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Onwudinuba and the Igbo Conception of Wealth: Death, Prosperity, and Ancestral Fulfillment in Indigenous Cosmology

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Abstract

This study examines the indigenous Igbo philosophy of Onwudinuba – the idea that death is a component of wealth – in order to reconceptualize wealth beyond narrow material definitions. It aims to demonstrate how, within Igbo cosmology, wealth (uba) is a holistic life project integrating material property, human reproduction, and a morally sanctioned "good death" that culminates in ancestral incorporation. The study adopts a qualitative, naturalistic research design grounded in interpretive and hermeneutic approaches, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and in-depth interviews conducted across selected Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria. Data were analyzed thematically to uncover indigenous categories of meaning embedded in language, ritual practice, and social norms. The findings reveal that Igbo wealth is evaluated retrospectively and communally, with death – specifically natural death accompanied by elaborate burial rites – serving as the final marker of a fulfilled life. Wealth-seeking is shown to be embedded in a moral economy that valorizes hard work, condemns laziness, institutionalizes entrepreneurship through the Igba boi apprenticeship system, and prioritizes procreation for lineage continuity and ritual remembrance. Funerary practices emerge as key arenas where material assets, social relations, and moral legitimacy are publicly transformed into symbolic capital. By integrating death into the analytic category of wealth, the study contributes a novel indigenous perspective to African philosophy, religious studies, and anthropological debates on prosperity and human flourishing. It underscores the importance of culturally grounded frameworks for

understanding economic behavior, social policy, and end-of-life practices in African contexts.

Keywords: *ancestral fulfillment; death; Igbo cosmology; indigenous philosophy; Onwudinuba; prosperity; wealth*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary scholarship in African religious studies and anthropology increasingly recognizes that cosmology plays a decisive role in shaping how wealth and human flourishing are conceptualized in sub-Saharan African societies. Rather than treating wealth as a purely economic category, scholars emphasize its embeddedness within moral, spiritual, and communal frameworks that link the living, the dead, and the cosmos. African Indigenous Religions, in particular, present wealth as relational and socially grounded, reflecting historical and cultural dynamics that prioritize collective well-being over individual accumulation (Urassa, 2022). Within these cosmologies, prosperity is evaluated not solely through material possession but through one's capacity to sustain social harmony, fulfill ritual obligations, and maintain continuity with ancestral forces that animate the moral universe of the community.

Recent interdisciplinary studies further demonstrate that religion continues to shape economic behavior and social valuation even amid processes of modernization and secularization. While the rise of religious non-affiliation in parts of Africa suggests shifting identities, underlying indigenous cosmological assumptions often persist in structuring attitudes toward wealth, obligation, and communal responsibility (Gez et al., 2022). Religious norms influence patterns of marriage, kinship, and resource distribution, thereby shaping both individual and collective economic outcomes (Agadjanian, 2020). Scholars also argue that wealth contributes to

human flourishing insofar as it enables access to healthcare, education, and social stability, all of which are interpreted through culturally specific moral lenses (Den Uyl & Rasmussen, 2024; Hagan et al., 2019; Lee & Mayor, 2023; VanderWeele, 2017). Consequently, wealth in African contexts cannot be detached from broader cosmological visions of life, purpose, and relational well-being.

Despite this growing body of literature, a significant theoretical problem persists in the study of African cosmologies: death is frequently reduced to a biological endpoint or a site of loss, rather than analyzed as a meaningful moral, social, and economic phenomenon. Western epistemological frameworks often impose linear conceptions of life and death that obscure indigenous understandings of continuity and transformation. In many African worldviews, death is not the negation of life but a passage into another mode of existence, commonly associated with ancestral incorporation (Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). This divergence presents interpretive challenges for scholars attempting to account for how death actively shapes social order, ethical conduct, and economic practice within African societies.

The challenge is compounded by the pluralistic nature of African cosmologies, where moral meanings attached to death vary across communities yet consistently emphasize relational continuity. Concepts such as the "living dead" underscore the belief that ancestors remain active participants in communal life, influencing moral decisions and material distributions (Magoqwana & Göçek, 2025). Furthermore, death often carries profound ethical implications, as individual conduct in life is believed to determine posthumous status and ancestral recognition (Ekeke & Ekpenyong, 2024). These moral dimensions intersect with social realities, including health-related stigma and economic vulnerability, revealing that

interpretations of death shape behavior far beyond ritual contexts (Katirayi et al., 2021).

To address these challenges, prior scholarship has proposed interpretive frameworks that treat death as a meaningful social and symbolic resource. Anthropological and religious studies emphasize death as a transition rather than termination, situating it within cosmologies that affirm continuity between the living and the ancestral realm. In Zulu traditions, for example, death marks a transformation through which individuals assume new relational roles as ancestors who continue to nurture and guide the living (De Gama et al., 2020). Such interpretations highlight death as a generative social force that reinforces kinship obligations, moral accountability, and communal memory.

Other studies focus on the role of ancestors in sustaining social cohesion and ethical order. Ancestors are often understood as custodians of moral knowledge whose presence regulates behavior and affirms communal norms (Clark, 2012, 2013; Kopytoff, 1971; Thurston, 2022). Within this framework, death functions as a social mechanism that binds individuals to collective histories and responsibilities. Economic practices surrounding death, including funerary rites and memorial obligations, mobilize communal resources and reaffirm solidarity among kin and neighbors (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). Rather than representing economic burden alone, such practices serve as sites where wealth circulates symbolically and materially, reinforcing networks of reciprocity and social recognition.

Scholars also underscore the symbolic and narrative dimensions of death in African indigenous religions. Death rituals often communicate values of continuity, rebirth, and moral exemplarity, embedding individual life stories within broader cultural narratives (Agboada, 2023). Beliefs in reincarnation and ancestral return further blur distinctions between life and death, reinforcing cyclical

conceptions of existence that shape identity and social expectation. Through ritual commemoration, communities transmit historical memory and ethical instruction across generations, ensuring cultural resilience and continuity (Falconer, 2024). These perspectives collectively reframe death as a resource that sustains moral economies and cultural meaning.

Nevertheless, a critical gap remains in the literature regarding the explicit integration of death into indigenous African conceptions of wealth, prosperity, and holistic well-being. While existing studies address spiritual and ritual dimensions, they rarely theorize death as an integral component of wealth systems themselves. The economic implications of death-related practices are often acknowledged descriptively but lack sustained analytical integration with broader theories of prosperity and social value (Golo & Novieto, 2022). Moreover, discussions of well-being tend to privilege material indicators, insufficiently accounting for spiritual, emotional, and communal dimensions shaped by beliefs about death and ancestry (Agboada, 2023).

This study addresses that gap by examining the indigenous Igbo philosophical concept of *Onwudinuba* as a framework for understanding death as a constitutive element of wealth. The article aims to demonstrate how *Onwudinuba* reframes wealth as a holistic assemblage of material success, moral legacy, social recognition, and ancestral continuity. By situating death within Igbo cosmology as a meaningful completion rather than negation of wealth, the study offers a novel theoretical contribution to African religious thought. Its scope is limited to Igbo contexts, drawing on ethnographic and interpretive analysis to illuminate how indigenous philosophy can enrich broader debates on wealth, death, and human flourishing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks for Wealth and Prosperity in African Indigenous Cosmologies

Scholarly discussions on wealth and prosperity in African indigenous cosmologies have increasingly moved beyond materialist interpretations toward holistic theoretical frameworks. One prominent approach is Afrocentricity, which emphasizes analyzing African realities through indigenous cultural logics rather than externally imposed epistemologies. Afrocentric scholars argue that wealth must be understood within communal, spiritual, and ancestral contexts that shape African social life (Masenya, 2022). This framework foregrounds collective identity, moral responsibility, and continuity with ancestors as essential dimensions of prosperity, challenging individualistic and accumulation-oriented economic models (Jamison, 2018; Okyere et al., 2024).

Afrocentricity further conceptualizes wealth as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing social harmony, moral standing, and spiritual fulfillment. Scholars highlight that economic success in African societies is frequently evaluated by its contribution to communal well-being rather than personal enrichment alone (Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2020; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020, 2022). Studies demonstrate that wealth is inseparable from social obligations and ancestral expectations, reinforcing the idea that prosperity is relational and morally embedded (Appau & Crockett, 2023; Banda, 2025; Hadnes & Schumacher, 2012; Koenane, 2014). This theoretical orientation provides a foundation for understanding why economic practices remain intertwined with ritual life and cosmological beliefs.

Another influential framework is Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), which emphasizes locally grounded epistemologies and practices developed over generations. IKS scholars argue that indigenous understandings of wealth integrate metaphysical beliefs,

environmental knowledge, and social networks into coherent systems of resilience and prosperity (Ebersöhn et al., 2017). These systems inform agricultural practices, resource management, and social governance, underscoring that economic life is inseparable from cultural values (Pereira et al., 2020; Sanganyado et al., 2017). By prioritizing community-based assessments of well-being, IKS frameworks offer critical insights into sustainable and culturally resonant notions of prosperity (Lushombo, 2025; Malapane et al., 2022; Muwanga-Zake & Kibukamusoke, 2024).

Death and the Afterlife in Indigenous African Worldviews

The study of death and the afterlife occupies a central position in African religious studies and anthropology. Scholars consistently emphasize that death is not conceived as a final rupture but as a transition into another mode of existence. Central to this understanding is the role of ancestors, who are believed to maintain active relationships with the living and influence moral and social order (Isiko & Serugo, 2021). Within this cosmological framework, death inaugurates a new social status rather than extinguishing personhood, reinforcing continuity between generations.

Beliefs in transition and reincarnation further illustrate the cyclical conception of existence prevalent in many African worldviews. Death rituals are understood as transformative processes that facilitate passage into the ancestral realm and ensure social and spiritual balance (Mosima, 2023). Reincarnation beliefs reinforce kinship continuity and collective identity, affirming that the boundaries between life and death are permeable rather than absolute (Cordeiro-Rodrigues & Agada, 2022; Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). These perspectives challenge linear ontologies dominant in Western philosophy and demand culturally grounded analytical approaches.

Moral judgment constitutes another critical dimension of death in African cosmologies. Actions undertaken during life are believed to

shape one's posthumous status and ancestral recognition. Scholars argue that African traditional religions contain robust eschatological elements that articulate ethical accountability beyond biological death (Ekeke & Ekpenyong, 2024). This moral framing situates death as a regulatory force that reinforces ethical conduct, social responsibility, and communal cohesion, thereby extending its significance beyond ritual domains.

Death as Social, Moral, and Symbolic Capital

Recent literature increasingly conceptualizes death as a source of social capital in African societies. Funerals and mourning practices function as collective events that strengthen communal bonds and reinforce networks of mutual support. Scholars note that participation in death rituals enhances solidarity and reinforces social ties that extend beyond immediate kinship (Snavely et al., 2020). These communal engagements generate social capital that sustains collective resilience, particularly in contexts of crisis and vulnerability.

Death also operates within moral economies that regulate ethical behavior and social legitimacy. Mortuary practices frequently serve as public evaluations of a person's moral life, reflecting community judgments regarding responsibility, generosity, and adherence to social norms. While specific empirical evidence varies across contexts, scholars agree that funeral rituals symbolically encode moral values and ethical expectations (Ekeke & Ekpenyong, 2024). The fear of moral sanctions associated with improper burial underscores the ethical weight attributed to death-related practices within these societies.

In addition to social and moral dimensions, death generates symbolic capital that contributes to cultural identity and legacy. Rituals, narratives, and commemorative practices surrounding death preserve collective memory and affirm communal values (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014; Basanti & Mekonen, 2023; Freerks, 2024). Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital, scholars argue that

funerary participation confers honor, prestige, and recognition upon families, reinforcing cultural continuity and social distinction (Agana et al., 2025; Arima & Baloyi, 2022; Bhuda et al., 2023). Through these processes, death becomes a site where social meaning, memory, and identity are actively constructed.

Funerary Practices, Wealth Display, and Social Status

The relationship between funerary practices, wealth display, and social status has been extensively documented in African ethnographic literature. Funerals often constitute significant economic investments that publicly signal the status of the deceased and their kin. Studies show that families frequently mobilize substantial resources to meet social expectations of "proper" burial, reflecting broader dynamics of honor and recognition (Noret, 2023). Such practices reveal that funerals function as arenas where wealth is visibly negotiated and affirmed.

Wealth display during funerals commonly involves conspicuous consumption, including livestock, food, attire, and ceremonial performances. These displays communicate social standing and reinforce hierarchical distinctions within communities. Empirical studies demonstrate that traditional indicators of wealth, such as cattle ownership, retain symbolic significance in funerary contexts, particularly in rural settings (Acosta et al., 2024; Dabasso et al., 2022; Di Lernia et al., 2013; Doran et al., 1979). Funerals thus operate as cultural performances through which economic capacity is translated into social legitimacy.

From a theoretical perspective, scholars analyze funerary practices through the lens of economic anthropology, emphasizing the economization of ritual life. Economic conditions influence the scale and form of funerals, reflecting broader patterns of inequality and aspiration (Mshamu et al., 2020). At the same time, funerary rituals remain ethically regulated, balancing wealth display with moral

expectations of reciprocity and communal responsibility (Jeske, 2016). This duality highlights the complex interplay between economic ambition and moral obligation in death-related practices.

Conceptual Gaps in Linking Death, Wealth, and Well-Being

Despite extensive scholarship on death and funerary practices, significant conceptual gaps remain in linking death to wealth and holistic well-being within African indigenous philosophies. Existing studies often address these domains separately, resulting in fragmented analyses that overlook their interdependence (Hill, 2023). Scholars call for integrated frameworks that systematically connect spiritual beliefs, economic practices, and social values to capture the complexity of indigenous worldviews (Johnson & Van Schalkwyk, 2022).

Another gap concerns insufficient attention to moral economies underpinning wealth display in funerary contexts. While studies acknowledge competitive and status-driven dimensions of funerals, they frequently neglect the ethical norms of reciprocity and communal obligation that regulate such displays (Isiko & Serugo, 2021). This omission limits understanding of how moral expectations shape economic behavior and social legitimacy in death-related practices.

Furthermore, holistic well-being remains under-theorized in relation to death. Many studies privilege material indicators of prosperity, marginalizing spiritual, emotional, and communal dimensions of well-being that are central to indigenous philosophies (Kometsi et al., 2020). The lack of integrative approaches obscures how beliefs about death contribute to resilience, identity, and social cohesion within African societies.

Research Gap and the Significance of the Study

The foregoing review demonstrates that while African scholarship richly theorizes death, ancestry, and funerary practices, it

has yet to fully integrate these insights into systematic analyses of wealth and holistic well-being. Death is frequently examined as ritual, morality, or symbolism, but rarely conceptualized as a constitutive component of wealth itself. This gap is particularly evident in the absence of indigenous philosophical frameworks that explicitly theorize death as integral to prosperity, social recognition, and moral legacy.

This study addresses that gap by foregrounding the Igbo concept of *Onwudinuba* as a theoretical intervention that integrates death, wealth, and cosmology. By situating death within a holistic assemblage of material success, social honor, and ancestral continuity, the study contributes a culturally grounded framework to African religious thought. Its significance lies in advancing interdisciplinary dialogue between anthropology, philosophy, and religious studies while offering an indigenous epistemology capable of enriching global debates on wealth, mortality, and human flourishing.

METHOD

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, naturalistic research design grounded in interpretive and hermeneutic traditions. The naturalistic approach is particularly suited to the exploration of indigenous cosmological concepts, as it allows social realities to be examined within their lived cultural contexts rather than through experimentally controlled conditions. Given that *Onwudinuba* is embedded in Igbo religious philosophy, moral reasoning, and everyday social practice, a qualitative design enables the researcher to capture meanings as articulated by participants themselves. This approach prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability, aligning with the study's objective to interpret culturally situated conceptions of death and wealth.

Philosophically, the study is informed by an interpretivist epistemology that views knowledge as socially constructed and context-dependent. Meaning is not treated as fixed or universal but as emerging from interactions between individuals, traditions, and cosmological assumptions. Hermeneutics therefore provides the overarching analytical lens, guiding the interpretation of narratives, practices, and symbols related to death, wealth, and ancestral continuity within Igbo society.

Study Area and Cultural Context

The research was conducted within selected communities across Igboland in southeastern Nigeria. Fieldwork locations included Uboma, Mbano, Ikwo, Okigwe, Nsukka, and Nnewi. These sites were purposively selected to reflect geographical, cultural, and socio-economic diversity across five Igbo-speaking states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The selection of multiple sites enabled the study to capture variations and shared patterns in beliefs and practices related to death and wealth, while maintaining a coherent cultural framework.

Igboland was chosen due to its rich philosophical traditions concerning life, death, ancestry, and prosperity. Within Igbo cosmology, death is not conceived as a rupture but as a transition that completes the human life cycle. Conducting the study within this cultural environment allowed for an in-depth engagement with indigenous categories of meaning, linguistic expressions, ritual practices, and moral evaluations that underpin the concept of *Onwudinuba*. The field sites thus provided an appropriate cultural setting for examining how philosophical ideas are enacted in everyday life.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those included possessed relevant cultural knowledge and experiential familiarity with Igbo cosmological beliefs. The study focused on individuals recognized within their communities as custodians or practitioners of indigenous knowledge, including traditional religion adherents, elders, titled men, and community leaders. These participants were considered well-positioned to articulate indigenous perspectives on death, wealth, ritual obligations, and ancestral relations.

Purposive sampling was employed to prioritize depth and cultural authority rather than numerical representation. Selection criteria emphasized participants' involvement in funerary practices, ritual leadership, or long-standing engagement with indigenous religious traditions. This strategy ensured access to narratives and interpretations that are often unavailable through random sampling. The diversity of participants across multiple communities also enabled comparative insights while preserving the integrity of localized meanings.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic engagement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via telephone, allowing flexibility in accessing participants across different locations. Interview questions focused on participants' understandings of death, classifications of "good" and "bad" death, the relationship between funerary practices and wealth, and the philosophical meanings associated with ancestral transition. This format allowed participants to narrate experiences and interpretations in their own terms.

Participant observation constituted a central component of data collection. The researcher attended funerals, memorial ceremonies, and post-burial rituals, observing material practices, symbolic displays, social interactions, and verbal expressions related to death. Ethnographic notes captured ritual sequences, community responses, and informal conversations. These observations were crucial for contextualizing interview data and for understanding how philosophical concepts such as *Onwudinuba* are embodied in practice rather than articulated solely at a discursive level.

Data Analysis and Interpretive Procedure

Data analysis followed a hermeneutic and thematic approach, emphasizing interpretation rather than quantification. Interview transcripts and field notes were read iteratively to identify recurring themes, symbolic patterns, and conceptual categories related to death, wealth, morality, and ancestral continuity. The analysis moved inductively from descriptive accounts toward higher-level interpretive insights, allowing meanings to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori.

Hermeneutic interpretation guided the analytical process by situating individual narratives within broader cultural, linguistic, and cosmological frameworks. Particular attention was paid to indigenous terminologies, metaphors, and naming practices, which were treated as philosophical texts in their own right. The analysis sought to uncover how participants construct meaning through language and ritual, and how these constructions reflect deeper ontological assumptions about life, death, and prosperity. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and ethnographic contexts enhanced interpretive coherence and analytical rigor.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement prior to data collection. Verbal consent was obtained in accordance with culturally appropriate practices, particularly in contexts where formal written consent might be intrusive or misunderstood. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and identifying details were omitted or anonymized in the presentation of findings.

Respect for cultural norms and sensitivities guided all stages of fieldwork. Given the sacred and emotionally charged nature of death-related rituals, the researcher exercised caution and reflexivity when observing and documenting practices. Participation was limited to contexts where presence was permitted by community members, and interpretive claims were made with sensitivity to indigenous perspectives. These ethical commitments ensured that the study upheld both scholarly integrity and respect for the communities whose knowledge forms the foundation of the research.

RESULTS

The Philosophy of *Onwudinuba* and the Expansion of "Wealth"

The central finding of this study is that the Igbo philosophical concept *Onwudinuba*—literally, "death is part of wealth" or "death is a component of wealth"—functions as an indigenous conceptual key for interpreting prosperity as more than material accumulation. Linguistically, the compound derives from *onwu* (death), *dina* (part/component of), and *uba* (wealth), yielding *Onwudinuba* as a culturally intelligible claim about what completes a successful life. In mainstream usage, wealth often denotes an abundance of valuable financial assets or physical possessions that can be converted for

transactions, consistent with etymological traces in Old English *weal*. In contemporary global measurement discourse, inclusive wealth is framed as a monetary sum of natural, human, and physical assets.

The results indicate that Igbo understandings resonate with the idea that wealth consists of multiple "ingredients," but they articulate this through local categories that combine tangible and intangible assets. On the tangible side, *uba* is associated with buildings, parcels of land, houses, furniture, cars, and clothing. On the intangible side, wealth includes valued conditions such as good health, as well as human and social resources that are "counted, praised, and imagined sources and instruments of power" (Guyer, 1993; Guyer & Belinga, 1995). The novel element foregrounded here is that death is added as a component—an inclusion that is not derived from abstract theorizing but from the semantic and social force of naming practices. The name *Onwudinuba* itself is treated as evidence of a culturally established logic through which the Igbo can affirm that wealth is incomplete without an appropriate, socially recognized passage into the spiritual realm.

At the same time, the findings show that the Igbo do not deny the experiential negativity of death. Death is widely recognized as an event that brings sorrow, grief, and pain, especially when it removes a loved one or a breadwinner. Yet, the same tradition holds that death—under specific conditions—can mark the completion of wealth and social achievement. This tension becomes intelligible once one considers the premium placed on prosperity and status in Igbo cultural life. Wealth is highly valued, and its acquisition functions as a status symbol that secures material welfare and social recognition (Mensah & Iloh, 2021). Within this value system, the pursuit of wealth implicitly includes a future-oriented desire for the kind of death that consummates a fulfilled life—one that affirms reputation, lineage continuity, and communal acknowledgment.

Wealth (*Uba*) in Igbo Cosmology: Material, Human, and Spiritual Dimensions

A second major result concerns the conceptual precision of Igbo terms for wealth. The study finds that *uba*—not *aku*—is the more comprehensive term for "wealth" within Igbo cosmology. Some scholars are reported to have identified wealth as *aku* (Mensah & Iloh, 2021), but the results emphasize that *aku* more accurately denotes "riches," which constitute only a subset of wealth. *Aku* primarily captures elements that are acquired through individual industry and labor, such as money, landholdings, nobility, and fame. Yet the Igbo naming repertoire indicates that wealth also includes the human element—persons, lineage, and social reproduction—captured in semantic contrasts such as *Madukaku* ("human is greater than property"). Accordingly, *uba* is presented as a composite category that integrates non-human property, the human element (large families and children), and the death element. Names such as *Ubaku* (wealth of property), *Ubasinachi* (wealth comes from God), *Ubamadu* (wealth of human beings), and *Madukaku* (humans are greater than property or money) illustrate this broader cosmological grammar.

The findings further show that wealth-making is framed as simultaneously human and spiritual. Igbo cosmology acknowledges a "double" structure of reality—physical and spiritual—within which human striving is necessary but not sufficient. Material success depends not only on effort but also on the cooperation of *chi* (guardian angel/spirit). This relationship is captured in the pithy saying: *Omemara ma chi ekweghi, onye uta atala ya* (nobody should blame anyone whose God has not granted or permitted success). The name *Ubasinachi* similarly expresses that wealth ultimately "comes from God," reinforcing the idea that prosperity is realized through combined agency across visible and super-sensible domains. Yet the results also stress that the spiritual dimension does not legitimate

idleness; those who desire wealth are expected to be diligent, industrious, and focused, reflecting an ethical discipline embedded in the cosmology.

This moral economy of effort is exemplified through the figure of *Ikenga*, a deity and symbol associated with industry, commerce, hard work, and achievement. *Ikenga* is described as the Igbo man's "right arm of valor" (Nwaorgu, 2001, p. 65), a motif enacted in celebratory exclamations such as *Aka-Ikenga mu!* ("Oh, my right hand of valor"). The results interpret *Ikenga* as cosmological proof that "things are double," physical and spiritual, and as a moral icon that encourages persistence and disciplined striving. Scholarly interpretations portray *Ikenga* as bound to status, success, and achievement in Igbo life (Cole & Aniakor, 1984, p. 38). Iconographic readings further specify its symbolism: ram horns for stubborn determination, a knife for overcoming obstacles, and a skull for daring leadership (Enekwe, 1987, p. 60). Complementary descriptions identify *Ikenga* as a cultic symbol of achievement, dramatizing the force of the right hand in forging pathways through adversity (Nwala, 1985, p. 53).

Death as a Component of Wealth: Differentiating "Bad Death" and "Good Death"

A third set of results clarifies how death becomes a component of wealth only through a culturally structured distinction between "bad death" and "good death." In general definitions, death is described as the permanent end of life for a person or animal and as the total cessation of life processes that eventually occur in all living organisms (Pallis, 1982). The study also notes that death has become a central topic in modern disciplinary inquiry, even though it was once avoided in serious scientific—and to some extent philosophical—reflection (Pallis, 1982). However, the findings emphasize that within Igbo worldview, death is primarily a transition, initiation, or passage

from physically active living to actively spiritual living. This approach aligns with the claim that for many Africans, death is not complete annihilation but a departure from one state of life to another—a portal to a wider world (Mbiti, 1970, p. 60).

Within this cosmological logic, existence is configured as a dynamic relation of physical and spiritual dimensions: while alive, a person is a physical-spiritual being; after death, the person becomes spiritual-physical, reversing the emphasis without negating relational continuity. Hence, Igbo kinship includes the living, the dead, and the unborn, and the dead remain invested in the affairs of the living, potentially re-entering the physical realm through reincarnation. Yet this continuity is ethically conditioned. The study identifies two categories of death. "Bad death" is premature death—occurring through accidents, lightning, illness framed as spiritually charged, drowning, falling, or the death of unmarried youth—often interpreted as a sign of divine anger or spiritual vengeance, possibly linked to wrongdoing by the person or relatives. This category is termed *Onwu mgbabi chi* (premature death) and is explicitly excluded from the wealth-completing logic of *Onwudinuba*.

The results show that the exclusion of "bad death" is reinforced through linguistic and ritual practices. Naming conventions encode its tragic character, as in *Onwu churuba* (death drives away wealth), *Onwuemenyi* (death has no friend), *Onwubuariri* (death is an impediment), *Onwubiko* (death I plead with you), and *Ntishirionwu* (death does not hear). Such deaths do not receive elaborate rites and do not lead to ancestral status. In support of this interpretation, Awolalu & Dopama (1979) maintain that bad deaths typically do not receive full funeral rites; deaths associated with divinities such as *amadioha* (the god of thunder), smallpox, or iron may be treated as punitive and therefore not mourned in ordinary ways. Burials are conducted quickly, often by specialists, and not within the homestead

but in spaces marked as "evil forest," alongside purificatory and expiatory rituals aimed at appeasing the relevant divinities (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). This ritual marginalization underscores why "bad death" cannot be construed as wealth.

Conversely, "good death" (*Onwuchi*, natural death) is the form of death that activates the death component of wealth. The results define it as benevolent death that comes after ripe old age, following a morally upright life characterized by fruitfulness, honesty, and the presence of offspring, and culminating in elaborate funerary rites. This is not framed merely as individual aspiration but as a communal judgment shaped by collective standards of what is beneficial and socially affirming. Enekwe (1987, p. 72) is cited to underscore the normative priority of communal humanism: even where individuals are highly developed, they remain bound to group-oriented life, perception, and practice. When a "good death" occurs, communal participation is extensive. Traditional announcements may be made through the gong (*ekwe*), whose sound language is intelligible to knowledgeable community members, sometimes accompanied by cannon shots marking the passing of an important person.

The material and social manifestations of wealth in "good death" are described as highly visible. Funeral ceremonies gather family, in-laws, friends, colleagues, titled men, age grades, and diverse associations. Food and gifts—money, goats, chickens, cows, sheep, assorted drinks, and other items—circulate into the compound, and survivors often receive substantial contributions. The results align Achebe's (1958, 1964) depiction of intensified funeral atmosphere—drums, guns, cannons, frenetic movement, and ritual exuberance—as an ethnographic illustration of the cultural intensity associated with death rites. The ceremonies may include multiple dancing groups (e.g., *Ndi-Okpanga*, *ndi-ma-ogu*, *Otu-ogbo*, *ndi-egberu-oba*) and the active participation of *Umu okpu* (kinswomen), who sustain nightly songs

and dances. A two-phase structure is highlighted: an initial phase following burial and a second phase after *Izu asaa* (seven market weeks), including market outings for titled men in which ritual items are carried and children pick items for "market dance" (Afuekwe, 1992).

A key analytical result is that these rites are interpreted as wealth-completing because they convert a life's achievements into publicly validated social memory and ancestral incorporation. After the market outing, the deceased is believed to have joined settled ancestors as *Ndi-iche* (ancestor), and the living may then offer drinks and kola nuts through rites of remembrance. The study links this pattern to a cyclical conception of the universe characterized by ordered succession and continuity, symbolizing harmony and dynamism (Onunwa, 1990). "Good death," with its elaborate burial, is interpreted as "life-affirming" or "world-affirming," enabling fellowship with ancestors and securing the conditions for return through reincarnation. Wealth, in this account, is incomplete if a person possesses money and children yet dies without the elaborate rites that draw multitudes and gifts—captured in the saying *girigiri wu ugwu eze* (the multitude is a sign of kingship/wealth).

The study's observational vignette provides an embodied illustration of how "wealth in death" is experienced as a social reality. Researchers observed the burial of an Igbo man who fit the culturally recognized profile of wealth, held in a primary school field on a Saturday. Amid dancing, eating, and gift presentation, a mentally challenged man collected burial brochures, food, drinks, and water, sorting them into waterproof bags. As he departed with his bags, youths called out that his bags were full; he replied, *ezi-okwu onwudinuba* ("truly there is wealth in death"). The scene is presented not as a theoretical claim but as an everyday articulation of the central finding: under conditions of "good death," funerary circulation of

people, goods, and recognition becomes a concrete social manifestation of wealth, thereby making death—specifically "natural death"—a culturally intelligible component of *uba*.

DISCUSSION

Wealth as a Composite Category: Property, Human Beings, and Death

The findings of this study demonstrate that, within the Igbo worldview, wealth (*uba*) is conceptualized as a composite category encompassing material property, human reproduction, and death as a consummating element. Wealth is not reduced to monetary assets or physical possessions alone but is understood as a holistic life project that unfolds across the human lifespan and culminates in a socially recognized "good death." The philosophy of Onwudinuba captures this synthesis by framing death—specifically natural death accompanied by elaborate rites—as the final component that completes wealth. This result shows that wealth, in Igbo cosmology, is evaluated retrospectively and communally, not merely by accumulation during life but by how one exits life and is integrated into ancestral continuity.

This understanding aligns with broader Africanist scholarship that conceptualizes wealth as relational and intergenerational rather than strictly economic. Studies emphasize that material assets, kinship networks, and ritual competence are intertwined in shaping social status and legacy (Haynie et al., 2021; Kabudula et al., 2017). Research on "good death" and ancestorhood similarly indicates that moral standing and ritual fulfillment are critical dimensions of prosperity, reinforcing the idea that wealth extends into the posthumous domain (Mulder, 2020; Sheftel, 2023; Van Wijngaarden et al., 2016). However, unlike some studies that treat funerary practices primarily as symbolic

or competitive displays, the present findings foreground death as an intrinsic and necessary component of wealth itself.

Theoretically, this reframing challenges economistic definitions of wealth by introducing death as an analytic category within prosperity studies. It expands African philosophy and religious studies by demonstrating how ontological assumptions about life, death, and continuity shape economic behavior. Practically, this insight encourages culturally sensitive development frameworks that recognize non-material aspirations and life-course evaluations of success. At the policy level, it suggests that interventions addressing wealth, inequality, or social welfare in Igbo contexts must account for ritual obligations and end-of-life expectations, as ignoring these dimensions risks misinterpreting local motivations and measures of well-being.

Moral Valuation of Labor and the Cultural Condemnation of Laziness

This study finds that the Igbo pursuit of wealth is deeply grounded in a moral economy that valorizes labor and condemns laziness. Wealth-seeking is framed as an ethical obligation rather than mere economic ambition. Idiomatic expressions and social practices emphasize early socialization into hard work, discipline, and perseverance, reinforcing the belief that dignity and nobility are achieved through labor. The pursuit of wealth thus reflects adherence to moral order, where industriousness signals both personal virtue and social responsibility. Laziness is socially stigmatized because it threatens not only individual survival but also communal stability and moral equilibrium.

Comparable findings appear across West African societies, where labor is widely interpreted as a moral duty embedded in cultural norms. Studies indicate that work ethic is socially produced through storytelling, proverbs, and communal recognition of

industrious individuals (Jecker, 2022; Sitawa & Lagat, 2022). Research further suggests that condemnation of laziness serves as a regulatory mechanism that aligns individual behavior with collective expectations (Smith, 2024). While some scholars highlight structural constraints on labor opportunities, the prevailing literature supports the view that moral discourses surrounding work strongly shape economic conduct and social valuation in African contexts.

The implications of these findings are significant. Theoretically, they affirm moral economy approaches that link ethics, labor, and wealth formation. Practically, they underscore the importance of culturally grounded education systems that reinforce dignity of labor and skill acquisition from early life stages. From a policy perspective, development programs aimed at employment and productivity in Igbo regions may gain legitimacy and effectiveness by aligning with indigenous moral frameworks that already privilege hard work, responsibility, and gradual wealth accumulation over speculative or extractive economic models.

Igba Boi and Institutionalized Pathways to Wealth Creation

The results of this study highlight Igba boi—the Igbo apprenticeship system—as a central institutional mechanism through which wealth-seeking, work ethic, and moral discipline are reproduced. Igba boi functions as an indigenous model of economic education that combines vocational training with ethical socialization. Through prolonged mentorship, apprentices internalize skills, business norms, and values of diligence and loyalty, positioning them for eventual economic independence. This system demonstrates that wealth creation in Igbo society is not individualistic but socially mediated, relying on trust, reciprocity, and long-term commitment.

Empirical studies strongly support the effectiveness of Igba boi in fostering entrepreneurship and social mobility. Research shows that apprenticeships significantly enhance entrepreneurial capacity,

facilitate intergenerational transfer of economic norms, and provide pathways out of poverty (Umemezia & Ojukwu, 2023). Comparative development literature similarly recognizes informal apprenticeship systems as viable alternatives to formal education, particularly in contexts where institutional access is limited. While some scholars critique the informality of such systems, evidence suggests that their cultural embeddedness contributes to resilience and sustainability.

Theoretically, *Igba boi* challenges dominant Western models of entrepreneurship by foregrounding relational learning and moral accountability. Practically, it offers a template for vocational training programs that integrate mentorship and community-based learning. Policy-wise, recognizing and supporting *Igba boi*—through legal recognition, skills certification, or access to microfinance—could strengthen local economies while preserving indigenous knowledge systems. Such integration can bridge informal and formal sectors without eroding cultural legitimacy.

Children, Lineage Continuity, and the Human Component of Wealth

Findings from this study indicate that children—particularly sons—constitute a central human component of wealth in Igbo cosmology. Procreation ensures lineage continuity, ritual performance, and posthumous remembrance, all of which are necessary for achieving a "complete" life. Wealth is therefore inseparable from reproductive success, as descendants perform libations, maintain ancestral ties, and safeguard family identity. The desire for children is not merely demographic but cosmological, rooted in the need to sustain the cycle connecting the living, the dead, and the unborn.

This interpretation is consistent with scholarship on patrilineal African societies, where sons are regarded as carriers of lineage, ritual authority, and inherited property (Den Boer & Hudson, 2017;

Edvardsson et al., 2021). Studies emphasize that children function as sources of security, social capital, and moral legitimacy (Ibrahimi & Mumtaz, 2024; Park, 2019). However, critical literature also highlights how son preference reinforces patriarchal structures and gender inequalities, revealing tensions between cultural continuity and social equity.

The implications are multifaceted. Theoretically, these findings deepen understanding of wealth as inclusive of biological and ritual reproduction. Practically, they underscore the need for culturally sensitive family and social policies that acknowledge lineage values while addressing gender imbalances. From a policy standpoint, integrating reproductive health, education, and gender equity initiatives with respect for indigenous cosmologies may promote social well-being without undermining cultural coherence.

Funerary Rituals, Status Display, and Moral Economy

The study further reveals that funerary rituals function as critical arenas for wealth display, status negotiation, and moral evaluation in Igbo society. Elaborate burials publicly affirm a deceased person's life achievements and their family's social standing. The presence of large crowds, abundant gifts, and extensive ceremonies embodies the proverb that "multitude signifies kingship or wealth." Such rituals transform accumulated wealth into symbolic capital, converting economic resources into honor, memory, and ancestral legitimacy.

Extant literature corroborates these findings by framing funerals as sites of social competition and moral economy in African communities (Cintas-Peña & Sanjuán, 2022; Tum et al., 2023). Scholars argue that funerals redistribute resources, reinforce kinship ties, and negotiate social hierarchies (Raja et al., 2021). At the same time, studies caution that escalating funeral costs can exacerbate inequality and financial strain, particularly among economically vulnerable households.

Theoretically, these insights advance moral economy perspectives that situate wealth within ritualized social exchange. Practically, they highlight the need for communal mechanisms that balance cultural expression with economic sustainability. Policy implications include the development of community support funds, culturally informed financial education, and social welfare programs that mitigate excessive financial pressure while respecting ritual significance. Such approaches can preserve cultural vitality while promoting equitable economic resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that, within the Igbo worldview, wealth (*uba*) is a holistic and composite construct that integrates material possessions, human reproduction, and death as a consummating element. Through the indigenous philosophy of *Onwudinuba*, the research shows that death—specifically a morally upright, natural death accompanied by elaborate rites—is not an interruption of prosperity but its completion. Wealth is therefore assessed not only during one's lifetime but retrospectively, through communal recognition, ancestral incorporation, and the continuity of lineage. This finding challenges narrow economic interpretations of wealth by situating prosperity within a culturally grounded life-cycle framework.

The discussion further revealed that the Igbo pursuit of wealth is deeply embedded in a moral economy that valorizes labor, condemns laziness, and institutionalizes industriousness through practices such as *Igba boi*. Wealth-seeking emerges as an ethical obligation tied to dignity, social responsibility, and communal well-being rather than individual accumulation alone. Procreation—particularly the production of descendants capable of performing rituals and sustaining lineage—constitutes a critical human component of wealth.

Funerary practices, in turn, function as arenas where wealth, status, and moral legitimacy are publicly affirmed and transformed into symbolic capital.

By integrating death into the analytical category of wealth, this study contributes a novel theoretical perspective to African philosophy, religious studies, and anthropological debates on prosperity and human flourishing. It extends existing scholarship by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies that link economic behavior, moral values, and cosmology. The study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive frameworks in development, social policy, and end-of-life discourse, while opening new avenues for comparative and interdisciplinary research on wealth beyond material metrics.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is context-specific, focusing primarily on Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria. While the findings offer deep insight into Igbo cosmology and philosophy, they may not be directly generalizable to other African societies with different cultural, religious, or socio-political configurations. Even within Igboland, local variations in ritual practices and interpretations of wealth and death exist, which this study could not exhaustively capture.

Second, the qualitative and interpretive nature of the research, while appropriate for exploring indigenous meanings, relies heavily on ethnographic observation, interviews, and hermeneutic analysis. Such methods privilege depth over breadth and are shaped by the researcher's interpretive positioning. Although efforts were made to ensure reflexivity and cultural sensitivity, some nuances of lived experience or dissenting voices—particularly those influenced by Christianity, urbanization, or modern economic pressures—may be

underrepresented. Additionally, the study did not employ quantitative measures that could have complemented qualitative insights by illustrating the economic scale or distributional effects of funerary practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could build on this study in several important ways. Comparative studies across different African societies would help determine whether the integration of death as a component of wealth is unique to the Igbo or reflects a broader African philosophical pattern. Cross-cultural analysis involving non-African indigenous traditions could also enrich global debates on wealth, mortality, and human flourishing. Such comparative work would strengthen theoretical generalization while preserving sensitivity to cultural specificity.

Further research is also recommended to examine how contemporary transformations—such as Christianity, urban migration, globalization, and digital economies—are reshaping Igbo conceptions of wealth, death, and ancestral continuity. Quantitative and mixed-method approaches could explore the economic implications of elaborate funerary practices, including their effects on household welfare and inequality. Finally, interdisciplinary engagement with development studies, public policy, and ethics could translate indigenous philosophical insights like *Onwudinuba* into culturally grounded frameworks for sustainable development, social protection, and end-of-life policy in plural societies.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: J.I.O.; Data curation: J.I.O.; Formal analysis: J.I.O.; Funding acquisition: J.I.O.; Investigation: J.I.O.; Methodology: J.I.O.; Project administration: J.I.O.; Resources: J.I.O.; Software: J.I.O.; Supervision: J.I.O.; Validation: J.I.O.; Visualization: J.I.O.; Writing – original draft: J.I.O.; Writing –

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not required for this study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this research.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT and PaperPal to improve the clarity of the language and readability of the article. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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