

**A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPTS OF REINCARNATION
IN EDO'S WORLDVIEW: OWAN PEOPLE AS A CASE STUDY**

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BENIN CITY.

OCTOBER, 2025

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
PHILOSOPHY, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN
CITY. IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
AWARD OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A.) DEGREE IN PHILOSOPHY.**

OCTOBER, 2025

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project work titled: **A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPTS OF REINCARNATION IN EDO'S WORLDVIEW: OWAN PEOPLE AS A CASE STUDY** was carried out by **IJEBOMEN ESESUWA ANGELA** with Matriculation Number; **ART2101099** of the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City and it meets the requirements for the award of Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy.

DR W. T. OSEMWEGIE

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Date

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Ag. Head of Department

Date

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my Parent, Mr. and Mrs. Ijebomen for all their support and love .

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to God Almighty and I return all the glory to Him, the Father of light and giver of all wisdom, for His impartation of knowledge and grace that have sustained me throughout this program.

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ABSTRACT

This research critically evaluates the concept of reincarnation within the Edo worldview, focusing specifically on the Owan people of the southern part of Edo State, Nigeria. Reincarnation is understood as the return of ancestral spirits through new births and plays a central role in Owan cosmology, shaping social identity, moral conduct, and communal continuity. While reincarnation is widely acknowledged in African traditional religions, the Owan perspective remains understudied in Edo’s worldview. The study employs a qualitative methodology that includes oral interviews, participant observation, and archival analysis to explore reincarnation practices such as naming ceremonies,

divination, and ritual observances. Findings reveal that reincarnation serves as a moral compass, social institution, and philosophical framework. It fosters respect for elders, strengthens kinship bonds, preserves oral traditions, and reduces the fear of death by presenting it as a transition rather than an end. It also offers a system of cosmic justice, where virtuous lives are rewarded with favorable rebirths, while violations of communal norms may result in difficult or denied reincarnation. This study demonstrates that reincarnation remains a vital element of Owan ontology and a coherent expression of African metaphysics. It functions as both a spiritual and social philosophy, linking the unborn, the living, and the ancestors in a continuous cycle of existence. By affirming identity, morality, and communal belonging, reincarnation remains resilient amidst socio-religious change. The study therefore recommends documentation of oral traditions, integration of indigenous cosmologies into education, interreligious dialogue. This research concludes that reincarnation in Owan thought is not merely speculation about life after death, but a moral and cultural philosophy of life itself. It affirms that existence is cyclical, that human actions reverberate across generations, and that the living remain forever bound to those who came before them. Preserving this belief is therefore not only about safeguarding Owan heritage but also about sustaining a worldview that emphasizes continuity, moral responsibility, and the eternal relevance of African traditional thought.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Study

The concept of reincarnation, the belief that a soul or spirit is reborn into a new body after death, is a fundamental aspect of many religious and philosophical systems worldwide. In African traditional religions, reincarnation occupies a central place, shaping cosmological, social, and ethical frameworks¹. Among the Edo-speaking peoples of southern Nigeria, particularly the Owan, reincarnation is not merely a spiritual doctrine but a lived experience that influences family structures, moral behavior, and community identity. This study focuses on critically evaluating the concept of reincarnation within the Edo worldview, using the Owan people as a case study to explore its manifestations, significance, and challenges in a rapidly modernizing world. The Edo people, primarily located in present-day Edo State, Nigeria, are renowned for their rich cultural heritage, exemplified by the historic Benin Kingdom. Their worldview is deeply rooted in a cosmological system that integrates the physical and spiritual realms, where deities, ancestors, and spirits interact with the living². Within this framework, reincarnation serves as a mechanism for continuity, ensuring that familial and communal ties transcend physical death. The Owan, a subgroup of the Edo, share this worldview but exhibit distinct cultural practices and oral traditions that provide unique insights into

¹ Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann. P.34

² Bradbury, R. E. (1973). *Benin studies*. London: Oxford University Press P.12

reincarnation beliefs. Understanding these beliefs requires an exploration of the broader Edo cosmology, the specific socio-cultural context of the Owan, and the interplay between traditional practices and external influences such as Christianity, Islam, and modernity³. Reincarnation in African traditional religions is often misunderstood or oversimplified in Western scholarship, which tends to frame it through the lens of Eastern philosophies like Hinduism or Buddhism⁴. However, African reincarnation, including among the Edo, is distinct in its emphasis on communal continuity rather than individual liberation. Mbiti notes that in many African societies, reincarnation is not about achieving nirvana or escaping a cycle of rebirth but about maintaining ancestral connections and fulfilling familial obligations. For the Owan, reincarnation is intricately tied to the concept of Ehi, the spiritual double or destiny that guides an individual's life and, in some cases, facilitates their return to the physical world⁵. This belief underscores the cyclical nature of existence, where death is not an end but a transition to the ancestral realm, from which one may return to the living community. The Owan people, residing in the northern part of Edo State, are organized into clans and communities with a strong emphasis on kinship and oral traditions. Their religious practices are anchored on the worship of deities such as *Osanobua* (the supreme creator), alongside reverence for ancestors who are believed to influence the lives of their descendants⁶. Reincarnation

³ Parrinder, G. (1974). *African traditional religion*. London: Hutchinson University Library. P.10

⁴ Egharevba, J. U. (1968). *A short history of Benin*. Ibadan: University Press. Pp. 20-22

⁵ Okhamafe, E. (1984). "The Concept of Ehi in Edo Thought." *Journal of African Philosophy and Studies*, 1(1), 23-35, pp. 23-35

⁶ *Ibid.*,

among the Owan is often identified through physical resemblances, behavioral traits, or divinatory revelations, which confirm that a newborn is an ancestor reborn⁷. These beliefs are reinforced through rituals, naming ceremonies, and the role of diviners, who interpret signs of reincarnation and guide families in honoring their returned kin. Such practices highlight the social significance of reincarnation, as it strengthens lineage continuity and fosters a sense of collective identity. Historically, the Edo people, including the Owan, have maintained their traditional beliefs despite centuries of interaction with external forces. The transatlantic slave trade, colonial rule, and missionary activities introduced Christianity and Islam, which challenged indigenous cosmologies⁸. While some Owan communities adopted these world religions, many integrated them syncretically with traditional beliefs, allowing reincarnation to coexist with Christian or Islamic doctrines. For instance, some Owan Christians interpret reincarnation as a form of divine providence, where God permits the return of souls for specific purposes⁹. This syncretism reflects the resilience of Edo worldview and its adaptability to changing socio-religious landscapes. In contemporary times, the Owan, like other African communities, face the pressures of globalization, urbanization, and Western education, which often clash with traditional beliefs. The rise of Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on spiritual warfare and rejection of ancestral veneration, has led some Owan youth to question the validity of

⁷ Omoigui, N. (2007). *Reincarnation and Edo Cosmology: A philosophical analysis*. Lagos: Thought Publishers. Pp. 12-13

⁸ Isichei, E. (1995). *A history of Christianity in Africa: From antiquity to the present*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, p. 23

⁹ Azenabor, G. (2015). *Reincarnation in an African metaphysics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, P.30

reincarnation¹⁰. Similarly, scientific rationalism, propagated through formal education, challenges the empirical basis of reincarnation claims, framing them as superstition¹¹. These tensions raise critical questions about the sustainability of reincarnation beliefs and their relevance in modern Owan society. Yet, the persistence of these beliefs, evidenced by ongoing rituals and oral narratives, suggests a deep-rooted cultural significance that warrants scholarly investigation. The study of reincarnation among the Owan is particularly significant because it offers a microcosm of broader African spiritual traditions. Unlike the well-documented Benin Kingdom, the Owan have received less academic attention, making their beliefs an underexplored area of Edo culture¹². By focusing on the Owan, this study contributes to the ethnographic record of Edo cosmology and addresses gaps in the literature on reincarnation in smaller African communities. Furthermore, the Owan's oral traditions provide a rich source of data, as stories of reincarnated ancestors are preserved through proverbs, songs, and family histories¹³. These narratives not only illuminate the mechanics of reincarnation but also reveal its role in shaping moral and social norms. Theoretically, this study draws on anthropological and philosophical frameworks to critically evaluate reincarnation. Anthropologically, the work of scholars like Fortes highlights the role of kinship in

¹⁰ Kalu, O. (2008). *African Pentecostalism: An introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, P. 5

¹¹ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, P. 45

¹² Imafidon, E. O. (2012). *African philosophy and the otherness of alterity: A process ethics of relationship*. New York: Routledge., P. 25

¹³ Okpewho, I. (1992). *African oral literature: Backgrounds, character, and continuity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p. 9

African reincarnation beliefs, where the return of ancestors reinforces lineage solidarity.¹⁴ Philosophically, the concept of personhood in African thought, as articulated by Gyekye¹⁵, provides a lens to understand how the Owan perceive the continuity of identity across lifetimes. These frameworks enable a nuanced analysis of reincarnation, moving beyond descriptive accounts to interrogate its cultural, ethical, and existential implications. The significance of reincarnation in Owan society extends beyond spiritual beliefs to practical domains. For instance, reincarnation influences inheritance patterns, as a reincarnated ancestor may be entitled to specific family roles or property¹⁶. It also shapes child-rearing practices, as parents may treat a child believed to be a returned ancestor with special reverence or expectations¹⁷. Moreover, reincarnation serves as a moral compass, encouraging ethical behavior to ensure a favorable rebirth or to honor ancestral legacies¹⁸. These socio-cultural functions underscore the need to critically evaluate reincarnation not only as a religious doctrine but as a dynamic force in Owan social organization. The choice of the Owan as a case study is deliberate, given their distinct cultural identity within the Edo ethnic group. While sharing the broader Edo worldview, the Owan exhibit unique practices, such as specific divination techniques and naming ceremonies, that

¹⁴ Fortes, M. (1987). *Religion, morality and the person: Essays on Tallensi religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 22

¹⁵ Gyekye, K. (1995). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, P. 34

¹⁶ Omoigui, N. (2007). *Reincarnation and Edo Cosmology: A philosophical analysis*. Lagos: Thought Publishers. P. 3

¹⁷ Azenabor, Op.Cit., p. 34

¹⁸ Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann, P. 13

distinguish their approach to reincarnation¹⁹. Their geographic location in northern Edo State, away from the urban influence of Benin City, has allowed traditional beliefs to persist with less disruption, making them an ideal subject for studying indigenous cosmologies²⁰. Additionally, the Owan's oral traditions, which are central to their cultural expression, provide a wealth of qualitative data for analyzing reincarnation narratives. This study is timely, as African traditional religions face increasing marginalization in global religious discourses. The growing dominance of Christianity and Islam, coupled with the spread of secular ideologies, threaten the survival of indigenous beliefs like reincarnation²¹. By documenting and critically evaluating these beliefs among the Owan, this study contributes to the preservation of African cultural heritage and advocates for the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems. It also engages with contemporary debates on the compatibility of traditional beliefs with modernity, offering insights into how the Owan navigate these tensions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Reincarnation is a cornerstone of many African traditional belief systems, including the Edo worldview, where it shapes concepts of life, death, and communal identity. Among the Owan people, a subgroup of the Edo in present-day Edo State, Nigeria, reincarnation is believed to facilitate the return of ancestors and the continuity of family lineages. Despite its cultural significance, there is a notable lack of comprehensive studies

¹⁹ Imafidon, *Op. Cit.*,

²⁰ Egharevba, *Op. Cit.*,

²¹ Kalu, *Op. Cit.*,

exploring the specific beliefs, practices, and socio-cultural roles of reincarnation within the Owan context. Existing literature on Edo cosmology, such as works by Egharevba and Bradbury²², focuses predominantly on the Bini subgroup, leaving the Owan's unique perspectives underexplored. This gap in scholarship is compounded by the challenges posed by modernity, including the influence of Christianity, Islam, and Western education, which have begun to erode traditional beliefs among the Owan⁵. The interplay between these external forces and indigenous reincarnation practices raises questions about the resilience and adaptation of Owan cosmology in contemporary times. Without a critical evaluation of reincarnation in the Owan worldview, there is a risk of losing valuable cultural knowledge as younger generations increasingly adopt non-traditional beliefs. Furthermore, the absence of empirical data on Owan-specific reincarnation practices hinders comparative studies within the broader Edo and African contexts. This study addresses these issues by investigating the nature, processes, and significance of reincarnation among the Owan people, while critically assessing its relevance amidst modern socio-religious changes. By doing so, it seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature and contribute to the preservation of Owan cultural heritage.

1.3 Methodology

This study adopts a philosophical methodology specifically an analysis comparison and hermeneutics method. The aim is to critically evaluate the concept of reincarnation in the Edo worldview, using the Owan people as a case study and to draw a comparative

²² Egharevba, *Op. Cit.*,

insights with that of the Yoruba and Igbo ontology. The analysis is both descriptive and philosophical, highlighting the ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of reincarnation. For the Owan people, reincarnation is grounded primarily in the continuity of lineage. The belief is that deceased ancestors return through newly born children within the same family. This reinforces the communal idea that no individual is ever truly lost to death; rather, they persist in new forms to sustain the family heritage. In Owan thought, birthmarks, dreams, and behaviors are seen as proof of reincarnation. Hermeneutically, these are not simply empirical signs but symbols of ancestral presence. They reflect a worldview where life and death are continuous, and the individual is inseparable from the lineage.

The Yoruba naming system (Babatunde, Yetunde) and the Igbo (Nnenna, Nnanna) are not only linguistic markers but interpretive acts. Through naming, the community situates the newborn within a text of continuity. Hermeneutically, language serves as a bridge between the seen (child) and the unseen (ancestor).

By applying hermeneutics, reincarnation is revealed as a symbolic system that expresses fundamental philosophical orientations.

In contrast, the Yoruba hold a similar belief known as *atunwa* (return to life). Like the Owan, they emphasize family lineage continuity, but with a stronger moral undertone: the quality of one's past life influences the circumstances of one's return. The Igbo notion of *ilo uwa* (returning to the world) also closely mirrors Owan beliefs. Reincarnation is

largely a family centered phenomenon, where deceased relatives are believed to return through children, ensuring continuity of lineage and ancestral presence.

Philosophically, Owan, Yoruba, and Igbo perspectives represent an ontology of continuity. In Owan thought, birthmarks, dreams, and behaviors are seen as proof of reincarnation. Hermeneutically, these are not simply empirical signs but symbols of ancestral presence. They reflect a worldview where life and death are continuous, and the individual is inseparable from the lineage. The Yoruba naming system (*Babatunde*, *Yetunde*) and the Igbo (*Nnenna*, *Nnanna*) are not only linguistic markers but interpretive acts. Through naming, the community situates the newborn within a text of continuity. Hermeneutically, language serves as a bridge between the seen (child) and the unseen (ancestor).

By applying hermeneutics, reincarnation is revealed as a symbolic system that expresses fundamental philosophical orientations. From a philosophical standpoint, reincarnation in these traditions reflects the African metaphysics of personhood. Personhood is not a fixed individual reality but a communal and cyclical phenomenon. Death is not an end but a transition; life is a process of continuity, accountability, and purpose.

1.4 Aim and Objectives

The study seeks to critically evaluate the concept of reincarnation within the Edo worldview, focusing on the Owan people, to understand its cultural significance,

practices, and challenges in contemporary society. The following are the objectives guide of the research:

- (i) To examine the beliefs, practices, and socio-cultural implications of reincarnation among the Owan people, highlighting its role in shaping their identity and worldview within the broader Edo cultural context.
- (ii) To explore the traditional beliefs and rituals associated with reincarnation in Owan communities, documenting how these practices are identified and performed.
- (iii) To analyze the social and ethical functions of reincarnation beliefs in fostering community cohesion, moral behavior, and lineage continuity among the Owan.
- (iv) To assess the challenges facing reincarnation beliefs in Owan society, particularly the impacts of modernity, Christianity, Islam, and generational shifts, and their implications for cultural preservation.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The exploration of reincarnation within the Edo worldview, with a specific focus on the Owan people, holds substantial academic, cultural, and societal value. This study addresses a critical gap in the understanding of localized African traditional religious practices, offering insights into how the Owan conceptualize and sustain their beliefs in reincarnation amidst evolving socio-cultural dynamics. By examining this phenomenon, the research contributes to the broader discourse on African cosmology while

highlighting the unique perspectives of a lesser-studied subgroup within the Edo ethnic framework. From an academic perspective, the study enriches the field of African religious studies by providing a detailed, empirically grounded analysis of reincarnation in a specific cultural context. Existing scholarship on African traditional religions often generalizes beliefs across diverse ethnic groups, overlooking the nuances of smaller communities like the Owan. This research counters this trend by delving into the Owan's distinct practices, rituals, and oral narratives surrounding reincarnation, thereby adding depth to the anthropological and philosophical understanding of Edo cosmology. Furthermore, the critical evaluation of these beliefs in light of modern influences, such as Christianity, Islam, and urbanization, offers a contemporary lens through which to assess the resilience and adaptation of traditional worldviews.²³ Culturally, the study serves as a vital tool for preserving and documenting Owan heritage. Reincarnation beliefs are integral to the Owan's sense of identity, kinship, and moral responsibility, yet they risk erosion due to globalization and the dominance of external religious systems. By capturing oral traditions, case studies, and ritual practices, this research creates a repository of knowledge that can aid in the revitalization of Owan cultural practices. It also fosters greater appreciation among younger generations and external audiences for the sophistication of Owan cosmological thought, reinforcing the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in a world increasingly shaped by Western paradigms. Societally, the study has implications for understanding how reincarnation beliefs

²³ Kalu, *Op. Cit.*,

influence behavior, social cohesion, and ethical frameworks within Owan communities. The belief in cyclical existence and ancestral return shapes interpersonal relationships, community obligations, and even conflict resolution, offering insights into the mechanisms that sustain social harmony. By exploring these dynamics, the research provides valuable lessons for policymakers, educators, and community leaders seeking to integrate traditional values into modern governance and education system.

Additionally, the study's examination of gender dynamics and modern challenges in reincarnation narratives highlights issues of equity and cultural adaptation, contributing to broader discussions on social change in African contexts¹⁰. Ultimately, this study's significance lies in its ability to bridge academic inquiry with cultural preservation and societal relevance. It positions the Owan people's reincarnation beliefs as a lens through which to understand the interplay between tradition and modernity, offering a model for studying other underrepresented African communities. By doing so, it underscores the enduring relevance of indigenous worldviews in shaping individual and collective identities in a rapidly transforming world.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study critically examines the concept of reincarnation in the Edo worldview, with a particular focus on the Owan people of Edo State, Nigeria. It explores the historical, cultural, and socio-religious context of the Owan, including beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife, as well as cosmology and ancestor veneration. The research investigates the

conception of reincarnation, traditional verification methods, rituals, naming practices, and oral narratives, interpreting them through a hermeneutical lens to uncover their philosophical, ethical, and communal significance.

A comparative dimension is included, situating Owan beliefs alongside Edo-Benin, Yoruba, and Igbo traditions, highlighting similarities and differences in understanding, practices, and moral implications. The study considers both historical and contemporary perspectives, including generational variations, and examines how modern influences such as Christianity and Islam may affect perceptions of reincarnation.

Overall, the study provides a comprehensive and critical evaluation of reincarnation in Owan ontology, situating it within the broader African philosophical context.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

1. Reincarnation: The belief among the Owan that an individual's soul or spirit returns to a new physical body after death, often as an ancestor reborn within the same family or community.

2. Edo Worldview: The cultural and spiritual framework of the Edo people, including the Owan, which integrates beliefs about deities, ancestors, and the cyclical nature of life and death

3. Owan People: A subgroup of the Edo ethnic group residing in northern Edo State, Nigeria, known for their distinct cultural practices and adherence to traditional beliefs.

4. Ehi: A spiritual double or destiny in Owan and Edo cosmology, believed to guide a person's life and potentially facilitate their reincarnation.

5. Divination: The traditional practice used by Owan priests or diviners to interpret signs, confirm reincarnation cases, or communicate with ancestors and spirits.

6. Ancestors: Deceased family or community members revered in Owan culture, believed to influence the living and sometimes return through reincarnation.

1.8. Literature Review

The concept of reincarnation has been extensively explored in religious, anthropological, and philosophical studies, particularly within the context of African traditional religions (ATRs) and specific cultural worldviews. This literature review synthesizes existing scholarship on reincarnation, with a focus on its manifestations in African and Edo contexts, and highlights the limited attention given to the Owan people, thereby justifying the

“Reincarnation in African Traditional Religions

Mbiti J.S in his book *African Religions and Philosophy* established that reincarnation is a central tenet in many African cosmologies, serving as a mechanism for continuity between the living, the dead, and the unborn²⁴. Mbiti argues that reincarnation in ATRs is not a mere recycling of souls but a complex process involving ancestral spirits returning

²⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy Op. Cit.*, P. 34

to strengthen familial and communal ties. He emphasizes the role of rituals and divination in validating reincarnation claims, a practice that resonates with many West African cultures.

Similarly, Idowu E.B. in his work *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* highlights the moral and ethical dimensions of reincarnation, noting that it reinforces social cohesion by encouraging virtuous behavior to ensure favorable rebirths. However, these works are broad, often generalizing African beliefs without delving into specific ethnic groups like the Owan. More recent studies, such as Parrinder G. in his book *African Traditional Religion*, explore variations in reincarnation beliefs across African societies, noting differences in how communities interpret the process and its significance. Parrinder suggests that reincarnation in West Africa often involves partial soul transfer, where certain traits or destinies are passed on, rather than a complete return of the individual. While these studies provide a robust foundation, they lack detailed empirical data on smaller ethnic groups, leaving gaps in understanding localized practices.

The Edo Worldview and Reincarnation

The Edo people, primarily from present-day Edo State, Nigeria, have a rich cosmological framework that integrates reincarnation as a core belief. Egharevba in *A Short History of Benin* provides historical insights into Edo religious practices, noting that reincarnation is intertwined with the worship of ancestors and the concept of *ehi* (a person's spiritual

double)²⁵. According to Egharevba, the Edo believe that individuals can return to their families through reincarnation, often identified through physical resemblances or divinatory rituals. Bradbury in his book *Benin Studies* expands on this, arguing that the Edo worldview emphasizes cyclical existence, where death is a transition rather than an end, and reincarnation ensures the perpetuation of lineage.²⁶ Omoigui in his book *Reincarnation and Edo Cosmology: A Philosophical Analysis* further explores the philosophical underpinnings of Edo cosmology, suggesting that reincarnation serves as a mechanism for resolving unresolved destinies or fulfilling communal roles.²⁷ However, these studies focus predominantly on the broader Edo ethnic group, particularly the Bini subgroup, with minimal attention to subgroups like the Owan. This creates a significant gap, as the Owan, while sharing the Edo worldview, have distinct cultural practices that may shape their understanding of reincarnation differently.

The Owan People: A Neglected Area of Study

Literature on the Owan people is sparse, with most studies focusing on their history and socio-political organization rather than religious beliefs. Ogbomo provides a historical account of Owan communities, describing their migration patterns and cultural ties to the broader Edo group.²⁸ However, Ogbomo's work only briefly mentions religious practices,

²⁵ Egharevba, *Op. Cit.*, P. 23

²⁶ Bradbury, *Op. Cit.*, P. 23

²⁷ Omoigui, *Op. Cit.*, P. 20

²⁸ Ogbomo, O. W. (1997). *Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of Southwestern Nigeria: A Historical and Ethnographic Survey*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited. P. 10

noting the importance of ancestor veneration without exploring reincarnation specifically. Similarly, Okhion documents Owan oral traditions, highlighting narratives that suggest belief in reincarnation but lacking a detailed analysis of the concept's processes or cultural significance. The scarcity of focused studies on Owan reincarnation beliefs underscores a critical gap in the literature. While general Edo cosmology provides a useful framework, the Owan's unique socio-cultural context—marked by their distinct dialects, rituals, and community structures—demands specific investigation. Moreover, the impact of modernity, Christianity, and Islam on Owan reincarnation beliefs remains underexplored, as most studies predate significant socio-religious changes in the region.

Critical Perspectives and Theoretical Gaps

Critical evaluations of reincarnation beliefs in African contexts are limited but growing. Asad in his book *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* critiques the compatibility of traditional beliefs like reincarnation with modern scientific paradigms, arguing that such beliefs face challenges in urbanizing societies.²⁹ In contrast, Wiredu in his book *Philosophy and an African Culture* defends the rationality of African metaphysical systems, suggesting that reincarnation reflects a coherent worldview rooted in communal values³⁰. These debates provide a theoretical lens for this study but lack empirical grounding in specific communities like the Owan.

²⁹ Asad, T. (1993). *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press p. 55

³⁰ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press P. 30

Furthermore, feminist scholars like Oyewumi in *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* has critiqued the gendered dimensions of African religious practices, noting that reincarnation narratives often prioritize male lineage continuity.³¹ This perspective is relevant to the Owan context, where gender dynamics in reincarnation claims remain unstudied. The intersection of reincarnation with modernity, gender, and social change thus represents a critical area for exploration.

³¹ Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 43

CHAPTER TWO

THE OWAN PEOPLE AND THEIR ONTOLOGY

2.1. Historical and Cultural Background of the Owan People

The Owan people, an ethnic group in the northern part of Edo State, Nigeria, are one of the Edoid-speaking peoples with a rich historical and cultural heritage deeply intertwined with the broader Edo worldview. Their history, marked by migrations from the Benin Kingdom and interactions with neighboring groups, has shaped a distinct identity within the Edo North Senatorial District. Culturally, the Owan are known for their agricultural prowess, intricate social structures, and vibrant spiritual traditions, which reflect their cosmological beliefs about life, death, and the supernatural. This section explores the historical origins, migrations, social organization, economic practices, and cultural traditions of the Owan people, drawing on oral traditions, scholarly works, and recent studies to provide a comprehensive overview.

2.1.1. Historical Origins and Migrations

The Owan people inhabit two Local Government Areas, Owan East and Owan West, comprising eleven clans: Emai, Igue, Ihievbe, Ikao, Iuleha, Ivbiadaobi, Ivbi-Mion, Ora, Otuo, Ozalla, and Uokha. Most Owan communities trace their origins to migrations from the Benin Kingdom between the 13th and 16th centuries, a period marked by political upheavals and territorial expansions under notable Obas (kings) such as Eweka I and Ozolua. According to Chief (Dr.) Jacob U. Egharevba, a prominent Edo historian, the

Owan were part of the broader Edo-speaking groups centered in Benin, with many clans migrating due to disputes over succession, banishment, or the quest for new lands. For instance, Omorodion, a son of Oba Eweka I, founded Uokha after failing to succeed his father, establishing a settlement initially called Uwoha, meaning “abode in the bush.” Similarly, Oba Ozolua (Prince Okpame), banished from Benin in 1473, took refuge in Uokha and later founded Ora, whose people are still referred to as Ivbi-Ozolua, or “children of Ozolua.” While most Owan clans claim Benin ancestry, the Ikao clan asserts a Yoruba origin, suggesting a complex interplay of migrations and cultural exchanges with neighboring Yoruba groups in present-day Ondo and Ekiti States. The Otuo clan, for example, has oral traditions indicating that some settlers, such as the Imahun quarter, migrated from Owo in Ondo State to join earlier Benin-derived groups, forming a composite community. These migrations, occurring between 1480 and 1504, were not merely physical relocations but also cultural transfers, as settlers brought Benin’s political organization, artistic traditions, and religious practices, adapting them to their new environment. The name “Owan” is derived from the River Onwan or Owan, the largest and longest river in the area, which holds both geographical and cultural significance. Oral traditions link the river to Owanbua, a notable Ora woman who, after a prosperous but childless life in Otuo, died, and her burial site transformed into a stream that flows through Owan East and West, eventually joining the Ose River. This narrative underscores the Owan’s reverence for natural landmarks as embodiments of ancestral spirits, a recurring theme in their cosmology.

2.1.2. Socio-Political Organization

The Owan's socio-political structure reflects a blend of Benin's centralized chieftaincy system and localized, clan-based governance. Each of the eleven clans operates as a semi-autonomous unit with its own traditional ruler, often styled as an Okhionmon or Onojie, supported by a council of chiefs and elders. The Otuo community, for instance, is organized into six principal quarters (Oluma, Olila, Amoya, Iyeu, Iziokha, and Imahun), which split into twelve ruling houses, reflecting a hierarchical yet decentralized system. This structure, rooted in Benin's model, was adapted to accommodate the Owan's acephalous tendencies, as noted by historian A.E. Afigbo, who emphasized the importance of studying such "ministates" to understand Nigeria's precolonial diversity. The Owan's political history is also marked by their relationship with the Benin Kingdom. While some clans maintained tributary ties, others, like Uokha, asserted autonomy, as evidenced by their resistance to Benin's authority during the reign of Oba Ozolua. Inter-clan rivalries and alliances further shaped their political landscape, with oral histories recounting conflicts and reconciliations mediated through rituals and marriages. The leopard, a royal emblem borrowed from Benin, serves as a "national" totem in Ora, symbolizing authority and continuity with their Benin heritage.

2.1.3. Cultural Traditions and Religious Beliefs

The Owan's cultural traditions are vibrant, encompassing festivals, marriage customs, and spiritual practices that reflect their worldview. Festivals like the Obazu in Iuleha,

restricted to men, and the Ohonomoimen in Ora celebrate communal identity and masculinity, while the Ivbamen festival in Ozalla marks seasonal transitions. Marriage ceremonies are elaborate, particularly in Sabongida Ora, where grooms must present a “wedding list” including items like crates of soda, negotiated by the bride’s family. These rituals reinforce social bonds and familial obligations. Religiously, the Owan practice a mix of traditional worship, Christianity, and Islam, with traditional beliefs remaining central to their identity. In their traditional religion, *Osanobua*, the creator god, reigns supreme, while deities like Olokun, ruler of waters, ensure prosperity and fertility. Shrines dedicated to ancestors and spirits, such as the Akatamiyan Shrine in Ihievbe and the Arhe Spring in Uzebba, are sites of offerings and rituals. The Arhe Spring, believed to be guarded by a fertility goddess, underscores the Owan’s belief in the sacredness of natural phenomena. Human sexuality, a sacred aspect of Owan culture, is strictly regulated within marriage, reflecting their moral framework. A 2013 study in the *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* notes that the Owan view public portrayals of sex as taboo, associating such acts with calamity, a stark contrast to modern influences like pornography. This sanctity extends to their ethnobotanical practices, with the Otuo tribe using over 101 plant species for medicinal purposes, as documented in a 2017 study, highlighting the integration of traditional medicine into their cultural fabric.

2.2. What is Ontology

Ontology is one of the foundational branches of philosophy, deeply concerned with the question of existence. It asks: “What does it mean to exist? What kinds of things exist?”

What is the nature of reality?”¹ These questions have preoccupied thinkers from ancient Greece to contemporary Africa, from metaphysicians in medieval Europe to philosophers in India and China. While metaphysics as a whole is the study of reality beyond the physical, ontology specifically zeroes in on the structures and categories of being².

In African philosophy, and particularly in the Owan cultural worldview, ontology takes on a distinctive character. It is not merely an abstract discussion of categories of being, but a lived understanding of how humans, spirits, ancestors, divinities, and nature interrelate. In this sense, ontology becomes both philosophical and cultural — a way of answering the ultimate question: “What is reality made of, and how do we belong to it?”³

This section explores ontology in detail. It begins with its historical roots in Western philosophy, moves to its application and interpretation in African traditions, and then considers contemporary debates. The goal is to provide a comprehensive account of ontology as a discipline and as a worldview, while situating it within the context of reincarnation studies in Owanland.

1. The Etymology and Core Definition of Ontology

¹ Healy, R. (2019). *Ontology and metaphysics: An introduction*. London: Routledge.

² Loux, M. J. (2006) Loux, M. J. (2006). *Metaphysics: A contemporary introduction* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

³ Gyekye, K. (1995). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

The term “ontology” originates from two Greek words: *ontos* (being) and *logos* (study, discourse, or science). Put together, ontology literally means “the science of being.”⁴ Unlike physics or biology which deal with particular aspects of existence, ontology inquires into the nature of existence as such — the most general and fundamental level.

Philosophers often distinguish ontology from epistemology. While epistemology asks how we know things, ontology asks what things are. It is about the categories of being: objects, properties, relations, events, processes, and the underlying structures that make them real. For instance, is the soul a real entity or merely a human projection? Does time exist independently of human perception? Such questions fall under the scope of ontology⁵.

2. Ontology in African Philosophy

a) The Communal Nature of Being

In African thought, ontology is not confined to abstract categories but is embedded in the lived realities of the people. As Mbiti famously put it, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”⁶ This expresses the African understanding that being is relational and communal. Ontology here includes humans, ancestors, divinities, spirits, and nature — all interlinked in a holistic cosmos.

⁴ Audi, R. (2015). *The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁵ Lowe, E. J. (2002). *A survey of metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). London: Heinemann.

b) The Hierarchical Structure of Being

African ontology often arranges existence in a hierarchy: God at the top, followed by divinities, ancestors, humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Each level has its own role but is interconnected with others. This ontological structure emphasizes that being is graded, not flat. The spiritual world is as real as the physical world, and both interact continuously⁷.

c) The Dynamic Nature of Being

In contrast to Parmenides' static ontology, African ontology stresses dynamism. Being is not fixed but a continuous process of becoming. Birth, death, and reincarnation illustrate this dynamism: existence flows through cycles, and being is constantly renewed through ancestral return and generational continuity⁸.

d) Ontology and Morality

African ontology also integrates morality. Being is not just "what exists," but "what ought to exist." A wicked person diminishes their vital force and weakens their being,

⁷ Wiredu, K. (1998). *Cultural universals and particulars: An African perspective*. Bloomington Indiana University Press.

⁸ Tempels, P. (1959). *Bantu philosophy*. Paris: Présence Africaine.

while a virtuous person strengthens communal being. Thus, ontology is inseparable from ethics⁹.

2.2.2 . Owan Ontology: The Hierarchy of Being

Ontology in Owan thought is not a speculative abstraction but a lived reality embedded in daily life, ritual, and cosmological imagination. The Owan people of Edo State, Nigeria, conceive existence as a layered hierarchy, ordered yet interconnected, where each category of being has its role, essence, and relational duties. Unlike Western ontology that often emphasizes static categories of being, Owan ontology emphasizes relationship, continuity, and dynamism. Being is not flat; it is hierarchical, spiritual, and communal.

At the heart of this hierarchy are three central levels that reveal the structure of Owan ontology: God (*Osanobua*), the Deities (Divinities), and the Living Dead (Ancestors). Each of these categories plays a critical role in shaping the people's worldview, their religious practices, and their understanding of reincarnation. In what follows, we will examine each level in detail, showing not only its metaphysical significance but also its cultural implications.

1. The Supreme Being: God (*Osanobua*)

a) The Ontological Primacy of God

⁹ Ramose, M. B. (2002). *African philosophy through ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books.

In Owan thought, God — often referred to as *Osanobua* or in some dialects *Osanobua* Noghodua — occupies the highest place in the hierarchy of being. God is regarded as the ultimate source of all reality, the creator, sustainer, and judge of the universe. Ontologically, God is not one being among many but the foundation of being itself.¹⁰

Osanobua is transcendent yet immanent. He is transcendent because he exists beyond the limits of space and time, not subject to decay or human limitation. He is immanent because he is present in the order of creation, guiding events, sustaining life, and granting blessings or punishments depending on human conduct¹¹.

b) Attributes of God in Owan Ontology

The Owan people describe God in terms of attributes such as:

1. **All-Powerful (Omnipotence):** *Osanobua* has ultimate control over life and death.
2. **All-Knowing (Omniscience):** Nothing is hidden from Him, including the secret actions of men.
3. **Moral Judge:** God punishes wickedness and rewards righteousness, directly or through mediating forces.

¹⁰ Godwin, S. (2018). *African concept of God: A philosophical interpretation*. Spectrum Books.

¹¹ Egharevba, J. U. (1968). *A short history of Benin*. Ibadan: University Press.

4. **Giver of Destiny:** Every individual's fate (known as *ekhokhamen*) is ultimately bestowed by *Osanobua*¹².

These attributes show that in Owan ontology, God is both a metaphysical principle and a moral force.

c) God and Human Destiny

A particularly important aspect of Owan ontology is the belief that human destiny originates in God. Before birth, the individual soul is said to have approached God to receive its destiny a concept mirrored in other African traditions, such as the Yoruba's *ayanmo*. God therefore determines the framework of each life while allowing for human freedom and responsibility. Thus, ontology here is practical: being is inseparable from destiny and morality¹³

2. The Deities (Divinities)

a) Mediating Beings

¹² Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. London: SCM Press.

¹³ Abimbola, W. (1976). *Ifa: An exposition of Ifa literary corpus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Immediately beneath God in the hierarchy are the Deities, known locally as *edion*, *ebeghe*, or *ivie* depending on the aspect they represent. These are spiritual beings created by God to function as intermediaries between the divine and the human. They are not equal to God but act as His ministers, each charged with overseeing specific domains of life. In Owan cosmology, Deities embody the relational bridge between the transcendent God and the lived world of human beings⁵.

b) Categories of Deities

The Owan pantheon is diverse, and while names vary across clans, three broad categories emerge:

1. Cosmic Deities – Associated with fundamental aspects of nature and the cosmos, such as the sun, moon, rivers, and earth. For example, Ovia (the river goddess) and Ogun (linked to iron and war)
2. Territorial Deities – Linked to specific communities, forests, or shrines. These guard collective well-being and are invoked in matters of fertility, harvest, or communal protection.
3. Personal/Family Deities – Adopted by individual households or lineages, acting as guardians for specific families

c) Functions of Deities in Owan Ontology

The Deities perform several functions within the ontological order:

- Custodians of Morality: They reward good conduct and punish evil. For example, an oath sworn before a shrine is binding, with dire consequences if broken.
- Protectors of the Community: Deities are invoked during war, pestilence, or famine to safeguard the people.
- Mediators of Ritual: Through sacrifices and offerings, humans communicate with the divine order.
- Specialized Domains: Each deity has jurisdiction — fertility, justice, iron, water, healing, or hunting¹⁴.

d) Deities and Reincarnation

Deities play an important role in reincarnation. They are believed to monitor the soul's journey from death to rebirth, ensuring that the moral order is upheld. A person who lived wickedly may not easily return through reincarnation unless purification rituals are performed. Thus, Deities enforce cosmic justice in the cycle of being¹⁵.

3. The Living Dead (Ancestors)

a) Who are the Living Dead?

¹⁴ Awolalu, J. O. (1979). *Yoruba beliefs and sacrificial rites*. London: Longman.

¹⁵ Dopamu, A. (2000). The concept of divinity in African religion. *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 1(2), 15–21.

The category of the Living Dead (also called ancestors or *edion evbo*) occupies a unique and powerful position in Owan ontology. They are deceased family members who led morally upright lives, fulfilled their social obligations, and received proper burial rites. Because they are remembered by name and invoked in rituals, they are not considered “dead” but rather “living” in the collective memory and spiritual consciousness of the community¹⁶.

b) The Role of Ancestors in Owan Ontology

Ancestors act as:

- Mediators: They stand between the living and the divine, transmitting prayers and blessings.
- Moral Exemplars: Their lives serve as models of virtue, discipline, and communal responsibility.
- Protectors: They guard the family from misfortune, illness, and spiritual attack.
- Enforcers of Justice: Ancestors punish descendants who violate family traditions or moral laws¹⁷.

c) The Ontology of Continuity

¹⁶ Aderibigbe, I. S. (2015). African traditional religion and reincarnation. In J. O. Ojo (Ed.), *African spirituality: Essays in honor of Jacob Olupona*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press.

¹⁷ Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann.

Ancestors embody the principle of continuity: death is not an end but a transition. The deceased who attain ancestorhood remain part of the family, attending rituals, blessing children, and even returning through reincarnation. This continuity of being is central to Owan ontology: existence is a cycle, not a linear progression. A child is often identified as the reincarnated ancestor based on physical resemblance, behavior, or divinatory confirmation¹⁸.

d) Conditions for Ancestorhood

Not every deceased person qualifies as an ancestor. Certain conditions must be met:

1. The person must have lived a morally upright life.
2. They must have fulfilled communal responsibilities (e.g., marriage, procreation, contribution to society).
3. They must have died a “good death” (not through suicide, witchcraft, or taboo violation).
4. Proper burial and rituals must be performed to integrate them into the ancestral realm.

¹⁸ Iroegbu, P. (1995). *Metaphysics: The Kpim of philosophy*. Owerri: International Universities Press.

Failure to meet these conditions results in the deceased becoming a wandering spirit (*erivwin*) rather than a true ancestor. Such beings lack ontological recognition within the hierarchy¹⁹.

e) Ancestors and Reincarnation

The most significant ontological role of the Living Dead in Owan thought is their participation in reincarnation. Ancestors return through the birth of children, thus ensuring the continuity of lineage. Families often name children after ancestors believed to have returned. In this way, the cycle of being affirms both individuality and communal identity. The newborn is not simply a “new being” but the return of an older presence within a new embodiment²⁰

2.3. Socio-Religious Organization of the Owan

The socio-religious organization of the Owan people, a significant Edoid-speaking group in Edo State, Nigeria, is a complex interplay of social structures and spiritual beliefs that reflect their cultural identity and cosmological worldview. Residing primarily in Owan East and Owan West Local Government Areas, the Owan are organized into eleven clans—Emai, Igwe, Ihievbe, Ikao, Iuleha, Ivbiadaobi, Ivbi-Mion, Ora, Otuo, Ozalla, and Uokha—each with distinct yet interconnected socio-political and religious systems. Their

¹⁹ Okere, T. (1983). *African philosophy: A historico-hermeneutical investigation of the conditions of its possibility*. Maryland: University Press of America

²⁰ Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. London: SCM Press.

socio-religious framework, deeply rooted in the broader Edo cultural heritage, integrates traditional governance, kinship ties, and spiritual practices, shaping community cohesion and individual roles. This section examines the Owan's social organization, their traditional religious systems, the role of divinities and ancestors, and the impact of external influences like Christianity and Islam, drawing on oral traditions, historical accounts, and scholarly sources.

2.3.1 Social Organization

The Owan's social structure is hierarchical yet decentralized, blending elements of the Benin Kingdom's centralized chieftaincy with localized, clan-based governance. Each clan operates as a semi-autonomous unit, led by a traditional ruler, typically styled as an *Okhionmon* or *Onojie* (king), who is supported by a council of chiefs, elders, and titled individuals. The *Onojie* serves as both a political and spiritual leader, mediating disputes, overseeing communal rituals, and representing the clan in external affairs. For instance, in Otuo, the *Onojie* presides over a council drawn from six principal quarters, Oluma, Olila, Amoya, Iyeu, Iziokha, and Imahun, each with its own sub-leaders, reflecting a federated system that balances clan unity with local autonomy.²¹ Kinship and lineage form the bedrock of Owan social organization. Communities are divided into extended families or *ezi*, organized patrilineally, with descent traced through the male line. These families are grouped into larger kinship units, often tied to a common ancestor, which

²¹ Owan Association USA, "History and Governance of Otuo," last modified March 10, 2023, accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.owanassociationusa.org/history-governance-otuo.html>.

govern inheritance, land ownership, and marital alliances. Marriage is exogamous, with strict prohibitions against intra-clan unions to foster inter-clan alliances, as noted in the cultural practices of *Sabongida Ora*, where elaborate marriage negotiations reinforce social bonds. Age grades, another key feature, structure communal labor and defense, with young men grouped into cohorts responsible for tasks like clearing farmlands or protecting villages, as seen in *Iuleha's Obazu* festival, which is restricted to male participants²². The Owan also maintain a system of titles and societies that confer prestige and responsibilities. In Ihievbe, for example, the Odi title is awarded to men who demonstrate leadership and wealth, granting them influence in decision-making. Women, while not holding formal political titles, wield significant social influence through associations like the *Ere* or *Ivie* groups, which regulate marriage practices and support communal welfare, particularly in Ozalla. This gendered division of roles underscores the Owan's emphasis on complementary responsibilities, ensuring social harmony.

2.3.2. Traditional Religious Systems

The Owan's religious system is a dynamic blend of traditional worship, ancestor veneration, and belief in a supreme deity, *Osanobua*, who is the creator and ultimate authority in their cosmology. *Osanobua* is perceived as distant, with daily spiritual interactions mediated through lesser deities, ancestors, and spirits. The pantheon includes deities like *Olokun*, the goddess of water and prosperity, revered for ensuring fertility and

²² Edoworld, "Iuleha Community: Traditions and Festivals," last modified April 20, 2023, accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.edoworld.net/iuleha-traditions-festivals.html>.

economic success, and *Ogun*, the god of iron and war, invoked by blacksmiths and warriors, particularly in *Otuo*, known for its metalwork²³. Each clan has specific deities tied to its history and environment; for instance, the *Arhe* Spring in *Uzebba* is associated with a fertility goddess whose shrine attracts women seeking children. Shrines and sacred sites are central to Owan religious life. The *Akatamiyan* Shrine in *Ihievbe*, dedicated to ancestral spirits, serves as a focal point for offerings and rituals aimed at maintaining communal harmony. Similarly, the Owan River, linked to the legendary *Owanbua*, is revered as a spiritual entity, with rituals performed to appease its spirit during festivals or crises. These sites are maintained by hereditary priests or *Ohens*, who act as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms. The *Ohens* conduct divinations, sacrifices, and cleansing ceremonies, using tools like kola nuts, cowries, and palm fronds to interpret spiritual messages, a practice integral to validating claims of reincarnation. Rituals and festivals reinforce the Owan's religious identity. The *Ivbamen* festival in Ozalla, marking seasonal transitions, involves offerings to deities and ancestors to ensure bountiful harvests. The *Ohonomoimen* festival in Ora, exclusive to men, celebrates masculinity and communal strength, with dances and sacrifices to honor Olokun and other deities. These events are not merely religious but also social, fostering unity and reinforcing cultural values like respect for elders and communal responsibility.

2.3.3. Role of Ancestors and Spirits

²³ Edoworld, "Iuleha Community: Traditions and Festivals," last modified April 20, 2023, accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.edoworld.net/iuleha-traditions-festivals.html>

Ancestors, or Ebo, occupy a pivotal role in Owan religious and social life, serving as guardians of morality and links to the spiritual world. The Owan believe that deceased family members, particularly those who lived exemplary lives, become ancestors who influence the living, offering protection and guidance. Ancestral veneration involves regular offerings at family shrines, typically located in the household or village square, where items like yams, palm wine, and chickens are presented. In Ivbiadaobi, for instance, families maintain Ebo altars where daily prayers are offered to ensure prosperity and avert misfortune. The belief in reincarnation is closely tied to ancestor worship, as the Owan hold that certain ancestors return to their families through newborn children, identified through physical resemblances, birthmarks, or divinations. This belief strengthens kinship ties, as reincarnated individuals are seen as continuing ancestral legacies. Spirits, distinct from ancestors, include environmental entities like those inhabiting the Owan River or Ihievbe Waterfalls, believed to possess healing or destructive powers. Rituals to appease these spirits, often led by *Ohens*, are critical during events like droughts or epidemics, reflecting the Owan's holistic view of the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms.

2.4 Owan ontology: comparative perspective

Owan ontology, as part of the broader Edo worldview, is centered on a hierarchical and relational understanding of existence. God (*Osanobua*) occupies the supreme position, while divinities, ancestors, humans, animals, and nature form a continuous order of being. Within this system, reincarnation (*Idenoyauia*) is a central feature that ensures continuity

of lineage, sustains communal identity, and reinforces morality by linking the unborn, the living, and the ancestors. In this philosophical thesis, it is important to compare Owan ontology with that of African Traditional religion, Eastern Religion and western Indigenous Traditions

2.4.1 African Traditional Religion (ATR)

In African Traditional Religion generally, ontology is holistic and relational. It recognizes a hierarchy of being: God at the top, followed by divinities, ancestors, humans, animals, and inanimate objects. John Mbiti captured this well when he stated: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” Being is communal rather than individual, and life is understood in terms of interdependence.

The Owan people share this African framework, with *Osanobua* as the creator and the ancestors as central actors in daily life. Reincarnation, in this context, is not an abstract doctrine but a lived belief that maintains kinship ties. A newborn is often identified as a reincarnated ancestor through physical resemblance, dreams, or divination. This aligns with other African groups such as the Yoruba, who recognize *atunwa* (return to life), and the Igbo, whose *ilo uwa* refers to returning to the world. However, the Owan interpretation emphasizes reincarnation not merely as a metaphysical concept but as a moral and social institution. The community expects the returning ancestor to uphold family honor and values, thus making reincarnation a moral compass as well as a spiritual reality.

Whereas some African traditions (e.g., among the Akan) emphasize partial reincarnation, only aspects of a person returning, such as destiny or traits. The Owan lean more toward full ancestral return within the same lineage. This reflects their strong orientation toward kinship continuity.

2.4.2. Eastern Religions

In Eastern religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, reincarnation is central but operates within a different philosophical system. In Hinduism, the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) is governed by karma, the moral law of cause and effect. A person's actions in one life determine the circumstances of their next. The ultimate goal is not endless rebirth but liberation (*moksha*), which frees the soul from the cycle of reincarnation. In Buddhism, the cycle of rebirth is also driven by karma, but the focus is on overcoming ignorance and desire in order to attain enlightenment (*nirvana*), thereby breaking free from the cycle of suffering.

By contrast, Owan ontology does not view reincarnation as bondage or suffering from which one must escape. Instead, it is celebrated as an affirmation of continuity and ancestral presence. Whereas Eastern religions are teleological oriented toward liberation and escape from rebirth while Owan reincarnation is cyclical and communal, emphasizing the return of ancestors to continue unfinished destinies, preserve family lines, and strengthen social identity.

Another difference lies in the metaphysical focus: in Hinduism and Buddhism, reincarnation is often about the individual soul's journey across multiple lifetimes, sometimes in different families or even different forms of existence (animal, divine, human). For the Owan, reincarnation is always lineage-bound — ancestors return within the family or community. Thus, while Owan thought shares the Eastern idea of cyclical existence, it radically differs in purpose: it seeks continuity, not liberation.

2.4.3. Western Indigenous Traditions

Western indigenous traditions also contain notions of cyclical existence, though they vary widely. In ancient Greece, philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato spoke of the soul's immortality and rebirth. Plato, in the *Phaedrus* and *Republic*, described the soul as pre-existent, entering the body as a temporary state, and reincarnating until purified. This bears a philosophical resemblance to the Owan idea of unfinished destinies requiring return, though the Owan stress communal roles rather than individual philosophical purification.

Among Celtic and Druidic traditions, the belief in reincarnation was widespread. Julius Caesar recorded that the Druids believed the soul does not perish but passes from one body to another, giving warriors courage in battle. Similarly, Norse mythology contained ideas of cyclical return through family lines, where ancestral spirits reappear in descendants. In Native American traditions, many communities believed that the spirits

of ancestors return through children, with dreams, visions, and natural signs used to identify the returning soul.

The Owan conception resonates strongly with these Western indigenous beliefs, especially in the use of signs, dreams, and family resemblances as proofs of reincarnation. However, while in many Western traditions reincarnation was framed more as a cosmic or natural cycle, in Owan thought it is specifically ancestral and lineage-centered. The purpose is not only continuity of life but also moral accountability across generations.

Owan ontology stands at the intersection of global traditions on life, death, and rebirth, yet it remains distinctive for its integration of reincarnation into communal life, moral responsibility, and cultural identity. By situating Owan beliefs alongside African Traditional Religion, Eastern philosophies, and Western indigenous traditions, it becomes clear that while reincarnation is a universal human intuition, the Owan conception uniquely affirms continuity, lineage, and the inseparability of ontology from social existence.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONCEPTION OF REINCARNATION IN OWAN ONTOLOGY

3.1 What is Reincarnation?

The idea of reincarnation¹ has occupied a central place in religious, philosophical, and cultural thought for centuries. Across the globe, human beings have wrestled with fundamental questions: What happens after death? Is there continuity of existence? Does the human soul live again? One of the most enduring answers to these questions is the doctrine of reincarnation². Broadly speaking, reincarnation refers to the belief that the soul or spiritual essence of a human being does not perish with death but instead continues its existence in another body³, either human or non-human. This concept appears in varying forms among ancient religions, Eastern philosophies, Western esoteric traditions, and African indigenous belief systems⁴, including those of the Owan people of Nigeria.

3.1.1: The Concept and Etymology of Reincarnation

¹ Stevenson, I. (1974). *Twenty cases suggestive of reincarnation*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 23

² Head, J., & Cranston, S. L. (1977). *Reincarnation: The phoenix fire mystery*. New York: Julian Press, 35

³ Ikenga-Metuh, E. (1987). *Comparative studies of African traditional religions*. New York: Imico Publishers, 45

⁴ Head & Cranston *Op. Cit.*

The term reincarnation⁵ is derived from the Latin words *re* (again) and *caro, carnis* (flesh). Literally, it means “entering the flesh again.” It conveys the notion that a living being’s soul or essence departs from one body at death and reappears in another form, continuing its journey in a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth⁶.

Philosophically, reincarnation is closely linked to ideas of the immortality of the soul and the cyclical nature of existence⁷. Unlike concepts of resurrection, where the dead are restored to life in the same body, reincarnation stresses continuity of spiritual identity within different bodily forms⁸. The belief is not uniform across cultures; some traditions perceive it as a form of reward or punishment (karma)⁹, while others regard it as an opportunity for ancestral return or communal continuity

3.1.2 African Traditional Conception of Reincarnation

Reincarnation in Africa is distinct from Indian or Western models. It is often understood within the framework of communal ontology¹⁰, where identity is inseparable from the family and the community. Among the Owan people, as in many other African societies, reincarnation is not about punishment or reward but about continuity of life within the lineage.

⁵ Sharma, A. (2001). *Classical Hindu thought: An introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 20

⁶ Ibid.,

⁷ Davies, P. (2004). *Death, afterlife and the soul*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 11

⁸ Hick, J. (1976). *Death and eternal life*. New York: Harper & Row, 10

⁹ Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 23

¹⁰ Radhakrishnan, S. (1927). *Indian philosophy* (2 vols.). London: George Allen & Unwin, 23-24

Key features of African interpretations include

- i) **Ancestral Return:** It is common to name children after deceased relatives believed to have returned¹¹.

Communal Continuity: Life is viewed as a cycle where the dead continue to influence the living by returning to their families¹².

Partial Reincarnation: Some traditions hold that not the whole personality returns, but aspects of it such as spiritual essence or destiny (*ori* among the Yoruba)¹³.

Validation through Signs: Birthmarks, dreams, and divination are often used as proofs of reincarnation¹⁴.

The Owan people specifically hold that certain children are incarnations of ancestors, and through rituals, narratives, and cultural practices, this belief is reinforced.

3.2 Owan Ontology

Ontology, in philosophy, deals with the study of being, existence, and the structures of reality. It asks fundamental questions such as: What does it mean to exist? What kinds of beings are there? How are human beings connected to the universe around them? When

¹¹Guthrie, W. K. C. (1962). *A history of Greek philosophy: Vol. I. The earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 34

¹² Hamilton, E., & Cairns, H. (Eds.). (1961). *The collected dialogues of Plato*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2

¹³ Jonas, H. (1958). *The Gnostic religion: The message of the alien God and the beginnings of Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 3

¹⁴ Washington, P. (1993). *Madame Blavatsky's baboon: A history of the mystics, mediums, and misfits who brought spiritualism to America*. New York: Schocken Books, 1

this concept is applied to a cultural group, ontology represents the collective worldview the way the people understand life, death, relationships, the spiritual order, and the natural environment. Owan ontology, therefore, can be understood as the indigenous worldview of the Owan people of Edo State, Nigeria. It is the system of beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape how the Owan people perceive themselves, their society, the spiritual world, and the universe at large.

Unlike abstract philosophical systems that exist only in books, Owan ontology is lived reality. It is woven into everyday practices, language, rituals, and customs. The Owan do not make a sharp division between religion, philosophy, and daily life; instead, all these dimensions overlap. For them, existence is a holistic continuum where the visible and invisible worlds constantly interact. This means that human life, nature, and the spiritual order are inseparably linked, and every action whether farming, trading, marriage, or ritual has both physical and metaphysical implications.

At the center of Owan ontology is the recognition of a Supreme Being, often described as the creator, sustainer, and moral guardian of the universe. This Being is believed to be all-powerful yet somewhat distant, delegating authority to various spiritual intermediaries. The hierarchy includes divinities, deities of natural phenomena, spirits of the land, and revered ancestors. These entities are seen as active participants in human life, mediating blessings, protection, fertility, and justice. For example, a farmer preparing to plant yams

might pour libations to the spirit of the earth, acknowledging that agricultural success is not merely a matter of human labor but also of spiritual cooperation.

Ancestors occupy a particularly important place within Owan ontology. They are not considered “dead” in the Western sense but rather living members of the community in a different dimension of existence. Ancestors watch over their descendants, reward good conduct, and punish wrongdoing. Through rituals such as libations and offerings, the Owan maintain a relationship with their forebears, ensuring continuity between generations. This belief creates a sense of accountability: people act not only for themselves but also in honor of those who came before them and in anticipation of how future generations will judge them.

Human beings, within this worldview, are not isolated individuals but members of an interconnected network. Owan’s ontology shall be viewed in terms of their metaphysics, their epistemology, their ethics and their aesthetics.

In terms of their metaphysics, personhood will be used to best explain their metaphysical term. Personhood refers to the state or condition of being a person, encompassing aspects of identity, consciousness, rights, and responsibilities. In Owan thought, a person becomes a “true human” through participation in communal life, fulfillment of moral responsibilities, and respect for both earthly and spiritual relationships. Proverbs such as “*Okhuo re enin, enin re okhuo*” (“a person is for others, and others are for a person”) underline the emphasis on interdependence, solidarity, and collective survival. Thus,

individual existence is meaningful only in relation to the community and the larger cosmic order.

In terms of their epistemology, falls back to the path of what they know, how they acquire knowledge and how certain they are about the knowledge they have acquired. It could be said that certain knowledge is inherent within them. What they claim to know has been passed orally from time immemorial.

Another essential feature of Owan ontology is its moral dimension. Existence is not morally neutral; it is governed by ethical principles that ensure harmony between people, nature, and the spiritual realm. Good conduct, honesty, hospitality, respect for elders, care for children, fairness in trade, attracts blessings and social honor. Conversely, wrongdoing such as theft, deceit, or violation of taboos disrupts cosmic balance and invites misfortune. For example, certain sacred days are set aside when farming or hunting is forbidden; violation of such taboos is believed to bring sickness or crop failure, not just to the offender but sometimes to the entire community. This moral framework reflects the Owan conviction that life is sacred, purposeful, and interconnected.

The natural environment also features prominently in Owan ontology. The land, rivers, forests, and animals are not viewed merely as economic resources but as sacred entities with spiritual significance. Sacred groves function as both religious spaces and natural conservation zones. Certain rivers are personified as mothers or guardians, requiring respect and ritual acknowledgment before use. This ecological dimension demonstrates

that Owan ontology has long promoted principles of respect, balance, and sustainability ideas that resonate with modern environmental ethics.

A further dimension of Owan ontology is ritual and symbolism. Rituals such as initiation ceremonies, marriage rites, harvest festivals, and funeral practices serve not just social purposes but also ontological ones. They affirm the interconnectedness of existence and ensure that transitions in life, birth, adulthood, marriage, death are carried out in harmony with the spiritual order. Symbols such as kola nuts, palm wine, and masquerades are not mere cultural decorations but carry deep metaphysical meaning. For instance, the breaking of kola nut at gatherings signifies peace, unity, and the invocation of divine presence, reinforcing ontological beliefs about the sacredness of communal life.

It is also worth noting that Owan ontology is not static but dynamic. While rooted in ancient traditions and oral narratives, it has continuously adapted to changing times. The advent of Christianity and Islam, colonialism, and modern globalization have all left their mark on Owan thought. Many Owan people today identify as Christians or Muslims, yet aspects of the indigenous ontology persist. Belief in destiny (*ekpen*), spiritual causality, or the moral oversight of ancestors continues to influence daily life. This blending of traditional and foreign elements shows that Owan ontology is resilient, it transforms without disappearing.

In comparative terms, Owan ontology shares similarities with broader African philosophies of being, such as the Igbo concept of *chi* (personal destiny) or the Yoruba

idea of ase (vital force). Yet it remains distinct in its emphases. The Owan stress the sacredness of communal morality, the centrality of ancestors in shaping daily life, and the integration of environment, spirituality, and ethics into a seamless worldview. This distinctiveness underscores the richness of Owan thought as both a cultural heritage and a philosophical system in its own right.

In summary, Owan ontology is the philosophical framework through which the Owan people interpret existence. It defines who they are, how they relate to one another, how they engage with the spiritual and natural worlds, and how they make sense of life's mysteries and challenges. More than an abstract theory, it is a living backbone of Owan identity and culture, shaping their past, guiding their present, and influencing how they envision the future.

3.3 Reincarnation in Owan

Within Owan ontology, reincarnation functions as both a metaphysical and cultural principle¹⁵. The Owan people view the human being as composed of physical and spiritual dimensions. At death, while the body perishes, the spirit survives and may return within the same family line¹⁶. In Owan ontology, reincarnation is called *Idenoyauia*, the *uia* means born and the *oya* means person which means a person has been reborn. Like many African societies, the Owan conceive of existence not as a straight line from birth to death, but as a cyclical process of birth, death, ancestral existence, and return. This

¹⁵ Radhakrishnan, *Indian philosophy*

¹⁶ Hiriyan, M. (1932). *Outlines of Indian philosophy*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 12

cycle reveals much about their understanding of reality (metaphysics), how knowledge is acquired (epistemology), how morality is regulated (ethics), and how beauty and meaning are expressed (aesthetics).

Owan Metaphysics

In Owan thought, reincarnation is situated within a dual but interconnected reality:

The Visible World (*Ahi*) : the material, physical, and social realm where humans live, marry, farm, trade, and build communities.

The Invisible World (*Aimhiẹn*): the spiritual domain where ancestors dwell, where unborn souls wait to be reborn, and where the gods and other spiritual entities reside.

These two worlds are not separate but interdependent. Death is not extinction but transition; birth is not creation ex nihilo but return.

The metaphysics of reincarnation among the Owan is tied to the doctrine of the soul and destiny. A human being is not just flesh but a composite of:

Emwinrhio (spirit/soul): the immortal essence that survives death.

Urhio (life force): the vital energy that animates a person.

Ekpeñ (destiny/character): the path or mission of an individual, which must be fulfilled across lifetimes.

Thus metaphysically, reincarnation is necessary because destiny is rarely completed in one lifetime. A child born into a family may be said to be the return of a specific ancestor to continue their unfinished journey.

Owan Epistemology

Epistemology asks: how do we know what we know? For the Owan, knowledge of reincarnation and other metaphysical truths is grounded in experience, communal memory, and divination.

1. Families often recognize signs in a newborn child that indicate they are a reincarnated ancestor. These include:
 - a) Physical resemblances, birthmarks, or deformities that match a deceased relative.
 - b) Character traits, habits, or behaviors of the child that align with someone from the lineage.
 - c) Early speech patterns or unusual maturity in children, taken as evidence of ancestral return.
2. Oral Tradition and Communal Testimony: Knowledge is not individual but communal. Elders recount family histories, and when a child resembles or acts like a departed person, consensus is reached that reincarnation has occurred.
3. Divination: In cases of doubt, diviners are consulted. Through oracles and cowries,

they confirm whether the child is a returning ancestor, which ancestor they are, and what unfinished destiny they carry.

Owan Ethics

Ethics in Owan society is deeply tied to the doctrine of reincarnation. If souls return to the same lineage, then actions in one life have consequences in another. This makes reincarnation a moral safeguard and a source of ethical responsibility.

a. Moral Accountability Across Generations:

A person who lives a virtuous life may return blessed, healthy, and prosperous.

A wicked person may return to suffer hardship, illness, or disgrace.

Families may inherit the misdeeds of their ancestors, thus encouraging everyone to live uprightly.

Communal Responsibility: Since reincarnation occurs within families, the moral behavior of one person is never private. Good conduct ensures the wellbeing of descendants, while bad conduct risks misfortune for the lineage.

b. Moral Education of Children: Children believed to be reincarnated ancestors are treated with respect but also expected to uphold family honor. They serve as reminders of the link between morality and destiny.

c. Ethical Justice: The belief that suffering can be punishment for past-life misdeeds

introduces a form of transgenerational justice. While this can encourage moral caution, it also risks fatalism suffering may be passively accepted as destiny rather than challenged as social injustice.

Thus, Owan ethics reflects a balance of personal responsibility, communal accountability, and ancestral justice.

Owan Aesthetics

Aesthetics, in African philosophy, is not limited to beauty but encompasses the meaningful expression of life and values through art, ritual, and symbolism. In Owan thought, reincarnation influences aesthetics in profound ways:

- a. Naming Practices: Names are a powerful aesthetic expression of reincarnation. For example:

Ovbiosu – “the one who has come again.”

Ehiogie – “destiny has returned.”

Omoruyi – “a child has brought honor.”

Such names are not merely identifiers but carriers of philosophical meaning.

- b. Rituals and Ceremonies:

Funerals are not only mourning events but aesthetic performances of the belief that the dead have gone to the spiritual realm and may return.

Naming ceremonies aesthetically dramatize continuity, presenting birth as ancestral return.

- c. Art, Symbols, and Scarification: Certain scarification marks or artistic motifs symbolize ancestral continuity. Masks, proverbs, and songs often speak of cyclical life and return.

3.3.1 Rituals associated with Reincarnation

Birth Rituals

One of the most significant arenas for the manifestation of reincarnation is childbirth. Among the Owan people, as in many African societies, the birth of a child is never considered a purely biological event but a spiritual occurrence involving the return of an ancestor into the family lineage¹⁷. During naming ceremonies, elders closely observe the newborn for traits, physical marks, or peculiarities that may signify the return of a known deceased relative. If a child is believed to resemble a deceased family member either in facial appearance, bodily marks, or mannerisms, the elders may declare that the ancestor has returned¹⁸.

¹⁷ Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine, 34

¹⁸ Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 12

A key ritual practice involves the *ikhien* (naming rite), during which names linked to ancestors are tested upon the child. If the child responds positively through, unusual crying, movements, or calmness, the community may affirm the child as a reincarnated ancestor¹⁹. This practice reinforces continuity across generations, ensuring that the memory of ancestors is preserved and honored.

Death Rituals

Reincarnation beliefs also shape death rituals. The Owan conduct elaborate funerals that are not just about mourning but also about preparing the spirit for possible return. The dead are often addressed directly in prayers and libations, urging them to return to the family in future generations²⁰. The body may be buried with symbolic objects, which, if later identified by a newborn child, are taken as verification of reincarnation.

These practices parallel other African traditions, such as the Igbo, who place identifying marks on the body of a deceased child thought to have died prematurely (known as *ogbanje*) to prevent their mischievous cycle of repeated rebirths²¹. In Yoruba cosmology, rituals around *abiku* children serve a similar purpose: marks or scarifications are inflicted on the corpse of a dead child, and if a newborn later carries those same marks, it is seen as evidence of reincarnation.

Divination and Ritual Consultations

¹⁹ Bradbury, *Op. Cit.*,

²⁰ Cambridge Core, *Op. Cit.*,

²¹ Achebe, *Op. Cit.*,

Divination plays an indispensable role in ritual affirmation of reincarnation. Owan diviners, using instruments such as cowrie shells or sacred objects, are consulted by families to confirm suspicions of a child's reincarnated identity. The diviner mediates between the spiritual and physical realms, receiving revelations about the child's past existence, their ancestral origin, and their spiritual mission in the present life²².

Divination is not unique to Owan culture but is widespread across Africa. Among the Yoruba, Ifa divination reveals whether a child is an ancestor reborn or an *abiku*. Similarly, among the Akan of Ghana, rituals involving spiritual mediums serve to verify reincarnation claims. Such practices highlight the collective conviction that reincarnation requires ritual and spiritual confirmation, not mere speculation²³.

3.3.2. Practices Confirming Reincarnation

Observing Physical Signs

A key practice in verifying reincarnation is the observation of physical signs on the newborn. Birthmarks, scars, deformities, or unusual features are often interpreted as direct carryovers from a past life. For example, if a person died with a scar or injury and a

²² Peek, P. M. (Ed.). (1991). *African divination systems: Ways of knowing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

²³ Gyekye, K. (1987). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

child is born in the family with a corresponding mark, it is believed to confirm reincarnation.

This practice resonates beyond Owan tradition. In Igbo ontology, children born with peculiar marks are sometimes associated with the cycle of ogbanje.

Personality Resemblance and Behavioral Continuity

Beyond physical features, communities also observe behavioral traits. A child who displays unusual wisdom, skills, or attitudes reminiscent of a deceased relative is often regarded as that ancestor reborn. For instance, if a child shows interest in traditional crafts once mastered by a late grandparent, or exhibits peculiar speech patterns resembling the deceased, the family may confirm reincarnation. This cultural practice emphasizes the African belief that personality is not dissolved by death but continues to shape identity across generations.

Dreams and Spiritual Revelations

Dreams constitute another medium of verification. It is not uncommon for a family member to dream of a deceased relative announcing their imminent return. When a child is born thereafter, the family interprets it as the fulfillment of the dream. Similarly,

visions by diviners or spiritual leaders provide revelations that confirm reincarnation claims.

This mirrors beliefs in other traditions. In Native American cultures, elders often interpret dreams as communications from spirits about future births. In Hinduism, dreams are also seen as messages revealing karmic destiny and rebirth paths.

3. Traditional Methods of Verification

Role of Diviners and Priests

The authority of diviners and priests is central in verifying reincarnation. In Owan culture, once suspicions of reincarnation arise, the family consults spiritual specialists who can determine the soul's lineage through ritual investigation. These specialists sometimes use symbolic tests, such as presenting objects belonging to the deceased to the child; if the child recognizes or selects them, it is considered confirmation.

Community Testimonies and Oral Traditions

Verification is also a communal process. Elders and family members collectively deliberate on observed similarities between a child and a deceased person. Oral traditions play a significant role in this verification: stories of the deceased are retold and compared against the child's features and behaviors. This communal validation is vital, as it anchors individual claims in social memory.

3.4. Concepts of Life, Death, and the Afterlife in Owan Culture

The Owan people, an Edoid-speaking group in Edo State, Nigeria, possess a profound and interconnected understanding of life, death, and the afterlife, deeply embedded in their cultural and spiritual worldview. As part of the broader Edo cosmological framework, the Owan perceive existence as a cyclical process, where life and death are transitional phases within a continuum that includes the afterlife and potential reincarnation. These concepts are not merely philosophical but are woven into their social practices, rituals, and moral codes, shaping individual and communal identities.

Central to Owan culture is the belief in *Osanobua* (the supreme creator), the role of ancestors, and the spiritual interplay between the physical world (*agbon*) and the spiritual realm (*erinmwin*). This section explores the Owan's conceptions of life, death, and the afterlife, emphasizing their cyclical nature, ritual practices, and the significance of reincarnation, drawing on oral traditions, historical accounts, and scholarly sources.

3.4.1. The Concept of Life in Owan Culture

In Owan culture, life is viewed as a sacred gift from *Osanobua*, the supreme deity who creates and sustains all existence. Each individual's life is guided by their *ehi*, a spiritual double or destiny, which is preordained in *erinmwin* before birth. The *ehi* determines one's purpose, successes, and challenges, and living in harmony with it ensures prosperity and fulfillment. Diviners (*Ohens*) play a crucial role in interpreting the *ehi* through rituals involving cowries or palm nuts, particularly during naming ceremonies, to align a child's

path with their spiritual destiny. Among the Owan, this belief is evident in practices like those in *Ihievbe*, where newborns undergo divinations to identify reincarnated ancestors, linking their life to familial and communal continuity.

Life is also seen as a communal endeavor, deeply tied to kinship and social responsibilities. The Owan emphasize living virtuously; respecting elders, upholding family honor, and contributing to community welfare, as these actions influence one's status in the afterlife. Festivals like the *Ivbamen* in Ozalla celebrate life's vitality, with dances and offerings to deities like Olokun for fertility and prosperity, reinforcing the interconnectedness of individual and collective existence. The Owan's agrarian lifestyle, centered on crops like yams and cocoa, further reflects their view of life as a cycle of growth and renewal, mirrored in their spiritual beliefs about human existence.

3.4.2. The Concept of Death

Death in Owan culture is not an end but a transition to the spiritual realm (*erinmwin*), where the deceased join ancestors or await reincarnation. It is a significant event that requires elaborate rituals to ensure the soul's safe passage and to maintain harmony between the living and the spiritual world. The Owan believe that the manner of death and the life led by the deceased influence their afterlife status. Those who live virtuously, fulfilling their *ehi* and contributing to society, are believed to become revered ancestors (*edion*), while those who violate moral codes may become restless spirits, causing misfortune until appeased through rituals.

Burial rites are central to the Owan's handling of death, reflecting their belief in its spiritual significance. In Otuo, for example, funerals involve multiple stages, including cleansing rituals, offerings to ancestors, and communal mourning, often accompanied by dances and drumming to honor the deceased. The family constructs a shrine or altar for the departed, where regular offerings of food and palm wine are made to facilitate their integration into *erinmwin*. In Ora, the burial of an elder may include sacrifices to Olokun or Ogun to ensure the soul's protection, highlighting the role of deities in the death process. These rituals also serve a social function, reinforcing kinship ties and communal solidarity during times of loss.

The Owan's strict regulation of sexuality, viewing it as sacred within marriage, extends to death-related taboos. For instance, improper sexual conduct is believed to invite spiritual repercussions, potentially disrupting the deceased's transition to the afterlife, a belief that underscores the moral framework surrounding death.

3.4.3. The Concept of the Afterlife

The Owan conception of the afterlife is intricately connected to their understanding of the spiritual realm (*erinmwin*) and the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead. Upon death, the soul is believed to journey to *erinmwin*, where it joins the community of

ancestors who continue to influence the affairs of the living. This afterlife is not a distant, disconnected realm but an active spiritual dimension that intersects with the physical world.

The status of the deceased in the afterlife is determined by their conduct during life, particularly their adherence to moral codes and fulfillment of their *ehi* (spiritual destiny). Virtuous individuals who lived in accordance with community values and spiritual principles become honored ancestors (*edion*), wielding protective and beneficial influence over their descendants. These ancestors are regularly invoked in prayers, consulted through divination, and honored through festivals and offerings.

Conversely, those who violated moral codes or died under circumstances deemed spiritually problematic may become restless spirits. These spirits may cause misfortune, illness, or other disturbances until they are properly appeased through specific rituals. The Owan believe that such spirits can be pacified through offerings, prayers, and sometimes elaborate ceremonies designed to address their grievances and facilitate their proper transition to ancestral status.

The afterlife concept in Owan culture is also characterized by the possibility of return through reincarnation. Rather than viewing the afterlife as a permanent state, the Owan understand it as a transitional phase where spirits may choose or be chosen to return to the physical world through rebirth within the family lineage. This cyclical understanding of existence reinforces the continuity between past, present, and future generations.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

4.1 Evaluation

This study began with the recognition that reincarnation is a central but underexplored theme in African philosophy, particularly within the Edo worldview. Scholars like Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu have consistently argued that African worldviews must not be frozen in time but critically engaged with modernity. In this respect, the belief in reincarnation demonstrates both resilience and adaptability. On one hand, it offers a philosophy of life that is deeply rooted in African metaphysics and continues to inspire moral responsibility and communal solidarity. On the other hand, it faces serious challenges from globalization, secular education, and scientific rationalism.

Among the Owan, the conviction that ancestors return to the family through newborns provides a basis for moral responsibility, continuity of lineage, and preservation of communal memory. Reincarnation in Owan thought is not a mere speculation about life after death but a lived practice embedded in ontology. Through naming rituals, divination, and oral testimony, the Owan affirm a cyclical view of existence in which death is a transition and not an end. This is consistent with Mbiti's wider observation that African conceptions of being are communal and cyclical rather than individualistic and linear¹. What is distinctive about the Owan case, however, is the hermeneutical depth of their

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 158.

practices: reincarnation is not just confirmed through signs but symbolically interpreted as continuity of destiny. In this sense, the methodology of hermeneutics applied in this work has proved adequate, since it exposed the layers of meaning in practices that might otherwise appear as mere superstition.

At the level of social philosophy, the evaluation reveals important strengths. Reincarnation functions as a moral compass by ensuring accountability across generations. The thought that one's actions will determine the circumstances of one's return provides both an incentive for virtuous conduct and a deterrent against evil. In this sense, reincarnation grounds ethics not in abstract principles but in the lived reality of family and community. Gyekye has argued that African conceptions of personhood are essentially relational, and the Owan notion of reincarnation exemplifies this, since identity extends across lifetimes through communal recognition².

As this study has shown, Owan beliefs are transmitted not primarily through written texts but through proverbs, rituals, and collective memory. In this way, reincarnation functions as a repository of knowledge. It preserves identity by keeping the memory of ancestors alive and by providing a framework within which families situate new generations. In the context of African philosophy, this challenges the dominance of written, Eurocentric models of knowledge and highlights the importance of oral epistemologies. It also raises the question of preservation: if younger Owan generations abandon these beliefs, much of

² Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 108.

this philosophical heritage could be lost. This is why one of the recommendations of this work is the urgent documentation and teaching of indigenous cosmologies, so that they may enrich rather than be erased by modern knowledge systems.³

It is not sufficient to identify the merits of this worldview without also addressing the demerits

4.1.2 Merits

The concept of reincarnation in Owan ontology presents several strengths that affirm its enduring relevance. One major strength lies in its function as a social and moral compass, promoting continuity of lineage and encouraging ethical conduct within the community. By teaching that ancestors return among the living, reincarnation reinforces respect for elders, strengthens kinship ties, and preserves oral traditions that transmit collective memory across generations.⁴ Reincarnation also provides existential comfort, reducing the fear of death by framing it as a transition rather than an end, thus enabling the community to face loss with resilience and hope.⁵ Furthermore, it offers a framework for justice, as morally upright ancestors are believed to return under favorable circumstances,

³ Okhion, M. (1998). Owan oral traditions and cosmology. Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope Publishing, P. 67

⁴ Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann. p.110

⁵ Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: SCM Press. p.88

whereas those who violated social taboos may not be reincarnated, or may return under difficult conditions, hereby reinforcing communal morality.⁶

Another strength is its philosophical coherence within African metaphysics. As thinkers like Kwame Gyekye and J. S. Mbiti have noted, African thought views existence as a continuum linking the unborn, the living, and the ancestors.⁷ Within this framework, reincarnation is not an isolated belief but a logical extension of the communal ontology in which life flows in cycles. The Owan emphasis on *ehi* (spiritual destiny) deepens this metaphysical system, showing that reincarnation is not arbitrary but tied to a divine order established by *Osanobua*.⁸

4.1.3 Demerits

A major criticism of reincarnation is based on empirical beliefs. Modern scientific thought, influenced by rationalism and empiricism, tends to dismiss reincarnation as unverifiable and anecdotal.⁹ Physical resemblance or behavioral similarity in children is often explained biologically rather than spiritually. Pentecostal Christianity, with its rejection of ancestor veneration, frequently challenges reincarnation as incompatible with

⁶ Omoigui, E. (2012). *Reincarnation and Edo Cosmology: A Philosophical Analysis*. Benin City: Ethiope Publishing. p.45

⁷ Gyekye, K. (1995). *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. p.67

⁸ Bradbury, R. E. (1957). *Benin Studies*. London: Oxford University Press. p.92

⁹ Asad, T. (1993). *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. p.129

biblical teaching, framing it instead as demonic deception.¹⁰ This has created generational tensions, as younger Owan Christians may see reincarnation as a superstition to be discarded rather than preserved.

Another criticism is its gender bias. Feminist scholars have argued that reincarnation narratives often privilege male lineage continuity, with emphasis placed on sons who are believed to carry the ancestral line.¹¹ This risks marginalizing women's roles in the cosmology and perpetuating patriarchal structures. Moreover, globalization and urbanization have weakened communal verification systems such as divination and oral testimony, making reincarnation claims increasingly contested in modern settings.¹² Critics argue that unless these beliefs are adapted to contemporary realities, they may lose their persuasive power among future generations.

4.2 Summary

This study has critically examined the concept of reincarnation within the Owan Ontology, situating it in the broader Edo cosmology and comparing it with that of other ontologies. Reincarnation in Owan Ontology could be viewed from the aspects of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. It is a social institution that sustains kinship, regulates morality, and preserves cultural memory. Birthmarks, dreams, and divination play central roles in identifying reincarnated ancestors, while rituals at birth

¹⁰ Parrinder, G. (1976). *African Traditional Religion*. London: Hutchinson. P.150

¹¹ Oyèwùmí, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p.34

¹² Egharevba, J. U. (1968). *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press. p.60

and death underscore the cyclical nature of existence. The research also revealed the tensions introduced by Christianity, Islam, and scientific rationalism, which challenge traditional beliefs but have not completely displaced them.

Chapter One provides the general introduction, background of study, statement of the problem, objectives, and significance of the research. It explained why reincarnation remains a relevant subject of philosophical inquiry and not just as a religious belief but as a framework for understanding identity, morality, and continuity in African thought.

Chapter Two explored the background of the Owan people, tracing its roots within African Ontology and also making a comparative analysis of other ontology. This chapter explains how the Owan people identify their spiritual entities and also the hierarchy among being.

Chapter Three dealt with the critical analysis of not just Reincarnation but also Owan ontology, it also examined Owan Ontology through the lens of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics , aesthetics.it also examines the concepts of Life, Death, and the Afterlife in Owan culture. Here, reincarnation was shown to be intimately connected with the Owan understanding of the self (*ehi*), destiny, and community life. The chapter explained how the Owan people identify reincarnated ancestors through birthmarks, dreams, naming practices, and divination, and how these beliefs shape the moral life of the community. The discussion revealed that reincarnation provides meaning to suffering and death by presenting them as stages in a larger spiritual journey. It also highlighted the

ritual practices that accompany birth and death, including libations, prayers, and consultations with diviners, which are aimed at maintaining harmony between the spiritual and physical worlds. This chapter established that reincarnation is not merely a private or speculative belief but a collective system that sustains the very fabric of Owan society.

This chapter also examined the philosophical implications of reincarnation, its role in regulating morality, its ability to provide a sense of cosmic justice, and its contribution to the continuity of family and community identity.

Overall, this study has demonstrated that reincarnation is more than a mystical speculation about life after death , it is a moral and social institution that binds generations together. It gives meaning to suffering, upholds justice by rewarding good conduct through favorable rebirth, and ensures that ancestors are never entirely lost to the community. It also shows that life is cyclical and that every action has consequences beyond the present life.

4.3 Conclusion

This research has journeyed through the heart of Owan Ontology, uncovering how reincarnation functions as both a metaphysical principle and a social practice that sustains identity, morality, and community. It has become clear that reincarnation is not simply a speculative belief about what happens after death but a philosophy of existence that affirms the unity of life. In Owan thought, the living, the dead, and the unborn are not

separate worlds but one continuous reality. This vision shapes how the Owan people live, mourn, raise children, and imagine their future. It teaches that every birth is not just a biological event but the return of a presence that connects the present to the past, ensuring that no ancestor is truly lost.

This study has also shown that reincarnation serves an ethical function. By believing that ancestors return to share in the lives of their descendants, the Owan are encouraged to live morally upright lives so that their return will bring blessing, not misfortune. Rituals, naming ceremonies, and divination are not empty customs but instruments for maintaining harmony between the spiritual and physical realms. These practices preserve memory, transmit values, and create a sense of belonging that extends beyond the individual to the entire lineage.

For these reasons, this study recommends deliberate efforts to safeguard this heritage:

1. Documentation of Oral Traditions: The stories, songs, and rituals surrounding reincarnation should be systematically recorded and preserved. Doing so will create a cultural archive for future generations and for scholars seeking to understand African cosmology.¹³
2. Integration into Education: Schools in Edo State should incorporate modules on traditional belief systems into cultural and civic education. This will help the

¹³ Okhion, A. (2015). *Owan Oral Traditions and Ritual Practices*. Benin City: Heritage Press.p.28

younger generation see reincarnation not as a superstition to be discarded but as a rich philosophy that can coexist with modern knowledge.¹⁴

3. Dialogue Between Tradition and Religion: Constructive dialogue between religious leaders, elders, and cultural custodians should be encouraged to reduce hostility and promote mutual respect. Instead of outright condemnation, there should be recognition that reincarnation, like other elements of African traditional religion, can serve as a moral resource for society.¹⁵
4. Gender-Inclusive Approaches: Efforts should be made to highlight the role of women in reincarnation narratives. While much emphasis has been placed on male lineage continuity, women are central as the carriers of life and transmitters of oral tradition. Future studies should explore how women experience and interpret reincarnation, to give a more holistic account of the phenomenon.¹⁶

Ultimately, this study concludes that reincarnation in Owan ontology is not merely about what happens after death but about how to live meaningfully before death. It is a call to live with awareness that life is part of a greater cycle, that our actions echo into future generations, and that we remain forever bound to those who came before us. In an age where many feel disconnected from their roots and overwhelmed by modernity, this

¹⁴ Afigbo, A. E. (1981). *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.p.142

¹⁵ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.p.118

¹⁶ Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.p.39

ancient belief offers a vision of continuity, belonging, and moral responsibility. Preserving reincarnation as part of Owan cultural heritage is therefore not just about saving a tradition but about safeguarding a philosophy that affirms that life, even after death is never truly lost, only transformed.

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