Funerals as Sources for Historical Reconstruction in Nembe, Central Niger Delta

By

Joseph Igoro, PhD
Department of History and International Studies
Faculty of Humanities
Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State.
Email: igorojj@fuotueke.edu.ng; josephigoro@gmail.com

Abstract

Funerals are flamboyantly celebrated in Nembe Community. In the process, the narration of the life history of the deceased provided sufficient information that reveal the origins, migrations and intergroup relations among lineages that aid historical reconstruction in general. The methodology adopted is the interdisciplinary approach which combines both oral tradition, ethnography and Secondary Sources. The paper notes the different types of death and appropriate rituals for various categories of personalities including Kings and ordinary people. The role of women through songs in the burial of an ancestral personality such as Onyoma provide elaborate details of precolonial inter communal brutal conflicts. The glaring changes in the burial rites occasioned by modernity are highlighted

Keywords: Funerals, Death, Traditional rites, Nembe Community, modernity

Introduction

Funerals are elaborately celebrated in Nembe, as it is done in most parts of the Niger Delta. The reality that a love one has departed, to be seen no more, is worth paying their last respect, no matter the cost. This justifies the publicity and elaborate cost put into funerals. This flamboyant and lavishness, is not for the reason that the deceased relatives can afford it, but customarily, the nucleus family of a deceased person are required to go extra length to ensure that the funeral is suitably celebrated.

Despite this seeming display of opulence, there is an historical narration of the deceased past, implicit in the funeral stages that begins and runs through the whole ceremony. A historian who follows the burial procession would be able to gather data sufficient to reconstruct the origin, migration and relationship among lineages. For instance from the mortuary, the casket is taken to the traditional family houses (mausoleums) where the deceased was related, if they were all in Nembe metropolis. Though recent inter-communal wars, caskets are hardly taken across either side of the two quarters comprising

Nembe headquarters. In some instance, the obituary announcement would give a biography of the deceased person.

There are aspects of the historical account of funeral in Nembe that have appeared in written works. Alagoa (1964) gave details of the burial of kings in Nembe. The burial of a king is exceptional, on the account that it involved the whole community or clan, becoming his family. As Alagoa stated, rituals are performed by priests, war dances enacted by warriors, and the decoration would be significantly royal.

In that same work, Alagoa as well commented on the towns founded by three strangers namely, Oboloama, Olodiama and Onyoama (Obolo's, Olodi's and Onyo's town). These he said, were dispersed by civil wars and epidemics. He commented on footnote 4, that "Onyo had left a deeper imprint on the minds of the people, and it is mentioned more often in songs and riddle. There is also a traditional song Alagoa narrated in his legends of origin. This song is only sung nowadays in funerals and is analyzed in this work and given its historical significance.

Okpu: Ancestral Houses in Nembe and European Antiquities on the Brass and Nun Rivers of the Niger Delta, is another book, Alagoa (2000) gave useful accounts of the meaning, function and contents of ancestral houses. The knowledge gained from the explanation of the book, gave a practical guide to understanding why burials are centred on these ancestral houses.

To begin with, the casket of the deceased would be taken to all Okpu which he or she traced ancestry through maternal and paternal lines. Thereafter, it would then lie-in-state, all-day, at the family Okpu (mausoleums) that would be responsible for the funeral. In the evening, the casket would be taken to the arena where the all-night wake keep would hold. Though, recently, funerals are also conducted during the day, starting in the morning and by 2pm the burial rites of tiripaga begins. We will also see that it is in the *Okpu*, the mourning period is observed after interment.

Barbara Sumberg (1997) gave a brief account of how mourners, Alapu, in Nembe are dressed and fed during "the post-funeral period, in a special room of the family house". The Okpu is the family house, referred here by Barbara Sumberg.

Origin of Funerals

There is a belief system in Nembe which maintain that the departed spirit of the human being could return to the body, after a period of comma, which bring into being the

religious concept of *osoin noin* (wake-keep). The concept of *osoin noin* evolved the practice to keep vigil throughout the night, for the likely return of the spirit to the body of a deceased. In Nembe cosmology, spirit moves only at night. So, while a person lies in comma, different methods are applied or invoked throughout the night, to get the spirit return to the body. The process of resuscitation involves bringing specialist in massaging, herbalist, native doctors and diviners: each trying in their domain and craft, sometimes, making invocations, rituals and appeasements, to bring back the spirit of the dead. When eventually the person was confirmed dead, local embalmment was applied. The corpse was only allowed to remain a day or two, as the preservatives used would not permit a longer period without decay. With the Western method of embalmment, corpses stay longer in a mortuary. Messages would be sent out to relatives, far and near, for a proper funeral ceremony.

Types of Death

Not everyone that dies qualify to be given a funeral ceremony. Only persons considered as adult and died normal deaths are given funeral ceremony. Even an adult who was the first to die among siblings, while both parents are still alive, would be given *ibomo dibi*. That is, the body will be buried facedown; it is considered as bad dead. First, objects such as broken bottles, the shells of oyster *(crassostrea gasar),* and other like objects, are spread all over the bottom of the grave and the corpse placed on them, facedown and naked. The corpse is usually carried to the burial ground wrapped with a mat but the mat will not be buried with the corpse; it will be torn into piece and left on top of the grave. Even a person who has been made a chief and died before their parents, are given *ibomo dibi*. The philosophy of *ibomo dibi* is encapsulated in a song during *iworoko* dance; *ama mie mie ye, ama mie mie ye, togu re numotimi daubo, yingibo dibi yeye, Nembe mie mie ye ba oo*. It says, it is a Nembe custom for a child to outlive the father, mother and bury them.

There is a second group classified as *iwofi*, which funerals are not given immediately. These are those who died violent deaths. They are not buried in the community burial ground but taken to *seipiri* or *iwofisara*, bad bush, as Alagoa (1964) also attested. An interval of a minimum of four must elapsed before a funeral ceremony would be conducted. It is believed that the wound(s) which had caused death, had healed. So, before the funeral ceremony, the spirit of the body buried at the *iwofisara* would be exhumed through invocation and buried at the normal cemetery. If this ritual is not completed, it is believed that the dead will cause havoc to the surviving members of the family.

A third category, are those persons who are known not to have married or even had a concubine in their life time. For such persons to qualify to be given funeral ceremony, a life

dog of the opposite sex would be touch on the deceased body, which symbolized mating. This is rarely observed nowadays due to the influence of modernity. The practice could have developed based on the importance attached to marriages which expectedly would lead to procreation and so, populate the war canoe house. It was the practice of leaders of lineages to get a specified number of able bodied men that would qualify them to have a war canoe house. From all indications, this humiliating practice was to warn young men how they would be treated at death, if they were not married and have children. This could also be an origin and explanation of the practice of polygamy.

Obligations of Relations and other Groups during Funerals

Beside the above, normal deaths are given befitting burials; to have a befitting burial would depend, of course, on the class or personality of the deceased and or the status of the children, the nucleus and extended family. At this stage, it is the primary responsibility of the maternal *omungu aru wari*, War Canoe House, to take charge of the burial ceremony. The funeral ceremony is woven around kinship ties and other networks. These ties define various categories of blood relationship, and carry expectations and obligations of behavior. It begins with the children, the surviving spouse and involves the extended family, the maternal War Canoe House and the community at large.

The children must meet with the extended family to pick a suitable burial date, having crosschecked from the records of the community burial committee. In these meetings, a family burial committee will be selected or elected. This committee has the responsibility of making a budget estimate. The children have more roles to play throughout the ceremony, though depending on their financial standing. The first son is expected to provide the casket for his deceased father. But a surviving husband provides the casket of his deceased wife.

Preparations and Protocols for the Funerals

The burial date and the details of the plans, from the committee will be communicated to the *Omungu Aru Wari Alabo*, War Canoe House Chief. The family burial committee gets the consent of the family chief to send out female family members to pick periwinkles (*fuscatus)*, and a male party, to gather firewood. On the eve of the burial, women cook and remove the periwinkles from their shells, the men breaks the firewood to pieces suitable for the cooking arrangement. Before the burial date, the family burial committee hands over foodstuffs and drinks to the head chief, bought from contributions. The chief then appoint a storekeeper. The cooks are not hired. Family women take the lead, joined by some volunteers from the community, cook and serve every visitor to the burial. At this stage, the family, and the community are involved. The communality of burials in Nembe,

was well reiterated or summed up by a local artist and song writer, which says, *ingiyai youyou pagayai youyou.* This means, crying for deaths that does not concern a person, also crying for their own.

On the evening of the first day, the family assisted and led the children, to set the stage for the takeoff of the burial ceremony, starting with the wake-keeping. It is the eldest daughter, in her absence, any other female child of the deceased or extended family member start and lead the women in a dancing procession, called *iworoko*. The first song that kick start the dancing procession captures the essence of the custom which says burying the dead is the responsibility of family and community: *bilai yanabo tibi tuatere doribo pagabee Nembe na ama .* The literal meaning says, the owner of a huge fishing mat starts by weaving the head, before others could assist.

Burial Songs as Sources for Historical Reconstruction

There are songs that serve as mnemonic devices, which are recorded information that is useful for historical reconstruction. The wording in such songs could be classified as the technique tagged "words and things". This technique is based on the feature of words, when they are studied or interpreted, would give an overall meaning of an historical event. That event is now encapsulated into a song and sang in funerals; the words can reconstruct the history of lineages and communities. For instance, there is an historical song sang during *iworoko,* that says in the Nembe dialect, *Onyoma buru bele indi nengi, buru na indi na gboribele, o mu bereki obie, kula ntaba, idei nona teigbania.* The interpretation is that Onyoma, yam is sweeter than fish, yam and fish are cooked in the same pot; Kula people go and enquire the reason of the palaver why my father killed my husband. The Kula people also had a song of victory which says, *Onyoma ye kingerebo dibigha mi ama.* It means that this town of Onyo will not bury only one person. There is another song complement these earlier ones which says, *Onyoma pere fua tarigha.* This means "the priest- king of Onyoma does not love sons-in-law", Alagoa (1964:157). This episode, when fully elaborated, would give the details of a brutal inter-communal war fought in pre-colonial era, between the Onyoma settlement and the Kula community. This song is now only recounted as memorized speech or epic and performed by woman during funerals. It is performed as an historical dance, displaying traditional dancing steps only. The songs and the drum beat orchestrate the ancient dancing steps, which the natives could differentiate to the dances coloured with modernity.

Nembe traditions of origin and migration narrate of three immigrants to Nembe territory – Obolo, Olodi and Onyo, from which were the extinct towns of Oboloma, Olodiama and Onyoma, Alagoa (1964). The first two were deserted due to civil wars. Onyoma's case was

due to the inter-communal war and sacking by the people of Kula. What happened with these first settlers could best be interpreted and explained by exponents of inter-group relations, as the natural state of man was that of war, in which every man was pitched against every man, Okpeh (2006). If peace and conflict expects were to be consulted about these pre-colonial wars, they would say that decision makers from Onyoma and Kula have a moral justification to defend their basic interests and ensure self-preservation using any means necessary, Faleti (2006).

Onyoma's account takes prominence over the other immigrants. As a matter of fact, there is in existence a compound in Bassambiri Nembe, called Onyoma polo, founded by Onyo, after the sacking and desertion of his first settlement. Onyoma is now worshipped as a deity; a priest serve and perform ritual along with many priestesses in a shrine built in the Onyoma polo. Oral account tells of Onyoma's daughter, called Polu, who outlived her father and was married to Ogbodo, the founder of Bassambiri Nembe. They had a son, called Dede. There is Dede Group of Houses, a major war canoe house in present-day Bassambiri, who claim every legacy of Onyoma. In addition to tracing Onyoma descendants to the Dede group of Houses, archaeologist had carried out excavations of three sites in Onyoma Island and had provided evidence of an extinct settlement, with dates of AD 1330, and AD 200 for Onyoma I and AD 1335 for Onyoma II, Nzewunwa (1983). The finds shows that, the settlers had the knowledge and use of iron and were very religious. There was iron slag, a piece of iron stone, and a lump of iron, as proof of iron works; while minipots known as *tamunobele*, a terracotta human head and two pieces of chalk, provided evidence of religiosity. Writing on the topic, Food of the Spirit: Chalk Use in Nembe, Nigeria, Sumberg (1997) said "Chalk use is one of the most visible signs of indigenous religion…" She, quoting Chief Owolo James Yousuo (the then chief priest of *Ogidiga*, their national god) said, "The chalk (*itoru*) is the dress of the *juju* or *oru* (water spirits)…There is nothing more important than chalk in the life of the *juju*..." These are proofs of aspect of life of Onyoma Island.

A pertinent question that requires speculation is how to determine whether such early iron-working in Onyoma was due to diffusion from outside or was an indigenous invention. Okafor (1993) writing on the origin of the knowledge of iron in Nigeria said "Diop (1968) saw no reason why iron-smelting should not have been indigenously developed at this date. Rustad (1980:237) supported an indigenous origin because iron-smelting could not have come from Meroe and he thought an ultimate Carthaginian source unlikely". Ajayi and Alagoa (1980) had said "The Niger-Benue area would appear to be a major crossroads in the general spread of the technology of iron working…" They also added that "there was constant traffic on the Niger-Benue waterway and the creeks and

lagoons". It could be tentatively agreed that the technology of iron-smelting most have reached the Onyoma Island through the Niger-Benue from the Nok culture. The Island is surrounded by mangrove forest and there is no evidence of iron ores nearby.

All the above narration of Onyoma's past, present and possibly, much more yet to be said, are summed up in songs. But apart from songs during a wake-keep, the family in control of a burial ceremony, if given keen interest, could be of historical interest. For the reason that, the rite of *kubu soun bitee,* that is, presentation of wrapper to the deceased during the course of the wake-keep, is a proof that the presenter was a blood relation of the deceased. From the persons whose wrappers are presented and accepted, a historian closely working and taking notes will be able to use such records to reconstruct family ties and genealogies. The arrangement of the arena of the wake-keep is unique. There is a section reserved for the community chiefs' council. The chief of the war canoe house of the body lying in state, sits at the centre of the front row. Late into the night, this house chief would lead the other chiefs present, to a lavish entertainment. Also in the wake-keep arena, a section is reserved for *wari okosi ongu defiye* (family elders' table). The institution of *wari okosibo (*family elder), is well established and respected; *Okosibo*(singular), *okosiongu* (plural). The arm of *wari okosibo* is the third hierarchy of authority in the *omungu aru wari* (War Canoe House). The*Wari Alabo* (house chief) is the head and the *Alabo Palibo* (Deputy Chief), is the second-in-command. *Wari okosibo* (house elder) is selected and traditionally chalked to head a sub-family/unit of the house. In a single *omungu aru wari* (war canoe house) there could be appointed, selected or elected many *wari okosiongu*, according to the numbers of sub-families/units. The *wari okosiongu* are the silent event planners, also directing and carrying out rituals that are required to be performed. For instance, when it is time for *ikurusi tein* (the firing of cannon), the elders direct the firing, and would be done three times in the course of the wake-keeping: early evening, mid-night and early morning before 6.00 o'clock. Firing of cannon in Nembe, and indeed, in the Niger Delta, is a mode of traditional communication. Cannon shot taken in the evening transmit the message that someone has died and the commencement of burial rites. Another significant shot is the one taken after interment, informing that the deceased has finally been buried. Cannon shots are also rampart during *omungu aru dogu* (canoe regatta), which will be explained in subsequent paragraph. A further basic role of the *wari okosi ongu defiye* (family elders' table), would be to direct the sharing of native gin (*iru diye*) around the arena, three times in the night. All these events are observed scrupulously.

Another key event that a historian need to note before commencement of the wake-keep is the choosing of the *duwei alapu;* these are kinfolks, selected to remain separated and dedicated, throughout the days of mourning. Initially, two persons would be chosen first,

preferably, the eldest son, if the dead is a man, or eldest daughter, if the dead is a female; or any of the sons or daughters, as the case may be, could be selected to perform the expected rituals. Still, if no direct child is available or not willing to play the role, possibly due to the influence of modernity, or other reasons, a close relative from the maternal lineage would stand in. The requirement of a replacement for a close relative from the maternal family as chief, shows that matrilineal is the type of descent group in existence in Nembe. The practice of matrilineal inheritance is strong and ingrained in Nembe.

The chief mourner will sit on a chair, placed at the head of the deceased lying in state at the wake-keep. He or she would keep vigil throughout the night overseeing the body lying in state. This practice is a relic and symbolic of the belief system of the possibility of a departed spirit of the human being, returning to the body. This forms the religious belief and concept of the *osoin noin* (wake-keep) in Nembe.

Still, other stages of the burial procession yields data useful to trace traditions of origin and migration of founding families of communities. For instance, after *tiri paga,*but before interment, it would be ascertained whether the deceased could be taken to the sacred locations of *Ogiopolo tiri* (in Ogbolomabiri Nembe), *Opu polo tiri* (in Bassambiri Nembe). There are known founding ancestors that have been ritually adjudged purified, which qualified a deceased from those lineages, to be taken to these sacred locations. Deceased descendants from the ancestors who were adjudged impure and settlers are not taken to these sacred locations.

At the *tiri paga,* the head chief presents his burial rites first, followed by the other chiefs, sympathizers, and the different descent groups that trace relationship to the deceased. The descent groups would publicly make pronouncement explaining their link to the deceased, before presentation of their burial rites. Such extended families are noted and later bottles of the native gin (*ogogoro*) are given to such families in reciprocity. Nowadays, it could be monetized, instead of the *ogogoro*. The *tiri paga* is a stage when relatives and sympathizers lined up and give native gin (*ogogoro*), *alu wari* akisi *ikiba* (a yard of cloth), *fown ololo* (bottle of gun powder) and *gbana dibi ye* (amount of money) as burial rite to show their support and connection.

Another notable event is the *Duwei wari* (the deceased mourning house) which commence the next morning after interment and every morning throughout the mourning period. A cannon is fired to announce the commencement of *duwei wari,* taking place at the *okpu*. The *Okpu* are physical ancestral houses built for the veneration of founders of lineages.

Main while, in another section of the *okpu,* the burial rite continues in a different form. Other *alapu* (mourners) would be selected from other lineages to join the chief mourner. Through the selection of these mourners from the descent groups, family traditions of origin and ties are reenacted. Also, the younger generation would be able to know the bond with distant cousins.

These mourners live in the *okpu* throughout the period, which is three days for a man and four days for a woman. For kings and chiefs, their mourning days is seven days. For kings and chiefs, at the end of mourning, a date would be set aside for *omungo aru dogo,* (war canoe regatta), and *fiyai dee*, (traditional feast). *Omungo aru dogo* (war canoe regatta), is displayed as a reenactment of its naval or military role. The *omungo aru dogo* usually comes up in the morning and at a right tidal level. The *omungo aru*, while on voyage, stops at every waterfront owned by a war canoe chief and would be welcomed with cannon shots, and gifts of bottles of the native and foreign gin. A flag of a war canoe chief would be tied and cannon fired at the waterfront, beckoning the sailing war canoe regatta to stopover. Flags are tied upside down for war canoe regatta performed to mourn a late king or chief. It is tied upright, during celebrations for ascension to office or during coronation ceremonies. The *omungu aru, (*war canoe), would be so decorated colourfully. There would be a *gig*, (a small boat for advance party), preceded the *omungu aru*.

After the *omungo aru dogo* (war canoe regatta) in the morning, the traditional rites of *fiyai dee* (banquet, feasting), takes place in the evening. The feast is for chiefs duly registered with the Council of Chiefs. The process of a chief qualifying to be a member of the Council of Chiefs begins, first, by being chosen by his family. The traditional chalking (*itoru baamo)* would be done by the oldest family member (*wari okosibo*). But sub chiefs in the War Canoe Group of Houses receive chalking from the head chief of that Group. In the absence of a head chief, the oldest title holder among the chiefs in the Group of Houses, does the chalking. It was the custom for the oldest family member to chalk a chief, when chiefs were not so proliferated. From this moment, this newly chalked chief is referred to as *kori tiemo worio alabo* (chief-elect). He is only recognized as a chief within his family; so would not be accorded a chieftaincy burial, if he was not initiated into the Council of Chiefs. The chief-elect family need to present him and to received the *Amanyanabo's* (King's) *itori* (traditional chalk). Afterwards, he would be initiated into the Council of Chiefs in a colorful ceremony and would then on, be qualified as a chief, in the affairs of the community.

Omungu aru dogo and *fiyai dee* rites are only performed for deceased members who were fully initiated into the Council of Chiefs. These occasions symbolize royalty, nobility, reverence and pay tribute to a former office holder, a former commander of the fleet.

Nowadays, the *Omungu aru,* could be said to be a 'survival' of its original military or naval role. That is, the *Omungu Aru* is nolonger used for naval or military expeditions. Instead, it is reserved for ceremonies. Vansina (1968:108) explained that "A survival is a cultural fossil, an item which still exists but has lost its obvious role so that it either doesn't play a role any more or has acquired a secondary one."

The *Omungu aru* is now used as a ceremonial regatta, after the coronation and also, after the death of both an *Amanyanabo* (King) and *Omungu aru Wari Alabo* (War Canoe House Chief). The *doni* (traditional attire reserved only for Kings and members of the Council of Chiefs) would be the costume worn on such events. During coronation ceremonies, each chief wore any colour of his taste, adorned with varieties of beads. They would be arrayed in their finest robes and jewels, looking noble and majestic. However, all through a burial ceremony the chiefs wore black *doni* (traditional attire reserved only for Kings and members of the Council of Chiefs) during the *iworoko* and *tiri paga*. The black *doni* worn gave a picture of melancholy. Nonetheless, everything needed for the event, the *fiyai dee* (traditional banquet, buffet, feast,), would be sublimely and lavishly served.

Conclusion

Funerals in Nembe is assumingly more expensive than it used to be. The explanation given by Professor Okeke in an article the "Economics of Elaborate Funeral", tend to justify extravagance displayed in funerals. His points or reasons would silence critics who could only see the opulence in Nembe burials, particularly for chiefs. He said "funerals are occasions for both sobriety and jollity, for both melancholy and cheerfulness, for both weeping and dancing for both holiness and sinfulness... "This flamboyancy and lavishness, as he said, is not for the reason that the deceased relatives can afford it, but customarily, the members nucleus family of a deceased person are required to go extra length to ensure that the funeral is suitably celebrated. This practice is under evolutionary process and "bits" are being added every now and then, under the impact of globalization. Diasporas return with new ways to give uniqueness to funerals of parents and loved ones. Exotic drinks for instance, are mostly preferred, in place of the local gin, the *Ogogoro,* which is used for libation in such public functions.

Since funerals are contain much history, this paper recommends that heads of families should invite and work with historians to cover funeral ceremonies in Nembe. There are lots of the past of families, lineages, and communities to recover during funerals. Though, Carr (1961) said "History has been called an enormous jig-saw with a lot of missing parts". However, a historian will use such data collected to reconstruct their origin and migration. The stages in the funeral procession could give timelines that would enable the historian

trace events back to their most distant significant epochs in of history. The *Sekiapu* songs and drum beat, songs during *Iworoko* dance, the *tiripaga*, the sacred sites of *Ogio polo tiri, Opupolo tiri*, the *Okpu, Omungu aru* etc., are monuments of antiquity and require a multi-disciplinary approach of archaeologists, ethnographers and historians for veritable historical reconstruction.

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