Ending Home Burials in Igbo Land

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Abstract

For Igbos, the nearer the graves of their loved ones are close to the homes the better. They cringe at the possibility of taking their dead relations away to be interred elsewhere. Thus, the departed occupy the same grounds, sometimes lie below the earth under the same roof, with the living. In some communities, households have reached their limits of taking anymore within the compounds, but relations still will find spots for them. The colonialists came with the cemetery pattern; but it was discontinued few years after colonization. People may be unwilling to continue with it because of supernatural beliefs and a host of other reasons. A collective burial place confers dignity to a community. It is important that some officials allocate positions for the burials. People who bury their relations in cemeteries do not in the real sense leave their relations behind. In many cities around the world, the burial ground comes easily to view. A collective burial place enables a society to keep tag on those who passed away in the current and previous generations. Having our dead nearby is undeniably glorious, it should be discouraged, because the disadvantage outweighs the advantages. This article has been influenced by the need to correct this anomaly in the Igbo society. The article serves as a reminder to Igbos that the dead finding repose in public cemeteries has once been adopted, and it worked well. Furthermore, it makes suggestions how this can be made possible.

Key words: supernatural beliefs, culture, burial, honorable, canon

Introduction

Igbo culture places high value on life. This is illustrated in the Igbo word mmandu, whose English equivalent is man. When we break up this word, we have 'mma' and 'ndu.' Mma is the Igbo word for beauty while ndu means life. Mma and ndu

taken together means the beauty of life. Like man, life is celebrated in the word urine. In Igbo, it is mmammiri. Mmiri is water. Combined with mma, it gives us the 'the beauty of water' in a direct translation. It can be said to glorify urine. What it informs us is that the waste water we discharge is beautiful.

Even though Igbo culture reveres life, Igbos, in history, have been involved in the most gruesome brutalization and annihilation of life. Like any other people, they have participated in the traumatization of populations through wars. When stories of conquests are told, they sound engaging, but victims go through terror. Igbo communities have not spared Igbo communities, and put up captured people, male and female sale as slaves. They have cast away the weak who were thought to have been afflicted by diseases understood as curses from the gods. They have done terrible things. How appropriate is the word mmandu in such a society when one contemplate s the tragedies of the osus and umes, who are outcasts? Ironically, Igbos do not have any history of capital punishment. An Igbo is guilty of being perpetually involved in self-preservation in all these instances. The sense of loss, when it has to do with death, is deep.

Egyptian kings sought to cheat death through mummification of dead royals, who were embalmed and placed in chambers, to rise eventually from the dead. The burial places were inside their castles and not in cemeteries. Rosalie and Baker describe some of what transpired in Egypt thus,

> Following precedent, the new king Djoser began making plans for his tomb. He knew well the religious traditions governing royal tomb design: a burial chamber and surrounding rooms sunk deep into bedrock with a mudbrick superstructure covering them. Today, Egyptologists refer to these tomb structures as mastabas, from the Arabic word mastaba, meaning "bench"—and they do indeed have a benchlike shape. Djoser was also well acquainted with the colorful exteriors of these tombs, especially the mud-brick paneling, which was painted in bright colors to resemble the matting found outside Egyptian homes. (21)

Native Americans have a culture of attachment to their ancestral burial grounds. The Native Americans wonder how people can cut the links that tie them to their burial sites and leave to other places. Jews also practice this attachment to the

homestead. It is the reason why the Jews believe that a disconnection from the land of Israel has consequences (Young 223).

People have developed different forms of funerals these days. Clearly, the practices were copied from overseas. A lot of businesses have been linked to the funerals, making them complex. But relations use these various forms to express their deep love for the departed. Makeup artists are employed while a caterer appears with a whole cooking structure for the meals of the day, paid for by the bereaved, whose friends, relations and relations' friends may have put in fortunes for the burials. Smart gives names to the burial plans and programs as they occur in Ontario Canada. She discloses some of them thus,

> In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, most communities had undertakers. Mainly cabinetmakers or furniture store owners, undertakers would go to the home of the deceased and look after an assortment of responsibilities, including preparing the corpse, supplying the casket or any other necessities, arranging the funeral service with the appropriate religious leader, notifying friends and family, and making arrangements for the burial. Like any other business, undertakers advertised in the local paper or directory, offering the highest quality at an affordable cost. Aspiring to be professionals, they also began to build associations, publish journals, and establish schools of training. By the early 1880s an Embalmers' Association had been formed in Ontario. In the United States, the term "funeral director" was in place and the National Funeral Directors Association was created in 1884. (77-78)

In Nigeria, a burial almost involves all arms of the economy. People are seen at the funeral grounds in the premises of the bereaved in groups, adorning group uniforms for that particular burial. The budget size of funerals in Igbo land has increased to frightening levels. The bereaved are indifferent to the realities of the time. This is how they now relate to their losses. Nwinya gives account how many people exhibit wealth at burials. He recalls how

> Recently, Simon Odo, a popular native doctor from Aji in Igbo-Eze North of Enugu State was buried in a car. People had it that the car was worth eight million naira. The car engine was said to be on with the native doctor's favourite song playing in the vehicle which served as coffin. This was said to

> signify his smooth transit to the spiritual world 1 . Similarly, Late Anthony Obiagoso Enukeme, CEO Tonimas Oil and Gas, was buried in a casket worth thirty-four million naira in August 2020. If casket could gulp such a whooping sum, one wonders what the total cost of the entire funeral could be. (89)

The trend continued, as Nwinya mentions another such event, when in

> July 2021, the whole South East Nigeria was shut for the burial of Innyom Ezinne Uche Iyiegbu, mother of Obinna Iyiegbu (Obi Cubana), at Oba Anambra State. Nigeria and the entire world were amazed at the culture of profligacy and wastage orchestrated at the event that lasted more than a week. (89)

Burying at Home in Igbo Land

European missionaries left, as landmarks cemeteries in various Igbo communities. The burial places were either situated in the Catholic or Anglican church premises or in a school compound. Many of them are not in use today. The place usually appears bald, as it is often swept clean by villagers. Trees are also sparse in the areas. Cemeteries have disappeared where the original owners of spaces have reclaimed their lands. Fears are rife that corpses and tombs may not be found intact if buries unguarded places (Olayinka). Governments and communities do not invest in cemeteries. Therefore, relations fear that the corpses of their loved ones would be out of their control and oversight. All investments and services for cemeteries have long been withdrawn in a return to the old ways. The corpse, it is thought, is an asset to the adversary of the family of the deceased. People can collect as much spiritual powers as possible from the body of a corpse. Money-yielding.. can be tapped from the corpse. People have been accused of manipulating a corpse to spiritually attack the bereaved family. They will take away the love the dead has for the loved ones and make the dead appear as a ghost to torment his own people. Keeping away those mischievous fellows and foiling any plans that can only be achieved by burying the corpse at home. They can also be hindered by a ritual performed in the Christian religious way or the Igbo traditional way. Besides, some people use corpses, through desecration, to score points against foes. A corpse is thought to be a weapon in the hands of the enemy. In Germany, police are called in occasionally over desecration of Jewish burial sites. It is thought that it diminishes the dead and his or her relations. The German

state is usually alarmed because of the dishonor it brings to the state and the Jewish community in Germany gets a lot of solidarity speeches and wishes. Concerns are raised if it is found out that a foe got close to a grave of … The deceased's relations may be disheartened that a diabolical .. may have been planted in the grave. Smart gives insight into Jewish funeral traditions. It can be said that, among the Igbos, process Smart describes below extends to not only when the body is lowered to the ground, but one that is unceasing. Smart remarks,

> From the moment of death until after burial the body was not left alone. This practice, called guarding or watching, is also based on the principle of honouring the dead. A family member would have passed the time by reciting psalms while watching over the deceased.6 Embalming is forbidden in the Jewish faith. (134)

In popular Igbo belief, when a man omits a rite due his father, such as sending him at burial with a cow, the father can strike him dead through a shrapnel at a similar burial event by the usual character of the attack, it is only the wrong doer that attracts the flying object, picking just this person in a crowd. The truth is that shooters of canons at funeral sites where the canons have to pop off restraining pack of sand do not move away enough from a crowd, making mourners targets of missiles. Igbos make holes at funeral grounds and insert canons containing carbide, which goof when lit. the sound is earth-shaking. The impact on a tree is amputation of a branch. A human cannot survive it. It is positioned to point and eject heaven wards, but can conduct itself the way it pleases. Nwinya gives us a large figure of the canon shots fired at a particular ceremony. He says, "with an average of three sets of fifty rounds of canon shot per a day (89)."

The death of an Igbo person in Europe, Asia or North America raises the question of the final resting place. When the fund is there, it points most often to the ancestral compound. They activate a system that draws money from a fund from a collective pool by an association the deceased belonged to. Increasing number of people join such unions for such benefits. Financial members usually enjoy such treatment, with a monthly financial contribution. There are other motivations, though. Lamentations are grim whereby the deceased does not belong to any union. They settle for a low-profile interment in the country of transition. But the soul may have a very tortuous journey (Adewumi).

A lot of realities now interfere with that disposition. When it is the trip of the children of the dead to think of where home is, they might think of the USA and would be bewildered to think that their parent may be buried in a foreign land. When the real figure of sending a corpse home is considered where funs are low, home not be preferred. It would damage the reputation of a wealthy family if one of their own who seeks medical treatment overseas loses the battle outside and the corpse is not brought back home. The stay overseas is never for a wealthy Igbo or Nigerian who travels overseas for treatment dies. Oftentimes, when death is certain to happen in a short time, to lighten the cost of conveyance, the journey back home is set rolling. People are witnesses to the unbearable pains the person that arises since the rural areas are starved of medical facilities, but the path of honor triumphs. There is absence of a medical practitioner or hospital equipment. The person is left with a nurse, and can only achieve what the contents of her bag … People rarely want to be under the radar of possible village gossip.

Burial in Other Cultures

When a person dies in Nigeria, his teenage children may perform the roles of the medics. They lift the unconscious corpse into a tricycle, and stay with him in the entire one-hour ride on bumpy roads, and check him into hall of full of naked corpses of young and old, female and male. After wards, they leave with a tag. In Germany, when death happens at home, an ambulance with medics is called in. how the corpse is conveyed is not the job of the bereaved, but only the destination of … is … The corpse arrives at the point of interment. But a lot of documentation goes on. Corpses of strangers do not come in the sight of the relations in any form. The manner they died is still visible; injuries and shock on the face. A burial spot is booked at the cemetery chosen by family or friends. Categories of graveyards exist. Therefore, affordability is considered.

The death and burial places are recorded, the information entered into a system. It means that Google search can take one to a location where a familiar person is buried. The place of the living is the place of the living. It does not double as a burial ground. This is similar to what Smart says when she observes thus,

> Early church records do exist, but unfortunately formal burial registers are quite rare. Again, burials for a particular church are probably mixed in with baptisms and marriages in the church register. An example of an early church

> register is the one kept by Reverend John Langhorn, an early Church of England minister in the Fredericksburgh area. This register includes burials from 1787 to 1813 in Fredericksburgh and is available on the Internet. Other useful church records include church bulletins and newsletters. Births, marriages, and deaths could be included along with other news items to keep parishioners up-to-date. Some church records have been microfilmed and are available on inter-library loan from the Ontario Archives. The archives' Church Records Collection has records for more than 60 Ontario churches that existed at some point during Ontario's history. Some of these records have very early dates and you may be fortunate to find a church of interest there (172).

In Nigeria, this is even done at a place of residence, where the ancestral home has been overrun by urban development. It is even said that a family can take care of this problem by quitting a tenant, lowering the corpse of their relation in the apartment, ceiling it up and get it ready for another unsuspecting tenant.

German law does not permit unapproved burial of a cat or dog in the place of abode. To open the earth and put in anything of that significance, the act must be accounted for. German cities have cemeteries that can compete with some districts in size. Burial spots are reused, though. In some places, all there are to see are burial grounds. The sights can be discomforting, but the dead once enjoyed the comforts of great mansions in the city as house owners.

Remarkably, many German cities have Jewish cemeteries. A Jewish burial place is known as Judische Friedhof. In the city of Mainz, the Judische Friedhof has been one of the city's four burial grounds, although it is now under lock for decades due to the circumstances of the Jews in Germany. It is like that until a solution is found to whatever led to the current status. The cemetery has marks of old age and abandonment. It should fall under the class of cemeteries with real, long history. In what looks like a forestry area is what is called Waldfriedhof or forest cemetery. Here, there is a criss-cross of burial spots, with more trees than any place of repose can have (Steinbrecher).

Northern cities of Kano and Maiduguri in Nigeria allot places for public burials. There are two along two major roads leading to the airport. The one at Brigade Quarters was meant for Lebanese dead. Generally, the burial grounds of Kano and Maiduguri are unsightly; perhaps, partly due to indifference by the state government. Lagos state has a more improved cemetery management. Normal behavior is almost ruled out when people contemplate cemetery officials. When interviewed, even some of these officials make outrageous claims like interacting with the dead (Olajide et al).

Conclusion

The cemetery system should be reactivated in Igbo land. Since Igbos believe death is a stage in the physical life, they should adjust how it is accounted for; to relinquish control of the corpse and concede to a collective home place for the dead. Culture should be cherished, but we should not forget that there is the good and the bad in culture. When there are better practices, then the old ways can be discarded. There are replicas of military cemeteries all over the world, copied from outside. It is an addition to the cemetery concept. Much attention is given to one in Arlington, Virginia in the U.S. anything linked to it is honorable. To the U.S. government's connection to it makes the cemetery a child of good fortunes. Americans have such fondness for the place that the thought of one's relation lying there lightens the pain of loss. A burial place forfeiting tombstones makes tending to the place and movement around it less cumbersome. Crosses simply mark positions when it is viewed from a distance. Names and other particulars are inscribed on the cross. It is an aspect of life that can be embraced in a way that will not hurt us. Urban plan must not overlook the various forms of living and dying. Transition can be fun sometimes.

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