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**Knowledge, Belief and Justification of the African
Conception of Reincarnation**

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Abstract

The study examines the epistemic justification of reincarnation in African Philosophy. It is also an attempt to investigate the problem of reincarnation and the belief in the ancestral world. It deploys the critical tool of epistemic justification to determine the conditions that render the African conception of reincarnation defensible. Epistemic justification is a philosophical theory aimed at investigating the extent to which a person's beliefs are knowledge-based and therefore worth holding. The paper defends the thesis that African idea of reincarnation is justifiable and that belief in reincarnation can coexist with the belief in the ancestral world without contradiction. Humans are reborn and come back into this world several times until they have sufficiently paid for all their past misdeeds and purified themselves, before their souls are released to go to the ancestral world. A person's destiny is never fulfilled in the first trip; hence a rebirth or reincarnation takes place to give the individual a succeeding chance or chances to fulfill his or her original destiny.

Keywords

Belief, Evidence, justification, knowledge, Reincarnation,

Introduction

Reincarnation has been an issue of academic interest, especially in African countries. One would find lively discussions, for example, among the Yoruba, Igbo and Nupe of Nigeria, Akamba of Kenya, Akan of Ghana, Lango of Uganda, Luo of Zambia, and Ndebele of Zimbabwe. Millions of people throughout recorded history have believed in reincarnation. The idea is found among some Greek philosophers and is known to have existed in some ancient religions such as Druidism, and later on, Spiritism, Theosophy and Eckankar. It is also found in primal societies around the world, in places such as Africa, North America and Australia.¹

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 justified epistemically 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 right version of this belief. 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 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.² Even though human bodies disintegrate after death, reincarnation is automatic, and it obeys spiritual causal laws. The paper explores the evidence of memory, family resemblance, birth marks for the belief in our epistemic justification of reincarnation.

¹Obeyesekere Gananath, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth*, (California: University of California Press 2020) p.15.

² Campbell Momoh, "Godlessness in Ancient African Metaphysics", *Journal of Philosophy and Development*, 2 (1&2), 1996, p. 65.

Nature of Epistemic Justification

Epistemology is the technical term for the theory of knowledge; it is a branch of philosophy concerned with nature, possibility, source, scope and limits of knowledge. Justification is crucial for avoiding error and increasing our state of knowledge. The theory of justification is a part of epistemology that attempts to determine the standards (of knowledge) required for the defense of the beliefs we hold. In the context of this paper, we can say justification is the reason why we hold a belief in reincarnation. The theory of justification is influenced by the definition of knowledge as 'justified true belief.' Epistemology is always linked to ontology-assumptions about the state of being. It asks: what is the nature of reality? When a claim is in doubt, justification can be used to support the claim and reduce or remove the doubt. Knowledge would not be possible without belief justification. If I did not have the kind of belief I do – if, for instance, I were wearing dark sunglasses and could not tell the difference between a green field and a smoothly ploughed one that is really an earthen brown – then on the basis of what I now see, I would not know that there is a green field before me. To see how knowledge fits into the picture so far sketched, consider two points. First, justified belief is important because at least the typical things we know we also justifiably believe on the same basis that grounds our knowing them. Second, much of what we justifiably believe we also know.³

Africans believe that reincarnation usually occurs within the same immediate or extended family. The reincarnated person is usually identified by means of birthmarks, statement a child makes when it becomes able to speak, and behavioral resemblances between the child and the deceased person presumably reincarnated.

However, an oracle is usually consulted to confirm identification. It is believed that the deceased inhabit a discarnate realm. The Nigerian version of the African conception of reincarnation includes belief in a group of souls called *ogbanje* who are born, die in early life and are reborn in the same family often repeatedly.⁴ Others include those who died accidental deaths, committed suicide, or died prematurely. Reincarnation cannot be partial or apparent; either it is, or it is not. Granted the truth of the

³ Robert Audi, *A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, (New York: Routledge and Kegan 2003), p.20.

⁴ G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, (London: Francass and Company,1966) , P. 121.

continual existence thesis, Onyewuenye is of the opinion that “the description of some African scholars of the ‘return’ of the living dead as reincarnation is due to the influence of western anthropologists and administrators who had earlier labeled it as such”.⁵ He regards such a conception as foreign and blatantly unchristian. But the truth is that reincarnation is not supposed to be part of Christian doctrine; it is an African religious idea.

Africans strongly believe that in reincarnation the dead actually came back to give guidance to the living or to prove that they still exist. Reincarnation is come back again after death to live. The Yoruba people of Nigeria also believe that at death a soul or personality passes into a realm of discarnate being. The three widely held beliefs are that (1) status loses no importance in the discarnate realm; they are more concerned about their status in the discarnate realm than they are about the fact of dying. (2) The discarnate realm is regarded as a joyless limbo from which the discarnate soul, with a few exceptions are eager to return to terrestrial life, they therefore consider terrestrial life to be desirable, and they have no aspiration to stop being reborn, this attitude is word affirming not world renouncing. (3) The ceremony of the second burial of a deceased person influences the condition of the discarnate person by helping them to achieve tranquility in the discarnate realm and a satisfactory positioning for reincarnation. “If this rite is not properly conducted, the deceased person’s spirit may become displeased and bring misfortune to the negligent offspring.”⁶ The second burial takes place within a week, a year or more in *Igbo* in Nigeria, this burial can be a costly affair because of the animal sacrifices.⁷ In traditional Nigeria it is believed that persons who die young will reincarnate more quickly than those who die at an older age. Also, bargain made before reincarnating with one’s personal god (*ori*) may result in more favorable opportunities for advancement in social status in the next life. The newborn infant is usually examined for birth marks or birth defects; this may be found to correspond with marks or mutilations that a deceased person had on his or her body. If the marks on the body correspond with sufficient closeness to wounds or other marks on the body of the deceased, this observation may settle the baby’s identification immediately.

⁵Innocent Onyewuenye, *African Belief in Reincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal*, Enugu: Snaap Press, 1996), p.16.

⁶ Francis Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press. 1970), p.17.

⁷ Basden, *op.cit.*, p. 121.

Family can also consult an oracle specializing in identifying the correct previous personality; this is usually done, when someone holds a hen's egg firmly in his or her hand while a list of deceased persons is recited. When the recitation gets to the name of the person who has reincarnated in the infant's body, the eggs shatters. The consultation take place when the infant is about a month old.⁸Sometimes the child may show behavioral resemblance to that of a particular deceased person, this can lead to the identification of the reincarnated person. The child can also make statements that indicate memories of the possessions owned by a deceased person or of events in that person's life. This usually occurs when the child learns to speak. The Yoruba tribe of Nigeria also attaches importance to naming ceremony, they give children several names, which indicate the identification of the person who reincarnated, e.g. my father is back means *Babatunde*, my mother is back means *Yetunde*, my child is back means *Omobowale*. Other names express thanks for the birth of a child or disappointment, especially if a woman is expecting a male child, but gave birth to a female child. In Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, an *Ogbanje* child lives only a few months or years and then dies. Some *Ogbanje* dies suddenly without any premonitory illness. A single *Ogbanje* may be reborn, die and be reborn in the same family only to die again. The word *Ogbanje* means "to make several trips to and from a place".⁹ It is believed that the *Ogbanje* children take an oath in the discarnate realm to die young in the next life. *Ogbanje* children may make unreasonable demand on their parents, sometimes with a limit or stronger threat as they will die if not given what they ask for. The parents in depression to keep the child alive often accede to such demands. This can lead to favoritism and cause tension among other family members.

Our belief in reincarnation provides us with knowledge. It is something that answers the question— how do you know? If your knowledge is perceptually based, it is plain that the answer to this question is something in support of the known belief to which perception contributes. In general, possessing factual knowledge implies having something available that shows the known proposition to be true. When you possess factual knowledge, the answer to the question: - How do you know?—constitutes what is

⁸ Northcote Thomas, *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria Part1, Law and Custom of the Ibo-Speaking Peoples of Ibo of the Awka Neighbourhood, South Nigeria*, (New York: Negro University Press, 2020), p.30.

⁹ John Noon, "A Preliminary Examination of the Death Concepts of the Ibo" *American Anthropologists* XLIV (6), 1942, p.641.

called your epistemic justification. Epistemic justification is the sort of justification that is a necessary condition for factual knowledge. Our epistemic justification of reincarnation is the evidence of the truth of the proposition.

The evidence one has at a time is restricted to what is both available and acceptable. One might say instead that everything that is available is part of the evidence one has, but that what this body of evidence makes rational or justified depends upon the epistemic status of that evidence. On this view, acceptability determines not what counts as evidence possessed but rather what is made rational or justified by the evidence possessed.¹⁰ Justification has long been considered a necessary condition of knowledge. Justification is required to distinguish knowledge from a guess that happens to be right, a justified belief is one supported by evidence, by reasons. The narrower question is, can we be justified in believing in reincarnation without knowing that one is justified? The opposing answers to this question bring out two rival conceptions of justification and of the nature of epistemological principles. To the externalist, being justified means being in a position to know. Knowledge differs from a lucky guess in that the knower stands in the appropriate relationship to the fact which is known, it is this relationship that makes a belief non accidental, non arbitrary, and hence justified. Whether or not one is in this relationship is a matter of fact, it does not depend on the knowledge of one's cognitive situation. Epistemological principles identify the nature of the appropriate relationship between the person's cognitive state and the world, and thus the necessary conditions for justification. Our cognitive state must satisfy these conditions. This may occur without the reflective knowledge that one has satisfied them.

Justifying Evidence and Beliefs in Reincarnation

Knowledge acquisition is central to the being of the human person. The desire to know is innate in every human being. Every day we make claim to certain knowledge. We go as far as arguing for the thing we claim to know. But the questions are: What actually do we know? Is knowledge relative or subjective? Can there be absolute claim to knowledge? These and many more form the subject matter of epistemology.

¹⁰ Earl Conee, and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*, (Oxford: Oxford: University Press, 2004), p.167.

The belief in reincarnation has been in existence for quiet sometimelow, and appears to be gaining ground in African philosophy. The paper examines the justifying evidence of the values and beliefs of the African people in reincarnation. Reincarnation is a basic concept that has attracted the attention of many thinkers, including ancient philosophers; this is due to the fact that the doctrine is directly connected with such enduring but perplexing questions as the nature of a person, life and death which humans have always been interested in. Reincarnation has been defined as “the passage of the soul from one body to another usually of the same species,¹¹but not all forms of reincarnation. The Buddhist does not believe in the existence of the soul, even though they teach reincarnation. Reincarnation is simply the belief that a person who lives on earth can be reborn. The element involved here is understood differently depending on one’s orientation. There are many pieces of epistemic evidence to justify African belief in reincarnation, these include, (1) Family resemblances and behavioral pattern: some babies resemble their departed ancestors so much that it may seem obvious that such ancestors reincarnated that particular baby. For example, the baby will have birth marks and scars that are peculiar to the ancestor who is believed to have reincarnated the baby. On the other hand some babies exhibit certain character traits of an ancestor in forms of skills, talent and behavior. (2) Memory transfer: There are cases where children recount the history of an ancestor, their actions and incidents that happened for a long time before their birth. Some reincarnated children can find certain things hidden by them in their previous life. (3) Divination: In some family when a child is born, the parents or any of the child’s relation will consult a diviner to ascertain which of the families ancestor has reincarnated. It is this knowledge of the incarnate person that will enable the parents to know how to treat or handle the child. This will also determine the name given to the baby. With the increase in the popularity of reincarnation, it appears that there is the need for proper examination of the justification of the belief.

Reincarnation can be defined as the rebirth of a dead individual. The first pre-condition for reincarnation is the death of a reincarnated person.¹² It also means successive animation of

¹¹ Thomas, *Op.cit.*, p. 70.

¹² Sophie Oluwole, *Witchcraft Reincarnation and the Godhead*, (Lagos: Excel Publishers, 1995), p.42.

different human bodies by one human mind.¹³ Here, the soul returns after death to live in a new body. The Igbo “word for reincarnation is “ilo uwa,” which means a return to the world., They believe that a person returning to the world, to life after death, exhibits concrete signs of his former person.¹⁴ The Akan people of Ghana speak of reincarnation as essential so that each individual can reach his or her full potential for compassion. It is like a man who dips a bucket in a deep well. The weight of the bucket when lifted up from the well would tell whether it is full of water or not. If it is felt to be light and not full, down goes back the bucket until the weight assures the man the bucket is full. So is the soul’s coming forth and going back into the source. He is not lifted up and taken into service with the source until his bucket is completely filled with good – until the destiny of the soul is fully realized. And then it is a glad home going for the fully integrated soul. The return of a soul to earth is not therefore like a condemned criminal to be hanged, but more like a little child ready to learn more and to do better.¹⁵In Africa especially among the Yoruba tribe 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 is 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 spirit 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, times reincarnating processes. In this explanation there is also the idea of family continuity that the bond of

¹³ Peter Geach, *Reincarnation in God and the Soul*, (New York: Schocken Book Inc. 1969), p.1.

¹⁴ Innocent Asouzu, *The Method and Principles Complimentary Reflection in and Beyond African Philosophy*, (Calabar: University Press, 2004), p. 169.

¹⁵ J.B. Danquah,, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, (London: Frankcass, 1968), p. 81.

family relationship never breaks. It continues to manifest in several sequences of offspring's.¹⁶

There is the belief among 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, 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 evidential basis of the belief in reincarnation. The joy of the 'Abiku' is to migrate from womb to womb and to die either as babies on an important occasion. The deceased still remain the father and mother who they were before their death in a more powerful and unhampered way over their survivors, "The Yoruba still say Baba mi": my father, or "iyami": my mother when speak of their deceased parent. They speak to bringing the spirit of the deceased into the house, they rarely say that I am going to speak of the spirit of my father, but rather I am going to speak to my father.¹⁷ 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. However, 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 to material continuity between the old body and the new".¹⁸Hence, why should we worry about material continuity? Would not mental continuity be both necessary and sufficient? The answer is that it is necessary but not sufficient because for example, supposing the claimant knows all the things he ought to know, but epistemic evidence about scars and old fractures indicates that he cannot be the man. If memory is not enough for personal identity, but if a man's living again does involve some bodily as well as

¹⁶ Godwin Azenabor, "Reincarnation in an African Metaphysics", Jim Unah (ed.) *Metaphysics, Phenomenology and African Philosophy*, (Ibadan: Hope Publishers, 1996), p. 365.

¹⁷ Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longman, 1962), p.192.

¹⁸ Terence Penelhum, *Immortality*, (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1973), p.18.

mental continuity with the man who lived formerly, then we may fairly call his new bodily life a reincarnation. Talking about family resemblance, at birth babies are carefully examined to identify any resemblance they bear to past parents. The first name of the child indicates this: father has come back or mother has returned. The Yoruba tribe of Nigeria calls the child who is born immediately after the death of the grandfather, *Babatunde* – father has returned and the girl, *Yetunde* – mother has returned. The Igbo tribe of Nigeria gives names such as *nne-na*: the mother of her father and *nná-nná*: the father of his father. *Nneji*: my bother sister, *nná-ji*: my half brother, half sister. “People pay to the child the same reverence they were accustomed paying to the deceased grandparent”.¹⁹ Children do resemble their dead ancestors, hence, this can be supported from the Yoruba proverbs “Eni bi ni la njo” i.e. man normally resembles his progenitor. 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.²⁰

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.”²¹ 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 example, 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

¹⁹ Onyewuenye, Op.Cit., p.22.

²⁰ Codell Carter, “Reincarnation and Personal Identity”, *Second Order:An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vi (1), 1977, p.57.

²¹ Arvind Sharma, *A Hindu Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion*, (London: Macmillan Press, 2015). p.148.

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. However, one of the strongest claims of the traditional African in support of reincarnation is divination. This happens when a child is born. This method also rules out the problem of untestability of Karma and reincarnation. In Hinduism the parents of the new born baby consults a diviner to ascertain which ancestors have been the concept of 'Samsara' which 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 needs to undergo innumerable births. Our 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 them 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 them. There is nothing like forgiveness whereby a person will do evil, and then asks 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."²² That would be an illusion. 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 tribe of Nigeria holds certain misfortune that happens at birth is due to specific punishment for forgotten misdeed in the previous life. Behind every evil suffered there lay a previous evil deed which accounts for it and for which it are. 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

²² Joseph Omoregbe, *A Comparative Analysis of Asian and Western Philosophies*, (Lagos: Joja Press, 2004), p.23.

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 unfailing."²³ 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. 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. "Iwa-rere" is a good character "Iwa buruku" is a bad character. In traditional Africa, 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, about themselves, their

²³Omogbe, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

world and their goals in life. 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.²⁴ 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

Reincarnation in the African concept is the philosophical or religious belief that the non-physical essence of a living being begins a new life in a different physical form or body after biological death. This occurs when the soul becomes transmigrated into a new infant to live again. The doctrine of rebirth offers a philosophically sound solution to the problem of evil. But even if our claim is correct, we may still be left with a philosophical problem of evil in relation to God. How is God to be related to evil? 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 supports 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 rebirth, then the problem in relation to God can still be kept at bay.

²⁴ K.C. Anyanwu, *The African Experience in the American Market*, (New York: Exposition Press, 1988), p. 421.