

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NIGERIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE



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Chapter Twelve

FUNERAL/BURIAL RITES IN RURAL NIGERIA: THE CASE OF THE IBIBIO, AKWA IBOM STATE

Nseabasi Akpan

Introduction:

Before any burial is carried out, there must be death. It is after death that the body is committed to the ground for final burial. Amongst the Ibibio people, death is seen as the transition from the world of the living to the ancestral world. The main characteristic of death is that the individual soul or spirit is believed to have left the body. Thus the belief that, unless a person is buried with the due rites and ceremonies, he or she will find it very difficult to get to the ghost town of one's ancestors. The resulting effect would be for such to wander about without food, haunting the houses of human beings and bushes (especially the family he or she was born). Due to this many families often impoverish themselves for months and years in order to give a befitting burial to a deceased member.

Since death is a necessary end for all living things, death anxiety is very common amongst the Ibibio people. Most of them have tried to fight death using magic, medicine, rituals and even prayers. Almost everybody wants to live for-ever. At death, there is a change of life. As Dopamu (2006) explained,

Highlight of the Nigerian Cultural Heritage

"This change of life has made the major religious the world over, to provide expression to visions of immortality which has brought a continuation of the existence of the soul in an after life."

Due to the belief in life after death or the change in life, the IBIBIO people have developed some dimensions of looking at the soul.

- (a) At death, the soul will depart from the body (invisibly) and represents the dead person before God for judgment.
- (b) The soul is an invisible entity representing an unborn invisible baby in heaven. It is this entity that appears before God, to receive the destiny that an individual will come into the world to fulfill.
- (c) The soul animates the body of a visible human being on each and pervades it with life
- (d) That the soul takes a form of a full fledged human being. That when one has a dream of the soul of a dead person, one sees him or her in the same physical Characteristics, which he or she had always assumed when he or she was living.

Amongst most rural people, there is a belief that there is a state of existence, that every human beings attain, beyond the limits of the present mortal life spans. That there is some kind of continuation of life after death. Thus, the behaviour and practices of living people such as funeral and burial rites concept of living- dead; Veneration of the ancestors, belief in Spirits and the punishment of moral offenders. These amongst others form the basis of this paper which intends to highlight the funeral and burial rites in Ibibio land.

The Ibibio:-

Though this work does not intend to look at the history of the Ibibio, it is pertinent to say that the Ibibio as a tribe in one of the most populous in Nigeria. They are predominantly found in Akwa Ibom State, Cross River and other States of the federation. In terms of religion, they are mostly Christians. Their religion is very rich in concepts, doctrines, philosophy and practices some of which are burial rites, ancestor veneration etc.

In terms of the constituent part of Ibibio person, the whole person is called 'Idem' (body), it is the 'Idem' that 'house' other parts. This is a tangible thing of flesh and bones. With 'Idem' a person can react to his or her physical environment. When a person dies, it is the 'Idem' that is buried and allowed to perish.

Death:

According to Lily (1975) death is a personal event that man cannot desire for himself. It is a necessary end. Every human being on earth must die. And every known culture has provided some answers to the meaning of death as summarized by DOPAMU.

"People believe that life here on earth is not interminable. Sooner or later, death will come upon man, who is a sojourner on God's earth. No matter how long a person lives, death must come as a necessary end".

Types Of Death:-

There are two categories of death. Good death and bad ones. though nobody would want to die and nobody want to lose a loved one, the death of an elderly or aged person is

categorized as good death. While the death of a young and promising person is categorized as 'bad death'. The bad deaths are always attributed to 'witches and witchcraft.' Unlike the popular belief that people do not want to die, there are some people who want to die in Ibibioland. These group of people are few, aged and not quite well to do. People who believe that they have accomplished their task on earth and without torture by sickness should depart to the world peacefully. To them, there should be no anxiety over death. it is this category of death that full funeral and death rites are accorded. The custom of Ibibio people stipulates different burial/funeral rites for different kinds of death depending on the circumstances of occurrence. This is because the traditional prerequisites for burying a chief of the village, or any distinguished person of the society is quite different from a mere villager, a slave or a stranger. The burial of a pregnant woman, those with infectious diseases (AIDS) and mental sickness is different from the one mentioned above.

The burial/funeral rites differs from family to family and from region to region to the Christians for example burial could be deferred for a long time especially if he/she is financially strong. To cheek the expenses many Christian denominations have fixed burial period or time. Most have agreed on three weeks after death. For the Muslims, Ibibio Muslims), their deceased or dead are buried as soon as possible, to avoid the need for embalment. In all cases, burial/funeral rites are always observed to accord a systematic as well as genuine farewell to their departed ones.

Funeral/Burial Rites Amongst The Ibibio People:

(i) Consultations/Announcement Of Death

The death of prominent people especially title holders are not immediately announced. Such news travels by a fixed route from the bottom to the top of the hierarchy. In Ibibio land, there is an hierarchy or chain of authority which starts with the personal family and extends through group of families, villages clans etc. At each level, some one is recognized as the head of the group. In other words, Once a prominent person who had children dies, the eldest son or daughter announces the death with some gift items to the family head, who is supposed to go with him or her leader of the organization in which the deceased held membership has to be informed. Where the deceased had no children, the family will take up this responsibility. The corpse is expected only to be buried once the family completes the necessary arrangements.

(ii) Opening Of The House ('Ufok Ikpo')

As soon as death is announced, the mourning house was expected to be opened. In Ibibio customs, the house is made up of women related to the deceased ("Ndito Iban Ufok Ikpo"). If the deceased was a man, the wife or wives were expected to be mourning throughout the period. Where the wives do not mourn, they were liable to fines by the 'Ndito Iban Ufok Ikpo' (women of the mourning house). The fines are always in forms of hots, fowl and even goat depending on the gravity to the offence. The Wives were also expected to feed the women of the mourning house. The major characteristics of the mourning house is that the women are expected to wail during the period. The women are expected to dress in black clothing use black head-tic symbolizing belief and lamentation for the loss of a loved one.

(iii) Gathering Or Meeting Of Age Grade Or Group Members.

The gathering of age – grade or group members is not quite common in Ibibio customs; it is most noticed if the deceased was not a Christian or Muslim. If he was a member of Ekpo, Ekpe, Ebre and Ekong, cults, then the gathering would be necessary. It is good to say that members of these groups in collaboration with the family of the deceased arrange for the burial of their members. Here the burial is different depending on the detects of the group which the deceased belong. It is expected that they will inspect the mourning house and directs on the activities as required by the group.

(iv) Bathing And Shrouding:

In all kinds of death, the body is invariably washed and prepared before the real burial is done. While the women of the family sit around the body bending and stretching its Joints, the body is shaved, washed and shrouded. The deceased are always washed respectfully with clean and scented water. In addition the body is always anointed with perfume. As they sit around, the women will speak of the body as though it still contained the spark of life. If the deceased was a traditionalist, grains of corn or aromatic leaves are burned to ward off the evil spirit that would come around the house where corpse is kept and to remove offensive odors. The body is always wrapped in clean white cloth and put in coffins. In the olden days the corpse was wrapped in mats.

(v) Digging Of Grave

In preparation for the burial proper, the family members will chose people to dig the grave. If the deceased was a traditional title holders, Ibibio custom requires that the grave

be dug in his living room. Gift items ranging from hot drinks (Local gin), fowl, beer and even cooked foods are always preserved. Traditional rulers and title holders are not always buried in the cemetery.

(vi) **Funeral Prayers**

The deceased after bathing and shrouding is brought outside or kept in an open place for people to see for the last time. It is often referred to as "Lying in state" though this may not have any importance, it is believed that the deceased should be laid openly for people to file pass thereby according him or her that last respect. At this point, the coffin is closed and prayers would be conducted. These prayers are commonly held outdoors, in a courtyard or public square and atimes inside the Church. The community and the Church gathers and the Pastor stands in front of the deceased facing away from the worshippers. Church service is conducted and sometimes offering are gathered.

(viii) **Burial:**

The deceased is then taken to the cemetery or designated places for burial. For the traditional title holders, burial is always done in his room. For the cult members e. g Ekpo and Ekpe, burial proper is conducted by initiates.

A very important part of the burial ceremony and indeed essential among Ibibio people is the second sphere of the burial called the "second burial rite". In this case, a wake invariably takes place, the duration of which depend upon the socio-economic possession of the family concerned. Animals including cows, goats, fowls etc if these can be afforded are killed while palm wine local gin are provided for the people to drink.

But in recent times funeral and burial rites have become a thing of general concern as people now tend to display wealth in their burial setting standards for people to follow. The whole process has moved towards a direction of more involvement, more demands and 'cut throat' expenses.

The Significance of Observing Funeral /Burial Rites

Though there are some variations in funeral/burial rites amongst the Ibibio people none of such rite is better or worse than the other. They share common functions and outcomes.

These are:

- (i) Guiding the handling of the body prior to burial.
- (ii) Guiding the expression of grief and the feelings of loss
- (iii) Maintaining a connection to the dead and strengthening relationships with the living.
- (iv) Reflection of the permanence of death and the existence of an after life
- (v) Comforting the bereaved and the families.
- (vi) Helping individuals to understand the causes of death.

Guiding the Handling of the Body Prior to Burial:

Though some cultures have rigid ruled about the way in which a body should be disposed (burial cremation), burial rites guides and specify the depth at which a body should be buried. In Ibibio land, the depth of burial depends on the family's social and financial status. Such burials are always done on the ground. This is opposed to what happens amongst the ABORIGINE tribes of Australia who leave dead bodies in tree platforms until decomposition.

Guiding the Feelings of Loss:-

Funeral/Burial rites guides in the expression of grief, unlike other cultures where the bereaved lacerate their heads, legs or hands and wail loudly for many years. In Ibibio land mourning lasts for only few months.

Maintaining of Relationship with the Deceased:

Burial rites help in maintaining cordial relationship with the deceased. The belief is that the soul of the dead is still living and may witch-hunt any member of the family who show disrespect. That is why most traditionalist and chiefs are buried in their houses. This also form one of the reasons of pouring libation.

Other functions of funeral/burial rites include reflection of the permanence of death, comforting the bereaved families and helping individuals and family members to understand the causes of death.

Conclusion:

From the above explanation, people do not die in a vacuum, but within the context of cultural patterns and expectations, of the family or individuals. Thus, the events, and even the feelings associated with death can be influenced by the social preferences, beliefs and behaviors of the primary social group. For example, mourning during death reflect a culture's belief in an afterlife and its understandings of the causes of death.

It is good to say that while rites emerge from different belief systems, the actual behaviors that make up these rites can be different. These behaviors usually share common functions and outcomes, and none funeral/burial rites are better or worse than others.

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