

Socio-Economic Implication of Elaborate Funeral Rites among the Ibibio

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is on the socio-economic implication of elaborate funeral rites among the Ibibio. Descriptive and qualitative survey methods are employed for the study. The paper seeks to evaluate whether multiple funeral rites have any social or economic consequence for the people. It was observed that elaborate funeral rites have a huge social and economic implication for most people, especially for those who do not have enough and to spare. The paper recommends that people should not allow *tradition* to push them to do what they cannot afford to do comfortably within their powers; that some of the rites could be curtailed due to inadequate fund. It concludes that obnoxious traditional practices are subject to change or outright abolition.

Keywords: Elaborate Funeral Rites among the Ibibio.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many literature abound on the Ibibio as an ethnic group in Nigeria located in the south-south geo-political region of the country, precisely in Akwa Ibom State. Hence this paper would not delve into that to avoid unnecessary duplication. It must be noted that it is really mind blowing to see a corpse lying at home among the living or in the mortuary among the Ibibio and a few other ethnic groups, for weeks, months, over a year or years rather than buried. And if you attempt to find out why the corpse is kept that long you realise that it is basically for financial reasons. Often times if the deceased or the family has a property somewhere, say land or a plantation such as oil palm or even a car, such a property would be sold or mortgaged to pool resources for the burial.

This practice is very common in the rural areas of Ibibio. Property that the deceased family would have fallen back on, especially if the deceased was the breadwinner, is sold just to bury the dead. How would the family survive afterwards? Is it ideal for people to sell their possessions and inheritances just to give the dead an elaborate burial, or the dead kept unburied for such a long time due to avoidable trivialities that are financially demanding? These and other issues are what constitute the thrust of this work.

There is a man who died since June, 2015 in a village called Ikot Ekeyak Ikono in Uyo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State and was taken to the mortuary by his poor widow. Up to the time of undertaking this research he was still not buried due to inability of the family to provide for the demands of the burial. A similar case also exists involving a woman in Ikot Obio Inyang in Etinan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State who died in July, 2015 and had long been taken to the mortuary. She is survived by a thirty-one year old son who does a lot of menial jobs for a living. As at the time of undertaking this research, the deceased was still lying in the mortuary due to the son's inability to meet the burial expenses. Many similar cases also abound in different localities.

Funeral Rites among the Ibibio: Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono:

Among the people of the above-mentioned community in Uyo Local Government Area (part of Ibibio) who are predominantly oil palm farmers, if a man or a woman dies, especially from the middle-age upward, the deceased would not be buried immediately but would be taken to the mortuary or embalmed at home. In the interim, news of the death would go round the village verbally. Adequate preparation would be made by the deceased family for the burial. This may involve series of meetings over days, weeks or months, as the case may be, during which fund would be raised by

participants to support what the immediate family can provide. The requirements for the funeral would be itemized in the meetings. If the amount estimated for the funeral cannot be raised by those concerned, suggestion will be made for the sale of the deceased asset(s) to realise the money. When the family procures all the items or is sure of providing them, the date for the burial will be fixed, often times by the church; since burial conducted by churches is now in vogue, even for non church members.

The deceased could be embalmed at home; but a mortician would be hired to preserve the corpse. If the corpse is taken to the mortuary, according to Ejoman mortuary attendant, a mortuary located within the community, the following items would be required: five thousand naira (N5000) initial deposit, two hundred naira (N200) fee per day, two thousand naira (N2000) dressing fee, a bottle of hot drink, a crate of beer, a crate of mineral, powder, perfume, toilet tissue and lux soap.¹

Two days before the burial, *atayad* (a booth) would be built with palm leaves in the deceased compound. The following items would be required from the family: *otu ukord ked* (a keg of palm wine), *ekpeme uforforb ked* (a bottle of local gin), *unen ked* (one fowl) *ye ekpada udia ked* (and one tuber of yam).² Programme for the obsequies containing photographs, a brief history of birth, education, social and religious life of the deceased would have been prepared colourfully. Arrangement for casket, canopies, plastic chairs, public address system and music would have also been concluded.

The grave is usually dug early on the funeral day. Showing where it would be dug requires a bottle of gin to intimate the ancestors – the owners of the land – before excavating their land. The same items required for building the *atayad* plus a toll, ranging from two to five thousand naira (N2000-5000), would be required by the excavators.³

The family members may be clad in their chosen uniform. As soon as the corpse arrives the compound from the mortuary, it is received by the chief-mourner with a bottle of hot drink. Immediately after the interment, guests, friends and sympathizers are expected to be served with foods and drinks. Two days after the burial, the same items required for building the *atayad* would also be required to demolish it.

Tombstone would be erected for the deceased if the family can afford to do that immediately; otherwise it may be done in a later date. Where there were no tombstones for the immediate ancestors, tradition requires that for a tombstone to be erected for the deceased, they must be erected for those ancestors too even if they were not buried in the vicinity. Sand, believed to symbolised them, would be taken from their gravesites for their tombstones.⁴ What is trendy these days is a small tombstone like a book size, called “passport”, against the big and long ones used decades ago. The former is sold for five thousand naira (N5000) upward. To erect it, one tuber of yam, one fowl, one bottle of gin and one thousand naira (N1000) workmanship fee would be required.⁵

The Socio-economic Implication of Elaborate Funeral Rites:

The various items required for burying the dead in the aforementioned community by and large involve financial and material resources and boils down to substantial amount of money which in most cases is difficult to realise and provide for the needs. Such money could have been spent on necessities for the living, such as on the deceased dependents and survivors – his wife and children, especially if the deceased was the breadwinner – and not on frivolities for the dead at the expense of the living, thereby bringing untold hardship on the latter.

It does not make economic sense and arguably, any sense at all where a deceased breadwinner leaves behind assets that his survivors could have fallen back on and move on with their lives after the demise and the assets are sold just to bury the dead. How would the family members fend for their lives after the burial? This should be of paramount interest to anyone as life has to continue after the burial. Cases abound, especially in the rural areas among the illiterate poor where the bereaved family lives by charity and the children stop going to school after the dead and burial of the breadwinner, usually the father. This is an anomaly and a misplaced priority; and it has got to be discouraged. The future of those innocent children should no longer be jeopardized in giving the dead an elaborate funeral. It must be understood that funeral is not an investment; therefore, it does not worth all the stress. The financial burden and the stress it poses to the bearers alone could cause physical, emotional and psychological trauma as those concerned may be extremely worried on how to get the money required for the funeral since they least expected the demise and so could not have planned for it.⁶

Some claim that elaborate funeral is a mark of honour to the dead – paying them the last respect. No doubt, respect for the dead is no harm; but it is harmful if such “respect” is paid at the detriment of the living. In other words, it is harmful if such “respect” compromises the welfare and comfort of the living: where it causes them to stretch their resources and or incur debt; where it impedes the children’s education, feeding, clothing and shelter. Cases also abound where a bereaved family that was residing in the city relocates to the village owing to inability to pay rent among other bills in the city since

the breadwinner had gone and the resources he or she left behind were used for the burial. This is not sensible; and as such, should not be encouraged.

Many say it is tradition. But tradition was made to serve man and not the other way round. Hence obnoxious traditional practices are subject to change or outright abolition. Just like the killing of twins and the burying of African chiefs with human heads were abolished owing to the influence of western civilisation, this obnoxious practice of selling off assets and at times going into borrowing and running into debt to bury the dead can also be changed by the Ibibio to lessen the huge financial burden it places on them.

2. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, the paper has explored funeral practices in Ibibioland, in Ikot Epkeyak Ikono precisely. It briefly describes the people, their location and occupation. It describes funeral rites among them and highlights the challenges most times encountered before and after giving the dead elaborate funeral rites by some. It discourages and suggests the way forward away from such practice and opines that people should not use tradition to make things difficult for themselves; that tradition was made for man and not man for tradition; hence it is subject to change or outright abolition. Elaborate funeral rites have unpleasant social and economic consequences for some and leave them with untold hardship.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper therefore makes the following recommendations:

- i. Obnoxious traditional practices should be changed or abolished out rightly. People should refuse to be compelled by tradition to budget beyond their resources in burying their dead.
- ii. They should be willing to forego certain funeral rites, such as serving foods and drinks to sympathizers, where they cannot comfortably take care of them. This will help reduce the cost of the ceremony. They must not allow tradition to compel them to stretch their resources.
- iii. People should not always expect to eat and drink at funerals. Funerals are for mourners and sympathizers who may not necessarily have to eat at the event.
- iv. People must realise that tradition and culture are dynamic and not static and are therefore subject to change where it becomes necessary.
- v. We must all oppose slavery to tradition.
- vi. Parents could instruct their children that when they (the parents) die the children should not embalm them but bury them without certain rites as people tend to respect the wishes of the dead a lot.
- vii. Churches could fix a maximum limit on the duration of embalmment as one of the requirements for burying the dead since most burials today are conducted by churches.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1] Interview with Basse Etim Akpan, a mortician, at Ejoman Mortuary, Ikot Ekeyak Ikono, Uyo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, aged 27, January 29, 2016.
- [2] Interview with Ezekiel Okokon Journey, a mason, at Ikot Ekeyak Ikono, Uyo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, aged 37, February 9, 2016.
- [3] Interview with Friday Eyo Udo, a trader, at Ikot Ekeyak Ikono, Uyo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, aged 43, February 16, 2016.
- [4] Interview with Okokon Johny, a trader, at Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono, Uyo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, aged 65, February 17, 2016.
- [5] Interview with Israel Okon Aaron, a trader, at Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono, Uyo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, aged 40, February 17, 2016.
- [6] Interview with Samuel Effiong, a barber, at 10, Udoekponkpo Street, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, aged 34, April 30, 2016.