept of Re-Incarnation

origin to the Hebrew stock; Aye traced Efik origin to Orient Africa; and Efik-Ibibio group whose claim of Efik origin is based on E.N. Amaku's fiction – 'Efik Ebrutu'.

The Hebrew origin is what the Efiks themselves have accepted. The etymological origin of the name 'Efik' evolves from its original Hebrew tongue 'Aphik' or 'Aphik' as recorded in the Bible (Judges 1:31). It is at this point that Akak claimed that the Efik was one of the tribes that came out from the many tribes of Israel particularly from among the offspring of Jacob. This may not be true because the Israelites met the 'Aphik' in Canaan when they came out of Egypt. At Canaan, the 'Aphik' appeared to have lived in republics with a central king who was killed by Joshua at Israel's arrival (Joshua 12:1-18). Joshua then shared the republics of 'Aphik' to Asher, a tribe in Israel (Joshua 19:17-23). The seat of 'Aphik' Kingdom was under Judah.

It is this 'Aphik' (later evolved into Efik) that drifted into Egypt, Sudan, Nubia and to Lake Chad where they involved in salt production. At Lake Chad two of their clans left to Ghana. The mainstream drifted downward to Ututu and Arochukwu in Igboland. Because of Long – juju of Arochukwu problem they moved to Uruan where they met the Ibibios. From there the Efiks moved to Ndodoghi and to Ikpaene. It is from here that King Eyo Ema Atai Ema Atai Iboku led the Efiks as their paramount ruler to Creek Town their final 'Canaan' in 1400 AD. Since then, the Efiks have stayed and spread their tentacles from Creek Town to Calabar, Akpabuyo, Bakassi and environs. Today, we have come to see the Efiks within many families in neighbourhood to the Efuts and the Quas in Calabar, the capital of Cross River State of Nigeria (Asukwo 2007: 170-171).

Definition of Re-Incarnation

Re-incarnation has been defined as 'the migration of the soul from the body at death and its re-entry into another body' (Isaac 1981: 1029). The ancient Greek philosophers believed that 'another body' can be human or animal, but the Efiks vary on that. The Efiks believe one can only come back through the process of re-incarnation into the human body after death and not into animal body. For Inya Egbe, though he views re-incarnation as the 'special cord of mysticism', defines it as 'the process of rebirth of a person to pay for his bad deeds until such is perfected' (1992:5). This is where morality is brought in as the fundamental reason for re-incarnation. The doctrine of karma as enshrined in most of the Eastern religions attests to this fact. Karma, which is also called the law of nemesis, is the external law of justice, the law of cause and effect, the law of retribution, which operates in the universe (Omeregbe 1993:199). It is evil that attracts karma, which determines *samsara* (rebirth). It recycles until the individual attains *nirvana* (paradise). Onyewuenyi also defines re-incarnation as 'the theory where the soul separates from the body at death to form another body for another span of earthly life' (1996:6).

The major factor from the above definitions is the process of the soul coming to life and going out at death repeatedly for some time which is transmigration. Among the Efiks (who are dipartite, i.e the belief in the existence of soul and body), like some other parts of the African culture, it is believed that 'the spirits of the ancestors are re-incarnated into their descendants and not the souls' (Opuku 1978:138). This implies that the ancestral souls continue to exist even after re-incarnation. The Efiks believe same that 'although the person is re-incarnated, something of himself is still... in the spirit world' (Fuller 1994:21), which warrants constant pouring of libation to the said re-incarnated ancestors. This of course is partial re-incarnation. The process of transmigration differs from Efik concept of metempsychosis in that, the latter implies that the soul of a living (physical person) can inhere in an animal or any other object while the person still lives. For the Efiks as well as the Ibibios (Ojong 1995: 83), the soul (ukpong) is believed to be in various forms, which enables a man to exist physically as a person and also inheres part of his soul into an animal for the protection of his life, or that of his family or for the exhibition of his personal spiritual prowess. In Efik, one perceives the type of animal one inheres his soul into, either through body odour, some physical manifestations or by divination. Philosophically speaking, the concept of soul has been a problem, but that does not mean that philosophy should come to a standstill because of many unsolved problems. Yet still, the Efik concept of re-incarnation is creating more problem than solving. One of these problems ensues when we consider the soul as a single entity playing a tripartite role by operating in three spheres: inhering into animal or fish, re-incarnating into a new born baby and still remaining as an ancestral spirit to be worshipped.

Re-Incarnation in Efik Thought

To understand Efik concept of re-incarnation, it will be needful to break it into related concepts like myths, morality, religion and its effects on the people. It is worth mentioning here that Efik philosophy is not found in volume of books but in their proverbs, names, songs, etc, as I have said earlier. Hence, their concept of re-incarnation is observed in expressions like *akani ekpo edi emana* (an old spirit has come back to the world). It is also seen in Efik pet names like *Ete-ete* (grandfather); *Ete-eka* (maternal grandfather); *Eka-eka* (grand mother); *Etinyin* (our father), etc. There may be no Efik extended family today without these names.

MYTHS: One of such myths used in explaining or transmitting the concept of re-incarnation from generation to generation among the Efiks is fiction stories like the one written by one of the Efik most popular writer, E.N. Amaku. He writes the story of how in the world beyond (Obio *Etinyin Abasi* – the city of God our Father), there was an order that forbids youths staying late outside the city of *Etinyin Abasi* (our Father). That any person who does that and the gate to the city is locked will only be allowed into the city after

A Critique of Efik Concept of Re-Incarnation

the process of re-carnation. What this means is that, unless a person dies, he will not be admitted back into the city of *Etinyin Abasi*. So, in this city there were a group of heady youths - *Nka Nkpri Eto* (association of stubborn peer group), who were locked out for disobedience. These youths then agreed to come into this world and into different houses (Amaku 1951: 9). The process was to be a recycled event. Sometimes this story is also told to explain away premature deaths. This belief has entrenched fears into Efik system to a point if many children are given birth to in a community, some Efik people will suspect evil happenings coming upon them because of the impact of the story above.

The second myth involves a divinity (*eka-abasi* – god’s mother) believed to be the mother of all children in the spirit world. She sends children to the world (physical) under oath, and the child in question will promise to come back to her if the would-be parent fails to grant him/her (the child) heart’s desires. This informs why Efik used to observe a feast called *udia okpo nka* (age-grade sacrificial food) whenever a child is sick and such sickness is linked to *eka-abasi* (god’s mother). Before the feast, sacrifice will be made on behalf of the sick child with incisions on the body of the child especially on the face. During that feast all the children in the neighbourhoods who partake in eating the food will rob their unwashed hands on the sick child (the food is not eaten with spoon), pleading with *eka-abasi* not to take their friend away by death. By so doing, it is believed that they will disassociate the sick child from other children in the world beyond. Failure to observe this feast, according to the belief the child will die. The child may be coming and going just that way, hence, when the parent observe such an unstable child they will name him – Nyong, meaning a child who moves in and out of life.

Sometimes, among the Efiks, when an ancestral spirit re-incarnates into his ‘former’ family and the people could not recognize the person coming, the person (the child) may feel offended and will start developing one sickness to the other. When a diviner is consulted, the child will allegedly tell them what he wants and who he is that comes. And whatever he wants the parent will give him. It can be a name title or whatever, else he dies. It is on this note that aged members of Efik families are highly respected. Most often they are the ones who inform the new parent who among the ancestral spirit that re-incarnates into their family. The new parent will now quickly know which family name to give the child. This could also inform why it takes the Efiks sometimes to give some children family name. They have to wait for such revelation to avoid mistakes.

The mother of this writer told him her life stories about her re-incarnation. That she was a man in the former life that used to carry the village masquerade called *Abasi idorike usen* (God does not fix a date). At that time, ‘he’ died physically and later re-incarnated into this life, now as a woman. It was at the age of five when this story became known to the three surrounding villages. She mentioned the family which ‘he’ was born into (as a man) which also exists till date, and the controversy she had with an ‘old brother’. According to her, this man beat her while she was eating when she

refused to fetch water for him. In annoyance, she ran out crying and reported to some chiefs in the village demanding 'his' properties inherited by the man. She even took the chiefs to show all her economic trees she owned when she was a man in the former life. When the chiefs saw these things they marveled, and agreed that none of these things should be handed over to her, should in-case any of them must have warranted 'his' death that time. To be frank, some of these economic trees are still there in the village without anyone claiming further ownership. Up till today the villagers there are still regarding this writer as part of that family whose 'brother died and later believed to have re-incarnated to become his (writer) mother.

The question now is how can a re-incarnated person be identified? Among the Efiks, it is believed that if an individual re-incarnates more than once, there will be small circles on the middle of his head as per a number of times he comes into this life. These small circles appear mysterious because not every person can see them. Another mark of identification is the exhibition of natural wisdom or talents. The more the person re-incarnates into this world the more wise he becomes. This fact informs the belief in the concept of *akpa-obot* (first coming and stupid child) among the Efiks. The problem here is, the Efiks claim to believe in creation and procreation theories of the Bible, which implies that children are born through the process of procreation through divine order. How comes then that a perfect God creates a stupid child at their first coming? This belief contradicts the Bible which states clearly that God's work at creation is 'very good' (Genesis 1: 31). What they called *akpa-obot* has been scientifically proven to be the Down 's syndrome where a child is born with medical complications that affect his brain and facial appearance. So, since they do not know the scientific way of explaining it they give a name – *akpa-obot*.

MORALITY: The moral foundation of re-incarnation has to be examined since it has bearings on Efik social life. And as this work focuses on Efik people, the practice of morality here is relative but its principle universal and absolute. It is relative in the sense that, the practical norms surrounding this concept may only be applicable to the Efiks but it conveys a universal meaning. Among other tribes and cultures, the story maybe different. The moral principle used here will be a negative one (Omoregbe, 12-13). This is because the belief in re-incarnation views it evil for one to wash plates at night after eating. The Efiks believe that children from the spirit world will come at night to eat in the house. And if the food is always available in that house, that will attract these 'children' to come into such house by birth. Some bareness are attributed to this fact, because these 'children' will not go to where there is no food. It is equally evil to throw something at night to avoid hitting an ancestral spirit or children from the other world. If such 'children' are wounded from the process to throwing something at night, they will eventually re-incarnate with marks of such wounds. To even spank the child at night believed to have come from *eka-abasi* is also regarded as evil because no one has such right. At the cry of such a child, *eka-abasi* will come

A Critique of Efik Concept of Re-Incarnation

for her child. It is also morally wrong to give somebody's child hot food (*udia ye uye*). When that is done, it is done with an appeal that such action is not deliberate. All these among others are moral laws that surround the belief of reincarnation. The moral implication here is as follows:

- To guide against child abuse.
- To moderate man's excesses
- To reduce child mortality rate
- To promote hardworking (in order to provide enough food for the family).
- To protect child's right.

RELIGION: The belief in re-incarnation forms the basis of ancestral worship among the Efiks. Efik ancestral spirits are believed to have a greater influence over the living. They are being consulted and appeased to through libation before any major decision is taken in a family or the entire community. If we take religion to be a way of life that includes a set of beliefs which science and natural experience cannot explain, and see it as rules and guidance that govern people's behaviour (Kajubi et al 1974: 424), then we can conclude that the Efiks though they believe in one Supreme Being – God, yet, their ancestors (*mbukpo*) whom they believe to be re-incarnating are part of their religious life and object of worship. Unfortunately, some Efik people are now embracing Christianity which condemns ancestral worship. The Bible position is that when dies, he goes either to heaven or hell (Hebrews 9: 27). That means no other existence remains to be worshipped. Doing so becomes idolatry.

EFFECTS: As religion involves an act of believing, the effects of such beliefs will be seen manifesting positively or negatively in the lifestyle, conduct and action of those that believe. In the case of re-incarnation in Efik culture, the effects of its belief are negative. It keeps the people (believers) in suspense, fear of uncertainty, confusion, doubt and hopelessness. It can even result to poverty because of incessant sacrifices. It makes victims to be narrow-minded in that, biological complications in a child which would have been arrested medically would be attributed to *eka-abasi*. This has led a lot of people into superstition and high increase rate of infant mortality. Most believers of this concept have no regard for birth control. They want to born more so that when some die, some will remain. This actually affects the economy of the entire community because of uncontrolled population.

A Critical Appraisal

Before appraising this concept of reincarnation among the Efiks, it is needful to look into the possible reasons why this belief found itself into their world-view. Firstly, there is that possibility that, in trying to explain what the natural science could not, concerning life hereafter, and what becomes of the

departed soul, that this belief has been brought into Efik belief system to explain the mystery of life.

Secondly, as African philosophy is founded on metaphysical inclination which links itself to divinities and ancestral worship, there is no way where the belief of re-incarnation will not be embellished in such a traditional religion. Thirdly, the historical part of the Efiks about their migration from the oriental world should be the possible means of infiltration of this belief into their thought system. Even in one of their stops over in Egypt, the Efiks imbibed some Egyptians traditions and cultures which are, 'reflection in the elaborate funeral rites of the ancient Efik when compared with those of ancient Egyptians and other Orientals. Equally true is the similarity in religious beliefs of the Efiks and Hebrews ...' (Akak 1986: 29).

If it was possible for the Efiks to imbibe such cultures, what could have stopped them from imbibing a belief in re-incarnation which was a reigning belief among the Orientals, including ancient Greece. This fact is further confirmed by Efik language origin. According to Akak, the Efik as great adventures who have sojourned as strangers into many cultures have borrowed some thoughts and words into their (Efik) language and grammar (1986:27). And this follows therefore that, if Efik language has been adulterated by foreign languages, this must have been one of the possible means through which the idea of re-incarnation imperceptibly filtered into their thought system. Fourthly, intermarriages with other tribes must have formed the bridge for this belief into Efik system. For examples, the Ibibio's whom the Efiks have stayed with at Uruan for many years also believe in reincarnation.

The above observations, notwithstanding, the belief has come to stay among the Efiks . The question now is, does it worth believing? Is there any substance to hold unto as a proof to this belief? Or should we just jettison the concept from Efik thought system because it lacks merit or proof? Or is there any benefit our society stands to enjoy or loose from this belief?

Actually, the 'belief is generally based on an assumption' (Omogbe 1993: 137). But this should not be a justification for not believing, after all the belief in the existence of atom is based on assumption too. This notwithstanding we need to deflate the balloon of this concept.

The philosophical review of African religion and their beliefs contradict the belief in re-incarnation. According to Mbiti, 'over the whole of Africa, creation is most widely acknowledge work of God... that God created all things, hence giving Him the name Creator' (Or molder, maker)(Mbiti 1969: 39).

For the Efiks , God as the Creator is referred to as *Andibot*. If they Efiks accept God as the Creator it implies that re-incarnation is false because there is no act of creation in the process of re-incarnation. Also, if we accept the concept of reincarnation, it means that we have to drop the idea of procreation. If that is the case then can we explain the current population explosion, the world over, knowing that the population would be determined by the number of the dead that would reincarnate?

A Critique of Efik Concept of Re-Incarnation

Furthermore, E. A. Offiong writes that, 'the traditional Efik people believe that death is designed by God (Abasi) to enable people to return to the land of the dead' (Offiong 1987:45). Assuming that is the plan and purpose, how come that these ancestors have the power to reincarnate, knowing fully that 'in all religious teachings, God has power over things which men are unable to do or control' (Kajubi 1974: 424). The belief on partial re-incarnation, where the spirit re-incarnates while the soul remains still as an ancestor, is questionable. If it remains in the spirit world during the process of re-incarnation, how does reincarnated child able to re-collect his past earthly life. And if such tales about former experience is true, that means the child in question should be in position to tell the condition the state of affairs, general attitudes of people (or spirits), population of the spirits in the spirit world, since they are conscious of themselves. They should also tell us when they – as spirit enter embryos to become living beings. This will even help the medical doctors on when to carry out abortion to avoid the killing of human beings.

Another area of claim by the belief of reincarnation is that of identification marks borned with those children. There is no empirical justification to this claim, having known that the body (the material entity) remains rotten in the grave at death. That is why Efiks still attached importance to their grave yards. They believed that the material components of the dead are still there. Hence, the place should remain sacred. So the marks in the body are not necessary proofs that the dead has reincarnated. Even drug abuse can cause a serious mutilation on the unborn child. Apart from that the concurrencies of certain events within the culture is determined by the peoples' world view or belief system.

There have been claims that an ancestor of a given family can reincarnate into another family. Such ancestral migration is greeted skepticism. How can the spirit migrate into another family while the soul stays back to be worshipped by the first family. What is the rationale of doing that? And of what benefit or value will such re-incarnation brings to the two families?

Finally, Efik's belief in metempsychosis (as earlier explained) brings doubts and uncertainty to the belief of reincarnation. It is possible for the two to be false at the same time, but cannot be true at the same time. It is practically impossible for the single entity to re-incarnate into a human being, and at the same being inhere into an animal, while a part remains as an ancestor.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is good to make it clear that the general acceptability of re-incarnation is not enough proof for the justification of its existence. Equally the denial of its existence for wants of evidence is unscholarly and equally not philosophical.

But yet, we need to re-examine our beliefs, (including re-incarnation), if they meet the taste of the modern time, then we can refine and repackage them well for 'sale'. If not we should reduce the rate of blowing the trumpet of such beyond proportion. What I am saying in essence is that any concept without a purpose is of no relevance to mankind. And the concept of re-incarnation is one of them. This concept has nothing to contribute to Efik social life, economic development and even in their personal lives where others can benefit from. Hence, the modern Efik culture is unconsciously replacing re-incarnation related names with English/Christian names. Also gradually, the pouring of libation in social gatherings is giving way to opening prayers in Christian manner. This is how life should be rather than holding tenaciously on things that will pay the society and mankind in general nothing.

WORKS CITED

- Akak, E. O.(1986). *The Palestine Origin of the Efik*. Calabar: Akak and Sons.
- Akak, E. O.(1981). *Efiks of old Calabar*. Calabar: Akak and Sons
- Amaku, E. N.(1951). *Edikot Nwed Mbuk Bk 4*. Lagos: Thomas Nelson (Nig) Ltd.
- Asukwo, Offiong O. (2007). 'Aesthetic Experience in Efik Culture', in G. O. Ozumba and S. Y. Alabi (eds), *LandMarks in Aesthetic Studies*. Makurdi: Microteacher and Associates (Nig) Ltd.
- Egbe, I. I. (1992). *Re-incarnation?* Calabar: Inya Egbe publications.
- Fuller, Lois (1994). *A Missionary Handbook on African Traditional Religion*.Nigeria: Evangelical Missionary Institute.
- Isaacs. Alan. (Ed)(1981). *The Macmillan Encyclopedia*. London: Macmillan Ltd.
- Kujubi, W. S. et al.(1974). *African Encyclopedia*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Offiong, E. A.(1987). "Efik Traditional Concepts of Death and the Hereafter". *Africana. Morburgensia: Shonderleft*.
- Ojong, K. A. (1995). "Metempsychosis and Reincarnation in Ibibio thought".*Footmarks on African Philosophy*. Ed. A. F. Uduigwomen. Lagos, O. O. Press Ltd.
- Omogbe, Joseph (1993). *A Philosophical Look on Religion*. Lagos: Jojo Educational Research and Publishers.
- Onyewuenyi, I. C.(1996). *African Belief in Rreincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal*. Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd.
- Opoku, K. A. (1978). *West African Traditional Religion*. Fep International Ltd.