

A functional-semiotic investigation of traditional funeral rites and rituals in Elugwu Ezike in Igboland

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Death is accompanied by the performance of a series of rituals and rites which connect the dead and the living. This study is a functional-semiotic analysis of burial rituals and rites in Elugwu Ezike, in Igboland, Enugu State, Nigeria. The main objectives of the study are to examine the context and functions, as well as signs and symbols, involved in funeral rituals and rites in Elugwu Ezike Igbo. Data for the study were collected through oral interview and participant observation at funerals in Elugwu Ezike, and documented materials on burial rites and rituals. The paper utilizes the functional and semiotic theories for the analysis of the data. It is observed in this study that burial rites and rituals are representations of cultural performances which mark a people's life experience. These funeral rites and rituals are an expression of the people's thoughts, emotions, social organization, and cultural identity. It is also observed in recent times that the waves of modernity, Islam and Christianity have had positive and negative impacts on the performance of traditional funeral rites and rituals in Elugwu Ezike.

Keywords: Burial; Death; Functionalism; Funerary Rites; Funerary Rituals; Semiotics

1. Introduction

There is a strong Igbo belief that spirits of one's ancestors keep a constant watch over the living, and must be placated through prayer. Igbo people are incurably religious, inherently afraid of death and permanently in love and in constant communion with their deceased parents and relations. Their expenditure indices are always very high in their honest efforts to satisfy their deceased parents and other relations.

The people of Elugwu Ezike Igbo cultural area spend far above their average income in a bid to meet up with the necessary requirements involved in organizing befitting burial and funeral rites for their deceased parents and relations. The reason for embarking on such an expensive venture is to avoid the wrath of the ancestors who feel offended when these rites are not well

performed by their progeny. It is believed that the ancestors often inflict their relations with terrible punishments such as death, misfortunes, sickness as well as stagnation in human endeavour when they are not happy with them. Such severe punishments are placated by engaging on funeral rites and conducting appropriate rituals to appease the deceased.

In most cases, an average Igbo man goes all out borrowing from friends and relations in order to ensure that all the necessary ritual ceremonies of the deceased are performed. Ancestors who live well, die in socially approved ways are given correct burial rites, are allowed to continue the afterlife in a world of the dead. The world of the dead that is filled with honoured ancestor mirror the world of the living, and the deceased relatives were periodically reincarnated among the living. Those who die bad deaths and lack correct burial rites cannot return to the world of the living or enter that of the dead. They wander homelessly expressing their grief by causing destruction among the living counterparts.

The current study adopts a semiotic approach to the issue of death and its rites and rituals in Elugwu Ezike in Igboland, Nigeria.

2. Background

People responses to death, and the rituals and beliefs surrounding it tend to vary widely across the world. In all societies, whether customs prescribe overt displays of grief or restrained behaviour, the issue of death brings into focus certain fundamental cultural values. The various rituals and ceremonies that are performed are primarily concerned with the explanation, validation and integration of a people's view of the world.

As death is not the end of man, it does not sever his connections with his family. On the contrary, death extends the family relationships into infinity. The ceremonies and rituals performed by the living for the dead emphasize the unbroken family relationship between the living and the dead. Both the living and the dead have a part to play in fulfilling family obligation, and things go well for a family when both sides perform their obligations properly. For example, it is the responsibility of the living to perform the funeral rites of the dead properly or to give them a befitting burial. The living thereafter offers the dead sacrifices, food and drink which constitute acts of remembrance and reverence. The dead on their own part protect the living from danger.

The funeral ceremonies of the Igbo people are extremely complex, the most elaborate of all is the funeral of a titled man (chief). However, elaborate funeral ceremonies are not granted to those who died from the several kinds of deaths that are considered shameful, and in these circumstances no burial

is provided at all. Women who die during childbirth, children who die before the develop teeth, those who commit suicide or die in a sacred month have their funeral ceremony consist of being thrown into the evil forest. Also seen as shameful is multiple birth because multiple births were considered part of the animal world and twins were put to death, children who were born with teeth or whose upper teeth came first, babies born feet first, boys with only one testicle, and lepers were killed and their bodies discarded in secrecy. However, some aspects of these funeral practices have been modernized. The modernization is not total and completes especially in Elugwu Ezike and other Igbo communities.

A funeral ceremony in Igbo society involves sacrifices, singing and dancing. Funerals are characterized by deep feelings that are partly, expressed through poetry (Uzochukwu, 2001). Thus, poetry performances become useful avenues to let out pent emotions that could easily be harmful to the health of the bereaved. To this extent funeral performances are therapeutic. Funerals are also characterized by feelings of joy. Contrary to what Finnegan (1970) records in a general discussion on elegiac poetry in Africa, claiming that wailing and singing are solely characteristics of feminine mourning, all members of an Elugwu Ezike community wail and sing at a funeral. Wailing and singing are the popular ways of “escorting” the dead to *ala mmuo* ‘the world of spirits.’ In fact, funeral ceremonies (*mmuo*) are seen by Elugwu Ezike Igbo as a process of seeing off the dead to the next abode in the world of spirits. In support of the above view, Egudu and Nwoga (1971, p. 22) postulate that “the end of a man’s journey through life is remarkable because it is a stage at which the gods have decided to claim back what they gave the world.” To the Igbo, earthly existence is transient. It is not the end of life because life continues in the great beyond after the cessation of immediate life on earth.

Elugwu Ezike people regard death as leopard in the jungle. Thus, when death strikes, they would say that *Agu anaru ovu nwa ya* ‘leopard has snatched the dove its chick.’ Here, death is personified. Sometimes, they regard death as a kite. This is expressed in the following words: *Egbe evuru nwa ooko la n’ugere elu* ‘the kite has taken the hen’s chick up the sky.’ At other times, they regard death as a robber. Thus, they say, *onwu bu abal[d]egwu o zuru o gbalaga* ‘death is a robber that steals and disappears.’ Through death, the life that one has lived is revealed. People who were rich are accorded respected burial while those who were poor are not (Okpewho, 1992).

Among the people of Elugwu Ezike Igbo, there are basically two stages in the burial rites of the deceased. The first consists of merely interring the remains, while the second, which is usually known as *ookwa onwu* ‘funeral ceremony’ is the preparation of the deceased for acceptance by the ancestors. The

significance of this rite is to prepare the soul of the deceased for presentation to his kin and fellow companions or family in the world beyond.

Before interment, the *okpara* 'eldest son of the deceased' prays and pleads on behalf of all other children. Special requests are made to the deceased especially those, who are believed to ensure peace and prosperity for all those left behind. Sometimes we have a tone of complaint and the ancestor is approached directly through the use of concrete and visual images from the everyday word. The speaker addresses the ancestor in whose honour the incantation is made. By the time the grave is ready, rituals are performed before the coffin is lowered into the grave.

Funeral rites differ according to age and sex and the social status of the deceased. A baby may be given an ordinary burial but if subsequent babies of the same mother die, they may be regarded as *ogbanje* (changeling) and their corpses are mutilated and buried in the bush. The adolescent is buried outside the compound as a sign of premature death. The death of an adolescent does not attract an elaborate funeral for his death is regarded as having perverted the order of nature *onwu mgbaji*. Similar to the funeral of the adolescent is that of the *ofoegar* 'the never-do-well.' He is invariably denied an elaborate funeral not on account of age but on account of his lack of achievement. He has left behind no possessions or children of his own.

2.1. Death

The term death has been conceptualized from an array of perspectives. According to Mbiti (1969, p. 157):

Death is conceived as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He moves on to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of existence. Some of the words describing death imply that a person goes 'home', which means that life is like a pilgrimage. That the real 'home' is in the hereafter, since one does not depart from there.

In line with the above statement, Parrinder (1975, p. 58) supports that when an African dies, he joins the ancestors and there he dies no more. He says that the "ancestors are believed to have survived death and lived in the spiritual world but still taking a lively interest in the affairs of their families". Ezeja James the eldest man in Amaja community and a retired civil servant says that "death is a debt which everybody owes. Death is a debt we owe to the soil".

We can infer from the responses of these informants that in Elugwu Ezike,

death is conceived not as the end of life but rather a transition from this present earthly life to another life in the great beyond. They also conceptualizes death as a phenomenon that has no friends or relations; hence, the name *onwu enweghi enyi* and *onwu enweghi nwanne*.

In the context¹ of this study, death is conceptualized as the separation of the soul from the physical body and a transition from the physical world to the spirit world. Death is not the end of man, it is a condition to join the ancestors because there is no way man can go to the spirit world or join the ancestors without dying.

2.2. Ritual

Kyriakidis (2007) defines “ritual” as a set of actions, performed mainly for the symbolic value. It may be presented by the traditions of a community. The term ritual usually refers to actions which are stylized, excluding actions which are arbitrarily chosen by the performers. Ritual may also be described as a prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or power. Ritual provides information and reduces anxiety by making people believe that what has been described has been affected or will be fulfilled.

In this study, ritual is used to denote a body of custom specifically associated with religious performance, but more generally as any non-instinctive predictable actions or series of actions that cannot be justified by a rational means. It is also a body of ceremonies or customary acts. Ritual performances are mostly based on belief in mystical powers and which by nature can be seen as manifestations of the religious or social life of the people. The elaborate nature of rituals associated with a death makes it possible for us to have some variations in dirges from different parts of the world. Their executions and functions differ from culture to culture, and their content, which normally deals with the loss occasioned by death, may sometimes vary depending on the community’s understanding of the concept of death.

2.3. Burial

The term burial has been conceptualized in different ways by different scholars. According to Carter (1989) the term burial implies the ceremonial interment of a corpse (which probably first occurred in Mousterian times) or a method of disposing the dead in which the body is placed on a platform above the ground and left to be defleshed by scavengers. From the mythological view point, Onoja (1988) rightfully asserts that when burial is viewed from the Igbo mythological perspective, the dead is viewed as the living that deserves necessary rituals in order to progress to the spirit realms.

A closer analysis of Onoja's ideas will confirm that the Igbo mythology held that the spirit or soul stays with the corpse awaiting burial or funerals. While the soul stays around, the family makes plan to bury the dead and also perform all necessary rituals the soul needs to move ahead. In the words of Gbenga (1992), souls that were denied decent burials roam about the streets as evil spirits that have no abode. They go about destroying lives and property and causing untold miseries to their families. This, according to Gbenga (1992), will force their families to organize their burial rites without delay and then set the soul moving to its destination—the spirit world. Iwuagu (1974) views the burial rites specifically as an act of worship. He postulates that burial rites are seen by the Igbo as an act of worship, of propitiating their gods, of communicating with the deceased and of making a thorough appraisal of the success and failures of the deceased in his career on earth.

In ancient periods, funeral rites in most African communities were colourful and engrossed in ritual practices. With the arrival of the Christian missionaries in 1843, the ritual practices associated with burials in Igboland began to change, and other Igbo traditional practices such as ancestral worship, came under serious attack. This is what we will cover in more details below.

2.4. The literature on funerary rites

Many have researched on rites and rituals of death and discovered that it varies from culture to culture (see Capone, 2010a, b; Herat, 2014a; 2014b; Sahoo, 2014; Salmani Nodoushan, 2013b; 2016e). Religious practices for death rites and rituals also varies. For instance Salmani Nodoushan (2013b; 2016e) in his study on funerary rituals in Shia Islam could testify that funerary rites and rituals employed by Catholics in Italy have slight difference (Capone, 2010a,b). Capone (2010a,b) observed that funeral rites and rituals performed by Italian Catholics bear similarities with, but also considerable differences from Catholics and Christians in the UK. Goffman (1967) cited in Sahoo (2014) opines that people decide on how to remember their dead, which can therefore be regarded as part of their individual and collective identity.

Amadi (1974) conducted a study on traditional burial rites in Aku community of Nsukka. The study found that without burial rites at the transition stage, the dead roams about instead of leaving for the land of the dead. The study further revealed that when a decent burial has been conducted, a good relationship is established between the spirit of the dead and the living.

In a similar way, Ugwuoke (1998) conducted a case study on death and burial rites of *ọzọ* titled men in Obimo community in Nsukka. The study found that

the burial of օզօ title holder in Obimo community is very expensive and colourful. Even if the bereaved family does not have money they would borrow in order to give the deceased title holder befitting burial. Burial rites of օզօ title holder in Obimo community include: washing the corpse thoroughly with a local pomade (*elu aki*), supervision of the corpse by the օզօ titled men to know whether the body was given due preparation, covering the body with black cloth and placing his cap on his head with eagle feather and a red feather (*awօ*) and his titled staff (*arua*) put in his hand. In Obimo, the dead օզօ titled man's grave is dug into two chambers, one chamber for his corpse and the other one for his bed.

3. The present study

3.1. Theoretical framework

This study is guided by functional approach propounded by Smith, Bruner and White (1956) and cultural semiotic theory by Cassirer (1955). The theory of functionalism holds that the nature of ritual is to be defined in terms of its function in a society. The aim of functionalism theory is to explain ritual behaviour in terms of individual needs and social equilibrium. Ritual is thus viewed as an adaptive and adjusting response to the social and physical environment. Many leading authorities on religion and ritual have taken this approach as the most adequate way to explain rituals. Bronislaw Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Parson and Edmund Leach, all English or American anthropologists, adopted a functional approach to explain ritual, religion and myth. Most functional explanations of ritual attempt to explain this behaviour in relation to the needs and maintenance of a society.

The strengths of functional approach are dependent upon a claim that it is both logical and empirical. It is a claim, however, that is open to serious criticism. If the claim of functionalism is to explain why rituals are present in a society, it will be necessary to clarify such terms as need, maintenance and a society functioning adequately, and this becomes crucial if they are to be taken as empirical terms. The relevance of functional approach to the present study is that it remains a heuristic-device, or indicator, for describing the role of ritual in society. The theory also holds that the function of ritual depends upon its reference. Whatever the referent, ritual as symbolic behaviour presupposes that the action is non-rational which means that the means-end relation of ritual to its referent is not intrinsic or necessary (Sebeok, 1977).

The functional approach also holds that ritual behaviour entails an attitude that is concerned with the sacred, and sacred acts and things, therefore, are nothing more than symbolic representations of society. For the functionalist, ritual involves a feeling of emotion of respect, awe, fascination, or dread in

relation to the sacred, with its dependence upon a belief system that is usually expressed in the language of myth and action that is symbolic in relation to its reference (Salmani Nodoushan, 2016a, 2019).

The central focus of the theory of semiotics is that it deals with the study of signs and sign behaviour (Pierce 1931; Welby, 1903). It further explicates the fact that signs work signs through representations (Danesi, 2004; Larsen, 1998). Universally, signs are associated with meaning and communication. Scholars such as Welby (1903), Morris (1964), Kowzan (1968), Eco (1984), Danesi (2004), Agyekum (2006) and Tyson (2006) opine that semiotic analysis is rarely considered a field of study in its own right. Rather, it is seen as a science used in a broad range of disciplines, including arts, literature, anthropology, sociology, and the mass media (Danesi, 2004). However it should be stressed that semiotic theory allows for the analysis of cultural and psychological patterns that underlie language and meanings, the art, and other cultural expressions (Agyekum, 2006; Pierce, 1931). Following the above assertion, this study therefore adopts cultural semiotics model by Cassirer (1955) for analysis.

Cultural semiotics is a signification theory that investigates a sign-system in a culture and different modes of representations employed by human beings to express their thoughts, feelings and ideologies. This model underscores two basic tasks namely: (i) the study of sign systems in culture with respect to what they contribute to the culture, and (ii) the study of cultures as sign systems with respect to the advantages and disadvantages which an individual experiences in belonging to a specific culture (Salmani Nodoushan, 2019; Wales, 1990). The strength of cultural semiotics lies in the fact that it focuses on matters of cultural phenomena. It also identifies the importance of shared knowledge² within a culture as a strong factor for comprehension³ of symbolic forms of representations, which shows the relationship between signifier and signified an essential tool in this investigation. Issues of signs and sign processes are the main concerns of semiotic as well as cultural studies (Salmani Nodoushan, 2019). Saussure (1966, p. 16) avers that:

Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems. A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek, *sēmeîon* "sign"). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them.

Based on Saussure's view, we must say that semiotics is not restricted to

language use alone, but it is connected to all that are sign-related. In this regard, Abram's (1981, p. 170) argues that:

signs are considered by scholars as a great diversity of human actions, and production of our bodily postures, gestures, the social rituals we perform; the cloths we wear, the meals we serve, the buildings we inhabit, all convey shared "meaning" to members of a particular culture, and so can be analysed as signs which function in diverse kinds of signifying systems.

In addition, meaning cannot be said to be limited to an individual; signs attract varied meanings, and the representation of a sign provides room for multiple interpretations, depending on the perception of the individual. It is no wonder why Eco (1976, p. 16) agrees with Morris' (1938) view by stating:

I propose to define as a sign everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*. In other terms, I would like to accept the definition proposed by Morris (1938) according to which something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter [. . .] Semiotics, then, is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of objects, but with ordinary objects in so far (and only in so far) as they participate in semiosis.

All of the above views on signs are relevant to the current study. This is because the description of the funeral rites and ritual items and processes signify something or another. Thus this cultural semiotics theory would enable us to underscore the guiding principles for the usages of discovered signs and performance codes within the peoples' performances.

3.2. Procedure

This study is purely a qualitative one. The data collection, analysis and interpretation are based on the interpretation of statements of the respondents and not on quantitative variables. The data were collected from various sources: primary and secondary. They were collected using the phenomenological approach during which the researchers detached their personal feelings, ideas, knowledge and beliefs. In the primary sources of data collection, the researchers made use of interview techniques and participant observation. A total number of Six ($N = 6$) traditional religious practitioners, elders, priests and academia, selected from various communities that make up Elugwu Ezike, were interviewed. The secondary data were gathered pieces of information from books, journals dissertations, theses and internet

materials. The functional and semiotic theory was utilized for the analysis of data.

4. Results

4.1. Funeral rites and rituals in Elugwu Ezike Igbo

Among the Elugwu Ezike Igbo, there are basically two stages in the burial rites of the deceased. The first consists of merely interring the remains, while the second, which is usually known as *oḡkwa oṅwụ* 'funeral ceremony' is the preparation of the deceased for acceptance by the ancestors. Significantly rites prepare the soul of the deceased for presentation to his kit and kin in the world beyond.

Before interment, *Okpara* 'the eldest son of the deceased' prays and pleads on behalf of all other children. Special requests are made to the deceased especially for those who are bereaved to ensure peace and prosperity for all those left behind. Sometimes, we have a tone of complaint and the ancestor is approached directly but the poetic effectiveness is created through the use of concrete and visual images from the everyday word. The speaker addresses the ancestor in whose honour the incantation is made. By the time the grave is ready, rituals are performed before the coffin is lowered into the grave.

Funeral rites differ according to age, sex and the social status of the deceased. A baby may be given an ordinary burial but if subsequent babies of the same mother die, they may be regarded as *oḡbanje* (changeling) and their corpses are mutilated and buried in the bush. The adolescent is buried outside the compound as a sign of premature death. The death of an adolescent does not attract an elaborate funeral for his death is regarded as having perverted the order of nature (*oṅwụ mgbaji*). Similar to the funeral of the adolescent is that of the *ofoegari* 'the never-do-well.' He is invariably denied an elaborate funeral not on account of age but on account of his lack of achievement. He has left behind neither possessions nor children of his own.

4.2. Funeral rites and rituals of a deceased man

The Elugwu Ezike Igbo philosophy of life has it that, when a person dies, he joins the other members of his family in the world of the spirits. Those who are accorded full burial rites are happily received into the folds of the ancestors. All the elaborate funeral rites accorded the dead by the living members of the family are meant to bid farewell to the deceased and prepare the deceased for a successful journey to the spirit world. The funeral rites could be likened to both passports and letters of recommendation, and it is usually in different stages as it shall be elaborated in detail below.

Stage 1: Announcement of death

Firstly, in Elugwu Ezike Igbo, as soon as a man is confirmed dead, the eldest son will inform the kindred family members (*umunna*) of the demise of one of them with (1) two gallons of palm wine, (2) two bottles of beer, and (3) four kola nuts. This information is given to the family members at *okpara umunna* 'the house of the eldest man in the family.' Thereafter, male relatives of the deceased's family will now send messages to their daughters and sisters living outside the community of the demise of one of their brothers.

Before the deceased is buried, relatives, in-laws and friends present fowl, goat or ram and cloth depending on one's financial capability. This is known as *iwa ihe*. This funeral rite signifies the separation of the deceased and the living. All those with whom the deceased used to have some form of association will present the items named above before the corpse and in the presence of the bereaved. They solemnly declare that as they are not responsible for the death, the deceased should not bother them and their families. The gifts they brought signify the end of their relationship with the deceased.

Stage 2: Iwayi ooku neanya ritual performance

Materials used for the performance of this ritual are *egbe* leaf 'a type of tree used in demarcating land boundary in Elugwu Ezike' and a fowl. The window leading to the deceased's bed is opened and the *egbe* leaf is passed through the window and put directly into the deceased left eye. The performer of the ritual pierces the fowl's jaw with his hand and the blood is dropped into the deceased's left eye through the *egbe* leaf. The significance of this ritual is to ensure that when the deceased reincarnates, he reincarnates as somebody who would be manly. Thus, red eye signifies manliness in this context. The fowl is later cooked and eaten by men present at the burial.

Stage 3: Igba ukwu ne nkwu ritual performance

After the performance of *Iwanyi ooku neanya* comes *igba ukwu ne nkwu* ritual performance. Here, the corpse is brought outside and is taken to a nearby palm tree. One of the corpse's legs is made to touch the palm tree four times by one of the carriers. It is one of the corpse carriers in front that touches the palm tree with one of the deceased's legs. It is the belief of the people of Elugwu Ezike that this ritual performance is performed so that the deceased's children will not fear climbing palm trees. After this ritual performance, the corpse is put to the grave and the deceased's son, daughter, wife, brothers, in-laws, relatives, friends and a member of his age grade use shovel to drop sand into the deceased's grave before the grave is finally covered with sand by the grave diggers.

The significance of this ritual is to enable his descendants to become good wine tappers. This ritual is necessary considering the fact that palm wine tapping is a lucrative enterprise in Elugwu Ezike. The poem associated with *igba ụkwụ ne nkwụ* is illustrated below (along with English translations):

Bobo o o

Bobo o o – corpse carriers o o

Bobo gaje – let us carry the corpse to the palm tree

Bobo o o – corpse carriers o o

Bobo gaje – let us carry the corpse to the palm tree

Bobo o o – corpse carriers o o

Bobo gaje – let us carry the corpse to the palm tree

Bobo o o – corpse carriers o o

Bobo gaje – let us carry the corpse to the palm tree

Stage 4: Igba ogige ẹnyasi ‘ogige Night Performance’

After the corpse has been buried at night, *igba ogige ẹnyasi* ‘ogige night performance’ is performed. The materials used in this ogige night performance include: a fowl, a machete and *Obini* ‘wooden gongs.’ The first son of the deceased ties a wrapper on his waist holding *awọbata* ‘a brand of knife’ on his right hand with the deceased’s cap on his head. A fowl is sacrificed to the wooden gongs (*obini*). The *obini* music, which symbolizes a war song is played by the professionals. The dirge associated with ogige night performance reads:

Owe wewe elele

Owe wewe elele – Where are the enemies?

Igbogbo ba anyarā ne esue – Let all of the enemies come

Me anyi ryie he ke ilolo – So that we shall defeat them

This is a war song. The enemy here refers to death that has killed one of their members. The performers of ogige night ritual are seeking where they can locate and fight death physically and also defeat death but they cannot see death.

The first son of the deceased, then dances to the tune of *obini* music holding the machete in his right hand; thereafter, other men who have cut human head during inter-village wars dance to the music indicating the number of heads they have cut by drawing lines on the ground with their machetes to match the number of heads they have cut. This process is done in turns. Those

who have cut many heads sit on top of the *obini* to signify that the number of heads they have killed are too numerous to mention. Those who have not cut any head do not stamp their feet on the *obini* wooden gong nor sit on top of it. It is the belief of the people of Elugwu Ezike that if anybody who has not cut any head stamps or sits on the *obini* wooden gong, he is liable to die within a few days of the performance.

It is not a childish music. It signifies bravery. The performance is done to enable the deceased to reincarnate as somebody who will be brave and also to show that the deceased was a brave man during his life time. Elements of drama, therefore, exist in the performance of dirges in Elugwu Ezike. The issue is that ritual burial performances in Elugwu Ezike reflect some elements of drama—a *la Owowomela's* (1979) views that drama as an independent art form was not developed in traditional Africa but the bases or the fundamental of what constitutes drama are certainly embedded in most of the burial ritual performances in Elugwu Ezike.

Stage 5: Igba ogige ụtụtụ 'ogige morning performance'

The next day, the morning features *Igba ogige ụtụtụ 'ogige morning performance.'* Here, all the men in the deceased's kindred who are traditionalists and friends of the deceased assemble at the deceased's house for onward movement to the *ogige* village shrine. A ram and a fowl are used at the *ogige* shrine. The first son of the deceased puts on his deceased father's cloth, cap and tie wrapper on his waist with *awobata* machete on his right hand. On reaching the *ogige* shrine, *obini* music is played and the son dances to the tune of the *obini* music recounting the good deeds of his late father and also imploring him to protect his family members.

The ram and the fowl are slaughtered by the beater of the big *obini* wooden gong. This is because the beater of the big wooden gong is somebody who has killed a tiger or human being in his life time. The ram and the fowl are killed with one stroke of the machete respectively. The blood of each of them is sprinkled on top of the *obini* wooden gong. The killed ram and the fowl are then roasted—but not cooked. All the meat is eaten up at the *ogige* shrine. No one takes the meat home. Other men who have cut human heads dance to the *obini* music recounting the number of heads each has killed and drawing lines on the floor to indicate the number.

After dancing to the *obini* music, there will be a wrestling match. The best wrestler takes the head of the slaughtered ram. Thereafter, the performers of *obini* music march to the deceased's house holding *okopi* leaves and singing war song while the horn blower (*okwa opu*) continues to blow the horn recounting the good deeds of the deceased and praising him for his good deeds. The horn blower, through this dirge is inviting members of the

deceased family to come out with their war weapons to fight death that has killed one of their members. He also described the deceased (*Eeke Omada*) as a warrior and a peace-maker in his community in his life time. The dirge below is associated with *ogige ututu* ritual performance:

Onye byarə ije alaare oo

Onye byarə ije alaare oo – The visitor to this world is dead

Elele lele elele lele – Elele lele elele lele

Ọ chi ụta chịta ụta – He who has bow should come up with it

Ọ chi egbe chita egbe – He who has gun should also come up

Ne agə anarə ububu nwa ya oo – For the tiger has snatched antelope's offspring

Agadagba aladoore oo – The warrior is dead.

Eeke Omada alaare oo – Eeke Omade is dead.

Ọchị aya be anyị alaare oo – Our war leader is dead

Okpe udo alaare oo – The peace-maker is dead

On reaching the deceased's house, the *okopi* leaves are dropped on the deceased's grave. The obini music is played again and dancers dance to the tune of the music. Later, the obini wooden gongs are taken to the house of the eldest man in the village where they are usually kept.

Stage 6: Mmabu Uke Performance

Uke is constructed with *ogbu ike*. *Ogbu ike* is cut and dipped on the ground. It is only a renowned hunter that is responsible for cutting the uke; the hunter shoots down the *uke*. Then, he holds a fowl on his left hand and a machete on his right hand. He slaughters the fowl in one stroke. The fowl is only eaten by hunters and those who have killed human beings. The reason for the performance is to enable the deceased to reincarnate as somebody who will be a good hunter.

Stage 7: Night Wake

During the night wake, the daughter of the deceased presents a she-goat to be used by *umuada* (kindred women) for pepper soup. It is called *ewu oryito*. The reason for the performance of *ewu oryito* is to enable the deceased's children to be good rearers of domestic animals. Also presented during the night wake keep is *inatu ogbo*.

Stage 8: Inatu Ogbo

Inatu ogbo is also a part of the ritual by the deceased's children with eggs or chickens. The chick is strangled as spiritual boycott of the deceased father or

mother and their children. It is done so that the deceased should not disturb his or her children. The meat (heart of the fowl) is divided into many parts according to the number of children. The purpose is for the deceased heart and his or her children to become one. It is the first ritual to be performed before the actual burial of the corpse. The dirges below illustrate the *inatu ogbo* ritual performance:

Nna anyị

Nna anyị - Our father

Haniya ị yara anyị - As you have died

Ukwu akpọle gā oo - Let your journey be successful

E yile anyị egwu - Do not terrify us

Kedoore anyị o - Take proper care of us.

Ukwutazā gā dānā anyị oyi - Let your departure bring us blessings.

Meme icheezā gā me ọ dārā igwugwuru - Make your family fruitful

Me ọ bāle adāle akpakpara - So that your family lineage will not be erased from the world.

Ladoore oyi oo - Go in peace

Anyị ne gā eryiherā - This is the end of our association with you.

Ne ọ gabā ne ụwa ọzọ - Till we meet in the next world.

In the above dirge, the children of the deceased are wishing their deceased father safe journey to the spirit world and at the same time asking the spirit of their deceased father to keep constant watch over them. The bereaved children equally solicit that their deceased father should ensure that he should not terrify them in any way. It is the hope of the deceased's children that the death of their father will bring blessings and make them fruitful so that the family lineage will be maintained for ever.

Stage: 9 Akereọku Ritual Performance

Akereọku ritual is performed with a hen, small yam called *ji chi* and *ikojo*. *Ikojo* resembles gold and was worn on the neck by our forefathers. Also used in the performance of *Akereọku* ritual is palm oil. The arena for the *Akereọku* is fenced with a rope to ensure that those who have not performed the same ritual for their deceased father cannot enter the place. *Ize* grass is used in roasting the yam.

The eldest son of the deceased takes the lead while the first daughter and the rest of the children line up and perform the *Akereọku* dance. The deceased's children chant the dirge below as they dance round the fence:

Ije nduru

Ije nduru - Dove's movement

Ụụ wee – Just swiftly
Ije nduru - Dove's movment
Ụụ wee – Just swiftly
Ije nduru - Dove's movment
Ụụ wee – Just swiftly
Gedee ke ogbodu – Why should the never-do-well
Gara awayinā anyị enya n'uhọ? – Be watching our performance
 through the fence?
Ogbodu legaa – The slaves
Ụmụ ngita – These puppies
Ne-emeru anyị egwugwu – That are disrupting our dance.

In the pre-colonial days, it was the practice of men who had few male children in Elugwu Ezike community that helped them in farm work to buy male children from or outside the community. Such people bought into the family become members of the family and are not treated as freeborn. They are the people referred to in the dirge above as *ogbodu legaa* (slaves) and *ụmụ ngita* (puppies) and are not allowed to participate in *akereọkụ* ritual performance: They only stay far away and watch the performance.

The eldest son holds a cutlass on his right hand and they march round the fence and on reaching the spot they started, he draws a line with the cutlass. This marching round the fence is completed after seven times and seven lines drawn on the floor with the cutlass. The hen is killed after marching round the *Akereọkụ* fence for seventh time. All the sons and daughters of the deceased eat the meat. After eating the meat, they cover the broken earthen pot (*mbegele eju*) until after seven native weeks (*izu ẹsaa*) when the first daughter presents another hen for opening of the covered broken earthen pot. The fence used for the performance of the *Akereọkụ* ritual is then demolished, thus ending the *akereọkụ* ritual performance (Felix Ogbonnaja, March 1, 2017)

Stage 10: Ikwo ẹka ụmatụ ritual performance

Ikwo ẹka ụmatụ is an aspect of ritual whereby palm wine is put in the pot for the deceased's honour. This ritual is performed by putting kola nuts, banana trunks, palm wine and other items in the pot. The significance of this ritual is to enable the dead person to reincarnate sons who will become good wine tappers.

Stage 11: Itọ nri ritual performance

This is the dropping of bits of food and meat on the grave of the deceased for him to partake. The cooked food and meat are provided by the daughters-in-law (*inyomu ụmụ*) known as *itọ nri* as part of their final dinning with the

deceased father-in-law. The ritual dropping is performed by the eldest woman of the deceased's family.

During the actual funeral ceremony, a cow and a horse are presented to the deceased by the deceased's children and in-laws. Two baskets full of pounded yam, palm wine, kola and assorted drinks are also presented to the deceased's kindred for consumption. Married men in the deceased's family present two lumps of pounded yam (*oṣkpụ nri ebọ*) while their women counterparts present one gallon of palm wine. The food and the wine are taken by the deceased kindred family, friends and sympathisers present at the funeral ceremony. This ritual signifies that the dead person has taken part in the eating of the food presented. A month after the funeral ceremony, the last ritual performance called hound dog (*ugodu ẹta*) is performed.

Stage 12: Uḡodu ẹta ritual performance

This is the killing of a hound dog before hunting instruments such as: bows, arrows, dane gun, etc. It is an aspect of the ritual associated with burial and funeral ceremonies of men who were hunters during their life time. This ritual is performed to enable the deceased's sons to become good or better hunters. In the pre-colonial days, hunting was a very lucrative enterprise.

Also performed the same day is *mpị ẹka ọrụ* (he goat for farmers). The essence of *mpị ẹka ọrụ* ritual performance is to enable the deceased's children to become good farmers. Any man around the deceased's home can kill the goat. The meat of the hound dog and *mpị ẹka ọrụ* (he goat for farmers) are cooked and taken to the eldest man in the deceased's family for sharing. Only elders with staff of authority (*odu atu*) are qualified to have a share in the meat. This ritual signifies innovativeness for the deceased who wish to be good farmers and hunters.

4.3. Funeral rites and rituals of a deceased woman

At the death of a married woman, the deceased's family is first informed verbally by the husband's family. In return the deceased family send delegates to ascertain whether their daughter was killed or died a natural death. Later, the deceased's family is informed formally with palm wine, kola nuts and assorted drinks. The number of these items sent to the deceased's kindred family varies from community to community. The palm wine and assorted drinks used here is called *manya ije ọnwụ* (announcement of death).

Before these items are taken to the deceased's kindred family, a chick is tied to *ọmu* 'fresh palm frond' and placed at the entrance leading to the deceased's brother's home before the commencement of *ije ọnwụ* 'journey of death'. This ritual signifies that the deceased's funeral is going to be a laborious one (*ọnwụ*

oḡkpu). If the funeral is to be the simple one, an empty egg is presented as in above instead of a chick. This is done for *ḡnwu eba* (simple funeral). This is done to signify that the funeral of the deceased is that of the poor.

On reaching the deceased's kindred family with the required quantity of wine, the *ego usoro ḡnwu* 'money for funeral proceedings' is then debated and the amount agreed upon is paid before the deceased family comes for the burial. Some women born at some villages called *mkpuru ma* are not buried at their husband's home. Their corpses are taken to their kindred family home for burial (Oyimaja, Ogbese 5th March, 2017). On the day the corpse of the deceased woman is taken to her home town, the corpse carriers (*ndi nvu ozu*) are entertained with enough palm wine, food and kola nuts. The children of the deceased also present wine for watching the grave (*manya oonyo ili*) of their deceased mother. After presenting the wine for watching their deceased mother's grave, they are required to present another wine for taking their mother's breast. This time each of the deceased children presents one gallon of wine and money depending on one's financial standing.

After these presentation by the deceased's children, the corpse carriers go into the deceased room, prepare the corpse for burial and then carry the corpse on their heads to the deceased's home town. This practice is still obtained in some communities in Elugwu Ezike especially women married from the villages with powerful deities like *Ikpuiga's ohe* deity or *Alor Uno's Adoro* deity. The dirge below is used when a deceased woman's corpse is being carried to her paternal home for burial.

Ije nduru
Ije nduru - Dove's movment
Uu wee - Just swiftly
Ije nduru - Dove's movment
Uu wee - just swiftly
Nene ala oo - mother is going home
Uu wee - Just swiftly
Nwomaja ala oo - Nwomaja is going home
Uu wee - Just swiftly

The deceased is here referred to as the dove. The detachment of the soul from the unity of the body and soul is described as *u u wee* (just swiftly). This detachment of the soul from the unity of the body and soul is likened to the manner the dove takes off from where it perches on the ground. The expressions "*nene ala oo*" and "*Nwomaja ala oo*" describe the action of taking the deceased's corpse to her paternal home for burial as was practiced in the pre-literate days.

Another dirge that is associated with taking the corpse of a deceased woman to her paternal home is:

Nene mu oo

Nene mu oo – My mother oo

Cho ogoro oo – Is going home

Nene mu oo – My mother oo

Cho ogoro oo – Is going home

Nene mu oo – My mother oo

Cho ogoro oo – Is going home

Nwelugwu ala oo – Nwelegwu is going home

Cho ogoro oo – Is going home

The above dirge is used to express the deceased children's joy in accomplishing all the necessary burial rites of their deceased mother without which the corpse will not be taken to the deceased's paternal home. The dirge is also used to express the final departure of the deceased from her husband's home. The first son of the deceased woman presents one she-goat to the deceased's kindred women. This goat is called *ewu ọnu ụmụada*. The goat is sacrificed at *ụmụada's* shrine to accompany the deceased woman to the spirit world (*ala mmụọ*). It is the belief of the people of Elugwu Ezike that if this ritual, *ewu ọnu ụmụada*, is not performed, the deceased woman does not enjoy the company of other deceased women in the spirit world.

A hen is also presented by the eldest son; the hen is used to support the goat (*ikwu ewun ọnu*). This is because there is an adage which states that the hen says that it supports any decision taken in its absence. A second hen is presented by the deceased first daughter. The hen presented by the first daughter of the deceased is taken to the eldest man in the deceased's village. This is done to inform the eldest man in the deceased woman's village that one of his daughters is dead.

Igba ọba ritual performance

The following materials are used for *igba ọba*: *anyaka*, *agbaja* and *ayakaya* (basin). The *agbaja* (basket) contains the following items as well: small quantity of water in a bottle, small quantity of groundnut and one hundred naira. *Anyaka* (a type of rope) is used to tie the basket (*agbaja*) with the basin (*ayakaya*). Then, the first daughter of the deceased takes the basket to the deceased's elder brother. The ritual signifies that the dead woman has finally left the husband's family since the daughter has returned a basket to the dead woman's family. This basket with different items in it is a symbol of the deceased's trade materials when she was alive. The dirge below is used

during the *igba ōba* ritual performance:

Agala saa be tu ugo ugo

Agala saa be tu ugo ugo – The deceased, come and be crowned

Ugo ugo ugo guo – *Ugo ugo ugo ugo*

Agala saa be tu ugo ugo – The deceased, come and be crowned

Nweeja nne m, oyi m – Nweeja, my mother and companion

I ga-eyiri m ma oo – you now resembles a masquerade

Agala saa be tu ugo ugo – The deceased, come and be crowned

Agala saa be tu ugo ugo – The deceased, come and be crowned

Ugo ugo ugo guo – *Ugo ugo ugo ugo*

Agala saa be tu ugo ugo – The deceased, come and be crowned

Nne m, oyi m mu – My mother and my companion

Ne i ga-abu oyi ndama – You are now a companion of the spirits

Agala saa be tu ugo ugo – The deceased, come and be crowned

Ugo ugo ugo guo – *Ugo ugo ugo ugo*

The dirge singer is here calling on the deceased to come and partake in her burial rite. The song *ugo ugo ugo* is an expression of deep sorrow by the deceased's children. In the dirge above the deceased's body is likened to a masquerade. People are frightened at the sight of a masquerade. In the same way, the corpse of the deceased frightens people. The audience is here reminded that the deceased is no longer their friend but a companion of the people in the spirit world.

The elder brother of the deceased takes the hundred naira put in the basket. After seven native weeks (*izu esaa*) the first daughter of the deceased goes back to the deceased mother's elder brother to collect the basket (*ōba*). The elder brother of the deceased gives the deceased woman's daughter two hundred naira. This ritual is only for *onwu ookpu*, that is, full burial rite for elderly women.

On the other hand, a poor deceased woman is given *ōba Ajagede (ogbenye)*. The contents of *ōba ajagede* include: a small basket and a chick tied with banana rope. *Akpara* (palm frond) is inserted into the small basket (*nwa asu*) and then tied on the carrier's neck. Any person paid for the job can carry it to *umuada* shrine (*onu umuada*). The carrier may be paid one hundred naira or more to perform the job. The carrier of *ōba ajagede* takes it to *umuada* shrine and throws it away there. When he/she comes back to the deceased's home, all the mourners go to their respective homes. The rituals of slaughtering of cow, horse and presentation of food items and assorted drinks that accompany the funeral ceremony of a deceased male are also present in that of female funeral ceremony.

4.4. Functionality

In the performance of funeral rites and rituals in Elugwu Ezike, it is observed that various people perform different functions depending on their positions in the family. For instance before the commencement of the ceremonies, in case of a dead man, the first son of the family announces the death of his father to the man's family while in case of a dead married woman her husband's family goes to announce the death of the woman to her family. In the ritual performances, *ịwayị ọọkụ neęnya*, *igba ogige eęnyasi* and *Igba ogige ụtụtu* are performed for dead men only. This is because it is a function performed for titled men. The *obini dance/wooden gong* is functional for men not women. It is a dance at the men's burial and the gong is usually beaten by high societal men. At the funeral ceremony of a deceased woman, the first daughter is the most functional person. For instance, she is always at the forefront of the *Igba ọba ritual performance* where a basket of items is presented to the family of her dead mother.

Conclusively, we would say that the performance of funeral rites and rituals in Elugwu Ezike is centered on the first son and daughter of the family who are most functional.

4.5. Foreign influence on funeral rites in Elugwu Ezike

External influence in the form influences from Christianity, Islam, and Westernization have had both positive and negative impact on the performance death rites and rituals in Elugwu Ezike (Ifesieh, 1988; Iwuagu, 1974).

On the positive side, the in-road of Christianity and Islam in Elugwu Ezike has contributed to putting an end to some of the traditional burial rites—such as the performance of *obini* ritual, *akereọkụ* ritual and *ịwayị ọọkụ ne-ęnya* in which some of the dirges were sung. Christianity and Islam have also contributed positively towards an end to the tradition of carrying the corpse of deceased woman to her paternal home for burial. The risk of contracting contagious diseases that might have contributed to the death of the deceased is high and hence the need to discontinue with the practice.

On the other hand, Christianity and Islamic religions have negatively affected the performance of dirges in funeral occasions in Elugwu Ezike. The discontinuance of some of the burial ritual performances in Elugwu Ezike has led to the disappearance of the dirges associated with such burial rituals. Both Christianity and Islam are antagonistic to the practices and the art of dirge performance in Elugwu Ezike. For instance, the belief that some dirge performers need spiritual fortification and therefore have to take magical preparations or even wear amulets for that purpose is against the tenets of

these two religions.

5. Findings

The findings of the study revealed that burial rituals and rites are representations of cultural performances and rites of passage which mark a people's life experience. Burial rituals and rites are an expression of people's thoughts, emotions, social organization, and cultural identity. Funeral rituals are forms of expressions and connections performed by individuals, groups of people or communities in communication with the living dead. Different funeral rituals include such rituals as *iwayi ooku neenya*, *igba ukwu neenkwu*, *igba ogige enyasi*, *igba ogige ututu*, *mmabu uke*, *inatu ogbo*, *ime akereoku*, *ikwo eka umaatu*, *ito nri*, *ugodu eta*, *igba oba* and *ikpu ishi*. Funeral rituals and rites are not performed for the unmarried people and suicidal victims, although the body is disposed. Funeral ritual performance ensures comfort to the grieved family and emphasizes community living and inter-personal relationship in the society. It is believed by the people in this community that it is only the performance of the appropriate funeral rituals and rites for the deceased that would guarantee his or her qualification for entry into the world of the ancestors. This study also shows that the wrestling match during the *igba ogige* ritual performance is done so that the deceased will remain a villain in the spirit world (*ala mmụọ*).

6. Conclusion

Death is seen as a transition from life to existence in another state. As the Igbo believe in reincarnation, funeral rituals are preformed not only for the disposal of the body, but also to assist the soul in its transmigration to the spiritual world. Hence, performing burial rites and rituals among the Elugwu Ezike people ensures comfort to the grieved family and emphasizes community living and inter-personal relationships in the society.

However, the advent of Islam, Christianity and the wave of modernization sweeping across Igboland have made the performance of traditional burial rites and rituals to dwindle in recent times.

Notes:

1. For more on 'context' see Adegbite, 2000; Adeniji & Osunbade, 2014; Allan & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Bhatia & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Capone, 2010a,b; 2016; Capone & Salmani Nodoushan, 2014; Johns & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Levinson 1983; Mey, 2001; 2009; Odebunmi, 2006; Palmer, 1996; Salmani Nodoushan, 2011a; 2011c; 2012a; 2018a; Salmani Nodoushan & Khakbaz, 2011; Salmani Nodoushan & Khakbaz, 2012;

Salmani Nodoushan & Montazeran, 2012; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996 cited in Solomon-Etefia & Nweya, 2017.

2. For more on 'shared knowledge', see Salmani Nodoushan, 1995; 2006a; 2006b; 2007b; 2007c; 2007f; 2008a; 2008b; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2015a; 2015b; 2016b; 2016c; 2016e; 2017; 2018b; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011.
3. For more on 'comprehension', see Salmani Nodoushan, 2002; ; 2002; 2003; 2007a; 2007d; 2007e; 2008c; 2010; 2011b; 2012c; 2016d.

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Informants Interviewed

- Felix Ogbonnajà 68years farmer Ikpanaodo 1/3/2017
Uramaja Eze M 77yrs Farmer Igogoro 21/3/2017
Abugu Eze M 76yrs Farmer Umuopu 23/4/2017
Ali nwa Onoja M 80yrs Eldest man Okata 25/5/2017
Ezeja James M 78yrs Retired Civil Servant Amaja 2/6/2017
Oyinaja Ogbese 72years farmer Ikpanaodo 5/3/2017