

## The Discourse of the Human Person and Its Eschatology in Urhobo Ontology: A Philosophical Perusal

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*Abstract— This paper provides an in-depth analysis of issues concerning the human person and its eschatology in Urhobo ontology, with specific interest in how the Urhobo people of Southern Nigeria conceive and understand the concepts of existence, death, and destiny. The study addresses the perceived neglect of holistic African perceptions in the analysis of the human person, particularly in relation to the concepts of personhood and the afterlife. The essence of this study is to highlight traditional African beliefs that provide a moral and communal framework shaping scholarly discussions as they relate to life and death. In Urhobo thought, personhood is conceived as a unity of body, spirit, and destiny. The study also highlights how their eschatological beliefs provide a moral and communal framework that shapes both life and death. Employing the methods of philosophical analysis and hermeneutics, the paper argues that the Urhobo view death not as an end but as a transition into Eriowin, the spiritual realm, and that moral conduct, communal belonging, and proper burial rites determine one's ultimate destiny. Ancestorhood is considered the highest fulfillment and attainment of the human person, serving as both a moral ideal and an eschatological goal. The paper concludes by affirming that Urhobo ontology offers a holistic perception of the human person, where morality, communal living, and destiny are inseparable, contributing importantly to global philosophical reflections on the themes of life and the afterlife.*

**Keywords:** Personhood; afterlife; death; Urhobo ontology; communalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The essence of creating a nexus between the discourse of the human person and their finality ignited the need to study the eschatology of the Urhobo people of Southern Nigeria. This inquiry is further premised on the need to understand how certain African thoughts capture the profound questions of existence, death, and destiny. The Urhobo people, one of the major ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria, hold a worldview in which life is not limited to the physical but extends into a spiritual continuum that connects the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. This understanding raises a significant point of reflection for philosophy because it challenges the materialistic or dualistic tendencies often found in Western discourse on the human person. Mbiti (1999) observed that Africans see life as a rhythm that moves from birth, through death, to the spiritual world and back to the community of the living (p. 161). Such a rhythm is evident in Urhobo ontology, where the human person is understood not only in terms of flesh and spirit but also as a relational being defined by moral responsibility and communal destiny.

The discourse around the human person in Urhobo thought raises important philosophical issues. One of these concerns the nature of death itself. For the Urhobo, death is not an end but a transition into another phase of existence. According to Oguejiofor (2001), death in African thought is conceived as a doorway, a passage to another form of life (p. 89). This perspective invites inquiry into what constitutes true personhood in Urhobo philosophy, since the human person is not reduced to the physical body but is seen as a unity of body, spirit, and destiny tied inextricably to the community. Another issue concerns eschatology itself, particularly the belief that moral conduct during earthly life shapes one's place in the spiritual community. Those who live uprightly are believed to become ancestors, while those who fail morally may face exclusion or spiritual disintegration.

The objective of this work is to highlight these conceptions and demonstrate how they shape the Urhobo worldview. By studying the Urhobo conception of the human person and eschatology, the work aims to show that African traditional thought is not only religious but also deeply philosophical. It considers questions of identity, morality, and destiny in a way that contributes meaningfully to global philosophical debates. Gyekye (1995) rightly emphasizes that African conceptions of the person are normative, linking moral responsibility to metaphysical destiny (p. 109). This work situates Urhobo ontology within this context and highlights its unique contribution to philosophical anthropology and eschatology.

The problem that this work addresses lies in the persistent neglect of African traditional perspectives in mainstream philosophy. While Western traditions have long debated the immortality of the soul, resurrection, and final judgment, African perspectives are often dismissed as mere folklore. This neglect creates a significant gap

in scholarship, as it overlooks the sophisticated ways in which African cultures, such as the Urhobo, understand the human person. Wiredu (2004) criticizes this imbalance, stating that African worldviews are often reduced to ethnographic curiosities rather than taken seriously as philosophical systems (p. 23). By addressing Urhobo thought directly, this study challenges such neglect and argues for the inclusion of African eschatological perspectives in broader philosophical discourse.

The methods employed in this study are philosophical analysis and hermeneutics. It uses these methods to draw on oral traditions, ethnographic accounts, and secondary literature to present a coherent picture of Urhobo beliefs. This methodological choice is necessary because Urhobo ontology is rooted in a lived culture where oral narratives, rituals, and practices convey complex metaphysical insights. Ekeh (2007) points out that to understand Urhobo thought, one must move beyond texts to the rituals and stories that embody the people's ontology (p. 47). This approach demonstrates that the Urhobo conception of the human person cannot be separated from eschatological beliefs that emphasize the continuity of life, moral accountability, and communal belonging. The work ultimately shows that Urhobo ontology presents a rich resource for philosophical consideration of the meaning of life and death, while also providing clarity that can broaden global conversations about human destiny.

## **THE CONCEPT OF THE HUMAN PERSON IN URHOBO ONTOLOGY**

The Urhobo understanding of the human person is deeply rooted in their cosmology, religion, and cultural practices. Unlike the strictly dualistic framework often found in Western philosophy, where the body and soul are sharply separated, the Urhobo view presents a holistic conception in which the human person is defined by the integration of the physical, spiritual, and communal dimensions of existence. In this sense, the human being is not only an individual but also a participant in a cosmic order that links the visible and invisible realms (Otor, et al., 2025; Irom, et al., 2025).

One central feature of Urhobo ontology is the belief that the human person is made up of both material and immaterial components. Ottuh (2017) explains that every human being is composed of two principal entities which are referred to as Erhi and Ugboma, which could be roughly translated as soul or spirit and body (p. 209). In Urhobo thought, the Erhi is considered primary because it gives meaning and expression to the Ugboma. Without the Erhi, the physical body has no reality. This shows that the Urhobo person is conceived as a unity of body and spirit rather than a fragmentary composition of separate parts.

This dual constitution also implies that the Urhobo conceive of life as a journey shaped by destiny. The Urhobo believe that before birth, every individual receives a destiny known as Urhievwe from Oghene, the Supreme Being. Once chosen, this destiny is irreversible, and the individual's life unfolds in accordance with it. Ottuh

(2017) observes that the life of the person right from birth thereafter becomes strictly governed by the wish made before Oghene, which could not be revoked (p. 207). The implication is that the Urhobo human person is not merely a biological being but a spiritual entity living out a preordained purpose.

The concept of Akpo further deepens the Urhobo view of personhood. Akpo means life or world, and it embodies both the physical and existential dimensions of human existence. Ofuafo (2017) notes that in Urhobo mythology, Akpo is a loaded term; literally the word means life or a spiritual force in man (p. 282). The Urhobo say Ow'ho r'akpo to designate a living person, emphasizing that life itself is the defining mark of personhood. At the same time, Akpo is contrasted with Eriw'in, the spirit world, showing that the human person is suspended between two realms: the material world of living beings and the spiritual world of ancestors and divinities.

Personhood in Urhobo thought is also inherently relational. The individual is always understood as part of the family, clan, and community. This communal understanding ensures that the identity of the human person is inseparable from social belonging and responsibility. Agbegbedia (2015) observes that for traditional Urhobo, community is much more than simply a social grouping of people bound together by reasons of natural origin or deep common interests and values. It is both a society as well as a unity of the visible and invisible worlds (p. 50). Thus, a human being is not only an individual entity but also an embodiment of communal and spiritual ties.

Moreover, the Urhobo view of the human person emphasizes continuity of existence beyond physical death. Death, in their conception, is not annihilation but transition. A person who dies well, after a morally upright life and with proper burial rites, is believed to become an ancestor. Agbegbedia (2015) explains that the major priority of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is the reason why every dead person is accorded a proper funeral rite in Urhobo culture (p. 47). Ancestorhood is the highest form of human fulfillment in Urhobo ontology because it signifies that the person has lived a life worthy of memory, respect, and spiritual continuation. However, not all individuals attain this state. Those who die prematurely or live wickedly may not become ancestors but instead wander as restless spirits. Ottuh (2017) highlights this moral dimension, stating that evil people who died go to the abode of suffering called Egbewerhe (p. 208) while the righteous move into Urhorho, the abode of peace. This eschatological outlook ties morality to personhood, making ethical living central to the full realization of the human person.

Another striking aspect of Urhobo ontology is the belief in the lingering presence of the dead among the living. The spirit of the deceased is thought to hover around the household until full burial rites are completed. Nabofa, as cited in Ottuh (2017), explains that the soul of the departed is said to stand near the body or hover around the premises where the corpse lies, watching over all the burial and funeral performances

on its physical part (p. 210). This belief underscores the Urhobo conviction that human personhood extends into the spiritual world and continues to interact with the living community.

The Urhobo conception of the human person integrates the body, spirit, destiny, and community into a coherent ontology that emphasizes continuity, morality, and belonging. The human person is viewed not merely as an individual but as a being whose existence is shaped by divine destiny, defined by communal ties, and fulfilled in ancestorhood. This vision offers a holistic understanding of human existence where the physical and spiritual dimensions are inseparable and where the moral quality of life determines one's ultimate destiny.

### **THE MEANING OF DEATH IN URHOBO THOUGHT**

For the Urhobo people, death is one of the most significant and complex realities of human existence. It is never seen as a mere cessation of biological functions but as a transition that connects the physical world, known as Akpo, with the spiritual realm, known as Erivwin. The Urhobo perception of death is inseparable from their wider ontology, which conceives the human person as a union of body and spirit, destined to continue in another mode of existence after earthly life.

At the most basic level, death is regarded as a universal and inevitable event that all humans must face. Agbegbedia (2015) notes that although death is a dreaded incidence, it is considered to be the beginning of a person's deeper relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds (p. 46). This shows that, for the Urhobo, death is not the destruction of life but its continuation in another form. It is through death that the individual crosses into the spiritual world where he or she either becomes an ancestor or faces exclusion depending on moral conduct.

The Urhobo understanding of death is closely tied to their communal worldview. A person's death is not treated as a private event but as one with profound implications for the entire family and community. Proper burial rites are seen as essential in ensuring the safe passage of the deceased into the afterlife. Agbegbedia (2015) emphasizes that proper burial rites are assurance of protection for the living than securing a safe passage for the dying (p. 47). This suggests that death is not only about the fate of the deceased but also about the ongoing welfare of the community, since the spirit of one who is not properly buried may wander and disturb the living.

The Urhobo language itself reflects the weight of death as an existential reality. The term *ughwuomiavwe* means death is a pain, capturing the deep sorrow that accompanies the loss of life (Agbegbedia, 2015). This sense of death as a painful rupture is further illustrated in proverbs and sayings. One Urhobo proverb states that it is forbidden even when playing about, to wander into the spirit world (Agbegbedia, 2015,

p. 56), showing the seriousness with which death is treated and the recognition that it is a one-way passage. Thus, even though death is accepted as inevitable, it is also feared and deeply respected.

A striking feature of Urhobo thought is the categorization of death into different types, each with its own meaning and consequence. Ottuh (2017) explains that there is *ughwu rhi ikprhegede*, which means sudden death, *ughwu ri idadiri*, which refers to death by accident or sickness, and *emamoru ughwu*, which signifies a good death (p. 208). Sudden and accidental deaths are seen as bad because they cut life short, while a good death refers to dying at an old age after living a fulfilled and honorable life. Those who die a good death are celebrated, as such deaths are understood as a smooth transition to ancestorhood. In contrast, people who die untimely or in morally corrupt ways may be denied proper funeral rites, preventing them from attaining the status of an ancestor.

The mythological narratives of the Urhobo also explain how death came into the world. One well-known myth tells of a race between the dog and the toad, who were both sent to God with messages about the fate of human beings (Irom, 2019; Irom, 2023). The dog was to declare that humans should live forever, while the toad was to announce that humans would die. Distracted along the way, the dog arrived late, and the toad delivered its message first. As a result, death became the destiny of all creatures. Ottuh (2017) recounts that the toad bore the message which states that they were not to live forever; but to return to God, that is, die after a while. God ratified the toad's message and death came to be among all creatures (p. 209). This myth not only explains the origin of death but also conveys the inevitability of mortality as a divine decree.

Despite its inevitability, death in Urhobo thought is not seen as the ultimate end. It is viewed as a passage into *Eriwvin*, the spiritual world, where the destiny of the individual is determined. The Urhobo hold that the soul hovers around after death, observing burial rites before finally joining the ancestors or being rejected. *Nabofa*, as cited in Ottuh (2017), explains that the soul of the departed is said to stand near the body or hover around the premises where the corpse lies, watching over all the burial and funeral performances on its physical part (p. 210). The process of incorporation into the ancestral realm is therefore not automatic but depends on the worthiness of the individual and the fulfillment of cultural obligations.

The moral dimension of death is central in Urhobo philosophy. Death is not only a biological necessity but also a moral reckoning. According to Agbegbedia (2015), one is therefore advised to live according to dictates of good and moral life to inherit this abode after death as conceived by the Urhobo (p. 45). Those who live righteously and uphold communal values secure their place as ancestors, while those who live wickedly face shame and exclusion in the spirit world (Onah, et al., 2023). This ethical orientation

makes death a constant reminder of the need for good living. Hence, the Urhobo conception of death combines existential, communal, mythical, and moral dimensions. Death is painful yet necessary, feared yet respected, final yet transitional. It is at once a rupture in physical existence and an entry into the spiritual realm. The meaning of death, therefore, lies not only in its inevitability but also in its role as a gateway to ancestorhood, where moral integrity and cultural rites determine one's ultimate destiny.

### **AFTERLIFE AND ANCESTORHOOD IN URHOBOL BELIEF**

The Urhobo conception of the afterlife reflects a deep conviction that existence does not end with biological death. In their ontology, human life continues beyond the physical realm in *Eriwwin*, the spirit world, where the destiny of each person is determined by their moral conduct while still alive, communal standing, and the fulfillment of cultural rites. Death is thus understood as a transition to another form of life, and ancestorhood becomes the highest state of fulfillment that a person can achieve after passing on.

The Urhobo strongly believe that death is not the end but a passage to another form of existence. Ottuh (2017) explains that the Urhobo believe that good people in the society who died metamorphose spiritually to the abode meant for such people to continue a better life called *Urhoro* (p. 208). *Urhoro* represents the abode of peace, rest, and honor where the spirits of the righteous reside. In contrast, those who lived wickedly or died in shame face exclusion from this blessed state. Ottuh (2017) further notes that evil people who died go to the abode of suffering called *Egbeverhe* (p. 208). This clear moral distinction highlights the eschatological dimension of Urhobo belief where ethical living determines eternal destiny.

The process of attaining ancestorhood is not automatic; it requires both a morally upright life and the performance of proper burial rites. Agbegbedia (2015) stresses that the major priority of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is the reason why every dead person is accorded a proper funeral rite in Urhobo culture (p. 47). Without these rites, the spirit of the deceased may not safely transition to the spiritual realm but may linger restlessly among the living. Burial rituals, therefore, serve both as a cultural obligation to the dead and as protection for the community, ensuring that the spirit joins the ranks of the ancestors rather than becoming a wandering ghost.

Ancestorhood in Urhobo thought is a revered state. Ancestors are not considered dead in the Western sense but are seen as the living-dead, who continue to participate in the life of the community. They are thought to protect, guide, and even discipline their descendants. Agbegbedia (2015) notes that ancestors are very much part of the living and their presence is invoked in prayers, rituals, and sacrifices (p. 48). This shows that ancestorhood is not merely a posthumous honor but an active role in maintaining the moral and spiritual order of the community.

The relationship between the living and the ancestors underscores the communal dimension of Urhobo eschatology. Personhood is not complete until one becomes an ancestor, and this status is achieved only through a life of moral responsibility and social belonging. Ottuh (2017) observes that the Urhobo people believe that the continuation of life after death is only assured for those who have lived well in the society and are qualified to be remembered (p. 207). The memory of the community, therefore, plays a decisive role in determining one's eternal destiny. Those who live selfishly or bring shame to their family may be denied ancestorhood, effectively cutting them off from communal remembrance and spiritual continuity.

Mythology also plays a role in shaping Urhobo beliefs about the afterlife. Stories about the origin of death and the journey of the soul emphasize that the human spirit does not vanish but travels into another realm. Nabofa, as cited in Ottuh (2017), explains that the soul of the departed is said to stand near the body or hover around the premises where the corpse lies, watching over all the burial and funeral performances on its physical part (p. 210). This belief highlights the transitional nature of death, in which the deceased remains connected to the physical world until rituals ensure proper incorporation into the spiritual realm.

The distinction between good and bad death also reflects Urhobo eschatological beliefs. Dying at old age after a fruitful life is celebrated because it ensures smooth passage into ancestorhood. Sudden, violent, or shameful deaths, however, complicate this transition. Ofuafo (2017) notes that the Urhobo see life, Akpo, as a journey that finds fulfillment only when the person completes the cycle and enters into Eriwin with dignity (p. 283). Dying prematurely is considered a disruption of destiny and often brings spiritual consequences for both the deceased and the community.

The ethical implications of ancestorhood are significant. Since becoming an ancestor depends on moral living, the belief system functions as a strong moral compass in Urhobo society. It encourages individuals to live in harmony with community values, knowing that their legacy and spiritual destiny depend on how they are remembered. Agbegbedia (2015) summarizes this point by stating that one is therefore advised to live according to dictates of good and moral life to inherit this abode after death, as conceived by the Urhobo (p. 45). This moral dimension makes ancestorhood both a religious and ethical ideal.

Thus, the Urhobo conception of the afterlife and ancestorhood emphasizes the continuity of existence, the centrality of morality, and the inseparability of the individual from the community. Death is not the termination of life but its transformation into another form of existence. Ancestorhood becomes the ultimate goal, symbolizing both personal fulfillment and communal integration. The Urhobo worldview thus provides a holistic eschatological vision where the afterlife is a natural extension of earthly life, shaped by ethical conduct and cultural rites.

## MORAL CONDUCT AND ESCHATOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS

In Urhobo ontology, morality and eschatology are inseparably linked. The belief that life continues beyond death into Eriwin, the spirit world, makes ethical conduct on earth more than a social requirement; it is also a determinant of one's eternal destiny (Ogar, et al., 2023). The Urhobo worldview teaches that good living ensures the honor of ancestorhood, while immoral behavior leads to rejection in the afterlife. In this sense, morality functions both as a cultural code for harmonious living and as an eschatological guide for attaining fulfillment after death.

The Urhobo believe that the human person is entrusted with a destiny, known as Urhievwe, given by Oghene, the Supreme Being, which must be lived out in accordance with divine and communal expectations. Ottuh (2017) states that the life of the person right from birth thereafter becomes strictly governed by the wish made before Oghene, which could not be revoked (p. 207). This conviction grounds morality in a religious context, since to live contrary to divine destiny is to invite spiritual consequences in this life and the next. Thus, moral conduct is not merely social but a sacred duty to Oghene and the ancestors.

Central to Urhobo moral thought is the idea that good conduct secures one's place in the community of ancestors. Agbegbedia (2015) notes that the major priority of life is to become an ancestor after death (p. 47). Ancestors are revered figures who are remembered, venerated, and called upon in rituals. However, only those who live uprightly and fulfill cultural duties can achieve this status. The implication is that morality is a pathway to immortality, ensuring that one's memory and spirit live on within the community. Those who fail in moral responsibility, by contrast, are denied ancestorhood and risk becoming restless spirits.

The Urhobo make a clear eschatological distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Ottuh (2017) explains that the Urhobo believe that good people in the society who died metamorphose spiritually to the abode meant for such people to continue a better life called Urhorho. However, evil people who died go to the abode of suffering called Egbevwerhe (p. 208). This belief system emphasizes that morality has direct consequences beyond earthly life. Just as Western theology teaches of heaven and hell, the Urhobo speak of Urhorho as the place of peace and Egbevwerhe as the place of torment. This dual eschatology reinforces moral behavior by attaching eternal consequences to human conduct.

Funeral practices also reflect this moral-eschatological relationship. Proper burial rites are essential for the transition of the deceased to ancestorhood, but the performance of such rites depends largely on the person's moral life. Nabofa, as cited in Ottuh (2017), explains that the soul of the departed is said to stand near the body or hover around the premises where the corpse lies, watching over all the burial and funeral performances on its physical part (p. 210). When a person has lived well, the

community honors them with a befitting burial, ensuring their acceptance into the ancestral realm. Conversely, those who lived immorally may be denied these rites, leaving their souls restless and excluded from the spiritual community.

The moral expectations of the Urhobo extend beyond individual behavior to communal responsibility. Agbegbedia (2015) highlights that for traditional Urhobo, community is much more than simply a social grouping of people bound together by reasons of natural origin or deep common interests and values. It is both a society as well as a unity of the visible and invisible worlds (p. 50). Thus, morality in Urhobo culture includes loyalty to family, respect for elders, honesty, and participation in communal rituals. To neglect these obligations is to fail both the living and the spirits, thereby jeopardizing one's eschatological destiny.

The categorization of death in Urhobo belief also reflects moral expectations. A good death, known as *emamoru ughwu*, is granted to those who live well and grow old in honor, while sudden, violent, or shameful deaths often befall those who fail morally. Ottuh (2017) records that there is *ughwu rhi ikprhegede*, which is sudden death, *ughwu ri idadiri*, which is death by accident or sickness, and *emamoru ughwu*, which is good death (p. 208). Only those who experience a good death are fully integrated into ancestorhood. Hence, moral living is viewed as the surest way to attain a good death and a favorable afterlife.

The eschatological expectations of Urhobo thought also serve as a moral check against antisocial behavior. The fear of becoming a wandering ghost or being consigned to *Egbevwerhe* deters individuals from dishonesty, cruelty, and neglect of duties. Agbegbedia (2015) observes that one is therefore advised to live according to dictates of good and moral life to inherit this abode after death, as conceived by the Urhobo (p. 45). This demonstrates how eschatology provides the foundation for moral philosophy in Urhobo society. Proverbs, myths, and oral traditions further enforce these moral-eschatological expectations. Ofuafo (2017) explains that *Akpo*, which means life, is understood as a sacred journey toward fulfillment in *Erivwin*. He notes that *Akpo* is the diametrical counterpoint to *Erivwin*, the spirit or supernatural realm (p. 282), showing that earthly life is intrinsically linked to the spirit world. This linkage ensures that moral actions taken in *Akpo* have eschatological consequences in *Erivwin*.

The Urhobo conception of moral conduct and eschatological expectation establishes a strong relationship between ethics, community, and destiny. The assurance of ancestorhood, the promise of *Urhoro*, and the fear of *Egbevwerhe* provide powerful motivations for living a morally upright life. Morality is thus not only a cultural requirement for harmony among the living but also the key determinant of one's eternal fate. Through this worldview, the Urhobo affirm that the quality of earthly life directly shapes the destiny of the human person in the afterlife.

## CONCLUSION

The study of the human person and eschatology in Urhobo ontology reveals a worldview that integrates life, death, morality, and destiny into a coherent and meaningful whole. The Urhobo do not see existence as ending with the physical death of the body but as a journey that continues into the spiritual realm. Death is conceived as a transition rather than annihilation, linking the living to the ancestors and ensuring continuity within the community. This understanding provides both meaning and direction to human life, showing that existence extends beyond the present into a future shaped by moral responsibility and cultural rites.

The conception of the human person in Urhobo thought emphasizes the unity of body and spirit, shaped by divine destiny and realized within communal ties. Personhood is not viewed in isolation but as part of a collective that includes the visible and invisible worlds. The human journey is seen as meaningful only when it fulfills its destiny and culminates in ancestorhood. Ancestors remain active members of the community, providing guidance, protection, and moral oversight to the living.

Moral conduct emerges as the central factor that determines one's eschatological destiny. The Urhobo belief that only the righteous and socially responsible achieve ancestorhood underscores the importance of ethics as the foundation of human life. This conviction transforms morality from a mere social code into a spiritual obligation that shapes one's eternal fate. The assurance of peaceful existence in the afterlife and the fear of exclusion provide strong incentives for upright living.

Urhobo ontology presents a holistic vision of life and death that highlights the inseparability of the human person, community, morality, and destiny. It demonstrates that to live well is to prepare for the afterlife, and to die well is to attain ancestorhood, which represents the ultimate fulfillment of human existence. This worldview offers valuable insights for global philosophical reflections on the meaning of personhood and the nature of the afterlife.

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