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Traditional Funeral Rites: *How Igbos Bury Their Dead*

By Idenze Ezeme

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TRADITIONAL FUNERAL RITES

Traditional Funeral Rites: How Igbo Bury Their Dead

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The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria hold their cultural traditions in high esteem, particularly those related to Death and the Afterlife. The three major events in the life of an Igbo are birth, marriage, and death. Marriage is arranged, whereas birth and death are inevitable, with both being deeply culturally significant. According to the Igbo, death is the passing from one stage of life to another, while Burial Ceremonies signify the last respects shown to the deceased on their passage to the afterlife. At the same time, such a rite arouses some socio-cultural problems, particularly gender-based discrimination against women, lying at the center of Igbo cultural customs.

In Igbo Cosmology, death is not an end to life but rather a passage into another life. This view makes the performance of appropriate burial rites important. In addition, the manner of one's burial is believed to impact the deceased person's journey into the afterlife. For this reason, burials in Igboland are highly elaborate and filled with rites tailored according to the deceased's gender, age, and social status.

In Igbo culture, the burial rites for men and women differ. When a woman dies, the Burial Rites are usually low-key unless the deceased woman is an older woman and highly respected in traditional women's societies. Whenever a man dies, however, there are generally highly elaborate and mandatory socio-cultural rites, most of which place a heavy burden on the widow.

Widows in Igboland are made to undergo rigorous mourning rituals, which are not demanded from widowers. Most of these practices

involve shaving the widow's head, confining her movement, and making her wear mourning clothes for as long as a year. Some could even be made to drink the water used in washing her deceased husband's body.

READ MORE: Widowhood Practices in Igbo Culture: Traditions, Challenges, and Social Change

Also, the widow might face unfair treatment, like having her late husband's property taken by male relatives. These actions disregard the widow and her children as the closest next of kin, leaving them vulnerable and destitute. These actions show strong traditional beliefs that favor men and their authority.

Gender Inequality in Funeral Practices

The stark differences in burial ceremonies between male and female genders reflect the general problem of gender inequality in Igbo culture. Tradition has often been used to keep women in lower positions. According to Anyoha, N. O., Chikaire, J., & Nwakwasi, R. N., these discriminatory practices lead to the poverty and psychosocial distress experienced by women.

The emphasis on male dominance in funeral rites reinforces patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. Generally, men are seen as superior, while women are viewed as their support, a perception perpetuated by institutions such as family, religion, and education. According to Ezenwa-Ohaeto, engaging with patriarchy demands a cultural attitude and behavior change.

The emphasis on male dominance in funeral rites reinforces patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. Men are often seen as superior, while women are viewed as their complements, a perception perpetuated by institutions such as family, religion, and education. Ezenwa-Ohaeto contends that combating patriarchy requires a fundamental shift in cultural attitudes and practices.

Stuart Hall's Social Constructionist Theory of Representation (2000)

explains the cultural practices surrounding Igbo funeral rites. According to the theory, meanings are not fixed but are brought about through social agreements and practices. In the case of Igbo funeral rites, the practices around widowhood show the socially constructed ideas concerning gender roles and power relations.

For example, the mourning rituals forced on widows show how culture views women as lower in status than men. These practices are neither natural nor ordained by God but have been brought about by long-standing social agreements. Gledhill (1997) explains that social practices carry meanings and values that shape how people see themselves. In Igboland, these traditions promote the idea that men are superior, leading to gender inequality.

Fixing the unfair parts of Igbo funeral rites needs several steps. Laws should be made to stop harmful widowhood practices, and cultural beliefs must also change. Teaching young people about gender equality and respect is key to breaking down patriarchal ideas.

Scholars like Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2015) advocate for using literature and media to challenge patriarchal values and promote gender equality. By reimagining cultural narratives and practices, the Igbo community can honor their traditions while ensuring they align with contemporary values of justice and equality.

Funeral rites in Igbo culture are very meaningful. They honor the dead and help guide them to the afterlife. These practices show and strengthen gender inequality, especially in the unfair treatment of widows. To stop these unfair practices, cultural changes and laws are needed to promote gender equality and respect for everyone. The Igbo people can keep their culture alive by rethinking and improving these traditions while building a fairer and more inclusive society.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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