

# The Belief in Reincarnation Among the Igbo of Nigeria<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The modern Igbo of Nigeria, even when adhering to the Christian religion, have preserved many features of Igbo traditional religion. The belief in reincarnation seems to be particularly strong. The Igbo believe that reincarnation usually occurs within the same immediate or extended family. They try to identify the reincarnated ancestor by means of birthmarks, statements a child makes when it becomes able to speak, and behavioral resemblances between the child and the deceased person of whom it is the presumed reincarnation. Oracles are frequently consulted to make or confirm an identification. The Igbo believe that deceased persons inhabit a discarnate realm, but they conceive this as an undesirable limbo from which discarnate souls are eager to return to a new terrestrial life. The Igbo concept of reincarnation includes belief in a group of souls called *ogbanje* who are born, die in early life, and are reborn in the same family, often repeatedly.

## Introduction

PARRINDER (1957) POINTED OUT that different groups of people who believe in reincarnation hold quite different concepts of how and why it occurs. He compared the Hindu-Buddhist concept of reincarnation, which is indissolubly linked to the doctrine of karma, with the belief (or beliefs) about reincarnation held among West African peoples, who have no concept corresponding to that of karma. In the course of investigating children who claim to remember previous lives, I have also studied the belief in reincarnation of the various peoples among whom such children often occur.<sup>2</sup> I obtained the information for the present article during the investigation of cases suggestive of reincarnation<sup>3</sup> among the Igbo.<sup>4</sup> I have presented data about the Igbo cases in a companion article to this one (Stevenson 1985).

Although anthropologists and other students of the Igbo often refer to the belief in reincarnation among them (Henderson 1972; Noon 1942:641, 646-8; Onwuejeogwu 1981:41-3; Uchendu 1964:30-5), I know of no systematic review of this subject. The most extensive discussion of it, the one by Noon, derived from information provided by a single informant. It seems appropriate, therefore, to present a new review of the subject and one that I believe is more embracing than any hitherto published.

Although I shall concern myself in this paper mainly with the belief in reincarnation among the Igbo, I shall also, in one section, make briefer

references to the belief in reincarnation among some of the other peoples of Nigeria and of other countries of West Africa. I think it important to point out some of the similarities in the beliefs about reincarnation held throughout sub-Saharan West Africa.

This report does not touch on many aspects of Igbo religion that are not directly related to the belief in reincarnation. Reincarnation is an important tenet of traditional Igbo religion, but it is only one of a group of Igbo religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

So far as I can tell, traditional Igbo religion remains strong. Although most Igbos are Christians, most also continue to believe in the traditional religion and appear to find nothing incompatible between it and Christianity, with the exception, sometimes, of the belief in reincarnation.

#### *Sources of Information for this Report*

Between 1978 and 1984 I made four field trips to Nigeria, primarily for the purpose of studying cases suggestive of reincarnation among the Igbo and other peoples of Nigeria. However, in the course of these investigations I used opportunities that arose for inquiring about my informants' beliefs concerning reincarnation. In addition to the informants for the cases, I had lengthy interviews with an *ogbanje* doctor (whose role I shall describe later) and with an oracle specializing in matters related to reincarnation. I also had two shorter interviews with native doctors versed in the management of *ogbanje* children.

The majority of my informants were men. They showed a wide variation in age (but all were adults), in socioeconomic circumstances, and in education. However, I did not conduct a formal survey with a randomly selected sample, and I do not wish to mislead readers into thinking that I did.

Although all my informants agreed that Igbo traditional religion includes a belief in reincarnation, they sometimes differed regarding details concerning the processes or "laws" governing reincarnation. These variations in the sub-concepts perhaps reflect the political organization of the Igbo, which was one of comparatively small, independent units without any formal confederacy among them (Ottenberg 1958:295-6). Writing of Igbo egalitarianism, Achebe (1976:139) mentioned approvingly that Henderson (1972) had given his book on the Onitsha Igbo the title *The King in Every Man*. Accordingly, in reporting the subsidiary beliefs, I have described those that seem most commonly held, but I do not mean to assert that every Igbo would agree to every subconcept that I mention.

I found Igbo informants to be, on the whole, affable and forthcoming in describing the beliefs about reincarnation among their people. In this respect they were more open than were—again speaking in general—my informants among the Yoruba and Edo. Nevertheless, some Igbo informants showed reluctance to speak with me and a few even refused to answer certain questions. There seemed to be three main reasons for such inhibitions. Some informants regarded the traditional religion as essentially private and something not

to be discussed with "outsiders," such as myself. Others did not wish to evoke memories of tragic past events, and this concern led to my being forbidden to talk with certain informants for cases that I studied. Finally, I met some Christianized Igbos who seemed half-ashamedly reluctant to reveal the extent of their persisting commitment to the traditional religion. Isichei (1970) described syncretism among first generation Igbo Christians, some of whom tried to meld the two religions. I found this effort persisting among some of my informants who were (probably) third and fourth generation Christians. Discordances between the two sets of beliefs still tormented them.

I also met a small number of Igbos who had obtained higher degrees in Western universities and who regarded the traditional religion of their people as a congeries of superstitions that they (these informants) had left behind. Yet other Igbos have preserved a belief in the truth and the wisdom of Igbo traditions along with what they have learned of Western science and technology.

In addition to information obtained directly from my own informants, I have studied previous publications bearing on the topic of this paper and will cite them when relevant. Whenever feasible, I have checked statements of earlier authors against those of my informants.

## The Igbo Belief in Reincarnation

### *A Summary of Igbo Eschatology*

Social status is important among the Igbo, and they attach particular importance to improving one's status. As with other peoples, high social status derives partly from the family into which a person is born, but the Igbo give less importance to this circumstance than do many other peoples. An Igbo aphorism, "No one knows the womb that bears the chief" (Uchendu 1965:20), shows the importance they attach to individual accomplishment when they make judgments about status.

The features of personal endeavor that confer status include having a large progeny, acquiring wealth, and, more recently, receiving a good education. However, qualities of effective leadership are also important. Moreover, a leader, if he is to achieve status through his leadership, must be a guide to others, not a tyrant; and generosity in helping other persons to "come up" earns more rewards in status than selfish pursuit of one's own goals.

The Igbo believe that a person may continue to improve his status from incarnation to incarnation, and the belief in reincarnation comforts dying persons who think that they have not raised their status sufficiently in the life that is ending. This idea relates to the importance the Igbo attach to identifying the deceased person of whom a baby is thought to be the reincarnation. The baby can thus, on reincarnating, assume whatever status he had in the previous life and build on it in the new life.

The Igbo believe that at death a soul or personality passes into a realm of discarnate beings, about which I shall mention three widely held concepts.

First, status loses no importance in the discarnate realm, and as Uchendu (1965:16) points out, dying Igbos are more concerned about their status in the discarnate realm than they are about the fact of dying.

Second, the Igbo regard the discarnate realm as a joyless limbo from which the discarnate souls (with a few exceptions) are eager to return to terrestrial life. They, therefore, consider terrestrial life (despite particular miseries) to be desirable, and, unlike Hindus and Buddhists, they have no aspiration to stop being reborn. In the phrase of Parrinder (1954/1970:138), "the African's attitude is world-affirming not world-renouncing."<sup>6</sup>

Third, the ceremony of the "second burial" of a deceased person influences the condition of the discarnate personality by helping him achieve tranquility in the discarnate realm and a satisfactory positioning for reincarnation. If these rites are improperly conducted, the deceased person's spirit may become displeased and bring misfortune to the negligent offspring (Arinze 1970:17; Basden 1921/1966:121; Ilogu 1974:42; Meek 1937/1970:61).

"Second burials," which may take place at any time between a week and a year or more after the death and "first burial" of the deceased, can be costly affairs, since they include animal sacrifices and much hospitality to participants (Basden 1921/1966:121-2). The expenditure involved should accord with the status of the deceased (Talbot 1926:493-510). (In 1981, I attended the "second burial" of a chief, which reminded me of a large country fair in the West, with singing, dancing, and ample consumption of alcohol.)<sup>7</sup>

The Igbo believe that good conduct in one life leads to a higher status both in the discarnate realm entered after death and in the next incarnation. Thus, an evildoer who by dishonest craft or skillful manipulation of the gods attains a high economic status and power will nevertheless have a low status in the discarnate realm. He may, moreover, have an inauspicious rebirth and return as a twin or be born feet first—conditions that are tabooed. Also, things may "go wrong" with this person in his next life; throughout it he could be troubled by repeated episodes of what in the West would be called "bad luck." More serious wickedness, such as murder or incest, may result in rebirth as a nonhuman animal.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the foregoing rather limited effects of misconduct, the Igbo do not believe that moral conduct in one life influences the circumstances of another. As I mentioned earlier, they have no concepts corresponding to the elaborate doctrine of retributive karma found in Hinduism and Buddhism. The circumstances of a future life derive much more from the results of bargaining with one's *Chi*<sup>9</sup> and from the fulfillment of wishes expressed premortem for an improvement in one's situation.

The Igbo believe that persons who die young will reincarnate more quickly than those who die at older ages. This enables a person whose strivings for a higher status were terminated early to resume them sooner. Aspirations for improvements in another incarnation may lead, for example, to opportunities for a better education. Also, bargains made before reincarnating with one's personal god (*Chi*) may result in more favorable opportunities for advancement in social status in the next life.

Some Igbo believe that not everyone reincarnates. Onwuejeogwu (1981:41-2) mentions two types of persons who cannot reincarnate: those who have led worthless, ineffective lives, especially if they have never married and had children; and those who have "died accidental deaths, committed suicide, or died prematurely."<sup>10</sup> Sometimes Igbo persons who feel angry and unforgiving over the wicked or useless conduct of a person who has died will try to prevent that person from reincarnating. They may try to do this by denying burial to the corpse (Meek 1937/1970:307), by burying it face downwards, or by other rituals.

In sum, most Igbo like living and wish to live a long life; and when they die they hope to return quickly from the discarnate realm and resume their endeavors toward the attainment of a higher social status. However, some Igbo souls are said to wish to die young. These, the *ogbanjes*, I shall discuss later in a separate section of this paper.

A further important feature of the Igbo belief in reincarnation is what we might call the malleability of one's situation. The concept of karma in Hinduism and Buddhism tends, in many persons of South Asia, to permit, and even to inculcate, an attitude of resignation and hence of passivity toward misfortunes in life. I am not asserting that Hinduism and Buddhism, properly understood, *should* have this tendency; but I think such an effect does occur in many South Asians. In contrast, the Igbo believe that through their own exertions—both in ordinary terrestrial affairs and by invoking the agency of gods—they can modify an unpleasant life situation. For them, although conduct has some effect on one's destiny, one's own wishes and efforts can change one's circumstances in a more immediate future than that envisaged for the effects of karma by most South Asians.

#### *Some Additional Features of the Igbo Belief in Reincarnation*

The Igbo expect, and usually wish, to reincarnate in the same family. Their cases suggestive of reincarnation tend to conform to this belief, because in a majority of those I have investigated, the subject (person with apparent memories of a previous life) and the deceased person with whom the subject is identified belong to the same immediate or extended family.<sup>11</sup> However, the Igbo acknowledge the occurrence of occasional aberrant cases in which a stranger, or even an enemy, is thought to have reincarnated in a particular family (Njaka 1974).

The Igbo believe that one can change sex from one life to another. Several reasons for "sex change" from one life to another were mentioned to me. Since in Igbo society males have (almost exclusively) the responsibility for economic support of a family (although this pattern is now changing), some men may wish to be reborn as women in order to have a life of reduced responsibility. Women, on the other hand, have little freedom or opportunity for independent action, and so some of them may wish to be reborn as men in order to have greater freedom. Effeminate and homosexual men may wish to make a full transition and become reborn as women.

Many Igbos believe that a single deceased person may reincarnate contemporaneously in two or more physical bodies (Meek 1937/1970:54, 118; Njaka 1974:39; Thomas 1913/1969:31). Indeed, a person may reincarnate in as many as ten or twelve later-born bodies. This process in one sense involves a duplicating of the discarnate soul. However, it also entails a "splitting" of the soul, because different qualities of character, and even different physical traits of the discarnate person, may become expressed in the several reincarnations of that person. For example, a person's strong physique may be embodied in one later-born child, while his tendency to stutter may appear in another.<sup>12</sup>

Each new physical body receives the soul (or part of the soul) of only one deceased person. This belief contrasts with that held by some Eskimos (and also by the Ga of Ghana [Field 1961:175]), according to which a newly-incarnated person may derive elements from the personalities of several deceased persons.

Some Igbo believe that a person may reincarnate, at least partially, before his or her physical body dies. This seems to be regarded as a rather exceptional occurrence. However, I learned of a case in which a two-months-old baby was identified as the reincarnation of a sickly old man who was moribund, but still alive. In another case, an elderly woman declared, after seeing a newly-born infant, that it was her reincarnation, and she died soon afterward. In studying this aspect of the belief, I had an illustration of the variation in the subconcepts about reincarnation among different Igbo informants, even ones closely related. One of them told me that the Igbo do not believe that persons can reincarnate before they die; but this man's son, speaking eighteen months later, said that they do believe this. When I told the son what his father had told me earlier, he said that his father knew about events only in his own village!

A part of a person may continue to exist in the discarnate realm and be honored as an ancestor by his or her living descendants even though a later-born child has been identified as that person's reincarnation (Arinze 1970:17-8).

Conception does not occur only from the contact of mother and father during sexual relations; it also requires a discarnate person wishing to be reborn (Henderson 1972:111). The Igbo regard measures of birth control as thwarting discarnate personalities wishing to reincarnate.

Dying Igbos sometimes express wishes for their next terrestrial life and sometimes make predictions about it. Uchendu (1965:6) stated that when his father's older brother was dying, he urged Uchendu's father, who was then single, to marry quickly because "he was coming back to him." Uchendu was later identified as being the reincarnation of this uncle.

#### *The Identification of the Previous Personality of an Infant*

I mentioned above the frequently expressed wish of dying persons to resume their strivings for higher social status in the next incarnation. Parents are eager to accommodate their children in these aspirations to the extent that

their resources permit. Proper recognition of the deceased person who has reincarnated may also help the new baby to avoid inadvertently breaking taboos that the deceased person had observed; such violation of a taboo could make the infant ill. For these reasons most parents wish to learn as soon as they can of whom a newborn baby is the reincarnation. There are several means for accomplishing this.

First, the newborn infant may be examined for birthmarks or birth defects. These may be found to correspond with marks or mutilations that a deceased person had on his or her body. If the marks on the baby correspond with sufficient closeness to wounds or other marks on the body of that person, this observation may settle the baby's identification immediately.

Second, the family may consult an oracle specializing in the identification of an infant's previous personality. In one procedure for identifying the correct previous personality, someone holds a hen's egg firmly in his or her hand while a list of deceased persons is recited. When the reciter reaches the name of the person who has reincarnated in the infant's body, the egg shatters. Ordinarily, the oracle holds the egg, but the one I interviewed said that when skeptics consulted him, he allowed one of them to hold it. Thomas (1913/1969: 30) described a procedure in which the names of ancestors are called over until the infant itself makes a sign to indicate its previous personality.

The parents usually consult an oracle when an infant is about a month old. However, they may advance the effort to identify the correct previous personality of an infant who is found to be ailing and is suspected of being an *ogbanje* or of having been improperly identified at birth.

Third, the child may show behavior resembling that of a particular deceased person, and this may lead to its being identified as the reincarnation of that person. Some Igbos have little or no understanding of physical heredity or of the influence parents and older siblings may have in the development of a child's behavior. Those who do not have such knowledge may attribute a similarity in behavior between a living and a deceased person to reincarnation, even when the persons concerned are members of the same family, as they are in most Igbo cases.

Fourth, the child may make statements that indicate memories of the possessions owned by a deceased person or of events in that person's life. Such statements usually occur soon after the child learns to speak, but the child may not make them until he or she is four or five years old. These utterances sometimes culminate in a more or less formal declaration by the child that he or she is a particular person reborn.

The Igbo, in contrast to the people of some other cultures having abundant cases suggestive of reincarnation (such as the Tlingit of Alaska, the Burmese, and the Alevis of Turkey), seem to make little use of dreams in the identification of a reincarnated deceased person.

The Igbo attach importance to naming children (Uchendu 1965:60, Wieschhoff 1941). They give children several names. Some of these indicate the identification of the person who has reincarnated, if the parents believe

they know who that person is (Basden 1921/1966:60; Meek 1937/1970:295-6).<sup>13</sup> (Other names express thanks for the birth of the child or disappointment perhaps, if a woman has borne yet another female child and no male one. Some names also indicate forebodings about the child's future. And some refer to the day on which the child was born.)

### *The Belief in Ogbanjes*

I mentioned earlier that most, but not all, Igbo people wish to reincarnate as soon as possible and to live as long as possible. The exceptions are called *ogbanjes*. They are conceived as a group of persons who, in the discarnate realm, have become leagued together in a kind of conspiracy to harass parents by dying young. Typically, an *ogbanje* child lives only a few months or years and then dies. Some *ogbanjes* die suddenly without any premonitory illness; others are frail and sickly for months or years before dying.

A single *ogbanje* soul may be born, die, and be reborn in the same family, only to die again. Indeed, the Igbo word *ogbanje* means "to make several trips to and from a place" (Williamson 1972:404). The word is sometimes translated into English as "repeater child" (Noon 1942:641).

The concept of the *ogbanje* is so highly specialized that some of my informants distinguished it from "reincarnation." One of them even said that I should not discuss the *ogbanje* children in a paper on the belief in reincarnation among the Igbo. However, my other informants acknowledged that these children were, so to speak, a subspecies of reincarnating people. Apart from the tendency to die young, *ogbanje* children are not (usually) recognized as having been any family ancestor in a previous life. They seem to come from nowhere.

Within the group of *ogbanje* children two subtypes seem to be distinguished. In the first type, the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth occur in infancy or at least within the first four or five years of life. In the second type, the *ogbanje* child survives early childhood and lives into the teens or early twenties only to die suddenly and seemingly capriciously. Girls seem to form a majority of this second group (Okonji 1970:1-2), and they seem particularly likely to die at the time of their marriage or the delivery of their first child.

It is sometimes claimed that an *ogbanje* can be recognized (in advance of sudden death and apart from evidence of ailments) by unusual characteristics, such as great physical beauty, superior intelligence, fastidiousness, and unreasonable demands made of their parents.

The Igbo are particularly fond of children. In addition, the village cultivators need the assistance of children in their yam-growing and other agricultural work. The repeated loss of children therefore causes more anguish to Igbo parents than it may to those in less necessitous conditions. Be that as it may, Igbo parents react with sadness, and sometimes with alarm, if they suspect that an *ogbanje* child has been born in their family. They then try to take measures to stabilize the *ogbanje* or to disengage him or her completely from the *ogbanje* band.



There are several means of doing this. As part of his or her oath (taken in the discarnate realm) to die young, the *ogbanje* is said to have hidden some object, the exposure of which will dissolve his ties with the other members of the band and enable him to live on. The object may be a rock or a pebble hidden in the ground, or it may be an artifact concealed elsewhere.

The reform of an *ogbanje* often requires the assistance of a native doctor with special skills. He has several resources. Okonji (1970:1) described a rather elaborate ritual in which the child is required to dance to frenzied music while balancing a medicine pot on its head. If the ritual succeeds, the *ogbanje* patient indicates the place where the object of the oath has been secreted. It is excavated or otherwise exposed, and the child recovers.

The *ogbanje* specialist doctor whom I interviewed said that he could diagnose an *ogbanje* by examining the lines on a baby's palm. He could then prolong the baby's life by cutting a line across its palm and rubbing certain herbal ingredients into the wound. He said that this procedure keeps the illness in abeyance until the baby becomes old enough to speak and to reveal the place where the object of the oath has been hidden.

When the measures described seem insufficient, the *ogbanje* doctor, or sometimes the parents themselves, may mutilate the child. In the area around Awgu (where I investigated cases in 1981 and 1982), they amputate the distal phalanx of the left little finger. However, in other regions of Igboland other parts of the body may be removed.<sup>14</sup>

If, notwithstanding whatever measures have been taken to keep a suspected *ogbanje* alive, the child nevertheless dies, the parents experience anger as well as grief. They have similar emotions if any child dies suddenly, even if he or she had not previously been suspected of being an *ogbanje*. The parents may then mutilate the body of the dead child. Part of a little finger may be amputated, but in one case that I studied, the angry father of an infant who had died cut off several of its fingers and toes. Noon (1942:648) cited a case in which parents burned the lips of a deceased *ogbanje* baby. When the parents' emotions are particularly intense, they may burn the entire corpse of the child.

With regard to the purpose in mutilating a living or dead *ogbanje*, my informants explained that *ogbanjes* dislike ugliness and deformities, and so the other members of the *ogbanje* league would expel from their group anyone whose body was disfigured.

I mentioned earlier that the Igbo attach importance to birthmarks and birth defects as indicators of the person who has reincarnated. When an *ogbanje* child has died and his body has been mutilated, the parents closely observe the next children born into the family. If a child is born with a birth defect corresponding to a particular mutilation of a deceased *ogbanje*, such as absence of the distal phalanx of the left little finger, they identify the newborn child as the *ogbanje* reborn. They consider that he or she has now returned to stay, and it is said that children having such birth defects (with rare exceptions) survive infancy and childhood and do not, like their predecessor siblings, die young.

An associated belief is that once parents have broken a cycle of *ogbanje* deaths in infancy, with one child (presumably a reformed *ogbanje*) surviving infancy, they will have other children who survive infancy without difficulty. It is suggested that the *ogbanje* child had been getting in the way of other, normal discarnate persons who had wanted to reincarnate in the family, but had been blocked from doing so by the *ogbanje*.

As I mentioned earlier, the Igbo believe that the *ogbanje* children take an oath in the discarnate realm to die young in the next life; nevertheless, they also believe that the fate of the *ogbanje* child is not necessarily a simple matter. Such a child is often regarded as being pulled in opposing directions—toward remaining alive with his or her family and toward fulfilling the oath by dying. *Ogbanje* children may make unreasonable demands on their parents, sometimes with a hint or stronger threat that they will die if not given what they ask for. The parents, in desperation to keep the child alive, often accede to such demands. This can lead to favoritism, which may increase tension among other family members.

I have not learned much about Igbo beliefs concerning why a particular family, instead of another one, is selected by an *ogbanje* for reincarnating in it and harassing it by dying young. Noon's (1942:641, 648) informant said that the birth of an *ogbanje* was intended to admonish a marital couple who lived in discord.<sup>15</sup> However, one of my informants disagreed with this view. He believed, on the contrary, that *ogbanje* children brought marital discord to the family by their repeated dying in infancy.

The concept of the *ogbanje* seems an unusually important one among all the traditional beliefs of the Igbo, and it has received considerable attention in literary works written by Igbo authors (Achebe, C. 1958; Achebe, C. C. 1980).

### **Some Similarities between Igbo Concepts of Reincarnation and those of other West African Peoples**

Although I know less about the beliefs related to reincarnation among other West African peoples than I do about the Igbo beliefs, I have learned enough about some of these—from published material and personal informants—to warrant a few remarks about similarities and differences in the beliefs about reincarnation among the various people of West Africa.

The belief that living persons may reincarnate before they die occurs among the Idoma, whose territory lies north of that of the Igbo in Nigeria. The Idoma also believe that a soul may reincarnate in several persons, simultaneously or successively. Furthermore, a part of the same soul may persist in the Idoma realm of discarnate persons.

A concept similar to that of the *ogbanje* among the Igbo extends across the whole of West Africa. In the east it occurs in southeastern Nigeria among the Ibibio (Parrinder 1951); and in the west it occurs in Senegal among the Serer (Collomb 1973:439-52) and the Diola (Thomas and Luneau 1977). I have learned of similar beliefs among the peoples of present Ghana (Field 1961;

Goody 1962) and Côte d'Ivoire (Parrinder 1951). Among peoples of Nigeria, other than the Igbo, the Edo and the Yoruba have well-developed concepts of "repeater children." They are given different names in the different African languages; for example, the Edo call such a child an *igbankhuan*, the Yoruba call one an *abi-kú*, and the Lodagaa (of Ghana) call one a *kontome*.

The Yoruba concept of the *abi-kú* closely resembles that of the Igbo *ogbanje* (Bascom 1969; Maclean 1971; Parrinder 1951; Wenger 1980). An *abi-kú*, like an *ogbanje*, is said to belong to a band of discarnates who have agreed to be reborn and die young. The *abi-kús* also sometimes figure in literary works (Soyinka 1981).

However, the Yoruba do not believe that an *abi-kú* has hidden some object the digging up of which will rehabilitate him. The Yoruba also use somewhat different measures to frustrate the plan of a suspected *abi-kú* and thus prevent it from dying young. When Yoruba parents suspect a baby of being an *abi-kú* reborn to them, they may give it a preventive name that will, they hope, keep it from dying. They may also apply amulets, especially ones that jingle or make other sounds that would frighten away evil spirits (conceived as discarnate members of the *abi-kú* band who are trying to help the *abi-kú* child rejoin them). In more resistant cases, an *abi-kú* child may be placed in a clay pot where he or she is immersed up to the neck in an herbal soup that is kept warmed at body heat. The child may be maintained in such a soup for as long as a month.

If, despite all efforts at prevention, a suspected *abi-kú* child dies, its parents may mutilate its body. In the Ile-Ife district, the upper lip is the site of such mutilations. Wenger (1980:91) described the case of a Yoruba woman whose first ten children died young. Enraged by the death of the tenth of these children, she dashed its body on the ground and broke its lower jaw. Her eleventh baby was born with the lower jaw missing (or greatly reduced in size; I have not seen this person myself), and she survived into adulthood.

## Discussion

### *Psychological Aspects of Rituals Related to the Concept of the Ogbanje*

I can say little about the effectiveness of the measures taken to prevent suspected *ogbanjes* from dying. The people who practice such rituals—both *ogbanje* doctors and the parents who engage them or carry out their own program—certainly believe in their efficacy. It is admitted, however, that some *ogbanjes* are not successfully treated and others are undetected before they suddenly die.

Parents also believe in the power of the mutilations practiced on the bodies of deceased *ogbanjes*. In support of this, they cite cases of children born with birth defects corresponding to the mutilation wounds inflicted on a deceased *ogbanje*; these later-born children are said to survive into adulthood. (However, I learned of two children who had a birth-mark or birth defect said to derive from the marking or mutilation of a deceased *ogbanje* sibling, but who nevertheless died in infancy.)

The widespread belief that *ogbanjes* have concealed somewhere an object as part of their oath to die young may have developed as a feature of the ritual to free suspected *ogbanjes* from the oath. Okonji (1970:1) skeptically suggested that *ogbanje* doctors may, in at least some instances, previously conceal objects that are to be dug up later during the ritual. If they do this, they would consider the deception a legitimate subterfuge to enhance the *ogbanje's* vacillating wish to continue living.

#### *High Infant Mortality and the Concept of the Ogbanje*

Infant mortality has been (and remains) high in Nigeria and other countries of West Africa. The principal causes, in medical terms, are pneumonia, malnutrition, dysenteries, sickle-cell disease, and malaria. Of these, sickle-cell disease has been particularly identified as the cause of the repeated deaths in the same family that the concept of the *ogbanje* aims at explaining (Isichei 1976:26-7; Onwubalili 1983). One can readily understand how the association may have developed. Of the disorders mentioned, sickle-cell disease is the only one with a clear-cut genetic causation. The sickle-cell trait is transmitted genetically, and when heterozygotes marry, one-quarter, on the average, of their children will have sickle-cell disease. In such a family, if one child has already died in infancy of sickle-cell disease there is a 25% chance that any later-born child will also have the disease and similarly die young.

Many Igbos know that sickle-cell disease is only one cause, although an important one, for the high infant mortality in Nigeria. Edelstein and I analyzed hemoglobin in a small sample (N = 13) of children (in the area of Awgu) who had been mutilated (with amputation of the distal phalanx of the left little finger) as suspected *ogbanjes*. We found that this group included no children with sickle-cell disease and no more carriers of the sickle trait than would be found in the general population (Edelstein and Stevenson 1983; Stevenson and Edelstein 1982). Although in the families of these children an average of three other children had died, sickle-cell disease evidently contributed little or nothing to the high infant mortality in this group.

#### *Why Is the Concept of the "Repeater Child" So Widespread?*

In many regions where the belief in reincarnation occurs, one finds also a belief that a deceased child will be reborn into the same family, as a younger sibling. The families holding such a belief in different parts of the world also look for many of the same indications or evidence that the deceased child has been reborn: dreams, birthmarks, similarities of behavior, and statements suggestive of memories of the previous person's life.

However, in only two parts of the world, so far as I know, has a custom developed of specially marking a deceased child so that a birthmark on a later-born child (in the same location as the mark on the deceased child's body) will provide evidence of its rebirth. In a region of Southeast Asia stretching from Assam through Burma to Thailand, parents of a deceased child frequently

mark its body with soot, charcoal, or ocher and look for a corresponding birth-mark on a later-born child (Mi Mi Khaing 1962; Parry 1932; Stevenson 1983). (Older persons, as well as infants, may be similarly marked.) However, parents in Southeast Asia do not cut or mutilate the body of a deceased infant, as do some of the West African peoples; nor do they believe that infants die in order to harass their parents, as do the Igbo and the Yoruba.

I have stated earlier that a concept of the "repeater child" exists across West Africa (south of the Sahara desert) from eastern Nigeria (around Calabar) to Senegal. There are some variations in the ideas of different tribes about "repeater babies," but the similarities are impressive, and I have described the Yoruba concept of the *abi-kú* sufficiently to show that it closely resembles the Igbo concept of the *ogbanje*. A belief in a league of discarnate souls planning to be reborn and die young in order to harass parents extends as far to the west as Ghana (Goody 1962:150), and it may be even more widespread in West Africa.

The close resemblance among the beliefs in West Africa about "repeater children" and proper measures to deal with them poses the question of how such similarities of belief and ritual arose over such a large territory.<sup>16</sup> The present major languages of West Africa are mutually unintelligible. This makes it improbable that the belief in "repeater children" spread across West Africa by normal means of communication during historical times. It seems unlikely, for example, that the Yoruba derived the belief in the *abi-kú*, through imitation or otherwise, from the Igbo belief in the *ogbanje*; it is equally unlikely that the Igbo borrowed their concept from the Yoruba. That a belief in "repeater children" who harass parents spread from Igboland to present Ghana (or vice-versa) seems even less probable. We cannot, however, exclude the possibility that beliefs and subconcepts about reincarnation were diffused across West Africa by travelers and traders, of whom many were bilingual or able to speak more than two languages.

Since the modern languages of sub-Saharan West Africa belong to the broad group of languages known as Niger-Congo (Greenberg 1963), they presumably descended from a proto-Niger-Congo language. If the beliefs about "repeater children" have not been spread by traders and travelers in historical times, they may have arisen many centuries ago during the period of the proto-language of the modern Niger-Congo languages. If that happened, we might say that the languages have evolved more than some of the beliefs about reincarnation have done.

#### *Reincarnation and Fatalism in Igbo Traditional Religion*

At the beginning of this paper, and also later, I said that Igbo traditional religion has no concept corresponding to that of retributive karma in Hinduism and Buddhism. It is not, however, devoid of a means for explaining the unpredictable vicissitudes of life. I hope it is not rash to say that most men and women do not like either to admit the results of their own folly or to believe that they are the victims of a purposeless chance. In Christianity and Islam, misfor-

tune is often explained as due to the will of God. In Hinduism and Buddhism it may be attributed to karma. The karmic causes can be set far back and attributed to some remote predecessor in a series of reincarnations. In this way a person can avoid assuming blame—since he or she is not recognizably the same person as the one whose misconduct in a previous life led to the present situation—but at the same time he or she acknowledges that events do have causes in someone's volition; they do not occur accidentally. The concept of the *Chi* may serve this purpose for Igbo people. As Arinze (1970:15) stated, "to one's *Chi* are ascribed a person's successes and failures." The *Chi* is not oneself, or not the whole of oneself, and yet the bargaining with the *Chi* (before one's incarnation) establishes the general pattern of the events of one's present life. This concept thus combines a desirable remoteness from immediate responsibility for misfortune along with an avoidance of the idea that events just happen without willed causes.

These beliefs have important consequences for relations between parents and children. In the West, parents do not become angry at a child who dies in infancy and childhood. If they feel any anger about such a loss, they tend to direct it either toward God, conceived as unjust to them, or toward doctors and hospitals who may be thought to have done less for the child than they should have done. Parents in Hindu-Buddhist countries also do not feel anger toward an infant or child who dies. For them, the loss results from the effects of their karma and that of the child. The causative karma can be set far back in anterior incarnations, and neither the parents nor the child are considered immediately responsible for the death. It is not so among the Igbo. They regard even a newborn infant as having the power—through its own will—to live or to die. Consequently, if a child dies young they may become angry at it. Correspondingly, a child who lives has done so because he loves his family; and this may contribute to the great affection Igbo parents have for their children.

#### NOTES

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- 2 Accounts of the beliefs about reincarnation in different cultures will be found in the following articles and books: Tlingit of Alaska (Stevenson 1966, 1966/1974); Sinhalese of Sri Lanka (Stevenson 1973, 1977); Druses of Lebanon and surrounding countries (Stevenson 1966/1974, 1980); Alevi of Turkey (Stevenson 1970, 1980); Hindus and Jains of India (Stevenson 1975b); Burmese (Stevenson 1983); Thais (Stevenson 1983); Haida of Alaska and British Columbia (Stevenson 1975a).
- 3 By a "case suggestive of reincarnation" (or "case of the reincarnation type") I mean one in which a child claims that he or she remembers a previous life or in which a child is identified

by older persons of his or her community (usually on the basis of birthmarks or birth defects, unusual behavior, or the statements of an oracle) as the reincarnation of a deceased person. Reports of such cases will be found in Stevenson (1966/1974, 1975b, 1977, 1980, and 1983.)

- 4 The spelling *Ibo* is often found, especially in the older literature, but *Igbo* appears to be favored, and gaining in favor, among modern writers; so I have adopted it.
- 5 Henderson (1972) and Uchendu (1964) have published comprehensive accounts of Igbo religion. See also O'Donnell (1931), Onwuejeogwu (1981:31-55), and Osia (1981).
- 6 In his writings about African religion, Parrinder sometimes made general statements about the peoples of a large area. However, he had an extensive knowledge of many tribes, including the Igbo, as his *West African Psychology* (Parrinder 1951) testifies. I think the remark quoted applicable to the Igbo.
- 7 The ceremony of the "second burial," together with the belief that the ceremony has a liberating effect on the discarnate soul, suggests analogies with the saying of masses for the dead in Roman Catholicism and with the chanting of the *paritta* in Buddhism at certain intervals after a person's death (Piyadassi Thera 1975; Stevenson 1983).
- 8 Parrinder (1957:266) stated that Africans (he did not specifically identify the Igbo) do not believe that rebirth as a nonhuman animal results from sinful conduct. Basden (1921/1966:119) also denied that the Igbo believe in the rebirth of humans in nonhuman bodies. However, according to Meek (1937/1970:54) and Uchendu (1964:34; 1965:102), some Igbo do believe this. Uchendu mentioned that one of the Igbo's most powerful curses is: "May you not reincarnate in the human form."
- 9 I found the concept of the *Chi* a particularly difficult one to understand, perhaps because different informants (and different authors) have described it in various ways. For fuller discussions of the *Chi* in Igbo eschatology, see Achebe (1976:131-45); Henderson (1972:106-9); Shelton (1971:83-9); Talbot (1926:279-97); and Uchendu (1964:35; 1965:16,95). Talbot uses the term "over-soul" as a translation of *Chi*. Arinze (1970:15), Il-ogu (1974:36), and Meek (1937/1970:55) describe the *Chi* as a person's "spiritual double."
- 10 This "rule" cannot be absolute, because among the Igbo cases suggestive of reincarnation that I investigated, several of the subjects were identified with persons who had died violently (Stevenson 1985).
- 11 For details of these and other recurrent features of the Igbo cases suggestive of reincarnation, see the companion article to this one (Stevenson 1985).
- 12 A similar concept of dividing one's several qualities among two or three later reincarnations occurs among the Tibetans (Norbu and Turnbull 1969:232). The Haida of British Columbia and Alaska also have a concept of multiple reincarnations of a single deceased person (Stevenson 1975a:373).
- 13 Wieschhoff (1941) did not mention a presumption about reincarnation as a factor in selecting a name for a child. This omission may derive from his having had (like Noon) only one informant.
- 14 I was told that the practice of mutilating suspected *ogbanjes* is dying out among the Igbo, partly because mutilated girls are considered less attractive (and hence less marriageable) than normal girls, and partly because Nigerian law now prohibits mutilations. However, I found that the practice continues nevertheless, and in one small community where I worked thirteen children who had been mutilated as suspected *ogbanjes* were assembled for my examination within a few days.
- 15 In some other cultures having a belief in reincarnation, informants may attribute the death of an infant to its discontent with the conduct of its parents. I have heard such explanations in connection with cases of deaths in infancy among the tribes (Tlingit and Haida) of British Columbia and Alaska.

In the West, cases of sudden deaths of infants or "crib deaths" somewhat resemble those of the sudden deaths of suspected *ogbanjes*. However, investigations of sudden death in infancy in the West have so far been conducted exclusively with regard to physical causation. Psychological aspects of "crib deaths" have not yet received the attention they may deserve.

- 16 The different West African peoples have other beliefs in common besides those in reincarnation and in repeater children, but these lie outside the scope of the present paper. The beliefs I have considered here bear on the relationship between the belief in reincarnation and the incidence and characteristics of cases suggestive of reincarnation.

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