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Coping with Anxiety of Death through the Assurance of Future Hope in the African Christian Contemporary Society

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Abstract

In African context any kind of death poses some treat or anxiety – either socio-cultural, or psychological anxiety. Different scholars at different times and places have given description of death – as departure from the life to the ancestor, a reunion with the ancestors.

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The reality of its anxiety is undoubted in both African culture and American, European and Asian World. Each of the above culture has different way and means of dealing or coping with anxiety of death either– social-cultural, psychological or emotional. For African Traditional religions, the immediate and spontaneous reaction will be to consult the futurn-teller – the medicine man who will immediately develop a long list of items for the process of appeasing the gods or the goddess. For the African Christian, the immediate reaction will be to offer Masses for the reaffirmation of their belief system in Christ’s death and resurrection – assurance of future hope in the resurrection and eternal life. According to Jurgen Motlmann: “Hope thereby opens a future outlook that embraces all things including also death, and into this it can and must also take the limited hope of a renewal of life...” This life is life in Christ, which is eternal life. Besides, human beings are fascinated by the death of their young relatives and friends, but when faced with the reality of their own death they are afraid to contemplate, imagine or even harbor such a thought in mind - this in itself is a lot of anxiety. This work focuses on how Christian can cope with the anxiety of death through the assurance of the future hope in Christ’s resurrection and eternal life.

Introduction

Different cultures and anthropologists have given different definitions of Death based on their cultural milieu. The question posed by the anthropophenomenological reality of suffering and death has several answers in various cultures and epochs. From a mythological explanation of the origin of death through accounts of a religious and philosophical nature, sometimes employing scientific and medical insight, and meaning of death to instruct its people – each religion, community knows how best to cope with anxiety of death. In this work we focus on how best to cope with the anxiety of death from the Christian perspective.

In the African context there are two kinds of death – death of good ripe –old age, happy death – a celebration of happy exit to the ancestor. In this context, there is less anxiety. In the second kind – is described as premature death – Onwuike – tragic and sudden passing away of a young teenage boy or girl. When such takes place there is lot of anxiety and pains –here death is personified as an unjust, heartless, non respecter of persons. Among the African Christian there

is social, psychological, socio-cultural anxiety and social phobia of death which affects the community, families and individuals. In light of the Christian belief in Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, hope in resurrection and assurance of eternal life becomes the cornerstone of the Christian faith – that by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness.

This work therefore presupposes the reality of death – the awareness and the anxiety and pain it causes in the African family, community, and individuals lives This paper will focus on the Christian perspective of – African cosmology where any kind of death poses a threat and great challenges and anxiety in every family.

A. What Is Death

Obi. (2001) earlier in his book (*Human Suffering: A challenge to Christian Faith*) saw death as the “terminus ad quem” of most human suffering. In the African context, people speak of death as of “a person”, or as some spirit, “as one of the servants of God.” At offering, appeals are made to death not to come.

Igbo names and proverbs employ similar expressions that refer to death as though to some personality or entity. Death is spoken of as a being who arrives, who enters and executes, leaving behind melancholy, sorrow and coldness. Names such as “Onwuegbule” (may death not kill), “Onwubiko” (death please, or I implore you) are earnest pleading addressed to this “personality” death. The Igbo, however do not worship death or offer sacrifices to him. Judging from this practice, it means that in actual fact, death is not accepted as some entity existing alone or belonging to the class of spirits with rational nature. Although death is felt so powerfully, since it overpowers man, and while man's prayers could persuade gods, death remains inexorable. The language that tends to personify death is in the final analysis, no more than a declaration of human frustration before the overwhelming traumatic experience associated with dying and man's helplessness.

Death is also spoken of as an irrational force. Since Igbo names as:

- | | | |
|----------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Onwuamaghiegbu | - | Death does not know how to kill |
| Onwuejiogu | - | Death has no sense of justice |
| Onwuama-eze` | - | Death is not a respecter of person |
- or

		Death does not know the king
Onwuamaghi-Onyeoma	-	Death does not know the innocent or the holy person
Onwuamaghi-nzu`	-	Death is unwarranted or stupid

Death is seen as too irrational to discriminate between an infant and an adult, between a man with responsibilities and the very old. The issue of language comes in also in describing the act of dying. To die is “to go home”. This whole life on earth is a visit. The proper home is in the company of the ancestors in the land of the dead.

Mbiti (1975:109) has a collection of expressions from several communities in Africa associated with the act of dying. Dying is returning home, going away, answering summons, saying “yes” to death, disappearing, departing, ceasing to eat, ceasing to breathe, fighting a lost battle, refusing food, rejecting people, sleeping, taking one away, etc. These expressions reveal nuances in beliefs and attitudes regarding this subject the most dominant of which according to Mbiti, is that death is not a complete destruction of the individual, but rather a vehicle by means of which one makes his/her journey to the better life. This journey is reversible through rebirth. Thus, when the person has lived out his life in this world he/she passes to the other form of better life. This is a desired end. It is the anticipation of every Igbo person. In such a situation strictly speaking, one is not said to have died but rather, to have joined the ancestors. It is a reunion. Such “a home journey” is more of a celebration than mourning. It is a liberation from the world of suffering to happiness.

B. What Is Anxiety

According to Chambers Thesaurus (1999:29) anxiety is linked with the nouns anxiousness, apprehension, concern, distress, nervousness, uneasiness, fretfulness, restlessness, etc. (adj.) anxious – afraid, desirous, tortured, troubled, worried, uneasy. For Wikipedia Encyclopedia it is a psychological and physiological state characterized by cognitive, somatic, emotional and behavioral components. These components combine to create an unpleasant feeling that is typically associated with uneasiness, apprehension, fear, or worry.

In our context, the reactions of death, especially in the African family is that of nervousness and distress, worries, anxious moments and troubled minds. Africans believed strongly that the young should

bury the old. It is the heart desired prayer and supplication of African parents to be looked after at old age and finally be buried by their children. When such desire or wishes were not met, (eg parent burying their child) the shock, apprehension, distress, anxiety is great. For the African family therefore, premature death is never acceptable.

C. Expression of anxiety – Premature Death

Onwuike. This could also be labeled “bad death” or (Onwumgbi, Onwu Ogbanje). In fact the central question here is whether belief in reincarnation could determine the Igbo or African’s attitude to death in such a way that it confronts them without its characteristic horror and anxiety. Maquest (1972:65) would affirm this:

Death does not have the tragic and shocking aspect that it has in the individualist tradition, where it means the annihilation of a being that is its own end... which is absurd. In Africa, death means the disappearance of being whose ultimate reality is entirely relative to entities that existed before it and will exist after it: true reality not in the individual.

In actual experience however, the contrary is the case and reincarnation offers but too little consolation. Such language that describes dying as “sleeping” or “going home” in no way eliminates the shock, horror, trauma, cries and challenges associated with premature death, especially in desperate cases. To appreciate this fact we may refer to G.T. Basden’s account of the Igbo people. According to him “immediately after the patient dies, there is a wild outburst of wailing. In the case of a near relative, as a wife for her husband, or a mother for her child, it speedily develops into a form of frenzy.” However, if we restrict these reactions to instinctive response to close and sudden encounters with premature death, when of course they are most pronounced, we do admit the value of reincarnation as a consolatory attitude-forming belief, with respect to the deceased’s kin. Although, this does not diminish the natural aversion for death among the Igbo people even for those in severe human conditions. Basden’s (1966:122) observation is correct but we have to be aware of the fact that in our discussion on the values of family – where parents play very strong role in the family. Such situation is worse at the death of a good husband who plays a protective (breadwinner) role in the family. It brings untold hardship, distress, anxiety and cries in the family. Hence, the Igbo song “how is the mighty fallen” the pillar/protector has fallen—“Mgbala ezela”.

The deceased had left behind many youngsters whose fate are yet to be determined.

There will be a lot of anxiety, tension and lament of economic and social pressures, conflict between succeeding generations and new social relationships, between the children and authorities in the family. The children could be subjected to social ridicule and torture since they lack protection. The “bastion of security,” who absorbs all the shocks and fend off attack coming on the family from outside, is dead. His premature death will indeed create a big vacuum. The family is exposed to all kinds of social abuse and injustice from the society. The woman (of the deceased) becomes aware of her limitations since the source of her pride has passed away. The Igbo saying “Ugwu nwanyi bu di ya”, (“a husband is the source of pride to woman”) becomes a reality to her life. A series of questions, and doubts are obvious: the question of existence, about the sense and non-sense of life; about God’s existence who could have intervened, or a youngster gifted with special talent is struck by death, or the death of the only son which will bring termination of the family lineage system. The reaction to such premature death is tragic, challenging, shocking and horrific. It will raise doubts and fears which lead to crisis of faith. Such death is described as: i) An enigma and a force to be reconciled with; ii) A wicked and heartless force; iii) No respecter of persons and unjust; vi) Death : unjust.

Death: An enigma and a force to be reconciled with. According to Obi. (2001:111) in spite of the general notion of death as a necessary bridge to the other nature, death still remains a puzzle, an enigma to the African/Igbo world. It is a force to be reckoned with. Death defies predication. In spite of man’s wisdom and, technological advancement, the knowledge of the precise time and circumstances of death eludes him. Relying on the authority of the experience that death has always defied every other power and stubbornly imposed its will on people, the Igbo names affirm: Ownukam ike (death is most powerful). This is a metaphorical expression of the irreconcilable strength of death among the Igbo. Therefore any child born within such period of constant premature bereavement in the family is given such name: as - “Ebiere Onwu”- give reverence to death. It is hailed as superimposing - “Onwukwe” - if death agrees, “Onwubuche” - death is my worry. And so

supplications and entreaties are a frequent occurrence - “Onwubiko”. (death I implore you).

Death: A wicked and Heartless Force. (Onwuanibe).

In his book: *Human Suffering: A Challenge to Christian Faith*. Obi D(ibid:..) emphasized among other things that, by the natural order, death comes whenever all the conditions necessary for it are complete. The desire of Igbo people is to see their children survive. That is why they find death of young people scandalous, tragic, painful, and a violation of the natural order. When Christian families are besieged by this constant death that eludes human technology the immediate reaction is to consult the fortune teller. Often the fortune tellers would attribute the cause to one evil spirit called “Ogbanje”.

Death: No Respector of Persons. In Igbo culture great respect is attached to people with great wealth and knowledge, and so, in life and the social structure of the Igbo world, honor is given to whom it is due. Consequently one’s wealth, talent and social status can bring favourable actions towards the person, community or family, but death defies this privilege. It kills kings, warriors, even renowned “traditional medicine men”, great thinkers and scientists. This bites the peoples’ imagination. They look at it with utter amazement. Hence they have such names as “Onwuasoanya” - Death is no respector of persons, “Onwuama-Onyeukwa”, Onwuama-eze- Death does not recognise a King nor a great person. Therefore each person, regardless of rank, status or religious affiliation strives to prevent death even if at the risk of faith, for example putting on charms especially when one’s life is threatened. This is practised mainly among the elite of the society. Michael Mozia describes them thus: “... they are Christians but consider it unnecessary or even irrelevant to express their Christian faith in one form of religious worship or another. They consider the Christian faith as something that exists only in the heart and not to be practiced.”

Death: Unjust. Igbo Society is filled with puzzlement and utter amazement in observing how death defies all ranks and privileges, robbing the society of her patriotic and devout people, robbing parents of young and talented children. It raises questions how evil and wicked people prosper and therefore death is described as unjust (2001:111)

In contrast, others who would be humanly speaking, considered good are besieged with hardship and even untimely death. It is the wish of the society that men and women who have its interest at heart be rewarded with commensurate good in this life, manifested by a prolonged life span. Many times the reverse is the case. This is not only the dilemma of the Igbo society, but of the whole African world where wealth and riches are in the hands of a few. Several efforts will be made to protect them (the patriotic). In some cases it is a community affair offering sacrifice to the god of the land “Chi- Ala.” In such a helpless situation, they simply console themselves with names like “onwuama-egbu” - Death does not know the right candidate - death is unjust or death is irrational.

From the foregoing, one can see that the anxieties and apprehension of premature death is psychologically and emotionally torturing. Africans love and cherish long life, ripe-old age, and above all family solidarity. Since mankind have to endure and cope with every life situation, Africans have strong faith and trust in the Supreme Being – God. The Christian belief in the future hope of resurrection and life, brings endurance through consolation that all hope is not lost and the future is great – *emesia ogadimma*. God’s time is the best, God has given God has taken, such expression of hope and wishes help the African families to cope with anxiety of death.

D. Coping with Anxiety of Death

1. Assurance of Future Hope

According to the new Catechism of the Catholic Church, hope is:

the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

This definition confirms the invitation of the book of Hebrews to all Christians: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful” (Heb.10:23). It also brings out clearly the vital role the virtue of hope plays in the human condition. Without hope mankind cannot exist. It is the virtue that makes mankind experience his existence as longing, striving, as a dynamism proceeding from a hidden impulse and aspiring for a better, more perfect life. For the Christian, a man of hope cannot disregard

his desire for perfection and lasting untroubled happiness. But since his desire is never completely fulfilled in this earthly existence he hopes for better health, his freedom, his family, what he believes to be right, a relief of the needy and the oppressed. It keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during the time of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude. By hope man is preserved from selfishness and leads to the happiness that flows from charity. This hope is also a weapon that protects us in the struggle of salvation. According to St. Paul “Let us ...put on the breastplate of faith and charity, and for a helmet the hope of salvation (1Thess.5:8). It affords us joy even under trial: St. Paul concludes, “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation.” (Rm.12:12).

Therefore what we are proposing is a practical virtue that should give relief to human limitations namely: premature death. The hope that maintains and upholds faith and keeps it moving on. The hope that draws the believer into the life of love, the hope that is the mobilizing and driving force of faith, of its knowledge and reflections on human nature, history and society. The hope that is continually leading on further by the promise of when God reveals all thinking in history to be eschatologically oriented and eschatologically stamped as provisional. It is this practical virtue that Jurgen Moltmann recommends that “...is directed towards a *novum ultimum*, towards a new creation of all things by the God of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Therefore a man of hope has as one of his objects, the conquest of suffering and death. Such hope, helps in a greater extent to alleviate human suffering, and challenge of death. Mankind is therefore open for the future. According to Moltmann (1980),

Hope thereby opens a future outlook that embraces all things including also death, and into this it can and must also take the limited hope of a renewal of life, stimulating them, relating them, giving them direction.

This brings to our mind what St. Paul described as the fruit of hope, namely; *openness for the future* and endurance in suffering. In our context we shall discuss briefly “*endurance* in suffering”, which I consider more relevant to this study.

2. Endurance

As we observed earlier in this inquiry, to be a Christian does not mean to be exempted from suffering. Therefore some Christians may

find themselves in the same hopeless situation or even more problematic situation than non-Christians. The Christian family like any other family may face the challenges of death and, if unfortunate with the dilemma of constant premature death, et cetera. In other words, the Christian vocation does not exonerate him from all these pains and sorrows, from the challenges of human suffering, and he has to confront them like a man with faith and hope without the risk of his faith. This entails taking up one's cross and following Jesus (Mk.8:34) adopting a kenotic lifestyle after the mind of Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, the fundamental Christian attitude to anxiety of death is hope. St. Paul concludes: 'We know that by turning everything to their good God co-operates with all those who love him, with all those that he has called according to his purpose' (Rm.8:28). Besides, Christians have an example in Christ himself . "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Lk.24:26). Thus, Christians should be taught and helped to carry their cross with patience and endurance with Christ, confident that God's faithfulness will not abandon them and expose their suffering to futility, but transmit them together with the Cross of Christ into glory. According to Moule (1963:)

Hope even gives strength to look at the bitterest thing of all, the remorse that we feel, when true penitence is aroused in us, for all the injury which our selfishness has caused to God and to others.

Hope grants mankind the possibility of a new life and of a return to the love of God and the community. While hope gives the Christian fortitude to endure suffering, his patience to bear distress and socio-culture humiliation also becomes witness for the strength and the hope he possesses. By accepting the cross, (poverty and premature death), "by taking upon himself the trials and struggle of obedience and surrendering himself to the pain of love, he proclaims in the everyday world the future of the resurrection, of life and the righteousness of God."

In the Igbo context, such philosophical expression of hope; *Emesia oga-dimma* - "things will be better in the future," or future is greater. *Echi di'imme*- tomorrow is uncertain, demonstrate the dynamic, futuristic and optimistic reality of the Igbo concept of hope. Therefore the Igbo community strongly believes that "*Emesia ogadi mma*" therefore confirming the fact that a man of hope is never

pessimistic with life, but rather optimistic and never accepts failure in life. Such expectation makes life good/noble. Thus hope goes on its way through the midst of happiness and pain, because in the promise of God it can see a future also for the promise of the dying and the dead. This confirms my philosophy “living without hope is like no longer living.”

In the same context, endurance is another conspicuous quality that characterizes the Igbo community lifestyle. They learn by experience the futility of lamenting over one’s misfortunes. Children are born in an environment which gives no room for much comfort, an environment which does not recommend self-pity. They are in a society where “one does not sit back to lick one’s wounds.” Hence he unconsciously learns to endure suffering. It is not necessary here to dwell on the harsh circumstances of his birth, but we must remember such ceremonies as circumcision, (though not treated in this work) and the pouring of cold water over the child immediately after birth. By these ceremonies the Igbo child learns to overcome his pain and suffering even from his earliest years. Therefore he has the courage and conviction that *Ndidi bu enyi nku* - “Endurance is a friend of “wing” or better put - Endurance, makes a person strong to bear the hardship, to fight against the challenges that may arise from human suffering.

Nchekwube mere nwanyi isikpe esola di ya. - It is hope that prevents a widow following her dead husband. This proverb teaches endurance among the Africans and the Igbos in particular, especially to any bereaved family. There is every hope that the future is greater, “*nkiruka*’- that things will be better: *Emesia oga di mma*. Such hope sustains the orphans, widows and widowers who receive a very big shock at the loss of their beloved relations. With such anticipation of a better future in life, he/she accepts his/her life situation with patience and resignation, humility and simplicity. This is the authentic life of a real African/Igbo personality. The Igbo proverbs that portray the Igbo as a person of “hope” are countless. In this frame of mind the Africans, like any other Christians, should be taught how to carry their cross with patience in endurance, and with assurance of hope, confident that God’s faithfulness will not abandon them and expose their suffering to futility. With the sure hope that if they suffer these socio-cultural humiliations, psychological torture etc., and accept

their situation as part and parcel of their Christian life, they will enter into the glory with Christ. This is why Christians should bear with patience and humility all their sufferings, and anxiety of death; while doing so they are sharing in Christ's love for humankind, that is, adopting a kenotic life-style.

Conclusion

From the above studies tragic effect, the nervousness, the anxiety of death is a reality to all cultures, and more so in the African Christian family. It is a challenge to cultures and religions. Death is a dilemma, a paradox. From the moment of birth mankind is confronted with the socio-cultural, psychological and emotional anxiety of death. It is a trauma to both the young and old, the poor and the rich alike. The awareness of our mortality could also make us feel death as most tragic. This awareness contributes to cause of anxiety and challenges of human life. From our study too, we conclude that death is unpredictable. This unpredictability imposes yet another aspect of psychological anxiety. The paper therefore proposes the assurance of future hope in Christ's event of death, resurrection and eternal life can help to a great extent to cope with anxiety of death.

We are aware of the dynamic relationship between the theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity). Faith recognizes the dawning of the future openness and freedom in the Christ's event. Dynamic hope is kindled and spans the horizons which then open over a closed existence. While charity animates and purifies other virtues, hope sets faith open to the comprehensive future of Christ. Hope is foremost the "inseparable companion" of faith. Jurgen Moltmann concludes: "When this hope is taken away, however eloquently or elegantly we discourse concerning faith, we are convicted of having none. Hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God." In our context firm belief in Christ's death and hope for eternal life. Faith is the foundation upon which hope rest, hope nourishes and sustains our faith. It suffices to say, authentic Christian faith, dynamic assurance of future hope in eternal life should be the watchwords of Christian life in order to sustain the anxiety of death – either emotional, socio-cultural and psychological. This requires proper integration and awareness of the contextualized theological virtues.

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