

THE PARADOX OF THE CONCEPTS OF LIFE AND DEATH IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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Abstract

Life and death are inseparable. There can be no death if there is no life. People' minds have been faced with the uncertainty surrounding life and death. This paper examines the concepts of life and death from the viewpoint of African Traditional Religion. It aims at assuaging people of the fear of death and reforming them. This work adopts an analytical approach in examining the paradox of life and death in African Traditional Religion. This paper discovered that life and death are inevitable phenomena in human existence. African Traditional Religion posits that God is the giver of life and he has the power to take it at will. Death is caused either through physical causes or mystical causes. Therefore, people should make good use of their life on earth since death is the price everyone must pay.

Keywords: Life, death, Paradox, African Traditional Religion.

Introduction

The uncertainty surrounding life and death pose a problem in the minds of people. Stuart (1987) defines life as "the condition that distinguishes organisms from inorganic objects and dead organisms, being manifested by growth through metabolism, reproduction, and the power of adaptation to environment through changes originating internally" (p.487). Death, on the other hand, is defined by Erickson (1985) as the cessation of life in our physical body. Baaren (1987) takes a theological look at the concept of life and death. Life and death, he says, are exclusive states of being. He admits that there is a life that comes after death, which is distinct from life on earth. According to Asuquo (2011), the African concept of life and death is closely linked to and influenced by his traditional religion.

This paper aims to assuage people of the fear of the unknown and the mysteries surrounding life and death. There can be no death if there is no life. Every religion regards life as sacred and the 'taking of life' as an atrocity. When we consider that more than fifty thousand people pass away every day, we know that the subject of death and what happens to the soul are important. Life is valued in African Traditional Religion. Chukwuedo (2015)

opines that life should not be desecrated. Nobody has the right to take his own life or the life of another person. Among the Ibos, it is believed that life should be lived to its fullness as one prays to see his children's children.

The Concept of Life and Death in African Traditional Religion

In describing life, Shorter (1997) says that "life is like a hill that one must climb with a load on one's head" (p.122). The arms do not matter much here but it is the feet that count, and they will be examined for bruises by "Chineke" *the creator*, who is a searching judge. This is to say that one has to live his life in a morally justified way so as to be accountable to the Creator. The philosophy behind the African's concern about life and death is that all the visible world around us and the invisible world beyond, the divine and the human, the past and the present, the living and the dead all form a harmonious entity says Ilogu (1988) in Adegbola (109). He went on to say that death is one of the dissonances of life disturbing entity, but because the dead themselves belong to this harmonious entity, all that is necessary is to ensure that the balance of life's harmony is not upset when one member of the group is transformed through death to another level of existence, namely the souls of the dead who constitute the unseen part of the community.

In most part of Igbo land, death is a solemn event fraught with danger for both the deceased and the living; hence Imasogie (1985) suggests that precaution must be taken to ensure that everything is done properly. In African Traditional Religion, burial rites and ceremonies therefore are means by which this transition is effected to ensure that the dead receives secure place in the spirit world which will help the established order of life to go uninterrupted. Life is a gift from the Creator. In general, Africans see themselves living a present reality, very much committed to life in the world, but this does not prevent them from expressing their hope of salvation, nor yet their consciousness of undergoing a trial in life itself, even a trial that reaches the climax at the moment of death (Shorter, 1997).

Njoku (2002) holds the same view regarding the concept of life in African Traditional Religion. He reveals that God is the originator of life, the creator of man, the universe and the sustainer of creation. Life is lived and enjoyed communally. "It involves a relationship and communion between man, God, ancestors, divinities, other men and the land. This relationship must be based on certain rules and regulations for it to succeed" (p. 169). In the same vein, Opoku (1978) opines that the ancestors play an important role in the communal life. They are not cut off from the living, for they may still reveal themselves in dreams or appear to their living relatives to guide or correct them.

Mbiti (1989) highlights another obvious aspect of life, which is the concept of human life in relation to time. This concept sees life as a rhythm or cycle which includes birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed and finally entry into the company of the spirits. This implies that God created man with the potentialities of passing through these stages of life. Every human being, rich or poor must go through them, although they vary according to cultures and time.

The Origin of Death

In many myths spreading all over Africa, death has always been traced to a particular fault or mistake made. Mbiti (1975) x-rayed some of such myths surrounding death and its origin. One of such myths is that God gave the first man one or more of the three gifts of immortality, resurrection and the ability to become young again. But all these three were lost and death came into the world. There are different explanations as to how the loss took place and how death came about.

God wanted man to live forever or better still rise again if they died. This message was given to one of the animals to take to men. This animal is often believed to have been the chameleon. But the chameleon lingered on the way and delayed the message. Meanwhile God sent another animal usually said to have been a bird, lizard or hare with another message that people would die. The latter message reached mankind before that of immortality or resurrection, and since then death has remained in the world. It is said that God sent at the same time a dog with message of immortality and a toad with a message of death. On the way the dog stopped to eat, so the toad got to men first and delivered its message. The dog after eating to its satisfaction arrived too late.

Other version has it that God used to hunt death if it appeared. He told men to remain indoors and not to give shelter to death if they saw it running away. A woman however, went to work in her field, and while she was there death came and asked for protection. She allowed it to hide under her clothes, or in another version, to get into her mouth. God came with his hunting dogs chasing after it, and when in his great wisdom he found that the woman had hidden it, he told her and the people to keep death thereafter.

Abrahamsson (1951) writes about the myth that tells of family quarrel that led to irrevocable end of life. It happened that once upon a time, a child died, and the mother implored the supreme 'god' to bring her son to life; her request was granted, but the father of the boy, for reasons that were not known, killed

the boy himself. There and then, the supreme god decreed that: "for the future, whenever a person dies, he must remain dead."

These and many more myths emphasize that death came almost by mistake, and since then it has remained among men. The blame is laid upon man (especially women), animals and in some cases spirits or monsters. Even though all these myths do not speak about how death might one day be overcome or removed from the world. Thus death spoilt the original paradise of men, according to African beliefs.

Causes of Death in Human Life

In African Traditional Religion, death is always traced to a reason. Even though people believe that death came into the world at a very early date in the history of mankind, they believe also that every time a person dies, this death is 'caused': There are several ways in which it is caused. Mbiti (1989, p.111) gives four ways in which death comes to man according to the African belief such as:

a. Death by Sorcery

It is believed that sorcery, witchcraft and evil magic cause death. Therefore, when someone has died, people often try to find out who used sorcery, witchcraft or magic against the dead person. Someone is often blamed for it, and in some cases the suspect may be beaten to death, fined or thrown out of the community.

b. Death caused by Spirits

Spirits are sometimes blamed for the death of someone. These might be spirits of people who have had a grudge against the person, or whose bodies were not properly buried, or who have been neglected by their relatives for some reason or another. Deaths caused by spirits are rare, since in most cases people always find or suspect someone in the village to be the cause.

c. Death by a curse

It is natural for old people to die but this belief is, however, rare, only in a few societies is such belief entertained. God is always left out of the picture when it comes to the cause of death, even though people believe that if he did not allow it, the person would not die. The cause of death could be physical or mystical. The physical causes of death include sickness, disease, old age, accident, lightning, earthquake, flood, drowning, animal attack and many more others. The mystical causes include curse, witchcraft, magic and so on. It is not enough to find out only the physical causes. People take much trouble to establish the mystical causes as well and this is done through consulting diviners and medicine men or by suspicion and guess work.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Every religion holds life at a high esteem. Christianity as well as adherents of African Traditional Religion see life as a gift from God and that only He has the right and power to take it. God atimes uses death to bring his purpose to accomplishment. African Traditional Religion upholds the view that death is the inevitable fate of all living beings. No man created by God is above death because death has no respect for anybody. The notion that death came as a result of man's disobedience is not absent in African Traditional Religion. Most myths told in different parts of Africa show that death was not God's original plan for man if not for his shortcoming.

Conclusively, African Traditional Religion holds the view that God is the giver of life and death is not elimination but an extension. Death can only terminate the physical existence, but it cannot stop life from continuing in another realm. Death is always traced to physical causes or mystical causes. It is believed that death entered into the world as a result of man's shortcoming, wicked animals and perhaps, divine conflict. This paper therefore recommends that:

- a. Death is inevitable; therefore, people should make good use of their time on earth no matter how short life is.
- b. Death is not complete destruction of the individual. Life goes on beyond the grave.
- c. In addition, having realized our limitations and helplessness as mortal beings, we should stop behaving as if the world is our permanent abode. We should try to make peace with all men, strive to make positive contributions to humanity so that by the time we are no more here, those we left behind can remember us for good.

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