

AFRICAN CHRISTIANS' ATTITUDES TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL BELIEF IN REBIRTH (REINCARNATION): A CRITIQUE

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Abstract

While Christianity does not in any way support the concept of rebirth (re-incarnation), the concept of reincarnation remains a very controversial theme among African Christians owing to some beliefs carried over from African traditional (indigenous) religion to the Christian faith. This article attempts a critical evaluation of this concept in the light of Christian Scripture, natural science and alleged instances of historical evidence in the Africa milieu. The work is a socio-historical study. Data were collected by library research method and oral interview. The research brings to the fore the notion that most of the alleged grounds for rebirth in the claims of some African Christians were founded on weak evidence. The article points out that the reality of rebirth (reincarnation) is only affirmable in the case of child wandering-spirits, who of course are of metaphysical existence rather than being normal human beings. While affirming the global Christian tradition that rejects the belief in actual rebirth, the work concludes with a call on African Christians to adhere strictly to the Bible in matters of faith and practices; and to discard every belief that finds no clear support in the Christian Scripture which is the ultimate guide to spiritual truths.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Christianity can be said to have come and stayed permanently on the African soil. In fact, it could be called a “traditional religion” in Africa (Parrinder 1969:112) in the light of the continuity of the faith from the first century of its planting to the present time. All the same, in beliefs and practices, a number of African Christians seemed to have incorporated into the faith brought by the early missionaries some features from African cultural heritage. Stated differently, in attempts to contextualise the Christian faith, some African Christians came to accept some doctrines which are without sufficient proof in Scripture. One such is the belief in rebirth (reincarnation), which today poses a great challenge to biblical Christianity in Africa.

The concept of reincarnation is a very controversial theme among Christians in Africa today. While some Christians dismissed it as unbiblical, others, owing to their indigenous setting and cultural orientation, strongly affirmed its reality with alleged proofs. The reason for this discrepancy, as explained by Stephen Lampe (1990:23), was that, while the Bible was of central importance to some, to others it was merely acknowledged - other issues coming first. On the other hand, the concept of reincarnation, in spite of the alleged available proofs of its existence in the world today, especially as used in the African context, still poses a serious problem to scholars, (Echeknube 1987). That the soul of a deceased person returned to take a new body and entered into another life while the corpse still remained in the grave was really enigmatic to scholars. Much debate has been generated over this issue with some quite confusing conclusions. This article is therefore a critical examination of the African Christians’ responses to the concept of reincarnation. The study is done in the light of some Christian scriptural passages, especially Hebrews 9:27 that says, “It is appointed for mortals to die once, after that the judgment” (NRSV). The work is approached from a historical perspective, making use of a combination of field work (interviewing) and library research method.

2 AFRICAN CONCEPT OF REINCARNATION: A BACKGROUND STUDY

Reincarnation was a doctrine fully at home in Africa, even among a number of Christians. The mystical worldview of Africans appeared to have had so great an effect on the way of thinking of some Christians that a passage such as Hebrews 9:27 was of secondary importance to them. While Western societies held to a linear conception of time (Mabogo 1986:6), the traditional African society had more of a cyclical worldview and, as such, the doctrine of reincarnation was not only tenaciously upheld but most dramatically claimed.

For the African society, physical death was not the end (Dickson & Ellingworth 1969:165). Africans believed that, upon physical death, the individual was not eliminated, that, while his body rotted behind, his soul or spirit continued to exist. In some societies like Igbo, Ashanti and Yoruba, the belief in life after death was expressed as reincarnation in which the souls took abode in various forms humans, animals, snakes, birds and even in nonliving objects (Dzurgba 1977:49).

Among the Yoruba and Edo peoples of Nigeria, for example, there was this strong belief that the souls of the departed good ancestors were reincarnated and reborn as grandchildren in the family as a way of maintaining continuity with the past. Such children, believed to be reincarnated ancestors/ancestresses, were given names among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria like *Yetunde*, *Dehinbo*, *Ayedun Iyabo*, and *Babatunde*.¹ Among the Edo people of mid-western Nigeria names that suggested reincarnation included *Uweyo-ose-rahari* (literally translated: "You are our father") and *Uweyo-ose-oru* ("You are our mother"). In the Tiv tribe of Benue State of northern Nigeria there were also such names as: *Ngohide* ("Mother has come") and *Terhide* ("Father has come") among Christians and non-Christians alike. *Tosego* ("My father has come") and *Iyasego* ("My mother has come") were among other reincarnation names among the Egun-speaking people of southern Nigeria.

As emphasised by Awolalu (1979:59), it was believed that the ancestors choose to do this as a result of their love for the family and the world which they are unwilling to cut ties with just like that. In other words, the traditional Africans believed that, when their parents died, they were still coming back to be reunited with the family sooner or later through rebirth.

On the other hand, in some African societies, it was believed that only the righteous people had the privilege of returning to human families. The wicked souls were believed to be punished by being reincarnated into animals or nonliving objects. Among the Igbo bachelors and spinsters, too, had little chance of reincarnation (Dzurgba 1977:49). For others, as related by Echeknube (1987:10), a person's life was conceived to be too short for him or her to have accomplished the divine assignments. Thus rebirth was considered as an opportunity for the deceased to come back as it were on a second mission to make amends for their evil deeds.

In fact, there was a very strong belief in reincarnation among Africans that people took time to disclose what they would love to be in the next birth (Christie-Murray 1981:18). There was a common practice among the Ibibio of south-eastern Nigeria called *uboro-Obot*, which, literally translated, may mean something like "answering or talking back to destiny". Children, men and women who in the present life lived in abject poverty usually expressed or confessed a desire to be rich in the next birth. Similarly, among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, whenever somebody died after a life of much suffering either from a protracted illness or some similar varied ills like barrenness, ill luck, and other related life misfortunes, the corpse was usually addressed as follows: "In the next life, make sure you change your destiny." Others simply said at the death of a beloved after a life of misfortunes: *O ti lo tun yan* (A Yoruba expression meaning "He or she has gone back to change his or her destiny"). But there was a very critical but interesting question raised by Udo Etuk (2002:7):

If everyone says he or she will come back very wealthy and have many children and be very influential (assuming that no rational would knowingly choose to be the opposite of any of these) then how is it that we still have the poor, and the disadvantaged and so on among us?

Apart from reincarnation resonating with some Christians in Africa, in world Christianity at large, there have been many adherents of reincarnation among various Christian sects at all times in the history of Christianity even among great Church leaders and theologians. Such, as found in the works of Stephen Lampe (1990:13-16),

included people like the scholarly Leslie D Weatherhead, author of *The case for reincarnation* (1958); Glavill (1636-1680), the chaplain to King Charles I; William R Alger (1822-1905), the Unitarian minister; Philips Brooks (1835-1893), bishop of the Episcopal Church; and Williams R Inge (1860-1954), dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London. The reasons for this support are attributed to misinterpretation of the Bible and influence of philosophy and ancient religions.

Hinnels (1995:413) related that, while reincarnation was alien to Jewish thought, it could be found as a sectarian belief among some mystics, especially the Kabbalists who, apart from their holding the later Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead in a future age, also saw humans as having to undergo a variety of rebirths before their present incarnation in order to fulfil their tasks on earth. But this belief on its own has been found to be nothing but a by-product of external influences on the Jewish nation, especially contacts with Greek philosophy and Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, to mention just a few.

Bruce Long (1995:268) revealed that the concept of rebirth occupied a central place in Greek thought from the time of Pythagoras (c.582-507 BCE) and came into full bloom in the writings of Plato (427-507 BCE) and Plotinus (205-170 BCE). He related that Plato believed that "the soul as the governor and indweller of all conscious being descends periodically into the physical realm of existence as a result of metaphysical necessity and bondage to the passions". In a similar vein, Long stated that the concept of reincarnation was elaborately developed in many ancient religions. The ancient scripture of Hinduism for example, presupposed the survival of the soul after death and assumed that the present life was fundamentally a preparation for the life to come. There was also a Buddhist teaching that the human being is made up of five constitutive elements or strands {Skandhals} which continually changed, based on previous actions. Furthermore, Mahavira (c.599-527 BCE), founder of Jainism, also taught a doctrine that the "unenlightened soul is bound to follow a course of transmigration that will persist for an unimaginable length of time" (Long 1995:260-268). While the concept of reincarnation has no foundation in Judaism, the Jews undoubtedly borrowed various Oriental and Greek views in the course of their interaction with other

nations and created from some of them doctrines unfounded in the Jewish scriptures. Similarly, some African Christians must have had their belief in reincarnation strengthened by such foreign influences arising from wide readings and contacts with the Oriental mystery religions and Greek philosophical thought.

All the same, African belief in rebirth which some Christians in Africa are still maintaining is very questionable in terms of some passages in the Christian Scripture. That one could come back into existence after death through rebirth to make amends for one's past evil deeds is in fact inconsistent with the passage in Hebrews 9:27 quoted earlier. In fact, as far as Christianity is concerned, there is no chance for repentance in the grave.

Furthermore, there was the *abiku*² phenomenon, commonly found among the Yoruba and some other African tribes, which upheld the view that a dead infant could be reborn as many times as it wished into the same family, not only with physical resemblance to the former but even with identifying marks. Olumide Lucas commented on this belief among the Yoruba. In his words:

The Yoruba believe that there is a certain class of spirits which enter into new-born children causing them to die in infancy according to a pre-arranged plan. These spirits are regarded as members of a fraternity. They live in the woods, in big and shady trees, the chief of which is the *Iroko*. If any of these spirits were to enter into a new born child, the child would die in infancy. Hence, the word *Abiku*, "born to die" (Lucas 1996:149).

In African belief, in this manner, some children were believed to have undergone rebirth or reincarnation through this phenomenon about three, four, and even up to seven, eight times or beyond (in some cases) before their final stay to grow unto adulthood. An African clergyman alleged that his grandfather was born up to eleven times before he finally stayed, and his own father nine times. In fact, besides these two claimed cases of reincarnation, there abound in Africa cases of some individuals who are alleged to have passed through a circle of birth and rebirth several times and are as such accorded special treatment as extraordinary human beings. In view

of this, some parents often gave them some special names to plead with them to stay. These names among the Yoruba included: *Malomo* ("Don't go again"), *Ayedun* ("The world is sweet"), *Durojaiye* ("Wait and enjoy the world"), *Bamikale* ("Stay with me to the end"), *Durosinmi* ("Wait to give me a befitting burial"), and so on.

The explanation of this belief, according to Lucas (1996:149), was that the spirit (*abiku* spirit) had received instructions from the fraternity of *abiku* spirits to return to them on a pre-arranged date. Among the Yoruba any woman who repeatedly lost several children was believed to be troubled by *abiku* spirits. The same belief was prevalent in some other African societies. In some African homes, too much money was spent on traditional medicine and charms to appease such alleged children and implore them to stay to give comfort to their parents. Similarly, some sections of African culture attempted to discourage further rebirth of alleged *abiku* children by treating such children with contempt: this included giving them opprobrious names or nicknames, mostly after animals, birds, insects, and the like. Among the Yoruba, for example, some children were called *Aja* (Dog), *Ekú* (Bush rat), *Olongbo* (Cat), and so on. In some cases, disfiguring marks were put on the faces and bodies of such children alleged to be *abiku* to humiliate and discourage them from further rebirth. Worse still, some went as far as dismembering them (that is, cutting off some parts of their dead bodies – such as legs, hands, ears and so on) as a calculated attempt to make coming back highly dishonouring and uninteresting to them.

Notwithstanding, the *abiku* children were generally dreaded in traditional African societies. This was because, apart from belief in their potential to die and be reborn as many times as possible, they were believed to have wielded some spiritual powers in the course of their repeated birth, through which they could wreak havoc at will. They were believed to be capable of inflicting their parents, relatives, neighbours or any individual who stepped on their toes with some or other evil. For instance, among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria the *Ogbanje*³ (as they were called) were treated with care because they were believed to cause trouble to parents and families or inflict physical and spiritual destruction on their enemies.

3 THE CONCEPT OF REINCARNATION AND AFRICAN CHRISTIANS' RESPONSE: A CRITIQUE.

In contrast to the early Christian missionary proclamation of a message of no rebirth after death that hinged on Hebrews 9:27, quite a number of Christians in Africa strongly believed in reincarnation, basically owing to the influence of their culture, pointed out above. Africans in general have around them a number of historical events to support the belief in reincarnation. An African Church cleric, Venerable A A Adetubo,⁴ for instance, gave a case in his family as an eye-witness example. He told of one of his half-sisters who was born in the late 1960s but died prematurely at the age of two. The mysterious circumstances under which she died suggested to the family that she was possessed of an *abiku* spirit. To discourage her rebirth into the family her corpse was disfigured with a cut from the nose down to the chin. In about 1972, the mother gave birth to another baby girl who, to the consternation of the family, bore a mark exactly like the one inflicted on the child who died earlier. As concluded by him, "She is still living with that mark till today" (Adetubo 2006).

A Methodist cleric, the Reverend P K Adeoye⁵, gave another instance. He recounted the case of a 10-year-old daughter of his elder sister's child who died mysteriously of just a slight fever in 1989. The family, on suspicion that she was an *abiku* child, made cuts on her wrists before burying her remains. Adeoye reported that, two years later, in 1991, the mother gave birth to a baby with the same marks which "she is still wearing till today". He also narrated the story of his grandmother whose twin brother died. To keep her from joining the deceased in the spirit world, she, according to Yoruba tradition, made a wood carving of the deceased (called *ere ibeji* (twin carving) as a substitute which she, as an adolescent, still carried about. In the mid-70s however, one of her children gave birth to a set of twins – a male and a female. Surprisingly, the male twin-child, apart from being a carbon copy of the grandmother's deceased twin brother, had on its buttock the exact mark the former had. On the conviction that it was her twin brother who had been reincarnated, she handed over the wood carving of the twin to him. He lived with this until he grew up and then threw it away (Adeoye interview: 2006).

An Anglican priest, Rev Canon Otusami,⁶ narrated the story of his stepsister who had allegedly undergone rebirth seven times. According to him, this lady, about 20 years of age, had been noted in the family to be a special being in some ways. A strange incident happened one day, some time after her marriage. She was in her shop and her face was sad. People were wondering what the problem was. No long afterwards, she went to the front of the shop and was engaged in a serious fight with an invisible figure. She was crying and rolling on the floor as if she was struggling with somebody (not seen by the people around). The struggle was such that all the clothes she was wearing and her whole body were soiled. After the end of the struggle, she was sobbing tearfully, and all of a sudden she became sick. She was rushed home and given some medications; but all to no avail, as the situation grew worse. At this juncture, she confessed to her people that she belonged to the *abiku* cult - that she had hitherto undergone seven rebirths. She confessed further that the person that came to fight with her in her shop was her spirit husband who had been tired of waiting for her return to the spirit world after the expiration of her promised time. She told them not to worry about taking care of her because she was going to die. Not long afterwards, she gave up the ghost (Otusami 2006).

A Pentecostal minister, Pastor Igigbise,⁷ also gave some instances. He told of a couple in his church who gave birth to a male child in 1979, barely one and half years after the death of the husband's father, and they named the child "Babatunde" (a Yoruba name meaning: "Father has returned"). Added to this was the story of his sister's male child (born some six months after the mother's father's death) named "Oseraphara" (an Edo name meaning: "Our father").

The *abiku* phenomenon, to be candid, could not be altogether dismissed with a wave of hand in African society as a whole, owing to a variety of historical accounts testifying to its reality. On the other hand, by way of analysis, some African clerics came to the conclusion that it was nothing other than a deceit of the devil to make people disbelieve the written word of God. A deliverance minister and Pentecostal pastor, Rev S G Samuel,⁸ explained away the traditional *abiku* claims as unnatural events and demonic manipulations intended to contradict the Christian scriptural passage that says it is appointed for man to die only once. The question therefore remains:

How then can we reconcile the abundant proofs of the *abiku* phenomenon with the Christian belief that says “It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27 NRSV)?

In all fairness, while the *abiku* phenomenon is an incontestable reality in Africa, the phenomenon itself calls for a critical examination in the light of the above Christian belief before an unbiased position can be taken. One could say that, while birth in the above biblical context is basically naturally conceived, birth and the cycle of rebirth in the *abiku* phenomenon is something purely metaphysical. This position is corroborated by the African cultural belief which conceives of the *abiku* children, not as normal children but, as members of a fraternity of spirits, the *Abiku* cult. Thus the *abiku* could be said not to be ordinary human beings but the incarnation of spirits which, in Christian belief, could be put into the category of fallen angels, popularly referred to as demons. S G Samuel attested to this. In his words:

In spite of the fall of Lucifer with the angels that supported him in his rebellion against God and their subsequent and expulsion from heaven, these spirit beings still retain some powers through which they effect some manipulations on the world of man – as a calculated attempt at turning the hearts of people from taking the Christian Scripture as authentic (Samuel, 2002).

However, while on one hand, this article affirms the reality of *abiku* phenomenon as an unnatural occurrence, on the other hand, the phenomenon can be dismissed as a natural case for reincarnation on medical grounds. One can safely say that not all cases attributed to *abiku* spirit in Africa were truly *abiku* children. What was called *abiku* in the traditional African society in most cases could be said to be nothing but some medical symptoms arising from genotype and other related conditions. The traditional African society had little or no knowledge of the biological implications of marriage between two partners with “AS”. In fact, many couples today in Africa do not even know their genotype. Most of the cases of persistent infant mortality in some families were simple cases of sickle-cell anaemia. However, the cases of children born with marks remain an enigma which

cannot be scientifically explained (and most Africans would call such cases *abiku*).

The above argument notwithstanding, we could not altogether rule out the reality of *abiku* phenomenon in Africa. This is because, unlike the western world, the worldview of Africans is one that believes so much in the existence of spirits and their nefarious activities and manipulations in human world. However, the *abiku* case for reincarnation, instead of being a case of real human beings dying and being reincarnated, was simply one of “familiar spirits” operating in some African families through possession of children from the womb. This was corroborated by the fact that, in African society, *abiku* children were generally believed to belong to the “world of wandering spirits”. For instance, among the Ibibio, as stated by Etuk (2002), when a dead infant was suspected of being one of these wandering-spirit children, one of the things that was usually done at its burial was that a diviner would put a handful of sand in its rough little coffin, and would instruct the dead infant never to return to earth until it had completed counting the grains of sand placed in its coffin. And since that much sand was considered to be uncountable, it was believed that the spirit-child would remain permanently in the spirit world.

In other words, rebirth (reincarnation) in the true sense of the word can be accepted as real in African society only on the grounds of the activities of wandering-spirit children, that is, demons or familiar spirits being incarnated into human world, and passing through the cycle of rebirth to perpetrate their nefarious activities. On these grounds, the *abiku* phenomenon, while real, could not in any way be accepted as a genuine case of reincarnation if reincarnation in the strict sense of the word was real human beings undergoing physical rebirth after initial existence.

However, some African Christians, apart from their cultural belief, further pointed to some biblical passages as scriptural evidence for reincarnation. Some often point to the “Elijah-John the Baptist” reference in the Christian Scripture to drive home their point. Particular reference was made to the promise of Elijah in Malachi 4:5: “I will send you Elijah the Prophet”, and Jesus’s later assertion in Matthew 17:12-13 that Elijah had truly come back. But in reaction to

this, S O Abogunrin (an African cleric and Professor of New Testament Studies),⁹ argued that: "Although the Bible believes in the existence of spirits, angels and demons, there was nothing like reincarnation in the Bible." He emphasised the point that the New Testament made it categorically clear in Hebrews 9:27 that man was destined to die once and after that, judgment. He argued that for any Christian to believe otherwise was to reject the validity of the Bible as a whole.

He pointed out that the passage that says, "I will send you the Prophet Elijah" did not in any way imply reincarnation. He lamented that quite a number of African Christians tended to take every biblical statement literally. In his submission, John the Baptist was not Elijah *redivivus* as some think. In fact, that John the Baptist himself denied this was enough proof that the alleged passage in no way implied reincarnation. In John 1:21 some priests and Levites asked him: "Are you Elijah?" He said "I am not".

In its own way, John the Baptist's own denial above that he was Elijah reincarnate was a very strong proof against some African Christians' case of alleged reincarnation in the "Elijah-John the Baptist controversy". For if it were truly Elijah that underwent rebirth in the person of John the Baptist, he (John) could not have been oblivious to such a fact.

Moreover, some African Christians referred to the promise in Malachi 4:5: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (RSV). A critical examination of the passage in question however revealed that, in contrast to people's literal interpretation, according to this school of thought, God was not saying outright that Elijah, who was carried away to heaven in the chariot of fire, would return again to the earth through rebirth. The phrase, "I will send you the Prophet Elijah" is only a figure of speech; a metaphorical statement which meant no more than that another person like Elijah would be sent. This position was further strengthened by James T H Adamson (Adamson, 1970). In his words:

In Matthew 11:10, 14 Jesus applies the words of the prophet to John the Baptist: John is the preparer of the

way and the Elijah who was to come. This identification doesn't mean that John is Elijah come back to earth according to some principles of reincarnation. The two were distinct personalities (Adamson, 1970:805).

The above position of Adamson supported the argument that the expression: "I will send Elijah the Prophet" did not in any way imply that Elijah would be reincarnated. In fact, the expression was just a figure of speech clarified by the direct message from the Angel Gabriel to Zechariah on the birth of John the Baptist in Luke 1:17:

And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the heart of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

In other words, the relationship between Elijah and John the Baptist could be repudiated as a case of biological resemblance and instead a psychological one – a reappearance of the characteristic boldness and vigour that distinguished Elijah among all the prophets of his days, could be made. The allusion to a similar dressing pattern in Mark 1:6 (cf. 2 Kings 1:8) could be explained to have been divinely arranged as physical evidence to the Jews that the promised Elijah had truly come on the scene. African Christians therefore need to bear in mind that the Bible is coded in mysteries with its use of parables, metaphors, hyperboles and the like. The phrase "the spirit and power of Elijah" therefore seems to imply that, as in the **prophetic age**, Elijah was a forerunner to the **writing prophets** in Israel, in like manner, for a smooth take-off, the **messianic age** needed somebody with the same charisma as Elijah. Thus, as the charismatic Elijah was largely instrumental in reconciling the adulterous Israel to Yahweh her legitimate **husband**, so too, the **messianic** precursor must combine the characteristic elements that gave Elijah success in the face of a rebellious and stubborn-hearted generation. In fact, it appears to have been in line with the above explanation of Jesus's outright admission:

But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done unto him everything they

wished. Then the disciple understood that He was talking to them about John the Baptist (Mathew 17:12&13).

In other words, we can safely say that John the Baptist, far from being Elijah reincarnate (as some Africans seem to think), was simply an “Elijah metaphor” – an atavistic progression of the boldness, vigour and exploits that characterised the eighth-century-BCE prophet Elijah.

Apart from the Elijah controversy above, reference was also made by some African Christians to the “two olive trees” allusions in Revelation 11:4 as future reincarnations of “Moses and Elijah”. Some African preachers held the view that during the period of **great tribulation** that would follow after the **rapture** of the saints, these two eschatological figures would be reincarnated to complete their earthly missions that were abruptly terminated. While this argument looks convincing on the grounds that the end-time activities of the eschatological figures spoken about in the book of Revelation fit well into the distinguishing marks of the ministries of the Old Testament Moses and Elijah, it however has its weaknesses as shown in these following facts:

- The names of Moses and Elijah are not mentioned, unlike in Malachi.4-5.
- God as All-powerful and Self-sufficient One does not necessarily need to bring Moses and Elijah of old to life again before accomplishing His desired related works. In fact, He can create thousands of people who can do similar and even greater exploits to meet His purpose.

Hence, such allusions as “spewing out fire”, “shutting up heaven”, “turning of water to blood”, and “smiting the earth with plague” in Revelation 11:5 and 6 – which are all reminiscent of the characteristic features of the ministries of Moses and Elijah are not grounds for some African Christian leaders to craft a doctrine of reincarnation from the passage above since God as the Omnipotent One can at any time raise up innumerable number of people with similar traits.

4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As could be clearly seen from the preceding discussion, actual reincarnation, in spite of its supposedly abundant occurrence in African society still remains questionable on a number of grounds. In fact, Ian Stevenson, one of the leading authorities in the academic study of reincarnation and Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Virginia, Charlottesville USA, has from his research conducted on the subject between 1960 and 1973, deduced that “it is not every case that is suggested of reincarnation that is necessarily a proof of reincarnation” (see Lampe 1990:15). As pointed out by Echeknube (1987:24), in science, the law of genetics has proved that there are biological reasons for the resemblance in organisms and their various species. Hence, there is nothing strange about discerning certain qualities of a grandfather or of a father in any of his children. Since “like begets like”, it is natural to have biological and even psychological qualities of parents reappearing in their children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren, qualities such as height, complexion and other hereditary features.

Moreover, belief in actual reincarnation whereby deceased parents could be reincarnated afterwards and be born by their own children or grandchildren, is critically examined, and found to be very illogical and inconsistent in the sense that the said reincarnated ancestors are at the same time still believed to continue their existence in the ancestral world of the spirits where, from time to time, they are invoked and appeased to assist their children left on earth with their future potential (Dickson & Ellingworth 1969:166). This paradox of existence is in fact confusing and highly questionable. Also the African belief that one could come back after death through rebirth to make amends for one’s first evil deeds or complete one’s assignment on earth is highly inconsistent with several passages of the Christian Scripture.

While Christianity agrees with African worldview that the human soul is immortal and that physical death is not the real end of life, unlike the African doctrine of reincarnation, biblical Christianity holds that, at death, the departed soul goes either to heaven till the time of resurrection or to hell, a place of temporal punishment before the final judgment. That a person dies, and the soul is reincarnated, is a doctrine that is inconsistent with the Christian Scripture. The recorded miracles of rising from the dead in the Bible are critically

examined, and found by analysis and logical reasoning to be clearly different from African concept of reincarnation. The raising-from-the-dead miracles are special cases in which certain dead individuals were divinely brought back to life again as complete human beings (spirit, soul and body). In other words, the departed spirit and soul of the deceased returned to the same body in which it had been before death as depicted in the cases of Lazarus and Jairus's daughter. However, reincarnation, going by Long's definition (1995:260), is more than that. It involves the returning of the soul of the deceased to another body in rebirth. Thus, while the raising-from-the-dead miracles are evidently logical and consistent in the sense that the bodies of the said raised individuals were not abandoned in the grave but instead the whole human person was by miraculous intervention retrieved from the power of death. In reincarnation, the body of the deceased which is abandoned for decomposition in the grave is at the same time believed to be replaced by another one. In fact, this is quite incoherent and fundamentally illogical.

To summarise then, not only does the African concept of reincarnation in all its ramifications, which has infiltrated Christianity in Africa, run contrary to the Christian stance of "it is appointed to man to die only once" in Hebrew 9:27, but the concept of reincarnation, exclusive to Africa with the exception of the *abiku* cases (the isolated cases of wandering-spirit children mentioned earlier), is also critically examined, and found to be both illogical and self-defeating since most incidents claimed to be instances of reincarnation can be explained away scientifically or in some other way. Consequently, the African concept of reincarnation calls for a radical rethinking by a critical mind in the light of correct biblical interpretation and natural science. In conclusion, African Christians should return to the Bible and accept it as the sole authority on earth in matters of both principle and practice. They should also learn to allow the Bible to interpret itself on contentious matters rather than imposing an interpretation from African cultural beliefs and practices. For some Christians in Africa to accept the reality of reincarnation is to totally reject the Bible as the inspired word of God and the authentic guide to all spiritual truths.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 *Yetunde* (meaning “Mother has come again.”) is a variation of the pure Yoruba name *Iyabo* (meaning “Mother has returned.”) among the Ijebu-speaking people of southern Nigeria. *Babatunde* (“Father has come again.”) is the masculine equivalent of *Iyabo* and *Yetunde*. *Omodehinbo* (“The child has returned.”) is also an Ijebu name but borne by both genders. So also is *Ayedun* (“The world is sweet.”).
 - 2 The word *abiku* is a Yoruba expression for a child born to die perpetually. The traditional Yoruba of south-western Nigeria strongly believe that some children are capable of going through the cycle of rebirth as many times as they wish. Consequent upon this, different measures are taken to break the *abiku* cycle by the traditional Yoruba.
 - 3 *Ogbanje* is the Ibo term for children believed to have the potential to be reincarnated after death, either to their families or to any family of their choice.
 - 4 Venerable A A Adetubo, *Interview respondent*, Clergyman, The African Church, Nigeria. Interviewed on 27 July 2006.
 - 5 The Rev P K Adeoye, *Interview respondent*, Vicar, The Methodist Church, Agbara, Ado-Odo Circuit, Badagry, Lagos State, Nigeria. Interviewed on 4 June 2006.
 - 6 The Rev Canon S A Otusami, *Interview respondent*, Clergyman, Anglican Church, Oke Oshun Diocese, Nigeria. Interviewed on 28 July 2006.
 - 7 Pastor Igigbise, *Interview respondent*, Pastor, The Apostolic Church, Agbowo District, Ibadan Area, Nigeria. Interviewed on 12 June 2006.
 - 8 S G Samuel, *Interview respondent*, Presiding Pastor, Throne of Grace Church, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Interviewed on 23 March 2002.
 - 9 S O Abogunrin (The Rev (Prof), *Interview respondent*, Nigerian first Professor of Biblical Studies, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and cleric, Evangelical Church of West Africa, (ECWA). Interviewed on 30 December 2001.