

## An Archaeological Study of the Origins of the Afterlife Beliefs from Early to Modern Humans in Africa

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In African traditional religions, the ideas surrounding the concept of death as a journey to a more reliable world is a precursor for the beliefs in reincarnation, transmigration, heaven, hell, ancestors, and in the existence of supreme beings. Africans beatify the afterlife as if they founded and spread the beliefs around the world. While the afterlife beliefs are highly revered in Africa, the study of the origins of the afterlife beliefs is less associated with Africa. Recent archaeological study reveals questionable results regarding the connection of Neanderthals that originated the afterlife beliefs with early humans that lived in Africa. This research investigates the origins of the afterlife beliefs among early humans in connection with its transmission to modern humans.

**Keywords:** Afterlife, Ancestors, Early Humans, Modern Humans, Yorubaland.

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### INTRODUCTION

Africa is a unique continent relevant for both ancient and modern history. While some Eurocentric scholars dissociate the continent from human history, others uphold the continent in high esteem (Reynolds, 2011). There are millions of people that live on the continent of Africa and there are diverse cultures amongst the African people. Bond (1992) noted that the diversity in African religion has made views on death and the afterlife diverse. Mbiti (1977) also said that the importance of death rites to the African person is what brought about the various African myths about death and the afterlife. Despite the diversity in their religions and afterlife cultures, there is a general belief among African people that death is a journey to another realm and not the end of life (cf. Opoku, 1989).

Opoku (1989) stressed that disputing death as a continuation of a journey is foreign to an African. He believed that Africans think that the dead travel to the land of the dead and return to be with the living to guide, help and provide for the needs of the living while others exist as ancestors (Opoku, 1989; Lawuyi, 1988). Proper observation of burial rites by the bereaved enabled the deceased to become an ancestor (Opoku, 1989). The interest Africans have over burial rituals and their perspectives of the afterlife made it possible to suggest that they are important in the spread of the afterlife beliefs.

However, most of the findings by various archaeologists and most studies conducted by scholars like Constable, McGregor and Hultkrantz concerning the earliest burial practices of the Neanderthals whom were allegedly regarded as the first to conceive the afterlife beliefs were carried out mostly in Europe and parts of Asia. Neanderthals were generally human-like creatures and the major physical difference between Neanderthals and humans is with regard to the shape of their faces. Neanderthals jaws and nose branched forward instead of being flat like those of modern humans, and their teeth are set much further forward with no obvious chin than they are in modern humans. Their average brain size was larger than that of modern humans and with skulls having characteristics bulges at the sides and back. They were generally of average height of about 1.67m (5 feet 8 inches) (Agai, 2013b).

There is a controversy regarding the role of Neanderthals in Africa. There is a school of thought according to which Neanderthals DNA do not exist amongst Africans while another school of thought portrays the view according to which Neanderthals DNA are found among Africans (Curnoe, 2015). Africa's contributions regarding its connection with the Neanderthals are understudied. There is a need to conduct more and professional archaeological researches in Africa especially on the study of early humans. While the origin of the afterlife beliefs amongst early humans is associated with the Neanderthals, how did modern humans especially the Egyptians and the Yorubas began to practice the rituals that made them to believe that there is an afterlife?

The elaborate burial practices of the ancient Egyptians which left so many evidences of how they perceived the afterlife has made some scholars to think that the beliefs might have originated in Egypt. Lucas (1948) said that it was Herodotus that suggested that the ancient Egyptians were the first people to conceive that there is life after death. Furthermore, there are so many similarities between the ancient Egyptian and Yoruba afterlife culture and this has made a number of writers to think that Egyptians were responsible for influencing or originating Yoruba afterlife culture (Agai, 2013a). Umoh (1971), Johnson (2011), and Folorunso (2003) opinionated that the Yorubas and their cultures originated from Egypt but Leo Frobenius said that the Yoruba culture had its origin from Etruscan sources (Frobenius, 1968; cf. Lucas, 1948).<sup>1</sup>

The argument with regard to the search for the origins of Yoruba afterlife culture can go on and on yet seemingly leaving behind more questions than answers. The non-availability of Neanderthal fossils in both Egypt and in Yorubaland left researchers with rather an option of a continued search for the origins of afterlife culture among the people of the mentioned two cultures in Africa (Carrington, 1963; Jordan, 1976; Redford, 2006). Even Carl Zimmer noted that despite the fact that Neanderthals interbreed with early humans in Africa, yet there is rather little or no Neanderthals DNA in modern Africans: "... the Neanderthal was a little more similar to the people of Asian and European descent than to those of African heritage" (Zimmer, 2020). This research deals with two subjects: the origins of the afterlife beliefs among early humans and how modern humans citing references with the Egyptians and the Yorubas came to believe in the afterlife.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE AFTERLIFE BELIEFS

### Among Early Humans

At Shanidar in Iraq, the remains of so many Neanderthals were found. The remains of a man who was buried 60,000 years ago has been found at the Shanidar grave. The grave had clusters of fossil pollen which shows that flowers of white, yellow, and blue colors were beautifully arranged round the body of the deceased. The piled flowers are all medicinal herbs. Leakey (1982) guessed that the deceased might have been a medical doctor and the herbs indicated his profession. In the view of this researcher, the deceased might have been a healer and the flowers could be aimed at supplying the deceased with his professional medicinal tools so that he would continue with his profession of healing the sick in the afterlife world. Although there is no evidence that the 60,000 year old remains died of sickness, yet it is likely that those medicinal herbs were in his grave to help heal the deceased or to prevent any form of sickness that the deceased might encounter in the afterlife; otherwise, the flowers might have been signs of reverence and a formal farewell for the deceased.<sup>2</sup> No one knows precisely why the deceased was buried with those flowers but the reason could be linked with the afterlife practice.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the remains of a teenage boy thought to be a Neanderthal was found at Le Moustier in France, the child was buried with his head resting on his arms, a pile of flints lay under his head and a beautiful stone axe lay near his hand,

<sup>1</sup>However, Lucas (1948:35) thought that Etruscan influences on the Yorubas only occupied a very small portion of the Yoruba culture.

<sup>2</sup>The Yorubas for example also revered their dead and buried the deceased with certain goods to be used in the afterlife.

<sup>3</sup>Neanderthals buried in fully excavated graves often near a fireplace and with food or pieces of meat to be used by the deceased in the afterlife (Caldwell and Gyles 1966:9).

surrounding him were the bones of wild cattle. Leakey (1982) believed that those implements the child was buried with were meant to help him journey in the afterlife and that Neanderthals were the first to bury their dead.<sup>4</sup> Carrington (1963) described the remains found in France as the most spectacular evidence concerning the burial customs of Neanderthal. Also, a cave at Monte Circeo in Italy was found to have contained a human skull within a small circles of stones, this served as an example of the so-called "skull burial" (Hultkrantz, 1982). The skull's *foramen magnum* was artificially enlarged, the jaw bone not found, and beneath the cranium was found a seemingly intentionally fractured limb bones of a deer and of an ox. The most popular school of thought concerning these findings in Italy is that the Neanderthals practiced magico-religious burial rituals (Carrington, 1963).<sup>5</sup>

MacGregor (1992) said that Neanderthals generally buried their loved ones together with flint implements and that they continued to serve food to the dead. This suggests that Neanderthals thought that death was a continuation of life, a journey to another realm and that the dead needed to be fed on this journey.<sup>6</sup> Caldwell and Gyles (1966) also said that the burial activities of the Neanderthal found by different archaeologists in different parts of the world indicates for the first time a culture of ceremonial burial practiced among early humans. The views of Caldwell and Gyles are further supported by Hultkrantz who said that Neanderthals had careful burial ceremonies because they might have believed in the afterlife (Hultkrantz, 1982). After a thorough study on the nature of the Neanderthals, Constable like others has come to the conclusion that Neanderthals were first humans to conceive the idea of the afterlife (Constable, 1973). It is difficult to ascertain why Neanderthals buried their dead with items and with elaborate ceremonies except for the idea of the afterlife. It is likely also that the presence of the pollen grains at the burial site might have been a modern contamination from humans or insects. Constable said:

By now, discovery after discovery has shown that these ancient people [Neanderthals] are due the honour accorded human pioneers, for they inaugurated some of the activities and beliefs that are considered most characteristic of mankind. The Neanderthal conceived life after death (Constable, 1973).

At the moment, there is no record which states that Neanderthals had vast ideas about what would have happened to their deceased loved ones in the afterlife. There is no archaeological evidence which described their conceptions of the abode of the dead; it is not known whether they believed in Hell, in Heaven or any other form of abode for the dead. The views of different scholars which described the Neanderthals as the originators of the afterlife practices are in respects to the burial goods and the various forms of burials found in graves where Neanderthals were buried, and then scholars began to compare Neanderthals burial rituals to those found in other primal human societies.

However, most of the findings with regard to the Neanderthals and their relations to the afterlife were carried out in Europe, Asia, and partly in the Middle East. *Homo sapiens*, firstly the ancestor of all humans including the Neanderthals, and secondly a contemporary of the Neanderthals lived in Europe and in Asia at the same time they lived in Africa (Zimmer, 2020; cf. Leakey, 1982). The *Homo sapiens* of Europe that lived between 100,000 and 40,000 years ago are specifically and technically called Neanderthals.<sup>7</sup> The fossils and tools of Neanderthals disappeared from the European fossil record 35,000 years ago (Akst, 2019).<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the last Ice Age in Europe, *Homo sapiens* began to encroach upon Neanderthals and displaced them entirely before the end of the last ice age. In other words, some interbreeding took place between these two human ancestors such that when the ice receded, no trace of Neanderthal tradition remained (Caldwell and Gyles, 1966). One of the results of these intercourses was the emergence of the Cro-Magnon people (Leakey, 1982, cf.

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<sup>4</sup>Burial practices initiated by the Neanderthals have contributed immensely to the preservation of fossils for research (Leakey 1982:57).

<sup>5</sup>Carrington (1963:110-111) taught that Neanderthals might have also conceived ideas about the fear of the unseen and that this might have made them to bury their loved ones with the bones of bears. Seemed bears were regarded as powerful and dangerous animals; Neanderthal might have buried their loved ones with bones of bears in order to protect the deceased from his or her enemies.

<sup>6</sup>Archaeologists have found the burial remains of Neanderthals in numerous graves in different parts of the world. In these graves, evidence was found of food offerings to the dead and burial goods like awls and scrapers were also found (MacGregor, 1992:55-56).

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<sup>7</sup>The name is derived from 'the valley of the Neander,' a small river which runs into river Dussel, not far from the city of Dusseldorf in West Germany (Leakey 1982:54) otherwise, the origin of the name has no geographical connection with Africa.

<sup>8</sup>The only surviving *Homo* and hominid is *Homo sapiens*. They have a skull modern in appearance, vertical forehead, with a brain that is both high and short. Brain capacity is almost the same as that of modern man; it is about 1550 cubic centimetres (Raven and Johnson, 1956:458).

Jordan, 1976).<sup>9</sup> The findings about the existence of a more advance humans in Africa like the Rhodesian Man found in the Broken Hill of Zambia is a break-through in the study of the role of Africa in human civilization, unfortunately, little or nothing is known about the afterlife practices of these early advanced African humans (cf. Agai, 2013a).

About 350,000 years ago, a group of hominins left Africa for Eurasia and they later became Neanderthal that gave rise to Homo sapiens (Akst, 2019). The early humans in Africa could be equally intelligent as those that lived in Eurasia. Further archaeological researches in Africa may support the view according to which early humans in Africa might have been buried with items as well. It is important to note that there are lesser archaeological researches done in Africa (and especially in West Africa) with regard to early humans and the origins of their afterlife beliefs otherwise as more research is conducted in Africa, it is possible to find more evidence of early practices of afterlife beliefs by those early humans in African (cf. Lange, 2004; Shaw, 2004; Boateng, 1978). Leakey said that European archaeologists have been looking for remains in Europe over 100 years ago unlike Africa which started her archaeological search for early human remains few years ago (Leakey, 1982).

It is important to note that early humans in Africa might have believed in the afterlife with or without the influence of the Eurasian Neanderthals. Constable (1973) technically described those early African humans in Africa as Homo sapiens.<sup>10</sup> Neanderthals gave rise to Homo sapiens. The African Homo sapiens have learnt the afterlife rituals or beliefs through imitation from other early humans (Nielsen et al., 2020).<sup>11</sup> Secondly, it is likely that early humans in Africa initiated their afterlife beliefs without the influence of other

<sup>9</sup>There is now good evidence that Neanderthals themselves evolved into recognizably modern people (Leakey, 1982:60). One major example of early sub-races people was the Cro-Magnon people who were rather tall with dolichocephalic skulls (long heads) (Caldwell and Gyles, 1966:14). Raven and Johnson (1999:458-460) noted that the Cro-Magnon people also interbreed with Neanderthals until they replaced the Neanderthals.

<sup>10</sup>As more and more studies are being carried out about Neanderthals, scientists have now clearly adjusted their views by classifying Neanderthals as recognizable human ancestors "...the Neanderthal have been granted the taxonomic title of Homo sapiens" (Constable, 1973:28).

<sup>11</sup>Apart from the various mitochondrion DNA analysis which traced human roots to Africa and the view is gaining more acceptance by more scientists (Stringer and Mckie, 1996:174-175), since the 1920s, fossils found by different archaeologists in Africa suggest that humans might have been originated in Africa (Gunther, 1955:10; Caldwell and Gyles, 1966:5; Clark 1970:18). All these points to the possibility that the early humans in Africa might have had their own afterlife beliefs.

early humans. For example, Homo sapiens were a form of advance humans that lived in Africa. The rituals practiced by advance early humans might have included the afterlife beliefs (Bautista et al., 2017). Modern humans might have learnt the afterlife beliefs as well through imitation from early humans via physical contacts or through items preserved at burials by early humans. The great value modern Africans attached to burials rituals and the beliefs in afterlife suggest that they might have created their own afterlife beliefs and not necessarily that they learnt from other foreign early humans like the Neanderthals. This is open for further studies.

More so, evidence for the use of stone tools (Late Stone Age) have been found in some parts of Yorubaland (Iwo Eleru in Ondo state and Mejiro in the old Oyo state). Omolewa (2008) gave dates to the stone tools to 65,000 BCE, about 62,987 years ago, and although no one knows how those stone tools came about and who used them; one can at the moment only guess that it might have been used by the African type of Neanderthals or by some beings that were like Neanderthals in Africa.

#### **Among the Yorubas**

Falola and Heaton (2010) stressed that early pioneers of the region of Nigeria have use tools made of wood, bones and stones. Shaw (2004) added that, in Nigeria, stone tools were mostly used in the form of pebbles or lumps popularly known as Oldowan type tools named after the Olduvai Gorge, in Tanzania. Omolewa (2008) confirmed that archaeologists have found early stone tools used for hunting in Jos Plateau, Afikpo in Ebonyi, Iwo Eleru in Ondo, and Mejiro in Old Oyo State. Omolewa, Falola and Heaton believed that the early people that resided in Nigeria used Oldowan type tools. Shaw (2004) added that the geological evidence found in some parts of Nigeria (at Beli, on the River Taraba) shows that the age of some rock deposits in Nigeria are similar to the Oldowan type tools. Also, Olduvai Gorge type tools are those said to be used by probably Homo ergaster, Homo rudolfensis, Homo habilis and mostly by Homo erectus and these primates lived over 500,000 years ago (cf. Raven and Johnson, 1956; Leakey, 1982). At present, there is no direct evidence showing that these types of primates lived or have ever lived in Nigeria, and it is not clearly known how or who made and used those wood, bones, and stone tools found in some parts of Nigeria.

Furthermore, apart from evidence of the use of wood, bones, and stone tools, there is also evidence of the use of iron tools in Nigeria. Omolewa (2008) thought that humans in Nigeria have advanced from Early Stone Age where they used stone tools to Early Iron Age where they began to use metals. Metals are rather generally thought to be used by strictly modern humans, in other words, the first humans that pioneered Nigeria and use metals are not some animal-like

creatures (Australopithecus, Homo erectus, Homo Neanderthals, etc.) but fully evolved humans tagged modern humans. It is important to note that the oldest iron sculptures found in Nigeria called the Nok terracottas explain the activities of iron smelting in Nigeria but they cannot give detailed information about the arrival of the first humans to occupy Nigeria. It is therefore difficult to estimate exactly the date when humans began to inhabit the various regions of Nigeria, but the indirect evidences from the use of Late Stone Age objects (65,000 BCE), the Iwo Eleru rock (9000 BCE), the practice of animal husbandry since 3000-2000 BCE and evidence from Nok sculptures (500 BCE to 200 AD)<sup>12</sup> suggest that humans have lived in Nigeria before or around the periods of the Stone Age (65,000 BCE) (cf. Omolewa, 2008). With regard to the regions occupied by the Yorubas of Nigeria, one of the first and earliest human remains was found in a cave at Iwo Eleru rock (in Yorubaland) and has been dated to 9000 BCE. According to Falola and Heaton, early humans must have lived in Iwo Eleru long before 9000 BCE (Falola and Heaton, 2010).<sup>13</sup> The Iwo Eleru discovery was made in 1965. The remains found is believed to be of an African (Clark, 1970).

If the remains found at Iwo Eleru are assumed to be those of the ancestors of the Yorubas, yet the little information known about the remains does not provide enough knowledge on when and on how the Yorubas began to believe in the afterlife. Neanderthals lived about 100,000 and 40,000 years ago yet none of their remains is found in Yorubaland and the remains of those early advance humans like the Rhodesian Man who lived in Africa have not also been found in Yorubaland. More so, the similarities of the afterlife practices which connects the ancient Egyptians to the Yorubas are those practiced during the predynastic and dynastic periods and these made Parrinder (1951) and Lucas (1948) to believed that migration between the Egyptians and the Yorubas took place during these two Egyptian periods. Parrinder and Lucas believed that migration between these two cultures led the Egyptians to initiate or influence the Yoruba afterlife culture. However, there is no archaeological evidence to proof that there were migrations between Egypt and Yorubaland.

This researcher believes that the origins of the Yoruba afterlife beliefs are at present not generally accepted by all. An option which may contribute to the search for the origins of Yoruba afterlife beliefs is to think that Yoruba afterlife

culture might have originated through the process of “parallel evolution.” The idea of parallel evolution teaches that the same species of early human ancestors evolved at various locations and developed abilities and characters that suit their specific environmental needs.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the rainforest nature of many parts of West Africa including the Yorubaland (cf. Shinnie, 1965) might have attracted the existence of early humans, and it is not a surprise that Clark (1970) suggested that the African type of Neanderthals or other early humans like the Neanderthals lived in the higher regions of West Africa and that West Africa is the place where the African Negro evolved from Neanderthal species. Fossils of ape-like creatures particularly of Australopithecus were also found in Lake Chad (Pfeiffer, 1970), a geographical neighbour of Nigeria, and a historically preferred route for many people of the old times who travelled to Nigeria (cf. Lange, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

Archaeology has contributed to the study of the afterlife in Africa and Eurasia. Without the archaeological researches conducted in various grave sites, many burial remains would not have been found. The archaeological researches done points that Neanderthals originated the afterlife beliefs and passed the practice or belief systems to modern humans by imitation. This research emphasises the need for more archaeological researches in Africa especially that pertained to the study of early humans. This is important because the early humans in Africa might have had their own afterlife beliefs without the influence of the Neanderthals from Eurasia.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

The article complied with all ethical standards without any intention to hurt any group or their belief systems.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the author.

## Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

<sup>12</sup>Dates from Michael Omolewa (1986:9-11) and Clark (1970:215).

<sup>13</sup>At present, one of the most favourable evidence for early afterlife practice among the Yorubas is the remains found in Iwo Eleru which is dated to 9000BCE. The remains suggest that the early occupiers of Yorubaland might have believed in the afterlife long before 6987 years ago.

<sup>14</sup>(Carrington 1963:137-142).

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