

FUNERAL RITES OF THE EJAGHAM PEOPLE IN CROSS RIVER STATE: AN APPRAISAL OF AKAMKPA LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

The rite of passage from the present world to the world of the ancestors (Okibansi), is practiced by most cultures in Cross River State including the Ejagham people. It exposes and explains their world view and tells why an Ejagham man or woman cherishes being buried with much pomps and celebrities. The pomps and celebrities are expressions of their belief in life after death. The method used in gathering data for this work is participant-observer method. The central theory in this work is the historical approach of Frank Boaz. The researcher decided to use the historical approach because, the people's culture is unique for it has sustained them over the centuries. It concludes by portraying Ejagham people as being still in touch with the past in order to appraise the present and work for a better future that will see them in the company of ancestors (Akibansi). This paper focuses on how the Ejagham people see death. This is unraveled by the use of affectionate phrases to express a relationship that cannot be broken even after death. This paper discusses burial rites among the Ejagham people of Cross River State.

KEY WORDS: Ejagham Funeral Rites, Appraisal of Ejagham Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The belief in the supernatural qualities of the corpse (Nnkuh) or the concept of "living corpse" (Mkpohakpoha) in Ejahamland is prompted by affection (Okord) or reverence (efup na ejik). In Akamkpa, funerals (Ekuh) are moments that members of the family (Nju) and the community (Mfam) express that love and affection they have for the deceased (Mkpohakpoha). Funerals are means of expressing concern for other members of the horde (ekid) and a liking for them that continues after death.

There is great importance attached to the religiosity of the ancestors (Akibansi) which the departed member of the community becomes at death. The belief is that, every departed member of the community goes to the country of the dead (okibansi) at death to join other members. Since Ejagham people believe that the country of the dead is where Obasi Nsi (god of the earth) who make what they plant grow and ripens reigns, the conclusion is that, Okibansi (Country of the dead) is for the righteous. Hence the non consideration of the moral state of the deceased which they believe is taken care of by the funeral rite. That is why even rain makers (Nkaha mbuta), (Nne-njom) na (Menga ajom) juju and medicine men are equally buried with the same affection.

According to Ntufam Ojong Ntuigim, "we shall one day become ancestors." At death, the deceased now an ancestor in union with "Obasi Nsi" (god of the earth), control the affairs of men in the community (Mfam).

At death, the deceased, now an ancestor in union with "Obasi Nsi" (god of the earth) control the affairs of men in the community (Mfam). I put it that the spiritual control the physical than vice-versa.

It is on grounds of the above that the Akamkpa people have different funeral rites to give each departed

person the respect due to him or her. The funeral rites depend on the status of the deceased person, and overlaps from person to person. The rites are used mostly for the following:

- (1) Ekuh Ntufam – Funeral rite for the village head
- (2) Ekuh Iyamba – Funeral rite for the supreme head over the "Mgba" (Leopard society).
- (3) Ekuh Nne- Mgbe – Funeral rite for a full member of the "Mgbe." (Leopard society)
- (4) Ekuh Nne – num na Nne- Nkae – Funeral rite for an elderly man or an elderly woman.
- (5) Ekuh Mmone – Funeral rite for a child
- (6) Ekuh Nnjen- Funeral rite for a stranger whose native home is not known.
- (7) Ekuh Nsung – Funeral rite for a slave. Of note is the fact that, the type of sickness that leads to your death determines the funeral rite to be used.

In this work, we shall describe the funeral rites used during burials in Akamkpa Local Government Area of Cross River State. We shall look as the world view of the people and explain the link between their world view and their funeral rites.

2. ORIGIN OF THE EJAGHAM PEOPLE

The term "Ejagham" is believed to be surrounded by facts and stories that refer to many meanings. "Ijagham" bears a strong affinity with the word "Ejagham". Lake Ijagham is the sacred lake of Ejagham people situated at southern Cameroon. Ijagham or Totem see, as the Germans have named it, is supposed to be haunted by the ghosts of dead and gone Ejagham people. It lies at the centre circle of thirteen salt springs with its own water beautifully clear and sweet. The thirteen salt springs served the Ejagham

communities before their further migrations (Talbot 1912). Ntufam Ndifon Attah explains that "Ejagham" is derived from the combination of three words: "Ekub" (a whole or parcel), "Ejag" (is split or broken), "Haam" (it is going infinite or without end). Put together then, Ejagham stands for that unified whole or parcel that was originally one but is now broken into pieces and is forging for reunification. This refers to the first break away of the other tribes (in Nigeria, Cameroon, Uganda, South Africa etc.) that migrated from the historical Bantu. It further refers to the reunification of the Ejagham speaking communities in Ikom LGA, Etung LGA, Quas of the present Calabar and its environs, Ishibor in Ogoja and almost the entire south Eastern Cameroons among others. On the spread of Ejagham people Thompson (1974) adds that Ejagham... dominate the Cross River Valley, from its origin at the confluence of the Mainyu and Bali in Cameroon, to its junction with the sea near Calabar. He further adds that the members of this civilization are famed for powers of ritual expression. Thompson further states that the Mbembe of the lower Cross River esteem them for their ritual prowess, with new cults repeatedly disseminated from their region. The neighbouring Yako are, likewise proud of their Nkpe cult: The (Ejagham) origin of the cult lends great credence to its power, for the Ejagham people are credited with remarkable magic powers and the control of most powerful spirits. The mgbe is central in Ejagham funeral rites, for its spiritual, social, political cultural and economic roles in the land.

For Talbot (1912), that the Ejagham people are believed to be mainly of the Bantu stock is shown by their language and the shape of their heads. They were probably among the first of the races so formed, to split off from the parent stem and seem to have come straight from the low end of the Nile valley. This is evident in their NSIBIDI writing which recalls traces of the earliest Egyptian hieroglyphics. Central to Ejagham funeral rites are the Mgbe (Leopard) institution and its Nsibidi writing. Onoh (1994) correlates Talbot's explanation of Ejagham by saying that the term Ejagham is derived from "Ijagham", a sacred lake believed to be

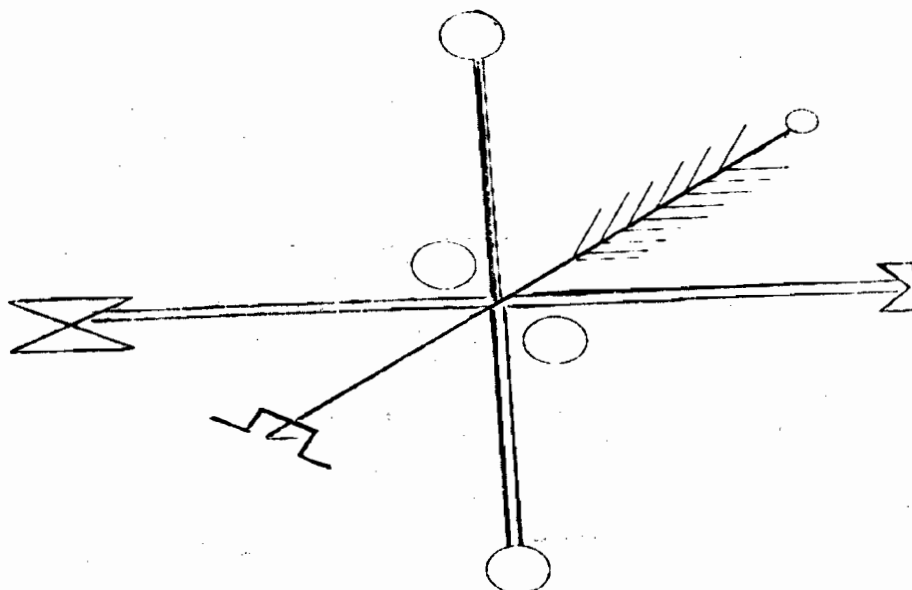
the cradle of Ejagham people. Other factors that may have caused migration of the Ejagham people from Bantu to Cameroon and Nigeria include wars and the search for edible salt. The salt springs which occur around the sacred Lake Ijagham and other parts of Ejagham land, some indeed quite near Oban station, were possibly a determining factor in the final settlement as the need for salt was strong among all tribes. Talbot (1912) opined.

Religion:

Religion is the heart and soul of the Ejagham people. Without mincing words, I dare say that the entire social, political, cultural economic and psychological life of the people is hard to analyse without religion at the centre.

The principle features in Ejagham religion are the cults of Ancestors and nature forces. Ancestors (Akibansi) Worship, Nature jujus (ajom) secret societies (Nkum), the principal events in life (Ojimi) and the commonest actions of the day all blend inextricably in the complicated ritual, (Talbot 1912).

Of actual Deities there are only two, Obasi Osaw (sky God), and Obasi Nsi (earth God), but of the less powerful Genii of trees, lakes, rocks and rivers, there are countless hordes. For the Ejagham people, the whole bush is peopled with these supernatural beings. Here, more truly even than in old Greece, the terror of Pan reigns supreme, says Talbot (1912). The belief is that they are created both by Obasi Osaw (sky God) and Obasi Nsi (Earth God). Obasi Osaw is father and Obasi Nsi is mother. The two are expressed in bird and tree worship as every small town has its "juju" tree with weaver birds inhabiting the tree. Talbot made an attempt at explaining this when he talked about the peoples myth on the wedding of earth and sky. Sky father and earth mother – for of all created things the bird is most to air and sky, while the tree, with its roots in the dark ground, reaching even, as in many Northern sagas, to the neither world is the best oldest personification of mother earth.



Picture from Tailbot's in the Shadow of the Bush (1912).

This is Ejagham cult of the double-ax which prevailed also in Egypt during certain dynasties where a knobbed scepter was used together as symbol of a deity. The above drawing represents the joint worship of sky – father and an earth-mother. The former descends from above when the lightning flashes down, and leaves his weapon as a tangible token of himself. The latter ascends from below when vegetation springs up, and at the same early epoch, gives visible proof of her presence in the sacred tree. In the above representation, the cleft base of the axe may well be a highly conventionalized remnant of pillar or tree, while the feather, now that of the peacock sacred to Mgbes societies (Leopard societies) is a bird symbol. The two circles may well be meant for eggs, and therefore as indications of fertility. It is easy to discern from the above that Obasi Osaw has the attributes of masculinity while Obasi Nsi that of femininity, for whenever we make offerings we were taught to say "Nta Obasi (Lord Obasi) and Nna Obasi (Lady Obasi). Lord is Osaw, and the Lady Nsi. Surely Nsi must be a woman, and mother for it is well known to all people that a woman has the tenderest heart.

On the whole, the Ejagham religion takes into account, the minutest of the created universe and with a degree of reverence in accordance with the activities of each in Ejagham Pantheon.

Thompson (1974) calls them spiritual colleague to the Greeks. The Ejagham people like the Greeks have a pantheon of gods. This is evident in their traditional writing system (Nsibidi) which according to Thompson predates western penetration of the area by several centuries, essentially functioned on two communicative levels, sacred and profane. Example is basalt monoliths of the Nnam and neighbouring Ejagham groups. Since these separated the world of sacred and profane it is evident that the Ejagham people like the Aborigines of Australia, are a people bonded by their religion that controls their daily affairs and serves as a guide to the type of burial rite they model their life towards.

World-view:

The Ejagham people have a puzzling world view. As earlier stated it is difficult to describe Ejagham people without their religion for religion permeates every facet of their life here and here after. Of note is the concern of the Ejagham people for life with the ancestors (akibanasi). Relationship with a fellow member of the community is based on the belief that the ancestors (akibansi), Anim (Nemesis) are watching. Commerce and trade can but provide what is just for the parties engaged in them. Land boundary is guided by the spirits of the ancestors, so you do not shift boundaries, else you swell up and die a shameful death without proper burial. Both gods, spirits, ancestors and Anim (Nemesis in plural) control the affairs of the people in the community. This makes for a functional just and egalitarian community that continues here after, apart from keeping the people together

Social Reality:

The social life of the members of the community centres around these deities and personages. For a

good harvest, safe delivery, safe journey, good luck in hunting, power to win at event of war, success in business etc. one or few deities have a hand to play. Because life in the community is a form of preparation for a life with the "living-dead", ill-will against a member of the community is punished mercilessly. For instance, raising of matchet during quarrel is a taboo as this could lead to "ichoe" (unintentional action prompted by evil spirits that lead to the infliction of injury). Quarrels (okponge) at night is a distraction of the peace of the community and attracts a fine by the chiefs (atuofam).

The entire community's social, economic, political and religious life centres around the belief system of the people. They all surrender their lives to ancestors, nature spirits, Anim, Obasi Nsi and Obasi Osaw.

Death:

A Typical Ejagham prayer at an occasion, say marriage runs thus: "Give him children, may he see his children children, until he gathers sticks to go to toilet." The belief is that children come from the agreement between the gods, spirits, Anim (Nemesis) and ancestors. Children come to replace departed members of the community. There is a sense of reincarnation here. The newly wedded couple are expected to live till the day they are called to join the ancestors. The expression "till he gathers sticks to go to the toilet" has this story surrounding it. In those days, Ejagham people do not die. One lives to a ripe old age and when the time for departure to join the ancestors comes, he/she calls the family together, shares his / her property and gives them pieces of advice. On a cool afternoon when all are in the farms, he / she gathers his/ her sticks and fends to go to toilet. There he remains and disappears to join the ancestors. This however, was a privilege reserved for very very good, honest, truthful and peaceful members of the community. Example was Okpong Okare of Nsan village in Akamkpa Local Government Area.

Ordinarily, when one lives a normal life and grows old, it is expected by Ejagham people that there will be a funeral for the elderly man or woman or a member of one of the societies in the community.

When somebody is sick, members of the immediate family, men and women diagnose the sickness and try their own known medication on the ailment. If the sick person continues to show serious "sick roles" then a diviner (Mbug-ebu) is consulted to know the cause of the sickness. All this is done in secret for fear witches and wizards come to know about the sickness and inflict or hasten death.

As the sickness proiongs, close relations stay close to take care Mbiti (1969) puts it thus in his study of the Ndebele which is akin to some degree that of the Ejagham people. When a person falls seriously ill, relatives watch by his /her bedside. These relatives must include at least one brother and the eldest son (and a sister) of the sick man, because the two or three are the ones who investigate the cause of the illness, which is generally magic bewitchment or the gods, and take preventive measures against it as prescribed by the "Mbugebu (diviner). Normally ancestors, gods and spirits are appeased through sacrifices to avert the death of the relative. This out pouring of affection on a sick relative shows itself further in the care given to the sick person's children and wife. At a point, when the relation notices

to pass through excruciating pain and suffering, the relative begin to call on the ancestors to take him/ her home. Eventually the person dies. In Ejagham tradition, corpses are neither embalmed nor kept beyond twenty-four hours. The reason is simple. As you came so shall you return. Immediately one expires, the relations give him or her a bath and dress him/her up before announcing his /her departure to the world of the dead with a cry.

The funeral rite somehow begins here, but it will be treated in detail under a separate heading (funeral rites). The grave is dug by young men in the community and the body is disposed of according to the person's status in the community. Details are in the rites. This is done amid prayers, incantations, songs, curses of suspected killers, and praises on the deceased on his or her area of prowess.

3. FUNERAL RITES AMONG AKAMKPA PEOPLE OF CROSS RIVER STATE.

When we talk about Akampka people, we are referring to the people occupying the geographical area lying between Odukpani, Akpabuyo, Calabar Municipality, Biase, Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River State and Afikpo in Abia State, with an estimated land mass of 9900 square kilometers.

The language predominantly spoken by the people is Ejagham language. When we use the terms, "Akamkpa people" or "Ejagham people", we are referring to the same people.

We enumerated the different funeral rites used by the Ejagham people, but for the purpose of this work, we shall discuss the funeral rite for a full member of the "Mgbe" (Leopard Society).

Ekuh (Burial) in Ejagham is a transition rather than annihilation. This is why there is no embalment. This is mainly from the fact that life continues after this one on earth. What leads to this belief is the belief in the existence of a village or community for the departed (Mfam Akibansi). Probably it is the mystery of human existence that leads to this belief or desire to continue living.

Okini or bidding the departed farewell to the other "village" or "Community" is an interesting rite.

The first step is during the time of ill health or sickness. While a member of the community is sick all work is done by immediate members of the family. During this time of sickness, there is neither farming nor hunting as the case may be, so the family is starving. Whosoever goes to the farm on return, gives a little thing as a mark of solidarity and good will for the sick to get well soon so as to join in farming, fishing or hunting for the continued survival of the family and the community. The belief in doing this is that, the gods, spirits, ancestors, nemesis, will be well disposed towards the good spirit exhibited by fellow members of the community, and respond favorable when one offers sacrifice for any purpose. Uttering words like "kpin-o-o" (live o o), they wish the sick person life because of his or her kith and kin. The belief here is that, there is a continuation of another form of existence. One must complete the one here first before going to join the ancestors.

Akpoh (He or She is dead)

At the last breath, the first word that is heard is "Akpoh" meaning he or she is dead. This is usually

accompanied by bathing and dressing (ayip eyumum na eturum). The reason for the bathing and dressing is purely hygienic. When this is done, then follows an outcry either from the children or the eldest relation to the departed. "Aba m - o o" which means come to my help o o. At this the community is alert and those around come to the affected family. Crying and rolling on the ground continues.

Burial:

Since it is against Ejagham custom to keep a corpse (Nkuh) beyond twenty four hours after expiry, the body is disposed of after the grave is dug through the night. Like what seems like a short rite, the women will all sit round the corpse crying and wailing "ejen tebere" (safe journey); "chong - - o-o" (Adieu); "Katan mba - o" (don't miss your way); "Kayini abon - o" (don't forget your children); Kayini nju -o (don't forget the family); 'Kayini mfam eya - o" (don't forget your community). If it is a young person or in an event of sudden death, the language changes. "Kakam - o (Don't let it down or fight those who kill you); "Yigi eyonge" (retaliate); "Ko abo erong" (take them also to where you are going). It is on the last reasons above that a knife or razor or any weapon is included in the coffin.

While the young men are digging the grave (oyim esimim), the men are doing the supervision. At completion, the men and a selected few, enter the room where the corpse is kept and give directives on what is to be done. This is a stage where the departed member of the society is about to be sent to the home of the ancestors. The corpse is carefully placed in the coffin. His or her best clothes and other belongings are included. The belief here is so that life over there will be comfortable or at least less burdensome. The inclusion of the said items will make the departed less dependent on other at "mfam akibansi" (village or country of the dead). The coffin is now led in a solemn procession to the grave. After lowering the coffin into the grave, the grave is covered and a heap of red earth must be made. This is in preparation for the next stage in the rite of burial.

Nsi Oyim Etughum (Removal of the Red Earth Mound)

Usually this takes place for every member who reaches the age of twelve and above, only infants and children are exempt because they have not yet been initiated and integrated into the community's life. These only came to see the world as it is and return. Since they have not been integrated members of the community by being formally initiated into the age grading system or other social and cultural clubs of the community, they are not truly and properly speaking members of that community who deserve funeral rites like adults.

Nsi Oyim Etughum (removal of the red earth mound) usually takes place within a period of fourteen and twenty one days, after you may have arrived at "mfam akibansi" (village or country of the dead).

Ekpa Ekuh / Nju Eku (mat spreading / mourning House)

Right from the day a member of the community transits to the other country mat for women mourners is spread and members of the community gather in the afflicted compound especially women to condole and

console members of the family and in the words of Malinowski, to tell death that it cannot make them sad, it cannot scatter their community. The period of mourning at this interim level is between twelve and twenty one days.

The immediate members of the afflicted family are helped by members of the community in virtually everything ranging from water fetching, wood hewing, collection of food stuff from the farms etc. Even the cooking is done by members of the community. Within these fourteen to twenty one days, food and drinks for the period of mourning comes mainly from other families. This stage in the funeral rite ends with the head of the bereaved family notifying the chiefs of the community of the family's intention to fold the mats in the mourning house (efirm ekpa ekuh). This however is not the last rite. This is just to allow the family prepare for the elaborate funeral rite which is knittly tied to the statue of the departed member either as member of the community women (Ekpa anakae) or the men (mgbe) the Leopard society. The last rite is that of Ekuh eyimim.

Ekuh Eyimim (The grand funeral)

At this grand funeral, the eldest in the family of the departed informs the chiefs of the community on the plan of the family to bid their dear one fare well. The family in conjunction with the elders of the community agree on the time (season – rainy or dry season) and take into consideration communal events. Let it be noted that informing the elders of the community is usually done by presenting some items as prescribed by traditional law and custom.

On agreement on the time, it behoves the family and the community to send message to the neighbouring communities on the intention of the family and the community to bid their departed one farewell or to do him or her last homage. It usually spans through days and under normal circumstances during week ends. Generally, it is done under three days. Eves to the first day visitors begin to arrive through the different entrances into the community. As you arrive you sound a note of your presence by an outcry in these or similar words: "mma aji –o-o-" (Mother is gone – o - o) "papa aji – o - o (father is gone o-o). Ere eyim nan e-e-e" (what shall we do e-e-e?). With this notifying of the arrival of a visitor some members of the mourning community will approach the wailing visitor. Should they delay in approaching him he begins to ask for somebody to do so by saying "Nne chang nyo atanga m-e-e-e." (is there one here to stop me from crying?) One or two persons do so, and the visiting mourner enters the mourning community. He / she is free to enter any household and stay till the period of funeral is over.

Mgbe Abe (Leopard Rites – Disappearance of the Leopard)

Since we are treating the funeral rites for a full member of the "mgbe" (Leopard Society), let us look at the three days rite of "Mgbe" (Leopard).

The Mgbe bell sounds the evening of the first day and Mgbe hums signifying the disappearance of the Mgbe. With his disappearance, he needs to be brought into the "Ocham Mbge" (house of the Leopard). The meaning of this is that, Mgbe is equally sad that a member is lost, so he is lost too. Until the Mgbe is convinced that, the departed is alive before he returns to

his house. Beside the above explanation the disappearance of Mgbe, signifies the seeming dislocation in the unity of the community because of the disappearance of a member who was a part of the bond of unity. It take almost a whole night to catch the Leopard. When the Mgbe is caught and brought into his house (Ocham Mgne) other rites follow. Some are reserved for initiates only.

Mgbe Display

The most conspicuous and colourful rite is the display of the different 'Ogbe' (the plural form of Mgbe). The songs used depict unity, community fellow-feeling etc. sample: 'Ebonko Njag erom" (repeat four time). (Ebonko – an arm of Mgbe that calls for unity among members is here portrayed as a concerned traveler). The idea here is that, at the death of a member of this society, Ebonko must fulfill this demand of making sure he is there to show the mourning community a sense of concern and to bid a member farewell.

After the Ogbe display, it is believed that the departed member has journeyed safely and arrived amid poms and celebrities among the Akinbansi (ancestors).

Ekpa Anaka (Literally translated as Met for Women)

Every woman at age of maturity must be initiated or inducted into it. At death, a member is equally treated as the men folk do. Though the elders take decisions on what is to be done on the night of the Ekpa Anakae, it is the women who carry out this funeral rite. Being a feminine group, the outcry is that of "Nyen Uma – o- o" meaning my mother o – o). Ekpa is shrouded in secrecy like the Mgbe. Only initiates are the ones who are permitted to be in attendance as they bid their member farewell. However, some aspects like that of dancing round the community and sounding gongs is witnessed by all. The gongs are like the Christian knell to direct the member the way to her home. Both ceremonies end with cooking food and buying drinks to notify the community and guests especially chiefs that, the mourner is satisfied with the way and manner the mother, father, sister, brother is given farewell by the family and the community. The general belief is that he or she is at ease, with the ancestors. "Nyen Okini Okara Mkpohakpoha oreng" (a good funeral gives the departed person peace over there). For that reason, one must be properly buried.

4. CONCLUSION

What guides the people in their rites is their world view. Ejagham people have been using the above rites over the centuries and it keeps them together. It makes them unique. However, contact with other cultures especially the Christian culture, is influencing their rites.

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