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THE IGBO VOCABULARY OF DEATH: AN INVITATION TO A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY.

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Abstract

This study creates an Igbo idea of Death which leads to a philosophy of History. Through its vocabulary here, a philosophy of history develops. Many reasons justify this focused inquiry as worthwhile. Some key terms have been noted alongside some Igbo names conveying senses of death through their meanings, causes and types. History and Philosophy have been defined briefly before considering some contextual facts such as change, activity asocialness, immanence, travelitis, and social deaths including assimilation. To the Igbo, Death obstructs achievement. They confront it to make history so as to avoid Death.

INTRODUCTION

"No condition is permanent in this World¹"

"Silence teaches the dignity and finality of Death²"

"Life is an art. If you help only yourself, you are useless. If you help others then you are useful in society³".

Igboana means the wealth of information about the Igbo people. History, Geography, Politics, Philosophy, Biography, Religion, Anthropology, - with other subjects, provide it. Scholars have investigated Igbo life in pre- British times⁴, during Anglo- Nigeria⁵ and Post- Independence⁶. Yet much more remains to be added by further inquiries from other angles other than in this thanatology⁷.

The goal in this study is to provide an Igbo idea of Death- as a philosophy- through its vocabulary, meaning, relevance and significance today. In doing so, the immediate thesis is that the Igbo have an idea of Death that is *philosophizeable* as History.

An investigation like this rests upon some justifications of this age of rapid change and *overscience*. First, Death has two doors – as an exit from life and as an entrance to another life. Second, it has numerous

causes. Third, there are deaths and deaths, indeed, an uneven variety. Fourth, this experience teaches hope, love, fear, determination, oblivion or amnesia. Fifth, studying Igbo death can be an invitation to a philosophy of History. Sixth, the uses and abuses of death affect Igbo society⁶. Seventh, an invitational view about it reveals the connection between Igbo points- of- view and the realities of death. Eight, dying and philosophy are life's durables. Ninth, philosophy and philosophers guide human actions, for better or for worse. Tenth, History as the Mother- general⁹ of all disciplines is still the lamp for humankind. Historical blindness¹⁰, wrong- headed history or avoidance¹¹, therefore, cook misfortunes in society.

Preface, focus and justification lead to the argument of this essay. That begins with the definitions of the key terms, namely Igbo, Idea, Death, Invitation, Philosophy and History. Igbo means a human group, an ethnicity and-its language. Geographically, the Igbo people live in five south eastern states of Nigeria,¹² and have diasporic colonies throughout Nigeria, in several countries of Africa and within the wider world of non-blacks comprising Europe, Asia and the Americas. Igbo population today hovers around sixty million¹³. An **Idea** is an opinion often resting upon evidence. This term stands for a **weltanschauung** or world - view. The Igbo vocabulary of death is a list conveying wisdoms wrapped in the names which Igbo parents give to their children. Such terms mean names¹⁴, show causes and typify deaths in the chart below:

NAMES	MEANINGS
ONWUBUALILI	Death is a long sorrow.
ONWUABUNSO	Death is not forbidden.
ONWUDIWE	Death yields angers.
ONWUAJUOHA ¹⁵	Death never asks questions.
ONWUAMAEZE ONWUAMA	Death does not respect even the big (rich) persons.
ONWUAMANSO	Death respects no custom.
ONWUANAIBE	Death does not take bribes or accept guarantors.
ONWUASOANYA	Death respects nobody.
ONWUBIKO	Death, people beg you, Go away!
ONWUBUNTA	Death reduces population or family.
ONWUBUYA	Death creates permanent sorrows.
ONWUGBOLU	Death has ended here now.
ONWUASOMBA	Death never regards any people as free or

	safe.
ONWUEGBUO	Death has struck here.
ONWUELINGO	Death does not accept bribes.
ONWUTEAKA	Death appears forgotten during its absence.
ONWUMELU	Death caused all the problems.
ONWUEMELIE	Death has defeated the people.
ONWUHAA	Death should leave people alone.
ONWUAMAEGBU	Death will not overtake us.
ONWUCHEKWA	Death has to wait.

CAUSES ¹⁶ OF DEATH	MEANINGS
AGHA ELIE	War took them (DIA) Died in Action.
AGUUEGBUO	Hunger killed them.
ILOEGBUO	Enemies killed them.
ONWUIHELE(IWHELE)	Suicide- because of shame or desertion.
ONWUNTI IKE	Death through rejection of advice – stubbornness.
ASHIOGBUGBU	Illness/Sickness (sometimes vague).

TYPES ¹⁷ OF DEATH	MEANINGS
ONWUIKE	Violent death.
ONWUANYIGHIYI	Slow, painful death.
ONWUOKOLOBIA	Death of an able youth.
ONWUNWATA	Death of a child.
ONWUAGADI	Death of an oldster.
ONWU CHI(M)	Death caused by <u>Chineke</u> or <u>Chukwuokike</u> via the private god/deity called <u>chi</u> .
ONWUAGBOGHOBIA	Death of an adult female.

How, it can be asked, are these facts an invitation? Some answers may stand for others. For one thing, ideas rule the world and influence human beings. For another, every society matures a philosophy of History –among other philosophies. But the term History¹⁸ needs explaining, even if briefly; as a discipline, it backgrounds all other studies and itself. Orderly, it examines past events, meaning the activities waged by men and women in society. For now, History studies the Igbo pasts within an overlong past – from pre-history to contemporary times. It shows their socio-economic activities such as agriculture, religion, politics, governance, trade, commerce and philosophy. Food is history for feeding changing populations. History denotes also their thoughts over life, death, *beingness* and time. Indeed,

it can also mean histories – community, local government, state, national, to say nothing about intellectual, cultural and social trends. With regards to ideas history, equips scholars to philosophize from praxis. It is work, a curative doctor for *ignorances*; and a national memory.

Philosophy is wide like History and Life; yet it focuses the views of individual scholars as they fish for truths in the sea of concrete or abstract ideas – ideas that are social constructs. This knowledge queries the so-called facts; doubts the assumptions; and suspends answers. For philosophers, everything is in a state of flux. The so-called conclusions remain unconcluded – not final in this onward march of the human mind. At this stage, the *Igboworlders* stress the following facts. These emerge from their general university of life called Death – the first and last in humankind's endless journey – back to back. That, means from Life to death to life.

First, change is continuous and uncontrollable. Survival, therefore, includes swimming along, on and up, as one of the lessons from historical exposure. **Second**, “No condition is permanent in this world¹⁹”. In 1947, this writer, then seven and others had to sing this song after Mr. Godfrey Edo of Eke, a primary school teacher. “Big man today, small man tomorrow. Na so de world de be. Na so de world debe?” “Small man today, Big man tomorrow, Na so de world de be²⁰” His song says that a person can be a rich man today, but a poor man tomorrow because life changes people and their positions.

Third, activity, doing any useful work, but never laziness, is the road to human survival and achievement. For that, begging before the Nigerian Civil War (the Nigeria – Biafra War) was invisible, if at all²¹. Hard work paid off, but laziness earned shame or dishonor.

Fourth, togetherness in sorrow or at pleasure marked the central value in human life, as such, persons appear useless or meaningless when they stay, dance or eat alone for “Life is an art. If you help only yourself, you are useless. If you help others then you are useful in society²²”.

Among them, evil doers – asocial beings – die spiritual death. Society refuses to bury them, but throws them into the wilderness for foxes and other predators to devour. This burial illustrates the reward for bad living, namely, homelessness at death. Likewise, linguistic death

suggests losing one's genuine tongue. "Engligbo²³" as an Anglocized Igbo dialect, like Broken English, distorts the original and leaves posterity in mid – air, for being neither a true original nor an acceptable variety. Migrants and assimilated Igbos tend, sometimes, to speak diluted versions of this cultural death.

Fifth, Chukwu (Chukwuókike, Chukwu Abiama) created Life for the Igbo. He, by man's choice, is the final judge in all affairs²⁴. Consequently, traditional religion, being Chukwu –centric glues the society and unites men and women for cooperative living.

Sixth, this Chukwu is immanent in the Igbo cosmos²⁵. He is not an outside – insider but only a permanent insider and actor who winds the clock of life- and- death.

Seventh, fear of non- achievement before death comes, not love- of- Death, stands tall in the Igbo mind. None would want to be ignored, forgotten, or unhistorified. Hunger for achievement is endemic to Igboness. Therefore, they are opportunity – hunters often interpreted as travelitis²⁶. It is a desperate quest to change places and statuses. Possibly, death or its fear linking anxiety stings the Igbo people awake, wide awake.

Fortunately, just like a guide, in the womb of Time, this aspect co-tenants with many other deaths²⁷. For an adult male, non-marriage is death, so is spinsterhood. The barren woman; no matter her beauty or candour, is taken as socially dead. Even in academic life where the slogans are "Publish OR Perish" and "Publish or Perish", non-publishing leads a *promotee* to "death". But cynics can pun that "OR" is not "or" and that the published scholar can still die in the politics of the university jungle. Migrants preserve their cultures in foreign lands or else lose them by getting assimilated, because assimilation is also death among deaths. The non- performing politician who loses power becomes socially dead alive in his remaining days²⁸.

These ideas provide a philosophy of History,²⁹ by revealing the elements in the socio- economy of a people trapped by change upon change – where no condition is or can be permanent. But their determination, hardwork fearlessness and self- confidence confront Death³⁰. For they realize that "Life everywhere contains a taste of Death". But the living must press on, and they do.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This vocabulary of Death as *nonbeingness* is relevant today. Its significance means that death and life are general. The Igbo people see it as an obstruction to their quest for survival, achievement and history – making. This investigation has been justified. Its argument covers deaths and explains types, class, cause and timelessness. Its thesis stands for studying Igbo death yields the elements that produce a philosophy of History indicating thanatophobia³¹. Its invitation is opened. For to the Igbo proper, their fear of Death joins their fear of History – eternal Siamese twins.

Beyond the conclusion, there comes a range of recommendations. Historians, as an academic family, should urge the Federal Government to make History a national subject, meaning that citizens have to study it at their proper levels.

For one thing, historians should write nationalist history to train patriots as against *patrioteers*.

For another, Historical Education today requires other *-ologies* as an interdisciplinary venture. Leadership or advisory positions should go to historians in Home Offices, Foreign Affairs posts, Embassies and International Commissions.

Understanding History and historians should be upgraded by boosting academic scholarships, expanding University curricula and creating Areal Universities for country – specific competences. Governments should de-genderize political and university leaderships as a harvest of History – that History which conscientizes society.

Finally, Death studies, like the above, should continue to deepen the understanding of History, Life, Philosophy and Death.

End Notes

1. Celestine Ukwu of Abor in Udi LGA whose educated popular music cannot die. He died after the Nigeria – Biafra War (1967 – 1970).
2. Innocent FA Uzoechi, Ph.D. Dept of History and Civics, Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri, Imo State, 15 May, 1998.
3. Uzoechi, DALA (Distinguished Academic Leadership Award by COFICON, 2017) to mentees, GOUiversity, Enugu.
4. Rev. G. T. Basden, Among the Ibos of Nigeria (London: Frank Cass, 1966), passim. Also C. C. Ifemesia, Traditional Humane Living Among the Igbo: A Historical Perspective. (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1979).
5. A. E. Afigbo, The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in South eastern Nigeria, 1891 – 1929 (London: Longman, 1972).
6. Dan O. Chukwu, Sylvanus I. Okoro, *et al.* (eds.) Studies in Igbo History. (Enugu: Nolix Publications, 2016) Chap. 20, pp 353 – 363.
7. Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 11th edn. (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 1492 – “the scientific study of death and its associated practices”.
8. The uses and abuses of death involved prayers, wasteful burial expenses and feasts to show off wealth and mask poverty in the sea of poverty. These prove nothing to the dead!
9. Every subject has a background to it – a historically developmental one, for an example, the History of Medicine, and the History of History, otherwise called Historiography.
10. By Teaching Government- stamped Histories such as Party studies and pro- Government histories. See Richard Grunenberger's A Social History of the Third Reich in Hitler's Germany 1930 – 1945.
11. Between 1970 and 2019, in Post – Civil War Nigeria, History-teaching was not for the Primary to pre – University, levels. Certainly a historyless Democracy looks like an unsuccessful night journey.
12. These are Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo.
13. This is a guess-timatesince population statistics are politicized and, therefore, dumbed down among Third World Countries.

- also see Eastern Trumpet, Vol 4 No. 26 (2019) Article: "UN Questions Nigerian Government over Biafra".
14. See R. C. Okafor, Igbo Personal and Title Names (Enugu: New Generation Books, 2008) Passim. This author thanks Prof. Okafor for a brief interview over ONWUBUYA. Also U. D. Anyanwu in Ed. U. D. Anyanwu & J. C. U. Aguwa, The Igbo and the Tradition of Politics (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Press, 1993). "Erima: Towards a Theory of Igbo Political Tradition" pp 31 – 40, especially, p. 39.
 15. I thank Associate Professor Nick Ngozilgwe of Godfrey Okoye University for introducing this name on 4th July, 2019.
 16. Causation is difficult to pin down in History as in Philosophy, for mono-causality traps the unwary and fogs the past.
 17. Typing death here is incomplete, and wisely so, because knowing and unknowing are endless. But some can serve for now.
 18. See A. I. Rowse, The Use of History (London: EUP, 1965).
 19. Celestine Ukwu, already cited. Waxed many records conveying Igbo philosophic wisdoms about life – including "IjeEnu" or "Life's Journey on Earth".
 20. This event happened at St. Michael's Primary School, AwhaImezi, in Colonial Udi Division of Anglo- Nigeria.
 21. Vatican Radio (Italy) reported that in 1967 there were over two million (2,000,000) refugees in Biafra, but there were no beggars on the streets.
 22. Uzoечи, to mentees, 2019.
 23. "Engligbo" and "Broken English" are common today because of the speakers desire to communicate in societies hosting foreigners or non- indigenes. These are bridge languages.
 24. Uzoечи, A Basic History of Nigeria to AD. 2000 (Enugu, Benalice Intl. Publications 2004), 6 – 7. Also F. K. Ekechi, Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland. 1857 – 1914 (London: Frank cass, 1978), 161.
 25. Chinwe Achebe, The World of the Ogbanie (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986), 10 – 11 on "Igbo World View". Edmund Ilogu, Christianity and Igbo Culture (A Study of the Interaction of Christianity and Igbo Culture) (Onitsha Univ. Publishing Co.) (NY. London. Enugu: Nok Publishers, 1974), 38.