

IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN IGALA RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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Abstract

For the traditional Igala people, the deceased is believed to be living in the ontology of the invisible intangible beings, dynamically engaging in an evolving state of existence in the world of animated being. From the point of view of the Igala people, death does not imply an end to life, instead, it marks the beginning of another phase of being. From the invisible world, the ancestors reincarnate into the families of their living relatives via a child or children born into the families of some parents. Different studies carried out in religions support the assumption that the majority of people believe that death is not the end of one's existence but rather a transition from one life to another. In the same vein, Igala Traditional Religion is not left out in the quest for the nature of life after the death of physical body. The aim of this paper is to appraise the Igala concept of the soul and evaluates the belief system among Igala people on the immortality of the soul. This research employed phenomenological, historical and descriptive approach in its methodology and methods of data collection are both primary and secondary sources. Findings from this study establishes that death is not the terminable point of human life but an avenue that ensure a transformation into another realm and thus, the paper concludes that life is one but it is lived in different phases, thus this life is one phase, life after this is another. Death is as importantly celebrated as life because death is not final, but a transition to a life in the spiritual realm further expanding the lens on immortality of the soul in religious thought.

Keywords: Immortality, Marriage, Procreation, Reincarnation, Igala

Introduction

Different studies carried out in religions support the assumption that the majority of people believe that death is not the end of one's existence but rather a transition from one life to another. Many religions have provided belief structures that support the religions and social need of practioners Rituals and sacred writings support the various religious interpretations of what death is and what it will be like in the afterlife. However, even with the differences in religious beliefs there are similarities between many different religious groups regarding afterlife belief. One similarity among religious groups is the belief in afterlife following physical death. Another similarity is the presence of “the two polar images of life after death, i.e., the abode of the

righteous, heaven or paradise, and the place for the wicked, or hell. In the same vein, Igala Traditional Religion is not left out in the quest for the nature of life after the death of physical body. Some of the questions that bothered the minds of Igala people are: is the human soul immortal? What will be the nature of life after death? Where is the abode of the living-dead? These and many other questions shall be attended to in the cause of this research. Different areas of Igala Traditional Religion have been researched into by various writers, this research work is an addition to the various works carried out on the immortality of the soul in Igala traditional religion. The study highlights the fact that immortality is a religious experience that is of great importance to the entirety of the beliefs and practices of Igala Traditional Religion. An examination of beliefs and practices of the Igala tradition would disabuse the wrong impressions generated by ignorant and arm chair scholars on Igala Traditional religion. Hence, the need for re-evaluation and deepening of the appraisal of immortality of the soul in Igala worldview call for research.

The soul is a non-material component of the human person; it is the essence of a person, the very being of man that makes a human who he is. It is an incorporeal and eternal being that dwells in the human body. Immortality on the other hand, is the immunity from any kind of decay and death. Immortality is the indefinite continuation of a person's existence, even after death. According to Igala belief system, when people dies, they transcend to the spirit world to be in the company of the living dead or ancestors. Ancestors protect and provide guidance to those in the material realm, therefore are highly respected, venerated and very important to the community of the living. There is therefore continuous and unbreakable communication and connectedness between the living and the living dead.

In Igala religious worldview, human person comprises of body (*Añola*) and soul (*Inmi* or *Olai*). It is believed in Igala society that, at the point of death, the soul will be separated from the physical body. While the physical body decays, the soul remains indestructible or incorruptible. It is believed among Igala people that death is not the end of human life, rather a transition from the visible world (*Ilei*) to the invisible world (*Oj'ona*) where human soul continue to live forever. By implication, the human life is first lived in this physical world, followed by eternal life in the hereafter or a return to life in the old or new body. As a result of this, Igala people do not consider death as the terminal point of human existence, rather a transition to a realm where man become “everlasting” or an ancestor. This paper puts forward the forms of immortality of the soul among the Igala people, significance of immortality, the notion and future of immortality of the soul as

believed by the Igala people in their indigenous religion.

Forms of Immortality of the Soul among the Igala People

Ibanga traces the concept of immortality from a philosophical perspective as he cites ancient philosophers, Pythagoras and Plato. For Pythagoras, soul is defined as the immaterial element in man which transmigrates into another human body, even an animal, after the death of individual. And that since the soul is imprisoned in the body; it seeks release from it which can only come as a result of soul purification through asceticism and philosophy. Plato also described soul as an immortal element which prior to its inhabitation in the human body, pre-existed in the world of the gods to which it shall return after the demise of the man.¹ The human soul is naturally and essentially immortal. It is uncreated and eternal. It passed from one body to another through a series of many reincarnations. After paying off its sin (Karmic debt), the soul is liberated from semantic existence and lives in a totally blissful state. The human soul is incorruptible and indestructible. A thing can be destroyed only by separating its parts. Therefore, the soul cannot be destroyed, since it does not have parts.²

Ted is of the view that soul is the deepest interior dimension of who each of us is as a person; soul connotes who each of us is as an individual, our deepest essence.³ Soul according to Aristotle is not a distinctive occupant of the body; rather, it is a principle which implies the actuating cause of the living body. An ensouled living body is an indication of a particular kind of informed matter.⁴ Kwaja and Vernekar described soul as the complete principle of feeling, life, thoughts and humans action, that is regarded as a distinct entity separate from the body, and commonly held to be separable in existence from the body; the spiritual part of humans as distinct from the physical part.⁵ They quoted one of the earliest Greek poets, Homer that the soul in human beings menaces in the battle. Even through the soul departed from the body, it remains in the underworld as a shadow of the lifeless... the soul is an entity which partakes of divinity, present before and after the physical body.⁶

1. Ibanga, F.D. "The African Meta-Medical Science of Ukpugho Ukpung (Soul Transplantation). A philosophical Critique" in (*International Journal of History and Philosophical Research*. 4 (1): 2016), 49 – 60.

2. (www.webpage.uidah.edu).

3. Ted, P. "Models of the Soul: Comparing concepts" (www.thoughtfulchristian.com). 2005, 4.

4. Dalhat, Y. "The Concept of al-Ruh (Soul) in Islam", in (*International Journal of Education and Research*. 3 (8): 2015), 431-440.

5. Kwaja, A.Z. and Vernekar, S.P. "Human Soul: A Religious Perspective" in (*Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*. 5(12): 2018,), 12 – 21.

6. Kwaja and Vernekar, 15-16

Belief system can be seen as a vague idea in which some confidence is placed. Among the Igala people of Kogi State, there is a strong belief that after the death of the physical body, the human soul continues to live in another realm or come back in a new body. This belief has been “officially written” in the minds of Igala people as it is passed from generation to generation via myths, proverbs, songs, folktales and so on. Unlike Christians and Muslims who believed that the immortality of the soul is either in paradise or hell fire, Igala people believed that there are diverse ways in which human soul can be immortalized. This research captures about four forms of immortality of the soul in Igala religious thought. They include: personal immortality; collective immortality; marriage and procreation and reincarnation.

1. Personal Immortality

In African belief system, death does not end life, but continues in another realm. In line with the above assumption, Mbiti affirms that death is a process which removes a person gradually from the living to the living death. After death, the individual is believed to continue existing in the world and is remembered by living relatives and friends who know him in this life and who have survived him. This is referred to as living dead and this is also a state of personal immortality.⁷

Haaga and Aye also affirms that, the Tiv regard man as the measure of all things and the Nworld and life are centred on man, therefore in every facet of life, the Tiv hold that man must be preeminent. Questions of immortality and afterlife are approached from an anthropocentric dimension and as such, procreative activity is taken seriously in Tiv society, issues of child care are accorded proper attention. It is pertinent to note that most “Akombo” (Cosmo-supernatural forces) are in one way or the other concerned with the wellbeing and survival of the family.⁸

Negedu comments that the ancestors are the departed relatives of the living, who led good lives on earth and at present, have found an abode with the rest of the ancestors in the other world. The *Ibegwu* are ever-living and active, once they have died, they became “everlasting.”⁹ In Igala traditional society, when a person is dead and buried and the second burial celebration is not carried out, the person's soul remains a “temporal ancestor”. In this case he/she is not allowed to join the rest of the ancestors because, his/her relatives on earth have not met up with the full

⁷ Mbiti, J.S. *African Religious and Philosophy*. (Nairobi: Heineman, 1969), 27.

⁸ Haaga, P.T and Joseph, A.A. A Philosophical Inquiry on Immortality in Tiv Thought. (*IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 2 (1):2016), 15

⁹ Negedu, I.A. “The Igala Traditional Religions Belief System: Between Monotheism and Polytheism”, in (*Ogiris: A New Journal of African Studies*. (10) 2013), 119.

criteria that will enables him/her to become bonafide member of the ancestors. This is why he/she is been remembered by the living relatives at the annual festival called *OteIbegwu*. On this note, Negedu writes:

Ancestors are specially remembered once every year at the *Ibegwu* festival. The day of this festival occurs shortly before yams are harvested. It marks the beginning of the period of harvesting yams. In this period, the ancestors are appreciated for their protection throughout the previous year and are appeased to bestow more blessings in the coming year. The *Ibegwu* shrine is cleaned thoroughly during this period in preparation for the festival.¹⁰

According to Igala belief system, until second burial is conducted for the dead person, he/she cannot get to the abode of the ancestors: in his article, “Death in Igala Worldview: The Question of Continuity and Discontinuity of Life”, Egbunu affirms that “the traditional Igala believe that the spirit of the departed hovers around the homestead after burial until the second burial when he/she now joins the ancestors, *Ibegwu*.”¹¹ In Igala belief system, if the second burial of the dead person is not celebrated, he/she will not join the rest of the ancestors, he/she will remain in isolation. But this does not stop his/her living relatives from appeasing him/her annually when the rest of the ancestors are remembered. In consonance with the above explanation, when discussing on the qualifications to become an ancestor, Ige maintains in his article, “The Cult of Ancestors in African Traditional Religion”, that “the celebration of a second burial by the children of the deceased is also very important. It is this that enables the deceased to enter into a place of rest where he enjoys the company of other ancestors”.¹² Furthermore, Ope emphasizes that Africans believe in the existence of the soul as distinct from the body. They also believe in the survival after death and the survival of the spirit. This is why great honour is accorded the dead who are still regarded as part of their families. It must be noted that the belief in the extra ordinary power of the dead and the part they play among the living explain the reason for attachment of the African Traditional Religion.¹³

^{10.} Negedu, 197

^{11.} Egbunu, F.E. “Death in Igala World View: The Question of Continuity and Discontinuity of Life” in *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*. 1 (8): 2014), 121.

^{12.} Ige, A.S. “The Cult of Ancestors in African Traditional Religion”, in *An Encyclopaedia of the Arts*. 10 (1) 2006), 30.

^{13.} Ope, A.J. Religion and Human Values, the Practice in Nigeria. (Lagos: LEKOBAPublishers, 2006), 17-18.

2. Collective Immortality

Immortality of the soul in Igala Traditional Religion becomes collective when the departed soul of a man joins the rest of the ancestors in the invisible world, when the second burial celebration has taken place. When the required burial rites are completed, the departed individual was gradually ushered into the abode of the ancestors, where he/she has the full right to carryout activities with rest of the ancestors. This is what Mbiti meant when he writes that “with time such a person sinks beyond personal immortality to collective immortality which is the state of the spirit.”¹⁴ For the indigenious African people, dying is a transition to, or 'growing' to a different phase of being. The dead transcends to the state of collective immortality and exists in the company of the spirits.

Ogbujah note that:

When the last person who know the living-dead dies, the departed is then entirely removed from the state of personal remembrance and immortality and enters into the stage of “collective immortality” of the ancestral spirit.¹⁵

3. Marriage and Procreation

In his article, “The Corpus of Life and the Phenomenon of Death in a Traditional Igala (African) Religious Society,” Okpe remarks that:

Another dimension to the idea of immortality of the soul in Igala Traditional Religion is marriage and procreation. On this score, Okpe remarks that one of the important concerns of the Igala is that a person ought to get married so that his name will be carried on. As such, if an Igala person reached the age of marriage and refused to be married without any reason, he or she cannot be treated with dignity. They often use the phrase “carrying on name”, which in other words means to 'live on' or simply to be alive. By this, they mean more than merely the bearing of one's name by future descendants. The importance of marriage in Igala society cannot be overemphasized and it is for this reason that many boys on reaching adulthood, do not delay in taking wives. It is because of the importance attached to marriage, that an unmarried adult, is not respected in Igala traditional communities. It expresses a concern that if a man was to leave this world without leaving behind any progeny, he would have no status in the spirit world. Therefore, it is a tremendous responsibility for a son to get married in order to make sure that his father has status when he goes into

^{14.} Mbiti, 27

^{15.} Ogbujah, C.W. “The Idea of Human Destiny in Africa: The Igbo Experience”, in (*MELINTAS* 23(3): 2008), 421.

the other world, for without children one is not able to “carry on one's name”. This essentially means to have life.¹⁶

In his discussion of how human souls are immortalized in the Traditional Igbo Society, Ogbujah maintains that immortality is seen as a mediated destiny for everyone through personal remembrances. Personal remembrance, as a form of perpetuating the life of a once existent human person is most prominent with the family circle. In the traditional Igbo society, there is an obvious link between immortality of persons and the institution of marriage. The act of marrying and begetting of children is an indispensable part of the excellences of one who has attained personhood. When a person dies, he/she is expected to be buried by his children. Phenomenally, he is no more, but part of his being survives in the memory of those who knew him while he lived, and most importantly, in the children who survived him. It is, so to speak, his immediate family that keeps him alive. For all practical intent and purposes, the personal immortality of the living-dead is dependent on his progenies. This is why it is said *Onye a muru, yaamutaibeya*, (he who is born should beget others). And the progression goes on ad infinitum. This form perpetuity of the life of the lineage is termed by some as 'corporate immortality'. This 'perpetuation of themselves through reproduction' is a way of effecting births in their clan without emptying their personalities; a way of perpetuating their personal marks of identity, which in a way enhances their personal remembrances and immortality.¹⁷

This form of immortality as noted above is not peculiar to Igala people and Igbo alone. The Yoruba people of the western part of Nigeria also held similar view. While discussing the value of marriage and child bearing and frowning at the law of celibacy or celibacy among the Yoruba people; Ige remarks that:

Unless a person has children and close relations to remember him when he has died physically, he is nobody and simply forgotten. Hence, it became a religious and ontological duty to have sex in marriage so as to have children who will keep him in personal immortality (with other living-dead of the family). Eschatology in African Traditional Religion like other religious tradition is not a matter for enjoyment or speculation. If a man has children or only daughters, he marries another wife so that sons may be born who will survive him so as not to be cut off from personal immortality. Even persons

¹⁶. Okpe, N.O. “The Corpus of Life and the Phenomenon of Death in a Traditional Igala (African) Religious Society”, in (*International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Education (IJHSSE)*). 85(8): 2018), 37.

¹⁷. Ogbujah, 420-421

born as eunuchs in Africa (especially among the Yoruba) still get married. Agreement is reached within the family for someone usually a close relation through whom she will bear children. But, these children shall be for the eunuch, they shall answer his name and he alone is known to them as their father. The same goes for a woman eunuch. She can marry a woman to bear children for her through a man of her choice. All is done that they may have children to keep them in personal immortality when they are no more.¹⁸

This form of immortality among Igala people is tangible and not abstract like the belief in ancestors. The children of the deceased are very much in their midst, that will go a long way to console the living relatives that their brother or sister is very much alive.

4. Reincarnation

Reincarnation means to come back to earthly life. It also means the circle of successive rebirths. It is the belief that while the spirit of the deceased lives in the spiritual world, some of his physical and other traits are manifested in his grandchildren or close relatives. Reincarnation is the process of rebirth of a person into the world to pay for his bad deeds until such person is perfected. The new-born baby is sometimes believed to possess some of the essential features of the departed grandfather or elderly relation, and sometimes both are believed to possess more or less similar characteristic. It is believed that the reincarnated person can take on a new destiny especially if things were bad for him in the previous existence.¹⁹

Similarly, Olorunnisola comments that reincarnation is a theory that life and existence are in a cyclic form. It is a corrective measure for all forms of inequalities in life; some are rich, others are poor, some are freeborn but others slaves, some are born in a class society while others in a class free, some are very fortunate in life while others are not, some live to old age while others die at infancy among others. It is affirmed that the conditions of the previous live determine this present life and the conditions of this present life will determine that of the next life. The operative principle on which reincarnation stands is called karma-a spiritual cum natural principle undergirding the consequences of all human actions.²⁰

^{18.} Ige, 42-43

^{19.} Uduigwoman, A.F. "Reincarnation as a Metaphysical Principle of Explanation in African Traditional Thought: A Critique", in (*Global Journal of Humanities*. 3 (1&2):2004), 15.

^{20.} Olorunnisola, T.S. "John Hick's Global Theology of Death and Immortality in Conversation with the Yoruba-African Philosophy of Afterlife", in *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. (44): 2019), 37

Like the above definition, Ogbujah note that:

In reincarnation, the soul is reborn in a new baby or in successive and different bodies. This life in a new body or successive and different bodies is occasioned and conditioned by the previous life either for better or for worse. For some, it is a time of suffering and purification of past life. For others, it is a “second chance” to correct one's previous faults, a chance that is opened to all without exception. For others still, it is “endless cycle” which goes on to stamp the immortality of the soul.²¹

In a simple term, reincarnation is a belief that someone who had once been birthed but had died, is returning as a newly birthed baby. It could be either in the same location as the first birth or a different location. The theory here is that a person who is known to have died in the past is presently identified as another person being birthed or currently living. Thus, the person who is living or being birthed newly will be deemed to be the reincarnation of the person who has died.²²

From the various definitions of reincarnation outlined above, the central thing that is noteworthy is that the soul do not perish. In Igala religious thought, reincarnation is a form in which the human souls are immortalized. The Igala name for reincarnation is *Adawa*. It is a means through which the ancestors come back to this world in their grandchildren. Egbunu affirms that reincarnation in Igala case, each soul remains distinct and each birth represents a new soul, the ancestors is re-incarnated but continues to live his own life in the afterlife. And it can be either a female or male, the sex of the deceased ancestor notwithstanding. Certain names are given to children to remind them. Such names are: *Omaye-mi* my brother/sister, *Ana mi* – In-law, *Iye-mi* – My mother and *Atayi* – Elder man, or my daddy. Or they could be given direct names of such ancestors. This reincarnated ancestors then become the *Ojo* (the guardian spirits of such children).²³

In Igala traditional religion, when a child was born in a particular family, the child will remain in the room for fourteen days before he/she was brought out on the fourteenth day for naming ceremony. On the day of *Egwele-ebo* (naming ceremony), *Ifa* (oracle) was consulted to determine the ancestor that has reincarnated in the child. In some cases, the oracle were not consulted but

^{21.} Ogbujah, 422

^{22.} Onwuaduegwu, I.N. “Fundamental Issues with Issues with Reincarnation as a Belief”, in (*Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3(1): 2020), 11.

^{23.} Egbunu, 121

ancestor will simply reveal himself or herself through dream to the father of the child. When this is done, the name that will be given to the child will determine the ancestor that re-incarnated in him or her, like the examples mentioned above. In the cause of bringing the child out for the first day, there is a particular ritual that was normally performs. The father of the child will look for someone with good character that he wants his child to emulate, to bring him or her out of the room. The man or woman will stand at the door with the child in his or her hands while prayers are offered for the child to be of good character; be strong, be full of wisdom and understanding and above all to live long.

Culture is a universal and at the same time a relative concept, which entails all the traits, characterized a particular society, which are consciously and unconsciously acquired by the members of the society. Culture is universal because there is no known society without culture. On the other hand, it is relative because, it differs from one society to the others; there exist no two societies with the same culture. The same is true among the Igala people. The belief in reincarnation differs among Igala people. It is unanimously agreed among Igala that there is reincarnation and the ancestors reincarnates in a child into the families of his/her living relatives. But the manner in which the reincarnation take place depend on the belief system in that area. Apart from the general belief that ancestors reincarnate in a child, there are other belief systems that are not common to the entire Igala people but only peculiar to a subsection of the Igala people. This will take this research into discussing the forms of reincarnation.

Apart from the belief that ancestors reincarnate in a child, some part of Igala people believed that those who are still alive can also reincarnate in a child. According to the belief of this part of Igala people, an aged man or woman can reincarnate in a child up to two or three times before they die. In an interview with Adukanya, when an aged man or woman reincarnates in a child, as the child grows up, there can never be a smooth relationship between the child and the man or woman who reincarnated in him or her while he or she was alive.²⁴ Similar to this, is what Adah explained in an interview. He says, a living person cannot reincarnate in a child, except in a situation whereby an aged person is sick awaiting death. He stress further that, if a child is given birth to at this period and was taken to the sick person and he/she rejects the child on several attempt, it is an indication that the man has reincarnated in that child. And if eventually the sick person died before the naming ceremony of the child (*Egwele-ebo*), when the oracle was consulted, it will be revealed that the man or the woman reincarnated in the child. The rejection of the child while he/she was

²⁴ Adukanya Boniface, (89 years), Oral Interview, (1/5/2023)

sick or the relationship between the aged man and woman which was not cordial was an indication that he/she has reincarnated in the child.²⁵

As stated earlier, when an ancestor reincarnates into a particular family via a child, oracle was consulted to know the particular ancestor that has returned. When this was known, libation was poured on the ground and a cola-nut in the hand of the enchanter, welcoming that particular ancestor into the family. He (the ancestor) will be begged to stay with the family in good luck and good health.

In the same way, when a living person reincarnates in a particular family through a child, some enchantments are made. In this case, Yahaya mentioned that, the particular child shall be held in the hands of the old man or woman who reincarnated in him or her, praying for him or her to be strong in health and be full of age and favour as he/she came to dwell with the family while mentioning the names of his/her forefathers who were solidly behind him and the family.²⁶

Ajuma also indicates that in a situation where the aged person who reincarnated in the child was not close to the parents, the father of her child gets some cola-nuts in a bowl of water while he makes some enchantments, calling the name of his father, uncle, Aunty, or ground-father who reincarnated in the child to stay with them in happiness and good health. He also call on him or her to ensure favour, good health long life and every good thing life can offer come with the child.²⁷

One question that demands an answer is, who has the capacity to return or reincarnate? In response to this question, Ogbujah note that the Igbos are unanimous with the position that only “qualified persons”, that is, members who attained “personhood”, married and begot at least a male child, lived a good life to a ripe old age, and were properly buried by performing all the ritual ceremonies, could return to earth through *Ilo-wa* (reincarnation).²⁸ Contrary to the above criteria for reincarnation among Igbo people, some part of Igala belief system defiles these criteria and states that once a person reaches adulthood, he/she can reincarnate in a child. Some part of Igala people believed that an adult who is not married and died as a result of accident or any form of

^{25.} Adah Attah (86 years), Oral interview, 15/10/2023

^{26.} Yahaya Iyaji (70 years), Oral Interview, 26/7/2023

^{27.} Ajuma Iyaji (75) Oral Interview, 22/6/2024

^{28.} Ogbujah, 424

untimely death will reincarnate in a child within his/her living family, so that his/her name will not be wipe out of the family.

Onwuaduegwu buttress this point when he writes that:

Another dimension of reincarnation has to do with a circumstance where the soul of a deceased person was not admitted into the realm of the spirits. This usually include persons who in their previous lives are believed to have died prematurely, either by an accident or by some illness or disease, thus, measuring up that they ought to be given more time adequate to live off their lives. The circumstances used to justify their rejection from the spirit world and subsequent return in the form of a newly birthed baby; one usually their inability to fulfil their life destined in their previous lives. In this setting, it is believed that the deceased merits to have his/her soul completely reincarnated or rebirthed; to make up for the shortcomings or unfulfilled life they had in the previous life.²⁹

Furthermore, Achoba maintains that, as part of the concept of reincarnation, the Igala people believed that a child born within a certain period, especially after the death of a loved one, will be named after him. The belief here is that the dead relative can come back to this world by reincarnating into the family that showed him or her love, while he was spending his/her first life on earth.³⁰ On the other hand, Ogbujah affirms that, “in reincarnation, the soul is reborn in a new body or in successive and different bodies. This life in a new body or successive and different bodies is occasioned and conditioned by the previous life either for better or for worse.”³¹

The above statement is similar to the belief of Igala people in reincarnation. They believed that as the ancestors reincarnate in a child that arrives a particular family for the love they showed him/her during his/her lifetime on earth. Equally, ancestor can also reincarnate in a child into a particular family to become “thorn in the flesh” of the parents. For instance, a man who troubles his aged father or uncle in their life time in form of insult, disrespect, humiliation or any form of inhuman treatment stands the chance of retribution when the man or the uncle dies and reincarnate in his children. It is believed in Igala traditional religion that such ancestors reincarnate into the family of that man to cause damage. The reincarnated ancestor can cause the

^{29.} Onwuaduegwu, 15

^{30.} Achoba, F. “African Traditional Religion in Igalaland, Nigeria (c. 1000- present)” in *RJHIS 4* (1)2017), 54.

^{31.} Ogbujah, 424

child to fall sick perpetually so that the parents can squander their money and resources they have as a punishment for what the man did to him during his lifetime. Reincarnation therefore, can be for better and for worse.

The Significance of the Immortality of the Soul in Igala Religious Thought

The Igala belief in afterlife has its root in the belief that man is both a material being and a spiritual being. It is believed that in addition to the tangible material component of man there is an intangible, spiritual, indestructible component which outlives the disintegration of the physical frame. This is the soul or spirit, at death, the body decomposes while the soul goes back to the Supreme Being who is the source of life.

In this way, Igala people believe that immortality of the soul is so significant because death is not the end point of human existence, rather a means through which transition take place from the visible world to the invisible world. In other words, in the invisible world, there is no extinction of life. Human life or soul continues till eternity. Immortality of soul is very important in Igala traditional religion as they believe that the ancestors that parted ways with the living relatives to the invisible world are said to be at the services of their descendants on earth by protecting and guiding them. On this score, Odiniya in Adama affirms that:

OteIbegwu was a religious festival which marked the people's belief that the dead continue to live after passing away from this life. The dead were for this reason entertained from time to time at the feast. From Hades the dead continue to visit the earth, guiding and protecting the living especially their relations.³²

Immortality of the soul creates a reunion between the ancestors and their living descendants by means of reincarnation. This is an opportunity for the ancestors whose existence in the invisible world continues till eternity to be reunited with his/her living family on earth by reincarnating in children, which make them more active and tangible in their various families.

Immortality of the soul also encourage morality in Igala society, there are “dos and the don'ts” in Igala traditional religion that attract reward and punishment by the ancestors. The adherents of Igala traditional religion were thought to embrace peace and shun vices. In his affirmation, Achoba opines that, in Igala society, belief in ancestors was almost a way of life. *Amibegwu* are

³² Adama, T. “The Meeting of Two Cultures: Igala Traditional Religious Culture and Christianity in Interaction”, in *(International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition. (7): 2015)*, 120.

the spirit of the dead. In other words, it is the name given to the spirit that attends to the fortunes of families. Allegedly, some have the power to kill evil doers or trespassers on family property. They also make the adulterer to become sick or die, if she refuses to confess. As for the men, they were traditionally polygamous and, as such, were not punished by the ancestors when they had extra marital affairs, except with somebody's wife. This was due to the fact that the ancestors kept the same tradition which was common to most African societies.³³

Change and the Igala Notion of Immortality of the Soul

In African Traditional Religion, it is believed the soul is quite active and exercises a great influence in the affairs of the living. African Traditional Religion does not believe that the soul is senseless and inactive. In fact, the dead who become ancestors are regarded as the living dead because they are believed to oversee the affairs of their children. They guide and protect their children (Chukwuedo.³⁴ In Igala Traditional Religion, the physical death of an individual marked the beginning of another existence in the spiritual realm called *Efojegwu*. From this realm, the ancestors visit their relatives in this physical world. The ancestors are the “watchmen” of their living relatives. They guide and protect their descendants from any harm that can be detrimental to their existence. The ancestors have their own way of rewarding or punishing those who defiles their order and those who do what is just respectively.

To be nearer and tangible, the ancestors also return into their respective families via reincarnation. The ancestor who reincarnate in a child is highly honoured through veneration and sacrifice. In this case, Igala people believe that the ancestor who reincarnated in the child automatically become his/her *Ojo* (the guardian, spirit). Egbunu comments that it is a relationship between an individual and a particular ancestor who is believed to control or predispose the person's destiny, and who is in some respects re-incarnated in the individual concerned. Even in situations where there is no indication, the *Ojo* is known through divining and oracle on the fourteenth day (*Egwele-ebo*).³⁵

However, these belief systems have been tampered with the advent of Christianity and Islam. *Otelbegwu* festival was considered as idolatry and those who offer sacrifice to the ancestors are regarded as idol worshippers. Adama opines that ancestral veneration (*Otelbegwu*) has been

³³. Achoba, 48-49

³⁴. Chukwuedo, M.U. “A Comparative Study of Immortality of the Soul in Christianity and African Traditional Religion”, in (*Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies*.(15): 2019), 60

³⁵. Egbunu, 121

neglected as a result of the influence of Christianity in Igalaland... Faith in God as the all-powerful father, as the all-merciful father, as the creator and foundation of all being, has dethroned the ancestors from the human-made pedestals. The belief in the power of ancestors to inflict pain or to enhance life, the belief that they can control the destiny of human beings, has been radically adjusted. Their gods like status as super human beings has been reduced to the status of deceased human beings. The dwindling in the ancestral veneration made the ancestors not to function well as before the advent of Christianity.³⁶

On the other hand, belief in reincarnation in Igalaland has reduced, as most of the people do not consult oracle to determine the ancestors who has reincarnated in their children. The act of naming in Igala traditional religion, which is called *Egwele-Ebo* has been eradicated by eighty percent if not ninety percent. The biblical act of naming which specify that a child should be named after eight days has taken over the act of naming in Igala tradition. Such names given to children to signify who reincarnated in them like: *Attah* (father) *Iye* (mother) *Omaye* (brother or sister) has been replaced with Christian names like Paul, Christopher, Andrew, Joseph, Philip, Matthew and so forth. In view of the drastic change, Adama has this to say:

Today, Igala Christians have refused to take Igala names at sacrament like baptism insisting that such names could not be part of Christian heritage. Foreign names like Theophilus, Daniel, Maxwell, Roseline and many more are preferred to the native names such as *Ifiene* (in the regime) *Atuluku* (he who bare seed does not die), *Ikani* (may be alive), *Okoliko* (on the farm), *Ojonoka* (God is a strategist), *Ocholi* (iron), to name a few, this is the most dangerous cultural change that is taking place in our society.³⁷

Despite the cultural change, the tradition of Igala is “written” in the minds of Igala people, be it Christian or Muslim.

The Future of Immortality of the Soul in Igala Religious Worldview

From the aforementioned beliefs and traditions of Igala people on the immortality of the soul, it is worthy of note that death does not cause human soul to go into extinction. In other words, the human soul is indestructible, and it is the reason for immortality. A close look at the various way through which the soul can be immortalized as highlighted by the researcher, it must be mentioned that some of these beliefs have been influenced by Christianity and Islamic religions.

^{36.} Adama, 120

^{37.} Adama, 122

This influence may go a long way to pose challenges on the Igala traditional values. That notwithstanding, there is no written document that contained Igala traditional values; it is passed from generation to generation through oral tradition. This made it to be "written" in the minds of Igala people. As a result of this, the prospect of the immortality of the soul among Igala people is guaranteed. Christians and Muslims do not deny the immortality of the soul in their respective religions.

Chukwuedo comments that, in African Traditional Religion, it is believed that the soul is quite active and exercises a great influence in the affairs of the living. African Traditional Religion does not believe that the soul is senseless and inactive; in fact, the dead who become ancestors are regarded as the living dead because they are believed to oversee the affairs of their children. They guide and protect their children.³⁸ Death, which is the transition for the soul to gain access into the spiritual realm play a major role in the immortality of the soul in Igala belief system. Abah is of the view that “the question of immortality of the soul is not a controversial issue in African reality scheme. It is taken a truism.”³⁹ Despite the influence of Christianity and Islamic religions, the belief system in the immortality of the soul among Igala people is still very relevant till date. Not even Christianity and Islam can eradicate it.

Conclusion

There is a common belief in Africa that death is not the end or annihilation of the human person rather, a transition to the world beyond, where the human soul continues to live forever. By implication, there are two realms: the visible and the invisible realm. The notion of immortality springs from the idea of afterlife. The concept of death understood as a cessation of life does not completely swallow-up the reality and mystery of human life. The human soul, which is regarded as immortal continues to live even after death. But the way and manner in which this belief is expressed differs from one religion to another. Many religions have provided belief structures that support the religions and social need of practioners which has given meaning to what happens in the soul of man after death. Does death mark the end of life? Is there possibility of reuniting with the departed? These questions beg for answers and requires religion which is man's belief system to come up with answers. Different studies carried out in religions as well as philosophical insights support the assumption that the majority of people believe that death is not

^{38.} Chukwuedo, 66

^{39.} Abah, J.B. “The Impact of Christianity on Igala Traditional Marriage”, in (*UMA Journal of Philosophy and Religious Studies*. (10):2015), 6.

the end of one's existence but rather a transition from one life to another. This study therefore, contributes to the discourse on immortality in African worldview from the lens of Igala traditional religious thought.

The paper shows that the idea of immortality or after life in Igala worldview emanates from the fact that man has two specific and distinct entities in him, namely: Body (*Añola*) and soul (*Inmi, Afu* or *Olai*). While the body is a physical entity, the soul is believed to be spiritual and immortal. The life of the ancestors in after life is a reality. It does not depend on the remembrance of them by those who are living on earth.

On this score, Nwala in Ogbenika asserts that:

The human world or the visible order is the realm with which we are in physical contact. We are aware of it and its objects and we perceive them through the normal senses of sight, touch, feeling, taste and hearing. It is partially different from the spiritual realm. The main difference between them lies mainly in the mode of apprehending or knowing them. The visible realm is empirical in the scientific sense, while the other is not definitely so.⁴⁰

This study further posits that the belief in immortality of the soul entail that at the separation of the body from soul at death, the human soul moves into a new world or return to this world, where it continues its existence again. By this, it means that life that each person has is first lived in this physical world, followed by eternal life in the hereafter or a return to life in the old or new body. Life is one but it is lived in different phases, thus this life is one phase, life after this is another. Death is as importantly celebrated as life because death is not final, but a transition to a life in the spiritual realm. For traditional Igala, death is regarded as one of the cycle of life which begins with birth of an individual; despite all precaution to prevent death it will inevitably come at the end of it all. It is in this regard that Aba echoed Ekeopara that 'death is seen as a necessary event in the life of man in a higher (spiritual) plane...just as birth signals the joy of life or living, death intervenes to terminate it' (4-5).⁴¹ It should be noted that death does not ends life but continues to exist after death; which bring about the whole idea of immortality of the soul in Igala Traditional

^{40.} Ogbenika, G.E. *The Idea of Spirit in African Philosophy: Scientific Rationality and the Phenomena of Spirit in Traditional African Societies*. (Ibadan: Safmos publishers, 2011), 28.

^{41.} Aba, C. "African Eschatology in the Igala Traditional Religion and Cultural Experience", (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation in Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2012), 4-5.

Religion. The paper provides a useful background to the immortality of the soul and religious values of the traditional life of Igala people

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