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Death, Burial Rites, and Reincarnation of Women among the Abakaliki Natives, South-East Nigeria

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Abstract

The Igbo of south-east Nigeria have a deep-seated belief in reincarnation. This belief is reflected and sustained in the names given to their children such as Nnenna, mother's father, Nnanna, father's father and Nnalota, father is back and so on. There is perpetuation of this thought pattern in funeral and burial ceremonies among the Igbo. The Abakaliki natives' ontological commitment to reincarnation is central to their funerary rites, most notably within the secondary burial of women, which signifies the definitive conclusion of the mortuary cycle. Without it, the deceased is not yet "home" and is not yet really dead. It must be performed because it will grant her a place among her ancestors and thus guarantee her reincarnation. There is also the belief in ogbanje, evil children who

continually re-enter the mother's womb only to die again and again after each birth. Birthmarks and behavioural resemblances between the child and the deceased and sometimes certain statements made by the child are ways of identifying the reincarnated ancestor. A diviner, *jibia afa*, is also consulted to confirm the people's suspicion of a reincarnated person. This study tends to bring to limelight the fact that Abakaliki natives still believe so much in reincarnation and are very much willing to perform the rituals and ceremonies that surround it. Qualitative analysis was adopted in evaluating both primary and secondary sources of information utilised. The findings of this study, amongst others, are that the people still hold tenaciously to a belief in reincarnation and would spend so much money, including selling off their choicest parcels of land to accord their deceased a second burial, which they believe will guarantee her reincarnation.

Keywords: *Death, Burial Rites, Reincarnation, Abakaliki, Women*

Introduction

The paper interrogates death, burial rites and reincarnation of women among the Abakaliki natives, South-East Nigeria. Generally, in Igbo land, in the south-east of Nigeria, ascendancy rituals are passive and are performed at and after death and are meant to transform the deceased from an ordinary person to the ancestral cadre. The Igbo idea of reincarnation is a strong argument for their belief in the immortality of the human soul. Igbo culture does not speak of reincarnation as taking up a different body as in Western ontology but speaks of reincarnation as 'coming back to earth or the world' in one's total self, *ilo uwa*. The ancestor that is reincarnated in a child is recognised in the child in her total self and physical characteristics and behavioural patterns. However, the general concept of reincarnation is solely rooted in the belief that human life has a very short span that is considered insufficient for the soul to gain enough experience to enable it qualify for eternal bliss. According to Echekwube (1994), these perspectives are predicated on the premise that human existence is inherently fraught with vicissitudes and characterised by a brevity that precludes the fulfilment of one's earthly destiny. Thus, they would need to return to Earth and live in some other body to accomplish their assignments in life.

Study Area

Abakaliki, the study of this research is the capital of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Ebonyi State was created out of Enugu and Abia States in 1996. Abakaliki was declared a third-class township in 1917 by the colonial officials during the colonial administration of the area. According to Mgbada (2004), Abakaliki people refer to such sub-dialectical groups as the Ezza, Izzi, Ikwo, Ezzamgbo, and Ngbo, as well as the Agba group, which is a descendant of Izzi' The area is bounded to the North by Benue State, to the South by Afikpo North and Ohaozara Local Government Areas of Ebonyi State, to East by Enugu state and West by Cross River State. According to the last population census (2006), the population of the area rose from 1,060,279 in 1991 to 1, 406,467 in 2006 (NPC, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

The problem this paper addresses is death, burial rites and reincarnation of women among the Abakaliki natives, South-East Nigeria. Most societies in Nigeria began to witness a rapid decline in certain traditional cultural practices, including burial rites, due to the growth of the Muslim and Christian populations in such societies. However, despite the accelerated pace of urbanisation and the increase in the number of Christian and Muslim populations in Abakaliki, burial rites or the practice of second burial service has remained unchanged.

Objectives of the Study

This work discusses how the practice of second burial is unique among the Abakaliki natives and also how this belief is driven by cultural practices rather than religious values. The objectives of the work therefore include the following:

To use the study of death, burial rites, and reincarnation of women to explain some aspects of Igbo life and culture using Abakaliki as a case study.

To use second burial as a practical framework for understanding aspects of burial and reincarnation among the Igbo.

To create a model that can be applied to the study of death, burial, and reincarnation in general, and in doing so provide a cross-cultural perspective of reincarnation in theory and practice.

Methodology

This paper adopted a narrative and historical interpretation of both primary and secondary sources. In interpreting information derived from both primary and secondary sources, a qualitative approach of the historical method was applied. Primary sources in the form of field research, which involved oral interviews, were collected from the communities of Ezza, Ikwo Izzi, and the other sub-clans of Ezzamgbo, Ngbo, Ishielu, and Agba. Participant observation was also used, and a total number of fifteen (15) persons were interviewed. Secondary data, which included journal articles, published books, and online sources, were consulted to corroborate the information gathered from the field.

Death Burial Rites and Reincarnation among the Igbo

Death for the Igbo is just the beginning of an end, a transition to a higher and wider world (Izunwa, 2015). Traditional Igbo religion remains strong even though most Igbo are Christians; most of them also continue to believe in the traditional religion and appear to find nothing incompatible between it and Christianity, with the exception, sometimes, of the belief in reincarnation (Njoku, 2000). The Igbo believe that good conduct in one's life leads to a higher status both in the discarnate realm entered after death and in the next incarnation. Thus, an evildoer who by dishonest craft or skilful manipulation of the gods attains a high economic status and power would nevertheless have a low status in the discarnate realm. The individual may experience an inauspicious rebirth, manifesting in conditions historically regarded as taboo, such as germinal birth or a breech presentation. Serious crimes, such as murder or incest, might result in rebirth as a nonhuman animal.

Some Igbo believe that not everyone reincarnates. Onwuejeogwu (1981, p.31) mentions two types of persons who cannot reincarnate: those 'who have led worthless, ineffective lives, especially if they have never married and had children, and those who have died accidental deaths, committed suicide, or died prematurely.' Sometimes when the people are angry and unforgiving over the wicked or useless conduct of a person who has died, they will try to prevent that person from reincarnating. They may try to do this by refusing to bury the corpse or by burying its face downward. From the above, it would be pertinent to state that of very significance to reincarnation is the kind of death that a person dies. Nkiruka (2010) distinguished three kinds of death among the Igbo. There

is a violent death, *onwu ike*, which describes the death of a young person, usually from a violent accident. Such a person is believed not to have accomplished his destiny, and so his spirit wanders in the world after death, disrupting the lives and peace of the members of his or her family. Such a person cannot reincarnate. The concept of *onwu ojoo*, or an ignominious death, pertains to individuals whose demise results from self-immolation, or from afflictions such as leprosy, smallpox, cholera, or lightning. Such persons are not mourned by the family or buried in the family land. They are usually thrown into the evil forest. Such persons cannot reincarnate as well unless expensive purification rites are done. Then the natural or good death, *onwu chi*, is the death that comes at good old age. When such a person is given full burial rites by his children, he or she qualifies to become an ancestor and thus reincarnates. To Madu (1997, p.56), ‘this is the philosophy underlying African burial rites whereby the dead king is buried with his full regalia, staff of office and even a slave or slaves’.

Another form of reincarnation belief among the Igbo is the *Ogbanje*, a kind of repeater child. There exists a persistent belief in the phenomenon of the recurring child, who cycles through brief lifespans and subsequent reincarnations, a process viewed as a metaphysical affliction designed to torment the bereaved parents. Achebe (1962) described them as ‘those wicked children who when they died, entered their mother’s wombs to be born again’. The paper focused mainly on the belief in reincarnation of women and the *ogbanje* phenomenon among the *Abakaliki* natives in southeast Nigeria.

Death and Burial of a Woman among the Abakaliki

The phenomenon of death, which the Western existentialists regard as completely antithetical to a meaningful existence, receives an adverse reaction from a fulfilled Igbo man and woman who embrace it happily. Egbekpalu (2019) asserts that “a fulfilled dying woman tells the children how she wishes to be buried and the type of funeral services to be accorded her to usher her into the community of the ancestors where she continues to manifest her presence in the living”. Similarly, Ugoeze states that death occasioned sorrow and mourning, except abnormal death, all other death attracted weeping and sorrowing. There are three phases connected with death and burial that stand out with distinctive prominence. First was death itself, *onwu*. The second phase was the first burial, *ikwa ozu*. It may be a simple matter of rolling the corpse in a mat, carrying it forth, and

disposing of it with little or no ceremony depending on the person's rank and social status. Then the third phase was commonly known as the "second burial." Anyanwu (1993) notes that if this was done soon after the death, it is termed Ozu-ndu but, if it was after a longer interval, it is called Ikwa-ndu. However, the last is a very important and indeed very serious affair in the traditional Abakaliki society. We shall come back to this later. Most of the aspects of the burial of a woman whether the first or the second burial are almost the same. A woman was never buried inside her house, but usually buried behind in her firewood-kitchen akpata uku. The woman was laid on her right side, facing her house, with her left hand freed because this was the hand she used in carrying her baby. Palm fronds were normally laid on the corpse before the grave was covered with sand. Ovuoba (1990, p.115) states that 'the palm frond portrayed the role she played when alive, just like the palm tree'. A piece of stone from her kitchen was laid on the grave. For titled women, especially those who were initiated into Ogbu agiyi or O-kuru-ema society, a fowl, called Oku ugbu oswa, would be given to the woman who followed the procession erwu ubvu. There was no Okperegede, a sacred and special music playing incessantly, re-telling the prowess of the deceased, which only his titled peers dance to. In the case of a woman, masquerades never perform, other dance groups are mainly women's groups.

All the daughters, including all her Ogbo, those named after her, including male and female, as it is common in the area, had to bring many household materials to the burial. These materials included pots to fetch water, for washing hands, cooking pots, a cam wood pot, ite uswe, a large spoon, a basket, a kitchen stool, local fowl, food items and sauce with meat, iron pots, and calabash, which would all be added and buried with the woman. These household utensils were put in the first chamber of the tomb. For this reason, the graves for women were larger than that of men. It had two layers or chambers; the first floor was the same as that of a man, but the second floor was made round, wider, and deep enough. Great care was taken not to bury a pregnant woman together with her pregnancy. If a pregnant woman died, she was operated upon, and the baby was removed. The people believe that the child, if not removed, would be angry not to have her own grave, and this could cause childlessness in a whole family (Uguru 2015).

Death, Burial Rites, and Reincarnation among the Abakaliki Igbo

In some pre-Christian Igbo societies like Abakaliki, when a dying woman was suspected of making her last struggles, she was properly taken care of to prevent her from falling to the ground or touching the wall. This is because she was respected as a “human being”*madu*. Should this happen, Njoku and Nworie (2010) note that it is a desecration of dignity of the human person who is not just earthly but also spiritual. The act of the body touching the ground is referred to as *Ochi eka l’ali*. There are three phases connected with death and burial of a woman among the Abakaliki which stand out with distinctive prominence as will be discussed in this work. However, when the woman eventually died, the corpse was first of all examined to make sure that it was not swollen. Her first daughter was summoned to close the mouth of the corpse either with dried meat or even with her bare hands as it was done within the ambit of her resources. The reason for closing of mouth was to prevent flies from perching on the mouth of the deceased. Njoku (2000, p. 6) asserts that, before arrangements were made for the burial, the corpse was laid flat with the face upwards, and materials, such as thread known as *egwo* were tied to a stone on the stomach and placed on the corpse to prevent it from getting swollen. Fire was prepared in such a way that smoke emitted from it and afterwards the corpse was stretched to enable the stiffened joints and body to soften. The first son of the dead woman was also summoned to show the place where the grave of his mother would be dug. He showed it by digging a hole on the spot. The most elderly man there invoked the spirits of the ancestors to come to their assistance so that the corpse would be buried in peace, that is, to prevent lizards and termites called *aghashi* from entering the grave. Isichei (1976) notes that if this should happen, it is a sign that the woman was wicked while alive and so should be thrown away into the evil forest. Thus, the dead woman would lose the privilege of being buried at home like a dead child or youth.

Men were buried within or immediately outside their own houses, while the corpses of women were returned to and buried with their pre-marital families in an elaborate performance referred to as second burial or, with the consent of the family, buried in her husband’s place. Chapman and Duncan (1936) observed that an elaborate ritual must be performed by the husband’s people, mainly by the women’s rich children, before her body could be buried at her husband’s place. In the Abakaliki area, Nwaji (2024) stated that the *Ngiga* and *aga* are two important properties for a woman and very indispensable items during her burial. The *Ngiga*, a

meticulously crafted wire-mesh basket, is a primary component of the bridal nuptials presented to women by their kin upon the culmination of their traditional marriage rites. It is used for storing her dried fish, meat and spices for cooking. The number of a woman's ngiga increases with the size of her family or she may even decide to have different ones for different food items. No matter the number of ngiga a woman has, they are usually hung on the uko (kitchen rafter) which is directly above the cooking tripod somewhere by the corner of the large compound. In this position, the smoke and heat from the firewood used in cooking reaches the ngiga and gradually dries up whatever its contents are without necessarily destroying the nutrients. The aga is like a fishing net that is woven with thicker ropes, and women in this area use it to cover their market wares after packing them. In traditional Igboland, Abakaliki inclusive, people travelled either on foot or in their canoes or rafts. Market women would walk miles on foot to sell their varied and oversized market wares in neighbouring markets and used the aga to cover and hold these overloaded wares in place so that they could carry all of them as one load on their head. The aga symbolises a woman's spirit of enterprise and it is returned to her family at her death. Therefore, when the woman's corpse is returned to her maiden family, her ngiga and aga, which are both symbols of her office (family cook and trader), go with her, and it is usually buried with her. However, if her family felt that she had not been properly catered for by either her husband and/or children, they may refuse to take her corpse, her ngiga, and her aga from her married family. When this happens, a lengthy negotiation process ensues during which gifts and money are offered to placate her birth family for the abuse their child suffered in her marriage, Mbam (2024). All these processes and rituals must be strictly observed in order to accord the dead woman a befitting burial, which guarantees her reincarnation.

Second Burial and Reincarnation

While some scholars assume that the second burial is regarded as a funeral ceremony in the belief systems in most Nigerian groups, however, the Abakaliki natives see it differently. According to the Abakaliki belief system, second burial is a significant aspect of the burial process that goes beyond the funeral ceremony because burial rites are also performed. The second burial is of utmost importance to the people. It is the completion of the burial ceremony. It was believed that without second burial the person was not yet “home” and not yet really dead, therefore it is necessary

to perform it because it would grant the deceased rite of passage and a place among the ancestors, thus making reincarnation possible. It was the last phase of the transition ritual around the burial, which signals her incorporation into the spirit world. Ogwali (2015) asserts that the second burial accorded a woman a place among the ancestors and qualified her to be given food on otutara, a festival of remembrance and feeding of the dead parents, and also, during Aje nma, a celebration of the departed soul done in November of every year for the Ikwo clan. The second burial was a costly affair. In the words of Basden (1966, p.180), 'the very poorest will spend their all, and often heavy debts are incurred in the effort to give the best possible 'send-forth' to a relative'. Corroborating Basden's observations through participant observation, I have seen men who sold off their most fertile land, driven by the perceived cultural imperative to finance the secondary funerary rites of their mothers.

There was no specific period for the second burial. It all depended on the wealth of the children or sometimes in case of a problem such as sickness or different kinds of misfortune that would make it necessary for it to be arranged quickly in order to prevent any calamity. It could be celebrated a few months after the death, but it could also take many years before the burial could take place. More important in this ceremony is that a man would not take a share of the cow meat killed for the deceased during the ceremony unless he killed a cow when he organised it for the mother. It is culturally believed that if he dared take such a share without fulfilling such a requirement, he would surely be attacked and killed by evil spirits in attendance during the funeral ceremony.

Reincarnation of a Woman (Iwa uwa nwanyi)

The concept of reincarnation of women among the Abakaliki is difficult to describe because in practice, it does not happen in the same sense as reincarnation in the Christian doctrine, where it is explained in terms of one body and one soul. Neither does it follow the pattern and processes in the other Igbo communities (Nshi 2024). Igbo duality expresses the human and spirit elements, but it does not specify if a single human translates into a single spirit after death. According to Ubah (1988), this stems from the Igbo conviction that individuals undergo multiple reincarnations, manifesting across different geographical contexts and generational lineages. Sometimes also, a person who is still alive may reincarnate, and the Igbo, would take all precautions to ensure that the 'new' and the 'old' persons do not come in contact with each other. This

is because the 'people believe that their meeting would lead to the death of the 'old' person'. Most Igbo hold that a man reincarnates as a male and a woman as a female. But in some sub-cultures, like Awka in Anambra State, Abakaliki, and the Igbo-speaking people of the lower Niger, for example, a deceased man can reincarnate as a woman and vice versa. The Efik people of Nigeria, who are neighbours of the Igbo, hold a similar view (Okoro, 2025).

Addressing the ontological challenges of understanding reincarnation among the Abakaliki, Echara (2024) contends that God is not engaged in the continuous creation of new souls, but rather in the cyclic manifestation of existing ones. According to him, 'reincarnation is a kind of old wine in a new bottle'. The people believe this type of reincarnation occurs within the same nuclear or extended family, that is, either in the paternal or maternal lineage. Certain characteristics, which include birthmarks, behavioural resemblances between the child and the deceased woman, and sometimes certain statements made by a child when the baby becomes able to speak, are ways of identifying the reincarnated ancestor. Oracles such as jibia and nte orinte are also consulted to confirm the people's suspicion. Once a child is born, the parents or grandparents, especially the grandmother, need to baptise the child, Iku uwa. The concept of this baptism is to wash off evils the reincarnating soul may have come in contact with while returning to earth. Ichi eze is also done within the first month that a child is born. Mbam (2024) is of the opinion that this tradition signifies the acceptance of the reincarnated soul into the society when it has been ascertained that it is not a wicked soul that reincarnated. Naming the child also warrants the blessing of the Ogbo, the person the child is named after, who may be her incarnate. For the Ezza people, a larger clan among the Abakaliki, they do not discriminate in naming a child. Thus, they can name a girl child after a man or a boy after a woman. The implication is that the girl child may not be able to give birth until serious rituals are performed on her behalf. It is also interesting to note that the same woman can reincarnate as a man within the same lineage.

Generally, they also believe that one can change his or her gender; thus, you hear people say, "in my next life, I would be a man or a woman". This explains why you can see a woman looking like a man, walking like a man, behaving like a man, yet she is a woman. Ogboji (2024) asserts that the reason for the above scenario is because the people believe it is a man that reincarnated as a woman because he was named after a woman and that the change in gender does not alter the behavioural characteristics of the child. Again, utterances induced by poverty could also result in a man

reincarnating into a woman. For instance, one can desire and wish that he reincarnates as a woman so that she can marry a rich man to avert poverty. The people believe their guiding angels record their utterances, especially in the early hours of the day and very late at night, and thus can make proclamations that can change their destinies (Obele, 2025).

Reinforcing this assertion, Stevenson (1985) notes that within Igbo cosmology, gender is not an immutable spiritual trait; rather, it is believed that an individual may undergo a gender transition across successive incarnations. The reasons for 'sex change' from one life to another included; since males in Igbo society have almost exclusively the responsibility for economic support of a family, some men may wish to be reborn as women in order to have a life of reduced responsibility. On the other hand, women have little freedom or opportunity for independent action, therefore, some of them may wish to be reborn as men in order to have greater freedom. Even effeminate and homosexual men may wish to make a full transition and become reborn as women. Idoko (2024) is of the view that sometimes it may be difficult for one to reincarnate depending on her offences while on earth. Until the ancestors decide to release her, then her family can start progressing. The soothsayers will always advise the people to check the spiritual status of their deceased ones so that they can help them to lessen whatever burden that is holding her from reincarnating. This is because it is believed that the earlier the deceased woman reincarnates, the earlier the progress and success of her children.

For the Izzi, another clan in Abakaliki, Okehi (2024) maintained that they believe strongly that the souls or ghosts of those who have died and were accorded proper second burial can return to this world and be born again. They can be born as animals; they can be born as humans again. Some women used to say, 'let me not be born as a woman again'. When a woman dies a thief, she may suffer in the spirit world and resolve never to steal in her next life. If a woman is always sickly, she may die and prepare herself not to be sickly in her next turn. It is a common belief that a man or a woman can reincarnate up to seven times. Odah (2024) said that after the seventh time, the soul may go and become a tree and stand in the bush. Sequel to the above, it is common to hear people say that in seven life cycles they would never do this or that.

Interestingly, in the course of my fieldwork, I came across some elders from both Amegu and Ebya communities in Izzi. They agree that the assertion above was not an original Izzi belief about reincarnation but a belief brought in by Igbo fortune-tellers and they object to it. Ogboji

(2024) posits that reincarnation functions as a form of ontological duplication; this conceptual framework explains how a single ancestor can manifest through multiple namesakes, or *ogbo*, simultaneously. Others like Ogalegu (2024) said that a dead person can go to a playground where children gather and announce where they are going to be born; there the dead person can choose his namesake. But, the person himself does not return.

Ogbanje

An *Ogbanje* is a wicked child who continually re-enters its mother's womb only to die again and again after birth, causing its parents grief. In Abakaliki, as noted by Chukwu (2024), there is a belief in different types of *ogbanje*: one that pushes you to make trouble, one that will not allow money to be in your hand, one that brings barrenness, and one of untimely death. It is believed that *Ogbanje* is a member of the "evil children society" in the spirit world. They usually go in groups of seven or more and have their mother in the spirit world. These usually very nice and good-looking children, mostly girls, torture their earthly mothers by a cyclic process of dying and being born again. The spirit mother controls them and they are bound by the laws of the spirit society. The *Dibia* is indispensable in dealing with these children. The Abakaliki believe that *Ogbanje* children borrow things from other spirits of the *ogbanje* society when they leave the spirit world. They promise that they will pay these things back from what they will recover from their earthly parents. To remedy this, the child's one finger will be cut off or the body pierced with a cutlass, depending on how angry the parents are. The people believe that when the child is treated in this way, the spirit-mother cannot accept her again because of the incomplete body, she will come back to torture the earthly mother.

Within the group of *Ogbanje* children two subtypes seem to be distinguished. In the first group, the cycles of birth, death and rebirth occur in infancy or at least with the first four or five years of life. In the second type, the *Ogbanje* child survives early childhood and lives into the teens or early twenties only to die suddenly and seemingly capriciously. According to Nwophoke (2024), girls seem to form a majority of this second group and seem likely to die at the time of marriage or at the delivery of their first child. To preserve the child's life, the intervention of a potent *Dibia* (traditional healer) may be required to 'bind' the spirit mother (*eke maa*), thereby severing the child's metaphysical ties to the

spirit realm. The Dibia tries to find out the origin of the spirit mother and accuse her of maltreatment of the earthly mother and thereby destabilise her.

Conclusion

Ilo uwa, ino uwa, and ibia uwa are the different names by which the Abakaliki describe the positive spirit-souls that return after death. The word "positive" is used because there are different groups of not-so-pleasant spirit-souls who keep being born and dying, thereby causing a lot of pain to their respective families. The origin of the reincarnated soul can be traced either to the child's paternal or maternal ancestry. Time is immaterial in reincarnation in the sense that the reincarnated spirit-soul need not have been dead for a stipulated number of years before coming again. Second burial is a prerequisite for reincarnation. Most times also, the child would present with the physical and behavioural traits of the reincarnated person. Ogbanje is a phenomenon used to describe a group of mischievous spirit-souls that come, die early and return as many times as they wish just to be a source of anguish to their parents. They are believed to only stop when a specialist ritual (ibo iyi uwa iji ogbanje) is performed to sever them from their kindred spirit. Therefore, traditional Igbo religion remains strong among the Abakaliki Igbo. Abakaliki has a large or considerable number of Christian and educated individuals, with urbanisation also proceeding at an accelerated pace. But in spite of these developments, traditional cultural practices and belief systems such as reincarnation and the Ogbanje phenomenon have persisted.

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