

## NEW TRENDS IN BURIAL RITES AMONG THE PEOPLE OF ACHARA ISUOCHI UMUNNEOCHI L.G.A

**Amanambu, Uchenna Ebony, PhD**

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State

[ebonyuchem@gmail.com](mailto:ebonyuchem@gmail.com)

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12616.55046

### **Abstract**

*There is no doubt of a huge correlation between religion and culture. The nexus has been an intriguing one both within the society and academic circle. This is an unbiased investigation into the history of the people of Achara Isuochi in Ummunneochi Local Government Area of Abia state and the hermeneutical foundation of burial rites among them. The study delves into the implications of the new trends in their burial rites which are unarguably, the most attractive rites among the people today. Like every other ritual and rite in any sensitive and pluralized religious environment across Igbo land, it has received some historic and critical attentions. However, the study tries to unearth the cause of this reservation, then analyze the social, religious and moral implications of the rites on the peace, development and sustenance of the community. This is because the overt aim of continuing the rites is usually to build a strong bond, the principles of solidarity and brotherhood both within Achara community and their neighbouring brother community. The ritual also strives to conscientize among the people the reality of death and assesses the quality of regard the family of the deceased have for him/her.*

**Keywords:** Burial Rites, Achara, Isuochi, Umunneochi LGA

### **Introduction**

There are three ceremonies in any given African society that are very crucial to her existence and they are birth, marriage and burial ceremonies. These ceremonies are very dear to the Africans because they define humanity. For instance, on the day of one's birth, the society rejoices that there is an increase in number and a source of hope for the future. The day of marriage represents two significant issues and they are the hope of the future productivity and addition to humanity. Incidentally, while one can control the day of marriage, the days of birth and death are beyond human. Marriage and subsequent relationship forged from the union of a couple comes with lots of excitements and expectations. One of such expectations is that the marriage lasts till death separates the couple. But death has remained a worrying phenomenon. For the fact that none of the ancestors and other loved ones who have died has physically returned to the families makes the issue of death most horrifying and anything humanly possible needed could be done by man and his people

to avoid it and when it finally comes, one of the ways of appreciating it is through ceremony accorded to the victim of death. Probably, in a bid to avoid death, many ideas, rites and practices are thought out to assuage the living. One of the ideas is the concept of burial rites. Just as it began in the times of old, it has been a serious practice in Achara Isuochi but it is now modernized with some glamour. Hence, the study aims at analyzing the new, modern and contemporary methods through which the people organize the burial rites of their loved ones.

### **Clarification of Some Terms**

**New:** The term “new” means something that is produced, introduced or discovered recently or for the first time. It implies something that has not existed before now, something that is recent, created or having started to exist recently.

**Trends:** Just like the above term, “trends” -the plural of the word “trend” which stands for a general development or change in a situation or in the way of things. This may include the pattern of people’s behaviours and attitude. A trend is a change or development towards something new or different.

**Burial:** Burial can be described as the act of putting or committing a dead body into the ground or the ceremonies connected with it.

**Rites:** Rites is the plural of the term “rite” meaning a prescribed form or manner governing the words or actions for a ceremony.

In the context of this study, new trends in burial rites in Achara Isuochi means the new changes and innovations which educational attainments, science and technological improvements as well as religious dynamism have brought to the ceremonies associated with the way people of Achara Isuochi mourn and commit their loved ones to mother earth. It means the analyses of the improved patterns and styles of the ceremonies organized by the people living in Achara Isuochi to bid farewell to their dead ones.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Functionalist, Interactionist Theories**

#### **Functionalist:**

In analyzing the data and findings in the study, the study adopts the Functionalist, Interactionist and Conflict theories together with the Historical approach to the study of religion. According to Pals (1996), Functionalist theory is developed by many thinkers such as Durkheim, Weber and Karl Marx. For instance, Karl Marx argues that religion is like other social institutions because it is dependent upon the material and economic realities

in a given society (p.157). Functionalist theory stresses the interdependence of the patterns and institutions of a society with their interactions in maintaining cultural and social unity.

### **Interactionist:**

Just like the functionalist theory, the interactionist theory is a useful social theory which Crossman (2016) sees as a major framework of sociological theory because people develop and rely upon it in the process of social interactions (p.13). Ahamefula and Nnajieta (2005) aver that interactionism is largely influenced by the works of early sociologists and philosophers such as George Simmel, Charles Cooley, George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman. Therefore, interactionism is a theoretical perspective that derives in social processes such as conflict, cooperation and identity formation from human interaction (p.14).

### **Historical Approach**

Madu (2002) describes Historical approach as an approach that asks question about what was. Thus from the basic question, the historical approach seeks to make an excursion into the past to know how religion originated, its founder, circumstances that favoured the spread, doctrine and liturgy. From the past, the present situation of religion is evaluated and future projection can be made (p.148). Nze (2009) said that historical approach emphasizes the systemic collection and objective evaluation of data related to the past occurrences in order to test hypothesis concerning causes, effects or trends of these events that may help explain events and anticipate future events (p.83). Ejizu (2013) avers that historical approach is essentially diachronic in nature, as it assists the students' attempts to contextualize beliefs; practices, objects and institutions in space and time and to unfold their dynamic evolution of realities over time and space (p.25). Therefore, these theories and approach make strong statement in understanding the new trend in burial rites among the people of Achara Isuochi Umunneochi Local Government Area of Abia state.

This study may not begin the discourse on cultural and religious issues anew but only recognizes the fact that burial rites are recurrent social phenomenon it is worth being explored further. One acknowledges that a study of this nature can best be substantiated by a practical field experience since it is a fact that spanned within the community. Hence, in this study, efforts were made to analyze the new trend in burial rites among the people of Achara Isuochi Umunneochi Local Government Area of Abia state. Therefore, the researcher believes that the society will be in danger if religion and culture are not

properly understood and reformed for social solidarity and harmony. This is because the end result will be nothing but violence, strife and disharmony.

### **Brief History of Achara Isuochi**

Ogbuaku (2008) argues that history deals with the study of past events and developments. It is not only learned from the myriads of books on the discipline of history but also transmitted orally from one person to another and from generation to generation with errors and distortions such a method entails. Compression of history therefore is a useful and commendable means of passing on information of more than common interest and a systemic account of the past people, the modes and consequences of their pattern of life, their mistakes and achievements (p.5). Achara Isuochi is one of the communities found in Igbo land. The Igbo people as stated by Nzomiwu (1999) live in the tropical region of Africa. They are mostly found in Anambra, Abia, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi state. Some others are found in parts of Delta and River States. Igbo land lies between latitude 5° and 7° north and longitude 6° and 8° east of Greenwich line. Igbo land is bounded on the north by the Igala and Tiv people, on the east by the Ekoi, on the south by the Ibibio and on the west by Bini and Isoko (p.1).

Achara Isuochi is one of the responsible communities that make up the ancient Ochi kingdom. The name 'Isuochi' is historically the acronym for the name of the ancestor of the nine communities that make up the modern town, Isuochi. The nine towns are Umuelem, Achara, Lomara, Amuda, Umuaku, Ndiawa, Ihie, Mbala and Ngodo. Some oral traditions have it that Ochi who lived in Obom clan in the present day Umuelem community in Isuochi married two wives who bore two sons for him. He named them Ezi and Ihite respectively. The first son, Ezi, had five sons in the order of seniority: the first son was Abuga who later became the father of Umuelem. The second son was Egbebi who became father to Achara, the third son was Aguoha who became father to Lomara, the fourth was Logu who became father to Amuda and Digbo the fifth son became father to Umuaku. The sons of Ihite were Awarikieze as the first son who became father to Ndiawa, the second son was Atuga who became father to Ihie, the third son was Agugba who became father to Mbala and the fourth son was Araka who became father to Ngodo. Except that these are myths, otherwise, questions could be asked as to why each of the children had only one son each without a daughter.

Meanwhile, late Pa Nathan Madu (personal communication 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2017) avers that Achara was the son of Egbebi and Egbebi was supposed to be the first son of Ochi. He said that Ochi had married two wives who

simultaneously conceived. The first wife gave birth to Egbebi in the morning but the child refused to cry and being worried, Ochi could not take him into his Obi (semi palace) because he did not cry. But in the evening, Ochi's second wife gave birth to another son who cried immediately and Ochi made for his dane gun to announce the arrival of his first son. He was named Abuga and as soon as the sound of the gun was heard, Egbebi who had been silent began to cry then Ochi became confused. His confusion was predicated upon who to present as the first son among these boys. Of course, within the Igbo society, the position of the first son is a juicy one.



Pix 1. Showing the first place where Egbebi, the founder of Achara once lived.

There arose a fierce positional tussle between Egbebi and Abuga but Ochi regarded Egbebi as his first son. Egbebi was a reputed warrior, hunter, wrestler and fearless man among them and at that point Ochi had fought series of wars with the Ohafia Udumeze people who were invading his territory from the Enugu axis. Looking at all his children, he found Egbebi capable of contending with the invaders. He then sent Egbebi to their present place of abode. Egbebi fought gallantly to ward off the Ohafia and Enugu warriors. He later had four sons who later founded the present day Achara. The names of his sons were: Okwellabo, Umumeze, Okpelu and Ezi-la-ato

In a personal communication with Elder Theophilus Okoroafor (15<sup>th</sup> April, 2020), he said that when the white people arrived, the positional dispute between the decedents of Egbebi, Achara and Abuga, Umuelem respectively came up. In a judgment at the court holding at Aguegbe in Awgu local government Area of Enugu State the position of the first son was awarded to Abuga hence Umuelem became the first son of Ochi. Hence, the first Ochi of

Ochi kingdom emerged from the decedents of Abuga often known as "Umuelem". Meanwhile, all the sons of Ochi were credited with bravery and he positioned them according to the measure of their braveries just to ward off intruders and occupy his land. Achara Isuochi has two distinct villages and they are Umuokpara and Akporo.

Achara community is bounded in the north by Ugwueme in Awgu Local Government Area of Enugu state, in the East by Lokpanta in Umuchieze, in the south by Mbala Isuochi and in the south by Amuda all in Umunneochi Local Government Area of Abia State. Achara people are very industrious group of people who deal in subsistence farming. They take some measures of pride in providing their basic needs by themselves. They are good at digging, gathering and breaking stones, producing cashew nuts, palm kernels and other crops. Within the comity of other communities in Isuochi they are nicknamed "Achara ikpo"-an initially derogatory phrase to acknowledge their astuteness, honesty, strength, courage, fearlessness, physicality and identity.



Pix 2. Showing heap of stone, one of the occupations of Achara people.

### **The Myth Surrounding Death among Ndi Achara**

According to Metuh (1981) death is the theme in many African myths and it is presented as a challenge to God who created the whole world to be a good and happy place. Majority of the myths maintain that deaths were not present at the beginning but came later because of man's activities and death became the reason people feared evil. One Igbo myth has it that when people started dying, out of worry, men sent dog to God to tell Him about the deaths of men. On the way, dog fell asleep and was overtaken by toad who overheard the message. Toad went first to God and twisted the message by telling God that

man desired to die and never to return to the world again. God, Who is referred to as Chukwu welcomed the toad's message and decided that death would sojourn on earth. Hence although human being may reincarnate, he comes back with different body, a different consciousness and a different *Chi* (p. 14).

Meanwhile, among the people of Achara Isuochi there is a myth as told to the researcher by his late father, Simeon Chianuruokwu Amanambu (personal communication 12th August 2005) that in the beginning, the people were not dying because of the existence of a deity called "Ibiniukpabi". The deity lived in a cave known as "Nkoro". The cave and its thick volcanic bush belonged to the kindred in the community called Umueze na Umuiwela. The deity was reputed to have known everything, solved every problem and could handle any difficult issues. But in the course of time, people had unfettered access to its abode. It got to the point that if a person misplaced his/her kitchen knife, they would rush to the deity for answer. Tired with all these troubles, the deity moved out of the community to an unknown place. In collaborating with the myth, Elder Theophilus Okoroafor in a personal communication (15<sup>th</sup> April, 2020) affirms that "ibiniukpabi" relocated to somewhere in Amakohia near Owerri Imo state. It is believed that the exit of the deity gave the path for death to be visiting the people.



Pix 3 showing the forest called "Nkoro" where the "ibiniukpabi" deity once lived.

### **The Concepts of Death among Ndi Achara**

The occurrence of death in Igboland and Achara Isuochi usually disturbs the harmony, cohesion and solidarity in both family and community even though

they believe that death is an inevitable end. The community's idea about death is reflected on the names they give to their children. These names include: "Onwuamaeze"- loosely translated "death knows no king, boundaries as no one regardless of sex, wealth, status and race is exempted". "Onwudiwe"- "death is heartless", "Onwukwe"- "let death permit", "Onwudiegwu"- death is frightening, "Onwu ruhuoro"- "death has not excused anybody" and so on.

### **Kinds and Causes of Death**

In Achara Isuochi, there are basically three types of deaths and they include "onwu ojoo"- "evil death", "onwu ogbanje"- "death by repeaters or marine spirits" and "onwu onye dinkpa"- "aged death". These are basically the type of deaths known in the community and they shall be further analyzed.

**"Onwu Ojoo"- "Evil Death"** -Before now, it was nearly impossible to record the death of a youth. There is a statement that expresses their mind about the death of a youth "aka nwa okorobia di na onwu ya" meaning "the death of a youth is contributed by him". If in any case a youth died, he would be taken beyond the house and taken across the river for burial. But presently, the practice is changing as the youth can be buried in front of his father's compound. Evil death is also characterized by the following modes:

1. **Suicide:** Within the community, suicide is called "ikwu eriri" simply put that "the person has tied his/her life with the rope". It is regarded as a bad or evil death because the person could have committed one "aruru ala"- sacrilege and the spirit of the land has led him/her into an in-defendable judgment.
2. **Lightening/ Thunderbolt-** Just like the above form of death, it is considered unusual. So far in the history of the community, it has occurred twice. It is often believed that the God of heaven (Chiukwu) has decided to recompense the abomination of the person in question. The person is often buried at the spot where the lightening has struck him or her.
3. **Leprosy-** This is a dreaded disease that was recorded in the village in the very past. It is said that those who contracted at that back in the history of the community were initially taken to the *ntogbo madu* axis- a dungeon forest dedicated to the spirit world.
4. **Dropsy:** It is called "ahuo otutuo"- meaning the "belly has swollen up". This according to them is the surest path through which the gods and land usually mete out justice to a person who has committed abominable acts like killing or poisoning another person to death,

removing the ancient landmarks, incest and their like. The implication is that the person has committed the evil and hid it but the gods have exposed the person with dropsy. Most times, the young men were instructed to go and cut heavy logs of wood with which they would carry the corpse and send it into the evil bush known as "ajo ohia".

5. **Dying in the bush or farm field-(Inwuchi Uzo).** This is another form of evil death. Just like the suspected abominable acts itemized in the features of dropsy, dying in the bush or farm was considered an evil hence the deceased should be critically checked.

Generally, the above modes of evil death are believed to be caused by "Imebi Nso Ala"- Committing sacrileges or taboos. These acts of sacrilege and abominations are also known as "aruru ala, imebi ala or iru ala". Anybody who committed taboo or sacrilege would die regardless of age and gender. Some of the actions considered as sacrilege include: spilling of innocent blood, incest, poisoning somebody, changing the ancient land boundaries, betraying a brother (ifu nwanne azu-to sell out a brother for personal gain), abortion and so on. In all these deaths, the deceased were not qualified for proper burial rites and ceremony because their modes of death were considered evil and unnatural. It is overtly believed that they had committed abominations which they hid but death has exposed them. Apart from that, their relatives were often clothed with shame. Generations would remember them with that particular omen. Even when scientific discoveries have suggested that underlying health ailments could cause some of these modes and kinds of death, many people still do not believe. Therefore, to avoid evil death, the parents and other elders would start earlier to teach the children morals and taboos of the community.

**Death by Repeaters, Marine and Evil spirits-"onwu ogbanje":** This is still an unwelcomed death in the community. It occurs mostly among new born children and others who are yet to get into adulthood. They were regarded as *ogbanje* meaning repeaters or *uke*-an unseen cultic group. These are mostly the deaths of new born children and little children who behaved mysteriously or showed some signs of mysterious sickness. When they died, they are regarded as "ogbanje"-repeaters. This kind of death can also be caused by stubbornness. This is because there are paths, bushes and places people are not expected to visit at a particular time or hour of the day. Children are often warned not to go to pick "udara" (local apple) during the period of the day called "owute" midday moments of the day to avoid being attacked by the evil spirits. It was believed that anybody who visited those places would die

or if the spirits are in lenient moods, they will suffer some misfortune such as deafness, dumbness, epilepsy and their like.

**Death by Ripe Age-“Onwu onye dinkpa”:** They believe that this is a natural death because it occurred at a good ripe age. This is when one has got to the point that he/she would be fed and assisted by children and grandchildren. After then, the person can transit to the world beyond. This kind of death though painful, receives all kinds of elaborate celebrations and glamorous rites in contrast to the two previous kinds of deaths.

### **The Intrigue on the Concept of Death**

In as much as the community dreads death as noted by all the kinds of names they give to their children, they still believe that death itself is not entirely the final end of man. They believe so much in reincarnation and the Mbiti's idea of the “living ancestor”. With this, they believe that even though their parents have died in the physical world, they are alive in the unseen world from where they keep vigil over their children. For instance, the father of any family is buried at the entrance of his house and it is this belief that informs the idea and nature of burial rites. Naturally, the children will spend their last dime so as to show to the world how they loved their deceased parents. The second idea is borne out of the fact that the kind of rites accorded the dead determines its level and quality of passage.

### **The Hermeneutics of Olili Or Ikwa-Ozu (Burial Rites)**

Odili (2013) suggests that hermeneutic should be involved in the study of human related activities (p.45). Mbonu (2013) argues that hermeneutics should not be reserved for sacred texts alone. According to her, hermeneutic is derived from the Greek word Ερμηνευτης (sic) meaning “interpreter”. In turn, it is related to the Greek god named “Hermes” whose role it was to interpret the message of the gods (p.97). Hermeneutics as the methodology of interpretation is concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly, word and text in a phrase, clause, statement or sentence. As a methodological discipline, it offers a toolbox for efficiently treating problems of the interpretation of human actions, texts and other meaningful material. In that case, it is all about interpreting a choice text in a statement hence the need to situate the phrase “Ikwa-Ozu”.

Due to the coming in contact between many people of Achara with other people across Igbo land and beyond, there were arguments among all the respondents as to whether it should be called “Ikwa-Ozu” or “olili-Ozu”. The

elders seemed to have preferred “olili ozu” because of the intonation of their dialect. But whichever one, the point is that each of them is a combination of two words pointing to the same thing. The first term is pronounced “Ikwa” and it is a word used to explain at least two thoughts. They are: ikwa as “to mourn” and ikwa as “to prepare”. The first explains the sorrowful mood of a deceased family or an individual. The second concept of ikwa is abbreviated form of the word “ikwado” meaning to prepare or plan for something. In the case of burial rites in Achara Isuochi, it means the preparation and rites associated with committing the body of the dead to mother earth. The implication is that the concept of ikwa is adopted to explain the procedural rites outlined in order to render a befitting celebration in honour of the departed ones. These preparations portray the mind, love and value the living attached to their dead ones.

The second term is referred to as “Ozu” which loosely or simply means “dead body or corpse” in English language. It is used in three dimensions to mean a corpse waiting to be committed to earth, the unseen dead body and lifelessness in somebody or something. In the idea of the latter, it is common term most times used in the community to insult somebody. For example, if someone has behaved in a manner suggestive of stupidity or has by his/her action hurt somebody else, the person who feels offended may simply retort “i bu ozu” which means “you are already a dead being”. The implication is that the offender does not deserve unnecessary attention. Most times the person who is referred to as “ozu” will show off his/her with fist –a kind of exchange of fight in order to prove that there is still life in him/her. Therefore, the hermeneutical meaning of “Ikwa-Ozu” or “Olili Ozu” is the preparation rites aimed at paying the departed ones honourable, commendable and happy committal to mother earth. Apart from the idea of smooth passage to the world of the dead, it is believed that the kind of preparations and rites rendered to the dead underscores the kind of love attached to them.

### **Burial Rites in Achara Isuochi**

In the past, which no date can be factually situated because the community has not got the real date when it began but for the sake of this work, the past can be dated between the time of the first man in the land, the coming of the church to the community and in the 1990s. The church was said to have arrived the community around 1920s with the first of them being Methodist church later followed by the Catholic church and Jehovah Witness before other churches flooded the community. Therefore, the past preparation to be looked at here stems from the time immemorial to 1920s down to around 1990s.

### **Burial Rites before Now**

**Immediate Preparations and Committal:** When an elderly man or woman died, the corpse was immediately washed or bathed mostly by the first daughter of the family if she was around. If she was not around, the most senior daughter or any close relative would bath the corpse. Late Pa Simeon Chinuruokwu Amanambu (personal communication 12th August 2005) informed the researcher that it was one of the reasons why first daughters in the families were not readily given out to marriage in far communities. After the cleaning, the body would be laid out in the living room while some women would be asked to cry aloud. Within a space of few seconds, people have converged and the next thing would be a competition for whose voice would be louder in the cry. It was considered anathema for anybody to raise alarm without first cleaning and arranging the corpse. Where the people around could not handle the cleaning rites and arrangement, they would secretly move to invite the mature and right people most especially from his kinsmen who would rush in to handle it.

While the women were busy competing for whose voice could be heard louder in the crying competition, the men would be busy planning and arranging on the next step to take depending on the class of the person that died. The status of the dead was of two types and they were the church and traditional persons. The church then was dominantly Methodist church. There were series of consultations on the death of a church person. The larger consultation was because reaching out to the church Agent who was not resident in the community then used to be tasking. Due to the *connexional* nature of the church at times, the members of the church who lived beyond the community ought to be informed. Owing to this, the kinsmen of the deceased were assigned with various errands. While the emissaries to the church agent were taking off, the other group would move to inform all the relatives ranging from the in-laws, paternal and maternal relatives. Others would go to his farm to harvest some yams or get into the barn to select some yams in preparation for the immediate burial. As soon as the church agent arrived, the church regulator would rush to ring the church bell which would be heard by all. Sometimes, people who were not informed would be alerted by the particular sound of the bell. The regulator of the church bell was trained on how to ring it with various tones so as to send out the message. It is needful to note that because of the lack of modern system of mortifying the dead bodies, people are often buried within forty eight hours.

### **Onye Ma Echi -The Church's Contributions**

There were roles expected of the church to play over her late members and one of them was the provision of casket for the corpse. For the church to meet up with this responsibility, members created a special welfare levy for all the members which they called "Onye ma Echi" meaning "nobody knew who would die tomorrow". It was collected on "choochi nkwo"-any Sunday worship that fell on the Nkwo market day in Methodist church Achara. Two trusted members were appointed to collect and keep the money and must make it available on demand. Even if wind blew off the roof of the church, nobody would touch the "utu onye ma echi"- the levy for nobody knew who would die tomorrow.

The church people were organized and at alert because there was a bell at the church which when a particular sound of it was made, nobody needed to be reminded. The men's fellowship would make available their yams while the women fellowship would contribute their "iwu" known as either African salad or tapioca snacks to augment whatever quantity the immediate family would provide. But while the deceased family was assisted by the church with both casket and other food items, they have to give the church a huge he-goat-(ewu choochi) with which the church would boil their own share of the yams. After slaughtering the goat by those in charge of welfare committee of the church, the neck part of the goat would go to the local church steward as the lay leader of the church. Generally, before the church funeral service would be over, these provisions were ready for the entertainment of the guests.



Pix 4 showing the ancient bell of the Methodist church in Achara Isuochi

### **The Burial Rites of a Traditionalist**

Metuh (1981) posits that the characteristic features of Africa traditional religions are that God is usually approached and worshipped through the intermediaries of deities and ancestors (p.13). The traditionalist here does not imply that the person did not believe in God rather he/she believed and approached God through the unchurched means. The same rites of bathing and communicating the relatives as in the case of a church person were accorded to the traditionalist. However, this form of rites was not more stressful like that of a church member. Anybody mostly the most senior member of the family could officiate in the burial. There was no formal arrangement apart from the presence of the masquerade men who would be around to entertain the people.

**Period of Confinement and Mourning Dress:** It was period when a woman would be specifically confined indoor so as to mourn her husband. Every widow shall be subjected to this traditional period of confinement of some weeks following the burial of her husband. There were particular dresses these widows were expected to wear. Her fellow women would arrange on how they would intermittently keep her company.

**Shaving of Hair:** When a man dies, his wife and children would be forced to cut their hair so as to honour their late father. Despite the fact that many Christian preachers have kicked and protested against this practice citing Deuteronomy 14 verse one, it has not been won. It seems many did not understand Ukpog (1995) when he posits that those Africans who were converted into Christianity did not change their African worldviews (p.76). Cutting of hair is still in practice till today.

**Kinsmen Entertainment:** This practice has not changed rather it has continued to be appreciated. Usually, the kinsmen are not entertained on the day of the funeral ceremony. There is a culture locally referred to as "iseka akwukwo ure" literally translated "to tear the leave of castor oil" But the meaning goes beyond the literal definition. It is all about stock taking. Mbiti (1981) avers that festivals in African setting are means through which the society receives blessing from God and their ancestors (p.137). Gullin (1948) said that culture is the cement binding together into a society its component individuals (pp.188-189). The system of Umunna or kinsmen are people whose genealogical relationship can be traced to a common ancestry and they constitute the strongest and most effective means of managing and controlling excesses in a community. It is also an essential vehicle for maintenance of law

and order in Igbo land. The practice is used to go and express their solidarity, unity of purpose and the principle of brotherhood both amongst themselves. Generally, the Igbo idea of wellness and healthiness is interpreted from the lenses of solidarity. "Onye nwere mmadu kaa onye nwere ego" translated in English "Anybody who has relatives is wealthy" Therefore, a healthy person is a person who has not been uprooted from the context of his primary solidarity rather one who is in harmony with his brothers and deity.

This culture of "iseka akwukwo ure" has richly been a blessing to the sustenance of brotherhood and unity in the community. Like the researcher, when his father passed on, everything provided for entertainment was handed over to the Umunna. The Umunna did marvelous job by ensuring that whoever attended the burial was entertained. They appointed people who were in charge of food and drinks and shared them according to the lists they were given. However, after the guests have gone, the following day, the kinsmen would converge at the house of the deceased to be entertained. Apart from the entertainment, they would use the opportunity to review their performances and carry out other informal meeting for the progress of the kindred. From the proceeds of the condolence gifts, delicious foods are prepared with drinks mostly palm wine and beer. They will be entertained and later dispersed at night.

The belief of the people about their departed ones determines the reasons behind the nature of burial rites accorded. Where the deceased was not socially and relatively rich, the brothers, sisters and distant friends come in to contribute to the glamour of the burial rite. If the deceased or their offspring (where the deceased has children) are the type of people that do not look after their relatives, the matter may become somewhat cumbersome.

**Onodu Abali - The Wake Keeping Ceremonies:** This is the culture of keeping wake in the family of the deceased by different groups but most profoundly, a group of women mostly born into the kindred where the person died whether they are married out or at home, they would converge in the night preceding the day of burial. Sometimes, some younger ones among them will assist in directing the cooking and other things that pertain to the burial rites while the older ones would continue with intermittent discussions and rendering of dirge. However, the harmonious participation is predicated upon the kind of relationship the surviving members of the family have kept with both the deceased and other institutions within the kindred system. A situation where the immediate family of the deceased has no commendable records both toward their treatments they rendered to the deceased and other institutions in the kindred and community, the night will be hot for them. Part of the

night will be spent marginally to iron out whatever it was. One fearful thing about “umuokpu” is that they are capable of dealing with anybody regardless of status and power. However, depending on the financial status of the family of the deceased, most times, they are fed sumptuously. Where the family of the dead person is responsible and respectable, “Umuokpu” will just focus on singing some touching dirges in honour of the dead person.

### **Some other New Trends in Burial Rites**

Society is a dynamic phenomenon that evolves also. As the society evolves and changes, religion and culture being two strong social forces evolve and change. Like it is noted before, the rites of bathing the corpse, traditional wake keep, the levy for who knows who will die tomorrow-“Utu onyema echi”, involving and communicating all known relatives, kinsmen entertainments-iseka akwukwo ure, shaving of hair, confinement periods have not changed but there are other aspects which new changes and modernizations have been introduced in the rites of committal of departed ones in Achara Isuochi and they include:

**Mortuary:** With the coming of a morgue at the neighbouring community, the dead bodies are generally preserved for a longer time thereby replacing the prompt or immediate committal preparations in the past. Nowadays, when somebody dies, after the bathing rites, the people present will quickly arrange for a vehicle and deposit the corpse at the mortuary.

**Immediate Family Meeting:** Depending on the status of the deceased, however generally the immediate family members comprising the children, uncles, aunts with the willing and close in-laws will gather for a relaxed meeting unlike in the past when everything was carried out in a military commando style. In this meeting, the eldest or knowledgeable member of the family is expected to chair it. They will look at their date and go straight to the church to secure a date. At the securing of the date, another meeting is usually fixed depending on the proximity of the abode of the people concerned.

**Burial Uniforms:** Burial rites in the community today are largely characterized by the glamour often adorned with burial uniforms. Some of the wears can be kept for the immediate family members while other uniforms can be made for other stake holders. With this, the rites have added more entertainment and celebrations.

**Public Address System:** Depending on the status of the bereaved family, public address system is always hired. Sometimes live band or DJ operator is hired and they must come at the evening before the day of burial to entertain

the people who came for the wake keep. This has replaced the old system of using local slate drums, gongs and voices to conduct funeral service.

**Hiring of Chairs and Canopies:** Previously bamboos, palm fronds and other makeshift thatched huts were erected to provide seats and shelters for the people during the rites of committal but nowadays, chairs and canopies are massively rented and sometimes decorated for glamour and the relaxation of the guests. All these have added to glamorous outlook of the burial rites in the community.

**Committee of Friends:** Some bereaved families can expand the stakeholders in the planning for a burial rite with the invitation of their friends and well-wishers to assist in planning and executing their plans unlike when it was restricted to the kinsmen and other relatives.

**Printing of Banners, Posters, Invitation Cards Video Coverage:** The new trends have come with the digital printing of the burial banners, posters, programmes, invitations card, hiring of photographers and camera men. All these often add colour to the rites. This method has replaced the emissaries running over the places to inform the stakeholders. Most importantly, it has weakened the efficacy of Methodist bell.

**Kinsmen Umunna Preparations:** There are duties expected of the kinsmen of the deceased and they include helping to keep the environment clean and choosing the appropriate site to dig a grave. They also ensured that the grave is dug and secured. The church especially Methodist church has elevated the position of Umunna so much that whenever a corpse is brought back from the mortuary, the church hands it over to the kinsmen for the lying in state rituals. Thereafter, in the course of the funeral ceremony they are called for orations and special prayers.

**Collection and Recording of Condolence Gifts:** The kinsmen usually appoint some people to collect and record the condolence gifts the people have come with. Some trays (plates) are placed on the tables and sometimes with notebooks. They are used for collection of the condolence money or other gifts during any funeral ceremony. Records of condolence money and gifts are not often allowed to sit with the mourners.

**Fetching of Firewoods and Water:** In Achara Isuochi, funeral rites can serve as an opportunity to assess the acceptability, rejection and general behaviour of an individual in the community beginning with the kinsmen. One of the ways of conducting the assessment is the practice of fetching water from the stream and firewood needed to prepare meals for the guests. This is an

ancient practice carried out by the able bodied young female folks. They usually go en-masse a day or two before the day of burial to fetch firewood for the bereaved family. As they are coming back from the bush with their bundles of firewood, other parents and people are watching them and from there, these parents usually assess marriageability of any of the girls. Most times when the mothers began to recommend a particular girl to either their sons or others, they will say “nwa ahu gbasiri ike” meaning “the girl is not given to laziness”. It is considered evil for the bereaved family to provide all these for themselves and if it did happen at all, the implication is that they are bad people whom their kinsmen have rejected. The researcher having grown in the community could not recall of any family that had provided these for themselves.

**Harvesting of Cassava:** Similar to the practice of fetching fire woods and water, the family’s role will only be to describe the place where their farmlands are located. Then the other women folks known as “ndi inyem di”-a term that is used to refer to other fellow married women into the clan and sometimes with other sisters will go and harvest the quantity of cassava they considered enough for the preparation of foo-foo and “iwu”-African salad. While they are harvesting the cassavas, they are also mindful of the fact that they must contribute both as church members, “ndi inyem di” and other extended relatives towards the entertainment. Whenever a bereaved family undertake to harvest the cassava by themselves, then something is seriously wrong and the platforms of “onodu umuokpu”-the wake keeping ceremonies of the daughters of the clan and “ise akwukwo ure” can be used to settle whatever the case. It can be by punishment of unleashing heavy fines such as provision of fowls and yams for the umunna (kinsmen), by the offending family or individual or sometimes simple apology can make the difference and restore the estranged people to the communality of the kinsmen.

**Varieties of Meals and Drinks:** Previously, the meals for the burial rites were yams, iwu-African salad and foo-foo. But today, all manner of meals are prepared in addition to the iwu and foo-foo yet people will eat all of them. Beer and other soft drinks have almost replaced the ancient palm wine that men used to drink at the burial.

**Souvenirs and Gifts:** Depending on the financial status of the bereaved family, majority of them will factor the souvenirs and gifts they will share to the guests into the budget they drew up at the immediate family meeting they had before the burial.

**Church Outing Service:** The oncoming Sunday after the burial day usually serves as the outing service for the bereaved family in the church. It is expected that all the immediate family members will be in the church for a thanksgiving service. Most times they dress in their burial uniforms. Often, they make some financial commitments in memory of their loved ones to the church.

**Financing the Burial Rites:** At some points in their meetings, lists are drawn and expenditures are itemized. The people concerned may adopt any method in financing the bills. Sometimes, they can go on freewill donations, levies or allocations.

### **Appraising Death and Burial Rites in Achara Isuochi**

Generally, the rites accorded to the dead vary from culture to culture and from one religion or one ideology to the other. There are various modes of burying people. The early man in the crude era could have used leaves to wrap the dead before burial. But all along the known history of the people of Achara, they have been making use of caskets for burial except for “onwu ojoo”-evil death in the past. There was one late Pa Godwin Iroabuchi Eke who could have been one of the earliest carpenters in the community. He was then on hand to construct casket for the people. The people have always made use of casket no matter how local it is. Existentially, after death comes the burial of the deceased. Burial has been described as lowering or committing the body of a deceased to the ground. In the Igbo religio-cultural cosmology, there is a belief that death is a passage to other form of life. Among the Achara people, death is traditionally a highly ritualized event filled with deep mourning.

### **Conclusion**

Death has remained a harsh reality to mankind but also a highly ritualized event among the people of Achara Isuochi. The rites associated with it seem to have been thought out to douse its harsh realities and assuage the troubled mind. Before now, most rites of committal in Achara Isuochi would not last more than forty eight hours because of the absence of mortuary. Earlier, there are kinds of deaths that were considered evil and were not qualified for proper burial rites. But today, the story has changed as all the families have abandoned the tradition and can decide on the kind of burial rites to be accorded to their dead one. But there are many aspects of rites associated with burial that have not changed and they include bathing the deceased, informing and the participations of all stakeholders, shaving of hair for fathers and husbands, traditional wake keep especially that of the “umuokpu” to mention but a few. But most importantly, the practices of “ise ka akwukwo

ure” have served as platforms for assessments and enforcement of discipline and solidifying the spirit of brotherhood, harmony, bonding, solidarity, settling of scores and enforcement of morals and values. The new trends in burial rites among the people of Achara Isuochi arose as a result of the fact that majority of the people have received western education and come in contact with other people from various communities and environs.

## References

- Ahamefula, E.I. & Nnajieta, C.C. (2005). *Sociology (the fundamentals)*. Owerri: divine mercy.
- Apawo, I. & Sarogini, N. (2000). *African women's theologies in African theory on the way current conversations* ed stinton D. SPC.K London: Ashford Colour
- Barret, R.S. (1999). “Issues and perspectives on religion and society” *Religion and society in Nigeria historical and sociological perspectives*. EdsOlupona, J and Falola, T. Ibadan: spectrum pp.3-31
- Basden, G.T. (1983). *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. Lagos: Academy press.
- Beyer, P. (1994). *Religion and globalization*. London: SAGE
- Crossman, A. (2016). *Understanding symbolic interaction theory: an overview*.www.about.com.accessed 18/07/207
- Ejizu, C.I. (2013). *Fundamentals of research methodology in humanities*. Porthacourt: Uniport.
- Gillin, L and Gillin, P. (1948). *Cultural sociology*. New York: Macmillan.
- Heselbarth, H. (1985). *Christian ethics in the African context*. Nairobi: Uzima.
- Hornby, A.S. (2010). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English 8<sup>th</sup> edition*. Oxford: oxford press.
- Horton, E.P and Hunt C. (1964). *Sociology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Iwe, N.S.S. (1986). *The history and contents of human rights*. Calaber: SAES print.
- Iwe, N.S.S. (2002). *Christianity culture and colonialism in Africa*. New York: Peterlang
- Madu, J.E. (2002). “Religious studies research project report” in *Handbook on research and teaching in religious studies*. Onitsha: Globe.
- Martey, E. (1995). *African theology inculturation and liberation*. New York: Orbis.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Oxford.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1981). *Introduction to African religions*. London: Heinemann.
- Mbonu, C.N. (2013). “Biblical Exegetical and Hermeneutical Approaches” In Ejizu C.I. Ed. *Fundamentals of research methodology in humanities*. Porthacourt: Uniport

- Metuh, E. I. (1981). *God and man in African religion*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Nmah P.E. 2009. "Conflict between two religious cultures: achieving reconciliation". *Journal of Religion and Human Relations*. Vol.1 no2.
- Nze, F.C. (2009). "Perspectives on qualitative research methods" In Nabude, P.C., Nkemnebe, A. D, &. Ezenwa, M. O. (eds). *Readings in research methodology and grant writing*. Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick.
- Nzomiwu, J.P.C (1999). *The concept of justice among the traditional Igbo: an enquiry*. Awka: Fides
- Odili, J.U. (2013). "The historical approach to religious study research" in Ejizu, C.I ed. *Fundamentals of research methodology in humanities*. Porthacourt: Uniport
- Ogbukagu, I.K.N.T (2008). *Traditional Igbo beliefs and practices*. Enugu: Snaap.
- Opoku, A. K. (1978). *West African traditional religion*. Legon: AFP
- Osei-Bonsu, J. (2005). *The inculturation of Christianity in Africa*. New York: Peterlang.
- Pals, D. (1986). *Seven theories of religion*. New York: Oxford university.
- Russel, B. (1963). *Why I am not a Christian*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Taylor, E. (1871). *Primitive culture researches into the development of methodology, philosophy, religion, language, art and custom*. London: John Murray.
- Ukpong, J.S. (1995). *Contextual theology*. Lagos: Campbell.

#### LIST OF INTERVIEWS:

S/NO	NAME	AGE	OCCUPATION	DATE OF INTERVIEW	ADDRESS
1.	Late Pa Simeon C. Amanambu	Adult	Farmer	12/08/2005	Achara
2.	Late Pa Nathaniel E. Madu	Adult	Farmer	15/04/2017	Achara
3.	Elder Theophilus Okoroafor	Adult	Farmer	14/03/2020	Achara
4.	Deacon Stephen Ekpereduru Okoro	Adult	Farmer	16/04/2020	Achara