

## **UWAM UWA ASAA: A PANACEA FOR THE IGBO BELIEF IN REINCARNATION**

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### **Abstract**

The idea of reincarnation has always been shrouded in mystery from the beginning of time. It is not surprising that the Igbo has a fascinating perception of this concept. In Igbo cycle of life, it is believed that each human has a total of seven lives before final resting in the ancestral home. This study attempts to present a soft approach to the Igbo belief in coming back to earthly life called *ilo-uwa*. This study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data collection with descriptive and the area-cultural methods. The paper douses the tension on *ilo-uwa* using the doctrine of seven life rounds in the evolutionary cycles of man (*uwam uwa asaa*), experience of child's prodigy, the birthmarks to demonstrate the existence of reincarnation in Igbo religious community.

### **Introduction**

The reality of afterlife has always been an issue shrouded in mystery from the beginning of time. The Igbo are known for their many life-centered beliefs. They are the people of spirituality, which is not excluded in their belief of life after death. Life for the Igbo is a series of coming and going till the person exhausts his life lines in what they call *ilo-uwa*, which literally means return to the world, transliterated as reincarnation in English. *Ilo-uwa* is a belief system by the traditional Igbo, which means that when a person dies, he may come back to life, the coming back depends on the circumstances surrounding the death (Tracer, 2021). The Igbo believe that each person comes back up to seven times. Life for the Igbo is a circle, one reincarnates into this world seven times before going to the land of *ora-muo* (astral realm), a preparing ground for rebirth.

The enduring conviction of the Igbo on reincarnation leaves much to be desired when examined from the evidence of the experience of prodigy, physical defects at birth noticed in the previous existence, the doctrine of seven rounds in the evolutionary cycles of man (*uwam uwa asaa*), names of children and existence of *Ogbanje* (repeater or born to die or changeling).

In the case of *ogbanje* spirit obsessions about which Achebe (1986) has produced a classic text, *The World Of The Ogbanje*, the *iyi-uwa* (material symbol of the pre-incarnation pact of the individual with the group spirits) buried or hidden somewhere in the space must be dug up or otherwise removed. The victim must remove his or her own object from the group's list of articles and thus sever all relationship with the *ogbanje* group. The occult adept is needed to perform the rite, which usually result in total cure for the disturbed victim. The adept may adopt many other methods of cure. But the victim is always the principal actor in the theater of cure. The *Ogbanje* phenomenon is a psychological experience across West Africa. In Yoruba tradition, it is called *abiku*. It is based on "past life recall" hypothesis, which is a strong belief in Africa.

*Ilo-uwa* is an expression of Igbo belief in reincarnation. Reincarnation being the philosophical or religious belief that the non-physical essence of a living being starts a new

life in a different physical form or body after death. Some call it rebirth or transmigration. Every event from the birth of a child to death is symbolic in the rite of passage in the human cyclic life..

On the other hand, seven is an important number in Igbo traditional religion. Seven (*asaa*) signifies, eternity, seven (*asaa*) is completeness – living life to the fullest at the end of which, a transformation occurs. It is an expression used both for ontological and cosmological beliefs in the area of reincarnation. Seven is considered as the finality of an action. The Igbo had adopted this figure because of its seven-time-bound and sacred symbolism. The historical analysis of *uwam uwa asaa* is that the Igbo believe that every soul has the ability to reincarnate seven times in the circle of his existence. In the human circle of life, the Igbo believed that each human has a total of seven lives before final resting in the ancestral home (Arazu, personal communication, May 2, 2018).

There must be something behind the numerical symbol of seven (*asaa*) in Igbo cosmology. For the traditional Igbo, the number seven (*asaa*) has a spiritual meaning. One month in the orthodox calendar is *izu asaa* in Igbo tradition. This *izu asaa* is made up of the four sacred market days. For instance, the number three (*ato*) signifies balance which is synonymous with *Ikenga* while the number four (*ano*) represents the sacred four market days in Igbo and when these two numbers are added together, it gives us an odd number seven (*Asaa*), considered to be sacred. Seven in this instance signifies spiritual perfection. Based on this assumption, one has seven chances of reincarnation to fulfil his/her mission on earth as human. After the seventh rebirth, the person will be transformed into other creatures.

There are certain principal phenomena that tend to facilitate and anchor the movement of the soul from the spirit world to the physical. *Chi* is often believed by the Igbo people to have upper hand in the decision making of each individual as the person takes rebirth. The *chi* is associated with each individual person and is believed to determine the destiny of each individual. This is not without the individual's consent as the duo reach agreement before the onward movement of rebirth. *Chi*, accompanies every individual who takes rebirth for the number of times the person reincarnates. According to Arazu (2004), "*Chi* is like the spirit shadow that accompanies every Igbo man in whatever act – good or bad. Whatever *chi* determines is final, immutable and fixed in the life of each person's palm" (p.6). The Igbo believe and reiterate in their adage that when a man says yes, his *chi* will also agree – *onye kwe, chi ya ekwe*. That is to say, the seven life journeys of every Igbo man is a joint task between the individual and his *chi*.

A good life is necessary if it has to impact on peoples' lives. When one is not contented in this life, he hopes to come back with the belief that his next life will be better.

### ***Uwa m Uwa Asaa – My Seven Time World***

The Igbo traces reincarnation to seven rebirths (*uwa m uwa asaa – i.e. my seven time world*). According to *Godianism Deep Thought* (2013): "Ancient people believed that man has seven rounds of life to go through before he stops reincarnating. In Ibo land, the old people say: "*uwa m, uwa asaa*", that is, everyone must reincarnate seven times" (p. 343).

This awareness presents the Igbo people as believing in seven life of cyclic reincarnations. The rest of other cultures have presented this idea as limitless, but the Igbo believe it has a maximum of seven life incarnations. Following this idea, the Igbo have expressed some level of hope for further opportunity for a better life; and have equally demonstrated disappointment amidst

misfortunes in life hence an Igbo craves for a better life in the next. The common spontaneous expressions of those devastated and besieged with misfortunes are always: *uwa ozo m g'alo*, *agam abu nwoke* (in my next life, I will be a man), *uwa ozo m g'alo*, *agam enwe ego* (in my next life, I will be rich) etc. This has gone a long way to affirm the Igbo belief in existence of reincarnation. The analogy of this expression seems to suggest that one is confident of coming back to life again but what he becomes, the circumstances he will be surrounded with, is not for him to decide; he does his own bit by expressing what he wishes to become in his next life. *Uwa'm uwa'm assa* "my world my seven world as some people call it is believed that the figure seven is symbolic of how many incarnations it took for one to complete human cycle". R C Arazu (personal communication, April 23, 2019) recounts that the Igbo believe that *uwa'm uwa asaa* is the number of times an individual has to reincarnate before completing the seven advancements of rebirth. By then the person must have learnt the basic mystical ethics of life. In Igbo land, our fore fathers' knowledge of life beyond the present one on earth is well understood to be transmigration of human souls through the seven worlds of being. In Igbo land when a good child or wife does quite a good turn to an old father or mother: the elderly ones are heard making such comments as: *ezi nwam/nwunyem*, *igakwa abu nwam/nwunyem*, *uwam uwa asaa* – meaning, my good child/wife, you will continue to be my child/wife in my seven worlds of being (Obiakor, 2012).

This suggests that our ancestors knew and believed in the process of seven rounds and seven races in the evolutionary cycles of rebirth. The Igbo conviction on the actual process by which a man reincarnates varies from region to region. Some are of the opinion that man reincarnates with his former body and all its characteristics, height, strength and even complexion. Many other are convinced that it is only the deathless soul of man that reincarnates. This group holds further that merits and demerits in one's former life would determine one's parentage on reincarnation in a new born child.

This also forms the basic principle on which the Igbo concepts of reincarnation are situated. It bits the imagination, how a new born child develops hatred on a particular individual at first sight without any known cause. E. Oforchukwu (personal communication, September 2, 2018) from Nkpologwu in Aguata Local Government Area narrated a case of little Eberé, her third daughter who never allowed her uncle Michael to touch her. She cries uncontrollably each time her uncle lays hands on her. The parents ignored the child's behavioral attitude towards Michael. Now Eberé is grown up but she hides at the sight of her uncle. Further enquiry reveals that the child in question is believed to have crossed-path with her uncle in some past existence with bitter experiences, or rather believed that the child has returned to the world to settle an previous scores. Sometimes too, past experiences do come in a sensational form when new events feel weirdly familiar. For instance, a new experience or occasion may trigger the memory of past incident, as such man begins to feel *déjà vu*- the feeling that one has already been here, already seen this, already had this conversation, but one is not just sure when and where it occurred previously. Or sighting someone, he never met before, yet his face appears familiar. This face seems familiar but he cannot recall or place where he met the person. Certainly some of these memories do come as a flash at some point in a person's life.

Within the context of *Uwa m uwa asaa* someone who has suffered terribly or sickened with poverty in a community may come to a conclusion that in his next life, he has to be wealthy, or come back in a better environment, home and healthy etc. This is the Igbo belief. Most women do resolve that they will prefer to be men in their next life. Ezeuko (1986) avers that:

*Na nkwenye ndi Igbo nwere, ... Ha kwetara na oburu na madu bie ndu n'elu uwa, ihe ana-esiri ya ike na o gaahara na mgbe ya ga alo uwa na o ga-abu n'uju ihe akuaku na*

*ihe enwenwe. Mgbe ufodu onye bu nwanyi ga ahara ilo uwa nwoke n'uwa ya ozo. Site na nkwenye a ha nwere n'ebe ilo uwa di mere na ha na-aga be Dibia afa ka o gbara ha afa agu iyi choputa onye loro nwa o bula a muru ohuru n'obodo. (pp.33-34)*

Literally translated, (the Igbo believe that when someone lives his life in this world under hardship, he will decide that in his next life he will be wealthy. Often the woman would decide to be a man in his next life. Due to this belief in reincarnation, they consult a diviner to ascertain who among the ancestors has come back in a new born).

In a famous **Igbolanding** (2018) movie called the '*Black Panther*', Kilmonger gave an iconic response referring to the heroic Igbo men and women who were abducted as slaves and brought to Georgia, United States of America in May 1803. Rather than accept slavery, they jumped ship and walked into Dunbar creek and drowned. It is tagged *Igbolanding*. These men and women took this action fully confident in their Igbo traditional belief in reincarnation, that they were going home- that it was better to drown and reincarnate in Igboland as free men and women than live in America as slaves. The concept of reincarnation and *uwam uwa-asaa* (seven times incarnation) are important for Igbo people as that explains why the captured Igbo people marched confidently into the sea, believed that they were going home.

The *uwa m uwa asaa* has become a kind of watchword used by many to impress or show satisfaction for a good turn by either the parents to their children or children to parents and wife to husband. Even in an ugly event, it has been used to either praise, curse or abuse. This principle has influenced the life of every traditional Igbo person. It has as well strengthened the belief in reincarnation. N. Nwankwo (personal communication, October 22, 2014) is an Igbo woman from Agu-Ukwu Nri who believes in reincarnation. She demonstrated spontaneously her belief in the seven cycle of rebirth when her goods were looted, "*onye mere ifea oma diri ya mma; oga na ezu ori uwa ya uwa asaa*" (it will never be well for whoever did this, he/she will remain a thief in his next seven rounds of lives). Some of these thoughts and wails come naturally from the subconscious revealing its ontology.

Traditional religion has helped to pin man's hope of happiness down to the planet earth in its physical form. Very often, the Igbo traditionalist expresses his hope for salvation in another and future life on earth thus: *uwam ga ano, agam abu...* (when I reincarnate, I shall be...). He /she then adds the kind of happy human being he or she would like to reincarnate into (Arazu, 2005). Old people are not left out in this seven life cycle belief and future hope as those bedeviled with some form of misfortune would exclaim "when I come again expressions followed by projected better life! Such syndrome is often done with a firm conviction and belief that they will come back better persons given that the present life has not treated them well. This is undoubtedly true confirmation of hopeful belief of better and happy life in subsequent incarnations. The Christian who does not accept reincarnation outside the final resurrection at the end of the world could panic at the prospect of one life time beset with troubles. He would then strive to procure the good life here on earth by appealing to God to bring it about even when his style of life is shot with vice and indiscipline.

### **Conclusion**

The Igbo believe that man receives gifts or talents, character and indeed his portion of life generally before he comes into the world. It appears that there is an element of choice and bargain available to him at that point. His *chi* is believed to have taken over the bargain hence the saying, *obu etu ya na chi ya si kwu* (that is the agreement he reached with his chi), often

heard when a man's misfortune is somehow thwarted and beyond expression. This can only be attributed to an agreement he himself must have entered into at the beginning of his journey to the earth alone with his *chi*.

The Igbo engage in high hope of the next life if his present life is riddled in misfortunes. The belief that *onye kwe chi ya ekwe* (if man says yes, his *chi* will also agree) has kept the Igbo hope alive. Although this parlance is not always true, for a man who struggles day and night is believed to have said yes to his *chi* but yet all his efforts end up in futility. In a situation as this, the Igbo still would say to such a man, *chi ya ekwero* (his *chi* does not agree). Traditionally, a person's *chi* is the personification of that individual's fate, which is credited to the misfortune, success, and failure of an individual. The successes in life is determined by individual *chi*, and no man can rise past the greatness of his *chi*. It is firmly believed that there is a fundamental justice in the universe and nothing so terrible can happen to an innocent soul without the awareness of his *chi*.

The insurance for every individual is that early life lived according to generally accepted standards of decency, based on the eternal rule of 'do to others what you would like them to do to you' will be followed by a satisfactory astral life. For all wicked people, an unpleasant existence after each death strictly regulated by laws of balance and justice lie in wait for them. It is very unruly for somebody born into a privileged physical conditions to assume that he is superior to person who have to work day and night to support his family.

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