

## IGBO TRADITIONAL BELIEFS: DEATH AND AFTERLIFE AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON MORALITY

**Dr. Michael Muonwe**

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: me.muonwe@unizik.edu.ng; makkymuo@yahoo.co.uk

### **Abstract**

The Igbo traditional society has a set of beliefs about death and afterlife. Those beliefs somehow regulate the way the people understand the relationship between the living and the dead. They help the people to live their lives in accordance with a set of codes of conduct that specifies what is right or wrong, good or bad in their relationship with their fellow human beings, their immediate environment, and the spiritual beings and forces that suffuse the Igbo universe. Such ordering promotes cosmic, moral, and social balance in the visible and invisible realms of existence. The Igbo people believe that a person's condition of existence after death is consequent upon how well or badly he or she conducts his or her life on earth and the way he or she dies. Hence, people generally try to live morally good life on earth in order to enjoy a befitting, happy death, burial, and afterlife existence. This paper works on the hypothesis that the Igbo beliefs about death and afterlife have a strong influence on their morality. It aims at showing how this influence is felt among the people and its implications. By examining the extant literature on those beliefs, their connectedness with, and their impact on, how the Igbo order their moral lives is clearly delineated and defined. The delineation and definition mark a unique contribution of the paper to research on the subject matter.

### **Introduction**

Two major kinds of worlds are usually distinguished in the Igbo universe (*uwa*): the world/land of humans (*ala mmadu*), that is, the visible world, and the invisible world/land of the spirit, which is called *ala mmuo* (Kalu 2003; Madubuko 1994; Uzukwu 1982). While the invisible world is so designated because it is inhabited solely by spirits (*ndi mmuo*), the visible world is called *ala mmadu* (literally, the land of humans), not because it is inhabited only by human beings, but because human beings constitute the cardinal focus therein. The distinction of the two worlds, one from the other, is chiefly on the grounds of their perceptibility (visibility) or otherwise. They are not conceived as two (spatially) separate realities. In fact, the spirit-world does not exist outside human experiential realm. That is why spiritual beings pervade the Igbo daily experience of reality and constitute a very cardinal hermeneutical tool for a better comprehension of these experiences and the people's relationship with their immediate environment. In Igbo society, notes Jordan (1971), every single person is fully convinced "that an invisible universe was in action all around him, and that his term of life was short if he happened to fall foul of its denizens" (p. 117).

The two Igbo worlds are viewed as complementary and, in some sense, interdependent. As Anyanwu (1984) and Ezeanya (1969) argue, just as humans need the spiritual beings who occupy the spirit-world for their own well-being, so also do some spirits need human beings for their comfort in their own world. The close relationship between the two makes it possible to have a continuous interactions among the beings

occupying both realms. According to Madubuko (1994), “beings in the [Igbo] universe are not in opposition and not in the situation of ‘either-or’. They are not even merely juxtaposed. Rather there is a vigorous interaction of beings which cuts across the line of the visible and the invisible” (p. 25). Human beings are at the centre of this interaction; they serve as the major mediating link, such that the dialectics of the two worlds could be said to be resolved in them. For Edeh (1985), human beings are simply “caught up within the boundaries of these two worlds” (p. 74). On one hand, through regular worship, veneration, prayers, and sacrifices, human beings influence the spiritual beings; on the other hand, the spiritual beings also intervene in human affairs and influence the course of human life. In the process, they can even possess human beings or become incarnate in any other visible form (Metuh, 1981).

It is important to note that the relationship between the two is far from being chaotic. Instead, it is guided by Igbo traditional laws and customs. This brings order and harmony into the relationship. That is why Edeh (1985) argues, “Regardless of the fact that they believe in the existence of two worlds, the Igbos, like all Africans, have an extraordinarily harmonious view of the universe. This view is the basic criterion by which all things, including life itself, must be measured for their meaningfulness and cohesiveness” (p. 114). Viewed thus, humans are able to live their life in a more fulfilling manner, and this way secure for themselves a relatively hitch-free entrance into the spirit-world.

Death (*onwụ*) is a very significant incident in the movement of human beings from *ala mmadu* to *ala mmụọ*. From the spirit-world, the dead continue to have influence on, and are influenced by, their living relatives. Their perceived status in the spirit-world condition the type of relationship they would enjoy with the surviving relatives. They may merit good relationship with the living, if they believe they are resting peacefully. If, on the other hand, they are perceived as restless, joyless sacrifices may be offered to ward off their spirits from among the living and rituals performed to sever any ties with the living, so that they enjoy a peaceful life here on earth devoid of their needless interference.

### **Igbo concept of death**

The Igbo people are fully aware that death is a universal phenomenon. They express this in the saying: *onwụ zulu Igbo* (death reaches every length and breadth of Igbo society). Some Igbo names also express the fact that death is no respecter of any person: *onwụamaeze* (death knows no king), *onwụasọanya* (death never discriminates), *onwụamadike* (death knows no strong person), *onwuatuegwu* (death fears no one), and *onyekaonwụ*, which means ‘who is greater than death’ (Udeani, 2007; Ekwunife, 1995). It is an inevitable and necessary occurrence for humans in order to live fully the reality of the spirit-world. As it brings to an end one’s existence in the world of humans, it opens at the same time the door for another form of existence. Death is, therefore, a very important phenomenon for the Igbo. “Death,” so writes Chukwuelobe (1998), “gives rise to new birth; it makes possible the Igbo ‘belongingness’ and affiliation to the ancestral dwelling and, hence, to new birth. Death for the Igbo is as important as life itself” (p. 3). In a sense, life is not complete without death.

Human life in this world is just one stage in the overall life to be lived by each person. It, therefore, follows that death as the Igbo people see it, does not terminate life as such.

Still less does it constitute the ultimate end of man/woman. This is well captured by Leonard (1968) when he writes:

The two existences, material and spiritual, are in reality, so far as the people are concerned, one life: the former a probation of the latter, death being merely a necessary ordeal in order to effect the transition, or rather a connecting link between the two phases. (p. 187)

Thus, when death brings to an end the physical life or existence of a person, it opens yet another opportunity for life, but this time, life in a different realm of existence – the spiritual. This is the sphere of the creator (*Chineke*) himself. This means that, by dying, one gains the opportunity of establishing a closer association with the creator than he or she may have had while still in the physical, visible sphere of existence (Amu, 1998). The person also comes into closer association with the Igbo ancient forebears. Therefore, the act of dying is not merely a separation from “the household in the flesh,” but also more importantly a more intimate connection to the more powerful “household in the spirit” (Leonard, 1968, p. 188).

The ancestral dwelling is perceived by the Igbo people as a home. The act of dying is often referred to as an ideal case of *ila ulo* or *ila ala mmuo* (going home or going home to the spirit-land). Hence, as people come to pay their last respect to a deceased before burial, they usually bid him or her farewell by saying, *laba n'udo* (go home in peace). This perception is very much evident in Igbo funeral songs as recorded by some authors, like Metuh (1981) and Chukwuelobe (1998). In fact, the Igbo perceive and describe human earthly life as a pilgrimage, a sojourn, and the activities of human beings therein as a sort of market transactions after which one would return home. This is captured in the following adages, as adduced by Okafor (1996):

*Obialu ije nwe una* – a visitor will surely return home. *Enu uwa bu afia, onye zujue ukpa ya, o naba* – the world is a market place, from which one returns home after accomplishing a business transaction. *Enu uwa bu olili, onye nosia o naba* – the world is for tourism; a visitor must go home. (p. 7)

The ancestral home is simply a place where life is lived most authentically, and every Igbo man or woman looks forward to it as his or her goal in life, before eventual return through *ilo uwa* (roughly translated as reincarnation).

Though death is understood as an avenue for going home to the creator, an inevitable and necessary end of human physical existence in this world and a passage to the higher, more powerful, spiritual form of existence, it remains a tragedy, an evil that must be kept at bay as long as possible. Such is the paradox of death. It is considered as a disruption to the normal flow of human earthly existence and relationships. Here, one readily recalls some of the Igbo names used to express this: *onwudinjo* (death is bad/evil), *onwubuya* (death is lamentation/grief), *onwudiegwu*, which translates ‘death is awful/terrible’ (Okafor, 1996). The family where death has occurred is perceived as one which darkness has enveloped. This perception lingers on until the whole funeral proceedings have come and gone. In some cases, death is more than a tragedy and is seen as an abominable incident that contaminates the land, thus requiring some kind of cleansing, without which, as Okafor avers, “more deaths will occur. And until the purification is done, anyone who dares to eat will die or suffer other calamities” (p. 9).

In certain occasions, if death has become rampant in a compound, all the inhabitants may decide to relocate to another place and the compound becomes completely deserted on the ground that the site is an unlucky one (Basden, 1966).

### **Kinds of death**

The Igbo people believe that nothing happens per chance. If, for instance, a car veered off the road and killed a person, an average Igbo person would not be satisfied by mere physical or scientific explanation. Since his universe is permeated by spiritual beings, he would go beyond such an explanation to ask further questions out of the conviction that any occurrence has some veiled purposes behind it (Nwala, 1985). This is borne out of the Igbo strong belief in the supernatural and their deep concern for their individual and collective relationship to the invisible world. Anyanwu (1984) maintains, “the reason for this is because they recognise the existence of *secret* forces (invisible forces) acting or ready to act in the universe, for example, ancestors, divinities, personal *chi*, and even God Himself” (p. 91).

The immediate cause could be physical or spiritual. Nevertheless, more often than not, every physical cause is traced to its origin in the spiritual realm. Therefore, events have much deeper meaning beyond the apparently obvious explanations. This belief is expressed in their saying that “whoever sees something dancing on top of a river should be aware that there must be some other thing underneath the water providing the music.” No death is merely accidental. The manner of its occurrence and the circumstances surrounding it clue people in on its possible veiled cause. These shed more light on the type of death involved, the destination of the deceased and the kind of funeral he or she will be accorded.

Generally, three major kinds of deaths can be identified. These three, according to Metuh (1981), include, *onwu ekwensu* (literally, the devil’s death), *onwu ojoo* (bad/shameful death) and *onwu chi* (appropriate, natural, or “good” death). In his study, Okafor (1985) substitutes Metuh’s *onwu ekwensu* with *onwu akamere* (death by human agency). He seems not to have introduced anything new by so doing, because his *onwu akamere* is already contained in and forms part of Metuh’s understanding of *onwu ekwensu*, since it is believed that the devil is ultimately behind any death brought about by human agency.

Though these classifications are made, one should note that once someone dies, especially without attaining ripe, old age, the first thing that comes to the mind of an average Igbo person is that some evil person or spirit is behind it. It is only when this possibility has been ruled out either through a diviner or through other means that other possibilities could be considered (Amu, 1998). That is why the most common type of death in Igbo land is *onwu ekwensu*.

### **Onwu Ekwensu**

This is the type of death believed to have been ultimately caused by the devil (*Ekwensu*). They occur at a time when people are seen as not having yet accomplished the mission for which they are sent into the world by the creator. Included here are deaths of children or youth through violence, accidents, or other deaths by (wilful) human agency (Okafor, 1996).

Because such deaths are believed to have occurred prematurely, they are believed to upset very deeply the existing order of the universe. A diviner is usually consulted to determine the immediate and remote causes. If it is discovered that someone is behind it, after the burial, it is usual, according to Basden (1938), that

more *omu* [that is, tender palm fronds] are deposited on top of the grave. The closing words said over the grave are *sokwu onye bulu-i* (follow and fight [kill] the one who killed you) or *imala onye bulu-i iso ya* (you know the one who has killed you: follow him). (p. 275)

If, on the other hand, it cannot be traced to any known human being as the immediate cause, then, evil forces take the whole blame. The diviner, more often than not, prescribes some remedies to prevent a recurrence. Such remedies include the offering of bleak sacrifices in which discarded, old, and useless items are used to show the spirit that humans are unhappy, and to let it know that it will only be receiving such items if it goes on acting the same way (Chukwuelobe, 1998).

According to Metuh (1981), at death, the spirits of such people belong to the group of unhappy wandering spirits. They continue to roam about in a disgruntled manner since they are not allowed to accomplish their destiny on earth. Being unhappy, they try to wreak havoc and inflict various hardships and sicknesses on their living colleagues. The latter can only enjoy some rest when these spirits are driven away through sacrifices. There is, however, a strong belief that this category of wandering spirits will eventually come back (reincarnate) to complete their assignments on earth. In fact, strictly speaking, those who die this way are not spoken of as having gone home.

### **Onwu ojoo**

Considered as *onwu ojoo* (bad/shameful death) are those deaths believed to have resulted from the evil lives the deceased may have led on earth. Deaths brought about by some sicknesses, like dropsy, smallpox, leprosy or cholera have traditionally been classified as *onwu ojoo*. It is believed that God (*Chukwu*) allows people to die in such a manner as a punishment for their sins. Those who commit suicide and those who die at certain designated periods, or those who die by drowning, fire and lightning also fall within this group. In the past, there was no formal announcement of the death of such people; they were not mourned for or given official burials. To perform funeral rites for them would be seen as an exercise in futility since their fate was only clearly evident. Their bodies were rather thrown into the evil/bad forest, *ajo ohia*, which, as Udeani (2007) notes, “symbolises total rejection and excommunication by both the living and the dead” (p. 63).

Nevertheless, if such people were not seen in a bad light in the first place, and were perceived to have died through infraction of minor taboos, sometimes involuntarily, they might still receive their funeral rites later, but not before an elaborate and often expensive cleansing rites had been duly performed. Such funerals may not come before the expiration of the first year post-mortem (Metuh, 1981).

### **Onwu chi**

*Onwu chi* is a death which is adjourned by the people as natural and, therefore, willed by God. It is, according to Horton (1956), “one of the not-too-common instances in

West Africa of death being subsumed under a general category of causation” (p. 20). What, according to Norton, is usually the case is that “every death is regarded as individually and personally caused, usually by witches, sorcerers or evil spirits” (p. 20). The major criterion for a death to be possibly regarded as *onwu chi* by the Igbo people is that it must occur at a very ripe old age. Besides, it must be abundantly clear that no other adverse agency visible or invisible, human or spiritual, has been instrumental to it. They are regarded as having occurred at the appropriate time as willed by the creator, and consequently, seen as one’s conclusion of his or her particular sojourn on earth. This is embodied in the Igbo saying, *ukwa ruo oge ya o daa* (literally, when a breadfruit fully ripens, it simply falls to the ground). It is regarded as part of God’s blessings for a well-lived life, which every Igbo person quite often prays for. Those who experience *onwu chi* are believed to merit the ancestral status. But, as Metuh (1981) avers, they should also have a surviving son or a relative to accord them befitting and proper funeral rites as well as the necessary sacrifices at their appropriate times.

It must be noted that, even though the people’s disposition towards such deaths viewed as natural differs significantly from what it is when other kinds of death occur, they do not see their occurrence an entirely positive phenomenon. Death, for the Igbo, regardless of where, when, how, and why it happens, remains an evil, and always evokes feelings of grief and sorrow; even a mere thought of it saddens the heart. It is understood “as a great and unredeemed tragedy even when it happens in extreme old age. If it happens in other than extreme old age, it is still a greater tragedy” (Afigbo, 1989, p. 15).

### **Funeral and afterlife existence**

Once dead, two major possibilities exist for the deceased in the spirit-world. One can either enjoy the fullness of life by becoming an ancestor, or he or she continues to be one of the wandering and dreadfully dangerous spirits (*akalogeli*). Following judgement after death by *Chukwu*, the good are allowed full entry into *ala mmuo* where they become ancestors, while the bad ones are condemned to the intermediate state between the two worlds called *ama nri mmuo na mmadu*. They continue to roam about restlessly as disembodied, dangerous spirits. The spirits of the deceased good men and women who are yet to reach their ancestral home also occupy this realm (Metuh, 1981; Uzukwu, 1982). Performance of appropriate burial and funeral rites is an indispensable requirement for ushering these good people home. In this connection, Jordan (1971) notes,

The spirit of the dead was restless and confused in the next world if it did not get the type of burial it demanded... the pagans were naturally horrified... and shook their heads in anger and amazement at the thought of the poor spirit wandering aimlessly. ‘Poor soul’, they said, ‘poor soul... he will be lonely and friendless forever. (p. 129)

The burial and funeral rites constitute one of the three most important rites of passage; the other two being birth rites and puberty rites. The significance of these rites comes out unmistakably in Chukwuolobe’s (1998) view of them as initiation ceremonies: “Initiation (*ikpobata*, i.e. ‘letting in’), which begins at birth,” he argues, “reaches its ‘wholeness’ at death – the initiation of all initiations” (p. 14). The Igbo word for funeral ceremony also helps to highlight its importance. Majority of the Igbo people call this

*ikwa mmadu/ozu*. *Ikwa* is the infinitive form of the root word, *kwa* – mend, sew; *mmadu/ozu* means human being/corpse. *Ikwa mmadu /ozu* would literally mean ‘repairing a (dead) human being/corpse.’ So, the performance of funeral ceremony or rites carries the connotation of “repairing,” (that is, mending), or “making whole.” It means sewing up or mending the rupture in human relationships caused by the event of death, and reconciling the dead with both the human society and the spirit-world (Agbasiere, 2000).

What also influences the nature of funeral rites is the belief in some sort of congruence between the two worlds of the Igbo universe. The spirit-world, though nonphysical in nature, is believed to be very much patterned after the life in the human world. Metuh (1985) points out that the layout, the social life, and the social organisations of the two are believed to be very much the same. What underlies this belief is what some authors have called the “Igbo theory of duality.” The basic idea behind this theory is that there is nothing that exists in this world in a sensible form that does not have its counterpart in a non-sensible form. In other words, everything “has a dual existence, dual in the sense that the reality of its existence is a phenomenon in the visible world and also a reality in the invisible world. Whatever obtains here has a replica in the world of the unseen” (Edeh, 1985, p. 77). Moreover, every household, patrilineage, village, or town in the spirit-world is understood to be situated at exactly the same place it is in the world of humans. In essence, existence in the spirit-land is, so to say, a continuation of the existence in the world of humans (Metuh, 1981; Leonard, 1968).

Since the two are taken to correspond this way, every Igbo man or woman normally has the desire to be brought home for burial even if he or she dies overseas. The relatives and friends usually do all they can to bring the body home. There are known cases where the body was exhumed long after burial, brought home, and reburied. If not so, it is believed, the spirit will never be happy, since it is left a wanderer in a foreign land. This is encapsulated in the Igbo saying, *ozu nwa-afọ adighi efu na mba* (the body of a full-fledged Igbo son/daughter does not remain lost in a foreign land). Where, however, it is not possible to do this, some repatriation rituals are performed by which his or her soul is returned home. In the traditional Igbo societies, this is also the case with a married woman. Her body is usually buried in her fathers’ compound. If she expresses the wish to be buried in her husband’s compound, it may be respected, but repatriation ritual is usually performed. In some communities, “death duty” is also paid to her relatives to allow her body to be buried in her husband’s home (Onwurah, 1989).

In the context of the ancestors, this theory of duality also undergirds the belief that in the ancestral dwelling, individuals continue to enjoy the same status they enjoyed while on earth. They also continue with the same occupation they had while on earth. A rich man, for instance, is believed to continue to be rich, while a poor man continues in his poverty. Such a status can only change at the point of one’s re-entry into the human world through re-incarnation; otherwise, it remains virtually the same (Kalu, 2003). Belief in this continuity and Igbo experience of its reality is ritually expressed at the burial and funeral rites of a deceased. In the past, for example, chiefs and kings used to be buried with their servants and attendants, some even with the youngest of their wives, so that they would continue their services in the spirit-world. It is traditionally

believed that if they are buried without these assistants (or their symbolic substitutes) they would not be given a rousing welcome in the spirit-land. In some areas too, kings were buried seated on their royal thrones. Nowadays, however, human beings are no longer used for the burials of such royal personalities. Some use animals in lieu of humans (Metuh, 1981; Kalu, 2003; Umeasiegbu, 1977). Other materials thought to be of help to the dead for the continuation of their life in the spirit-world, such as their farm implements or other professional tools, like guns, cutlasses, wears, and other personal belongings can also be buried alongside the body.

Furthermore, although in today's Igbo society all bodies do *lie in state* for friends and well-wishers to come and pay their last respect before burial, few decades ago, it was not so. Only women did lie in state. Men "sat in state." While men were seated on a stool set against a wall in their home, women were generally laid flat on a mat spread on the floor. As Basden (1966) makes us understand, what underlies this practice is the idea that "she should not be placed in a false position in death," since "it is not customary for a woman to sit upon a chair in life" (p. 113). Other rituals that also dramatize such continuity include, "war dance for a warrior, hunting ritual for the hunter, title ceremony for a titled person, and even a grand escapade for a known burglar. As the saying goes *ife onye na eme na ejere ya uno onwu* 'What a person does comes to his funeral'" (Uzukwu, 1982, p. 206).

### **Death, afterlife, and Igbo morality**

It was clearly stated at the beginning of this paper that the Igbo beliefs about death and afterlife exert enormous influence on the Igbo concept of right and wrong, good and bad. Because the two worlds in the Igbo universe are closely related, what happens in one easily affects the other. The way one lives his life on earth affects his place hereafter and the place one wants to occupy in the hereafter conditions his life on earth.

### **Igbo traditional morality**

The term, morality, comes from the Latin word, *mos*, meaning custom or habit. It is a translation of the Greek *ethos* from where the word, ethics, is got. Morality, according to Hare (2019), "is a set of customs and habits that shape how we think about how we should live or about what is a good human life." Gert (2020) puts forward two broad senses in which morality could be used: descriptive and normative. In the normative sense, it refers to a code of conduct that, under specific conditions, could be applicable to all rational people. In its descriptive sense, as is commonly used by anthropologists and as used in this paper, morality refers to a set of code of conduct set forth by specific groups, societies, or individuals. This code functions as a standard for determining what constitutes good or bad, right or wrong actions.

Often this code remains unwritten and is passed on orally from generation to generation through proverbs, folklores, and sayings. All these constitute what the Igbo people call *omenala*, which endures for generations, thereby serving as a means of preservation and perpetuation of the morality of the people. According to Areji and Anyaehie (2015), *omenala* has both prescriptive and prohibitive dimensions that help to ensure maintenance of the ontological harmony or order among human beings and between them and the spiritual beings in the Igbo universe.



The code of conduct as contained in *omenala* relates to both social and personal responsibilities, to human beings and the physical universe, to the spiritual beings and the spiritual universe, as well as the relationship between these dimensions of existence. All these different dimensions work together and are related one to the other for the achievement of cohesion and harmony in the society. That is why a disruption in one dimension may likely affect the other. The Igbo saying that *otu mkpisi aka ruata mmanu, o zuo pha onu* (when a finger get soiled with oil, it can easily spread to all others) shows the Igbo belief in the social effect of personal sin or guilt. *Onye buru chi ya uzọ, o gbagbuo onwe ya n'osọ* (He or she who runs ahead of his or her *chi*, will definitely run to exhaustion) is another saying that emphasizes the role of *chi* in personal moral guidance and the consequences awaiting anyone who usurps that role.

To act in accordance with *omenala* is regarded as good behaviour because it helps to maintain the ontological harmony or order. This attracts praise, commendations, prosperity, happiness, and blessings from both human and spiritual beings. Conversely, one who contravenes the *omenala* commits evil, because his action disrupts the harmony or order, and calls for reprove, reprimand, and/or punishment, the level of which depends on the nature of the offence. Some offences could be such that they topple the ontological order altogether. Such offenses are classified as *aru* (abominations), and demand the cleansing ceremony called *ikpu aru* in order to get rid of their harmful effects on the land and the people and restore order (Metuh, 1981). Some offences could even lead to death.

Furthermore, while some offenders receive full punishments due for their offenses here on earth, some others receive theirs partly in this life and partly after death; still others receive theirs only after death. The nature of the offense, the attitude of the offender, and the divine will determine the appropriate punishment, the manner, and when it is applied.

Apart from *omenala*, the Igbo also recognize the role of conscience (*obi*) as a moral guide for every human being. They understand conscience as a tiny voice in human beings that directs them to do good and avoid evil, praises them when good is done and reproves them when evil is done. A person with bad character is regarded as having a bad conscience (*obi ojoo*), while one with good character is said to have *obi oma* – a good conscience (Metuh, 1981).

### **Death and afterlife beliefs: Impact on morality**

Having examined the Igbo beliefs about death and afterlife as well as their understanding of morality, it is ripe to discuss how these two influence each other. How do people's adherence or disobedience to the principles of *omenala* while on earth affect their state after death? How do the people's belief in the state and condition of death and afterlife influence their moral behaviour on earth? These and other similar questions are addressed below.

#### **a) Elaborate and expensive funerals**

The strong beliefs the Igbo people have about the effect of funeral rites on the deceased have impacted so much, both positively and negatively, on the social and moral life of an average Igbo person. The significance attached to funeral rites is such that, even if

the deceased has lived a good, long life in this world and had many progeny, but without having an elaborate, befitting funeral rites, often very expensive, performed for him or her by the surviving relatives, the person's spirit is believed to remain a homeless wanderer. He or she is not at home with either of the two worlds. It partially explains, as Uzukwu (1982) notes, why it quite often happens that those unable to shoulder the huge expenses involved in the performance of full funeral ceremonies do postpone them to such a time there is enough financial resources. In the meantime, the person can be buried since mere burial rites are not that elaborate.

Sometimes part of the preparations for the funeral ceremonies includes the erection of a new house if there is yet no descent one in the family. On the positive side, it brings about development in the immediate surroundings of the deceased. But the unfortunate part of it is that the person may not have enjoyed good house, good medication, or care before death, while money is being saved to accord him an expensive funeral, without which the family may become an object of mockery in the society. If the deceased is a married man, sometimes it matters little how his wife and children get on with life afterwards. It is important to listen to what Onwurah (1989) has to say in this regard:

To give one's parents an expensive burial is regarded as one of the great tests of manhood. The Igbo [people] say that a child who has not buried his parents 'properly' cannot boast of having conquered life's problems... Howbeit, the society will not allow that to pass undone, for until it is done the entire family of the deceased will be scorned and taunted by everybody for their inability to give their parent(s) a proper and befitting burial. (p. 10)

The higher the social status of the deceased, the costlier the funeral ceremonies and more elaborate its proceedings (Umeasiegbu, 1977). Some even go to the point of selling off their landed property or borrowing in order to be sure things are done the proper way. Sometimes, they care less whether they end up in penury after the funeral. Indeed, nothing is practically spared to make sure the dead receive a well-deserved rest.

Be that as it may, because of the beliefs surrounding death, elaborate funerals entail some respite for the living, who, until it is done, are afraid of the deceased's roaming spirit and tend to attribute anything regarded as evil befalling them as a fall out from their inability to send their own to his or her appropriate abode. In this connection, Basden (1966) aptly observes:

Neglect to fulfil the rites... leads to disastrous consequences. The 'spirit' itself is unhappy, a homeless wanderer, and finding no rest, will not cease to haunt its former dwelling-place, and will assuredly wreak fitting vengeance on the relatives for their unfeeling and unwarranted negligence. (p. 121)

#### **b) Industry and enterprising spirit**

Igbo beliefs about death and afterlife help to inspire the Igbo people to work hard and be resourceful while alive. First, since the people believe that in the spirit-world the dead continue to enjoy relatively the same status they enjoyed while on earth, people generally work hard on earth to become people of means, so that when they die, they will also have a comfortable otherworldly existence. It is believed that the status can only change at the point of *ilo uwa* when the person's negotiation with his or her *chi* determines his or her fate in his or her future worldly existence. Second, because an

average Igbo person would like to be accorded an elaborate funeral rites at death to facilitate his or her entrance into the spirit-world, people generally make every effort to acquire as much wealth as they could while alive, so that at death, the surviving relatives could find enough money to accord them befitting funerals.

**c) Longing for old age**

As stated already, the Igbo people usually perceive death at ripe, old age is *onwu chi*; that is, an appropriate, natural, and good death willed by God. It is one of the factors that could make the deceased merit the ancestral status. Since the ancestral home is believed to be a place where life is lived most authentically, no Igbo person would not want to undergo such a natural death in order to become an ancestor and enjoy a peaceful rest in the spirit-world. To die as a child or a youth is usually regarded as bad death (*onwu ojoo*) that may make one's spirit disgruntled and unhappy and not enjoy a peaceful rest. They are seen as not having been allowed to accomplish their mission on earth, and could easily wreak havoc on their surviving relatives. No one wants his spirit to roam about aimlessly that way. This makes people strive to practise healthy lifestyles and to promote lovely and peaceful coexistence with their neighbours in order to live long and die old. Besides, children could also see in this a reason to carter for their aged, since they would like them to enjoy the ancestral status and be helpful to them in their life struggles on earth.

**d) Polygamy and the desire for male progeny**

To have died at ripe, old age may not be enough to accord one an ancestral status. There is need for an appropriate funeral rites to usher one home peacefully. But these rites may not be properly performed without having a surviving son or a trusted relative. Again, the ancestors need periodic sacrifices and libations, some of which need to be performed by the deceased sons, especially the first son (*diokpara*). Therefore, no Igbo man would like his name to die soon. They strive to have surviving sons to perpetuate their lineage. This is expressed in the name *Afamefuna* (may my name not be lost). The quest for sons has led many men into polygamy if their first wives beget no male child. Some have married more than two wives to ensure a male child is left behind to more or less guarantee continuous remembrance of them, lineage continuity, and more importantly, performance of the needed sacrifices and libations for their peaceful repose in the world beyond.

**(e) Fear of *onwu ojoo* and its consequences**

The Igbo people fear being disgraced publicly in life and at death and try to do everything humanly possible to avert such. *Onwu ojoo* (bad/shameful death) symbolizes the most ignominious experience an Igbo person could pass through. Since it is believed to be a form of punishment from God for evil deeds, hidden or open sins committed by people while on earth, the fear of *onwu ojoo* and its consequences makes Igbo people be careful about their dealings. It makes them keep to the dictates of *omenala*, avoiding especially those offenses that constitute *aru*; and when they mistakenly get into such lives, they strive to make amends early enough to avert disaster. Because of the kind of punishments that accompany *onwu ojoo*, which include denial of burial and funeral rites, and the dumping of the body in the evil forest where it is left at the mercy of wild animals, many people refrain from doing evil to avoid such disgraceful experiences. Besides, for the Igbo people, for a deceased to be so

treated means total annihilation, so to speak. It follows him or her beyond this life, such that in the spirit world, he or she is tormented all the more and becomes a wandering and restless spirit.

#### **(f) Mutual suspicion**

As noted earlier, once death occurs in Igbo society, the first thing that ordinarily comes to the mind of the people is to attribute it to underlying spiritual causes. Often the spiritual cause is believed to work through human agency. This is especially true when the deceased is a young person. People usually consult diviners to ascertain the exact source of the 'misfortune'. In many instances, through such spiritual means, one or more persons are fingered within or without the family as having brought about the unfortunate incident, either through witchcraft, poisoning, or any other diabolic means (*onwu akamere*). This usually breeds bad blood, misunderstandings, feuds, and conflicts among relatives. Lack of trust and mutual suspicion often set in. The people may try to bring about reconciliation by making the accused take an oath (*inu iyi*) to show his or her innocence, or by both parties undertaking the traditional ritual alliance of *igba ndu* where they promise never to cause any harm to one another without being visited by severe spiritual punishment, part of which could be death. Experience, however, shows that, even after such ritual actions, real and full reconciliation is hardly achieved.

It has been clearly demonstrated in this section of the paper how the traditional Igbo beliefs about death and afterlife exact enormous influence on the people's moral life. This is evident, as has been presented above, in their attitude to work, ingenuity and creativity, and in their family life and relationships in the wider society. Here lies the uniqueness of the paper: sifting out the different aspects of those beliefs and relating them to the different ways they help to direct the moral life of the people, thus helping to unravel some of the factors that undergird some undying, peculiar moral character of the Igbo people.

#### **Conclusion**

Though the Igbo people regard death as an undesirable phenomenon, they believe that it is unavoidable for all mortals. They go about their daily activities knowing full well that the way they live determines to some extent the way they die and then their condition after death. While those who lead good life on earth, die natural death, and are accorded appropriate funerals are believed to be in a happy state in the otherworld, those who do not live well on earth, or who do not die well, or who are not accorded befitting funerals are believed to suffer as unhappy, wandering spirits in the world of the spirits. The desire to enjoy happy, ancestral home and to avoid suffering after death do exert much influence on the people's moral conduct in their daily life.

#### **References**

- Afigbo, A. (1989). Widowhood practices in Africa: A preliminary survey and analysis. In *Widowhood practices in Imo state: Proceedings of the better life programme for rural women workshop*, 7-23. Owerri: Better Life Programme for Rural Women Imo State.
- Agbasiere, T. (2000). *Women in Igbo life and thought*. London: Routledge.

- Amu, B. P. (1998). *Religion and religious experience in Igbo culture and Christian faith experience*. Bonn: Borengässe.
- Anyanwu, C. (1984). The meaning of ultimate reality in Igbo cultural experience. *URAM*, 7, 84-101.
- Areji, A. and Anyaehie, M. C. (2015). Igbo traditional morality as panacea to Nigerian security crises. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 5, 102-108.
- Basden, G. (1966). *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. London: Frank Cass.
- . (1938). *Niger Ibos*. London: Frank Cass.
- Chukwuelobe, M. (1998). Death and the question of ultimate reality and meaning in the thought of the Igbo of Nigeria and of M. Heidegger: A Further contribution to the URAM Igbo studies. *URAM*, 21, 3-17.
- Edeh, E. (1985). *Towards an Igbo metaphysics*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.
- Ekwunife, A. (1995). The Christian celebration of death and burial and the position of widows in the context of inculturation: A case study of the Igbo-south-east of Nigeria. *WAJES*, 3(1), 34-56.
- Ezeanya, S. (1969). Gods, spirits and the spirit world: With special reference to the Igbo-speaking people of southern Nigeria. In K. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (Eds.), *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 30-46. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Gert, B. and Gert, J. (2020). The definition of morality. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved May 6, 2021, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/morality-definition/>>
- Hare, J. (2019). Religion and morality. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved June 5, 2021, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/religion-morality/>>.
- Horton, R. (1956). God, man, and the land in a northern Ibo village-group. *Journal of the International African Institute*, 26(1), 17-28.
- Jordan, J. (1971). *Bishop Shanahan of southern Nigeria*. Dublin: Elo
- Kalu, O. (2003). *The embattled gods: Christianization of Igboland, 1841-1991*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World.
- Leonard, A. (1968). *The lower Niger and its tribes*. London: Frank Cass.
- Madubuko, L. (1994). Igbo World-View. *Bigard Theological Studies*, 14(2), 5-32.
- Metuh, E. (1985). *African religions in western conceptual schemes: The problem of interpretation – studies in Igbo religion*. Ibadan: Pastoral Institute.
- Metuh, E. (1981). *God and man in African religion*. London: Chapman.
- Nwala, U. (1985). *Igbo philosophy*. Lagos: Lantern.
- Okafor, S. (1996). *Death, burial, funeral and widowhood in the Catholic Diocese of Awka: Guidelines and directives*. Okpuno: Fides.
- Okoye, P. (1995). *Widowhood: A natural or cultural tragedy*. Enugu, NUCIK.
- Onwurah, E. (1989). Kingship and marriage among the Igbo of Nigeria. *Sevartham*, 14, 3-12.
- Udeani, C. (2007). *Inculturation as dialogue: Igbo culture and the message of Christ*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Umeasiegbu, R. (1977). *The way we lived: Ibo customs and stories*. London: Heinemann.
- Uzukwu, E. (1982). Igbo world and ultimate reality and meaning. *URAM*, 5, 188-209.