

BURIAL CULTURE OF THE ISOKO AND URHOB0 PEOPLE OF DELTA STATE 1990-2020

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the burial culture of the Isoko and Urhobo people of Delta state, especially from 1990 to 2020, and the aspect of the burial culture as it pertains to returning the body of a woman at death back to her natal home for burial. With the wave of globalization came a number of changes in the burial culture of the Isoko and Urhobo people of Delta state. This paper aims at examining the changes and the continuity in an aspect of the burial culture of the Isoko and Urhobo people of Delta State. It critically examines the practice of returning the body of a deceased woman back to her natal home for burial. This practice has over the years been questioned, interrogated and called for scrutiny by both the Isoko and Urhobo people and some of their neighbours. The work argues that social factors have introduced continuous changes in the Isoko and Urhobo culture with regards to their funeral rites and the burial culture of the people have been greatly affected. This practice have been perceived as one which promotes patriarchal dominance. The work adopts the analytical method, using both primary and secondary sources of data in interrogating the practice of returning the body of a deceased woman back to her natal home for burial rather than burying her in her husband's home and maintains that if this practice is not properly handled, it could affect inter-group relations. The paper therefore concludes that this practice is posing as a serious threat to a peaceful and harmonious inter-group relationship among families that are involved in inter-tribal marriage. It recommends that the Isoko and Urhobo people should rehabilitate properly to blend with modernity in this aspect of their culture while preserving some others.

Keywords: Burial, Culture, Rites, Deceased woman, Patriarchal dominance

Introduction

Culture and tradition are two defining characteristics of any group of people. Burying the dead in every culture is a practice that varies from one culture to another. The culture and tradition of the people includes practices such as the burial practices of the people, their marriage rites, festivals, belief and so on which have been passed down from one generation to another. 1

The work examines an aspect of the culture and tradition of the Isoko and Urhobo people of Delta State as it relates to burying a married woman who has died. There is an age long practice among some of the Isoko and Urhobo communities of Delta State that at death, no matter how many years the woman had spent with her husband in marriage while alive, whenever she dies, it is mandatory that she be taken back to her natal home for burial, a practice seen by most observers as strange and unacceptable.2

The lower-ranking position of women to men has been a global debate for decades now. This paper in addition to the above thus seeks to address the dead woman's testamentary rights which have grown to become a major issue raising controversies among the Isoko and Urhobo people of

Delta state over the years.³

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of analysis, the theoretical framework of this paper will be based on the theory of patriarchal dominance. The theory of patriarchal dominance is also referred to as patriarchy. It is a sociological and feminist concept that examines how societies have historically been structured in ways that privilege men and subordinate women.⁴ The theory seeks to analyze power dynamics, social structures and cultural norms that reinforce male dominance and control over various aspects of the society.

At this juncture, it is important to relate this theory to the burial culture of the Isoko and Urhobo people as it pertains to returning the deceased woman's body to her natal home for burial. This theory by Sylvia Walby emphasizes the male dominance and gender-based inequalities that shape the society⁵ and this is applicable in the burial culture of Isoko and Urhobo communities as it is the women alone, as custom demands, who have their bodies returned to their natal home at death for burial. Although, this practice does not cut across all Isoko and Urhobo communities, the practice is one that is not to be compromised and have been known to have far reaching implications on those who do not adhere to it.

Burial Culture of the Isoko and Urhobo People

Burial is a ceremony of laying a dead person to rest with certain rituals as is the custom of the people and the Isoko and Urhobo people have a unique way of burying the dead, and the burial rites are performed in several phases, each with its own significance.⁶ In Isoko and Urhobo culture, not everyone is buried and those who were buried were buried according to the circumstances which led to their death, and the rites and rituals accompanying each form of death varied.⁷ The burial rites of a child or pregnant woman was different from that of an aged person, the rituals carried out during the burial ceremony of a woman who died during childbirth is different from that performed at the burial ceremony of one who drowned in the river, and those who were tagged witches and wizards were not buried in the villages but had their corpses thrown outside the village or in the bushes the people called 'evil forest'.⁸

According to the peoples culture, those eligible for burial in the land were those who had no criminal records, those who died peacefully, those who died at old age, the young children who were either killed or were victims of circumstances and those who died mysteriously were buried but with certain burial rites. According to Isoko and Urhobo tradition, when a loved one died, such a person is buried in the house or within the family compound because they believed that even at death, such a person remained a member of the family.⁹ If the deceased was young, such a person was buried with certain rites but outside of the family compound because the death of the young was seen as a taboo and thus the spirit of such a person was sent forth to war during the funeral rites to go and fight whosoever may have had a hand in the death of such a person. ¹⁰

The burial ceremony according to the Isoko and Urhobo culture lasted for about four days after the interment, on the fourth day, the wife(s), children and relatives of the deceased were expected to shave their heads in honour of the deceased.¹¹ In the evening of the lying-in state, a goat must be slaughtered, this goat is called Ewweaghwun or Ewwe-inuvwun, the goat is used to 'wash, bathe and rinse off dirt' this implied that the goat was used to wash, bathe and rinse the deceased of dirt before embarking on his journey, the goat is specifically meant for those who bathed the deceased and prepared him in the coffin and every other member of the family of the

deceased.¹² Another goat was also slaughtered, this one was called *Evwe-ehun*, this goat was connotatively meant to honour the deceased for utilizing his waist and bearing children while alive, this goat was meant to be consumed by the children of the deceased. All these were encompassed in the first state of the burial rites.¹³

This is the second stage of the burial rites of the Isoko and Urhobo people, *Aruereshi* is also called *Erhu he* or *Eberia* *ive*. This ritual aims at preparing the *Erhi* of the deceased to be received by the ancestors in *Erhivwin*. There was usually no stipulated or recommended time lapses between the *Egigo* and the *Aruereshi* which causes the people to say '*Erivwin gbo-o*', which means, the spirit does not decay.¹⁴ The financial status of the children of the deceased usually determined how soon the *Aruereshi* would take place, and also how elaborate the occasion would be. The rituals for the *Aruereshi* were believed to be permanent and in the same vein, there were hard and fast rules as to whether the *Aruereshi* should be observed as a separate ritual from the *Egigo*, since the financial capability of the children of the deceased played a great role in these ceremonies, the two stages could be carried out simultaneously, however, care must be taken to perform the rituals in the right order of importance.¹⁵

The Isoko and Urhobo culture upholds the treasures and properties of the deceased. Usually, after the interment of the corpse, a day is fixed by the elders in consultation with the off springs of the deceased to gather the earthly belongings of the deceased, his wife inclusive (in the case of a man) for sharing as inheritance among his children, siblings and extended relations.¹⁶ The clothes, shoes, farmlands, beads and other earthly possessions of the deceased were shared among the family members of the deceased. The wife of the deceased was included among the earthly belongings of her late husband because it is a belief among the people that until the death of a woman, she remains a member of the husband's family and will continue to bear and raise children for them until she join her ancestors in *Erivwin*, that is, the spirit world.¹⁷ When all the earthly belongings of the deceased had been shared, the eldest man in the family would then offer prayers for the children.

The Return of a Deceased Woman's Body to her Natal Home for Burial

The reason(s) for the practice of returning a woman's corpse back to her father's compound for burial among many Isoko and Urhobo communities have been questioned over the years, this is one of the cultural burial practices that have continued over the time despite civilization, modernization and Christianity. A woman who had spent her entire life in her husband's house, at death, be taken back to her father's house for burial actually calls for reconsideration. Research has revealed the following as some of the factors responsible for the practice among most of the Isoko and Urhobo communities of Delta State.

Several arguments have risen from burying the Isoko and Urhobo woman in her natal home, some of these arguments are:

- I. In order to avoid maltreatment by their husbands whilst married, and in the case of any marital challenges, the women have a home where they can come and they will not be treated as slaves or second class citizens, but will have a sense of belonging as a member of their parental families.
- II. Because of the influential nature of women to bring about development in their communities, culture demands that they must be returned home at death.
- III. The female children are not slaves and they are not sold out for many reasons including marriage, therefore, they must be returned home at death.
- IV. Due to the fact that women, upon their death must be brought home, they develop

their communities and bring their children to their father's home town for visits or even residence.¹⁸

According to Isoko and Urhobo tradition, during a traditional marriage ceremony, whatever amount the family of the bride requests as the bride price must never be paid in full, this is so because while the bride price is being paid, the family of the bride, led by her father or any of her relatives standing in as her father if he was late, accepts the bride price, after which he gives a fraction of it back to the husband. This act, according to the Isoko and Urhobo tradition signifies that their daughter is not an item for sale on the shelf for sale but is going on a marriage escapade, who after her activities in her husband's house would be brought back to her family at death.¹⁹ This is why traditional marriage system among the Isoko and Urhobo people are cheaper than that of their neighbours and the fraction returned to the husband is believed to be used by him to take proper care of his wife during their marital life together.²⁰

To the Isoko and Urhobo communities that indulge in this practice, they believe that:

1. The practice has over time made the children born to always remember their maternal home and thus give them a need to associate with their mother's relatives.
2. The practice makes the woman participate in the activities of her father's family rather than her absolute concentration on her husband's family. Her non-participation in her family's functions such as marriages and burials means that, she, at death, will not be given a befitting burial in her father's home.
3. It gives a sense of belonging to the mother's family as it is a tradition among the Isoko and Urhobo people that every individual comes from two families- the father's family and the mother's family, and as such, both families must be given due respect.²¹
4. It gives the Isoko and Urhobo man, or, any suitor from outside Isoko and Urhobo land to take proper care of his wife as on her death, the husband and his family would be made to give account on the circumstances that surrounded her death before burial preparations begin.²²
5. It is believed to be a profound way of honouring family ties as it signifies the importance of lineage and heritage, acknowledging the role the woman played within her family structure. This act reflects a deep respect for the matriarchal figures who often serve as pillars of strength, wisdom, and love within their families.
6. It creates a lasting legacy that transcends the moment of passing. It becomes a significant part of the family history, one to be told to younger generations as a reminder of the importance of root and identity. In this way, the traditional practice ensures that the woman's presence lives on in the hearts and minds of those who knew her.²³
7. It is also believed to be a way of preserving the traditions of the people. It reinforces the continuity of customs and values that have been passed down through generations. This traditional practice does not only pay homage to the deceased woman, but also highlights the importance of maintaining cultural authenticity in the evolving world.²⁴

Given the reasons above, it becomes plausible to defend this long term practice of burying a married woman in her father's compound rather than in her husband's home. Although, this practice does not apply to all Isoko and Urhobo communities, those who indulge in it ensure they carry it out diligently.²⁵

The practice was still very much in play and the Isoko and Urhobo communities involved in it have received a number of criticisms from their neighbours such as the Ukwani, the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Delta Ibo, amongst others. The reasons for these criticism include the following:

1. That the wife who spent her entire life with her husband and his family need not be taken back to her father's home for burial, rather, she be buried beside her husband at death, as the woman, by virtue of marriage has crossed over to her husband's family.²⁶
2. Of what use is the woman's corpse to her family? While she was alive and healthy, the family did not request for her, so why then must they request for her body at death?
3. It reduces the cost of burial for the children as both parents would be buried in same place rather than excessive expenses in the Isoko and Urhobo tradition which requires the children to purchase a land if their parents did not have any in their lifetime, and also erect a building in which the woman would be laid to rest. ²⁷

It had been argued that every culture is amendable to slight or notable changes as the world and its people evolves, this has therefore been the reason for the present agitation by some of the Isoko and Urhobo communities who practice this culture as well as her neighbours that the practice should be reversed.²⁸

Intergroup marriage is a common phenomenon among the Nigerian people and this is quite evident among the Isoko and Urhobo people and their neighbours, it is also said that one man's food is another man's poison, this thus calls to mind the review of an aspect of burial among the Isoko and Urhobo people which might be acceptable to them, but unacceptable to the outside world.²⁹ In interrogating the practice of returning the corpse of a married woman back to her father's homestead for burial rather than burying her in her husband's home may affect the intergroup relationship that exists between these people and their neighbours if not properly handled. In recent times, it was observed that this practice has begun to pose as a serious threat to the peaceful and harmonious intergroup relation among families that indulge in inter-tribal marriage. An examples of this is the late Henrietta Kosoko, wife of the veteran Nollywood actor Jide Kosoko who died on June 6th 2016, had to bring back the body of his late wife to her hometown in Urhoboland to be buried amid the controversial circumstance.³⁰

In Isoko, the Emevor, Umeh, Enwhe, Oweh and Iyede communities, the conception of burying a deceased woman in her natal home seems to be very relevant and entrenched in their culture. Thus, women married to men outside these communities, on their demise are brought back to their natal home for burial. However, in some of these afore mentioned communities where this is practiced, financial negotiations are done for permission to be granted to bury the deceased in her marital home instead, but among the Emevor people in particular, returning a deceased woman's body back to her natal home for burial is never compromised like their conservative Urhobo neighbours.³¹

It has been severely argued that every culture is amendable to slight changes, this is therefore the reason for the present agitation of people both from Isoko and Urhobo communities and even their neighbours that this practice be overturn. Although, record has it that there have been several instances where some women who were buried wrongly, that is, outside of their natal home without due process, revealed themselves to their children on the need for the reversal of such burials.³² Changing the tradition of a people has its spiritual implications on its people and the importance

of this traditional practice cannot be over emphasized. Therefore, this issue of returning the body of a deceased woman back to her natal home for burial is one that requires critical thinking, the opinions of those who have kept this practice for ages must be sought, also, the input of the custodian of the cultures and traditions such as the Chief Priest, the Council of Elders, and the Oldest person in the clan or kingdom must be recognized.

Bearing these in mind, the Isoko and Urhobo people who are still involved in the practice of returning the body of a dead woman back to her natal home for burial are advised to move with time and amend this practice.³³ In recent times, with the wave of globalization and civilization, some of the old cultural practices and beliefs are now being modified by modern and innovative ideas, for example, town criers in towns and villages no longer go around with the local gong to make public announcements, instead they go with a public address system which enables them spread their messages within a short period of time. Christianity on its part has altered some traditional practices including the burial practice of the people. The people's mode of dressing has been changed drastically, the people no longer go about tying wrappers, and also, the education of the girl-child which was more like a taboo in the past is now very much encouraged. These are some of the cultural practices that have been altered and accepted by the Isoko and Urhobo people. Similarly, the people should accept the changes advocated by this study.³⁴

A few reasons have been given as to why women should be buried in their marital homes, these reasons include the following:

1. To enable them benefit from the fruits of their labour after living and toiling with their husbands.³⁵
2. To avoid being strangers back at home after so many years in their husband's house.³⁶
3. To avoid undue exploitation of the children by their maternal family during the burial.³⁷
4. The women had earlier been discriminated against in the sharing of their father's heritage at his death.³⁸

These reasons may not be genuine as they were only opinions expressed during data collection, but the women of Isoko and Urhobo communities should have a say on where they wished to be buried at death, rather than imposing on them that they must be returned to their natal home for burial at death. In other words, the Isoko and Urhobo people should overhaul their ways of treating women and allow them decide on whether they want to be brought back home at death or not.

Intergroup relation has been an existing phenomena among the Nigerian peoples, the people relate through trade, war, marriage, diplomacy and other forms of intergroup relations. Intergroup or inter-tribal marriage is one common occurrence among the Isoko and Urhobo people and their neighbours, and the practice of returning a body of a deceased woman back to her natal home for burial rather than burying her in her marital home is a practice that does not sit well with other ethnic groups. If this practice is not properly handled, could affect inter-group relations in terms of marriage.³⁹

It is important to note that this practice is not peculiar to the Isoko and Urhobo people of Delta state alone, late Stella Obasanjo who hails from Irukepken in Esan land, Edo State and died on October 23rd 2005, before being allowed to be buried in her husband's place elicited a lot of

crisis between her family and that of her husband, and even among the Idoma people of Benue state, this practice has been a veritable source of intergroup conflict between her people.⁴⁰ Proponents of the abolishment of this practice maintain that such a tradition has put the traditional oath of marriage to question, stating that the Isoko and Urhobo marriage tradition must be in agreement with the universal institution of marriage which maintains the interminable union of two different gender.⁴¹

Conclusion

The return of a deceased woman's body to her natal home for burial is a tradition that encapsulates deep-seated emotions, cultural heritage, and celebration of family connections. It serves as a poignant reminder of the bonds that tie us to our past, the importance of acknowledging where we come from and the profound impact an individual can have on the lives of those around her. In an ever-changing world, this age-old practice continues to stand as a symbol of respect, love and the enduring power of tradition.⁴²

Be that as it may, the only constant phenomenon in life is change and what one is trying to put across is to allow the husband or children of the deceased bury her wherever they please, so long she gave her consent before death. Some other ethnic groups are already evolving and changing their cultural practices due to some of the effects it has had on them due to ignorance. The Isoko and Urhobo people are not only known for their burial practice of returning the body of a deceased woman back to her natal home for burial, they are also known to be peace-loving people who are friendly and kind hearted too.

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