



The Yoruba Muslims and the Credence in Reincarnation: An Orthodox Intrusion

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ABSTRACT

Everybody knows that death is the unescapable end of man. What waves the mind of many, consciously or otherwise, is the question of what happens to man when he breaths his last breath. While some are of the opinion that after death comes judgment; a determent of whether one goes to eternal blissful domains, or into everlasting tenant; depending on whether he had lived piously or otherwise, while on earth. Another school of thought opines that the soul of the dead will reincarnate by taking abode in a new physical body, born as a new baby and live another normal life, whereby he/she has the opportunity to correct his/her wrong actions in the previous incarnation. While some are of the opinion that when the soul has gathered wisdom, knowledge and understanding through several incarnations, it becomes one with the creator; others believe that reincarnation is a continuous process without neither beginning nor an ending. The Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria, like most other Africans, believes that humans reincarnate in order to re-choose their destiny and fulfill their life ambitions which they had no chance to achieve in a previous incarnation. An examination of some Yoruba traditional songs about death and what follows, show that they believe in 'a day of reckoning' and the continuum of the life cycle. Reincarnation, generally speaking, is always thought of, and discussed as a religious phenomenon, most probably because it borders on the super-natural; an issue to which only God; the creative force, has the totally correct answer

INTRODUCTION

Among Muslims reincarnation is one phenomenon that has generated great controversies. Being an age-long controversial issue, scholars from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, have discussed reincarnation and attempted to resolve various controversies surrounding it. J.B Long in his article to the encyclopedia of religion views the issue from multi-cultural dynamics as archaic and modern simultaneously.¹ Dwelling on the subject matter, he looks at it in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and among the ancient Greeks. He, however, fails to discuss reincarnation in the light of the two leading revealed religions Christianity and Islam.

Onyewuenyi, writing from philosophical point of view, has done philosophical reappraisal of the African belief in reincarnation. He reached the conclusion that the use of the term reincarnation as understood by the west for the African belief (in the coming back of the dead), is grossly erroneous and misleading.² Leading authorities in Yoruba traditional religion like Idowu, Awolalu, and Dopamu have also contributed to the debate. While some Muslim writers in the Arab etc. have discussed reincarnation, through in passing, we are not aware of any Muslim writers except Balogun who discussed the position of Islam and reincarnation of course, most of these contributions not only discuss the subject of reincarnation but also attempt to resolve the controversial issues involved. Regrettably, however, their explanations have not, in the opinion of the Muslims theologians, really laid the matter to rest. This paper is focused on Yoruba Muslims and their position on reincarnation.³ As a background to the main study, the paper looks at the concept of reincarnation among the Yoruba people. The Yoruba Muslims regarding beliefs in reincarnation are divided into i.e. the ardent believers and, the opponents of reincarnation. The work then presents and analyses the views of the orthodox Muslims theologians especially their explanation of people's experience associated with reincarnation, rebirth and the act of recalling their past life experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Occupying a large area, Yoruba constitutes one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are also one of the largest homogenous groups among Africans. Mostly found in the southwestern part of the country, Yoruba predominantly belong to the Ogun, Oyo, Ondo Osun, Ekiti and Lagos states of Nigeria.⁵ Substantial portions of the population of the Kwara state are also Yoruba. Some neighboring countries such as the Republic of Benin, Dahomey, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire also accommodate some sections of the Yoruba. On the historic origin of the Yoruba, there are (according to Akinjobin and Ayandelo the two authorities in Yoruba history) two opinions. One says that the Yoruba originally migrated from the northeastern area of Africa. To settle down in Ile-Ife, now a part of Osun state of Nigeria. The other holds that the Yoruba originated from Ile-Ife, which, whole world was created.

The Yoruba, like other Africans are traditional people. The advent of Islam and Christianity led to the abandoning of the traditional religion and the way of life. However substantial numbers of people are still traditionalists while a good number is of those who were unable to break completely from their origin

METHODOLOGY

Derived from two Latin words: 're' means again and Incarnate' means to enter the body; reincarnation, in classical sense, is therefore the transfer of soul after death to a new body, human or animal. When the soul enters an animal or tree that instead is referred as transmigration. Reincarnation, doctrinally, is the belief that the soul of a dead person, rather than going to the spiritual world and living there is transferred into another body, may be that of a newly born baby in which case it is called rebirth or it continues its existence in another part of the world in some other shape.⁸ As earlier noted in the introduction, reincarnation is an age-long belief. Indeed, there are evidences that it had existed, ever before the coming of Jesus. For instance, four centuries before Christ, Pythagoras of Samos and his followers had expressed their belief in transmigration of soul as a result of which they never ate animal flesh believing that the souls of one's friends might be in the body of the animals killed for food. The Christian bible contains texts that imply reincarnation. Such include Mathew 11:14, 17:12-13 concerning the identity of John the Baptist; Mathew 16:13-16 and Mark 6:14-16 concerning the identity of Jesus himself. However, some Christian writers have argued that these texts only suggest reincarnation but do not really prove it.⁹ This is a mere confirmation that the Jews and not Jesus and his disciples believed in reincarnation. J.B Long in this article on this subject locates the cultural areas of the world where the doctrine of reincarnation could be found. He writes: it is significantly important that a belief in reincarnation in some form or another is to be found in non-literate cultures all over the world. Other primary cultural areas (besides central Australia) in which this precept is noticeably present are West Africa (among the Ewe, Edo, Igbo and Yoruba), South Africa (among Bantu speakers and Zulu), Indonesia, Oceania, New Guinea and both North and South America (among selected ethnic groups). It is of particular interest that the Nupe in the Northern Nigeria also believe in reincarnation. Strangely their belief is that every man has two souls and that at death, it is one of the souls that goes and abide with the creator while the other finds another body and continues its existence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Various manifestations of reincarnation have been given by the Yoruba people to prove the possibility of reincarnation. In an instance, people who may not be aware of a person's death may see one who dies elsewhere shortly before or after his burial. In another instance, he might be seen leading another life elsewhere.¹¹ He might even settle down with a wife who, not suspecting her partner, may have issues with him. Once, we were invited to see a body whose father was said to have died later reincarnated. The information gathered reveals that the father died in Lagos only to be seen in another Yoruba town where he married a woman who had the boy for him. Awolalu and Dopamu have confirmed that this is what the Yoruba people call *Aku-da-aya* "the ghost of a dead person appearing in a place other than his home town. It implies that those who die here on earth have only changed places on this same earth. It is, however, believed that only those who do not live to a ripe old age but die prematurely fall

in this category. Another manifestation of reincarnation among the Yoruba is *a-tun-wa* (another coming or rebirth) this, according to the Yoruba, is a peculiar to those who have lived to a ripe old age and were righteous.¹² They become ancestors and can also re-incarnate, in most cases as a grandchild or great grandchild in the family. That is why we often hear the Yoruba name some children as *Iyabo* (mother has come back) and *Babatunde* father has come back). An authority has submitted that the reason why the ancestors perform the feat of reincarnation is because of their love for this world and especially for their family. The case of a man is reported, who at the time of his death told his people that he would soon come back and that his younger brother would give birth to him. When questioned as to how they would be sure he was the one, he told them he would be born with teeth in his mouth. Soon the brother gave birth to a baby boy with teeth in his mouth. Similar experiences abound, and are frequently quoted.

Two major factors that strengthen the Yoruba belief in rebirth are reappearance in body marks of an ancestor on the body of a newly-born child and past life recalls a situation whereby a child exhibits traits that make the Yoruba conclude that he is older than his age, and also he is able to recall that he had lived before. This person can even recount some of his/her experiences during that past existence.¹³ The above enunciation notwithstanding, the concept of reincarnation among the Yoruba is shrouded in confusion. This, according to Danoye has made Idowu, an authority in Yoruba traditional religion to conclude that, in reality, there appears to be nothing like it (reincarnation). One major problem Idowu has with it is that of reconciling between it and the ancestor could, invocation. He finds it difficult to believe that an ancestor could reincarnate fully, walk and talk with the living in this physical world while at the same time, he could continue to remain in the after-life as a result of which he is also invoked from time to time.¹⁵ Idowu, sensing this contradiction came up with the theory of partial reincarnation a theory of that the continuous existence of the ancestors in the spiritual world necessitates their partial reincarnation in this physical world.

Awolalu in his Yoruba beliefs and sacrificial rites has endorsed this theory of Idowu. On the contrary, onyewuanyi says it is no solution at all to the problem of Yoruba beliefs in reincarnation. According to him: reincarnation is a European word, which conveys a definite constant concept. It would be erroneous, therefore, to limit African interpretations of concept that explain the vital influence of the dead forebears on the living and for which there are no proper translations in European languages, to the stable concept of reincarnation.¹⁴ A critical look at the arguments of Idowu and Onyewuanyi shows that they both limit reincarnation in Yoruba belief to rebirth of ancestors; losing sight of *a-ku-da-ya* phenomenon discussed earlier as a manifestation of reincarnation. The Yoruba people believe in reincarnation the classical sense, through their religion has no room for this concept.¹⁵

Yoruba Muslims and Reincarnation:

It should be noted that the concept of reincarnation had existed among Yoruba, long before their contact with Islam. Therefore, when one compares the belief of the Yoruba Muslims about reincarnation with that of the Yoruba traditional belief, one cannot but conclude that, to a large extent, the latter, not only informed but also equally had great influence on the former. Be that as it may, this category of Yoruba Muslims who express belief in reincarnation equally rely on experiences of people who claim to have seen dead people reincarnate, and quote two distinct Quran portions to prove their point. The first portion is verse 60 and 61 of chapter 56 "We have decreed death to be your common lot, and we are not being frustrated from changing your forms and creating you (again) in (forms) that you know not. "In the opinion of this group, this is a clear reference and evidence for reincarnation.¹⁶ Thus, by implication, the present existence, for many, is not the first and may not be the last. They bitterness this with recalling of past life experiences. The second Quran reference is made in verse 2 of chapter 6 where Allah says: He, it is who created you from clay, and then decreed a stated term (for you) and there is in his presence another know term; yet you doubt within yourselves. In this verse, the word Ajal (started term) occurs twice. The second is qualified with Musamman (meaning known). Scholars have given the two different interpretations. One interprets, the first Ajal to mean the termination of a life span and the second Ajal to mean the time of resurrection. Another view maintains that two life spans are decreed for every man.¹⁷ The first is shorter. It is the one written down for man by the angel mentioned in the fourth hadith in the forty selected traditions of Al-Nawawi. The second is longer. It is kept in the Ummu 'I-Kitab (mother of the book) which, according to most Sunni writers is the same as Lawhu 'I-Mahfuz (the preserved tablet). Yusuf Ali remarks that it is the original foundation of all revelation, the Essence of Allah's will law. It is, however, interpreted by Gumi as a Divine book. Also whatever is contained in the Ummu 'I-Kitab is unchangeable and no one, other than Allah, has access to it, not even the Angels. This interpretation is further supported with a statement of the prophet (peace be upon him) that righteousness such as keeping the family ties can necessitate the first Ajal being lengthened. The lengthening in our understanding will, however, be within the span of the second Ajal.

The third interpretation is oral. It takes the first Ajal to refer to 'untimely death' and the second Ajal to mean the natural death. It is not impossible that interpretation is formed by the African traditional belief in 'untimely death' of young people, the implication of which is that the dead did not die a natural death rather, there are some forces that caused them to die before their appointed term. It is therefore believed that such soul cannot gain entrance into the spiritual world. It will still live on the earth to complete its appointed term and die naturally. On verses 60 and 61 of chapter 56, they say the statement "to transfigure you and create you in (forms) that you know not refers to resurrection in the world hereafter and not reincarnation in this physical world. They argue that if it is a reference to reincarnation, it then means that the soul will reincarnate in a new body or a form different from the original form¹⁹ In that case, the a- ku-

da-aya phenomenon will not fit in because those who say they see dead soul reincarnate have always claimed to see the same bodies and forms of the dead ones. In fact, that is one reason why they are able to recognize them. ²⁰Also, on the issue of untimely death, they submit that it is not possible for any soul to die before its appointed term as the Quran clearly states: And no person can ever die except by Allah's leave and at an appointed term." Further, they ask that if truly there is reincarnation with all its manifestations, what form will accountability and recompose take on the Day of judgment? That is, if for example, a particular soul led an ungodly and unrighteous life, it then died and later reincarnated and then led a godly and righteous life, will this single soul, on the Day of Judgment account for its position for its first existence or the second or both? However, to establish their position on the impossibility of reincarnation, they cite certain portions of the Quran. One of such verses 100 of Suratu I'-Mu'minun where Allah says concerning the unrighteous ones: Until when death comes to one of them he says: My Lord! Send me back, so that I may do good in that which I have left behind" No! It is but a word that he speaks, and behind them is Barzakh (a barrier) until the day when they will be resurrected. Certain points, according to this group, are to be deduced from these verses. Firstly, the plea of the unrighteous asking to be sent back is at the point of death.²¹ The phrase "and behind them is Barzakh", further clarifies this, Barzakh literally means a barrier which intervenes between this world and the life hereafter commencing immediately after the death of a man and ending on the day of Resurrection". As soon as a man dies, he enters Barzakh.

Secondly, the emphatic 'No' response given by Allah shows the impossibility of reincarnation and that the dead will be barred completely from returning to this physical world, rather, he will be in Barzakh and will not be resurrected until the day of Resurrection. ²³Another Qur'an reference cited by the group is the verse 15 and 16 of chapter 23, which reads thus, "After that, surely, you will die. Then (again), surely, you will be resurrected on the day of Resurrection.²⁴ "The argument raised there by this group is that phrase 'Yaomu I-Qiyamah both of which occur in verse 16 are clear indications that there is no resurrection immediately after death prior to the day of Resurrection.²⁵ They explain that while Thumma shows that resurrection cannot be immediately after death, Yaomu I-Qiyamah establishes the exact period that resurrection will take place. They therefore, conclude that it is not possible for any soul to reincarnate. Another reference is made to verse 42 of Surah Zumar where Allah says:It is Allah who takes away the soul at the time of their death, and those that die during their sleep. He keeps those (soul) for which he has ordained death and sends the rest for a term appointed.²The reference point here is to the phrase in italics. They argue that if Allah withholds and keeps a soul after its death, the soul dwells there in the spiritual world and cannot therefore reincarnate and be seen again in his physical world. To support this argument, they make reference to various reports on the positions and states of souls after death. Such reports have it that the souls of Allah's Prophets at the death are taken to the highest of the high places (in the heavens) or in the paradise: drinking, eating and enjoying and at night resting in a lamp attached to Allah's Throne of Authority. The soul of

martyr resides in the belly of a green bird in the paradise also enjoying there. As for the soul of obedient believer, it abides in a place called Rabd in paradise.²⁸ the disobedient believer's soul is in its own case, suspended in the air between heaven and the earth. The disbeliever soul is confined in the belly of a black bird in Jijjin (a prison or a dungeon in the seventh earth).²⁹ Similar reports to the ones given about the martyr's soul are for the souls of Muslim children who die in infancy. The conclusion they draw from these reports is that no soul, whether righteous or otherwise still resides on this earth after death. In short, in the light of all these references, Islam rejects the doctrine of reincarnation.

The Orthodox Explanations

Not many Muslim scholars in this part of the world have written on this subject matter, I.A.B Balogun, however, has an article titled "Islam, Reincarnation, Resurrection and Incarnation", in which he submits that the belief in reincarnation is alien to Islam. Though, he does not offer any explanation for the experiences of those who claim its possibility.³¹ If the first group claims that reincarnation is possible some Quran verses and personal experiences which in logic is considered a strong proof as evidences; then the second group says it is not possible disproving their Quran citations but certainly not their personal experiences. How then do we resolve the issue? The orthodox Muslims have taken up this challenge.³² though, they also do not believe in reincarnation. The reason is that it has no basis; neither in the Quran nor in the Hadith. They however, do not disprove the 'experiences' of its proponents; though they have their explanations for them. In their opinion, such 'experiences' are nothing but the work of Jinns.

1. The Jinns: The Jinns are creatures of Allah that are also called spirit in English.³⁴ they are created from fire, free of smoke (Q.55:15) and are simply invisible to man's sight when in their natural state. The Jinns co-exist with man on earth.³⁵ they are also blessed with some powers, which enables them to perform certain feats such as transformation/transfiguration. Jinns may take human form (man or women, old or young). They could also appear in the form of animals and creeping or flying creatures. Swiftness in movement in another power the Jinns are imbued with (Q.27:39).³⁶ since they are created from smokeless fire, they have no weight; and are light and very swift in movement.³⁷ Like light, they travel very fast. Also because of this nature, they are able to penetrate any concrete object. This is known as mass (possession). The Jinns can enter into trees, animals, and even human beings and reside in them for years. Another features of the Jinns is longevity of life. This explains the reason why they are highly knowledgeable especially in the area of history. Also the Jinns do marry and procreate like man. Theologians have also confirmed the possibility of marriage between Jinns and man. They, however, differ on its desirability.
2. The Qarin: It is believed that for every man, there is a Jinn companion called Qarin. Quran mentioned the Satan or devil companion appointed for whoever turns away from the remembrance of the Most Beneficent

God. Qarin, however, assumes a general usage in the hadith in which the prophet (peace be upon him) said that for every man, there are two Qarins—one, a Jinns and the other, an Angel.⁴⁰ From the hadith, it could be inferred that the two Qarins are always in man's company and that the one from the Jinn is a Shaytan (i.e. evil companion always commanding and spurring one to commit evil). It can therefore be said (and safely too) that the Qarin's accessibility to man gives it the privilege to have knowledge about almost every bit of man's life.

3. The Qarin and Reincarnation: to the orthodox Muslim theologians, relying on Quranic text, soul, at death do not die but are withheld by Allah and are kept back from returning to this world.⁴² In the words of Yusuf Ali, it goes back to a plane of existence in which it is more conscious of the realities of the spiritual world. That being the case, the orthodox Muslims theologians conclude that reincarnation is not possible.

As for the experiences of people, they maintain that the only possible explanation is the involvement of Jinns especially the Qarins.⁴⁴ These Jinns, having longevity of life as part of their features, mostly outlive the men they are attached to and who's from they can easily assume thereafter. ⁴⁵It is the Jinns in human form that roam about deceiving and confusing people. It may also decide to settle down in a locality, marry a human and bear children and if, perchance, its nature is about to be discovered, the next thing, according to those who narrate to us their experiences, is mysterious disappearance which is strong confirmation that it is a Jinn not a human being. The author of *Kitabu I'Iman bi I'Mala'ikah*, after narrating his personal experiences concludes that reincarnation is but the handiwork of Qarins.⁴⁶ The same conclusion is drawn by ibn Taymiyyah and Umar Salayman al-Ashqar. On the issue of rebirth and recalling past life experiences, the same explanation holds. When a man dies, his Qarins does not die with him. It may also decide not to go away from the family.⁴⁷ Therefore, when a new baby is born into the family or while still in the mother's womb the Jinn of the deceased might take possession of the new baby. And, since it had the privilege of knowing virtually all about the deceased, it is able to recall these details through the young member of the family it has possessed now. Thus it appears to people that the deceased has reincarnate in the form of the baby when actually, it is not so.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One reason advanced by some sections of African people to justify the need for reincarnation is that it affords the deceased one another opportunity to undo his wrong thereby improving the world of the living. This line of thinking is also shared by the Muslim believers who believe in reincarnation. It is, however, not only absurd but opposite to the beliefs and teachings of Islam as contained in verse 99 and 100 of *Suratu I'Mu'minun* cited earlier. Another reason why Islam rejects it is that its acceptance is tantamount to an outright ejection of an article of faith in Islam (i.e. belief in the last day). When reincarnation is viewed critically, it would be realized that it is a doctrine subscribed to by people who express disbelief in the final resurrection and consequently, final judgment and Recompose. These are the people, who according to Quran say: there is

nothing but our life in this world, we die and (then) live (again) never shall we be raised up again (q.23:37) the implication of this statement is that there is no world other than the present. It is (only) those who die that come back to life again and so life goes on. The world will not come to an end and therefore, there will be no Yaumu I'-Qiyamah (Day of Resurrection). Thus reincarnation has not place in orthodox Islam since it has basis neither in Quran nor in the hadith.

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When we got this information, we made inquiries in order to determine the correctness or otherwise of the information. We were thus conducted on 5-10-2001 to a house in Adeola Street, Aguda, Lagos, where the boy lived with his grandfather, Baba Ewe Nla many residents of this area testified to the correctness of the information.