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PERCEPTION AND ARTISTIC PRESENTATION OF THE PHENOMENON OF DEATH AMONG IGBO POETS.

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Abstract
Death is abhorred among all mortals, but the negative proclivity has not deterred writers from dwelling on the subject. Although the Igbo tribe endorses the unsavory and harrowing impact of death, there is no homogeneity in the perception of death in life and in their literature. Consequently, this study examines the various ways death is seen and treated by different Igbo poets. Four poems on onwu 'death' written by four different Igbo poets, Obienyem, Nzeako, Ajaegbu, and Emenike, were purposively selected from R.M Ekechukwu's Akpa Uche (1982). The result shows both similarities and discrepancies in the perception and presentation of death among the poets. In terms of presentation, Obienyem, Nzeako and Ajaegbu used mainly personification and rhetorical questions, while Emenike utilized the contrastive style. In terms of perception of death, Obienyem and Ajaegbu perceived death negatively while Nzeako and Emenike perceived death positively, based on varying religious orientations. Apparently, death is a common human denominator, but viewed from different prisms and vistas, it has no uniform perception.

Keywords: Perception, Artistic Presentation, Death, Igbo Poets, Igbo Cosmology.

Introduction

Death is a universal phenomenon; it is an experience that all mortals share, irrespective of ethnicity, nationality, religion, class, colour, language, gender, etc. Ordinarily, life, as a process, commences at birth and ends at death. This is the normal cycle of life and this is why the Igbo believe that *igwe niile na-ejen'uzu* 'all irons must go to the blacksmith, or all irons must pass through the smith's fire'. The meaning of this proverb is not far-fetched: the blacksmith is a symbol for the Supreme Being, the iron is a symbol for mortal man, and the smelting fire is a symbol of the change/transition agent. As the blacksmith uses fire to melt iron/knife and transforms it into another object such as pot, tripod, gun etc., the Supreme Being uses death, as an agent to transform human beings from one form (mortality) to another form (immortality). In other words, all humans must pass through death or experience death. It also affirms that death is a process of transformation. A notable maxim used by Igbo to describe the inevitability of death as well as the transience nature of life is *uwa bu ahia* "life is market". The saying is metaphorically used to paint a picture of people coming (birth) to market (world), buying and selling (existence), and eventually going (death) back home (spirit world).

Although the gamut from birth to death is the normal cycle of life, the terminal point of life, or its cessation is usually expected to be at old age. Everybody wishes and desires to reach an

advanced age before he/she dies; consequently prayers, invocations and sacrifices are made to the deities for long life. However, due to certain explainable and unexplainable incidents in life, this terminal point is realized by a minority. Many human beings die before they attain old age; specifically, some people die at infancy, some die at adolescence, some die at youth while others die at adulthood. Such deaths or truncated lives are unnatural, untimely and in some situations as evil that needs to be purged. Igbo refers to such deaths as *mmadụ ịnwụchu anwụchu* 'someone dying before his/her time'. As a result of this perception, death is viewed with so much dread and apprehension among individuals and communities. And this accounts for the reason why death has become such an (un)attractive subject among people.

A truncated life naturally engenders sorrow and pain in the family and community. Irrespective of the cause, the community finds it difficult to understand why a child, or youth should die, for instance, and some individuals just cannot come to terms with that reality. Such an uncanny situation brings sobriety to a community as people (especially the bereaved) wonder and try to find explanation for the loss just to moderate their pains. Normally, varied questions (mainly rhetoric) are asked, directed at the Maker of life, the deities, the deceased, or no one in particular, all aimed at seeking understanding of the overwhelming experience. An interrogation of this nature reflects the disorientation of the community, their helplessness, powerlessness, and mortality in the face of an inexplicable, intractable mystery. It is mainly when human beings face death directly that they pause and re-think, reflect and philosophize about the meaning of life, existence, and the afterlife. Overwhelmed by feelings of emptiness, the Igbo express their distress with sayings such as *onweghị ihe mmadụ bụ* 'human beings are nothing', *mmadụ enweghị isi* 'human life makes no sense', *mmadụ bụaja* 'human beings are common sand', *gịnị ka anyị nọ n'ụwaaeme*? 'what are we doing in this world', etc. Due to the abhorrence with which death is held, in Igbo culture, it is a taboo to mention it in the course of interaction among people in certain situations and times. Rather, several euphemisms are used to refer to death such as *ngafe* 'passing', *ịrahụ ụra* 'sleeping', *njem* 'journey', etc.

Although it is a taboo to mention death in some situations, the Igbo have used death as the subject of certain names given to their children such as *Ọnwụkwe*, "if death permits", *Ọnwụhaa*, "may death let go", *Ọnwụbiko*, "may death have mercy", *Ebereọnwụ* "the mercy of death". These names are used to express the supremacy of death over mortals or the helplessness of man in the face of death. Even though death is abhorred among the Igbo, this negative proclivity has not deterred writers from dwelling on the subject matter. Several Igbo writers have used death as a motif in their writings, ranging from the novel, drama and poetry. It is particularly in poetry that Igbo poets have paid adequate attention to the issue of death as a natural phenomenon. However, Igbo people and poets do not have a homogenous perception of death; people do not see death the same way due to factors such as experience, age, cultural rootedness, religion, philosophy, etc. Several Igbo poets have written on the same subject of death but not from the same point of view or standpoint. The present study is aimed at examining the various perspectives from which Igbo poets view death as a human experience.

Theme in Literature

The subject of theme is a common feature of literature and many scholars have given the term different definitions. Theme is the central idea of a literary work, or the major subject that underlies a narrative. It is an abstract idea that encapsulates the entirety of action, dialogue

and situations in a story, or an idea that controls the author's choice of characters, plot, and conflict. Baldick (2001) defines theme as a salient concept that arises from the treatment of a literary work, in relation to topic, or subject matter that recurs in the story. Baldick's notion suggests that, although a theme is derived, it is indicated in several areas in a work of fiction. In other words, there are sign posts in a narrative used to mark or delineate a theme. In the view of Okebalama (1993: 133) theme is "the image of reality which men have the innate capacity to form from the gestaltic experiential". Given the allusion to Gestalt psychology, the emphasis is on the idea that captures the whole, the entire essence of the work, and not just a part of it. These definitions may vary in some aspects, but they agree in at least two aspects. First, theme is the overriding idea in a work of fiction, and second, theme is not overt or explicitly expressed, but derived from the totality of a narrative and also expresses the whole. There are as many themes as there are human experiences found in literature, vis-à-vis the novel, drama, poetry, short story, etc. There are themes based on social, cultural, political and historical aspect of people's experiences. Adewunmi et al, (2014) opines that Black-American literature is characterized by themes that index their economic, social and political condition in white-dominated America. According to them, a considerable number of African American literature were in the protest mode, and they featured themes of racial discrimination, racial oppression and deprivation of blacks of their rights and freedom. Among African writers, themes varied with respect to cultural, social, and political situations in different periods. Most South African writers such as Nadine Gordimar, Alan Paton, Athol Fugard, Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma, were pre-occupied with themes of Apartheid and racial discrimination in white-ruled South Africa. East and West African writers, such as Ngugi, Achebe, Soyinka, etc. focused their literary lenses on culture conflict between Africa and the West, especially during the colonial period, while others like Armah, Rotimi, were concerned with politics and corruption in the new African states. This is not excluding notable female writers such as Ba, Nwapa, Sofola whose primary interests was the unsavory condition of women in patriarchal African cultures.

According to Adetuyi (2017), Nigerian writers have explored vast and varied literary themes consisting mainly of Anti-Colonialism, Religion, Tradition, Gender, Feminism, Marriage, Love, Morality, After-life (Mortality), Reincarnation, and Politics among others. He opines that social matters and inter-personal relationship represent some of the major subjects in the three main genres of Nigerian literature, novel, drama, and poetry. In corroboration, Uwasomba (2014: 196) submits that "the writer irrespective of his or her ideological persuasion has a duty to discharge to the society and to self". This assertion is premised on the grounds that "…the writer is saddled with social responsibility to communicate certain social and personal experiences to an audience". It is noteworthy that, the varied nature of themes stems from context and situation. Adetutyi (2017) avers that in literature, as far as theme is concerned, the paramount thing is who is the writer and in what context is the writer working. In relation to context, he suggests that time, place, space and history are the factors that influence literary creation. So far, it is evident that theme is one of the major components of literature; different genres have peculiar ways of evaluating themes. Attention will now be beamed on the concept of themes in poetry, as that is the focus of this study.

African poets have used poetry to express varied concerns related to the African experience; these concerns cut across fields of culture, religion, politics, etc. Soyinka (1999: 29) asserts that

African poets "embrace most of the experience of the African world- modern and historic- though naturally, no claim is made here for an unattainable comprehensiveness of themes; or for their mutual exclusiveness". The themes may not have covered all aspects of African life, nor restricted to the African experience alone, but they have helped to reflect the past/history and the contemporary realities in Africa. Adetuyi and Adeniran (2018) opine that some poems are centered on self-assertion, and identity like Leopold Senghor's poems that typically strive for self/black consciousness, while other poems are premised on man and (un)natural phenomenon, like J.P. Clarke's poems that treat man's powerlessness when confronted with forces beyond his control. Additionally, other poems like Niyi Osundare's are termed mythical, and cultural, while they made a distinction between psychological and philosophical poems. Igbo poets, that is, poets that write in the Igbo language medium, have maintained the tradition of spreading their themes to cover the Igbo experience. On the basis of Onuigbo's (2006:1) stand that "poetry represents a poet's insight, perception or vision of people and of society through a careful, conscious and deliberate presentation of the figurative language", a majority of their themes are based on places and things, natural phenomenon, philosophy, politics, etc. Amidst the subjects of nature and philosophy are found themes of life, death and the hereafter.

Theme of Death

On the theme of death, people have different perspectives such as fear, wonder, resignation, etc. A majority view death as a terrible enemy that snatches our family members and friends. Beyond the common experience, the subject of death has been portrayed in literature, especially poetry. According to Daghmin (2017), poets employ minimal words to express their opinions about death, while readers appreciate it through their personal reflections and experiences. In the view of Vashisth (2019), Walt Whitman, one of the famous American poets preoccupied with death, conceives of death as a cyclical, cosmic dance of life which is reflected everywhere including a dung heap. To him, life and death are intermingled and part of the same natural reality. He conceives of death as a rebirth, a transition to another life and not a termination of life, thus signaling the immortality of mortals. Whitman's transcendental view of death is reflected in two dimensions-the conceptual and the experimental. As a result, he engages the rhetorical mode to question the reality, and uses symbols to couch the experience. Some of these poems are "Out of the cradle Endlessly Rocking", "When lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed", and "Leaves of grass". In "Leaves of grass" In the poem, "Out of the cradle Endlessly Rocking", Whitman refers to the onset of his creative life, as a poet, and his transcendental communion who whispered death to his ears. It is for this passionate inclination towards death issues that Whitman is often referred to as the poet of death.

In the view of Daghmin (2017), the treatment of the theme of death by Emily Dickenson in her poetry may be taken as one of her distinct input to American literature. In her more than five hundred poems about death, she expresses death in various contrastive forms such as a king, a lover, a wild beast, a coachman, a cunning courtier, a democrat, a frost, a brutal killer, etc. In all, she portrays death as a physical being who comes to take someone to her final destination, that is, death. In many of her poems, Dickinson personifies death in various characters. In "The only Ghost I ever saw", Death is shown as a barefooted ghost with rapid but silent gaits. Death is also seen as a cunny and clever lover who temporarily engages the poet in an interview. The concept of death as something to be embraced finds best expression

in the poem, "Because I could not stop for Death", where Dickinson personifies Death as a gentleman who kindly stops to carry the poet in his carriage. In this famous poem, Dickinson shows death as a lovely person to be embraced. The idea of death as a lover is also tactfully seen in the poem "Death is the Supple Suitor", where death is personified as a lover man wooing a lady. In contrast to these ideas of death as a good thing, Dickinson also presents death in a negative light. In the poem, "A Clock stopped", Emily Dickinson portrays death as a wicked enemy and a brutal killer who attacks his hapless victims without any permission or show of mercy which leaves his victims suffering in their last moments.

In the poem "What care the Dead, for Chanticleer", Dickinson portrays death as a leveler, that is, no one is exempt from death. She sees death as a messenger of God whose duty is to usher God's children to heaven. In the same perception of equality, two of Dickinson's poems, ("Color- Caste-Denomination" and "Not any higher stands the Grave"), personifies death as an equalizer. In "Not any higher stands the Grave" death is personified as a democrat, and an impartial being that claims men and women. Death is shown as an inevitable reality that faces all people, poor and rich, old and young. In "Color-Caste Denomination", death is portrayed as a detribalized person that negates differences of colour that exist among humans. The inevitability of death is also reflected in the poem, "All but Death can be Adjusted", where death is portrayed as something fixed and predetermined for all humans, and fate that no mortal can alter, except God.

Ashraf (2015). Analyzes death as represented by Robert Frost; in the poem, "A Soldier", Frost mourns and pays tribute to the sacrifices made by a soldier. Frost's conceives death as something that happens to the body and not the spirit. He is of the view that the spirit survives the flesh; that is, the dead continue existence in the form of a spirit after the body rests. Then poem is centered on a soldier who died in a battle and abandoned. As time passed, the body of the soldier accumulates dew and rust, while his lance lies beside him pointing at a certain direction. Frost uses the imagery of the lance to show that the soldier is still alive to his responsibility, through his spirit. This is subtly captured in the line, "And tripped the body, shot the spirit on". Although the body cannot move, the spirit lives on.

Azuonye (2010) examines Achebe's Igbo poem, *Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo*, a lamentation and tribute to one of Africa's greatest poets, Christopher Okigbo, who died in action during the Nigerian civil war. In this poem, Achebe highlights the transitory nature of death, and the fact that dead humans continue living in the spirit world. This is aptly shown in the conclusion of the poem, *Okolobịan'ọgbọmmee! Ọgalanyana be mmọọ!* 'Young man in the circle of blood!' 'Lord in the domain of spirits!'. Even though Okigbo had died in the circle of blood, a metaphor for war front, he has become a lord in the land of the spirits or ancestors. This view reflects the Igbo belief in the non-permanence of death.

In this paper, four poems written by four different Igbo poets in the Igbo language medium were purposively sampled from the Anthology of modern Igbo verse edited by R.M Ekechukwu. These poets are J, C. Obienyem, J. U. T. Nzeako, C. W. Ajaegbu, and Chidi Emenike. In the structure of the Anthology, the poems of the first three poets were placed under poems on Nature and Phenomena containing a total of 9 poems, while the poem of the fourth poet was placed under poems on philosophy, containing a total of 21 poems. The

reason for the choice of the four poems is because they are all on the same subject of*ọnwụ* (death). It is curious to find four poems on the same subject written by four different poets; hence, the need to investigate the variations in their approach to the subject of death.

Analysis
Perception and artistic expression of death among Igbo poets are as follows:

'Ọnwụ' by J.C. Obienyem
This poem is a lamentation about the cruel nature of death. There are five stanzas of four lines each, and a concluding stanza of two lines. In this poem, Obienyem sees death as an impartial and indiscriminate killer. This idea is tactfully expressed in all the stanzas of the poem. In the first stanza, death is depicted as pervasive and infinite.
O nweghịonye nọn'akụkụ
Ebeịnaghịagaru.
Ma ọ bụmaaraọmaraire
Nkenwereikeigbote gi.

There is no one in a corner
Where you do not reach.
Or knows a cure
That can prevent you.

In this opening stanza, death is presented as a person who walks or traverses[*aga(ru)*] through the length and breadth of the world and reaches every nook and corner. The reference to death in the personal pronoun *i* in line 2, and the second person pronoun *gi*, in line 4 are used to delineate death as a person. The word *akụkụ* 'corner' is used to show that death can transcend the remotest corner of the earth; in other words, it is not possible for anybody to hide from it. Additionally, as shown in lines 3-4, no one knows a solution that can halt and terminate its destructive match. The poet portrays death as a peripatetic and omnipresent being who traverses the broad gamut of the earth. In the second stanza, the poet emphasizes the proximity of death and two of the realms it transcends and the beings that are its victims.

O nwere ala ebeị kọrọụkọ?
Nnụnụnke Igweagbanapụghị
Ihegakwudorokpakparinwa Okpongu
N'imeọnụnụ ala.

Is there a land where you are scarce?
Birds of the air cannot escape
Something that confronted the shrew
Inside the hole in the ground

On the premise of the Igbo belief on three realms of existence, (the Sky, the land of the living, and the land of the dead) the initial rhetoric question in line 5 *O nwere ala ebeịkọrọụkọ* 'Is there a land where you are scarce?' is a hyperbolic construct used to establish the fact that death respects no space or domain of existence. The poet is neither suggesting that death can reach

the domain of the major divinities in the sky, nor the ancestors in the land of the dead, who are already dead. In lines 6-8, he delimits the realms and the actual entities that are victimized. Although Igwe, 'Sky' is the abode of the Supreme being, it is the minor stratospheric beings *nnụnụ* 'birds' at the bottom of the celestial hierarchy that are afflicted by death. By using the word *agbanapụghị* 'cannot escape', the poet suggests that, although birds are very swift and meteoric in flight, they cannot escape the hands of death. At the other extreme is the fissure in the earth inhabited by burrowing animals such as *kpakpari*' shrew' whose abode is beyond the reach of man, except by skillful hunters. The poet states that, even though they occupy the deep recesses of the earth where they are seemingly secure, they are still visited by death. The invasion of these two special bipolar extremes is an index that, death does not respect natural boundaries or species.

Stanzas 3-5 are an account of other animals and humans that are reached by death. These are *awọ* 'toad' and *ahụhụ* 'ant' in stanza 3. By visiting the toad, an animal that is despised for its rotund, disgusting appearance, the poet states *n'ihi ihere adịghị ọnwụ n'iku*' because death does not have shame in his/her brow'. Death is personified as a shameless man or woman who visits everyone including the despicable. In addition, death also visits an animal as minuscule as *ahụhụ* 'ant' despite its size. The poet reveals that the death of the ant is an indication that *ọnwụ anaghị asọ obere nke ọ na-asọ nnukwu* 'death does not spare the small neither does it spare the big'. The obvious implication of these results is that death does not mind appearance or size in its operations. It is a reckless and random killer. To further strengthen the inconsiderate nature of death, in stanza 4, the poet paints the pathetic picture of a widow who succumbed to death on her way to pick the corpse of her only child.

Ọbụrụnaọdịiheọzọ ka ọnwụ,
Gịnị mere ka ajadunwụan'okporo,
Mgbe o naraagaibuteozuotunwaọmụtara?
Asị m, gịnị mere Ọnwụịhapụokenyerucherenku
Gbuenwaya bụnwanta?

If there is something worse than death,
Why should a widow die on the way,
When she was going to carry the corpse of her only child?
I said, why should death leave an old person who grew hairs
And kill the child that is young?

The poet uses two rhetorical questions to show injustice in the operations of death. Why should a widow die and lose her only child? Why should an old parent see the death of his/her child. In both scenarios, the poet is asking one question. Why should the future be lost or killed? The widow's child and the old parent's child are symbols of the future. They are the ones to survive the parents and perpetuate the lineage. The norm is that parents and the elderly are buried by their children and not the other way around. It is against the natural order for parents to bury their children. Evidently, the poor widow died as a result of heartbreak, because her future (child) died. The elderly parent whose child died had also lost the future, and there seems to be nothing more to live for. The rhetorical questions are used to show that the death of children before their parents represents the worst thing that can

happen to someone. In stanza 5, the poet's list of death's victims includes men and women, rich and poor. In the concluding two lines, the poet uses the rhetorical question to address death in relation to the instruments it uses to carry out its operations in the world.

Ọnwụ, oleeebemmagịdị?
Ọnwụ, I zoroubegịebee?

Death, where is your cutlass?
Death, where did you hide your spear?

The poet is convinced that death operates with an instrument; incidentally, the instrument is neither known nor seen. Hence, the poet's inquiry about the whereabout of the weapons *mma* 'cutlas' and *ube* 'spear'. Death is depicted as a person/warrior wielding a cutlass or a spear and using them to kill people. Generally, in this poem, Obienyemsees death as an indiscriminate and dispassionate serial killer. Death is depicted as having the ability to permeate the realms of the Sky, Earth and beneath the Earth to kill its victims comprising of birds, animals and men, and no one is exempt. The major style used to realize this theme is personification; death is portrayed as a person with arms with which he/she kills. Notably, in the opening stanza, and the first line of the second stanza, as well as the concluding two lines, Obienyem addresses death as a person. Far from demystifying death, the personification of death represents Obienyem's attempt to explain what is inexplicable; to find meaning and fathom what is beyond his knowledge and capacity as a mortal.

'Ọnwụ' by J.U.T. Nzeako

Nzeakọ's 'Ọnwụ' contains 13 stanzas of equal length; each stanza has four lines. The poem is replete with questions about death, questions posed directly to death, and probable answers to the questions. After establishing the reality that all living things hate death in the first stanza, the poet asks several questions about death in stanzas 2-4 as shown below:

Oleeihekereọnwụ n'ụwa,
Meeyaonyeiro mmadụniile?
Ma, meeyaọdịghịatụegwu,
Ịgaan'igwe mmadụgbuo mmadụ?

What created death in the world,
And made it an enemy to all humans?
And, made it fearless,
To go to a crowd and kill someone?

Oleeihe mere naọnwụmaara mmadụniile,
Ọdịghịotuonyeọna-echefu?
Ọ bụnaanyaọnwụna-ahụụwaniile?
Ụkwụyana-agazun'ụwaniile?

Why is it that death knows everybody?
There is no one he/she forgets?
Is it that death's eyes see the whole world?

His/her legs walk through the whole world?

Oleeihenyereọnwụiken'ụwa,
Ụraadịghịatụya o bụlaotuụbochi?
Ọdịghị a ka nkadịkandị mmadụ?
Ma anya mmadụadịghịahụya.

What gave death its strength in the world,
It does not slumber even for one day?
It does not get old like human beings?
But human eyes do not see it.

In these stanzas, the poet uses rhetorical questions and personification to underline the nature, features, and dispositions of death. The rhetorical questions are targeted at the reason and purpose behind the creation of death, the pervasive nature of death, as well as its unnatural potency and capacity. In relation to the motive, the poet indirectly questions the Supreme Being for creating a being who is an enemy to Man *Mee ya onye iro mmadụ niile? '*And made it an enemy to all humans?' and a fearless killer *Ma, mee ya ọdịghị atụ egwu, Ịgaa n'igwe mmadụ gbuo mmadụ?* And, made it fearless, to go to a crowd and kill someone. To the poet, there is no justification for creating a being whose activities are inconsistent and antithetical with human existence. In reference to the prevalent and universal mode of death, the poet cannot comprehend why death is a widespread phenomenon, so all-inclusive that no one can escape *Ọdịghị out onye ọ na-echefu? '*There is no one he/she forgets?' In terms of death's power, the poet questions the source of its power *Olee ihe nyere ọnwụ ike n'ụwa?, '*What gave death its strength in the world?' Its power is reflected by the fact that, it is not affected by natural laws, hence *Ụra adịghị atu ya ọbụla out ụbọchị?'*It does not slumber even for one day?' *Ọdịghị a ka nka dịka ndị mmadụ?* It does not get old like human beings. The implication of perpetual alertness and agelessness is that death is overwhelming, and man is at its mercy.In these three stanzas, death is personified in so many ways, just like in Obienyem's poem. Death is portrayed as a created being and a fearless person who can walk into a crowd and kill someone (stanza 2). In stanza 3, death is portrayed as a person who knows everybody, who has a memory to remember all and cannot forget even one person, has eyes to see all, and legs that walk all over the world. In stanza 4, the power of death is reflected in the fact that, it does not sleep and age like humans. These non-human attributes do not make it inhuman nor remove from the personification; rather, it implies that death is a super person, or a super man; that is, one who has too much power.

The rhetoric questions posed directly to death are seen in stanzas 5-6 and 9-10. These questions are related to justice, capacity, inhumanity and deference. In stanza 5, Nzeakọ uses the second person singular pronoun i to ask death why it is partial in its operations, given that death does not allow good people to live long, but allows evil people to live long and continue to carry out their evil activities *Olee ihe mere I jiri hapụ ndị ọjọọ, ka ha na-eme ihe ọjọọ n'ogologo ndụ ha?* 'Why did you leave evil people to continue to do evil in their long life?' Unlike Obienyem, Nzeako exploits the rhetorical question to state categorically that death is selective and partial in its operation. Beneath this interrogation is the wish for a reversal of fate, where the godly will live long but the life of the evil be cut short. In stanza 6, Nzeakọ questions the capacity of

death *Olee mgbe ike gị ga-agwụ n'uwa?* 'When will you exhaust your strength in the world?' Using the second person singular pronoun gi, Nzeakọ adopts the question style to delineate his anxiety and dread about the scope and timelessness of death. In other words, he is echoing the fact that man is at the mercy of death at all time. In stanza 9, Nzeakọ bewails the cruelty and viciousness of death because it lets people suffer but kills them when their fortunes change for good *Olee ihe ị na-ahapụ mmadụ ọ na-ata ahụhụ, gbuo ya naanị mgbe o malitere iri uru*? 'Why do you allow people to suffer and kill them only when they begin to revel in pleasure'? The poet's position here is that death is heartless killjoy, sadist, and even envious of peoples' fortune. If peoples' joy is cut short at the moment they experience a positive change in fortune, it implies that death is an enemy of progress, a clog in the wheel of human evolution. The last rhetorical question posed to death directly in stanza 10 shows that death does not have regard for man *Olee ihe mere na I dịghị akụ aka, mgbe ị na-aga igbu mmadụ n'ụlọ ya*? 'Why is it that you do not knock, when you go to kill a man in his/her house?' Nzeakọ uses the symbol of a guest knocking at the door of the house owner to illustrate that, the inability of death to follow that convention of courtesy implies that death is disrespectful and irreverent. There are two or three other points underlying the poet's premises. First, is that man deserves respect and second, which is consequent on the first, is that man deserves to be warned about his or her passing, and third is that man should be given the power to say no to the entrance of death. The fact that death crashes into the house, irrespective of the homeowner's disposition, is evidence that death is an intruder. The poet is subtly protesting that man's opinion is not sought regarding the time he will leave his home, the earth. It is also a wish that man had the capacity to resist the invasion of death in his domain.

Consequent on the inquiry, Nzeakọ attempts to proffer answers to his own questions. This is found in stanza 8, as follows:

Eleghịanyaikegịmaliteren'igwe,
N'ebeịna-arụrụChinekeọrụ.
N'ihinaịna-akpọlarayandịnsọ,
Ma ndịmmehiena-agan'ọkụ (ala) mmụọ.

Probably, your power began in Heaven,
Where you work for God.
Because you send His saints home,
But sinners will go to hell fire.

It is apparent that Nzeakọ's response to the question of death is from the Christian perspective where Heaven and Hell are emphasized as final resting places of the dead. In Igbo cosmology, the idea of Heaven and Hell, the abode of the righteous ones and the sinners respectively, as well as upward transition, does not exist. In Igbo belief system, the elders who had lived a good life, go on to join the prestigious and exclusive guild of ancestors, whose abode is beneath the earth, the land of the spirits (*Ala mmụọ*), and not above. In Igbo belief, it is unthinkable that mortal man should, dead or alive, share the same geographical space with the Supreme Being *Chineke* who can only be accessed through the medium of the lesser gods. This view is delineated by Ebo(2019:) thus:

> While alive, the Igbo aspired to join the comity of ancestors. Neither God nor heaven was in the picture. The same is also applicable to hell. The punishment for immorality after death was the refusal of admittance into the comity of ancestors. Clearly, the concept of death among Ndigbo did not factor in God, heaven or hell…They neither shaped ethical behavior among Ndigbo nor did they contribute to the meaning of life or death among Ndigbo.

Ebo's view finds corroboration in Mbefo (2001:40) that

> When the missionaries preached hell-fire at the beginning of their enterprise as the lot of those who never received baptism, many Igbo traditional religionists preferred to go down to hell with their ancestors than to be separated from them on account of baptism.

These two commentators confirm the fact that Igbo ontology has no room for the twin concepts of Heaven and Hell as eternal entities. Rather, these are Christian beliefs used to shape the behavior and life of adherents. However, an inescapable question is, why did Nzeako resort to the Christian world view to attempt an explanation for the mystery of death? It is plausible that, Igbo traditional belief does not possess enough answer to the question of death. This is especially because, the land of the spirits (*ala mmụọ*) is the exclusive reserve of ancestors, who are elders while alive, and there is no place for other people, like young men and women, and children. Again Ebo (2019:) avers that:

> Even the immortality of personality among Ndigbo is not universal. Dead infants just disappear…Even youths who die just disappear. They don't enjoy personality immortality in Igbo ontology…Apparently, Igbos believe in selective personality immortality. From all indications, only two sets of people enjoy personality immortality in Igbo ontology: the elderly good and the truly evil. The elderly good, who of course must have married and had children…join the prestigious comity of ancestors who intercede for their families and the community. The truly evil on the other hand, become *akalogheri* wandering spirits who can neither disappear nor be integrated into the comity of ancestors…Ndigbo however, have no form of immortally for those who fall outside the categories above: the youthful good, infants and the unmarried. The Igbo worldview is silent on the fate of their personalities after death.

Some of those excluded from the comity of ancestors are the poet's brother and friend (young men) both of whom died during the war *Gbuo nwanne m na enyi ọma m, Ọnụkwube na enyi m Akụnna nwụrụ n'agha* 'Killed my brother and my good friend, *Ọnụkwube* and my friend Akụnna who died in the war' as seen in stanza 7. This deficiency in the Igbo world view to account for the destiny of other groups of people, apart from the elders could be an explanation for Nzeakọ's resort to the Christian belief for consolation and courage. The Christian Bible states that Heaven is a place for all faithful irrespective of race, tribe, nationality, language, and age, (Revelation, 7:9), who had lived a good life in Christ. Thus, the poet conceives of death as a benign spirit or messenger of God whose primary responsibility is to usher the spirit of dead Christians to Heaven.

In the last three stanzas, the poet offers advice to all people and showers praise on death for its positive attributes. In stanza 11, Nzeako adopts a fatalistic stance to advice people to accept the reality of death because it is a fate that awaits all, *Ọnwụ bụ ihe na-eche mmadụ niile* 'Death is what awaits all people'. He further avers that, it is pointless being apprehensive of death since death provides a second opportunity to see our loved ones in Heaven, *Mgbe anyị na-aga ihu ndị anyị n'igwe*, and also a chance to worship God forever in Heaven, *Ma na-eto ihekere anyị ebighịebi*. The reference to ndi anyi 'our people' implies our deceased family members, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, friends and relations. The poet is of the view that consciousness and prospects for this glorious and Elysian after life suffices to cushion and moderate our dread for death. In stanza 12, Nzeako overtly eulogizes death because it gives man a reason to fear, *Otuto dịrị onwụ nke na-echetara mmadụ, na o dị mma ka mmadụ na-atụ egwu* 'Praise be to death, for reminding man, that it is good to fear'. The fear in this instance is contrasted with the fear of death exemplified in stanza 11. This is the fear of God that helps a man to desist from evil and lead a good moral life. He is of the opinion that, man should leverage on the fear of death to fear the Supreme Being in terms of living a godly life beneficial to humanity. In the concluding stanza, Nzeakọ exploits the rhetorical mode to highlight some positive attributes of death in relation to global population and the most essential of human existential need-food. *Olee n'ụlo mmadụ ga-ebi? Olee ihe oriri mmadụ ga-eri?* 'In which house would man live?' 'Which food would man eat?' Nzeakọ is positing here that death is propitious as a means of controlling world population, and food supply, for in its absence, there may not be enough housing and food for all. In sum, despite the reality of death, and its debilitating effect on mankind, Nzeakọ sees death in positive terms due to the role it plays in the relationship between man and God.

'Ọnwụ' by Ajaegbu

Ajaegbu's poem has four stanzas with four lines each. Each stanza is used to explore an attribute of death. Like Obienyem and Nzeakọ, Ajaegbu adopts the rhetorical style to account for the mystery of death. In the first stanza, Ajaegbu questions the nature of death

Ọnwụ! Oleeebeịdị?
Ịdị ka onyeọrụubi,
Nkena-adighịecheọkaya ka ọchaa,
Tupu ọ ghọrọ.

Death! What are you like?
You are like a farmer,
Who does not wait for his corn to ripe,
Before he harvests.

In this opening stanza, Ajaegbu likens death to a farmer, albeit a bad farmer because it does not respect the seasons of harvest. The symbol of a farmer harvesting an unripe crop shows that death takes people before their time. Evidently, Ajaegbu is positing that death takes people at their prime without allowing them to actualize their potentials. To harvest crops before maturity is tantamount to a waste of the planting season and an agronomical disaster. It is also a way of upsetting the natural order of planting time and harvesting time. Ajaegbu seems to be suggesting that the farmer/reaper (death) owns the corn (people) and harvests

the crop before they mature. However, despite the right of the owner to do as he pleases with his own, the act of harvesting an unripe crop is condemnable. Ajaegbu's point is that, just as it is not right to harvest an unripe crop, it is not proper for people to die before their time. This may be the reason why the elders are the sole group who join the guild of ancestors after death. The young are not allowed to become ancestors because, since they did not reach their potentials, their death is interpreted as an abomination (*nsọ ala*) or a sacrilege. Thus, the act of preventing people from attaining to maturity, death is seen as one who commits abomination in the land.

In the second stanza, the poet questions the abode of death.

Ọnwụ! Ebee ka ị bi
Nna m ji egbe achọ gị;
Nne m ji aka odoetugị;
Ma ha ahụghịgị.

Death! Where do you live?
My father is looking for you with a gun;
My mother is looking for you with a pestle;
But they did not see you.

In this stanza Ajaegbu likens death to a thief who comes in stealthily, steals and runs away with his loot. This idea is subtly captured in the imagery of the man of the house searching for the thief with a gun *Nna m ji egbe achọ gị*, and the mother searching for the thief with a pestle *Nne m ji aka odoachọgị*. This idea is in consonant with the Igbo belief that *ọnwụ bụonyeohi, ozuruọgbalaga* 'death is a thief, he snatches and runs away', which has been rendered as a song performed during funerals. The father and mother are symbols standing for the community that has been victimized by death. The imagery of the man and woman using physical weapons (gun and pestle) to kill a spiritual being is used by the poet to indicate the futility of human efforts against death. However, waging war against death represents a human wish to engage that which punctures and disrupts the traction and propulsion of life and immortality and leaving pain and agony in its wake.

In the third stanza, Ajaegbu questions the personality of death

Ọnwụ! Gịnị ka ị bụ?
Ụgwọ gị enweghịọsịsa;
Agbogịenweghịnyigharị;
Onyeịkpọrọoku ga-azarịrị.

Death! What are you?
Your debt cannot be redeemed;
Your appointment cannot be changed;
Anyone you call must answer.

In this stanza, Ajaegbu likens death to a creditor, whose debt cannot be fully paid, *Ụgwọ gị enweghị ọsịsa.* This view is in tandem with the Igbo belief that *ọnwụ bụ ụgwọ onye ọbụla ji* 'death is a debt owed by all'. Consequently, when one dies, it is believed that, he/she has paid his/her own debt. The idea of the debt being irredeemable suggests that, no one can satisfactorily write off the debt. To be able to pay the debt implies immortality on earth; but the sad reality is that, it is impossible to redeem it, hence all are debtors at the mercy of the creditor (death) who comes eventually to claim the debtor (people). At the appointed time, the creditor comes and that appointment cannot be postponed or negotiated *Agbo gị enweghị nyigharị.* The idea of appointment with death is also consistent with the Igbo belief that, everyone has his own time to die. When someone dies, it is common to hear that *oge ya eruola* 'his/her time has reached'. Incidentally, this time (which may be early or late) was not consented to by the deceased or the bereaved; it is believed that, it is the Supreme Being that fixes the time for everyone for reasons best known to him. Irrespective of the nature of death such as sickness, accident, sudden death with no known cause, it is claimed that the person's time had reached and he had no option than to pay the debt. Logically though, it seems that anchoring someone's death on time is just a way of deriving comfort and consolation for the loss of a dear one.

In the concluding stanza, Ajaegbu questions death's capacity for mercy. He chides death for not having regard for anyone, both high and low in the society *Ịmaghịonyeukwu, Ịmaghịonyenta*. Underlying the poet's denunciation of death for being impartial in its operation, Ajaegbu's wish is that death should have regard for some persons. In other words, death should respect and spare people of status and worth who have attained some enviable heights in the society. Since people are not the same, in terms of personal achievement, people of high status ought to be given preferential treatment with regards to death. Unfortunately, death is a leveler, having respect for none, and it is for this reason that Ajaegbu is mystified and overwhelmed. Hei! *Ịdị m egwu*. This dispassionate disposition of death is a re-echoing of the same sentiment expressed by Obienyem and Nzeako in their poems.

'Ọnwụ' by Emenike

Emenike's poem has five stanzas of unequal length. The poem is an articulate analysis of the end of physical existence, and the onset of spiritual life and a comparative analysis of material and celestial life. In the opening stanza, he defines death and describes the process of death as follows

Ọnwụ bụ ndụ!
Ndụebighịebi-
Ma n'ọkụ ma nando.
Mgbeumefepụrụ,
Mkpụrụ obi adaajụụ
Kudebe kpum, kpum, kpum,
Obaraajụọoyigbakọọọnụ,
Mgbeahụ ka ndụbidoro.

Death is life!

Life everlasting-
In the fire or shadow,
When breath flies away,
The heart stays still
And stops beating
The blood becomes cold and clotted,
That is when life begins.

In this opening stanza, Emenike uses a paradox to state categorically his view of death; death is life, everlasting life. This view is a mixture of the Igbo concept of death and the Christian notion of death. The Igbo see death as a transition from a material existence to a spiritual life. According to Ikenga Metu (1991: 62) a professor of African Religious Anthropology, "death is not the final end of man in Igbo thoughts, all men continue to live in some form or the other after death". This opinion is corroborated by Okoro (2014) that for the Igbo life is a continuum that does not terminate in death, but continues to another world. Among the Igbo, the dead are always alive in the hearts of the bereaved and are not considered dead in the sense of non-existence (Ikwueme & Onwuegbuna, 2018). Onunwa (1990) states that the Igbo believe that death is not the end or complete annihilation of life but a transition from one state of life to another. Eboh (2019) endorses the aversion of Igbo to the biological finality of death due to a hold to an ontology where the mortal defies material finality and continues to exist in other varied guilds in the spirit. Two of such guilds are the prestigious cult of ancestors and the notorious guild of Akaliogholi. The ancestors are elders that died after having lived a good life and so are venerated at death, as they intercede for their families and community, while the Akaliogholi are those who lived an unworthy life, and after death are not accepted by the ancestors, and so they become wandering spirits and a nuisance (Eze, 2012; Eboh, 2019). Thus, in Igbo thought, one's relations comprise of both the living and the dead (Okoro, 2011). The principal reason for this transitory idea of death in African/Igbo cosmogony is the belief in a multiplicity of worlds or realms of existence. In Igbo religious worldview, the human world is three dimensional, arranged in a hierarchical way – Igwe 'the sky' above, Ala 'the earth' medial, and Ala mmuo 'the land of the spirits or ancestors' beneath. The sky comprise of other divinities as Sun, Moon, Lightning, and Thunder. It is believed that the sky is the abode of the Supreme Being (Chineke), along with other powerful forces such as Anyanwu (the Sun god), Amadioha (the god of thunder), Igwe, (the sky god). The earth consists of the land (human and animal) and seas; the earth is seen as the abode of human beings, the earth deity, water spirits, animals and minor divinities such as *agwụ*, and natural forces. The underworld (*ala mmụọ*) is the abode of ancestral spirits and other malevolent spirits, and it is believed that when people die, they proceed to the underworld where they will be received by the ancestors who had earlier died(Arazu, 2005; Chukwu, 2008; Tuche, 2009).However, the idea of everlasting life is not consistent with Igbo belief in the afterlife. Although the Igbo are disposed to a continuity of life after death, such a life is not seen to be eternal. The dead are expected to return in the form of reincarnation, that is, the same soul, but in another body, and in another habitat or family. There is no doubt that Christianity had a great influence on Igbo world view and superstition. Ekpunobi and Ezeaku (2011) note that the coming of Christianity in Igbo society led to the introduction of a Christian way of life and belief system. The poet proceeds by describing the process of death from the time the breath ceases through the period the body becomes cold. Emenike is simply positing that the moment rigor mortis

sets in, spiritual life begins *mgbe ahu ka ndu bidoro* 'that time life begins'. According to Luper (2009), physical life ends when the physiological systems of the body cease to function as aunified whole. He sees death as the irreversible termination of the functions of human organs, that is the cessation of those organisms by which living things develop or maintain themselves which consist of photosynthesis, cellular respiration, chemosynthesis, maintenance of homeostasis and cell generation. In stanza three and four, Emenike makes a comparison of the two worlds, the physical and the spiritual, and makes his choice, as follows:

Nye m ndụọhụrụnke a!
Ndụikukunamfeghaṛị-
Si n'isiụwanke a fee n'ụwandịọzọ;
Ndụdịomimi,
Ndụnkemmụọ
Ndụụwatụụwa-
Ebeghịebe, e be ebe.

Give me this new life!
Life of the air and flying-
Fly from this part of the world to another;
Life that is deep,
Life of the spirit
Life everlasting-
For ever and ever.

Nara m ndụụwanke a!
Ndụ nchekasị,
Ndụmmekpaahụ,
Ekworona obi ọjọọ,
Ndụntajianya.

Take away life of this world!
Life of anxieties,
Life of perplexities,
Jealousy and evil mind,
Life of spite.

The poet chooses the new spiritual life because of its features; in simple terms, it is a life of absolute freedom. Like a bird, the poet prefers to fly from one end of the earth to another without any restrain, *si n'isiụwanke a fee n'ụwa ndi ọzọ* 'fly from this part of the world to another'. This idea of flying like a bird stems from the belief, among the Igbo that spiritual life takes different forms and dimensions. Ikenga-Metu(1991) suggests that after physical death, all men continue to live in one form or another. Okoro (2011: 332) amplifies this view by positing that the dead are still with the living in different ways

> Those who are dead are never gone. They are in the thickening shadow. The dead are not under the earth, they are in the trees that rustle, they are in the

> woods that groan, they are in the waters that run, they are in the waters that steep, they are in the huts, they are in the crowd...they are in the breast of the woman, they are in the child who is wailing and in the firebrand that flames…they are in the fire that is dying, they are in the grasses that weep, they are in the whimpering rocks, they are in the forest, they are in the house, the dead are not dead

Given Okoro's position, the dead are not in the ground but are still with the living, in the environment, and where and in what form they assume is dependent on the whims of the deceased. In the case of Emenike, his choice of post-life form is the bird that flies from place to place. This idea is also tied to the idea of reincarnation; that is, the transitory phase between the time one dies and the time the person assumes a new body. However, in the case of the poet, he does not want to take on a new body, but prefers to fly about freely *ebeghịebe, e be ebe* 'for ever and ever'. The apostrophe at the end of the first line in this stanza is used to emphasize the finality of the poet's choice of afterlife existence. In the same note of finality, the poet emphasizes his rejection of the present material existence *Nara m ndu ụwanke a!*Take away life of this world! with an apostrophe at the end of the first line in stanza 4. The reasons advanced by the poet for rejecting the present world are anxieties, perplexities, jealousy, and spite that characterize human life and relationship. Based on this natural reality, Emenike concludes that, ultimately every person will receive the just recompense of his actions. While those who do good works will harvest good things *eziosisiga-amịtaezimkpụrụ*, those who do evil works will also harvest bad things *osisi ọjọọ amịta kwa mkpụrụ ọjọọ*. But after death, everyone will receive their reward in full. Again, Emenike borrows or refers to the Christian belief of events after death. Although Igbo adhere strictly to retributive justice, or the law of Karma, in terms of sowing and reaping, it is limited to earthly life and activities and not beyond. It is in the Christian ethos that judgment after death is found whereby God judges the souls of the dead by either confining them in Heaven or Hell, the two presumed eternal destinies of mankind.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the perception and presentation of death by the four poets is not the same. Although there are some similarities, they differ on several counts. From the analysis it is easy to categorise the four poets into two on account of perception; thus, two poets -Obienyem and Ajaegbu perceive death negatively while Nzeako and Emenike perceive death positively. The negative perception of death by Obienyem and Ajaegbu is a fallout of the fact that, human beings (and also animals) are helpless and powerless when visited or confronted by death. The submission to the caprices of death pits man in a vulnerable position which results in dread and fear. In contrast, the positive perception of death by Nzeako and Emenike is the product of a balanced and holistic consideration of the subject. Though Nzeako acknowledges death as an enemy of man for many reasons, he concludes that death is beneficial to man and God. On his part, Emenike sees death as positive all through and prefers to die so as to enjoy the major benefit accruing from death, which is freedom of the soul. A major factor that aids the positive perception by both poets is the resort to the Christian world view. Whereas Nzeako sees death as a messenger of God whose duty is to take dead people to Heaven to stay with God, Emenike conceives of death as that which culminates to everlasting life. A major

feature of Emenike's portrayal of death is the Igbo world view that sees death as a transition from the material world to the world of the spirits or ancestors.

In terms of presentation of death, there are similarities and differences in style used by the four poets. Obienyeyem, Nzeakọ and Ajaegbu used mainly personification and rhetorical question to present death in different ways. Using personification, Obienyem portrays death as a traveler that transcends every nook and cranny of the earth in search of victims, and also as a mindless killer armed with a cutlass and a spear. In the same way, Nzeakọ presents death as an unjust judge and a sadist that takes good people but spares evil people. Ajaegbu presents death as a farmer, a thief, and a creditor. The personified images are used by the poets to symbolize varying attributes of death. The personification of death by these poets is reminiscent of the portrayal of death by Emily Dickenson, who presented death in so many ways such as a clever lover, a gentleman, a wicked enemy, a brutal killer, a messenger of God, etc. With respect to rhetorical question, the three poets (Obienyeyem, Nzeakọ and Ajaegbu) used the form to underline the facts and realities of death, and their confusion about the nature and operations of death. The questions are attempts made to fathom the mystery of death. The fact that Emenike used neither personification nor rhetorical question makes his poem outstanding and distinct from the others. Arising from the paradoxical tone in his opening line, the poem is contrastive in form, whereby the end of one life translates to the beginning of another life, coupled with the rejection of one world and acceptance of another world by the poet.

It is quite incidental that four poets wrote poems on the same topic in one anthology. The reason why these poems on the same subject were allowed is definitely due to reasons of perception. The four poems were written by four different poets in different ways that provides interesting reading. Additionally, the reason why four poets chose the same subject is due to the commonality and mysterious phenomenon of death in the African and Igbo thought. Findings from this study reveal that two poets portrayed death in a negative light while two depicted death in a positive light. The two poets that portrayed the negative aspect of death were narrow and restricted in their approach, but the two who showed the positive aspects were broad and inclusive in their view. The finding reveals that, although death is a universal phenomenon, peoples' view about it is not homogeneous. This is mainly due to the fact that, people are not the same; people differ with respect to age, sex, education, ethnicity, race, experience, religion, etc. It is actually in the area of religion that this study found a reason for variations in the perception of death among Igbo poets. The influence of the Christian religion is clearly seen in the positive orientation towards death by two Igbo poets, which is lacking in the poems of the other two. Furthermore, factors such as experience of bereavement may have played a part in the total denunciation of death by the two poets who saw no light in death. The finding also reveals that, even though death is a harrowing experience for everyone, it is not totally abhorrent; there are several benefits arising from the experience.

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