

Death in IGALA Worldview: The Question of Continuity and Discontinuity of Life

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Abstract: *Igala people, like most Africans, hold certain strong views on life, death and the hereafter. This piece is a modest attempt at tabling before us very significant aspects of the traditional beliefs and practices which are to some extent peculiar to Igala people on death. Besides, it desires positing that such an understanding on death accentuates their overall perspectives on human life. While employing the social, historical and descriptive methods, the entire life of the human person is portrayed as cyclic. Death is not only seen negatively as a necessary end but also positively as a passage or gateway unto a much higher, enhanced and refined existence. The human person is thus motivated through such a reflection to become radically decisive on virtuous living. This is by and large, presented as the basic yardstick to a more meaningful, focused, impactful and goal-oriented life.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper integrates the beliefs, practices, customs or traditions of the Igala people on death with a view to investigating what their worldview entails. In doing this, we shall begin by raising a few questions, thus: Who are the Igalas? What are their core ideas on death? What do they hold on the origin of death? What causes do they attribute to death? What is the Igala understanding on the act of dying? What rituals do they perform at the event of the death of their people? What are the different stages in their funeral rites? What beliefs do they have on the hereafter and how are the departed souls remembered? We may now commence with Igala identity.

2. WHO ARE THE IGALA PEOPLE?

Igala is the language of the ethnic group located at the eastern flank of the confluence of rivers Niger and Benue. In other words, they are located on the eastern region of Kogi State, bordered on the North by Benue and Nassarawa States, on the West by River Niger, on the East by Enugu State and on the South by Anambra State. Igala land is 120 kilometres wide and 160 kilometres long. It is located approximately between latitudes 6° 30" and 8° North and longitudes 6° 30" and 7° 40" East and covers an area of about 13,665 square kilometres. The people are densely populated around Idah, Anyigba and Ankpa and are also sparsely found in Edo, Delta, Anambra, Enugu, Nassarawa, Adamawa and Benue States. But the bulk of the Igala are found in Idah, Ankpa, Dekina, Omala, Olamabolo, Ofu, Igalamela/Odolu, Ibaji, Bassa (and even Lokoja and Ajaokuta) Local Government Areas of Kogi State at present (Egbunu 2001: 49). The traditional boundaries of the land included: "the greater part of Idoma land, Nsukka area, Kogi, Anambra Area (North of Onitsha) which were formerly under the suzerainty of the Attah Igala" (Okwoli 1973: 5). It is estimated that their population is about 2 million in the present dispensation. However, the 2006 Federal Government census puts it at 1.6 million.

The Igala are within the middle-belt of Nigeria and have good vegetation upon which they depend for their large-scale and subsistence farming. Owing to the centrality of the location of Igalaland in Nigeria, it has enjoyed some influence by its neighbours, especially the Yoruba, Edo (Benin), Jukun, Idoma, Nupe, Ibo, Hausa, Igbirra, Bassa-kwomu, Bassa-Nge and the Kakandas. Writing on the Ibaji area, for instance, the current Ejeh of Ibaji, HRH, Ajofe John Egwemi (1983: 8) offers an explanation on how

Today Odochala and Elele from Etsako Division of Bendel State (Inele). Those of Onugwa are Nupes from Niger State ... Echeno people came from Iboland. All these migrated into the area to settle along with the first Igalas who can be found at Aya, Uje, Onyedega, Unale, Machiga, Enweli, etc.

This natural situation has left some indelible marks on the tradition and culture of the people. As Oguagha (1981: 168) succinctly confirms: "Oral traditions would seem to indicate that the Igala are essentially an amalgam of various Nigerian ethnic groups, and that the Igala have been in contact with their various neighbours".

This accounts for the land being regarded by many people as a cultural melting pot. That is why Egwemi (1983: 8) never minced words when he concluded that, "in spite of the diversity in origin, our natural habitation has joined us firmly as brothers and sisters. Our culture is one just as our language is one. We all now speak Igala". The same thing can also be said of Idoma/Ibo boundaries and other places where some other linguistic groups have been assimilated. Here are a people who believe strongly in unity in diversity. Igalaland is indeed, a miniature Nigeria. However, this does not denote that Igalaland is totally a conglomeration of different ethnic groups. It existed as an entity on its own before the other cultures got assimilated into its mainstream. That in itself shows how welcoming the Igala people are. Linguistic categorization puts the Igala and Yoruba languages in the same group of *Kwa* sub-group of the Niger-Congo family (Armstrong 1967: 13).

The majority of the population were adherents of Igala traditional religion until recent times. A good number of them embraced Islam before the introduction of Christianity in the land. As a matter of fact, they came in contact with protestant missionaries before the advent of Catholic Missionaries. Many converts have now been won to the Christian fold but in most cases, the real experience of Christianity is virtually only skin-deep.

3. THE IGALA IDEA OF DEATH

"*Ukwu*" is the Igala name for death. It is the inevitable end of the human person, the final end of growth, the ultimate end of man so, all life is seen as a preparation for death which is regarded as a mere departure and not a total annihilation of a person. The time of death is when the human person leaves this world, which is considered a market place, packs his/her load, prepared to go to the world of the ancestors or the great beyond in the hereafter which is believed to be the real home. As Opoku (1978: 133) would put it, it is seen "as a transition from this present earthly life to another life in the land of the spirits. It is a journey which man must make in order to reach the life beyond and continue to live as an ancestor". As Lucas (cited in Okaba 1997: 52) sums it, "it is a mere changing of earthly existence for another desirable one". It is a transition to the beyond, the abode of the ancestors, a life after life. They see it as a continuation of life. Nobody can escape it. Whether ugly or beautiful, intelligent or unintelligent, rich or poor, young or old, man or woman, fat or lean, death must knock at your door. Death can come at anytime and place, it does not accept bribes. According to Mbiti (1975: 110), it is "one of the most universal and mysterious experiences". Since nobody is like food (*oje*) or stone (*okuta*) that linger perpetually in the world, death is on every human being. The typical Igala person would say "*odo monu nada ile taku na gotajiya ebije*" (how long a time would I live in the world so as to warrant my making an iron cap). In other words, death is a debt everyone must pay and a dress of gown or crown that every mortal must wear.

In fact, faced with the stark and monstrous realities of death, the Igala nicknames death as "*Ukwu-edumogo*" (death as the enemy with gnawing pangs). It is also described as the "*Ukokolo*" or "*Uji*" (the Kite) which swiftly and mercilessly snatches its victims without prior warning or notification. In fact, its manner, time and place is unknown. As it is often said,

Ukwu n'ogwun – there is no medicine against death

Ukwu n'ikon – there is no stipulated time for death

Ukwu n'imoton – no one is too young to die

Ukwu n'ogijon – no one is too old to die

Ukwu n'ananan – the rich also die

Ukwu n'ene alen – the poor also die

Ukwu m'onun – death is no respecter of a king

Death is also regarded as “a wicked destroyer, a killer and a curse, which frustrates human efforts” (Opoku 1978: 134). It is an implacable enemy of the human race. In the words of Riamela (1994: 37), “we are like water spilt on the ground which cannot be gathered up again. Man will perish forever like his own dung. He is dust and shall return to dust. In the grave he will rot away, with maggots beneath and worms on top”.

4. THE ORIGIN OF DEATH IN IGALA TRADITION

The Igala have certain mythologies on the origin of death. The commonest version is that which says God never intended death for humankind originally. However,

After creating mankind he wanted them to make the choice between life and death. Two parcels containing both life and death were sent to humankind. That of life was entrusted to the dog to deliver and that of death was sent through the toad. The dog was dilly-dallying on its way licking oil, confident that he would in a flash of a moment overtake the toad anytime he was ready. He wasted so much time so that before he could reach mankind, the toad had already delivered the death parcel. When he arrived, the message of life came too late. So he could not just bear the shame and so he wept and continued to bark in regret (Egbunu 2009: 67-68)

Thus death is portrayed as destroying the original plan of God. Death is therefore seen as a consequence of a mistake. Closely related to this belief is that the coming of death also distanced mankind from God and ushered in sufferings, hardships, sorrow, and sickness. However, the origin of death remains an enigma for the Igala person as it is among the Urhobos of Nigeria, “no one knows how water gets into the coconut so also no one knows how death comes into this world” (Riamela 1994: 37). By this token then, humanity is called to resign to the will of God (*ojo*) and accept whatever is decreed as *ukwu* (death) is seen as a messenger or agent of God.

The Igala look at death as a reunion with their ancestors or kinsfolk. Like it is among the Luo of South Africa, “death is a process which removes a person gradually from the present to a future which is identified with the ancestral period. It is a gateway, a bridge, a line of demarcation which divides the world of human beings and the world of the spirit, the visible and invisible” (Ongoja, n.d: 22).

Though it is understood that death is inevitable, it is still believed strongly among the Igala that every death is caused. It is only acceptable to an extent as being natural when the dead is of advanced age.

5. CAUSES OF DEATH

There are both proximate and remote causes attributed to every death. Even when the proximate causes are glaringly evident either as a result of sickness, vehicle accident, drowning, falling off a tree, thunder and lightning, fire disaster, fallen wall, flood, animal attack or old age, mystical or remote causes are often attributed, oracles are consulted to show whatever is behind such deaths, even if it is an old man. Though, death could be regarded as a natural phenomenon which must occur, almost every death is interpreted as having some external causes, which emanates from either natural or supernatural backgrounds. Witchcraft, sorcery, poisoning or evil magic are said to be the causes of most deaths. Suspects are threatened, fined and/or ostracized, in some cases, kolanuts, food or drink is offered to such suspects on the grave of the deceased or on the corpse. However, in some other very grave instances, some are given *orachi* concoction to drink. Such people are exonerated who are not affected by it. In some other cases, a knife, razor or any weapon is tied in the hand of the corpse asking it to revenge by himself/herself from the land of the dead.

It is thus believed that death could also be caused by spirits who might have had either certain squabbles to settle with or grudges against their victims. At times such could be due to improper burial, neglect of relatives or as a result of curses, broken oaths or taboos. Generally speaking, any death at a ripe-old age is considered a good death. Okwoli (1996: 55) puts this well when he asserted that “the death of old persons are occasions of joy by the grandchildren of the deceased”.

Whereas certain deaths are considered out rightly as “Bad deaths”. Such deaths include: “death of children, death by leprosy, small-pox, epilepsy, by accidents, falling from a palm tree or any tree, drowning, burning, et cetera. Such victims are not given full burial rites. Purification rites are made to appease the gods. And such people are not buried near homes but in the bush” (Okwoli 1996: 55)

6. THE ACT OF DYING

Many terms or phrases are employed by the Igala people to express the real act of dying and their attitudes to death could easily be gleaned from the way the news of death is disseminated. A typical Igala never announces death directly. Messages of this magnitude are carefully couched with euphemisms such as:

“*Ile*” – He/she has gone

“*Imohi Kole*” – He/she has gone to render accounts.

“*Imimi da*” – He/she has breathed the last breath.

“*Ifilẹ-chepka*” – He/she has finished the life course.

“*Ile tunyi*” – He/she has gone home.

“*Itu wa nọ*” – He/she has left us

“*Ibu jilẹ*” – He/she has eaten enough.

“*Itakpa ranẹ*” – He/she has disappeared.

“*Imolu du mẹ*” – He/she has slept off.

“*Imu kpabiẹ*” – He/she is spoilt

“*iko 'wao*” – He/she has rejected us

“*Ija 'etu*” – He/she has fought in vain

“*iko wn jọ*” – His/Her time is up

“*mafudọ tunyi*” – He/She has been summoned home

“*Ilekwu*” – He/she had left this world i.e. *Ile- Kwefu ile*

And in most cases, even the phrase “*ilekwu*” (he/she has died or left this world) is rarely used directly. All this phrases belly the belief that death is not a total annihilation of the individual. Though it may spell the extinction of one’s physical body, there is a general understanding that life goes on beyond the grave. That explains why some of the expressions above show either one of two ways, the minus factor of a loss, an evil and pain or on the other hand, the plus factor of heeding the summons by the ancestors to join them, which would be arriving at a fulfilled stage by means of this transition, for instance, the Attah Igala’s death is announced as “*imu cholu*” (he has slept off) or “*ọdọgọ mubu*” (the tower has been removed) even though it is understood that he has gone home (*ile tunyi*).

Owing to the way the news of death is often taken in the Igala traditional society, it is not typical of any messenger sent to deliver the message on death directly. Such an announcer does it with tact and diplomacy so as not to cause more havoc or death to the living. So it is not just anybody that can be considered as “*enẹ kia k'akwu*” (one who is wise enough to announce death).

Through certain names that Igala people bear, their basic attitude towards death are identifiable. Such names include:

Ukwubilẹ – (death destroys the world)

Ukwutẹnọ – (death has left this one)

Akwubọ – (remnant from death)

Adukwu – (one who cuts off death)

Enẹmadukwu – (it is not expected target that strikes)

Atulukwu – (the roots of death are disentangled)

Okwuęnya – death has reduced one

Ukwumonu – death is no respecter of any king

Okwumaji – it is the dead that gets buried

As it were, death is seen as the ultimate human destination. All mortals are subject to death and decay and when fate summons, every mortal, including kings, queens, princes and princesses are forced to follow suit. As Mbiti (1969: 157) aptly described of an African, “Life is like a pilgrimage: the real home is in the hereafter”. This is very true of the Igala.

The dastardly terror and cruelty of death is expressed in funeral dirges and wailings especially by women mourners:

Emi ta bo-bo-bo – I am done forever.

Una fumi jo – fire has raged my domain.

Unęę ọgban unęę ubi-n - I have nobody in front and at my back.

Ọjọ mi -mi -mi – O’God, my God, my God.

Ukwu fumi tagofo – death has rendered me naked

These go to show the depth of feeling and sorrow of the bereaved. The loss is much and death is seen as depriving them of their “backbone”. Among the crises of life, death is what seems to shake and move an Igala to the marrows most. However, from a broader perspective, death is not seen as a “complete destruction of the individual. Life goes on beyond the grave” (Mbiti 1969: 113). All the rituals surrounding death reveal the depth of the society’s religious beliefs.

7. RITUALS OF DEATH

Death does not only bring sorrow and tears to the bereaved but it creates some physical gap or loss. The dead relative is separated perpetually from the other people. So everybody in the community feels the pinch of the loss, this is so because in Igala land nobody suffers a misfortune in isolation.

To an Igala, death is very significant. Therefore, the funeral rites surrounding the burial of the member of the community is not taken lightly. Every work and business comes to a standstill once death is announced. “This is done in such a way as to avoid causing any offences to the departed” (Mbiti 1969: 113).

Like any other traditional African society, the funeral rites and ceremonies are performed in a way as “to draw attention to that permanent separation” (Mbiti 1969: 113) of the individual physically from other human beings. Such ceremonies also act therapeutically by cushioning the negative impacts of the various incomprehensible challenges the people are faced with. Enormous gathering of people from far and wide are the common features in order to fulfill such funeral rites.

The Igala people also share the widespread belief that if the appropriate rites and ceremonies are not performed, “the spirit of the dead may not be able to join the ancestral spirits” (Opoku n.d: 135).

It must be made clear, however, that there are variations in these celebrations. The rites carried out are “not only by the circumstances of the death, making it a good or bad death, but also by such considerations as the age, social positions, and status of the deceased” (Opoku n.d: 135).

A child, for instance, does not deserve an elaborate funeral rite. It is generally characterized by less wailing and the rites and ceremonies are usually very brief, light and precise. That of an adult receives much attention and feasting. And that of a chief (*Onu*) or queen (*ọya Onu*) is markedly different with great planning, grandeur and coloration. Elaborate ceremonies are hardly done for those who have no children of their own or are unmarried. Thieves, murderers, witches and evil people are never accorded this sort of honourable burial even if they have children.

8. STAGES OF FUNERAL RITES

The Igala have six distinct stages in their funeral celebrations.

8.1 The Bathing of the Corpse (*Ọla-egwẹ*)

After the people in the homestead and others who matter have been duly informed in the community either by gunshots, or otherwise, the “*Okpegu*” (corpse) is then washed by some elders with water, soap and some traditional herbs. It is then dressed and laid in state. They are normally dressed in their best attire (*otogbo*) or “*Ukpo*” (flowing gown or clothe) in certain cases before the “*Okpe*” (the locally woven white calico) is used to wrap the corpse.

8.2 The Laying in State (*Edu-Kpẹka*)

This could be for three consecutive days before the burial in certain cases. In these days of refrigeration facilities, the days could be extended or postponed while they wait for the sons, daughters abroad to come home and/or prepare more adequately. Meanwhile only the relic (*Ayibọ*) would be available on a mat while the funeral dirges (*Iya-Oye*) and dances are organized by mourners who are usually women, for days.

8.3 The Burial Proper (*Egwu-eji* or *Enyi-eji*)

The grave is dug either in the homestead right into the house, at the backyard or any place earlier designated by the deceased before death. The relatives come from all walks of life and go into funeral orations, extolling the good deeds of the person, then they present their gifts in form of cowry shells or money. The money is supposedly for the oil of the lamp to brighten his pathway to the ancestors (this is because of the dark nature the world of the dead), for his transport fare, and perhaps feeding on his journey to the great beyond. This money is however used by the family members to defray the cost of funeral ceremonies and entertaining guests. Clothes known as “*Okpe*” (white locally woven calico) are also presented as gifts to signify peaceful reposes, pure hearts and best wishes.

In some parts of Igala land, the deceased are buried with some of the belongings such as clothing hanging or spread on the grave mounds. And at the death of certain chiefs, horses are buried with them. Various rituals are performed at the actual burial of the corpse. Sacrificial animals like “*Okolo*” (rams) and “*Ewo*” or “*Obuko*” (she goats or he goats) are sacrificed.

8.4 The Communal Wake-Keep (*Ide-Okolo*)

Depending on which part of Igala land, this may replace ceremonies for the lying in state in some places. Funeral dirges (*Iya-Oye*) are sung. They have “*Ode-chi*” for certain chiefs (*Onu*) in some parts of the land.

8.5 Grave Leveling (*Ekpoji Tuka*)

This is another rite performed days or weeks after the actual burial. In this case, the grave-mound (*Ojinoji*) is leveled by the family to symbolize the removal of calamities from the family (Okwoli 1996, 56).

8.6 Second Burial (*Ubi, Akwu*)

This is proper funeral rite performed with certain ceremonies by the sons and daughters after an arrangement with the family head (*Ogijo Olopu*). It could be fixed immediately after the burial, some weeks later, months later or even a year or more later. The “*Ayibọ*” (relic of the deceased) is placed on the mat to symbolize the deceased’s presence and the grandchildren gather in a happy mood. By means of the befitting burial, it is believed that the children have the opportunity of initiating them into the world of their ancestors thereby in a sense giving birth to their own parents in turn.

At a stage, masquerades brought by the children and the in-laws dance in honour of the deceased. The masquerades also dance to entertain the guests and perform certain rituals. They also represent the coming home of the spirits of the ancestors to welcome the deceased. This is based on the belief that “unless the proper rites and ceremonies are performed, the spirits of the dead person may not be able to join the ancestral spirits” (Opoku 1978: 135). As Okwoli (1996: 57) points out, “the ceremony is really aimed at making the deceased secure his place in the spirit

world”. Writing on the Ijos, Okaba (1997: 52) holds that “their neglect and improper handling is like setting fire on a keg of gun powder”. This ceremony involves a lot of expenditure.

As a matter of fact, this ceremony could be effected in such a way that they would involve two main stages (the interment involving III – V above and the second burial involving VI). The details would vary from place to place and in most cases not easily delineated.

9. THE AFTER LIFE (OR HEREAFTER)

In observing how the Igala people treat a dead person’s body and the respect accorded it, one would not be far from the truth to affirm that they believe there is a part of human person that survives death and one that is interred. That part which survives death is the “*Afu*” (spirit). Igala believe that the hereafter is an invisible world but much less the same with the present life. For a great many of them it is situated here on earth or under the earth and has similar features, arrangements, materials and animals, namely- mountains, valleys, forests, family homes, farms lands, rivers, goats cattle sheep, chickens, etc. As for the location some point to the sky.

The traditional Igala believe that the spirit of the departed hovers around the homestead after burial until the second burial when he/she now joins the ancestors (*Ibegwu*).

These spirits pay visit to their close relatives. As Opoku (1978: 134) rightly stated, “even in the after life the dead are not cut off from the living relatives to give instructions, warnings or information which are normally taken seriously by those who believe them”.

They appear to members of their family within the period that may span through four or five generations. It is possible to notice some of their characteristic features in a new born baby in their family. So they are believed to have re-incarnated. This sort of re-incarnation has a different tincture because, according to Opoku (1978: 137), “it is only the dominant characteristics and the spirit of the ancestor which are believed to be re-incarnated in his descendants and not his soul”. In the Igala case each soul remains distinct and each birth represents a new soul, the ancestor is re-incarnated but continues his own life in the after life. And it can be either a female or male, the sex of the deceased ancestor notwithstanding. Certain names are given to children to remind them. Such names are:

Qmaye-mi – my brother/sister

Ana mi – my inlaw

Iye-mi – my mother

Atayi – Elder man, or my daddy.

Or they could be given direct names of such ancestors. This re-incarnated ancestors then become the “*Ojo*” (the guardian spirits) of such children. In the words of Boston (1968: 213) “it refers to the relation between an individual and a particular ancestor who is believed to control or predispose the person’s destiny, and who is in some respects re-incarnated in the individual concerned. Even in situations where there is no indication the “*Ojo*” is known through divining through and oracle on the fourteenth day (*Egwẹle-ẹbo*)”. According to Idowu (1982: 87) such spirits are referred to as the living dead and at this stage they “live in new born babies who are given their names”. This period is what Ongonja (n.d: 24) refers to as “the period of personal immortality”. He does not live forever because if those who knew him die then he joins the oblivion of the “*abogijo-igbele*” (forefathers). After four or five generations they are eventually forgotten, they lose their identity in the memory of the living. Though they remain human spirits, they now appear as ghosts of unknown persons (no longer the living dead). Such ghosts have no personal interest in any family. Mbiti (1975: 122) describes such spirits as dwelling:

In trees, lakes, rivers, rocks, animals and so on. Or may just disappear to congregate with other spirits in the world of spirits. Such are the spirits which people fear if they meet them, because they are strangers... sometimes these spirits attack people through an outbreak of possession or an epidemic and then the people drive them away with ceremonies

It is not clear whether such spirits die eventually in the Igala belief. However, what is certain is that they gradually disappear from human memory and the universe is “thickly populated with invisible beings including the spirits” (Mbiti 1975: 122).

10. REMEMBERING THE DEPARTED

Often, shrines (*Unyi-ẹbo*) are made of the graves of the departed in the homesteads for keeping the memory of the departed. At times they are consulted through diviners, medicine men and medium if big decisions are being taken or some great calamity befalls them. In the hierarchy of beings, the Igala people believe that the living dead and ancestors rank higher than men/women who come before other living beings, such as the trees, other plants and lower animals. Thereafter, we then have the inanimate objects at the base. When certain ceremonies such as births, initiations, marriages or festivals are being carried out they are remembered in a special way. Water, local liquor (*burukutu*), palm wine and blood are being poured as libations to them, and cooked food, Kolanuts and raw food items are offered. And the people expect blessings in return.

11. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it may be concluded that, among the Igala, death is not a discontinuity of life, but a change of man’s level of existence, although a continuity. Igala has an innate desire to live long, they still see life and death as the two sides of a coin. It is hard to speak of one without implying the other at the same time. The death of the human person is a necessary end and before this, he/she is expected to search for meaning to life. It is in this alone, a good life consists. Without this, an entire life could be considered unfulfilled and useless.

Erich Fried’s (in HansKung 1982, 162) poem applies to the Igala person in the face of death:

*A dog that dies
And that knows that it dies, like a dog
And that can say that it knows it dies
Like a dog
Is a man.*

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