

## A STUDY ON DEATH AND FUNERAL RITUALS IN IBIBIO: THE EXAMPLE OF IKOT EKPEYAK IKONO

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on death and funeral rites in Ibibio. It seeks to explore the various rites performed for the dead in Ibibioland before, during and after interment. The researchers adopted participant observation and ethnographic method of research for the study. Findings show that among the Ibibio, there are numerous rites performed for the dead basically because of the people's belief in life after death. The paper concludes that the value of funeral rites to the Ibibio can not be overemphasized. The study is recommended to students and teachers of African Traditional Religion and the reading public. It promises a useful companion indeed.*

**Keywords: Study, Death, Funeral, Rituals, Ibibio.**

### Introduction

As the title suggests, the scope of this work is limited to Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono – the first author's hometown – in Uyo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The aforementioned community is part of Ibibioland. The inhabitants are predominantly oil palm farmers.

Among the Ibibio generally, when a person dies, he is not always buried in a hurry like a chicken, except in rare cases, such as if the person died as a mentally sick person roaming the street, shot death, burnt to death, beaten to death for stealing, drowned or died any other type of death considered unnatural and bad to the people.

Burials are usually planned in Ibibio over time in series of meetings by members of the bereaved family, especially if the deceased had lived up to a ripe old age and has children; for it is usually children that bury their parents, not the other way round; hence in burial meetings, the bereaved children are usually the conveners along with other close members of the extended family such as uncles, if they are still alive.

A lot of attention is given to burial rites in Ibibio to the extent that none of these rites can be disregarded by an act of omission or commission. This presupposes that burial rites among the Ibibio are very significant.

What is death and what constitutes burial rites in Ibibio? This shall be discussed subsequently. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (2000:478), rite is simply defined as a ritual. Akpan (2017:180) defines ritual as a religious ceremony involving a set series of actions. This similarity between rites and rituals accounts for the use of the two words interchangeably in this research.

### **Who are the Ibibio?**

The Ibibio are coastal people in southern Nigeria. They are mostly found in Akwa Ibom State, Cross River State and in the eastern part of Abia State. They are related to the Annang, Oron and Efik people. During the colonial period in Nigeria, the Ibibio Union asked for recognition by the British as a sovereign nation (Noah, 1988). The Annang, Efik, Ekid, Oron and Ibeno share personal names, culture and traditions with the Ibibio and speak closely related varieties of Ibibio-Efik language (Noah, 1988:115).

The Ibibio people are noted to be the earliest inhabitants of south-eastern Nigeria (Noah, 1988:115; Akpan, 2016:80). It is estimated that they arrived at the present location from very earliest time, about 700 BC (Essien, 1990:20). In spite of the historical account, it is not clear when the people known as the Ibibio arrived Akwa Ibom State. According to some scholars, they may have come from the central Benue valley, particularly the Jukun influence in the old Calabar at some historical period. Another pointer is the widespread use of the manila by the Ibibio, a popular currency also used by the Jukun (Okon, 1984:69; Akpan, 2019:82). Coupled with this is the Jukun southern drive to the coast which appears to have been recently compared with the formation of Akwa Ibom settlements in their present location (Noah, 1988:115).

Another theory with regards to the origin of the Ibibio is closely related to the Cameroonians. This theory offers a more concise explanation of the Ibibio migration story. The theory is corroborated by oral testimonies of field workers who say that the core Ibibio people were of the Afaha lineage whose original home was Usak Edet (actually a French word *Isangele*) in the Republic of Cameroon. The Ibibio settlement of *Isangele* now forms a small tribe in the Kumba division of Cameroon (Noah, 1988:115). Upon leaving the Cameroon territory, the Ibibio arrived at their present location following two major directions. Probably at about 800 BC one group reached Nigeria by an overland route and settled at Arochuku. This group erected the famous shrine now known as "Long Juju of Arochukwu". From Arochuku, some of the people spread to Abak, Uyo, Ikot Ekpene and other areas of the mainland of Cross River State. Other groups of the Ibibio are said to have come to the mainland by sea. These groups include the Uruan, Oron, Eket and Ibeno people. The split of the sub-group (now called Efik) from their kinfolk – the Uruan – seems to have started around the sixteenth century AD (Offiong, 1983:95).

Talbot, who for many years conducted anthropological research among the Ibibio, suggests that the Efik started to claim separate identity from the Ibibio around 1600 AD. He writes: "Soon afterwards, a section of the Ibibio (Uruan), expelled either by the on-coming of the Igbo

or in consequence of a defeat at the hands of a town of their own tribe, migrated to old Efik town near Ikoneto” (Talbot, 1969:85). Shortly afterwards, a greater number of the Uruan people moved again, some to Mbiabo and Adiabo and others to Creek Town, all in the present day Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross River State. The final settlement of this set of the Ibibio people seems to have occurred in 1670. At about this time, some of the Ibibio chiefs from Creek Town who were cut off from their kin at Obutong by European traders, moved to a new location now called Duke Town. This is about four kilometers south of Obutong, a strategic area just across the anchorage of the European trading ships (Talbot, 1969:86).

### **The Concept of Death in Traditional Ibibio**

Traditional African people believe that men and women’s lives have their turning points which are usually welcome with religious ceremonies and rituals. Worthy of note is that one of such turning points is death.

Many traditional African people believe that life here on earth is not interminable. They hold the view that sooner or later, the inevitable phenomenon called death will come upon man, who only is a sojourner on God’s planet earth. Thus, no matter how long a person lives on earth, death must come as a necessary end.

However, for the traditional Ibibio, death is not an end to life but rather a transition. It is a means of passing from the world of men to the world of spirits. Ekanem (2015:8) corroborates this when he opines that death is a transitory stage that opens up the body to another birth and mode of existence. He notes that death is not an extinction of a person but rather an extension of the dead to the ancestral world. Ekeopara(2007:24) also corroborates this when he says that:

For the African, death is one of the cycles of life which begins with the birth of an individual. It is seen as a necessary event in the life of a man. Just as birth signals or initiates the joy of life, death intervenes to terminate life. Africans conceive death to be a transition and not the end of life, hence the elaborate ceremonies accorded the dead. Without death, concepts like ancestors and reincarnation will have no place in traditional African societies.

Man is made up of the physical-tangible body and the personality-soul, which is the real human essence. It is believed that when death occurs, the personality-soul, which is the spiritual substance (the essential person) is separated from the physical body. The physical body decays, while the personality-soul returns to the source of Being. This belief underscores the importance Africans attach to funeral rituals. For if everything ends with the passing away of the physical body, Africans would not bother to engage themselves in elaborate funeral rites. It would have been enough to enjoy as much of the physical life as possible, doing whatever one thinks will suit his or her selfish desires without adequate consideration for the discomfort of other people. But since Africans know that death only brings a change of life, and that at death, man passes from this physical world into a new type of life where the conduct of man in the physical world will be judged, the people then prepare themselves for this final end (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:45). Ekeopara also supports this when he opines that, “for the African, death has meaning in life for the concept of hereafter – a continuous existence in the spiritual world; hence elaborate and adequate funeral rites and rituals are observed for the dead”.

These funeral rites serve triple purposes, namely: separation, transition and reincorporation (Udo,1983:12; Akpan and Eton, 2022:95). Separation in the sense that the dead is separated from the living members of his family physically; transition in the sense that the rites help to facilitate his journey from the physical world to the spiritual world; and finally, they help to facilitate the admission of the deceased into the spiritworld. Hence the belief that when a person dies, his spirit hovers around the compound waiting for the rites of passage to be performed to facilitate his or her journey to the spiritworld. It is believed that if the rites of passage are not performed during the funeral ceremony of the deceased, this may hinder the acceptance of the spirit of the dead in the spiritworld. Therefore, for the traditional Africans, death does not sever the union between the dead and his kith and kin, hence the people's belief in ancestors (the living-dead) and reincarnation (Ekeopara, 2007:24).

### **Types of Deaths in Traditional Ibibio**

There are categories of deaths in traditional Ibibio, namely: the good and bad deaths. Those who die bad death are not accorded full burial rites. For instance, when a child dies, the parents and other relatives lament such death and dispose of the corpse as quickly as possible since it is a bad death. Death caused by anti-wickedness divinities like *Abuma* (thunder divinity) and smallpox are regarded as bad deaths. Such deaths are regarded as capital punishment from the deities, and must not be mourned. The deceased are often buried with purificatory and expiatory rites to appease the divinities responsible for their deaths. Other types of bad deaths include those who die of leprosy, those who die of accident, like falling from a palm tree, women who die in childbirth or fattening room, death of a lunatic, death by suicide, those who have been murdered, drowned or burnt to death, etc. People who die this type of deaths are not usually given formal burial rites, but are buried without delay by specialists or traditional priests with appropriate sacrifice.

The burial of a person who died a bad death is not attended by everyone, but by specialists who are knowledgeable in the required rituals such death requires. For example, among the Yoruba, a person killed by Sango, thunder divinity, is buried by the *Mogba*, the priest of Sango, at the spot where the deceased was struck dead, or in the "evil forest"; and his belongings must not be used by anybody unless the oracle directs otherwise. The same thing happens to the belongings of the victims of Sanponna (the god of smallpox) and Iyelala (anti-wickedness goddess and guardian of social morality) (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:78). It is also believed that those who die bad death cannot join their ancestors, neither can they reincarnate. People do not give them much thought, and they are not discussed beyond the need to dispose of their corpse as quickly as possible. That is why such people do not enjoy the attention given to the ancestors; they are not remembered, neither do they erect ancestral shrines in their honour (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:79). Here is what Ekeopara (2007:80) has to say about bad death:

Bad death includes those of children between the ages of one and fourteen, those in their teens; all these are regarded as premature death and are attended with little or no funeral ceremonies at all. Death by suicide is regarded as a bad death. This is based on the African belief in the sanctity of human life; for it is against the traditional norm that one should take his own life. Life belongs to the Supreme Being, the author of life. Those who also die by poisoning (either by themselves or others) are considered to have died badly, and in the past, they were not buried but were thrown into the "evil forest" to decay; and as such, they were denied burial ceremony. Death by thunder is

another bad death. Death by drowning in a river or by falling from a palm tree is also regarded as bad death among Africans. All these forms of death are attended with little or no burial ceremonies.

Similarly, Okon (2015:56) notes that:

Death is considered bad and a problem if one dies prematurely by any form of accident anytime anywhere. Death by accident, suicide, leprosy, smallpox, epilepsy, etc., are generally regarded as bad death. Then the living begins to ask the question “why”? This is because those who die such deaths are not usually given full burial rites and cannot be considered as ancestors. This often leads to various consultations with the diviners because it is considered abnormal, unexpected, unjust and carries with it deep and long-lasting emotional consequences. It is generally attributed to either the anger of the gods, the wickedness of members of the witchcraft society or the malicious act of some open or secret foes, performed through the subtle and mystical arts of magic. Hence, whenever such tragic event occurs, the cause must be sought for possible appeasement of the gods, punishment of the perpetrator of such mischievous act and the removal of the curse brought about by such death before the deceased is buried to avoid future reoccurrence.

On the other hand, good death is such death that occurs when one lives to a ripe old age. Although death is often regarded as uncanny and disturbing by many people, the death of the aged is an occasion for rejoicing, and ritual elaboration is heaviest at their funerals since people see nothing tragic about it. Also, there are occasions when the death of a young man or woman is not considered totally bad. Such a person must have lived an exemplary good life and must have left behind some children. It is believed that the spirits of such dead ones will have a good place in the abode of the spirits. Although they are mourned, yet they are accorded befitting burial with appropriate rites or rituals. Ekeopara(2007:80) corroborates this:

Those who die good death are the ones who are accorded full burial rites. Such death is when one dies at ripe old age, having lived what the society considers to be good and fulfilled life on earth. The death of a middle-aged man or woman may also be regarded as a good death if the deceased had lived a life of fulfilment by societal standard. The deceased may or not have left behind offspring. Death like this, though regrettable, could also be regarded as a good death.

Okon (2015:56) in his opinion, notes that:

Death is viewed as good when one dies at ripe old age, that is, from eighty years and above, leaving behind many offspring and other cherished footprints on the sands of time. African Traditional Religion agrees that only such people are promoted to the rank of ancestors in any given society including the Ibibio.

Many traditional African people basically believe that the death of a person, young or old, must have a cause, or must have been brought about in one way or the other by some evil forces, such as witchcraft and sorcery. These two agencies are often regarded by Africans as the major cause of untimely death. That is why when a person dies untimely in the traditional society, his relations try to find out the cause through a diviner.

The oracle may reveal that the deceased had broken a taboo or swore falsely, or that he had neglected a divinity or ancestor, or committed a grievous sin resulting in

abomination. In some cases, the divinity responsible for the death may be apparent. Among the Yoruba, if the deceased was struck dead by thunder, smallpox, or die by motor accident, people may conclude that Sango (the god of thunder), or Sanponna (the god of smallpox) or Ogun (the god of iron) is responsible for such death (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:18).

Ekeopara (2007:65) lays his weight behind this idea when he observes that:

There is no smoke without fire. Africans' belief is that every death has a cause, especially if it is a bad one. Generally, in Africa, apart from the death of infants, which may be attributed to the capricious gods or spirits, in many other cases of untimely death, witches and wizards are held responsible, or the deceased may have committed one form of sin or the other against the deities, the ancestors and man. In this case, such death is seen as punishment for violating the harmony between the spirits and man. Africans have no place for accidental death as it is in Western concept of death. All the bad deaths are justified in one way or the other as the case may be. But in all, no burial rituals are accorded to those who die bad death. The only rituals that are performed are aimed at cleansing the society of their sins as such sins affect the harmony of the society negatively. In other words, the sin of one man can affect the entire community. Hence cleansing rituals are performed to remove them and restore social harmony and balance in the society. This is the principle of collective responsibility.

There is also natural death. This may come by reason of old age. The deceased may have passed away after a brief illness. But when an old person dies of an inexplicable disease or a prolonged illness, people still ascertain whether or not the death is due to some human evil machination (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:43). Okon (2015:12) has a slightly different opinion with regard to natural death. According to him, in traditional African societies, every death is traceable to a cause; because to the people, there is no natural death.

There are times when old people really know that their death is imminent. They usually send for their sons, daughters and relatives who are not at home to come back home. The wishes of a dying old man are usually taken seriously. The dying old man would give advice to his children, telling them what they ought to do and what they must not do, where they should bury him and the type of funeral arrangement he desires. He may also make known his creditors, the amount involved, the names of his debtors, where he keeps his money, and shares his wealth among his children. He would bless the children, talk about those who had passed on before him as if they are already together. He would get prepared to take his last breath. Although it is a well-known fact that the man is old enough to die, these last wishes usually bring tears. On the other hand, the children would be happy that their father is dying a good death and going *home* to rest.

On the whole, it is those who die good death that are given impressive burial ceremonies. That is why in Ibibio traditional society, everyone strives to live a good moral life and die a good death, which entitles one to a formal burial; they avoid bad death which will not only deprive them of full burial rites, but also deny them a good place in the company of the blessed departed.

That death is not the final end of man and does not write *finis* to the life of a man, but rather a transition from the physical world to the spiritual world; and that the deceased is only undertaking a journey from this earth to another region unseen, is evident in the funeral arrangements and burial rites accorded the dead in many African societies (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:65).

### **Funeral Rites in Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono**

In their opinion from a focused group discussion, Unwana Sampson, Bassey Etim, Inemesit Eyo and Ifiok Sandy (personal communication, August 12, 2022) observe that among their people – the people of Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono – if a man or woman dies, especially from the middle-age upward, the deceased would not be buried immediately but would be taken to the morgue unless he or she had spoken otherwise. The deceased could also be embalmed at home, but a mortician would be hired to preserve the corpse. If the corpse is taken to the mortuary, according to Ejoman mortuary attendant, a mortuary located within the community, the following items would be required: ten thousand naira (N10,000) initial deposit, five hundred naira (N500) fee per day, five thousand naira (N5000) fee to dress the deceased on the burial day, a bottle of hot drink, a crate of beer, a crate of mineral, powder, perfume, toilet tissue and lux soap (Unwana Sampson, personal communication, August 12, 2022).

News of the demise would go round the village verbally. Adequate preparation would be made by the deceased family for the burial. This may involve series of meetings during which funds would be raised by participants to support the immediate family for the burial.

Requirements for the burial would be itemized in the meetings. If the amount estimated for the burial cannot be raised by the family, suggestion will be made for the sale of the deceased asset(s) to raise funds for the burial. When the family procures all the items needed for the burial or is sure to provide them successfully, the burial date will be fixed.

Two days before the event, *atayad* (a booth) would be built with palm leaves in the deceased compound. The following items would be provided by the family: *otuukordked* (a keg of palm wine), *ekpemeuforforbked* (a bottle of local gin), *unenked* (one fowl) *yeekpadudiaked* (and one tuber of yam). Programme for the obsequies containing photographs, a brief history of birth, education, social and religious life of the deceased would have been prepared colourfully. Arrangement for casket, canopies, chairs, public address system and music would have also been made. The grave is dug early on the D-day. A bottle of local gin is required for libation to intimate the ancestors—the owners of the land – before excavating the grave. The same items required for building the *atayad* plus a toll, ranging from two to five thousand naira (N2000-5000) would be required by the excavators (Ezekiel Okokon, personal communication, August 12, 2022).

On the burial day, the family members may be clad in their chosen uniform. As soon as the corpse arrives the compound from the mortuary, it is received by the chief-mourner with a bottle of hot drink. This is usually accompanied with wailings if it is a young person that died. After the interment, guests, friends and sympathizers are expected to be served with foods and drinks. Two days after the burial, the same items required for erecting the *atayad* would also be provided by the family for the demolition of the structure.

Tombstone would be erected in memory of the deceased if the family can afford to do so immediately; otherwise it may be done on a later date. What is trendy these days is a small tombstone like the size of a book. It is called *passport*, against the big tomb stones used decades ago. The former costs five thousand naira (N5000) and beyond. To erect it, one tuber of yam, one fowl, one bottle of local gin and one thousand naira (N1000) workmanship fee would be required (Akpan, 2016:65; Akpan, 2014:24). However, all the five respondents expressed mild dissatisfaction over the numerous rites performed for the dead in the community due to the cost implication.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is clear that the people of Ikot Ekpeya kIkono, like other Ibibio people, believe in the existence of life-after-death, hence the various rites they performed for the dead. Although burial rites are basically the same in Ibibioland, however, they are a few differences from one locality to another.

It must be noted that culture is dynamic; no culture is static. Funeral rites in Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono in particular and Ibibioland in general keep evolving. It is only a matter of time for some of the rites to fizzle out as it is perhaps due to societal pressure and fear of the unknown that a number of persons give into the demands of all these rites. Worthy of note also is that information used for this work was mainly derived from primary sources; hence the study is a great contribution to knowledge in understanding funeral rites in Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono; it is probably the first of its kind.

### **Recommendations**

- i. Some of the burial rites mentioned above should be written off as they pose huge financial burden to the bereaved family.
- ii. Embalment should not be done for too long as it presents serious financial concern to the bereaved family.
- iii. Selling off assets to raise money for burial should be frowned at.
- iv. Burial should be done based on the resources at hand. The children would need something to fall back on after the burial, especially if the deceased was the bread winner. Therefore, in attempting to give our loved ones a befitting burial, we should be cautious.

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S/N	NAME	AGE	OCCUPATION	PLACE	DATE
1.	Unwana Sampson	55 years	Mortuary Staff	Uyo	12/8/2022
2.	Ezekiel Okokon	40 years	Bricklayer	Uyo	12/8/2022
3.	Ifiok Sandy	47 years	Trader	Uyo	12/8/2022
4.	InemesitEyo	50 years	Public Service	Uyo	12/8/2022
5.	BasseyEtim	60 years	Farmer	Uyo	12/8/2022