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The Dead in the Lives of the Living: A Socio- Cultural Survey of Burial Sites in the Niger Delta

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Abstract- Burial sites come into existence only after death. Death is therefore a unique phenomenon which we either appreciate or denigrate. The death of an individual may bring sorrow to some, great relief and joy to others and often captured or marked by a burial site. It is the inevitability of death and the African understanding that the dead are not dead and gone, that informs this exercise. This paper attempts to examine the meaning of death, the beauty of death, types of burial sites and the place or importance of the dead in the life of the living. It then concludes with the view that History is incomplete without the history of the dead dotted round our society.

I. Introduction

Scholars' shy away from the study of man's morbid nature .Not that there is anything fundamentally iniquitous about such a study. Rather it is borne out of the decency and respect for the dead .The desire not to disparage the dead who had translated to the spirit world, also informs the awe with which death is discussed and the premium attached to the way by which the dead joined his/her ancestors. Death is the worst thing that happens to man on Earth, it is one evil that could render man's achievements meaningless and make human life appear purposeless. It is probably for this reason that many try to achieve whatever they desire within the shortest possible time not minding the method or consequences. But before we explore this further, it is necessary to have a working definition of death.

II. What is Death?

Defining death is illusive and controversial .The controversy is borne out of the fact that those who experience it have no way of explaining their experiences to those who observe the incident. In other words, the attempt of the living to recount or explain death will be problematic having not empirically experiencing it. Their accounts are only based on observation and these could be influenced by their emotional ties to the individual going through the process of death, or who died. Moreover, defining death is complicated by its vagueness. This explains why virtually all disciplines define death from its own perspective. For instance, in religion, death is viewed as a spiritual transformation.

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A transformation that involves the mind and matter. In All religions death affects man holistically, leading to the disintegration of the body, mind and spirit. Indeed death is reviewed in two ways. The first involves the disintegration of the body and the second that affects destruction of the soul, mind and the condemnation of man to eternal torture and misery. Jesus said: "Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28).

And materialists hold a different views, because death and life after involves some transcendental existence. It is therefore faith rather than actual empirical experiences that determines ones explanation of death. Death is the worst evil that happens to man, an evil that makes human life appear purposeless and meaningless. According to the Sartre (1969:545) "If we have to die then our life has no meaning". The strongest instinct in many living things is that of self preservation. The instinct to avoid death, the instinct to continue living. However, death is the surest thing that will happen to us. If there is one thing that is unmistakably certain, it is that death is inevitable. It is certain that we shall all die, because we were all condemned to death even before we were born. "As soon as a man is born, he is old enough to die" says Martin Heidegger (1913:289). Some people are not even born before they die. They die in the womb before they are born. Some die just as they are born, some die a few minutes after they are born, some a few hours, others a few days. Some live to a ripe old age, others in the prime of their lives and so on. Death can come and does come at anytime in a person's life, at any age, from the antenatal stage, to infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, to old age.

Not only is man old enough to die as soon as he is born, he actually begins to die from that very moment, that very day. (Heidegger 1973:289) Yes, we begin to die the day we are born. We are all dying men and women, for human life on earth is a dying life. And when a dying man begins to struggle to acquire all the money and wealth in the world for himself, he behaves like a fool and makes himself ridiculous. He believes foolishly that he can take all his wealth and money with him to the grave.

> "What did we bring into this world?
> Nothing. What can we take out of it?
> Nothing…those who want to get rich

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> …are caught in the trap of many
> Foolish and harmful desires which pull
> them down to ruin and destruction
> (1 Tim 6:7-9).

We cannot understand life until we learn to understand the phenomenon of death. For, to learn to live is to learn to die and to learn to die is to learn to live. The good book said it all. "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it". (Mathew 16:25).

For man, life and death are inseparably interwoven since man lives a dying life. Death is a process which span all through life, it is not something that comes at the end of ones life and terminates it. On the contrary; it is something that accompanies man all through mortal life, a dying life. (Heidegger, 1973:307). For man, death begins when life begins and ends when life ends. Man carries life and death with him in a process, for each is a process which comes to an end the moment he leaves the world. That is why, we cannot understand life until we understand death, nor can we learn to live until we learn to die, since the two are inseparably interwoven. Indeed a reflection on the phenomenon of death shows the true nature of man. Once again the good book stated:

> *"Surely every man walketh in a vain show: Surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them". (Psalm 39:6).*

Let us examine the causes of death.

III. Causes of Death

There is no doubt that the phenomenon of death is enigmatic and interesting. Miguel de Unamuno, the Spanish philosopher in his book states that human life is a tragedy and that philosophy is that science that studies this tragedy. It is a tragedy because man's strongest instinct and strongest desire to continue living is frustrated by the inevitability of death and there is nothing one can do about it: The Ibani proverb *"Fi bara gbananye yanabem" or "Fi bara or olobienye yanabem"* states that death must have a witness or must be hinged on one excuse.

a) Death by ill Health

Health is not the reserve of any particular age range in human beings. Consequently, children, young and old people die as a result of one form of ill health or the other which affect one part of their body system or the other. The result is that, when not properly managed or attended to death occurs.

b) Death by Accident

Some deaths are caused by accidents due to carelessness on the part of the individual or another party, resulting in the death of someone when in our mortal estimation the time is not ripe for the individual to die.

c) Death at Old Age

There are however, some who by sheer faith/providence live to the ripe old age because they did not encounter the forces or struggles that led to death in the two case, noted above. They somehow overcame all to get to the ripe age of three score, ten and above.

The above discuss on causes of death is the product of realization that man's sojourn on earth is not endless. That, indeed, there are two worlds – the ethereal and the corporeal. The corporeal must come to an end to translate to the ethereal. Dying is the process through which man must be transported to the ethereal. Plato noted the existence of these two worlds when the argued. "Behind the mercurial world of the senses, there is a world – composed of the timeless (Nisbet 1982:7). The "timeless rear" (the ethereal) according to Osai (2007:73) single super-consciousness of the divine spirit God, controls the multiplicity of habitable and inhabitable planets in the corporeal.

There is an eternal scuffle that is taking place between higher and lower forces and the main arena of this struggle is the human mind's interpretation of the concept of death. In other words, how does different disciplines or professions view death? This we shall consider presently.

IV. Medical Opinion of Death

The medical profession focuses on the prevention of ill health and the preservation of life. The medical understanding of death is the inevitable cessation of the heart and lungs. This was before the developments in technology. But before this breakthrough many have been buried due to the inability to detect their heart beat. The result was the need for a new definition which is tied to the brain. The brain became the major factor in determining death, Moderk Suatest believed that since the brain controls man's faculty, it should be a determining factor in case of permanent coma or permanent vegetative state.

The American medical Association Journal (1968:6) note that: A permanent non functioning brain must exhibit four criteria: unacceptivity and unresponsibility, in which there is a total unawareness of externally applied stimuli, no movement or breathing during period of at least an hour in which the patient is continuously observed by physicians, no reflexes such as blinking, eye movement, and stretch of tendon, reflexes; and a flat electroencephalogram, assuming that the electrodes have been properly placed, the equipment is functioning normally, and the personnel operating it competent.

Death therefore occurs when there is irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain

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(De Grazi : 1) Although Perret challenges this position and argues that it is an attempt to confuse the question of what is death with the question of how to determine whether death has occurred (De Grazi : 10) Medicine pronounces death the moment it occurs.

V. Biological Explanation of Death

Biology studies living organism, man, animals and plants. Therefore living organisms must exhibit living characteristics. When it is the opposite then that organism is dead. These characteristics are: growth, feeding, respiration; excretion; movement, response to stimuli, development, reproduction and finally death. It is a fact of nature that all organisms live and die. Culver and Bernard (1982:40) defines death as "the permanent cessation of functioning of the organism as a whole". Medically this may be a state of inactivity or malfunction, but not death. It is important to note that, the heart may be vigorously pounding but it is not functioning or it is malfunctioning. Consequently, cessation of functioning cannot be regarded as death in all cases. Encyclopedia Britannica (1970:12) defines death as the absence of potential life. It means lack of ability to synthesize new molecules in an integrated organized system. The implication here is that such criteria as respiration, procreation, and transpiration of substances and irons are not necessary for potential life. For example, bacteria responds to different atmospheric situation; it may be dry and dusty but when exposed to moist, it comes back to life.

VI. Existentialist Explanation of Death

The existentialist reasoning holds that only man exists. According to Heidegger (1962:272)

> The being that exist in man. Man alone exist
> Trees are, but they do not exist
> Houses are but they do not exist
> Angels are but they do not exist
> God is, but he does not exist

Heidegger however makes a distinction between "to exist" and "real being" while all things including man are real being, it is "man alone that exists. Death is one major theme in existentialism that features prominently. Heidegger argued that "so far as one knows, all men die". Death to the existentialist, must be understood existentially as "…existential interpretation of death takes precedence over any biology and ontology of life" (1962:291). Accordingly, the existentialist believes death rather than being is just an event, is a way of life for man. Heidegger noted that "Dasein, is in its existence. This simply means that human reality cannot be defined because it is not something given, it is in question. For Heidegger, death, is the clue to authentic living.

> *"It is the eventual and omni-present possibility which binds together and stabilizes my existence. I am projected in advance of myself becoming what I will be, whether I will to be or not, but I am not waiting for the end, and this is the only way in which I can command and possess my existence and give it unity and authenticity. I anticipate death not by suicide but by living in the presence of death as always immediately possible and as undermining everything."*

This full-loaded acceptance of death, emphasized, his authentic personal existence (Blackham, 1952:96). Death, is being towards its death, Dasein is dying factually and indeed constantly, as long as it has not yet come to its demise. Perret (1987:17) distinguishes between "dying" and "death" He claims that "dying" is a process while "death" is an event. Dying is a process if un-interrupted by external forces will normally end in death – Death, on the other hand, represents the completion of a process of dying.

Omoregbe also holds this view. For him death is a way of life for man, for he is a "being – towards – death", a being whose every moment of life, is a step towards his death. Man's whole life is a progressive journey to death, for he begins to die from the day he is born, (Omoregbe 1991:52). Satre's interpretation of death is instructive. According to him:

> *"Death is never that which gives life its meaning. It is on the contrary that which on principles remove all meaning from life If we must die, then our life has no meaning. Because, its problems receives no solution. It is absurd that we are born, it is absurd that we die" (Omoregbe 1991:57).*

Although death is a common phenomenon, nobody while still alive experiences his own death, but experiences that of others as an observer, not as a participant. There is a remarkable difference between personal involvement and detached experience. One experiences his own death by participating in it but cannot tell the story of the experience.

If death must have any meaningful existential interpretation, then it must be defined in the widest sense, as a phenomenon of life". Perret (1987:271) defines death as "an event which is in relation to life". Heidegger helps out when he asserts that death "… in the widest sense marks the being, a boundary of living organisms" Consequently, death is "simply to die, to cease to be from being". These definitions accommodate all shades and perspective and expressly explain death.

Having examined these various interpretations of death, what is the African notion of death? This we will now examine.

VII. African Notion of Death

Despite the misgiving about death, mainly associated with fear of the unknown, Africans see death

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as a transition, a deviation from one status to a higher realm of duty. The African believe that everyone is on a mission on earth. It is expected that one moves to the next stage as soon as he she is done with the lessons of the earthly stage. Every next stage is an improvement, a desired improvement, a desired maturity with responsibility. Death is a progression, a promotion to ancestral realm. It depicts the completion of a phase in the eternal journey of purification.

VIII. The Uniqueness of Death

It is strange that anyone should think of death but then it is a predicament man has been born to fulfill, it is a journey man must take but man seldom contemplates or plans toward that great journey and therein lies the uniqueness. A Road one knows he must take but a road one never looks at or bothers to check its situation. Is there therefore any meaning in death? In Omoregbe's (1991:58) opinion.

> *If there were no death, there would be no sense of urgency, nor would time be taken seriously. In fact, if there were no death, life itself would not be taken Seriously and it would certainly be lived differently from the way it is being lived, we cannot say that death gives meaning to life since we do not live in order to die."*

One of the uniqueness of death is that it excuses man from the inexhaustible demand of life. But it appears that uniqueness seem lost, whether in life or death. Truly, it is absurd that we are born. It is absurd that we die".

Omoregbe has stated that our inability to make meaning from life or death is because we do not know why we live. Russell's (1886:127) argued that "life is favor, a gift from God and it will be continued everlastingly only to the obedient." (1886:127). But Russell here may be referring to the ethereal life, life everlasting. The good books also stated in 2 Peter 1:3. "As his divine power has given to us, all things that pertain to life and godliness…" Furthermore James 1:17 states. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the father of light…"

No matter the special uniqueness that lies in death, nobody wants to die. Indeed the strongest instinct known in man is that of "self preservation". Consequently, death is a loss, a loss to those left behind. It is probably the need not to forget, not to feel the loss that the dead are properly buried and epithet put for them. They are not to be forgotten. To forget them is to forget the sense of history in the lives they shared with their loved ones. As Daniels (1972:3) pointed out…

> *History is the memory of human group experience. If it is forgotten or ignored, we cease in that measure to be human. Without history, we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be, like victims of collective amnesia groping in the dark for our identity. It is the events recorded in history that have generated all the emotions, the values, the ideals that make life meaningful, that have given men something to live for, struggle over, die for…*

One question we must ponder upon is "do men really die?" Don't burial sites attest to the affirmative? It needs to be emphasized that what is real never dies. The real essence of man is the soul; the soul is the spark of life which exists for eternity. Man is made up of the soul and the matter. The belief in the immortality of the soul is exercised in several post interment funeral rite. Among the Ijo, these rituals include the shaving of the hair, in-law condolence visitation and enshrinement. These ceremonies are meant to deviate the spirit of the deceased into the ancestral shrine. (Okaba 1999:73). Similarly, the rituals serve the purpose of enthroning the heir apparent to filling the deceased position as head of the ancestral cult.

Among the Edo (Nigeria) the elevation rituals require the deceased's fingernails, shaved hair and the sponge used for washing the corpse. These are put in a white clay pot and kept at the family ancestral shrine. This no doubt constitutes the visible embodiment of the deceased earthly sojourn. By implication, it shows that death does not dissolve the relationship between the deceased and his Kith and kin (Bradbury 1973:634).

The pre-interment rituals and ceremonies ritually separate the spirit of the deceased from his earth family. The deceased is transposed into liminiality between and betwixt the stages of interment and formal deification. The enshrinement rituals elevate and re-incorporate the spirit of the dead into the abode of the living dead (Okaba 1999:74). Thus Africans believe in the spirit living after the material body – matter is interred. Consequently, it reinforces the notion of the spirit of the dead and the living dead. The spirit lives, the spirit or soul never dies. Man is a spirit being, man is a spirit, he has a soul and he lives in a physical body (1 Thess. 5:23). When the physical body of a man is dead and in the grave, the spirit lives on. That part of man is eternal.

Paul in 2nd Corinthians 4:16 states "… But though our outward man perish, yet the inward Man is renewed day by day." This attests to the fact that there is an inward man and there is an outward man. The outward man is not the real you, it is only the house in which you live, it fades away, it dies. The inward man is the real you, it never grows old, he is renewed day by day. The inward man is a spirit man. The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord (proverbs 20:27). Paul calls man's spirit "the inward man" Peter calls man's spirit "the hidden man of the heart".

> *"But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that, which is not corruptible, even the quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (1 Peter 3:4).*

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The heart here means the spirit. It is the spirit that is born again. God does not do anything with the outward man. Let us conclude this part of the discussion by examining briefly the matter; the body, that which is buried, that which confirms that matter, the body dies. The body is buried when it dies but it is not dead and totally forgotten. This is because it impacted on the lives of people that are still living. Where are the dead buried?

IX. Burial Sites and the Living

Various kinds of burial sites exist among the people of the Niger Delta. These are as follows:

(a) In the House: This is especially where land scarcity makes it difficult to bury the dead elsewhere. The dead is buried in the room he/she occupied while alive. The room now assume a sacred status and only someone very close to the dead can easily occupy the room. No special land mark or memorial is made in this situation.

(b) The Compound: Some bury in front or behind the court yard within their compound. A small monument or tomb of concrete marks the place of burial. It could be simply made or beautified with inscriptions. Depending on the temperament of the family, at the time.

(c) The Cemetry: This is the general area mapped out for the burial of the dead by the community. "Plots" are bought by people for their loved ones. Concrete cement with inscriptions are made for the dead. The inscriptions tell a brief history of the dead.

(d) Special Mausoleum: This is usually a state of the art tomb specially built for important personalities and statesmen, for their contribution to the society. In most cases they become historical sites for visitors who come to pay homage to the great individual. The King Jaja's mausoleum is closely guarded, so is that of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tafawa Belewa, Ojukwu and General Murtala Mohammed, among others.

(e) The Swamp "Grave": This is peculiar to the Niger Delta societies. It is regarded as a bad omen, an unnatural burial site for those that die by drowning. Because of the nature of death, a shallow grave is usually dug for the deceased, no ceremony, burial rites or mourning is done for the dead. And there is nothing to mark the grave.

These are where the dead are buried. It could be a specified area meant for the purpose by government a community or just a place the family chose to bury its dead.

X. Burial Sites and History

Burial sites' uniqueness lie not only in it being the abode of the ancestors but more important is the motley history it unconsciously exhibit. It reminds us not to forget. Not to forget that here lies Jeki Opusenibo Michael Alali Jaja or Alabo Watson Gabriel for instance. Burial sites takes us to the past. It admonishes us not to forget. It reminds one of St Augustine's philosophy of time. St Augustine makes an attempt to pin time down, but discovers it to be always moving, always in process of passing "towards non-being". "If we were to measure time, the only possible unit to consider would be time passing in the present, yet "the present has no space" between a past and a future where reality is attested to by memory and prophecy."

Burial sites bring memories back and reminds one of prophecies and proclamations made by the departed when they were alive, where or if these declarations comes to reality, then the departed did prophecy of a future that came to pass.

St Augustine saw the mind as the key to an understanding of time or of our account of the past, or prophecies or predictions of the future.

> *Historical accounts of the past are "images recovered from the mind where they had been implanted… Like footprints they passed through the sands, and even prophecies and predictions of the future are only possible from present things which already exist and are seen" (Alagoa 2006:170).*

Accordingly, the past, present and future are merely;

> *"The presence of things past, the presence of thing present and the presence of things future." And it is the mind alone that synthesizes time: Time is nothing more than distinction of the mind itself.*

The point being made here, is that the human mind is unconsciously built not to forget. Memory relates to the mind and the mind like footprints, prophecy as well as predict the future. St Augustine found balance in his attempt to understand time or the past. He found God and the idea of eternity.

> *"God precedes all times created all times and with Him, today does not give way to tomorrow, nor does it succeed yesterday".*

In the eternal, nothing can pass away but the whole is present. It is this understanding that informs the belief that burial is not an end but a transition. For those in the faith, it is a beautiful sleep in which they will eventually wake 1 Thessalonians (4:13-16). Reads in full.

1. But I will not have you be ignorant, brethren concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as other which have no hope.
2. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose gain, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring to them.
3. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.
4. For the lord himself shall descend from Heaven with a shout with voice of the archangel, and with the

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trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

5. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the lord in the air and so shall we ever be with the lord…

It is evident from the above passage that the meeting with the faithfuls is an actuality, a truism. It also informs the popular comment "till we meet again" in the eternal city.

In most African societies, places of burial are not far removed from the place of abode. In deed African bury their loved ones within their compound or within the building- in the room the departed lived when he or she was alive. Burial sites tell history about the dead. The kind of life a person lived, status in society, age and circumstances of death. The grave also show affluence or otherwise of the late individual. No expense is spared in giving the departed the last honor and this show in the preparation and final resting place of the departed. The burial program, flags, banner, souvenir and the manner of entertainment depict the status and affluence of the departed in society. So also is the grave-site and epitaph.

It must be pointed out that in the Niger Delta communities; land scarcity to a large extent explains the recourse to burial in the house or the room of the departed. Largely a rural community with little land for agriculture and building of individual homes, land scarcity often led to conflict and some individuals resort to entering into agreement with poor land owners to build a storey building so they could occupy up while the land owner would have an improved ground floor. Sometimes the living name children as a constant reminder, (a living memory) of the departed. For example, if the departed's name was Alali, a new born child into the family is named Alali in memory of the departed. This researcher is named after his grand father Alali. Thus land hunger has militated against a designated cemetery in Opobo. Some families are reluctant to give up their land for such noble venture. This has resulted in the continued burial of loved ones in homes in Opobo kingdom. Sometimes, two or three persons are buried in the same spot. This is unlike what obtains in the hinterland communities with large expanse of lands. In the hinter land not only are there cemeteries, there are enough land mass making burials in the homes unattractive and unnecessary.

The point being made here is that while the Ibani Communities and some Eastern Niger Delta Communities are faced with land scarcity resulting in burials in homes and near residential houses, other communities in the hinter land have designated burial grounds and bury their dead far from the homes because of the large expanse of land available to them.

XI. Conclusion

We have attempted to study a rather difficult area of a people's culture history. Difficult in the light of scholars aversion to study the dead. In spite of the misgiving about death and the inherent tendencies in man associated with the fear of the unknown, our study shows that not only are the departed revered in the processes and manner burial rites are undertaken but that in most African societies, the dead is not gone and forgotten. They exist in the living memory of the living, indeed, they are the living dead. In the Niger Delta Communities where land hunger exists, the dead are buried near homes or in the very room they occupied earlier.

The departed are "epitaph" written among the living as children are named after them as a constant reminder of the fond memories of their existence. Consequently, even in death they still exist in the history of the living. Burial sites are reminders that someone once passed through these lands, his name was say Michael, Alali Jaja, he was a shipping magnet and lived a fulfilled life having left behind a wife and a number of children. Such sites among the living, constantly remind us not to forget the past, for to forget is to erase the history of the dead among the living. In other words the history of the living will be incomplete without the history of the dead among the living (without burial sites).

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