

OFHIA IN OGIDI: A CHALLENGE TO EVANGELISM IN THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE ON THE NIGER

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Abstract

Ofhia is a common practice in the entire Igboland that whenever anybody dies, his or her people normally rally around in preparing shade where the kindred including the Chief mourners will stay to receive the visitors. Research was also observed in some other communities in Anambra State as to make the fact clearer. The Ofhia. or “Ima Ntu” has posed a big challenge to Anglican church in Ogidi in the recent past. The challenge existed between the Igbo traditional leadership and the Anglican church in Ogidi. The Igbo traditional leadership were of the view that church must observe the Ofhia in every burial, while the church maintained their stand to be using canopy as a more modern practice. The research preceded by oral interview especially of the key role players in the Igbo traditional leadership and Christian body in Ogidi whose responses were analyzed and synthesized. The Igbo traditional leader said no to new modern technology of using canopy as shade while the Christian body said no to old pattern of using palm fronts to prepare shade for the kindred and Chief mourners' corner for receiving visitors during burial. The paper is to draw a balance of accommodation, knowledge of modernism and dynamism between the Igbo traditional leadership and Christian church in Ogidi Anambra State to restore a mutual understanding and free flow of evangelistic out-reach in their church burial. It is also to draw a distinction between Igbo traditional burial and church burial in Ogidi.

Introduction

This is a common practice in the entire Igbo land that wherever and whenever anybody dies his or her people normally rally around putting their heads together alongside their resources to make sure that their person is given a befitting burial. Wickham (1957) explain that before the coming of the whites, our people when preparing burials do make shades where all people are usually accommodated and entertained during their burial ceremony and to differentiate or separate the bereaved from other members of the public a little shade is as well made to accommodate them and therein they stay to receive their visitors.

These shades are usually known to be “**Ntu**” as Ogidi people will always say “Ima Ntu” that is “making these shades” which includes the big ones and the small ones which is known to be in Ogidi customs and traditions as the Ofhia that is the small “Ntu”. Smith (1967) said that, the entire Igbo land have embraced Christianity which is referred to European Humanities where their ways of life are studied and practiced thereby paving ways for detailed investigation or probe into our customs and traditions.

Earlier before now, palm fronds are used as shades to secure the comfort of people who either come for burial or any other occasion in the entire Igbo land. Nweke .C. (personal communication August 17, 2017) said that Ogidi people refer to it as Ofhia, Ojoto, Enugwu-ukwu and environs call it Mkpukpu Okafor J. (personal communication August 2017) said that in Ekwusigo

Local Govt. Area, it is called **Owoko** while it is called **Nwogho** in Ihiala Local Govt. Area.

Historically, Ibemesi .D. (personal communication June 6, 2017) affirms that Ogidi community is known for their rich traditional and cultural heritage. In the hey days before the influx of the Europeans who brought to our forefathers Education and Christianity and prevailed on us by way of preaching to us their words from the bible, the average Igbo man have their way of life and this their way of life, is their ways of doing their own things and their ways of communicating their God through their gods. The period under review, Okeke, D.C (2006) affirms that the Igbo man were in total darkness, they do not have cloths to wear let alone having the ability to afford other good things.

Life was meaningless, but people cherished one another to that extent that if one dies; his or her relations do rally round knowing that someone amongst them were no more. They come together to put their heads together in order to fashion out the best way forward to bury him or her,

However, in planning or designing the burial, the visitors and invitees are taking care of by making out shades where they normally stay. These shades which usually are made of palm fronds are designed to shade off sunlight or rainfall to the comfort of the visitors. In Ogidi's context, these shades are called “**Ntu**”, this sounds like the name of a “Nail” in Igbo language, but it is actually known to be shelter or shade made of palm fronds in the funeral

settings. Now one would ask after the “**Ofhia**”, since the general shades made of palm fronds are known and called “Ntu”, that little shade still made with four sticks of bamboo trees with the roof covered with palm fronds usually and normally found in the burial ceremony settings accommodating the bereaved and their household in the **OFHIA** in Ogidi's tongue.

Ibemesi .D. (personal communication March 12,2017) said that Ofhia and Ntu came into being as a result of the fact that the chief mourner and his people have it in the mind to secure the comfort and safety of their invited guests and visitors during their funeral ceremonies. And more, to keep within and available the bereaved and his people but that is why the Ofhia is conspicuously set at the entrance of the compound,

Okonsu Nwafor(personal communication June, 10, 2017) said that three items were placed at the left side of the top of the ofhia:- namely: (a) wooden hoe, for the dead person to farm in the land of the dead. (b) a tuber of yam as his wealth in the land of the dead. (c)finally, a “cock” hanged there will be used to cook for “Umuada” especially those who are not christians

Abinitio, the significane of yam is riches in Igbo land hence the name Duruji, in the same vein, the man who has livestock is symbolized by the presence of a “cock” where as the wooden handle of the hoe, in Ogidi language known as “Ego ogu” depicts that the person in question handles the hoe effectively and does something reasonable and tangible with it.

Achebe (1958) affirms that, before and immediately after the civil war, Ogidi people predominantly were farmers except those in the mould of Unoka of the “THINGS FALL APART”, that is the lazy ones who cannot and does not go to farm or have their own farmlands. If such people who are farmers dies, bearing in mind that they were all non-Christians at that time. In the frontage of the Ofhia, a cock and a tuber of yam are tied to a wooden handle of a hoe without blade is kept, this signifies that the deceased is a very rich farmer that has both yam and livestock, there's no incantations, prayers or any sort of breaking of kola-nuts either for revering or paying obeisance to anything seen or unseen attached to the Ofhia but those three items has its significances.

In addition to that, where a woman is involved, the above feature will not be found rather a basin filled with grain of rice will be kept at the foot stead of the deceased, a big dried cat fish and few condiments are placed on the rice, which at the end of the day are shared by the “Umuada”.

Definition of Ofhia

Ofhia as commonly known in Ogidi custom and tradition is a small shade made of palm fronds that stands on a four bamboo sticks. It is commonly found in the funeral ceremonies and habits the bereaved and his or her people.

Ofhia in Other Communities

Ofhia as fondly called in Ogidi is a phenomenon in Igbo land for instance, it is called **Ofhia** in Ogidi, Akwa-ukwu calls it

mkpukpu, Ihembosi Ekwusigo Local Govt. Area refers to it as **Owoko**, Enugwu-ukwu in Njokoka knew it as **mkpuku** too and Uli in Ihiala calls it **Nwogho**. There's nothing to revere, adore or adulate as far as the shade Ofhia is concerned in Igbo land. It is done to provide shades and separate the bereaved from others and expose the bereaved to the visitors who might want to pay condolence to them.

There was no alternatives to the usage of the palm fronds then because our forefathers were not exposed to western education which is in vogue now, otherwise they would have known that using canopies as it is done today is neater and energy saving than that of palm fronds.

Significance of Ofhia

This phenomenon signifies that there is burial of a person. Ofhia has a position where the “Umunna” usually mounts it and it is not that you cannot receive your visitor anywhere but the legitimacy of ones condolence is the person's reception at the Ofhia. Moreover, at the seven native weeks after the burial, the Umunna or the Age grade of the deceased gathers at the front of the Ofhia to destroy it. Afterwards this however leads us to another important question like “why must the age grade or the Umunna gather at the front of the ofhia, what other ceremonies are done or performed before the scattering or destruction of the ofhia.

Meanwhile, it is most important to note that issues are about being modeled up as to remember that already Ofhia had been

mounted by the “Umunna” without blemishes, without saying prayers for or against it or revered adoring or adulating same and now that the burial is over, no prayer was said muttered either with or without kola-nuts, it is like the Ofhia have served its purpose if not that it's a duty left to be performed by either the age grades or “Umunna” of the deceased otherwise it would have been rooted out.

Dismantling of Ofhia

After the burial, from the date deceased was buried ,four days that makes up one native week will be counted into seven, which is twenty-eight days in Ogidi custom and tradition, this is called "**izu asaa**". This is another ceremony where the Umunna ,age grades and the relatives of the deceased are invited. The age grade calls it," Nzowa iko". In this ceremony of Nzowa Iko, it literally means **breaking the cup**, this cup is usually made of calabash, before it is broken by any member of the age grade, the age grade as represented by the chairman had made available 2 gallons of “Iti” palm wine, I kola nut and the calabash cup. At this point, the chairman will hold the kola-nut in his hand and say the prayers of separation and demarcation between the age grade and the deceased. The prayer goes as follows:-

Chairman

(Kola in his hand he raises his voice loud enough) Ogbo----
Eke neem unu/3x.

Members of the Age Grade: Iya-A.

Chairman

With this kolanut in my hand, I pray as I decree that you shall not die young, as we are here, in fulfillment of “Izaa Isaa”, of our member (name the person) since he's gone to land of the dead, you should be speaking for us there while we speak for you here.

Members of the Age Grade: (Choruses) Ise!

Chairman

(Continued) A great demarcation has been instituted between both of us. We decree that you should go as you are separated from us. (He breaks the kolanut and throws on the ground) for both the dead and living to share from it.

Members: Ise!

Chairman:

You have been eating with us when you are alive but now you are dead we decree that you shall cease from eating with us from today.

Members: (Choruses) Ise!

Chairman:

You shall as well cease from winning (drinking) with us. (At this point a calabash cup is brought and palm wine is poured into it and after saying the above, he throws the wine on the ground as libation and litter the cup too and forcefully breaks it with his leg. Then drags out of the dried palm fronds to the ground)

Members: Joined one after the other until Ofhia is dismantled.

They go with dried palm fronds out of the compound without looking back. The remains of the Ofhia is burnt outside the entrance of the compound.

Secret Spiritual Attachment to Ofhia

The inquisitive nature and interest in man propels him to ask questions in order to know. This is where the church is skeptical about this particular way of life of our people and could thus be looked into as the subject matter to this work. Opinions of people from diverse communities were sampled and they make contributions, some negative while others positive. Okonkwo E.O (personal communication June 6, 2018) said that “If wishes were horses, I would have buried my father like a King”. This is one of the lamentations of Chief Emmanuel Oji Okonkwo of Umualiche Abba village in Azia, Ihiala L.G.A freely stated that “Mwogbo” is Ofhia in Ogidi town is an ordinary place under the bereaved and his people in habits during burial or funeral ceremony so that they will not be sought for.

The significance of a handle of hoe(ego ugu) without blade tied with yam and cock and placed in the front of Nnwogho is that the deceased is a known farmer that has yam and many livestock. There's no kind of prayer, incantation made or said with kola-nuts or what have you.

Nwankow, Benneth (personal communication June, 8 2018) opine that those three items will be used by the dead to continue farming in

the land of the dead. The church as well has nothing to do with the ancestors or the dead as they both believe that after death comes judgment. Also they believe that communication with the dead is unchristian.

However, in Njikoka Local Govt. Area of Anambra State Enugwu-ukwu to be precise, chief Innocent Amunwa a.k.a Eze Anya nemeluife of Uru Nebo was one that said it all. He declared that Enugwu-ukw is the first born of the “legendary Nri” whom the Igbo's of Anambra had much respect for. Ukalor J.(personal communication May, 15, 2018) said that when a child is born, the father will after two native weeks make feast known as *IKPABA NWA IFE N'AKA*. This is where the man's immediate brothers from their kindred will be invited.

The woman of the house that delivered the baby will carry the baby as the following commences. The host that is the father, will provide his visitors with four kola nuts and the eldest will pick one of the kola nuts up in his hand and begin to say prayers which looks like sowing the seed of progress to the newly born baby.

Eldest man: *(Having a kolanut in his hand) my people I greet you people/3x*

Others *Iyaah*

Eldest man: *(picks up the small hoe)my child (Hands over the hoe to the child) with this hoe my child, you shall not be hungry, you will be rich much more than your mates, it will not hurt you rather places you ahead of others.*

Others *Iseeh, as you pray so shall it be*

Eldest man: *(Returns the hoe and pick up the machete and placed same on the baby) the son of our father, with this machete in your hand you shall work with it to infinity and no dull moment with it. Big animal that will give you big money you shall kill with it and protect your family and yourself as well. (He drops the matchete)*

Others *Iseeh.*

Eldest man: *(picks up the yam) the yam symbolizes riches, you shall be a rich man, your kind, you will have the riches to train your kids and your siblings as well.*

Others *That is what we have decreed, Isee!*

Eldest man: *(Pick up goat and chicken droplets and places same on the palms of the newly born baby) the livestock shall be obedient to you as they shall yield increases to you, “gbo kwo nu ibe anyi.”*

Others *Isee, Iseeh.*

After the ceremony, both the eldest man and others will be served with food and drinks as the ceremony of “Ikpaba Nwa Ife n' aka” is completed just as we all remember and knows what “oma gwolu owelu” is all about. So after perfecting this ceremony with a newly born baby, then he or she grows old and dies, a tuber of yam will be tied to a hoe stick alongside with a cock in commemoration and fulfillment of that prayer which was said by his elders when he/she was newly born.

However, the meaning of **IKPABA NWA IFE N'AKA** is a ceremony where the mother of the newly born baby alongside the

husband carefully presents their newly born baby to the elders of their kindred family who are left with the duty of sowing the seed of prosperity by traditionally breaking the kola nuts, after saying the prayers, and handing over to the newly born baby, the materials of prosperity.

The yam symbolizes riches. The wooden handle of hoe signifies strength in farming and the cock simply means success in livestock rearing.

Finally, **mkpukpu** as often called in Enugwu-ukwu as free from being revered and canopies and still places scanty palm fronds on the canopy roof to maintain the tradition has no spiritual attachment of any kind. Today the rich usually replace it with modern

Challenges of Ofhia in Ogidi:

1. Traditional body was of the view that there must be Ofhia before burial.
2. The Christian body abhors the Ofhia.
3. The synod 2015 declares no Ofhia in the Anglican burial in Ogidi.
4. Placing of scanty palm fronds on the canopy of the church during burial.
5. They said that the church are destroying their tradition.
6. They said that the church must observe all the Igbo tradition in burial.

7. Any attempt the church made to accommodate, brings division. Some believe that the church is becoming weak thereby reducing the nominal role of the member.

Findings:

*Ofhia is a phenomenon that takes up different nomenclatures in different localized Igbo land for instance, it is called **Ofhia** in Ogidi, Emugwu-ukwu refers to it as **mkpukpu**, Ihiala LGA calls it **mwogbo**. In Ihembosi, it is known and called **owoko**, Aghamelum Local Govt. Area calls it “**EGBU**” especially the Anakus.*

In the entire Igbo land, it is evidently clear that Ofhia has different names according to communities in Igbo land, some still attach importance to it while some do not but the most important thing is that this phenomenon is not revered in the whole of these communities, there's no kind of prayer said before or after the making of the outfit as to have it that it is spiritually satanic or ungodly. Rather some of these communities embrace this tradition or culture because it is cost effective and originally, this part of the world is not westernized until now that an alternative is found or now that people can think of bringing in the poly product to complement the palm fronds.

Moreover, the practice of tying a cock and yam to the wooden hoe handle is to show the practice fulfillment of those prayers already said to the dead, when he was newly born, and this practice is seen today among the Igbo traditionalist preparation of a burial ceremony, the Christians of today abhors it. Again, Ofhia in

Ogidi is seen and regarded as a holy place where any woman who is still under her period is forbidden to step on, let alone staying there, but in other communities like Nnewi, the situation is the other way round.

Today, Christianity is the order of the day as far as funeral ceremony is concerned Ofhia is still prominent in scheme of affairs but things like yam and the cock tied to the wooden handle of a hoe which is displayed conspicuously at the front of the ofhia has been either jettisoned, forgotten or laid low in the scheme of things as far as nowadays funeral ceremony is concerned.

Implications of Ofhia for our contemporary society:

In a world fraught with persistent infringement on human rights, and overt degradation of human dignity, Christian and traditional conscience calls for a renewed insight into the modern technology brought about by our forebear both parties should allow time and God to heal our land as well as gospel message play its part.

The Reason why the Christians Abhors Ofhia are as follows:

- i. We are in the modern world and canopy can replace the old palm front.
- ii. The Christians condemned the idea of communication with the dead.

- iii. The three items wooden hoe, cock and yam which they use to hang at the left part of the ofhia has some traditional implicatios which stands, against Christian faith.
- iv. Purring of libation which the age grade does when they want to separate their relationship between the living and the dead after the funeral speaks against Christian faith.

Recommendation:

1. Christians should be allowed to bury their dead in the Christian traditional liturgy.
2. The Igbo traditional people should be allowed to bury their dead in their own traditional way.

Conclusion:

Ofhia as Ogidi refers to it, is widely known in Igbo land. It is not revered, no prayers are made before or after making it. No kind of obeisance is paid to it.

The church as well should be dynamic in handling the issue of ofhia in Ogidi. The understanding of everybody may not be the same. It is believed that with time, the misunderstanding generated by the traditional ofhia with the Christian body in Ogidi will soon be understood as modernism has to play its role in trying to replace ofhia with modern canopy. The missionaries who came to Ogidi in 1892 should be allowed to show the light. The models discovered in

this study are meant to stimulate studies and solution to challenges in a situation like this.

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