

TRADITIONAL BURIAL RITES AND COSTOMS OF THE OGO NI PEOPLE (A CASE STUDY OF THE KONO PEOPLE OF RIVERS STATE)

Kenneth Yowika PhD

INTRODUCTION

The Ogoni's are indigenous people situated in the South-South region of Nigeria and they speak a language called the Khana language with a population of over 12 million people in this area. This area is made up of four local government areas namely Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme with some dissenting voices on Eleme as been part of Ogoni but that is for another discuss. The people of Ogoni are predominantly farmers and fishermen with land blessed with numerous mineral resources, most importantly crude that most people feel has done them more harm than good. This resources brought the agitation for their land to be developed with their God given wealth by the government of Nigeria after being abandoned by the government for several years, but rather than development, it brought them death. The Ogoni's lost their sons Ken Saro Wiwa, Barinem Kiobel, Edward Kobani, Albert Tombari Badey, Theophilus Orage, Samuel Orage and many others because of their agitation. This sad tale put the indigenous people of Ogoni on the world map with nations of the world pushing for the clean-up of the polluted area by crude oil and the exoneration of Ken Saro Wiwa and others.

With reference to this study we will narrow our write-up to Khana local government and to Kono community which is an enclave in Ken - Khana District in Ogoni it is situated on the coast and about 45 miles (72.4km) from Port Harcourt the capital of Rivers State. The tradition burial rites in Ogoni in general is similar in practice and have been adhered to since the settlement of the people In this region called the South-South and Kono community has not been left out from practice.

The people of Kono are said to have migrated from a place called Sii community in the Babbe region of Khana.¹ History posit that the people of Kono would have settled in their present location at about the 17th century with Gbene-akpana and family coming from Sii to farm in the now settled area now Kono and found the land to be fertile for planting. The now Kono community fertility attracted more inhabitants who joined Gbene-akpana to settle in this new found fertile land called Kono.

Expansion, growth, marriage, procreation and old age is sure to bring about death, which is a necessity of life that must come. This issue called death a compulsory end to man has brought us to do a study about the traditional burial rites and custom of safe passage to be with the ancestors on a higher plain.

THE BURIAL

When someone dies in kono especially when they are old, it is believed that they have gone to join the ancestral realm of the spirits to protect the living be it a male or a female but when it is a child it is believed that such a child will be reincarnated haven't completed his or her mission here on earth. The people of Kono have variation in the rites of passage for a first son (Saro) and a first daughter (Sira) this passage to the ancestral realm requires unique practices that will ensure safe passage to the spirits.

¹ Chief Monday Nwige Paramount Ruler Kono Community.

The practice for Chiefs or call them traditional rulers to be buried in Kono also has its practice and in this study we will avail readers with the various practices carried out by Kono community people in the transition of their people to the grate beyond.

THE BURIAL OF A FIRST SON (SARO) IN KONO COMMUNITY

When a first son dies in Kono, his death is announced to his immediate family by his own first son and wife and brief questions are required of them by the compound chiefs, who are made-up of other first sons of relatives of that family to know the course of death. Where the first son is also the compound Chief the next in command is informed after which the body is either embalmed or taken to the morgue for preservation by the next in line.

The family of the deceased led by the first son, head of the family (Te be) calls for a family meeting which is attended by male relatives of that family (gha-Wuga) and the first daughter of the compound (Sira be) of the family, where the relatives (gha-wuga) are officially briefed of the demise of the first born head of the family. The next in line will inform those relatives present (gha-wuga) that the body had been preserved to be set for burial after which a new date will be taken for the next meeting of the family. The next meeting of the family (kpagakpaga gha-wuga) will bring to the table the arrangements for the laying to rest the first son of the family. The family will enquire if the family of the deceased sons wife have been informed about their inlaws death, also if the traditional stool in the community has to be informed if not all such information should be passed immediately to avoid suspicion in the death of the deceased. The relatives (gha-wuga) in conjunction with the immediate family will also put in place burial place, grave, casket, deceased clothes and the area to lay the body in state it is also key that relatives (gha-wuga) as it is customary make enquiry (si wea bib nu) about the cause of death of their family member to know if the death was of a natural cause, or as a result of the deceased action or the hand of an evil person.² This action gives closure to the incident.

The third and final meeting to be called will be the one to dot the i's and cross the t's. where the leader of the family will enquire if all arrangements have been properly put in place to make sure there will be no embarrassing situation on the day of the funeral e.g payment for casket, ambulance, feeding, drinks and the grave area. With all these in place the die is cast.

THE FUNERAL PROPER

The said date set aside for the funeral comes with the early arrival of the deceased second son and relatives (pia gha- wuga) at the morgue or the funeral home where the body has been embalmed for identification and collection. The due fees are paid and the body is immediately released conveyed to the family compound to be received by the first son with family Elders sometimes with gun salute as the deceased was a first son, thereafter the body is conveyed to the deceased family house for lying in state.

Prior the lying in state at the home of the deceased a day old chick is tied to the head of the bed where the deceased is to be layed, it is believed that the spirit of the deceased is transferred to the chick and as long as that body lies in state the day old chick kept

² Mr. Leyira Nwiwuga. Member Kono Leadership Forum

there stays alive.³ At the lying in state the family is first allowed to view the corpse wife, children and relatives thereafter friends and well-wishers, at the end of viewing the corpse, an important traditional rite is performed which is by translation, is turning around the top of your hand (wop mee ba) the reason for this is that it is a rite of translation from the earth to the spirits to become an ancestor⁴ at the end of this by the Chiefs and elders, the male children are invited into the room where the body is been layed to bid the loved one bye for the last time they also seek protection of the children from the dead who is now believed to be an ancestor this does not involve any woman for it is expected that the men who represent the family have stood in for the family. At the conclusion of the transition and protective rite for the family, the body is placed in the casket and that day old chicken that was placed on the head of the bed dies because it is believed that the spirit of the dead has returned to the body of the deceased and is set for burial. The casket is brought to an open area where another traditional rite of dropping of cloth and money on the dead (Tere be le tere kpugi yor eei nee) is performed,⁵ various families come with money or cloth (George wrapper) as support for the family of the dead and the support is placed by the casket informing with a call of your name that you have buried the dead with the said amount you have placed.⁶ This is expected to be support to the bereave family.

The George wrappers are then taken and one piece is now collected and the energetic relatives are called upon for the rites to carry the coffin. The wrapper is thrown into the air and whosoever it falls on is selected to carry the coffin, this practice is done severally and about eight young men are selected with the first son of the deceased to handle the rite of directing the coffin (kon piri).⁷ Two energetic men carry the coffin on their head and immediately are possessed by the spirit of the dead with the first son directing with a life chicken in his hand (kor piri) will lead the casket to visit all loved ones of the family for the last time or may go to the house of the one that may had been suspected of having a hand in the death of the deceased and may decide not to leave except persuaded by chiefs after promising an enquiry.⁸ With the conclusion of this process the casket is now led back to the burial site where the body is immediately laid to rest after the grave side oration.

BURIAL RITES OF A FIRST DAUGHTER (SIRA)

The death of a first daughter is key to the family because she is seen as the galvaniser of the family. Sira is seen as the person who brings all desenting voices together to speak in one voice, so in her absence it is believed that they have lost the family unifier. First daughter (Sira) is always a (biaken) interpreted the left behind to take care of the larger family she is unmarried, this is the tradition in Kono. At her death the sons of the family are all informed and an immediate family meeting is called like in the situation of the first son, at the meeting a date is fixed for her burial by the family in conjunction with her children if she had. The tradition believes that whichever children given birth to

³ Chief John Yowika Mene Be Gbeneteegure

⁴ Elder Lucky Yobana

⁵ Elder Lucky Yobana

⁶ Mene Monday Nwige Paramount Ruler Kono Community

⁷ Eld. Leyira Nwiyuga Eld. Gbeneteegure Group of Houses

⁸ Elder Leyira Wiwuga.

by the biaken is owned by her fathers family since she was not traditionally married, no matter the status of the biological father of the child. The biological father of the child of a biaken has no hand in the rites of burial of the biaken, he is not even known to the family the children of that unsanctioned Union as seen by the family bear the first daughter's family name.

The various female meeting groups she belongs to are informed of her passing with soft drinks and biscuits and the date of burial given to them which signifies an invite to the burial. A second meeting is called where the first son head will request for final information on the steps taken so far to meet up with the date for the burial everybody will give a detailed run-down of how far they have gone and if anything is left to do. The first son also reaffirms the importance of the grave and casket if they have been taken care of. The first Son is supposed to be the one to take the first dig with a shovel on the spot for the grave and he will inform the family that he has also done that. The meeting groups that she belongs to are informed by the family of the demise of their member with drinks and biscuits which is by extension an invite attend the funeral of a fallen member. The burial date comes with the Son going with relatives (pia gha-wuga) to the embalment home where settlement is made with drinks and money for the collection of the corpse. The deceased is identified and taken home, at the family entrance the head of the compound (Te be) receives the corpse of their daughter and she is Immediately laid in state in a decorated room and various female groups she belongs to come to perform to bid her fairwell. Those groups perform with songs that will speak of what, the deceased had done for the community and the group itself as a form of aulogy. With the body laid in-state it affords the family, groups and friends to pay their last respect to the deceased and bid her good bye. Thereafter the body is brought outside where the act of putting out wrapper and money (Tere be le tere kpugi) is performed.⁹ This act is to assist the family with the money realised and also the wrappers are given to the bereave family. The casting of wrapper on who carries the casket immediately takes place and the moment that is done the casket is carried with the spirit of the dead possessing the carriers while the one directing the casket (Nee doo koon piri) with a swing of a life chicken on the casket commands for onward movement to final goodbyes to family and loved ones. The moment that is concluded the coffin is taken to its final burial site where the grave has been dug and after oration at the graveside the first daughter (Sira) is lowered and the grave covered.

THE BURIAL OF A CHILD MALE OR FEMALE

The burial of a child in Kono tradition is met with mixed reactions, it is almost kept in hiding because it is believed that children should bury their parents and not the other way round. When a child dies it is whispered and not announced openly because it is seen as a taboo. A child is a tabula rasa (blank slate) this term was made popular by a philosopher John Locke which says individuals are born without innate knowledge and their minds are blank.¹⁰ Children are expected to be alive because they have committed no evil therefore they should be living but when the unfortunate happens tradition must be adhered to. The death of a child male or female brings sorrow and pain and it is immediately kept away from the elderly in the family, the mother and father of the child

⁹ Elder Jack Yowika

¹⁰ John Locke

are not allowed to set their eyes on the deceased because it is expected that the child would have been the one to bury the parents and not them burying their child. A meeting of the young men is quickly called and the reason is for the immediate burial of the child. A deity (si wey bip nu) is immediately consulted to unravel the secret behind the death once that is done and it is of natural cause, an area is spotted and a the grave is dug and the child lowered and covered but if after enquiry the death is linked to anybody, such a person is summoned before the chiefs and elders to explain the reason for mysteriously taking the life of the child and if found guilty, such a person is burnished from the community and his evil act cleansed from the community.¹¹ The tradition also believes that reincarnation takes place mainly in situation involving children that are suddenly cut short as a result of evil deeds of wicked people, they return to stay-out the period that was cut shot by the hands of evil and this is made observed when they see physical traits of a new born exactly that of a child that died in the past e.g body marks or physical resemblance.

THE DEATH OF A TRADITIONAL RULER OR A CHIEF

The death of the traditional ruler (Te-ere- buen) or a chief in council (ka-baari- buen)is announced amid pomp and pageantry when the chief has come of age to the community with the traditional talking drum (Akere) passing the information to the entire community of the rulers demise.¹² The announcement is made to the chiefs Council if it is the death of the paramount ruler but if it is the death of a chief in council it is made to the paramount ruler and his chiefs in council by the immediate family. The paramount ruler will as a matter of urgency call for a brief meeting with the immediate family for proper traditional burial arrangement. The death of the paramount ruler is more complicated. The council will as a matter of urgency send emissaries to Sii which is the Kono ancestral home of origin after the immediate family may have informed the council of the passing of the chief, to inform them of the demise which will require some traditional rites to free the spirit of the paramount ruler from the thrown. Thereafter the chiefs return home and liaise with the family of a possible date for the funeral and some traditional rites are performed in the community too that remain sacrosanct. The traditional groups like the Society group (pia society) is informed of the death of the paramount ruler because he stands as the spiritual head of the group for them to begin to make preparations for his final passing to the spirits, all other traditional groups are informed of his passing and they prepare themselves for his final transition. The Khana Council of chiefs are also informed of his passing as a member of the Council, date of burial is given to them to prepare for the burial.

With a date fixed, the information goes round that on the burial day markets, fishing and farming will not take place as a mark of honour for the paramount ruler also no other burial will be fixed on that day of the burial of the paramount ruler. The funeral day comes with the full compliment of the youth, accompanied by some titled chiefs and family members who will go to the morgue for the identification and collection of the corpse. The body then enters the community through the community entrance path and is received by the council of chiefs and elders led by the mene zogor (chief of the section) of the community after which the corpse is taken to the traditional Palace for lying in state for the final view. At the point of final view in the room, a day old chick is placed at

¹¹ Elder Koki Nwikina

¹² Eld. Lemii Ekomtu

the head of the bed for transfer of the spirit of the dead ruler from the corpse to the day old chick then the family is invited to first view the corpse, led by the first son (Saro), thereafter the council of chiefs at all levels, community members and visitors soon after the males in the family are invited for (wop mee ba) the traditional ritual of transfer the corpse of the dead ruler to the spirits now as an ancestor. While these rights that are above the knowledge of most visitors are in progress, traditional masquerades will be performing saying there farewell to the Te-ere-bue of the community.

SATURDAY THE ACTUAL BURIAL DAY

The day comes with the suspension of all other traditional or communal activities like fishing, farming, selling and hunting even marriages as a mark of honour to the late Te-ere-buen. Canon shots are heard in the community to show that something serious is going on in the community while various groups are richly dressed and performing in the town. At noon the chief priest returns to the bed side of the corpse to perform rituals of transfer of spirit of the dead from the day old chick back to the corpse as it is been prepared for final resting. As this process commences the first son and other sons of the family will be accompanied by council chiefs (Kabaari's) into the room to view the rites of final passage of the chief. Immediately after the transfer of the spirit of the dead back to the corpse the body is now lifted back to the casket and shut and brought to the open for the rite of support for the family of the dead (tere-kpugi le tere-be). This is where various families come forward to support the bereaved family mainly with money or traditional George wrapper to bid farewell. When this is concluded, it will now be time for carrying of casket with the control with a chicken (tora akpo le koon piri) where George wrappers are thrown into the air after all eligible males of the family are assembled, whoever it drops on is made to carry the casket. Three males are made to carry the casket they maybe more at a particular time depending on the distance to be covered by the man who leads the casket with the chicken (Nee doo koon piri) and the spirit of the dead who is now believed to be an ancestor leads the casket through the man leading the casket with the chicken and those carrying the casket.¹³ The train visits family members for the last time before the casket is led by the spirit to the final burial place. At the burial place the casket is laid in a six fifth dug grave and covered with sand and later with cement as it is laid to rest. The room where the body was laid is left dressed for the next seven days as people still come to mourn with the family and as they do so, they still eat and drink until the seven days after burial elapses.

BENEFIT TO EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

The study of Kono traditional burial rites brings back to focus lost traditional burial rites and believes not known to the present generation of Ogoni youths kono in particular and those that have been erased as a result of lack of passage of oral traditional beliefs as a result distorted history. It is said that history is the study of the past, present and future and if this is believed to be true there will be no co-relation between the past and the future without this history.

History is not just a collection of facts, but an "unending dialogue between the present and the past," a continuous process where the historian interprets past events through the lens of their own time, making history inherently subjective yet purposeful, driven by

¹³ Chief Bestman Johnmiller.

present concerns and aimed at understanding human progress. He argued that historical facts are selected and given meaning by historians, who must acknowledge their own biases and societal context, challenging the idea of pure objectivity.¹⁴ This study will awaken lost and forgotten history of the rites of burial for the Ogoni people Kono in particular. This fear and respect for traditional beliefs that had been erased by time will now be remembered and possibly reintroduced into society and practiced again as a result of recent findings from this work.

This will further give a clearer understanding of the historical origin of the Ogoni people and the Kono people in particular as they use tradition, culture and beliefs systems to trace similar traditions and practices of other indigenous people.

CONCLUSION

History must be practiced as People's way of life in all spheres of life and study be is science or acts related without it there cannot be continuity and development in anything been practiced by man in the society. More attention should be given to the study of history as a compulsory in the primary, secondary and tertiary educational system.

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¹⁴ E. H Carr.