

Conceptualization of Reincarnation and Embodiment in African Religious Belief

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Abstract

The doctrine of reincarnation concerns the rebirth of the soul in a series of physical or preternatural embodiments, which are customarily human or animal in nature but are in some instances divine, angelic, demonic, vegetative or astrological (associated with the sun, moon, stars or planets). The concept of rebirth may also be expressed in such terms as metempsychosis (or accurately, metempsychosis, (“passage from one body to another) and palingenesis (means to begin again). The belief in rebirth in one form or another is found in tribal or nonliterate cultures all over the world. The notion is most dramatically evident in the native societies of central Australia and West Africa, where it is intimately associated with the cult of ancestor worship. It is also in ancient India and Greece. In India the precept is linked inextricably with the teaching and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. In ancient Greece, the idea is identified primarily with the philosophical lineages of Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato and Plotinus. This doctrine is asserted to be one of the most elaborately developed of other doctrines. Reincarnation as a doctrine does not incorporate the idea of symbolization, symbolization is an act of the human imagination to depict or represent spiritual forms in physical modes. This is unlike reincarnation wherein the spirit initiates the process of its own

embodiment, whereas symbolization and containment begin as a human initiative.

Introduction

That the belief of reincarnation is of great antiquity in the history of human species is suggested by the existence of the idea at the core of the belief systems of numerous nonliterate ethnic groups scattered throughout various parts of the world. It is further Suggested by the fact that some archaic people's whose physical culture (domestic, architecture, implements of livelihood, etc) is of extremely primitive nature (e.g. the Arunta or Aranda people who originally inhabited the wastelands of central Australia and who may be classified as the Stone Age society) espouse the idea of pre-existence and reincarnation, which may indicate that this belief arose contemporaneously with the origins of human culture.

It is particularly significant that a belief in reincarnation in some or another is to be found in nonliterate cultures all over the world. Other major cultural areas besides (central Australia) in which this precept is noticeably present are West Africa (among the Ewe, Edo, Igbo, and Yoruba), southern Africa (among the Bantu-speakers and Zulu), New Guinea, Indonesia, Oceania and both North and South America.

In sub-Saharan Africa, reincarnation is not only viewed positively, but failure to be reborn and thereby gain yet another opportunity to improve the world of the living is regarded as an evil (as in the state of childlessness). Weighty emphasis is placed upon fertility rites and the efficacious powers of shaman to promote the production of offspring (the rebirth of the ancestral spirits).

Reincarnation holds that the spirit of each person undergoes rebirths in the bodies of various beasts, which range in size from tiny insects to huge elephants, until at long last the spirit enters a human body where it is fated to undergo yet another birth.

Finally, after reaching the pinnacle of human existence, the soul is united with the supreme spirit from which it originated in the beginning. The belief in reincarnation is linked directly with the veneration of ancestors, for it is the spirits of deceased ancestors that return in one or another life-form in association with the various totemic groups that form the organizational structure of the society.

The Concept of Reincarnation in African Thought

A fundamental form of the embodiment of spirits in African thought is by means of incarnation (or reincarnation). Etymologically, according to Ezechi (2018), Incarnation (from LATIN carne- flesh, body) pertains to the act of taking flesh or materiality by a spirit-being or mythical figure. When it is used of the disembodied spirit (souls) of dead humans-especially in the complex cases of *ogbanje* or born to die spirits and *ịnọ ụwa (ịla ụwa)*, it will imply reincarnation; that is taking flesh again. In the theology of Igbo Traditional Religion, the disembodied spirits (or souls) of dead human beings are believed to take new bodies in order to continue their existence in the material world or simply to make themselves visible to the living. Igbo masquerades abundantly celebrate the return of dead humans to the material world order. It may also depict the return of dead animals, given their physique as well as the philosophy behind it (Umogu, 2000).

Reincarnation as a philosophical concept, have developed from the rhythm which traditional Africans experience in the repeatable alternation of the events life. Okeke and Okechukwu (1978) have suggested that the change from one to the other of seasons of plenty and scarcity or of many and dry seasons may have influenced the people's worldview and their idea of reincarnation. Every bounty of harvest time is displaced by the scarcity of famine until another harvest time certainly comes again. Every daylight yields inexorably to the darkness of the imminent night but another new daylight certainly dawns. The same goes for the weather and seasons and so forth. The displacement of one season by another forms a rhythm which have probably inspired the people's cyclic worldview and their hope in the return of life after death.

The other spirits and mythic figures are also thought capable of incarnating or being embodied in such things as animals and trees. Since reincarnation concerns the movement of spirit from the body of its original habitation to a new one, which is related to the ancient Egyptian doctrine of Metempsychosis or Transmigration, that is also found in the Pythagorean philosophies (Osay, 1989) or to the phenomenon of *ogbanje*, the born-to-die spirit (Achebe, 1986),. Disagreeing with this view, Ekwunife (2000) argued probably incorrectly - that on a strict conceptual distinction between reincarnation and metempsychosis on one hand and *ogbanje*, born-to-die on the other hand. Ekwunife holds that metempsychosis involves the transmigration of soul of human being or animal at death into a new body of same or different species. In his view, this related to the phenomenon of *erili* or *ehiri* which is a sort of magical transformation of a material object into another object as in a man changing into a lion. And this must not be

confused with reincarnation, which according to him should better be understood as *inọ uwa*. For him *inọ uwa*(reincarnation) suggests that:

Certain categories of the deceased in the African world of the dead are believed to be mysteriously, but in a real way, capable of incarnating their personality traits on a new born physical body of a child, without either destroying the new unique personality of the child or substituting for it (p.33)

The meaning of *inọ uwa* itself is varied from one Igbo community to the other. Ekwunife himself thinks that it cannot appropriately fit into the of the English word 'reincarnation' with which it is usually interpreted. This is because *Ino uwa* in his opinion is more like coming back to the world, not necessarily being born again. Ezechi (2018), opined that the terms *inọ uwa*, *ogbanje* and metempsychosis appear basically coterminous. In all these cases, the idea of taking on a flesh, embodiment or (re) incarnation is involved. This universal doctrine implies that disembodied spirits can take a flesh. To be sure, *Ogbanje* or born-to-die is clearly a case of a spirit always taking new embodiment in the form of a new body (Achebe, 1986, Idowu, 1973). Idowu maintained that *Ogbanje* known in Yoruba as *Abiku* are wandering spirits who specialize in the sadistic mischief of finding the way into wombs to be born in order to die'. In continuation, he said:

The traditional explanation is that there is a company of spirits whose members are under an agreement to undertake in turns this errand of mischief: before those who are thus assigned leave the company temporarily, they enter into a pact that they will return, that is, die at certain named dates and times.

Africans where this belief prevails are always seeking protection against this category of spirits especially when women are pregnant. It is believed that a child who is an incarnation of one of such spirits may be detected through divination (p. 175).

Therefore, a family whose children continue to die in early life naturally suspects the case of *Ogbanje* especially, where there are supposed semblances in the series of child deaths. Idowu does not say for certain whether the *Ogbanje* company began as spirits of deceased human persons or not. But he affirms that if the pact with the spirit company is successfully broken, an *Ogbanje* child may remain a human being on earth.

Reincarnation cannot be proved scientifically; and some of its evidences, like the issue of birth mark in *Ogbanje* cases, or sameness of character traits in ino-uwo, tend to be dismissed with the development of the law of genetics (Ononuwa, 1990).

It is also common knowledge today that health conditions like sickle cell anemia may have precipitated the death of children coming from particular couples, especially in the cases thought to be *Ogbanje*. But the principle that spirits can incarnate in physical human forms or other material objects has remained a persistent religious doctrine not only in traditional religions across the globe but also in modern religions like Christianity. The classical Christian example of incarnation is Jesus of Nazareth, believed to be the incarnation of the word of God in human flesh (John 1v. 14). According to the scriptures, Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1 v. 15); for, in him lives the fullness of divinity in bodily form (Colossians 2 V. 9)

Forms of Reincarnation

Possession

Possession is another form of embodiment of spirits, especially for temporary indwelling Spirit-possession, says Morris (2006) in his study of the Shaman culture, generally denotes.

The incarnation or possession of an individual by some spiritual being and not by some vague 'external forces'. According to the culture, the spirit may possess' or control the individual person in a number of different ways- it may reside in the head, 'ride' the individual as a horse, or a spirit might fully incarnate the person, the person is seized' by the divinity or spirit. He or she then becomes vessel' or 'temple' or the embodiment of the spirit (p. 22).

While possession may be related closely with incarnation, the experiences of the two are different. Apart from the different levels of ecstasy or disordered consciousness that may be involved in both, the duration of the supposed indwelling' of spirit seems clearly different. In most cases, spirit-possession are temporary or occasional in the life of the individual. To further illustrate the nature of spirit-possession, Horton (1981), writing on Kalabari religious life, observes three distinct levels or ways in which human actions are thought to 'bring the gods into the village'. According to him,

First of all there is the simple mime, in which a man or woman runs through behaviour that exemplifies the character of a god or illustrates an episode in the god's life. This perhaps, is the least widely used technique, and is usually subsidiary to the other two. Then there

is the masquerade. In this, a man once more mimes the character and attributes of the god; only now he is covered in clothing and a mask, which also symbolize the god. Finally, there is possession, in which the god is alleged to come into the man's head and displace the *teme* [that is, spirit] in control of his body (pp. 90-91).

All three kinds of behaviour serve to bring the gods into contact with the human world. But in religious terms, it is the gods that actually visit men in these modes. The spirit which the player mimics is believed to take control of the players personality, and everything; and so practically communicates with the people through the player as only a medium, Horton further explains that anything the player does or say to represent the gods is thought to do so:

The key idea here is summarized in the maxim it is with their names that the gods stay and come'. By name' in this context is implied any word, object, or act which can be taken to symbolize the god- either its name in the literal sense, the Sculpture, the masquerade and its carved head-dress, or the sequence of action by means of which a human being represents it. For all of these, the fact of their presence or occurrence in a given place is enough to secure the presence of the god they refer to (p. 91).

For Horton, the third level is considered a case of possession. In his observation, the god is believed to take full control of the individual's life, displacing as it were the basic animating principle of his or her body. With particular reference to masquerading, Horton believes that the god comes to the world of man only in the symbolic way of masking that

depicts the god. In some other places, the wearing of mask is thought also to effect a degree of possession (Enekwe, 1987). Enekwe however interprets this kind of spirit-possession in psychological terms, noting that the masker seems to be transmogrified into the figure he is representing' (p. 57). Once the mask is donned out and performing, both the masker and the audience tend to picture only the spirit it depicts and not the human actor. The psychological transformation may also be induced by some ritual performances on the player. According to Enekwe,

Before a performance, an animal that the particular spirit to be represented likes is usually identified by the *dibia* and sacrificed. Its blood is spilled on the mask to which magical objects and talismans are also attached. In some cases a life cock is tied to the headpiece of the mask so that it dangles to death during the performance. This is intended to reinforce the power of the mask. When the masker has donned the mask, the *dibia* sprays some magical potion on him, saying incantations (p. 78).

Some maskers claim that they are no longer themselves once the magical potion is sprayed on them, while others say that they begin to feel possessed by the spirit of the masquerade as soon as they don the mask. Basically, the masker no longer does what he wants or goes where he wants. He exhibits unusual energy that necessitates his being controlled with a girdle tied around his waist. He may feel human emotions like hunger, anger, tiredness, pain and fear, but all these feelings are sublimated by the spiritual role he plays.

Onunwa (1990) speaks of possession in terms of inspiration. His study of spirit and possession in Igbo traditional religion

is yoked exclusively to prophecy. A deity is believed to speak to the community through ordinary human agents- various categories of diviners, seers, prophets and soothsayers, as well as oracles. Spirit-possession, properly understood, is believed to entail abnormal personal behaviour being interpreted by other members of a society as evidence that a spirit is controlling the person's action, probably inhabiting his or her body (Firth, 1967, p. 296). But there is no clear indication that any abnormality occurred in the lives of the Igbo prophets studied by Onunwa - no ecstasy or the disordering of the prophet's consciousness arising from possible displacement of his or her spirit by the deity. In almost all the cases he studied, the inspired individual would pick up a metal gong and cry around the village with his or her gotten message.

Spirit possession can occur in some societies or cases without obvious manifestation of ecstasy or abnormal behaviour. In this regard the distinction between a possessed person and other inspired votaries or intermediaries cannot be absolute (Lewis, 1986; Morris, 2006), since all involve some level of possession. Spirits generally possess material beings or objects for the purpose of communication. Any person possessed becomes the spirit's agent or medium of manifesting its powers or actions. Sometimes such a person turns a sacred functionary for the spirit, but in some other cases mostly when it involves bad spirit possession, the possessed persons are merely the object of torment by dint of the powers or actions of the spirits manifesting in them.

Morris (2006) noted that different kinds of spirits have the power to possess material objects for various purposes good or bad. It follows therefore that ancestral spirits, mythical cultural heroes, ghosts, nature spirits and many other kinds of

deities can manifest their being and their activities in the material world order by possessing human beings, animals and various other material objects. Bad spirits also possess human beings, animals and other beings. Put differently, one and the same spirit can possess its objects for good or bad ends. A typical Igbo example is the divination spirit, *Agwu*, which can grant creativity or healing powers to the one it possesses, as well as inflict such a one with madness if they should resist the call to its service (Metuh, 1999). *Agwu* is therefore conceived ambivalently as spirit of divination and spirit of confusion. Such ambivalence has been noted as the spirit of *Ekwensu* which is thought to be capable of doing good and depending on the context (Ekwunife, 1995, Metuh, 1999, Opata, 2005). For the traditional Igbo, this ambivalence is not scandalous because to them good and bad are seen as co-existing in the same reality; creativity and destructiveness may be achieved by the same agencies (Nwoga, 1984). Ekwunife on the other hand sees *Ekwensu* as a mysterious violent force that is perhaps naturally embedded in the nature of every human or spirit being, Metuh and Opata tend to view it as a deity whose violent spirit when aggravated can possess a man to instigate him to war. Metuh observes that this can be very useful during wars and *Ekwensu* is therefore invoked by warriors and head-hunters (1999). A person possessed by *Ekwensu* becomes violent and daring, operating as it were under the control of the spirit of violence.

Spirits that are viewed as intrinsically evil do also possess human beings. In ordinary parlance, mad people or those tormented by evil forces are said to be possessed by one demonic spirit or another. The Christian story of the Gerasene demoniac (Matt. 8: 28-34) is a classical example of evil spirit possession or the invasion of human personality by an evil

spirit. The Igbo example of a bad spirit is the spirit of witchcraft, which can possess human agents to foment suffering and even death on members of the society (Ekwunife, 2011, Offiong, 1991, Quarcoopome, 1987). Quarcoopome defines a witch as a person who is possessed by a witch spirit, a spirit that can be sent out on errands to cause harm to people. In Offiong's opinion, witchcraft is the natural exercise of evil by persons who are possessed by malevolent but sometimes innate power which can be employed to hurt people. The soul of a witch is believed to leave their bodies and change into an animal in a manner of metempsychosis. Offiong, who studied witchcraft in Ibibio, concludes that it can be acquired by the presence of a substance in the body of the witch which allows his or her soul to engage on the errand of harming people. An individual may eat the substance knowingly or unknowingly to become a witch. He opined further that witchcraft is a natural disposition of the individual instead of an evil influence by an extraneous spirit. He maintained that the witch is a normal person in terms of physical appearance, but one who behaves abnormally, that is to say that he or she acts outside the expected patterns of behaviour in the society.

Offiong argued that some behaviour may likely earn one the stigma of being a witch, including the manifestation of antisocial behaviour such as not being fond of greeting people; living alone in an isolated area; enjoying adultery; exacting too much for sales of anything; committing incest; walking about in the night; crying at night (in cases of children); not showing adequate sorrow at the death of a relative or somebody from within the community; not taking proper care of one's parents (particularly aged parents); children, wife or wives; hard heartedness; and so on. In

general, witches are mean looking, mean-acting, or otherwise socially disruptive people whose behaviour deviates significantly from cultural or community norms (Pp.80-81)

Suffice it to say that these behaviour patterns are not exclusive to witchcraft. It is the view of many that witches and wizards are enemies of the society. They are thought to suck the blood of their victims in the manner of a vampire. Some scholars including Evans-Pritchard (1935) argue that witchcraft is not real but an imaginary feeling. Yet it remains a fact of common experience in Africa (Arazu, 2004, Idowu, 1973, Mbiti, 2011).

Containment

The embodiment of spirits can occur in another mode described as containment. Most Africans are of the view that spirits or spiritual forces can be contained in physical or material vessels. Such objects or contains as works of art or icon, ceramic pots, gourds, bags, hollowed woods, caves, plates, caps etc. are possible containers for spiritual forces (Hackett, 1996; Nooter, 1993). In some places, some persons are gifted or others who have attained some level of control over respective spirits are believed to domesticate these forces and use them for either malevolent or benevolent purposes. Ezechi (2018) illustrated this with an example, that the Odenigbo family, Ugwufie Amofiagu Affa, are noted for their ability to manipulate Harmattan wind, Uguru. They protect their medicine or harmattan spirit in sealed pot or gourd. The harmattan force is released by slightly opening the old pot and facing it to a desired direction. The process is described in a material sense in which case, the extent to which the pot is opened is thought to determine the intensity of the harmattan wind in a particular season. The pot is put away from the easy reach of children or strangers because it embodies their power

as a family to attract and control the harmattan wind. Some other African societies such as the Mafa and Bulabay of northern Cameroun as well as the Yungur of northeaster Nigeria, also use pots to trap spirits and when ritually closed, it holds the spirits for keep (Berns, 1990; David et al, 1988; Hackett, 1998). The pots become the representation of the trapped spirits. For the Yunur people, these pots are more than a representation of the trapped spirits, according Hackett, they are also thought to contain the spirits from which the creator god, leura, is said to create new life.

The process of trapping a spirit force or embuing material objects or art works with such spirits or forces are varied. Hackett observes that in Africa, works of art do not ordinarily embody spiritual powers, but needs some activation to do so. According to her, it is frequently the act of sacrifice which turns a simple piece of wood into a powerful mask or statue. The activation of a carved object into a container or body for the spirit may be achieved through the performance of sacrifices on the object by a ritual expert. To achieve this, a diviner must have indicated the nature of the spirit-force and the particular object it may need to be localized or settled.

In the wider African society, the containment of spirits by insertion of medicine is more copiously illustrated in the Kongo Minkisi (singular nkisi) or power figure from kongo Zaire. In this case, according to Hackett in Ezechi (2018), wooden figures have medicines placed in their cavities created on heads or bellies or between their legs. The belly of the icon could be seen protruded and sometimes, a mirror is used to cover the spot where the medicine is inserted. These vessels embodying spiritual forces or medicines are often taken as physical bodies of the spirits they contain. The people

refer to the object as it is a human person. They can therefore be said to suck out disease from an ailing individual. This attribute of personhood to an artwork appears to the European mind, as Hackett observes, to confound the distinction person and object. For, they are fabricated and yet may be invoked to produce desired effect, have a will of their own, and may influence human behaviour. Reference to the *nkisi* as a person, or its perceived capacity to produce effects, is probably the reason for its condemnation as fetishism or idolatry by the missionaries.

Symbolization

Symbolization is a conscious act of the human imagination to depict or represent spiritual forms in physical modes. Unlike incarnation or reincarnation and possession where the spirit initiates the process of its own embodiment, symbolization and containment begin as a human initiative. The process of symbolization creates symbols such as the sacred objects, music, words, actions, relationships and other empirical gestures that help man to translate the ideas and beliefs that constitute the worldview. In theological terms, symbols are sacramental signs because they not only represent the invisible but also effectively depict their real presence in the physical world, for their users.

Symbolization is an innate human tendency to draw analogies between unrelated things, to represent one with the other. Man is by nature a symbolizing animal for whom abstract concepts can be transcribed effectively into concreteness by the use of symbols. The Igbo manifest great tendency to see the invisible through the optics of the visible. The apparent dualism of matter and spirit is as it were remedied in Igbo traditional religion through symbolism. Symbolism like other forms of

possession is another way through which spirits transmigrate to objects for habitation. In this, art works or sculptures or artistic signs or objects embody spirits.

Summary

The pattern or mode of inhabiting objects, that is the embodiment of spirits may depend on the type of the spirit or the nature of its functions. It is necessary to emphasize that this manifestation or embodiment is primarily the free act of the spirit. Simply put, it is the spirit that desires and sometimes initiates the process of revealing itself in a particular place and in most cases determines the method of such self-revelation. Spiritual possession or call it manifestation in physical objects may be temporal or permanent. Temporal probably for reasons that may range from the destruction of the object to the displacement of the spirit that inhabits the particular object. The embodiment may be permanent if the spirit becomes so much identified with the object so much that the name of the object is tagged to the spirit or visa-versa. It should be noted that the patterns are not mutually exclusive since two or three of them can be combined to achieve a good understanding of cases of spiritual embodiment. There is a famous idea among many Africans that spirits or spiritual forces can be contained in physical or material vessels. Physical or material vessels as pots, gourds, bags, hollowed woods, curved stones or any open vessel. The concept of reincarnation in African religious belief primarily portrays the idea that spirits can possess living beings and non-living things (objects). This possession can manifest in many different forms. Among other forms of possession are the few discussed in this paper as possession, embodiment, containment and symbolization. All these forms suggest that spirits can migrate from one being or object to inhabit another different being or object as a temporal or permanent habitation.

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