Traditional Burial Rites in Ughievwen Land of the Western Niger Delta, Nigeria up to 1900.

By

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ABSTRACT

It is universally acknowledged that death is inevitable. This explains why people who loss their beloved ones organise elaborate burial rites for the deceased in order not to render them as outcast in the land of the 'Spirit'. This study investigated traditional burial rites among the Ughievwen, a subset of the Urhobo people of Western Niger Delta, Nigeria. The objective of the study is to demonstrate how traditional values united African Societies until the introduction of Christianity and its values. The study adopted the historical method of investigation. It relied on existing oral traditions of the people and few available literatures to attempt an analysis of traditional burial rites in Ughievwen land considering the difficulty of getting reliable data for the period covered by the study. It was found that adherence to Christian doctrines appears not to have prevented people from inheriting properties left by deceased persons, yet, Christian adherents saw the indigenous rites as fetish. The study concludes that burial rites do not connote fetishism; rather, it is part of culture which need to be sustained so that the people’s culture does not go into extinction.

Keywords: Burial rites, Ughievwen land, Western Delta, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Ughievwen is made up of thirty-two villages and towns with its headquarters at Otughievwen (Otujeremi) covering a total land area of 275 square kilometres. It is bounded on the South by the Forcados River, on the East by Olomu, on the West by Udu clan and on the North by Agbarho and Ughelli¹. The creation of new Local Government Area in 1991 made it possible for Otughievwen (Otujeremi) to become the headquarters of Ughelli South Local Government Area consisting Arhavwarien, Eghwu, Ephronto, Okparabe, Olomu and Ughievwen. It is one of the twenty-two clans in the Urhobo area of the Niger Delta in Nigeria². Whereas the immediate neighbours of the Ughievwen include: Udu, Olomu, Ewhu, Agbarho, Ughelli and Uvwie the distant neighbours are: Isoko, Agbon, Okpe, Ibo and Benin³.
In the pre-colonial times, Ughievwen clan consisted of four sub-clans. They were in the order of seniority: Orhowe, Owahwa, Ukpedi and Uvburie. In the past, the people were mainly fishermen, pottery makers (Oto-Edo people) and native-gin producers. They were also involved in subsistence farming particularly foodstuffs such as plantain, cassava and cocoyam. The economy was diversified embracing food production, fishing, indigenous gin production and crafts like mat production. There was also distribution of various products through exchange system. The implication of these was that the economy became market-oriented which involved the use of the barter system. Therefore, like most precolonial economies of West Africa, it was not entirely subsistence. Internal trade went on amongst the people and the means of exchange was the barter system. Places like Okwagbe, Ekakpamre, Okpare and Warri were outlets where products were sold. However, when the trade in palm oil became the vogue, migrations took place as part of their adaptation to the changing economic system and this took them to far-flunged area like Ikale land in present day Ondo State and parts of Edo State.

It was this naturally endowed and hardworking people that evolved a dynamic culture that reverenced their dead. Before the period of colonial rule, Ughievwen realized quite early that death is a necessary end and that there is life after death. Ughievwen people believed in reincarnation and thus instituted cults for ancestor worship. They also worshipped “elements” (through Igbe) which as Nabofa has argued to have come from Kokori land. Therefore, life being a continuum, and Ughievwen person believed that departed persons continue to play the role of guardian and protector of their families against evil forces and must be entertained with sacrifices to intervene in the affairs of those living, from time to time. Although death at any point, was regarded as undesirable, when it occurred at an old age complimented by accomplishments in life, such death was regarded as natural and thus, the necessary rites were done to facilitate easy passage to the world of the spirits.
In Ughievwen land, death was classified into two – death at ripe age characterized by accomplishments and the type regarded as ‘bad’ death. The later included death by drowning, suicide and witchcraft. This category of death was viewed with suspicion and regarded as bad death, *Ugba* *Uwhu*. This type of death scarcely attracted sympathy. In this study, attempt will be made to analyze the burial rites of persons that passed away at a very ripe old age as against bad death that did not attract burial rites. It would also analyze how modernity (westernism) has reduced this vital aspect of the culture of the Ughievwen people. The paper will also examine the alleged consequences that followed non-performance of burial rites for persons because of the acceptance of new beliefs (faith) and equally ascertain the veracity of the claim of fetishism in the burial rites.

**TRADITIONAL BURIAL RITES IN UGHIEVWEN IN THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD**

Death, all over the world, is a phenomenon that is bound to occur given the mortal nature of humans, but when it happens, it is one of the most reluctantly accepted reality. For the Ughievwen peoples, before the introduction of colonial rule, burial rites were done to enable the spirit of the deceased join the ancestors, *erivwin*. Thus, burial rites and ceremonies were accorded to persons who were matured, attained old age and lived a fulfilled life. It was particularly the case for the aged and those who lived a fulfilled life especially if the deceased built a house before his or her death. This point was abundantly underscored by Wereso Orogun, when he said:

> Among the Urhobo, such a country home (a house) serves a dual purpose. The first and more obvious purpose is that of providing decent housing accommodation. The other but less often expressed purpose is that it provides a distinguished burial space for the owner. In this sense, our villages are huge burial grounds by cheerful undertakers whose duty is to receive the migrant at the end of his days.
Traditional burial rites in Ughievwen land were not only elaborate but quite complex. There were five main stages, namely, the building of booths, wake-keep (*Igherhoke*), the interment (*Orivwiesho*), traditional rites (*Orivwierhuere*) and the cleansing rituals. The first phase involved the building of booths. In the past, this was done with palm fronds. Booths were built by youths of the village in the compound of the deceased. At the end of the exercise, they were given presents in the form of money, usually a paltry sum, and drinks by the children and relations of the deceased person. This phase was followed by wake-keep during which relations, friends and well-wishers of the deceased organised colourful traditional dances to pay their last respect. This phase lasted from dusk till dawn. Where the deceased had female children who were married, sons-in-law came to pay their last respect to their father-in-law or mother-in-law depending on the sex of the deceased. At the wake-keep, people were lavishly entertained with food and drinks by the children and relations of the deceased. In return, *Owha* (spraying of money) was done for the bereaved family. Representatives of the community occupied conspicuous section of the arena and were well entertained. Gun salutes were also done with local improvisations called *Ituru*. Where the deceased was a woman, the wake-keep (*Igherhoke*) took place on *Edewor* or *Edepre*, while the traditional burial was done on *Omamede* and *Edebi* of the traditional week. However, where the deceased was a male, the burial took place in any day of the week.

The traditional wake-keep was followed by the burial proper. This was called *Orivwi-esho*. For persons who attained old age, before committing the corpse to grave (*Ushi*) in the evening before sun set, the corpse (in a casket, *ekpotti*) was carried by youths from the quarter of the deceased persons round the village on shoulders in a processional dance throughout most parts of the village especially the ancestral lineages of the deceased. For females, this processional dance took her corpse from her matrimonial home to her father's compound where it is buried.
The fourth phase of the traditional burial system in Ughievwen land was called *Orivwi erhuere*. This took place two or three days after the deceased had been buried\(^{10}\). Burial rites traditionally endorsed were performed by the children of the deceased. These rites were traditionally believed, to induct the deceased into the fold of the ancestors\(^{11}\). The performance of this stage of the rites was done by the eldest son or daughter of the deceased depending on the sex of the deceased. At this stage, palm oil is poured into a broken clay pot and lit up. The eldest son of the deceased (where the deceased was a male) was asked to declare his intention of performing the final burial rites. However, where the deceased was a female, these rites were done by the eldest daughter, same as where the deceased had no male child. The eldest man in the family of the deceased took palm wine, (*Udiamen*) in his left hand and invoked the spirit of the ancestors to accept the deceased into their fold. This was followed by three gun shots. It is important to note that a he-goat (for deceased male) or she-goat (for deceased female) yams, plantains, palm oil, palm wine, local gin, smoked fish especially mud fish, plantain stems, four cowries, bonfire and a broken clay pot was expected to be provided by the eldest son or daughter for the performance of these rites\(^{12}\).

On the night that preceded the interment, a he-goat or she-goat was also provided by the eldest son or daughter of the deceased to be slaughtered, from which one of the legs was used to prepare *Ukodo* (yam and plantain porridge) for the elders that performed the rites. At dawn, the elders took a bottle of native gin, three bones of the slaughtered goat, its tail and skull as well as the head of the cooked mud fish to the outskirt of the village at a cross-road, *ada*. The items were left there after libations had been poured and prayers said\(^{13}\). After these rituals, the elders plucked fresh leaves that were used to circle round their heads and thrown into the aforementioned items and returned home without looking backwards.

The final stage of the burial ceremony in Ughievwen land was the cleansing ritual. This took place in the morning after the elders had returned from the cross-road, *ada*, where
they performed the final rites. The eldest son or the eldest daughter of the deceased as the case may be, was adorned and thereafter expected to prepare the traditional meal, *Owho*, accompanied by some sacrifice. This symbolically brought (as it was believed) the deceased ‘hand’ or presence into his or her house. Sons-in-law and daughters-in-law where available, thereafter again paid visit to the deceased family. This phase which marked the final burial rites system in Ughievwen, called *Amiovie erie* (wiping of tears) was characterized with presentation of gifts to the family of the deceased.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BURIAL RITES IN UGHIEVWEN

Traditional burial rites were compulsory in Ughievwen world view. It was performed to ensure a departed father, mother or relative took his or her place in the spirit world. It was the general belief of the people that without befitting burial rites, the deceased remained a wretch in the spirit world. Therefore, it was necessary for the family of an Ughievwen person to accord the dead the basic burial rites to prevent the deceased from returning to the spirit world, *erivwin* wretched. Where the children of the deceased had the financial strength to do this and they refused, the consequences were calamitous. It could lead to the death of one child, suffering and different type of temptations in life such that they would be forced to consult an *Obo epha* (diviner) to ascertain the cause of such calamities.

An informant alleged that those who refused to perform the burial rites for their parents did not do well in life. There were situations where either of parents died and the children were still of tender age or lack financial capacity to perform the traditional burial rites. In such situations, either the family through joint effort interred the deceased and did some propitiatory rites until the children attained maturity or one of the family members could volunteer to carry out the rites on behalf of the children. Where the former was the case, it was called *Eshidjahren*. However, it is important to note that one’s deceased parents
did not disturb their children until it was apparent that the children had matured and could afford the expenses of the burial rites\textsuperscript{17}. The ability to perform burial rites for departed parents in pre-colonial Ughievwen society was considered a great achievement and was in fact, a status symbol.

\textbf{THE PLACE OF EGBADA, OVENREN AND UDJE IN BURIAL CEREMONY}

Burial rites in Ughievwen land were complemented with traditional dances. Prominent among such dances were Egbada, Ovenren and Udje. The dance called Egbada was a solemn, emotional, traditional dance that was highly ritualistic in nature\textsuperscript{18}. Apart from its use for burial ceremonies, it was also used for festivals to deities (gods) and during times of war. Available information from our informants posited that it was indigenous to the Ughievwen people\textsuperscript{19}. These pieces of information were endorsed by the few existing literatures. The Egbada dance was invented to pay respect and homage to the gods and deceased persons\textsuperscript{20}. The dance was performed before a deceased person was interred. It was organised in the form of procession with the corpse of the deceased in a casket which was carried on the shoulders of the young men accompanied with the chanting of songs. Even though this performance sometimes caused pandemonium as a result of the scores of people who rushed to catch a glimpse of the performers, it added panache to the entire burial process\textsuperscript{21}.

Apart from Egbada dance, there was also the Ovenren dance that was performed in the burial rites of the Ughievwen people. It was said to be peculiar to the Ughievwen and Udu people\textsuperscript{22}. In Ughievwen land, this dance was said to have been invented by a group of young men and women to entertain members of the public during important occasions such as festivals and burial ceremonies. It was organised in such a way that rituals existed that bound members of the group\textsuperscript{23}. John E. Nukueye asserted that “members of the troupe became so
infatuated with each other that the ladies among them could not break the spiritual bond with men of their choice outside the group”24. The important point to be noted was that the performance of the Ovenren dance troupe added fun to the burial rites of the Ughievwen people.

There was also the Udje dance which J.P. Clark described as the “premier dance form of the Urhobo people, practised in seven divisions (Kingdoms) of Urhobo ethnic nationality”25. Darah even suggested that the Udje dance was more accomplished among the Ughievwen and Udu people26. From studies carried out by these scholars, Udje dance was said to be the oldest surviving traditions of secular song-poetry in Urhobo. Generally, the Udje practice was organised as an artistic warfare amongst communities or groups and was depicted in the form of inter-group rivalry Omesuo27. In later years, the dance was restricted to traditional occasions such as festivals and burial ceremonies28. It is important to state that the performance of Udje dance troupe was not in all burial ceremonies. As a form of entertainment, it was only common in burial ceremonies where the deceased lived a good and fulfilled life29. Death of persons who attained ripe age was thus graced with the performance of the Udje dance troupe. In fact, it was the most prestigious dance reserved for high achievers, freeborn who had performed the burial rites of their parents. It was a mark of social distinction in Ughievwen land30.

**CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS TRADITIONAL BURIAL RITES**

Westernism is a concept that refers to the ideas and ways of doing things like the Europeans and Americans. It concerns the imitation of the western culture from Europe and the Americas. The penetration of European culture to different parts of Africa, particularly, Nigeria was facilitated by the activities of explorers and later Christian missionaries. By 1900 the whole of Ughievwen clan was brought under British control. One of the areas in which
Ughievwen society was affected, was the activities of Christian missionaries. S.U. Erivwo noted that “at the turn of the nineteenth century, liberated slave who returned from parts of Yoruba land and, particularly the Owo Area, first introduced Christianity to Ukwokori (Kokori), Ovu land, Eku and later Avwraka”\(^{31}\) and that “about the same period, the returnees commenced worshipping in communities, one at Warri and the other at Sapele”\(^{32}\).

However, before 1900, the Roman Catholic Mission had made in-roads into Urhobo land. Among the early converts were Uvietabore Eyube whose mother was from Ekiugbo in Ughelli and whose father was from Gbogidi\(^ {33}\). Through the effort of Uvietabore, Catholicism was introduced to Gbogidi and many Ughievwen Villages. Others were Daniel Sadjere, Enaohwo of Ovu, Peter Iweh of Okurekpo and Obudu of Okwagbe.

The introduction of Christianity into Ughievwen communities by the second half of the twentieth century gradually began to erode belief in traditional burial rites because it was now suppressed by Christian practice of burial that frowned on these rites. This was quite unfortunate because as Gusfield once noted:

> the capacity of old and new cultures and structures to exist without conflict and even with mutual adaptation is a frequent phenomenon of social change; the old is not necessarily replaced by the new. The acceptance of a new product, a new religion, a new mode of decision making does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of the older form.\(^ {34}\)

The ironical aspect of Christian practice was that it did not prevent Ughievwen Christian adherents from inheriting properties left behind by their parents for whom burial rites ought to be performed. It could be said therefore, that avoiding burial rites on the basis of religious persuasion while at the same time inheriting property would amount to hypocrisy.
CONCLUSION

Ughievwen people are religious. They believed in life after death. It was expected of children to equip their departed parents well on the journey to the world of the spirits, erivwi. It was also the belief of the people that deceased parents or relatives that were not accorded full burial rites went to the spirit world, wretched. Consequently, befitting burial rites emboldened their spirits to enter the world beyond with respect, dignity and could help the departed socialize among their peers. The prestigious and fascinating Egbada, Ovenren and Udje dances added glamour to this journey. Available evidence suggests that burial rites in Ughievwen did not imply anything fetish because it did not compromise any Christian belief. The burial rites were neither diabolical nor abhorrent; rather it was part of the people’s culture which ought to be sustained from generation to generation.

As stated in this paper earlier, two cultures could co-exist without one necessarily obliterating the other. Culture all over the world is dynamic and African culture is no exception. To denigrate African culture in favour of external ones constitute an endorsement of cultural imperialism, which should not be in twenty-first century Africa. There is therefore need for the rich, political office holders and even church officials from Ughievwen to do their level best to preserve these cherished traditions of the people. Scholars need to urgently carry out researches into how best this aspect of the people’s culture could be preserved and help save it from going into extinction.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


8. Interview with Oghenevbede Igun, b. 1926, Eyara Village, 16 March, 2011.


10. Interview with Oghenevbede Igun.

11. Interview with Oghenevbede Igun.


13. Interview with Oghenevbede Igun.

14. Interview with Solomon Koyor, the Ogbirhue of Ughievwen Kingdom, b. 1941, Eyara Village, 28 September, 2010.

15. Interview with Oghenevbede Igun.

16. Interview with Solomon Koyor.

17. Interview with Madam Usen Okpohie, b. 1897, *Okpako Ewheya* (Eldest Woman), Owawha Village, 14 June, 2008.


19. Interview with Oghenevbede Igun.


21. Interview with Thomas Okotete, Traditional Ruler, Ughievwen Kingdom, b. 1934, Otujeremi Royal Palace, 28 September, 2010.


23. Interview with Usen Okpohie.


29. Interview with Solomon Koyor.


