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REINCARNATION: THE DOCTRINE OF HEREDITY AND HOPE IN URHOB BELIEF

M. Y. NABOFA

The Urhobo people of the Southern part of Nigeria describe the rhythm of human existence as being in a cyclic form. One is born, grows old and dies to be brought into life again by his offspring and/or his relations to repeat the same process as many more times as possible. Their idea is that man's normal transitional cycle of life involves decorporation and incorporation. Those who died here on earth and thus decorporated from the physical sections of their extended paternal and maternal family groups with elaborate burial rites, are reborn and incorporated into the stocks of these same families in the spiritual realm. It is the firm belief and hope of every adherent of Urhobo indigenous religion that when he dies he will join the members of his family groups who had gone before him and he would be reborn here on earth either by his offspring or his other affins. The purpose of this paper is to attempt a discussion of this cyclic pattern of existence, a doctrine which tries to resolve the problem of existence after death, and character traces and physical resemblance of the departed found in the newly born ones into the lineage. They try to explain this issue by the doctrine of reincarnation whose main theories hinge on the fact of heredity and hope. The materials for this study are drawn mainly from the information which I gathered during my field work among the Urhobo between 1973 and 1982.

In the Urhobo concept of man it is stated that every human being is composed of two principal entities which are referred to as *Erhi* and *Ugboma*, which could be roughly translated as Soul/Spirit and body.¹ In referring to these two halves of man at the same time the people first mention *Erhi* before *Ugboma* (Soul and body) because it is the former that gives meaning and expression or reality to the latter. In the people's cosmology these two entities were supposed to have lived forever, but something happened whereby man has been caused to die. God's primeval plan was that when human beings grew really old they would regenerate by sloughing off their skins like snakes, including the renewal of their physical nature and vigour. They were to become fresh and young human beings. This process was to be repeated, so man was to live for ever (Nabofa, in Adegbola 1983, p. 297); but they lost this mythical eternity. They explain the loss with a myth which states that misunderstanding arose among human beings and animals at the cradle of their lives over the fate and duration of all creatures' stay on earth. In order to resolve this issue they sent the dog and the toad to God for final determination. Each of these emissaries was given a different message to deliver to God as the choice of his creatures. It was agreed that whichever message out of the two got to God first He would ratify as a choice they made out of their free will. The dog was asked to tell God that all creatures have chosen to live forever, in accordance with the primordial plan; while the toad bore the message which states that they were not to live forever, but to return to God, that is, die after a while.² At the start of the race to God the dog outran his rival but its attention was diverted to the human faeces and its other favourite foods that lay along the path they were running. It stopped and started to eat; it over-helped itself and fell asleep. The toad caught up with the dog, passed it where it was snoring in a deep slumber and got to God first with its message just before the dog sped to

the finishing point. God ratified the toad's message and death came to be among all creatures. They all came to accept it as God's decree resulting from their decision which cannot be altered.³

As time went on men started to reflect on the nature and purpose of human life and they came to develop the hope that death does not write *finis* to human life; a hope that is built on what Arthur Schopenhauer refers to as Palingenesis (1974, 276) or partial reincarnation.

It has been suggested that the more clearly conscious a man is of the frailty, vanity and dreamlike nature of all things, the more clearly aware also of the eternity of his own true inner nature (Schopenhauer 1974, 271). This is very true of the Urhobo person, because he is very aware of the temporary nature of his physical existence hence he does not regard this earthly life as his permanent home. He looks upon death as a going home. His metaphysical teaching relates that as soon as man breathes his last breath his *Erhi* gets out of him, visits his beloved ones in distant places and haunts all places where he had lived and worked before it returns quickly to the place where the death occurred. The *Erhi* is said to accomplish all these distant activities within a split second. It is believed to be able to do all these within a short time because having been released out of the physical body it will no longer be affected nor restricted by time and space. It is during this period of its visitation that the beloved ones of the dead, who had not heard of the death are said to experience some awkward signs and uneasy feelings; and those who are capable of interpreting such feelings would decipher at once that some one very close to them has passed away.

The soul of the departed is said to stand near the body or hover around the premises where the corpse lies, watching over all the burial and funeral performances on its physical part. It remains there for about ninety days before it finally expires into the land of the dead⁴ to be fully incorporated into the happy folds of the ancestors, if he is considered worthy to be among them, otherwise, he will be driven out to lament his fate. This is one of the main reasons why full burial rites among the Urhobo are spread over such a period. The descendants of the deceased, especially those who are supposed to take over his erstwhile responsibilities, both in the home and in the community are required to remain in his home, where, in most cases, he is buried, for at least three months. They are required to remain there so that the soul of the newly departed may not feel lonely while still hovering around; rather it is believed to make the living-dead feel happy in the midst of his descendants. Such practice is said to give the departed an assurance that though he is dead his place in the society has not become empty. This is an aspect of immortality that every Urhobo craves for and those who have no offspring from their own loins are said to lament their fate in their death-bed and while on their journey to the land of the dead. There is an aspect of every Urhobo funeral rites which eloquently reveals the idea of the presence of the deceased's soul where such rituals may be taking place. The first few drops from each bottle of drink opened for the rites are poured out. They are for the departed and his invisible spiritual companions who have come to rejoice his home-coming with him and receive him into their fold. Not to pour out such libations is believed to result in the breaking of drinking glasses and bottles, and fights among the celebrants. It is as a result of the above belief and practices that the deceased are said not to be really

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in the grave that the Urhobo have no doctrine of the resurrection of the body, that is, to use Idowu's words, "not in the dramatic eschatological sense of the grave giving up their dead at the consummation of all things" (E. B. Idowu, 1970 p. 196). To them, what takes place happens immediately after death. The dead pass through the gates to the spiritual realm when all the necessary rituals have been performed. As the departed are never regarded as being really dead in the grave, their offspring and other relations still refer to them as their fathers, mothers, brothers or sisters which they were before their transition. They are believed to be still capable of exercising their parental roles or so, though now in a more powerful and unrestricted way, over their survivors.

While the Urhobo do not believe that the dead remain in the grave nor in the eschatological resurrection, they have the doctrine of reincarnation. Theirs is not metempsychosis or total reincarnation, in which it is believed that the soul passes from one body to another, whereby the lot of the soul in each being is determined by its behaviour in a former life as it is explained in some oriental religions.⁵ An aspect of their doctrine of reincarnation states that before birth the reincarnating soul goes through a process of self-predestination whereby it declares a more propitious destiny for itself, taking into consideration the reverses or otherwise it suffered or enjoyed in the previous life, to lead a more successful one. The belief is that the person will really live according to the scheme of life which he mapped out for himself during this process of self-predestination.

When confronted as to whether they have an empirical evidence for this belief, or a mere wishful thinking, they say categorically that it is not a mere hallucination, and those whom I interviewed often gave three broad based areas of proof in their bid to validate their stand. The first is that nine days after a child's birth the parents find out through divination processes which of the departed member of the extended family groups has reincarnated in the new baby. The diviner identifies one of the either recently or long dead members of their lineage as the one who has just returned to earth, and as they so much have confidence in their divination processes they accept the diviner's declaration to be true and as a good proof for this doctrine under review.

Secondly, a reincarnated person is said to be easily identified through the bodily signs and behaviour of the child as he/she grows up. If there are conspicuous identical marks and behaviour the departed who is believed to have returned would be easily known. The orthodox Urhobo belief is that no soul goes to other families other than its own to reincarnate. The movement of souls is said to be always within the extended family groups both into the physical and the spiritual spheres.

Once it is revealed that a known person has come back to life, libations are poured to the ancestors and the original members of the family who bore such marks and characteristics, praying them to guard and guide the new child. If such a person had not been accorded proper and full burial rites these would be quickly carried out under the sponsorship of the parents of the newly born-babe so as to ensure peace and harmony for their child. This is one of the major reasons why the deceased is usually well arranged in the coffin before burial. Even if he were lame, or disfigured somehow, the disfigured part is straightened or well arranged as much as possible, before interment. Such is done so that no child

may take after him or her in such an ugly manner. It is in this area of physical resemblance, character traces and behavioural attitudes that the people mostly draw concrete examples from in trying to prove the reality of rebirth.

Thirdly, which is somehow related to the preceding one, is the phenomenon of the born-to-die children. The belief is that there are wandering souls who enter some women's wombs only to be born and die soon after. There are many stories and practical instances of such children who are said to have died and been born again bearing the marks that were made on them in their previous incarnation. From careful observations the people have come to believe that such children, who eventually survive and live up to old age as a result of preventive measures taken by the parents, usually behave quite funny. One of their common characteristics is that they easily feel moody with quick outburst of anger without any justifiable reason. Children who are suspected to be in this category of freaks are given derogatory and supplicatory names such as: *Oji*, meaning a thief who has come to exploit and squander the parents' resources and to die at last. Children of this nature are believed to fall sick as soon as they are born, only to die when their parents had expended so much on them. Identifiable incisions are usually made on the faces of such sadistic tricksters before they are buried. When a child is born bearing such marks the people would quickly come to the conclusion that it is one of such children that has come back and it would be given one of such humiliating names which is believed to make the soul of the child recoil on the realization that its tricks have been discovered and such may serve as a deterrent. *Mudiake* is another of such names. It means stay with your earthly parents. The soul of the child is thus being pleaded with not to allow the child die again and avoid causing the parent grief. This common occurrence among the Urhobo has strongly buttressed the people's belief in the doctrine that the dead are the ones who are reborn.

It is stated in the conventional Urhobo concept of eschatology that once a person is dead he enters the after-life, there he remains and there his offspring can keep unbroken relationship with him as an ancestor, especially if he had been a good individual while on earth and was ripe enough before he died. Yet we are confronted with a contradiction in the belief that the deceased do reincarnate in grand-children and great grand-children. In the first place the doctrine implies that in spite of this reincarnation the departed continue to live in the spiritual world, and those who are still in the earth-plane can have communion with them, and they are there with all their ancestral qualities unaffected. Secondly, it is said that they do reincarnate not only in one grand-child or great grand-child, but also in several contemporary grand-children who are members of the same extended family. Yet in spite of all these repeated "births" which should be rather exhausting, the deceased continue to remain in full life and vigour in the land of the dead receiving the sacrifices and other peculiar services of their descendants. If the departed are the ones who reincarnate, who then constitute the cult of the ancestors? How is it possible for one person to reincarnate in several contemporary persons?

In an attempt to resolve this contradiction there is a theory that only those who are not qualified to join the ancestors reincarnate with the view to fulfil such conditions as would enable them to enter into the group of the blessed.

While there is no concept of a father or mother coming back in a particular child, as the Yoruba concept of *Babtunde*, meaning the recently dead father has returned, and *Yetunde* which is the feminine gender of the former⁶, the Urhobo believe that even those who are qualified to join the ancestral folds reincarnate. That is why even those who are very old and believed to have fulfilled all conditions that would enable them to be incorporated into the group of the ancestors are still urged with dirges and funerary prayers and recitals during their burial rites to improve upon their previous lives and live better in their next incarnation than they had done while on earth; therefore the above theory does not help us so much out of this contradictions. Here is really a paradox.

What this doctrine tries to establish is the belief that there are certain dominant lineage characteristics which keep recurring through births and thus ensuring the continuity of the vital existence of every family. The Urhobo people thus have a firm belief that the dead are the ones who go into the loins of their offspring and are brought back into life in several contemporary grand- and great grand-children. The scientists may try to explain this phenomenon of heredity and characteristic resemblance by saying that every person starts life as a fertilized egg which is formed by the union of a sperm from his father with an egg from his mother. Present within this egg or zygote are genes which are the blueprints according to which the zygote develops. The inherited characteristics of an individual are determined by the chromosome content of his zygote and consequently all other cells in his body because they are derived from this zygote (D. E. James 1980, 233). Every lineage or family has its own chromosome numbers and arrangements of chromosomes and each child born into the lineage is governed by his parents' genes, which they also inherited from their forebears.

In other words what the scientist is saying is that the children inherit the genes but not the souls of their ancestors; and that these inherited genes are what the Urhobo regard as the spiritual qualities which are numberless. Thus it is only partial reincarnation in the sense that only some characteristics of the departed are manifest in the reincarnate. The Urhobo do not accept the above scientific view as "the total explanation" for this everyday evident occurrence of reincarnation among them. However they see it as throwing some light on what they believe to be the work of God, the ancestors and fertility divinities who are the guiding powers behind all human reproductions and who also have control over the movement and incarnation of human souls. The scientific explanations only illuminate this belief. I am inclined to agree with Mbiti that this belief is partly the result of externalizing people's awareness of the nearness of their living-dead, and partly an attempt to explain what is otherwise a biological phenomenon which applies not only to human beings but also animals (Mbiti 1970 p. 150). Those who hold someone in a state of personal immortality see biological or character resemblance in a young child and immediately feel that since the particular living-dead has not yet sunk into the oblivion he has returned to them. It pains the community, therefore, that someone should die without getting married, since this causes to dwindle the chances of his being reborn. It is a mechanism of hope which assures the quick that death will not be the end of his life. He hopes to be remembered by his offspring and through them he would come back to life.

Although the belief in partial reincarnation is quite

common among the Urhobo it is not expected that it is everybody who will automatically reincarnate. Those who suffered bad death as a result of their bad behaviour and humiliating sicknesses like leprosy and small-pox, which seemed to have brought disrepute and humiliation to the family groups, and whose burial rites were conducted in such a way as to exorcise their souls from the lineage, are not believed to be reborn. It is in this sense that the doctrine in no small measure influences the people's behaviour for good. As only those who have lived well and died well are accorded appropriate burial rites, and thus are qualified to reincarnate, they tend to watch their ethical behaviour and faithfulness to their religious practices. The souls of those whose behaviour and lot while on earth tend to bring shame and ridicule into the lineage are exorcised from both the spiritual and physical groups of his extended families. He will not be allowed to join the ancestors nor welcomed into any other lineage. He has no hope of coming back to life and nowhere to go for repose⁷. His soul is thus believed to roam about restlessly and without a goal, lamenting his fate. Such a soul is considered to be in a hell because he has been decorporated from where he rightly belongs. No Urhobo person would like to be in such a pitiable state when he dies, hence this doctrine serves as a major factor in checking people's excesses, especially within the lineage group. It also helps to cement the unity between the families in both physical and spiritual worlds.

The foregoing are not necessarily aimed at finding a solution to the problem of partial reincarnation, but rather to show that there is a problem about this doctrine among the Urhobo, and that it is too complex to warrant easy generalization. Although we cannot resolve the contradictions contained in it, there is one basic fact about it, and that is, like all other such related doctrines dealing with eschatology, it is an attempt to calm human fears and anxieties generated by the constant harassment that human beings receive from death and other vicissitudes of life. It is a part of man's continuous struggle against the loss of his original immortality. There has been a constant struggle between man and death, but however hard he tries, victory appears to be a mirage to him. He therefore came up with this sort of psychological therapy to boost his morale and hope on hopes. It is also an attempt to explain the influence of heredity upon human behaviour, a subject which the scientists claimed to rightly belong to psychology and biological studies, overlooking the fact that the spiritual qualities contained in genes cannot be successfully examined scientifically. While the Urhobo may accept the idea that biologically both husband and wife are reproduced in their children thus perpetuating the chain of humanity, his major preoccupation when he is getting old and is thus drawing nearer the grave is an expectation of a blissful reunion with the members of his own lineage in the great beyond, and a hope of continuous existence here on earth among his descendants; and as a man of faith he does not see any contradiction in these two ways of conquering death.

FOOTNOTES

1. In my other studies I identify five entities which the Urhobo consider to make up a human being and these are:-
 - (a) Erhi - the Human Double or the Soul;
 - (b) Ugboma - the physical body;
 - (c) Enhwen - the breath of life,
 - (d) Udu - the essence of the human heart and
 - (e) Uhoho - the ethereal body.

Among all these Erhi and Ugboma are considered to be more vital. For more details on this see Nabofa, M. Y., *ERHI: The concept of the Human Double and the Paradox of self-predestination in the Religion of the Urhobo*, University of Ibadan Ph.D. Thesis, 1978 Pages 72-78.

2. The Urhobo name for toad is Owokpo which, etymologically and literally means, "he who dies should go home". This name arose out of the myth which states that it was the one whose message brought death to mankind.
3. For more details on the Urhobo myth on the origin of death, *vide* Nabofa, M. Y. "Erhi and Eschatology", in Adegbola, E. A. Ade, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, Day Star Press, Ibadan, 1983, p. 297.
4. On the geographical location of the abode of the dead *vide* *ibid.* p. 298ff.
5. For more information on this see the Buddhist concept of life after death in Whitfield Toy (ed.), *Man's Religious Quest*, Croom Helm, London, 1982 pp. 194-197.
6. On the Yoruba concept of reincarnation see E. B. Idowu, *OLODUMARE, God in Yoruba Belief*, Longman, 1970 p. 195f.
7. For more details on the Urhobo concept of the state of Ghosts see Otite, O. J. (ed.), *The Urhobo People*, Heinemann, Ibadan, 1982 p. 229.

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