

## **DEATH AND PEOPLES' ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH: THE SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF DEATH AMONG THE NAWFIA IGBO OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*Mortuary rites appear to be a cultural universal that bears a people's cosmology in a measure very large and significant. The present study investigated the autochthonous mortuary rites of the Nawfia Igbo and how it has been affected by Christianity. The main data collection strategy was the participant-as-observer option of participant observation, which began on April 2012 and ended November 2012. It was supplemented with the in-depth interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) categories as appropriate. Although the people of Nawfia generally regard death as painful (onwudiwe), it is not to them only a physiological phenomenon or simply a sudden expulsion into a void. It is rather a major turning point in the human cycle; and so other defined states must be passed through before the final and complete fusion with the other world. Thus, we see that death is not simply an end in itself but it is also the beginning of a new life in another world.*

**Keywords:** *Death, Attitude, Mortuary rites, New life, Transition*

### **Background**

According to Borgatta & Borgatta (1992:413), death is typically viewed as a transition, as a "rite de passage". It is a transition from one life to another life. Death is a personal event that man cannot describe for himself. As far back as we can tell man has been both intrigued by death and fearful of it; he has been motivated to seek answers to the mystery and solution to his anxiety. Borgatta & Borgatta (1992:413) noted also that every known culture has provided some answers to the meaning of death; for death, like birth or marriage, is universally regarded as a socially significant event, set of by ritual and supported by institutions. It is the final rite "de passage" (Riley, 1968). The meanings which have been attached to death in most cultures include beliefs in some kind of existence after death; most people – save the non-literate – have entertained theories of personal salvation; and religion, philosophy, and political ideology have provided some answers to man's quest for the meaning of death (Riley, 1968).

Basden in his studies among the Igbo described the excitement that follows death among the Igbo as follows:

As long as breath remains in the body there is little excitement. Some sit or stand with sorrowful countenances, while others move about in a casual manner, seemingly but little affected by the scene. But immediately the patient dies there is a wild outburst of wailing. In the case of a near relative, as a wife for her husband, or a mother for her child, it speedily developed into a form of frenzy. The bereaved woman rushes forth from the death chambers, heating her breast, and runs through the village bewailing her loss at the top of her voice. She salutes none, but continues to cry out even when she has left the town behind her. A woman will thus pass the whole night in the bush pouring out her lamentations, and returns next morning in an utterly exhausted condition (Basden, 1983:112).

Death is a universal phenomenon. Yet it evokes incredible varieties of responses. Kottak (2008) recorded that Americans regard expensive weddings as more socially appropriate than lavish funeral, however the Bestileo of Madagascar takes the opposite view. The marriage ceremony is a minor event that brings together just the couple and a few close relatives. However, a funeral is a measure of the deceased person's social position and lifetime achievements, and it may attract a thousand people (Kottak, 2008)

Corpses are burnt or buried, with or without animals or human sacrifices. They are preserved by smoking, embalming, or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrions or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of these ways (Huntington & Metcalf, 1979). Wilford (2004) described the archaeological excavations that proved ancient Egyptian practice of sending companions to the afterlife along with a deceased pharaoh. This diversity of cultural reaction in the opinion of Huntington & Metcalf (1979) is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; always it is meaningful and expensive.

In the opinion of Talbot (1969) death is just like a dream. Death is a male and dream is a female. The death of one who has not reached old age is more often than not regarded as unnatural and is commonly ascribed to witchcraft or to some "juju" or medicine. One of the first acts of the bereaved family is to procure the services of a diviner and ask him to find out the cause, with the result that it is often followed by many other deaths.

Among most ethnic groups in Nigeria, the proper carrying out of mortuary rites is the most important duty in life. Families are known to impoverish themselves for years in order to give a befitting burial to an important member (Talbot, 1969). For an old man, there is great need for a proper burial to ensure that he lives well and happy in the spirit world. That he reincarnates into another life without any problem.

Van Gennep (1960) recounts that of the rites of passage; funerals are most strongly associated with symbols that express the core of life values sacred to the society in question. Funerals rites are part of cultural practices which serve different purposes in different societies.

### **Theoretical perspective**

This paper anchors on the functionalist explanation of cultural relativism and human diversity. Functionalism arose out of the acknowledged inadequacies of the evolutionary and diffusion theories in the explanation of human societies or social life (Ezeh, 2010). It postponed the search of origins (through evolution or diffusion) and instead focuses on the role of culture traits and practices in contemporary societies.

Sherman & Wood (1982) in Ezeh (2010) described functionalism as "the investigation of how each social institution – such as the family, religion, and government – operates in relation to the survival of the whole society". Functionalism is hinged on the idea of the contribution of sub-units to the maintenance and growth of the larger units as well as the nature of interaction or functional dependence between these sub-units (Igbo & Anugwom, 2002). Functionalism sees the existence of order and stability as benchmarks, or the irreducible minimum standard of any society (Nnonyelu, 2009).

Functionalism views society as a system. That is, a set of interconnected parts which together form a whole. The basic unit of analysis is society, and its various parts are understood primarily in terms of their relationship to the whole (Haralambos, Holborn & Heald, 2008 & 2004; Ezeh, 2004 & 2010).

Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown focused on the present rather than on historical reconstruction (Ezeh, 2010). Malinowski did a pioneering fieldwork among living people. Usually considered the father of ethnography (Kottak, 2008) by virtue of his years of fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski was a functionalist in two senses. In the first, rooted in his ethnography, he believed that all customs and institutions in society were integrated and interrelated, so that if one changed, others would change as well. Each, then, was a function of the others. A corollary of this belief was that the ethnography could begin anywhere and eventually get at the rest of the culture. Thus, a study of Trobriand fishing eventually would lead the ethnographer to study the entire economic system, the role of magic and religion, myth, trade, and kinship

The second strand of Malinowski's functionalism is known as "needs functionalism". Malinowski (1944) in (Kottak, 2008; Ezeh, 2010) stated that humans had a set of universal biological needs, and that customs developed to fulfill those needs. The function of any practice was the role it played in satisfying those universal biological needs, such as the need for food, sex, shelter, and so on. Malinowski himself explained what he meant by function:

Function means ... always the satisfaction of need, from the simplest act of eating to the sacramental performance in which the taking of the communion is related to a whole system of belief determined by a cultural necessity to be at one with the living God (Malinowski,(1944) in Ezeh, 2010:52).

The term "structural functionalism" is associated with Radcliffe-Brown and Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard. The latter is famous for many books, including "The Nuer" (1940), an ethnographic classic that laid out very clearly the structural principles that organized Nuer society in Sudan. According to functionalism and structural functionalism (Kottak, 2008), customs (social practices) function to preserve the social structure. In Radcliffe-Brown's view, the function of any practice is what it does to maintain the system to which it is a part. That system has a structure that works or functions to maintain the whole. Radcliffe-Brown saw social system as comparable to anatomical and physiological systems. The function of organs and physiological processes is their role in keeping the body running smoothly. So, too, he thought, did customs, practices, social roles, and behavior function to keep the social system running smoothly

Culture is group specific in the sense that no culture is superior to the other. Culture in the view of Tylor (1871, 1958) in (Kottak, 2008:279) and (Ezeh, 2010:33) is that "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Tylor equated culture with civilization. He saw the culture of any society as the indicator of such a society's evolutionary attainment, at the point in time, for culture was cumulative. Functionalism established cultural relativism, the argument that behavior in one culture should not be judged by the standards of another culture. Cultural relativism argues that there is no superior, international, or universal morality, that the moral and ethical rules of all cultures deserve equal respect.

### **Death and Peoples' Attitudes towards Death in Nawfia Igbo**

Nawfia Igbo of Southern Nigeria formed the area of this study. Nawfia is in Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State of Nigeria. Nawfia Igbo was chosen for this study because of her traditional characteristics. Among the sub-communities that make up Nawfia are:

- (a) Ifite Nawfia (which comprises of five villages) and are exogamous.
- (b) Umuriam (which is made up of three villages) and are exogamous.

(c) Mmimi (Enugu and Adagbe) which are endogamous.

(d) Umukwa which is exogamous.

Nawfia lies in the latitude of  $6^{\circ} 11' 18''$ N and longitude  $7^{\circ} 0' 58''$ E. Nawfia is bordered to the West by Abagana, Ukpo Akpu, etc. and to the North by Enugu Agidi, Nogu. In the East lies Umokpu, Amawbia, Nise, etc., and in the South by Nimo, Enugu-Ukwu.

Nawfia Igbo is chosen for this study because of her cultural uniformity. This implies that Nawfia Igbo still maintains parts of her indigenous values and ways of life.

Nawfia people's concern about the reality, pain and sorrow of death is mostly found in their names and expressions. The Nawfia noun for death is "onwu". Names like "Onwudinjo" (death is evil), "onwura" (if death permits), "onwujoka" (death is bad); "onwubiko" (death please), "rapuonwu" (leave death) among others are more than just names. They are expressions portraying various dispositions that Nawfia people adapt to when death strikes.

When persons die in a family more often than considered necessary, Nawfia people would consult their ancestors and oracles to find out what has gone amiss, and why a particular family should receive an unfair share from death. Sacrifices and propitiations are offered to appease the gods and make them reconsider the position.

In Nawfia world view, death is debt we owe for life (ugwo eji ani). This is reflected in the songs they sing when a dead person is taken for burial. Nawfia people believe that one is not free until one pays this debt (onye kwuo ugwo oji onwere onweya). For Nawfia people, life is not a burden: it is the supreme good. This is why "Ndukaku" (life is greater than wealth), "Ndubueze" (Life is ultimate), and "Ndubuisi" (life is the supreme good), are names and expressions Nawfia people give their sons

For Nawfia people, "uwa bu ahia" (the world is a market place). A market place, in their world view, is never a place of habitation. No one resides there. It is not a home, and does not pretend as such, or lay claim to being one. To this end, it is never a place of rest. Both the sane and insane have the market place as their theatres of social interaction in Nawfia world view. This is why everybody that comes to the market place is expected to go home at the end of the day. This analogy contends that, since all of us are visitors in the market place who came to buy or sell, we would all go home, which is to meet our ancestors, when we must have died.

Generally, when someone dies in Nawfia, there is always outburst of wailing (iku ota, igbu emeri). The crying expresses the grief the mourner feels for the breach of the physical interaction with the deceased. Death provokes in the survivors a dual response of love and loathing, a deep-going emotional ambivalence of fascination and fear which threatens both the psychological and social foundations of human existence. The survivors are drawn towards the deceased by their affection for him/her, repelled from him/her by the dreadful transformation wrought by death. Among the Nawfia people, the response to death and the structure of the attendant ambivalence are heavily influenced by the kind of death to which the individual succumbs. They distinguish between natural death (onwu chi) and bad death (ajo onwu). They not only respond differently to these two forms of death but also express their feelings toward the dead as expressed in burial rites in accordance with the category into which the dead person falls.

Natural death (onwu chi), among the Nawfia is a death which takes place when someone dies at a ripe old age, at least from seventy years upwards. To further qualify as a natural death, the deceased must have lived good and honest life, had children and grand children and prospects of a good burial.

“Ajo onwu” among the Nawfia includes death that they consider disturbing, as having been meted out on the victim as a kind of punishment or as an aberration of the sacredness of human life. “Ajo onwu” are considered bad because the Nawfia believe that they are associated with the machinations of evil forces, and are unnatural because the victim did not reach a ripe old age.

At the lowest level of Nawfia belief, bad deaths are those they consider as merely disturbing, in the sense of being mysterious and difficult to explain. In this category, we have “onwu Ogbanje”, which can best be explained as a kind of repeated voluntary birth and premature death by the same individual, through the same parents. This individual, who comes and goes in this sporadic way, is considered as having a pact to this effect in the spirit world, and is referred by Nawfia people as “ogbanje.” Also disturbing is the death, especially of a man/woman, at an old age without having any descendants. It is disturbing because it is considered as having created a dead – end in the family tree.

Another category of bad deaths are those considered as a kind of punishment to the victim. In this group are sudden deaths, dying in the prime of one’s life, in the hands of a deity, in water (drowning) or fire accident, auto crash or any form of crash, swollen stomach, and in the process of committing an abomination (adultery, stealing and violence), and during abortion.

Another category and worst form of bad death in Nawfia is the one considered as an aberration to the sacredness of human life. Looming very large in this category is death by suicide. Also in traditional Nawfia belief, any person who dies in a storey building is treated as suicide. Also dying in bed is termed suicide. This, in the Nawfia belief system is suicide because the person died without being on the ground. This accounts for why the Nawfia would always bring a person down to the floor once the person is heavily sick, and death becomes imminent. Furthermore, any person who dies lying faced-down is considered as bad death. Since life comes from God no individual has the right to take his or her own life under any circumstances. Their reactions to the two major distinctions and the subcategories of death are expressed through the funeral rites that are accorded to the deceased. These types of death require purification (ikpu aru) before and after burial.

### **Conclusion**

Many of the descriptions that have been made in the foregoing tend to indicate that rituals for death have many uses for life, and the study of these rites can illuminate much about culture and society. Although the people of Nawfia generally regard death as painful (onwudiwe), it is not to them only a physiological phenomenon or simply a sudden expulsion into a void. It is rather a major turning point in the human cycle; and so other defined states must be passed through before the final and complete fusion with the other world. Thus, we see that death is not simply an end in itself but it is also the beginning of a new life in another world.

Consequently, the corpse of the human person is not treated like the carcass of an animal. Specific care must be given to it, which involves a complex mass of beliefs, emotions, and activities to give it a distinctive character. These are the mortuary rites.

Nawfia mortuary rites reflect the social differentiation which characterizes their daily life. Thus, the type of mortuary rites accorded to a deceased is dependent on age, sex, social position, and cause of the death. These mortuary rites should be seen in terms of their symbolic meanings which are mainly the functions they perform in the maintenance of the entire social structure.

Death has a specific meaning for the social consciousness; it is the object of a collective consciousness. This is because funeral ceremonies provides one of the most important occasions upon which community/members of community meet to express their unity and to reaffirm the values upon which that unity is based. Frequent attendance at these ceremonies does more than breed familiarity with the deceased's family; it intensifies the awareness of belonging to the community.

Finally, with the occurrence of death, a dismal period begins for the living, during which special duties are imposed upon them. Whatever their personal feelings may be, they have to sorrow over the dead person for a certain period, change the colour of their clothes and modify the pattern of their daily life. These obligations increase with closeness of ties with the deceased, e.g. the widower and the widow.

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