

## Final Burial Rites and Ceremonies in Benin Kingdom, Nigeria: Socio-Religious Issues and Implications

CLIFFORD MEESUA SIBANI, CHARLES EHISIENMEN  
University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

**Abstract.** Kingdom is a monarchy with a king or queen as head of state. The title of this paper is “final burial rites and ceremonies in Benin Kingdom, Nigeria: Issues and implications”. This paper examines burial as a crisis that requires urgent solution. It is aimed to educate the society of the need to follow the traditional way of burial rites ceremony. Traditionally, lay down principles from fore-fathers exist in relation to final burial in Benin Kingdom. This paper is to portray the extent to which traditional burial as of old can help ameliorate the issue of present problem. The way and manners the final burial rites and ceremonies in Benin kingdom is performed is becoming alarming due to high cost of burring the dead family members and the rituals of killing both animals and humans. Focus is made on a sketchy history of Benin kingdom, the royal burial rites and ceremony, other types of burial ceremonies in Benin kingdom, forbidden burial rites and ceremonies in Benin kingdom, funeral rites in Benin kingdom and the issues in Benin traditional burial rite and ceremony. Due to essential nature of this research work, this research made used of historical and analytical methods as well as personal communication (interview), books, journals and internet sources. The researchers recommend amongst others that a review of rituals or rites of the final burial be made and communicated to the ancestors as so many could no longer afford the cost of the items in our contemporary era.

**Keywords:** Burial, Rites, Ceremony, Benin Kingdom, Socio-religious, Issues, Implications

### 1. Introduction

The ideal of burial rites and ceremony varies from place to place, tribe to tribe all over the world. This is as a result of different cultural heritage passed on from one generation to another. According to Charles, Howard and Vos (2001:670) stated that “burial is the manner of disposing of dead bodies in biblical times varied from country to country. In Egypt the outstanding burial practice for nobles and royalty was the unique method of embalming”. Final burial rites and ceremonies in Benin Kingdom: issues and implications among the (Bini) Benin speaking people is a religious and cultural issue. The customary burial rites and ceremony of the Benin people varies according to the ranking of the deceased in the society. The burial of a king is the topmost of it all followed by the *Enigies*, (titled chiefs) and then the ordinary citizen. The age of the decease is another issue in burial rites and ceremony of the Benin people. No matter how close the decease maybe to you the moment he/her is not up to your age tradition does not allow such a person to participate. The reason behind this is that it is a taboo for the older ones to burial the younger ones, instead the younger ones buries the older. According to Ivie (2014:70), greeting for the dead, these are heard at the graveside when the corpse is being lowered into the grave. Uhimwe (spirit) for the dead is part of it. To ‘hi’ is to pray for a much better and well-fulfilled life for the departed soul. The participant engages in breaking of broom stick which is being thrown

into the grave in bits with every pronouncement of farewell to the dead is Okhianrriavbhe (semantically means till I die to meet you there in heaven or spirit word).

According to Antony (2019) burial is the ritual placing of a corpse in a grave entombment, inhumation, interment, and sepulture. Rites are any customary observance or rituals while ceremony is seen to be any activity that is performed in a solemn elaborate or formal form. Benin in the name of their forebears, the Edo people have always dwelt there. They cannot say much without a reference to their past which, again and again compels them to seek to know who they are! The heartland of Edo revolves round Benin City on which the famous Old Benin Empire held sway for over two thousand years (Eweka 1992:1). Therefore, burial here is the act of rituals placing of a corpse according to the Benin customary observance of activity performed in solemn formal of final burial rites and ceremonies of the Benin in accordance to monarchy which has been settled by the King and can be inferred.

### **1.1 A Sketchy History of Benin Kingdom**

According to Egharevba (2016:6), the Benin kingdom/Empire is regarded as one of the oldest and most highly developed states in the coastal hinterlands of West Africa, dating perhaps to the eleventh century until it was annexed by the British Empire in 1897. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Edo as a system of protected settlements expanded into a thriving city-state and, the 12<sup>th</sup> Oba Ewuare the Great (1440-1473) expanded the city-state to an Empire. Also, its administrative centre Ubinu began to be known as Benin City by the Portuguese. Efforts at tracing the early history and foundation of the ancient Benin kingdom had its first fruit in the work of Egharevba, "A Short History of Benin" was published in 1968. According to Felix (2014:78),

Many, many years ago, the Binis came all the way from Egypt to found a more secure shelter in this part of the world after a short stay in the Sudan and at Ile-Ife which the Benin people call Uhe.

This has been punctuated by scholars and thus doubts exist concerning the authenticity of the account. Felix (2014:89) further states that the controversy elicited by this position appeared to have been laid to rest thus:

The significance of these claims to Egyptian, or at any rate Middle East origin belongs to wider framework of West African History and Sociology as they are found among most West African peoples whether inhabit the Savanna or Forest zone, are Islamized or not. It is quite clear, however, that in the present state of our knowledge about West Africa, they cannot be taken seriously by the serious-minded students of history.

Moses (2011:1) disagreed with views that the Benin people migrated from Egypt, or Sudan. "Benins or Edo people have lived here since God's creation. A popular account of Benin origin which has passed on from one generation to another through oral record, states that the youngest child of God Almighty (Osanobua) founded Benin". This research agrees with the view of Moses that the Benins or Edo people cannot migrate from Egypt to settle in South-Western party of Nigeria instead they would have settled close to Egypt or Sudan. Moses further explained that, according to Benin mythology, when God Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth sent his seven children to planet earth, they were given opportunity to choose different things according to seniority. Some took wealth, power, wisdom, skills etc. At the end the youngest one was left with nothing but a bird advised him to take a snail shell (Ughughon-Edile) fill with sand. Moses concluded that when they got to the planet earth, the whole place was filled with water. The bird advised him to empty the sand of the snail shell on the water where Benin is today. Ekhausosa (1995:1) asserted that the Edo people of South-Western Nigeria are divided into a number of sub-units. Each of these units speaks a patois of the Edo stem-language. One of these ethnic sub-units is the Binis.

## **2. The Royal Burial Rites and Ceremony**

According to Omosade and Adalumo (1979), West African people believe that life here on earth is interminable. They hold that sooner or later, the inevitable phenomenon called death will come upon man, who only is a sojourner on God's earth. No matter how long a person lives, death must come as a necessary end". In Benin the death of the King is not announced like any others. Such information is usually applied with idiomatic expression "Oba-gbera" (pass away), "Owen d' Okun" (the sun has set) "Oto ri Orhue" (the ground eat chalk) are some of the expression used by the officially authorized person, who is the Iyase (prime minister) of Benin kingdom. Even after that it is a taboo for anyone who may have received the news of death to address it differently from the Benin Prime minister; otherwise such a person could be sanctioned by the palace. Till date the tradition still remains the same.

### **2.1 Royal Burial Rites and Ceremonies before the Colonial Era**

Mbiti (1979:94) stated that:

*There are rituals concerning the preparation of the corpse for disposal. In some places it is washed either with water or with water and traditional medicine. In other areas it is shaved and the nails are cut off. There are places where oil or butter is put through the mouth and nostrils, ears, and other bodies' openings. These rituals are done to ascertain the state of the decease if killed by anything before burial ceremony take place. This, and many orders where done before the colonial era.*

Before the colonial era the burial rites and ceremony of the king used to be so fearful, this is as a result of the sacrifices/ rituals that are involved during and before the interment. The Benin's hold the belief that the Oba owns everybody and as such people are to worship and serve him before and after his death. When he dies, sacrifices are made before the interment and on the day of his interment between seven (7) to fourteen (14) slaves are buried for him to continue in the services of the king even in the land of the dead.

### **2.2 Royal Burial Rites and Ceremonies after the Colonial**

Colonialism brought civilization to the world. The burial ceremonies that use to be fearful have now become a thing of joy to the society. E. B. Uyi (Personal Communication, April 20, 2020) resident at Jalo close, off Aiguobasiwin, GRA Benin City, avers that after the colonial era, some of the sacrifices that used to involved human sacrifice in Benin Kingdom were now replaced with "dog". This is because the traditionalist believed that dog have the same characteristics or future with human beings. This now make the burial rites and ceremony simpler than as it used to be 'before the colonial people arrived.

### **3. Other Types of Burial Ceremonies in Benin Kingdom**

#### **3.1 Burial Rites and Ceremonies of Titled Chiefs (Enigies)**

According to Eweka (1992), on the death of the title-holder/chiefs, the eldest surviving son must inform the Oba, who in the absence of any violation of the customary laws of the land, grants the royal permission for the corpse to be buried. To signify that the deceased is not an enemy of the Oba and the people, the Oba send the Ukpen-Eguae (Royal palace cloth) to be used to lay the corpse to rest. Also accompanying the "royal cloth" is an eagle feather to be worn on the head of the deceased when laid in state with the Oba's permission, the corpse is granted a "compound" burial (i.e. buried in the deceased's residence instead of the general cemetery as a mark of great honor from the Oba).

#### **3.2 Burial Rites and Ceremonies of Odionwere (Chief of a Community without a King)**

According to Osaren (1997:40), life assignment for any person was not known and would not be known, it was proper to keep the burial ceremony lively on, each time there was death and one could afford the festival and the opportunity of being recorded. During the age of Odionwere, the practice was to use a 14-day

burial period to remind everyone about this overriding heavenly provision of the irrevocable death after birth, and learn to live well when there was the chance for a time of life.

Osaren concluded that since death is an application for admission into the heavenly home, the 14-day burial ceremony must fully pass through four stages, Iwa-orinmwi (laying the dead in state) or the 1<sup>st</sup> presentation of the dead; Izakhue or 7<sup>th</sup> day expiation of the sins; Isoton or the 11<sup>th</sup> day thanksgiving for acceptance; and Isuerhanfua or the 14<sup>th</sup> day recording of his life round.

### **3.3 Burial Rites and Ceremony of Ordinary Citizen**

In Benin tradition, the ordinary citizen are the non- title holder or chiefs or king (Oba). Their burial rites and ceremonies are totally different from the two mentioned above, the rites and ceremonies are done without response from the chiefs or the king. The children of the decease perform the burial the way they want and it is also subject to availability of funds.

### **3.4 Children Burial Rites and Ceremonies**

The burial rites and ceremony of children is different from that of the adult. In Benin tradition, Burial ceremonies are different according to age group. They believed that the older people do not attend the burial ceremony of the younger ones with the view asserted that it is the younger one that do burial the burial of the older people. According to A. Izevbigie (Personal Communication, April 20, 2020), who resides at no. 5 TV road, Benin City, the burial ceremony of children and those that have are not married either boy or girl is done without any importance to the role of tradition. This is done because the said person has no child who by tradition is to inherit his or her property and to also perform the burial rites according to tradition and customs of the Benin people. He further stated that the children burial is done with or without coffin and in most cases they use white liner to rape the dead body and cover it with sand without any further rituals or rites.

### **3.5 Forbidden Burial Rites and Ceremonies in Benin Kingdom**

Before the Colonial era, the Benin use to attach importance to forbidden burials. This type of burial ceremony is majorly for those with forbidden act such as witchcraft, murder, homicide or any act that is contrary to the custom and norm of the people. According to E. B. Uyi (Personal Communication, April 20, 2020), Jalo close, off Aiguobasiwin, GRA Benin City, people in this category are buried either in the bush or evil forest in with view of separating them from the ancestors. Traditionally, when people of good character die, it is believed that they will join the ancestor to protect the living against any seen and unseen troubles. He maintained that when such forbidden issue occur the relatives or family are salient about it, which has destroy the value of the Benin custom and tradition thereby leading the family into serious problem in the near future.

### **3.6 Igue Festive Bound on Burial Rites and Ceremonies**

**During Igue festival, the Benin Monarch** will suspend all funeral rites in Benin kingdom for 20 days for the celebration of annual Igue festival. According to the programme, activities for the festival kicks off on December 12 and will culminate with worship at the Benin traditional church, Holy Arousa. The festival is regarded as the Annual Thanksgiving and a way of ushering in the New Year in Benin kingdom. S. Efosa (Personal Communication, April 20, 2020) of no. 31 Nomayo off Upper Sakponba road, Benin City opines, “We use this medium to remind the public and appeal to them that celebration of funeral rites are not permitted during the period of the Annual Royal Festivals. We pray to God to keep death from peoples’ homes”.

### **3.7 Interment**

According to John Mbiti (1970:67):  
*Death is sorrowful and very important. There are many complex and even long rituals and ceremonies associated with death. In every African society people are very sensitive to what*

*is done when there is a death in family. Death marks a physical separation of individual from other human beings.*

The interment ceremonies take place after the observance of the “wake-keeping” ceremonies consisting among other things, of an all-night vigil which is an expensive affair. The ceremonies involve such engagement as organizing funeral dances and entertaining the large crowds which come for the ceremonies. On the completion of the wake-keeping, the corpse is buried.

#### **4. Funeral Rites in Benin Kingdom**

##### **4.1 Iwa-Orinmwini**

U. Omorodion (Personal Communication, June 10, 2020) of no. 2 Oredo Line Urhonigbe Ogo quarters states that if the funeral rite commences immediately before the interment, the ceremonies called “Iwa-Orinmwini” (lay the dead in state) begins on the appointed date (usually on one of the two prominent market days namely –ekioba of Ekiagbado (Oba market); but some family perform it on any other traditional days), while the corpse lies in state. But if the funeral rite are postponed till such time as the considerable expense involved can be met, then Iwa-Orinmwini commences on the appointed date, with the ceremonial “laying in state of the corpse” which involves using the nails and hair of the deceased (which have been preserved) wrapped in a white clothe to represent the deceased’s body. This is a mock laying-in-state of the body of the deceased.

##### **4.2 Izakhue**

A. Izevbigie (Personal Communication, April 20, 2020), who resides at no. 5 TV road, Benin City, asserts that on the third day of the commencement of the funeral rites, Izakhue ceremonies are performed. The ceremonies entail the slaughtering of a cow or a goat to the spirit of the family by the eldest surviving son. He with his brothers, sisters and other members of the family in their order of seniority, dance round the town with funeral songs. These ceremonies are followed in the night with

another vigil night. Cows and goats are killed and the carcass together with drinks and kola-nuts are distributed to the local community, the invited guests and the class of chiefs to which the title holder belong.

##### **4.3 Isoton**

O. Omorogbe (Personal Communication, June 10, 2020) of Obagie community, Edo State avers that this ceremony is performed on the fifth day. Isoton consists of processions headed by the sons and daughter of the deceased and other members of the family. The leader of such a procession carries an Okun which is a box decorated with multi-colored cloths and brass ornaments, symbolic the deceased’s property befitting his status in the community. The eldest son does not go round the town with his Okun. He merely dances within a short distance along the street where the deceased lived and return to present his Okun before the elders of the family who remain seated in front of the residence of the deceased where the ceremonies take place. When the family accepts the Okun together with all its (accouterment), then he takes his seat with the elders. Edo manner of speaking, this indicates that the son has taken the position of his father amongst the elders of the family. All other brothers and sisters who have gone on procession round the town present their Okun to their eldest brother as a sign of submission to his jurisdiction thus acknowledging his leadership. Performing the Isoton ceremonies is very important to any Edo person because it indicates that a child has played his proper role in the funeral rites of the deceased and he or she is therefore entitled to a share of the property of the deceased.

##### **4.4 Ako or Ihako**

In the case of Uzama, (title for chief) the ceremony of Ako or Ihako (which means image of the dead either wood or white chock) is subsequently performed. During the ceremony, an image is made and the rituals performed are designed to indicate that the title-holder has been given an honorable burial.

#### 4.5 Isuerhanfua

The ceremony takes place on the seventh day when there is another vigil. This involves elaborate entertainment and dance to funeral songs. At dawn, the ceremonial mock corpse is given a mock interment to bring the burial rites to a close. Usually, this last ceremony is done on a day other than the traditional Eken day (day of rest) and such arrangements are made that it falls on any of the main market days, like Ekioba or Ekiagbado (Oba market). It must be appreciated that the duration of funeral rites vary from family and from group titles to group titles. Some may take seven days as described while others last for fourteen days or more. Where major rites can only be performed on main market days, the duration will normally be longer than seven or fourteen days.

#### 4.6 Succession

The final ceremony is very important for the eldest son although other children may or may not take part. The performance by the eldest son or whoever is to inherit the title or properties is mandatory. During this ceremony, the successor places an "Ukhourhe" (carved staff representing the spirit of the deceased) in the family Edion Shrine (Elders Shrine)-amongst the ukhourhe of the deceased's ancestors. It is at this point succession to the titles passes to the eldest son of the deceased.

### 5. The Issues in Benin Traditional Burial Rite and Ceremony

#### 5.1 The Spirit will not find Rest

Oyibo (2011:56) opined that:

*The purpose of burial ceremony is rooted in a strong; traditional religious belief. Traditionally, burial ceremony is done to initiate the spirit of the dead into the community of the ancestors. It is believed that when a person dies, his spirit immediately leaves his physical body and beings to hover around spiritually in the community.*

The spirit of the decease will continue to hovers if the necessary things are not done by the

children of the deceased. S. Efosa (Personal Communication, April 20, 2020) of no. 31 Nomayo off Upper Sakponba road, Benin City states that the spirit of the deceased will not be accepted to join the community of the dead if the children have not done the needful. The deceased will not be regarded as an ancestor to be worshipped and will not eat and commune with the living and the dead, the spirit of the deceased will continue to hover and be revealing him/her to the children and any loved ones among the family members until the burial rites are done.

#### 5.2 Family Disunity and Misfortunes

O. Omorogbe (Personal Communication, June 10, 2020) of Obagie community, Edo State opines that the restless spirit of the deceased will begin to curses havoc among the family members of the deceased as a mark of not giving him/her the final respect which is traditional demanded by the children to their dead person. This is a serious issue in Benin traditional burial. This disunity and misfortune may lead to so many issues as a result of the children negligence to perform the burial rites and ceremony of their dead person. The issues may result to sickness, financial problems, and so on. Ikechukwu (2003:34) state that, "Utagba-Uno attaches much importance to the disposal of the dead". As indicated earlier, they believe in the continuity of life in the spirit realm. If the dead is not given a befitting burial, it is feared that his ghost would haunt the survivors perhaps even the entire community.

#### 5.3 The Children will not Participate in another Burial Program

V. Osagie (Personal Communication, June 10, 2020) who resides at 1<sup>st</sup> Oredo Line, Urhonigbe Ogo avers that in Benin tradition it is a taboo for children not to burial their parent or love ones when the join the ancestor. The interview show that children that refuse or did not burial their loved ones will not participate in another burial rites and ceremony. The reason behind this is that the children of the deceased are not responsible to the family and society; they will be seen as a laughingstock to the entire family

members and the community which they came from.

#### **5.4 Their Children will not be Buried if They Die**

This is another issue in Benin traditional burial rites and ceremony. U. Omorodion (Personal Communication, June 10, 2020) of no. 2 Oredo Line Urhonigbe Ogo quarters started with a parable “you cut the first wood that fell on another wood before cutting the down one”. In his explanations he said the children of the deceased will not bury their dead without first burying their father or mother if not the ancestors will not accept their rites. Traditionally, whether these current children are his/hers, biological children or not they must burial older ones first before their real parent.

#### **5.5 Implications of Benin Traditional Burial Rites and Ceremony**

The traditional religious belief on the status and involvement of the ancestors in the affairs of the living accounts for the strong commitment to burial ceremony. It can therefore be said that burial ceremony is rooted in a belief in the existence of the spirit of the dead as ancestors for the benefits of the living family members. It is this belief that makes burial ceremony to be significant.

#### **5.6 Family Prestige**

According to Gideon (2011:62), stated:

*The purpose of burial ceremony is family prestige or pride. People organize elaborate burial ceremony for their departed ones to display their wealth and again social glory for themselves from the society. Because of this reason, burial ceremony has become very competitive today. In the name of family prestige, one must not perform below certain defined standard of burial ceremony whether the resources are there or not.*

The view above has actually defined the state of African traditional burial rites and ceremony. The problem with us Nigerians is the tendency to show off our wealth in order to impress

people. This has put a lot of people into a serious debt and some leading to home breakage. These are done in other to avoid the common knowledge that some people fail to burial their parent by killing cows, goat, and music and so on at the detriment of not caring or providing for their parents in their life-times.

#### **5.7 Protection of Life and Properties**

In African, there is a strong bound between the living and the dead. The Benin people believed that it is the dead that protect the living from being harm by the unseen power (Evil). J. Obasuyi, (Personal Communication, August 18, 2020) who lives at no. 16 Omo street, Ikpoba Hill, Benin City posits that when the dead is at peace with the living they protect them and their properties from being taken forcefully. He further observed that it is their duties to protect their love ones from the land of the dead just as they would have done if they are still alive. According to him, children are to care for their parents and also give them final burial rites for them to have peace wherever they are and in turn fight for them.

#### **5.8 Provision of Good Fortune**

O. Williams (Personal Communication, August 18, 2020) who hails from Obagie community of Edo State declares that the fortunes of the children of the deceased are caused by their father or mother as a result of the rites performed which has made them to have rest in the community of the dead and it is their duty to pronounce blessings upon the children, causing them to prosper in all their physical endeavor’s. Traditionally, when a man or woman is not buried according to tradition, performing all the necessary rites the children will not prosper.

### **6. Recommendations**

Bases on the finds of the researcher, the following recommendations are reached:

- The burial rites and ceremonies of the Benin people should be without human sacrifice, because one among these people may be our savior tomorrow.

- The traditional burial of the Benin should remain as it used to be during the time of our forefathers without high cost of killing cows, goat and so on.
- Final burial rites in Benin kingdom should be done in a more social way rather than making it ritualistically diabolical.

## 7. Conclusion

The traditional burial rite and ceremony of the Benin people in African traditional religion is very important. This tradition is as old as the creation of the world which is still practice till date. Burial rites and ceremony cannot be over looked whether one is a Christian or not. Just as some are born so also some dead and just the way we celebrate the new born so we celebrate the death of our love ones. The final burial is very demanding in such a way that so many people go all out to borrow, become indebted to have their parents or patriarch buried. Since the Benin tradition holds that anyone who did not bury their parents are sanctioned, it becomes very necessary for the living to bury their dead. Obviously, for the living to have peace, it is obligatory that give their parents a smooth journey of transition into the land of the dead to become ancestors. The final burial rites are a debt that must be paid for a blissful life on the living otherwise, calamities, destruction and anguish will befall the living.

## References

- Antony, L. (2019). *Burial rites in Africa*. Retrieved from [www.wordwebsoftware.com](http://www.wordwebsoftware.com). Accessed June 7, 2020
- Charles, F. P., Howard, F. and Vos, J. R. (2001). *Wycliffe Bible Dictionary*. London: Hendrickson.
- Egharevba, U. J. (2016). *Benin Kingdom: Path to Nation Building*. Wikipedia National Standard Special Edition.
- Ekhaguosa, A. (1995). *Benin City, the Edo Capital*. Benin: Aisien publishers
- Eweka, P. E. B. (1992). *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. University of Benin: Uniben Press
- Felix, E. O. (2014). Conflict Resolution in Pre-Human Social Science: The History, Archaeology and Anthropology. *Global Journal* 14 (6), pp. 39-47.
- Gideon, O. O. (2011). *Death and Burial of the Dead: Issues in Christian Burial Ceremony*. Benin: Functional Publishing Company
- Ikechukwu, I. (2003). *Utagba Uno: A Political History (A.D 1600-2001)*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books
- Ivie, B. E and Uwa Igbino (2014). *Assents of Edo Greetings: Uniqueness and Significance*. Benin: Ivie Cultural Publishers
- Mbiti, J. S. (1979). *Introduction to African Religion*. London: Heinemann.
- Moses, N. O. E. (2011). *History of Benin Ancient and Modern*. Benin: Noren Company Publisher.
- Omosade, J. A. and Adelumo, A. D. (1979). *West African traditional religion*. Lagos: Onibonoje Press and Book Industries.
- Osaren, S. B. O. (1997). *Great Benin 2: The Age of Odionwere (600-900 AD)*. Benin: Neraso Books.
- Oyibo, G. O. (2011). *Death and burial of the dead: Issue in Christian burial ceremony*. Benin: Functional Publishing Company.