

Death and Burial in Nnentu Ngwa: Theatre in Burial Dirges and Rituals

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Abstract

Death is inevitable and a sure reality for the living. Its reality mystifies the essence of life itself. Hence, the knowledge of what happens to the dead is limited to a living man. For it is often said that no man has died and returned to the same flesh and place. Death therefore is the end of man's consciousness. But the beauty of it all is that everything dwells in dual opposite; while life is lived in consciousness, death is a termination of that consciousness. Between the living and the dead is a continuous effort to commune with each other through such mediums as dreams and invocations. The Igbo of the South East Nigeria believe in their ancestors and their protective guidance in the affairs of man. This belief is established and strengthened through such elements as songs, dance, invocations and rituals which are the primary ingredients of theatre. This paper examines the dirges and rituals in burial rites of the people of Nnentu Ngwa. Using a socio-cultural performance analysis, the paper discovers that there are various kinds of deaths such as *Onwu oma* (good death) and *Onwu ojoo* (bad death); each has its manner of burial and attracts different kinds of dirges and rituals. The paper concludes that dirges, dances, invocations at funerals are sources of consolation to the bereaved, enlightenment and spectacular entertainment to the mourners as well.

Introduction

The Igbo belief is that man is totally different from the other anthropoids, because he is material and partly immaterial, which means that man is both physical and spiritual being. Man as a living being in his biological nature bears the blood which is the link between man and his lineage, and also brothers, sisters, clan and tribe, while his immaterial part bears the soul which links him to his maker. The soul is believed to be that which makes a person a living being and once the soul departs from man, death occurs. Thus living and dying are two important factors in a human life. While alive, the soul dwells in man but at death, the soul departs and the body decays. The soul of man according to Quarcoopome, (1987:99) "is rather complex among West Africans. It is considered the indestructible part which reincarnates in offsprings-an impersonal principle of descent and heredity." Hence the soul is the divine element that connects man with the maker and returns to the creator at death. The Igbo people of West Africa believe in both the physical and the spiritual realm of which Achebe, (1975:93) opines that "A man lives here and his Chi there. Indeed the human being is only one half (and the weaker half at that) of a person".

Death therefore refers to the absence of the soul from the body, a cessation of breath which stops the organic functions of the body. The body becomes lifeless and stops to function. It is the end of consciousness, a point where something/someone's life cease to exist. On life and death, Wole Soyinka, (1991:3) opines that "the material world we know disappears, in the latter case, but it is revived on a different plane, as Paradise, Purgatory or Hell". Hence, man has a dual personality, at death, there is a separation; a split, the body decays. And Quarcoopome, (1987:100) says that "the soul presents itself before God for judgment with respect to its activities on earth". The dead body is buried by the living with certain rites

according to the culture of the deceased. The burial of a dead relative is considered an honour and the highest respect the living can accord the dead. While the bereaved mourn, they take delicate care in burying their dead because burial rites ensure that the dead relative has been accorded all rites due him, since these rites aid communication between the living and the dead, also “the ancestors are believed to be watching over the living relatives, guarding them and ensuring their general success in this life” (Quarcoopome, 1987:103), hence, the living take precaution in the administration of burial rites. It is a belief among Ngwa people of Easter Nigeria that if a person is not properly buried, the spirit hovers and becomes restless and malevolent.

In this study, we shall examine the importance of burial rites in Nnentu Ngwa, the need for dance, dirges and rituals at funerals. The tragic and comic moods as well as the spiritual underpinnings of death and burials will be looked at.

Death in Igbo Cosmology

Euthanasia is not an acceptable phenomenon in Igbo cosmology, due to moral and ethical arguments, but organ transplant and life support devices are welcomed. This demonstrates the desire to continue living, and the belief that only God can take the life of the living. However, suicide is totally condemned among the Igbo. Death is seen as a natural process of coming and going since the people believe in a life beyond the grave, hence death is part of the circle of life. Death is abstract, it is “one phenomenon that no one would usually want to discuss” (Ihentuge & Ogbonna: 2012:386), for death is a personification of that which destroys or terminates life. Ukaegbu, (2005:168) explains death as “the end of life and cessation of all vital organic functions including circulation and breathing process”, hence at death, the physical body stops to function. Death in the Igbo is called *Onwu*, defining it as the end of the living, of which Onwuliri, (2011:56) acknowledges that “the cycle of life commences from the conception of a child, and ends at death”, which infers that death marks the end of a specific life cycle. But Damian Opata, (1998: 174) says that the Igbo conceive death as “simply a return to where life emanated, but a return that is never final and definitive” therefore death is a transition.

The type of death is a factor in Igbo cosmology before burial rites can be carried out. How did the person die? At what age did the person die? What killed the person? These are some of the questions asked when somebody dies. But often times people joke saying ‘something must kill a man’, people have sentiments as to when and how they wish to die. But a pregnant woman who dies with the child or at childbirth, is termed as *Onwu Ojo* (bad death), suicide and infant deaths are considered abominable, also death “by hanging, drowning, and bad diseases” (Quarcoopome,1987:126). Again, Onwuliri, (2011:62) points out that “bad deaths do not normally receive full funeral rites. When a child dies, the parents and relatives lament that death and dispose of the corpse as quickly as possible since it is a bad death”. From another perspective, Ukaegbu, (2002:168) observes that in Igbo land “it is therefore not honorable for any parents to bury who would have buried them”, which is why when a young person dies, the kind of rites performed during the burial reflects this position.

For example, if a body is not buried, the spirit of that body causes disharmony and havoc in the family. The living relatives of the deceased-spirit experience disturbances, strange things, ghost appearances, sudden deaths and sickness/illness that may lead them to consult a herbalist or a diviner. But *Onwu oma* is summed up by Opata, (1998: 175) as:

...One who first and foremost reached old age before dying. Secondly the person must have had children and grandchildren who are well to do. Thirdly the person must have died the sort of death in which all the needed burial and funeral rites must be performed.

Onwu oma (Good death) is a positive comment on the nature of existence of the deceased and attracts full burial rites as the deceased take his place among the community of ancestors.

Ndu bu isi (Life first) and another, *Onwu di njo* (Death is bad), which is why death is often associated with grief and mourning. The Igbo people are anthropocentric hence the aphorism *Ndu ka aku* (life is greater than wealth). The death of a relative is a loss whether the dead person is rich or not, good or bad, because the Igbo people place great value on life/the living. Death is in fact an undesirable event but a journey and a relationship with creation. That is why the Igbo philosophy of burying her own properly is upheld everywhere in Igbo land. It is believed that when the dead person is buried properly the person will rest peacefully and if not done, the dead person becomes a wandering ghost and becomes an evil spirit/a danger to the living. Hence, the Igbo emphasize on living well which is synonymous to dying well. Igbo people call their dead ones who had lived well, *Ndichie* (ancestors). The dead ones qualify as ancestors when according to Onwuliri, (2011:52) they have led “a good life, live to a ripe old age, die good death, and are accorded full burial rites”. Igbo people do not worship their ancestors; rather, they are venerated and regarded as members of the family whose watchful eyes continue to protect the living.

Communing with the Dead

Between the living and the dead, there is a continuous effort to commune with each other. The Igbo of the South East Nigeria believe in their ancestors and their protective guidance. This belief is established and strengthened through such elements as libations, songs, dance, invocations, dreams and rituals. There are so many reasons for communing with the dead; for protection, blessings, fertility, communal cleansing and peace. Often times it is initiated by the living who calls on the ancestors to aid him or her to achieve a positive aim. Then such a person seeking for the ancestors’ help prays through libations or invocations. According to Onwuliri, (2011:55) it is a practicing reality that:

Many African people have ancestral shrines where they can go and have communion and communication with the ancestors, to beg for aid, to thank for past gifts, to appease for a wrong done so that they may not suffer penalties, to enter into covenant with them, and to ask for all kinds of material benefits.

It is observed that both the individual and the community make effort to keep good relationship with the ancestors especially those who led good lives while here on earth. Most times when the community is in a dilemma, they consult the ancestors “to ascertain the will of the ancestors through the oracle, secure their help and appease them when they are provoked to anger” (Onwuliri: 2011:54). On the other hand, the ancestors are interested in the affairs of their families and communities. As custodians of customs, traditional laws and morality, they maintain close relationship with their descendants through dreams, signs and messages. Also there are signs that indicate that the ancestor need your attention or wants to pass a message across; mysterious appearances of the dead relative, flies; especially bees visiting a living relative, illness, breaking of items and projections which will prompt the living relative to consult a diviner to reach the ancestor in question. From time to time, offerings are made, libations poured and occasionally, feast are held in their honour in order to attract their blessings or receive messages from them on a particular issue. This

relationship concurs with Udeze, (2012:212) as she confirms that “their reality and presence in the community are acknowledged and honoured among various traditional Igbo groups and their neglect could spell disaster for human beings and the community”.

However, the advent of Christianity seems to water down the communication between the living and the ancestors in Igbo land as the churches brand the ancestors with such names as: familiar spirit or generation spirit. And such prayer points as ‘I disconnect myself from every ancestral spirit’. Yet, the traditional Igbo hold the ancestors in high esteem and respect. The Igbo Christian who also is a member of the community unconsciously calls/shouts the name of his/her ancestor spontaneously when in danger, for example if unsuspectingly something hits him/her, spontaneously he/she shouts *Nnem eh!* (My mother!) Or *Nnam eh!* (My father!) Or the name of any dear person who has passed away. But where the dead go and what happens to them are intelligent guesses that the living concern themselves with. The termination of this earthly life brings to a halt the activities of that specific human life circle.

Burial in Nnentu Ngwa

Nnentu Ngwa is a community in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State, traditionally identified as Nnentu-ama-isii. The Ama-isii designates the six clans that make up the village and they are Umuobasi, Eziukwu, Okpuala, Ahiaba, Umuebeke and Umuokennunu. While the first three clans cannot marry from among themselves; because they are related in blood, the last three clans can marry from any of the clans. The community is now identified as Okporoenyi Autonomous Community. The people were basically farmers, hunters and traders. With the advent of civilization and white-collar jobs, the people have progressed from hunting to teaching jobs, businesses and politics. Also Christianity now permeates the people’s belief, but when someone dies, the living bury their dead ones. The burial rites are diligently applied to everyone according to the type of death that befell him/her. More so, if the dead person died well (Good death), he/she is accorded the complete burial rites known as *Okwukwu*. However, *Okwukwu* is the completion/final burial rites for both male and female adults of/in Ngwa land, but the rites for the man are elaborate, expensive and hold spiritual underpinnings. When a meritorious Ngwa person dies and is properly buried, it is believed that the deceased has joined the community of ancestors whose duties are to guide and protect their immediate families and the community.

The Ceremony Announcing Death

Announcement of death in Nnentu Ngwa marks the beginning of burial procedure. The first witness to any death is traditionally under obligation to notify the eldest man of the family. No matter who has died and who is the first witness to a death, the tradition demands such a person to secretly notify the eldest man in the family who upon confirmation summons a meeting of the immediate family members to announce the death to them. Upon doing so, the death can be said to be announced to the public because it is a negative development, it is usually an information passed to the general public with sadness and until arrangements for the burial rites is commenced there is no further announcement except for person to person interaction upon which each individual quietly visits the deceased family for confirmation and condolence.

However, the announcement of a death could be extended beyond the immediate family depending on who is involved (circumstances). In the case of a married woman who dies, her death must be announced to her original family of birth. In fact, it is tradition that even before

she is taken away for preservation of the corpse, her people (the in-laws) must come to see her dead body in confirmation. But in situations of accident, the announcement of death instantly becomes public knowledge and as such the announcement may not even emanate from the immediate family.

Preliminary Burial Rites

The burial rites of a male adult of merit in Nnentu Ngwa are our major concern here. This begins with the first call which is a continuation of the announcement of death signaling the commencement of the burial rites. The immediate kindred is invited and notified of the death and commencement of burial rites. This is done with the following items: 1 goat, 3 bottles of local gin, 3 kegs of palm wine, kola nuts, and 4 tubers of yam. There could be exceptions in the case of the death of a young one who died pre-maturely. Also this may be the end of the first phase of burial; *Ituba ozu ala* (Burying the physical body). The *Ituba ozu ala* (the mere burying of the dead body without the complete rites) is an inconclusive burial that is different from *Okwukwu*. This happens when the relatives/children of the deceased lack the financial empowerment to conclusively bury their dead. If the rites end at this sad phase, it restricts the children of the deceased from partaking/eating of any animal slaughtered at *Okwukwu*, mostly the cow. The second phase/calling is termed the *Ikpe okwukwu*; where the elders of the village (*amaala*) are summoned by the family of the deceased with the following items: 1 goat, 3 bottles of gin, 3 kegs of palm wine, kola nuts, and 4 tubers of yam. At this juncture the *amaala* (elders of the village), tell the children, wife and relatives of the deceased, what each of them (sex and seniority is highly considered) is required to bury their dead. However, emphasis and responsibility are laid on the first son.

Burial Rites

The burial ceremony of a merited adult of Nnentu Ngwa culminates into *Okwukwu* because it is the *Okwukwu* that “Confers on the deceased person (Man or Woman) the supernatural status as an ancestor...in fact, it is believed that anyone who has not performed *Okwukwu* for his deceased parent does not eat anything slaughtered at *Okwukwu*” (Kanu, 1994:46). Consequent upon this, every first son of the family patrilineage honours his dead parent by burying him properly. The following are the prescribed requirements by the *amaala*: 1 cow, goats (depending on the number of adult males from the deceased), bottles of local dry gin (depending on the number of males from the deceased too), kola nuts, 10 tubers of yam, cartons of beer, Maltina and mineral drinks. In the case of a man, his second son is expected to kill (behead) the cow under some count of the knife-cuts in most cases not exceeding three times. Anything more than that is seen as a flaw and must be made-up with the provision of drinks to the *amaala*. But the shame of not beheading the cow/goat within the specified cuts may lead one to commit suicide because it indicates that such a son has lost the favour of the father/ancestors.

But for the *Okwukwu* ceremony, the first son is expected to behead a he-goat, according to Kanu, (1994:48) the climax of the funeral ceremony “is performed about mid-day. It is the ritual killing of a he-goat and other household animals (*Igbu aku*). *Ese* music provides the psychological support for the acts. The first act is performed by the opera, the first son, who severs the head of a he-goat with one stroke of a sharp knife”. But in the burial of a female, who died well, the children take a cow to her birthplace and other funeral rites are carried out in her husband’s house. The *Ese* music is not played for the woman and her sons are not subjected to the public display of beheading a goat/cow. The *Ukom* music is played to celebrate the *Okwukwu* (Burial) of the female.

Rituals, Rites and dirges

The final burial rites and ceremony (*Okwukwu*) begin with the arrival of the *Ese* music, often in the evening preceding ceremonial day. For an adult man of merit whose children are economically empowered, his burial takes the form of a festival, which goes to say that his children can afford the requirements of *Okwukwu* and are willing to display the stipulated ritual procedure which takes place in the deceased compound. The event is kick started the same evening with the *Ese* music orchestra situated under a shade in front of the compound. The *Ese* music supports the vigil activities as dance and entertainment is carried on till morning. The following dirges are sung by the Umuada as they wail through the village:

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|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Iwe Iwe –Iwe x3 | Sadness, Sadness Sadness x3 |
| Iwe ona ewe unu e? | Are you people sad? |
| Eeeh iwe na ewe anyi o | Yes we sad |
| Anyi ahughi papa anyi o | We have not seen our father |
| Obu nu ihe na ewe anyi o iwe | That is why we are sad-sadness! |
| 2. Diwa diwa diwa | Endure, endure, endure |
| Ndidi ka nma, | Patience is the best |
| onye omere ya diwa o | Whoever it happens to should endure |
| Ndidi ka nma | Patience is the best |
| 3. Onwu bu onye ohi | Death is a thief |
| Onwu bu onye ohi, | Death is a thief |
| oburu ogbalaga | He carries and he runs |

The major performance which takes place on the funeral ceremony day is the beheading of a he-goat by the first son. Kanu, (1994: 48) confirms that “before the goat is killed, it is symbolically blessed in a ritual ceremony called *Egbu ntuwo* performed by the same *amaala* jurors who acted as principal panelist during the *Okwukwu* tribunal (*Ikpe okwukwu*)”, the act of beheading takes place at the centre of the compound with nervous relatives watching, the *Ese* music playing and the son tensed as he dances towards the sacrificial goat and with a stroke severs the head of the goat. If unsuccessfully done, it becomes an abomination, but successfully achieved, the jubilant relatives celebrates as the chief celebrant dances to *Igba ota* (Martial runs to and fro) to the *Ese* music. From *Igba ota* to *Itu aka ese* (The boasting of the accomplishment of his late father), this act is a demonstration in dance in front of the *Ese*; the first son recounts his father’s achievements after which he boasts of his own achievements too. Here the first son is the actor, supported by the *Ese* master musician because it is the drums that prompts him to action.

Ikwo aka (Washing hands) is another dramatic action that follows the *Itu aka ese*, elders take the knife from the celebrant and lead him to wash off the hand which spilled blood so as to cleanse him from any after effect associated with the ritual act he just performed. The second son also does the same *Ese* dance and kills the cow with prescribed strokes after which dancing, celebrations and entertainment of guests continue. Another factor is that the daughters do not dance to the *Ese* but the first daughter (accompanied with *Uri* or *Nkelebe* or *Aghirigha nkwa*) dances round the village with their father’s picture accompanied by her sisters and other women, (If married), the daughters are joined in the dance by their husbands and in-laws. The performances continue in various entertainment forms; general music making, dancing, drinking and eating till dawn.

Theatre in Burial Dirges and Rituals

The burial rites and funeral ceremony involve a series of theatrical scenes which unconsciously touches the emotion of the bereaved and are of artistic importance. These spiritual and psychological presentations are important norms which accord to the deceased respect as ancestor and to the deceased relatives some sociopolitical status in the society. The burial rites start with the announcement of death which marks the beginning of burial preparations. These rites, dirges, and rituals that take place in the course of funeral ceremony demonstrates what Aristotle describe as the beginning, middle and end in dramatic form. Again, Dele Layiwola (2001:213) observes that “the purpose of any ritual or theatre is after all not to create transfixed material events, but an imitation of the same in a manner that elicit pathos, as Aristotle elucidates”. The use of dance which takes place during the night vigil, and when the first son dances to the *Ese* before the ritual killing of the he-goat is a performance. The *Itu aka ese*, where the first son boasts of his father’s achievements is another dramatic performance that involves spectators who cheer him as he dances to the rhythm of the drums. Also, the dirges: *Onwu bu onye oghi o...*, *Iwe Iwe Iwe...*, *Diwe Diwe Diwe...*, sang by the *Umuada* is a performance. The *Umuada* in their uniform (costume) will march round the village wailing and dirging. Also, the arguments that arise from the discussion between the *amaala* and the deceased family during the *Ikpe Okwukw/Ili ozu* may be described as the conflict and dialogues while the rites and rituals contribute to the performance as spectacle and rising action. Another conspicuous element of theatre is the audience; the *amaala* of the patrilineage, the *Umuada*, friends and relatives form the spectator/audience.

Conclusion

The burial ceremony of a meritorious Nnentu Ngwa man or woman takes the shape of a festival. The application of all burial rites due to such a person confers on the deceased relatives some sociopolitical status in the community and to the deceased, the right position with rights and privileges in the community of ancestors. The effective communication between the living and the dead is premised on the above conditions. Hence, when a community or person is in a dilemma and desires the guidance and protection of the ancestors, the community/person invokes their presence from the ancestral shrines or pours libation to speak to them. While if an ancestor wishes to pass a message across to a living relative or to the community, such ancestor(s) appears through dreams, relays signs and symbols that can be interpreted or cause illnesses that may lead the sick person to a diviner that will reveal the message from the ancestor. The presence of theatre in the burial rites of the people of Nnentu Ngwa reveals that dramatic and performative contents in this ceremonies help to stabilize the emotional and psychological tensions of the bereaved and equally re-affirm that the deceased had a meaningful existence here on earth. However, all these are intelligent guesses of the living because no one who has not experienced death can have authority over its operative dynamics. When and how people die, Good deaths (*Onwu oma*) and Bad deaths (*Onwu Ojoo*) can be summed up with Soyinka’s, (1991: 4) assertion that “existence, as we know it, comes to the end that was preordained from the beginning of time”. Therefore, death is the end of every beginning and the beginning of another life.

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Interviews

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