

Signs of Reincarnation in Africa

Beliefs in some sort of rebirth or reincarnation were common in traditional African societies and are still found today, despite the influence of Christianity and Islam on the region. African reincarnation beliefs typically are associated with signs such as a parent's dreams, a child's birthmarks, and other phenomena, including past-life memories. This article focusses on the relationship between beliefs and signs of reincarnation in sub-Saharan Africa and shows that African reincarnation cases are very similar to cases reported from other parts of the world.

Reincarnation in Sub-Saharan Africa

A great deal has been written about reincarnation beliefs as a feature of African religious systems. Before the arrival of Christianity and Islam in the region, the tribal societies of sub-Saharan Africa subscribed to an animistic worldview that included beliefs in postmortem survival and the possibility of interaction between the living and dead through dreams and other contacts.

As in other tribal societies with animistic belief systems, African ideas include the possibility that part of the spirit may survive bodily death and continue to interact with the living, while a different part reincarnates in another body. In some societies, one finds beliefs in the possibility of returning in more than one body simultaneously.^[1] To some extent, traditional beliefs – and associated experiences – related to reincarnation continue to be reported from Africa, despite opposition from the world religions.^[2]

Some African philosophers have questioned whether African rebirth beliefs may be rightly classified as reincarnation, but their doubt appears to be based on the assumption that reincarnation implies rebirth on an Indic model, with its notion of karma as a moral law flowing from one's deeds in earlier lives. Because traditional African reincarnation beliefs did not include karma and allowed for part of a spirit to remain in the afterlife while another part reincarnated, the thinking goes, African beliefs cannot properly be called reincarnation beliefs.^[3]

However, Indic ideas represent only one variety of reincarnation belief. Other systems – including the beliefs of tribal societies, the beliefs of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and the beliefs of heterodox Shia Islamic sects such as the Druze of Lebanon, Syria and Israel – do not include karma either. It would be better therefore to define reincarnation without reference to karma, simply as the return of some essence of a human being to another human being, a definition that allows African and other metaphysical systems to be counted as embracing reincarnation.^[4]

Anthropologists have noted the connection between reincarnation and social practices, particularly naming and mortuary practices. For instance, it may be important to identify a child as the reincarnation of a specific ancestor so that he or she may be given the same name as before. Burials may be intended to facilitate or block rebirth – in the house compound to encourage return in the family, or face-down at crossroads to confuse the spirit and deter it from returning to the community.^[5]

This article focuses not on reincarnation beliefs and social practices, but on a comparatively neglected aspect of the reincarnation issue, signs and accounts of apparent reincarnation that underlie beliefs in cultures throughout the world.^[6] These signs include [announcing dreams](#), [birthmarks](#) and [other physical traits](#), [distinctive behaviours](#), and [past-life memories](#) that permit the identification of a child as the reincarnation of a deceased person, in Africa typically a relative.

In addition to watching for such signs, African parents may consult oracles or diviners for help in

identifying a child as an ancestor returned. Anthropologist Victor Uchendu, an Igbo, related that his father's elder brother on his deathbed had advised Victor's father to marry soon, for 'he was coming back to him'. At his birth, a diviner identified Uchendu as the reincarnation of this uncle.^[7]

The diviner's identification was confirmed by three small birthmarks on the right side of Uchendu's belly, in places his uncle's body had been marked after his death. Birthmarks of this kind, called [experimental birthmarks](#), are better known from East Asia, where the practice of cadaver marking is widespread and of long standing.^[8]

An important class of reincarnation beliefs and signs in West Africa relate to 'repeater children', children who are reborn to the same parents several times, only to die at a young age each time. The bodies of children suspected of being repeaters are mutilated, with the idea that the mutilations (eg amputated finger segments or clipped ears) will reappear on their new bodies and so prevent them from being called away to a premature death again. Repeater children are covered [in a separate article](#) in the *Psi Encyclopedia*.

Igbo Beliefs and Cases

Reincarnation researcher [Jan Stevenson](#) gave special attention to the Igbo and published two journal papers concerning their reincarnation beliefs and cases. He discovered that many Igbo preserved features of their traditional religion, including beliefs about reincarnation. All children were thought to be reborn ancestors, who might be identified through birthmarks, behavioural traits, recognitions of people and, later, memory claims. Diviners were often consulted for aid in making identifications when children were young.^[9]

In a 1986 paper, Stevenson presented an analysis of 57 Igbo cases about which he and colleagues had collected information.^[10] The subjects were male in 44 (77%) of the cases and female in thirteen (23%) of them. The previous incarnation was identified in 53 (93%) of the cases. In almost all cases, the subject was related to the previous incarnation through either blood or marriage, with a high proportion related through the father or in the father's kinship line, consistent with their patrilineal social organization.^[11] Ten (18%) were identified as having been a member of the opposite sex.

Dates of death and birth could be established in 35 cases. The intermission varied from six to 540 months (45 years, in the case of Uwamachi Okogbue, summarized below), with a median of 34 months. Death was violent in thirteen cases (30%) and natural in 31 cases (70%). Only a few subjects talked about the previous lives, but in 39 (68%) of the cases, there were birthmarks or birth defects. Some subjects had more than one birthmark or birth defect and four subjects had both a birthmark and a birth defect.

Several children exhibited behaviour linked to the previous lives. Four wanted to be called by the name of the previous person and addressed adults as their previous incarnations had done. Ten had phobias, in seven cases connected to circumstances of the previous death. Some children who were identified as having changed sex acted in ways appropriate to the opposite sex. Five were antagonistic towards persons with whom their previous incarnations were in conflict, while eleven showed unusual affection for a person of whom their previous incarnation had been fond.

Stevenson reported four Igbo cases in greater detail; these and a case he investigated among the Ga people are summarized below.

Cases in West and East Africa

Introductory Comments

Stevenson began to work in Africa during the period he was concentrating on reincarnation-linked birthmarks and birth defects,^[12] the subject of his two-volume monograph, *Reincarnation and Biology*,^[13] with the result that many of his African cases have prominent physical features.

Anthropologist and reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#) has collected three additional accounts through social media appeals. Although Matlock has not had the opportunity to study these cases in the field and they may be considered no more than anecdotes, nevertheless they have features that place them in the same class with Stevenson's cases.

A few cases of non-native children are excluded from the list. Omitted are a case reported from the island of Mauritius in 1955^[14], the case of Vashnee Rattan, an Indian girl resident in Rhodesia^[15]; and Joey Verwey, of South Africa, whose case has been widely publicized on the internet but never investigated or properly documented by researchers.^[16]

Aristide Kolotey (Ghana – Ga)

Aristide Kolotey was identified as the reincarnation of a man (a classificatory uncle) named Poepak by a long linear birthmark across his chest. Four years before Aristide's birth, Poepak had gone for a swim in a river but apparently had not seen a submerged rock, which sliced through his chest. Aristide had no imaged memories of Poepak's life and never claimed to be him, although he had a strong phobia of water and did not learn to swim until adulthood.^[17]

Augustine Nwachi (Nigeria – Igbo)

Augustine Nwachi was identified as the return of his maternal grandfather Dominic, who had died more than 21 years prior, by a diviner and a severe defect of his left foot: A third of the foot was absent; the toes were nubbins only. Dominic's left foot had become infected and gangrenous shortly before his death. The area around the great toe and second toe swelled and turned brown, then the entire foot became swollen. He died at 56, having been ill for only a week.

After Dominic's death, his son (Augustine's father) dreamed about him on several occasions. Although Dominic never said explicitly that he planned to reincarnate as Augustine's father's child, that is how Augustine's father interpreted the dreams. Normally announcing dreams cease with the birth of a child, but Augustine's father continued to dream of Dominic after Augustine's birth. Augustine had no memories of Dominic up until Stevenson last saw him, when he was six and a half years old, although he was said to resemble Dominic in his personality and to have the same stocky body build.^[18]

Cordelia Ekouroume (Nigeria – Igbo)

Cordelia Ekouroume was born with defects of her hands and feet, identifying her as the reincarnation of a deceased sister, who in turn was thought to be the reincarnation of one of her father's sisters, Wankwo. When she was threatened with death, Wankwo had appealed for assistance to her brother, Ekouroume (Cordelia's father), a medicine man. Ekouroume had employed witchcraft to dispatch the offender, but Wankwo subsequently died of natural causes.

A year later, one of Ekouroume's wives gave birth to a girl, whom a diviner identified as the reincarnation of Wankwo. Unfortunately, the girl sickened and died in infancy and Ekouroume, enraged that she had not lived longer after what he had done to help her, chopped the fingers and toes off her corpse, bound its legs to keep her spirit from walking, put the remains along with some 'medicines' in a bag, and hung it from rafters of his house.

By this method he intended to prevent Wankwo's further return in his family. For eleven years his

actions had the intended effect, but a new wife unknowingly cut down the bag, breaking the spell. She had already delivered three healthy babies but her next child, Cordelia, was born with several malformed fingers and toes and a deep constriction ring round her lower left leg, where Ekouroume had bound the corpse's legs. Cordelia never spoke about Wankwo but according to Ekouroume, she gave 'certain signs suggesting she was aware of her presumed previous incarnation or incarnations'. Cordelia's mother requested that Stevenson not ask Cordelia about any past-life memories she might have, and he did not.^[19]

Ngozi Uduji (Nigeria – Igbo)

Ngozi Uduji was born in 1969 or possibly 1970 with the lower part of her left forearm missing. Her body was covered with dark patches resembling burns, but these healed after a week or so and disappeared. On the basis of these physical signs, along with a diviner's declaration, she was identified as the reincarnation of Ogbonna Ireghu, a cousin of her father who had been killed in 1968 during the Biafran War (Nigerian Civil War). Ogbonna had been tending his bicycle repair shop at the village market when it was bombed by government forces, reportedly using napalm. Ogbonna was amongst those killed in the attack; his left arm was left dangling if not torn off altogether, and his body was burned.

When she was about two years old, Ngozi told her paternal grandfather (Ogbonna's uncle) that she was Ogbonna. To test her, her grandfather asked her where Ogbonna's tools were, and she led the way to a no-longer-used corner of an old house belonging to the family and showed him the tools, which she handled as if she were familiar with their use. Ngozi had phobias of guns and aeroplanes and also of white men, who had been hired as mercenaries during the war. She never again spoke of Ogbonna but until she was four years of age she acted in a boyish manner and preferred the company of boys. She never tried to dress as a boy, however, as do some girls who recall having been male, and in middle childhood shifted away from her masculine identity and began to prefer the company of girls.^[20]

Uwamachi Okogbue (Nigeria – Igbo)

Uwamachi Okogbue was identified as the reincarnation of a paternal uncle, Nkume, on the basis of a severe birth defect: His entire right arm was missing, his hand attached directly to the shoulder.^[21]

Nkume had been killed in 1914, about a year before Uwamachi's father's birth and 45 years before Uwamachi's. The circumstances of Nkume's death were not known to Uwamachi's parents before his birth; they were recalled only by an older member of the family. According to this woman, Nkume had had a reputation of being fierce and other villagers were afraid of him. They set upon him and murdered him, one of his assailants severing his right arm with a cutlass, from which injury he bled out and died. Uwamachi never talked about Nkume's life or death. The 45-year intermission between lives is the longest of any of Stevenson's African cases and one of the longest of his entire collection.

^[22]

Wunmi (Nigeria – Yoruba)

Wunmi is Yoruba, a native people who live to the west of the Igbo in southern Nigeria. Unlike the Igbo, the Yoruba are matrilineal, tracing descent through the mother's line, and their reincarnation cases tend to follow suit.^[23]

Stevenson studied some Yoruba cases but did not report any in detail. The case of Wunmi is one of those collected by James Matlock through appeals on Facebook.

Wunmi's grandmother died her 40s, before she was able to have as many children as she would have

liked and before she had met other goals (such as education) she had set for herself. On her deathbed, she told her only daughter that she would return as her child, and two months later the daughter conceived Wunmi.

Wunmi was born with an extraordinary greenish mark on her back, exactly where her grandmother had a similar mark. She grew up to have many children and to become educated, satisfying goals her grandmother had been unable to realize for herself.^[24]

Yemisi (Nigeria – Yoruba)

Yemisi is one of Wunmi's granddaughters. She was recognized as the reincarnation of a sister who had died at 22 after an accidental fall in which she hit the side of her head, about six years before her birth.

Yemisi was born with a mark on her ear that matched an injury her sister had sustained in the fall. As a young child she complained of feeling of a hard smack on the side of head, followed by excruciating pain in her ear that took some time to subside. At eleven, she continues to experience this trauma, especially on the anniversary of her sister's death.

Yemisi was an early talker and when only about a year old began to refer to her late sister's son (her nephew) as her son. At two, when a niece her sister had trained came for a visit, she recognized her, embraced her and called her by name. Although the woman was a good deal older than she was, she cared for her as if she were ministering to a child.^[25]

Shadrack Kipkorir Tarus (Kenya – Kalenjin)

The Kalenjin are a patrilineal people of Kenya whose traditional reincarnation beliefs have largely been displaced by Christianity. Like other unilineal tribal peoples, the Kalenjin expected reincarnation to occur in the lineage.

All children are thought to be the returns of patrilineal ancestors who died forty or more days before. When a child is born, the elders assemble for a ritual at which they call out the names of patrilineal ancestors who have not yet been recognized as having reincarnated. Upon hearing its former name, the child is expected to sneeze or pee, acknowledging it as his.

At his birth on 21 March 1993, Shadrack 'Shads' Tarus sneezed at 'Bowen', the name of one of his paternal grandfather's 'cousin brothers' or parallel cousins. He was assigned Bowen as one of his names, although he chooses not to use it. Consistent with having been Bowen, he was noticed to have a birthmark over his left eye. In middle age, Bowen had accidentally fallen from a rock, almost losing his left eye, and leaving a permanent scar. He died of unrelated causes at 82 on 14 January 1993, nine weeks (63 days) before Shads was born.

Shads' paternal grandmother, who passed in 2011, used to call him 'brother-in-law', in recognition of his past life as Bowen.

When he was 21, Shads visited Bowen's village for the first time. He was recognized as the reincarnation of Bowen by one of Bowen's sons, who hugged him on meeting him, although he did not know at the time that Shads was supposed to be Bowen come back. Shads looked exactly like his father, he said. As they became better acquainted, Bowen's children told Shads that he resembled their father in his calmness and other facets of his personality; his gestures and his manner of making eye contact when speaking to people was the same as Bowen. Shads has never had memories of Bowen and Bowen's children asked him questions he could not answer; nevertheless, they continue to honour him as their father returned.^[26]

African Reincarnation in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Matlock notes the widespread association of reincarnation beliefs with signs such as announcing dreams, birthmarks matching scars on a deceased person's body, behavioural and personality similarities between lives, et cetera, and argues that it was the observation of these signs, not speculative thinking, that led to the development of beliefs in reincarnation. If this is so, then the beliefs could be very old, stretching far back in human history.^[27]

There is no question about the similarity of the African cases sketched above to cases reported by Stevenson and other cultures.^[28] Nonetheless, it is striking that there are comparatively few African cases with past-life memory and that on the whole, African cases are less well-developed than those reported from Asia and other world areas, with the exception of those from other native societies. [Native North American cases](#), also, are relatively impoverished and physical signs such as birthmarks and birth defects predominate in them too.^[29]

Additionally, in both African and North American tribal societies most cases occur within the lineage, meaning that the previous persons were well known to the case subjects' families. This makes it much harder to make a strong case for reincarnation from them; returns in the family open the possibility of social construction more than in cases in which the subject's family was unacquainted with the previous person. For this reason, Stevenson concentrated on cases from other world areas, where 'stranger' cases outnumber cases with family and acquaintance connections.

Why should there be this cultural variation in the expression of reincarnation signs? Perhaps it has to do with the high incidence of cases with family relationships in tribal cultures, because cases with family relationships are on the whole less well developed than cases with stranger relationships, for reasons unknown.^[30]

Another intriguing possibility is genetic variation in the ability for past-life memory to rise into conscious awareness.^[31] Genetic variation might help to explain the uneven distribution of well-developed cases in different populations, for instance, the abundance of reincarnation cases in North India as compared to South India.^[32] In support of this conjecture, North and South Indian populations are known to be genetically distinct.^[33] A genetic link might also help explain why past-life memories sometimes seem to run in families.^[34] However, at the present state of knowledge, this possibility is at best theoretical.

James G Matlock

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Matlock (1993, 2019).
- 2.^ The earliest review of reincarnation in African societies may be that of Theodore Besterman (1930/1968). Matlock (1993) has information on several African societies in a worldwide cross-cultural study.
- 3.^ See Majeed (2012); Mbiti (1989); Onyewuenyi (2009).
- 4.^ Matlock (1993, 2019).
- 5.^ Matlock (1993).
- 6.^ Matlock (1993, 2019).
- 7.^ Uchendu (1965), 6.
- 8.^ Another African example, from northern Ghana, is mentioned by AW Cardinall (1920, 66-67): 'On the death of an infant the grave diggers make a small mark with ashes on his cheek or forehead, and when the child is born again he will have the same mark on his forehead or cheek'.

9. ^ Stevenson (1985).
10. ^ Stevenson (1986b); all data in this section is drawn from this paper. Stevenson heard about 30 additional Igbo cases that he and his time did not have time to investigate (1986b, 205).
11. ^ In reincarnating predominately in the father's line, the Igbo are following the kinship organization of their society: the Igbo trace kinship exclusively through the father (they are patrilineal). They form an interesting contrast to the Tlingit Indians of southeastern Alaska, who are matrilineal, and whose cases fall predominantly on the mother's side (Stevenson, 1966). See Matlock (2019, 181-82) for further discussion of this issue.
12. ^ Stevenson (1986), 205.
13. ^ Stevenson (1997a, 1997b)
14. ^ Bissondoyal (1955).
15. ^ Hind (1977).
16. ^ Joey Verway is said to have recalled 10 previous lives, highly unusual for a child subject. In [one article about the case](#), Verway is said to have been interviewed by Ian Stevenson, but he never wrote about her and there is not a file on her case at the University of Virginia (personal communication from [Jim B Tucker](#)).
17. ^ Stevenson (1997a), 340-42. Phobias related to the circumstances of deaths are a common feature of reincarnation cases globally (see [here](#)).
18. ^ Stevenson (1997b), 1335-39. Stevenson (1997b, 1338) comments that dreams persisting after birth are consistent with the idea of continuing discarnate existence after reincarnation, as found not only in Africa, but in animistic societies worldwide (Matlock, 1993).
19. ^ Stevenson (1997b), 1634-40.
20. ^ Stevenson (1997b), 1330-35. For a discussion of cases with a sex of change between lives, see [here](#).
21. ^ See Stevenson (1997b, 1340, 1341) for photographs.
22. ^ Stevenson (1997b) 1339-44. The longest intermission in a solved case recorded by Stevenson was 82 years in a Sri Lankan case (Stevenson, 1973, 31).
23. ^ The Yoruba are not the only matrilineal tribal people whose reincarnation cases fall the maternal line; the same is true the Tlingit of southeastern Alaska (Stevenson, 1966) and the Haida of British Columbia (Stevenson, 1975). See Matlock (2019, 181-82) for further discussion of this issue.
24. ^ Matlock (2021).
25. ^ Matlock (2021).
26. ^ Matlock (2021).
27. ^ Matlock (1993, 2019).
28. ^ Compare, for instance, the case Stevenson (1974) reported in *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation.*)
29. ^ Well-developed reincarnation cases are easier to find in Asia and parts of the Middle East than in Europe and in non-native American societies, yet strong cases have been reported from the latter regions: See [European Children Who Remember Previous Lives](#) and [American Children Who Remember Previous Lives](#).
30. ^ Stevenson (1986), 205.
31. ^ Matlock (2021).
32. ^ Pasricha (2001).
33. ^ Joseph (2018).
34. ^ Matlock (2021).