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## ABSTRACT

The issue of life and death is a preponderance problem that has eluded people of various eras. So many generations have come and gone, but the problem remains unsolved. It is older than every age but remains very effective and influential in every age. Man made their first appearance in life reluctantly, and this is demonstrated in the first confused crying of a new born baby. He, therefore, grew up bewildered and askance and will eventually die and leaving the empirical physical world strugglingly disappointed and more confused. Meanwhile, the moment of death is a moment of confusion, a moment of stack face to face with the necked truth of the reality of life.

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# The Rationale for Funeral Rites, An Aspect of African Culture among the Igbo-Africans

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## ABSTRACT

*The issue of life and death is a preponderance problem that has eluded people of various eras. So many generations have come and gone, but the problem remains unsolved. It is older than every age but remains very effective and influential in every age. Man made their first appearance in life reluctantly, and this is demonstrated in the first confused crying of a new born baby. He, therefore, grew up bewildered and askance and will eventually die and leaving the empirical physical world strugglingly disappointed and more confused. Meanwhile, the moment of death is a moment of confusion, a moment of stack face to face with the necked truth of the reality of life. The problem of life and death, therefore, has become a serious preoccupation of every rational mortal being. In this line of thought, an Igbo proverb opines that "a leaf knows no rest until it comes to decay under the earth ". It is in this backdrop that this study sought to delve into the rationale behind the affluent funeral rites among the Igbo-Africans. The researcher employed the methodological approach of critical reflection to achieve the purpose of the study. The study first seeks to find out the reasons why death still remains a problem for every individual person, the extent of the issue of death, and how to proffer solutions to the situation in question. It then discusses the Igbo concept of death and funeral rites and draws critical evaluations and conclusions.*

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## I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The present cosmos in which you and I dwell is more mysterious than you and I could ever think about. In other words, man's life on earth is so profound that it is more widely extended than logic. Nevertheless, no one has ever delved deep into the profundity of life so much to know for sure what life and its end are all about. This particular subject has eluded philosophers as well as theologians of different religious affiliations and cultural traditions of various eras.

Despite man's intellectual integrity and jingoism, technological leap and scientific sophistication, his astuteness and humongous ability claim to be ahead of the "jet age " with its concomitant massification of everything and its resultant modernity, man still lacks the wisdom that would have enabled him to raise a meaningful question as regards life and its end; neither has he the energy to answer this question articulately and meaningfully even if the question is raised.

Consequently, the puzzle and perplexity of life estranged man more from the secrets of life itself. Moreover, the oblivion-ness of the human mind or, rather the obscurity of the real coupled with the disheartening awareness of the transient nature of man's existence in his passing existence seems to have rendered more hopeless man's tussles towards grasping in its entirety, the ultimate meaning of life- concerning the present temporal nature of reality. Protagoras completely captured this in his idea:

About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form, for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life. <sup>1</sup>

A multiplicity of things are yet to be disclosed, discovered, and grasped in life. The temporality of life has made it difficult, if not an impossibility, for man to fully comprehend what life is all about before the knock on the door of life for one to leave (vacate) the stage. Little wonder the Igbo, in cognizance of the above, expressed in their proverb that '*Enu uwa bu olili, onye nosia, o naba*' implying that the world is a recreational ground in which the players go home after the games. <sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, life is full of probabilities. This chain of chances starts even from the moment of conception. Over and above the chain of chances, is a crystalline fact that is free from all probabilities. Consequently, over and beyond all chances, one thing is inevitable in man's life, and that thing is the reality of death. Even monarchs answer, and answer promptly, too, when death's call comes. End does not understand the language of "wait, I am coming."

According to O. A. Onwubiko, the Igbo people are not unaware of the inevitability of death. He, therefore, writes:

The Igbo know that death is an inevitability and say: *Onwuamadike, onwukamike*, yet he pleadingly asks death not to kill him and says *onwuegbule, Onwukwe* etc...<sup>3</sup>

The most devastating truth is that death can neither be compromised nor successfully avoided. In that case, the Igbo, therefore, conduct an affluent ceremonies for the deceased relative in a bid to undermine or reduce the pains death inflicts on the mourning relatives.

However, for a better and clear understanding of Igbo-African funeral rites and their accompanying ceremonies, therefore, we shall go over and above the merely ceremonial and merely ritualistic and raise the question concerning the reason behind the merely ceremonial and merely ritualistic. It is only in so doing that the meaningfulness, or, rather the rationale behind the affluent funeral rites among the Igbo people, could be possibly unfolded and comprehended. In any case, the motive or the reason can only make its appearance in the sensible world of reality

through merely ceremonial and simply ritualistic. Hence, through the formal ceremonies and proper rituals, the hidden meaning is unfolded.

What, then is the rationale behind Igbo funeral rites? Why must the passing to the great beyond of a relative be accompanied with affluent ceremonies? Has this ceremonies anything to do with life in the world beyond? Consideration should be made as regards the cultural and religious aspects of Igbo funeral rites so as to have a better understanding of them.

## II. THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE/RELIGION

Religion is part and parcel of culture. Hence, the two concepts are so interwoven that many authors have often used them interchangeably. If you are not accepted in your village, go to the town and tell them that you are a prophet; nobody will care to know. Mbiti succinctly confirmed the above points when he says:

What people do is motivated by what they believe, and what they believe springs from what they do and experience. So then, belief and action in African traditional society cannot be separated: They belong to a single whole. <sup>4</sup>

The action in the above citation implies culture, as culture, in simple definition, is a people's general way of life. Belief, on the other hand, has to do with people's beliefs system or, in other words, a people's religious affiliation. Hence, culture and religion for Africans are two sides of the same reality. Both cannot separate from one another, but rather compliments one another.

## III. IGBO CONCEPTION OF DEATH

It is a general conception among the Igbo people that man is a pilgrim of the divine and that the period of human sojourn in the empirical physical world is temporal and, therefore, a period of preparation for death and the eventual indwelling of life in the world beyond. Every Igbo man or woman is desirous to rest among the souls of their ancestors, and it is a genuine and poignant hope.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, the spirit that moves and sustains an

Igbo man in his struggle and hustle in life is the spirit of belongingness and togetherness or communion.<sup>6</sup> The Igbo sense of communalism has, affected or influenced their general attitude to life. Hence, the social tie with community members is so much cherished by the Igbo that nothing whatsoever is allowed to tamper with this belongingness. The individual, from the Igbo anthropological perspective, exists only in the community.<sup>7</sup>

This fact necessitates the Igbo saying that the world is a marketplace from where one must depart in due time, whether or not one in question has gotten all that one needed (*uwa bu ahia, azuta ahia azutaghi ahia, oge zue a laa*). The Igbo people, hence affirm that death is a "return home " from where one came into the world. The return home implies for the Igbo, that death is a "call" from God to someone to return home. This call from God also demands a response from the one called.<sup>8</sup>

One thing that is very clear from the above points is that the call is irrevocable. The awareness that death can strike at any moment in time and any form, and the knowledge that the call necessarily comes from God, the creator and sustainer of life, has brought about the reason why every traditional Igbo man usually adds: "*Ma onwe ndu ewereghi* " (please God, the owner of life) after every decision making. Death for the Igbo is not only a necessary end but also a bitter truth. Madam Monica Odinchezo Onwuatiegwu, in one of her unpolished wisdom sayings, succinctly puts:

Death is such a bitter fact of life that every single person wishes never to think of or be reminded. In other words, nobody is in a hurry to experience death. Nevertheless, the truth is that every life is summarized at death. Hence, the fact of death is what each individual must eventually, at the appointed time, come face to face with, willingly or unwillingly, with equanimity or with revolt and struggle. The question of when one shall die and how one's death shall be, is what is over and above the human power to know and comprehend. Consequently, the question of

"please, do it for me " is outside the context of death, for death is not a battle that a father or mother can wage for his or her child (*onwu abughi ogu nna ma o bu nne na-agbara nwa ya*). It is a share that reaches everyone without exception, as each iron must eventually, at one time, or another, visit the Smith's workshop (*igwe nile gaje n'uzu*).<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, as the Igbo conceptualize death as being gathered to one's people or joining one's forebears or ancestors, death is not only seen as a problem but also as a mystery. Therefore, an Igbo man at a ripe old age welcomes death with equanimity, knowing very well that he is only going there to join the community of his ancestors.<sup>10</sup> Having understood the temporarily of the earthly indwelling, an Igbo is entangled in a ceaseless effort to be successful in his present life, bearing in mind that the world is a place from which one must leave the stage after trying one's possible best (*uwa bu onye mere ike ya o laa*). Moreso, P. N. Chinyere, coming from another dimension, maintains that the ceaseless struggle may be a result of the fact that the Igbo are not flashy people generally. Still, they are not indifferent to places or positions of honor and respect.<sup>11</sup>

Admittedly, the above point brings us to the fact of an Igbo proverb that holds that a bird at hand is better than hundreds of leopards in the forest. Hence, every Igbo, despite the temporality of the present passing existence, is determined to succeed and make meaningful achievements. An unfulfilled and unaccomplished life equals a near wasteful life for an Igbo. Consequently, a disgruntled and unaccomplished individual has no place amongst the ancestors in the ancestral realm.

A successful man is a fulfilled man. One achieves self-actualization through the maximum use of one's talents and time. By so doing, one's life also becomes a fulfilled one. Success for the Igbo is more than being a rich man or an intelligent person. A successful life is a complete whole, a critical success. An unsuccessful life is hated with passion among the Igbo people. Considering the

extent to which the Igbo people hate laziness and unsuccessful life, O. A. Onwubiko emphasizes:

Normally if a man lived a very hopeless life, his relatives would give him a burial that would make it impossible for him to reincarnate among them, at times, such persons are tormented by flogging their corpses with the hope of frightening them, at times, they are buried with their faces facing the ground so that they may not "see" the way to return.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, every Igbo-African makes a serious and unrelenting effort to achieve success. Moreso, it is believed that man's condition and situation of life here and now determines and fashions his or her life in the hereafter. Consequently, reincarnation is not the only thing that be-clouds the Igbo man's notion of life after death, instead the Igbo, also believe in life after death but rather express it in a different way. Therefore, the traditional Igbo and Christians believe that life continues beyond the grave.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, death necessarily engenders the separation of man from his physical clothing, that is the flesh (the material body) with which man appears in the empirical physical world. However, the fact remains that life does not end up at death for:

It is clear that people view death paradoxically: it is a separation but not annihilation, the death person is suddenly cut off from the human society and yet the corporate group clings to him. This is shown through the elaborate funeral rites, as well as other methods of keeping in contact with the departed.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. THE RATIONALE BEHIND FUNERAL RITES AMONG THE IGBO

One of the most excruciating and unbearable things that can happen to an Igbo is not to have accorded them funeral rites. You dare not joke with an Igbo about such a matter. Basden understands this very well as he writes:

The Igbos will endure everything in order to ensure that their burial will be properly

performed. His whole future welfare depends upon this and hence it takes at all times almost prominent place in man's calculations.<sup>15</sup>

*Following the above points O. A. Onwubiko thus summarises:*

Funeral ceremonies in Igboland are elaborate and highly expensive and are relatively celebrated according to the status of the deceased. A common characteristic of all funeral ceremonies is that they are believed to determine the place the defunct would enjoy in the spirit world,... The dead who have not received these ceremonies are believed not to be able to enter the spirit land and as such they do not belong to the "village" of the dead nor to that of the living. They are believed to be in a state of unrest and suffering, and they wander about menacing the living.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of funeral rites as conditioning one's life in the world beyond emanated from the fact that the Igbo people firmly hold that life is not annihilation but a journey from the empirical temporal world to the world hereafter. Hence, life in the spirit world in the traditional Igbo man's conception is nothing but only a continuation of life more or less as in the bodily form. Little wonder the Igbo have the notion that some sacred plants and animals here in the human world also exist in the spiritual/ancestral world. In a situation where life is lived in such a manner, in the world hereafter then, nothing worst can happen to a man than to deny them funeral rites, which is in this case, considered as a ticket to the world beyond. One can imagine the gravity of such a denial; just come to think of a situation where one is in the world and yet belonging to no group or people, or where one is in the midst of a people but yet alone.

Obviously, in Igbo cultural milieu, anyone who cannot accord either his parents or relatives a befitting burial/funeral rites is understandably regarded as a good-for-nothing. Such a person cannot proudly talk in the public domain with his face up; neither can such a one stand his ground before his age group. Achebe, in his book *Arrow of*

God, alluded to the idea above. He, therefore writes :

If there were any shame left in the world, how could that beast of the bush who could not give his father a decent burial stand up before you and pass shit through his mouth.<sup>17</sup>

Funeral rites must be given to the dead if not because it determines the place of the dead in the spirit world, at least for the fact that the dead are pretty awake and can exert influence on their living relatives. Hence, they are called "the living dead." Should they be denied funeral rites, they are believed to have the power to disturb and hinder the progress or even the health of their living relatives. Hence, for Onwubiko, the dead are pretty awake in the spirit world and this is often manifested in the fear that drives the Igbo to obey and carry out the last wishes of the dead. It seems to be common feature in the burial rites of most African communities.<sup>18</sup>

More still, the Igbo have the notion that when one dies, there is an emotional cord (just like an umbilical cord) holding deceased ghost to their material body. Hence, such a one is believed to be still hovering familiar places like their grave, family compound, and related sites. This situation will persist until the final funeral rites are duly completed. Only after the funeral rites will the deceased quietly and peacefully descends into the community of the ancestors in the village of the dead. I. N. Onwuatiegwu, in this case, writes that it is believed that after the departure of the self from the physical and material body that self continues to hover around as a ghost until after their second funeral rites which enables the dead to descend peacefully into the ancestral world – '*ala ndiichie*'.<sup>19</sup>

Come to think of a situation where a child is born, and their umbilical cord is left uncut. Can such a baby possibly survive? For the Igbo, it is the same thing with a deceased relative. In that case, death is seen as birth given to the world beyond. Hence, the necessity of funeral rites to the dead in the Igbo cultural milieu.

## V. EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Evaluation

It is good to note that the purpose of this work is not just to describe funeral rites as it is performed among the Igbo, but to point to the implications or rather the rationale behind the funeral rites.

Consequently, the dead are believed to have arrived in the ancestral village only after the completion of their funeral rites. Having formally carried out their final funeral rites, the dead settle down in the ancestral domain - the village of the living dead. The peaceful arrival of the dead in the ancestral domain is demonstrated and announced by the sound of guns. P. N. Chinyere reiterates that gun shooting is sometimes connected with superstition. Hence in certain parts of Igboland, gun shooting after the final burial ceremonies, indicates that it is at that particular moment that the deceased has reached the ancestral world. The traditional Igbo also believe that gun shooting serves to clear the road of vicious demons, to ensure the deceased a safe conduct to the land of the spirits.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, the dead are believed to be wandering until their funeral rites are duly completed. This is tantamount to the Christian doctrine of purgatory as a place of purification or purgation. It is, therefore, apparent that the Igbo have the notion of life after death and the idea of the communion of the saints, as well as the vague idea of purgatory even before the advent of Christianity. The Igbo have to certain degree the notion of the communion of the saints. Hence, they believe that the dead can influence their living relatives positively or negatively, and the living relatives can as well influence their dead relatives either by feeding them with offerings and sacrifices or staving them.

### 5.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Igbo are not illogical or uncritical in their characteristic attitude towards their dead relatives or the elaborate ceremonies with which the dead are conducted in the ancestral realm. In every act of a people, there is a rationale behind it. Hence, in every culture or

every race, there are deposits of both philosophical and theological facts that contribute for the betterment of humanity in the temporal and empirical physical world and which enables man to prepare for his eventual indwelling in the world beyond.

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