

## THE SYMBOLISM OF DEATH AND BURIAL RITES IN EPIE-ATISSA, YENAGOA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, BAYELSA STATE

BY

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### Abstract

This paper on Symbolism of Death and Burial Rites in Epie-Atissa Clan in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State starts with a compendium exposition of burial rites and its symbolism in the study area. The researcher used the phenomenological methodology to carry out the research. This has not been documented in the study area and as such the problem that the study is meant to achieve in the Epie-Atissa peoples burial process. In the cause of this study, the researcher finds out that many symbolism are inherent in the people's burial rite for example, the washing of the deceased corps before internment symbolizes purifying and beautifying of the deceased for his journey to the ancestral world because of the peoples belief that there is life after death, the shooting of canon when one dies symbolizes announcement the interring of the body of a deceased symbolizes that such person is still part of his or her family and his spirit can be consulted at any point in time by the living family members for protection amongst others. Nevertheless, much work has been done on other areas of the people's culture but literature on symbolism on burial rites of the people is non-existence. Therefore, the literature that the study will generate would be of great relevance to the body of knowledge, for it will fill the gap on the people's culture that was missing. It would also advertise the culture of the people to scholars for further research.

## INTRODUCTION

The paper "The Symbolism of Death and Burial Rites in the indigenous religion of the Epie-Atissa people's tends to decipher and explain the various symbols that are inherent in the Epie-Atissa people's burial rites.

Death stands as a link between the human world and the spirit world. Death to the Epie Atissa people is a natural transition from the visible existence to the invisible existence or from the physical body which decays, while the spiritual part of the human being lives on and still continues in the spirit world, that is why African scholars like John S. Mbiti (1969:53) would use the term "the living dead" for African ancestors.

By the way, Africans believe in two categories of death, the good death *Uwuvie*, and the bad death *Uwudidieli*. Those who died good death by way of dying at old age, dying naturally after much achievement and are accorded good funeral, are those who are qualified of the ancestral bliss/abode from where they now relate with their living relatives, whereas those who die bad death, for

example, dying young, through abominable disease or other means such as suicide *Uwu Iden Somu by accident*, were not accorded good funeral as such do not qualify to enjoy the ancestral abode among the Epie-Atissa people when one die they find out through the *aganaga* oracle his or her cause of death, that is why when death occurs, they do not immediately announce it until after necessary traditional divinatory autopsy known in Epie-Atissa as *Aganaga Pulemu* to ascertain the cause of the death of whether it was a good or bad death. Death and burial rites *Ikpese wulemu uzi* are therefore, important rites in Epie Atissa setting/culture because the deceased is transiting from the physical to the spiritual level of existence without which the dead will not be received in the new level of existence or *Eken Iduama / Eken Iwemu*.

Besides, death and burial rites are important because they are the final rites of transition that are performed on individuals who at the point of death or *Uwu* had undergone the first three (3) traditional

transitory rites of passage, rites at birth, puberty, marriage, and now deaths and burial rites (*Wotogbe Weneka et al 2018:2*).

### Statement of Problem

As earlier indicated, the overall focus of this paper is to discuss the Symbolism of Death and Burial rites of the Epie and the Atissa community. This has to do with how the Epie and the Atissa people bury their dead and the rites involved therein.

Moreover, the religious specialists and the elderly that knew these rites of the people are dying out and there's no deliberate attempt been made by researchers to document them. This is why the author have decided to fulfill that the Epie-Atissa people's long tradition and rich cultural heritage must not be allowed to pass into oblivion.

### Research Methodology

The phenomenological Approach was used to carry out the investigation. Along this scheme, the interpretation of the phenomenology of Burial rites and the symbolism involved were sought and obtained, and analyzed.

The Epie and the Atissa people are the inhabitants of the Epie-speaking area of Yenagoa Local Government Area in Bayelsa State.

### Funeral Rites in Epie Atissa

Before we discuss the Symbolism of Death or *Uwu* burial rites in Epie-Atissa, it is expedient for us to first of all look at how the Epie-Atissa people bury their dead. In Epie-Atissa, when it is most probable that death is in the offing, the dying man's or his close agnates, especially his children and his kit and kins are sent for. When they arrive, they gather around the sick bed to listen to the final words of the dying man which for many reasons, are taken very seriously. The presence of the children and close kit and kins of the dying man assures him that there are people left behind to mourn him. The first sign of imminent death is gasping and a struggle for breath which was followed by exhaustion and breathlessness. The instant when the dying man breathes his last is interpreted as the moment when the *osiyo* soul leaves, and is taken as the actual moment of death. Directly after breathing ceases, the reality of the state of the deceased is down on the relations and this is acknowledged by a spontaneous outburst of wailing *edei vieyemu*. This loud wailing and lamentation of the women at the moment when death occurs is what informs the immediate neighbourhood of the development.

After a while, the wailing recedes and the deceased is laid in state in a room preferably in his *Ikigene* or sitting room. Then the next step is the *aganaga puluemi oracle* *aganaga* divination, the *aganaga* diviners are summoned to find out through the *aganaga* oracle whether when the deceased was in the world of the living, he or she was a witch or was involved in the evil practice of sorcery act. This is a traditional act of necromancy enforced through the *aganaga* or ladder detector. If the person was declared free from these acts, then the preparation of the person's burial rites or *uzi* now starts. The canon gun *okurusi* is short to pass information across to the whole area. This was done to express

their belief that death is not a hidden phenomenon and therefore, must be publicized.

When the body is certified dead, the body then is washed ritually by aged women that have passed the menopause stage and have become asexual, this not in all cases. The asexual age qualifies them to arrange corpses of both sexes. This category of women are wives, sisters of the deceased person that can stand the grieve. The corpse is bathed, *Kpiin* with water prepared by the wives, daughters or sisters of the deceased.

The corpse is then carried from the backyard of the deceased house where the washing took place to his house. The body of a man is laid in his sitting room while that of a woman is laid in her own room in her husband's house. This is not also in all cases too.

The corpse is laid on a prepared bed befitting the status of the deceased in the middle of the house with the legs usually faced towards the entrance of the house and the head inside. It is rubbed with palm kernel oil *ude* or pomade and dressed in a white cloth in most cases. The big toes are tied together to maintain a balance of the body. Dry local gin is poured through the mouth of the corpse into its stomach to serve as preservative measures, as long as the corpse would stay before final burial takes place. If it was the corpse of a prominent person that needed to be kept for some days, *ogogoro* or *kaikai* local gin is poured into a small canoe in large quantity and the corpse soaked in it for the purpose of its preservation. The corpse is then gathered around by the women in the *ufamu uwu* who would chant mournful songs, until burial takes place on the following day.

It is the belief of the people that the corpse must be properly cared for and dressed so as to return it to the maker God or *Izibe* in a decent form. Suffice it to say that such care is taken only of those who die a good death. After the washing and dressing of the body in white chieftaincy attire, if the corpse was a male and in her best attire if a female, in each case, clothes are purchased by both the paternal and maternal relations of the deceased, or the person's members of clubs, sons, daughters and son in-laws or even his church and used in the dressing of the deceased.

These donated clothes which are laid on the body of the corpse from the beginning are later removed during the interment proper and later shared among the sons and daughters during the *edeisinikiesemu* or sharing of property ritual. The corpse is however buried with some clothes. The corpse of a good man is usually preserved for at least a night until the time of interment the following day. However, these days, corpse are even kept in the mortuary for months or years. This is in tandem with the suggestion of Albert (2017:27) when he says:

"Cost of burial rites in Epie-Atissa Nation is on the increase, given the practice of depositing corpses at the mortuary for a long time, before the official commencement of burial rites.

It is at this point that Wake-keeping or *edekoruemu* is done by sympathizers and relatives of the deceased family. These sympathizers are usually well-wishers and members of social cultural societies to which the dead person had belonged during his or her life time. The women among these sympathizers stay in the

house or *ufamu idue* keeping watch over the corpse. While the men stay outside, sitting in their various tables or canopies in groups charting away the night.

During the night of the wake-keep or *iduewei koremu* drinks usually local gin *kaikai* is demanded by the mourners from various married or unmarried sons and daughters and husbands depending on the position occupied by these groups of people in the family. As singing dances and drumming are being displayed members of the paternal relations *igbanipele oyoyeni imotiomomosi oyoye* (kins – brothers), approaches the family of the deceased to demand for the *isilibeni edibe* or the owners of the deceased fee. The size and pattern of the grave or *ogugu uzi* usually reflect the age and status of the dead person.

In the past, graves were prepared in the cemetery meant for people that died good death.. Those of them that are chiefs were given special design of grave while that of the ordinary people were the usual fore corner style. For example, the graves of chief were prepared in such a way that it is usually cemented and in some cases tiles are used. However, today things have changed tremendously because *iduewei* or corpses are no longer preserved in the house before burial but in hospital mortuaries and they are sometimes buried in the compound of the person and also sometimes canon guns are shot before the corpse is finally laid to rest in the grave. In some cases of aged persons, funeral procession took the corpse to the mother's or father's home *fan idiuenye tami ipele ni oyon yedianize* before he or she is finally carried to his or her home where burial *uzi* takes places. (Oral Interview).

The grave is covered with sand after the chief mourner and some of the close relations or sympathizers have dropped a little quantity of sand on the coffin. Inside the coffin, two lumps of the grave site soil or mud are put at the two corners of the deceased head and by the ear so that the head and the ear be balanced. This is not in all cases any way especially for people that died of bad death. When the body is finally laid to rest, entertainment of sympathizers that came continued for some days. Wake-keeping which was started the first night of the incident continued for seven days. Plantain porridge prepared with fowls and drinks and other types of foods are served to the people.

General mourning which involves keeping of unkept hair and wearing of black clothes by mourners continued immediately after the burial. Wearing and shaving off of hair for the dead person commonly known as *utomu welemuare* is done on the fourth day after the burial. This ceremony is accompanied in some cases by ritualistic sacrifices such as killing of goats, dancing and drinking. The burial ceremony of those that died bad death are quite different, compared to that given to those who die a good death. For instance, all those who died bad death are buried in the evil forest at the outskirts of the village designated for that purpose. Those corpses are not washed and dressed and watched over by relations because their deaths are considered as evil hence a disgrace to the family and community.

Bad deaths include death from leprosy, accident, suicide, smallpox, anti-wickedness divinities like god of thunder etc. In the case of

death caused by thunder and lightning, it is assumed as capital punishment from the divine and must not be mourned. Such deceased are buried with purificatory and expiatory rites to appease the divinities concerned. The burial of a person who die a bad death is not always attended by common people but by traditional medicine specialists who are knowledgeable in the essential rituals. People, generally do not give much attention to bad death, and they are not discussed beyond the point of the necessity to dispose off their corpses as hurriedly as possible.

As earlier indicated, they are buried without casket and they were usually buried at night. The useless and tormenting ways in which they are buried is as a result of the belief that by handling the corpses of bad people carelessly, the living people would learn their lessons from such experience and so be discouraged from engaging in malevolent activities while still alive (Saale 2017:61).

On the seventh day of the burial ceremony, there is a special ceremony that the people performs that marks the end of the burial rites. That is known as the *Ekebeletimo* that is, the ceremony of showcasing love to the deceased by his or her surviving offsprings (relations) and well-wishers.

On such days, all the relations of the deceased are expected to coverage at the playground of the compound of the deceased person for the ceremony. Every person involved is expected to donate drinks and packets of biscuit into a common pool after which the drinks and the biscuits are then shared to everybody present and representatives of all the communities present at the ceremony to be taken to their various communities in the area as a symbol of appreciation from the deceased person's family to them for their participation and show of sympathy to the deceased's family and for their bereaved person. At the end of the sharing, everybody goes home to his or her abode.

In the Epie axis of the twin clans, burials are observed and celebrated for twelve days consecutively, especially for old men or women. In the first four days of the deceased in both clans, no farming activities are permitted among community members and after the expiration of that period, distant relations especially women go back home while some close relations remain till eight days before going home. The immediate family members stay till twelve days for final departure and to end the burial proper. However, most burial wake-keeps in Epie-Atissa were carried out in the night. But presently, that have been discontinued particularly in the Atissa axis of the twin clan.

According to Wisdom Albert (2017:13), "Night wakes in Atissa kingdom were stopped by the Atissa Council of Traditional Rulers in July 2007 with a public pronouncement at the Agbura Community *Uge Adiafaa* (New Yam Festival). The ban was as a result of increased rate of violent crimes such as rape and cultism perpetrated by both indigenes and non-indigenes during night wake keeps".

There was also a burial rite that the Epie-Atissa people used to perform but it has been discontinued as a result of the advent of Western civilization. This was known as the *iquedance*. This rite is done for only people of very old age and were traditional title

holders. In the *Ique dance*, normal drums are not used to provide music. They used bamboo poles to produce the music. Five men, would stoop down opposite each other on both sides with the bamboo pole at their center or between them. They would then use either stick or in some cases, *abalaba* native garri turner to beat the bamboo at the centre to produce a sacred tone kind of music. At a point during the dance, nobody goes out to dance, and they would do this for three or four times for male and female deceased respectively. It is believed that the spirit of the departed and his ancestral folks are taken their turns in the dance drama. This is like a send forth ritual to the departed to the ancestral abode.

### Some of the Symbolism of Death and Burial Rites in Epie-Atissa

Nabofa (1994) made us to understand that man's ability to symbolize, that is, to make use of symbols is what distinguishes man the *Homo sapiens* from the lower animals, hence man is described as a homo symbolicus.

In the Epie the washing of the corpse of the deceased and dressing it up properly symbolizes purifying and beautifying the body of the deceased for a journey so that it will be received by the spirit world and to avoid body odour.

The use of the local palm wine and palm gin (*kaikai*), to perform traditional embalming and infact why these type of drinks features in traditional burial generally in our area of study symbolizes the drinks that are known to the ancestors.

The symbolism of not announcing death immediately it occurs in Epie-Atissa is to ascertain the cause of the death and the type of death and hence the commensurate burial type after the traditional autopsy through *aganaga* divination.

Lying in state of a deceased symbolizes the last honour due the dead.

Drumming to announce a death signifies or symbolizes to the ancestors that a new entrance is on its way to the ancestral abode so that they will prepare to receive it. Of course, the medium of information dissemination known to the ancestors is the traditional drums, not SMS text message.

Burying of the dead in his community or his compound or the frontage of his compound especially people that died at old and died good death symbolizes to the deceased that he is still near his people for continuous relationship.

The grave where the dead is to be buried, whether simple or elaborate, (depending on the deceased's social status and resources) and its decoration symbolizes a final resting place which must be well decorated and kept.

The light that is often lit at the grave side, sometimes for some days or weeks after burial in our area of study symbolizes the lightening of the dead's path to the ancestral bliss.

The giving of gift (such as money, cloth, snuff, cigarettes, pipes, pouring of *kaikai* into the grave etc symbolizes presents to assist the dead on his very far journey so that he/she will not lack in the spirit world, while some send them as messages to their dead

relatives, beseeching them not to forget their living relatives and ask for their continuous blessings from the spirit world.

The sharing of the deceased properties *isinkiesemu oyon uwu* which includes clothings and jewelries, houses to relations and close friends, etc symbolizes that the deceased children could not have done the funeral alone without the co-operation and assistance of relatives and friends. In the study area, if this rite is not done to the deceased, his spirit would react.

Symbolism of some Animals that feature at Funeral Rites in Epie-Atissa includes; Fowl (with its protection chest) – symbolizes a potent protective tool, for protective medicine, secrecy and dispeller of spirit of hardship while the aroma of the fowl feathers when roasted is a special favourite perfume for the spirits, especially the ancestral spirits.

A She goat – symbolizes a special delicacy of the gods alongside alligator pepper, kolanut and bitter kola, and palm wine.

A He goat odour killed during funeral session in the area of our study symbolizes an offensive ordour that scares evil and malevolent spirits away from the abode of humans, during funeral rite session so that the atmosphere during the funeral period would be peaceful.

Black cloth used in mourning the departed in Epie-Atissa symbolizes mourning, sadness and sacredness at such time of mourning for their dead. They are, at such time believed to be under the watchful eye of the spirits, hence the children and relatives of the deceased do not barb their hairs or attend social functions of excitement until the mourning periods are over. The living relatives of the deceased especially the female folk among them are believed to have been possessed by the spirit of their dead relatives at the time of mourning and so every Epie-Atissa man is careful how he approaches a woman at her mourning period.

Palm fronds, especially the young palm frond *Iminmiused* during burial are ritual gestures which symbolize the presence of the gods/spirit who are partaking in the funeral ritual ceremony. They are there to separate the dead from the human world and usher it to the next spiritual abode.

The communal eating of the funeral ritual items symbolizes that the dead is still part of a member of the family especially the ritual meal prepared during the *ique* dance rite. This food is cooked without adding salt to it. It is believed that the spirit of the dead does not eat salted food.

The *ique* dance rite performed for the aged deceased among the Epie-Atissa people symbolizes a send-forth ceremony of the deceased spirit to the ancestral abode.

The performance of the *Ekebeletiomu* or the ceremony to showcase the deceased relations to the departed in the study area symbolizes the love that the deceased children, relations and well-wishers had for him even when he was alive and in turn they want him to also exhibit such to them even in the ancestral world.

### Conclusion

The focus of the paper is the examination of symbolism in the Epie-Atissa people's burial rites. Symbols and rituals are core elements in religion. They are concepts which religion uses to explain phenomenal and reality that cannot be proven through the laboratory.

This is exactly why the understanding of the symbols involved in the burial rites of the Epie-Atissa people is relevant to scholars and that is what is meant for this study to achieve and that is the bane of this work. The work will thus far bring to bear on people, that is researchers and scholars etc, the dipper understanding of the Epie-Atissa people's world view, tradition and culture.

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