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Man (Dasein), a Being-Towards-Death: Ruminating on the Heideggerian Ontology of Death with African Lenses

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Abstract

This study is a rumination on the Heideggerian thesis of Man as Being-Towards-Death in African (Bekwarra) Lenses. One of the inescapable, universal and mysterious experiences of human nature is death. Death has always been a major concern of humanity since the beginning of history. Among philosophers who have addressed the subject of death, Heidegger addressed not only immortality and life after death but also the nature of death during one's existence. In his view, man (which he named *Dasein*) through death becomes aware of his finitude. Heidegger chooses human beings as the only way of understanding existence among creatures. In his view, death is the most original form of the possibility of Existence. Thus, the being of *Dasein* can never fully be grasped or actualized without his death. Therefore, for him, man is a being-towards-death; as soon as one is born, he/she is old enough to die. This Heideggerian postulation on death has far-reaching implications and import for contemporary society. That is why this study is aimed at sifting lessons from Heidegger's notion of man as a being-towards-death to inundate contemporary interpretations of death. The methods employed in this study are textual and contextual analyses. Through textual analysis, the study

undertakes an analysis of Heidegger's proposition on death as contained in *Being and Time*; whereas, through Contextual analysis, the study applies ideas from Heidegger's notion to some interpretations of death and burial rites in various societies, especially of Africa. This study employs secondary sources for data collection. This comprises Martin Heidegger's work, *Being and Time* and other books, journals, newspapers, magazines, dictionaries, encyclopedias and internet sources. This study found out that some African societies have no clear theory of "natural death". Rather, they believe that most deaths result from the intervention of an outside agent, usually witchcraft. In the final analysis, the study surmises that Heidegger's notion of death has salient lessons for the contemporary African society. It however cautions that care must be taken to jettison the seeming gloom that his concept of man as being-towards-death portrays to some people.

Introduction

From earliest times, man has been compelled to seek answers to the mystery of death as well as seek solutions to his anxiety in the face of death. This, according to Gbenda accounts for the different disciplines concerned with its study.⁶⁷ Death in general is believed to be the end of human existence. Death has something to do with the body and not the spirit; it is a physical event. Hence death marks the physical separation of the individual from the living. In spite of the various studies that have been carried out on death, it seems to have remained elusive and continually wrapped in a puzzle. The German metaphysician and existentialist, Martin Heidegger dedicated a large section of his most popular work, *Being and Time* to the treatment of death and his postulations have far reaching implications for contemporary society. This paper undertakes a rumination of this Heideggerian notion of man as a being-

67 Gbenda, J.S. *Eschatology in Tiv Traditional Religious Culture: An Interpretative Enquiry*. (Nsukka: Chuka Educational Publishers, 2005), Pg.26.

towards death, bringing to fore its relevance for contemporary interpretations of death.

The Concept of Death

Various attempts have been made to exactly define what death is. This owes partly to the different manifestations of death on the one hand, and the many fields of study that engage in death-studies on the other. To have a fair idea of what death means, however, one needs to understand its etymological root. Etymologically, the word "death" has a chain of roots. It comes directly from old English *dead*, which in turn comes from the Proto-Germanic *daubatz*, which itself comes from the Proto-Indo-European stem *dheu* - meaning the process, act, condition of ceasing to exist.⁶⁸ In this guise, death is the termination of the biological functions that sustain a living organism. The word refers both to the particular processes of life's cessation as well as to the condition or state of a formerly living body. This process is often accompanied by various signs. According to Carman, signs of death or strong indications that a person is no longer alive are: cessation of breathing, no pulse (cardiac arrest), *pallor mortis* (paleness which happens in 15-20 minutes after death), *livor mortis* (a settling of the blood in the lower (dependent) portion of the body), *algor mortis* (the reduction in body temperature of the dead. There is generally a steady decline until matching ambient temperature), *rigor mortis* (the ribs of the corpse become stiff and difficult to move or manipulate), decomposition (the reduction into simpler forms of matter, accomplished by a strong, unpleasant odour).⁶⁹

Whatever definition one gives to death, the widest conception about death is that it is the greatest of humankind's enemy that shows no respect for fame, age or wealth. It robs families of precious relatives leaving them to mourn their loss for the

68 "The Meaning of Death" <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=death>. Retrieved 12/01/2019.

69 Carman, T. *Heidegger's Analytic: Interpretation, Discourse, and Authenticity in 'Being and Time'*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Pg.31.

rest of their lives. It deprives wives and children of their bread winner and protector, leaving them vulnerable in a hostile world. Most times it arrives suddenly and unannounced, at other times it approaches slowly, as if stalking or taunting its helpless victim. Sometimes it hauls away its victims en masse, using a variety of methods and weapons; but only rarely does it capture its prey without inflicting pain and terror.⁷⁰

Man as Being-Towards-Death

Martin Heidegger gave radically new insights to the meaning of death in his ontological inquiry in *Being and Time*. According to Heidegger, the Being of human beings can be established on a purely phenomenological basis without reference to the long-held concept of immortality of the soul or a divinity. Thus, for Heidegger, the fundamental question is “what does it entail to be a human being?” And instead of projecting an abstract definition of the human being from outside, he delved into a much more concrete analysis of being. His intention was to look at how things appear through the examination of our experiences of them, phenomenologically. Filiz avers here that “Heidegger’s analysis of death is not concerned with how people feel when they are about to die nor with death as a biological event. Its focus is on the existential significance which this certain ‘yet-to-come’ death has to human life, i.e. to *Dasein’s* being-in-the-world”.⁷¹ For Heidegger, understanding the phenomenon of death involves grasping the Being of *Dasein* as a whole. If *Dasein* is understood existentially as a possibility, then it becomes clear that *Dasein’s* authentic Being in its totality is ‘Being-towards-death’, which can never be actualized fragmentally, but in a whole gamut of the possibilities of existence. Heidegger puts it thus;

70 Clark, T. *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Martin Heidegger*. (London: Routledge, 2001), Pg. 82.

71 Filiz, Peach. “Death, Faith and Existentialism” http://philosophynow.org/issues/27/death_Faith_and_Existentialism.

It is essential to the basic constitution of *Dasein* that there is constantly something still to be settled. Such a lack of totality signifies that there is something still outstanding in one's potential-for-Being. But as soon as *Dasein* lives in such a way that absolutely nothing more is still outstanding in it, then it has already for this very reason become "no-longer-Being-there". Its Being is annihilated when what is still outstanding in its Being has been liquidated. As long as *Dasein* is an entity, it has never reached its 'wholeness'. But if it gains such 'wholeness', this gain becomes the utter loss of Being-in-the-world.⁷²

From the above, it is clear that Heidegger sees death as the acquisition of 'wholeness' of Being which is at the same time its annihilation and cessation to be experienced as an entity.

Heidegger distinguishes between one's death and the death of the other. In the everyday mode of Being, *Dasein* interprets the phenomenon of death as an event constantly occurring in the world. It is a 'case' that happens to others and it is as it happens to others that we can analyse the reality of death, since man cannot experience his own death. In his words;

When *Dasein* reaches its 'wholeness' in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its 'there'....it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced...this makes the death of others more impressive. In this way a termination of *Dasein* becomes objectively accessible. *Dasein* can thus gain an experience of death, all the more so because *Dasein* is essentially Being with Others.⁷³

In this sense, dying remains anonymous and it has no connection with the 'I' as long as it is still with the 'other'. Facing one's own death is radically different from being concerned

72 Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Macquarie, John and Robinson, Edward. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), Pg. 279-280.

73 Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*,Pg. 281.

with the death of others. My own death means the end of my possibilities, the total disintegration and the end of my world. The existential connotation of *Dasein's* possibility is that *Dasein* is open to freedom, that one may need to create one's own meaning for life in order to achieve an authentic existence. This also signifies that life is temporal; man is basically a temporal being. It therefore behooves on man to make the best of his existential situations.

In Heidegger's exposition, the fear of my own death comes from the fear of my extinction as a human being. This causes me a great deal of anxiety. I may be able to face other people's death but may find it virtually impossible to come to terms with my own death. Heidegger says *Dasein* cannot experience its own death. As long as *Dasein* exists, it is not complete, that is, there are still some of its possibilities outstanding. If, however, *Dasein* dies, then it is 'no-longer-there'. Through facing death, *Dasein* understands what it means to be. Death is existentially significant when one perceives one's existence in the light of Being, not if it is merely taken as an empirical event that will happen someday. According to Heidegger, this analysis enables us to have an understanding of our finitude, and this awareness makes authentic existence possible.⁷⁴

Death, in Heidegger's thinking, paradoxically affirms that whose possibility lies in the future. It is always something that is yet to come and, to this extent, one's being-toward-death affirms the fact that one *is* - that a "not yet", "whose eventuality is not ours to decide, always remains to be lived because it has not yet passed. *Dasein* means that I am structurally related to this "not yet" that will always remain to be passed, and that this "unfinished" status is ultimately something like a gift of finitude, of being given".⁷⁵

Hence, being-toward-death does not mean withdrawing or shrinking from death, as if one moves through life in an ever

74 Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Stambaugh, Joan. Albany: (State University of New York Press, 1996), Pg. 305.

75 Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Stambaugh, Pg. 309.

narrowing tunnel. Rather, it means understanding death in a higher sense: neither as an ominous imminence nor a self-nullifying event, of demising and perishing, but as possibility, "*That I will die...*". Thus, for Heidegger, when attuned to the authentic comportment of a being-toward-death, there is a relating to death which in fact *returns me to my most proper self*, to my most proper possibility. To put it as succinctly as we can, Heidegger's radical reinterpretation of death thus amounts to something like the following: death is the absolute impossibility that makes my being *there* in the world possible. Death is that possibility which is the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*. As such, it cannot be compared to any other kind of ending or "running out" of something. For example, one's death is not an empirical event. With average, everyday (normal) discussion of death, all this is concealed. The "they-self" talks about it in a fugitive manner, passes it off as something that occurs at some time but is not yet "present-at-hand" as an *actuality*, and hides its character as one's ownmost possibility, presenting it as belonging to no one in particular. It becomes devalued – redefined as a neutral and mundane aspect of existence that merits no authentic consideration. "One dies" is interpreted as a fact, and comes to mean "nobody dies".⁷⁶

On the other hand, authenticity takes *Dasein* out of the "They", in part by revealing its place as a part of the "They". Heidegger states that *Authentic being-toward-death* calls *Dasein*'s individual self out of its "they-self", and frees it to re-evaluate life from the standpoint of finitude. In so doing, *Dasein* opens itself up for "angst", translated alternately as "dread" or as "anxiety". Angst, as opposed to fear, does not have any distinct object for its dread; it is rather anxious in the face of Being-in-the-world in general - that is, it is anxious in the face of *Dasein*'s own self. Angst is a shocking individuation of *Dasein*, when it realizes that it is not at home in the world, or when it comes face to face with its own "uncanny", a term which Heidegger

76 Waal, Frans. *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Pg. 41.

uses to qualify man's uniqueness and individuality. In Dasein's individuation, it is open to hearing the "call of conscience" (German *Gewissensruf*), which comes from Dasein's own Self when it wants to be its Self. This Self is then open to truth, understood as unconcealment (Greek *aletheia*). In this moment of vision, Dasein understands what is hidden as well as hiddenness itself. It is the realization of Dasein's individuality that gingers him to yearn for, and work towards authentic existence in the world with others.

African Conception of Death: The Bekwarra Worldview

Donald Omagu in his epochal work, *A Wind of Change: Bekwarra in an Age of Globalization*, lucidly presents the attitude of the Bekwarra towards death and burial. He begins by asserting that death is a mysterious phenomenon which man cannot come to grips with. However, he notes that, like other Africans, the Bekwarra see death, not as a final end to human existence; rather they see it as "a transition to the world of ancestors".⁷⁷ In Bekwarra, like many other Africa societies, death is not usually considered as a natural event but is often attributed to supernatural forces like witches, spirits or curse. Very few deaths, it is also believed can occur as a result of old age, accident or illness. Because of the belief among Bekwarra people that the premature death of a young person is the handiwork of evil forces, it is not uncommon before the burial of the deceased, a delegation comprising friends, family members or age grade members may decide to consult a sorcerer to know the cause of death.

To the Bekwarra man, death is the cessation of the physical body, when the spirit or soul has gone out of the body. The body, as Nwala posits of the Igbo belief, "is the visible part of the human beings which perishes and becomes earth at death".⁷⁸ Thus, death is regarded by the Bekwarra as one of the crisis periods in the life of the individual. Consequently, in

⁷⁷ Omagu, Donald O. *A Wind of Change: Bekwarra in an Age of Globalization*. (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2012), Pg.193.

⁷⁸ Nwala, T. *Uzodinma. Igbo Philosophy*. (Lagos: Lantern Books, 1985), Pg. 43.

Bekwarra as in other African societies, “along with evils such as ill-health, war, epidemic, famine, enmity, envy and so forth death is seen as the result of this estrangement in human relationship”.⁷⁹

Gbenda observes that an important but often neglected factor in discussing death is that it is not an end of life but part of the continuum of life. However, he quickly points out that the grief felt at the death of a man is usually due to the sense of loss of his physical presence.⁸⁰ Man therefore changes religiously and recreates with new roles. Hence, in Gbenda’s position, “death is simply a transition and transformation from the physical life to the world of spirits”.⁸¹ This is a source of consolation, that the Bekwarra do not regard death as the end of life, but as a transition from earthly life to another form of life in the land of the spirits (*iye 'befo*). The dead, therefore, are seen by the Bekwarra not to remain in the grave, but they become spirits and proceed to the land of the dead called *iyeebefo*. This leads to the view that “death is simply a transition and transformation from the physical life to the world of spirits”. This view is also shared by Mbiti that, “Death is a departure but not a complete annihilation of a person. He moves to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of existence”.⁸²

Heidegger’s Notion of Man as Being-Towards-Death in African Lenses

From the analysis of Heidegger’s conception of death above, one can surmise that death ought not be taken as an enemy, neither is any type of death supposed to be termed as “bad

79 Metuh, E.I. *God and Man in African Religion*. (London: Geoffery Chapman, 1981), Pg.47.

80 Gbenda, J.S. *Eschatology in Tiv Traditional Religious Culture: An Interpretative Enquiry*, Pg.37.

81 Gbenda, J.S. *Eschatology in Tiv Traditional Religious Culture: An Interpretative Enquiry* Pg.38.

82 Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), Pg. 157.

death" as with most Bekwarra (and African) people. Heidegger's ontology of death does not simply spell the end of existence, for in recognizing the undeniable certainty of one's death, something else is revealed, something more fundamental is disclosed – that man's being is tied with time, hence we are basically temporal beings. It is therefore left for man to make the best use of his existential situations. One of Heidegger's aims in Part I Division II of *Being and Time* is to formulate a more authentic mode of relating to death that goes beyond understanding death as the simple coming to an end of life or the final annihilation of all possibilities. This "more authentic" relation to death is a being-toward-death which Heidegger calls a "running ahead".⁸³ Because the certainty of my death is futural, because death will always come to me out of the future, my anticipation of death in the present makes me, so to speak, ahead of myself. I am *thrown* to the certainty of my own death, Heidegger would say. Insofar as I exist, I am running ahead of myself because I am related to a futural possibility that is essentially always a "not yet," namely, my death. "I *will* die, therefore I am," to reformulate once again the Cartesian adage. Heidegger puts it thus, "Because I relate to the possibility of my death with resolute certainty, because what I can be most certain of in the world is that I will someday die, I am always already a being that is a being-toward-death".⁸⁴

According to Heidegger, this being-toward-death is precisely what makes my being possible, for death is the most extreme possibility of my existence, my "ownmost potentiality of being" "I myself *am*, in that I *will* die."⁸⁵ At stake for Heidegger, then, is to conceptualize death not as pure nothingness, but rather as pure possibility. In other words, the "end" of death is neither conceived as *eskhaton* nor as *telos* i.e. one cannot after all "experience" the nullity that is one's own death. This is because when my death "arrives," I am no longer *there* to experience

83 Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, Pg. 217.

84 Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, Pg. 219.

85 Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, Pg. 232.

dying as no-longer-being-able-to-be-there. The impossibility of phenomenologically grasping or experiencing the “end” of death is one aspect of what Heidegger means when he defines death as “the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*”.⁸⁶

This means that *Dasein* experiences phenomenologically all the things that happen to him during his life time, but cannot experience his death in like manner. It is a possibility that *Dasein* can die, but an impossibility for *Dasein* to experience his own death. Yet death is nonetheless a certain “end” I can posit: I am certain of the possibility of my death, in spite of the very *impossibility* of my directly experiencing it. The “end” of death thus “must be understood *as possibility*, cultivated *as possibility* and endured *as possibility* in our relation to it”.⁸⁷

At this juncture, the crucial question becomes: if death is a fate which I cannot overcome but must face and confront as my ownmost extreme possibility, how, exactly, do I relate in an authentic way toward the possibility that is the impossibility of my death? Omoregbe responds here that, “the fact that he has to undergo his own death alone without the possibility of somebody else doing it for him reveals to man his singularity, individuality and uniqueness”.⁸⁸ The authentic way is to face death not as event, but as always a “not yet” which constitutes every moment and second of my existence. This brings to bare the existential condition that there is no given but a world of possibilities. This means that I anticipate death not as an actuality I expect, but as an omnipresent, immanent possibility to which I am always already thrown. In other words, one countenances death as constitutive possibility, that is, as constituting life. For Heidegger, death is a possibility of being that *Dasein* always has to take upon itself. As we have spelt out above, Heidegger conceives death as a unique form of possibility, a radical being-possible: death as the “possibility of

86 Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*,Pg. 232.

87 Pattison, George. *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Theological Essay*.(USA: Ashgate, 2013), Pg. 122.

88 Omoregbe, J.I. *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy: Contemporary Philosophy* (Vol. 3). (Lagos: JOJA Educational Research and Publishers, 1991),Pg. 74.

the absolute impossibility" is *Dasein's* "most proper possibility".⁸⁹

The being-possible of death is not a possibility of something that may become actual, for death is an existential possibility that is at the same time an impossibility to the extent that it cannot, strictly speaking, be actualized. That death is not an actuality means that death can never be present *as such* because it is beyond the reach of cognition and therefore not available to phenomenal experience. Heidegger insists that, as a futural possibility (i.e., as a certain *end* that cannot be bypassed), being-toward-death is what makes the present possible. Being-toward-death is what possibilizes the present. Heidegger views death as that which throws *Dasein* back upon its "ownmost potentiality-of-being" which discloses *Dasein's* ontological structure as possibility.⁹⁰

Heidegger's secular turn re-discovers something like the question of the significance of existence. Being-in-the-world, he shows, is structured in such a way that the question of significance is inhabited when existence takes up its being in the world authentically. In fact, Heidegger represents the distinctly modern condition in which the aspiration to eternal life with God has been replaced by resolutely running toward death as the realization of authentic human selfhood. For Heidegger, the existence of such a self, though void of divine aspiration, is not without significance; indeed hearing the call to authentic existence represents a turning toward the networks of significance that Heidegger believed was the world and human inherence in it.

Amidst all this, Heidegger's secular turn makes a sharp deviation from the African conception of death precisely what Pattison contends makes it possible for existence to be affected in such hopeful and thankful ways. This difference is visibly presented at the heart of Pattison's theological critique of Heidegger:

89 Heidegger, Martin *Being and Time*, Pg. 231.

90 Heidegger, Martin *Being and Time*, Pg. 236.

Existence thrown toward death gives no ground for hope, while Christian existence created by and for God does include hope. But is hope really a secular impossibility? Here, it becomes pertinent to distinguish hope from expectation and contend that hope becomes meaningful when the future is unknown and indeterminate, that the nothingness of death is therefore the ground of hope, not its opposite but what calls for it: only a being aware of future nothingness hopes to be. ...*Dasein's* resoluteness, then, would not be desperate or despairing running-ahead-to-death, but in anticipating the nothingness of death, would expose us to that which makes hope a meaningful existential possibility.⁹¹

From the above, Heidegger's postulation subjects hope to the realm of the possible – as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Man only has a possibility of hope by the realization of the nothingness of man in the face of death.

The second perspective from which one could distinguish the African conception of death from Heidegger's is that Heidegger fails to portray correctly the defining characteristics of human *Dasein* in the here and now. This failure revolves around Heidegger's account of resoluteness. Here, Pattison equally points out that the resolution required for taking up our thrown existence in running ahead toward death is rare, indeed foreign to our human condition.⁹² For the African, man comes to authentic existence not in running ahead toward his own death, but in the desire "just to remain, to stay alive" and in the love and pity we show to our fellow men who suffer the same fear and share the same desire. Pattison furthered that "Human weakness in the face of death does not condemn existence to inauthenticity and insignificance, for our being is constituted most fundamentally in connection with others

91 Pattison, George. *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Theological Essay*, Pg. 109.

92 Pattison, George. *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Theological Essay*, Pg. 56.

whose pain we feel as ours and whose death we suffer as our own loss".⁹³

It is the view of most African societies that life does not end with death, but continues in another realm. The concepts of life and death are not mutually exclusive concepts and there are no clear dividing lines between them.⁹⁴ Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person's deeper relationship with all creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and invisible worlds. This accords with Asouzu's assertion that "ignoring the mutual complementary connection between these tools would always lead to a distortion of our picture of the world".⁹⁵ This means that death ought not be seen as an absurdity in the human existential situation, but rather as one of the necessary elements that make life whole and meaningful. Death does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual, but only causes a change in its conditions.⁹⁶

Considering the above, one could surmise that Heidegger does not give an explanation of death itself but offers a phenomenology of our relationship to death. His philosophy is thoughtful but gloomy. His account of death portrays a no-hope mode of Being. Thus, while savoring the comfort it offers from the knowledge that no death is untimely, care must be taken not to fall into despair which might lead to a hurry towards death even when it is not time. It is with such mindset that we can consider the pros and cons of Bekwarra death and burial rites under the searchlight of Heidegger's conception of death.

On another note, death for Africans, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person's deeper

93 Pattison, George. *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Theological Essay*, Pg. 59.

94 Magesa, L. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. (Nairobi: Pauline Publications African, 1997), Pg.71.

95 Asouzu, Innocent I. *Ibuanyidanda (Complementary Reflection) and some Basic Philosophical Problems in Africa Today*. (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013), Pg. 72.

96 Parrinder, E.G. *African Traditional Religion*. (Hutchinson: Hutchinson University Library, 1954), Pg. 37.

relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. For the African, the greatest joy is to become an ancestor after death. This is why every person who dies must be given a “correct” funeral, supported by a number of religious ceremonies. If this is not done, it is believed the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to “live” properly after death and therefore at anger to those who remain alive. It might be argued that “proper” death rites are more a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dying. This is why Mandelbaum concludes that “rites performed for the dead generally have important effects for the living. A funeral ceremony is personal in its focus and is societal in its consequences”.⁹⁷

Death: Man’s Best Friend

After a critical consideration of Heidegger’s notion of man as being-towards-death, the basic thesis of this study is that death ought not be seen as a frightful phenomenon any longer. Rather, it should be seen as, in the words of Ogabo, “one’s best friend”.⁹⁸ After all, in Africa death only separates a person from one status and introduces him to another. Thus, death terminates a person’s physical life and confers on him the status of ancestorhood when he dies under normal circumstance. Such a transition generally requires rites and rituals to send off the departed and normalize life for the survivors; it demonstrates the close bond between the visible and the invisible world.⁹⁹ However, the rituals should not take so much that the living are left in penury. Death for the African means ‘going home’ – to the spirit land. The dead person is alive, but as a spirit. Death

97 Mandelbaum, David G. “Social Uses of Funeral Rites” *Eastern Anthropologist*, (1958): 202 – 209.

98 Ogabo, Godwin Adinya. “Death and Burial in Traditional Bekwarra Society and Martin Heidegger’s Notion of Man as Being-Towards-Death”. PhD Dissertation in the Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Calabar, 2019, Pg.12.

99 Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, Pg. 182.

should not be thus seen as an enemy of man, but as a friend that perfects man.

This is the same consideration that Heidegger has when he considers death as that possibility which is the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*. As such, it cannot be compared to any other kind of ending or “running out” of something. For Heidegger, death is *Dasein*’s ownmost (most friendly or closest reality), it is non-relational (nobody can take one’s death away from one, or die in one’s place, and we cannot understand our own death through the death of other *Dasein*), and it is not to be outstripped. The “not-yet” of life is always already a part of *Dasein*: “as soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die.” The threefold condition of death is thus simultaneously one’s “ownmost potentiality-for-being, non-relational, and not to be out-stripped”. Death is determinate in its inevitability, but an authentic Being-toward-death understands the indeterminate nature of one’s own inevitable death – one never knows when or how it is going to come. However, this indeterminacy does not put death in some distant, futural “not-yet”; authentic Being-toward-death understands one’s individual death as always already a part of one, and thus as one’s best friend. Just as one’s best friend is close at all times, and constantly communicates with him, death is also close to man, and when all else desert him, his death stays with him always.

Conclusion

From what has been analysed in this discourse so far, it is apparent that the 20th and 21st centuries existential view of death is significant for contemporary African society. Heidegger’s notion of dying or being-towards-death as a way of life gives life seriousness and a better structure, and so makes possible a life that makes sense in terms of a beginning, middle and end. Death is the closing down of possibilities. *Dasein* is essentially an ability-to-be and death is the possibility by which *Dasein* loses its ability to be. Heidegger formalizes death and dying, and so treats death as a structural feature of all human

lives. Heidegger is silent on any possibility of transcending the finitude of *Dasein*; human beings are inherent in the world and authentic existence within the world is emphasized by him.

One salient discovery is that death will continue to take different forms in accordance with people's world views. At the present time there is a general scientific scepticism about the possibility of life after death. The traditional concepts of reward and punishment by God do not seem to be relevant today to many people. We know we must all die but we are not certain that contemporary scientists are correct in maintaining that consciousness must discontinue with the bodily death. We know that the concepts of physics have changed. On the one hand, we may believe but cannot prove that scientists have sufficient knowledge about the nature of things to assert that survival in some form is impossible. On the other hand, we may be convinced, but similarly cannot prove, that certain phenomena indicate that survival is possible. A belief in survival provides a universal comfort and reassurance but since knowledge of ultimate things cannot be attained by mere reasoning, such belief, has most often and would still for a long time be resorted to the act of faith.

The issue of human relatedness to death manifests itself in various forms. There is neither a single, unchangeable attitude nor a correct one. In recognition of their importance, traditional attitudes towards death can be presented under three headings:

- i. Death is not the absolute end of the human being.
- ii. Death is the absolute end of the human being.
- iii. Sceptical, evasive and indifferent attitudes to death.

However one conceives of death, the reality is that death-awareness enables the individual to look into some fundamental questions and develop an attitude and a more meaningful relationship to death. Death should not be seen as an evil. No death is bad. The classification of death into good or bad should be discarded and every death treated equally. If the long period before a man was born are not considered as evil, why would the long period of his departure from this world be considered as evil?