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UNALIVING THE LIVING TO BURY THE DEAD: AN EXAMINATION OF EXORBITANT BURIAL CEREMONIES IN IGBO LAND

Dr. Ratzinger E. E. Nwobodo (Ph.D)

Philosophy Department Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State.

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***Corresponding author:** Dr. Ratzinger E. E. Nwobodo (Ph.D)

Philosophy Department Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State.

Abstract

*The doctrine of complementarity, encapsulated in the Igbo saying *ihe kwuru ihe akwudobe ihe akwudobe ya* (when something stands, another stands beside it), is central to Igbo cosmology. This worldview emphasizes the interconnection of opposites, such as the complementarity between male and female, the earth and the sky, spirits and humans, and the living and the dead. Particularly, the relationship between the living and the dead informs the meticulous care the Igbo take in burial practices. For the Igbo, death is not viewed as a final cessation but as a transition. Consequently, significant effort is invested in ensuring a smooth transition for the deceased, as failure to do so risks turning them into wandering spirits, potentially disturbing the living, especially their families. It is this belief that fosters the desire to provide proper burial. However, over time, the concept of a "proper burial" has evolved into a troubling trend marked by extravagant material demands, turning burial ceremonies into displays of wealth. The focus has shifted from honouring the dead to inflating the status of the bereaved. In contemporary Igbo society, families often face societal pressure to sell property or incur debt to provide what is now termed a "befitting burial," plunging economically disadvantaged households into severe financial crises. This paper addresses this emerging phenomenon by posing critical questions: How are Igbo burials traditionally conducted? How do modern burial practices undermine the well-being of the living? What are the impacts of this trend? And what factors contribute to the current escalation of burial costs? Employing a method of critical analysis, this study draws on journals, books, online articles, magazines, and newspapers to answer these questions. The paper concludes that the current exorbitant burial practices in Igboland represent a distortion of traditional burial customs. Finally, it advocates for a reorientation towards a more authentic understanding of Igbo burial rites.*

Keywords: Complementarity, Igbo cosmology, Befitting burial, Bereaved, Transition.

Introduction:

The Igbo proverb, *A zota ndu e debere ya owu* (life is saved and preserved for death), encapsulates the existential perspective through which the Igbo people view death: as an inevitable certainty. While death is assured, it remains uncertain in terms of its timing, location, and manner. Despite these uncertainties, death holds significant importance in Igbo culture, where intricate funeral rites are observed to ensure a smooth transition from the physical world to the spiritual realm. This practice is rooted in the duality present in Igbo cosmology, where the physical and spiritual worlds are viewed as two sides of the same coin. For the Igbo, death is not the end of existence but rather a passage into the afterlife. A proper funeral is essential for this transition, ensuring that the deceased peacefully joins the ancestors in the spiritual realm.

Death, therefore, is treated with utmost seriousness in Igbo land, with concerted efforts made to guarantee the peaceful transition of the deceased. In Igbo cosmology, the interconnectedness between the living and the dead is paramount; without proper burial rites, a restless spirit may return to torment its living relatives, compelling them to perform the necessary funeral rites. In this sense, the deceased is entitled to a comprehensive and respectful burial, and the living are obligated to fulfil this duty. Failure to do so can provoke the deceased into harassing the living, as noted by Nze (2007, qtd. by Anetoh, 2017:63).

However, the issue arises with what constitutes a "proper" funeral, which has evolved into an elaborate and costly affair. Traditionally, funeral rites were more modest, and both the wealthy and the poor could afford to bury their dead. In recent times, however, funerals have become extravagant events, emphasizing lavish displays of wealth rather than the solemnity of the occasion. This shift has transformed funerals from rites of passage into ostentatious displays of affluence, driven by societal pressure to provide a "befitting burial." The term, now synonymous with excessive grandeur, has overshadowed the original purpose of funeral rites. In response to these pressures, bereaved families, particularly the children of the deceased, often sell property or incur significant debt to meet societal expectations of a proper funeral. The focus of funerals has shifted away from honouring the dead to catering to the material demands of those attending the ceremony. Families are now more concerned with providing for the guests and fulfilling the demands of various social groups. Some even rush to construct new houses following the death of a relative—not for the deceased, but to satisfy societal expectations. In many cases, the deceased remains in the mortuary for extended periods, sometimes over a year, not due to a lack of burial space, but because the family is unable to meet the financial demands of a "befitting burial." This trend often plunges poor families into severe economic hardship, as they exhaust scarce resources to fulfill societal expectations. In attempting to bury their dead, they metaphorically "unalive" themselves in the process, succumbing to the overwhelming financial burden imposed by extravagant funeral customs.

This paper seeks to critically examine the pernicious trend of exorbitant funeral practices in Igbo society. It analyzes how the pressures of these elaborate ceremonies financially and emotionally burden the living and explores the causes of this growing phenomenon. Finally, the paper offers recommendations for addressing this cultural shift and suggests potential solutions for returning to more traditional, meaningful funeral practices.

Understanding the concept of death and burial in Igbo land

In Igbo culture, death does not signify the end of human existence. This perspective is supported by Noon (1942, p. 653, in Onyibor, 2019) in his article "Death Concept of the Ibo," where he asserts:

Individual existence becomes a continuum of alternating periods of life in this world and the spirit land *ani mmuo*, and death is the portal to one phase of existence as birth is to another. Both phases are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, death is the cause of birth or living and vice versa. It is a continuum, one face of the roller and life the other – an aspect in a continuous action (p. 68).

For the Igbo, death represents both the end of a beginning and the beginning of an end, as life emerges from death only to eventually return to it. This cyclical return is not final or definitive, but rather a continuous process of departure and return (Onyibor, 2019). Nwala (1985) concurs with this view, asserting that among the Igbo, death signifies merely the dissolution of the physical body, not the cessation of life. The mourning that follows a person's death, therefore, stems from the loss of their physical presence rather than an end to their existence. Nwala emphasizes this point further, stating: "The institution of mortuary (burial) among the Igbo is very elaborate, and it illustrates much that is found in Igbo philosophy of life" (p. 41). The Igbo belief in the continuity of existence in the afterlife is central to their elaborate burial rites, which are intended to secure a place of honour for the deceased in the spirit world. A typical Igbo burial ceremony involves a series of rituals and functions, facilitated by the sons of the deceased, kinsmen (*Umunna*), age grades, and secret societies, among others, all of which reflect the community's deep-rooted philosophical and spiritual understanding of life and death.

Among the Igbo, a well-conducted burial involves a series of symbolic rituals designed to facilitate the ritual separation of the deceased from the living, while simultaneously establishing their integration into the realm of the ancestors. This process enables the deceased to maintain a new form of spiritual relationship with the living, often characterized by some form of communion from the beyond (Izunwa, 2016). The effectiveness of this circular relationship between the living and the dead hinges on the proper execution of burial rites (Metuh, 1987). It is widely held among the Igbo that when burial ceremonies are not conducted appropriately, the deceased's spirit remains unsettled, wandering restlessly, and may afflict the living (Izunwa, 2016). In such cases, organizing a secondary burial is often considered the only remedy to halt these spiritual disturbances.

In Igbo cosmology, death is perceived as a journey from the physical world ("here") to another realm, which mirrors the physical world but allows for the possibility of returning (Izunwa, 2016). As part of this belief, the dead are often accompanied by their possessions or symbols of their status, which are thought to aid them in continuing a similar existence in the afterlife. For example, kings (*ndieze*) are traditionally buried with slaves and symbols of their authority, such as the staff of office (Izunwa, 2016). The nature and quality of burial rites depend significantly on the type of life the deceased lived and the manner of their death. In Igbo tradition, individuals who die naturally at an old age are said to have experienced *onwu chi*—a good death (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987). This concept of a "good death" also requires that the individual lived a morally upright life, was married with children,

and did not die during a festive period (Agbasiere, 2000). Conversely, those who fail to meet these criteria are considered to have experienced a "bad death"—*ajo-onwu*. This category includes those who die as *ogbanje* (repeaters), in extreme poverty, or without proper care, as well as victims of sudden deaths, such as those caused by fire, drowning, accidents, or suicide (Ukagba, 2007). When a person dies a natural death, the burial rites are typically elaborate and carried out with mixed emotions—sorrow for the loss of the individual's presence, yet joy in celebrating a life well-lived. These ceremonies often involve feasting, dancing, and cultural displays, which serve to honour the deceased, appease their spirit, and facilitate their smooth transition into the afterlife (Ukagba, 2007).

For individuals who suffer unnatural deaths (*ajo-onwu*), the burial atmosphere is typically sombre, with the nature and circumstances of the death determining whether a low-key burial is conducted or none at all. In particularly distressing cases, such as the death of *ogbanje* (reincarnating spirits), the deceased may be subjected to mutilation in front of relatives to prevent the possibility of reincarnation (Ukagba, 2007). When these burials are performed, they are often marked by disgrace and disrespect. Some individuals who die such ignoble deaths are cast into the evil forest (*ajo ofia*), and their memories are quickly forgotten.

In the case of suicide victims, their bodies are not only viewed with disdain but are also buried hastily and without the observance of any funeral rites. Onah and Leman (2007), in their essay "New Perspectives on 'Natural' Death (*Onwu chi*) among Belgo-Igbo," describe the treatment of Igbo men who committed suicide in Belgium between 1996 and 2006. According to their account, the Igbo diaspora did not collectively arrange to return the bodies to their homeland, nor did they ensure that the deceased were accorded a respectable burial (Ukagba, 2007). This response is rooted in a deeply ingrained cultural and ideological framework that governs burial practices, irrespective of geographical or temporal constraints. The Igbo place significant importance on the manner of death in determining the possibility and nature of the burial.

Upon a person's death, it is customary for the body to be displayed publicly so that the community can inspect it and ascertain the cause of death. Izunwa (2016) notes that a universally observed practice in Igbo culture is the ritual bathing and decoration of the deceased, in preparation for lying in state. The purpose of this solemn procession is to allow members of the community to witness that the deceased did not succumb to a shameful or virulent disease, nor did they die from violent causes such as a machete wound or bullet injury. This practice helps to confirm that the individual was not struck down by a divine curse, nor did they perish in acts of robbery or theft.

Given that *ajo onwu* (bad death) represents a deviation from the norm, the richness and cultural significance of the Igbo burial ceremony are found primarily within the framework of *onwu chi* (natural death) (Izunwa, 2016). In contrast to the death of young children, which is considered a great tragedy and does not warrant elaborate religious or burial observances, the death of an elderly woman is marked by extensive and symbolic rituals, imbued with fertility and spiritual significance (Izunwa, 2016). For example, in the *Ihiala* cultural region, when the death of an elderly woman is announced to her relatives, it is immediately followed by the family head performing a ritual sacrifice of a chicken before they mournfully gather to view her remains. This initial mourning is

accompanied by prolonged dirges and dances, culminating in the demand for various ritual items of deep symbolic meaning (Izunwa, 2016). The responsibility for providing these items, which may include goats, chickens, cloth, mutual chalk, and camwood lotion, falls to the deceased woman's husband and children (Izunwa, 2016). Furthermore, if the woman is to be buried in her family home, additional sacrifices are made following traditional practices (Ilogu, 1974).

When it is a titled man who has passed, the ritual observances are even more elaborate, particularly concerning religious rites (Izunwa, 2016). Some of the symbolic elements required for the burial of an *Ozo* man are mysterious or difficult to obtain, such as the *mpi nkita* (dog's horn) and *aka agwo* (snake's limb). Upon the death of a titled man, a common practice in certain areas involves collecting the blood of a cock, mixing it with specific leaves, and using the concoction for a ritual absolution of the deceased. A traditional healer then performs a ritual hand washing of the body with the mixture, which is believed to absolve the dead of any evil deeds committed during their lifetime. In addition, all shrines established by the deceased are adorned with palm fronds (*omu nkwu*) as part of the ceremonial process (Izunwa, 2016).

Before burial, the corpse undergoes specific preparations: the body is washed, the fingernails are trimmed, and the deceased is laid in state amid the sound of cannon shots. During this time, a white-plumed cock is tied alive, head downward, near the body, as it is believed that this ritual guarantees the peaceful transition of the deceased's soul to the ancestral realm. If the titled man served as a priest to a deity, a traditional healer is called upon to sever his spiritual connection to the cult. Similarly, if he had engaged in sorcery, all related cult objects would have been ritually deactivated and discarded (Izunwa, 2016). Ogbalu (1979) provides an apt description of these rituals in his detailed analysis.

If it is the chief priest of a deity that dies, an expert/potent medicine man is invited to ritually separate him (the dead) from the deity he ministered to. If it is a man who practised much sorcery, made and used many charms that die, all his cult objects, charms and amulets are cast away in the common belief that they have been depotentiated at the death of their user (p.103).

It is customary before burial to conduct a divinatory inquiry (*iju ase*) to determine whether the spirit of the deceased may cause harm or unrest to the living after interment. The purpose of this ritual is to identify potential remedies or preventative measures to avert such spiritual disturbances (Izunwa, 2016). As the critical moment of burial approaches, the solemn ritual of *Igwa ozu* aka or its hermeneutical equivalent, *iwa nkita anya*, is performed. These rituals, reserved for only the most distinguished titled men (*Dike*), are carried out with the utmost reverence in communities that observe them. The *iwa nkita anya* ceremony serves to symbolically create a separation between the living and the deceased, ensuring that the spirit remains at peace in the afterlife (Izunwa, 2016). Ubesie (1978) further illuminates the significance of these rituals in his writings.

The rite of *iwa nkita anya* is performed to the end of detaching the dead from all interests in the physical world, otherwise, he/she will continue to parade and/or wander the earth causing panic and harm, (p. 223).

Furthermore, it is noted that the ritual is fulfilled by the sacrifice of a dog, with its blood poured into the eyes of the deceased. In

cultural regions that follow the Igwa aka paradigm, a ram is sacrificed, and its blood is sprinkled on the chest of the dead. Subsequently, a cock is split in half through its oral cavity, and the blood is similarly placed in the eyes of the deceased. Following these rites, the head of the titled man is adorned with abuba ugo (eagle feathers), signifying readiness for interment. The committal process is initiated when a member of the family severs the eriri ozo (the ceremonial cord) (Ubesie, 1978).

Before the burial, a goat or cow is slaughtered, depending on the financial capacity of the deceased's children or relatives, with the blood poured into the earth at the burial site. Shortly after the interment, the wives of the deceased partake in a cleansing ritual using shrubs known as akoro and ujiji, washing their hands four times at the women's uke shrine to absolve themselves from any association with their husband's death (Izunwa, 2016). None of the wives may eat until this ritual is completed. The announcement of the deceased's interment is marked by the sound of a white drum, a practice that continues for seven weeks. During this period, prayers and incantations are offered to the spirit of the deceased, seeking retribution against any individual believed to have contributed to the titled man's demise (Ilogu, 1974, p. 48). Typically, distinguished individuals, particularly titled men, are buried by mid-afternoon, a time referred to as "mgbe anwu kwuru n'isi."

Following the laying of the remains, the women are invited to place symbolic earth into their husbands' graves, a practice known as "ikponye aja n'anya." Alternatively, a goat may be sacrificed, with one of its limbs placed in the grave. These actions, along with other customs, constitute the concluding rites before the tomb is sealed (Izunwa, 2016). Throughout the funeral proceedings, it is customary in some communities to prepare food, which is then placed in a bowl and set along the path to the grave site (Ogbalu, 1979). After the completion of the burial ceremonies, the wives of the deceased enter a period of sacred isolation known as iba n'nsò, which lasts for two months. During this time, they remain in seclusion, refraining from bathing or changing clothes, while neither the surroundings are swept nor the kitchen cleaned. Each day is heralded by their lamentations. At the conclusion of this isolation period, referred to as iputa na nso, an elderly woman (nwa ada) conducts a cleansing ritual for the widow, assists her in disposing of the debris, provides a haircut, and accompanies her to the stream for a bath, ultimately helping her change into fresh clothing (Ogbalu).

With the ini ozu, the interment of the deceased's remains in the earth marks the conclusion of the initial phase of the burial rites. This phase transitions into the second segment known as ikwa ozu, which is typically characterized by a festive atmosphere aimed at facilitating the peaceful passage of the deceased's spirit to the afterlife. According to Ilogu (1974), if this second phase is inadequately performed, the proper inheritance of the deceased father's estate cannot be definitively settled. More concerning, the extended family may be tormented by the unsettled spirit of the deceased, who has failed to integrate with the other ancestral spirits (Ilogu, 1974, p. 67).

The origins of the contemporary extravagance associated with funeral ceremonies in Igbo culture can be traced to this necessity for proper burial rites. Historically, while funeral rites were elaborate, they were accessible even to individuals from impoverished backgrounds, and there was minimal societal pressure to adhere to specific expectations. Eze (2021) supports this observation by linking the current opulence of Igbo burials to

the influence of modernity. He argues that prior to the rise of modernity, burial practices among the Igbo were straightforward and manageable for the average individual. He laments that the intrusion of modern influences has rendered funerals financially burdensome for ordinary people. Additionally, Akam (2022), as cited in Nwinya (2022), corroborates this perspective, noting that modern influences on the socio-economic structure of the Igbo community have significantly altered the cultural expectations surrounding once modest funerals. Given the intricate nature of burial ceremonies within Igbo culture, it is essential to examine the recent trend of exorbitant funerals in Igboland.

An Overview of Exorbitant Burial Ceremonies in Igbo Land

The pursuit of providing the deceased with a peaceful transition has rendered burial ceremonies in Igbo land exceedingly extravagant, prompting critical reflection on the underlying motives of these rituals. One may question whether the primary purpose of such ceremonies is to honour the deceased or to showcase wealth. This troubling trend has been aptly characterized as "befitting burial" by Chidiobi and Ibekwe (2024) and other scholars. They assert that the term "befitting burial" has become synonymous with households across Igbo societies in Nigeria today. It is common to hear bereaved families invoke this term as they prepare to lay their loved ones to rest. Citing Chigbo (2021), Chidiobi and Ibekwe (2024) highlight that, as the term suggests, a "befitting burial" refers to an excessively elaborate ceremony that entails numerous elements requiring substantial financial resources from the grieving family. These elements are believed to enhance the burial experience, making it entertaining, memorable, enjoyable, and worthwhile. In this context, significant efforts are made to ensure that guests are adequately catered to regarding food, drinks, and overall comfort, even as they share in the family's mourning.

While organizing a befitting burial, immediate family members of the deceased, along with friends and well-wishers, pool substantial financial and material resources to ensure the comfort of expected attendees during the burial period. Such elaborate funerals often draw a diverse array of guests, including friends, business associates, colleagues, high-ranking government officials, business magnates, senior religious leaders, and individuals from various backgrounds. These invitations are typically extended by the family of the deceased, who may seek to showcase their political and social status, as well as their connections and networks (Chigbo, 2021; Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024).

In preparation for a befitting burial, Ibekwe (2021), as cited in Chidiobi and Ibekwe (2024), notes that it is common for families to renovate existing buildings or construct new ones, purchase expensive caskets, and sometimes prolong the time the corpse remains in the morgue to facilitate thorough preparations. The event is marked by an abundance of food and drinks, along with the production of large, colourful posters and banners proclaiming the deceased as a "rare gem," "icon," or "legend." Furthermore, prominent musical artists—whether religious or secular—as well as live bands and traditional musicians are often invited and compensated generously for their performances. The family also invests in high-quality souvenirs, brochures, and invitation cards, while transportation arrangements are made for guests via chartered buses and other vehicles. Additionally, various expensive burial uniforms (ashebis) are acquired, and, in some cases, guests

may be fed for several days or even weeks following the funeral (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024).

This phenomenon aligns with Ejiofor's (1985) observation regarding the paradigm shift in burial ceremonies in Igbo land, where he remarked that "except for the immediate relations, death is no more a source of sorrow, but an opportunity for conspicuous consumption" (p. 88). In this context, Nkwede (2022), as cited in Nwinya (2022), opines that:

For all intents and purposes, Igbo burial is increasingly and incredibly extravagant. In recent times, Igbo people have spent millions of naira including selling landed properties to ensure that a burial is prosecuted. In some cases, the dead body is cushioned in the morgue for the period of one to two years in the pretence that arrangement is being made to give the dead a befitting burial. Neighbourhood and close camaraderie are taxed heavily in the name of a committee of friends weekly. All in an attempt to give the dead the best burial on earth. The implication of this elaborate funeral is that it is an economic leakage, it mortgages the future of the younger ones, leads to school dropout, encourages poverty and leads to crime and social vices, (Nkwede, O, 2022, cited in Nwinya, 2022).

Nwinya (2022) substantiates the claim of exorbitant burials in Igbo land with concrete examples, citing the burial of Ogbuinya Nwibo Nwinya, a title holder from Igbeagu Izzi, Ebonyi State, in 2014. According to him, nine cows were required for his traditional burial rites, in addition to food and drinks provided for the entire community over a week long funeral. This event featured an average of three sets of fifty rounds of cannon shots fired per day. Similarly, the late Anthony Obiagoso Enukeme, CEO of Tonimas Oil and Gas, was buried in a casket valued at thirty-four million naira in August 2020. Given such a staggering expense for the casket alone, one can only imagine the overall cost of the entire funeral. Yet, there are individuals who view this extravagance as a benchmark to achieve or even exceed (Lailasnews, 2020, in Nwinya, 2022).

In another instance, Simon Odo, a well-known native doctor from Aji in Igbo-Eze North, Enugu State, was interred in a car reportedly worth eight million naira. The vehicle's engine was kept running, and the native doctor's favorite song played inside, symbolizing his smooth transition to the spiritual realm (Sahara Reporters, 2021, in Nwinya, 2022). Furthermore, in July 2021, the entire Southeast Nigeria came to a standstill for the burial of Innyom Ezinne Uche Iyiegbu, the mother of Obinna Iyiegbu (Obi Cubana), at Oba, Anambra State. The lavishness of this event, which extended for over a week, shocked both Nigeria and the global community, showcasing a culture of profligacy and waste (Nwinya, 2022). Reacting to this spectacle, Onyeka Onwenu (2021, qtd. in Nwinya, 2022) remarked, "The burial of Obi Cubana's mother was not only lavish, but it was also obscene and insensitive. It sent all the wrong signals at a time when Nigeria is wracked with widespread poverty and lack" (p. 89).

Most Rev. Ezeokafor (2017) aptly captures the essence of exorbitant burial ceremonies in Igbo land when he laments that:

Beginning from the time of death to the conclusion of the funeral ceremonies, bereaved families engage in mundane, flamboyant, and wasteful practices and ceremonies, largely in a bid to meet with demands made

on them by society and those they lay on themselves. Therefore, burial and funeral ceremonies have become a multi-million Naira project, such that many families unable to meet the demands do borrow or sell some of their property and real estate. Some postpone the burials and funeral to such a time they can finance the huge bills that may accompany the funeral ceremonies (p.20).

With the above overview of exorbitant burials in Igbo land, codified into the concept of "befitting burial," it has become evident that while death inherently brings pain and sorrow, the burial process has increasingly been trivialized into a display of personal or familial affluence. This shift in the paradigm surrounding burial ceremonies in Igbo land has fostered a pernicious tendency among individuals to resort to drastic measures, including self-harm, in an attempt to meet the exorbitant demands associated with interring with their deceased loved ones. The implications of such a trend raise critical questions about the cultural values that underpin these practices and the socio-economic pressures faced by families in the wake of a loss. It is within this context of heightened expectations and financial burdens that the next section of this paper will dig deeper into the motivations and consequences of these extravagant burial practices, exploring their impact on the community and individual well-being.

Unaliving the Living to Bury the Dead: A Critical Examination

Prior to modernization, burial practices in Igbo land were straightforward and affordable for the average person (Jude, 2021). However, the rise of "befitting" burials has transformed these traditions into extravagant displays of wealth, overshadowing the respect traditionally afforded to the deceased. This shift has created immense societal pressure on families lacking financial resources, leading some to contemplate drastic measures, including self-harm, in their quest to honor their loved ones appropriately. As financial burdens accumulate, the bereaved may find themselves increasingly consumed by monetary worries, resulting in feelings of anger, frustration, and blame that often escalate into conflicts over finances. This stress can deepen feelings of depression, prompting individuals to isolate themselves from family members and diminishing their capacity to provide emotional support (Ofor, 2022).

As this cycle perpetuates, bereaved individuals may resort to harmful behaviors, such as criticism and insults, which further undermine familial support. These negative dynamics tend to be most pronounced among those with pre-existing unstable relationships (Offor, 2022). Consequently, in their efforts to meet societal expectations for a "befitting burial," families risk incurring crippling expenses that can lead to their own emotional and financial downfall. The surge in extravagant burial ceremonies in Igbo land is driven by various financially burdensome factors. A thorough examination of these elements illustrates how such excessive practices can metaphorically "unalive" the bereaved, compounding their grief with overwhelming financial strain and emotional turmoil.

Unreasonable long stays of corpses in the mortuary: Mortuary fees are a significant contributor to the rising costs of burial in Igbo land. This issue often arises when families opt to keep the deceased in the morgue for extended periods, sometimes months or even years, in an effort to organize a "befitting burial." This delay

allows relatives time to gather sufficient funds for the funeral. Interestingly, as noted by Chibor (2023, in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024), the prolonged stay in the mortuary is frequently not due to financial constraints but rather a desire to adequately prepare for an elaborate send-off that will impress mourners attending the funeral. While the original purpose of utilizing a morgue is to give the family time to make necessary arrangements for the burial—particularly to accommodate relatives residing abroad or in distant locations—the contemporary emphasis on extravagant funerals has altered this practice. By the time families feel ready to conduct a “befitting burial,” the accumulated mortuary fees can be substantial, forcing them to incur significant financial burdens to reclaim the remains of their loved ones. This situation can lead to unnecessary debt and exacerbate the financial strain on the bereaved family.

The desire to purchase the most expensive casket: Is a significant factor contributing to the financial strain associated with burial ceremonies. In many Igbo societies, there is often a frantic rush to acquire caskets that will be the talk of the town, and regarded as befitting of the deceased. The market offers a wide range of caskets, varying in quality, size, shape, and design. Unfortunately, many families opt for exorbitantly priced caskets, treating them as symbols of status during these funerals (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024).

In numerous cases, undertakers are hired not only to transport the deceased but also to enhance the burial experience. Their performances—often elaborate and energetic—during the procession from the mortuary to the burial site captivate mourners and guests alike, providing a form of entertainment even amidst sorrow. However, the services of these undertakers come at a steep price, making them accessible primarily to families with considerable financial resources. For instance, hiring a prestigious burial entertainment firm like APAMS FUNERAL SERVICES is typically beyond the means of many families, yet the prevailing trend of “befitting burials” compels families to pursue such costly options in an effort to stand out, regardless of their financial limitations.

Production of burial brochures, souvenirs and invitation cards: Invitation cards, burial brochures, and souvenirs represent another significant expenditure associated with “befitting” burials, consuming a substantial portion of the overall budget (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024). While a burial can be considered dignified without these elements, the prevailing trend has transformed it into a perceived necessity. The costs associated with producing brochures can be considerable, influenced by factors such as whether the design is in black and white or color, as well as the texture and quality of the paper used. Generally, higher-quality materials lead to increased costs. Similarly, burial invitation cards fall into the same category of expenses, with prices varying based on design and quality (Olisaemeka, 2023, in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024). Souvenirs also contribute significantly to the budget during this period. Families often purchase various gift items to distribute to invited guests, sympathizers, or mourners as they depart the burial service (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024). Common gifts include umbrellas, towels, trays, jotter, shirts, polos, caps, buckets, teacups, and waste bins. This practice of providing souvenirs to mourners stands in stark contrast to traditional Igbo customs, where it was customary for sympathizers—friends and relatives—to offer support in the form of food, drinks, or monetary gifts to the bereaved family, thereby helping to alleviate some of the costs

associated with the burial (Olisaemeka, 2023, in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024).

Burial Publicity: In contemporary Igbo societies, substantial sums are often allocated to promote an anticipated “befitting burial” through radio and television announcements, jingles, and print media. These promotional efforts typically occur both before and after the burial itself. The costs associated with this publicity can vary significantly, depending on the media outlet's popularity, reputation, and the terms negotiated between the bereaved family and the media. For example, if a significant program is currently airing and must be interrupted for the burial announcement, this can incur additional fees, as noted by Ogbonna (2021, cited in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024). The rationale behind this surcharge lies in the expected larger audience that will be listening at that time. Similarly, print media—such as newspapers and magazines—also charge considerable fees for publishing obituary announcements and related information about the deceased (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024).

Beating the Records in Refreshments: In the contemporary trend of “befitting burials” in Igbo land, the most pronounced area of competition among families is in the provision of food and drinks. There is a strong societal expectation to hear that food is abundant—so much so that it goes uneaten. This pressure often compels families to stretch their financial limits to uphold their reputations. Consequently, significant amounts of money are spent on catering, even when the bereaved family may be struggling to meet their basic needs, or when hunger may have been a contributing factor to the deceased's passing. At these lavish burials, a wide variety of local and international delicacies are typically served, yet, unfortunately, much of this food often goes to waste. Many guests, having eaten their fill, may continue to request additional servings out of greed, leaving a large quantity of food uneaten and subsequently spoiled, only to be discarded immediately after the event. A similar pattern is observed with drinks, as some guests may demand more beverages, only to take a few sips before abandoning them (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024).

Ostentatious burial Uniforms: Burial uniforms, which should primarily serve as a means of mourning the deceased, have increasingly become an ostentatious display in contemporary Igbo society, often referred to as “burial Ashebi.” This trend has significantly contributed to the rising costs associated with organizing what is deemed a befitting burial. According to Eluke (2021, Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024), Ashebi—a term borrowed from the Yoruba culture—typically denotes uniforms worn by family members, friends, and well-wishers during significant celebrations. However, this practice has shifted, and these uniforms are now often worn during mourning periods in Southeast Igbo land.

Despite the substantial financial burden these uniforms place on the bereaved, they are often discarded shortly after the funeral. Additionally, various associations and groups to which the deceased belonged frequently impose extravagant demands that must be met before the burial or funeral rites. These practices reveal the myriad ways in which contemporary burial ceremonies burden the living, forcing families to navigate unreasonable expectations that could be avoided. Such demands, coupled with the extensive emotional and financial strain they impose, adversely affect both affluent and less wealthy families alike.

An overview of the impacts of exorbitant burial ceremonies.

The lavish trends observed in recent funerals within Igbo communities are not rooted in traditional customs nor do they align with Christian teachings (Onyibor, 2019). Mbalisi et al. (2014) underscore this perspective by stating that:

One recent trend of burial among the Igbo is the commercialization of the burial ceremonies.... Almost everything about burial in recent times has been translated into monetary value by individual families. People use the death of their beloved for fundraising. It is instructive to mention that burial or funeral ceremonies are moral and civic obligations owed to the dead. These burial rights exist in the rituals of the church as well as under native law and custom. But the changed materialistic world of the present time has so painted, camouflaged and exaggerated these rights (p.63)

Burial ceremonies in Igbo land have become notably extravagant, with the definition of a “befitting” burial increasingly tied to the financial capacity of the bereaved rather than a genuine expression of respect for the deceased. This shift has resulted in numerous self-imposed and external financial pressures on grieving families, compelling them to conform to societal expectations of what constitutes an appropriate burial. The demands associated with such costly burials have significant repercussions, creating numerous challenges for those involved (Nwinya, 2022). As money becomes the primary determinant of burial expenses, it places a substantial burden on families.

Eziechi (2023, as cited in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024) highlights that the impacts of these so-called “befitting” burials are both socio-economic and psychological. He asserts that this emerging subculture has led to a significant waste of economic resources. Funds that could have been utilized to empower unemployed family members are extravagantly spent on funerals. Additionally, resources that might have been invested in productive ventures—such as establishing factories or industries that could create jobs for the many unemployed youths in the community—are often squandered in the pursuit of impressing burial guests under the guise of a befitting burial.

Still hampering these negative impacts, Ofor (2022) asserts that financial burdens can have profound detrimental effects on the bereaved. He emphasizes that the exorbitant costs associated with burial ceremonies can adversely influence the mental, physical, and relational well-being of those grieving, ultimately diminishing their overall quality of life. The mental impact often manifests as depression and anxiety. Living under the weight of financial obligations can leave individuals feeling despondent, hopeless, and struggling to focus or make decisions. The constant worry about unpaid bills can foster vulnerability and heightened anxiety. Physically, the repercussions can include insomnia, weight fluctuations, and various health issues. Worries about financial strains can lead to sleepless nights, disrupt appetite, and result in overeating or skipping meals. Furthermore, chronic stress related to financial burdens may contribute to ailments such as headaches, gastrointestinal issues, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease (Ofor, 2022). In terms of relationships, the financial strain of extravagant burials can foster anger and irritability, undermining even the strongest connections. It may also curtail the bereaved's

social life, leading to withdrawal from friends and social activities (Ofor, 2022).

In summary, exorbitant burial ceremonies can leave individuals feeling overwhelmed by financial stress, adversely affecting their sleep, self-esteem, and energy levels. This burden can lead to feelings of anger, shame, and fear, intensifying tensions and arguments with loved ones, exacerbating emotional pain and mood swings, and heightening the risk of depression and anxiety. Consequently, the bereaved may resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as alcohol or drug abuse, or gambling as a means of escaping their worries. In extreme cases, financial strain can even trigger suicidal thoughts or actions (Ofor, 2022). Given these adverse effects, it is crucial to examine the leading causes of exorbitant burial ceremonies in Igbo land.

Leading causes of exorbitant burial ceremonies in Igbo land

The contemporary extravagance of burial ceremonies in Igbo land has been attributed to various causes identified by different scholars. Despite the prevalence of this trend, Nwinya (2022) accurately observes that many individuals do not engage in such practices out of preference or financial capacity; rather, they perceive it as a societal expectation and a necessity for ensuring a peaceful transition for the deceased. However, the burden of fulfilling these burial traditions can become overwhelming, leaving even affluent families expressing their grievances. Below are some of the leading causes of exorbitant burial ceremonies in Igbo land.

Modernity: Scholars have identified modernity as a primary driver of exorbitant burial practices in Igbo land. According to Eze (2021), the influence of modernity on Igbo funerals has rendered burial ceremonies unattainable for the average individual. Traditionally, funerals in Igbo culture were straightforward and accessible, but modernization has introduced a wave of extravagance. This perspective is supported by Akam (2022, as cited in Nwinya, 2022), who asserts that the cultural requirements for funerals in Igbo land are not inherently extravagant; rather, they have become costly due to the influence of modern socio-economic structures. He argues that modernity has transformed cultural necessities, making what was once easily obtainable now scarce while simultaneously adding new demands. Expanding on this point, he states:

Modernity has eroded traditional occupations and those things that were readily available are now scarce. The land which was the raw materials of Igbo industry has been badly encroached into by industrialisation and urbanisation. Sadly, industrialisation is not strong enough to absorb the masses. Few people got carried away by promises of modernity which has failed to fulfil its promises. Others have no land to grow, produce or rear those things which culture wanted to sustain their ever presence in the society by incorporating them as requirements for funerals. Few people in the occupation cannot satisfy the demand of buyers and the more demand, the greater the price logic set in (p.92)

African Metaphysics/Igbo Cosmology: Scholars have also traced the exorbitance of burial ceremonies in Igbo land to the broader cosmological perspectives of Africans, particularly the Igbo people, concerning death and burial practices. Agbakoba (2022, as cited in Nwinya, 2022) posits that there exists a profound

interconnection between the African worldview and the phenomenon of extravagant burials in Igbo culture. He identifies the origins of elaborate burial customs in African metaphysics, which emphasizes a spiritually enriched material afterlife. He elaborates on this notion by explaining:

We believed in a spiritualized materiality in which the present world is duplicated in the spiritual world, the material status of a person here is carried over to the spiritual world. If you are a chief here, you will be and live like a chief there. So, you have to take your chieftaincy things over there. The way to do this is an elaborate burial to tell the gatekeepers that a chief is coming. In the past, such a person would be buried with many valuables including servants and slaves who would attend to his needs. So, the more elaborate the burial, the more the acquired status in the spirit world. This explains the necessity for expensive burials (p.94).

Iniobong (2022, in Nwinya, 2022) summarizes the rootedness of elaborate burial in African cosmology thus:

The African cosmology clearly captures the living dead or ancestors in its second hierarchy of Forces. This prominence given to the ancestors has made it such that everyone who dies must be given a good burial for ease of entry into that realm as believed by many African communities. It is believed that elaborate celebrations with the killing of cows will fast-track speedy acceptance and entrance (p.95).

It is in line with the above, scholars readily agree that the Igbo extravagant funeral/burial ceremonies, just as other traditional practices of African societies, are strongly rooted in African cosmology.

The quest for social recognition: Social recognition is another significant factor contributing to the exorbitance of burial ceremonies in Igbo land. Many families who engage in lavish burials do so to gain societal recognition and to publicly display their success and affluence. For these families, the funeral of a loved one becomes a poignant opportunity to showcase their wealth, social connections, and achievements to mourners, family members, friends, and well-wishers. This desire for recognition is often reflected in the attendance of numerous guests, both invited and uninvited, at these ceremonies (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024).

Class consciousness and the quest to save face: Class consciousness, defined as an individual's awareness and understanding of their social class within a capitalist society, significantly influences extravagant burial ceremonies in Igbo land. Bereaved individuals often feel compelled to elevate their perceived class status, even when it diverges from their actual economic standing, to save face and uphold a certain societal image. This quest for social validation can lead to severe financial strain, resulting in frustration and depression in the aftermath of the burial ceremony (Adair, 2001; Evans & Kelley, 2004, in Ofor, 2022). Similarly, Aniebonam (2013, in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024) argues that families engage in lavish burial practices not solely because they possess the financial means or genuinely desire to do so, but largely due to their awareness of the perceptions held by friends, colleagues, political and business associates, and academic acquaintances. The potential judgment and commentary from these individuals weigh heavily on the bereaved, compelling them to

spend their last resources in a bid to impress others and uphold their social prestige, pride, and ostentatious lifestyles.

Family show-off: The Igbo people are known for their industriousness and strong sense of pride. Beyond families who inherit wealth, many individuals who have ascended the economic ladder seek to showcase their financial success at every opportunity, particularly during burial ceremonies (Eziechi, 2023, in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024). In preparation for a grand burial, families meticulously consider various elements to impress both invited and uninvited guests, demonstrating how they have been blessed by divine providence. Moreover, it is undeniable that many affluent families, in their pursuit of success, have cultivated significant networks and relationships. Consequently, during the burial of a loved one, these families often invite a diverse array of attendees, including friends, colleagues, business associates, and well-wishers from various sectors of society—such as religious organizations, academia, business, and politics. The sophistication of the bereaved family is typically on full display during these occasions, transforming funerals into platforms for showcasing their social, political, economic, educational, and religious connections.

Undue rivalry: Undue competition is another significant factor driving many families in Igbo land to pursue extravagant burials. The Igbo culture is characterized by a spirit of competition, which has played a vital role in shaping their identity and achievements. This competitive nature manifests across various domains, including business, academics, and social status (Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024). According to Chiakwa (2023, in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024), this spirit of competition has increasingly permeated burial ceremonies, making "befitting burials" a focal point. In many Igbo villages and towns, families strive to outdo one another, seeking to showcase their wealth and social or political connections during these occasions. As a result, substantial amounts of money are often spent recklessly on various unnecessary and extravagant items, all to impress mourners and demonstrate superiority over other families.

Possible Solutions to exorbitant burial ceremonies in Igbo land.

Having thoroughly examined the leading causes of exorbitant burial ceremonies in Igbo land, it is essential to propose viable solutions to mitigate this detrimental trend. As traditional Igbo burials become increasingly costly, many families unable to afford lavish ceremonies find themselves neglecting or abandoning their deceased loved ones in mortuaries, sometimes for over three months, in an attempt to raise funds for an extravagant send-off. This situation underscores the need to discourage expensive burials (Nwobodo, 2021). Below are some potential solutions to address the issue of exorbitant burial ceremonies:

Understanding the primary purpose of burial ceremonies: There has been a significant shift in the recent trend of extravagant burial ceremonies, moving the focus away from honouring the deceased and facilitating a peaceful transition to making the burial the talk of the town. These ceremonies have increasingly become opportunities for communities and religious organizations to recoup debts, often imposing hefty fees on the bereaved before agreeing to officiate. It is crucial to recognize that burial should not be a money-making venture but rather a time for expressing empathy and providing genuine support to those in mourning. To address this issue, community leaders and religious organizations

must promote awareness and reorientation within their communities, educating individuals on the need to discourage expensive burial rites (Ofor, 2022).

Giving flowers when it's still fresh and can be smelt: Caring for your loved ones while they are alive and healthy, or even during their illness, is far more meaningful than attempting to impress with elaborate displays after their passing. As the saying goes, the dead do not partake in cows, goats, fowls, or cannon shots (egbe ala). What truly matters upon someone's death is the spiritual benefit that follows—a focus on honouring their soul and ensuring a peaceful transition to the afterlife. If funerals lose their spiritual significance and become mere showcases of materialism, they cease to fulfil their true purpose. The emphasis should be on what can benefit the deceased in the next world and nurture their soul (Ezeji, 2023, in Chidiobi & Ibekwe, 2024). Once the bereaved have fulfilled their obligations to the deceased during their lifetime, burials and funeral ceremonies should primarily aim to pay final homage and respect to the departed, rather than serve as ostentatious displays of wealth.

Contentment: Being true to oneself means living within one's means and recognizing the importance of financial responsibility. The bereaved should refrain from competing or attempting to impress others through extravagant burial practices. This approach can alleviate financial burdens and help avoid the debts that lead to sleepless nights. The pressure of expensive burials often fosters corruption within society, prompting individuals to engage in various criminal activities, including armed robbery, occult practices, kidnapping, and embezzlement, all in the name of funding burial ceremonies.

Contentment plays a vital role in helping the bereaved navigate this challenging time without added stress. Understanding the principles of sound financial management—such as budgeting and planning—is crucial. The bereaved need to develop a financial plan that aligns with their income at the time of the burial. By doing so, they can honour their loved ones without jeopardizing their well-being or resorting to unethical means to finance a burial. This mindset allows them to focus on what truly matters: commemorating their loved ones without the weight of financial strain.

Critical evaluation and conclusion.

The deeply entrenched beliefs among the Igbo people regarding the impact of funeral rites on the deceased have significantly influenced both the social and moral fabric of the average Igbo individual (Muonwe, 2021). The importance attributed to these rites is such that, irrespective of the deceased's long life or the number of descendants, a lack of elaborate and often costly funeral rites performed by surviving relatives leaves the spirit of the deceased believed to wander, unsettled between the worlds of the living and the dead (Muonwe, 2021). This notion partially elucidates the phenomenon, as noted by Uzuoku (1982), where families unable to bear the substantial financial burden of comprehensive funeral ceremonies often postpone them until sufficient resources can be gathered. Preparation for such funerals can entail significant financial sacrifices, including erecting a new house for the deceased if a suitable one is lacking, or even selling land or accruing debt to ensure that the funeral meets societal expectations. This often results in a disregard for the potential financial hardship that may follow, as families prioritize providing a well-deserved farewell to their loved ones.

On a positive note, these elaborate funerals can lead to development in the deceased's immediate community. However, it is paradoxical that many individuals may not have experienced adequate care or comfort during their lives, with funds earmarked for a lavish funeral instead of addressing their basic needs. If the deceased was a married man, the repercussions can extend to the welfare of his family, who may be left struggling after the expenses of an extravagant funeral (Muonwe, 2021). Moreover, the social status of the deceased often correlates with the cost and complexity of the funeral rites (Umeasiegbu, 1977). Thus, the fear of the deceased's spirit roaming and potentially bringing misfortune to the living drives families to ensure that funerals are as grand as possible. This fear often leads them to attribute any misfortunes they experience to their failure to provide an appropriate send-off (Muonwe, 2021).

In summary, while modernity and various external factors have contributed to the current extravagant nature of funerals in Igboland—often leading to financial ruin for the living—the root cause lies primarily in the Igbo belief system. This belief that grand funerals can secure a peaceful resting place for the deceased, coupled with a materialistic view of the afterlife, propels the ongoing trend. Everyone desires to honour their loved ones in the best possible manner; however, as noted by Akam (2022, in Nwinya, 2022), historically, elaborate burials were accessible to the less affluent. Today, with a fluctuating economy, such practices have become prohibitively expensive for the average person. Nevertheless, both wealthy and poorer families may feel compelled to spend excessively on funerals, sometimes resorting to loans, thereby placing an insurmountable burden on the living.

The contemporary motivations for extravagant burials, such as the pursuit of social recognition, represent deviations from the fundamental beliefs underpinning burial practices. Many people lose sight of the fact that, in Igbo cosmology, elaborate or costly funerals do not necessarily guarantee peace for the deceased; rather, it is one's virtuous life that merits a place among the ancestors. Hence, while elaborate burials are culturally significant, they do not ensure spiritual peace. This understanding raises critical questions about the true purpose of these ceremonies: Is it merely a display of wealth, a means to burden the living or a sincere tribute to the deceased? Although arguments may be made that lavish funerals are a traditional aspect of Igbo culture, it is essential to recognize that culture should serve humanity, not the reverse.

In conclusion, this paper has thoroughly examined how exorbitant burial practices in Igbo land negatively impact the living. It has explored the nature of these ceremonies, their implications, causes, and potential solutions. Ultimately, a re-evaluation of the primary purpose of burial ceremonies is imperative. By doing so, families can honour their deceased without succumbing to the heavy burden of societal expectations.

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