

BOOK REVIEW:

**EXPLORING THE QUESTION OF REINCARNATION IN
AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY WITHIN INTRACULTURAL AND
INTERCULTURAL CONTEXTS**

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With this excellent 275-page book titled [Reincarnation: A Question in the African Philosophy of Mind], the Ghanaian philosopher Hasskei M. Majeed has thrown down the gauntlet to the sceptics among African philosophers who believe that the time is not yet ripe for African philosophy to displace Western philosophy as the central focus of African philosophy departments. The avalanche of high quality books and journal articles that have rained down from the minds of dedicated African philosophy scholars shows beyond doubt that African philosophy has come of age and is now ready to enter into a meaningful internal dialogue (intracultural philosophy) and external dialogue (intercultural dialogue). Dr Majeed's book is a heart-lifting testimony to the readiness of African philosophy to make a success of the decidedly formidable project of intracultural and intercultural philosophy.

At first glance, the reader is puzzled and intrigued by the title of Majeed's book. The subtitle seems somewhat disconnected from the main title. But the ambiguity disappears once the reader acquaints himself or herself with the preface where the author says that the question of personal identity and, by implication, the mind-body-problem, is central to his discourse on reincarnation. This promise is later fulfilled in the body of this meticulously researched and well-written book. The book is structured into three parts, with a total of nine chapters. Part 1 demonstrates the ancient provenance of the notion of reincarnation. The author takes the reader on an exciting journey to Greece through the glory of ancient Egypt, on to Asia and the Inca lands. Majeed's research establishes that the ancient Egyptians indeed

believed in reincarnation. He agrees with Egyptologists like Margaret Murray who see in the Egyptian practice of giving individuals ka-names the confirmation of belief in reincarnation although “it might not have featured significantly in the general religious consciousness of the people” (MAJEED 2017, 10). The ka-name is “given to a person on the basis of the basic attribute that the bearer’s specific soul is conceived to have” (9). In Greece, the notion of immortality and reincarnation in its many forms had become diffused in society through the influence of the Orphic religion. Indeed, the great Greek philosopher Plato made the soul a permanent essence of the human being. Majeed establishes that belief in reincarnation is widespread in the ancient cultures of the Indians, Chinese, and the Inca people.

Part 2 of the work, titled “Personal Identity: A Prelude to Reincarnation,” has just one chapter, the longest and most important chapter in the book. Like an experienced surgeon cutting confidently into the human body with a scalpel to root out malignant growths, Majeed clinically disentangles the clashing conceptions of the person as proposed by philosophers like Segun Gbadegesin, Kwame Gyekye, and Kwasi Wiredu. The reader familiar with African philosophy and the debate over the African conception of the mind will agree from the beginning that there is a consensus that Africans conceive the human person as a unity of the material and spiritual components of existence. The relation of the mind (conceived either as spiritual and independent of the body or as material or even as semi-material) with the body has generated debates about the status of the mind in African philosophy. Gyekye’s interactionist stance clashes with Wiredu’s quasi-physicalist stance, for instance. Majeed seeks to lay the controversy to rest by evaluating the two stances on Akan traditional conception of the mind and settling all disputes arising. Gyekye had identified the *okra* (and *sunsum*) with consciousness considered as a mental substance in the Cartesian sense. In Akan philosophy of mind, the *honam* is the body, the *okra* is the soul and the *sunsum* is the spirit or the active part of *okra*. Gbadegesin’s investigations of the Yoruba conception of the mind led him to identify the *sunsum* as the Akan equivalent of the *okan* which literally translates to heart but which, in fact, indicates the mind. Since the *okan* is not wholly immaterial, Gbadegesin felt that the *sunsum* should also not be wholly immaterial. The Yoruba conceptualization is similar to the Idoma conceptualization where *otu* literally means heart but in actuality indicates mind (AGADA 2015).

Majeed makes a clear distinction between the Yoruba conception of *okan* and the Akan conception of *sunsum*. He says: “Unlike in Yoruba thought where the *okan* ... is identified with or as a physical organ, *sunsum* is not.” (82). Majeed then turns to Wiredu’s

criticism of Gyekye. For Wiredu (1983, 116, 118), the closest thing to thought in the Akan language is *adwene*, thinking capacity or simply thought. Consequently, the Cartesian conception of the mind as a thinking thing has no equivalent in Akan traditional thought, contrary to Gyekye's attempt to cast the *okra* in the mould of Descartes' thinking substance. *Adwene* is not a thing but merely the capacity of the human being for thought. After exhibiting the conditions under which terms used in different cultures and languages can be translated and comparatively discussed, Majeed proceeds to criticize Wiredu thus:

Wiredu begins his investigations by first looking for words to translate, but not ideas to name. One disadvantage in adopting his method is that when a complex term such as 'mind' is to be examined, our analysis might not be comprehensive enough. He sets off by declaring: "Our major issue is whether there is any exact equivalent in Akan of the English word "mind". What this approach does is to make it seem, although that might not be his intention, as if the Western perspective is the foil through which African philosophy must be carried out. It is not surprising then, that he goes ahead with his discussion by first outlining the English conception of the term, to be followed by how adequately, he thinks, Akan expressions match it. (2017, 86-87)

Majeed believes that Wiredu pays undue attention to the dictionary definitions of mind and goes on to identify the definitions that suggest the substance view of mind, which view he then finds incompatible with the Akan conception of mind. Majeed notes that Wiredu's reason for considering the substance view unfit to play any significant role in intercultural analysis is that the substance view has been rejected by Western philosophers or is, at best, a minority view, and that the main understanding of mind in the English language lends itself to the identification of mind with the brain and mere thought processes. In other words, Wiredu's physicalist or quasi-physicalist disposition made him opposed to Gyekye's dualist-interactionist stance. For Majeed, the fact that some philosophers believe that the mind as an enduring entity does not exist cannot automatically mean that we can assume the loss of the meaning of the word mind in its reference to an immaterial entity. Nevertheless, he agrees with Wiredu that the *okra* cannot be reduced to thought in the Cartesian sense as Gyekye attempted to do.

In a sweeping exercise in intercultural thinking, Majeed discusses the seemingly intractable questions of consciousness and the mind-body problem as they feature in Western philosophy of mind. Is consciousness reducible to brain states or is it a fundamental property of

matter? If our universe is assumed to be a self-sustaining universe, does matter carry the seed of life within it? Agreeing with Michael Polyani, Majeed thinks that if indeed matter carries an ordering principle within it, this very principle cannot be itself material (97-98). This conclusion holds much promise for a discussion on panpsychism. Majeed, however, does not take up the issue further, no doubt because it is outside the scope of his work.

After an in-depth discussion of the bodily, psychological, and linguistic criteria of personal identity and then the quasi-physicalist or semi-materialistic understanding of the mind proposed by Wiredu and Safo Kwame, Majeed criticizes the quasi-physicalist thesis in his search for a synthesis between the dualist and quasi-physicalist understanding of *okra*. He writes:

It is not clear why, for instance, from the occasional visibility of spirits quasi-physicalists describe them only in terms of features exhibited on those occasions...it is only fair to ask what the identity of those spirits are when they have not allegedly revealed or are not revealing themselves to human beings...the *okra* cannot be regarded as quasi-physical based on fleeting visibility alone...It appears more acceptable to me that spirits, including the *okra*, are essentially metaphysical, even though they have some capacity for quasi-physical manifestation. (2017, 127)

If the *okra* is a permanent spiritual essence of the human being, does it reincarnate? The subject of reincarnation dominates the third part of Majeed's carefully written work. Majeed rejects the denialist stance of scholars like Innocent Onyewuenyi and insists that names, burial practices, and beliefs of the Akan people, for instance, reveal beyond doubt that the belief in reincarnation has strong roots in African societies. Onyewuenyi thinks that it is the whole person in an invisible form that goes to the ancestral realm when a person dies and that this form does not return to the land of the living but may somehow have an "influence" on the newly born. For Onyewuenyi, it is this 'influence' that is widely mistaken for reincarnation. As Majeed correctly notes, Onyewuenyi does not clearly state what this influence is. This leaves the reader wondering if Onyewuenyi may be referring to the purely biological transfer of genetic information.

The philosophical problem of reincarnation revolves around the plausibility of the submission that people die and are reborn. While this belief is widely held in many cultures, including African cultures, there is no scientific evidence that confirms reincarnation. Studies in

parapsychology, for instance, have not demonstrated the fact of reincarnation and immortality, though near-death experience narratives offer intriguing glimpses into extrasensory modes of existence. Majeed is aware of the sceptical tendency to dismiss as irrational a set of belief that fails the scientific or empirical test. Given the logical and empirical contradiction that arises when one puts forward the claim of reincarnation, the conceptual difficulty of linking the essence of the dead to the new-born baby in whom the dead is said to have been reborn, Majeed concludes that belief in reincarnation is irrational. Nevertheless, he is sympathetic to the idea of reincarnation as it illuminates the Akan conception of a person. Majeed arrives at his irrationality thesis from his exhibition of the logical dimension of rationality. Thus, a proposition is irrational if it lacks logical consistency. On this requirement, belief in reincarnation is irrational. But logical consistency is not all there is to rationality. If rationality can also be understood in terms of structuring reality, in enabling human beings make a meaning of their lives, then belief in reincarnation is rational. For, it is a means of understanding the phenomenon of death from a non-scientific angle since the scientific angle does not offer sufficient hope. One may say that human hope is irrelevant to the discourse. This is a mistaken stance because all human activities are directly and indirectly conditioned by our fears and expectations, regardless of the technological sophistication attained by human beings. Indeed, the real value of technology itself is providing material comfort, with the attendant psychological feeling of solace.

The philosopher Mesembe Edet latched on to this insight when he suggested that a hermeneutical approach to the question of reincarnation rather than the semantic approach adopted by Onyewuenyi alone can show how the belief in reincarnation is an explanatory template that satisfies the longing for immortality, the human quest for endurance in time and through eternity. Indeed, any reader familiar with Edet's recent critique of Onyewuenyi's view on reincarnation titled "Innocent Onyewuenyi's 'Philosophical Re-appraisal of the African Belief in Reincarnation: A Conversational Study'" will wonder why Majeed failed to critically engage Edet in his book. Not only would Majeed have benefitted from Edet's submissions but he would also have clearly demonstrated how African philosophy is progressing in the subject area under investigation. Regrettably, African scholars tend to focus attention on the first and second generations of African philosophers while overlooking the exciting contributions from new

philosophers.¹ Like Majeed, Edet identified Onyewuenyi's basic problem as one arising from the assertion that the dead can be reincarnated in their descendents while, at the same time, retaining their complete identity in a different world. Edet thinks that Onyewuenyi fell into a semantic quagmire in the face of the semantic dilemma brought on by Onyewuenyi's quest for the intracultural and crosscultural meaning of the term 'reincarnation'. What does the term 'reincarnation' connote and is it culturally autochthonous in Africa or a borrowed Western semantic category introduced into African philosophico-religious discourse by Western anthropologists? Edet (2016, 96) asks rhetorically: "If 'reincarnation' is a misleading translation that has a different sense in describing the specific African cultural thinking and belief, and mind you, African languages have a translation for the word, as Onyewuenyi himself admits, then what alternative term or concept does he recommend?" Onyewuenyi's semantic quagmire is his brave but losing struggle to justify his view that terms like 'vital force', 'life share', and 'vital influence' are more appropriate than the term 'reincarnation'. Edet notes the irony inherent in Onyewuenyi rejecting external Western influences while, at the same time, reconceptualizing reincarnation along the line drawn by Placide Tempels, a Western anthropologist.

Edet agrees with Onyewuenyi that the strict understanding of reincarnation as the return of the dead with their personal identity intact has no epistemic foundation in traditional African cosmogony. Unlike Majeed, Edet does not think that the belief in reincarnation, or the continuing vital influence of the dead, as Onyewuenyi prefers to put it, is irrational because this particular belief is a hermeneutic instrument that sheds light on the human longing for immortality. On the flip side, Edet's assertion that the concept of reincarnation poses a hermeneutic rather than semantic challenge is vague. Hermeneutic models, as interpretations of words and symbols, derive their plausibility from their explanatory power, which involves semantics, the meaning of words and symbols and the relation to truth. Perhaps Edet will want to pursue his intriguing semantic-hermeneutic distinction in a future work even as

¹ The reluctance to look in the direction of new philosophers is not restricted to African scholars. In my correspondence with a European philosopher specializing in African philosophy, I was taken aback by the intellectual insularity of the European specialist of African philosophy when she insisted that if the emergence of conversationalism and consolationism (both endorsed by the Conversational School of Philosophy) is as significant as I believe it is, she would have heard of it. I told her that if she claimed to be a specialist and had never heard of the Conversational School of Philosophy and its espousals, then she must have restricted her research to the first and second generations of African philosophers.

Majeed will find it rewarding to appraise Edet's critical conversation with Onyewuenyi in a second edition of his compelling book.

In [Reincarnation: A Question in the African Philosophy of Mind] Dr Hasskei M. Majeed has made an important contribution to African philosophy. The author writes with confidence and creates insight by putting a dignified linguistic style into the service of incisive thinking.

Relevant Literature

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