

# A CRITIQUE OF THE CHANGING TRENDS IN IGBO TRADITIONAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF DEATH AND FUNERAL RITES

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## Abstract

Death is a universal phenomenon common to all temporal beings. The human being as the being for whom its being is both a reality and an issue is confronted by the phenomenon of death with special significance and force. This significance and force resonate in the various conceptions of death in the various cultures of humanity. Conceptually, Igbo belief about death is rooted in their cosmological understanding of the world, which they believe exists in three realms namely; sky above, *elu igwe*, the solid earth, *ala*, and the underworld, *ala-mmuo* with an ontological inextricable link between them. Each of these spheres is significant, as there is continuous effort at unravelling mysteries of existence and the forces behind them. The problem of death is taken up in this paper from the Igbo traditional cosmological background. The paper investigates the Igbo traditional conceptual understanding of death and its relationship with their cosmology by reviewing the various literatures on the issue, and how it affects their attitude to life. The paper adopts the methodology of critical analysis and interpretation of the various fundamental elements of traditional Igbo cultural symbols and belief systems that are directly or indirectly related to death and its interpretations within the cosmology. The paper also draws attention to the current conflict arising from the impact of Christian religious teachings and doctrines on this belief especially on funeral rites of passage. The paper, therefore, proposes that while introducing other cultures and religion in Igbo land care must be taken in the process of proselytisation to avoid what Nobles (2013:232) called, “conceptual incarnation.” Our conclusion after identifying some logical difficulties involved in Igbo conceptualisation of death, is that it enables them to humanise death, by so doing overcome the psychological anguish of dread and fear, which the thought and experience of death evokes; while motivating them to live a morally upright life in the spirit of hard work, industry and integrity, which not only merit them an enviable status in the community of living, but also a possible reincarnation *ilo-uwa* in their lineage.

**Keywords:** Traditional Igbo, Death, Attitude, Trends, Conceptualisation, Funeral, Burial and Belief

## Introduction

Among the traditional Igbo ethnic group of South Eastern Nigeria, despite their understanding of death as a necessary transition to the ancestral world, it still remains a puzzle, a mystery and an enigma yet to be solved in their worldview (Onyibor, 2012: 1). It is a force to be reckoned with, because it defies prediction and predication. Thus, despite man’s wisdom and acclaimed knowledge of the world, knowledge of the precise time and circumstances of death most times eludes him. Thus, *Ndi* Igbo relying on the authority of their experiences assert that death always defies every known power and stubbornly imposes its will on people, they affirm this by giving names such as “*Onwu ka m ike*” (death is most powerful than I), *onwuka* (death is the worst), *onwuatiegwu* (death does not fear), *onwudinjo* (death is bad or cruel).

These are their different metaphorical and idiomatic expression for the irreconcilable strength of death over human beings.

Thus, the occasions of death provide opportunities for people to reflect on life and philosophise not only about death but on the general nature of existence and ultimately the meaning of life. This work will explore the traditional Igbo cosmo-ontological understanding of death and how it influences their attitude to life, by analysing the concept of death prevalent in Igbo cosmology. It will equally explain and systematise the implicit and/or loosely held notions and beliefs regarding the nature and existence of death from the Igbo traditional communalistic understanding, as well as discuss: What is the prevailing traditional conceptual understanding of death and funeral rites in Igbo culture? What concepts and theory of death can be developed consistently and authentically from the Igbo traditional cosmology that would be of service to the contemporary Igbo who incidentally is plagued with a mixture of traditional Igbo and Western Christian conceptions of death and funeral rites? This attitude has always left him confused on where to anchor his life expectations and actions in occasions of difficulties. A meaningful search for answer to the above questions must assume the responsibility of developing a metaphysical and anthropological concept of death that will rise and evolve consistently and authentically from the ashes of the mode of existence traditional to this circumstance. Such an undertaking will significantly necessitate a construction or reconstruction of the cosmo-ontological and anthropological foundation of Igbo concept of death in the light of the current circumstances of contemporary Igbo life. Thus, this paper will thematically discuss the Igbo traditional attitude to death by reviewing past literatures on traditional Igbo conceptual understanding of death, burial and funeral vis-à-vis the changing trends in their conceptualisation of the world. It will also explore the conflicts generated by the introduction of Christianity and western civilisation on this subject matter.

### **A Brief Literature Review**

Literature on death in Igbo cosmology is very scanty. The existing ones are either written from the socio-anthropological background or from the religious perspective, and even at that, death as a theme is discussed only as subtopic with more emphasis on burial and funeral rites and ceremonies (Onyibor, 2012:15). However, we shall review the available scholarly literature on death that discuss the following themes namely the traditional Igbo concept and understanding of death, the influence of Igbo cosmology on this notion and how these affect their attitude to death.

Basden (1983:118) an early writer and commentator on Igbo culture and life discussed death and burial in his book *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, while describing death and burial rites and ceremonies, said that for the Igbo death is like “[...] having gone home or as simply as having gone to the spirit world and the mourning of the survivors is that of those who have said farewell for the time being only.” Similarly, Jordan (1971:120) who had worked for several years among the Igbo as a missionary, in his book *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria* wrote that “[...] death among the Igbo is a necessary end a going home to occupy one’s proper place permanently in the spirit land.” Other scholars like Kalu (1980:41) admit that “[...] death among the Igbo is not a terminus.” The soul continues to live in the spirit world until it reincarnates or acquires body again. While Okafor (1996:7) in *Death, Burial, Funeral and Widowhood in the Catholic Diocese of Awka* describes the Igbo understanding of death “[...] as the conclusion and the way out of earthly life, an inevitable consequence of life on this earth and a necessary means of reunion with the ancestors in the spirit land.” He continues that the earthly life is a pilgrimage which ends with death – a trip to the market for business at the end of which one returns home. To buttress this fact Ndi Igbo have the following adage, *obialu ije nwe una* (A visitor will surely return home), *Uwa bu afia onye zujue ukpa ya o naba* (The world

is a market place from which one returns home after accomplishing business transaction). Hence, Ndi Igbo believe that the material world is man's temporary abode not a permanent one. Death, therefore, is understood as a gateway that switches life from the temporal to the eternal realm.

The view of Okafor in the text above seems to have emphasised elements of Igbo worldview that run counter to certain fundamental elements of Igbo cosmology: the integrated world of the Igbo where the three worlds – the ancestors, the terrestrial and the yet unborn – merge and exist in the here and now; the cyclic concept of life and time; and the consequent belief in reincarnation. He further distinguishes three types and causes of death namely: “*onwuchi* – natural death, *onwu ojoo* bad/shameful death, and *Onwu akamelu* death brought about by a human agent” (Okafor, 1996:7). He also describes the various burial and funeral rites and makes a serious distinction between them when he asserts that: “[...] in the traditional Igbo society, burial rite is distinct from funeral rite. While the former is the interment of the body of a deceased, funeral rite follows as rituals designed to ensure his /her safe arrival in the spirit land. Both burial and funeral rites constitute the rite of passage and take place concurrently.”

But it is the funeral rites that enable the spirit of the dead to reach the spirit land. Without these rites, the dead continues to wander restlessly all over the earth and to cause havoc on human beings. He recognises the fact that burial rites are different from funeral rites, but fails in his interpretation when he avers that both take place concurrently. Burial can take place without the funeral rites if it is not convenient for the relations of the deceased who may decide to postpone it to a near future when they will gather enough material wealth to give him/her a befitting funeral. One may not be surprised at this interpretation because Christianity in Igbo land frowns at such funeral rite long after burial, in fact they wrongly call it second burial *ikwa ozu nkwa na – abuo* which we shall elaborate on later. Okafor (1996:8) also recognises that:

[...] there are gradations in both the burial and funeral ceremonies of the traditional Igbo. For those who suffered bad death (*onwu ojoo*), burial is very simple and quiet... with lots of rites to purify the land.... For people who died well they are laid to rest in the bosom of the earth amid pomp and pageantry.... After their interment elaborate ... “*Ikwa ozu*” commences, and this, it is believed, is necessary to usher the deceased into the abode of the ancestors. It complements the good moral life already presumed of a good death.

Nwala (1985:47) in his book, *Igbo Philosophy* describes the Igbo understanding of death “[...] as a transformation from this life to the yonder world with the possibility of reincarnation”. He further states that “[...] for an old man, there is great need for proper burial to ensure that he lives well and happily in the spirit world, that he reincarnates into another life without any problems”. He rightly states that “[...] all deaths are believed to be caused by some force, deity or some other agency. As a result the cause of death must be found out and cleared before or after burial”. He concludes by alluding that the institution of mortuary (burial) among the Igbo is very elaborate and it illustrates much that is found in Igbo philosophy. For example, the belief in the continuity of life in the spirit world leads to elaborate burial rites to ensure an honourable place for the dead in the spirit world.” (Nwala. 27)

It would seem that Okafor's distinction between burial and funeral rites is not realised or recognised by Nwala. While Okafor perceives burial as mere interment of the body and thereby argues that it is funeral rite that is necessary for the journey of the soul to the spirit world, Nwala lumps the two rites under burial and allocates to 'elaborate burial rites' the burden of ensuring safe arrival and place of honour for the dead in the spirit world. At any rate, it is pertinent to observe that Nwala's conception of the Igbo understanding of death "as a transformation from this life to the yonder world with the possibility of reincarnation" appears more logically consistent with Igbo traditional cosmology.

Ilogu (1974:4) in his *Christianity and Ibo Culture* introduces the element of the Igbo tenacious holding unto life. In this regard, he remarks: "I have not come across any death that any Ibo accepts as natural and biological end .... After many inquiries, I realize that to the Ibo, life is eternal and man, because of his share in the Supreme God (Chineke) through the chi particles in him, is meant to be immortal." Elsewhere he maintains that:

[...] the philosophy behind the people's concern about life and death is that all the visible world around us and the invisible world beyond, the divine and the human, the past and the present, the living and the dead all form a harmonious entity. Death is one of the dissonances of life disturbing this entity, but because the dead themselves belong to this harmonious entity all that is necessary as to ensure that the balance of life's harmony is not upset when one member of the group is transformed through death to another level of existence; namely the souls of the dead who constitute the unseen part of the community (Ilogu, 1998:109).

He further posits that "[...] burial rites and ceremonies therefore are the means by which this transition is effected to ensure that the dead received secure place in the spirit world which will help the established order of life to go on uninterrupted". Hence, he concludes that "[...] the souls of the dead members of the community cannot rest or find secure place among the dead unless proper burial rites and ceremonies have been performed" (Ilogu, 109).

Abanuka (1994:36) in his book *A New Essay in African Philosophy* while discussing the reality of the ancestors observes that "The dead are not considered as very far removed from the living and those who are still living are conscious of their journey to join those who have gone before them to the land of the dead". He went further to state that "[...] in certain sense, death is located at the boundary between the living and the ancestors. Death is significant not just because it is the end of earthly striving and achievement, but because it marks the entry into the abode of the ancestors" (Abanuka, 50). Hence, he concludes that:

[...] the fundamental significance of the ancestors is that they are those who have immortalized themselves in their extraordinary deeds, and so they are concrete imperishable models who influence the living. Ancestors are remembered in the community for their deeds, their past achievements are pointer to people of what can be done in the present and in the future for the welfare or progress of the community. (Abanuka, 53)

Thus, the above scholars all agree that that death in Igbo understanding is a transition from the physico-spiritual world to the pure ancestral spirit world. To be dead is to pass from the physic-spiritual force to pure spiritual form. Thus, Arinze (1970:17) in his book *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion* confirms the above view when he states that:

[...] the Ibo have a firm belief in a life after death. When a person dies, his soul or spirit *nkpuru obi, mmuo* wanders till it is received into the blessed company of his forebears on condition that the relations on earth celebrate the full funeral ceremonies. In some places this belief requires also that the person must have been a good man on earth or at least that a cleansing rite be performed over the corpse before burial. The main passport however is the performance of the funeral cerebrations, without these ceremonies the restless ghost of the deceased would return to haunt and harass his merciless relatives.

Notwithstanding the above conception of death, however, the Igbo have a negative attitude to death. J.O. Oguejiofor (1996:24) in “Eschatology Immortality and Igbo Philosophy of Life,” remarks that: “[...] the positive Igbo attitude to life is accompanied by a negative attitude towards death. Death is also personified and there are proper names that express the deep Igbo desire to keep it at bay. *Egwuonwu* (Fear of Death), *Onwuzuruike* (let death rest) *Onwughalu* (let death allow) etc.” He further states in the same page that “despite these wishes expressed in countless names, the Igbo are well aware of the fatality of death (*Ogbenye onwu, Ogalanya onwu* – the poor as well as rich are destined to die).” Mbefo (1996:49) equally observes the negative attitude to death:

[...] in Igbo traditional self-understanding, death is the ultimate tragedy, the unmitigated calamity. It signals the end of ambition, the wiping away of grandiose plan for self-advancement. Every sort of means is employed to stave it off or at least delay it. Its folklore contains the saga of a delegation to God, the story of dog and the toad intended to lobby for physical immortality. In Igbo mythic consciousness, nobody dies except through the machination of an enemy ... people’s names and Igbo treasury of wisdom stored in its proverbs warned people of the ultimate enemy death lurking at every stage of human life.

Thus, it becomes clearer from the above scholarly opinion that the traditional Igbo conceived death as the worst evil that can befall a human being, yet he does not see it as ultimate end which is capable of annihilating the human person, because the human being has been endowed with a soul or spirit capable of reincarnating after death from the ancestral world. Hence, life in the Igbo world is conceived primarily as a process of birth – living - death - reincarnation. Noon (1942:653) is of the same opinion in his article “Death Concept of the Ibo” when he states:

Individual existence becomes a continuum of alternating periods of life in this world and in the spirit land *ani mmuo*, and death is the portal to one phase of existence as birth is to another. Both phases are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, death is the cause of birth or living and vice versa. It is a continuum, one face of the roller and life the other – an aspect in a continuous action.

The above implies that, for the traditional Igbo, death is fatal, but its fatality does not signify finality of life. Hence, Nze (2007:621) in his article *Aspects of African Communalism* describes the traditional Igbo conception of death as “[...] a withdrawal, a submergence of life into death and death into life.” From this position, Nze argues that if death is a loss, it is “[...] only a

physical loss, because the constant communion or communication between the dead and the living brings them into daily contact so that death continues to be a positive phenomenon wearing a negative appearance.”

Death for the Igbo is the end of the beginning as well as the beginning of an end; this is because life comes out of death only to return to it. It is a return that is never final and definitive, but a process of departing and returning. *Uwa bu abia alaa*. It is against this background that one can appreciate what Mbiti (1971:157) says about the perception of death in Africa which is closely related to Igbo notion of death in his *African Religions and Philosophy* where he observes that:

Death is conceived as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He moves on to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of existence. Some of the words describing death imply that a person goes home, which means that this life is like a pilgrimage: the real home is in the thereafter....

Beyond the conception of death as a departure, many scholars recognise that the traditional Igbo have a clear distinction of kinds and causes of death. Opata (1998:175) in his book *Essays on Igbo World View* recognises two major types of death in Igbo society namely dying well or good death, *ezigbo onwu* and bad/evil death, *ajo onwu*. He describes good death in Igbo tradition:

[...] as one who first and foremost reached old age before dying, secondly the person must have had children and grandchildren who are well to do. Thirdly, the person must have died the sort of death in which all the needed burial and funeral rites must be performed. Fourthly and perhaps not very important is that the person should have died at an opportune time, a time when there is plenty to eat and plenty to drink, a time where there are no on-going traditional festivals during which mourning is interdicted in the person's community, and a time when clan members and extended family members are all in peace such that there would be no wrangling about unsettled grievances such that could prevent the participation of all in the burial/funeral ceremonies. Finally, a person who is deemed to have died well is also deemed free from all associations with the factors we shall later on enumerate as constituting evil/bad death.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly bad/evil death *ajo onwu* is presumed if, at the time of death, the victim “[...] is known to be under any type of interdiction which prevents such a person from receiving full burial rites and funeral ceremonies.” Good death definitively involves living well and quitting this world peacefully and with a sense of deep satisfaction not only for what one achieved, but also for the type of life one had lived. Hence, a fulfilled life in Igbo understanding, according to Opata (177), [...] is one that has reached old age, left children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and relations behind; is assured of being treated well at death and burial; has plenty of material prosperity with which to support existence and with which the person's death would be celebrated.

In the same vein, many Igbo scholars also hold that death does not just occur, that there are causes of death which must be ascertained in each case in order to know the type of burial

and funeral rites to be accorded the dead. Thus, F.A. Arinze (1970:28) states that “[...] when a grown-up person dies, the diviner is first of all consulted to find out why he died at all, for the traditional Ibos do not easily attribute death to a natural cause but often suspect the hand of a spirit or an evil man at work.” However, a dead man, no matter his social status is entitled to fairly comprehensive burial and funeral rites, worthy of his life, character and achievement. The dead expect and often demand or force the fulfillment of the obligation. Failure on the part of the living usually brings about harassment of the living by the spirit of the dead. Similarly, the above concept of natural and unnatural death is closely related to traditional Igbo cosmological interpretation of morning and evening world *Uwa Ututu na Uwa mgbede*. The two worlds are closely associated with the earlier discussed notion of dying well and not dying well. Opatá (1998:178) notes that:

*Uwa mgbede* when applied in interpreting the graph of life imply a life that has attained a ripe old age represented by morning, afternoon and evening stages of life. Ndi Igbo abhor death that occurs during the morning/afternoon progression of life because it does not give the victim the opportunity to attain the desired old age that enables him to accomplish his life ambitions and contribute meaningfully to the community.

Thus, he cites an Igbo folk musician Mike Ejeagha’s album which captures this expression in one of his tracks titled “*Uwa Mgbede ka Mma*” which implies that living to a ripe old age is the best. However, living to attain a ripe old age has exceptions, because no Igbo man or woman wants to live a life of “*odi ndu onwu ka mma*” living in a state in which death is preferable to life such as life of long debilitating sickness or permanent incapacitation.

In sum, a critical review of available literature reveals that death in traditional Igbo thought is conceived as a negative phenomenon which often prompts the people to deify or personify it. However, it is never understood as a total annihilation of life rather as a transition of life to the ancestral world which is accomplished by living a good life and subsequent good death, accompanied by befitting burial and funeral rites worthy of the victim’s social and moral status in the community that will transit him/her to the abode of the ancestors. Idowu (1973:78) rightly aver that:

Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with all creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is why every person who dies must be given a ‘correct’ funeral, supported by a number of religious ceremonies. If this is not done, the dead person may become ghost, unable to ‘live’ properly after death and therefore a danger to those who remain alive.

Thus, one can infer from the above that the goal of life in the traditional Igbo society is to live a good life, die a good death, receive a proper burial and passage rite worthy of his/her status in the community that will admit him/her into the ancestral realm, awaiting *ilo-uwa* reincarnation. This is the hope of every traditional Igbo person prior to the introduction of Christianity and western civilisation through colonialism in Igbo society. Hence, we shall now discuss the effect of this on Igbo conception and attitude to death, burial and funeral rite of passage.

### Contemporary Igbo Changing Attitude to Funeral Rites

Funeral rites refer to various ceremonial rites of passage conducted for the dead to lay the deceased to rest. Its root word is derived from Latin word *funus, funeralis*- which means for the dead or in relation to the dead or corpse etc., i.e. a ceremony in which the dead person is buried. (Collins English Dictionary: 2000). It is a ritual rite of passage to mark the end of life of the deceased. Capone (2010), Nohoushan (2013), Sahoo (2014) and Egenti & Mmadike (2016:48) agree that funeral rites make us aware of the link between life and death as well as the meaning of our lives on earth. It also helps to enlarge our individual existence. It demonstrates how to live a virtuous life and to be prepared for death instead of being afraid of it. Hence, it is as old as human race and found in all cultures of the world.

In Igbo traditional culture, funeral rites of passage have under gone some significant change over the years as a result of European colonisation of Africa especially Igbo land in early twentieth century. This period witnessed the forceful imposition of colonialism, western education and culture, and Christian religion, which challenged the cosmo-ontological foundation of most Igbo traditional culture and beliefs, of which traditional system of funeral rites for the dead became one of its first casualties. For instance, it started with the mistranslation and misinterpretation of *ikwa-ozu* funeral ceremonial rites of passage as 'second burial'. In Igbo traditional culture, there is a clear distinction between the burial of the dead called *ini-ozu* and *ikwa-ozu* which is funeral ceremonial rites of passage. There is no expression in Igbo language that depicts any part of funeral ceremony as second burial which is *ini-ozu nke abua ma o bu ini-ozu ugbolo n'abuo/ikwa-ozu nkwa n'abuo*. What brought about this phenomenon of misinterpretation is because of the inability of the early translators to find English equivalent for *ikwa-ozu*, sometimes celebrated long after the burial of the deceased and their lack of understanding of that aspect of funeral rite. *Ndi Igbo* for the avoidance of doubt do not bury their dead twice. It is, therefore, surprising that even some prominent Igbo scholars got entangled in the use of this second burial translation for *ikwa-ozu*.

For instance, Chinua Achebe in chapter nineteen of his book *Arrow of God* use the expression *second burial* when he narrates that: "the first serious sufferers from the postponement of the harvest were the family of Ogbuefi Amalu who had died in the rainy season from *aru-muo*. Amalu was a man of substance and, in normal times, the rites of *second burial* and funeral feast would have followed two or three days after his death." In the same vein Ilogu (1974:67) uses the same word second burial to describe *ikwa-ozu* when he reports that: "Greater complications arose when many children of many family heads became Christians, and were forbidden by the teachings of missionaries to perform the second burial of their fathers." In my opinion, as earlier discussed above, the use of second burial is wrong for *ikwa-ozu*, and that has given rise to other conflicts in the interpretation of other aspects Igbo traditional funeral rites. To be precise, Ilogu (67) is right in his description of *ikwa-ozu* when he states that: "The Ibo practice was to bury an elderly person soon after death, with preliminary ceremonies. Then after a year or less, sometimes more, the second burial would take place with a lot more elaborate ceremonies than the first". However, he is wrong to have translated *ikwa-ozu* as second burial.

Achebe's narrative is equally in line with Igbo belief and custom when he further states in the same book cited above that: "... Amalu himself knew it and was prepared. Before he died he had called his first son, Anieto, and given him directions for the burial. I would have said: do it a day or two after I have been put into the earth. But this is *ugani*; I cannot ask you to arrange my burial feast with your saliva. I must wait until there are yams again." However, the use of second burial for this all important funeral rites of passage is misleading and has caused a lot of conflict, misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the very essence of funeral



rites in many Igbo communities. It specifically challenges the traditional belief that *ikwa-ozu* was necessary for smooth and easy transition to ancestral realm, which the Christian missionaries understood as second burial. The traditional Igbo belief is that proper funeral rites of *ini-ozu* and *ikwa-ozu* which we earlier said may or may not take place simultaneously; are the rites that admit the spirit of the departed person into the “ancestral bliss, from where they plead effectively with the gods for the well-being of their children on earth. If this “...was not performed, the proper inheritance of the late father’s property could not be finally settled. What was worse, the extended family would be harassed by the hovering spirit of the dead person who had not properly settled down with the other ancestral spirits” (Ilogu, 67).

The Christian missionaries frowned at the above practice and it created a conflict in the faith of the new converts who were ready to obey the teachings of the missionaries, and at the same time felt the compunction of filial duty to dead parents as well as respect to their communal wellbeing and affiliations. Consequently, Christian missionaries sought ways of integrating and influencing the new converts to adopt the Christian burial rites and jettison their traditional funeral rites. Their efforts metamorphosed, according to Ilogu (67), into meetings aimed at providing safe landing for Christian and native burial customs in Igbo land. He reports that in the meeting held in May 1914 at the instance and chairmanship of Archdeacon T.J Denis to discuss the whole question of the “church and Native customs” the burial question was one. The meeting resolved and adopted that “the government be asked to make it that Christian heirs inherit the property, pay the debt of the deceased (father or brother) and leave out the second burial. In the discussions the chairman held strongly that it is not right for a Christian to have anything to do with a second burial.”

The outcome of the meeting became the beginning of the paradigm shift in the attitude to burial *ini-ozu* and *ikwa-ozu* rites of passage in Igbo culture and tradition. In essence, this changed the Igbo attitude to burial significantly and continued to assume new dimensions till today as western culture especially its economic ideology; technological development and scientific materialism have permeated the norms and values of Igbo way of life. In fact, some scholars believe that the introduction of western technological advancement have caused funeral for the dead in Igbo land to be monetised. Mbalisi, Alumona & Okeke (2014:63) note that: “one recent trend of burial among the Igbo is the commercialization of the burial ceremonies.... Almost everything about burial in recent times has been translated into monetary value by individual families. People use the death of their beloved for fund raising. It is instructive to mention that burial or funeral ceremonies are moral and civic obligations owed the dead. These burial rights exist in the rituals of the church as well as under native law and custom. But the changed materialistic world of the present time has so painted, camouflaged and exaggerated these rights.” They argue that some of the lavish trends witnessed in funerals in recent times in Igbo communities are neither traditionally customary to the Igbo nor found within the confines of Christianity.

Okafor (1981:12-13) further states that: “...in Igbo customs, different degrees of relationships are expected to attend burial ceremony with certain materials like cloth, palm wine, eagle feather, cap (okpu agbala), cock etc, relations like in-laws come under this category. Such things were normal and minimal. Two gallons of palm wine and two yards of cloth where required, were sufficient. In recent times there are loads of cartons of beer, whisky and pieces of costly clothes. The idea of perpetual indebtedness of the children and relatives of the deceased is not far from this practice as it is commonly understood that one good turn begets another.” This trend is further reinforced by the family of the deceased and relations who most of time wants to use the ceremony to showcase/impress their friends, associates and contemporaries that they have material wealth. This shows the extent funeral rites have been

monetised due to increasing quest for materialism and egoism. Okafor (1981:16) further avers that: “from modest expenses at burial and funeral ceremonies, death expenditure has today risen to unprecedented height of squander-mania.”

Some town unions in Igbo land have actually tried to curb this squander-mania attitude of people in funeral by promulgating laws aimed at checking excessive expenditure and inordinate display of material wealth during burial. While some ban vigils/wake *ida abali*, others try to regulate excessive eating and drinking during funeral by imposing stringent fine on any family who distribute food and drinks during burial. It must be noted that in some cases the deceased family opt to pay the fine rather than adhere to the regulation. Similarly, most Catholic Dioceses in Igbo land have also impose some laws to regulate wasteful spending during funeral by first insisting that the deceased member must be buried within three months of death, secondly, no brochure, excessive entertainment of guest with food and drinks, and that the funeral must be concluded within a stipulated period etc. However, one must acknowledge the fact that most Igbo customs on funeral rites stipulate that it is the duty of family and relations to give befitting and resounding funeral rites to their departed member, it specifically states that they should spare nothing to ensure decent and correct rite of passage is given to the deceased, or face the wrath of the dead, and at times they may have to borrow to do so. Basden (120) one of early writers on Igbo culture narrates what he observed in Awka with respect to cost of burial and funeral rites before the incursion of Christianity and western culture. “These second burial are costly affairs.” He reiterates that even “the very poorest will spend their all, and often heavy debts are incurred in the desire to give the best possible ‘send off’ to a relative...” He further states that:

I was passing through Awka one day and came across a display of funeral trophies. There were 21 skulls of cows, 11 of pigs, and 10 of goats, the price of cows \$5 a piece, pigs \$2, a goat 10s. In addition to these animals provided for sacrificial feasting, many cases of gin (then 15s. precise) and an unlimited supply of palm wine, yams and other provisions were consumed. That funeral must have cost at estimate \$150, and it would probably be nearer the mark to fix the figure at \$200. Of course such expenses could be incurred only by a rich family, but every family will spend to its utmost capacity when fulfilling the rites of second burial (Basden 121).

Burial and funeral rites for the dead, especially the elderly and titled ones of Igbo society, have always been an expensive obligation on the living. In fact, Ekwuru (2009) notes that in Igbo land, the nature and types of funeral rites depend mostly on the socio-religious status of the dead. As such, children, youth and adults/ titled ones have different funeral rites/ritual. At the early part of Christianity in Igbo society, some people actually got converted to Christianity to escape expensive Igbo customary funeral rites. But what is in contention today is not whether Christian or traditional funeral have become expensive, but that funeral rites in Igbo land have become a show of extravagancy, that offends both Christian moral sensibilities and Igbo religious belief system.

For instance, Mbalisi, Alumona & Okeke (65-66) reiterate that: “the number of clergy ... political office holders, traditional rulers and influential personalities that attend burial, show how popular the burial is. It also determines the form of arrangement made and money expended. More often such questions such as; how much did he spend in his father’s burial? Who are the dignitaries that attended his wife’s burial?” are common question during and after the funeral rites has been completed. The above questions not only suggest the changing

attitude to death and funeral rites practices in most Igbo communities today, but show the extent of commercialisation, politicisation and monetisation of *ini-ozu na ikwa-ozu* in Igbo land today. Another critical issue on the changing nature of burial and funeral rites in Igbo land today is the conflict between the Christians and Igbo traditional religious adherents on one of the rites of burial *Ikponye aja n'ili* (dust-to-dust rite) especially by the widow. In some Igbo communities, it is a taboo for a widow to perform this rite for the husband. They reason that it is not the duty of the widow to perform such ritual rather the duty of the son(s)/ the brothers or the *umunna*. The widow is expected to seat at the corner of the house mourning the demise of her husband. But some Christian denominations have insisted on the widow performing this rite which has generated a lot of conflict and violent reaction between them and the Igbo traditional religious adherents. For instance, in Awka and Nanka communities in Anambra state this issue has generated serious conflict between the church and the people especially within the Roman Catholic Church denomination. The community, most often, comprising of Igbo traditional religious believers in connivance with some 'weak Christian' insist that the church should allow them to bury their dead in accordance with their custom and tradition irrespective of whether the deceased was a Christian or not. They maintain that if the church must allow widows to throw shovelled sand into the grave- *ikponye aja n'ini*, they should provide a cemetery for their church members, because they are not ready to allow widows to perform such rites that are contrary to their culture, tradition and religious belief (Nmah, 2016:80). Ofodile (2013:1) avers that there are instances of priests refusing to conduct funeral services for deceased members just because the widow may not be allowed by villagers to perform dust to dust task since our tradition prefers a male child of the deceased to execute exactly the same role. In the Catholic Diocese of Awka for instance, especially in Awka town, currently many people object to their widows/widower pouring sand into the grave of their husbands/wives as the tradition of the church demands. Despite the intervention and advice by notable personalities of the town from both the church and some traditional institutions, the conflict still lingers. The Catholic authorities in the area, however, maintain that the rites are not being forced on anyone, but only their members that requested the church to bury them according to the church rites.

An indigene of Awka, Chief Michael Okafor told Vanguard newspaper in June 8 2016 at the heat of the crisis that "The community has made it clear that the customs of the town must not be tampered with, but the Catholic church is forcing our wives to perform this rite of pouring sand into the grave, which is not acceptable to the society. In Awka culture, a man is not allowed to pour sand into the wife's grave in the case of death and the wife is not allowed to pour sand into the man's grave in the case of the man's death, but the Catholic Church is trying to turn around the custom of the people." He, however, did not say why, or give logical convincing reason his people are afraid of this dust to dust rite of the church, resorting only to the argument that "it is not our culture."

However, a closer inquiry into the custom reveals that Awka traditional belief and custom object to shovelling sand into the grave- *ikponye aja n'ini* ritual whether by widow or widower *because of their belief that* by their doing so they will still be naturally bound to the late spouse and there could likely be natural consequences like death for any man or woman who has canal knowledge of the widow/widower. Hence, to avoid such calamity, the community traditionally banned the dust-to-dust rite by survived husband or wife of the deceased. This aspect of the belief needs thorough investigation by church authorities.

Similarly, the observance of widowhood rites not only causes incessant conflicts between Christianity and African Traditional religion but also has resulted to the untimely death of some widows. Mbefo (1996; 44) recalls a tragedy that happened at Nanka in Anambra

State where a Christian man instructed his wife not to observe traditional widowhood rites for him. Unfortunately, when he died, his kinsmen compelled the widow to observe widowhood rites by abstaining from participating in her late husband's burial ceremony, which included the widow not being allowed to "see the corpse of the late husband" (Ekei 2001:125). But, the widow disregarded their instruction and participated in the burial ceremony of her late husband. The people were enraged and decided to exhume and rebury the corpse of the man in the 'bad bush', *ajo ohia*. It was during the process of reburying the corpse of the man that conflict ensued between the Christian group who supported the widow and the adherents of traditional religion, *Ndi amala*, in which a man and a woman were shot dead and others sustained serious injuries. The church should forestall this unfortunate incidence by entering into dialogue with the African Traditionalists with the view of resolving perennial conflict of second burial, widowhood rites, reincarnation *ilo-uwa*, and ancestor ship.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

In sum, this research examined the changing trends in Igbo concept of death and funeral rites and its implication for man as a social being. It also dwelt on how the Igbo as a cultural group perceive and interpret the problem of death and other issues revolving around it in relation to human existence. The concept of death cannot be discussed independent of life, because both compliment as well as contradict each other, in the sense that without birth, there will be no death. It is birth that begets death.

Just as life and all that promote it are of the greatest value for the Igbo, so death and all that facilitate it, seem to be regarded as the worst evil. This can be observed in Igbo names: *Onwukanjo*, (Death is the worst), *Onwudiwe*, (Death is annoyed), *Eberemeonwu*, (Death has no mercy), *Onwuzuruigbo*, (Death is universal in Igbo world), etc. Implied in the above names is the fact that death is personified as a being with separate existence and absolute power over human being. Sacrifices are often offered to the gods appealing to them to chase away death from the family or community. Mbefo (1985:49) explains that:

[...] in Igbo traditional self-understanding, death is the ultimate tragedy, the unmitigated calamity. It signals the end of ambition, the wiping away of grandiose plans for self- advancement. Every sort of the means is employed to stave it off or at least delay it. Its folklore contains the saga of a delegation to God, the story of dog and toad, intended to lobby for physical immortality. In Igbo mythic consciousness nobody dies except through the machination of an enemy.... People's names and Igbo treasury of wisdom stored in its proverbs warned people of the ultimate enemy, death, lurking at every stage of human life.

Similarly, Ilogu (1974:41) states that "I have not come across any death that any Ibo accepts as natural and biological end.... After many enquiries, I realized that to the Ibo life is 'eternal' and man, because of his share in the Supreme God *Chineke*, through the Chi particle in him, is meant to be immortal." Thus, *Ndi* Igbo conceive death as the worst evil that can befall a human being. Yet, they do not understand it as the ultimate end which is capable of annihilating the human person, an embodiment of body *anu- ahu* and soul *muo- madu*. This soul *muo- madu* leaves the body after death to join the ancestors in the underworld after receiving proper and befitting burial and funeral rites. It is only then will it be endowed with the potential of *ilo-uwa* a type of reincarnation through the unborn babies in the deceased person's lineage.

In Igbo cosmo-ontology, death, though accepted as a necessity, is somehow viewed as a bad omen when it occurs especially in an unbecoming circumstance. This is the reason behind their classification of death into good and bad death, or premature and mature death. But, what is bad death? Could human being be said to die prematurely? What is mature death? When do we say that man has died prematurely or maturely? Igbo conceptual understanding of death is built on the philosophy of good/mature death, which is death at a ripe old age, of someone who has fulfilled all the socio-culturally prescribed criteria for achieving the goal of human life. That is to say, a set criteria of life of moral uprightness, marriage, procreation and having received a proper funeral rites from one's children/relatives; conditions which qualify him/her for attaining the glorious ancestor-hood.

However, there are some questions, criticisms and arguments arising from Igbo belief and attitude to death. For instance, their belief in ancestral world, good/mature death and reincarnation etc is questionable, if one considers the fact that no one knows exactly the time or age he/she is going to die. Similarly, if we are to strictly follow their criteria for the dead to reach the ancestral world, what will happen to those who did not marry like the celibate, but received the proper burial and funeral rites? Is the reincarnate truly the person that is said to have reincarnated? Thus, Igbo attitude to death, burial and funeral rites is as result of their belief about the destiny of human being. The traditional Igbo have a strong belief in the ontological and personal immortality of the human soul after the death of the body. This belief is fundamental to their conception of life, death, burial, ancestral world and reincarnation. Even though, there is no special effort on their part to prove with philosophical arguments the immortality of the soul; but, their belief in this phenomenon flows from their traditional religion and cosmological belief about the destiny of man. Ilogu (42) observes this and opines that; [...] the belief or desire for immortality is part of the background to the cult of the ancestors through which the dead share in this life of the living. Furthermore, children yet unborn receive the spirit genius of some dead ancestors through a kind of reincarnation. Afigbo (1981:197-180) has yet another useful insight when he states that:

[...] since the Igbo never thought this close contact, this coming and going, between the two worlds could ever be terminated, it could be said that they had a doctrine of eternity, a doctrine certainly more dynamic and human than the Christian one in which the traffic is one way, and men are translated from life through death to eternal damnation or eternal joy, but there is no traffic from these two equally awful eternal extremities to life.

Metuh (1991:116) equally explains the logical implication of what such an Igbo concept of immortality consists of: "is that [...] the center of concern is the eternal now; since the past and the fulfillment of man are sought in the present. Consequently, the afterlife is conceived in terms of the present life. The environment and social structure of each society are each projected into the invisible world and form the framework of its conceptions of the after-life." Chinwe Achebe (1986:17) avers in that:

[...] an individual in Igbo cosmology is expected to complete seven life cycles. He can return after death to start another life cycle provided that he completed the previous cycle naturally. If he dies before the prescribed cycle is completed, then it means that the natural order has been interfered with. Such a person is likely to

make more than the seven rounds or cycles in order to re-align his life to the cosmic order.

However, *Ndi Igbo* dwell more on the betterment of this present life because it is the way it is lived and managed that admits a person into the ancestral world as well as pave the way for his/her possible reincarnation. Thus, the Igbo belief in reincarnation is a strong argument for their belief in the immortality of the human soul. However, their concept of immortality can be described as a kind of cyclic immortality; where life and death follow an interminable cycle of birth, death and reincarnation.

The hallmark of a fulfilled Igbo life is to remain in the continuous immortal cycle of life through reincarnation which must be attained through achieved personal success that is all embracing- economically, morally, religiously and biologically. This includes attainment of a reasonable old age before death. Failure in any of the above aspects means exclusion from the community of life which is both earthly and ancestral. Furthermore, the reincarnated person needs to start the struggle for a fulfilled life all over again. He cannot lay claim to his previous incarnation as meriting him a life of bliss here on earth. Thus, the above conception implies that the traditional Igbo belief in cyclic immortality applies to only those who lived and died within the community ethos and mores. These are the dead that will attain eternity of life through reincarnation. However, there are those who at death are banished from the ancestral world because of their past lifestyle and manner of death, but they do not lose their personality and immortality as such rather are excluded from the cycle of *ilo-uwa*. They simply join the large band of non-descript malevolent spirits. They can neither reincarnate (except in form of *Ogbanje*) nor join the ancestors, “[...] their painful immortality is linear and definitive” (Oguejiofor, 1996:31).

Overall, the picture that emerges from the above conception is that the traditional Igbo understand life as a struggle in which one must put in all one’s best in order to attain a successful life, because this has implications for his personal immortality. Thus, if the Igbo work hard, if he is competitive and aggressive, if he admires personal achievement, it is because these have great weight and implications on his immortality and eschatological destiny. Hence, Christianity and western education has not been able to change the above belief. In fact, many Igbo Christians today are living in the reality of these conflicts of beliefs. They attend church and participate in church activities but when confronted with the realities of life like death and other vicissitudes of life, they resort to their traditional customs and belief to sort themselves out. Thus, resulting to the above conflicts earlier discussed on burial rites.

In conclusion, funeral rites are traditional, symbolic and unique ways various cultures and religions of the world express their beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about the dead especially a beloved one. It provides acceptable means to express the painful feelings which death provoke, as well as opportunity for sympathisers to condole and support the bereaved, show one’s relationship with the deceased and share the memory with others. Christian church authorities operating in Igbo land must, as matter of urgency, train their pastors on rudiments and fundamentals of Igbo traditional culture and religion to enable them understand the essence of certain rites especially funeral rites in order to sift the wheat from the chaff. Nmah (2016:85) advises that: “since *ikponyeajan’ili* (dust to dust rite) by a widow is partly the conundrum of gender discrimination or taboo by the Awka people; and partly the cause of factions among the Awka people, therefore the church should adopt optional approach in dealing with this issue. Pastoral care and counseling in this case is capable of diffusing tension, violence and other forms of religious conflict tendencies.”

For the Awka community and others opposed to dust-to-dust rite by the widow, the church can solve this problem by making use of church cemetery for burial of their members

who request for Christian funeral rite. In fact, the church authorities should critically look into the attitude of most Christians in Igbo land today requesting to be buried at home rather than Christian burial ground, which I think is a manifestation of their implicit belief that if they are buried in the Christian cemetery, they may not be able to join their ancestors. Hence, confirming the fact that belief in the reality of the ancestral world and reincarnation is still prevalent in their minds. Otherwise, how can one explain the prevalent practice among Ndi Igbo of bringing back the remains of especially adult deceased persons home for burial in their ancestral home, whether the person is a Christian or not. Similarly, names like *Nnenna* "Father's mother come back" and *Nnanna* "Father's father come back," which reflect their belief in *ilo-uwa* reincarnation is still prevalent even among Christian's adherents today. Hence, one may suggest that Christianity in Igbo land should be mindful of the fact that, despite the shortcomings associated with Igbo belief in death, burial and rites of passage, this belief system enables them to humanise death, overcome the psychology of anguish, fear and dread, which the thought and experience of death evokes in human beings; while motivating them to live a morally upright life in the spirit of hard work, industry and integrity, which not only merit them an enviable status in the community of living, but also a possible reincarnation *ilo-uwa* in their lineage. Finally, our research reveals that Igbo conception of death is slightly different in interpretation, representation and meaning. Hence, one is inclined to suggest that while introducing other cultures and religion in Igbo land care should be taken in the process of proselytisation to avoid what Nobles (2013:232) called, "conceptual incarnation". That is the demonstration of the understanding that there is no normative population or behaviour in the world, except for that particular context. Thus, only arrogance and hegemonic intent can explain the blind application of particular experiences of humanity as if they were valid global modes (Parham 2002: xxii).

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