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Death and the Question of Ultimate Reality and Meaning in the Thought of the Igbo of Nigeria and of M. Heidegger: A Further Contribution to URAM Igbo Studies (URAM 5: pp. 188–209; 7: pp. 84–101)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Just as life (*ndu*) permeates the Igbo existential world (*uwa*), so does death (*onwu*). Death gives rise to new birth; it makes possible the Igbo 'belongingness' and affiliation to the ancestral dwelling and, hence, to new birth. Death for the Igbo is as important as life itself. Understanding Igbo experience and its holistic context will enable us to inquire into the meaning of death for the Igbo. Given the encompassing and holistic view of the Igbo world and its cosmology, it can easily be understood why and how the Igbo life-experience relates intimately and meaningfully to the question of death.

Generally Igbo thought (philosophy and religion) organizes itself within the ambience of experienced life. The Igbo are pragmatic people who 'live existence rather than indulge in futile mental speculations about it' (Egbuji 1976, p. 141). It is expressly this existential milieu, experienced life, that lends meaning and vitality to Igbo thought. Igbo philosophy is thinking within the finite. Because of this, research into Igbo phenomena/experience inevitably raises the following question: How do the Igbo understand this experience?

The Igbo 'brush with experience', which to some extent parallels Heidegger's idea of 'undergoing experience' (Heidegger 1982, p. 57), is personal and egocentric. It implies that the Igbo is deeply involved in experience. Thus his or her whole approach to phenomena is neither from the perspective of a spectator nor from the epistemological subject-object relationship. The meaning and truth of personal experience of the Igbo, which remind us of existentialist thought, require personal commitment and concern for the phenomena involved. The Igbo 'brush with experience' constitutes an immersion into these phenomena, which, in turn, makes possible human transformation.

This is not a solitary reality. The Igbo does not exist for and by him/herself alone; he is not an island. Rather, he derives vitality and life-force from his immediate community. His rapport with these phenomena depends on the extent to which he is able to identify with his community. It is within this community that the Igbo lives and has his or her being.

rary, provides us with a good example of such an effort to bring to the surface what was really at stake when the second century Christian apologist Justin Martyr made the Cross of Christ his 'ultimate' category. In 1981 Prof. Story presented URAM readers with 'Ultimate Reality and "The Gospel of Truth"' (URAM 4: 279-296). We welcome this second contribution.

Johannes Cocceius was a seventeenth century Reformed theologian from the Netherlands. Although scholasticism was the preferred method of doing theology in his day. Cocceius was primarily a biblical theologian for whom the notions of Covenant and friendship with God were paramount. Whereas Covenant theology was central to his ecclesiology, for Cocceius friendship with God was an individual's ultimate reality and meaning in terms of his or her spirituality and ethics. Prof. W. J. van Asselt of the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands provides us with essential information on Cocceius as well as an in-depth study of these two basic ideas in all their social impact for the seventeenth century as well as our own age.

Our final article is the third of a series on the seventeenth-century 'metaphysical poets' of England by Prof. Albert C. Labriola of Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, USA (URAM 18: 92-101; 19: 162-167). As he did in his earlier studies on John Donne and George Herbert Professor Labriola locates the ultimate reality and meaning of Richard Crashaw within Christian mysticism variously named 'heavenly communion', the 'beatific vision' or 'metaphysical contemplation'. Writing about Crashaw's URAM Professor Labriola describes this mysteriously altered consciousness in the following way: 'By escaping the earthly environment if not the human condition, one's soul ascends toward the heavenly community that enjoys proximity to the godhead and the so-called beatific vision. This glimpse of ultimate reality and meaning whets one's appetite for the eternal bliss of the heavenly hereafter'.

Each of these articles approaches an ultimate issue located beyond the present life: death, the Cross of Jesus, friendship with God, and mystical union with God. Each of these issues is, on the one hand, perceptible to us, but, on the other hand, is located beyond the liminal boundaries of this life. Different religious and cultural expressions are employed to gesture toward what is ultimately inexpressible.

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nomena. 'Igbo cosmology forms a compact system, and it is not possible to isolate and dissect (analyze) each aspect of Igbo experience without destroying or distorting the vital relationship among all levels of experience' (Anyanwu 1984, p. 94). It should be noted that the Igbo inhabits and finds himself in two worlds: the human world (*ala madu*) and the spirit land/world (*ala mmo*). These two worlds are intimately connected; the one cannot exist without the other. As man/woman immerses himself in both the human and spirit worlds he is, as it were, the mediator between the two realities. He or she is, in other words, the focal point of the universe.

The Igbo culture does not make a clear-cut distinction between the self and the world, between body and spirit, between the visible and invisible worlds but regards all as a field of aesthetic continuum. The world is centred on the self and is inseparable from it. As a result, the self fuses life into the world so that the soul or spirit of man becomes the soul or the spirit of the world (Anyanwu 1984, p. 89).

In a sense, we can maintain that the dialectics of the human-spirit world resolve themselves in man. Thus, in the Igbo experience, the intimacy between man (*madu*) and the world reminds one immediately of Heidegger's idea that the Dasein's ontological relation to its world is as a Being-in-the-world. It is a world where *Da-sein* engages and finds itself; a world that characterizes and defines its being. In the same way the Igbo world centres on man, from whom it derives its meaning. Only then does the world become his own. The Igbo, therefore, cannot conceive of a world which is not grounded in the self (*onwe m*). However this self-experience of the world does not imply an extreme individuality. To the degree that there is no isolation in the Igbo experience of the world, every experience entails sharing.

The Igbo experiencing of the world does not allow passivity in any way; the Igbo cosmos does not constitute a static world. Rather, it is a world filled with dynamism. The Igbo world could best be characterized as a world of 'becoming' and not a world of 'being' (Uchedu 1965, p. 12). It is a world where there are constant interactions between the dead and the living, between the spirit land and human world. This 'becoming' allows for an interpenetration of the spirit land and human world. The implication of the Igbo world as becoming lies in the fact that it is not open to absolute control nor to rigid principles. This will become clearer when we reflect on the Igbo experience of religion. The Igbo world, however, communicates and 'speaks' (Zahan 1979, p. 81).

The logos of the world awakens the human logos ... without the action of the logos of the world on human beings, the latter would not awaken to consciousness. Without the conscious awakening of humans, the logos of the world would never emerge from its anonymity. Thus human beings are responsible for their world, and for making the intelligibility of the world transparent (Boff 1988, p. 53).

The Igbo immerses himself in his world to hear it 'speaking'. According to Anyanwu, the Igbo aim at understanding their world not with a view to conquering or overpower-

But to say, however, that the Igbo have personal experience of reality/phenomenon does not mean that this experience or reality is completely individual in nature. Rather, philosophic experience, like the religious experience to which it is ultimately connected, is not an individual property but a shared and a cooperative one ... The experience of God, divinities, ancestors, life, death, etc. in Igbo culture is therefore a shared one, and this experience is valuable for all those who identify themselves with it ... (Anyanwu 1984, p. 88).

In this paper we shall examine this Igbo experience as it finds expression in cosmology, religion, and the individual person (*madu*) as finite being and centre of the universe. The Igbo phenomenon is intimately tied up with the question of death, as the ultimate reality and meaning of life itself. Since the readers of this essay will include westerners, the thought on death as the ultimate reality and meaning of life of Martin Heidegger will be used by way of comparison with Igbo philosophy and theology. We shall also consider Igbo thinking on the hermeneutics of death.

2. IGBO COSMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Underlying the intelligibility of the Igbo world in all of its manifestations (man/woman, God, ancestors, time) is its cosmology. Igbo cosmology has two essential dimensions which define and explain our world. It explains such phenomena as the origin of the world and death; it is also involved with the Igbo system of action and is a guide to morality (Uchedu 1965, p. 11). We shall focus on only one aspect of cosmology: its relevance to man's activity as a 'Being-in-the-world'. This will help to situate Igbo cosmology within the context of overall existential thinking. In this exploration/inquiry proverbs and some traditional Igbo rituals provide an access to Igbo cosmology.

Since Igbo people did not construct a rigid and closely argued system of thought to explain the universe and the place of man in it, preferring the metaphor of myth and poetry, anyone seeking an insight into their world must seek it along their own ways, some of these ways are folk tales, proverbs, proper names, rituals and festivals (Achebe 1976, p. 132).

This implies that Igbo traditional thinking derives essentially from oral transmission. Igbo tradition refers to the era which preceded the advent of western civilization and Christianity. In the absence of writing and 'organized' systems of education, their pedagogical method consisted in recitation and oral transmission. Though contemporary Igbo thinking draws from both the oral and literary traditions, the former presents us with firsthand information about the Igbo experience of thinking.

In a world in which life is viewed as a whole/totality, in a world in which phenomena seem to fall into one holistic pattern, man/woman finds a place at the centre of the universe. It is only natural that he forms a link between the cosmic forces and the Igbo world itself. In keeping with the uniqueness and wholeness of Igbo experience/phe-

ing it, but with the intention of finding out how they could 'realize themselves in the world' (Anyanwu 1984, p. 95). If there were no world to which the Igbo 'listens and finds himself', no reality would be communicated.

In other words, it is precisely the Igbo dialogue with his or her world that enables him to understand and find himself. This, in turn, makes possible the openness and meaning of the phenomena of death, time, God, and the ancestors. 'The world reveals itself as language (logos). It speaks to man through its own mode of being, through its structures and its rhythms' (Eliade 1975, p. 141).

In Igbo thinking everyone in his own right interprets reality because each individual has a direct and personal link to the world. Among the Igbo there are professional interpreters of the universe who possess technical and scientific know-how for this task. These skilled technicians include diviners (*afu dibia*) who are able to penetrate and organize the world of signs and meanings. That the Igbo community recognizes the proficiency and skill of these individuals is another indication of a shared experience to which the Igbo submits as a member of his or her clan. Steeped in this experience the Igbo is in contact with the meaning and message which his world conveys.

Even though the Igbo submerges himself in his or her world, he is able to order, manipulate, and control it. This is because he constantly solicits the help of experts such as the diviners, already mentioned, as well as priests and healers.

The primitive who sees his field laid waste by drought, his cattle decimated by disease, his child ill, himself attacked by fever or too frequently unlucky as a hunter, knows that all these contingencies are not due to chance but to certain magical or demonic influences, against which the priest or sorcerer possesses weapons ... As soon as the sorcerer or the priest discovers what is causing children or animals to die, drought to continue, rain to increase, game to disappear, the suffering begins to become tolerable; it has a meaning and a cause, hence it can be fitted into a system and explained (Eliade 1974, pp. 96-98).

In Igbo tradition, however, the diviners (*dibia*) are prominent in the lives of the people. The Igbo consult them for different reasons: the telling of fortunes, giving general spiritual advice about sacrifice, and the offering of sacrifice to drive away evil spirits.

Certain phenomena such as the death of a young man upset the existing order in the Igbo world. If the disaster cannot easily be traced to known human causes, it is ascribed to invisible powers. This kind of disorder can be offset by seeking diviners to determine its cause. The experts help by recommending certain remedies such as rituals and sacrifices (*aja*) to prevent its future occurrence. Ultimately the diviners have the power to ward off evil spirits. The diviner offers 'joyless sacrifices to the evil spirits and he is the person who can "tie down" the Akalogeli (evil human spirits)' (Arinze 1970, p. 66). Thus, the diviners hold the key to unlocking various problems that defy the Igbo in his experience with the world. They also advise people on how to avoid mishaps and impending dangers.

The Igbo claim that mishaps and cosmic forces, which wreak havoc in their world, can be curbed and exploited in their favour. More closely considered, it could be argued

that the Igbo are able to circumvent and manipulate the inherent forces in their world because there is no viable absolute (cosmic forces) with which to reckon. The Igbo have a saying which goes as follows: '*the di ihe adidebe ya*' ('where something stands, something else will stand beside it'). In other words, nothing stands all by itself; there is always something behind it. This Igbo maxim is a strong affirmation that in the Igbo world there is nothing that is absolute. Since this is the case, there would always be some way of maneuvering and controlling the natural and cosmic forces at play in it. The nonexistence of an absolute in Igbo tradition and thinking has far-reaching implications for their religious experience and explains why religious experts are so highly regarded by them. Because these people have the techniques and skills to keep these forces at bay and to manipulate them, the Igbo see in these priests, diviners and healers more than a match for hostile forces. In this way maintaining 'social and cosmological balance in the world becomes a dominant and pervasive theme in Igbo life' (Uchedu 1965, p. 13).

Indeed the world, which provides a dwelling for and meaning to the Igbo, is not isolated from their religion. Being religious to the core, the Igbo see the world and every phenomenon therein, as having a spiritual value. Confirming the intimacy between the world and man's religion, Mircea Eliade observed that:

Ultimately, for the man of archaic society, the very fact of living in the world has a religious value. For he lives in a world which has been created by supernatural beings and where his village or house is an image of the cosmos. The cosmology, that is, the cosmological images and symbols which inform the habitable world, is not only a system of religious ideas but also a pattern of religious behaviour (Eliade 1976, p. 21).

To understand better the phenomenon of death we need to turn to another dimension of Igbo experience, namely the Igbo experience of religion.

3. IGBO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Many elements contribute toward shaping and developing Igbo philosophical thought. Religion forms an indispensable element in the life and thinking of the Igbo. It is essentially religion that makes it possible for the Igbo to dwell in the existential.

Because traditional religion permeates all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion ... (Mbiti 1969, p. 2).

Mbiti's remark here is true of the Igbo experience. Their religious experience begins with observing the world/nature and tracing it to the sacred. This experience, however, implies a leap from the worldly dwelling to the abode of the gods. Thus, given the nature of Igbo thought, which blends and harmonizes human experience, it can easily be seen where and how religion falls within this whole framework. Understanding Igbo

religious experience will give us further access into the Igbo world and their thinking about death. Like Igbo language, religion is the experience of the community. Having this experience depends on the degree to which man attaches himself to the community.

Igbo religion is quite a wide and vast area to consider within the limitations of a single article, so we ought not to pretend to cover all its aspects. In our study, therefore, we intend to focus primarily on the human encounter with the divine. Since, for the Igbo, life and death collide in that life gives rise to death and death makes possible new birth, it would be interesting to see how religion fits into the domain of death.

The question that comes to mind in this connection is: What is the nature of Igbo religion? How do the Igbo experience the divine? Addressing these concerns, it is important to bear in mind that Igbo traditional religion is best approached phenomenologically. It evokes a hierophantic experience, an experience where the sacred shows itself through man's link with his world. Therefore, anyone who seeks to understand the traditional religion of the Igbo must be disposed to enter into genuine dialogue with the Igbo religionist (Arazu 1982, p. 3), the Igbo traditional theologians. The inquirer must respect Igbo traditional religion as distinct from the Christianity which many Igbos now practise. Christian concepts, such as the resurrection of the dead, are not particularly helpful in elaborating Igbo religion which stands on its own and does not need illumination from any other religion.

Igbo religion does not, in other words, follow the pattern of the Christian/western experience of religion with its 'representational thinking' (*vorstellendes Denken*) of subject-object relationships. The Igbo believe in many gods. They are polytheist by nature.

Since belief in gods arose ... as a result of teleological needs of the organic life, the Igbo have labyrinths and myriads of gods and these are individually supreme in their own rights and fields (Nze 1981, p. 22).

The existence of many gods in Igbo traditional religion suggests that there is continuous competition among the gods. More importantly, and herein lies the uniqueness of Igbo religion, there is no sense of the absolute, and this sets it in distinct opposition to the religious experience of the Christian/Western world. Speaking for Africa as well as for the Igbo, Zahan makes the intriguing but genuine observation that:

The idea of a finality outside of man is foreign to it [i.e. African religion]. Man was not made for God or for the universe; he exists for himself and carries within himself the justification of his existence and of this religious and moral perfection. It is not to 'please' God or out of love for God that the African 'prays', implores, or makes sacrifices, but rather to become himself and to realize the order in which he finds himself implicated ... When man venerates the divinity, it is not for the glory of God but for his own personal development. Religion is thus essentially a function of the human element and of its domain, the earth (Zahan 1979, pp. 5-6).

Notwithstanding the approach of a Christian who might think of the human relationship

to the divine in terms of the superior-inferior or subject-object mold, Zahan's remark is true for Igbo traditional religion and for polytheism in general.

In a religion which emphasizes the idea of *chi* (the god in every man), where *chi* is the personal creator, it is hard to conceive of an absolute God. This polytheistic dimension of Igbo religion and man's centrality in the universe make possible a contract between the Igbo and their gods. In light of the contractual nature of Igbo religion, reciprocity between man and his god seems to dictate the essential terms of their relationship.

An Igbo man pledges to sacrifice to, and worship his gods. He expects his gods in return to protect, provide and preserve him and his house-hold. He endeavours to fulfil his own side of the obligation and looks on gods to perform their part ... Failure on the side of the gods impels the Igbo to defy them (Nze 1981, p. 23).

There are both playfulness and flexibility in man's dealing with the divine in Igbo traditional religion, and this is something that also distinguishes it from western (Christian) religion. This playfulness allows for the maneuvering of gods, and sometimes the offering of sacrifices and rituals to appease them or deter their wrath. These reciprocal ties between man/woman and the gods are like

'... a chess-board of manipulatory relationships where men and spirits interact on a theoretically equal basis, each side theoretically motivated by intense self-interest ...' (Chukwukere 1971, p. 112).

Put differently, because of the playful nature of religious experience, the gods are not to be feared but rather are to be considered as one's friends as long as each party maintains his or her side of the contract.

Religion is indispensable for any elaboration of Igbo phenomena such as the experience of finitude or death. Before dealing with death itself we shall examine the Igbo experience of earth (*ala*) and finitude in order to understand how these phenomena lead to their thinking about death.

4. INDIVIDUAL, EARTH AND FINITUDE

Man occupies a central place in the Igbo universe occupying as he or she does the focal point for the interpenetration of the two worlds. As the intersection between the spirit land and the human world, the Igbo finds himself in a situation or world which he did not make or fashion, a world where he is powerless to change the ancestral traditions or the law of the land. Dwelling in this 'world' is an affirmation of his finitude. By definition the Igbo lives within the framework of the institutions and 'world' inhabited and established by the ancestors (*ndichie*). The concept of 'earth' embodies Igbo tradition and life itself. This constitutes and contributes to (Igbo) individual finitude.

4.1 *Chi or the God in Everyone*

Underlying the existential being (life-force) of the Igbo is *chi*, which individualizes

every man and woman. This individualization of *chi* finds expression in the Igbo saying: '*Chi awu otu*' ('*Chi* is not the same for all individuals'). *Chi*, the personal genius, is given to every man at birth to direct him.

Chi is life, or life conceived as an animate self that guides the course of existence. The most directly important manifestation of this for any person is '*chi* in me,' which is thought of as a spiritual essence of the living self that guides and determines the course of that person's life from birth to death (Henderson 1971, p. 107).

Chi, the god in every man, has both existential and religious implications. The Igbo hold that every individual is created by his own *chi*. It can be said that each person not only fashions his own life, but creates himself. This is possible because prior to birth an Igbo bargains with his *chi*. The individual creativity of *chi* is reflected in the Igbo dictum that: '*Otu nne na amu ma otu chi adi eke*' ('born of the same mother but not created/made by the same *chi*').

This 'god in every man' (*chi*) frees at the same time as it limits. It frees in the sense that *chi* allows the individual to create him/herself or shape his life: it limits in that it accounts for man's achievement and failure (Anyanwu 1984, p. 97). The only limit which *chi* imposes on the Igbo is that which he himself chooses. Man remains for the Igbo a finite and dependent being, notwithstanding his *chi*'s affirmation of freedom.

This dialectic between freedom and finitude finds expression in the Igbo saying: '*Onye kwe chi ye ekwe*' ('If a person willingly chooses/agrees, his *chi* consents, because *chi* honours an individual's freedom'). On the other hand, because *chi* is a power to be reckoned with, it is able to impose limits on an individual's freedom. In fact, the individual depends on his or her *chi* for survival: '*Chi onye adili n' izu, ma onwu egbuna ya*' ('If one's *chi* is not party to the arrangement, death will not kill that person'). In other words, 'no matter how many divinities sit together to plot a man's ruin, it will come to nothing unless his *chi* is there among them'. *Chi* wields a tremendous influence over man's destiny (Achebe 1976, p. 135). *Chi* holds sway over the Igbo; it determines or delimits his or her existential being. This determination suggests the finitude of 'Igbo being'. Igbo thought is rooted in *chi* which frees even as it limits man. This thought therefore is a thinking within the bounds of the finite, a thinking which always remains earthbound.

4.2 *Ala or the Earth*

The '*chi* in me' falls under the aegis of *ala* (earth) which itself epitomizes life. 'Without her (*ala*), life would be impossible for the Igbo, who attach much sentiment to the land' (Uchedu 1965, p. 95). The notion of earth brings together all aspects of Igbo life. The earth is Being from which other beings have their source and grounding. Heidegger argued that the

earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises as such. In the things that arise, earth occurs essentially as the sheltering agent (Heidegger 1977, p. 169)

Like Being, the earth provides a dwelling for the Igbo sheltering him in her home.

4.2.1 Omenala or the Law of the Land

Dwelling authentically on 'earth' means oneness with her and conformity to the law of the land (*omenala*). The Igbo, however, believe that staying within the boundary of *omenala* (tradition or law) is a key to a long life and a protection from all dangers. A breach of the traditional law (*nso ala*) incurs the wrath and vengeance of the ancestors (*ndichie*). This is because the ancestors, under the rubric of *ala*, are the custodians of morality and the owners of the soil. Dwelling in this terrain not only calls for unity with the earth or nature, but for the preservation of it as well.

Like Nietzsche, Heidegger believed that the technological destruction of the earth was an expression of the will to power's hatred of everything that reminded it of its finitude, limitation and time. Taking revenge on the earth meant subjugating and dominating it, instead of preserving and caring for it (Zimmermann 1990, p. 246).

Obviously preserving the earth would have different meaning for Heidegger and the Igbo. Still, both would promote a meaningful relationship with nature, and its finitude.

4.2.2 *Ala* and Finitude/Death

The Igbo does not strive to conquer the earth, which would be tantamount to overcoming *ala*. Rather the Igbo lives intimately on earth. His or her 'earthbound dwelling is itself a manifestation of finitude. Man's very mode of belonging determines him. 'Madu bu aja' ('man is earth/dust'). This maxim is an intimation of man's mortality and finitude. Man's relationship to the earth evokes a sense of dependence implicit within the Igbo 'belongingness' to *ala*. 'Ala nwe mmadu' ('man belongs to the earth') is yet another Igbo proverb, which suggests the necessity of death since it implies the Igbo 'thrownness' on earth. The close connection between the Igbo understanding of death to *ala* is yet another indication and manifestation of human finitude. For the Igbo life is incomplete without death.

5. IGBO THOUGHTS ON DEATH

Death evokes for the Igbo, on the one hand, a sense of estrangement and disruption, and, on the other hand, an urgent longing to join one's ancestors. Death becomes a 'going-to-the-spirit land' (*ila muo*). This Igbo sense of 'going-home' through death deserves further articulation since it is an intrinsic part of the overall Igbo attitude to death.

Even as death marks a 'disruption' in the rhythm of life, it also enhances life itself. It provides access to the spirit land (*ala mmo*), which embodies authentic life for the Igbo. So the Igbo, at the same time, both acknowledge and deny the disruption of death. 'A person dies and yet continues to live: he is a living-dead' (Mbiti 1969, p. 161). Death mediates the visible and invisible worlds, and the Igbo dwells within its ontological and dialectical framework. This is because man at the centre of the cosmos lives out the two existential levels of the Igbo world, the human and the spiritual.

5.1 *Death as the 'Other Beginning'*

The spirit land and the human world intermingle. This is characteristic of the holistic nature of Igbo thought. Therefore death does not constitute human finality, but marks a transition; it is 'the other beginning' which is 'the first beginning'. The rhythms of birth and death are not to be construed '... as the definite beginning and end of existence but rather only as "crossings" in an eternal continuum of existence ...' (Shelton 1968, p. 162). This crossing or interpenetration of the visible and invisible world means that:

the land of the living is not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There is coming and going between them, especially at festivals and when an old man dies, because an old man is very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death is a series of transition rites which brings him nearer and nearer to his ancestors (Achebe 1978, p. 85).

These transition rites could be viewed as man's continuous dying, which issue forth in the series of initiations that punctuate his life. Initiation is an aspect, therefore, of Igbo anticipation of death. This being so, death becomes a phenomenon of life, which thereby enters the Igbo existential and ontological being.

5.2 *Death as a Necessity*

Not only is death for the Igbo merely a phenomenon of life; it is more importantly a necessity. '*Onwu bu ugwo madu ji*' ('Death is a debt which man owes'). It is a debt which remains continually 'outstanding'. This need not lead the Igbo to despair and fear. Rather, it calls for an effort to reflect on the meaning of existence. The truth is that 'death ... enjoys the incontestable advantage over life in that it is necessary, it was not inevitable that life be given, but as soon as it appeared, death had to follow' (Zahan 1979, p. 36). While death is a necessity, life itself is a possibility. This suggests the Heideggerian claim that death is a possibility based on the thesis that death is a phenomenon of life.

5.2.1 *The Death of a Young Man*

A qualification must be made at this point. The Igbo ascribe necessity to death as it pertains to old age. Such a death is viewed as *onwu-chi* (death which is destined by one's *chi*, the god in every man). *Onwu-chi*, which intimates the inevitability of death, makes possible man's entry into his or her ancestral dwelling. Without *onwu-chi* the Igbo can neither join the ancestors nor attain authentic being. The death of a young man does not carry this same necessity and remains enigmatic.

By definition a young man has not yet fully achieved his social status and individuation. Death does not change a man's individuation or social status because the craving for individual status or achievement is related to authentic existence and is purposefully significant.

The Igbo look forward to the next world as being much the same as this ... They picture life there to be exactly as it is in this world. The ground there is just the same as it is here;

the earth is similar ... People in spirit land have their ordinary occupations, the farmer his farm ... The king remains king ... (Leonard 1968, pp. 185–186).

5.2.2 The Ancestral Dwelling Place

The earthbound nature of death is a symbol and, as such, is meaningful when viewed from the Igbo holistic thinking which tends to meld matter and spirit, the visible and the invisible. Death neither signals a dismantling of a man's being nor does it suggest an 'end'. Instead it represents one's engagement in 'the other beginning', which in itself is authentic being, the ancestral dwelling. This is because the young man does not inherit authentic existence, ancestorship. Rather he earns it by continuously creating and affirming himself. This affirmation of the self, which *chi* makes possible, finds expression in the individual's effort to achieve authentic being. Becoming an ancestor is the dream and longing of every Igbo from his youth onwards; his existential striving is geared toward reaching this goal. Wholeness or authentic being depends on the Igbo being granted induction into the ancestral dwelling place which is made possible and preceded by individual achievement. Not everyone attains this status.

Not just anyone can become an ancestor. The society of the living 'directs' towards this 'paradise' only those dead who satisfy certain well-defined conditions ... The ancestor is, first of all, a man who has reached a great age and who has acquired along with longevity a profound experience of people and things. He is thus distinguished from people less advanced in age and whose credulity and inexperience in life classify them with children; the latter are usually not given an elaborate funeral and are never the focus of a cult (Zahan 1979, p. 49).

5.3 *Death as the 'Fullness of Life'*

The mythic state of being with one's ancestors opens the Igbo ontologically to a conception of death as an opening to authenticity. This is similar to Heidegger's perspective in which death is linked to authentic existence as well. For him an individual becomes authentic to the extent to which he knows that death is a part of his being and in interiorizing the inevitability of death he realizes 'freedom-towards-death' (*Freiheit zum Tode*). Similarly, but from a different thought world, the Igbo accept death because it provides access to 'fullness of life' in the ancestral dwelling-place.

The Igbo do not deny death. It permeates the entire fabric of life itself. Understanding death, the Igbo hermeneutics of death, leads to thinking about life because it is grounded in the dialectic between life and death.

6. IGBO HERMENEUTICS OF DEATH

Death and life belong together. This place where death enters life is the region of 'existential possibility'. What follows is an Igbo interpretation of death within the framework of anticipation, eschatology and time.

6.1 Anticipation

The inevitability of death and its 'this-worldliness' evokes in the Igbo a sense of anticipation and the need to prepare for its eventuality. Tying death to authentic existence through the ancestral status enables the Igbo to overcome the fear which normally attends death. Heidegger connected death's anticipation to anxiety and conscience. The Igbo who is 'advancing-towards-death' enjoys certain presentiments and various symbols of initiation into it which represent very different ontological possibilities of death than those of Heidegger. Death becomes 'alive' in an Igbo. It is in this way that the Igbo accepts the inevitability of death.

6.1.1 Presentiments

By presentiment understood as an Igbo phenomenon of anticipation what is meant has to do with certain signs gesturing towards the imminence of death. These portents find expression in the appearance of certain birds, such as the owl, whose cry presages death. The Igbo associate floods, shooting stars or comets with the death of a king or noble. '*Onwu ama eze*' ('death does not recognize a king') is a saying which means that death does not discriminate between persons and belongs to all without exception.

6.1.2 Initiations

Different existential phases are situated between life and death. Initiation (*ikpobata*, i.e. 'letting in'), which begins at birth, reaches its 'wholeness' at death – the initiation of all initiations. Initiation as a process involves a symbolic dying and rising. Initiation for Igbos punctuates life itself; man is 'let-in' at crucial moments. These include the naming ceremony (*igo aha*), puberty, age-grade (*ogbo*), and masquerade society. Every initiation evokes a sense of dying or death. As an anticipation of death an initiation ritually imitates death and serves as an introduction to a new mode of being. In other words, an initiation is a symbolic death: '... any passage from one mode of being to another implies necessarily a symbolic act of dying' (Eliade 1976, p. 38). The initiation into the masquerade society (*otum mmanwu*, i.e. the incarnate dead) is the clearest instance of this nexus.

Initiation into the *mmanwu* cult, which sometimes involves elaborate ordeals of various types and magnitudes, is a rite of symbolic death. Following it the Igbo emerges with vitality and knowledge of the 'world of the dead'. By going beyond himself and his world the man reaches his 'wholeness', and in some sense abolishes his natural humanity.

Initiation is accomplished and marks the death of the old man and the resurrection of a new being. This is what constitutes, strictly speaking, man's passage to knowledge. Thus, the human being goes beyond himself insofar as he acquires a new vision of himself (Zahan 1979, p. 54).

By anticipating death in this way an Igbo male transcends himself and overcomes his terror of death. It is then that he becomes an authentic being. From Heidegger's perspective man's authentic existence and wholeness depend on the extent to which he

acknowledges his death or that death belongs to his being. The Igbo lends himself to such genuine being in the act of initiation which brings to man an awareness of himself as mortal.

6.1.3 Preparedness

Beneath presentiment and initiation is the Igbo concern for preparedness for and anticipation of death. These arouse within him or her an ontological sense of death. The interplay of life and death within the framework of anticipation

... discloses a nostalgia and, perhaps, a secret hope of attaining a level of meaning, where both (life and death) reveal themselves as aspects or dialectical stages of one ultimate reality' (Eliade 1976, p. 42).

6.2 *Eschatology and Time*

Evoking an eternal return the funeral rites and rituals of the Igbo, imbued as they are with eschatological symbols, make possible 'the other beginning', the new life. This expresses itself in the Igbo version of reincarnation (*ilo uwa*), which Nietzsche might describe as an overcoming of 'the spirit of revenge' (Nietzsche 1958, p. 252).

6.2.1 Igbo Notions of Time

Like other Igbo phenomena time can only be understood within the framework of existential concern for life itself. Outside of the traditional and cultural milieu of the Igbo time does not exist. The Igbo knows time only as it is constituted by event. Time does not preexist the Igbo nor vice versa; the Igbo is always contemporaneous with time. Only in this way is time meaningful.

Instead of the onward march of time to the infinite (a linear conception of time), the Igbo speak about the passage of life from one level to another, from birth ... to death and re-birth. In this vital concept of time or reality, the depth of lived experience replaces the abstract precision of impersonal, scientific time; and this depth of lived experience is a field of existential concern. Time, in Igbo culture, is a totality of living which becomes deeper and richer with age and experience (Anyanwu 1984, p. 93).

6.2.2 Igbo Notions of Finitude

Igbo thinking about time is rooted in finitude. An Igbo concerns himself or herself with the immediate rather than the distant past, present or future. Rather than giving priority to the future, where successive links through birth occur, the Igbo's inclination is towards the past. The past is to the Igbo what the future is to Heidegger in *Being and Time*.

Being oriented towards the past, the African finds the justification and meaning of his actions not in the future but in time already elapsed. His reasoning is thus 'regressive': 'I do this because my ancestors did it.' The profound and necessary connection between present activity and the past thus appears. The aim is to trace the present from the past and thereby to justify it (Zahan 1979, p. 47).

It has been argued that the Igbo does not conceive of the future because he thinks only of something which he is able to experience. The future falls outside of man's experienced life and is not the preoccupation of the Igbo. This position is belied however by the technique of the diviner known as 'projecting to the future' which is employed to interpret reality.

What is clear is that Igbo eschatology does not have a linear, western notion of time with a definite past, present and infinite future. Igbo time is 'cyclical' or, perhaps better, relational. Man's life marks an ontological rhythm of birth and death,

which are not to be considered as the definite beginning and end of existence but rather only as "crossing" in an eternal continuum of existence which is ... dynamic (Shelton 1968, p. 165).

6.2.3 Igbo Women and Time

Within the context of the three dimensions of time, the woman's role as a mother becomes significant. Living in the present, she immerses herself both in the past and the future simultaneously. Because a woman gives birth to a child, who the Igbo conceive of as one of their dead ancestors, she is a link between the past and the future. Thus, a woman is 'the crossroad where future and past, death and life intersect' (Zahan 1979, p. 45).

6.3 Igbo Eschatology as 'Overcoming'

Underlying the Igbo thinking regarding eschatology is the idea of 'overcoming', the arresting of time within the dialectical play of life and death. Igbo eschatology evokes a synthesis of life and death. 'Overcoming' is possible within the framework of a ritual. Transcending time – overcoming the temporal terrain – enables the Igbo to enter the domain of the sacred or the mythical.

Entering the terrain of the sacred, 'the other beginning', through a ritual, the Igbo transcends the realm of the profane, where time holds sway. Only then is he able to dwell in the region of authentic time, the domain of sacred and mythical time. This can only be realized within a ritual setting. Within such a context the three dimensions of time, past, present and future, coalesce. As a historical being the Igbo finds himself thrown into time, where death marks an end and his destruction. Eschatology, however, holds the promise of redemption, and the overcoming of the 'spirit of revenge' which is an Igbo metaphor for time.

From the Igbo eschatological perspective, death is not an end in which time evokes terror and limitation of man. Rather it is now an initiation into a new terrain and another beginning. It is an 'eternal return' to a primordial and authentic time, the time of origin. It is obviously an overcoming of profane time. *Da-sein* does not 'die' to the extent in which it anchors this time of origin in temporality. Thus the Igbo continually recover primordial time within the framework of the eschatological, mortuary rite known as *ikwa ozu*.

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