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The Second Funeral in Igbo Tradition: *Honouring Ancestors in Afikpo*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE IMAGE

A sister of Oteleri dancing at the Afikpo market. Photographed by Simon Ottenberg, 1951-53. Smithsonian.

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Introduction In Amachara, a village in Afikpo, Ebonyi State, a remarkable cultural event takes place when an elder passes away at a full and respected age. This event, often called the “horse funeral” or “horse title,” is a second funeral (ịkwa ozu), a grand remembrance ceremony that symbolizes the deceased’s transition into the ancestral realm….

01

Introduction

In Amachara, a village in Afikpo, Ebonyi State, a remarkable cultural event takes place when an elder passes away at a full and respected age. This event, often called the “horse funeral” or “horse title,” is a second funeral (ịkwa ozu), a grand remembrance ceremony that symbolizes the deceased’s transition into the ancestral realm. In the 1950s, Simon Ottenberg, an anthropologist, documented such a ceremony, capturing the essence of Igbo funerary traditions.

02

Honouring the Departed Through Rituals

In traditional Igbo society, a burial is not the final rite of passage for an elder who lived to an advanced age. The second funeral serves as a

communal event where family and friends formally send off the deceased to the embrace of Ala, the Earth Mother, ensuring they take their rightful place among the ancestors. This act affirms the belief that the spirits of the departed continue to influence the lives of the living.

The first son often enshrines a symbolic representation of the ancestor, to which offerings of kola nuts, palm wine, and sacrifices are made. This act maintains a spiritual connection between the family and their departed loved ones, reinforcing the importance of lineage and continuity.

03

The Role of Animal Sacrifice and Prestige

A key aspect of the ịkwa ozu ceremony is the offering of a significant animal sacrifice to the maternal family of the deceased. In Igbo society, both the umunna (patrilineal kin) and nne (maternal lineage) hold important roles, with the maternal family often receiving ritual offerings as a sign of respect.

Different animals symbolize varying levels of honour and social prestige. While cows (idu ehi) are commonly sacrificed, the highest status is given to a horse, a rare and expensive offering due to the inability of horses to thrive in the tse-tse fly climate of southeastern Nigeria. In even rarer cases, a leopard may be offered, signifying extraordinary status. The meat from these sacrifices is shared among the extended family and the wider community, strengthening bonds of kinship and respect.

04

Selective Invitations and the Role of Secret Societies

The second funeral is not an open event. Invitations are typically extended to those who attended the initial burial and condolence visits (mgbarụ), ensuring that those who showed respect for the deceased are honoured in return. The ceremony also considers the deceased's affiliations with title societies, fraternal organizations, or other cultural groups that play a role in Igbo social structure.

05

Christian Influence and the Transformation of Ịkwa ozu

Today, many Igbo communities still observe the second funeral, but it is often referred to as a "thanksgiving celebration" or "memorial" to align with Christian sensibilities. While modern Christianity has influenced Igbo society, many traditional practices remain intact, hidden in plain sight under new names and interpretations. This blending of indigenous beliefs and Christian customs reflects the merging nature of post-colonial Igbo culture.

The ịkwa ozu ceremony is a powerful reminder of the deep respect Igbo people hold for their ancestors and the enduring strength of cultural traditions. While modernity may reshape the ways these rites are practiced, their core purpose, which is honouring the past and maintaining the spiritual fabric of the community remains unchanged.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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