

## Stretching the Economy Through the Culture of Mourning Among Igbo People of South East Nigeria

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### Abstract

Death is sure and mourning is certain. The process of mourning among communities of the world are varied and ostensibly tailored in accordance with the culture and customs prevalent where the death occurred and or where the deceased comes from. This study investigated the relationship between mourning the dead in the Igbo speaking communities of South East Nigeria and the economy of the community. The study relied on both primary and secondary data obtained through interviews, questionnaires and library content. Visits to places and discussions with members of the community were assembled in a methodical order and examined in the light of physical facilities and infrastructures observed within the community that came about as a result of death, burial and mourning of deceased persons.

### Keywords:

Death, Burial,  
Funeral, Mourning,  
Economy

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### **Background to the Study**

Death is predestined whenever birth occurs. This has been the trend since creation of man. As was recorded in the Bible (Gen., 1:27) God created man in his own image and breathed unto him the breath of life and man became a living being. The bible also recorded that since man's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, God proclaimed death as the wages of sin, not just disobedience but all types of sin (Romans, 6:23). Death is therefore nothing but a cessation of the spirit from the body. When this happens, the body goes back to the earth from which it was formed. This could be through burial, incineration, dumping, howsoever whatsoever. The process of death is one that scientists and philosophers have found hard to explain. All effort has remained as guesses as nothing can fathom the depth of God's work. We may not be as concerned with the process of death or burial as with the mourning that may follow thereafter.

All beings mourn their dead. This has been explained severally but especially through the works of James Patterson, Hellen Keller, Buchianeri E.A., Rowling J. K, Tolkien J. R.R and many others. The loss of a member is as painful as the loss of oneself since it is the people that make up the community. The animal world is replete with mourning incidences just as man. The process may differ but howsoever one thinks about it, mourning is the painful realization that something is lost irretrievably and irredeemably. It does not matter how death occurred be it through accident, homicide, and suicide, howsoever by whatsoever. Death is death. Mourning follows death. It is true that someone can mourn even when death has not occurred but such mourning only typifies the gradual loss of hope and faith in the process of recovery of someone who is sick and gradually dying. Thus, this type of mourning is periodic since there may be the possibility of recovery of the sick person with time, providence and luck maybe. It is therefore true that the temporal nature of a sickness could not be appropriately equated with death.

Mourning starts with death as a process and a ceremony. It is a process owing to the sequence of events that graduate to make it satisfy cultural standards fitting for the dead. It is a ceremony since it is with mourning that people relish their understanding of death as some painful but necessary obligation for the transition from physical to spiritual. Such phenomenon rightly requires an abundance of pomp and pageantry for the expected progression from known to the unknown world. For the Igbo people of South East Nigeria, mourning is something else.

### **Research Questions**

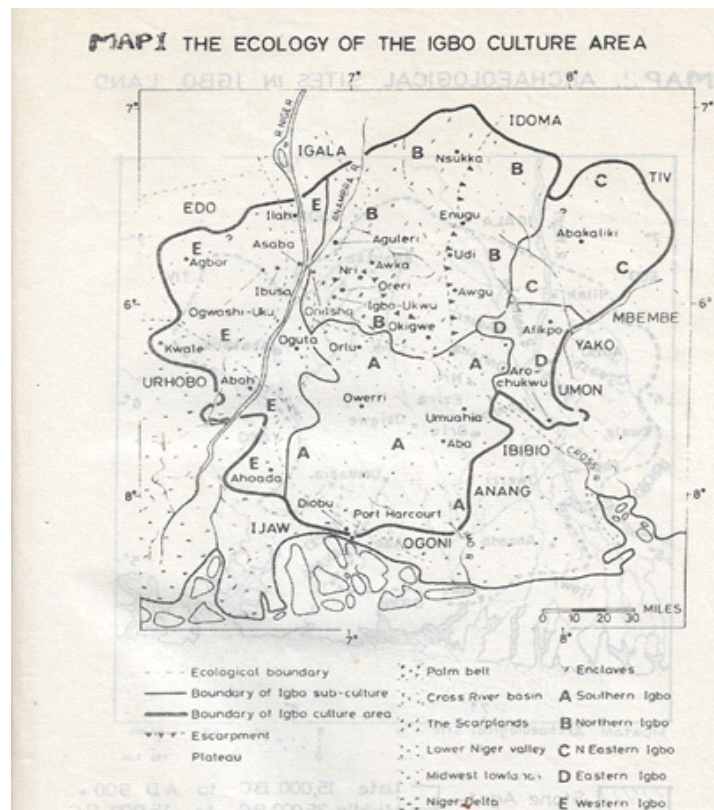
- i) Which class of people does mourning affect the most?
- ii) What preparations precede the burial and mourning of a dead person?
- iii) What actions and activities of people run counter to the acceptable mourning standards?
- iv) What effect does present notion of burial in Igboland have on the economy of the people?

## The Igbo People

The Igbo people are settled predominantly in the South Eastern part of Nigeria stretching from Longitude 6°E, Latitude 4°N, to Longitude 8.76°E. Politically, they predominate in ten (10) States of the 36 States in the Federal Republic of Nigeria – Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Benue, Kogi, Edo, Delta and Rivers States although they are natives to the first five states.

Isichei, E; Afigbo A. E; and Onwuejiogwu A., have recorded widely how this ethnic group is scattered all over the world with their myriads of exploits and entrepreneurship. In Nigeria, the Igbo people have been recorded as the most resilient and pragmatic people with the heart of a king and the humility of a queen all at the same time. Chuku (2005) and Archibald and Warmer Lewis (2007) took time to discuss the men and women of the Igbo people.

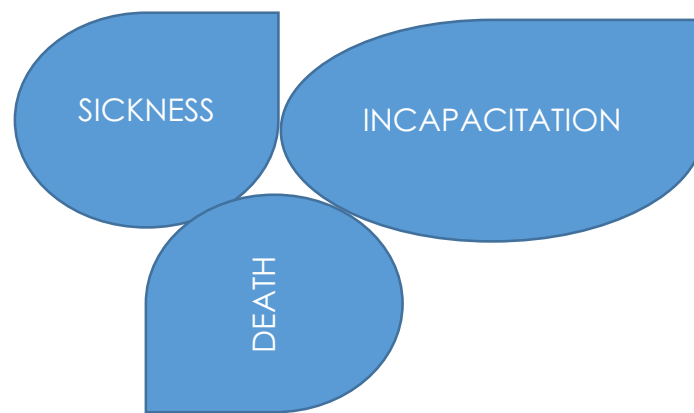
While the history of the Igbo people is one mired in controversy, the truth remains that this ethnic group has all the qualities of nation building and democracy in their genes. The Igbo people have their unique ways of mourning which this study examined. Though they may seem to be ordinary in every sense of the word but they have deep meanings and connotations without which understanding the effect and impact of the mourning will be lost to people.



**Fig. 1:** Map of Igbo land

### Mourning in Igbo Land

Humans across cultures and religions express and experience grief and mourning after the death of their loved ones. Every culture has its own traditions just like every community has its own customs. The role of mourning is simply to express grief and thereafter help the deceased and members of the family to feel and accept the obvious loss however with a total resignation of self since it is very clear that nothing could be done to retrieve and bring back the dead to the normal life they lived before. Mourning in Igbo land is an expression of grief on loss occasioned by helplessness to control a situation that led to the loss. It is an uncontrollable reaction by people and other beings to signify their love and attachment to and for the object of the loss.



**Fig2:** Routes to Mourning

It may not be necessary to examine or discuss certain inherent discoveries concerning mourning among males and females. However, it will be justified if one observed that females mourn more than males. Just as studies have proven that males die earlier than females, it becomes very clear without any doubt that the female folk are presented always with the opportunity of mourning. How they cope and eventually overcome the process of mourning may be subject of further studies. Rochaun Meadows-Fernandez (2020) observed appropriately that

*“As women (mothers), grief is embedded in our being. It accumulates and manifests as body aches and pains but many of us have never been taught how to deal with it so that it does not become yet another risk to our health”*

Notwithstanding the gender, mourning is real and painful. Adichie could not understand herself when death of her father came knocking. Her *Notes on Grief* is a moving account of a daughter's sorrow and it is also a love letter to the one who has gone. Adichie wanted him back; she wanted to rescue him from death and to tell him once again how much she adored him (Nicci Gerald; 2021). It is in this circumstance that a lot comes to pass during this period and process of hating but also at the same time, loving mourning.

### Methods of Data Collection

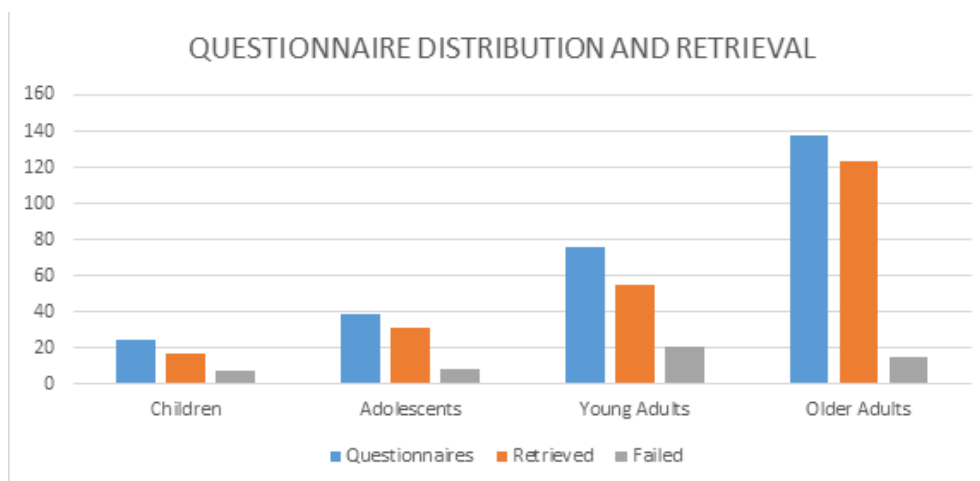
This study which investigated the impact of mourning on the economy of the community chose to get around the assignment by the use of questionnaires, interview schedules and library content. There were visits to the families of bereaved persons in different parts of Igbo land and assessing the activities that took place prior to the death, during the period of preparations and burials and thereafter, after the burials when members of the bereaved families may have returned to their various jobs and places of work. It was also convenient to attend the burial ceremonies of people in different part of the region, though uninvited. Information on such burials were easily obtained simply by listening to radio and television announcement on obituaries.

### Presentation of Data

Two Hundred & Seventy-Seven (277) questionnaires were distributed to respondents in different categories and age brackets. Out of these 81.59% were retrieved, collated and assessed. The questionnaires were distributed to the five major Igbo Speaking States of Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo. Though the Igbo people are scattered all over the world and occupy other states of the Federation of Nigeria in appreciable numbers, the States were chosen because they were core Igbo speaking States of Nigeria and occupy the South East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

**Table 1:** Category of Respondents

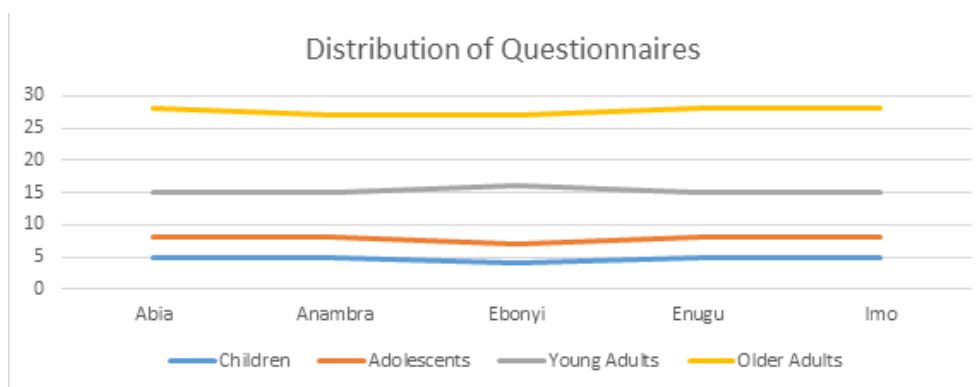
Category	Questionnaires	Retrieved	Failed	% Retrieved	% Failed
Children	24	17	7	70.83	29.16
Adolescents	39	31	8	79.48	20.51
Young Adults	76	55	21	72.36	27.63
Older Adults	138	123	15	89.13	10.86
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>81.59</b>	<b>18.41</b>



**Figure 3:** Questionnaire Distribution and Retrieval

**Table 2:** Questionnaire Distribution in South East States of Nigeria

S/No.	State	Questionnaire Distribution	Children	Adolescents	Young Adults	Older Adults
1	Abia	56	5	8	15	28
2	Anambra	55	5	8	15	27
3	Ebonyi	55	4	7	16	27
4	Enugu	56	5	8	15	28
5	Imo	55	5	8	15	28
	Total	277	24	39	76	138



**Fig 4:** Questionnaire Distribution

### Analysis of Data and Discussions

Every activity of man is seen as economic because man is a rational being who wants at all times to maximize all available benefits. Economics in very simple terms is the maximization of opportunities to achieve preconceived objectives. Severally, it may have been seen as the satisfaction of wants; Demand and Supply or Choices. Economy on the other hand is the process or systems by which goods and services are produced, sold and bought in a community or region.

#### a) Which class of respondents does mourning affect the most?

It was very amusing to observe that each class of respondents felt that they were most affected by the death, burial and mourning of a loved one. While the children think that they are most affected when either of their parents die, the older adults accept that it is abnormal and therefore a taboo should they lose their younger ones. This understanding is predicated on Igbo ideologies, principles and pronouncements that it is a taboo for a father to bury his son. Though death is tough on our body and soul, most parents would prefer that their children bury them instead of vice versa. The death of a young person is an unacceptable happenstance. This is most probably the reason why such deaths are not mourned. The casket is usually buried and people go their separate ways in anger. It is called *onwu erughi eru* (untimely death). Indeed, as happens in some communities, the elders will send out emissaries to fortune tellers and soothsayers to find out why such a



death would occur at the time it did. The efficacy or otherwise of the outcome of these investigations is a discussion for another investigation.

**b) What preparations precede the burial and mourning of a dead person?**

Sixty Three percent (63%) of respondents agree that the death of a loved one is difficult to bear in the first place. They however accept that the best service to accord a loved one is to prepare an elaborate burial ceremony to show how much he was loved. In doing so a lot of preparations are put in place to give the deceased what is usually referred to as a “befitting burial.”

What amounts to a befitting burial in one community may be different from another. While it is customary to slaughter a goat or cow for the deceased in celebration of his passage, it is gradually becoming second grade as young and wealthy people now slaughter cows as a show of affluence and in the guise of a “befitting burial.

The type and quality of casket in which the deceased is buried has become a suitable measure of the quality of burial. Hitherto, a wooden casket used to be the accepted standard but that is gradually been jettisoned as people now go for gold lined coffins and horse cart/hearse drawn carriages for the coffin. These cost lots of money but are accepted as one of the best ways of saying goodbye to a loved one especially where the money is available. Unfortunately, however, families of deceased persons are now competing on who procures the best and costliest of coffins as a mark of befitting burial.

There is also the unusual preparation of leafy brochures chronicling the life and times of the deceased. It is pronounced more often than not where the deceased is either a politician, successful business man or even in the academia. These brochures which most of the time cost fortunes are usually discarded once the burial is concluded. Ironically, illiterate persons have been identified to be the first to fight over brochure booklets that are sometimes unusually not enough for the crowd of supposedly mourners.

The printing of banners and flyers for advertisement and direction to the home of the deceased need appropriate mention as so much funds are wasted but delightfully appreciated by graphic artists, designers and printers. These actions positively affect the economy of the people while negatively affecting the purse of the bereaved family. The decoration of the Church and venues where the funeral ceremonies will take place has recently come under scrutiny as one way of exhibiting unnecessary affluence. These costs money and run in the millions. The ugly part of it all is that these decorations are even discarded as soon as people start dispersing from burial venues.

The Church has latched on these unusual preparations to extort bereaved families especially those whose deceased have not been showing expected participation in the activities and functions of the church. In most communities, the death of a loved one will turn into a deeply sorrowful adventure as the church will usually insist on recovering all debts owed not just by the deceased but all other members of the family. Usually, it is a

very traumatic period for such families that are not affluent enough to comply. Situations have arisen where the priests refused to officiate at such functions because the sum expected was not realized before the burial date.

In most communities of the Igbo people, “unuru ube nwanne agbala oso” is the norm. What this means is that every member of the community must contribute in both cash and kind for the burial of the deceased. This study unearthed a situation where “the dead are now gradually being allowed to bury the dead”. The sense of a brothers' keeper is gradually being lost. Families are allowed to do it their own way and as grand or petty. This does not in any way affect the willful contribution of resources by friends and well-wishers who come together to contribute funds to assist the family of the deceased. In such cases, it is usual and expected that there must have been a member of the family who has been contributing to the burial of other friend's beloved.

It may happen that the death of a prominent man occurred who was yet to build a house in his village. This is the time that friends and family who will be receiving and entertaining people for the burial will most likely see it as a shame that such a man or figure had no house in his village or that his house is old and derelict. What has been happening over recent years is that funds are hurriedly assembled and a house is either built, rebuilt or renovated to fit the status of the deceased. This is actually why most houses that hosted burial ceremonies are usually aglow with radiance in splendid colours immediately after burial.

In a celebrated case of misplaced priorities, friends and associates of the deceased embarked on and completed a road project in an unusually short period so that their loved one could be buried in grand style. It was a surprise how the sum was raised without government contribution and in a record time. The best of materials was employed in the construction while it lasted. There was no doubt that people benefitted financially from the construction and works that came about because of the death and burial of the man.

**c) What actions and activities of people run counter to the acceptable mourning standards?**

The understanding of mourning is that the affected persons experience great pain and grief for the loss of a loved one. However, what is witnessed during burials and mourning periods in Igbo land seem not to align with this understanding. These days, mourning has turned into a carnival of some sort where wealth is displayed and the bereaved dance away their sorrows. It is worse when the deceased is an elderly person advanced in years in which case it is dubbed as a 'celebration of life' and no more a loss through death. If it should happen that the deceased was rich or that his children and relations are well-to-do, no amount is spared to exhibit the highest attitude of financial recklessness in the name of celebration of life, exit of an icon, passage of a sage and so many other eulogies.



**d) What effect does present notion of burial in Igboland have on the economy of the people?**

Death is a total loss of a human being to nature and to God. Death seems not to benefit anyone except in extreme cases where the death of a person is preferred than living. These exceptions are acceptable. However, notwithstanding the sins of a man, he is better alive than dead. When death occurs, nothing is retrievable to make the person come alive and even live the life he had lived hitherto. The best that can be done to the dead is to bury the body or dispose of it honourably. To spend an entire fortune in the name of burial is stupid and foolish. This apparently was why the Igbo people think that those who sell their land to bury the dead destroy their future hence the adage “he who sells land to bury a dead has buried two persons”. It is clear from this study that there are tremendous economic rob-offs in the way the Igbo people mourn their dead. The season is one laced with economic activities where those who engage in them see it as a means of survival through the activities of the period and other intervening and related activities.



**Fig. 5:** Posters and billboards are signs of affluence for the deceased families.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

It could be seen without any doubt that burials and mourning among the Igbo people of South East Nigeria is not altogether sorrowful as should be but has gradually become a

thing of joy in one way or the other. It is in the midst of the actions that fragrant display of wealth is witnessed with it rubbing off on the economy of the people some positively, others negatively.

- i) The Igbo people observe what is usually called a proper burial. This is one through which the prerequisites of preservation of the corpse for long periods; even longer for some classes of chiefs and traditional rulers are observed and painstakingly adhered to. The implication is that the costs associated with these though humongous are usually taken as necessary for the fulfilment of certain customs and traditions of the people.
- ii) For the Igbo people a proper burial must be organized through the formation of a burial committee to recognize all interests including political and cultural. It is this committee that is responsible for creating all other sub committees including fund raising, budget, works, security, brochure and billboards, publicity committee, entertainment, mortuary/ambulance/casket. The intention is to put together a classy and flamboyant display during the burial of the deceased. No doubt, these cost money in the millions in the name of befitting burial. Contracts are given and businesses concluded just to achieve befitting burials.
- iii) The important part is that time, energy and other financial resources are wasted to achieve a befitting burial. Indeed, most of the actors in this game are there for their personal financial interests as these opportunities present moments through which they will enrich their personal pockets to the chagrin and consternation of the mourners.
- iv) Most items procured to beef up the urpoted befitting burial become almost useless and unuseable the moment the burial date is past. Though billboards may be allowed to weather off and forgotten, other materials are jettisoned because of their associations with burial.
- v) It is disheartening and truly embarrassing that certain persons gather during burials and mourning only to sell their merchandise such as drinks, biscuits, groundnuts, etc; to visitors who came for the burial.

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