

## rites of transition: cultural significance of death and burial rites of the ikwerre, rivers state

CHINDA, C. IZEOMA

Department of History and International Diplomacy  
Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt.  
Email: izeoma.chinda@ust.edu.ng

### Abstract

*Death, a universal human experience, is perceived and responded to in diverse ways across cultures. Among the Ikwerre of Rivers State, death is regarded as a transitional phase, marking the passage from the physical realm to the spiritual domain. This study delves into the traditional death and burial customs of the Ikwerre, highlighting the spiritual significance of ancestral veneration, the roles of family members and community elders, and the socio-political implications of burial rites. Employing a qualitative approach, this research draws on primary sources, including oral traditions and histories, supplemented by secondary sources such as textbooks, journals, and seminar papers. The findings underscore the importance of preserving cultural heritage while navigating contemporary realities, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the Ikwerre's rich cultural traditions.*

**Keywords:** Burial rites, Death, Ancestral veneration, Rites of passage, Ikwerre, Rivers State.

### Introduction:

Death is a universal and mysterious experience that has fascinated humans across cultures and centuries (Mbiti, 1980, p. 110). In many African societies, including the Ikwerre, death is not merely the cessation of life but a significant passage into the ancestral realm (Talbot, 1969, p. 470). This notion is deeply ingrained in the spiritual beliefs and communal values of the Ikwerre, who perceive death not as termination, but as a seamless continuity, wherein the deceased merges with the ancestral collective, exerting a lasting influence on the living (Idowu, 1973, p. 168).

The Ikwerre, an ethnic group from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, have a rich cultural heritage that is characterized by a strong sense of community and a deep reverence for the ancestors. In Ikwerre society, the concept of death is closely tied to the concept of the afterlife, which is believed to be a continuation of life on earth (Mbiti, 1980, p. 111). The Ikwerre believe that the deceased continues to play an active role in the lives of their descendants, offering guidance, protection, and wisdom (Talbot, 1969, p. 471).

The significance of burial rites in Ikwerre society cannot be overstated. These rites serve as a critical means of ensuring a smooth transition for the deceased into the afterlife, while also maintaining harmony between the living and the dead (Idowu, 1973, p. 169). The proper execution of burial customs is believed to avert spiritual retribution, while funeral ceremonies provide a platform for social status reinforcement, community convergence, and cultural expression.

Furthermore, burial rites in Ikwerre society are often characterized by elaborate ceremonies and rituals, which are designed to honor the deceased and ensure their safe passage into the afterlife (Mbiti, 1980, p. 112). These ceremonies typically involve the performance of traditional music and dance, the recitation of prayers and incantations, and the offering of sacrifices and libations to the ancestors (Talbot, 1969, p. 472). This paper undertakes an exploratory examination of the death and burial customs of the Ikwerre, with a particular focus on the evolving nature of these practices amidst the intersecting forces of modernization, Christianity, and urban migration. By examining the historical and cultural contexts of Ikwerre burial rites, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of death and dying in African societies.

### **Death (ÉÑWÚ) in Ikwerre Metaphysical Thought**

In the rich cultural mosaic of Ikwerre traditional society, death occupies a profound significance, evoking complex emotions and sparking existential inquiries (Tasie, 1999, p. 182). The Ikwerre people's perception of death is deeply rooted in their metaphysical understanding of the world, where the cessation of breath (okhebi iwhe) marks the transition from the world of the living to the realm of the ancestors (Mbiti, 1980, p. 111). This transition is not merely a physical phenomenon but a spiritual one, imbued with cultural and traditional significance.

The Ikwerre believe that death is an inevitable part of life, a temporal interruption in the continuum of existence. This perspective is encapsulated in the expression, "enwu bu nye bushu, ozurule ogbahnu" (death is a thief that steals precious relatives) (Tasie, 1999, p. 183). The Ikwerre people's acceptance of death as a natural part of life is tempered by their recognition of its unpredictable nature, as expressed in the saying, "enwu su anya" (death is no respecter of persons) (Idowu, 1973, p. 168).

The circumstances surrounding death are believed to influence the type of burial accorded the deceased. The Ikwerre people distinguish between "good death" (enwu onma) and "bad death" (enwu ojoo), with the latter often attributed to sorcery, ancestral curses, evil spirits, or bad destiny (chi ojoo) (Idowu, 1973, p. 169). The importance of divination in ascertaining the cause of death is underscored by the Ikwerre people's conviction that death must have a cause, and that the deceased's spirit must be appeased to prevent further misfortune (Mbiti, 1980, p. 112).

The Ikwerre people's response to death is, therefore, a complex interplay of cultural, traditional, and metaphysical factors, reflecting their profound respect for the mysteries of life and death. As van Gennep (1960) notes, death is a rite of passage that marks a significant transition in the life cycle of an individual and their community. The grieving process among the Ikwerre people is characterized by intense emotional expression, including mourning and weeping, which serves as a means of negotiating this transition and re-establishing social order (Huntington & Metcalf, 1979, p. 123).

As we transition to the next section, we will explore the process of grieving and mourning among the Ikwerre people, examining the cultural and traditional practices that shape their response to death

### **Cultural Significance of Burial Practices in Ikwerre (Olili-izu)**

Burial rites are an integral part of human culture, influenced by customs and traditions specific to each society (Onu, 2018, p. 87). In Africa, for example, burial ceremonies are a sacred and emotional experience, underscoring the communitarian nature of grief (Shorter, 2000, p. 122). This collective participation allows the community to share their grief with the deceased's family and highlights the significance attached to the sanctity of life and social upheaval caused by death.

As van Gennep (1960) notes, burial rites serve as a transitional phase, facilitating the deceased's passage from the world of the living to the afterlife. In Nigeria, diverse ethnic groups have established guidelines for conducting befitting burials, often dependent on factors such as the cause of death, the deceased's age, and their social standing (Weneka, 2003).

Among the Ikwerre, burial ceremonies are a group affair, involving the entire community in sending off the deceased (Onu, 2018, p. 87). The Ikwerre perform two burial ceremony rites: Olili and Okwuwku. The level of celebration depends on the deceased's social status, involvement in the community, and the financial state of the bereaved family.

The initial burial ceremony, Olili Badu, involves interring the deceased in a casket. This process has been a long-standing tradition, with the act of burial serving as a means of showing respect for the dead (Ogbeifun, n.d.). Prior to the grave's excavation, the Rimene (the deceased's maternal home) must designate the burial site. Community youths then perform the digging.

Notably, the Ikwerre people observe specific customs and rituals during the burial process. For instance, the grave of a Diali Rishi Asato – an individual whose lineage can be traced to eight generations without marrying outside the Ikwerre ethnic nationality – is dug in a carved tunnel grave known as Ali-nkpopor (Onu, 2018, p. 84).

According to Weneka (2003), the Ikwerre perform elaborate death rites, which may vary depending on the deceased's age and the nature of their death. These rites include washing and dressing the corpse, as well as cleaning and washing the mouth with local distilled gin to prevent odour and teeth decay in the afterlife (Weneka, 2003).

As Hertz (1960) argues, death rites serve as a means of reconciling the living with the deceased, and the Ikwerre people's elaborate death rites reflect this notion. Additionally, the deceased's hair, finger, and toe nails are trimmed, and they are bathed and massaged with hot water and oil. This final to bath is considered essential for the deceased's transition into the afterlife.

Failure to perform these ceremonies may result in the restless ghost of the deceased returning to haunt their relatives (Weneka, 2003). The second traditional burial ceremony, particularly for the aged, involves the slaughtering of a cow by the first son of the deceased. This rite is intended to dignify the dead and facilitate their transition into the ancestral plane (Weneka, 2003).

In the case of a titled man (Nye Oha), the burial ceremony is accompanied by the display of the *mkpakpamkpa* – a divination object – and the firing of twenty-one cannon shots to announce the deceased's departure and usher them into ancestorhood. The *npkacamkpa* involves invoking the spirit of the dead into a relation, who will convey the deceased's message to the living.

The Ikwerre people's burial practices are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage, reflecting their values and traditions. For instance, if the deceased was a renowned wrestler, mock wrestling matches are performed during the burial ceremony to honor their memory and celebrate their achievements. Similarly, great hunters and farmers are celebrated with vibrant cultural dances and displays, highlighting their contributions to the community.

The burial site itself holds significant cultural meaning. Traditionally, the deceased is buried in front of their house, symbolizing their connection to their family and community. This practice also serves as a reminder of the deceased's presence and legacy.

In the Akpor community, the burial of a Diali Rishi Asato – an individual whose lineage can be traced to seven generations without marrying outside the Ikwerre ethnic nationality – is a distinctive and sacred ritual. The deceased is laid to rest in an *Ali-nkporpo* funnel grave, which requires a unique grave preparation style. Two graves are dug in close proximity, connected by a hollow entrance, distinguishing them from other graves within the community.

The burial process involves placing the casket through the connecting hollow entrance, allowing it to occupy both graves. This peculiar burial pattern is exclusive to the Akpor community and serves as a testament to their rich cultural heritage. Within the *Iwhnuruohna* ethnic nationality, no other community is known to practice this unique burial method, which is reserved for Akpor families who have maintained their cultural purity through seven generations of marrying within their kingdom.

In many African cultures, the passing of an elderly woman is celebrated as a significant life event, marking the culmination of a life well-lived (Mbiti, 1969). In Ikwerre, the death of a woman at an advanced age is referred to as "*enwu oma*" or "*enwu chia*," and is celebrated by her children and the broader community (Chinda, 2015). This celebration is often accompanied by various rituals and customs, such as the singing of "*Eri Okporo*" by elderly women and the presentation of gifts to the deceased's first daughter, known as "*owho ekperi*" (Onu, 2018).

Similarly, among the *Uvuawhu* clan, the burial of an elderly woman is marked by the beating of the "*Okporo-drum*," while in *Omuawwa*, the burial of "*Ada Asato*" is celebrated with great fanfare (Chinda, 2015). In *Apara* culture, the burial of a woman is accompanied by the ritual of "*Ovu Owu ekperi*," which involves carrying a goat in a basket, while in *Ipo* culture, the equivalent ritual is known as "*Ovu Igwe*" (Onu, 2018). In many of these cultures, women are typically buried within the family compound, either at the side of the house or within the room itself (Chinda, 2015). This practice is rooted in the belief that a person's remains should be laid to rest within their ancestral home, as expressed in the *Elele* and *Ozuaha* proverb, "*ishi diali nta nu mba*" (Onu, 2018).

In *Ozuaha* culture, for example, "*Ele Ada*" (first daughters) are accorded great respect and are buried within their father's *obiri* (Onu, 2018). The "*Ada*" is also responsible for preparing the corpse of a deceased male family member, underscoring their significant role within the family and community.

In stark contrast, the death of a young person is often regarded as unnatural and untimely, and is frequently attributed to witchcraft or the wrath of a deity (Mbiti, 1969). Such deaths are typically marked by great sorrow and mourning, and may involve consultations with diviners to perform sacrifices aimed at preventing similar tragedies in the future.

In Elele cultural group, the traditional burial rites for a deceased male involve laying the corpse in state, where the wife or wives of the deceased are required to sit beside the body throughout the mourning period (Chinda, 2015). Prior to the influence of Christianity, widows were obligated to sit on a specially constructed bed, known as "Ojoo," alongside the corpse. This bed, measuring six feet in length, was crafted from wooden planks and featured steps to facilitate the widow's ascent. Throughout the night, the widow would remain beside the deceased, with a fire lit beneath the *ojoo* to ward off mosquitoes and provide warmth. This poignant ritual was believed to signify the final moment of intimacy between the widow and her deceased husband before his interment.

The role of the *rimene*, or maternal kinsmen of the deceased, is paramount during Elele burial ceremonies. Upon notification of the death, the Rimene must be afforded the opportunity to view the corpse before it is taken for embalming or to the mortuary. Similarly, upon the return of the corpse to the family home, the Rimene must again verify the identity of the deceased. Throughout the burial preparations, the family of the deceased is expected to maintain open communication with the Rimene. A significant aspect of the Rimene's involvement is their responsibility for marking the burial site with an amha-knife, which is subsequently retained by them as a symbol of their participation. The date for the burial is also determined in consultation with the Rimene.

The importance of the Rimene is underscored by the kinship bonds they establish. In a display of solidarity and grief, the youths of the Rimene would traditionally engage in the destruction of economic crops, known as "Oru-ota," on the day of the burial. However, this practice has largely been discontinued in favor of more subdued expressions of mourning. The Rumurinya, comprising married and unmarried daughters of the village, also play a vital role in ensuring that the spouse and children of the deceased fulfill their traditional burial obligations. On the fourth day following the burial, the Rumurinya would perform the ritual of "Okwari eli," dressing the grave and providing solace to the bereaved family. Historically, the Rumurinya would remain with the family for a period of eight days, during which time they would be provided with food and shelter. However, in contemporary times, this practice has been adapted, with the Rumurinya now returning to their homes after the burial and reconvening on the fourth day to perform the Okwari eli ritual.

### **Second Burial Rites among the Ikwerre**

Mourning, referred to as "Ogbe nmkpe" in Ikwerre culture, is a period of intense grief and degradation for women, particularly widows (Chinda, 2015). During this time, Ikwerre women are subjected to various forms of mistreatment, including being labeled as "evil" and "unclean" (Rose Chinda, 12/2/24). They are also required to adhere to a strict set of rules, including refraining from cutting their hair, leaving their fingernails and toenails uncut, and wearing unwashed black clothing (Chinda, 2015).

The duration of the mourning period varies from one to three years, depending on the family's traditions (Chinda, 2015). Pregnant widows are particularly stigmatized, with their condition being regarded as taboo and necessitating sacrifices to appease the gods (Rose Chinda, 12/2/24).

The "Otú rishi nkpe" ceremony marks the end of the mourning period, during which the widow's mourning clothes are burned, her hair is shaved, and her fingernails and toenails are cut (Chinda, 2015). This ritual is followed by the "Okwhukwu" (second burial) ceremony, which is believed to secure the deceased's place in the ancestral world (Weneka, as cited in Chinda, 2015).

The ókwhûkû ceremony is a grand affair, involving the slaughter of animals, including cows and goats, and the performance of various rituals (Weneka, as cited in Chinda, 2015). The ceremony is typically elaborate, with lavish entertainment and feasting (Chinda, 2015).

According to Wanjoku, the *ókwhukú* ceremony is a 16-day program, although it can be shortened depending on the family's financial resources. The ceremony involves various activities, including the raising of the "Njijie Okwuo Kwuo" (burial or memorial flag) and the performance of the "Mkpakamkpa Igwe" ritual (Wanjoku,nd).

The *ókwhuku* ceremony is significant, as it is believed to ensure the deceased's safe passage into the afterlife (Mbiti, 1969). The ceremony also serves as a means of reconciling the living with the deceased, and of seeking blessings and protection for the family and community (Dopamu & Awolalu, 1979).

### **Modern Influences on Ikwerre Burial Traditions**

The Ikwerre people, an ethnic group from Rivers State, Nigeria, have a rich cultural heritage surrounding death and burial. However, the advent of Christianity and Western-style education has significantly impacted their burial traditions, leading to changes in their practices and beliefs surrounding death, burial, and the afterlife (Olumati, 2015).

Christianity's influence has been profound, introducing the concept that all deaths are equal in the eyes of God, and that proper burial should be accorded to all, regardless of the circumstances of death (Tasie, 1999). The Christian doctrine has also led to a shift away from the traditional Ikwerre practice of discarding individuals who died under unfavorable circumstances, known as "enwu ojoo," in the "ohia ojo" (evil forest) (Olumati, 2015).

The Church has replaced traditional religious wakes with more modern practices, such as the Service of Songs and Commendation Service, which are held before interment (Olumati, 2015). The Anglican Communion has established a two-week timeframe for burial, leading to a more structured and formalized approach to mourning and burial (Tasie, 1999).

Western education has also played a significant role in shaping Ikwerre burial culture. With increased access to modern medicine and healthcare, the Ikwerre have come to understand that many deaths attributed to curses or divine wrath are, in fact, caused by diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and malaria (Olumati, 2015).

In addition to Christianity and Western education, other influences of globalizing culture have also impacted Ikwerre burial traditions. The increasing adoption of modern funeral practices, such as embalming and the use of coffins, has led to a decline in traditional burial practices (Kalu, 2017). Urbanization and migration have also led to changes in the way Ikwerre people approach death and burial, with many opting for more modern and convenient funeral practices (Uchendu, 2018).

The impact of globalization on Ikwerre burial traditions is also evident in the increasing commercialization of funeral practices. With the rise of modern funeral homes and mortuaries, the traditional Ikwerre practice of community-based burial has given way to more individualized and commercialized funeral practices (Nwosu, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the influence of Christianity, Western education, and other globalizing cultural forces on Ikwerre burial traditions has been profound. As the Ikwerre people navigate the complexities of modernization and cultural preservation, it is essential to recognize the importance of their traditional burial practices and to find ways to balance cultural heritage with contemporary realities.

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