

## **The Problem of Reincarnation and the Belief in Ancestral Word**

**Toluwalase Ajayi Ph.D.**

Department of Philosophy Faculty of Arts  
Olabisi Onabanjo University  
Ago – Iwoye, Ogun-Stat  
Nigeria. West Africa

### **Abstract**

*The study investigates the issue of reincarnation in the metaphysical concept of African Philosophy. It is also an attempt to examine the problem of reincarnation and the belief in ancestral world. The paper points out that the belief in reincarnation can coexist with the belief in ancestral world without contradiction. The doctrine of rebirth, reincarnation 'Samsara' is closely linked with the doctrine of Karma in Hinduism. The paper argues that men are reborn and come back into this world several times and continue to come back until they have sufficiently paid for all their past misdeeds and have purified themselves, before their souls are released to go to the spiritual world, and stop coming back to this world. We agree with Harry Sawyer in his book titled "God: Ancestors or Creator", that man's destiny is never fulfilled in the first trip, hence a rebirth or reincarnation takes place to give the individual succeeding chance or chances to fulfill his original destiny.*

### **Introduction**

Millions of people throughout recorded history have believed in reincarnation. Those who do not believe in it are apt to think that those who do are indulging in wishful thinking. The question now is: Can a belief in reincarnation be expressed coherently or not? As soon as we attempt to confront this question, however we are faced with the fact that the belief has been expressed in many forms, some of which may contain confusions, and others not. Many of those who believe there is an afterlife would unhesitatingly identify the doctrine of immortality of the soul as the version of this belief which they espouse. It has two implications. First, it implies the dualistic view that people are composite beings, consisting of an immaterial soul and a physical body. Second, it implies that the immaterial soul is the real person, and the body is merely his temporary residence. Belief in the immortality of the soul is the first step in the doctrine of reincarnation. This is because a soul has to be immortal to qualify to reincarnate, while the doctrine of reincarnation is metaphysico-moral because one's moral probity is believed to be a function of what material form one's soul will take in a reincarnation. That of immortality is purely a religious one (Momoh, 1996:65). Even though human bodies disintegrate after death, reincarnation is automatic, it obeys spiritual causal laws.

### **Nature of Reincarnation**

Reincarnation can be defined as the rebirth of a dead individual. The first pre-condition for reincarnation is the death of a reincarnated person (Oluwole, 1995:42). It also means successive animation of different human bodies by one human mind. (Geach, 1960:1). In African especially the Yoruba there is the belief that it is not the entire spirit of the deceased that reincarnates in a new baby but some of his spiritual qualities, this because if we say that the whole spirit of the dead father or mother is reborn, it could not at the same time reincarnate and still remain in the ancestral world. But rather, it is the spiritual that remains in the ancestral world, while features of it are reborn in one several children. This is often justified on the basis that there are three different facets of human personality. While a particular facet transforms into an ancestral spirit, another goes to the spirit world, and the remaining one reincarnates or gets born again. To this end Azenabor writes: We understand that the ancestors in the ancestral world are those that have completed their 14 times of reincarnating processes and now stay permanently in the ancestral world. While the reincarnating ancestors are those still to complete their 14 times reincarnating processes.

In this explanation there is also the idea of family continuity that the bond of family relationship never breaks. It continues to manifest in several sequences of offspring's (1996:365). There is the belief of the Yoruba elders that the ancestors reincarnate, they illustrated their claim through memory transfer, and this is a situation whereby a child recounts the life history of an ancestor who died long before he was born. Even though critics have argued that a child could possess a mysterious power through which he discovers this, but this could not be the case in all situations. The Yoruba doctrine of 'Abiku' (born to die children) and family resemblance have also been justified as the basis of the belief in reincarnation. The joy of the 'Abiku' is to migrate from womb to womb and to die either as babies or an important occasion. In an attempt to put an end to the sorrow that 'Abiku' create, the ears, fingers, legs, upper lips may be amputated. A belief in reincarnation can be justified on the basis that such children are born with one deformity or the other. How could a living man be rightly identifiable with a man who previously died? Absence of a birthmark, different fingerprints would disapprove personal identity. It seems that we cannot rightly identify a man living again with a man who died unless material conditions of identity are fulfilled. There must be some one or two relation of material continuity between the old body and the new (Penelhum, 1973:18). Hence, why should we worry about material continuity? Would not mental continuity be both necessary and sufficient? Necessary but not sufficient because for example supposing the claimant knows all the things he ought to know, but medical evidence about scars and old fractures indicates that he cannot be the man. If memory is not enough for personal identity, if a man's living again does involve some bodily as well as mental continuity with the man who lived formerly, then we may fairly call his new bodily life a reincarnation. Talking about family resemblance we can say that it is not in all cases that the traditional African could justify in their view of family resemblance as an evidence of the belief in reincarnation, because we all know that children do resemble their dead ancestors, this can be supported from the Yoruba proverbs "Eni bi ni la njo" i.e. man normally resembles his progenitor. Even though Carter argues that: Putatively, reincarnated person often display skills and talents, that are claimed to have been inherited from former reincarnations. They often adopt pattern of behaviors that would have been natural for the persons they claim earlier to have been. They also claim to know things that could, presumably, not have been discovered by them in their present life. Such circumstances generally contribute much of the popular interest surrounding reincarnation stories (1977:57).

But the truth of the matter is that there is a difference between similar behavior patterns and similar identification marks. We have seen a situation whereby people so much resemble one another, behave the same way and they are not reincarnation of one another. It had also been argued that the story of Karma and reincarnation are untestable because of technical difficulties (Sharma, 2015:148). If we say that it is precisely the responsibility of the Karma theory to convince us that rebirth takes place at all, that there are many Karmic residues, for examples the parallel complaint may be recorded against the physicist who postulates unobservable micro particles. In both cases what is it to be explained is observable in two cases that the explanation involved postulation of unobservable. Meanwhile this can be a problem but we know that technological advances may in time make possible testing of both types of theories, if we build bigger and better microscopes, or find theoretical ways of controlling the effects of quantum jump jumps or indeterminacy, in the same vein we may eventually discover ways of identifying Karmic residues and also of re-identifying them in another body at a later time. However one of the strongest claims of the traditional African in support of reincarnation is divination, this happens when the parents of the new born baby consults a diviner to ascertain which ancestors has been born. This method also rules out the problem of untestability of Karma and reincarnation. In Hinduism the concept 'Samsara' means rebirth or reincarnation. At the point of death the soul leave the body to inhabit another body in accordance with Karma. Hence, coming back to this world means one has not yet sufficiently purified oneself from all one's misdeeds; one is not fit to go to Brahman. To Hinduism one's lifetime is too short to accomplish such a task, hence one need to undergo innumerable births.

### ***Basis for Reincarnation***

One life on earth is a mixture of joy and sorrows. There are indeed many pleasures of life, and also many creatures that have a good share of them. The central theme of the doctrine of Karma and reincarnation is that whatever you sow you will reap, the law of action reaction, the law of cause and effect., that is whatever action is done by an individual leaves behind for him joy or sorrow in the future. Thus, when the fruits of the action are such that they cannot be enjoyed in the present life, the individual has to take another birth as a man or any other being in order to suffer them.

Everything a person does is a boomerang which will surely bounce back on him. There is nothing like forgiveness whereby a person will do evil, and then ask for forgiveness, the doctrine of Karma rules out the idea of forgiveness. It is better not to do evil than to do it and expect that you will not reap what you sown. That would be an illusion (Omoregbe, 2004:23). Behind every evil suffered there lies a previous evil deed which accounts for it and for which it is retribution. This is why the Yoruba elders hold certain misfortunes that happen at birth is due to specific punishment for forgotten misdeed in the previous life. The law of Karma does not allow anybody to suffer innocently; it does not allow anything to happen to a person if he does not deserve it by his previous misdeeds. This is why a Hindu does not complain about anything that happens to him. He does not ask why me? Why should such a thing happen to me? He knows that he is now reaping what he sowed in the past, either in this present existence or in his previous existence. He knows that he is not suffering innocently or undeservedly, the law of Karma does not allow such a thing to happen, Karma is inexorable, infallible and unailing (Omoregbe, 2004: 24). The doctrine of Karma is central to Indian philosophical schools of Hinduism, here there is nothing like freedom, when a man thinks that he freely decides to do certain things he is not aware that certain forces beyond his control made him to take that decision. In the same vein Spinoza observed that belief in human freedom and claims is due to inadequate knowledge and ignorance, men think themselves free in as much as they are conscious of their volitions and desires, and because they are ignorant of the cause by which they are led to wish and desires. However, everything about man, his thoughts, his desires, his decisions, actions and his whole life, are all controlled by natural forces. Man can never escape pleasure or pain because his body, which is a product of his good or bad actions, is by nature transient. After pleasure pain, and after pain pleasure, creatures cannot escape these two; they are intimately associated as water and mud. In traditional Africa, there is a code of conduct in the form of societal norms entrenched in the traditional thought and practice of the people. Man is brought up, trained and nourished with acceptable character. Every action whether good or bad, must have its result for the doer. If in the present life a man is on the whole good, his next existence is better by just so much as his good deeds. He becomes a great and noble man, or a king, conversely, a wicked man is reborn as a person of low position or as an animal. Hence, death is not the end of life; it is only a means where the present earthly existence is changed for another. Man must strive to do good generally to his fellow men and he would be rewarded accordingly, this leads us to what is called “Iwa” (character) in Yoruba. “I wa-rere” is a good character “Iwa buruku” is a bad character. Through myths, legends and other short stories, right attitudes are regularly inculcated into the youths both at the family level and level of the community at large. Societal facts are not isolated from philosophy, that is, the beliefs and ideas that people hold about themselves, their world and their goals in life. Nobody can live without some conscious or unconscious working assumptions about the nature of the universe and man’s place in the world. As long as people want to live, to live well and even to live better, they must develop some kind of philosophy that will enable them to distinguish between the relevant and the irrelevant, the valuable and the valueless (Anyanwu, 1983:421). Every individual can act as his own philosopher as long as he tries to know carefully what makes life worth living and tries to justify the goals he chooses.

### ***Conclusion***

We may therefore conclude that the doctrine of Karma and rebirth offers a philosophically sound solution to the problem of evil. But even if our claim is correct we may still left with a philosophical problem of evil in relation to God. How is God to be related to Karma? If the doctrine of Karma is accepted as an adequate explanation of the problem of evil, and then it is philosophically plausible to accept atheism as well. If God may cause evil under the doctrine of Karma, if we accept the existence of God then He allows it to exist. Evil has permanently raised doubts about God’s existence. Many philosophers have claimed that given evil, that there are conclusive grounds for denying that God exist. If the claim is justified, theism and in fact particularly the Christianity must be based on a fallacy. As far as truth is concern they should disappear, and every belief and practice that suppose them should disappear these are the consequences which would affect profoundly the way many people live. If God is accepted as just and as the supervisor of the operation of Karma, then the problem in relation to God can still be kept at bay. But God becomes implicated in Karmic evil and the problem of evil if He is involved in the process of creation for the purpose of enabling the Karmic destinies of the various being to be walked out.

## References

- Anyanwu, K.C.(1988): *The African Experience in the American Market*, New York: Exposition Press.
- Azenabor, Godwin (1996): “Reincarnation in an African Metaphysics” in Jim Unah (ed.) *Metaphysics, Phenomenology and African Philosophy*, Ibadan: Hope Publishers.
- Carter, Codell (1977): “Reincarnation and Personal Identity”, *Second Order : An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.Vi, No.1
- Geach, Peter (1969): *Reincarnation in God and the Soul*, New York: Schocken Book Inc.
- Momoh, Campell (1996): “Godlessness in Ancient African Metaphysics” in *Journal of Philosophy and Development* Vol.2 No.1&2.
- Oluwole, Sophie (1995): *Witchcraft Reincarnation and the Godhead*, Lagos: Excel Publishers.
- Omogbe, Joseph (2004): *A Comparative Analysis of Asian and Western Philosophies*, Lagos: Joja Press.
- Penelhum, Terence (1973): *Immortality*, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Sawyer, Harry (1970): *God: Ancestor or Creator?* London: Longman Group Ltd.
- Sharma, Arvind (2015): *A Hindu Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion*, London: Macmillan Press.