

IBEKU CULTURAL PRACTICE OF CHILD-BEARING AND DEATH AND ASSOCIATED BURIAL RITES, UP TO 1896

By

Dr. Emmanuel Ikechukwu Uvere and Igbolekwu Chijioke

Abia State University Uturu, Nigeria.

Email: chijiks2015@gmail.com and ikechukwuvere@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper understudied Ibeku cultural practice of child-bearing and death and associated burial rites, up to 1896. The work highlighted some salient points on believe associated with childlessness, birth and associated ceremonies, circumcision, naming ceremony, the male child, the female child and twin and other multiple births. Others included: natural death, premature death, suicide and manslaughter. This paper adopted historical methods such as: primary and secondary. This study is of the opinion that Ibeku pre-colonial cultural practices were traditionally patriarchal. Multiple births were even profaned during Ibeku pre-colonial cultural practices. This study recommended that Ibeku pre-colonial cultural practices should be transformed and modernized to ensure gender equality and promote multiple births.

Keywords: Cultural Practice, Child-bearing, Death, Burial, Manslaughter and Suicide.

Introduction

Ibeku clan is occupied by an Igbo speaking people who live in segmentary lineage group of villages consisting of such mini-clans as Isieke, Afarata, Afaraukwu, Ndume, Ossah, Emede and Amaoforo. Asiegbu, aptly describes the composition of Ibeku clan thus: As the seven original villages of Ibeku grew in numbers, extended families began to split away from the parent villages, and to establish their own settlements adjacent to the parent ones. This description of the composition of Ibeku clan proved that the Ibeku clan originally comprised of seven Egwus or kindred groups of villages. Ibeku clan is situated to the West of Bende town.² Around the border, are Ohuhu, Uzuakoli and Ozuitem clans; to the East, are the clans of Ibere and parts of Bende; and to the South, are Olokoro and Ubakala clans. The paper reviewed Ibeku cultural practices with regards to child-bearing and death and associated burial rites since pre-colonial periods. Child bearing was the main reason for marriage institution in Ibeku pre-colonial times. The belief associated with childlessness could be attributed to four principal causes, namely, Ehie Afor (fibroid), Ogbanje (water goddess) Iji-uwa and iri-miri (gods) or irregular menstrual cycle, delayed pregnancy in a woman.³ In pre-colonial times, there were virtually no hospitals and clinics. Every family in pre-colonial Ibeku was desirous of having at least one traditional mid-wife to assist in child delivery. In pre-colonial Ibekuland, uncircumcised children were seen ritually unclean. The Ibeku pre-colonial social institutions were traditionally patriarchal. Ibeku people believed that every human should propagate his species by single births in contradistinction to animals.⁴ Death in Ibeku was classified into: the Natural and the unnatural deaths. This study is divided into ten sub-headings, namely: belief associated with childlessness, birth and associated ceremony, naming ceremony, the male child, the female child, twins and other multiple births, natural death, unnatural death, suicide and manslaughter.

Child Bearing

In Ibeku, if marriage failed to produce children within a reasonable period of time, from the date of marriage, most family members intervened in the marriage to proffer remedies. Sadly, most childless marriages were blamed on the woman. This was due to the prevailing low level of education and the unavailability of western medical facilities.⁵ Infact, little did the society believe that men could be the cause of childless marriages. Before a young girl finally left her mother's house to her husband's house, her mother usually lectured her on how to go about her matrimonial responsibilities, like cooking, washing, sweeping and raising her own children. Whatever instructions she received from her mother were complemented by some traditional practices associated with pregnancy.⁶ After three traditional market weeks on her arrival from her father's house to her husband's home the entire women from her husband's compound choose a day in which they welcomed her, preferably on an *Orie* market day. On this day, the women invited her to the hut of the eldest woman in the compound and she was made to sit in the centre of the hut while the other women sat around her. She was made to tie short wrap beads and the oldest woman or whoever she delegated stepped forward and rubbed the belly of the bride with *Nzu* (local chalk) and calling on *Onyekere Uwa* (deity) to grant the young bride many offspring.⁷ On this occasion, women who had not been pregnant or given birth to any child were not be allowed to enter the hut. This was to prevent them from inflicting the young bride with their bad luck. On that same day, no woman from that compound was expected to go to the farm. The husbands compensated their wives with cash gifts and palm wine drinks. The young bride was tutored on how to sleep with her husband with the *Nzu* (local chalk) that was rubbed on her for fertility.⁸

Belief Associated With Childlessness

If a married woman was childless for a period of about three years, her own type of ritual involved going to sit under a high *Ogiri isi* tree (a medicinal tree) on the way to the stream. It was believed that the *Ogiri-isi* tree harbored the spirits of children waiting to be born. Therefore, any childless woman sat under it singing and invoking the spirits of the unborn children, so that she would have them. A woman desirous of having her own children was expected to show love and care to children by constantly carrying their neighbor's children and buying gifts for them. If she remained barren after, her husband was expected to consult a native doctor or the traditional mid-wives for medications.⁹ There was a belief about childlessness in precolonial Ibeku. This was- attributed to four principal causes, namely, *Ehie Afor* (fibroid), *Ogbanje* (water goddess) *Iji-uwa* and *iri-miri* (gods) or irregular menstrual circle, delayed pregnancy in a woman. An *Ogbanje* was supposed to have died and reincarnated from the spirit world and then born again with a special mission here on earth.¹⁰ Ibeku people believed that they were to be spiritually different from normal human beings and did not do anything that was not included in their specific mission. For instance, assuming an *Ogbanje* child had the mission of tormenting his/her parents, even if he/she lived up to marriageable age, he/she did not have children so that his/her parents remained unhappy. The official mission of an *Ogbanje* child was not to bear children.¹¹

lyi-Uwa had to do with ways through which some evil children maintained a link with the spirit world. It was *Ogbanje*, but the difference was that *lyi-Uwa*, usually had a contact point between them and the spirit

world hidden and buried somewhere. Once it was dug up, the link was broken and the child was saved and the young bride who battled with this evil spirit automatically became pregnant. Another evil spirit that caused childlessness was *Di-Miri* (water spirit) which was referred to young girls who were believed to have married in the spirit world and therefore were not expected to marry in the physical world. This spirit did not allow the young brides to have children, as a remedy a native doctor usually appeased the water spirit husbands in order to break the link. The moment the link was broken, the bride became pregnant. Another factor of childlessness was hereditary, and in this regard, the older and more experienced woman advised a barren woman to reduce the rate at which she worked on the farm and on her advice the woman was exempt from community works that involved women.¹²

Birth and Associated Ceremonies

Because of the importance attached to children and child bearing, every family in pre-colonial Ibeku was desirous of having at least one traditional mid-wife to assist in child delivery. In pre-colonial times, there were virtually no hospitals and clinics; birth was exclusively the concern of the traditional mid-wives and some experienced mothers. If a woman was about to give birth, the woman present in the compound went around and informed the women in neighborhood and subsequently a birth attendant was invited and after due examination, she was taken to the back of the house where she was delivered of the baby. At times, she would be taken to the house of the traditional birth attendant which then served as the local clinic. If she successfully delivered the baby, she was given some quantity of fresh palm wine to drink to induce the flow of her breast milk.¹³ Men irrespective of their ages, in the society were not allowed into the place where child birth was taking place. It used to be the shout or cry of joy from the woman that signified safe delivery *Onunwa* (celebration of the birth of a new born baby). It was how this exercise was carried out that showed if a father was prepared for the arrival of the new born baby or not. The women in the neighborhood usually organized themselves into groups with their drums and sang round the entire village. As they sang and danced, they announced the name of the parents of the new born baby and the sex of the baby to the public.

Circumcision: Circumcision was and still is ancient practice common indigenous tribes. Religion, health and even class, supposedly, played a role. Foot in her work argues that “we all know that the basic of circumcision. It’s the surgical removal of a man’s (penis) foreskin.”¹⁴ This expression pointed out that circumcision was the* cutting of a ring of skin from the penis foreskin. It was done after the seventh day of the child’s birth by the traditional birth attendants. It involved the use of sharp objects such as knife or ‘*Nso*’. This practice often resulted to infections and to loss of blood and even in the death of some children. After the ritual of circumcision children born into Ibeku society would be ritually clean and accepted into the society.¹⁵ In precolonial Ibekuland, uncircumcised children were seen ritually unclean and so unacceptable. There was the practice of burying the umbilical cord of a new baby. It was very significant ceremony in pre-colonial Ibeku. As it was believed that if a child’s umbilical cord fell off, as was the case it was picked and wrapped up and kept pending when the father organized an *Ili-Alo* (umbilical cord) ceremony. Ibeku as a patrilineal society, often only permitted that a child’s umbilical cord was buried where that child, particularly

a male, had right to inherit a property. On the appointed day, the father took a few of his trusted friends with his wife to any of the personal properties he hoped to bequeath to the child in question. If it was buried on an empty land, that parcel was automatically bequeathed to the child.¹⁶ His mother was to continue to farm on that parcel of land, holding it in trust for her young son. The other friends were simply to bear witness to what happened. If the umbilical cord was buried at the foot of an economic tree, it meant that the father loved his son. If he grew up, he would never be dispossessed of that property. At the end of the burying, the team headed home for some feasting. It was one of the methods a polygamist used to favour the children of a more loved wife.¹⁷

Igu Aha (Naming Ceremony). The name couples in Ibeku gave their children was usually symbolic, as it signified a lot of things. It often signified an event the couples passed through before a child was born. It also signified gratitude to the gods or to any of the agencies believed in the birth of the children. In pre-colonial times, a child was in some cases named in consonance with the days of the week. If therefore a child was born on an 'Orie' day he was called 'Okorie' so also we had *Okafor*, *Okereke* or *Okonkwo*. Similarly, we had *Mgbaeke* and *Mgbaorie*, for the females. For a *mother who had terrible problems before she became pregnant, to the point that she lost hope of motherhood*, she often named her child 'Onyekwere'. For most men who did not have *biological* brothers, they could give their children names, such as 'Nwaabunnem', *Obioma* or *Azunna*. While a mother was still pregnant, the father often contemplated a suitable name for the unborn child. Right from the date of birth, a naming ceremony was fixed on the twenty first days. It was not usually a very elaborate affair. It depended on the choice of the father and how much he had to put into it. The grandparents of the new baby often took the lead in the naming ceremony.¹⁸

The Male Child. The Igbo were traditionally patriarchal, therefore, the male child grew to see himself as superior to the females, and he was made to understand this very early in life. Thus, the male child was perceived as being very important by both men and women in the traditional Igbo society. Ohagwu observes that: Male gender preference is strongly perceived among Igbo women and its perception is significantly influenced by socio-demographic factors. Male gender preference may be responsible for Igbo women seeking male gender at ultra sound.¹⁹ This assertion proved that male children were and still highly held to in esteem in Igbo society. This emphasis on male children was for the sake of continuity of the family's name. Even the customs and laws of inheritance in Ibeku land did not recognize female children: therefore, the death of a man who had no male child meant the shifting of his property to another lineage. On this account, every man's wish in Ibeku was first to have a male son who would succeed him and inherit his property. This feeling was made stronger when viewed from the point that customs and traditions also did not recognize adoption. If a man adopted a son while alive, his kinsmen would not allow the adopted son to inherit the property of his father. Moreso, if a son was born to a man out of wedlock or without the necessary marriage traditions and bride price paid on his mother, the society regarded the son as belonging to his mother's family and so was excluded from the man's property. To avoid losing his property to his kinsmen, a man whose first wife did not produce a male child married a second wife or even two more wives in order to have one. Wives who did not produce male child were treated like house helps or even slaves. One male

child in a family was regarded as more important than eight females. Thus, when the birth of a male child was announced, the celebration that went with it took a different turn, women even felt happier when they had more male children than females.²⁰

The Female Child: Female children were regarded as belonging to other families. Most in pre-colonial times did not believe in equality between male and female children. Parents believed that whatever was done for the females was done for unknown persons that would marry them in life. Against this backdrop, fathers did not show open excitement when female children were born to them. Moreover, it was mothers who shouted for joy and thanked the creator of the universe for giving her a helper both in the kitchen and in their farms.²¹

Twin and Other Multiple Births: The birth of twins was a calamity of the first magnitude, spelt disaster for the family and for the unfortunate mother. The underlying idea was that it was ordained that it should propagate his species by single births in contradistinction to animals. For a woman to bear more than one child at a time was to degrade humanity to the level of the animals. Multiple offspring was nature's law for goats and dogs and for a woman to imitate them in this respect bred unspeakable disgust among the Igbo. Mothers and children were cursed and subjected to contempt and ill-treatment. The women made no attempts to defend themselves and such children, rather they accepted the situation and wondered why their *chi* (personal god) will treat them with such dishonor.²² Abel Asindi, et al, on multiple birth state that:

It has been a taboo in some parts of south eastern Nigeria to bear twins. Mothers who bore twins were thought to have had intercourse with evil spirit and given birth to something monstrous and unnatural.

The offspring were brutally killed and the mother was shunned by her husband and cast out of the family. These women were then relegated to live in interim villages. Female twins who survived were shunned throughout life.²³

This expression showed that a woman who gave birth to twins was hated. She turned from them with loathing and despair, and unless compelled, made no efforts at nursing them. It was believed that in some mysterious manner there was an unholy alliance with an evil spirit during sleep. In order to avoid this sacrilege in pre-colonial Ibeku, immediately a woman's pregnancy was confirmed, her husband took her, with some drinks, kola nuts and, at times, cash to the shrine of *lhanjoku* for sacrifice and prayed the goddess to bless his wife with one child only. If on the day of delivery, she delivered more than one child, it was taken that she had desecrated the land and the traditional attendants deserted her. The babies were consequently subjected to some discriminatory attitudes. The twins were covered with a calabash and left to die at a road junction and their evil mother driven away and left to wonder about in the forest till she died. All her properties would be released to the priest of *lhanjoku*.²⁴

Death and Associated Burial Rites: The Ibeku buried their dead in full recognition of the circumstances surrounding their death. Death in Ibeku was classified into: the Natural and the unnatural deaths. Natural death could be referred to as ripe of old age. It was highly celebrated in Ibeku cultural practices. Whereas, unnatural death could be referred to as untimely death or premature death.

Ripe of Old Age/Natural Deaths: When an Ibeku son or daughter died at a ripe old age of about 90 and above, he was entitled to a full traditional burial which involved the entire village. This depended on how many secret societies he belonged to. For example, if he was a member of the prestigious 'Okonko' society, he was entitled for a week-long traditional burial. On the first day of the death, it was announced to the community and the body would be locally embalmed. After the embalmment, members of the Okonko society were informed and the burial date was fixed, members of the society or community were made to contribute in both materials and "cash towards giving their late member a befitting burial. If a member of the Zkonko society died, he was buried in front of his house. The burial site was inspected and approved by members of his age grade before the burial. If a proposed site was not approved, the family of the deceased provided an alternative site which was inspected and approved before the digging of the grave and final burial. The corpse must be dressed up by members of his age grade and the actual burial done by them. After a period of seven days, the final burial rites, known as *Okwukwu* or *Ikwamadu* (memorial ceremony) began and lasted for another seven days.²⁵

For the period of seven days, members of the Okonko society always assembled - the house of their late member early every morning and remained there till late evening, night. There was feasting and merry making as well as pouring of libations through which they bade farewell to their departed member. In the case of a woman who was married and lived happily with her husband till her death, she was buried in her husband's compound in the presence of her husbands and children. The burial had to be witnessed by members from her maiden family. At the end of her actual commitment the maiden family were given goat, fowl, two kegs of palm wine and some kola nuts to take home. If on the other hand the woman was maltreated while she was alive or she was childless, her maiden family often requested to take her corpse back home for burial.²⁶

Premature Death/Accidents. The people of Ibeku believed that premature death was not natural. They also believed that premature death was the repercussion of some wrong deeds and consequently rewarded by the god of Thunder and justice. There were unnatural deaths which resulted from the wrath of certain deities. Whoever that was killed the gods died as a result of his or her misdeeds was regarded as *An* (forbidden).²⁷

Suicide: Suicide was another type of death regarded as disgraceful. The gods of the land were offended if people took their lives. The goddess of fertility often, as contended, refused to grant more yields and the people suffered. Several steps were taken to appease the gods. The first step was to consult traditional diviners, who were the only group of people that could bring the corpse down from the tree where he or she hung him or herself. Once the body was brought down, that tree was also cut down. The next step was that all his properties were surrendered to the medicine men. If the property were to be re-owned by the members of his family, the members of his family paid for them before retrieval from the traditional medicine men. The person who committed suicide was buried by ordinary people but by traditional, medicine men. In most cases, their corpses were not buried but thrown into the evil forest. Such people were not mourned.²⁸

Man-slaughter: This could refer to the unlawful killing of a human being by another. In Ibeku land, people engaged in manslaughter with no prior intent to kill and acted on the spur of the moment. For example, one could kill a home or community invader. An Ibeku son was, therefore, respected if he was war-like and had his machet and gun close by him always, in anticipation of a war. If he died in a war in defiance of his

people, was given a hero's burial and all due rights were accorded to him and some solace given to the children. It was possible for a man to die in the hands of another towns-man due to an accident. For example, if a hunter accidental discharged his gun and caused the death of another towns-man, and if it had been established that was an accidental discharge, the survivor would be made to bear the cost of the burial but he would not be killed. But he would be made to go through the cleansing ritual known as *Ikwa-Aka* (appeasement of the gods).²⁹

Conclusion

This study discussed Ibeku pre-colonial cultural practices. It revealed that Ibeku cultural practices were child bearing celebration and death and associated burial rites, among others. Marriages without any child were forbidden in Ibeku pre-colonial institutions. Due to low level of education childless marriages were blamed on the women. However most families intervened with what they tagged as practical solution. This study indentified four principal causes of childlessness, namely, *Ehie Afor* (fibroid), *Ogbanje* (water goddess) *Iji-uwa* and *iri-miri* (gods) or irregular menstrual circle, delayed pregnancy in a woman. This study discovered that there were no hospitals and clinics during Ibeku pre-colonial social institutions. Every family in pre-colonial Ibeku social institutions was desirous of having at least one traditional mid-wife to assist in child delivery.³⁰ Ibeku pre-colonial cultural were traditionally controlled by men. The male child was viewed as being very important by both men and women. The birth of twins or multiple births was regarded as unfortunate and barbaric to the family and the society in general. Death in Ibeku precolonial cultural practices was structured into two namely: natural and unnatural death. The study recommended that Ibeku pre-colonial social institutions should be transformed and modernized so as to uphold gender eqQality, justice and fairness.

ENDNOTES

1. J. U. Asiegbu, *The Umuahia People and Their Neighbours: An Introduction to the Traditional History and Indigenous Technology of a Dynamic Igbo people* (Lagos: Nelson Pitman, 1987), 43, 44.
2. C. Aliwa (78years), Civil Servant-Retired, Okwuta, Interviewed on 10/12/2019.
3. C. Ibelegbu (78years), Farmer, Umuajiji, Interviewed on 12/07/2017.
4. D. Onyewaku (79years), Farmer, Umuaroko, Interviewed on 12/05/2016.
5. A. Nnochiri (67years), Civil Servant, Amuzoro, Interviewed on 12/06/2022.
6. J. Onuigbo (62years), Politician, Ugba, Interviewed on 21/03/2016.
7. A. O. Kanu (78years), Politician, Afaraukwu, Interviewed on 01/06/2016.
8. S.Ezekwem (71years), Politician, Agbor, Interviewed on 23/01/2014.

9. A.Kanu (65years) Lawyer, Ohokobe, Interviewed on 28/02/2017.
10. E. Ugwueje (58years), Lecturer, Nkata, Interviewed on 30/12/2018.
11. A.I. Nwabughuogu (73years), Lecturer, Agbama Housing Estate, Interviewed on 23/05/2019.
12. C. Okoko (57years), Lecturer, Agbama Housing Estate, Interviewed on 12/12/2018.
13. S. Onuoha (78years), Politician, Okwoiyi, Interviewed on 03/01/2016.
14. Product-Foot, *Circumcision: 7 things you didn't know about it -but should*, www.marriedaire.Co.uk/life/health-fitness/circumcision-male-circumcision-0604. Accessed on 10/2/2018.
15. R. Igboiekwu (54years), Trader, Okwuta, Interviewed on 4/1/2018.
16. U. Chikezie (63years), Civil Servant, Okwuta, Interviewed on 12/12/2018.
17. C. Ogbonna (64years), Politician, Ugba Ibeku, Interviewed on 30/12/2018.
18. M. Obike (56years), Lawyer, Ugba, Interviewed on 30/12/2018.
19. C. Ohagwu, "Perception of male Gender Preference Among Pregnant Igbo Woman", *U.S National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2014*, 6-81.
20. E. Ogbonna (56years), Trader, Okwuta, Interviewed on 15/11/2018.
- 210 U. Ugabja (78years), Trader, Okwuta, Interviewed on 20/12/2018. ^B.B.Apugo (82years) Politician, Nkata, Interviewed on 23/1/2019.
22. A. A. Asindi, et al, "Brutality to Twins in South-Eastern Nigeria: *What is the Existing Situation*", *West African Journal* (July-September, 1993), 52.
23. G. I. Nwaka, (73yaers), Lecturer, Owerre, Interviewed on 21/01/2019.
24. J.N. Ogbonna (66years), Journalist Lodu, Interviewed on 21/02/2021.
25. R. Agbara (96years), Farmer-Retired, Okwuta, Interviewed on 10/12/2016.
27. C. Nwakodo (58years), Politician, Umuanna, Interviewed on 12/12/2015.
28. S. Nwakodo (56years), Politician, Umuanna, interviewed on 01/12/2020.
29. J. C. Ogbonnaya (80years), Lecturer, Government House Lodge, Interviewed on 07/10/2018.
30. I. Ngadiuba (60years), Civil Servant, Okwuta, Interviewed on 02/12/2021.