

Valentine Ehichioya Obinyan  
(Benin, Nigeria)

ETHNO-PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF HUMAN  
EXISTENCE IN ESAN ESCHATOLOGY:  
PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE OF CUSTOMS  
AND CULTURE IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

1. Introduction

In various ways African literature embodies ethnographic or ethno-philosophical writings on the issue of human nature and origin. In it, it is clearly emphasized that this has always remained one of the major preoccupations of man right from the very beginning of his consciousness to know and understand himself and his position in the universe. As a result of this, Africans and indeed all human beings have given different explanations for their existence, origin and position in the universe. This is most evident in the mythologies of many ancient and traditional cultures containing accounts of the origin and position of man in the universe. In most of these ethnographic or ethno-philosophical accounts, like that of the Esan, '*Oria*' -man was seen as the most privileged creature that descended mysteriously from '*ukhun*'-the sky. In other cases he was given the noble position of being the greatest of all the creatures created by '*Osanoburwa*' – the Supreme God<sup>1</sup>. This latter view of man's origin and nature has been popularized by some of the major religions of the world. This practically forms their religious anthropology.

---

<sup>1</sup> An interview with Pa. Pious Obinyan, age 72, on; *The Origin of Man*, Ubiaji, Esan South East local Government Area, Edo State. Nigeria, on 12/5/2011.

Apart from the numerous anthropological, philosophical and religious exoduses, the fundamental questions of human origin, existence, free will, determinism or destiny and responsibility has continued to bug the mind of every human being till date and these forms the fact of a philosophical dimension of such a religious understanding. In this philosophical search-race and prying into the nature and origin of man, modern science is not left out as it has paved its way right through and into the center of this issue. Departing completely from this anthropological background let us in this study examine the ethnographic and ethno-philosophical analysis of human existence in Esan eschatology so as to attempt a hermeneutics of what constitutes the origin, process and end of man's life.

It should be borne in mind that we shall not devote our time to the detailed description of the particular beliefs and rituals of the Esan people, but we shall make recourse to them as they bear deep ontological relevance in indicating profoundly what constitutes our analysis of human existence in Esan eschatology.

### 1.1. Eschaltology: conceptual analysis

Etymologically, the word eschatology comes from two Greek words, 'eskata' and 'logos' the former meaning "the final thing"<sup>2</sup> and the latter, 'study' or 'science'. Thus eschatology is the study of science of the last destiny of the world and of humanity. This includes the study of the final cause or end of humanity or human existence; the reality which draws us to human fulfillment or the reality to God.

Both anthropologists, ethnographers, philosophers and theologians alike have argued that the goal of human existence and of the world is God and others. This no doubt has raised stern reaction and in fact other issues that cluster the existence and nature of man. Popular notions of eschatology includes the idea of moral actions, hell, purgatory, and limbo tend to focus on the final goal of human existence such as everlasting life or eternal punishment. But these ideas are out of context if not in terms of God as the reality and ultimate goal of human existence and the community as his/her 'action ground'. This fact permeates the essence of every world-view as well as that of the Esan people.

---

<sup>2</sup> S. E. McGinn, *Summary of Christian eschatology*.

## 1.2. The epistemological pre-suppositions of the esan world-view

Going through the prism of the Esan world-view in ethnographic and ethno-philosophical writings and studies as I have discussed elsewhere, a fundamental question of, 'how do the Esan come to have such a view of the world constituting the foundation of their philosophy?', is susceptible. But maybe a deeper look at their metaphysical, cosmological and eschatological beliefs which is an offshoot of what constitutes their world-view, one can better appreciate the wealth of wisdom in the Esan thought. It should be borne in mind that our treatment of the categories of beliefs of the Esan people is not to delve into an already unanimous emphasis on their culture or an argument on whether the Esan do have a culture as that will not be philosophy. It is not even an attempt to describe the Esan culture or beliefs in God, divinities, ancestors, mask, figurines, tales proverbs, rituals or ceremonies<sup>3</sup> as this will also be totally anthropological. But it is to show its instrumentality to an existential analysis of man's being in the world.

The Esan people do believe in God, divinities, spirit, ancestors, living dead etc. as stated above and this makes up the background for their metaphysical, cosmological and eschatological belief. But if these beliefs have any meaning, value and justification at all, they must have sprang from human experiences, over time and become part of the Esan people's culture that is; the beliefs and ideas which forms the enabling ground for meaningful human living. Beliefs are borne out of human experience, true. But reality with thought forms the quint-essentials for such meaningful establishments. Reality according to Ruch and Ayanwu in their; *'African Philosophy; an Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Africa'*, makes reference to this fact when they noted that:

...objects of experience and thought. This can be natural object, events, social institutions, language, artistic products, myths, religious beliefs and even thought itself. Thought refers to a conscious activity which handles the object of thought or reality. It analyzes, synthesizes, modifies and organizes them. In fact this is where philosophy emerges<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> E. I. Metuh, *African Religion in Western Conceptual Scheme the Problem of Interpretation*(Ibadan:P.I, 1985), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> E. A. Ruch and K. C. Ayanwun, *African Philosophy; An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Africa'*, (Roma: Catholic Book Agency, 1981), p. 81.

Therefore a conscious and systematic organization of beliefs in reality by means of thought is philosophy. This philosophy brings to human consciousness the implicit embodiment of these beliefs and crystallizes its consistencies, its meaning, value and justification in every day human life.

## 2. Time and eschatology: the esan perspective

The Perceptions of time and eschatology among the Esan people constitute a broad ideological framework of human existence. However, this can be better understood from a little insight on the current debates about time in African literature. Mbiti in his: *Concepts of God in Africa*<sup>5</sup>, devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of eschatological concepts, and in the *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*<sup>6</sup>, which describes the effects of the encounter between Christianity and African traditional concepts. Without going into the debate regarding time as either linear or cyclic, Mbiti found that, for the African, "time is not an academic concern; it is simply a composition of events"<sup>7</sup>. It does not really matter whether or not a day is twenty-four hours long, or whether or not a month is thirty days long. Rather, the events in a day or month are what matters. These events also determine its reckoning, and not the mathematics<sup>8</sup>. Mbiti provides us with the following example of a day, when he noted that: "...Reckoned according to the major events: rising up milking cattle, herding, working in the fields, driving to the watering places, {resting on the field} returning home for the night, {taking of meal and tales by moon light}.... and going to sleep"<sup>9</sup>.

Mbiti observes that history is understood to be moving "backward, from the now moment to that beyond which nothing can go"<sup>10</sup> hence he noted that: "Time as a succession or simultaneity of events "moves" not forward but backward. People look more to the past for orientation of their being than to anything that might yet come into history"<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> J. T. Mbi, *Ecclesia in Africa Is Us*, (Yaounde, 2004), p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African concept of time*. *Africa Theological Journal*, 1, (1968), pp. 8-20.

<sup>7</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *New Testament eschatology in an African background*, (London: Oxford University Press 1971). p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

This conception of time and history helps us to put things in perspective and shapes the dimension of human existence in the universe. It does this by pointing out that time and history as a process, is to be understood as that moving "from the present to the past and, forward to some far-off event or goal"<sup>12</sup>. Based on Mbiti's understanding of the African concept of time<sup>13</sup>, we will explore this issue as discussed by various scholars in African literature so as to gain fuller understanding of the Esan concept of time and eschatology. Byang Kato in his: '*Theological Pitfalls in Africa*', outlined what he considered to be a Christian view of eschatology in light of current trends in religion, philosophy and science. In this regard, Kato rejects Mbiti's assumption that the *kamba* concepts are universal<sup>14</sup>. According to Kato, Mbiti has generalized far beyond what the scope of his research permits. Another African scholar, Byaruhanga Akiiki, states that:

Bantu time concepts do not fully support this idea that time is only a mental reality. The Bantu seem rather to define time in terms of a succession of events. Thus when people talk of "good times", they refer to good happenings or good events taking place. For the Bantu, the succession of events is a daily experience taken for granted<sup>15</sup>.

Further analyzing Mbiti's position, Kato points out that; the African lives a life which demonstrates an awareness of the future<sup>16</sup>. However, severe criticism has been rendered to Mbiti's position by some other scholars. For Scott Moreau, Mbiti's, negation of the future may not be entirely accepted by some. Moreau goes on to comment that the<sup>17</sup> answer to this problem does not lie solely with linguistics, mythical analysis and planning<sup>18</sup>. From all indication, Moreau assumed that Mbiti's understanding of the African concept of time cannot be regarded as definitive. At the same time, we must also recognize that Mbiti writing on time has indeed given us valuable insight to help us understand some of the traditional African orientations which forms a background to assimilating

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> *Loc., cit.*

<sup>15</sup> B. H. Kato, *Theological pitfalls in Africa*, (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangelical Publishing House, 1975) p 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>17</sup> A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, "The Philosophy and Theology of Time in Africa: The Bantu Case" *AFER*, 22, (1980), pp. 365-366.

<sup>18</sup> B.H. Kato, p. 60-61.

the essence of human existence in ethno-philosophy. As such, his contributions are not to be ignored, since they represent an insider's careful analysis and thoughts. In addition, they reflect aspects of a true understanding of the African mindset.

There is little doubt that in general, the traditional African focuses on the past far more than is done in the West<sup>19</sup>. However is Mbiti correct then in denying to African thought any substantial concept of future time? On observing that African societies are predominantly backward-looking, in the sense that the present is seen in terms of the past, and the social system and its relationships are determined by myths and history as well as the fact that rites, whether communal rituals or rites of passage, are also rooted in the past and conceived of in terms of primal events<sup>20</sup>, Parratt concluded that time in traditional Africa was not conceived of in linear terms, nor was it in any sense eschatological<sup>21</sup>. Thus, this strongly supports Mbiti's thesis.

In Newell's opinion, as cited by Ngamdeye Bako in his; *Eschatology in African Folk Religion* ', it is important to bear in mind that:

Further careful linguistic study is needed before any definitive statement can be made about the view of time in Africa as a whole. On the other hand, it may be asked whether there is even anything distinctively African about the view of time with which we are dealing. Perhaps traditional man-including African traditional man-is not so much seeking to abolish time or reject history as to affirm and celebrate the essential identity of past, present and future<sup>22</sup>.

In terms of Kwame Bediako's interpretation of Mbiti's African trilogy<sup>23</sup>, the African concept of time has three main features. Firstly, it is two-dimensional, with a long past, a present, and virtually no future. Secondly, African reckoning of time is concrete and specific, related to events but never mathematically verifiable. And thirdly, African time is related to history, but it always moves towards the past-from the present (the now) into the past. This

<sup>19</sup> A. S. Moreau, *A critique of John Mbiti 's understanding of the African concept of time*. East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology, 5, (1986), pp. 36-48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>21</sup> J. Parratt, *Time in Traditional African Thought*, Religion, 7, (1977), p. 123.

<sup>22</sup> Newell, 1975, p.91 in N. Bako, *Eschatology in African Folk Religion* Doctoral Dissertation on the Subject Missiology at the University of South Africa, December 2009, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> K. Bediako, *John Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology*, (New York: De Gruyter, 1993), pp, 22-23.

conception of time is related to a "religious ontology" where "to live is to be caught in a religious drama"<sup>24</sup>.

As a result of Mbiti's African concept of time and its emphasis on the past and present, contemporary Africans return to the past when uncertain (in the present) about what is going to happen. Time moves by creating an ever-increasing past. The future is in fact a forthcoming event rooted in the present, an expression of time discerned only through the present, in which the passing of seasons is rooted; as well as the birth and death of human beings and the passing of day and night. The Esan concept of time disagrees with Mbiti's concept of time among the Africans in some dimensions. Byahanga Akiiki's questions of: "Who determines that one is conceived, born, lives and dies in time? What is one expected to do with one's allotment of time, and by whom? What is time anyway and what is life in time all about?"<sup>25</sup> will serve as a touch light to the Esan's eschatological perspective of human existence. Although there appears to be some uncertainty as to whether time "moves" or whether we move through time. At any rate, there is agreement that in some sense, we are "headed toward the future" since it is clear that men plan, work and struggle in order that the future may be better than the past. Some even look forward to a "future life", after death, or for an "end of age".

## 2.2. Esan eschatology and human existence

The Esan people like other people view time in a cyclical way and also simply house the unilinear view of reality. Hence according to Riamela in his: '*African Tradition and Christianity in Dialogue*', "That the day and night cycle, the annual cycle of the season, the planting and harvesting periods apparently demonstrating the birth and death of these phenomenon has for so long dominated the human conduct in life"<sup>26</sup> and to large extent, these belief according to Nwosu "reassures the believer that death is incapable of annihilating man. He can lay hold to life again through the process of re-incarnation which opens up to him a series of re-birth"<sup>27</sup>. In their concept of time and human existence, the

<sup>24</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Concept of Time*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> A. B. T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, p. 357.

<sup>26</sup> D. Riamela, *African Tradition and Christianity in Dialogue*, (Ibadan: Claverianum Press, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> 27. Nwosu, 2004, p. 9 in P. O. Ali, *Esan Cosmology and Its Effect on The Social Behavior of The People*, (Lagos; Deocraft Communication, 2011), p. 21.

Esan people believe "*Tawwin ehiyon Oria ra agbon*" i.e that man can reincarnate seven times. They believe it is a privilege given to man by '*Osanobua*' either to correct the wrong done in the life before or to enjoy or share again in life. This is what the Esan understands to be '*irosó*'. This accounts for their belief in a life after death and in the continuity in existence of the ancestors. Indeed this Esan concept of time is a reconciliatory tool of life opposites.

That history is not a linear process moving to some future point. And that in fact, since to some, according to Mbiti<sup>28</sup> "the end of the world" is inconceivable, many African languages simply do not contain a future tense or a future history according to Mbi<sup>29</sup>. But this is not true for the Esan people and their language. This is because for the Esan, time as it is conceived has a moral implication for human existence as it serves as a guide and protector of the live and traditional values of the community. And as a tool, is used to assist people in the understanding of the present with purposefulness and guide against if necessarily such mistakes, if there are, in the future. This future time consciousness of the Esan people accounts for why they live the way they do and the names they give to their children which sometime talks of a future event, the reality of '*Osanobua*', time and in time existence of man-'*Oria*', and the the Esan concept of the world-'*Agbon*'. Hence they commonly say, '*Ebi mba mwan ukhun*' - our hope is in the sky.

In a dissimilar manner, for the Esan people, history is understood to be events and not dates. It is in light of such an understanding that an event which occurred in the past is held in high regard among the Esan people. The Esan ontology of time is correlated to a five-fold division of reality: God, spirits, humans, non-human animate and non-human inanimate creations. Human actions, birth and death fall within the ongoing interaction among these five social categories, hence we shall see later in this work the various stages of human existence in Esan ontology. However it is important to note that in the Esan concept of time and eschatology, while there is a physical distinction between humans and spirits as I noted earlier, they move within the same space and time, and therefore interact with each other. Hence, those who die maintain a certain constant interaction with the living, within the same social drama of a continuous social world or community.

---

<sup>28</sup> J. S. Mbiti, pp. 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> J. T. Mbi, *Loc., cit.*



The Esan are well noted, for not being time-conscious (when viewed from a Western time perspective). Before blaming them further, we must understand what time is for them. The Esan people do not think of time in-itself but as it 'is' that is, time is time for me. I do not count time, rather I experience it and I live it. Time is evaluated by what I do with it, what I achieve, what it offers me. Time is the totality of my being and the beauty of my existence. Put clearly, we can say that:

The westerner, we could say, counts time. He pays attention to time units such as seconds, minutes, hours, etc. and programs himself to follow these time units. He has invented the clock for this purpose. This again, follows from his <<objective vision>> time-as-it-is. He has objectified time to the point that he can even buy and sell it as a commodity. Time is money<sup>30</sup> he would say. This measured time is what the Greek calls *chronos*. By paying attention to time in this way the westerner has developed a linear conception of time. Time for him passes. What is past shall never be again. There is a linear progression and no unit of time past is repeatable<sup>31</sup>.

It is important to consider the Esan eschatology carefully as Charles Ryrie's did when he proposed eschatology for Africa, Hence emphasizing the importance of hermeneutics in the study of theology, he noted that:

Hermeneutics is that science which furnishes the principles of interpretation. These principles guide and govern anybody's system of theology. They ought to be determined before one's theology is systematized, but in practice the reverse is usually true<sup>32</sup>.

In his observation, Kato comments that: it is only by following the normal, grammatico-historical interpretation of a people would one be free from extreme subjectivism. To follow therefore, the allegorical method or to spiritualize normal concepts necessarily leads to subjectivism and preconceived notions<sup>33</sup>. The basic stages of the human person among the Esan people constitute a broad understanding of their eschatological belief. These stages are the pre - earthly, the earthly stage and death. Let us examine them in brief.

---

<sup>30</sup> B. H. Kato, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77-78.

<sup>33</sup> *Loc., cit.*

### 3. Basic stages of human existence in esan eschatology

The fundamental reality of human existence in Esan eschatology is in no little way a determinant of their concept and attitude to life generally. The onus of this eschatological analysis on human existence can be understood from the following positions.

#### 3.1. The Pre-Earthly Stage

This stage amongst the Esan people is the stage in which the human soul- 'Orion' is yet to assume its bodily form- '*Ebge*' and to be perceived in the physical world '*Agbon medagbe*'. It is the conception of the Esan people that every living soul is predetermined to live in a particular human body. And this, to a large extent can be influenced by the '*Ehi*' (Guardian Angel) so in asking for a child- '*Omon*' therefore, the parents will ask for the intercession of the '*Ehi*'- decider or question this is why the Esan in situations of this sort always say: '*Ebi ehi ta*' – 'what my decider say' or 'that which has been decided for me' or 'my destiny'. On good cases, the Esan also say "*Ehi mhen mhen*" – 'my angel is good'.

'*Ehi*' is a spiritual being who in the Esan community or hierarchical placement of beings exists in the level of the Divinities, yet immanently; it guides the activities of '*Oria*'-man on earth. Among the Esan people the primary duty of '*Ehi*' is to take control of mans destiny and ensure its actualization hence the Esan commonly say: "*Ehi chioya noria*" – "it's your angel that decides for you". '*Ehi*'-destiny is believe to be hidden and coded in "*Uhomon or Uhumu*"-the head of the human being this is why the Esan commonly say "*Uhumuenhen*"-bad head "*Unhumhumben sun mhen*" – my head leads me. This accounts for why a traditional Esan man will always wash his/her head first while having his bath believing that '*Uhumu odion*' – head is first and forbids unnecessary touching of his head by another. According to Ali in his; '*Esan Cosmology and its Effect on the Social Behavior of the people*', '*Uhumu or Uhomon*' is a very important part of the Esan bodily structure and has significance in the life of an individual. He noted that:

Sometimes in Esan, particularly when one is undertaking a very serious challenge; one touches one's head by saying "*Unhumhumben sun mhen*". Some make sacrifice to the guardian angel present in the head. In Benin, this is done

as represented in half calabash studded with cowries, also in Yoruba land, directly to the head<sup>34</sup>.

To this end, in asking for a child, the parents requests for a child with a good human soul, this is because; it is the soul according to the Esan people, which determines the kind of child that will be given girth to that is; a good or bad one.

### 3.2. The Earthly Stage

Given the explanation at conception, it is already believed that the soul has assumed the rightful human body. However, to protect and nurture the child to become the desired child, there are still efforts the parents will make to guard against bad influence or evil spirit. This is why pregnant woman amongst the Esan people are warned against walking in lonely places, going to river alone, going to fetch firewood alone or even warned not to communicate with some identified bad persons in the society. The period from the time of conception through the birth of a child, down to the age of reasoning is considered critical amongst the Esan people. This is because it is within that period that the child is vulnerable to bad influences. If this child is well protected from such influences, he/she develops into a good human person. On the contrary it becomes a bad human person.

The Esan believe strongly in the fact that proceeding from '*Aisagbonhi*' – the pre earthly world and having been given a destiny, '*Oria*' – man therefore, has a purpose on earth. A purpose marked out for him by '*Osanobulua*'. According to Ali this process is unique in that:

This is done by the person's soul going before God to choose how his/her life will be lived out before coming into the world "*Aisagbonhi*". He/she kneels before the creator and receives it in the presence of his guardian angel. Each man/woman has his/her specific purpose; he or she is himself or herself, even in identical twins. At the end of the earthly journey each person is accountable to God "*Aiyo noria*"<sup>35</sup>.

Traditionally, living in fulfillment of one's destiny is of outmost priority, hence everyman struggle to live fulfilling his unique, identical, unrepeatable de-

---

<sup>34</sup> P. O. Ali; *Esan Cosmology and Its Effect on the Social Behavior of the People*, (Lagos; Deocraft Communication, 2011), p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23

stiny. Consequently, any man who lags in this, is considered 'cursed' or a failure. In fact, he is less a man.

After birth, the child does not live in isolation in the Esan schema; he/she is born into a community of other human beings like him/her. Here he/she learns the necessary and essential tools for living with others and achieving his/her destiny. Communal life in 'the Esan community is grouped according to members' or age grades. Hence when the child reaches a certain age of reasoning, he/she is initiated into a group. There are three groups among the male folks in the Esan community. These are:

- A. '*Egbenugbele*'- the Scavengers,
- B. '*Igenes*'- the group before the elders
- C. '*Enedion*' -the Elders<sup>36</sup>.

Each of these groups is charged with certain responsibility according to its degree and interest. By initiation, one becomes a member of any of these groups and this is very ceremonious as it marks a hinge of responsibility and maturity. More so, promotion from one group to another is strongly out of necessity as some prerequisite must be met especially on the death of an elder or any member of the "*Enedion*". Hence living responsibly in the community with others in thought, word and action is very imperative. When a member of the "*Enedion*" group dies, he still none the less, occupies his position until after three months before any move to fill his position is made. Within these three months, all his rights and privileges are duly given to him by his eldest son until after.

### 3.3. Death ('*Uwu*')

'*Uwu*'-death is the last among the rites of passage '*Oria*'-man goes through on his earthly stage of existence (among birth, puberty and marriage). The Esan see death as that point or process through which '*Orion*'-the soul detaches from '*Egbe*'-the body and moves into the abode of the spirits. Death is of two folds for the Esan; the good death- which is that which occurs at a ripe age with children to perform the funeral rites and bad death- that commonly known as 'untimely'. Funeral rites are very essential traditional and spiritual exercises as without it, the dead is denied an ancestral 'welcome home'. These are the ritual of separation, transition and incorporation of the deceased into the great beyond.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Following from this, the Esan people believe that the spirit of the deceased go into the presence of the supreme being to give account of his/her earthly life after which he/she is either rewarded or punished; sent to a place the Esan describes as that which is full of 'palm kernel shell'<sup>37</sup>, piercing the wicked from all sides and making him uncomfortable.

According to Battista Mondin in his: *Philosophical Anthropology*, "Death is a sign of the creatureness of man. ('Uwu'-) Death for ('Oria'-) the human person is tri-logically significant that is; it is inescapable, necessary and the direct consequence of his composite structure, namely his psycho- physical constitution"<sup>38</sup>. Although, the Esan people are not unaware of these experiences of earthly termination of physical life, they also have the notion and belief in the reality of the life after death. In their view, the kind of life one lived while on earth, determines the goodness or badness of the life he will be rewarded with after death.

Since the good life is desirable for every human being, the Esan people have their moral norms to enable the individual develop into a good human person. Here there is co-operation of the individual with the regulatory norms in the society. It is also because of the consciousness of death 'Oria'-man in Esan community endeavors to be charitable to other. This consciousness of the 'life after' can be said to support immensely the concept of 'Oria'- man as a 'being-with' others in the community as it ensures communal sharing, caring, interpersonal relationship, interpersonal involvement, valuation and respect for the other. This is because it is the notion of the Esan people that only those who are good to others, in the community-'Usuabgon' will be rewarded with good life after death. It is from this understanding of 'Uwu'-death that the concept of the life after death and the immortality of 'Orion'-the soul, emerged. The Esan people would totally agree with E. B. Idowu who describe ('Uwu')-death "as a means whereby the present earthly existence is changed for another"<sup>39</sup>. 'Uwu'-death in Esan eschatology therefore, is a transformation or movement, journey or transition into another life-'Agbon'. In their concept of time and human existence as shown above, it is made clear that the Esan people believe that man can re-incarnate seven times, "*Igba hilon na ra agbgon*". They believe it is a privilege

<sup>37</sup> *Loc., cit.*

<sup>38</sup> B. Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, (Bangalore India: Theological Publication, 1991), pp. 264 -265.

<sup>39</sup> E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longman, 1962), pp. 79/182.

given to man by '*Osanobua*' either to correct the wrong done in the life before or to enjoy or share again in life. This is better expressed in their concept of '*Iroso*'-re-incarnation. No doubt all this put together, accounts for a better understanding of the Esan belief in a life after death, in the continuity and in existence of the ancestors. Indeed this Esan concept of time is a reconciliatory tool of human existential opposites.

Below is a diagrammatic illustration of the imports of the Esan belief of time and eschatology. To a large extent, this will aid a clearer understanding of the Esan concept of life in totality especially in their concept of man as a 'being-with'.

#### D. Esan Time and Eschatology of Life.

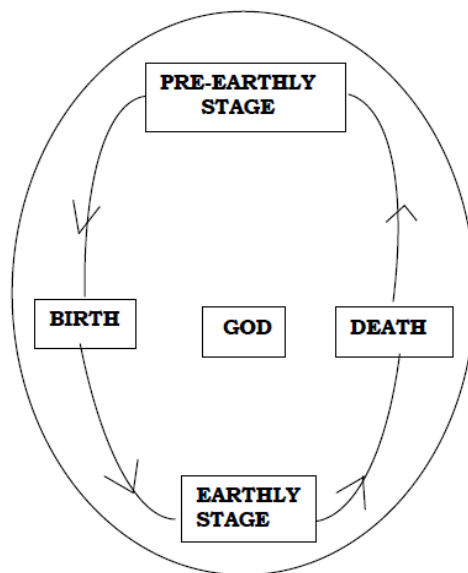


Figure: 1.: Esan time and Eschatology of life.

From the above diagrammatic illustration, the conception of time and eschatology in Esan ontology or ethnographic/ethno-philosophical studies is connected to other events in the life and history of man. Human life in Esan time and eschatological belief follows also another rhythm or cycle which knows neither end nor radical alteration. This is the rhythm or cycle of the pre-earthly li-

fe, the earthly life which includes; initiation, marriage, procreation, old age; Death and entry into the company of the departed. Finally, the return to the creator around whom mans' life is centered<sup>40</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ethno-philosophy is a particular current of thought which considers wisdom as in African philosophy as derived from a peoples culture and religious background. This thought provoking perspective of African study has largely contributed to African literature hence writing of intellectuals like Alex Kagame, John Mbiti, E. A Ruch and Anyanwu, Kwesi Wiredu, A. G. Bello, Joseph Omoregbe, many others including V. E. Obinyan expresses this fundamental echelon. This work therefore is one of such contributions. In this study so far, human existence in Esan ethnography and ethno-philosophy is not an aimless or purposeless process, it has a value and a meaning, it has an end or destination. This determines man's attitude to life. From our analysis above on time and eschatology, we can understand that the Esan world-view like most other Africans such as the Akan, Ashantis, Igbo's, Yorubas, Effic, Afemai e.t.c, encapsulates a broad and exhaustive idea of the concept of life and time and this has a great influence and effect on the Esan people in their thought and behavioral patterns or approach to the fundamentals of reality<sup>41</sup> as much as an understanding of human existence. This forms the background for their dynamic and dual view of '*Oria*'- man as a being belonging to two different worlds; the here and now- '*Enabiuwana*' and the hereafter- '*Enabiazebu*'. To a large extent, this gives practical explanations to why Esan anthropology is the central reconciling point of the Esan world-view of life and time as all realities are considered only in relation to man- '*Oria*' who is '*Eno yan abgon*' -the one who own the world; who is at the center of all things giving them their bearing and significance from his position, meaning and end.

The views of Anyanwu and Ruch, captures the onus of human existence in Esan eschatology. For the Esan people, no conception of an existence is strictly independent of the others. All are ultimately related to a common creator and

<sup>40</sup> E. A. Ruch and K. C. Anyanwu, p., 7.

<sup>41</sup> V. E. Obinyan, '*Man As A Being-With In Esan Ontology*' (A Ph.D dissertation in department of Philosophy Faculty of Artsnamdi Azikiwe University Awka July, 2012), p.78.

are ontologically connected. So the Esan people share from the common African view namely that all realities are permeated and animated by a common vital force, human being inclusive. It is against this background that relationship with others must bear certain exigencies in the earthly state of human existence.

Some philosophers might debunk our analysis as too religious and communalistic and call it folk-philosophy as they say philosophy is individualistic, like thought itself, it is instrumental. However no statement of confidence can be made of the African belief system outside the full acceptance of the fact that they, the Africans, are naturally religious people. From the affirmation of J. Mbiti as cited in Menkiti's *"On the Normative Conception of the Person."* the African is profoundly and essentially a religious person<sup>42</sup>, it could be deduced that from an in-depth study and a wealthy understanding of the Esan people, one could come to terms with most of their philosophical concepts of the universe and its being as well as the eschatological backdrop of human existence. From all indications therefore the Esan religious concept is from a cosmological observation and understanding in the belief that '*Osanobua*'-the Supreme Being is the beginning and end or the source and summit of everything in the universe which man in turn is the central point.

Consequently therefore this contribution to African literature, emphasize that the Esan religion and philosophy like other African's seem two but is one reality due to the singular fact that both are holistically seen as one inseparable reality. This accounts for why the Esan culture or ontology conceptually springs from a religious locale. Borne out of this is the conclusion that the physical and spiritual are but two dimensions of one and the same universe, hence for the Esan people and indeed all Africans, either viewed from a time point or a space perspective, the universe is characteristically a religious one, and human life in it is a religious experience. The God-consciousness of the Esan people can be seen as observed in every instrument of culture. Language, art, proverbs, songs, names and so on, this is demonstrated in the proverb that "no one shows a child the Supreme Being"<sup>43</sup>. Hence any study of African religion and philosophy must be done with a measure of objectivity as this emphatically underscores the reason for the Esan belief in the reality of God-'*Osanobua*' and human destiny, human free-will, responsibility, death and indeed all other cosmic realities in the

<sup>42</sup> I. A. Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of the Person." Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), pp. 32-329.

<sup>43</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and philosophy*, *Ibid.*



Esan world. The concept of human existence in the Esan philosophical outlook is that which cannot be considered outside the scope of 'Osanobua'- the Supreme Being, who is his maker, his beginning and his end and who determines by destiny his nature during the course of his existence.

Clearly from the above, even though the Esan analysis of human existence raise fundamental philosophical problems or questions such as that of the authenticity of human free will, the question of who takes responsibility for our actions and problem of determinism or destiny, it is an indisputable fact that Esan ontology or metaphysics has to some extent served a very important function of creating conducive atmosphere for the realization of very important psychological and moral needs of the individual and community at large. It is a metaphysics that is instrumental in tackling fundamental questions surrounding human life, problems of ethics and society and, as such, has been instrumental to questions of cohesion, social control, and law and order within Esan communities<sup>44</sup>.

Even though 'village' have become a thing of the mind in a fast globalizing world, It is necessary, therefore, to ponder on where such a conception of reality, of Being, of human life and existence evolved and where it can be properly located if not in traditional philosophy. Even though the issues of human destiny, free will, determinism, responsibility and after life remain problematic issues surrounding our subject, It should be borne in mind in the Esan philosophy, the human person is both a subject to fate ad freedom he is both a victim of his pre-earthly restrictions and an architect of his own future. The Esan like other Africans believe in one God, in divinities and ancestors, respect elders have elaborate rituals and ceremonies, etc... but these do not constitute the African philosophy. African philosophy does not refer to the beliefs and ideas of individuals and groups but to the fundamental and general principle governing the community of people called Africans. African cultural beliefs which shape African institution and behavior exist whether individuals know them or not. But philosophy is a conscious effort to know or justify the general principles governing such beliefs and transmit it through African literature; this no doubt is the energetic factor behind this study on human existence in Esan eschatology from an ethnographic/ethno-philosophical perspective. The burden on African philo-

---

<sup>44</sup> I.I. Asouzu, "Science and African Metaphysics: A Search for Direction." *Philosophy in Africa*. Boston Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, August 1998.<http://www.paedeia.com> (1 5/7/2011).

sophers in every African literary art therefore is to continually undertake constructive, deconstructive, reconstructive and integrative reflections and analysis on our African phenomena inherent culture, customs or traditional and religious belief. However, the result of our critical, hermeneutic and phenomenological analysis of human existence in Esan eschatology is that human existence is all-englobing as it illuminates all aspects of reality as they affect us and it is in this recognition that the essence of our being as human persons and more importantly as individuals who live in the community is amplified. This periscope ethnographic/ethno-philosophical analysis of man's existence in Esan eschatology lime lights the inter-deep relationship between all realities visible, invisible, material and spiritual as well as the particular and universal. This contributes to other scholarly expressions of culture, traditional and religious beliefs in African literature.

#### Abstract

African literature embodies a profound ethnographic or ethno-philosophical diverse conceptions and analysis of history and existence of man. Although it has in no little way, been considered synonymously with the teleological movement of time hence the questions 'From where is man?' 'what is life?' 'why death?' and 'to where does man go' are underlying imperatives of human existence and this to a large extent, constitutes eschatology. But what is eschatology and to what extent does it envelope a broad understanding of human existence? How much does this structures human attitude to life itself? Does this qualify for a people's philosophy? In this study we shall examine human existence in Esan eschatology especially as it constitute a broad ideological frame work to an understanding to fundamental issues that constitute being and beings and as a peoples philosophy to certain global demands. The researcher adopts a critical, hermeneutic and phenomenological method in crystallizing the wealth or quintessence and relevance of the Esan eschatological analysis of human existence in African literature and philosophy and concludes with the affirmation that African ethnography and philosophy affirms that human existence cuts across three transcendental stages in a teleological movement through fundamental or existential realities which brings his will, choice and responsibility to play.

**Key words:** *eschatology, human existence, Esan, death, immortality, soul, time, religion*

#### Bibliography

- An interview with Pa. Pious Obinyan, age 72, on; *The Origin of Man*, Ubiaji, Esan South East local Government Area, Edo State. Nigeria, on 12/5/2011.  
S. E. McGinn, *Summary of Christian eschatology*.

- E. I. Metuh, *African Religion in Western Conceptual Scheme the Problem of Interpretation*(Ibadan:P.I, 1985), p. 19.
- E. A. Ruch and K. C. Ayanwun, *African Philosophy; An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Africa*, (Roma: Catholic Book Agency, 1981), p. 81.
- J. T. Mbi, *Ecclesia in Africa Is Us*, (Yaounde, 2004), p. 72.
- J. S. Mbiti, *African concept of time. Africa Theological Journal*, 1, (1968), pp. 8-20.
- J. S. Mbiti, *New Testament eschatology in an African background*, (London: Oxford University Press 1971). p. 20.
- B. H. Kato, *Theological pitfalls in Africa*, (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangelical Publishing House, 1975) p 30.
- A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, "The Philosophy and Theology of Time in Africa: The Bantu Case" *AFER*, 22, (1980), pp. 365-366.
- A. S. Moreau, *A critique of John Mbiti 's understanding of the African concept of time*. *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 5, (1986), pp. 36-48.
- J. Parratt, *Time in Traditional African Thought*, *Religion*, 7, (1977), p. 123.
- Newell, 1975, p.91 in N. Bako, *Eschatology in African Folk Religion* Doctoral Dissertation on the Subject Missiology at the University of South Africa, December 2009, p. 41.
- K. Bediako, *John Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology*, (New York: De Gruyter, 1993), pp. 22-23.
- D. Riamela, *African Tradition and Christianity in Dialogue*, (Ibadan: Claverianum Press, 1992), p. 7.
- Nwosu, 2004, p. 9 in P. O. Ali, *Esan Cosmology and Its Effect on The Social Behavior of The People*, (Lagos; Deocraft Communication, 2011), p. 21.
- P. O. Ali; *Esan Cosmology and Its Effect on the Social Behavior of the People*, (Lagos; Deocraft Communication, 2011), p. 22.
- B. Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, (Bangalore India: Theological Publication, 1991), pp. 264-265.
- V. E. Obinyan, 'Man As A 'Being-With' In Esan Ontology' (A Ph.D dissertation in department of Philosophy Faculty of Artsnnamdi Azikiwe University Awka July, 2012), p.78.
- E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longman, 1962), pp. 79/182.
- E. A. Ruch and K. C. Anyanwu, p., 7.
- I. A. Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of the Person." Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), pp. 32-329.
- J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and philosophy*, *Ibid*.
- I.I. Asouzu, "Science and African Metaphysics: A Search for Direction." *Philosophy in Africa*. Boston Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, August 1998.<http://www.paeedia.com> (1 5/7/2011).

Valentine Ehichioya Obinyan, Ph.D – Department of Philosophy and Religions, faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City. Nigeria.