

# **Changes in the Communication of Death and Funeral in Igboland: The Case of Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria.**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

*Westernisation has impacted greatly on Igbo traditions and cultural values. Dissemination and sharing of information on death and funeral in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria are no exceptions. Using the technique of documentary analysis, in-depth library research method and interview, this paper examined the changes in the modes and patterns of disseminating and sharing information on the dead from traditional to modern time in Owerri West Local Government Area. Also, the paper discussed how some of these modes of communication had discontinued, others modified by modernity while new communication modes and patterns emerged. Furthermore, the paper interpreted the impact of these changes on the value system of the people. The position of the paper is that those traditional modes which propagate the peoples' values but devoid of fetish and superstitious beliefs should be protected from extinction while those that are extinct should be revived. This is necessary considering the fact that the values which are embedded in the cultural life of the group are necessary for the peaceful co-existence of the people.*

## **Background to the Study**

Mere mention of death, *onwu* as it is referred to in Igboland evokes fear, pain and misery. Death, when it occurs is communicated to relations and members of the community through various modes communication.

In Owerri West Local Government Area, as a result of Westernization, much of the traditional forms of communication involved in deaths and funerals have undergone changes. While some had become extinct, others have been modified and yet others have been struggling to survive in competition with the more powerful modern and new media such as newspaper, radio, television and internet resources. Consequently, these changes have impacted negatively on the peoples value system.

Using the technique of documentary analysis, in-depth library research method and interview, this study examined the traditional and modern modes of sharing information on deaths and funerals in Owerri West Local Government Area. Also the paper discussed how some of these modes had discontinued, others modified by modernity while new communication modes and patterns emerged. The paper showed how some core traditional values of the people had been lost as a result of the dislocation of these traditional forms of communication. Discussion of these modes are in two parts; traditional modes of communication and modern (new) modes of communication.

Owerri West Local Government Area has a population of 101, 754 people (NPC, 2006). Located South-East of Imo State, Nigeria, it is made up of the following towns: Avu, Amakohia-ubi, Emeabiam, Eziobodo, Ihiagwa, Irete and Ndegwu. Others are Nekede, Obinze, Oforola, Ohii, Okolochi, Okuku, Orogwe and Umuguma.

### **Conceptual Framework: Communication**

Communication is derived from the Latin word ‘communus’ which means ‘common’. According to Wilber Schramm (1955) cited in Okunna (1999:6), when people communicate, they are trying to establish ‘commonness’ with someone. This implies sharing information, ideas, experience or messages.

Traditional media of communication therefore refer to indigenous tools, objects, instruments, signs and symbols which serve as channels or modes for sharing information, ideas or messages. However, for the purpose of this discourse, media and modes are used interchangeably because some traditional modes of communication also serve as channels (media) of communication.

### **What is Death?**

Death signifies the end of life. It signals sorrow and misery to every family in a community. For Hornby (2000:299), death is “the end of life, the state of being dead”(cited in Ugwu, (2004:57). The significance of death is explicable in various dimensions:- death stands between the visible and invisible; it is a transition from one state of existence to another and a passage from the earthly world to spiritual world. Thus, for the people, life is a continuum and death only signifies transition from the physical world to the spirit world.

In Owerri West Local Government Area, and elsewhere in Igbo land, death could be a ‘good death’ (onwu chi) or a ‘bad death’ ( nnwuchi onwu or onwu ojoo). Death after a ripe age is regarded as ‘good death’. ‘Bad death’ according to Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004:59) include death resulting from small pox, or death incurred from the wrath of anti-wickedness divinities like god of thunder or leprosy. Any death involved in abomination such as self-hanging (ikwu-udo), or death resulting from AIDS are ‘bad deaths’.

Associated with ‘bad death’ also, is a dead child who ‘tormented’ the parents with a protracted illness before dieing. In a ritual during the burial of such death, oil bean seed, *ugbakala* (shortened to *ugba*) is placed on the corpse of the deceased immediately before burial. This signifies a curse to the deceased to wander away and not to return to the parents in time of reincarnation( *iyo uwa*).

It is believed that the spirit world is inhabited by ancestors. Ancestors are intermediaries between man and God as well as factors of cohesion among members of the community. The dominant factor for qualifying as ancestor rests on full burial rites

given to the deceased by his living relatives (Madu, 1997 cited in Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004:71). Witches, wizards, armed robbers do not qualify for ancestorhood. It is believed that ancestors 'are still part of their human families; they turn to their families from time to time, and even share meals with them, though symbolically' (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004:66). This partly explains the reason during meal, bereaved family members cannot eat, without first 'dropping' on the ground, few balls of pounded food called *fufu or utara* symbolically for the ancestors during the period of mourning. It is believed that the ghost of the dead still 'haunt his compound and neighbourhood before his final departure to the spirit-land.' (Metuh 1985). In the same vein, adult male cannot take palm wine from a keg without first pouring little quantity on the ground for the ancestors. According to Metuh p 31, dead members of the family 'expect frequent and regular offering from the living, while the living expect the 'living dead' to reciprocate by giving them protection and property.' The people of Owerri West believe strongly that ancestors are responsible for the life and growth of any family member. Also, they (ancestors) can inflict punishment on, as well as kill erring members of the community. The fear of the wrath of the ancestors inculcates moral discipline in the society.

### **Funeral**

Funeral is the term given to the ceremony for burying a dead person. In Owerri West, it is referred to as *okwu- kwu*. Every death is followed with funeral rites and the nature of the funeral depends on whether it is 'good death' or 'bad death'; it depends on age, sex, and the socio-economic status of the deceased in the community.

The essence of the funeral rite is to ensure that the dead is received in the spirit land as a full-fledged member of his lineage while the burial rite is a mark of respect to the dead. It is believed that when a person dies, he (or she) transits from the physical world to the spirit world to join the ancestors. However, this journey, it is believed, cannot sail smoothly to the spirit world if funeral rite is left un-performed, thus leaving the spirit of the dead to wander endlessly. As Metuh, p 23 rightly observed, 'the funeral rites demonstrate the close bond between the visible and invisible world in an essentially religious world view,' and for the people of Owerri West, a dead man is still 'living' in the form of spirit and therefore invisible.

To prepare the corpse of a titled man such as *nze* for a funeral rite, it undergoes a ritual washing using a mixture of little quantity of water and black camwood dye called *uri* which is smeared all over the body. In a ritual called *iwa- nkita -anya*, a dog is killed over the eyes of the corpse in the night in a manner which allows the blood to drip to the eyes of the dead man. With this ritual performed, it is believed that the deceased is now prepared for a journey to join his ancestors in the spirit world.

### **Traditional Modes of Communication Associated with Death and Funeral.**

Traditional modes of disseminating and exchanging information on death and funeral in Owerri West and elsewhere in Igboland are varied and diverse. Through them,

messages are disseminated which could be in non-verbal or verbal form. Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998), cited in Anunike (2007:84) see traditional communication channel as ‘any form of indigenous communication system, which by virtue of its origin, form and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilisation of the value.’ This definition is adopted in this discourse. Also, for the purpose of the present study, modes of communication are discussed under non-verbal and verbal modes.

### **Non-verbal Modes**

Non-verbal communication manifests in different forms. A number of instruments developed for this purpose are: *omu* (tender palm frond), *ekwe*, (small wooden gong), *ugele* (metal gong), *nkpo- na- ala or egbe-ala* (cannon), *ogwe* (hollow cylindrical drum covered at one end with animal parchment), dress pattern and hair style. *Omu* – tender yellowish palm frond is used widely to convey information on death. On the death of any family member, a visitor or passer-by is greeted with the appearance of *omu* which is tied on the trunks of every economic tree in the family compound. It is believed that the spirit of the dead ‘hovers’ within the family vicinity and, the *omu*, it is believed, could prevent the spirit from ‘entering’ economic trees to avoid premature deaths or withering of the trees.

Generally *omu* expresses: death/bereavement when placed in front of the compound; presence of corpse when tied to any moving object, or death of someone when placed at one’s business premises, office, shed, shop, or house.

*Ekwe* – large wooden drum measuring about one meter long and 35 centimeters in diameter with double membrane was used to summon citizens in case of death. Supported by smaller *ekwe* with single membrane, large *ekwe* is used in *odiike* dance. *Odiike* is a musical festivity in which male relations of the dead and men of valour dance with gestures to demonstrate and dramatize, with simulated enthusiasm, the achievements, the strength and characteristic behaviour of the dead in his lifetime. Such musical festivity is known as *esse* in Mbaise. Related to this is a ritual performed at the foot of the deceased house where a tall raffia bamboo stick is mounted. A narrow strip band of white cloth is tied at the top of the stick and it is made to flow vertically to the ground. At this location, sacrifices are made from the date of the death till 8 market days after burial. The sacrifice is directed at the spirit of the dead to ward off any calamity

*Nkpo- na- ala or egbe-ala*, a local cannon, transmits information by sounds of powerful blast to signal and signify death of great man such as *nze* title holder. The number of canon shots depicts the level of maturity, achievement and socio-economic status of the deceased. For the male achiever, the beginning of the funeral ceremony is heralded by the release of four cannon shots as early as 5am. Though shots are released intermittently between this time and the burial proper, interment is heralded by the release of 21 or more cannon shots. After interment, a den gun shot is fired into the room or the hut where the corpse was kept before burial. This is to ensure the complete

expulsion of the spiritual remains of the deceased and for purposes of purification of the room or hut. After this ritual, the living could inhabit the same room or hut without fear of contamination.

Okon (2012:24) observes that *town criers* “are reporters, correspondents, news agents, messengers, spokesmen, and broadcasters.” Traditionally, they are empowered to carry messages to every part of the community. The *Town crier* beats *ugele* (metal gong) or small *ekwe* or *nwokwa* (small gong made of wood or bamboo) to draw the attention of people before giving out his message from ward to ward, usually in vernacular. The *town crier* gives information on the detailed programme of events relating to any burial and funeral ceremonies. Town crier uses *ekwe*, *ugele* or *nwokwa* in combination with voice to disseminate information. In other words, *town crier* is a combination of verbal and non-verbal mode but treated here as non-verbal mode because of the more powerful instruments of *ekwe*, *ugele* and *nwokwa* to alert people before announcements are made.

Another symbol of communication which portrays the death of cherished one is the mode of dressing. At the death or immediately after, the bereaved tie folded wrapper around their waste up on another dress. With this mode of dressing, those who are not aware of the death are informed of it. Any who observes the dress code is prompted to ask; ‘who was the deceased and when did it occur?’

Added to the dress code is the hair style. The shaving of hair immediately after interment by close relations, such as husband, wife, children and other members of the extended family communicates bereavement.

Other manifestations of non-verbal modes of communication are: *odu opii*, and *ogwe*. An elephant tusk, *odu* is blown during burial ceremony of titled men such as *nze* or when escorting the corpse of a dead woman to her father’s home. *Opii*, antelope horn, when blown produces sounds that blend burial songs by mass of mourners while conveying their female corpse to another town for burial. *Ogwe* is a drum made of hollow cylindrical wood covered at one end with hide. It is a communicative instrument used to praise achievers during funeral rites while advising the younger ones to maintain high standard of morality in their struggle for life achievement.

### **Verbal Communication**

Verbal communication involved in death and funerals come in the form of language expressions. These take the form of spoken words or sung communication. Spoken words in communication include among others, ‘proverbs, riddles, narrations, simple commands, requests, explanations and statements’ (Oreh, 1978:108). Also, it includes idiomatic expressions.

Some songs are specifically devoted to mourning the dead. Oreh, p 96 described it succinctly when he said, ‘a stranger approaching a funeral party does not need to be told that somebody has died as funeral songs convey a motif of sorrow, loss, search, anger and grief.’ Songs such as these are indicative of sorrow during funeral rites:

*O la-la O la-la nwanne a- la- la ya nodi mma –  
meaning ‘he is gone, he is gone, may his soul rest in  
peace.’*

*Another says: Anyi na cho , anyi na cho , anyi na cho  
Anyi na cho nwanne puru k a mma echi,  
Anyi na cho nwanne puru k a mma echi  
Onye obula cho ya , ka anyi mara ebe onu,  
Onye obula cho ya , ka anyi mara ebe onu.*

-meaning, we are searching for our lost relation who went out since yesterday, everybody should join hands in the search so as to locate his where about.

### **Breaking the News of a Dead Mother to her Parents or Members of her Biological Family.**

In the event of death of married woman, breaking the news to members of her family requires caution and involves traditional rites. The son, a maternal child referred to as *nwa-nwa*, or the husband in company of kinsmen approaches the immediate relations of the dead woman with kolanuts and a keg of palm wine.

Here, the relations are informed metaphorically, that their daughter was ‘missing’. Thereafter, questions such as when and how she got missing are posed by her relations and after series of interactions, a date is agreed upon when the husband or children would come for the main rite referred to as *ihaa-ihe*. This is the bargaining and provision of items demanded in the list of items earlier handed over to the husband or children of the deceased wife. Items demanded include: tobacco, kegs of palm wine, kolanuts and cash among others. With this rite completed, the relations of the deceased are authorized to prepare for the burial of the deceased.

### **Changes in Modes of Communication Associated with Death.**

Today, Information and Communication Technologies( ICT) have made dissemination and sharing of information on death and funeral much faster and easier. People have cultivated the expensive and impoverishing habit of rushing to the print and electronic industries for paid advertisement placed on radio, television and newspapers on funeral arrangements, - a function formally and entirely performed by *town crier* in traditional setting.

With small digital cameras and video tape recorders, and using Facebook in social media, pictures of burial events are uploaded to internet and publicised instantly. Informing distant relatives about the death of their brother, father, mother, uncle and aunt could be effected instantly with cellular phones, facebook, fax, e-mail or text messages instead of physically travelling to meet the person or employing the services of *town*

*crier*. Handbills, which contain programmes of burial arrangements are pasted on tree trunks, walls of building and fences.

Up till 1980s, the ringing of the Christian church bell in quick succession was indicative of the loss of a member of the church. This is in combination with the use of *nkpo- na- ala*, and *omu*. Presently however, the use of church bell seems to have been relegated by Information Communication Technologies ( ICTs ) as it is no more fashionable. The tying of *omu* on tree trunks is no more fashionable.

The use of *ekwe* , *ugele* and *ogwe* (drum) in music and dancing in funerals are no more fashionable as the entertainment functions have been dominated by music produced with electronic guitars, and pianos. Gospel musics, highlife music and western pop music produced with electronic instruments dominate in funeral ceremonies instead of folk music characterized by lamentation.

### **There are other changes in the use of communication modes.**

Today, some traditional modes exist side by side with modern media in relation to announcement of death, burial schedules, and funeral announcements. The *town crier*, using wooden gong, *ekwe* or metal gong, *ugele* shares the function of announcement, informing and educating the populace with face book, radio, television and other social media. On the other hand, this indicates fundamental transfer of the role of media from the traditional to modern. There are occasions when microphones, mounted on the top of vehicles are used to announce, continuously, the arrival of a corpse, giving identity of the dead person, a function formerly carried out with the use of *odu* (elephant tusk) or *town crier*.

Folk tales – verbal modes of communication which are associated with the transmission of cultural heritage, and values; and norms which provide baseline for society's dos and don'ts, are non-existent presently. The usual lamentation where talented local performers sing dirge to mourn a dead relation is history. A dirge is a slow but sad piece of song or music sung at funeral or for a dead person. It is lamentation akin to the song signalling the commencement of the program, *Nsukka De-Jenu* presented by Uchechukwu, Samuel in Lion Fm located at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It is pertinent to observe that communal solidarity, formally a rallying point in the society is shifting to individualism. Prior to the modern media era, values were transmitted through macro-social process involving communal efforts. It is no longer same today. Print, electronic and new media have had major impact on the shaping and reshaping of the individuals world view, affecting perceptions of what is right, wrong or true. As Akpoghiran (2010:69) posits, ' as new forms of ICT emerge over time, new lifestyles and values will emerge thereby rendering our cherished cultures inadequate.' For instance, internet has the potential, to mould and shape new forms of values and ethics. Today, violent and pornographic films have encouraged sexual promiscuity and rape – vices dreaded in the past.

## Summary

Westernisation has impacted greatly on Igbo traditions and cultural values. Dissemination and sharing of information on death and funeral are no exceptions. The *town crier* took advantage of the power of the gong to mobilize the people when a prominent man died. There has been dislocation, cannibalization and displacement of some of these traditional media.

The Traditional communication system did not only serve as a source of cultural, political and enlightenment programmes for the people of Owerri West Local Government Area, the system enhanced self-actualisation. However, while the use of some traditional modes, such as *town crier*, *nkpo—na- ala*, *ekwe* and *omu* have been reduced to the barest minimum, others such as *odiike* dance pattern and burial folk songs, tying of *omu* on the trunk of economic trees are nonexistent; use of posters, hand bills, face book, text messages, television, and radio have assumed dominant role in handling messages, information and stories relating to death, burial and funeral ceremonies. Important folk tales and funeral songs which inculcate disciplines and morality in youths are at the verge of extinction

## Conclusion

It is the conviction of the author that some traditional modes of communication are still relevant and such should not be allowed to go into extinction. They include *ekwe*, (wooden gong), *nkpo-na-ala* (cannon) and *odu* (antelope horn). They should be preserved, encouraged and protected because of their cultural values to the society.

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