

DEATH AND THE CONTINUITY OF EXISTENCE IN IGALA PHILOSOPHY: A METAPHYSICAL ANALYSIS OF LIFE, ANCESTORS AND THE AFTERWORD

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Abstract

Adopting an analytical method, this study explores the concept of death and the continuity of existence within Igala philosophy, examining the metaphysical foundations of life, the role of ancestors, and the afterword in shaping individual and communal existence. Drawing from oral traditions, ethnographic accounts, and philosophical analysis, the research investigates how the Igala conceive the interconnection between the living and the dead, and how ancestral presence influences morality, social cohesion, and the ethical conduct of life. The study highlights the significance of rituals, spiritual beliefs, and communal practices in sustaining existential continuity. It contributes to African philosophical discourse by providing a nuanced understanding of the metaphysical dimensions of life and death among the Igala, emphasizing the integration of metaphysics, ethics, and cultural praxis.

Keywords: Igala philosophy, death, continuity of existence, ancestors, metaphysics.

Introduction

Death is a universal human experience, yet its interpretation and significance vary profoundly across cultures and philosophical traditions. In African thought, death is not merely a cessation of physical life but a transition within a larger metaphysical continuum that encompasses the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born. Among the Igala people of Nigeria, life and death are deeply interconnected phenomena, intricately woven into social, spiritual, and ethical frameworks. Unlike some Western philosophical paradigms, which often perceive death as an absolute end, Igala philosophy understands death as a transformation that preserves the continuity of existence through ancestral influence and communal memory. The Igala perceive life not as an isolated event but as a relational process in which the

living maintains a reciprocal connection with ancestors, who continue to guide, protect, and influence human affairs even after physical demise.

The Igala conception of existence is grounded in metaphysical principles that emphasize the unity of body, soul, and spirit, as well as the interdependence of individuals and the community. Death, in this context, is a critical juncture that allows the individual to transition into the ancestral realm, thus sustaining the cyclical nature of existence. Rituals, rites of passage, and communal practices are central to this philosophical understanding, serving both as mechanisms for social cohesion and as channels through which metaphysical truths about life, death, and the afterword are realized. By mediating between the tangible and intangible dimensions of human experience, these practices underscore the belief that life transcends corporeal boundaries and that the individuals impact continues through communal memory and spiritual legacy.

The study of death and the continuity of existence in Igala philosophy is significant for several reasons. First, it provides insights into a distinctive African worldview, contributing to the broader discourse on African metaphysics and philosophy of life. While much of contemporary philosophical inquiry has been dominated by Western frameworks that prioritize materialism and individualism, the Igala perspective emphasizes relationality, communal responsibility, and the moral significance of ancestral guidance. This presents an alternative understanding of existential questions such as the nature of life, the purpose of human existence, and the ethical obligations owed to both the living and the dead. Second, the study addresses the gap in scholarly literature on the Igala, a relatively under-researched ethnic group within Nigerian and African philosophy. While studies of death and afterlife abound in general African philosophy, there remains a dearth of focused analyses on how the Igala specifically interpret and navigate these existential phenomena.

On the Conceptions of Life and Death in the Igala Worldviews

Thus, across cultures, the conception of life and death reflects fundamental philosophical, religious, and metaphysical commitments. Worldviews provide frameworks through which societies interpret the nature of human existence, the meaning of mortality, and the continuity or cessation of being. While Western philosophical and religious traditions often emphasize a dualistic separation between life and death, many indigenous and non-Western perspectives, such as those found in African cosmologies, view life and death as interconnected phases within a continuous existential process. In African philosophical thought, life is not merely biological existence but a relational and moral reality intertwined with the community and the cosmos. John Mbiti, in *African Religions and Philosophy*, emphasizes that:

The African worldview perceives death not as an absolute end but as a transition to a spiritual phase, where the deceased continue to participate in the life of the community through ancestral presence. The living and the dead are engaged in a reciprocal relationship, where moral behavior in life ensures harmony in both the material and spiritual realms (Mbiti 42–45).

Similarly, E. Bolaji Idowu highlights that:

African traditional religions stress the moral and communal dimensions of life, suggesting that death completes a phase of existence while inaugurating another, thereby maintaining continuity of being and social order (Idowu 89).

Comparatively, Western philosophical traditions, particularly Cartesian dualism, often treat life and death in sharply divided terms, with the body and soul existing as separate substances and death marking a definitive cessation of corporeal existence. However, even within Western thought, debates on the immortality of the soul and posthumous continuity reflect enduring concern with existential persistence. Kwasi Wiredu in his *Philosophy and an African Culture*, contrasts African relational ontology with Western individualistic models, emphasizing that:

In many African worldviews, the ethical and social quality of life determines the nature of existence after death, highlighting the interconnectedness of moral action, spiritual continuity, and communal life (Wiredu 57).

Indigenous perspectives in particular, including Igala and Igbo worldviews, further illustrate that conceptions of life and death are cyclic rather than linear. Death is a passage facilitating the transformation of the individual's essence into the ancestral sphere, and life is understood as preparation for such continuity. Rituals, funerary practices, and naming ceremonies serve both to honor the deceased and to reinforce the philosophical and ethical principles that govern existence, demonstrating that conceptions of life and death are inseparable from social, spiritual, and moral contexts (Egbunu 116–120; Abalaka 45–47).

Thus, across worldviews, conceptions of life and death reflect the interplay of ontology, morality, and cosmology. Indigenous African perspectives challenge purely biological or dualistic interpretations of existence, emphasizing relationality, continuity, and the moral dimensions of life as integral to understanding death. These frameworks provide insight into how societies construct meaning around mortality, ensuring both the persistence of cultural values and the integration of the living and the dead within an enduring cosmic order.

Igala Cultural and Philosophical Context

The Igala people, predominantly located in Kogi State, Nigeria, possess a rich cultural and philosophical heritage that informs their understanding of existence, morality, and the afterlife. Central to Igala thought is the integration of social, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions of life, which are inseparable from communal and ethical obligations. Their philosophy is not abstract but embedded in everyday practices, rituals, and oral traditions that collectively constitute a coherent worldview. As noted by Egbunu:

The Igala people understand existence as a continuous, interconnected flow, where life and death are not separate states but integral phases within a broader cosmic order. Human beings are seen as relational agents whose responsibilities and connections extend beyond mere physical existence, linking ancestors, descendants, and the spiritual realm in an enduring cycle of being (Egbunu 116).

The Igala worldview emphasizes the interconnectedness of the living, the deceased, and the divine. The spiritual realm, including the community of ancestors (*Ibègwu*), plays an active role in influencing daily life, guiding moral conduct, and maintaining societal cohesion.

Individuals are considered both physical and spiritual entities; while the body is temporary, the soul persists and transitions to the ancestral realm after death. Ancestors are venerated not merely as relics of the past but as moral and spiritual agents whose ongoing presence ensures ethical accountability and communal stability (Adama & Suleman 14).

Igala philosophical thought encompasses a rich array of beliefs that link human existence, morality, and the cosmic order, highlighting the significance of reincarnation, moral evaluation, and the fulfillment of communal responsibilities. Reincarnation is particularly important, as it allows the essence of ancestors to return through new births, maintaining continuity across generations and reinforcing relational identity. Naming practices serve as a tangible acknowledgment of this continuity, often reflecting the presence of returning ancestors within the living community. Ritual performances, including ceremonies for birth, initiation, and marriage, alongside burial rites, hold profound metaphysical significance, as they ensure the proper integration of individuals into both social and spiritual realms.

These practices collectively underscore that moral behavior, spiritual continuity, and communal engagement are inseparable.

Ethical conduct in life is therefore central to one's spiritual status and influence in the afterlife, reflecting a worldview in which existence is cyclical, relational, and morally grounded (Abalaka 46).

Overall, the Igala cultural and philosophical context presents a worldview in which life is purposeful, death is transitional, and existence is relational. By integrating ritual, morality, and metaphysical reflection, Igala philosophy provides a framework for understanding human experience as continuous, cyclical, and deeply embedded in communal and cosmic structures, offering an alternative to purely individualistic or dualistic interpretations of life and death.

The Place of Ancestors and Continuity of Existence in the Igala Thought Pattern

In Igala viewpoint, ancestors (*Ibẹgwu*) occupy a central place in both metaphysical and social frameworks, serving as active agents in maintaining the continuity of existence. Death is not conceived as final annihilation but as a transition to a spiritual realm where the individual assumes new roles as an ancestor. The ancestors are believed to engage with the living community, influencing moral behavior, social harmony, and communal decision-making. Their presence ensures that the ethical and spiritual dimensions of life extend beyond physical existence, sustaining continuity across generations (Egbunu 117).

Ancestors in Igala thought are moral and spiritual arbiters. They reward upright conduct and intervene in instances of wrongdoing, such as adultery, theft, or neglect of communal duties. This active engagement illustrates that:

Continuity of existence is not merely an ontological fact but also an ethical reality: the living bear ongoing responsibility toward their ancestors, upholding their memory and honor, while the status and influence of the ancestors themselves are shaped by the ethical conduct, social contributions, and moral fulfillment they achieved during their earthly lives, creating a reciprocal moral and spiritual bond (Adama & Suleman 14).

By linking moral life with spiritual continuity, the Igala worldview reinforces a cyclical conception of existence, in which death transforms rather than terminates life.

The practice of ancestor veneration, through rituals, libations, and commemorative ceremonies, exemplifies this relational philosophy. These rituals serve multiple purposes:

They honor the deceased, ensure safe transition into the ancestral realm, and maintain the interconnectedness of the living and the

dead. Reincarnation further strengthens this continuity, as ancestors are believed to return to the community through new births, reinforcing relational identity and linking past, present, and future generations (Abalaka 46).

Thus, in Igala thought, ancestors (*Ibẹgwu*) are not merely symbolic or ceremonial figures but are considered dynamic and active participants in the moral, spiritual, and social life of the community. Their presence bridges the gap between the living and the dead, ensuring that ethical standards and communal norms are maintained across generations. Ancestors serve as guardians, advisors, and mediators, influencing human behavior and guiding the living toward socially and morally responsible actions.

They embody both the continuity of existence and the principles of ethical governance, reinforcing the idea that human life extends beyond physical death into a relational and spiritual domain. By participating in the affairs of the living, ancestors integrate social, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions into a cohesive philosophical framework, demonstrating that existence is fundamentally interconnected. The Igala understanding of ancestors thus underscores the inseparability of life, death, and communal responsibility, offering a model of existence that is cyclical, relational, and morally grounded, where the living and the dead remain mutually accountable within a continuous cosmic order.

Understanding Death in Igala Cosmology

In Igala cosmology, death is conceptualized not as an ultimate cessation of existence but as a transitional phase in a continuous cycle of life. Unlike Western paradigms that often treat death as a final boundary separating the living from the dead, the Igala worldview situates human existence within an interconnected and cyclical cosmic order. The physical demise of the body (*ẹhẹ*) is only one aspect of human existence; the spiritual component, the soul, continues its journey into the ancestral realm (*ef'ojegwu*), where it maintains active relationships with the living and contributes to communal and cosmic harmony (Egbunu 116).

Death, therefore, is both an ending and a beginning. It terminates earthly existence but inaugurates a new form of being in which the deceased participates as an ancestor (*Ibẹgwu*), influencing moral conduct, social cohesion, and ritual practice.

The transition is facilitated through carefully performed burial rites, libations, and commemorative ceremonies, which ensure the safe passage of the soul into the spiritual realm. Proper observance of these rituals is believed to prevent spiritual unrest and integrate the deceased fully into the community of ancestors (Adama & Suleman 14).

Moral conduct during life significantly affects one's status after death. Individuals who fulfill social and ethical obligations, such as maintaining familial duties and contributing positively to the community, are more likely to achieve honored ancestral status. Conversely, unethical behavior may result in liminality or spiritual unrest, demonstrating the inseparable link between moral life and existential continuity (Mbiti 42–45).

Thus, understanding death in Igala cosmology requires a holistic recognition of life as more than mere biological existence; it is a preparatory phase that shapes and determines continued spiritual existence in the ancestral realm. Life is relational, morally charged, and embedded within communal and cosmic networks, where every action carries consequences for both the present and the afterlife. Death, in this context, is not a rupture but a transition that transforms the individual from a physical being into an ancestral presence (*Ibegwu*) with ongoing influence over the living community. By emphasizing relationality, cyclical continuity, and moral accountability, Igala cosmology demonstrates that human existence is interconnected across generations, and that ethical behavior during life ensures a favorable and active role in the spiritual world. This worldview integrates the social, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions of being, offering an indigenous philosophical framework that portrays existence as enduring, transformative, and inseparably linked to the community, the cosmos, and the spiritual continuum beyond physical death.

The Journey of the Soul

In Igala cosmology, the journey of the soul represents a central metaphysical concept that bridges life, death, and continued existence in the spiritual realm. The human person is understood as comprising both physical and spiritual components: the body (*éhé*) and the soul (*Okaye*). While the body is mortal and returns to the earth after death, the soul persists, embarking on a journey to the ancestral realm (*ef'ojegwu*), where it assumes new roles within the cosmic and communal order (Egbunu 116). This journey is both transformative and relational, as the soul's continuity is maintained through moral conduct, communal responsibilities, and ritual facilitation.

Death is not perceived as termination but as a transition that prepares the soul for integration into the spiritual community of ancestors.

Rituals, including burial ceremonies, libations, and commemorative observances, play a vital role in facilitating this passage. Proper performance of these rites ensures the soul's smooth transition, preventing spiritual unrest and enabling continued interaction with the living community (Adama & Suleman 14).

Ancestors (*Ibẹgwu*) are morally and spiritually active, providing guidance, protection, and oversight, reflecting a worldview in which life and death are interconnected.

Furthermore:

The concept of reincarnation in Igala belief strengthens the idea of the soul's cyclical journey. Souls may return through new births, and naming practices often signify this continuity, linking past, present, and future generations and reinforcing relational identity across lifetimes (Abalaka 46).

The moral quality of one's earthly life significantly determines the nature of existence in the afterlife; ethically upright individuals achieve honored ancestral status, while transgressors may face liminality or spiritual punishment. Overall, the Igala understanding of the journey of the soul illustrates a metaphysical framework that emphasizes continuity, ethical accountability, and relational existence. It portrays life and death as phases of a single, ongoing process, highlighting the enduring, transformative, and interconnected nature of human existence within both the physical and spiritual realms.

Ancestral Presence and Influence

In Igala cosmology, ancestors (*Ibẹgwu*) occupy a central and dynamic role, bridging the spiritual and material realms while ensuring the continuity of communal life and moral order. The Igala conceive of existence as relational, where life, death, and the spiritual realm form an interconnected continuum. Ancestors are not passive remnants of the past but active participants who influence the lives of the living, guide moral behavior, and sustain social cohesion. Their presence reflects the belief that human life is embedded within a broader cosmic and ethical framework, and that spiritual continuity depends on fulfilling social and moral responsibilities during life.

The influence of ancestors manifests in multiple domains of Igala communal and spiritual life.

Rituals, libations, and commemorative ceremonies honor the deceased, facilitate their transition into the ancestral realm, and secure their continued participation in the community. Ancestors are believed to intervene in daily affairs, providing protection, guidance, and oversight. They ensure that ethical standards are maintained, rewarding upright conduct and sanctioning violations such as adultery, theft, or neglect of communal obligations (Egbunu 117).

This moral agency underscores the integration of spiritual, social, and ethical dimensions within Igala philosophy, demonstrating that the living are accountable to both their peers and the ancestral order.

Moreover, Abalaka argues that:

The concept of reincarnation reinforces the ongoing influence of ancestors. Souls may return through new births, and naming practices often recognize the presence of returning ancestors, emphasizing relational identity across generations (Abalaka 46).

In this way, ancestors provide continuity not only in spiritual oversight but also in the perpetuation of lineage, culture, and communal values. Their influence extends across temporal boundaries, connecting past, present, and future generations in a continuous ethical and spiritual network.

Thus, the presence and influence of ancestors in Igala thought provide a profound insight into the community's metaphysical understanding of life and death. Death is not viewed as a final cessation of existence but as a critical transition in a continuous cycle of being, where the soul moves from the physical world into the spiritual realm of the ancestors (*Ibegwu*). In this framework, existence is inherently relational, linking the living, the deceased, and the broader cosmic order. Ancestors actively participate in the moral and social governance of the community, rewarding virtuous behavior and addressing transgressions, thereby maintaining ethical balance and social cohesion. Their presence affirms that spiritual continuity and moral responsibility are inseparable, and that human life extends beyond corporeal limitations. Through rituals, commemorations, and the moral influence of ancestors, the Igala worldview emphasizes the interconnectedness of ethical conduct, spiritual existence, and communal life, presenting a philosophy in which life, death, and ongoing relational engagement are unified, cyclical, and morally grounded.

On the Igala Metaphysical Analysis of Life and Death (At What Point is a Person Said to Die among the Igalas?)

In Igala cosmology, the concept of death is complex, relational, and closely tied to both the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence. The Igala perceive the human person as composed of a physical body (*ẹhẹ*) and a spiritual essence or soul (Okaye), and death is understood as a transition rather than a total cessation of being. Within this metaphysical framework, a person is said to die only when both physical and spiritual discontinuities are recognized. While the physical body may cease to function, the person is not considered fully departed until the soul has transitioned into the spiritual realm, the community of ancestors (*Ibegwu*), and appropriate ritual and social practices have been completed. This understanding

contrasts sharply with many Western perspectives, which often equate death with the cessation of biological life.

According to Egbunu, the Igala thought emphasizes that:

The recognition of death is socially and spiritually mediated. Traditional burial rites, libations, prayers, and commemorative ceremonies are crucial for marking the moment when a person is fully acknowledged as deceased. These rites are believed to facilitate the soul's journey to the ancestral realm and to integrate the individual into the spiritual community (Egbunu 116).

Improper or incomplete performance of such rites can result in liminality, where the deceased exists in an unsettled or restless state, neither fully present among the living nor fully integrated among the ancestors.

Moreover, the Igala view links moral and social fulfillment to the definition of death. A person who dies without completing key societal and ethical obligations—such as marriage, procreation, and communal duties may not be immediately recognized as a full ancestor. Instead, such individuals may be considered in transitional limbo until their obligations are ritually addressed, illustrating that the metaphysical acknowledgment of death is inseparable from ethical, communal, and spiritual considerations (Mbiti 43–44; Egbunu 117). This perspective highlights a key feature of Igala metaphysics: life and death are phases of an ongoing, relational continuum. Death is defined not merely biologically but socially, ethically, and spiritually, with recognition contingent upon communal acknowledgment and ritual facilitation. Through this lens, the Igala philosophy challenges purely physicalist notions of mortality, emphasizing relational existence, moral accountability, and the continuity of being beyond corporeal cessation.

Conclusion

The study of death and the continuity of existence in Igala philosophy reveals a rich metaphysical framework in which life, death, and the afterlife are interconnected and relational. Unlike perspectives that treat death as an absolute end, the Igala worldview conceptualizes it as a transformative transition in a continuous cycle of being. Human existence is understood as comprising both physical and spiritual dimensions, with the soul (*Okaye*) persisting beyond the mortality of the body (*ẹhẹ*) to enter the ancestral realm (*ef'ojegwu*), where it remains active and influential in guiding the living. Ancestors (*Ibẹgwu*) serve as moral and spiritual agents whose presence reinforces communal ethics, social cohesion, and cultural continuity.

Rituals, burial rites, and commemorative practices occupy a central role in Igala philosophy, serving as vital mechanisms through which the deceased are properly integrated into the spiritual and ancestral order. These practices ensure that the

transition from the physical realm to the ancestral realm (*ef'ojegwu*) occurs smoothly, honoring the body (*éhé*) while facilitating the continued journey of the soul (*Okaye*). By performing these rites, the living maintain cosmic balance, uphold ethical standards, and preserve communal harmony, reinforcing the inseparable connection between spiritual continuity and social cohesion. In addition to these ceremonial practices, the Igala belief in reincarnation and the careful assignment of names to newborns further underscores the cyclical and relational nature of existence. Through such practices, ancestral presence is recognized across generations, allowing the souls of the departed to return and maintain identity and influence within the community. Moreover, the moral quality of an individual's earthly life directly determines the status and role of the soul in the afterlife, highlighting the ethical dimension at the heart of Igala metaphysics. Together, these practices reflect a worldview in which life, death, and spiritual continuity are interdependent, morally grounded, and relationally sustained, illustrating the holistic and integrative nature of Igala thought.

In conclusion, Igala philosophy presents a holistic and integrative understanding of being, one in which existence is continuous, morally grounded, and relational. It challenges purely materialistic or dualistic interpretations of life and death, highlighting the inseparability of ethical conduct, communal engagement, and spiritual continuity. By emphasizing the transformative and enduring nature of existence, Igala thought offers an alternative framework for understanding human life, one that sustains cultural identity, moral responsibility, and metaphysical meaning across generations.

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