

## REINCARNATION IN IGBO COSMOLOGY: A NEW LOOK

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.19482.59846

### Abstract

*Many Igbo scholars have looked at reincarnation in various perspectives, ranging from philosophical, psychological down to theological. In this work, the concept of reincarnation is considered from the standpoint of Igbo anthropological view of man and from the analysis of minimalistic reincarnation hypothesis. In trying to grapple with the issue of reincarnation, many scholars have sacrificed the Igbo understanding of human personality without which for the Igbo, man ceases to be complete self in the real sense of the word. The method has been analytical. Books, internet sources and journals were used in study. The result shows that the Igbo concept of reincarnation or *ilo-uw*a in the Igbo philosophy and cosmology can have a scientific explanation based on human nature itself given that the proofs of fact itself are themselves proofs of genetic inheritance. The researcher recommends that a much more appropriate term should be given to this phenomenon. The writer therefore redefined the term *ilo-uw*a or reincarnation.*

**Keywords:** Reincarnation, Igbo and Cosmology

### Introduction

The belief in reincarnation is extensively debated in a wide-range of literature. Scholars from different age and time have approached this phenomenon from different perspectives. Many religions like Hinduism and Buddhism have built the belief into their own religious faith. Today, we can speak of different views of reincarnation. At present we may speak, for instance, of Eastern view, Western view and African view of reincarnation. Each one of the views appears to have its characteristic features although all the views may have their common features. The Igbo concept of reincarnation is not only quite different from the Eastern and Western types of reincarnation, but also from other African views. Undoubtedly, the subject of reincarnation has become topical. At present it has assumed different forms and can no longer be treated as ancient belief of "pagan people". Mbach (2019) concisely stated that "the Igbo idea is unique and

original from the point of view of its theology and also from the point of view of its anthropology.

### **Igbo Cosmology**

Like every other people, the Igbo appear to have their own unique worldview. According to Metuh (1985) the Igbo know only one world inhabited by both visible and invisible beings. For Anozia (1968), "The Igbo world whether visible or invisible was a 'real' world in every sense of the word" (p. 2). It is in this understanding that Uzukwu (cited in Obilor, 1994) regarded the Igbo world as a world: "Where time and space, objects and persons are made sacred... where from cradle to grave life is moving towards fullness through dynamic interaction between the human community and its spiritual originators" (p. 117).

This sacralized worldview also extends to commerce. Each Igbo day is a market day and is dedicated to a spirit: *Eke, Orié, Afo and Nkwó*. This is repeated in the same order. The Igbo believe in three-step structured hierarchical order of the hereafter: the land of *Chukwu* (God), the land of the non-human spirits like *Ana or Ala* and that of the human spirits with special reference to the ancestors. Obilor (1994) pointed out that there are three relations which maintain equilibrium in Igbo thought: cosmic, social, and religious. The three relations are viewed both from the spirit world and the world of humans. Both *Chukwu* and the gods expect a harmonious co-existence among the three. Man is said to be responsible for any disharmony or disequilibrium. Any disorder arising from any of the three relations is attributed to human negligence or transgressions. Thus, natural disaster, epidemics, famine, certain deaths, and all that are considered unnatural are attributed to human 'sin' and 'wrong doings'. These are ultimately traced to the violation of taboos, *nsó* (abomination), *arú* (evil) like the sin of sorcery, homicide, suicide, incest, false oath, theft, etc. In this worldview, any evil in the world is caused by man.

The Igbo thoughts and ideas are usually experimental, concrete, practical and inductive rather than abstract and deductive. For instance, the Igbo relate to God through His self-manifestations, and approach the destiny of man through the value and reward of good life. This approach extends to their idea of reincarnation and retribution. Reincarnation is therefore not only the effort to unite the visible and invisible spheres of existence but also to give value and reward to good life. For the Igbo, justice in its most perfect form exists in God.

For them, justice takes its bearing from God and not from man. Nzomiwu (1999) noted that in the Igbo thought, "All other beings are just according to the degree of their propinquity to God" (p.77). God is understood as the source of all justice.

God has some names which indicate what the Igbo believe about Him. For example, He is *Chukwu* (Chi-ukwu, the great God), *Chineke* (Chi-n'eke, the God that creates), *Oseburuwa* (Lord who upholds the world). *Amamikpe nke ndi ikpe* (the Judge of the judges) and *Nwoke oghorogho anya* (One with very wide eyes), thereby implying that He can see all things.

From the point of view of origin and final destiny, *mmadu* (man) for Igbo belongs to *Chukwu*. God at the moment of conception creates the spirit of the would-be person. Metuh (1985) concisely put it this way: "The spirit that will be born goes before Chukwu to receive his 'Chi' (spirit destiny) and his 'Eke' (reincarnating ancestor), and then the Okike (creative emanation of Chukwu) lets him out into the world" (p. 40).

The two elements which come together to make up what can be called the identity of man must here immediately be underlined. The 'chi' not only determines one's destiny, it brings it to the proper end, and thus the Igbo would say, *ebe onye dara ka chi ya kwaturu ya* (where a person falls, there his Chi pushed him down). The 'Eke' on the other hand refers to the person's shape, character or some qualities. According to Obilor (1994), when these qualities are derived from an identical ancestor, or any good dead person as the case may be, the Igbo say that the child is the 'reincarnation of that ancestor or the person' (p. 121). Some people promise while still alive that they would come back after their death and show signs or identification. In this case, there is no doubt and people at the birth of a child can identify him immediately. When there is doubt, then it is the work of the *dibia afa* (diviner) to identify the reincarnated person.

The Igbo believe that humans survive after death. Death is a passage into the community of the 'living dead', a separation and not an annihilation, a bridge to another existence, a reality which is awaited with 'anxiety', *ina unọ* (returning home), *ila ala mmuọ* (returning to the land of the spirits) especially *ala nna nna anyi ha* (the land of our ancestors). The Igbo believe that the dead are living side-by-side with them. One can say that for the Igbo, the dead are regarded as people who have completed their work. The wicked and the just do not share the same realm after death in Igboman's thought. While the just join the ancestors or "community of the saints" the wicked are believed to pass on to oblivion or stay

at the region referred to by Isidienu (2015) “*As agbata ụwa na-agbata mmụọ*” (p.111) (the boundary between the living and the dead). There is no general consensus about the abode of the wicked in Igboland.

Mourning for the dead is religiously observed in Igboland. The period of mourning depends on certain factors. If the deceased is a titled person, the period is usually longer. What used to be a common practice in Igboland is one year mourning period. Death affects whatever the deceased owned and renders it unclean. Therefore, purificatory sacrifices are performed. The Igbo have the practices of shaving the head or wearing mourning dress for a period of one year as a sign of respect for the dead.

The notion of the hereafter appears to be very vast and complicated but the belief in reincarnation depends on that of the hereafter and not the other way round. For Obilor (1994), all decisions about who will return, the shape, the form and qualities are taken in the hereafter by the community of the ancestors in strict accord with *Chukwu* who finally sends the person to the earth through birth.

The most important sphere of the hereafter appears to be the ‘ancestral community’- the community of the dead. The ancestors who are in their permanent rest are conceived to be with *Chukwu* (God) and can help the living because they are closer to the source of salvation. This does not refer to a condition of being with God as parents do with their children. It rather refers to the community of the ancestors which is God’s community. God in relation to creature is considered as completely other. The dead are believed to return to *Chukwu* only to take their rightful place among the ancestors commensurate with the way they conducted their life here on earth. The help which comes from *Chukwu* is often believed to reach man through the intermediaries. The ancestors are believed to be the major intermediaries. For the Igboman, reincarnation is seen as a witness to the power of *Chukwu* who not only saves life and provides for life but also can bless a family by sending back to them a good and noble life lived before.

They admit new members and give them their rightful place. This admittance is believed to base on spotless life, ripe old age, founding lineages, proper burial as the case may be. These conditions are not within the reach of the poor, the invalid and those who die young. The living do their best to win the favour of the ancestors and to be in line with the moral discipline of the clan. The living are

expected to live a good and holy life to enable them get a reward of good rest among the ancestors.

### **Reincarnation in Igbo Worldview**

For the Igbo reincarnation is a phenomenon in which an identifiable personality in the Igbo spiritual world is believed in a mysterious but real way to transmit his personality traits on a newborn personality without destroying that personality or substituting himself or herself for that new personality. In doing so, the said reincarnate person still retains his complete personal identity in Igbo spiritual world of the dead. By virtue of the power he commands as a spirit he is able to impress his former traits on the new born child in a human way. The ritual for identifying the reincarnated dead person is called in many areas in Igboland as "*igba agu*" (divining for the reincarnate person). Only the traditional Igbo diviners (*dibia afa*) can authoritatively pronounce the name of the reincarnated person through *igba afa*. Ekwealor (2013) described *igba afa* as a means of finding out the hidden things which are elusive to an ordinary man. It is the means of finding out the thoughts of the deities and the ancestors. For Ogbuagu, Udemmadu and Anedo (2012) *igba afa* means gaining access to secret things that man on his own cannot find out. According to Ubesie (2003), *igba afa* is a means of finding any secret that exists between the living and the dead or between two or more living persons. However, Umeodinka (2015) understood *igba afa* to be the means through which the Igbo people bring out the hidden things from the realm of darkness into the limelight of knowledge.

Igbo people anchor on experience on their insistence on reincarnation. Of course, experience they say is the best teacher. They base reincarnation on what is visible or sensible or perceptible or the like. No one can tell a man that what he sees with his own eyes does not exist. Throughout the Igboland, people abound who are said to be the reincarnation of one deceased person or another. There are signs, marks and often existing 'lectures' why the living person should be the one who had died. Of course, these would be backed up with the confirmatory affirmation of the *dibia afa* (diviner).

When a child is born, during *igu aha* (naming ceremony) the *okpala* (the family head) or the father of the child or both will consult the diviner to discover the ancestor who has been reincarnated, and especially to discover his name and his *nsọ* (prohibitions). The child must take the name of the reincarnated ancestor, but when no reincarnation has been confirmed, the patriarchal grandfather or the

eldest man present has the prerogative of giving the child a name. The divination rite which precedes the naming ceremony is to establish his identity. The naming ceremony is to affect his incorporation into the society.

### **The Igbo Understanding of Man**

In Igbo anthropology, man (*mmadu*) is neither a dichotomy of body and soul nor a trichotomy of body, soul and spirit. *Mmadu* is a unity of personality. The spiritual anatomy of man for the Igbo is *ahụ*, (body), *mkpuruobi* (seed of the heart) and *muo* (spirit). According to Obilor (1994), the spirits on the other hand are made up of the spirit ancestors and the spirit deities which are invisible; the malignant spirits or attacking spirits which are visible only to the *dibia* (diviner) and in the form of *mba muo* (the attack by the evil spirit); and the spirit messenger (*mmuo*). Although the Igboman is very much at home with pneumatology, yet the concept of Holy Spirit is strange to him. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit falls outside their belief system because they have nothing to do with Three in One God. Be it as it may, the Igboman shares the concept of man with the Hebrews.

Abogunrin (1991) pointed out that in the Old Testament man is not considered as an immortal soul temporarily inhabiting a mortal body, but rather as a body-soul unity. Of course, the Hebrews could only conceive of man in his totality, as the vital union of body and soul. According to ancient Jewish belief, man is a product of two factors, namely *nepeš* (breath or soul which is the principle of life) and *basher* (body or flesh which is the complex organ that *nepeš* animates). Man may therefore be described as the animated body, but this falls short of a true description of man, since in this regard he is not different from the animal creation (Gen. 2: 19). Genesis 2: 7 says: "Then the LORD God formed man out of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being". Clark (1967) contended that man's distinctiveness is based on the fact that to him alone is imparted the breath of life by the direct activity of God. Although the use of *nepeš* in Genesis 2: 7 denotes a complete being, according to the general understanding of the Old Testament, neither *basher* nor *nepeš* can make a complete man. The separation of both of them means that man ceases to be, in any real sense of personality. Man is a unity of personality, and the dissolution of either the soul or the body means the true end of life. *Nepeš* is closely connected with blood, and the loss of any of them is the tangible mark of a passing away of life. Therefore, *nepeš* is spoken of as being breathed out (Gen. 2: 7; 35: 18; 1 Kg. 17: 22). The whole of man's intense emotions

and desires are attributed to his *nepeš*. That is, the term is used inevitably for living self, or as a substitute for a personal pronoun. Similarly, transition is made from a dead body or carcass (Num. 5: 2; 6: 6, 11; Hag. 2. 13).

Man also has a *rūah* (spirit) denoting the invasive power of God. From the time of the exile, there was a tendency to replace *nepeš* with *rūah* as the centre of aspiration and desires. The absence of *rūah* is the loss of life and vitality, and ultimately death (1Kg. 10: 5; Ps. 104: 29). The return of *rūah* means revival (Gen. 45: 27). While *nepeš* refers to the life concretely manifested, *rūah* means the hidden strength of a living person. So, for the Hebrews as well as for the Igbo, there is no distinction between the soul and the body. What lives in the underworld is not just the soul but the whole man. Hence the dead are not called *nepeš* nor *rūah*, but *rephaim*. At death, a shadowy image of man is detached from him. As long as the body exists or at least the bones remain, the essential person still exists like a shade under the condition of extreme weakness (Job 26: 5-6; Isa. 14: 9- 10; Ez. 32: 17- 32). The soul continues to feel the care and honour bestowed on the body.

### **Minimalistic Reincarnation Hypothesis**

This hypothesis is the brain child of Robert Almeder, Professor emeritus of philosophy at Georgia State University. It states that:

There is something essential to some human personalities ... which we cannot plausibly construe solely in terms of either brain states, or properties of brain states ... and, further, after biological death this non-reducible essential trait sometimes persists for some time, in some way, in some place, and for some reason or other, existing independently of the person's former brain and body. Moreover, after some time, some of these irreducible essential traits of human personality, for some reason or other, and by some mechanism or other, come to reside in other human bodies either some time during the gestation period, at birth, or shortly after birth (p. 211).

From the above quotation one can deduce the following:

- i. Some human personalities are essential and non-destructive and they survive after death;

- ii. The survived human personalities exist independently of the former bodies;
- iii. By no known mechanism those non-destructive human personalities came to reside in other human bodies during gestation period, at birth or shortly after birth.

From the above analysis, it is revealing to note that the proponents of Igbo concept of reincarnation draw inspiration heavily from this hypothesis concerning their belief in reincarnation. "By some mechanism or other..." which Robert Almeder could not identify was identified by these proponents as "reincarnation". Perhaps, their logic runs like this:

- i. Personality traits- these they personified;
- ii. Source- they traced the starting place to ancestors;
- iii. Mode of transmission- they described the process as reincarnation;
- iv. Time of transmission-gestation period, birth or shortly after birth.

There is a need to establish a common ground. This common ground is that there are some personality traits that persist along a family line. It is doubtful whether the process of this persistence can rightly be called "reincarnation". It has often been said that life begets life. Non-destructive human personalities on their own cannot attach themselves to growing foetus in the womb. Even if they do, they cannot be equated to complete self and thus, cannot fit into Igbo idea of human personality. This is because the Igboman believes that *Maduka biara uwa* (Maduka returned or reincarnated) and not some personality traits of Maduka living in a symbiotic association with its victim.

### **A Critical Look at the Igbo Scholars' View on Reincarnation**

Being part of the African world, the Igbo share many things in common with other African societies including that of their belief in reincarnation. Ekwunife (1999) observed that where the Igbo differ from other societies is in the interpretation of the phenomenon of reincarnation. He argued that the English word 'reincarnation' with its meaning in English environment does not and cannot fit into the Igbo experience of the phenomenon. Rather their experience is better translated in their native language as "*Ino uwa or inyọ uwa*" (p. 20). Ekwunife (1999) attempted a descriptive definition of *ilo uwa* or reincarnation when he said, "It is the process by which certain categories of the deceased in African spiritual world of the dead are believed to be mysteriously, but in a real way, capable of incarnating their personality traits on a newborn physical body

of a child, without either destroying the new unique personality of the child or substituting for it" (p. 22). He saw Igbo belief in reincarnation as a process in which an identifiable personality in Igbo spiritual world is said to, in a mysterious but real way, incorporate his personality traits on a unique born personality without destroying that personality or substituting himself / herself for that new personality. For him, by so doing, the said reincarnated person, 'onye n̄r̄ọ ụw̄a' still retains his complete personal identity in Igbo spiritual world of the dead. However, by virtue of an enhanced power of spirits, he / she was able to impress his former traits on the newborn child in a human way. Ekwunife (1999) suggested that the spiritual influence of the identified deceased is better described in English as "mystical influence" (p. 21). He explained that it should be considered as such given that it neither diminishes the status of the dead in the Igbo spiritual world nor destroys the status of a newborn child who should possess complete freedom and possibilities of achieving fulfilment. Hence the ritual for identifying the reincarnated dead person is referred to in Igbo subculture areas as "igba agụ nwa" (divining for child's companion). He argued that only the traditional ritual specialists - the traditional Igbo diviners (*dibia afa*) can authoritatively pronounce the name of the reincarnated person.

It is doubtful whether the concept of reincarnation as presented by Ekwunife above is the true representation of Igbo concept of reincarnation. In the spiritual anatomy of man in Igbo cosmology, *mmadu* (man) is neither a dichotomy of body and soul nor a trichotomy of body, soul and spirit. *Mmadu* (man) is a unity of personality. The Igboman, for instance, believes that Okeke *n̄r̄ọ ụw̄a* (Okeke reincarnated) and not an aspect or part of Okeke or his "mystical influence". The author therefore disagrees with Ekwunife in that he cannot reconcile Ekwunife's "mystical influence" with the Igbo concept of human personality. Besides, the Igbo often speak of "*ndi mmadu*" (humans) and "*ndi mmuo*" (spirits). Hence "spirits" and "humans" are both persons, where "*ndi*" also stands for persons. Ekwunife's "mystical influence" is therefore considered by the author as nothing other than a distortion of Igbo idea of man and personal identity.

Onyewuenyi (1989) views reincarnation as "Perpetuation of ancestors through reproduction" (p. 39). He further described reincarnation as 'life-giving will' or 'vital influence' or 'secretion of vital force' (p. 39). He saw the ancestors as dynamic force who can influence and effect many births in his clan without emptying his personality. He compared the vital force of an ancestor to the sun, which is not diminished by the number and extent of its rays. Onyewuenyi (1989)

noted that “Just as the sun is the causal agent of heat, so is an ancestor a causal agent of his descendants who are below him in the ontological hierarchy” (p. 40). Onyewuenyi admitted that the biological conception of the child results from the concurrent act of God and parents. Then the influence of the ancestor which is referred to as reincarnation comes later. For him, it is the human being, who already possesses life in the womb of his mother (by divine influence), who finds himself under the vital, the ontological influence of a predestined ancestor or of a spirit.

It is also doubtful whether Onyewuenyi’s view is the true representation of Igbo concept of reincarnation. Onyewuenyi’s ‘vital force’, or ‘life-giving will’ or ‘secretion of vital power’ falls short of Igbo concept of human personality and personal identity. The author notes that Onyewuenyi confused ‘being’ (a living creature) with ‘force’ (a physical action) which belongs to different planes of life. The writer agrees with Onyewuenyi that the sun is present in its rays and heats and brightens through its ray; yet he disagrees with Onyewuenyi in that the rays of the sun singly or together are not the sun. The author insists on the fact that an aspect of man cannot be a holistic view of man; to do so is nothing other than an alteration of reality. The author therefore notes that Onyewuenyi’s ideas cannot be a better representation of Igbo understanding of reincarnation.

Ezenweke (2012,) considers reincarnation as “The theory that when the soul separates from the body at death, it informs another body for another span of life” (p. 195). For Ezenweke, the soul (*mkpuru obi*) leaves the body at death and waits for judgment. It is received into the blessed company of his forbearers only if it scales through the test of life. It is his activities on earth that will score him to merit or demerit the blissful existence. She also noted that one may come back in non human form like various types of animal or any other living thing.

The author notes that Ezenweke’s view cannot be a better representation of Igbo belief in reincarnation since she ranked her view with the Asiatic cyclic notion of reincarnation. Besides, Igboman does not refer to *mmadu* (man) as *mkpuru obi* (soul). Instead, *mkpuru obi* (soul) is what man has. It is a component of man; not the sum total make-up of man. For the Igbo, Okeke *noro uwa* (okeke reincarnated) and not *mkpuru obi* Okeke *noro uwa* (the soul of Okeke reincarnated). Moreso, the Igboman does not believe that his ancestor would be reborn as an animal or be reincarnated into an inanimate object. Such thinking is foreign to the Igboman concept of afterlife. Consequently, the view of

reincarnation as presented by Ezenweke leaves much to be considered as the true representation of Igbo concept of reincarnation. Like Ekwunife, Obilor believed that Igbo concept of reincarnation can better be translated in Igbo as *ilọ-ụwa*. Obilor (1994) defined reincarnation as “The belief that the qualified deceased or living persons can return to the earth through birth in their grandchildren, great grandchildren or the children of their relatives within the extended family circle as a sign of love and fellowship”(pp. 137- 138). Obilor (1994) attempted a comparison of *ilọ-ụwa* and reincarnation in order to bring out their differences thus:

Reincarnation proposes a dualism of body and soul and matter. Igbo anthropology on the other hand abhors any form of dualism; reincarnation proposes that all the dead can be reincarnated, but in *ilọ- ụwa* only the qualified person can be ‘reincarnated’; reincarnation proposes that there is an original body and a new body while in the Igbo *ilọ ụwa*, both the original body and the new body are considered side by side (pp.140-141).

If the above descriptive definition of Igbo *ilọ ụwa* succeeds in the possibility of excluding the African experiences of born to die group, classical Western or Asiatic definitions and the transmigration of the soul of the deceased into non-human animate objects, it is still fraught with problems. The Igbo do say for instance, Okeke *bịara ụwa* or *lọlọ-ụwa* (Okeke reincarnated) not aspect of Okeke. If it were so, it then becomes illogical to refer to an aspect of one’s person to one’s entire personhood for an aspect of Okeke cannot be Okeke himself.

For Obilor, the most distinctive proofs of *ilọ-ụwa* (reincarnation) are based on visible or sensible resemblance: the reappearance of marks on the body. The ‘relacking’ of a lacking part of the body, the facial and physical resemblance, the vocal and oratorical resemblance, behavioural resemblance, intellectual and humorous resemblance. If this view is the true representation of Igbo notion of reincarnation, the question now is, how is this “uniqueness” to be proven? And why are only some features carried on to the next incarnation to the exclusion of others? Certainly, demonic must be considered as a possible source. If a person with a birth mark dies or if a person who sustains an injury in any part of his body dies, he is believed to have left the old body. When an infant bears marks which are similar to those of the dead, it is claimed to be a case of reincarnation. How could the corpse bear the “karmic energy” or “vital force” to be transmitted

to its next incarnation? Besides, science teaches that individual life begins at conception. In 1981, the US Senate held extensive hearings on the "Human Life Bill". National and international scientific authorities testified on the origin of human life. The official Senate report read as follows (as cited in Geisler & Amano, 1986):

Physicians, biologists, and other scientists agree that conception (they defined fertilization and conception to be the same) marks the beginning of the life of a human being- a being that is alive and is a member of the human species. There is overwhelming agreement on this point in countless medical, biological, and scientific writings (p. 160).

In brief, the available scientific evidence pointed to individual human life beginning at conception. There is no scientific evidence for the reincarnationist belief that life begins before conception. Of course, some Igbo traditionalists believe that life begins at conception but that the reincarnating ancestor emits its "self" to the baby during conception. However, this theory lacks scientific support. Scientific evidence indicated that an individual's life, soul and body begin at conception.

Moreover, two elements identified as defining the identity of man in Igbo worldview are *Chi* and *Eke*. Whereas *Chi* not only determines one's destiny, it brings it to the proper end; *Eke* on the other hand refers to the person's shape, character, or some qualities. Obilor (1994) emphatically stated: "When these qualities are derived from an identified ancestor, or any good dead person as a case may be, the Igbo say that the child is the reincarnation of that ancestor or the person" (p. 121). He went on to say that these qualities are often "personified; when this happens, it refers to an ancestor or a spirit" (p. 122). If the view represented by Obilor is right, it then means that what the Igbo people believe as *ilọ-uwá*, and by extension reincarnation, is nothing other than hereditary traits personified. Besides, in Igbo cosmology, not everybody can reincarnate even if he met the standard for reincarnation. Sutton (cited by Ramlingam, 2005) "Proposed that chromosomes are the carriers of Mendel's factors (genes); this is called the chromosome theory of heredity" (p. 546). The chromosomes contain deoxyribonucleic acid or DNA, the molecule that contains hereditary information in a code form. This information includes all genetic instructions for controlling the production of chemicals for normal cell functioning; the production of a new cell or the whole organism itself; and the development of

genetically acquired traits. Thus, this theory may account for all the apparent similarities and differences that are observed between the parents and their progenies. Mbiti (1969) clearly admitted that the pros and con about reincarnation is "Partly an attempt to explain what is, otherwise, a purely biological phenomenon, which applies not only to human beings but also to animals (p. 164).

It is revealing that various authors examined above point to the resurgence of character traits in the descendants of an ancestor in their attempts to explain the phenomenon of *ilo-ṛwa*. For Arinze, it seems only a part of the ancestor spirit is believed born again in the new child. Obilor sees the concept of *ilo-ṛwa* as nothing but an interpretation of, an attempt to grasp, hereditary traits transferred by genes while Onyewuenyi enjoins that what one sees in the new born is only a portion of the "vital force" or "vital power" or "vital influence" of the living-dead. An ancestor who is now 'pure dynamic force' can influence and effect many births without emptying his personality. His 'vital force' is such that it can be emitted into the "returned" baby without losing or diminishing his cherished place in the spirit world, just as the number and extent of the rays of the sun do not diminish it. Thus, instead of seeing a new born as a complete 'return' of a departed personality, it is differently seen as a 'vital influence', a 'personal ray' or a 'living-perpetuation of the living-dead. *Ilo-ṛwa* as thus delineated presupposes something tangible or noticeable of a person, which can stand for that person and re-enact his previous life in the new existent person. Here, an identifiable personality in the Igbo spiritual world is said to, in a mysterious but real manner, incorporate his personality traits on a new unique personality without destroying or substituting for that new personality and without diminishing his complete personal identity in the spirit world. The special impact of the identified deceased on the new born which Onyewuenyi calls 'vital influence' is identified by Ekwunife as a 'mystical influence' since it neither diminishes the status of the dead nor destroys the freedom and possibilities of the new born to achieve fulfilment in life.

Having critically weighed the thoughts of the above writers, it is therefore the contention of the author that the term *ilo-ṛwa* in the Igbo philosophy and cosmology can have a scientific explanation based on human nature itself given that the proofs of fact itself are themselves proofs of genetic inheritance. Considered scientifically, a much more appropriate term should be given to it. The writer therefore proposes *oyiyi* (resemblance or in the likeness of) instead of

the term *ilo-uwā*. In the scientific analysis, it then means that what is obtainable in Igboland as the phenomena of reincarnation is *oyiyi*.

*Oyiyi* (resemblance or in the likeness of) if so approved, will take care of apparent differences and similarities observable in *ilo-uwā* such as a single ancestor returning in many individuals; somebody reincarnating in a newborn baby while still alive and so on. However, it is reasonable and logical for an individual to “resemble” or be “in the likeness of” many persons including the young, old and even the dead. On the issue of reappearance of the marks on the body, the author opines that familiar spirit is involved. Reappearance of the marks on the body is only witnessed among the people that believe in reincarnation. If it were not so, why is it that that phenomenon does not occur among the people that do not believe in reincarnation? So, in a mysterious way, familiar spirit plays upon its victim during conception to produce the said mark. The author sees the reappearance of marks on the body as a manipulative action of the familiar spirit upon its victim during conception rather than as a proof of reincarnation or, rather still as a paranormal experience. The author categorically states that this manipulative action of the familiar spirits can only be witnessed among the people that believe in it. In other words, it is a manipulative action of familiar spirits facilitated by the belief system of the people.

The writer contends that the proofs of the fact of reincarnation are themselves the proofs of the fact of genetic inheritance. The findings of genetics (scientific study of heredity and variation in living organism) showed that certain traits are persistent along family lines. *Ilo-uwā* or reincarnation as noted above occurs mostly within family circles and the proofs themselves are qualities and characteristics which are inheritable from parents and ancestors. Igbo ancestors knew this and gave the Igbo traditions some norms governing marriage contracts and other relations. For instance, the Igbo say, *agburu ndi ara* (the family of mad people) or *agburu ndi onwu ike* (the family of bad deaths) and other examples referring to serious hereditary traits. The author contends that given that these genetic problems are known and accepted by the Igbo as negative implication of heredity even before the dawning of medical science, what prevents the Igbo people from accepting *ilo-uwā* as the positive implication of the same heredity? Nothing prevents a child from inheriting the qualities or physical marks and signs of his or her ancestors and great grandfathers and mothers.

Again, considered differently, if it is argued that it is not the aspect of an ancestor but his personhood that is reincarnated in a child, it will not only present the problem of dualism which the Igbo stand against but it will also cast a question mark on their ancestor worship or veneration for it does not make sense to adore and worship an ancestor who is believed to have reincarnated and at the same time dwells among the ancestral cult.

The writer doubts if this is a better representation of Igbo beliefs in *ilo-uwa* and at the same time wants to challenge the signs of those influences as phenomenon subject to modern law of heredity. The author wants to show that no matter how this phenomenon is explained away as Ekwunife (1999) tried to do as a “vital influence or the life-share or living perpetuation of the ancestor” (p. 56), it cannot fit into the Igbo perception of reincarnation. This is because the Igboman believes that Maduka *biara uwa* (Maduka returned or reincarnated) and not an aspect of Maduka or a “vital force of Maduka.

### **Conclusion**

The writer can doubt any other thing but not anyone’s experience. This is because one’s experience is personal to one. No-one shares the experience with that person in question. Although the writer can claim not to doubt one’s experience however, he can question the interpretation one gives to one’s experience. This is applicable to Igbo concept of reincarnation. That one believes in something does not necessarily mean that it exists. It is a belief. And, a belief is based on inconclusive evidence. It could as well mean that it does not exist. The author wants to believe that the interpretation that the authors reviewed above gave to reincarnation does not exist. Of course, the author is talking from his own experience and learning. It is a matter of interpretation. What exists is that the dead and the living can share certain observable features and characteristics. If this is what some scholars call reincarnation, then it is a matter of nomenclature. The experience is there and undeniable. Reincarnation therefore means the phenomenon whereby grandchildren, or great grandchildren resemble their parents or great grandparents by acquisition of inheritable characteristics passed down to them through the family line.

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