

THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF BURIAL AND FUNERAL RITES IN ONICHA COMMUNITY, EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Death is a passage from this earthly life to the world beyond. The death of any member of the family leaves us with fear, sorrow and pains. Therefore, the duty owed to the dead by the living is a befitting burial. However, the rites associated with burial are meant to send the dead home to the world of ancestors. But in doing this, the process has rather become very expensive that people now wince under the burden of this socio-religious duty of sending their dead home. Therefore, this research tries to find out the socio-economic and religious implications of burial rites on families, causes of merriment instead of sympathy and justification for expensive burial and funeral rites in Onicha sub-culture area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The research was carried out by reviewing past documents on the subject, use of oral interviews and participant observation in the area of study. It was found out that this problem has caused families a lot of socio-economic and psychological problems like poverty, indebtedness, prostitution, child labor, abortion, fighting, destitution and death. The implication is that if the society does not fight it, it will continue to cause poverty, corruption and death. Therefore, communities can come up with a blue print on moderate burial ceremony among other recommendations

Keywords: Dead, Wake-keep, Burial, Funeral rites.

Introduction:

The belief that human beings survive death in some form has profoundly influenced the thoughts, emotions and actions of mankind. This belief occurs in all religions past and present and decisively conditions their evaluation of man and his place in the universe. Onicha people just like every other African community acknowledge that human existence is fraught with life-crisis situation or rites of passage. Death is one of such life-crisis situations which mark the end of life on earth. According to Anyacho (2005), life to an African is a continuous thing. Its cessation on earth paves way for the soul to experience life in the great beyond. Therefore, death is a passage to the hereafter. The last rite is given to a man at death. This makes for a transition from the physical existence to the invisible existence which takes

place in the land of the ancestors. It is for this reason that a corpse is accorded a special rite before it is buried. Man is the only creature known to bury his dead. The fact is of fundamental significance. The practice was not originally motivated by hygienic considerations but by ideas entertained by primitive people concerning human nature and destiny. This is clearly evident from the fact that the disposal of the dead from the earliest times was of a ritual kind. The primitive people not only buried their dead but they provided for them food and other equipment thereby implying a belief that the dead still needed such things in the grave. As Quarcoopome (1987) saw it, communion and communication between the living and the dead is an evidence of reality of life after death. The ancestors are addressed in much the same way as the living members of the family by their seniors. They are called upon during prayers to bless the living with long life and prosperity. The ancestors are capable of influencing the living for good or for ill. Thus, the ancestors are regarded as part of the social structure and this is manifested in ancestral cults. Death rites and customs emanated from the instructive inability or refusal on the part of man to accept death as the definitive end of human life. They also reflect the belief that human beings survive death in some form and represent the practical measures taken to assist the dead achieve their destiny and sometimes to save the living from dreaded molestation by the dead. However, in giving honour to the departed, the people of Onicha spend fortunes to bury their dead. Families have had to spend huge amounts of money in order to give their dead a befitting burial and sometimes, they have to borrow to do this. All these have serious socio-economic and religious implications for the people.

It is quite disheartening to note that after burial, some families go a borrowing in order to survive while some others live almost the rest of their lives paying debts incurred during burial ceremonies. Burial ceremonies are also occasions or opportunities for enemies to create problems for the mourning family. Hence, this study x-rays the socio-economic and religious implications of burial and funeral rites not only for families in Onicha, but also for families outside their socio-cultural worldview. For a better insight, this discourse was done under the following subheadings theoretical framework, the concept of death in Onicha, burial and funeral rites in Onicha and the socio-economic and religious implications of burial and funeral rites in Onicha.

Theoretical Framework

In his theory of grief, Turner (1969) explored liminality as a period in which human feelings found great strength in the mutual support of others in the same situation. He used the word “communitas” to describe this feeling of shared unity among those who for instance were initiated together. He said that the same might also apply to groups of people in the army or at the college together, at carnivals or in pilgrimages and those who are bereaved. Together, they share the succour of their common humanity as they come together in adversity. For a

moment, they forget their different status and the symbols that divided them to enter into the shared emotional experiences associated with grief. In Onicha, there is this feeling of common humanity which is evoked in the people each time someone dies as they come together irrespective of their social status to mourn and bury their dead. At such a time, the people acknowledge what it means to be human and to be mortal as they give support to the bereaved family. People spend time with the bereaved family and provide relief materials even if too small. Bereavement in itself has changed and still changes the social status of people in Onicha. Many members of the community have ceased from being wives to being widows, from being husbands to being widowers, from being children to being orphans or from being subordinate adults to being heads of families. Turner(1969) supported this in his theory, saying that bereavement involves both the social change of status of people from for instance being a wife to being a widow, from being a child to being an orphan or from being a subordinate adult to becoming the head of the family. The fear of ghosts or spirits for example can be related to both the dimensions of status and identity.

In terms of status, ghosts and spirits can be seen as the dead who have not been successfully moved from their place in this world to that of the next. They are of an unintended liminal state, which are potentially dangerous liminal entities or phenomena as they symbolize radical change that challenges the social life set up against such change. Sometimes further rites exist to try to get such spiritual forces finally to leave the world of the living and get on with their future destiny. At its most extreme, rites of exorcism serve to banish the dead or other supernatural entities to prevent them from adversely influencing the living. In terms of identity, the identity of the living, ghosts and spirits and perhaps vivid dreams of the dead all reflect the individual experience of a bereaved person who is still psychologically caught up with the identity of the deceased person. Physical death has also been widely employed as an idiom to describe the leaving of an old status and the entry into a new one (Genep, 1960).

The Concept of Death in Onicha

Death in Onicha is known as *onwu*. It is seen as a passage, which changes the status of a person from being a human to being a spirit or an ancestor. As in every other African community, death is seen as an enemy and therefore feared. It is the greatest tragedy that may yet befall any living being in the community. This fear is expressed in the various names given to children by their parents at birth which testify to the ruthless nature of death. Such names as *Onwuharaonye* meaning “death does not spare anybody” shows the ubiquitous of death and a bitter pill which everybody must taste. *Onwuatuegwu* which means “death is not afraid” is a name which portrays death as a no respecter of persons. It does not mind whether one is rich or poor, big or small, in other words, *onwuamaonyekwu*, *onwuamaonyenta*. It does not mind one’s status or position in the society, in other words, *onwuamaeze*. The name *onwuchekwa* or *onwubiko* portrays death

as a menace or potent force which determines or decides somebody's fates as well as one whose permission must be sought for if one must make any head way in life. Quite often, these names are connected with families that have suffered a chain of deaths. The names *onwudiwe* and *onwudiegwu* all express the danger posed by death.

Since human life is of prime value, everything has to be done to preserve and enhance it. This explains why rituals are carried out to pacify the spirit of death. However, the attitude towards death everywhere is ambivalent. As far as Onicha people are concerned, death is regarded as the inevitable end of man. As in most other African communities, Onicha people do not regard death as the end of life rather they see it as a transition from this earthly life to another life. Death is seen as journey which every man must make in order to reach the world beyond and continue to exist there as an ancestor. The dead therefore do not remain in the grave but become spirits from where they proceed to the spiritual world. Since death is not the end of man's life in Onicha, it does not sever its relationship with the family rather it extends family relationship to the great beyond. The ceremonies performed by the living members of the family for the dead lend credence to this unbroken family relationship between the living and the dead. In Onicha, the family extends to the spiritual and supernatural world made up of the living dead. This reality of family membership of the dead is shown by the consideration accorded the dead by the family at every family activity including burial ceremonies. Both the living and the dead have a part to play in fulfilling family obligations. It is believed that things go well for the family when both parties perform their roles or obligations properly, for instance, it is the duty of the living members of the family to give the dead members of the family a befitting burial and to perform funeral rites for them and thereafter offer them sacrifices, food, drinks and shelter which constitutes acts of reverence and remembrance. On the other hand, the dead members of the family would then reciprocate by playing their roles in the life of the family because of their increased powers. Their role is to protect, direct, intervene and guide the living members of the family. According to Metuh (1987) as spirits, the ancestors have enhanced powers and influence. They are believed to be closer to the Supreme Being and deities and act as intermediaries between these divine beings and members of their families. With their better knowledge of the affairs of the spirit world, they constantly warn their descendants and kinsmen of an impending disaster and advise them on what to do to attract the most favourable fortunes. (p. 149).

As a member of the clan into which they hope to reincarnate, they are very concerned with the continued existence and strengthening of the clan. They are believed to be the custodians of traditional laws and customs (Metuh, 1987).

Burial and Funeral Rites in Onicha

Burial is an occasion when people come together to share their emotional experiences associated with grief. It is the act of committing a corpse or dead body to the mother earth. In Onicha, when a person dies, the first step towards the burial is to inform or send message across to the relations (*unwunna*) of the deceased both far and near. The concerned relatives (*unwunna*) will then converge in the compound of the deceased to discuss and plan the burial. During the meeting, a date for the burial proper is fixed. If the deceased is an infant, small boy or girl, an unmarried man or woman, a married man or woman without a child, he will be quickly buried without elaborate ceremonies because this type of death is regarded as a bad death. But if the deceased is an elder or a prominent person that is a title man (*amadu*) who died in good old age or a sage, the death is traditionally announced by firing of muskets and guns (*okponani*). According to custom and tradition, it is the first son (*okpara*) who marks or decides where the grave will be dug for the burial.

Wake Keep (*okuabani*)

Wake keep is a party or social gathering held in honour of the dead. According to Toolis(1995), wake keep is a way of creating a space for irrational grief to be acted out (p. 18). In the words of Clare(1995), it is energy and activity used to anaesthetize the bereaved (p. 7). It involves keeping watch beside the corpse and behaving in a demonstrative way either by lamenting or merry-making. It means preventing someone from sleeping, to wake the person up, to disturb the person's slumber and make it impossible for him or her to slip back into it. The junketing and dancing take place in order to wake the person up again. To O'sulleabhain (1967), it was an attempt to heal the wound of death and to do final justice to the deceased while he was still physically present. After the burial, the opportunity to do so would be absent (p. 172).

Thus, in Onicha, burial follows an elaborate wake keep with the dead lying-in-state. While lying-in-state, the women keep vigil or watch by sitting around the corpse as a mark of honour to one of their departed husbands if he is a man or to one of their departed mothers if she is a woman. During wake keep, some of the characters or activities of the departed will be reenacted in a dramatic fashion. Those things he or she was known for, for instance, if he or she was a trader, a farmer, a palm wine tapper, a hunter etc. all these would be demonstrated just as he did them when he was alive. His character ranging from his manner of speech, jokes, relationship with people and how he lived his life generally will all be demonstrated. However, waking the dead is carried out mainly for the benefit of the dead themselves in order to restore them to wakefulness. Wake keep is not

merely to give the dead person a good sendoff but to keep the dead properly moving in the right direction instead of simply losing consciousness. In religious terms, it means making sure that the person goes on living in the dimension he or she must now enter upon. In other words, the deceased must be awake among the dead, a state of affairs that is held to be beneficial to the deceased survivors as well. So, the practice is held to be an expression of a straight forward fear of dead people and what they are capable of doing to the living. In religious ceremonies surrounding death and dying, fear and awe, thanksgiving and praise are easy to account for, but to play games and invent ways of amusing the mourners seems rather more than out of place in such circumstances.

Burial or Interment (*iniozu*)

According to Alabi (2007), the responsibility of burying the dead lies not only with the bereaved family but also with the entire members of the community. It is a practice that is still adhered to (p.26). In Onicha, modern practice has somewhat changed the status quo. As part of preparations for burial, the compound is cleared and kept in order, posters of the deceased are printed and pasted at strategic locations to let people know about the death of such a person, invitation cards are also printed for invitation of guests, gifts are also prepared, a huge sum of money is spent on food and drinks for entertainment etc. As the corpse leaves the mortuary, the portrait of the deceased is carried along and displayed for people to catch a glimpse of the deceased. Inside the compound, the portrait of the deceased is displayed beside the coffin or placed on top of the coffin for the purpose of identification. After the funeral service by the church, the deceased is buried.

On the other hand, the traditional burial rite in Onicha starts from when a person dies till a few days after interment. Before the deceased is finally buried, he undergoes a sort of ritual washing and dressing in which the body will be rubbed with camwood or *ufie*. A goat or ram is slaughtered for the rite of *igwaikenga*. This rite involves cutting out a part of the animal or victim and wrapping it like an arms band around the upper arm of the right hand of the corpse. The animal used for this purpose is called *ebunuiikenga*. Another part of the animal is cut off and placed on the lips of the corpse. These rites accord the deceased full and well deserved respect as an elder, a titled man or woman or a prominent person in the community and as one who was fulfilled in life. Having carried out these rites, the corpse is lowered into the grave. It is the first son (*okpara*) again who initiates the covering of the grave by putting some earth into the grave. As soon as the grave is covered, some rounds of canon shots announce the burial that is to signify that the deceased has been buried. Traditional drumming and dancing (*igbaikpa*) follows.

According to tradition, the first music produced by the traditional drum (*ikpa*) is exclusively for the ancestors and therefore cannot be danced to. The subsequent music can now be danced to and the first son, according to tradition opens the dance floor by taking the lead. He could do this with the cascading tail of a horse (*nzainyinya*) on his shoulder which symbolizes the title of “*ogbuinyinya*” taken by the deceased or with the skin of the tiger (*akpukpoagu*) which symbolizes strength and shows that the deceased was a great warrior. The elders, titled men and other prominent people then take their turns to dance. As all these go on amidst canon shots, the guests are fed. The ceremony comes to an end after the traditional dance and cultural display. In the case of a woman, the burial rites are the same except that the rites of “*igwaikenga*” and “*igbafunkwaigbo*” are not performed.

Funeral Ceremony (*ikwaozu*)

A funeral is a ceremony organized to mark or celebrate a person’s death. Funeral customs comprise a complex of beliefs and practices used by a culture to remember the dead, prayers and rituals are undertaken in their honour. According to Quarcoopome (1987), the practice of second burial is to ensure that no ritual element is left out so that the danger of misfortune brought about by the displeasure of the deceased may be averted (p.125). In Onicha, when a man dies and the family is not ready to perform the burial and funeral ceremonies at once, the corpse is buried at the first instance without elaborate rites or ceremonies necessary to send the dead home. Afterwards, the family (*unwunna*) then meets to determine or decide the date for the second burial which is the proper burial. Funeral rites depend very much on the status of the deceased as well as the circumstances surrounding his death. Funeral ceremonies for elders, *amadus*, chiefs etc tend to be longer and more elaborate than those of other citizens who may not have met the requirements. To this, Kayode (1984) added that “the burial of infants is not elaborate; their bodies are disposed of quickly” (p. 31). For the average individual, funeral rites among the people of Onicha include washing, shaving and dressing of the corpse and lying-in-state. Grave digging involves giving the diggers a gallon of palm wine, a live chicken and some tubers of yam with which they prepare porridge. Although the loss of a loved one is always a thing of sorrow, death is desirable when the deceased is old with children and dies in his or her sleep or after a brief illness. But when it occurs in infancy or as a result of diseases like leprosy, epilepsy, suicide, thunder, pregnancy, fire disaster or poison, it is undesirable (Kayode, 1984). The aged are buried inside the house in the belief that they will continue to contribute to the welfare of the family. But this practice is no longer in vogue as the people now bury their dead outside the house. Immediately after committing the dead to the mother earth, there may be

drumming, dancing, firing of muskets and guns and pouring of libation depending on the status of the deceased as part of the funeral rites (Quarcoopome, 1987). The funeral ceremony may last between three days and one week depending on the status of the deceased. On the first day, a wake keep is observed for the deceased. At about 4.00pm in the evening of the second day, the corpse is buried. This is followed by the main ceremony on the third day which involves traditional drumming, dancing and cultural display by various cultural troupes amidst firing of guns. Then on the fourth day, the rite of *ifuafia* is observed. This involves making a cultural outing to *Afor* market to drink and dance in honour of the dead and to show that the funeral ceremony has been successfully carried out. During such outing, the first daughter of the deceased (*Ada*) carries with her the cascading tail of the horse, a portrait of the deceased and a bell with which she announces the departure of the deceased at intervals as she leads the group to the market square. When they return from the market, another ritual is performed. This is called *igbafunkwaigbo*. It involves making a short trip to the village square (*ogamgbo*) with a live ram (*ebunuikenga*) to drum and dance for the departed.

Eight days after the funeral ceremony, the relations converge again in the compound of the deceased for the rite of *ikpuisi* that is shaving of the hair as a mark of honour and respect for the departed. On this day, disputes and debts owed to the deceased or incurred by the deceased and other minor cases are settled. After this ceremony of hair shaving, the widow of the deceased now clad in black apparel will continue to mourn the departed husband as long as six months, a year or more depending on her love for him. During this period, she will not sleep outside the husband's house, she may not go to the farm or do any tedious work and she will be confined in the compound and may not take her bath until the end of the mourning period. At the end of the mourning period, she is taken to the stream by a priest with a torch made from dried palm frond. At the stream, she takes off the black apparel, takes a purifying bath and puts on a new cloth. She casts the black clothes into the stream, signifying the end of the mourning period. From the stream, she is led to the compound where she will pass the night. In the morning of the next day, she is led back to her husband's house by the priest. This practice is no longer in vogue as Christian religion has phased it out.

Socio-religious Implications of Burial and Funeral Rites

Funeral rites demonstrate the close bond or affinity between the visible and invisible world in an essentially religious worldview. For the Igbo, death means going home to the spirit land. The dead man is alive but as a spirit. The rites are designed to send him home where he now belongs and this makes it possible for

the living to continue to communicate with him as a living dead. A rare sacrifice is made to the Supreme Being on this occasion. Absolutions are pronounced on the dead, ritual purifications and prayers all add to the religious dimensions of the funeral rites (Metuh, 1985). According to the custom and tradition of Onicha community, once someone dies, the body belongs to the family. You would think that you know what and who constitute the family, but once there is a death, the definition of family changes completely. A spouse and the children suddenly do not qualify as family once there is a death. It is only the family, that is, the extended family into which the dead was born that decides how the dead is to be buried. The first son (*okpara*) is usually the chief mourner. Some members of the extended family might not have seen or spoken with the dearly departed for many years while he was alive, but they are deemed to know more than the spouse and the children. There are series of meetings which are presided over by this extended family where the words of the spouse and the children can be ignored. They take seriously the idea of giving the dead a befitting burial. They refurbish the house in which the dearly departed lived and died or sometimes, a new house has to be built to be able to stage a spectacular funeral. Before mortuaries became popular in Onicha community, they buried their dead within two to three days and then set a date for the final funeral rites. Now, the regular period in which a dead body is kept in the mortuary before being buried ranges from three to six months. Ten months to one year is not unheard of. Anybody who tries to bury someone within a period regarded as “too early” is certain to invoke outrage. They say it is a sacrilege and lack of respect to bury an elderly person too early. In the practice of burial and funeral rites in Onicha, there is a fusion of three compartments of beings which Madu (1996) refers to as a unified view of reality. This entails that the three spheres of the heavens, the earth and the underworld are in continuous interaction, a sense of community and a sense of the preservation and enhancement of life. These influence the religious beliefs of the people. Since there is no demarcation between the spiritual and material realms, the living and the dead are always in continuous interaction to the extent that the spirit world is only an extension of the material world. As the living live in families and clans, so also it is believed by the Igbo that the dead also live in families and clans. This philosophy underlies the interaction between the living and the dead (Madu, 1996). This in a way explains why the people of Onicha spend fortunes to perform funeral rites for their dead. They want their dead to reach the great beyond so that they will live in the clan of ancestors in the spirit world and continue to contribute to the well-being of the family instead of wandering like worthless spirits without rest and causing harm and havoc to their families. It is believed that when they are given a befitting burial, they rest in peace as they take their rightful place among

the ancestors and will cease to appear as ghosts and spirits to torment people in the community. According to Onunwa (1990), one of the desires of every Igbo man at death is to reach the spirit world and enjoy fellowship with his ancestors. Damnation and punishment mean total exclusion from clan life in the spirit world which forms part of the cycle of return to the human world through the process of reincarnation. (p.97).

Those who died continue to live in one form or the other in the spirit world. Those who lived transparent, honest and moral life and died a good death that is natural death (*onwuchi*) at a very ripe old age received appropriate funeral rites and go to the spirit world (*alammuo*) where they continue to live and eventually return to join their kith and kin here in the human world through the process of reincarnation (Onunwa, 1990). The rites Onicha people perform for their dead invariably explains their belief in ancestors and in the survival of the human person after death. In Onicha, ancestral veneration features prominently on occasions like funeral ceremonies. The period of preparing the dead for burial moves them into a traditional phase when they are neither what they have not been nor yet what they will become. Such moment of transition often involves uncertainty and potential danger. The ritual impurity of the corpse derives from its inability to respond to others, yet, it is still present in their everyday routine.

Accordingly, people pay their respect to the dead, marking their former identity with them, expressing sorrow for the bereaved and by so doing; reaffirm their continued relationship with them. Stories recounting the achievements or character of the dead and supernatural powers may be invoked to forgive any evil the deceased may have perpetrated and to guide them into the afterlife. Gifts and goods are provided to assist the dead to depart from this world to the next world. In Onicha, what qualifies one according to Metuh (1987) are old age; life lived according to acceptable moral standards of the community and appropriate funeral rites. Funeral rites are absolutely necessary because they are regarded as rites of passage by which the dead are installed as ancestors. In Onicha, people see it as a shame if they cannot accord their dead a befitting burial and the community frowns at a family that fails to meet up with this socio-religious obligation. This has placed heavy financial burden on families that are not well to do since this socio-religious obligation requires a lot of money to accomplish. In most cases, families borrow or sell their property to be able to discharge this responsibility. Although very expensive, families consider it essential in order to pacify their dead who may feel offended and begin to appear to the members of the family in dreams to register their grievances or to appear as ghosts and spirits to torment members of the community. On the other hand, if the

funeral rites are not performed, the deceased may not reach the ancestral world to take up his ancestral responsibility of contributing to the welfare of the family. This can bring a family so low in the community and worse still the spirit of the dead will continue to rage and torment the family. So, since reality is unified, families do what they can do to preserve and enhance life so as to be in harmony with other beings like the ancestors and other higher spirits.

Recommendations

To end poverty and wasteful spending created by expensive burials in Onicha community, the following suggestions will suffice.

Government should ban expensive burials. Wealthy families who make celebrations out of burial ceremonies thereby making it expensive should be taxed to serve as a deterrent to others.

This unhealthy competition of “ours must be better than theirs” among families should be frowned at by the community. Families should be encouraged to perform burial ceremonies for their dead within the resources available to them.

The community should come up with a blueprint on what a modest burial ceremony that is affordable to both the rich and the poor should be. Families should realize that huge financial investments on burials amount to a colossal waste of resources since there is no return on such investments.

Conclusion

Death no matter what form it takes is an undesirable element. It creates a feeling of emptiness in the bereaved and brings about sadness and sorrow among the living. But harsh as it appears to be, people have refused to allow death to diminish life. In view of this, Onicha people see death as a transition to another life, that is, a life lived in the spirit world. To them, death is something good and should be celebrated if it occurred in good old age and if the person has offspring and lived a good moral life. To send the dead home, the people believe that he must be buried properly and since he continues to live after death, it is only necessary that they perform the funeral rites so that he will continue to contribute to the welfare of the family. This informs why every family strives to bury their dead at any cost just to ensure that he reaches home. (that is, eternal destination).

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