

THE EXISTENTIAL-PRAGMATIC REALITY OF DEATH IN URHOBO MYTH AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR POPULATION ETHICS

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Abstract: *One serious problem that the world is facing is the environmental crisis. One of the things that negatively impacts environmental well-being is overpopulation. As there is growth in the human population, human beings have to make use of more natural resources. Humans fell more trees to give way to human beings, thus affecting biodiversity and denying other beings in the forest their habitation. Human beings create more waste that, if not properly managed, affects the environment. This is why there is a need for population ethics to strike a balance so that the human impact on the earth is minimal. This paper argues that natural death and other forms of death, as long as they are not induced, have a place in mitigating overpopulation. The paper hermeneutically and analytically uses an Urhobo myth about death to propound this claim. The paper finds that overpopulation is a reality, and death is also a reality. It concludes that a stoic acceptance of death without undue prolongation of human life can contribute to creating an environmentally sustainable world.*

Keywords: Existentialism, Pragmatism, Reality, Death, Urhobo, Mythology, Population, Ethics.

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Introduction

One serious social and environmental problem that has confronted the world from ancient times until the present is overpopulation. Bish (2020) rightly notes that any increase in population implies more resources that will be used by humans, such as water, food, housing, healthcare, energy, and transportation. The use of more resources by humans when not well managed causes environmental degradation, resource scarcity, wars, etc. Other dangers that overpopulation can cause are discussed by various scholars; for Ehrlich and Ehrlich (1968), overpopulation causes environmental problems; for Hardin (1968), it affects the carrying capacity of the earth; and for Bloom and Canning (2008), it affects economic growth. The fact is that the geographic earth does not have unlimited space for human beings to live. The physical earth has a limited carrying capacity. Overpopulation does have a negative impact on the earth and its natural resources. Chappell and MacAskill (2022) have shown that utilitarians have argued that growth in population affects the quality of human life on Earth. Overpopulation also affects the well-being of other non-human beings on Earth. The larger the population, the more forest has to be cut down for human habitation.

Because of the grave dangers of overpopulation, various measures and policies have been adopted by different governments to curb population growth. In biblical days, one of the Pharaohs of Egypt adopted the killing of male Hebrew children at birth to curb the Hebrew population. The *Encyclopaedia* (2023) states that population policies include those of recent China's one-child policy, India's coercion and sterilisation, and Indonesia's vigorous fertility control.

The main thesis of this paper is that Urhobo's indigenous beliefs about death can add value to the debate on population ethics. Population ethics is informed by people's beliefs and attitudes. Whatever belief or attitude helps to ethically manage the human population should be studied. Imagine a world in which there is no physical death and the human population continues to rise exponentially. Wolf (2001) has opined that some scholars have affirmed that this will lead to unsustainable exploitation of the earth's resources. Due to the fact that death occurs and people depart from this life, the human population is reduced, even if minimally. The paper is not arguing for a sadist attitude that glorifies death. But the reality is that death is also an essential part of religious doctrine and many religious

philosophies. It is an issue that should not be discounted but discussed and dialogued about. Though death is generally not a pleasant experience for many human beings, it is an existential reality that should not be ignored.

Conceptual Analysis

Concepts that require clarification here are existential, pragmatic, death, Urhobo, myths, and population ethics. Existential as used in this paper is linked with existentialism. Abbagnano (2013) writes that existentialism is "...any of various philosophies, most influential in continental Europe from about 1930 to the mid-20th century, that have in common an interpretation of human existence in the world that stresses its concreteness and its problematic character" (p.1). Philosophy Basics (2023) asserts that existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. According to Omoregbe (1991), core themes in existentialism are irrationalism, man and the world, the others, freedom of choice, responsibility, anguish, commitment, the facticity of

human existence, and death. Existential as used here refers to human beings facing and tackling the reality of human experience, the vicissitudes of life, and facing the fact of their finitude and death.

In the light of the reality of death, human beings need to be pragmatic. They should not build castles in the air and forget to grapple with the fact of their existence. McDermid (2023) states that: “Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that includes those who claim that an ideology or proposition is true if it works satisfactorily, that the meaning of a proposition is to be found in the practical consequences of accepting it, and that unpractical ideas are to be rejected” (p.1). Pragmatism refers to what works and moves beyond theoretical or idealism. A thing is pragmatic when it is what helps human beings to get the desired results that enhance their existence in a meaningful manner. Cline (2019) avers that pragmatism is an American philosophy that originated in the 1870s but became popular in the early 20th century.

According to pragmatism, the truth or meaning of an idea or a proposition lies in its observable practical consequences rather than in any

metaphysical attributes. Pragmatism can be summarized by the phrase ‘whatever works, is likely true. Existential-pragmatism as used in this work entails that human beings radically acknowledge the reality of their finite human life/existence on earth and so engage themselves in what works and helps them achieve and accomplish a meaningful and purposeful life.

One of the areas of human life that human beings need to be pragmatic and realistic about is the phenomenon of death. They cannot escape from it. Death is the cessation of human life on earth. When an individual breathes his/her last breath and can no longer inhale oxygen, the person is generally considered to be dead. Pallis (2023) states that death is “the total cessation of life processes that eventually occurs in all living organisms - state of human death has always been obscured by mystery and superstition, and its precise definition remains controversial, differing according to culture and legal systems”(p.1). Since death happens to all human beings, they need to face it courageously without being afraid.

Omoregbe (1991) opines that for Heidegger, death is a meaningful aspect of human life, but for Sartre, it is a meaningless absurdity. The position of this paper is that death is a meaningful aspect of human existence that human beings should face pragmatically and realistically in accepting it and living well until it comes. By accepting death and avoiding its undue prolongation, human beings help to contribute to building a sustainable planet.

The paper focuses on Urhobo death mythology. The Urhobo people live in Delta State, in South-South of Nigeria. They are the largest ethnic group in Delta State. Idjakpo (2010) citing Otite, Umukoro, and Ukere notes that some Urhobo groups migrated from the Benin area, while for other scholars some clans like Ughelli, and Ewu claim their origin from the Ijo area. Before the advent of foreign missionary projects in Africa, the Urhobo were mainly African traditional religious worshippers. They like other indigenous people believed and ordered their lives by religious myths and beliefs.

What is a myth? Mark (2018) states that: “Myths are a part of every culture in the world and are

used to explain natural phenomena, where a people came from and how their civilization developed, and why things happen as they do. At their most basic level, myths comfort by giving a sense of order and meaning to what can sometimes seem a chaotic world”(p.1). Buxton (2022) opines that:

...myth, a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief. It is distinguished from symbolic behaviour (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (temples, icons). Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience. The term mythology denotes both the study of myth and the body of myths belonging to a particular religious tradition (p. 1).

A principal question in this research is, can myths assist in population ethics? Have and Neves (2021) state that population ethics is an area of applied

ethics concerned with the ethical problems caused by human activities aimed at controlling who is born and how people are born in the future. Pummer (2014) states that: “it is a rigorous investigation into plausibility of competing theories about the value or moral desirability of different populations of people, where these populations may vary in terms of:- personal identity (the populations compared may contain different people)–number (the populations may be of different sizes), and,–the quality of life (the people in these populations may be at different levels of quality of life, or well-being)” (p. 1). Of concern to this paper is the quality of life when the population increases there is often a scarcity of resources in human society.

Need for Population Ethics

Population ethics is a special issue in environmental philosophy. Wolf (2001) states that: “Environmental philosophers have not generally devoted attention to the growth of human population, but it is clear that population growth is one of the most important environmental problems of our time. For Wolf (2001), “unless human population growth is

slowed and stabilized it is unlikely that efforts to reduce the rate of environmental destruction will not be successful” (p. 374).

Since overpopulation negatively affects the quality of people’s lives it is imperative that there are ethical considerations on population issues. It is certain that more people put more pressure on scarce resources on Earth. But the way that population is managed also matters. Human life in Urhobo tradition and many other world religious philosophies is a gift from the almighty and supreme being. This gift is sacred and has worth and value. Even secular human rights declarations such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights acknowledge that human beings have a right to life. This is why almost all human societies outlaw murder, arson, and other threats to human life. Life is to be preserved and safeguarded.

The population question matters. There is certainly a difference between 100 persons living in a village and 500 persons living in the same village in terms of natural resources and social facilities. More people put pressure on resources as they will need more natural resources and more social facilities.

There is also the question of waste. As human beings make use of natural resources and social infrastructures they generate waste. When those wastes are not well managed, they cause more environmental problems and ill health for humans. There is also the issue of the carrying capacity of the earth. And so, there is a need for population ethics and policies that respect basic human rights and ethical values but at the same time help to manage population growth. In light of all these, there is a need for population ethics and policies to help manage the human population. The Urhobo death mythology can help inform population ethics and policies.

Urhobo Myth on Death

Though a concern of this paper is with death as presented in Urhobo mythology, it is helpful to state some general understanding of death in Urhobo thought and culture. Erhiurhoro (2020) states that:

In Urhobo cosmology, the people believe that the spirit does not die. Death to the Urhobo man is a spiritual process of changing the mortal body through decay while the spirit moves to join his ancestors in the land of the dead. This

metaphysical thought is almost the same in the whole of Africa. This was widely buttressed by the literary works of Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Zaynab Ankali, Ngugi Wa Thiogo and many other literary authors across Africa.

Nabofa (2005) writes that Urhobo people believe that “the rhythm of human existence” is cyclical One is born, grows old and dies to be brought into life again by his offspring and/or relations to repeat the same process as many more times as possible” (p. 287). It should be noted that though there is reincarnation, it is not everybody who reincarnates back to mortal life. Though it was God’s original plan that human beings should live forever by renewing themselves as snake sloughs off their old skin, Nabofa (2005) states an argument among humans and animals over the fate and duration of creatures’ life on earth, which made God allow death to occur. This is clearly brought out in the myth narrated below.

One of the most told Urhobo myths about the origin and existence of death is that concerning the journey of the dog and toad to God. Kindly permit a

long quotation here that narrates the myth. *The Oxford Reference* (2002) narrates that:

Oghene (*Oghenukpabe*) is the creator of the world and of life and death. Connected with the sky, he is at the junction of the earth and sky. *Oghene* is good and kind, though he punishes evil, even by death. An emema provided each child by *Oghene* is responsible for the child's welfare. At death, the personal spirit leaves the world and goes to the underworld where life continues much as it did on earth. Originally, *Oghene* created humans to live forever. When a man grew really old, he would be regenerated by sloughing off his old skin like a snake, and assume the skin and vigor of a young man. This process was to be repeated, and so man was to live forever. But as time went on, men increased and the earth became overpopulated. There arose an argument among the men and animals on earth as to what should be done to control the growing population. The dog argued that man should live forever, that *Oghene* should be implored to extend the frontiers of the earth to accommodate the increasing population. The

dog's stand was prompted by his intimate association with man. The toad argued that anyone who dies should go home for good: space in the universe was limited and there was no room for further expansion of the earth. The dog and toad were told to take their views to *Oghene* in heaven. The views of the one who arrived there first would be accepted, after it had been ratified by *Oghene*, as the natural law about death. They started on their race to *Oghene*. The dog soon outran the toad. Convinced that it would get to *Oghene* before the toad, the dog relaxed, looking for food. It went off the road, overfed itself, and fell asleep. While the dog was sleeping, the toad continued its race. The toad got to heaven first, and said that man must not live forever but must die. The dog woke up later and hurried to cover lost ground, only to find to its dismay and that of man that the toad had already arrived and delivered its message, and that its opinion had been accepted as binding on all creatures. Death came into the world to stay (p.1).

The above myth adequately relates that the origin of death is connected with population issues.

The earth is becoming overpopulated. Something needs to be done. The animals travelled to the Supreme Being who created human life to inquire of him what needs to be done. The Supreme Being allowed the position of the toad to prevail. The traditional name of the toad comes from this myth. Eriwo (2005) relates that the traditional name of the toad, *Orowhuruokpo* (he who died should go) comes from that myth. The toad said, “*Owhwokpo*” which means the one who dies should go home. Home is returning back to the creator. In generality, in traditional African cultures and societies, people had equanimity and serenity about death. Death is not what was dreaded as you have it in modern society. Death does not end life, for as Burnham (2000) puts it, “For African people, life is a never-ending cycle” (p.49), and there was an “unrivalled acceptance of death, though it is viewed with deep suspicion since it will always be wholly unnatural in the created order of things” (p. 49). Pragmatically human beings have accepted death as the end of human life on earth, but also as a beginning and continuation in the next realm.

Eriwo (2005) argues that though it was the toad that brought the message of death to human

beings, death was created by God. Among the Urhobo people and other West African peoples, Eriwwo (2005b) notes that the death of a person who attained extremely old age is seen as going home, for "...the dead are not dead but go on living in another dimension form where they largely control the destinies of the living" (p. 224). Nabofa (2005) corroborates this by saying that the Urhobo person does not see this world as his eternal place, it is temporary and he sees death as going home. The human body, "*Ugboma*" in Urhobo decays in the soil but his spirit (*Erhi*) departs to the spiritual realms. Nabofa (2005) has rightly noted that there may be some conflict in the Urhobo doctrine of eschatology, for the dead reincarnates back to this mortal life, and then are remaining in the world of the ancestors. He notes that some try to resolve this conflict by affirming that only those who are not qualified to enter the world of their ancestors reincarnate. This debate shall not be entered into here, in order not to derail from the focus of this paper. In Urhobo culture, it is the death of children, young people or those who die in mysterious circumstances that is generally considered tragic and very painful.

Population Ethics Informed by Urhobo Thoughts on Death

A central thesis of this paper is that population ethics should take into consideration the Urhobo indigenous beliefs about the reality of death. Natural death, not human-induced death should be seen and welcomed as the divine instrument of *Oghene* (the Supreme Being) to manage population growth. Natural death especially one that comes after a ripe old age is not something to be shunned or rejected. It is a veritable means of passage to the next life, which is equally a very important life also.

The above Urhobo myth on death originated from the context of population growth on the earth. This is why this paper thinks that it has a contemporary application in the population debate. Natural death is not an accident on the path of the Supreme Being. It was permitted by the Supreme Being as a way of controlling the growing population on Earth. This implies that natural death should not be seen as an enemy of humankind. The myth of death that has to do with the toad means that the person who dies should go home. There is a home outside this earth.

Human beings are pilgrims on Earth. They are here on a sacred pilgrimage. Through death, they return back home. Returning back home then is beneficial to both people here on earth and those in the next life. In returning home, more geographic and political spatial space is created for others to come into human existence. At the same time, people journey to the next life. Though it is natural death that is welcomed and acceptable after a ripe old age, by extension even tragic death becomes also an avenue through which people depart from this earth. This is not to in any way to support causing the death of people to give room for new people to enter the earth's space. There is also the fact that there are some forms of death that are tragic and unacceptable. Causing one's death through suicide and causing other people's death through murder, arson, terrorism, assassination, etc are criminal and are to be denounced. No one should see these as forms of population growth management.

One fundamental issue that population ethics deals with is the question of the quality of life. It is often a reality of life that aged persons often suffer from a lot of health challenges and they get to a certain

age that the quality of their lives seems to be nothing to write home about in terms of the suffering and pain that they are undergoing. Natural death, not induced death can be a sweet way to overcome those pain and suffering. Therefore, it can be welcomed as providential. For the mental well-being of people and for consolation at the point of death, natural death should be welcomed with a good attitude.

When natural death is welcomed it can help people prepare for death in a healthy manner and help people live happier lives. When people live in anxiety of death and constant fear it can impede their activities. Living in fear of death can eclipse people's positive image and prospects. The way death is thought of is an important issue in population ethics for population ethics is also concerned about the well-being and welfare of existing people. This paper disagrees with theologies, philosophies, epistemologies, and thought systems that promote forceful population policies to curb population growth. Death in a way controls the growth of the human population thus it has a pragmatic purpose in the human story. This does not mean that death is to be forced or caused. Crimes against humanity and war

crimes such as genocide, ethnocide, etc remain heinous and grave crimes and evils in human history. Likewise, evils like eugenics, racism, apartheid, etc are to be condemned as they see some populations of humans as inferior and should be denied basic rights or eliminated.

This paper pointedly argues that population policies should be open to seeing natural death as something to be welcomed. Therefore, policies should be created that make the end of life either of aged people or people suffering from terminal sickness enjoyable and pleasurable. Allowing death to occur not by forcing it, imposing it, or causing it, can be a great relief to those family members who have borne the untold hardship of family members at the point of death. The term allowing as used here does not mean there should be no palliative or curative care for the aged and those at the point of death. It simply means that when death comes on its own even after all the care for the sick and others, there should be a mindset of serenity towards it. This notion of allowing death to occur naturally and take its course is not morally unacceptable. The Holy See (1994) enunciates that:

Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected (p. 549).

In Urhobo traditional thought, death is to be accepted especially when it comes at a ripe old age. Aged persons in Urhobo culture and even in other African cultures have often prayed for death in their old age and longed for it. Donovan (2019) commenting on the position of the Vatican states:

The key principle in this statement is that one does not will to cause death. When a person has an underlying terminal disease, or their heart, or some other organ, cannot work without mechanical assistance, or a therapy being proposed is dangerous, or has little chance of

success, then not using that machine or that therapy results in the person dying from the disease or organ failure they already have. The omission allows nature to take its course. It does not directly kill the person, even though it may contribute to the person dying earlier than if aggressive treatment had been done.

The issue here is about the quality of life. The death that occurs naturally should be seen as allowing people to go home. Since overpopulation can reduce the quality of life, and cause conflicts and violence over material resources, the death that occurs naturally should be allowed to take its cause. It should be made clear that this idea of allowing death that occurs naturally to take its course does not amount to euthanasia. Donovan (2019) comes to mind again here when he states:

We must, therefore, ask the question ‘will the withdrawal of nutrition and hydration allow the person to die, or kill the person?’ When it will allow a person to die from an underlying condition, rather than unnecessarily prolonging their suffering, it may be removed. So, for

example, in the last hours, even days, of a cancer patient's life, or if a sick person's body is no longer able to process food and water, there is no moral obligation to provide nutrition and hydration. The patient will die of their disease or their organ failure before starvation or dehydration could kill them. However, when the withdrawal of nutrition and hydration is intended to kill the person, or will be the immediate and direct cause of doing so, quite apart from any disease or failure of their bodies, then to withdraw food and water would be an act of euthanasia, a grave sin against the natural law and the law of God.

This is akin to the view of Scott (2009) who writes that: "the standard Catholic teaching since the new medical technologies have been developing is that when one is near death or terminally ill, one need not start or continue procedures that merely prolong dying. The same moral consensus held about persons who were so brain damaged that they were in what was judged by the doctors to be a permanent coma, incapable of revival. In this case, treatments such as a

ventilator or an artificial feeding and hydration tube would be considered “extraordinary.”

Gula (1987) states that: “According to the Roman Catholic perspective, we are not obliged to ward off death at all costs, but we should not deliberately intervene to bring death about....Thus death may not be directly sought, but it may be tolerated as an inevitable side effect of one's goal (such as the relief of suffering)” (P. 28). The reason for citing these immediate preceding sources is to show that allowing death when it comes and not prolonging dying with extraordinary means is in consonance with the Urhobo myth that affirms human beings seeing death as part of their fate. The quality of life of the dying matters also. Since the quality of life of some of the dying has gravely diminished and prolonging it with extraordinary means may only add more suffering and pain, death can be allowed to take its cause. Keeping in mind that as in Urhobo tradition and other religious philosophies, death does not end life but is a gateway to the next life.

Conclusion

The Urhobo mythology of death is existential and pragmatic. It deals with the real issue of human existence. It pragmatically shows how human beings should accept death as fate and meet it with fortitude. By accepting the death that comes naturally or even accidentally but is not forced or induced, resources are made available to enhance the quality of life of the living family members and others. The pragmatic reality of death is that it reduces the number of people on Earth. What should really matter for human beings is a life well lived, not necessarily longevity. In light of existentialist philosophy that gives priority to human freedom, the facticity of life, grappling with human anxiety, and facing death with courage, human beings should preoccupy themselves with how to live ethical and moral lives and make sense of their existence on earth. Death is an existential reality. It is a reality and an event that human beings must confront and grapple with. When it occurs on its own, whether at a young age or through accidents or other unforeseen circumstances (not forced or induced), it should be prepared for and faced. It should be allowed to occur; it helps to manage the human population on Earth. A geospatial avenue is created for new human beings to come to earth and exist.

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