# Hereafter an Aspectes of Etche Beliefs in the Interpretation of What Happens to the Dead After Death.

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on Hereafter An Aspects of Etche Beliefs in the Interpretation of what happens to the Dead After Death. At death, Etche people would say that the dead is "going home" to the spirit land of the ancestors to continue to enjoy the brotherhood, comradeship and communal life which it hitherto enjoyed here on earth, from where it will reincarnate back in the homestead. This, however, form the basis of the people's belief in the hereafter to assert the state or nature of the dead in the life after-death. The paper argues that the overall picture of the hereafter, for the Etche people, is one that is believed to be similar in many respects as life in the visible tangible world, where the dead move about and conduct their affairs with their material bodies unimpaired. The methodology adopted was oral interviews (reports of the elders of Etche and Handed down tradition from the custodians of custom and tradition of Etche) and secondary sources (Published materials). The study adopts "The parallel Universe" theory as a theoretical framework. Findings from

the study reveal that the belief in the life after-death for the Etche people is real and that it has helped the Living to take utmost care in the burial rites given to the dead beginning from the time of washing of the corpse to the time of interment for the salvation of the soul of the deceased.

**Key words**: Hereafter, Etche Beliefs, Interpretation, Dead, After Death.

**Introduction**

Among the Etche people, the belief in the life after-life debunk the notion that life in the grave is not the final end of man. This belief is considered very important that even at death, it is believed that the dead had gone home to continue to enjoy the brotherhood and communal life which it hitherto enjoyed while on earth. This belief, however, further explains why the living take utmost care in the burial rites given to the dead beginning from the washing of the corpse to the time of intermet. The essence of this is not only for the salvation of the soul of the deceased, but also to ensure that the dead will have their material bodies unimpaired.

For the Etche people, belief in the after-Life is believed to be the same as life in the material tangible world where the dead are believed to attend their needs and go about their activities with their material bodies intact and complete.

**Background of the Study**

Etche is one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas that make up Rivers State it is Located at the Northern part of Rivers State having boundaries with Ngor – Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State in the North, as well as Abia State in the East (Nwiyi, 2012, P.68). According to Etche Socio-Political organization, there are five outstanding clans are, Mba, Okechi, Ozuzu, Igbo and Ulakwo Umuselem. The essence of this, is for ease administration (Amele, 2000, P.I).

As for their economic life, the people of Etche are predominantly farmers. They engaged in production of palm oil, cocoyam, etc but the most important are yam and cassava which are planted in large quantities. As a people Located within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, they experience the normal Niger Delta climate condition with two main seasons namely, the rainy and dry seasons. The rainy

season take place between March and November. The dry season occurs between November and February (Amadi, 2019, P.104).

With regards to their religious life, there is a strong believe in the existence of a supreme Beign to which the people refer to as Chineke (the God who created everything in the universe). Etche, like other traditional African societies do not approach Him directly rather He is approached and worshipped through the pantheon of divinities.

**Statement of the Problem**

The place of belief in hereafter in the interpretation of what happens to the dead in the life—after death in the religious life of Etche people over the years cannot be over emphasized. The belief in the hereafter has helped the Living to take utmost care in the burial rites given to the dead beginning from the washing of the corpse to time of interment not only for the salvation of the soul of the deceased, but also to ensure that the dead move about and conduct their affairs with their material bodies intact and complete.

However, as important as belief in the hereafter seems to be in the religious life of Etche people, the belief in the hereafter appears to have continued to escape the attention of scholars, leading to a death of scholarship. In consequence of this, custodians of customs and traditions of Etche appears to be phasing out in undocumented formats. Therefore, this study will document for posterity, the beliefs and practice relating to life in the hereafter for education and information.

Two factors motivated the researcher's interest in pursuing this study. The first, as earlier stated, was to document for posterity the beliefs and practices relating to life in the hereafter especially in this era of rapid change and cultural globalization and the second was to explain what happens to the dead in the life-after death.

**Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This study was carried out as an interviewed-based research. Two types of oral investigation procedures were utilized viz:

i) Reports of custodians of custom and tradition of Etche about beliefs and practices relating to life in the hereafter.

ii) Handed down tradition about meaning of beliefs and practices relating to life in the after-life and secondary sources ( Published materials).

There were certain issues that were taken into account in selecting the interviewees and some of the considerations are the positions of the informant in the society; the cultural organization he/she belongs to and the position or title he/she holds; the level of the interviewees cultural affinity. Those who were culturally rooted in the practices of the Local Community were found to be better versed in the tradition and cultural practices of the people.

The study also adopted "The Parallel Universe" theory whose major exponent is Barleen Barton (2012). "The Parallel Universe" theory not only attempt to take into cognizance the reality of the existence of two realms namely, the visible and invisible universe, but also explains what happens in the after-life. The theory, however, argues that there is no wall of demarcation between the two realms in the sense that in the after-life the soul/spirit of the dead continues to live thereafter death since there is communion and communication between the living and the dead (P.31).

**Hereafter in African Culture: An Overview**

According to Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004), the hereafter means a life believed to begin after here. According to them, the idea of the hereafter varies from society to society. But the general traditional belief as they further noted is that it is a carbon copy of this earthly life. This for them, explains why the wealthy or those of royal descent is buried along with them articles such as clothing, sponges, towels, combs, pomades, which he carries to the hereafter. Their view in the reality of Life after death is the general belief that communion and communication are possible between the living and the dead (PP. 61-62).

For Metuh, (1987) the after-life is conceived in terms of the present life. The environment and social structure of each society as he further noted are projected into the invisible world and this for him form the basis of the conceptions of the after-life. This belief according to Metuh, is clearly demonstrated in the continuing relationship of the dead and the Living; a pointer to the fact that physical death is not the final end of man or of the world. Explaining the idea further, Metuh

however, adds that as the present life, and the after-life are infact one continuous stretch of life, so also the visible and the spiritual are interconnected (P.251).

According to Metuh:

> To live here and now is the most important concern of Africa religious activities and beliefs. There is little concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor to be feared in the hereafter. The soul of man does not long for redemption or for closer contact with God in the next world (P.249)

According to Egbucha (2013), from the ancient to the modern world Africa, all the dead are believed to be in different departments in the spirit world. According to him, at the death of any person, the ancestors would scrutinize the person; wherever the person's age mates are found, such a person would be found there. A slave will go there and stay with slaves while the spirit of the dead person is restless until it locates its appropriate position (P.278).

According to Egbucha, there are three stages of hereafter. The first stage comprises the souls of the recent dead people outside the gateway to ancestral world. every dead soul according to him, must be in this stage until separated as a result of adequate burial rites. As he further noted, the qualified ancestors migrate from this stage to the ancestral world leaving the souls wo died bad death in that place while such souls of bad death become wandering spirits which terrorize the living. The second stage, he noted is the ancestral stage. According to him, it comprises of the souls of the dead who had living sons who are bearing their names in the land of the living thereby seen as the "living dead" and by extension the moral guidance of the living in their different lineages. The head of this cult among the living according to Egbucha, is the "Ofo holder". For him, the final stage is the stage of free spirits who came out from the abode of ancestors because the living as he further noted, do not know them or answer their names, do not feed them again; no libations to them or mention of their names in the daily activities of the people (PP.278-279).

According to Mbiti (1969), the belief in the hereafter is sacrosanct in African religious thought and as such one of the African indigenous practices that give direction not only to the genuineness of the Africaness, but also make African beliefs and practices traditionally distinct (P.21). In much the same vein, the reality of the hereafter in African beliefs system according to Ugwu (1999), is strong and supported in the everyday communion between the dead and the living through a number of rituals (P.26).

According to Agbo (1993), for the African peoples, there is no remarkable difference between life in the after-life and life in the material tangible world in the sense that there has always been a constant flow of interaction between the departed and the living as the two worlds cannot function independent of the other (P.56). For Madu, (1996), the hereafter is a continuation of life here on earth after the physical death which for the Africans according to him, clearly affirm the fact that the physical death is nothing but a mere transition into the spirit world of the good departed (P.22). In the words of Ajayi, (1981), the overall picture of the hereafter according to African traditional belief not only describes the importance of the people's world view, but also give meaning to the people's religious practices and beliefs system; a further proof for the Africans that life itself is practically Cyclicle (P.57). For Booth, (1977), one major pointer to the existence and importance of the hereafter in the religious world view of the African people's is the belief in reincarnation where it is believed that the dead after death returns back into the homestead to perpetuate his lineage (P.48). That is why, Tasie (2013), describes it (reincarnation) as a source of comfort to ameliorate the pain associate with death (P.4). In the remaining section of this essay, we shall be examining the Etche belief in the life after –death.

**An Analysis of Etche Belief in the Hereafter.**

In Etche, the belief in the hereafter negates the notion that life in the grave is not the termination of the existence of individual person. That is why at death, Etche people would say that the dead is "going home" to the spirit land of the ancestors to continue to enjoy the brotherhood, comradeship and communal life which it hitherto enjoyed here on earth, from where it will reincarnate back into the homestead. This, however, further explains why the living take special care in handling the corpse beginning from the washing of the corpse, attiring of the

corpse, viewing of the corpse; marking of the grave; selection of the grave diggers until its final interment; even when the corpse has been lowered into the grave; before it is covered with earth, to ensure that it reincarnates whole without deformity, a relation of the deceased is called upon to go down into the grave and adjust the head of the deceased.

According to our informant, Amadi Alfred, this is considered very important because should he not straighten the head, the deceased may reincarnate deformed (Amadi, A. 05/05/2023, oral interview). Also, for the Etche people, life in the after-life is believed to be patterned and structured similarly as life in the visible tangible world. That is why our informant, Njoku Joshua, Disclosed that the dead, even though spirits are believed to possess physical human attributes, retaining their material bodies; even when they appear in dreams or sometimes in real life, they assume their material bodies, and are recognized, as it were fearfully by their kith and kin (Njoku, J. 15/05/2023, oral interview).

Moreso, the economic activities of the Mundane world is believed to be a replica of the hereafter. According to our informant, Anele innocent, there are yam farmers, hunters, fisher men and palm wine tappers who carries out their farming activities there as they did while on earth. Thus the sociopolitical organization of the mundane world as he further said is also believed to be similar as the hereafter. There are office holders such as family and Lineage heads, elders and chiefs, operating as they did while on earth. Similarly, socio-cultural activities like wrestling and new yam festivals according to Anele, are believed to be celebrated in the hereafter and almost at the same time here (Anele, I. 10/05/2023/ Oral interview).

For the Etche people, the overall picture of the hereafter, therefore, is one that is believed to be similar in many respects as life in the visible tangible world, where the dead move about and conduct their affairs with their material bodies unimpaired. This belief that the dead exist in the hereafter with their material bodies intact and complete further explains why at death, an accomplish person is buried along with money, personal articles not only to attend to his needs, but it is also believed that he carries some token of his position here in the visible tangible world to the world in the hereafter.

## Conclusion

To re-assess the view of Barton on "The Parallel universe" theory, against the background of Etche with special reference to life in the hereafter, we noticed that our data on the belief in the hereafter in traditional Etche, clearly fall in line with the theory. For instance, for the Etche people, life in the hereafter is believed to be patterned and organized similarly as life in the visible tangible world in such a way that the dead, even though spirits are believed to possess physical human attributes, retaining their material bodies; even when they appear in dreams or sometimes in real life, they assume their material bodies, and are recognized, as it were fearfully by their kith and kin.

Therefore, for the Etche people, their belief is the hereafter has helped the living to take utmost cave in the handling of the dead beginning from the washing not only for the salvation of the soul of the deceased, but also to ensure that the dead will have their initial bodies unimpaired.

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