

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITIONAL BURIAL RITES IN ETCHE SOUTH SOUTH, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined traditional burial rites in Etche south-South Nigeria. The paper contends that burial rites which are formally observed in honor of the deceased are organized into two major phases. The first phase begins with nchor-okwukwu (notification of the deceased maternal home people over the death of their son, via the deceased first son, elders and some respective traditionalists of Etche, uzo-ubi (appeasing and removing of the spirit of the deceased from the farm), isa-ozu (washing of the corpse), ijike-ozu (attiring of the corpse), ika-wala-ozu (marking of the grave), iho-ndi-igwuala-ozu (selection of the grave diggers), ishi-onyenwuruanwu oshi (message to the deceased to his ancestor to the spirit world by his near kin, to ili-ozu (interment), while the second phase on the other hand, begins with nkita-anya (dog killing ritual), mgba onyenwuruanwu (wrestling), oke-okpa- elu (fowl shooting ritual, to ijennama-ejeeaghia (taking of a live cow and other items such as ego-akparakpa (woven money and dogbala igwe (iron bars), to the market. The paper posits that each of these rites are performed with utmost care and sense of respect and they are intended not only to secure a permanent abode for the deceased in the ancestral world of the good departed, but also to enhance his status therein. The methodology adopted was oral interviews (reports of the elders of Etche and Handed tradition from the custodians of customs and traditions of Etche and secondary sources (published materials). The study also adopts phenomenological approaches to describe and interpret the rituals relating to burial rites. Findings from the study reveal that burial rites have helped to sustain the continuing relationship between the deceased and his living kith and kin.

Keywords: Etche, Significance, Traditional Burial Rites, Death, Life after Death.

INTRODUCTION

In indigenous Etche, to accord burial rites to the dead or departed loved ones is not only significant but also inevitable. To accord burial rites to the deceased, for the Etche people find meaning in the people's belief that death is not the termination of life but rather a transition from the physical to the spirit world; a continuation of life thereafter. That is why at death, an Etche man would say that the deceased is 'going home' to the spirit land of the ancestors to continue to enjoy the brotherhood, comradeship and communal life which it hitherto enjoyed here on earth from where it reincarnate back into the homestead.

For the Etche people, burial rites are organized into two phases. The first phase begins with the rites of *nchor-okwukwu* (message to the deceased maternal home people about the death of their son, *ije – uzo-ubi* (the rites of going to the farm to appease the spirit of the deceased from lurking around the farm, *isa-ozu* (the rites of washing of the corpse), to *ili-ozu* (internment) while the second phase begins with the rites of *igba-nkitanya* (killing a dog), to the rites of taking a live cow to the market.

As noted earlier, these rites are not only significant, but also inevitable and this explains why Etche people take special care in handling the burial rites given to the deceased if he is expected to enjoy smooth entrance into the blissful plane of the ancestors.

Background to the Study

Etche is one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas that make up Rivers State. It is located at the Northern part of Rivers State having boundaries with Ngor-Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State in the North, as well as Aba in Abia State in the East. According to Etche socio-political organization, there are five outstanding clans that make up Etche ethnic-nationality. The clans are Mba, Okehi, Ozuzu, Igbo Agwuruasa and Ulakwo Umuselem. The essence of this is for ease administration. The people of Etche speak Etche language which is one of the languages spoken in Rivers State. Etche in turn belongs to the Igbo language group of which Igbo is among (Ndimele, 2003, P. 11). The climate of the area follows a regular circle. Since it is located within the tropical rainforest of Nigeria, it rains more or less heavily from March to October and it is relatively sunny and dry from November to February. The topography is fairly uniform. It consists of a flat plain, threaded with fresh water rivers and streams. Their economic activities include, farming, fishing, hunting, palm-wine-tapping, distilling of local gin, etc (Amaele, 2000, P.1).

As regards their spiritual life, Etche people strongly believe in the existential reality of a Supreme Being to which the people refer to as Chineke (the God who created everything in the universe). Etche like other traditional African societies do not approach Him directly, rather He is approached and worshipped through the pantheon of divinities (Amadi Echezolochi, 2015, p.209).

Statement of the Problem

The place of burial rites in indigenous Etche over the years cannot be over emphasized. Burial rites as earlier pointed out, has helped to guarantee the dead smooth entrance into the blissful plane of the ancestors.

However, as important as burial rites seems to be in the religious life of Etche people, burial rites appears to have continued to escape the attention of scholars leading to a dearth of scholarship in such a significant religious practices. In consequences of this, custodians of customs and traditions of Etche appear to be phasing out in undocumented formats. Therefore, this study will document for posterity, the beliefs and practices relating to burial rites for education, information and sustainability.

Two factors motivated the researcher's interest in pursuing this study. The first, as earlier stated, was to document for posterity the beliefs and practices associated burial rites especially in this era of a rapid global change and cultural globalization and the second was to examine the role of burial rites in Etche and to see how this has helped to enhance the status of the dead in the ancestral world.

Methodology

The study was carried out as an interview- based research. Two types of oral investigation procedures were utilized viz:

- i. Reports of custodians of custom and tradition of Etche about beliefs and practices relating to burial rites.
- ii. Handed down tradition about meaning of beliefs and practices relating to burial rites.

There were certain issues that were taken into account in selecting the interviewees and some of the considerations are the position of the informant in the society, the cultural organization he/she belongs to and the position or title he/she holds, the level of the interviewees, cultural affinity, education, social exposure and so on. Those who were culturally rooted in the practices of the local community were found to be better versed in the tradition and cultural practices of the people. The study also adopted phenomenological approaches to describe and interpret the rituals relating to burial rites.

Works on Deaths and Burial Rites in Africa

The concept of death has been given different interpretation by scholars of different hues. Seeing death from the psychological perspective, Egbuchu, G. C. (2013) in Moody R. A. (1975). Captures this thus:

No doubt many people have the feeling that to talk about death at all is in effect to conjure it mentally to bring it closer in such a way that one has to face up to the inevitability of one's own eventual demise (p.17).

As he further noted, to a poor person, a murderer, suicide bomber and a reckless soldier, death is annihilation of conscious experience. The people of West African as he noted believe that man is a tripartite being consist of the soul, spirit and body. According to Egbucha, the soul is self conscious, the spirit is God's conscious while the body is world's conscious. Thus, Egbucha, quoting Pearlman M. (1937), said that "the soul is the life-giving and intelligent principle animating the human body, using the bodily senses as its agents in-exploration of materials things, and the bodily organs for its self-expression and communication with the outside world. For him, death occurs when the soul leaves the body to continue existence in any world; that is the spirit world. The body which becomes, lifeless is buried in the sand according to the west African tradition" (p.103).

In the words of Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) death is not only the end of life, but also the state of being dead (p.56.) For Awolalu and Dopanm (1979), death is only a transition; a means of passing from the world of men to the world of spirits. In addition, Awolalu and Dopamu further assert man is made of the physical tangible body and personality soul, which is the real human essence. The people believe that when death occurs, the personality soul, which is the spiritual substance, the essential personal, is separate from the physical body. The physical body decays, while the personality soul returns to the source of being from when, it comes. This belief is practically demonstrated in the importance which the West African people attach to funeral rites (p.253).

From the fore, therefore, it is obvious that the perception of West African on death conditions burial accorded to the dead. In much the same vein, the elaborate burial rites in different West African cultures also indicate a strong belief in the hereafter and also in reincarnation. With regards to burial rites, burial rites according to scholars vary and differ from one traditional African society to another. For instance, among the Ikwerre speaking Wotogbe-Weneka (2003), p. 101) observes that various elaborate death rites are performed at the instance of death. According to Weneka, there are little or significant variation in the rites. As he further noted, it depends the ages of the deceased and the nature of the death that has befallen on the one.

For him, it begins with the rites of washing and dressing of the corpse and this must be done properly before interment. In addition to this is the rites of mouth cleaning and washing which must also be performed with *kai-kai* local distilled gin; for Weneka, this is to guide not only against mouth odour and teeth decay during the next incarnation, but also it is believed that it will prevent repulsive of odour and also give the dead a sense of decency during his next rebirth or reincarnation. According to Weneka, this type of burial rites is associated with the first funeral ceremony without these ceremonies he said, the restless ghost of the deceased could return to haunt and harass his merciless relatives. As for the second traditional burial especially the aged, activities and rites as Weneka rightly stated involved the slaughtering of the cow by the first son of the deceased. Though there are other minor rites that are performed

but the top of all is the rites of slaughtering of the cow. According to Weneka, the significant of the rites, are intended to dignify the dead and make him go into ancestral plane blissfully. Similarly, Bina Odogu (2008), affirms that the second traditional burial rites among the Kabo-Ibe people are considered to be the greatest of all the rites of passage. For Odogu, prominent among some of these rites included a mock wrestling organized in honour of the deceased, where no participants is expected to throw one another, and the rites of carrying an iron bar which signifies that the deceased was a hardworking person during the time he had lived on earth. He further stated that at death, if a man who was advanced in age was not given this honour the deceased was considered not only half way to the ancestral abode but also to arrive to the ancestral world of the good departed anytime the rites was celebrated in his honour. In sum, the rites if properly performed, he adds, significantly enhanced the status of the deceased in the ancestral bliss of the good dead; but on the contrary, it weakened their status therein. In the examining section of this essay, we shall be examining the traditional burial rites in Etche.

An Analysis of Burial Rites

In Etche tradition, burial rites are organized into two phases. The first phase begins with *nchor-okwukwu* (i.e. a delegation of respected elders and traditionalists of Etche in conjunction with the deceased first son to the deceased maternal home to inform them about the demise of their son. Though, such delegation according to our informant, Amadi Livinus, requires some degree of maturity and wisdom because for Amadi, it is believed that such message cannot be delivered directly. Customarily, such message as he further intimated, is expected to be delivered thus: we have come to inform you that “your son is sick as to seek your permission to take him to hospital”, and not your son is dead. As he further explained, this rite is so significant that until it is done no further rites can be accomplished (Amadi, L. 05/ 03/ 2024, oral interview).

This is followed by *uzo-ubi*. here, the deceased first son in conjunction with some respected traditionalists and youths amid chanting funeral songs that eulogizes the deceased goes to *uzo-ubi* (access road to farmlands) with the following items: *otu-okenne-ewu* (one old female goat), *kai-kai* (locally distilled gin), *oji* (kola – nuts), *omu – nkwu* (string of palm frond), *npi* (drinking horn), *nshiegbe* (gun powder or *egbe*(den gun), and *nkikara-abo* (old locally woven basket). According to our informant, Amadi Joshua, it is the most senior person among them that is expected to perform the rituals.

First, he stoops down, next, he presents the string of palm frond, and places it on the ground, next he presents the kola, he breaks it with his fingers and throws it about the place. Next, he presents the local gin and he pours some into the *npi* and libates while he libates, the goat is slaughtered and the blood sprinkled on the string of palm frond. Next, he presents the basket, he breaks it with machet. When this is done, they proceed to the deceased farm. In the farm, he presents the den gun, next, he loads it with bullet and he released a shot into the air amid

invoking the deceased name. *Uzo-ubi*, which is the access roads to farmlands, is believed not only to be sacred, but it also symbolizes the meeting points of the spirits. Here, the essence of this rites is to appease the spirits of the deceased and to remove it from lurking around the farm so that his living kith and kin can go to the farm unmolested (Amadi, J.10/ 03/ 2024, oral interview).

Following this is *isa-ozu* (the rites of washing of the corpse). Here, the corpse is thoroughly washed with sponge and soap. According to tradition, the washing is carried out by the deceased first son and his family members. Sometimes, the corpse is washed thoroughly with local gin, soap and stream water using a wrapper, preferably George as sponge. The mouth is opened and thoroughly washed, as also are the limbs, and armpits. Equally important here is that adequate care is taken to ensure that water be allowed to drain out of the ear so that the deceased may not have ear discharge in his next incarnation. Our informant Nweke Lawrence disclosed that the washing is not only carried out without most care so that the deceased may reincarnate without body ordour (Nweke, L. 15/ 03/2024, oral interview).

In addition to this is *ijike-ozu* (the rites of attiring of the corpse). The attiring of the corpse is the exclusive preserve of the deceased first son and children (sons and daughters approved by tradition). The children take special care in attiring the corpse. Most often, the deceased is attired in its finest clothes, often reflecting his social status and professional affiliations. For instance, if he is a king, he is attired in his royal attires, if he is a priest or cult functionaries, he is dressed in his cultic accoutrements, if he is a hunter, he is attired in his hunting gab, if an accomplished person, he is further bedecked with jewelries and expensive wrappers (Njoku Fidelis, 20/ 03/2024, oral interview).

Next, is *ile-ozu* (the rites of viewing of the corpse). When the attiring is done, the corpse is expected to be brought into the chamber and laid in a beautifully decorated platform for its final public viewing. According to my informant, Ordu Martins, this elaborate preparation of the corpse for its final public appearance has direct relationship and relevance to important Etche cultural values. First, how elaborate the corpse is attired tells the crowd of sympathizers the caliber of the person the colds of hands of death has snatched away. It is also a reminder to the mourners that the deceased left behind children – sons and daughters well endowed materially to mourn their parents. Most importantly, it is of essence that the deceased be dressed to reflect his status, because it is believed that he carries some token of his position here in the material world to the world in the hereafter (Ordu, N. 25/03/2024, oral interview). In addition to this is *ikawala-ozu* (marking of the grave). Customarily, the marking of the grave is carried out by the deceased material home people. Items such as one he-goat, a keg of palm wine, kola-nuts, schnapps bottle of local gin with some plates of meat are presented to them to perform the ritual. The marking of the grave is carried out not only with utmost care but

also with every sense of respect because the exact spot where the grave will be dug is believed to be so significant, according to my informant, Nweke Longinus. First, it determines how the deceased may return to the homestead without much resistance, it becomes a veritable spot to locate the deceased and near kin frequent it, a symbol of re-enacting the bond of family tiers where the deceased near kin can communicate their hearts desires to the deceased (Nweke, L. 05/ 04/ 2024, oral interview).

This is followed by *ihondi-igwuala-ozu* (selection of the grave diggers). The selection of the grave diggers is carried out rotationally, approved by tradition. The grave diggers may be six or eight able bodied persons who are chosen from different families which must not necessarily come from the deceased family. The grave diggers as our informant, Anaele Friday, disclosed are carefully chosen because they are believed to be knowledgeable in the people's tradition and way of life; by this standard they are to see to it that the width, length and depth of the grave are taken care of if the deceased must reincarnate with his material body complete and intact (Anele, F. 10/ 04/ 2024, oral interview).

Following closely is *ili-ozu* (interment), concludes the first phase of the burial rites. It begins with *iko-he* (messages sent to the deceased) to take to his ancestors to the world in the hereafter by the deceased children – sons and daughters and relatives via the deceased first son. It is done at the grave side. There are many of these messages but the most important is that which the deceased near kin may ask the deceased to come back for the continuation of his good deeds while on earth. Thereafter, the corpse is lowered in the grave. Before it is covered with the earth, a relation of the deceased is called upon to go down into the grave and adjust the head of the deceased. According to our informant, Elemuwa Maurice, this is considered very important because should he not strengthen the head, the deceased may reincarnate deformed (Elemuwa, M. 15/ 04/ 2024, oral interview).

As for the second phase, it begins with *igba-nkitaanya* (dog killing ritual). According to tradition, the dog must be a mature male dog. The ritual takes place not only on *eke* (the first day in Etche traditional week), but also in the homestead of the deceased by 12am in the midnight, this is because it is believed to be a time when the spirits of the ancestors lurk around the homestead to have their own share of the offerings. Our informant, Nwala Boniface, said that it is the first son of the deceased (*okwara*) that the tradition approves to perform the ritual. Though the *okwara* (first son) do not do this alone but in conjunction with *Umuokorobia* (the youths and *nde okemanu* (elders) of Etche. The taboo relating this ritual is that it is forbidden for the sacrificial item however, little small to be taken to the house in order not to incur the wrath of the gods. Significantly, it is performed to make the deceased to be smart and fearless, especially if the deceased was a coward when he lived on earth.

Following closely is *ikuru-onyenwuruawumgba* (mock wrestling) organized in honour of the deceased. It takes place in the compound of the deceased. It is called a mock wrestling because no participants are expected to throw one another as to produce wrestling champions. Significantly, it is celebrated in honour of a man who was a great wrestler during his sojourn on earth (Nwala, B. 20/ 04/ 2024, oral interview). This is followed by *igba okeokpa elu* (fowl shocking ritual). In this ritual, a live fowl is tied up at the apex of a long standing bamboo stick in the homestead of the deceased. It is expected to be shot dead. Everybody is expected to participate in the shooting (old or young, head hunters or not). As tradition demands, the deceased first son is the first to shoot. Thereafter, others can begin to shoot. When the fowl is shot dead and brought down from the stick, the youths will all drag over it to remove its head with bare hands. In the end, one person is expected to pull off the head and this is complimented with the singing of traditions burial songs amid jubilating round the village. Significantly, it is celebrated in honour of a seasoned hunter who had a made feat in his hunting profession when he lived on earth.

In addition not this is *ijinnama* (the rites of taking a live cow to the market). It begins with the hoisting of *ngwogoroji*. In the compound of the deceased *ngwogoroji* is a long standing bamboo stick tied with a George wrapper. The full length of the George must be sprayed over the deceased *obiri* (hut) in order to expose its beauty for admiration. According to our informant, Amadi Peter, it has multiplicity of meanings; it signifies that the burial of a prominent man is on going in the society. It also signifies that a man of high status in the society is dead and has been accorded his last respect and entitlements by his children, wives and relations. Apart from this, the George wrapper, symbolizes a sisal rope used to tie the yams on the *ekwe* (sticks) in the barn while the bamboo itself symbolically, represents the *ekwe* (sticks (where the yams are tied in the barn. Furthermore, it is a sign that the burial of a hero had just been celebrated. It is true that this ritual begins on eke, but going by Etche tradition, it actually, begins on the eve of *nkwo* with twenty-four gunshots; it signifies that the ceremony has just begun. On the *eke* morning, the deceased first son who is adorned with George wrapper and *uwe-eze* (chieftaincy regalia), *okpu-nwagoro* (traditional red cap), and *mkpara* (walking stick) of the deceased and *mma-elekeh* (sheathed machet), to compliment with takes the cow to the market. He is accompanied by the youth, elders and respected traditionalists of the land amid chanting of traditional burial songs to eulogize the good deeds of the deceased. Also, the Ada (first daughter of the deceased is dressed same way like that of the son. She is also accompanied by *Umungboto* (daughters of the land), to the market whose roles are to sing, ululate and to pour powder on the Ada. Also, the Ada is expected to carry *egoakpara* (woven money), along with her to the market while the urlu (second daughter of the deceased) carries *igwe* (iron bar), along with her to the market. Here, another twenty-four gunshot is released to indicate that the party has gone to market while at the market, they are expected to go round the entire market singing, dancing, ululating while the Ada brandishes the woven

money she carries while dancing. When this has been accomplished, the party returns home amid singing and dancing as another twenty-four gun shot is released to signify that the party has returned from the market.

Significantly, taken a live cow to the market, for Etche people, is that it is believed that both the dead and the living come to the market, so by this it is believed that the ancestors on this day will be present; since they will come to buy and sell in the market. It also signifies that the deceased children, wife (s) have paid their debts, hence free not only from the worries of the deceased who may from time to time be demanding his burial entitlements from the spirit world but also from the societal abuse especially from those who accorded burial rites to their departed loved ones.

As for the woven money, is a symbol of wealth, it also symbolizes that the deceased was rich and wealthy when he was alive. Therefore, this has to be done to honour him for the last time. While the *ogbalaigwe* (iron bar), symbolically represents weapons of war which in turn signify that the deceased was a hero who had fought countless of inter-tribal wars during his sojourn on earth to defend his people (Amadi, P. 25/04/ 2024, oral interview).

Significantly, burial rites have helped not only to secure a permanent abode for the deceased in the ancestral world of the good departed, but also enhance his status therein.

Findings

Findings from the study reveal that:

- i. Burial rites have played a remarkable role in Etche by ensuring a continuing relationship between the deceased and his living kith and kin.
- ii. It shows the people's strong belief in the reality of life in the hereafter.
- iii. More importantly, our findings also show the people's belief in reincarnation.

Conclusion

In Etche, burial rites which are formally observed in honour of the deceased are organized into two phases. The first phase which begins with *nchor-okwukwu* (formal notification of the deceased's maternal home people about the death of their son to the time of ili-ozu interment concludes the first phase while the second phase which begins with *ipuaghia* or *ijennama-ejeaghia* also ends the second phase of the rites.

According to Etche custom and tradition, these rites are so important and that is why the Etche people take special care in handling the burial rites given to the dead to ensure that the dead enjoys smooth entrance into the ancestral world of the good dead.

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