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Ogbogbo Funeral Rite: The Metaphor for Continuity in Discontinuity among the Ogu People of Badagry

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Abstract:

In African cosmology, the attainment of old age before death is considered a sign of the favour of the gods and as such worthy of celebration. Death, although a dreaded occurrence, is to the people not necessarily an end of life, but a passage or transition to another realm of existence in the spiritual world. Therefore, funeral ceremony of the deceased elderly ones is observed with much respect because of its perceived significance to the living and the society at large especially, because, having passed on, they are considered ancestors, whose favours and spiritual guidance are needed and passionately sought by the living. The same belief is held by the Ogu people of Badagry, southwest of Nigeria. Through conceptual and expository analysis, this paper investigates the Ogbogbo traditional funeral rites of the people. It explores this belief system, its essence and social implications both to the deceased, the family members left behind and the community at large. The findings reveal that the rite, though significant in several ways, is gradually fading away because of the influence of Western religions and modernization, but not without its implications. The paper concludes by calling for revitalization of this abandoned sacred tradition.

Keywords: Death, globalisation, ogbogbo, ogu, pasha, vothun

1. Introduction

Death is a phenomenon that engages the mind of everyone because it is inevitable for all. It is dreaded by all as the end of human physical existence on earth while the different beliefs about life after death are not so empirically ascertained. Being a global phenomenon, several articulations have been provided by scholars to conceptualise it. Mbiti describes it as “something that concerns everybody, partly because sooner or later everyone personally faces it and particularly because it brings loss and sorrow to every family and community”(149), while Labeodan sees death as that phenomenon that “forces humans to pause from time to time to review our position here on earth”(1). And also to interrogate the essence and the ultimate goal of life after death. Death can therefore be viewed from two basic perspectives; the biological perspective and the metaphorical perspective.

The biological perspective, according to Falaye is a situation where a “person or individual has ceased to live physically”(81). This is a condition where there is a permanent physical existence and end of life of a person. The metaphorical articulation of death is controversial because it does not suggest a permanent physical death and from various instances, the metaphorically dead person could still be alive, but he or she may not be able to carry out some roles effectively as humans.

The metaphorical death may be classified as medical, economical, sociological, political, religious or philosophical death. For instance, one could be adjudged dead economically when he or she has lost all available means of economic survival, thereby rendering him not worthy of living from the economic perspective. Such persons could be referred to as being dead economically. Political death like the economic death is when a politician has lost his or her political relevance and importance among the people. In this case, this politician is no more reckoned with in the political arena; hence he/she becomes useless politically.

It is worthy of note that the fortune of a person before death and the circumstances surrounding such death determine the quality of a person’s death. In the traditional Ogu communities, a person who lived a remarkable life and attained old age before death becomes a potential ancestor. To qualify as an ancestor or to be allowed into the world of the ancestors in most African (Ogu) communities, a dead person must have been considerably old; must have contributed to the success of the family while on earth; must have played a remarkable role in the community; must have had offspring(s) who would immortalise his or her name and above all, must have died a good death. This implies that only good or remarkable people “are welcomed into the cult of the ancestors” Mesewaku et al. (39). For this discourse however, we shall adopt the biological conception of death as our signpost for the exploration of death and Ogbogbo among the Ogu people of Badagry.

2. Burial Rites Among the Ogu People

It is important to note here that most of the traditions, rites, rituals and ceremonies that constitute the culture of the Ogu people, like most other African traditional practices have purposes for which they are performed. To have a full understanding of Odogbo burial rites among the Ogu people, it is imperative to discuss the people's cosmology and beliefs about death. Like most ethnic groups in Africa, the Ogu people believe that human beings live within two distinct but inseparable realms: Ogbe; the physical world of the living and Olon; the invisible and spiritual abode of the Togbos (Ancestors), Vothuns, (gods) Kuvitos (the living dead) etc. These two worlds, to every Ogu person, are closely knitted to an extent that the inhabitants of Olon regularly take part in the affairs of Ogbe. Hence, a typical Ogu community is not only seen as a geographical entity with defined boundaries but also as, according to Lanrewaju and Bolatito a "transcendental continuum, which stretches back into the past to include the dead represented by the ancestors and at the same time anticipating the future world of the unborn" (56).

Such link is evidenced in the several yoho(ancestral shrines) where communication with Olon is achieved and the several Legba that serve as intermediaries between Gbeto(the living) and the members of Olon as well as offer supernatural advocacy and defence. The assertion above thus shows clearly that the Ogu people believe the idea that death does not mean the permanent termination of human life, so when death occurs, especially of an elderly person, it is usually an occasion for ceremony and feasting in which every family member, both nuclear and extended must participate to usher the deceased into the spiritual realm. Since most Ogu communities are linked by blood, such ceremonies often turn out to be a communal event. It is also an occasion which has its established rituals, rites and order of ceremony. It is the occasion for Odogbo and of course, it begins with a good death which sets off the series of burial rites that are viewed as inevitable in ogu land. Such rites include announcement, dressing of the corpse, shiodayi, Digging the grave and internment.

3. Miselu (Announcement)

As soon as a good death occurs, the male in-laws of the deceased are dispatched to beat Gansu (gong in four sets) round the community to, according to Mesewaku (op cit), "officially announce and create awareness that an old person in the community has passed on to the great beyond". The Gansu party ensures that all communities with links with the deceased are informed. The elders of such communities and the direct relations are particularly targeted in drawing up the itinerary of the Gansu party. Reactions to such announcements are immediate as people begin to troop to the deceased's house to pay homage and participate in the preparation of the corpse for internment.

The gansu announcement is followed almost immediately by another form of awareness creation by the Yaogbe (the body of wives of the male children of the community). The yaogbe moves around the neighbouring communities where there are marriage links, with brooms. They embark on the sweeping of compounds of their in-laws in such communities. They sing and dance as they do this, beating their Gangbe (a drum ensemble synonymous with the yaogbe. They beat ringed plates to create rhythms for their dirge and sweeping) the essence of this is to express the wives' participation in the Odogbo. They also serve as providers of detailed information about the burial arrangements and they are normally given gifts of money as they sweep, dance and sing dirge in honour of the deceased.

4. Shiodayi

The shiodayi, which means "awaiting burial", lasts for a maximum of two days. It is the period during which all relatives have the opportunity of confirming the death of the deceased and to participate in the initial burial rites. Delaying the burial in Ogu land is perceived as a dishonour to the dead.

Preservation is often not necessary before burial in Ogu land. This is due to the fact that burial is done as early as possible. Most traditional Ogu communities are closely knit in space and blood. Consequently, all relatives who should pay their last respect to the dead would have arrived on the same day the announcement is made. In cases where the deceased passes on in the evening or night and the body had to wait till morning before internment, or a close relative living in distant lands is being awaited, preservation becomes necessary. The actual preservation is done usually by passing pure alcohol down the throat of the corpse. It is then propped up in a sitting position, usually in its favourite chair, creating the impression that it is still there, receiving visitors. The nostrils are kept dry by intermittently dabbing it with akla (the curved part of a broken clay pot which has been specially dried by heating its inner part, usually by burning clothes or Ogusho (palm cancell shaft). Visitors and most relatives will see the body in this state.

5. Dressing

After shiodayi, the corpse is prepared for internment. It is cleaned and the head, the armpit and pubic hair is shaved. It is also made up in some cases. At this point, relatives begin to present clothing. Each contributor states categorically why he or she is donating the cloth. He tells the deceased that the cloth is from him as a mark of honour for the dead. Relatives consider it a great honour that they are able to clothe the deceased. In fact, as a show of disagreement with some relatives, who might not have played their expected roles in support of the deceased before death, the clothing they bring might not be allowed on the corpse. The significance of this is that the community frowns at any member who neglects their aged or has been wicked to them. This is because the cloth contributed could atone for the grievances of the diseased against such contributor.

All clothes contributed in this manner are cut at the tip to indicate that the recipient is dead. The corpse is then adorned in all the clothes. It is finally dressed in another cloth which is not cut at the tip. This cloth is provided not by an individual relative but

collectively, by the extended family. It is worn over all the other contributed clothes. The picture this presents is of a person dressed in many new white clothes. It is in this state that the corpse will be placed in the coffin.

6. Digging of the Grave

The male in-laws of the deceased are expected by tradition to dig the grave of the deceased. The grave of an Ogu person who had a good death is often dug in his or her compound, usually beside earlier ones. The grave is usually a 3ft by 6ft trench, 6ft deep. It is manually dug, with cutlass to cut off roots, hoes and shovels to dig the sand and buckets to take out sand when the depth makes shovelling difficult. The sand from this grave is of a great significance as the soul of the deceased is somewhat linked with it after the burial this sand is referred to as yoyi.

7. Internment

Having dug the grave, on the day of the internment, before the body is placed in the coffin, it would be wrapped in white cloth presented by the children and relative. This could be accompanied by other accessories like money, beads and trinkets being placed in the coffin. At this point, many people gather to pay their last respect to the deceased. One of the relatives goes into the grave when the coffin has been placed in it. He stands at the head of the coffin and collects money from other relatives who send messages to the deceased, basically telling the deceased what they wish that him or her to do. It is usually an emotion and humour laden event.

When this is over, ethema (palmfront) is placed on the coffin by the relative in the grave. The significance of this is to seal the ghost of the deceased to prevent him from appearing to people or visiting them in dreams. The relative then climbs out, taking the money with him, except the last one offered to the deceased, which he places in the coffin before the grave is filled.

8. Miyon Tita

Yoyi, (sand from the grave) is then taken for Miyon Tita (lighting). The Yoyi is placed in an Akla (a curved piece of broken pot) where fire is lit on it, using oil or oguso as fuel and the Tayinos (elderly female children in the compound) then sit by the fire and offer prayers to berate death and supplicate that the deceased should take away sickness, poverty and sin and to send messages through the deceased to the ancestors who had gone before him/her. At this point he/she is already perceived as present in spirit form. The fire burns and the prayers continue for six days if the deceased is female and eight days if a male. During this period, people visit to pay homage to the dead. On the seventh day or eight day as the case may be, the Şimion (extinguishing of the fire) takes place, marking the end of the miyon tita. The remnants of the yoyi and akla are gathered and disposed of in the bush at night. It is pertinent to note that Yoyi is brought back for the miyon tita rite when an indigene dies and is buried away from home.

9. Agoji

Agoji rite, from which the name of the whole burial process is derived, is carried out on the day after internment. The ceremony is handled by one of the tanyinos who are engaged in the miyon tita. On this day, miyon tita would already be in its second day and the tayinos would delegate one of them to lead others in the agoji rite.

An agogbanis first of all prepared for the rites. It is an assemblage of items used by the deceased before his death, particularly items closely associated with his death. Items like clothes and other personal effects are gathered and placed in a calabash or in a plapla (bamboo mat). A female relative, who has been chosen for the event, would be shaven, cleaned and dressed. She bears Agogban to Agoji with an entourage of relatives, children and elders in the community.

The Agoji venue is a place designated by each Yoho (ancestral shrine) and the agoji rite begins from the point where the deceased is prepared for internment and ends at the agoji venue. The lady bearing the Agogban makes her way to Agoji, followed closely by the tayinos, children of the deceased, and other relatives, each holding his personal Agogban.

The road to Agoji is very dramatic as the inlaws of the deceased would come along snatching the personal agogban from them. They have the right to do this according to tradition. However, at least one of the personal agogban must get to the venue of Agoji. This is seen as the item from the whole family. At the Agoji, the tayino takes the agogban off the lady's head, places it on agoji where she unveils the items for all to see, then says prayers, against recurrent death while she also informs other ancestors that members of the family have been taking care of the homes they left behind. She then sets the agogban on fire. Other relatives present also say their personal prayers and request before throwing their personal agogban in the fire. When this is accomplished, festivities could commence, so, the agoji party is met on their return by an Oblu band. The party returns, singing and dancing to this band.

10. Plosin

While Agoji is being rounded off, the young men, two or three of them, prepare cleansing water in a pot. They take this around the community, sprinkling every person, home and compound. This cleansing process is referred to as plosin and the people show their appreciation of it by offering the young men gifts of money. The plosin which literally means sweeping the floor paves way for hitch free final stages of the burial rites.

11. Ago

At this point, a meeting of the extended family is held. The sole aim of this meeting is to determine when the final burial rites referred to as 'Ago' will take place. The decision reached will be determined by the capability of the children and the extended family to

finance the ceremony. It could be immediate or fixed for a later time. This could be within a month, two or several months away. The rite is done in three days except if extended by the elders for a purpose.

“Ago ma do toji depe no tho huve” (No young one sleeps hungry when Ago holds)

The above saying which is common among the Ogu people is a testimony to what Ago rite is all about. The day is prepared for by all family members; children of the deceased, the extended family, in-laws are all under obligation to participate. The children are compelled to participate as without this, such child will be deemed not to have buried the parent and as such has put the deceased to shame. All others who are related to the deceased by blood must also participate as a statement of the goodwill of their families. The in-laws must also participate in support of their spouses. Participating in Ago implies that one must get a pig, cow, and goat or ram to slaughter for the ceremony. Usually, there is a place set aside for the slaughtering of these animals. The head of each animal slaughtered for the ago is taken for ‘thole’ in the yoho where a sort of register is kept of the participants. The head is left with the tanyinos there as an evidence of participation. The remaining parts of the animal is then prepared into traditional delicacies as desired by the participant. With this, the guests, and community members are entertained. It is the tradition that when the food is ready, each participant dishes some and take them to each of the elders or homes in the community irrespective of whether that person is also participating or not. In other words, by evening, every home would have sampled the food prepared by every other participant. Musical performing artistes are invited by different homes and there is singing and dancing. Children of the deceased also dance to the appreciation of their guests.

12. Hungan Rite

Hungan is a drum ensemble which must be played before a deceased could be deemed to have been buried. It is a drum ensemble comprising of the hungan itself, athugba, hunkle, azehhun,ogan and kaka. In other words, a burial process among the Ogu people which does not include the performance of all the rites that lead to the Hungan rite as well as the hungan performance itself is not complete. The burial of such deceased is considered pending.

Hungan is played on the day after the ago ceremonies. It is played in the evening, usually commencing from about three pm. A fraction of the ensemble, not including the hungan drum itself, is played around the community to create awareness of the hungan holding in the evening. Such awareness yields financial benefits for the drummers as they are often appreciated in gifts of money. The actual hungan rite takes place at the village square. The drummers are positioned opposite the children of the deceased in an arrangement that could be likened to the Theatre- in- the Round formation. The drum is beaten briefly twice as sort of warm up. On the third beat, the whole ensemble comes to life and the Hungan rite begins.

The actual hungan rite takes place at the village square. The drummers are positioned opposite the children of the deceased in an arrangement that could be likened to the Theatre- in- the Round formation. The drum is beaten briefly twice as sort of warm up. On the third beat, the whole ensemble comes to life and the Hungan rite begins. Hungan is a lively performance. The dancers perform some sort of dance drama, depicting historical events in the community, lives of some ancestors etc. Some of the performances tilt towards vulgarism and mimicry. More interesting is the fact that in some cases, there could be more than one hungan ensemble present at the same ago. Thus the dramatic essence becomes much more prolific and interesting. When this performance is over, the children could confidently assert that they have buried their parent and as such have fulfilled the rites of burial as is the tradition in Ogu land.

13. Thole

Thole could be described as a ceremony which establishes continuity of the deceased in Ogbe, the world of the living. It is held on the day after the Hungan rite. It holds in the community’s yoho which is the ancestral shrine of the Ogu people. In it, insignia of every deceased indigene is placed. Skulls of remarkable games killed by hunters in the community are also placed in the yoho. Every Ogu community has a yoho. There are yohogbo and yohovu. The yohovu is a small ancestral shrine which serves a community. The yohogbo on the other hand is a bigger one which serves all communities under a clan. It is thus a bigger ancestral shrine to which all the other yohovu are linked.

Thole is thus the rite which culminates in the placement of the insignia of the deceased with those of other ancestors in the yoho. The insignia is an anthropomorphic representation of the deceased. The significance of this is that the deceased is now placed among the ancestors. The ceremony commences with the cooking of all the heads of animals submitted to the tanyinos in the yoho on the day of the ago. Note that at this point, most visitors to the burial would have departed the community. So this is more of a family merriment in celebration of the acceptance of the deceased into the world of the ancestors as well as the establishment of his/her continuity among his people. Prayers are thus offered for the new ancestor.

The potency of prayers offered at this shrine is believed to be very strong; so strong that it is not trifled with. In fact, aggrieved members of the community could avail themselves of the opportunity of this strong spiritual link to report those who wronged them to the ancestors. This is considered a very risky thing to do as the complainant must be sure of what he reports to prevent a deadly backfire. Where his complaint is genuine, the ancestors are believed to come to the aid of the complainant in seeking a redress.

Yoho rite concludes the Ogogbo. The burial is concluded. The spirit of the deceased is believed to feel fulfilled and rightfully placed among other ancestors where he or she will continue to bring the children and other relatives’ good fortune and peace. In other words, when the rite is not concluded, the deceased suffer unrest in the spirit world. He or she is believed to be aggrieved against the children and relatives who failed to perform ogogbo

14. Punishment for Non- Observance of Odogbo

Although it is generally and strongly believed among Ogu people that non observance of the rights of Odogbo for a deserving person has consequences for the living relatives, particularly the children. As the consequences of observance include good fortune, so do the consequences for non observance entail misfortune. In fact, the person who fails to perform Odogbo rights will be punished. The punishment is however spiritual, and often manifest in the physical. There are stories of people who suffered untimely death, those who lose their children, properties, jobs and many more. It is however pertinent to note that establishing an empirical link between the non performance of Odogbo and the misfortunes of the relatives is farfetched. This is due to the fact that consequences or punishments do not occur instantly. Events occurring years later have been linked with non observance of Odogbo.

In the same vein, the kind of misfortune is never specified. Death, loss or the kind of death or loss is never specified. This makes it difficult to establish an empirical link. Moreover, the inability of anyone to really know what the future holds reduces the evidence of the consequence of non performance. A person who, as a punishment, loses a chance to gain a great fortune might never be aware of such loss.

Divination which is a common practice in Africa however often points to the non observance of Odogbo as a reason for misfortunes. Many have thus been directed to go and perform the rites as a solution to their misfortunes. In fact, in Ogu land, such divination periodically directs that a communal Odogbo be observed. Communal Odogbo is a burial rite where all who die in the community within specified number of years received the rites of Odogbo again. This communal Odogbo is not covered in this paper as this is limited to the individual Odogbo. Both the communal and the individual odogbo suffer the same fate in the present time.

15. Odogbo Rite and Its Encounter with Globalization

As traditional communities disappeared and ancient cultures are overwhelmed, billions of human beings are losing the sense of self that gave life meaning. (Yakubu, Nasidi, 2001:116)

From the above, it is clear that the idea of globalisation is a cultural game where only the western culture is privileged as the world's culture while other cultures like African culture is negated as the peripheral culture. The effect of globalisation has really taken its toll on African culture especially in the area of traditions. For instance, the Odogbo burial rite tradition among the Ogu people, though still practiced, is now hybridised with western traditions. These days, burial rites are performed in line with the doctrines of the western religions (Christianity and Islam). The communal practice of Odogbo has been taken over by the individualistic burial practice of the western religions. Many Ogu communities don't observe the Odogbo funeral rites anymore. The Western ideal of burial and funeral rites have been imposed on the Odogbo rites thereby making the rites to be jettisoned by the people. It is our fear that the neglect of this tradition may lead to the total extinction of one of the people's major tradition in the area of traditional funeral rite.

At this point, we may ask ourselves this salient question: what is the importance of cultural globalisation to Africa? Here we say, it is another way of introducing colonialism and imperialism: way of making the western culture the master culture where all other cultures look up to and borrow ideas from. African culture is now shaped by the large and powerful influence of globalisation as the western world continues to exercise control over the marginal cultures. Our position however is that indigenous culture and traditions should be protected and used to subvert the cultural hegemony of the west. Hence it is imperative for indigenous people to guide jealously their cultures in order to avoid erasure through the process of cultural hybridisation of globalisation. In this case, Odogbo funeral rite should not be allowed to go into extinction; instead, it should be used to counter the onslaught of globalisation on African culture.

16. Conclusion

It is important to emphasize here that the conceptual understanding of death in traditional African society is that it is a transition from the physical realm to the spiritual realm, hence burial and funeral ceremonies are germane parts of the people's tradition due to its spiritual importance. Thus, the Odogbo funeral rites among the Ogu people of Badagry is a phenomenon, therefore, its spiritual essence to the people cannot be downplayed. It serves as the link between discontinuities of life here on earth and the continuity of life hereafter. But the upsurge of western religions and globalization has really affected the people's adherence to the tradition. So to avoid the rites going into total extinction, it is important that the Ogu people of today uphold the traditional rite so that the coming generation can understand its importance. The admittance of Western culture at the detriment of our own culture is dangerous because the consequence is that the future generations will lose touch of the culture and no value will be placed on it anymore.

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