

# Critical appraisal of reasons for traditional embalming among igbos in the southeast nigeria

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## Abstract

Traditional embalming or preservation of the dead is always for a reason or reasons. In some cultures these reasons were documented, while in others as in Nigeria there had been no documentation. The objective is to find and document the reasons for traditional embalming amongst Igbos of southeast Nigeria. A descriptive survey was carried out among five thousand two hundred and fifty Igbo elders from five hundred and twenty five communities randomly chosen from five Igbo speaking states of southeast, Nigeria using a checklist form – a descriptive assessment form scale for the oral interviewer. The main reason for Igbo traditional embalming was timing of burial found in one hundred and ninety four (371) communities. In one hundred ten (21%) communities, befitting burial rite was a reason settlement of affairs of the dead featured as a reason in 102 communities (19.5%); while desire to keeping in touch with the dead, in fifty three (10%) communities. In eighteen (3.5%) communities investigation of cause of death was a reason. Cheapness of the traditional method and unavailability of modern embalming method, each was found as a reason in thirteen (2.5%) communities. In eleven (2%) communities, religion was a reason, while in five (1%) communities, sanitation and transportation were reasons for the traditional embalming. Reasons for Igbo traditional embalming are, to a large extent, same with other ancient cultures. The study also found that Igbo's still practice traditional embalming for its cheapness and availability of modern embalming methods.

## INTRODUCTION

Embalming or preservation of the dead body has a very long and cross cultural history<sup>1</sup>. Reasons for traditional embalming varied from one culture to another. The culture that had developed embalming to the highest point was that of the ancient Egypt<sup>12</sup>. Other cultures that developed the process of embalming are the ancient Greeks, Babylonians, Sumerians, Romans, Ethiopians, prehistoric Paraca Indians of Peru, the Jivaro tribes of Ecuador, the aborigines of Canary Island and the Tibetians [12345].

Many cultures including Egypt and Greek gave the embalming processes a greater religious meaning [1]. Other reasons for traditional embalming are sanitation, transportation, keeping in touch with the beloved dead, befitting burial right and settlement of affairs of the dead [23467]. Cheapness of method, investigating cause of death and unavailability of modern methods are also reasons [8] for traditional embalming.

In Nigeria, there were no written records prior to the coming of the white man. There is also paucity of literature in traditional embalming of ancient Nigerians. However it is

common knowledge that bodies are still being preserved using traditional methods in parts of Nigeria.

This study is to find and document the reasons for traditional embalming amongst the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### STUDY AREA

This study was conducted in the southeast Nigeria. This embraced the Igbo speaking people living in the five Southeastern States; Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo.

### STUDY POPULATION

The population for the study comprises of all the elders in the Igbo communities of the five states in the Southeast, Nigeria. The number of Igbo elders in the five states of Southeast Nigeria is too large. Using a multistage sampling technique each state is divided into three zones. From each zone in a state, five local government areas were randomly selected to make up a total of 25 local government areas. In each local government area, seven Igbo communities were randomly chosen. In each community ten elders were

randomly chosen. This means that in each zone, thirty five (35) communities and three hundred and fifty (350) elders were randomly chosen. In each state, one hundred and five (105) communities and one thousand and fifty (1050) elders were randomly chosen. This means that in five Igbo states of Southeast, Nigeria, five hundred and twenty five (525) communities and five thousand two hundred and fifty (5250) elders represent the sample of population.

### **INSTRUMENT FOR DATA COLLECTION**

The instrument was a thirteen – item descriptive assessment form scale used for oral interview by research assistants. The instrument was in form of a checklist subjected to face validation. The checklist has parts 1 and 2. The part 1 of the instrument contains items on the socio-demographic characteristics of the Igbo elders interviewed. The part 2 of the instrument display reasons for embalming by other cultures world wide. The part 1 has 4 items while the part 2 has nine items. Research questions were answered on community basis. Data were collated and analysed descriptively using percentages of the 525 communities.

### **RESULTS**

Five thousand two hundred and fifty(5250) elders from five hundred and twenty five(525) communities were interviewed. One hundred and ninety four (37%) communities had timing of burial as a reason for embalming. In one hundred and ten (21%) communities befitting burial rite was a reason for traditional embalming. While in one hundred and two (19.5%) communities settlement of affairs of the dead was the reason for embalming. Desire to keeping in touch with the beloved dead was a reason in fifty three (10%) communities sampled in the study. Investigation of cause of death was one of the reasons for embalming in eighteen (3.5%) communities. Cheapness of the traditional embalming method and unavailability of modern methods each was found as a reason in 13 communities (2.5%) of the five hundred and twenty five communities studied. This study showed that eleven communities or 2% of the 525 communities had religion as a reason for embalming. Only five communities (1%) sampled had sanitation and or transportation as reasons for traditional embalming.

### **DISCUSSION**

This study confirmed that Igbos of Southeast, Nigeria practiced and still carry out traditional embalming. Most of the communities sampled (37%) gave timing of burial as a reason for the traditional embalming. The Igbo Calendar runs on four market days – Eke, Orié, Afor and Nkwo. Their

great dead such as a royal father, the eldest in the community, chief priest or a title holder may be buried only on a particular market day which may be one or more days from time of death. The ancient Greeks and Romans also embalmed to prevent premature burial [ 6 ] Some Igbo communities have certain festivals during which their great dead must not be buried. In certain Igbo communities the ancestral home of a married woman determines the day she will be buried. Igbo tradition has laid down rules and regulations for the burial of great men and women. These may explain why befitting burial rite is the reason for traditional embalming in 21% of the 525 communities surveyed in this study. The ancient Greeks and British also embalmed bodies for befitting burials[ 7 ].

Settlement of affairs of the dead featured as a reason in eleven (11) or 19.5% of all the communities surveyed. Nsukka Igbos believe that as long as the dead is not buried, the individual remains alive[ 8 ] This study showed that some other Igbo communities had the same believe which drive them to preserve the body for as long as 10 years to settle the affairs of the dead. This enables the deceased family to enjoy the trust-holding for such long years.

Ten percent (10%) of the 525 communities studied preserve the body to keep in touch with their beloved dead. This may be as long as all the children or important relations of the deceased return from far away places. The ancient Greeks and Romans that embalm to prevent premature burial [ 6 ] were with the hope that their beloved would not have died. Bodies of some devout Christians were embalmed to have the person linger on even though embalming was regarded as a pagan practice [ 2567910 ]. Investigation of cause of death is a reason for traditional embalming in 3.5% of all the communities surveyed. In Igbo land sudden and or suspicious death must be investigated to ensure that the gods or perceived enemies are not to be blamed. Death of a suspect within one month of taking oath is usually investigated before burial.

Resort to traditional embalming is blamed on high cost and unavailability of modern embalming in some Igbo communities. Cheapness of the traditional embalming is the reason for the practice in 2.5% of the sampled communities. Also 2.5% of the 525 communities surveyed gave lack of modern embalming as a reason for the traditional method.

Many cultures gave the embalming processes a greater religious meaning but this study showed that only 2% of the 525 communities had religion as reason for embalming.

Such Igbo communities usually have strong deity in control of their ways of life.

Transportation and sanitation each as a reason for Igbo traditional embalming featured in only one per cent (1%) of the 525 communities surveyed. Theory of germs as a cause of disease is not popular with a traditional Igbo man, thus sanitation hardly featured as a reason for traditional embalming. Also few dead bodies such as some married women required by tradition to be buried in their ancestral home were transported to far distances. The ancient British and Greeks embalmed to enable them transport their dead home from war fronts [ 12345671112 ]. Sanitation was a second reason why the ancient Egypt embalmed their dead [ 3 ].

This study has shown that the reasons for Igbo traditional embalming are same with other ancient cultures world-wide. The study also confirms that Igbos still practice traditional embalming much like in Tibet where bodies are still being preserved using ancient formulae [ 23 ] Finally, this study has documented the reasons for Igbo traditional embalming

hitherto undocumented.

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