

Rites and Rituals for the Dead: Bases for Good Moral Behaviour in Ezzaland, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated rites and rituals for the dead: bases for a good moral behaviour, using Ezzaland (as its scope). Rites and ritual for the dead are important rites of passage in African traditional beliefs. It is the last ritual one must pass through to enable such person complete the transitional ritual stages. But in Ezzaland, death rituals have a latent function of promoting good moral behaviour. This is because the rites are limited to people that lived good life. This ritual was more effective during the pre-colonial era with evidence of high moral value to show. Presently, this ritual has declined as a result of it being objected by Christianity, Western culture and civilization. The rate our rich cultural heritage is shrinking with the resultant impact to our traditional religion is what triggered this research work. Also, Lack of appropriate observance of rites and ritual for the dead has disturbed the relative peace and stable order of the Ezza society. Traditional sanctions and taboos are no longer treasured and a new way of life begins which leads to a new way of morality. The purpose of this research work was to make an apology for our cultural heritage by analytically and descriptively unveil how these rituals contribute to good moral behaviour and its implication to Nigeria. Also, how moral decadence in Ezzaland will also be revisited in a more traditional approach. This work employed the analytical descriptive methodology. In order to ascertain reliable data, various methods of data collection were employed. These include oral interview and personal observation. Literatures are reviewed. Journal articles and internet are consulted. This work

finally reveals the following: The practice of rites and rituals for the dead is culturally normative in Ezzaland and is a social reality. It also reveals the existence of burial rites and rituals for different categories of people in Ezza cultural setting. It discovers how rites and rituals for the dead have contributed to good moral behaviour in Ezzaland. In addition, this work reveals the effects of rites and rituals for the dead of a good person from three aspects. The first is from the aspect of the deceased, the other is from the angle of the relatives and thirdly the perspective of Nigerian society.

Introduction

Rites and rituals for the dead in Ezzaland were greatly influenced by the people's traditional belief in the ancestors and re-incarnation. Death rites of passage in Ezzaland have been an exercise which features prominently among the other three traditional rites of passage (i.e. birth rite, puberty rite and adulthood rite). Age, sex and status of the deceased as well as the cause of the death are some indispensable conditions that determine the appropriate rites and rituals for the deceased. Apart from sex, the three other conditions greatly centre on the moral behaviour of the deceased.

Rites and rituals for the dead in Ezzaland do not end in the normal burial or disposing the body of the deceased to the mother earth rather, it includes the second burial. The second burial is a process of preparing the soul of the deceased for a continuous existence in a place Ilogu (1998) referred to as "hereafter" and Nzoiwu (2012) refers to it as 'ancestral paradise' (p.178) In order words while the first burial rites was to dispose the deceased, the second burial rites prepared the soul of the deceased for a journey into the land of the ancestor and possible re-incarnation. Rites and rituals for the dead in Ezzaland are not all

about the dead, rather in addition to burying the dead they go a long way to remind the living on the need to embrace good moral behaviour. This is because the denial of some rites and rituals from the deceased is a frustrating and strange experience to the family, kindred and friends of the deceased. This is also a warning and a lesson to the indigenes of the community who may be living immorally like the deceased. Bad death in Ezzaland is not unconnected to bad moral behaviour of the deceased and in accordance with Igbo traditional beliefs, denial of some burial death rites will prevent the soul from attaining the status of ancestorship. Also, oil seed, *ugba* will be put in the grave of the deceased as a mark of rejection and this will prevent the deceased from re-incarnating back into the family or community.

Initially rites and rituals for the dead were limited to the people that have good moral behaviour in the society. Presently due to absence or reluctance from some families on such rituals, it is now performed indiscriminately without minding the moral implications to the society. Madu (1997) recalls that; ‘armed robbers, vagabonds, witches, fugitives etc were denied such rites’ (p.135). Therefore, the indiscriminate performance of rites and rituals to the dead undermines the main aim of our forefathers which is to promote good moral behaviour in the society.

Ilogu (1979) points out that after some times; not performing these rites and rituals for the deceased, the family will start experiencing some difficulties. Many families in Ezzaland immediately abandon their traditional religion to Christianity. They adhere strictly to the teachings of Western missionaries who know next to nothing about the African worldview. These families bluntly refuse to perform the traditional rituals for their deceased; despite the word of wisdom from the elders of the community. Today some of these families are having difficult times like late marriage, barrenness and

untimely death. Notwithstanding, they are unable to locate their problem, rather they accuse their neighbour and relatives as the source of their predicaments. The devastating effect of Western civilization on the rich cultural heritage of the people of Ezzaland, especially on the rites and rituals for the dead is the major problem this work tends to solve.

People especially Youths disassociate themselves from the ritual practices for the dead; and the resultant effect on the moral decadence in the Ezza society cannot be over emphasized. Traditional sanctions and taboos are no longer treasured in the society. Almost all that is good in traditional morality is lost to western civilization which greatly undermines the future of some cultural elements such as rites and rituals for the dead which are the bases for good moral behaviour in Ezza cultural framework.

The scope of this study will be limited to Ezza North and Ezza South local government areas of Ebony state, Nigeria. Onueke the Headquarters of Ezza South is also the ancestral home of Ezekunna the progenitor of Ezza people. Geographically, Ikimi (2013) asserts that Ezzaland is located within the North Eastern Igboland. It lies approximately between 7° 54' and 8° 7' East of Greenwich meridian and 620' North of the Equator. Igwe (2004) asserts that, "Ezzaland is bounded in the North and North East by Izzi, in the East by Ikwo, in the South and South West by Ohaozara Local Government, in the North West by Ishielu Local Government and in the West by Isu and Oshiri" (p. 20).

Conceptual Framework

Rites

Genney (1960) writes that life passes through four transitional ritual stages namely, birth, puberty, adulthood and death rites. In addition, Agha (2012) defines rites of passage as; "ceremonies

performed at certain stages in the life cycle of an individual when he or she moves from one stage or status to another"(p.56). According to BBC dictionary (1992), "a rite is a traditional ceremony carried out a by particular group"(p.1005). In this work, rites are understood as some entitlements that are performed on behalf of the deceased during the "first" and "second" burial.

Death Rite

Death rites are those rituals performed to make a deceased arrive safely into the land of the ancestors. It is a traditional ceremony performed on behalf of the deceased, by the living relatives during the first burial and second burial. In Ezzaland, as used in this work; it is the necessary ritual requirements a deceased must pass through before it can be accepted into the land of the ancestors.

Rituals

Kanu (2019) observes that “one of the common rituals among the diverse African societies is the life circle rituals’ (p.26). In the same vein, Agha (2012) defines “rituals” as; "the prescribed ways of performing religious set, praying, singing sacred songs, dancing to the gods, pouring libation and the likes” (p.6). Rituals are series of action that are always perform in the same way, especially as part of a religious ceremony, something that is done regularly in the same way. Ritual means set of order or words used in a religious ceremony. A series of action that are performed compulsively, anything that is performed habitually and according to the dictate of the fore-fathers or ancestors and common to a particular religion or society.

Good Moral Behaviour

Goldthorpe (1978) defines morals as; “a system of ideas about right and wrong behaviour about which there is, if not unanimity at least wide agreement in a given society” (p. 165). For moral to be good it must be accepted by the society. Morality which may be defined as the standard of human behaviour determines either subjectively or objectively and based on what is considered ethically right or wrong. Hence good moral behaviour in this context are those conducts which the society has acknowledged to be rules from the gods and the ancestors in making the ideal society. Good moral are the acceptable conduct of individuals for the interest of the societal development. An individual whose attitudes are deemed satisfactory is described as morally upright.

Death

Hornby (2000) defines death as; “the end of life, the state of being dead” (p. 229). It is the power that destroys life. According to Anyanwu (1983), “Death is a transitional process which sends an individual into another world of existence which is regarded as a carbon copy of this world but invisible” (p. 18). Also Ugwu (2009) notes that; death is not the end of a man but a transition from a physical world and the deceased is only from one state of existence to another. This shows that life is a pilgrimage. It is the last rite man must go through on earth. Death marks a period of separation in ones level of existence into another which is different in nature from the first one level on earth. It stands between the world of human beings and spirits.

Literature Review

Various scholars have contributed immensely and meaningfully to the study of rites and rituals for the dead and their opinions

constitute the bedrock of literature consulted and reviewed. Though death is a universal phenomenon, it receives special attention in African traditional religion and culture and this cannot be unconnected to their belief in the court of the ancestors and re incarnation.

According to Arinze (2001), Death in Africa is a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He only moves to join the company of the departed. The only change here is the decay of the physical body but the spirit or soul moves to another state of life. According to Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004), "Death stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible as a transition from one state of existence to another" (p.58). Death in Africa is one of the last transition stages of life requiring passage rite. The deceased must be completely detached from the living and make a smooth transition to the next life. Rituals are needed to progress into the other phase of life which is called here-after. The African belief in life after death is so strong to the point that they can pass message to the past relatives.

Quarcoopome (1987) underscores the traditional belief about here after as this; "when the breath of life leaves a person he is declared death. The physical frame rot, in the ground but the spirit which is the essential person survives death and return to God".(p.157) A person in this regard is made of two component viz body and soul.

Mbiti (1975 affirms that, 'Death marks a physical separation of the individual from the human beings.(p.133) This is a radical, change and the funeral rites and rituals are intended to draw attention to the permanent separation. Meticulous care is taken to fulfill the funeral rites and to avoid causing any offence to the departed for death rites are performed to send the departed

peacefully to sever his links with the living and to ensure that normal life continues among the survivors.

Ilogu (1998) pointed out that, after sometime of not performing these rite and rituals for the decease, the family will start experiencing some difficulties. In collaboration, Eze (2001) observes that “It is believed in Ezzaland that any debtor of this ceremony who for any reason participates in any of the forbidden activities catches fever and drops death thereafter” (p. 397). In his writing on death and here-after. Anizoba (1990) asserts that, “The rites and rituals performed at this phase of human ontological circle are purposeful” (p. 110). For instance, the ritual ceremonies concerning the preparation of corpse for burial were mainly intended to make the passage of the departed into this phase i.e. death and hereafter of the deceased hitch free.

Death rites and rituals are very significant not just in Ezzaland but to African traditional faithful at large. One of the importance of these according to Metuh (1981), “is to ensure that the deceased gains entrance to the spirit land” (p. 114). This shows that death rites and rituals are necessary for the dead to enter into the spirit land. The aims of death rituals are; first to absolve the deceased of his transgression and to rid off all obstacles which could impede his entrance into the spirit land. And then pray for the deceased to-reincarnate and bring greater blessing to the family.

During the ritual ceremony, the gods are asked to receive the dead and keep him in peace and also the deceased not to obstruct the family on earth rather to send them more blessing. According to Agha (2012), “The happiness of the dead according to African beliefs, depend largely on the type of burial accorded him during the first and second burial” (p. 120). For the dead to go

home unhappy person means the wrath of his spirit to the departed family. His spirit would constantly visit the family members to torment them. There is no doubt that the coming of bad spirit is not a healthy visit to the living. Such bad visit could result to accident, barrenness, late marriages and hard lucks. This is often regarded as generational curses because it continues recurring in the family. The idea of second burial is to ensure that no ritual element has been left unperformed, so that the danger of misfortune brought about by the displeasure of the deceased may be averted. Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) assert that; "death rites and rituals are basically performed for the ones that died good death according to the people stand of goodness or morality"(p.58). They differentiated bad death from good death. Bad deaths include death from leprosy, accidents, suicide, smallpox, anti-wickedness divinities like god of thunder. The good death is that which comes when one lived to a ripe old age. While bad death is not always attended by common people but specialists who are knowledgeable in essential rituals. The death of aged person is an occasion of much rejoicing and the celebration is heaviest at funeral since people see nothing tragic about it.

Megesa (1998) included marriage and childbearing as a requirement for good death. Marriage is seen in Africa as a means of attending maturity. This is in connection to the African belief in reincarnation. Barrenness is seen as a punishment from the spirit world in Africa Traditional Religion. According to Ezekwugo (1992), "the death of one who has no offspring is seen as the end of the continuity of life, the discontinuance of family tree and the quenching of the flame of life of the pedigree" (p. 88). Also included to be a bad is falling from a tree. Suicide, widows still wearing mourning dress, death resulting from dreadful

deceases such as leprosy madness, swollen abdomen and prolonged diseased.

The fear of dying a bad death is very significant to every adherent of the African Tradition Religion. This is because bad death will not only deprive one of full burial rites but will also deny them a good place in the world of the spirit. For one to live a decent life on earth one must not be associate with these behaviours that diminish life- theft, adultery, poisoning, witchcraft and the totality of what is regarded as abomination in the society. The implication of traditional adherent avoiding immoral act is to enable him receive full burial rites. And also have place in the ancestral world which is the chief goal of rites and rituals for the dead. Death rituals were religiously arranged to promote good behaviour.

Such religious beliefs go a long way in bringing fear in the life of the faithful and as a result, they avoid doing evil in the society. According to Durkhiem (1965), “The institution of religion is normally the product of collective behaviour” (p. 32). This shows that rituals especially death rites and rituals are not one man show, in-laws and maternal peoples in diasporas most time unite to make the ceremony a success. When the worshipers from various clans or tribes gather together, they feast, drink dance, make new friends or renew their old friendship and induce a relation of crowd behaviour. In this way, the individual lose their sense of individualism or separateness and isolation as a result of the inevitable excitement.

In Ezzaland, rituals for the dead serve the function of inculcating good moral behaviour, promoting peace not just within the family and kindred but across communities and societies. Consequently death rites and rituals were one important means our fore fathers used to promote good moral behaviour in

the society in one hand and enhancing the passage of a deceased into the ancestral world on the other hand.

According to Onwubiko (1991), “Religion and religious beliefs and their effects on the African community are the key to understanding the African world and ideology” (p. 3). As earlier stated, in Africa death is not the final end of human beings rather it is a transition from earth to the abode of the ancestors. Death rituals ensure the comfort of the dead person during his journey. Second burial of a deceased person influences the condition of the discarnate personality by helping him achieve tranquillity in the discarnate realm and a satisfactory positioning for re-incarnation. If these rites are improperly conducted, the deceased person's spirit may become displeased and bring misfortune to the negligent offspring (Arinze 1970:17, Ilogu 1974:121, Meek 1970:61).

The Ezza people believe that good conduct in one's life leads to higher status. Thus, an evil doer who by dishonest craft or skillful manipulation of the goods attains a high economic status and power will nevertheless have a low status in the discarnate realm. He may have inauspicious rebirth and return in a condition that are tabooed. One of the ways Ezza people bury to prevent reincarnation is burying his face downwards or by other rituals. Ezza people frown at the death of children and youth, because they were unable to complete the cyclic rites of passage. This will equally destroy their chance of belonging to the cult of ancestors and possible re-incarnation.

Rites and Rituals for Children and Youths

Like other traditional societies, the Ezza people handle different circumstances and types of death in different ways. According to their belief, someone in the spirit world may return to earth to finish a life purpose, especially if that person was still a

child. Children's or youth's death is serious frowning at. This is because such person did contribute much to society. A native doctor is called upon to tell the cause of such death through oracle. Youths do not have any rite at all rather they are mourned for seriously. Prayers are offered to the Gods to prevent such death in the community.

The people of Ezza believe that if a dead body is properly buried with some rites, it would make the body to reincarnate. However, the deceased age grade especially if up -to eleven years upwards performs some deploy in honour of their departed age mate. This includes war song dance to show that they are briefed.

Burial Rituals for Adult Men and Women

The world view of the Ezza people like other Igbo societies is patriarchal in nature, hence rites and rituals for men are more pronounced than that of women, especially during second burial.

Burial Rites among Titled Men and Women

When titled men like warrant chief dies, family members are not permitted to work till the burial rites are completed. If it is a traditional king, his stool and crown will remain untouched for complete one year. Some rituals are performed on the first one year to enhance the transfer to the successor. The rites and rituals will be performed by the chief priest of the community's deity. In modern times, the deceased chief will be brought to the village square for his stewardship to be revalued.

The rites and rituals are accorded him is a community affair. Many cows, goats, fowls will be killed as a mark of honour to the king. These rites are not specific but it must be memorable.

Rituals for Somebody that Committed Suicide

Suicide is considered the worst way to die in Igbo society. Somebody who commits suicide is more looked down upon than somebody who commits an act of murder. To commit suicide brings shame on one's family, village and friends. People that committed suicide are not mourned in Ezzaland. They are thrown into *Ikirikpo* forest traditional priests are exclusively responsible for such death. They will confiscate the deceased property cleanse the land with stipulated rites and rituals and rituals and do the burial.

Burial Rites and Rituals for a Moral Person

In order to appreciate the rites and rituals for a moral person, one has to explain the concept "moral person" in Ezza worldview. In Ezzaland it is believed that those who died at a very good old age lived a good life. This is because for one to die at a very good old age means that such a person must have lived in peace with the Gods, ancestors and deities who monitored the activities of the people. Their punishment most of the times is to' make the culprit repent or show remorse. In extreme cases the culprits are struck dead to put a stop to further dissemination of such bad acts.

Effects of Burial Rites and Rituals on a Good Moral Person

The effects of rites and rituals for the dead of a good person can be viewed from three aspects. The first is from the aspect of the deceased, secondly from the angle of the relatives and the Nigerian society.

(i) Effect to the Deceased

The major effect of rites and rituals for a good moral person is that it qualifies the deceased to be an ancestor. According to

Madu (1997), “Although different African peoples have different standard for measuring who qualifies as an ancestor, it seems that the dominant factor rest on full burial rites given to the deceased by his living relatives” (p .65). These rituals are performed to ensure a peaceful passage of his soul to the land of the dead. If any or all these rites are not done, the spirit of the dead cannot reach the ancestral land instead it will keep on hovering around.

(ii) Effect to the Relatives

Rites and rituals performed for good moral person have great impact to his relatives. The fact that the deceased relative, were able to perform all the death rites for their good loved ones always boost their ego. Most often they even sell their valuable property like land, just to make sure that the burial was successful. Any family according to Nwankwo (personal communications) that was ‘unable to perform these burial rites to their moral deceased ones is always in shame because they will be mocked by their kinsmen. They are not allowed to participate in the burial rites of other people.’

In Ezzaland as in other parts of Igboland, before a man gets married, his parent secretly makes inquiry about the family of his proposed in-laws. If the family has performed the burial rites and rituals of their deceased, the marriage will be permitted to take place with no objection. But if the family was unable to perform these rituals for their dead ones, the son or their daughter will be advised not to have anything to do with such family.

Burial rites and rituals for a good moral person help to bind the relationship between in-law and maternal home people. For the fact that the in-laws have some important role to play during the burial of their daughter, everyman sees it as a ritual responsibility to love and care for his wife and in-laws because it is a shame or even abomination in Ezzaland to deny a man and his

children the grave of their wife and mother respectively. The children on their own part will always make sure that their mother is well taken care of.

Rites and rituals for a good moral person also have some effect on the moral behaviour of a society. Children or grand children of someone that did not die a good death hence denied some rites will one day ask some questions why their family is not participating in the rites and rituals for others. The story about their father or fore-father will then be narrated to them. In an effort to stop a recurrence of such, they will learn a lesson and live a very good life so that they will create a new legacy for the family and generations as well as to the society.

(ii) Implications of Burial Rites and Rituals for Nigerian Society

The implication of rites and rituals for the dead to Nigeria can never be overemphasized. This is because the rites and rituals for the dead cut across every sector of life. The implication can be viewed from the economic benefits, social aspect like promotion of good moral behaviour in the societies. It can also be implied politically by providing a platform through which our past heroes (the ancestors) are recognized. Good moral promote peace among tribes, culture and religion. Importance of rites and rituals for the dead have a unique implication to the Nigerian or African Traditional Religion in that it serve as a propaganda machinery.

Encouragement of Good Moral Values in Nigerian Societies

For one to die at a very old age is believed in Ezzaland worldview that such a person must have lived a morally sound life. Also the belief in life after death is a driving force that deeply influences the people lifestyle for good. Dead rites and rituals are not all about celebration but calls for a moment of sober reflection. It brings one

to a point of respecting one's own life and how one's own burial will look if one continues the way he is living his life.

The fear of being rejected by the ancestors and the resultant effect on the deceased to be hovering around brings to everyone the consciousness of the need to live a good life. Such belief and practice helps to propel one to do good and this impacts positively in promotion of moral values in Nigeria.

Conclusion

In summary, rites and rituals for the dead in Ezzaland was partly a process by which a dead person gains light feet for the Journey to the other world. Also partly a measure through which our fore-fathers used to maintain law and order in the society: The goal of every traditional African is to become an ancestor after death. This is why a decrease must be given correct funeral rites supported by a number of religious ceremonies which in turn will attract blessings and favours to the living relatives. The cumulative ideas of death rituals have a positive implication to the Nigeria society. The ancestors, divinities and age grades were strong agents through which the societies were policed. And their punishment, especially that of the divinities are always capital (death) or serious illness. The fact that the divinities and ancestors are Invisible shows that to see even in secret means that nobody can run away from justice. So for one to have survival up to 70, 80- 90 years means that the secret eyes of justice have confirmed such to be morally.

In conclusion, it should be noted that rites and rituals for the dead in Ezzaland is partly a process by which a dead person that lived a good moral life enters into the land of the ancestors and also partly a means by which our fore-fathers used to maintain law and order in the ancient days. It was a measure carefully arranged to esteem good moral behaviour as against evil vices. The rites and

rituals for a good moral person have great effect both for the deceased and for the living relatives. These rites for the dead also have a great implication to Nigerian society.

Recommendations

The idea of analyzing cultural activities from the Christian cum Western pit is a grave mistake that have cost Nigeria their rich cultural heritage with great ideology. This study recommends that

1. Avenue should be created for Africa at large to be taught to understand the African worldview because this is the only, way they can fully understand and appreciate the effort and ideas of their fore-fathers.
2. Government should also introduce African Traditional religion and cultural studies in our secondary schools and primary schools to promote good moral behaviour.

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