

A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY ON IMMORTALITY IN TIV THOUGHT

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Abstract

Immortality in Tiv Thought: A Philosophical Appraisal" is an inquiry into the Tiv concept of immortality. The question of immortality is no doubt a crucial issue that stems from the inner recesses of man in his attempt to define his destiny. The Tiv from whose perspective this paper is anchored are also deeply concerned about this issue and seek to address it in the best way possible. The thrust of this paper is an attempt to philosophically appraise the concept of immortality from the perspective of the Tiv of central Nigeria. This paper seeks to venture the Tiv conception of immortality which has received little attention from scholars especially that of Tiv extraction. In its inquiry the paper adapts an interpretative approach to arrive at its findings. From its investigation, the paper posits that the Tiv explicitly express belief in immortality though from an anthropomorphic standpoint. The paper seeks to contribute to the corpus of knowledge in the subject matter from the perspective understudy.

Keyword: Immortality, Soul, Conception, Tiv, Uma

Introduction

It is quite apparent that what makes a man to be a man is not to have a body or life or emotions (animals have all these too) but to have rationality and intellect, powers which are spiritual. This implies that the "substantial form" of man or what makes a man to be a man must be a "formal act" or principle of life (Soul) whose nature is spiritual and which actualizes the body and its potencies. This spirituality of the human soul makes it a very special type of substantial form, since it has "subsistence" of its own. This implies that the human soul is immortal.

Much has been said and written on the subject of immortality of the soul from antiquity to the present, scholars of various disciplines have expounded on the subject from philosophers, theologians, religionists, psychologists, poets and even scientists. However, the mystery surrounding this issue is yet to unravel. While some express belief in it, some see it as a mere human fantasy. The veil demarcating the spatio-temporal world and the world that lies beyond is yet to be clearly lifted. How can an immaterial soul and the body which is material coexist to form a substantial unity? Such questions have been asked and answered variously in form of proofs.

The question of the soul and immortality transcends scholarship; it is a question that emanates from the inner recesses of man. As a question involving the collective destiny of man as a whole, it ought to be considered from the perspective of the individual and collective experience of man in his various cultures and belief systems.

Blaise Pascal in (Guersart 1975:14) observes that, what is at stake here is not for rational consideration alone. Rational knowledge satisfies the intellect not the emotions and appetite. The implication of this is that the question of immortality is at the core of man's existence.

In most African cultures, man belongs to two worlds; the material and the world of the hereafter. There is however an ontological relation between all reality as a whole. The world is seen as living, active and dynamic unity in which material and spiritual beings find their place (Nwigwe 2001:3) the concept immortality features prominently in the African spirit world. The African concept of Immortality is anthropocentric. For the Traditional African, one enters into personal immortality at death when there are people to remember him especially his or her children. however he enters into collective immortality when all who knew him have died. He becomes a member of the family of spirits who are believed to occupy the ontological state between God and men. (Uduigwomen 1995:80) Death therefore is the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual from mankind to spirithood. The Tiv from whose perspective this study is premised shares to some extent in the foregoing.

TivPhilosophico - Religious World View

The Tiv are presently found in Benue State in North Central Nigeria. Social research about the Tiv ethnic group spanned many years. There are various versions concerning the origin of the Tiv people. Various scholars both early and modern have contradicted themselves about Tiv origin, (Gbenda 2005:71)

One school of thought traced Tiv origin to a certain “Shon” who was said to have two sons “Oryian” and “Orii”. Oryian Means white man while “Orii” means black man from whom Tiv descended (Moti and Wegh 2001:9). Another version traced Tiv ancestor to one “Takuruku” who had two sons; Tiv and Uke; Uke refers to all non Tiv. The reference to “Takuruku” is however contentious as many Tiv did not conceive of him as a human being but some kind of music to announce the death of someone (Moti and Wegh 2001:10) Tiv had two sons i.e “Ichongo” and “Ipusu”. The Tiv are descended from Tiv two sons” Ichongo” and “Ipusu”. This segmentation is reflected in Tiv Socio-Political Organization.

According to some versions, the Tiv are said to have originated and migrated from the Bantu of Southern Africa, though the Congo Region of Central Africa, across the mountains of Cameroon to the Benue valley in the 16th and 17th centuries (Makar 1975:28). Religion is no doubt a most embracing subject. Tiv philosophy and religion is subsumed under this assertion. Tiv religion seems ambiguous and often times bizarre because of the complex nature of the subject matter. Religion in Tiv worldview does not present a consistent picture to elicit a clear understanding. Tiv religion and philosophy can only be understood when viewed from a holistic perspective, where man, nature and the supernatural constitute a continuum (Moti and Wegh 2001:19).

Tiv: Philosophico - religious worldview like most Africans acknowledges the existence of a supernatural being called “Aondo” (God). Aondo is the creator of the universe and everything in it including man, man is the crown of creation. There is also a strong belief in “Akombo” (Cosmo - Supernatural forces). Through the instrumentality of Akombo, man participates in the creative work of Aondo (God) by ensuring the ordering of society. Akombo is synonymous with Tiv religion since you cannot talk of Tiv religion in Isolation of Akombo. Akombo are represented in cultic emblems and touches almost all aspects of Tiv life. Abraham (33:62) attests to this by identifying eight areas in which Akombo are employed: illness, birth, fertility of crops, rendering arrows efficacious, hunting, good luck, obtaining wives etc. Another fundamental element of Tiv religion is “Tsav” (witchcraft). For the Tiv, Tsav is a mystical power, it is a tangible and intangible mysterious power. Tsav is normally neutral deployed for both good and evil proposes depending on the disposition of the carrier Bohannan (1965:513), Downes (1971:18), Moti and Wegh (2001:58) hold that, Tsav is related to life itself and it is used as a means of social control to maintain law and order, it occupies a prominent place in Tiv social organization both ideological and functionally.

The Concept of Immortality: Philosophical Perspective

Immortality generally implies the continuity of human spiritual existence after the death of the body. This is both a philosophical and religious view. It is pertinent to note that this concept is distinct from bodily resurrection. Apart from Pythagoras who also has influence on Plato, Plato (428 – 348 B.C) was the first thinker from the west to systematically address the issue of immortality, it was one of the main problems of his thought. With the contention that reality as such is fundamentally spiritual, Plato tried to prove immortality maintaining that nothing could destroy the soul. According to Plato, the soul is self-moving, un-generated and eternal. The soul according to him came into the world from the world of forms after its liberation. (Encyclopedia Britannica Vol. 26).

Albertus Magnus (Encyclopedia Britannica Vol. 26) defined immortality on the basis that the soul in itself is a cause, an independent reality. This assertion by Magnus implies that the soul is ungenerated and simple, hence it is not subject to the body. Benedict Spinoza (1652 – 1677) saw God as ultimate reality, hence he maintains his eternity but not the immortality of individual persons within him. According to him all things are only the modifications of God who is the ultimate and eternal reality. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1666 – 1716) contended that, reality is constituted of spiritual monads. Human beings as finite monads not capable of origination by composition are created by God, he could also annihilate them. However, in that he has planted in men a striving for spiritual perfection, there may be faith that he will ensure their continual existence, thus giving them the possibility to achieve this.

George Hegel's (1770 – 1931) idea of immortality is subsumed in his idea of the absolute. For him, God is the absolute and everything is a manifestation of that absolute including the soul which will also go back to the absolute. Emmanuel Kant (1724 – 1841) contended that immortality of the soul is an essential requirement of morality. Man should conform to the moral law through the practice of virtue. However, in no instance of his existence is a rational being capable of realizing perfect virtue. Therefore Kant concluded that this perfection can be attained through an indefinite progress and indefinite existence. This indefinite progress is only possible in an indefinite duration of the existence of this same rational being which is called immortality.

Rene Descartes concept of man implies immortality because he conceives man as mind (Soul) that happens to have a body, but which is not an essential part

of its nature. St Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430) conception of man is that of a “rational soul using a body”. Thus as a Platonist, Augustine argues that the Soul obtains truth in intellectual knowledge. He remarked that the soul is immaterial and is superior to the body, therefore, it cannot be acted upon by the body, hence it is immortal (Frost 62:32).

Thomas Aquinas though and Aristotelian parted ways with his tradition concerning the issue of immortality of the soul and clinged to the Platonic tradition. He argued that the Soul is not intrinsically dependent on the body, for it cannot be affected by the death and corruption of the body. He maintained that the soul is immaterial otherwise it would be incapable of reflecting on itself or apprehending abstract knowledge. St Thomas further stressed that, the Soul naturally desire immortality, since this desire is natural, then it cannot be in vain (Summa theological 19,75).

St Bonaventure (1221 – 274) conceives the soul as composed of form and spiritual substance which he calls “spiritual matter”. As such, the soul is not intrinsically dependent on the body, it can be separated from the body and exist without the body. He uses both Augustinian and Aristotelian arguments to prove the immortality of the soul. First, that the human soul derives perfect happiness, secondly he based his argument on the necessity for adequate sanction for the violation or observance of the natural law. He based another argument on the independence of intellectual activities of the body. The soul’s natural faculty carries out reflective activities without expending physical energy that shows its superiority. Finally he held that the fact that the soul is capable of grasping the eternal truths shows that it is of the same nature as these truths namely, immaterial, immutable, eternal and indestructible.

African Concept of Immortality

In almost all African cultures there is a belief in the afterlife, however, with varying degrees. According to Mbiti (1969:27) death is a process which removes a person gradually from the living to the living dead. After death, the individual is believed to continue existing in the world and is remembered by relative 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. With time however, such a person sinks beyond personal immortality to collective immortality which is the state of the spirit. The belief in the continuation of life in the spirit world leads to burial rites to ensure a place in the invisible world, (Ela 93:14). Dopamu (79:253) Opined that the washing of the corpse and burying a person with material things as is the case

in some African cultures signifies getting ready for the journey to the next world. Commenting on the Igbo culture, Nwigwe (2001:23) observes that, death does not involve the separation of body and soul and that it is not explicit what happens at death. The Igbo rather see death as a change from one state of existence to another (Kanu 2015:228).

In consonance with the foregoing, Nabofa in Adegbola (1983:17) maintains that, there is a general consensus in Urhobo thought that after death, the soul (Erhi) passes into another world which is known as "Erivbin". However, there are also others who hold that the dead only change their places of abode on this earth. This implies that such people only go to live in other places other than theirs and continue with their normal lives. This belief is flawed in the sense that, the glimpse of a stranger remotely resembling the dead person from a particular place is no proof enough to conclude that such a deceased person is actually residing in another place on earth with all his physical and daily attributes. These views among other invariably affirm immortality and that the living dead are always around.

Opoku (1978:21) is of the view that the dead only go on a journey and that death does not end life. The present life is seen as a preparation for the journey into after life where the dead continue to live. Even in the afterlife Opoku contends that the dead are not cut off from the living as they continue to reveal themselves in dreams or appear to their living relatives. Africans see immortality as consisting in the act of procreation. This explains the significant role of marriage in African societies, unless a person has children to remember him and carry his name after his death, he is soon forgotten and sinks into oblivion. It is incumbent upon every mature African to get married with the intent of having children especially males in order not to be cut off from immortality.

The general African approach to the question of immortality is anthropocentric rather than spiritual. This is because the Africans see life beyond the grave as neither better nor worse than life on earth because they have no way of knowing so they consider it unattractive. This explains why emphasis is placed on life in the world than beyond; and this consists in the accumulation of as many children as possible. This ensures interminable life here on earth.

Tiv Concept of the Nature of the Soul

Part of the problem of western teaching on the soul is that of definition. Every reality is defined by making it fit into the scheme of definition through genus and specific difference.

The African belief system is both less and more than philosophy. In African thought there is an ontological relation between all things, however, the material things serve merely as vessels through which spiritual forces manifest themselves, such entities are believed to have existence of their own. In most African cultures there is no sharp dualism in the relationship between body and soul. This is because death is not conceived as a separation of body and soul, but rather a change from one state of existence to another. The body is applied not just to stand for the physical body but the totality of man because the bodily organs are believed to exercise mental functions.

The Tiv world is a psycho-spiritual one in which everything visible has its equivalent in the invisible sphere of life. Man is conceived as a composite of material and spiritual elements. The material aspect is "Iyol" (body) while the spiritual is "Jjingi" (Spirit). This "Jjingi" is the life force of man, it is demonstrated by the shadow cast by the body. Spirit and soul are used interchangeably since there is no sharp distinction between the two in Tiv thought. The soul is seen as imperishable while the body is perishable. The Tiv believe that at death, the spirit (Jjingi) leaves the body, it doesn't die with the body. It is believed that it hovers around the dead body before departing. This "Jjingi" is not just a shadow, but a reflection of life (Uma) which is also construed as the soul in man. (Gbenda 2005:17) the soul or "Jjingi" (Spirit) is believed to have endless life since it has a divine origin and therefore indestructible. (Hulugh 2014).

Immortality in Tiv thought

In Tiv society according to Gbenda (2005), marriage brings out clearly eschatological ideals of eternal life. This is because children are a product of marriage and the main purpose of marriage is for continuity in the transmission of life. An unmarried man in Tiv traditional thought is to some extent considered irresponsible hence he cannot be trusted with responsibility. Tarbo (1980:56) Opine thus, "to the Tiv, having children means eternal life. It means to cooperate with God for the continuity of one's life and the community in general.

Parents look forward to seeing their grand children before they die". This assures them of the continuation of their generation. A man who among other things has married many wives and has many children is said to be "Shagbaor" (Greatman), at his death he is said not to have died but to have

“oughaough” (Sloughed off) and continue living in his children. The values and ideals of the family are also expected to be immortalized in the children.

Like the sophists, the Tiv regard man as the measure of all things and the world and life are centred around 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. 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 well being and survival of the family.

In Tiv tradition, a new born child of all polluting influences (Moti and Wegh 2001:23). “Tyumbun” and “iee” enhances the child’s health and growth. All this is geared towards sustaining and perpetuating one’s lineage.

Conclusion

Man has always been an enigma to himself. He has sought answers to questions such as who is man? What constitute man? What is his purpose and mission in the world? These questions have always perplexed and intrigued man. To these questions various answers and solutions have been proffered by scholars of various disciplines and schools. In view of the foregoing, man has refused to see life as factitious but has tried to find meaning in life. The concept of immortality will continue to be relevant as long as man lives in the world. Because it is at the core of human existence, it is an issue that is fundamental to human life and our attitudes to it determines our entire attitude to life itself. This piece in conclusion established that the Tiv like other Africans believe in immortality though with their own peculiarities. For the Tiv, the spirit or soul of man does not cease to exist with the death of the body. The soul continues to live and there is a strong belief that the souls of the living dead gather to rest after their sojourn on earth at a blissful place. Also, the Tiv conception of immortality is anthropocentric and consists in having as many children as possible to perpetuate one’s lineage. They also express immortality in names. Names such as “Orbeenga” (Man never ceases to exist) are suggestive of immortality and express the Tiv belief that man will never cease to exist even in death, he lives on in his children.

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