



African Humanities Research  
& Development Circle



Journal of  
**AFRICAN HUMANITIES  
RESEARCH AND  
DEVELOPMENT (JAHRD)**

Volume 1, 2024

Published by The African Humanities  
Research and Development Circle (AHRDC)

**A COMMENTARY ON INNOCENT ONYEWUENYI'S *AFRICAN BELIEF IN REINCARNATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL REAPPRAISAL*.**

**Enugu: Snaap Press, 1996, pp. xii+50. ISBN 978-2919-37-3 (paperback)**

**Emmanuel Johnson Ibuot**

University of Nigeria Nsukka

[emmanuel.ibuot@unn.edu.ng](mailto:emmanuel.ibuot@unn.edu.ng)

Man is a mystery, which death further highlights. At the heart of human nature lurks a strange desire, an inclination towards resisting death. Understood as the principle of self-preservation, this crave to persist in being speaks to a universal human search for meaning. Onyewuenyi's reflection on African belief in reincarnation instantiates human search for meaning.

The African mind is inserted in the movement of history, coloured by the search for meaning. Resisting the seduction of human annihilation at death, it seeks for the meaning of human historical existence. Reincarnation, though Western and misleading, is considered one way out of the lure. "It is incorrect to say that Africans believe in reincarnation" (14). The work argues that African tradition, unlike the Jewish, Hindu and Western, believes that the deceased goes to the ancestral world and returns some other time as a child to begin a new race. Using Igbo traditional worldview to clarify African belief about the deceased, Onyewuenyi posits "*ilo una* = a return to the world" (20) instead of "metempsychosis or transmigration of souls" (16) as African. Asserting that the ancestor remains in the ancestral world even after birth as a child in this world is uniquely African. But how can this be logically explained?

For Onyewuenyi, to grasp what Africans believe about "reincarnation," otherwise called "metempsychosis or transmigration of souls" (16), it is important to clarify African notion of "being." Being, in the African view, is dynamic since it is a "force" and vice versa (33, 37, 41); being, otherwise, is flexible. In the West, being is arguably static. If being is an inflexible reality, reincarnation is impossible in the African ontology. For the African, when a man dies, the whole person departs from this world and goes to the world of the ancestors. Though his/her bodily energies dissipate, his vital force waxes strong increasingly (38). The African also believes in perpetuating themselves via reproduction, an act involving agreement between God and the human parents. According to Onyewuenyi, it is this belief that has been mistaken for reincarnation in Africa (39, 41).

The newborn child does not possess the same identity with the living-dead, neither does biological birth terminate the existence of the ancestor in the spiritual world (41). Using Placide Tempels, Onyewuenyi notes that the newborn here and the ancestor in the world of the dead mutually exist at the same time: "the birth of the little Ngoi is not identified with the dead... the birth of the little Ngoi in no wise puts an end to the existence of the deceased Ngoi in the world of the dead" (43). This criticism is grounded on a methodological concern, the language of accommodation, which is a science-influenced need to concretise "abstract and immaterial" concepts through ordinary language (42). Thus, African sense of reincarnation is not identical with strict metempsychosis.

Taking reincarnation as "a language of accommodation" employed by Western writers to make sense of immaterial and abstract cultural concepts, he argues that the products of such

methodological exercise produced misconceptions such as “ancestor worship, polytheism, animism” (2), needing revision for accurate cultural archiving.

Regarding the idea of vital force as the continued presence of the ancestor in this world, we may ask a few questions. What is the nature of vital force? How does vital force inform the life of the newborn child? If the child has a unique identity, then what is the contribution of this vital force (of distinct personality) to the child’s identity? What is person? How does Onyewuenyi explain the nature and influence of the ancestor on the child in this physical world as it is in the spiritual plane? We note that the nature of this vital force is absent from the text, a major challenge to Onyewuenyi’s theoretical explication of *ilo uma*. Despite these gaps and challenges, *African Belief in Reincarnation*, invites us to further our investigations into African conception of human nature.

*Ilo uma* referenced a people’s search for meaning in antiquity and that present-day Africans can continue that reflective search for better ways to be humans as a template for the next generation.