

BURIAL RITES IN AFRICAN SOCIETY: THE IBIBIO PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

*The Ibibio view death as a transition from the visible to the invisible world, no wonder they believe that death is an unavoidable phenomenon. From the spiritual, the dead are believed to influence the living in the physical realm. The spiritual world is believed to maintain transcendental powers over the cosmological and terrestrial elements of the universe. Despite these, man has the power to manipulate the spirits and all in the world for his own good through rituals or insure the wrath of such spirits through carelessness. These views gives motivation to the Ibibio person in all he does religiously and otherwise in life including death and burial rites. This paper arrived at examining Ibibio burial rites as a rite of passage. This paper adopts a comparative approach. We have discovered that the Ibibio's people in south-south Nigeria belief in the concept of life after death, that is why they indulged in elaborate burial rites as a result of the belief that **Ekpo Akpa Enyin Ikpaha Utong** meaning, someone is physically dead, but the ears are still opened for the dead to hear. It is this belief that pushes them to observe chronological burial rites in order to secure a place for the deceased in the abode of the ancestors. Since burial cannot be conducted without death occurring, as such, this work will show the various types of burial rites in Ibibio.*

Keywords: Human Person, Death, Funeral Rites, Ibibio Worldview, Life after Death.

1. Introduction

Death is an inevitable experience that every human must pass through on earth. It is a call which humans are bound to answer; it is a road that every man has to travel back to his father. King David perfectly captured this phenomenon in the book of 1stKings 2:2 "I am about to go to the way of all earth". This refers to the time he was about to die.

Death is a necessary end to every life, since the moment anyone is born into the world; he or she is a candidate for death. As John Mbiti says, death concerns everyone; "Sooner or later everyone personally faces it And it brings loss and sorrow to every family and community". Mbiti (1970:195).

The Ibibio people generally have the perception that death is adebt to be paid by all. This belief finds expression in some Ibibio proverbs. Death is the last rite of passage (after birth, puberty and marriage). Death therefore, is regarded as transition from one state of existence to another world. In view of this, great care is taken in burying the dead, depending on the type of dead and the status of deceased.

There is a practice of second burial to ensure that no ritual element has been left out, so that danger of misfortune brought about by the displeasure of the deceased may be turned away as observed by Udoekong through personal communication, in the past, death use to be a great thing of mourning most especially during funerals. But it has been observed that in Ibibio, death and burial ceremonies are events that connotes celebrations, Offiong, (1991:23). Burial rites or funeral rites in Ibibio form an integral part of both cultural and religious practices. Therefore, since death and burial of people is a common and natural phenomena which no mortal can stop, hence this paper, Burial rites in African society: Ibibio perspective. In Ibibio, there was a belief that after death, the departed ones enter into a spiritual state of existence. They are believed to be everywhere at any time and continue to live on among the family members. The Ibibios always revered and held the Ancestors in a high esteem, they believed that after God, the ancestors is the final authority in all matters. That is why the cost of burying the death in the traditional as well as the contemporary society in Ibibio land is highly emphasized. In support of this, Okon (2015:10), asserts that “emphasis is geared towards buying the departed relation in a way to boost one’s ego, even though the bereaved might not have been able to care for the deceased that much when the former was alive. The death appears to be feared and respected more than the living”.

The Ibibio still believe that the death if nor properly settled in the world would torment the living relatives. Therefore in order to avoid this, all protocols must be carefully observed when a person dies. A befitting burial will be given in order to ensure him/her a proper settlement in the world of the dead. This is done irrespective of the capacity of the living. Ibibio also believe in the Hereafter. This hereafter is thought to be underground, probably because dead bodies are buried. The ground on which people walk is therefore the most intimate point of contact between the living dead and their human relative. That believe it is ground (grave) which hides them from the sight of their kinsmen and which effect erases their physical existence as far as human beings are concerned. It is this ground through which offering of libation and even divination enable human beings communicate with the ancestors. Therefore, family shrines for the living dead are found mostly near the spot where the family head or the oldest member of the family is buried.

Rite of Passage

People throughout the world have higher ended emotions during times of major life changes. These stressful changes may be physiological or social in nature. They are usually connected with personal transitions between important stages that occur during their lives. These transitions are generally emotionally charged, they are life crises. Most cultures consider the important transitions to be birth, puberty, marriage, life threatening illness and finally death. Baptism or confirmation into, graduation from school, divorce and retirement at the end of a work life are also major transitions in modern large scale societies.

The Belgian anthropologist Alnold Van Gennep observed that all cultures have prescribed way for an individual and society mourn the dead with these emotionally-charged situations. They have ritual ceremonies intended to mark the transition from one phase of life to another. Van Gennep called these ceremonies rites of passage.

Rites of passage in many cultures are used to mark the socially recognized transition to sexual maturity. Among some other indigenous societies of Africa, internationally painful genital

surgery has been an integral part of such rites of passage. For boys, this usually involve circumcision the removal of all or part of the foreskin of the penis, usually with a knife. For girls, genital surgery connected with rites of passage usually involved clitoridectomy (or “female circumcision”) and/or infibulations. Clitoridectomy is the cutting off of all or part of the clitoris and sometimes all or part of the labia. Infibulation is partially closing off the opening to the vagina by sewing, pinning, or clamping part of the vulva. All these rite of passage rituals were intended to be painful in order to increase the importance of the transition to adulthood.

The term “Rites of passage” was popularized by Belgian ethnographer Alnold Van Gennep (1893-1957), in the early part of the twentieth century. Rites of passage are diverse, celebrated in a wide variety of ways throughout the world. But despite their diversity, they all serve the same purpose which is to separate the individual from their former group, prepare them for their new phase of life, and their re-entry into society at this level or position. The process not only prepares the individual for a new role or phase in their life, but also may serve to bind them with others who are going through the same process.

Rites of passage are nearly universal throughout human culture, both ancient and modern. Universally preserved behaviors whether physiological traits or cultural artifacts are usually there for very important reasons. According to Gennep, rites of passage exist in order to consolidate social ties, establish roles and give members of a group a sense of purpose and placement. He said that the smaller the group, the easier it is to have cooperation and social cohesion. Consider a single family of hunter-gathers with Mom, Dad, Son, Daughter, the four people in this situation are family. Here cohesion is built-in, it is natural. There is no confusion over who does what and who listens to whom. Thus, the parents protect and provide for the youngsters, while the youngsters listen to parents. This is biological and no artifice is required. But the larger a group gets, the more it requires formalized roles, boundaries and relationships to enable the same kind of cooperation and cohesion. To maintain social cohesion and maximize survivability, hunter groups composed of not one but five, ten or twenty families who are going to have to figure out how to emulate the familial ties and bonds. It will contrive and create social connection and establish roles and statuses for the members. Hence, you cannot have everyone doing his own thing without a thought to the group, because survival will be that much more difficult. Since resources are scare-there are no guarantees, and working together improves their chance at thriving and surviving. People in the group need to feel like they belong to the group. Everyone needs a stake in a tribe, and rites of passage help provide that by establishing and formalizing the roles at various life-stages. It is well established that humans are social animals, hominids that fight and argue and bicker and laugh, cry and work together, and we feel intrinsic bonds with our family members. We cohere and co-operate, thus rites of passage and ritual makes these social ties stronger and easier to establish Sisson (2012).

Umoh (2016:35), claims that not all the rites are rites of passage. Hence, a true rite of passage portrays some basic characteristics which include change, alteration, progress, advancement and transformation in the individuals state of life and the attainment of a new status.

There are five major rites which represent and integrated initiation system that has given indigenous African cultures the stability and longevity to provide a model of consistency and

inter-generational unity. They represent a complete set of devices that prevent the inherent conflicts between various age groups or the systematic ill-treatment of women, children or elder. The five rites are birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership and ancestorship.

a. **BIRTH RITES:** This is the first of the major African initiation rites which involves initiating the infant into the world through a ritual and naming ceremony. Nearly all African culture hold from that world, and is bringing unique talents and gifts to offer to the community. The infant, is believed to have been commissioned to come to the world and accomplish a particular mission or project, and often has a great message to deliver. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the family and community to discover the infants' unique mission through consultations with a diviner and to have rituals and a birth chart done: This is done in order to clearly determine the new community member's mission in order to guide him or her through their life path. The infant name is given after the determination of mission and it is a reflection of the infant's personality or the mission itself.

b. **INITIATION INTO ADULTHOOD:** Adulthood rites are usually done at the onset of puberty age (around 12-13 years of age) and they are to ensure the shaping of productive, community-oriented responsible adults.

African societies systematically initiate boys and girls. They often take the young initiates out of the community, and away from the concerns of everyday life, to teach them all the ways of adulthood which includes the rules and taboos of the society, moral instruction and social responsibilities and further clarification of his/her mission or calling in life.

c. **MARRIAGE:** This is the third major initiation rite which represents not only the joining of two families, but also the joining of the two missions of the new couple. That is to say, marriage rites are performed not only for the coming together male and female to procreate and perpetuate life and the coming together of families rather it is also an institution that helps both the husband and later wife to best fulfill their mission and objectives in life.

The Ibibio society does not emphasize individual looks and lust as the primary motivation for marriage, rather the basic focus is on building families and comities. Thus the focus is on collective more than the individual. Also a person is not generally considered an adult until they have married and had children.

d. **RITE OF ELDERSHIP:** This is the fourth and important component of the initiation system, because it is the elders who represent tradition and the wisdom of the past. In Ibibio as in other African cultures, there is a fundamental distinction that has to be made between an "Elder" and "Older" person. An older person has simply lived a longer life than most of the people, but he is not considered one who deserves high praise and respect. This is because the older person's life has not been a positive example for community. An older person could be a thief or drunkard, and evil person, or could be someone who never married and had children, and thus these examples would prevent a person from being considered a respected elder.

An elder is someone who is given the highest status among the Ibibios because he or she has lived a life of purpose, and there is nothing more respected than living a purposeful life. The life of the elder is centered in the best tradition of the community and is someone who has gone through all the previous three rites, and is a living model for the other groups in the society to emulate. They are given the highest status and along with new

born infants because these two groups represent the closest links to the wisdom of the spirit world.

- e. **RITE OF ANCESTORSHIP:** The last of the five major rites is the rite of ancestor ship which concern passing over into the spirit world. This final initiation rite is an extension of the elder/older distinction because the status that a person has in life is the same status that they will have when they pass on there. There is no African society that believes that when a person dies this ends all ties and communication with the living, Rather, African philosophy from one culture to another agrees that the spirit of the deceased is still with the living community, and that a distinction must be made in the status of the various spirits, as there are distinctions made in the status of the living.

One of such distinctions is the differences between an older person and an elder. A respected elder who passes on is revered as an honor “ancestor”. The dead relative who dies without honour is not remembered as a great person or someone who should be followed or emulated. On the other hand, a respected elder who passes on becomes a respected ancestor and is given the highest honor. These groups of ancestor wield great power and are often called upon in matters of troubles or uncertainty to help influence a favorable outcome. Thus, ancestors are respected elders who have passed away and who continue to serve as an extension of the family and community. [www.mamuampin.com/africaninitiationrites.htm\(2022\)](http://www.mamuampin.com/africaninitiationrites.htm(2022)).

In addition, Umoh (2015:91) holds that every rite of passage betrays there distinction but interrelated phases”. These according to him include separation, marginality and re-incorporation.

SEPARATION: By separation, he meant that the initiate would be removed from the normal social life, and he has to dissolve all bonds of relationship and his social status. Separation means a rapture with the part and with all the features that concern the initiate’s old personality. It is a burst or social breach that occurs in the physical, religious, psychological and social levels. Physically; it helps to withdraw the initiate from his or her usual social surrounding and normal way of life. Psychologically; it gives extra weight to the occasion and make the initiate to be brave and fearless in time of danger as he was trained under hard conditions, torture, authentic fear, and death. According to Eliade (1959) quoted in Umoh (2015:91), death here symbolized the return of the initiate into the cosmic might in order to be created a new or regenerated.

MARGINALITY: This is a stage where the novice stands in a position that is directly opposites some other proposition. This stage established the mid-flow between what has been lost already and what is yet to be achieved. At this point, the novices sits on the fence, they are neither here nor there, they are belonging to nowhere, they are nobody and nothing or everybody and everything, they stand in an opposite direction, they are peerless, unique and famous, not touched by the norms of the society, they are neither children nor adults, male nor female, humans nor spirits and they may be both or neither. This is a moment of malformation which is very crucial as the initiate is made to ignore a factor which observes the reality and get ready to become something new thought not yet Umoh (2015:91-92).

In support of this, an English anthropologist, Mary Douglas as cited in Umoh opines that at the marginal stage, the novices finds themselves at the betwixt –and between which are likely

to be both polluted and polluting This is a condition which the Ibibios calls 'unaubeng and yengyeng' respectively which means formless, directionless, aimless or faceless. Thus, they are in the process of rebirth, remaking and recreation. In fact, this is the stage of isolement where the physical and social invisibility was included and this puts the novices in state of imprecision and self contradictory (Umoh, 2015:92).

REINCORPORATION: This is the final stage of initiation. This stage is otherwise known as aggregation according to Umoh, which means the act of collecting together in union a group of distinct person. After the foregone stages, comes the reincorporation; which means that without separation and marginality, there is no reincorporation and without death there could be no resurrection. In confirmation, Mbiti (1970), pose that the rebirth, that is the initiate going back to their families, is a means of expression that the young people are now new, with new personalities after shading of the old one. This emphasizes that they are qualified and legally recognized men and women, ready to be independent as father and mothers and defend their country as brave people. The return of the initiates after the rituals represents an experience of resurrection meaning that the death is over, the seclusion is ended, and now the initiates rejoins their families and their community as fresh, glorified, full fledged, new human being, fully accepted and respected for who and what they are which is the dawn of the new creation (Umoh, 2015:92).

Bloch (1992:36), made a significant contribution to rites of passage in his theory of Rebounding Conquest or Rebounding violence. He describes the ordering fact of life in terms of people being born, maturing and then dying. Through ritual form human cultures take living people and in a symbolic sense cause them to "die" and be "reborn" as new kinds of individuals, shedding old used-up selves so that new one can take their place. Not only are they given a new status but they will also have experienced inner changes in their sense of identity. Many rituals of initiation in religious as well as in some secret societies use natural idioms of birth and idioms of birth and death but reverse them to speak of death and birth. It is also through the ordinariness of human nature is "killed" and a new and higher nature is bestowed. In some religious traditions this scheme of rebounding conquest can be applied to death rites when physical death is said to be basis for a new and spiritual life either in future transmigration of the soul or in some form of resurrection.

Burial Rite for Members of Socio-Religious Societies

1. Burial Rite for Members of Ekpe Society

Ekpe cult is one of the traditional societies in Ibibio society. It is a society for the wealthy; therefore all the recognized chiefs of the community were members of *Ekpe* cult. Traditionally, the function of this cult was to promulgate and enforced laws, protect the property of the community and judge important cases in the community. The invitation into *Ekpe* society was expensive due to its various grades the initiates must pass through. If the initiate had enough money, he might reach the highest stage of membership at once, but if not he could do that in stages. In *Ekpe* cult, member distinguished themselves by wearing peacock feather in their corp. At the death of a member, ritual items includes the following: "*UsangUkangItiaba*", Seven big balls of "*fufu*", seven big tubers of yam, three cocks, a jar of illicit gin, a stick of dry fish, and a bag of cray-fish.

The burial ceremony usually lasted for at least seven days, and the families must entertain all visitors and relatives who would be mourning with them throughout that period.

The Burial Rite of an Ekong Member

When a member of *Ekong* society dies, he is buried within twenty four hours as the *Ibibio* had no tradition of embalming dead bodies. The corpse is washed, rubbed with camwood and dressed. It is then placed in *Mupa Odung* (the traditional coffin artfully and beautifully made from young raffia leaves). As an *Ekong* member, he is placed in this beautiful coffin with his right arm stretched up at right angle to the body. This position is called "*Udipe Ubok Udom*" (raising the right hand) symbolically, the deceased points its way back to life by way of reincarnation. Then the coffin and its content is buried in a grave dug in the deceased bedroom or sitting room, along with life slaves, wives or their heads. Before covering the grave, the ritual called "*EbotObom*" must be observed. This is done by creating a hole on the central beam of the roof (*Obom Ufok*) directly over the deceased sitting room. Someone at the top will pull a rope to which had been tied a goat that has been beaten to death. The dead goat at the top would be left to roll down to the ground. Then the "*Obodom Ekong*" (A big wooden gong used to communicate message to members of this cult) would be sounded. This would be the second sounding in twenty four hours. The first sounding was to notify the members that one of them had died. This will bring all those concerned to the deceased's house. Then the second sounding as soon as the "*Ebot Obom*" has touched the ground sends the message out that the first part of the burial has been concluded successfully.

At second burial though the real corpse had been buried months back, according to Ekong (1983:40), something which look like a corpse is constructed and placed in a sitting position on a chair, placed as its footstool is a slaughtered goat while "*Ekere*" (a metal gong) is fixed to its left hand, on the right hand the "corpse" holds a gong beater and to the wrist is suspended a life cock. The construction is done in such a way that as the cock flaps its wings, the gong beater hits the gong, giving the impression that the "corpse" is hitting the "*Ekere*". *Ekong* went on to say that, as this happens, "*Ndito Iban*" (female daughters of the family) will be giving shouts of joy, recounting the achievements of the dead man and generally praising him. After this, members of the society will place the "deceased" in a new coffin. What really happens is that construction will be dismantled and a trunk of plantain will be placed in the coffin and buried somewhere outside in the deceased compound amidst booming of den guns and shouts from "*Ndito Iban*".

It is also to say that when the actual burial of *Ekong* person is done, the head is placed on to face the road or the entrance to the compound which the feet faces the home, whereas the ordinary man is buried with the feet facing the road or entrance of the compound. This reaffirms their continuing relationship with the living. Also, the "*Nwomo*" of an *Ekong* member was a triangle instead of rectangular one. "*Nwomo*" is a small hut or house erected on the grave of someone as his house in the spirit world. *Nwomo* of an *Ekong* members was always expensive and beautifully decorated with things belonging like war heads, machet, climbing robes, paddles, plates, spoons etc. "*Nwomo*" was done in every *Ibibio* leap year and was done properly with the sacrifice of a big red cock.

Burial Rites of an Ekpo Society (Member)

Unon (2015:31), opines that the burial of a member of Ekpo society is similar in ritual and expenditure to that of *Ekong*, as the deceased is buried as soon as he dies by members of his society within twenty four hours. Since all arrangements were to put in place with the speed of lightening, in order to performed the traditional burial rites, all the masquerades would congregate themselves urgently in the deceased compound and immediately start their performance. Burial in Ibibio, is not the concern of only the deceased family, as the whole, community is obliged to participate. Therefore all the women in each housed-hold would come out with cooked food (*Nteem*) to the deceased family in order to entertain their visitors. They can also offer money to the family members. For instance the man will give to the male relatives while the woman to the wives and or the daughters of the deceased. Thereafter, the arrangement for second buried would be made.

When the death was publicly announced, distant relations would be invited, the ceremony was always fixed bearing in mind the various market days that *Ekpo* would go to the market. The celebration take weeks or months depending on the wealth of that family, but the main feature are that the various type of *Ekpo* masquerade would be on display. A night will be set aside for *Asong Ekpo* (a special kind of musical display by *Ekpo* group), a night during which *Ekpo* will parade the whole community. In order to minimize the destruction of economic crops and trees, members of the deceased family had to meet with the *Ekpo* leaders and give certain items ranging from goats, yams, chicken, local gin and palm wine, this is called "*Ukok Udek Ikwa*" (preventing the knife blade from cutting anyone or any plant). If the deceased was a wicked person, if he had been cutting down peoples crops on occasion of like manner, then the occasion was an opportunity to pay back. The destruction would start from cocoyam to raffia palm tree. After the *Osom Ekpo*, a day is fixed that the *Ekpo* masquerades will go to the market with *Ndito Iban*. This claims that the women normally do not get close to *Ekpo* masquerades, but a burial cuts across every boundaries of hatred, the two groups would be friendly. Before going to the market, a temporary stage would be constructed in the deceased compound, this temporary stage is called *Okom Ikpe*. It is for a particular type of *Ekpo* masquerade who are always beautifully dressed-*Ikpe Ekpo*. They would dance on the stage for some time and before coming down, each of them would behead a goat and take the head to the market. The goats would be provided by the members of the deceased family. After all these, all the grades of *Ekpo* would parade to the market and there will be various kinds of display, amidst gun shots and shouts of joy. After all this display, beautiful *Nwomo* with a rectangular shape would be constructed at the grave of the deceased it is believed that after the "*Nwomo*" has been erected the deceased has assumed a proper settlement in the land of the spirit.

Burial Rite for a Member of Ebre Society

This society is mainly for women of good character or repute; mothers of twins are not eligible into membership. They are sometimes called "*Iban Isong*" (women of the land). At death, the corpse would be washed with cold or warm water, the body robbed with camwood, the face with pancake with Uto (a native powder), it was then robbed with its best clothes and tied up in a mat and buried. A woman according to Ekong (1983:41), was given a smaller "*Nwomo*" with flat roof under which are placed her cooking and water pots, cups, market basket, raffia filter (*Nkiken Abak*) and so forth.

It is generally believed that after elaborate burial ceremonies and the erection of the “*Nwomo*” which has its own accompanying festivities, the surviving children of the deceased had very little or no personal effects left to inherit except a few immovable assets like landed property. Since the dead are believed to have a life which is not too different from the one led by the living, they require and have need of those items with which they had their while on earth.

Conclusion

The Ibibio people believed in the concept of life after death that was why they indulged in elaborate burial rites as a result of the belief that *Ekpo Akpa Eyin Ikpana Utong* meaning, though a person is dead, he is still aware of everything that is going on in the physical world. It is this belief that pushes them to embark on chronological burial rites in order to give their dead relation a status in the spiritual world. Equally, the dead will not be given a place among the ancestors if they fail to give them a befitting burial. According to this belief, failure to give their dead relation a befitting burial rite will bring calamity upon the living.

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