

## The Phenomenon of Death and Its Moral Implications Among the Esan of Edo State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study is an ontological inquiry into the phenomenon of death in Esan culture before the advent of imported religions and other Western incursions. It does not busy itself with life after death per se but on death itself. It examined how the phenomenon of death informs the Esan worldview and influences the concrete behaviour of the Esan people. It discussed the reasons why Esan people feared death, the deceased, and why they avoid seeing the dead. It also extended its discussion to mourn generally, mourning of a deceased spouse, burying the dead and the concrete steps people take in Esan to impede or prosper the journey of the deceased to after life and his concrete life in the hereafter. It then discussed the people's attitude toward death and the dead. It argues further that the occurrences of death, the agony of dying and the belief in life after death have some moral implications which influence the moral disposition of the Esan people toward their neighbor, the sick, the dying and even the deceased in solidarity. Not only this. It also makes them to live good lives to avoid the consequences of bad living either here or in the hereafter. While focusing on Esan per se, this inquiry attempts some comparisons with some other cultures.

**Key words:** Death; Causality; Ontology; Hereafter; Fear of death; Mourning; Moral implication

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### INTRODUCTION

Presently the Esan people occupy the central part of Edo state Nigeria. In the Nigeria political terrain, it constitutes Edo Central, which is one of the three Senatorial Districts in the state. Just as it is anywhere, death is one of the most pervasive existential realities in Esan cosmology. Fundamentally, death is a metaphysical phenomenon among the people of Esan. It is an event which traverses time, space, age, sex, colour, culture, and size. It is a phenomenon which whatever has life must undergo. It is one of the most certain in human events. Just as it is certain that one is born, it is also certain that one will die. However, death occurs most unpredictably and at any age of human existence, and anywhere. It has no specific time or location for it to occur. Yet it is a reality. It is a game which does not admit any replay. It pervades all races and cultures including Esan culture.

By Esan culture we mean the beliefs of the people of Esan concerning death and how these beliefs inform and influence their consciousness and attitude about death uninfluenced by imported religions and other Western incursions. Whether in Esan or elsewhere, people tend to fear death. But it is an event which inseparably characterized human life. It is one of the fundamental natures of whatever has life. Yet people fear it; they abhor it; they reject it and tend to hold on tenaciously to life in preference. Now what is this death? This article is poised to engage in a treatment of death in Esan by examining their beliefs and practices philosophically. To begin with, what is the Esan understanding of the concept of death?

### 1. CONCEPT OF DEATH IN ESAN

Death is the cessation of life. It is transition into a spirit world. It is mostly conceived as something bad, a monster, and its occurrence causes grills, anxiety, chill and fear in people. Death is an irreversible phenomenon,

an irreversible cessation of life. According to Peter Alli, “Death in Esan is regarded as a transition from one state of existence to another. It is the last of the rites of passage that a person has to go through on earth (others being birth, puberty, marriage)” (Alli, 2011, pp.25-26). It is the event which truncates activities in mundane existence. Among the Esan people of Edo state of Nigeria, death is a process by which the soul detaches from the physical body and moves into the spiritual home (*elinmin*). Esan people believe that man has two homes: one on earth and the other in the great beyond. Death on earth is of two folds: bad death and good death. The good death is the one that occurs at old age and the deceased has children to perform his funeral rites (Alli, 2011, pp.25-26). All forms of premature and mysterious deaths are bad death. Although this claim to good death at old age is a belief in Esan, it is suspicious and ambivalent. The reason is that there is also the antithetical belief even by the same people that all events including deaths are caused. This causality is a constitutive part of Esan ontology. Even for such empirical misfortunes like miscarriage, accident and death, sufferings and sicknesses resulting from insect vectors like mosquito, tsetse fly and so on, the Esan just like many other African cultures believes they are caused by some agents for some purpose(s). As in some other cultures, the Esan people believe that at any stage an individual dies, it is caused for a purpose. If he or she dies at infancy, in short at any stage from the first day of existence to 100 years, or even more, it must be attributed to something. This is why death is not only conceived as bad. It also suggests that one ought not to die. But ironically, the Esan people like people in some other cultures also believe that death is inevitable.

For example, according to Imasogie, “[t]he Edo believe that death is inevitable. They emphasize this in such proverb as “Ed’uwu inwen Ebo”, which translates: “No medicine or charm can alter the day of death” (Imasogie, 1985, p.44; Alli, 2011, p.27). The Esan belief is both in agreement and disagreement with this submission by Imasogie about the Benin. In the first place, it is in complete harmony with the Bini conception that death is inevitable. For the Esan, *aifuo bha agbon* which when translated means: “no perpetual stay in the world”. Indeed no one can remain in this world forever. Death is an unavoidable experience that awaits everyone. It is therefore onerous for everyone to live a good life here and await the next; and as Alli puts it, to be “ready for the life beyond death.... This raises the question of judgment after death” (Alli, 2011, p.27). The belief in judgment after death traverses cultures. For example, the extent to which the final impartial judgment of God is dreaded is captured by a Yoruba saying which **Idowu (do you have Idowu’s source?)** translates as follows: “Lying does not debar one from becoming rich, covenant breaking does not debar one from reaching old age, but

the day of sleeping (death) there awaits trouble” (see Imasogie, 1985, p.44; Alli, 2011, p.28). But we shall not go beyond this here since life after death is not the focus of this inquiry. However, the Esan position diverges from the Bini’s in the sense that for the Esan, the day of death can be altered, shortened or deferred as the case may be. It is for this reason that the Esan will often say that the life (of a deceased) was cut short. The belief that death at any stage of human existence (even that of one’s livestock and plants), is caused supports this claim. Concrete steps are also taken to defer the death of the critically ill (especially the aged) for some reasons. One of such reasons is to make him or her well. Another reason is to delay the death to enable any of the children or a particular child to see him or her before death. The act or process involved is not medicament but charm. And this charm is called *edai* (put on hold) in Esan. Once this charm is worn the patient, he/she will have life in him; he/she will merely be breathing—vegetating. When the situation becomes too critical to the extent that the patient is almost decomposing (bed sore), the *edai* is removed and then the patient will die. The *edai* can also be removed in order not to unduly prolong the excruciating pain of the patient. This exercise is not a common place practice. In modern day, can the removal of *adai* be likened to euthanasia? Any inquiry into this will take us beyond the scope of this study.

Another way of deferring death is the mysterious use of another person to exchange and then prolong one’s life. There is the common belief in Esan that some malevolent human being, ordinarily or upon sensing the imminence of their own death, can swap another’s life and then use him or her, especially their child or any other person very close to them to prolong their lives. Such a person whose life is swapped and are always younger die in their stead while they themselves continue to live. In few cases these fiends do not need to be sick or show any visible sign of illness before they can wreck such malevolence on their victim(s). Although it is an unavoidable phenomenon, the peoples’ belief and attitudes towards death epitomizes their willingness to continue life *ad infinitum* or at least to defer it where possible. This desire reflects the belief that life is good despite its challenges and that death is bad.

Some Esan beliefs about death are at variance with Christian belief in some ways. Among others since the Esan believe that death is bad, such belief conflicts with the Christian notion that death is the prelude to the fullness of life. Another is that when death occurs, the Christian belief is that God brings and God takes away and that the deceased who live well is going to a place better than the present, a place of blessedness, an *el dorado*, bereft of contradictions, vicissitudes and limitations of life. This conflicts with the Esan notion which epitomizes the belief that something important has been taken from the world, and if the deceased is a good person, then his death is conceived as evil. At any stage a human being dies,

the Esan must have interpretations for it. If it occurs at infancy or early stage, it will be interpreted that he or she was not allowed to see the light of the day. This is because it is perceived that he or she would have been great in life. If it occurs at mid age, it will be interpreted that he has labored but was not allowed to enjoy the fruit of his labour. If it is at old age, he is prevented to reap from his children whom he has laboured to bring up.

Although Esan has a firm belief in destiny (Airoboman, 2012, pp.84-99) and that death may be due to destiny, but the people's concrete reaction show that the timing is always wrong. This is why the Esan do not only have the desire to but concretely attempt to perpetuate life. The use of *edai* mentioned above is one of such measures. No matter how hard we try, death cannot ultimately be prevented and it can never be avoided. These divergent beliefs about death between the Esan and Christian are mimicked by two existentialist philosophers—Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. While Sartre believed that death is meaningless and absurd; that it removes meaning from life, Heidegger opines that death is a meaningful part of human existence. It confers uniqueness and meaning into human existence. But Albert Camus will not agree with Heidegger that death imbues meaning on life since *ab initio* for Camus life has not meaning, it is meaningless and absurd. He will not also agree with Sartre that it removes meaning from life for the same reason. But Camus claims that life is a futile exercise does not give man a sense of solace either.

There is the belief in some quarters that the pattern of life in the hereafter is a replica or a replay or at least similar to what obtains in this world of matter. For example, eating and drinking, marrying, labour and rest, birth and death, among others are features of the two worlds. This means birth and death are successive phenomena in the two worlds; they occur in turns. If a person dies here somebody is born the world beyond and if a child is born here it means someone has died over there, *vice versa*. When we are rejoicing over a new birth here they are weeping over the loss by death in the other world and when we weeping over death here they are rejoicing over new birth over there, *vice versa*.

Until recently, people avoid seeing corpses especially if they are young ones. The sight of it sent chill in people. Even hearing of the death of unknown person in a distanced place causes cold feelings. One of the reasons people dislike seeing corpse is to avoid seeing the spirit of the dead in dreams and lonely places. Generally, children and pregnant women are prevented from seeing corpses. The awe with which Esan people hold death is reflected in the following names (Okojie, What is in a name?):

- Uujalen*: No one knows when death comes;
- Uujaman*: You cannot measure or time death;
- Uujaguina*: You cannot beg death to go away;
- Uujawarie*: You cannot alter the time of death;

*Uuyoshioria*: Death is no one's friend;

*Uuzofen*: Death goes with fear;

*Uubuede*: Uubhuede: Death does no appoint a day for anyone;

*Uudan*: No one wants to die;

*Uuigbosun*: Death does not take everyone at the same time;

*Uuihenhen*: Death does not repair;

*Uuijakhena*: There is no way to avoid death;

*Uuimoeghe*: Death has no time;

*Uuinahan*: Death can never be better than settlement;

*Uuinene*: Death does not have any consideration;

*Uuivbibho*: Many things are possible if death spares one;

*Uuireyi*: Death does not send a warning.

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## 2. TALKING ABOUT THE DEAD

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In some cultures, citing the Yoruba as an example, people do not talk evil about the dead. Morally speaking, there is most often, insincerity of human judgment when people eulogize the dead especially when such judgment antithetical to reality. King Solomon tells us that "I have seen wicked men buried and in their graves, but on the way back from cemetery people praise them in the very city where they did their evil. It is useless" (*Ecclesiastes*, 8:10). Such judgments are unethical and set bad precedence. Generally, one of such bad precedence is that the living would have no need to change their evil ways since after their death no matter how much evil they did while they were alive, people will tell good from them. And since most people believe that the voice of men is the voice of the ancestors and God; (*eba agbon tale elinmin tale*.) they will not anticipate or dread the evil consequences of their bad living on themselves and their progeny. The reverse is however, the case in Esan. Generally people talk of the good or evil deeds of the dead. The death of an evil man is a sigh of relief for those who suffer unjustly from his malefaction. Such death is conceived as an elimination of evil. The Esan takes step not merely talking about the dead but take concrete actions to them. For the aged, sacrifices are made before and after burial to prosper their journey to another life and to waive off any unfavourable conditions of life which he may encounter when he/she reincarnated. Where he had fullness of life in present existence, concrete steps are taken on the deceased's behalf to ensure a repeat when next he reincarnates. For the middle aged and under aged, efforts are made to prevent them from premature death in their next existence and to redress whatever was uncongenial in their present existence. Those who were heinously evil are maledicted. They can be buried in undignified manner that is, by burying them face down to prevent them from coming back to the world. Some other

efforts may be made to impede the smoothness in their journey to afterlife.

### 3. FEAR OF DEATH

Although death is an inevitable phenomenon the people weep over the death of others and the fear their own death. The reasons for this attitude are as follows:

- a) Because of human frailty;
- b) Because of fear of the unknown. Despite all the beliefs which they have about death and the hereafter, epistemologically speaking, no one really knows exactly what lies beyond here;
- c) When they see people die in agony and groaning, they fear the pain of death since that also awaits them.

The Esan, like every other people, has the instinct of survival. Consequent upon this, he/she desires to perpetuate his/her life. In some cases, he attempts some measures to sustain even both old and vegetative lives as earlier said. However, no matter how hard they tries to keep life, old age and death cannot be ultimately prevented. Any success recorded is only a pyrrhic victory. Pantaloon Iroegbu (Iroegbu, 2004, p.34) puts it that at times if not often, human beings suffered limitations imposed by ontological evil of lack or privation. This limitedness prevents man from getting at the cure of the gruesome realities of ageing and death.

### 4. BURYING THE DEAD

Before the emergence of mortuary, interment was not delayed after death. As soon as a wife dies, arrangement is made to return her corpse to the village of her birth that is, her paternal village. It is a must that the corpse is returned to her family. In some cultures, such as Benin, when a married woman dies she is buried either in her husband or son's house (Okojie, 1994, p.172). But in Esan custom, marriage does not alter a woman's birth place. This is why whenever she dies, her corpse is returned to her family. If she dies at old age, the members of community where she married obligatorily accompany her in a festive mood; drumming, singing and dancing back to her birth place. The corpse bearers walk or run or stagger or stand still as if they are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. It is a common belief among the people that such movements are influenced by the corpse. According to Christopher Okojie,

[s]uperstition made many believe that the movements of these carriers were controlled by the dead body! Thus before leaving the husband's village, the corpse "paid" courtesy visits to the home of her friends and "went" to say goodbye to places she had cherished when alive. (Ibid., p.170)

In fact, in most communities the corpse is used to dance round, that is, visit almost all the houses in the

community. Thereafter, it is returned to her community and eventually handed over not only to members of her family who will normally wait in assemblage to receive their "returning" daughter. After the handing over, her people also dance with the corpse round homes in her community. For the Esan, once a woman is betrothed and eventually married under normal circumstances, she is never expected to ultimately come back home alive, because for the Esan, *isodo okhuo yienlen*, that is, it is in husband's home that a woman (wife) lives. Once married, even for marital problems, issues are resolved for the marriage to continue.

The death of old men and women is usually celebrated by their children and relatives in the form of burial ceremonies which usually lasted for about seven days. This may suggest that deaths are celebrated, like a celebration of victory.

However, the fear of death; the mourning that follows before and after the celebration; the belief that deaths even at old age is sometimes caused; and the conception of death as bad or as something that prevent life, seem irreconcilable with the celebration of death as described above. What is evident here is that while people fear their own death and that of their loved ones, they nevertheless celebrate any one that succumbs to death. Christopher Okojie however, has a contrary submission from the claim just made that the corpse of deceased old men are not accorded such dancing rounds the village as are accorded old women. According to him, for an old man with children there is dancing round the village; the places visited depend upon the whims of the carriers although they make the onlookers believe the dead body is directing them (Ibid., p.174). What these divergent descriptions connote is that even in the same Esan, custom varies in some regard from one village to the other. If the corpse is eventually interred in the bush/cemetery (for those communities who do not inter at home), everybody turned for home with the strict injunction that no one must look back or kick each others' heels. The idea was to get out of the burial ground (cemetery) as quickly as possible (Ibid.). Since this idea is probably premised on the fear of the dead, bury grounds and chill of the scenario, the injunction not to look back may be to prevent seeing the just interred or other spirits whom it is believed usually followed one from behind. The instruments such as hoes and cutlasses used for burial are left at *uluamen* that is: gutter in the compound for seven days before they can be touched or used again. Different communities also diverge in this. People who handle corpses usually had a thorough bath with indigenous soap. This is to prevent among others, contamination and spread of germs and bacteria, and to detach themselves from the spirit of the dead. These actions epitomize the dreadful beliefs which the Esan have about death and the dead. In most communities the aged are buried at home since it will be an act of

disrespect and a taboo, not to do so. It is only those who are young that are buried in the cemetery always located in the outskirts of the village. The idea is to keep the memory of their death away from their parents and other relations who will continue to wail or mourn or keep sorrowing anytime they see the grave.

In Esan, *Eman Elinmin* that is, pounded yam for spirit or of the dead literally and the last meal connotatively is firmly believed in and is offered especially for the aged since the people believe that the journey to the world of spirits is long and tedious. The significance of this meal is to provide energy for this long and tedious journey. This *Eman Elinmin* in Esan may be similar to the doctrine of extreme unction in Catholic Church. Extreme unction or the anointing of the sick is the sacrament administered to the Catholic faithful in danger of death due to illness (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000, pp.375-382; Kinkead, 1978, pp.243-254). It is preceded with *viaticum* or food by the way, believed to strengthen the Catholic faithful on his or her journey to another life. But there is a difference. While *Eman Elinmin* is strictly offered for the dead to strengthen them for the journey, the sacrament of extreme unction is administered to those in danger of death, and that for two reasons: either for the sick person to recover or to offer him strength if he or she eventually dies.

With the advent of Western education, religions and modern technology there is a significant shift from this solemnity; the feelings and reverence for the death have been lost and have been transmuted into mere social events. For this reason people, even children no longer fear the dead and have therefore deviated from the norms which dictate respect for the dead and the solemnity which traditionally characterized scenes of death.

The death of any accepted member of the village is a collective liability. The reason is that any accepted member of the village with or without a relative, while alive and in health, is like one of the fingers of a hand, acting in unison with the rest for the common welfare of a village. According to Okojie, even in modern times no Doctor just coming into a village or community will fail to be impressed and sometimes alarmed, by the whole village turning out to accompany one sick man to the hospital, particularly if it was a case of an accident. Thus when someone dies especially the not too old, the whole community mourns him/her for the customary seven days; abstaining from their usual work, dance and merriment (Okojie, 1994, p.171) after which burial takes place. However, the elderly ones are usually buried with much celebrations and least mourning.

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## 5. MOURNING OF THE DEAD

Generally, in the contemporary age, it appears that people maximally mourn the dead for the cessation or loss of

benefits—financial, advice, moral, protection, friendship, intellectual, and so on—derived from the deceased. If this is true, it means that mourning the dead is premised on egoism. This does not depict the Esan account of mourning. Essentially, in Esan mourning is based on feelings. Since there is a communal sense of living and since there is a high sense of putting oneself in another's shoe, a sense of "if I were the one", mourning is based on loss of the being including his absence in the scheme of things and the vacuum which his or her demise has created. His uniqueness makes his or her death felt by everyone. The extent to which the death of an individual is felt depends on the extent of this uniqueness and functionality in the society. Even for those who do not really play any assigned functional role like infants, children, imbecile, lunatics, there is always a sense of incompleteness with their loss; to talk with you, to sit with you, to look at you, to make noise around you and the likes are in a way functional and important. You will not know this until the opportunity is lost. This correctly depicts the saying that "a cow does not know the value of its tail until it is cut off". To be, realistic the death of dependants whether relations or not and for the indigents to whom one always done some favour are deeply felt. At their death the opportunity to render such favour is lost; this is also felt. There is derivation of fulfillment in giving. Except in very rare cases where people celebrate the death of heinously evil persons, people mourn in some cases even excessively for a perceived enemy. Part of the reason is that they have lost the opportunity for reconciliation. More important than this, is that the Esan believe that "it is better to see a person to keep enmity with than to lose him"; "*a kha mie egbe ne kha lue eghianlan me ne*".

It is a fact that the pains arising from death vary in degree and do not affect members of the immediate family of the deceased alone but of the whole community. The death of children and the middle aged are mostly felt than that of the aged. This is because death has denied them the meaningful contributions they would have made themselves, their families and the community in general. The death of criminals and diabolic persons are least felt. In most cases intense feelings of pain of loss are restricted to the immediate family of the deceased; those of other members of the community are mild. Most parents and relations would desire to take the place of their children and dear ones when in sickness or death. But since it is not possible to live another's life and die another's death existentially, one cannot ascertain the truthfulness of such sentiment. Besides this general mourning and pains, the immediate family of the dead has rituals attached to the mourning.

If Chin Shih had had contact with the Esan people, he would have remonstrated with them on the manner they weep as he did to the people of China over the death

of Lao Tzu, who was his friend. When Chin Shih went to mourn his friend, he met “the old folk weeping as though they had lost a child; there were young people wailing as if for the loss of a mother”. (source?) For Shih, the deceased did not ask for weeping, wailing or tear. These acts are mere expressions of emotions and failing to recognize what must be; this failure is a violation of the principle of reality. “When the Master came, it was because he was due to be born. When he died, it was entirely natural. If you are prepared to accept this and flow with it, then sorrow and joy cannot touch you” (Palmer et al., 1996, p.24). This is how we can be free from bondage. Whatever is not within our power should be taken in good faith. **Although “[w]e can point to the wood that has been burned, but when the fire has passed on, we cannot know where it has gone”** (Ibid.). We have either forgotten or neglected one ontological *cum* existential reality and that is:

Death and birth are fixed. They are as certain as the dawn that comes after the night, established by the decree of Heaven. This is beyond the control of humanity; this is just how things are.... The cosmos gives me the burden of a physical form, makes life a struggle, gives me rest in old age and peace in death. What makes life good, therefore, also makes death good (Ibid., pp.49-50).

Okojie (1994, p.173) asserts that the Esan of old had a deep respect bordering on superstition and dread for dead bodies not just because they fear dead body but because a dead body is a source of health hazard to the living and in tropical climate, bodies decompose at an alarming rate. This is why relatives of the deceased, since they have it as a duty to prevent any disgraceful associations with the body of dead relatives, did all that is in their powers to bury the body as quickly as possible before the slightest onset of putrefaction. According to him, during the night when the dead was among the living, only the bravest of the living ventured out. The playful and harmless dotard whose whiskers, his *Eye* and *Ihienhien* (grand-children and great grand-children) pulled fondly a couple of days back had now become an object of fright.

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## 6. MOURNING OF A SPOUSE AND KEEPING AWAY THE SPIRIT OF THE DECEASED

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It is evident from the above, that death in all categories of persons is painful and mourned. We shall however, focus specifically here on the death of spouses. The loss of a spouse among others is indeed painful. It involves both mental and physical imbalance. For example, to a woman, the death of her husband is not only a grievous loss; it also brings her enormous pains and humiliation. Losing her husband automatically terminates her membership of the association of women in the village. Even when she is inherited (remarries the eldest son or younger brother

of the deceased) as it was in the tradition of Esan, the woman would sink in status like stone in water. For example, even if she was the most senior woman in the village, she would then become the most junior (Ibid., p.171). Generally, mourning is bi-directional since both men and women mourn their deceased spouses. Taking the death of a man as case study, when a man dies the wife mourns him. Such mourning is characteristically tainted with rituals. For example, a woman may have her hair shaved, eat with left hand, eat in unwashed plates, drink from unwashed cups, sleep and sit on the bare floor for seven or more days and wear black clothes for up to three months. She abstains from sex for as long as possible until she is in normal case inherited. In addition, she “decked herself in black with *Irialo* round her wrists, ankle and neck” (Ibid.). She armed herself with some objects such as *ihinmin*, *elo* (female knife for cutting yam), bow and seven arrows, and some other objects depending on the community, believed to be shunned by the spirits. These steps are taken to deter the spirit of the dead. All the attempts to keep away the spirit of the deceased spouse or any other person suggest that;

- a) The spirit of the dead hovers around, and exercise influence on people or the spouse.
- b) The spirit of the dead may be malicious and so can inflict harm even on loved ones.
- c) Since the Esan fear the dead, to scare away their spirits so that they will not be visible to or appear before the living or, so that they will not live among them or come around them.

It is for such fear of death and the dead that people dread and abhor cemetery and other lonely placed especially at odd hours to avoid physical contact with them, sight them or hear their voices.

While the Esan attempt to keep the deceased’s spirit away, the Ndebeles would want the departed to be present among them. Immediately after death, a grave is dug in an uncultivated ground. If the person is the head of the homestead, his body is taken out of the house through a hole in the wall, and through an opening in the fence that surrounds the homestead. It must not be carried through the door of the house or the gate of the homestead. John Mbiti tells us that this probably symbolizes the belief that the deceased person has not ‘gone’ away from, or completely left the homestead: he is in effect still present (Mbiti, 1969, p.150). Although the Esan try to keep them away, it is implicit that they are around them. This is evident in the explicit erection of family shrines where they believe that the spirits of their parents and ancestors are present and offer libation to them.

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## 7. MORAL IMPLICATIONS

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Death has some moral implications. One of such is that since the Esan talk about the dead and in fact take

concrete steps that can affect people after death, positively or negatively, to enhance or impede their destiny after life, people lead good lives to attract favourable comments and favourable rituals to prosper their journey to the abode of the dead and for a favourable reincarnation. Not only this, they would also want to enjoy comfortable existence wherever they are. People also lead good lives to attract befitting burial for the same reason.

Another implication is that people do well and eschew evil so that the consequences of their misdeed will not visit their progeny after death. Since the people believe in cosmic rectification, and since cosmic consequences are not limited to the doers of the actions alone but also their children and family, people avoid evil deeds in order to still have a happy and prosperous family after death.

Following from the above, the people avoid evil to attain ontological relevance in the hereafter world. Since the people believe in karma and reincarnation, they lead good lives so that the consequences of their misdeeds will not visit them in a subsequent existence. Alli quoted Dopamu as saying that: “[i]t is African belief that man cannot flout the moral order and go free, for the moral order contains with it an imminent principle of justice which ensures that the good is rewarded and the wicked punished” (Dopamu, 2006; Alli, 2011, p.47) either here or hereafter or both. This is clearly reflected in Esan belief. The law of cosmic justice is part of reality for the people. They often say *Ebunu lele imien obha noghu uholo*; put literarily, “whatever the mouth eats must inconvenience the anus”. There is no shaking it off. The people therefore live well with each other to in order to avoid: negative cosmic consequences on their children and family after death; avoid bad death for themselves in order to attain relevance in the ancestral world and attain a better and prosperous life when they eventually reincarnate since they strongly believe in reincarnation. From these premises it is clear that the law of cosmic justice or cosmic rectification in addition to golden rule partly informs the moral behavior of the Esan people.

The contemporary norm has diverged significantly from the traditional norm about some of these beliefs. In fact, it has been perverted it. People now eulogized the dead and accord them exorbitant burial ceremonies even when it is obvious that they did not live well. This sends bad moral precedence for social order and for the proper functioning of community life.

In the course of time, the feeling and empathy for the sick and the dying has waned, especially for those with unhygienic illnesses. The sick are left to suffer without adequate care since they have become irritating. They are sometimes abandoned. This contemporary characteristic is found mostly among the educated. This suggests that

Western education with which we are maximally tutored has eroded our values and implanted in our individuality and carefree attitude. When these people who were not cared for die, those who did not care for them contribute or borrow money for exorbitant burial. If they were cared for when they were sick, some of them would have survived. These same persons, who treated their sick relatives with levity, would not want to be treated in the same way when they are sick or old. They exploit the vulnerability of others—their helpless and hapless relations. This is immoral. It falls short of the Aristotelian golden rule which says that you should do to others what you would want them to do to you and do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you. Although Aristotle’s thoughts were unknown to the Esan; this dictum was pervasive in the Esan scheme of things in the form of question: *aha lu ele odeiyee?* — If it is done to you would you like it? This maximally forms the bases of actions, judgments and settlements in traditional Esan society.

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## CONCLUSION

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Since the Esan values life and thus holds it supreme, and since they abhor death as a terrifying phenomenon, a calamity and a truncation of life, suicide is unheard of and euthanasia has no place in their lexicon.

Although some contradictions are involved in some of their beliefs; contradictions are parts of the furniture of life including science. Everything about life is not consistency or logic. In fact in logic there is contradiction. In the same way, contradictions are parts of traditional beliefs. Despite this, it has the merit of meaningfully organizing the life of the people. Although life may not ultimately have something spectacular for mankind, people still fear death. They would like to continue with life here. However, some are not afraid of death *per se* nor for their own sake, but the deprivation and absence which the death will cause others. This is true from experience that even for those who are educated and have travelled the sense of loss is felt at the death of a loved one. **Any attempts of the Western or Oriental kind [philosophy or religion??] to banish man from fear of death, by either denying life and punishment after death, and the existence of the gods or their interference in human affairs does not make any sense to and serve any relief for the traditional Esan people because they are ardent believers in life after death and in the supremacy of deities. (\*\*\*\*\*this sentence is not clear)** And nothing can erode these beliefs. These beliefs reinforce their moral attitudes to lead good lives to avoid the consequences of bad living either here or hereafter and in solidarity with the living, the dying and the dead.

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