

## ARTICLE

# Rethinking the idea of Perpetual Existence in an African Culture

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### Abstract

It is a truism that there are inconsistencies with the idea of post mortem human existence in traditional African thought. These inconsistencies have become even more challenging in Africa today, given the trappings of scientism occasioned by the contemporary breakthroughs of science and technology, thereby worsening disbelief in traditional African thought that do not fit the highly influential materialist bent of contemporary science. Preservation of some of African traditional beliefs has, therefore, become necessarily imminent on us as Africans, from our cultural milieu, to ensure that the salient aspects of the African belief system which make Africans unique as a people are not lost. In lieu of this, this paper attempts to justify the idea of post mortem existence in Igbo cultural belief system. While adopting a critical posture to the Igbo conception of reincarnation (*ilouwa*) due to the seeming plurality of identity implicit in the idea of the ancestral lineage (*ndi ichie*) in Igbo culture, I argue that death, being a prerequisite for the afterlife, is an extension of *Chi-Ukwu's* goodness towards humans to enable them have a firsthand experience of immaterial existence, and partake in His divine nature, which includes endlessness (*ebighiebi*). I conclude that immortality is at its best, a linkage or a synthesis between the realm of the spirits and that of humans through a triadic process of birth, death and the afterlife.

**Keywords:** Immortality; Perpetual existence; Igbo metaphysics; African philosophy; Reincarnation; Death and afterlife

## 1. Introduction

It is a common belief in Africa that physical death is not an end to life but only a beginning to yet another form of life (Wiredu 1992, 167). That is, when a person's life ceases on earth, it continues beyond the physical world. This conception of the continuity of life in a post mortem form refers to the belief in perpetual existence or, immortality in many African cultures. Generally, immortality

simply implies that the soul of a dead person survives the destruction or decay of the physical body at death, and goes on to live in another form. Hence, there is a component of every human person, often called *soul*, which is indestructible and immune to death. This component of the human person is immaterial, and is, thus, different from the material body which perishes at death. The question often asked about the nature of this soul is that in the event that the soul survives physical death, is it disembodied completely or it has an entirely different body of its own? (Onwuanibe 1980, 178-79). The often ready answer to this is usually that the soul has a spiritualized body in the transcendent world (Onwuanibe 1980, 178-79).

It should be noted, however, that the belief in perpetual existence or immortality is not peculiar to African peoples and cultures, as it is also found in other cultures and civilizations the world over. In ancient Greece for instance, it was postulated, by the Orphic religious sect of the Pythagorean philosophy, that the human person is a constituent of both physical and divine elements. Orphism particularly believe that the soul is divine, immortal, and spiritual and have pre-existed in the transcendent world, and then sentenced to imprisonment in the body, and that at death the soul transmigrates to another body, until it eventually attains release through ritual purification (Omogrebe 1990, 74). In like manner, Plato in his philosophy, argued that the human soul is immortal, being that it is characteristically immutable, eternal, immaterial and indestructible (Omogrebe 1993, 161). As such, it does not, and cannot, stop to exist at the point of death because, according to Plato, the soul preexisted independently and had knowledge of absolute realities or forms of things in the other world before it got united with the physical body. Thus, because it was capable of independent existence previously, it is only logical that when the physical body dies, the soul simply leaves it to return to the world of its previous existence (Omogrebe 1993, 160). More so, in the Hindu philosophical purview, there are the concepts of *karma* and *samsara*. The first is the cosmic principle of justice by which a person's fate in the lived world is determined with respect to his deeds in his previous life (Omogrebe 1993, 143), while the second is the Hindi equivalent of the English words *reincarnation* and *transmigration*—the belief that a dead person is reborn into the world through successive bodies of either human, animal or plant, until he successfully purifies himself enough to attain liberation or *moksha*, and returns to *Brahman* as a divine being (Omogrebe 1993, 143).

The concern of this paper therefore, is to philosophically engage with the idea of perpetuity of life in human existence from the Igbo cultural perspective. The paper explores Igbo metaphysics in order to highlight the essence of Igbo belief in the phenomenon of the afterlife, as well as its relevance, and implications (from a materialistic point of view) for African philosophy, identity and cultural heritage.

## 2. African Metaphysics

Metaphysics, generally as a branch of philosophy studies the nature, forms and essence of existence. It tries to understand the totality of reality or the ultimately real, the components of the cosmos and the entire universe, the nature of beings, the reality of God, angels, universals and other abstract entities, particular things in the physical world amongst others, as well as the impacts they have on humans and the world. Ideally, attempt at understanding a particular African tradition and philosophy necessarily always starts with an understanding of the general idea of metaphysics, and then the metaphysics of the larger locality where that given culture is situated—African metaphysics in this case. That is, the general African understanding of reality, in both its ontological, cosmological, eschatological and even religious facets, and how they make sense of the same in navigating through existence. The reason for this is that, no African culture exists in vacuum. The various cultures are interconnected in each other, having several similarities in their beliefs, practices and understanding of reality. Hence, while individual African cultures have their respective philosophies, it is however not uncommon to see striking similarities in these respective philosophies of the African people, which points to their near similar conception of reality in a generic sense. Echeke-

wube (2009, 29), in giving credence to this, said of African metaphysics that it does not have to be homogenous for all African people and philosophies, but that a common theme runs through them which makes it a coherent world view qualified to be called African metaphysics. Going forward, he defined African metaphysics as the African “conception of reality and reaction to their peculiar experiences” (Echekwube (2009, 29). Corroborating this, Ozumba defined African metaphysics as “the systematization of the African man’s perspectives as it relates to being and existence” (2004, 21). One can, therefore, say that African metaphysics is the African’s attempt to understand the world around him, understand himself in relation to other beings or entities in both his remote and immediate environment. Suffice it to say that the several issues which make up the sphere of African metaphysics will reasonably include the question of being, the ideas of human personality, substance, causation, immortality, witchcraft, predestination and of course the puzzle associated with the notion of reincarnation amongst other (Igbafen 2015, 21).

Central to African metaphysics is the idea that reality is made of two components which, though opposite in nature, are interconnected. The two opposite components in African metaphysics are the physical and spiritual worlds or otherwise, material and immaterial worlds. Hence, the African conception of reality is dualistic. The African believes that, beyond the lived-out physical world of humans, animals, plants and other objects, there is a spiritual world which is invisible; where invisible realities, including the Supreme Deity, divine beings, the ancestors, and the living dead reside. However, these two worlds interact with one another on a regular basis. In the words of Dzobo, reality is seen by Africans as “unity in duality”, consisting of two opposite elements (Dzobo 1992, 130). Quoting a Tanzanian proverb, Dzobo, explains that the traditional African believes that “In the world, all things are two and two” (Dzobo 1992, 128). In African traditional thought, there is no boundary or a barrier between the spiritual and the physical worlds; the spiritual participates in the physical and the physical in the spiritual. This informs the Tanzanian proverb quoted above, suggesting that the two component natures of things in the universe, though opposite, but remain one even in their duality (Dzobo 1992, 128). This dualistic perception of reality as united in diversity takes precedence in all African beliefs about existence, thus, giving Africa her unique cultural, traditional, religious and moral identity, as well as her understanding of the human person as equally being constitutive of material and immaterial elements.

### 3. Igbo Ontological Metaphysics and the Idea of Immortality

In studying the thought patterns of a people, it is most appropriate to begin by understanding the people themselves. The enquirer would ideally ask the apposite question: “who are the Igbo?” before asking what is their metaphysics of being, or that of anything else. Naturally, to be complete, an answer to the question “who are the Igbo?” should include elements of the geography, ontology, language and cultural variants of the people. On this ground, the African word of Nigerian origin, IGBO, is an ontological, linguistic, territorial and cultural term that represents and describes the entirety of beings with similar ancestry, language and cultural originality traceable to the lands and communities situated in the South East states of Nigeria— Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi— and some parts of the South-South states. Thus, the term “Igbo” refers not only to the people of the above geographical location, but also their culture and language.

Igbo metaphysics refers to what/how the Igbo people view reality in its entirety, especially the cosmic universe and the beings within it, in close relation to the overarching African metaphysics. Igbo cosmology sees the universe or *uwa* as consisting of two interrelated but different realms: the realm of invisible realities or land of spirits which they called *ala mmuo* or *uwa mmuo*, and the realm of the visible realities or land of humans and mortals called *ala mmadu* (Muonwe 2021, 147) or *uwa mmadu*, thus, corresponding to the African metaphysical conception of reality. Furthermore, in their ontological understanding of the beings in these two realms, the Igbo believe that the realities or beings inhabiting the *uwa mmuo* “world of the spirits” are *ndi mmuo* “spirit beings” or simply

*mmuo* “spirits”, meanwhile the realities present in the *uwa mmadu* “world of humans” are *ndi mmadu* “people” or simply *mmadu* “persons”, “humans”. It should be noted that the expression *uwa mmadu* literally translates as “world of humans”; but it does not simply translate to the narrow sense of humans as the sole inhabitants of the physical world. Rather, it is so called because humans are the central concern (Muonwe 2021, 147), as Mbaegbu puts it, Igbo ontology is “anthropocentric ontology” (2015, 146). Its usage amongst the Igbo is such that it usually and understandably includes both nonhuman realities in the world. However, there is an all-inclusive alternative Igbo expression that refers to all mortals and inanimate realities in the human world. The use of an alternative expression in the bifurcation of reality in Igbo cosmology and ontology would translate directly as *uwa anaghi afuanya* “invisible world” or the “world that cannot be seen with eyes”, and *uwa anafu anya* “visible world” or the “world that can be seen with eyes”. In this sense, things in these two worlds would be referred to as *ihe ndi anaghiafu anya* “things that are not visible” or simply “invisible things”, and *ihe ndi anafu anya* (Mbaegbu 2015, 146) “things that are seen with the eyes” or “visible things”. In this sense the Igbo accord recognition to the fact that humans exist alongside nonhuman animals and inanimate objects all in the *uwa mmadu* “human world”.

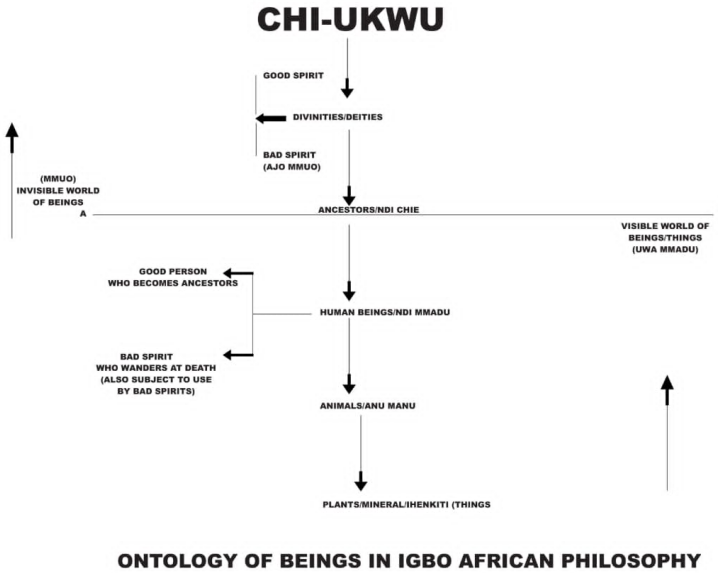
Like most African cultures, the Igbo believe that these two worlds are complementary and interdependent to some point (Muonwe 2021, 147), and both the *mmuo* and *mmadu* maintain regular communications from within both realms. This belief informs statements like *Ka esi eme ya n’uwa ka esi emeya n’ala mmuo* meaning “as it is done on earth so it is done in the spirit world”, suggesting the interconnectedness of the *uwa mmuo* and the *uwa mmadu*, and how events in the latter mirror those in the former in Igbo cosmology.

In Igbo ontology, *Chi-Ukwu* “Great God” or *Oke Mmuo* “Mighty Spirit” is the greatest reality or being who is supreme, and high above all other beings in both realms of reality. His main abode is *eluiuwe* “heaven”, the topmost part of *uwa mmuo*, the realm of spirits. *Chi-Ukwu* is not alone in the spirit realm; next to Him in hierarchy are His ministers, who are also of divine nature like him. They are the Divinities or primordial beings, seen as smaller gods, messengers and ministers of *Chi-Ukwu*, who reigns supreme above all. Examples of these spirits are *Ala* “earth goddess”, *Igwe* “sky god”, *Amadioha* “thunder god” (Mbaegbu 2015, 146), amongst others, all of whom are seen as “good spirits” (*ezi mmuo* as against *ajo mmuo* “bad spirits” or *mmuo’joo* “evil spirits”) such as *Aghara*, *Ogbanje*, *Amaosu*, etc who also inhabit this realm. However, all of these spirit beings are subject to the Great *Chi-Ukwu* and thus also share in his spiritual nature. Last in the hierarchy of beings in the *uwa mmuo* are the *ndi ichie* “ancestors” who constitute the larger society of the “living dead” that watch over the living in the physical world *uwa mmadu* and the spirit realm *uwa mmuo*. A major characteristic feature of all the beings in the *uwa mmuo*, the ancestors inclusive, is that they have the ability to operate beyond their own world to interact with humans or things (objects) in the physical realm, due to their divine forms. As articulated by Mbaegbu

They are characterized by immateriality, and autonomy. They are not bound by space and time and know immaterial, intelligible essences and will immaterial ends, their essential functions are to know and to will (Mbaegbu 2015, 146).

The *uwa mmuo* ends at the level of *ndi ichie* “ancestors”; but below it are another set of beings the highest of which is that of *mmadu* “humans”. Here marks the beginning of the *uwa mmadu* where, like *Chi-Ukwu*, *mmadu* reigns supreme above all other beings. As in the spirit realm where there are good and bad spirits, in the physical realm, there are *ezi mmadu* or *ezi gbo mmadu* “good persons” and *ajo mmadu* “bad persons”. The *ezi gbo mmadu* are the ones who progress to the realm of *ndi ichie* at death, while the *ajo mmadu* are believed to wander about after death, subject to the influence of *ajo mmuo* “bad spirits”, who might use them for mischief. Directly below *mmadu* “humans” are *anumanu* “animals”, the first of the nonhuman entities residing in the *uwa mmadu* alongside humans. Next to them are plants and vegetables, minerals and objects, which are all together, called *ihe* “things” or *ihe nkiti* “ordinary things”. The belief in the interdependence of the two realms, especially that of

progressive transition from the physical realm of *mmadu* to the spiritual realm of *ndi ichie*, alongside the divine ability of the spirits to transverse both forms of existence, are part of the reasons for the Igbo belief in immortality.



In the Igbo cultural setting, immortality consists in the both forms of continued existence in the world beyond the physical, and also in reincarnation (Onwuanibe 1980, 178). It is more manifestly ingrained in their view of death as a passage, their belief in ancestors and in reincarnation than it is in any other phenomenon.

### 3.1 Belief in Death as a Passage

Death in Igbo translates as *omwu*, often generally seen as the cessation of life. But for the Igbo, death goes beyond mere cessation of physical life to rather imply a passage to another life in the beyond. The Igbo believe that death is a universal inescapable phenomenon that causes fear, mystery, terror, sorrow and even celebration, in some cases, depending on the type and nature of its occurrence; but it is not the cessation of existence.

In the words of Onwuanibe, “in Igbo existential frame of reference, as in other African cultures, although death instills fear in the minds of men, its redeeming feature is that it is a "passage", a "going home" to the world beyond” (Onwuanibe 1980, 177). Implicit here is that the average person in Igbo culture views death with anticipation because it is a necessary pathway to immortality in the ancestral world (Muonwe 2021, 149). Human death thus is analogous to the seed which dies in the ground but then springs forth again to a new form of life (Onwuanibe 1980, 177). The problem however is that one does not know when and how his death will come, although it is everyone’s goal to grow old and eventually join the ancestors. But what is painful is that death comes unannounced. The Igbo conception and attitude towards death are sometimes captured in their names and other expressions. This includes *onwudiiwe* “death is aggressive or vengeful”, *onwuamaeze* “death knows no king”, *onwuasoanya* “death never discriminates”, *onwuatuegwu* “death fears no one” (Muonwe 2021, 148). The Igbo distinguishes three types of death, viz; *omwu chi* “natural, or good death approved by God”, *omwu ekwensu* “death believed to have been caused by the devil”, and lastly *omwu ojoo* “bad or

shameful death” usually adjudged as caused by the person’s bad or evil living or deeds” (Muonwe 2021, 150).

### 3.2 Belief in Ancestors

An ancestor is an *ichie*, an embodiment of virtue and wisdom. The Igbo believe that when a person of ripe age dies, having led a good life he is usually elevated to the status of an ancestor and welcomed into the ancestral cult of *ndi ichie* seen as saints and revered by their living families, and community. It is the dream of every traditional Igbo man alive to join the rank of ancestors at death. However, not everyone who dies successfully attains this status. The reason is simple, as there are certain conditions a person must have met while alive to attain such an exalted status. These conditions are well captioned by Nwobodo to include that;

one must live a good (ethical) life while on earth, ii. One must attain ripe age (must not die young), iii. One must be given a proper and befitting burial, iv. One must not die from a contagious disease like small pox, tuberculosis, leprosy etc. (Nwobodo 2021, 11).

These ancestors become guardians or keepers of their communities, having the capabilities to bring blessings, avert evils or harms for their living family members or communities when invoked (Onwuanibe 1980, 177). They are also believed to have the power and will to traverse space and time, and also to be reborn in successive reincarnations, as many times as possible, even while remaining in the ancestral abode.

### 3.3 Belief in Reincarnation

The belief in reincarnation is another manifest belief of the Igbo that substantiates their belief in immortality. Reincarnation is the Igbo belief that the dead, especially dead ancestors, come back to life by being reborn as babies in new bodies, although their spirits remain permanently in the spirit world. Accordingly, an ancestor, in Igbo ontology, can be reborn in several newborns, as he is not limited to a particular number of newborn. In furtherance, he (the ancestor) upon reincarnation, does not exit the comity of ancestors in the beyond, rather he subsists to live in the ancestral comity; carrying out his tasks of interceding for, and watching over or protecting his family alive, as well as living simultaneously in his incarnate body (or bodies) in the physical world (Nwobodo 2021, 12). This phenomenon is traditionally analogous to the planted seed which, though sprouts a new seed but it cannot be seen as the same seed earlier planted, although it embodies attributes of original seed in the new seed (Nwobodo 2021, 12). Reincarnation informs the reason why;

in Igbo land, when a new born baby is given birth to in a family, you see either the husband or wife having consulted a diviner *dibia afa* through divination *igba ag* process to ascertain the person that reincarnates the baby, calling the baby either *mem ma obu unam* “my mother or my father”, *mnenmma obu nna nnam* “my mother’s mother or my father’s father”; *ogom nwoke ma obu ogom nwanyi* “my father in-law or my mother in-law” depending on the sex gender etc. (La Trobe University 2022).

This phenomenon of rebirth in Igbo culture is referred to as *ilo uwa* meaning a “return to the world”, and it informs the idea of immortality of persons in Igbo belief system.

## 4. Discrepancies in the Belief in Perpetual Existence

There are several seemingly irreconcilable issues with the idea of immortality in Igbo culture, especially when viewed from the point of view of reincarnation. What is even more puzzling about this is the identity and individuality of the reincarnating individual. Aside the identification of particular familiar attribute of a deceased person in a newborn, how does one know the identity of this

new born as a distinct individual from the deceased person who's incarnate it is believed he is? This question has become necessary because, as Nwobodo pointed out;

Ndi Igbo believe that their ancestors come back to them in the form of newborns. *Ndi Igbo* do not believe that the newborn is the same person as the ancestor. They recognize the newborn as a brand new person with a unique identity. However, the newborn is a reincarnation of an ancestor, and the newborn is viewed to be under the influence of the ancestors (Nwobodo 2021, 12).

This would sound rather illogical to a critical mind, a contradiction to logical reasoning. How can a person believed to have reincarnated be different from himself and still be himself? There is definitely a problem of conflicting identity in this belief. One cannot be and not be simultaneously. Either it is the dead person who has reincarnated, or it is a different person born entirely, not the incarnate of anyone else. This is one side of the problem; the other is: how can an ancestor possibly be the one in his incarnate and at the same time still exist as an ancestor discharging his responsibilities towards his family and lineage?

If the new born is the same as the dead person, then it means that the new born is not a unique individual in his own right; that he has no other soul but that of the previous person whose incarnate he is. Secondly, the logical implication is that the dead person ceases to be identified as an ancestor since he has returned back to life. In furtherance, if it is granted that it is the ancestor that has reincarnated, then his seat in the beyond as ancestor must, of necessity, be vacant; otherwise, who then occupies his place as ancestor in the beyond? What would be the logical explanation of the reverence given to these ancestors by their living relatives through rituals and sacrifices, when the said ancestors have already been reborn and are living with their family members? There must be some other being, a different spirit, who receives those prayers, honours and sacrifices, perhaps a regent of the particularly reborn ancestor in the spirit realm. But, it is not certain that the ancestors have any regent. So, it could not have been a regent. But if it were the case that they have regents, then it would have been quite understandable if the ancestors reincarnate.

On the other hand, if the new born is a unique individual, then the new born has his soul, not that of the dead person, which means he is not the incarnate of any previous person. If this is the case, where then comes reincarnation? When reacting to the above issue, it is often reiterated that the ancestors can transcend space and time and, as such, can take as many forms as possible and also exist in the two cosmic realms simultaneously. But on the contrary, this creates even more problems as to the identities of the many souls the dead individual has. Or simply what is the number of souls an individual has at death? Ideally, the individual person in Igbo ontology has a dual component—*mmuo/mkpouru obi* and *ahu*—of a tripartite nature. The *mmuo* and *mkpouruobi* are both immaterial, and constitute a single component, while *ahu* is the physical component. When a person dies, it is believed that it is the immaterial component—*mmuo* that departs to the world beyond. Hence, every person has a single life force or soul. The problem arises: how many souls does the dead person have when the Igbo claim that the ancestors can reincarnate in multiple persons and exist in the two worlds simultaneously because they have unlimited transcendence? Does a person's soul become multiple when he dies? Again, this is unclear in Igbo cosmology and ontology. So, the problem with the individuals' identity in extension to the ancestor's status persists.

On a different instance, the Igbo place so much emphasis on procreation and maintaining the family lineage, specifically in the patriarchal sense. As such, a man having only female children or no child at all, is more like a king without an heir. By this,

The worst evil that can befall a married person is lack of child or children. The Igbo believe that the primary reason for marriage is procreation. Once a person without a child dies, all about him will end and he or she will be forgotten completely (La Trobe University 2022).

Going by the belief in reincarnation, if the ancestors or dead family members are the ones who reincarnate, then why do the Igbo still care so much about preserving their lineage, particularly in the case of childlessness or no male issue? This worry is needless, since such a person already knows so well that in the event of him dying without an heir, he could come back to life, marry and raise children to fill the vacuum to be created when he dies again.

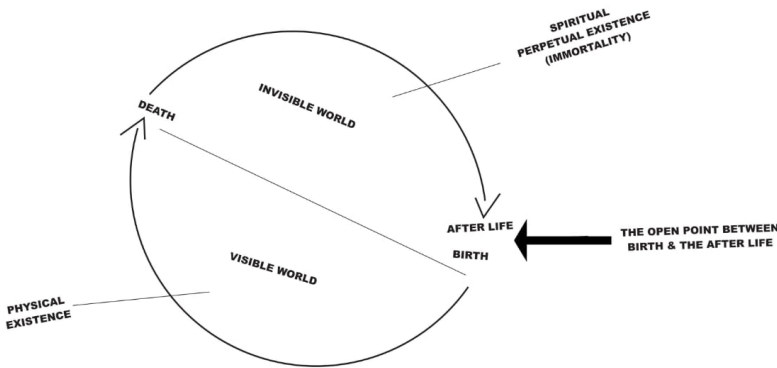
Given the above problems with reincarnation or *ilo uwa* in Igbo culture, it therefore, does not satisfactorily proffer solution to the question or problem of the nature and possibility of perpetual existence or immortality in Igbo belief system. Notwithstanding, it has some plausible explanatory relevance though. Consequent upon this, the Igbo, and traditional Africans in general, need to look elsewhere for additional facts and theories to validate their belief in the phenomenon of immortality for the positivist mind who sees reality as materialistic.

### 5. Conclusion: Immortality as the Synthesis of Reality

The Western materialistic conception of the world and the beings in it are both inconsistent and contrary to the Igbo and general African understanding of reality. Thus, this paper wishes to state that the African individuals' cultural and philosophical uniqueness subsists as the right attitude and response to the challenges posed by scientism and Western materialistic understanding of reality. By this, the belief in the unity or connectedness of opposite realities of the physical and spiritual in African metaphysics stands as a credible justification for the belief in the perpetuity of existence in Igbo and African cultures generally. Nothing exists in isolation—whether spirit or human. For example, in African metaphysics, the dead depend on the living to prepare them for their journey, and the living likewise depend on the dead—particularly the living dead or ancestors—to protect them and mediate between them and the Great Deity—Chi-Ukwu. On the basis of a relationship like this, it only becomes normal that the ancestor, being a caring patriarch or matriarch, would long to visit his children whom he loves and misses, either by physical rebirth or through the various media of communicating with the transcendent realm such as through rituals, prayers, and sacrifices. Going by this, there is obviously a kind of reciprocal relationship in the African conception of reality—the spiritual and the physical existing for each other—the living for the dead, the visible for the invisible and vice versa, and neither is entirely separated or disconnected from the other. Accordingly, Wiredu, observed that “reciprocity is a strong feature of African society... [An offshoot of their conception of reality] Accordingly, the living feel not only beholden to the ancestors for their help and protection but also positively obliged to do honour to them and render services to them as appropriate” (Wiredu 1992, 138).

On a different note, the African (Igbo) belief in *Chi-Ukwu* includes the idea that He is not only omnipresent “present everywhere same time” as in the expression *anya juru uwa onu* “the eye that fills the entire universe”, but also, that He exists in perpetuity: immortality or perpetual existence is a basic component of the divine nature of *Chi-Ukwu* “God”. The Igbo use phrases like *anwu anwu* “undying”, *Chukwu adighi anwu anwu* “God never dies”, *emebi emebi* “indestructible”, *ebi ebi* “endless” or “everlasting” or “eternal”, all of which refer to the nature of God. Hence, it can be seen that immortality is an extension of God's graciousness to human kind, elevating humans to the status of endless existence. This further informs the reason that the Igbo and Africans in general see death as only a passage or a stage of continued existence in a different realm, and not the end of existence. So, when a person dies, he has only accepted the offer of invitation by *Chi-Ukwu* to cross over and to participate in the divine nature—a higher realm of existence. Granted, in traditional African cosmology, there are two opposite realms of existence—the physical and the spiritual. Entities inhabiting the spirit realm have the capacity to traverse both realms actively, but those of the physical realm do not (except when they do so using such media as divination and rituals which in fact give only a partial experience of the non physical reality). Death, therefore, (as the highest medium) offers humans the direct and full access to participate in the hereafter. By this, a

person drops his earthly body like a snake sheds off its skin, and takes up the spirit form into the immaterial realm. This process of taking up a new form is called *nwoari* “transformation”, and can also only lightly seen as *ngbanwe* “change”. Hence, death is viewed as *nwoari* “transformation” into the realm of *ndi mmuo* “spirit beings” who live in *uwa a na-di-ghi afu anya* “invisible world”. The Igbo usually use the statement *óbu Chi ya kpòró ya* “It is his God that called him” to express death as an invitation of a person by his *Chi* “God” when consoling the bereaved family.



From the analysis given, it follows in the conclusion that; immortality as a phenomenon in Igbo culture, as well as in the majority of traditional African cultures, is at its best, an attempt by reality to establish a link between the realms of the spiritual and that of humans through a triadic process of birth, death and the afterlife. Birth, being the first stage of this process, is when the person is born into the world *uwa mmadu*. The person is limited to the experiences of this realm of existence—the physical world—but has little next to no knowledge or firsthand experience of the other realm outside physical existence. Death, the second and very crucial stage, is when the ultimate reality—God—extends invitation to the human person to come over and experience the divine realities firsthand, beyond his mere conceptual understanding. The outcome of this stage is immortality or perpetual existence, which is the third and final stage of the synthesis known as afterlife. In the afterlife, the person who was born, and later died, has now attained full status of a immaterial existence, which neither dies anymore nor has an end to its existence. The synthesis reached in the afterlife is immortality, which may not always include the possibility of a rebirth or regeneration although it is a secondary part of it. In the afterlife, immortality is fundamentally transcendent in nature and supersedes all else. This analysis, informs us of the reason the Igbo and other Africans have a metaphysics of monistic dualism—that although the elements of reality are poles apart, they are connected to each other and participate in the same reality. In a sharp contrast with Western understanding of reality as constitutive of separate and opposing forces, African conception of reality transcends the diversity of the world’s forms to include an understanding of the world as a simultaneously dynamic and unique reality that seeks synthesis (Dzobo 1992, 130). With the above diagram, the processes leading to immortality is cyclical, but not a closed cycle, since rebirth is not constant. Rebirth is only a matter of choice and necessity for the dead person in his afterlife to either

return and be reborn or remain in the transcendental realm. Hence, there is an open point on one end of the cyclical process of immortality; that is the point of reentry into life.

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