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## Death is not Natural

### The African Story

Dominic Umoh, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

#### Abstract

Due to its tolerant attitude towards religious pluralism, Sub-Saharan Africa provides a fertile ground for religious syncretism. Converts to Christianity or Islam are unconsciously unable to let go of their traditional religions. Rather, they blend or marry their traditional beliefs with those of their newly embraced faiths, coming up with doctrines that are neither Islamic nor Christian. The negative result of this unconscious alliance becomes evident during serious life crises such as death, especially “untimely deaths.” Today the Christian teaching on death and resurrection has been replaced by a strange doctrine according to which there can be no natural death. Every death, apart from that of elders, is considered untimely or premature because the hand of one’s enemy is presumed to be involved. Given the contemporary climate of “witch hunt” on the continent today, addressing this wrong attitude towards death has become urgent and imperative. Using a phenomenological method of philosophy of religion, the author explores and exposes the implications of the African attitude toward death, and proposes a radical change of attitude and the return to a authentic Christian doctrine on death.

#### Introduction

I was once at a funeral of an 18-year-old youngster in a remote village in the southern part of Nigeria. The deceased was the older of the two sons of a widow. He had died “suddenly” some days back. In most African villages, each family has its graveyard within the vicinity of its compound because of the cultural belief that the dead remain part of their earthly families. This belief and practice promotes African ancestral cult.

The graveyard of this young man was crowded with sympathizers. As the body was brought in from the church by his peers, as is the custom, an embarrassing drama took place. Amidst great mourning, the only brother of the deceased got hold of his aged uncle and beat him, smearing him from head to toe with sand from the grave and attempting to drag him into the grave before the coffin. He called out curses on his brother's "killer," and called for the gods to take revenge for the murder. His uncle had to be forcefully extricated from his grasp to safety and the young man was dragged away from the graveside amidst uncontrollable yelling. Later, I learned that there had been a long-standing land dispute between the uncle and the deceased. Hence, no one but the uncle could be held responsible for the nephew's "untimely death." I am now sure that almost all the sympathizers at that funeral were convinced that the young man was right; his brother had been killed through some malicious powers engineered either by the uncle as alleged or by another enemy. "A youngster cannot just slump and die that way." But it would never cross their minds that the deceased could have been a victim of a sudden cardiac arrest or asthmatic attack – as was very likely the case.

This very irrational and fanatical attitude toward death in general, "untimely death" in particular, and the disastrous consequences created among those left behind, constitute the focus of this paper. Social upheavals in the aftermath of "untimely deaths" are alarming in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Is it believed that people hardly ever die, rather that they are "killed" by witches, who are typically members of one's household. This irrational and superstitious attitude towards death generates grave disaster for family unity and harmony. There are intrigues, suspicions, despondence, and bitterness after almost every funeral. Families are torn apart due to innumerable witch accusations. Some family members have to escape into exile for the sake of their lives. Such escapes are interpreted as tacit signs of guilt, and the houses and other personal belongings of escapees are often destroyed by fire. Of late, these acrimonies have taken a different and more drastic toll in Nigeria. To vindicate the death of dear ones, accused family members are attacked and killed by a sort of organized mob action and all their personal goods are wantonly destroyed. In some cases their wives and children are not spared. One recent attack on suspected "witches" formed the background of my article entitled, "Why I do not Believe in Witchcraft." In that article, I tell the story of a person who decried the barbaric, uncultured, and inhuman treatment of witch suspects accused of killing members of their extended families. This person witnessed the public execution of more than five suspects accused of causing the death of their relatives through witchcraft. The accused were thrown alive into a ninety-four foot deep well along with their household property. There was no trial whatsoever prior to the public execution. This happened not long ago in Uruk Otong, a village in the Ukanafun Local Government Area in the south-southern geo-political zone of Nigeria (2011).

My position in this paper is that death, whether of a young or old person, belongs to everyone and strikes only at its appropriate time. Hence nobody can die before that appointed time. Everybody dies only whenever the time is up; not before, not after. The time of each person's death is shrouded in mystery. Death is inevitable and its pangs irreversible, but Christian belief teaches that death is a pathway to eternal life. Therefore, it is sheer folly and a mark of faithlessness for Christians to disturb the public peace or to shatter the family solidarity and unity that characterizes typical African families at the death of dear

ones. Christian believers the world over are advised not to mourn like those without hope. Death of either young or old cannot be averted or reversed. Acts committed in the name of revenge yield no dividend, and killing either oneself or another because of the death of a dear one is nothing but savagery.

I have lived in the United States and Western Europe. I have attended several funerals of both young and old on these continents, including funerals of teenagers who committed suicide. But I have never witnessed or heard of a fight or even a quarrel sparked by relatives or friends against presumed “killers.” This alone indicates something negatively unique about the attitude of Africans toward death. In Nigeria, security agents have to be brought in during some funerals. Their duty is to forestall possible anticipated violence from degenerating into a blood bath. Some people arrive at funerals armed in case of an attack from mourners. Recently, soldiers had to be mobilized during the burial of my friend who was killed in a ghastly car accident, but whose demise was attributed to the maliciousness of an “enemy.” I think this attitude toward death is more than superstitious, because superstition is nothing other than a belief that some events cannot be explained by reason or by science. In the case of my friend’s death, the real scientific cause of death was clearly evident.

History is replete with tearful experiences of untimely deaths, and whenever death strikes unexpectedly, it is tragic, devastating, and heart-breaking, irrespective of race or culture. Popular and admired iconic figures have bowed out of existence at the prime of their youthfulness, leaving tears flowing perpetually down the cheeks of their fans, family members and other dear ones. I want to refer just to one such untimely death, that of Michael Jackson. Many were terribly saddened by the shocking death of The King of Pop, the icon, Michael Jackson (1958-2009). His demise threw the world of pop and his fans into confusion, mourning, and agonizing sadness. This gloom was not only because of the celebrity of the music star, but more so because of the premature nature of his death. Moreover, Michael Jackson spent the last hours of his earthly existence doing what he thought he was born to do. The 50-year-old hit the main stage of Los Angeles’ Staples Center, putting himself and his backup dancers through a lengthy rehearsal for his London tour set to begin in two weeks, not knowing that in less than 12 hours he would die.

My particular interest in citing Jackson’s death here is, despite the short lifespan and the “untimely” nature of his demise, his death was not attributed to mysterious, devilish forces as is almost always the case among Africans. Family doctors might have been accused of negligence and irresponsibility; the autopsy might have revealed what gave the final fatal blow to the human organism in him; but no diviner was consulted to reveal which ghost, witchcraft, ancestor, or witch killed the star prematurely. For dear ones, it was bad enough, a great loss, but they resigned to the inescapable ordeal or to the will of God, as some believers say.

### **The Early Grave Syndrome – the African Story**

The attitude of Africans towards death in general and of young people in particular is unique. Apart from the deaths of elders, who are said to return to their ancestral homeland after a ripe old age, all other deaths in Africa, especially in Nigeria, are considered unnatural; they are viewed as premature, untimely, and therefore caused by an evil force. Unfortunately,

the number of deaths considered “natural deaths” is gradually diminishing, and may become non-existent. Apart from rare cases such as the death of an elderly person, nobody dies in Africa. Rather, people are “killed” before their time and the death is the handiwork either of an earthly or spiritual foe. E. Parrinder observes:

Disease in Africa is normally regarded as having some spiritual cause. Because they neglect this side of life, European hospitals are suspected and regarded as cold and inhuman. Not only disease but death itself is thought to be due to an evil spiritual force. The idea of natural death is foreign to many peoples. “An enemy hath done this thing”(106-107).

The same idea runs through these lines by Kofi Appiah-Kubi concerning the Akan people of Ghana:

An illness which does not yield to medicine must be attributed to other baneful forces. Thus except in the case of a very old man, the Akan do not talk of natural death. For a common man, religion is largely the means of reinforcing life, of proper precautions against the destructive powers. When straight-forward remedies fail, as in the case of illness not responding to normal treatment or in time of disaster, recourse to the priest-healer is necessary (261).

Among the Annangs of the south-south Nigeria, the names given to presumably incurable diseases depict clearly the enemy’s handiwork. There is a type of sickness called *eka inyonyoñ urua ilisime*, meaning “May the mother’s return from market not meet this child still alive.” Another is *akpachak ibok*, “the illness that defies all medications.” There are some other ailments, for instance a stroke, which, according to popular belief, does not strike its victims naturally. Such diseases are always said to be inflicted upon one, or as put locally, “given to victims by enemies.” The situation becomes more complicated given the absence of healthcare that is available in the West, where infant mortality and death at young ages are dramatically lower than in Africa. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross comments on the role of healthcare in *On Death and Dying*:

Epidemics have taken a great toll of lives in past generations. Death in infancy and early childhood was frequent and there were few families who didn’t lose a member of the family at an early age. Medicine has changed greatly in the last decades. Widespread vaccinations have practically eradicated many illnesses, at least in Western Europe and the United State (1).

In Africa, several generations have gone without healthcare, and a majority does not go to the hospital, which may not have adequate and authentic medication or may be too expensive for them. Some use traditional medicine, which is mixed with cultural superstitious beliefs (syncretism). Nowadays, the great majority turns to healing prophets, healing homes and churches, miracle crusaders, prayer houses, fellowships – which have no creditable link with medical care. The atmosphere is so confused that even the few that dare go to a hospital have little or no confidence in the Western medicine. Some are happy when they are told that a particular hospital is incapable of handling a particular sickness, and this

confirms their lack of trust in Western medicine and their belief that illnesses are inflicted by evil forces. In such a climate, mutual suspicion takes over, enemies are found everywhere, and every death is related to a particular enemy. The death of a youngster reinforces their disbelief in natural deaths, yet no one realizes or admits that many young Africans have never been to a hospital for a medical checkup after being delivered locally by traditional midwives. An ailment as common as cerebral malaria can kill instantly, but such a “sudden death,” particularly of a youngster, is attributed to enemies.

The predominant mentality is that young people should not die. Additionally, it is believed that a spirit may be solicited by one’s enemy to deal with the victim, or an offended ancestor may kill a youngster in revenge for an inordinate behavior towards the ancestral spirit. Dying childless can never be natural; it must be the handiwork of one’s foe or a punishment for one’s offense against any one of the local African gods.

Most societies in West Africa believe that death cannot be controlled and would take anyone irrespective of position, (age), sex or race, West African traditional believers have a firm belief that only the aged should die; the death of a young man therefore is attributed to some supernatural forces (Amponsah: 53).

Various expressions, proverbs, and adages bear ample testimony to this powerful belief in the unnaturalness of death. Expressions like “young victims are plucked off their life,” or “struck at the prime of their youthfulness,” or “dying before one’s time” are just a few. No matter how deep Christianity has penetrated the hearts of African converts, the majority of African Christians, in the very depth of their beings, hold on to and never completely let go of some negative aspects of their traditional religions. This may be because traditional beliefs are inextricably wrapped up with African culture.

Converted or not, many African Christians still look to native sacred specialists, especially in times of great calamities. Some still wear amulets and charms (hidden) to churches or mosques. The African type of Christianity is a thorough syncretism; ideas indiscriminately taken from several sources are forced together and thereby produce strange doctrines, dogmas, philosophies or religion, which are neither traditionally African nor Christian. I agree completely with Nnamani who affirms: “All the separatist churches – even the African sections of the mission churches – are syncretistic. All their Christian ideas are edited by the religious ideas they bring with them from their cultural upbringing” (94; on the definition of syncretism, see Angeles: 286). Syncretism is an adulterated doctrinal option, arrived at by compounding bits of various views resulting in a doctrine completely new, which does not reflect its original prototypes. Such a syncretistic view is beyond any claim of authentic enculturation, already in vogue in African Christianity, because enculturation implies embracing Christianity or another religious tradition in a typically African way. One could not advocate, for instance, sacrificing a tortoise to an ancestral spirit and remain authentically Christian. Omoregbe contends that African religion is very much a living religion that is now blended with Christianity and Islam:

Even among those Africans who have been converted to Christianity or Islam, very many have not really abandoned their indigenous religion completely. In times of difficulties or dire need they go back to their roots –

to their indigenous religion. Indeed, very many African Christians and Muslims have continued with the practice of their indigenous religion along with Christianity or Islam as the case may be, which means that their “conversion” from African indigenous Religion to Christianity or Islam was never total (63).

The impact of Western education is limited in that it is never able to uproot completely even learned Africans from various superstitious beliefs that originate from their cultural milieu. Many Africans denounce superstitious practices as pagan when they convert to Christianity, but fall back to them. It is the syncretistic frame of mind that gives birth to the typical African attitude towards death.

When one sees an African professor of nuclear physics standing naked at a road junction in the midnight and pulling off the head of a living chicken while making some incantations to the evil spirits or when one considers the number of Christians seeking exorcism from numerous healers in modern African communities, one would not need to be told again that science has not succeeded in dealing a fatal blow to the belief in demons. The issue of demonology is once more actual even in modern cultures (Nnamani: 88).

### **The African Worldview: A Contributing Factor**

In addition to the syncretistic tendency of modern African believers, another factor that gives birth to their attitude towards death originates from the traditional African worldview. The world for the African is a single whole with no sharp demarcation between entities, units, and denominations. Rather, there is a mutual *mélange* among the various types of beings, parts of the universe, and their respective departments. As in Harvey Cox’s secular society, African culture is characterized by pluralism and tolerance; different worldviews, including different religions, peacefully coexist. There is also what J. Mbiti calls “compenetration” depicting various layers of the same entity from the outermost to the innermost levels.

Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament (2).

The implications of compenetration means there is no real demarcation between the divine and the contingent, between humans and ghosts, and everything, especially the incomprehensible, must be given a mysterious interpretation – whether rightly or wrongly. F. W. Butt-Thompson maintains, “Mystery permeates the whole of the African’s life day by day and night by night” (quoted in Weber: 334), and such a situation, if judged from the point of view of Christianity, gives vent to superstition. Spiritual beings that share the African world with human being are believed to be more powerful than humans and capable of everything

and anything – good or evil – depending on their temperament or mood. Therefore, Africans consider themselves perpetually and helplessly at their mercy. People are typically afraid of the unknown, so when any disaster strikes, their minds turn immediately to the mysterious. This helps explain mutual suspicions, even among relatives, at the slightest quarrel or provocation. Nnamani poignantly observes:

These spiritual beings have the powers to influence human life positively or negatively. On their own accord, or if incited by wicked people, they could inflict misfortune of every magnitude on people, ranging from physical and mental sickness to barrenness, accidents, premature deaths, drought, poor harvest, unfulfilled life and personal failures. The demons could implement their evil designs directly or indirectly through the agency of wicked persons (witches and sorcerers)(53).

From another perspective, long life is a blessing for an African and the opposite is considered a curse either from the gods, ancestors, or an earthly foe. Therefore, during ceremonial libation and sacrifice, people ask for blessings and protection from the deities, and they pray to ancestors to reward them with long life. Every misfortune is considered a result of the wrath of spiritual beings or the handiwork of the wicked. With the inadequate or total absence of healthcare in some sectors, people still interpret every sickness superstitiously as the handiwork of evil doers – their enemies, intending to harm them out of malice. For instance, in Uganda some families were completely wiped out by HIV/AIDS in the 1990s, but neighbors kept pointing accusing fingers at “witches” and “wizards” despite medical proof to the contrary. Amponsah is correct to insist:

The commonest cause of premature death in West African societies is believed to be witchcraft, magic, sorcery and a powerful curse. Death is also inflicted as punishment due to improper burial of a deceased relative, a grudge against someone or a negligence of a duty. The cause of death in West African societies is revealed by diviners and medicinemen [sic] or sometimes by the spirit of the deceased through someone (a medium) who might be spiritually possessed (53-54).

Currently, in the southern states of Nigeria, there is a crazed hunt for suspected witches who are considered the most harmful creatures on earth. The government had to intervene in the state of Akwa Ibom to prevent the situation from getting out of hand. Suspected witches are dragged from their homes and burnt to ashes. The worst part of the story is that in nearly all cases the suspects were either family or close relatives. “The victims brought to the assembly are mostly close relatives. Witchcraft acts most often upon those who are in close contact with the witches. The new witch entering the company must bring the soul of a relative, often one of her own children” (Parrinder: 127). On a daily basis, the media report cases of seriously wounded children thrown out of homes by parents accused of witchcraft. Some parents even pay to have their children executed in order to save their family from witchcraft-associated misfortunes.

The year 2008 will remain evergreen in the minds of religious and political leaders of Akwa Ibom State (Nigeria). It was the year one self-styled pastor, Bishop Sunday William, declared the entire state a coven of witches, saying

there were roughly 2.3 million witches and wizards in the state, most of them children. William, in fact, added a serious dimension to the allegation: he told the international media that he had killed 110 of such child witches. He even claimed he charged some fee, sometime as much as ₦400,000 (four hundred thousand naira) [±\$260,000] to help willing parents kill their child witches (Effiong).

In this setting, coupled with the fact that children are being kidnapped daily for ritual killings, the issue of natural death becomes less tenable. Every death is caused and, therefore, is premature because it is the handiwork of one's enemy.

### **The Christian Philosophical Outlook**

The Christian message of the resurrection continues to be preached daily in churches and at Christian funerals to the very people upholding traditional beliefs about untimely death.

The soul of the virtuous are in the hands of God, no torment shall ever touch them. In the eyes of the unwise [fools] they did appear to die, their going looked like a disaster, their leaving us, like annihilation; but they are in peace (Wisdom 3:1-2).

In light of this biblical passage, the notion of premature death makes sense only to the unwise or, as some biblical versions put it, to the "the fool." In our context, the fool is one who does not believe in God's promise of the resurrection. The fool is on a totally different plain or wavelength, so also is their judgment concerning those "who sleep in the Lord."

Christians believe that we came from somewhere and that we must one day return to somewhere. Hence, the lamentation about dying prematurely is a traditional man's longing for eternity within time. This is ontologically impossible. This impossibility arises from the fact that eternity cannot be accommodated in time. Death occurs in time. Death is now, for as soon as we are born, we begin to die. If life is a journey, death merely marks the end of a beginning; death is simply the end of a phase – the phase that those alive call life. But the journey continues. Life is shrouded in mysteries. But life is real. Death, too, is mysterious and real. All men who live must die; all men do, in fact, die, but when and how they die are masked in mystery.

Some die at a time considered a ripe old age, some in the womb, some at birth, some giving birth. Some die either destroying or saving life. But death is death. Those make the mystery. Death comes whenever and wherever. The idea of "dying before one's time" is therefore a lamentation of those yearning for eternity within time. They fail to realize that eternity cannot be engulfed in time. The whole mystery surrounding our futile endeavor to overcome death is contained in these lines of Mircea Eliade: "People of the primitive tribes in an earnest attempt to overpower death at all costs, opted for it (death) in order to emerge victorious over it. This is the hallmark of the initiatory death characteristic of all rites of passage" (68).

Life is a gradual death – Christianity wants us to believe. Two forces are simultaneously at work in the same living organism – the one gaining while the other is losing. On earth we

meet a person either alive or dead; in reality death is always surer than life. Death is, therefore, just the other side of life, because life is framed by death. Life strives on the frame of death. Death is a way of life, an integral part of it. Life is life but only in relation to death. Death is what remains when life is no more and, therefore, it has its own logic, format, and time. Death shows us what difference life makes. Hence, the erroneousness of the attitude that death is always premature becomes obvious.

### **The Existential Dimension**

Africans should also learn from the existentialists' conception of death, for instance that of Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, death is very much a part of life, the summit of life and, therefore, not to be regarded as annihilation whenever it occurs (234). Another important observation is that whether one is considered as dying at one's time or prematurely, the issue only has relevance for the living. As for the dead, it seems none of their business. Perhaps it is because we know nothing about their plight behind the screen. They appear willing to yield to the dictates and scheme of creation without complaint. They appear "to be more understanding" than those left behind. We, the survivors, are those piling up "whys?" We are those describing the deceased's death as "painful!" or "untimely!" But what would one say of a 17-year-old suicide bomber of the Boko Haram sect in the London subway station, who voluntarily goes to his death in order to destroy others? What of infants or pregnant women who perish during such attacks? Or how do we tag the death of an ordinary young suicide victim, who kills no one other than himself? What witchcraft, which ghost could be accused of being responsible for their premature deaths?

Death is the only possibility that renders impossible every other possibility. The grave, it is said, is everybody's lot. This assertion makes no provision for the "when." Science and technology have struggled to conquer death, but fail. Modern medicine can prolong life, but can never prevent death. No power on earth has been able to postpone death even for a moment when it is its time to strike. With every breath we breathe, every step we take, all living beings move closer to that compulsory destination. Death lurks. All men and women walk, but only towards death. In Christianity, death signifies everyone's final stroke. Death is the closing of account that decides the value of one's life. No curriculum vitae can be complete until R.I.P. is added to it.

### **Conclusion**

Africans do not doubt the inevitability of death; like all other human beings they are sure it will come. Their main problem is death's timetable. They prefer that death be perpetually late for its appointment with them. Death could, if possible, eternally forget its appointment with them.

The African attitude towards death is unrealistic; it is, to say the least, ambivalent. This ambivalence reflects the confused and syncretistic religious beliefs of most contemporary African Christians. They are committed believers who reject various beliefs about death from the traditional religions of their forefathers. Yet, at various times, these beliefs tactfully infiltrate and influence their Christian lives and practices. It is well entrenched in the African ethno-philosophy, adages, wise sayings, and proverbs that the serial numbers on death's

register are not arranged chronologically. Hence the Annang proverb that human death is different from the chronological death of the raffia palm bamboos (Umoh: 2009).

Africans' erroneous attitude towards death becomes even more glaring from the point of view of the African conception of time; their attitude toward death betrays their ignorance of the African notion of time. In the African philosophical worldview, there are two concepts of time: the ordinary temporal duration (profane time), in which acts without religious meanings and significance have their sway, and sacred time, the time of festivals which re-enact the primeval mythical time, making it present through festivities and liturgies.

One essential difference between these two qualities of time strikes us immediately: by its very nature sacred time is reversible in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a primordial mythical time made present. Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the re-actualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, "in the beginning" (Eliade: 69).

In African religion, any religious participation in any traditional festival implies emerging from the ordinary temporal duration (profane time) and being integrated into the mythical time re-actualized by the festival. Hence, sacred time is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable; in a sense it does not "pass" away. That is, it does not constitute an irreversible duration as with profane time. These two time states and realms are the inverse of each other and are represented in terms of opposition: divine/human, sacred/profane, immortality/mortality (Ray: 41). Coincidentally, death and funeral rituals, according to African tradition, belong to the realm of sacred time, which does not end, but is perpetually reversible. Yet, paradoxically these are the very ritual events often judged out of context (that is, from the standpoint of profane time) as an abrupt annihilation. Judged against the backdrop of this cosmogonic time, my position in this paper is, therefore, *no death is premature*.

The virtuous man though he *dies before his time*, will find rest. Length of days is not what makes age honourable; nor numbers of years the true measure of life; understanding this is man's grey hairs untarnished life, this is ripe old age (Wisdom 4:7-8).

Many African Christians who fall in love with this version of the biblical text do so because its nuances rhyme with their traditional belief in an "early grave" or "untimely death." They often make allusion to it in order to support their stand. At any rate, the translation in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible appears less controversial and makes the point more clearly:

The righteous man, though he dies early, will be at rest. For old age is not honoured for length of time, nor measured by number of years; but understanding is gray hair for men, and a blameless life is ripe old age (Wisdom 4:7-9).

"Dying early" or "being killed prematurely" according to African philosophy falls within the realm of the human time reckoning; that is according to the profane definition of time, the duration between the before and the after. However, the issue of dying prematurely

presupposes the ability to know exactly the length of life scheduled for each individual by the Creator *ab initio*. Nobody knows the length of life reserved for each individual at creation.

Christians are aware that graves are meant for the dead and the dead for graves. This thesis has no exception. Consequently, the grave is meant for any dead, and not only for dead centenarians. This thesis applies to all, regardless of race, social or academic status, or wealth. In this context, even a one-day-old baby is qualified to die. The poor parents must be sympathized with, but nobody can reverse the irreversible. The exact moment one dies is precisely when that one is to die. That is the time; not before, not after. Everyone has an appointed time to die. The issue of early or premature grave or dying before one's time is ontologically nonsensical. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

The notion of an early grave stems from the longstanding African traditional belief that only the aged should die; any other death is caused by man. This attitude is contrary to Christian teaching and, paradoxically, un-African. In African philosophy it is an attitude of a non-religious person who has no knowledge of what Eliade calls the "transhuman features of liturgical time": "This quality of liturgical time is inaccessible to one with a non-religious frame of mind. This is to say that for such, time can present neither break nor mystery; for him, time constitutes a person's deepest existential dimension; it is linked to his own life, hence it has a beginning and an end, which is death, the annihilation of his life" (71).

Here lies the greatest paradox of the African believer, who is at the same time said to be very religious. Mbiti holds:

Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community (2).

Unfortunately, this same African is ignorant of his religion; for a religious person, man is born to die. As St. Paul says: "For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Corinthians 4: 11). From the African traditional perspective, death is one of the rites of passage and, according to Ray, the specific functions of these rites is to create fixed and meaningful transformations in the life cycle (birth, puberty, marriage death) of individuals (90).

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Untimely Deaths

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