

The Perception of Death in Ibibio Society: A Cultural Implication

By

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Abstract

From the Ibibio perspective, death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible spiritual ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to the spirit of the ancestral realm. It signifies an inextricable spiritual connection between the visible and the invisible worlds. Death is not a new phenomenon in the history of humanity however, what matters is the perception about it among every Ibibio person. This paper focuses on examining the perception of death in Ibibio and the religiously and culturally informed attitude and belief towards it. This paper adopts the Ibibio worldview. For Ibibios, death is accompanied by a series of the performance of rituals which connect the living dead and the living. The Ibibio culture conceives and perceives death as a grieving process which is not restricted to time. This process is marked by a series of spiritually connecting rituals which have symbolic and material meanings to the living dead and the living, therefore death and mourning are not regarded as discrete activities but circular processes which stretch over time. This work reveals that African indigenous ways of dealing with death are still not recognized, respected and understood in organizations which have a dominant western culture.

Keywords: Death, perception, Ibibio Society, cultural.

Introduction

In Ibibio traditional society, death is that inevitable end of man. It is the most disrupting phenomenon in every society Mbiti, (1980) said "finally comes death, that inevitable and, in many societies, most disrupting phenomenon of all". It is something that concerns everybody, partly because it brings loss and sorrow to families and communities. Death is a subject that is most frightening to man. Hence, the topic of death is an avoided one. It is more or less a taboo for scholars to write on death. Thus, Giddens (1990), observes:

For us death tends to be a subject that goes undiscussed. It is taken for granted that people are frightened of dying, and thus doctors or relatives quite commonly hide from a mortality ill person the news that he will shortly die.

The denial of death has been described as functional. Kimmel. (1980), accepts the functionality of death denial thus:

At the deepest levels of our being, denial of death is probably necessary to function in a world where accidents, illnesses, wars and killings are present. We may need to feel that these events will happen to others not to us, or we would be unable to take risks, drive cars, or even leave the house.

In Ibibio, nobody wants to see or discuss about anything that will remind him of death. Yet we cannot do without such things as witnessing the scene of a fatal motor accident, visiting a neighbour who is terminally ill at home or in the hospital, sighting coffins either being displayed by their producers or being carried by people who are about to bury their death, and seeing feeble aged. Everybody feels that he shall surely never die, yet death is obviously inevitable for every person, perhaps that is why Kimmel (1980), remarks;

...as we become more aware of our own mortality and our fears of death, we may become more comfortable in relations with older people and with terminally ill people of any age. In our own lives also, we may find that the uniqueness of each day may be more appreciated that if the finiteness of life is ignored and each day is seen as just one more of an endless flows of days.

Death is the most certain phenomenon in human life. It is something that concerns everybody (Feifel, 1973). This is partly because sooner or later everyone personally faces it and partly because it brings loss and sorrows to every family and community (Mbiti, 1980). Death is that depredator which suddenly turns human joy to sorrow and leave a mark behind wherever it struck.

Although life is inevitably subject to termination and device, there are still differences in the way individuals and groups perceive the end of it. The differences in the perception of death by individuals and groups runs on different understanding of life itself such as life being seen from the religious perspective, cultural perspective as well as scientific perspective. Which interpreting life scientifically, may result in preparing for death based on doctor's report and other scientific evidence, those who see death from religious perspective are more or less interested in the religious injunctions about death, those who

are perceiving death from the cultural end of the pendulum consider other factors which can be responsible for someone's death. These factors include the enemies who use spiritual powers to cause misfortune, the deities that can strike people if they offend the gods and other spiritually connected forces, which can end human life.

Similarly, Frank (1977), maintained that the inevitability nature of death made it a somewhat challenge to the perception and understanding of the individuals that end up in search of consolation. According to Frank, spiritual belief and the level of civilization an individual had attained can significantly affect the understanding perspective one may have about death. The way death is perceived in Africa in general and among the young ones is unique compares to other parts of the world. Viewing death in the African perspective, only the elders are assumed to have finished their assignment on earth and can be perceived as due to go home to their ancestors; anything beyond that is the hand work of the enemy thus, if a young person dies it is naturally unacceptable.

Death, It's Meaning

Kalish (1976), defines death as a process of transition that starts with dying and ends with being death. Atchley (1980), describes a dying person as one identified as having a condition for which no recovery can be expected. Dying, according to him is a period during which the organism loss its viability, the term dying trajectory refers to the speed with which a person dies, that is, the rate of decline in functioning.

To Atchely (1980), therefore, the word death refers to a point in which a person becomes physically death. Thus he observes that "often which we say that someone died yesterday we are not referring to the entire dying process but instead to its final product". The moment in time when a person becomes dead was once considered an easy practical issue to resolve. But in recent times, science has made it possible to stimulate artificially both breathing and heart beat. Consequently, there is a lot of argument about the point at which a person is actually dead. Booth (1977), sees death as a failure of the positive forces and disintegration of man into his constituent parts. It is the final rites of passage which like birth or marriage, is universally accepted as socially significant event characterized by rituals.

Mbiti (1980), views death as that phenomenon which stands between the world of human begins and the world of the spirits, said:

Man has since accepted death as part of the natural rhythm of life; and yet, paradoxically, every human death is thought to have external causes, making it both natural and unnatural

Kastenbaum (1975), observes that death can be looked at socially. He notes that people are socially dead when we no longer treat them as people but as unthinking and unfulfilling object. Social death, according to him, occurs when people talk about a dying person rather than to the dying person even when the dying person is capable of hearing and understanding what is being said. Usually, social death occurs before physical death.

Varying Perceptions of Death

Death means different things to different people. What death means to people determines their approach to their own death as an ugly and meaningless extinction of life while others see it as a beautiful and meaningful transition to a new and better type of life (Atchley, 1980). That is, some people see death as hateful destruction while others see it as a welcome release.

Back (1971), examined the meaning of death through ratings of various metaphors about what death is like (Atchley, 1980). He finds little age variation in the meaning of death among people within the community who were over 48. He observes that there is significant sex difference in the meaning of death. Women tend to be accepting death; they seem to see it as a peaceful thing. In fact, they tend to see death as most like a "compassionate mother and as an understanding doctor". On the other hand, men tend to see death as an antagonist as a "grinning butcher" or as "hangmen with bloody hands".

The most common idea of death is fear (Atchley, 1980). Whether fear of death is inevitable or a learned response is an unresolved issue. But whatever their cause, death fears exist. Kastenbaum (1975) and Kalish (1976), have noted that older people do not appear to be extremely afraid of death that is older people express less death fear than the younger people do. Kastenbaum adds that there appears to be no tendency for death fears to increase among older people with terminal conditions while among the young, terminal illness increases the prevalence of death fears.

Kalish (1976), attributes the lower prevalence of death fears in the face of a higher prevalence of death to several factors. These include, firstly, that older people who live past the age they expected have a sense of living on "borrowed time"; secondly, that older people see their lives as having less prospects for the future and less value; and, thirdly,

that dealing with the deaths of friends can help socialize older people toward the acceptance of their own death.

Furthermore, fear of death depends, to some extent, on religiosity Kalish (1976), reports that the most consistent finding is that people who are strongly religious show less death fears. On the other hand, uncertain and sporadically religious people show greater death fears. Garfield (1974), reports that people who use psychedelic drugs or who practice meditation have lower death anxiety than do others (Atchley, 1980). Kalish remarked that because "altered mind states" tend to blur ego boundaries, death of self is less threatening to people familiar with such mental states. Kimmel (1980), observes that blurring boundaries of ego in old age serves as a mechanism for transcending pain, and Kalish (1976), feels that this blurring may be related to the lower prevalence of death fears among older people.

Culture and Perception of Death in Traditional Ibibio Societies

Among the Ibibio traditional society, death is attached with such sacredness such that it is becoming harder for people to see it as natural phenomenon other than human induced. This is becoming worst especially in the era when a lot of socio-economic is fuelling the low life expectancy and health factors in the Ibibio society. In the understanding of majority of traditional Ibibio people, it is assumed or rather believed that death before certain age in life is unnatural and therefore is connected to invisible powers. According to Umo (1986), this attitude to death has done more harm than good to the families and households even communities where such attitude is dominant. In most societies in Africa especially in Ibibio rural communities, there is a lot of bitterness which is overly shown after burial. In most cases, some individuals or even families have to avoid the burial scene reasons ranging from the fear of being accused to some people avoiding being bewitched at the area out of fear, some people decide to leave the community during the burial to avoid trouble. In most cases, such deliberate avoidance is interpreted as tacit signs of guilt, and the houses and other personal belongings of such people are often destroyed.

In most African societies (Ibibio inclusive), rejecting the possibility of people dying of a natural cause of death is inevitable is becoming the perfect way of coping psychologically with moment of grief. Without certifying in their subconscious mind that this is who or what killed their loved ones, the typical African Society members find it difficult to accept death's inevitability. Consequently, since it is not easy to lay hand on any physical and reliable scientific explanation that can convince the bereaved especially with poor health system, the nearest argument becomes the witchcraft and spiritual enemies. In like

manner, an illness, which does not yield to medicine, must be attributed to other baneful forces, ranging from the spiritual foes to the gods and deities.

Among the Ibibio of southern Nigeria the various names given to presumably incurable diseases project such as unnatural and the handwork of an enemy or the gods. Due to the poor health system and lack of health information among the poor masses, there are a number of ailments, for instances, paralysis, (*akpa-ubeng*) epilepsy (*nduo-unam*), elephantiasis (*iwa-ukot*) etc. which according to popular belief does not strike their victims naturally. Such diseases are always said to be inflicted upon one, or as they put locally, "given to victims by enemies". Spiritual beings have the power to influence human life positively or negatively in the context of African culture. On their own accord, or if incited by wicked people, they could inflict misfortune of a serious magnitude on people, ranging from physical and mental sickness to barrenness, accidents, premature deaths, drought, poor harvest, unfulfilled life, and personal failure.

The demons could implement the evil designs directly or indirectly through the agency of wicked persons. The belief and attitude towards death and dying is a subject to experience from the environment and culture in which one lives. By implications, what people show as attitude toward death and dying is typically the reflection of his cultural background including religious belief. In Ibibio society, belief and attitude towards death and dying is mostly related to cultural background, religious belief, and level of civilization.

The Ibibio Conception of Death

The Ibibio belief that life is consisting of discrete stages, starting with conception and ending with death. Death therefore marks the end stage of life. On dying, the dead person literally cease to exist. On the contrary, an Ibibio world view understands death as an integrated and continuous developmental life process which is inseparable from the interwoven connections between the visible and invisible ontologies. People do not cease to exist once they are physically dead, instead, they transcend to the spiritual world to live in the community of the living death (Mbiti, 1990, Ramose, 2002a & Bujo, 1998). For indigenous Ibibio people, marks a further the developmental milestone which is not separates from life developmental processes and stages, for the Ibibio, dying is a transition to or growing" to a different phase of being. The dead transcends to the state of collective immortality and exists in the company of the spirits.

Motsei (2004), emphasis on the spiritual connectedness by reminding us that when we die, we transcend to heaven, the heaven is however here on earth, like birth, death is characterized by a series of cultural rituals and rites of passage which at times continue for

the duration of the mourning period, as long as the living dead is remembered and continues to influence the actions of the living. The mourning or grieving process cannot therefore be linked or limited to some time span in a discrete sense. It is for this reason that the Ibibio's take time off from work when their loved ones are dead, to perform rituals that eternally connect them to the deceased. Therefore from an indigenous Ibibio ontological viewpoint, death does not imply an end to life, instead, it marks the beginning of another phase of being (Kings, 2013). The process of reincarnation, in which Ibibio belief, allows life process. The meaning of reincarnation here should not be understood in the western ancestors amongst others, to return to their families in their grandchildren, to maintain this never ending evolutionary sense of the dead coming back in a different form or spices. Instead, it emphasis different forms of remembering and acknowledging the ever present spiritual beingness of the living dead, dreams are also forms of communication which maintain this unbreakable connectedness. For traditional Ibibio society, the living dead are an inseparable and influential part of their being. It is for this reason that wen Ibibio perform rituals by the grave side for example that they do not refer to connecting with the dead person's spirit. They communicate with the living dead as, 'I am talking to my father or mother or grandfather, not the spirit or body of my dead father or dead mother'. This is a clear illustration that the living dead are regarded as genuinely and authentically living with and among the living and having an influence on them.

Burial: The Ibibio Survey and View

Death is always followed by burial in every society. At death the human corpse becomes useless and valueless, but great importance is attached to the manner in which it is disposed of whatever may be the perception of death among groups in the world, there is always burial which is performed according to the belief of the people. Indeed, every society develops, through time, norms for treating the dead.

Bendann (1930) observes that man is the only creature known to bury his dead. In their attempt to trace the origin of religion, archaeologist has suggested that the Neanderthals were the first hominids to bury their dead. In fact, the fact that Neanderthals buried their dead and put objects in graves has convinced many anthropologists that they conceived of an after-life (Kottak, 1991). The practice of burying the dead may not have been motivated by hygienic considerations, but by ideas developed by primitive people concerning the place of man after death (Bendann 1930). Therefore, the act of committing a dead body to the mother earth is not a practice that is learned or initiated, it is that which is associated with human nature.

Ordinarily, bereavement brings special pain and grief to the human soul. Often, it has an adverse impact on the health of those left behind and has been known to precipitate illness and sometimes death. No matter which member of a family dies, there is always a great sense of loss. Thus, the adage, "when your parent dies, you have lost your past but when your child dies you have lost your future". (Udoh, 1998).

When one lost somebody, the distress that follows can be beyond description. In Ibibio society, pressure to adhere to certain burial practices and customs can add to the grief associated with bereavement. But the consolation is always found in the fact that if the person is given a befitting burial he or she would continue his life in the world beyond. Thus, Michael (1992) observes:

The psychological state of mind of the bereaved as expressed through cultural prescription holds that if a befitting burial is not accorded the dead, something sinister would befall the immediate relatives of the deceased.

The general perception of Ibibio people about burial centers around the act of committing a dead body to the mother earth, but the act of burial in the different African societies varies perhaps according to customs. The Mbuti pygmies of Zaire do not have time for elaborate preparation of corpse. The corpse is immediately buried at the spot where death occurred. But among the Edo of Western Nigeria, there are mortuary rites in which many days of preparation precedes the actual burial of the corpse in a place chosen by the eldest son of the deceased.

Funeral is the "last of the rites of passage". Ekong (1983) notes that the importance attached to funeral rites is motivated by the beliefs of the people that man is totally free from all sort of problems at death. Thus, Africans believe that the day in which death calls is far more better than that in which there is birth. In fact, Africans hold the belief that in death, one is only transiting into another world.

Similarly, the belief in reincarnation motivates people to accord their dead a befitting burial: Mbiti (1969), observes that Africans are compelled by the belief in reincarnation to bury their dead the way they do, at least in a more proper way. In this regard the burial of children is given particular attention. A child whose reincarnation is desired is buried side-ward, in a sleeping position with fine cloths (Mbiti, 1969). In that case the mother must weep seriously. By this, the dead will accept that he was really loved by his people and so will reincarnate into the same family. But in the burial of a child whose reincarnation is not desired, he is buried face downward in a shallow grave with thorn mats and rags. Nobody

weeps for such child. The process of burying this category of children signifies rejection and dissociation, which, in essence, means that the dead will not be motivated to reincarnate into such a family (Mbiti, 1969).

Generally, burial rites place emphasis on where the dead is buried, the time burial takes place and, probably how the burial is done (Udoh, 1998). Pincus (1975), observes that people are usually buried within the house or secretly in the bush to avoid the deception of the grave and mutilation and or decapitation of the corpse by enemies or head hunters. For example, the Yoruba culture forbids the act of burying the dead afar off from their places of abode (Awolalu, 1970). There is the common belief among the Yoruba that to bury somebody in the common cementries (as done by some Christians) is to cast him or her out and to loose contact with such a person. This is because regular ancestral veneration which involves pouring of libations, breaking kola nuts and praying on the grave of the deceased would not be convenient and domestic (Awolalu 1970).

Ibibio see no wall of demarcation between the visible and invisible worlds. They believe that the two shade into each other and overlap. This conception is rooted in the fact that what links the dead with the affairs of this physical world is the dead's ability to hear. This is the belief of Ibibio and is evident in their proverbs. Thus, the Annang proverb, "it is the dead man's eyes' that die, not his ears" (Udo, 1998). This is why funerals of the aged and the wealthy are full of pomp and fanfare so that the deceased might hear and be satisfied. Mbiti (1969), notes that although the soul of the dead is separated from the body, it is believed to retain most, if not all, of the physical and social characteristics of its human life.

According to Idowu (1973), the beliefs of Africans in proper burial is a measure of placing the departed in the land of the dead. He notes that people do all that is possible and even impossible just to make a proper burial as the dead is believed to be "in between the land of the dead and the physical world", if no proper burial is done. Since the concept of life after death is a common belief among Africans, it is believed that the dead cannot lead a comfortable life in the next world unless a befitting burial is performed.

Proper burial is enhanced by the desire to make the dead an ancestor (Idowu, 1973) Ancestors are not only worshipped in African societies, they are revered as gods who protect their relatives in the physical world. The dead can become a spirit after burial, but the chances of becoming an ancestor is determined by the type of burial that was accorded him.

Sometimes there exist differences in the burial of different categories of people in the same society. Ekong (1983), reports that among the Ibibio those who belong to certain organisations, cults or secret societies are given a type of burial that is quite different from that of non members. In the case of a member of the Ekong society, the corpse is usually installed on a chair in a room, the roof of which has been partially removed. A goat is slaughtered and placed as a footstool under its feet while a gong (Ekere) is affixed to its left hand. On the right hand, the corpse holds the gong beater and on its waist, a long strip of white cloth is tied, the loose end of which is tied to the beam at the roof top and to the thigh of a live cock. Whenever the cock moves, the gong is struck thereby giving the semblance of the dead man actually hitting the gong. As this happens, the people shout and sing praise of the departed. This arrangement, according to Ekong (1983), is peculiar to members of this society and is supposed to signify that such people die happily and enter the land of the ghost triumphantly.

Udoh (1998), describes burial and burial rites among the Annang of Akwa Thom State. He reports that the Annang believe that death is a transition or journey to another world. It is only a befitting burial that can make this possible. He also reports that the Annang believe in reincarnation and in the power of the ancestors to protect the living members of the family. Also, they believe that the dead will only become an ancestor after the necessary burial rites have been observed.

Among the Annang not everybody is given a benefiting burial. According to Udoh (1998), burial is determined by the type of death an individual suffered. The people believe that burial must not be accorded those who die "evil death". Evil death includes death by suicide, abortion, drowning etc. These types of death are abomination among the Annang. Those who die evil deaths are denied proper burial. They are either thrown into an open pit or left in a specific forest to rot away.

Burial rites among the Annang involve sacrifices but not in all cases (Udoh, 1998) Sacrifices are performed at the burial of one who is believed to be killed by the gods. This is so because such deaths are abomination. It is believed that if the sacrifice is not performed, the earth goddess would not only show its annoyance by mysteriously sending the corpse out of the grave at night, it will also cause more deaths among the people.

Furthermore, the Annang believe that the dead constantly interact with their living relatives (Udoh 1998). He participates in almost every activity in the community. Consequently, food must be kept for him at the same place he had been eating his food when he was alive. Sometimes the dead send messages in dreams to their relatives if

nothing is kept for them at the appropriate spot. The Annang also believe that the dead can turn their spirits into certain animals like snakes, lions etc. These animals appear only when the need arises.

Udoh (1998), also notes that certain categories of corpses are buried secretly. These include those who die of swollen stomachs, feet and, even, the whole body. The people believe that such people have offended the gods and as such are punished with such disease. Their corpses are buried secretly to avoid public humiliation. There is always a great deal of sacrifice at such burials. Such sacrifice is meant to appease the gods of the evil done by the dead person.

Also among the Annang chiefs and prominent individuals are not buried during the day rather in the night. Usually, plantain trunks are kept in their coffins (Udoh, 1998). In fact, they are buried with them. These categories of people are buried amidst several gun salutes, dancing and feasting which normally take several days.

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