

## Research Report

# Second funeral rituals and integration of the dead with the living among the Nawfia of Southeastern Nigeria

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**Abstract** - This study explores the second funeral rituals practiced among the Nawfia of Southeastern Nigeria and their integration of the dead with the living. Second funerals are traditionally conducted by the Nawfia to honor and celebrate the lives of their deceased family members. Through detailed ethnographic interviews and focus group discussion (FGD), this research examines the customs, practices, and beliefs related to second funeral rituals and the integration of the dead with the living. The study reveals that second funerals are seen as an important part of the grieving process and are conducted to provide closure to the grieving family members. Findings of this study also reveals that the rituals often involve the preparation of a special meal and libation and blessings. Additionally, participants discuss the idea that the dead can “witness” these rituals from the spirit realm and that these rituals serve as a source of comfort for grieving family members. The study further explores the ways in which these rituals serve to integrate the dead with the living. Reports show that these rituals help to bridge the gap between the physical world and the spirit world, allowing for a closer connection between those who have passed and those who remain. The study also suggest that the rituals create a sense of security, as they provide a sense of continuity and hope for the future. Overall, this study provides important insights into the second funeral rituals and the integration of the dead with the living among the Nawfia of Southeastern Nigeria. This research highlights the importance of these rituals and sheds light on the traditions, customs, and beliefs associated with them. It also offers valuable implications for both grief counseling and the preservation of cultural heritage.

**Key words:** second funeral, funeral rituals, second funeral rites and integration of the dead with the living, Nawfia, Southeastern Nigeria.

## Introduction

Recent studies suggest that hasty funerals (as witnessed during the Covid-19 era) have implications on mortuary ritual processes: these include but not limited to psychological, social and religious. These studies note the importance of funeral rites in social and psychological wellbeing of members of the society (Adu *et al.* 2023; Ba-an *et al.* 2023).

Vu Hong Van study among the Vietnamese shows that funeral rites are performed to show respect for the dead family member. His study also emphasized the spiritual and social connotation of funeral rites. According to the study, funeral customs embody the complexity of beliefs and practices used by a culture to honor and respect the dead (Van 2021).

Further studies emphasize the spiritual complexities of funeral rites. For instance, Mukuka's study on a Zambian society, Mwami, shows that there is the belief that when people die, they enter into a new relationship with the living. Consequently, great care is always taken to ensure peace and harmony with the ancestors. A proper burial, following the traditions of the ancestors, is necessary in order to avoid trouble in the family and community. Hence, funeral rituals are required to be performed in the proscribed way to appease the spirits. The study notes that when funeral rituals are ignored, people believe that the dead will come back as ghosts to torment the family and the community. Besides, they also believe that failure to perform the required death rituals could also cause mental sickness and mysterious deaths among the family members (Mukuka 2021).

Among the Akans of Ghana, mortuary rituals are seen as high in importance (Adom 2022). The study records that mortuary rites are performed in varying forms, depending on the status, and nature of death. This includes how successful the deceased is, or the age attained. There is also recognition of gradation in mortuary rites among the Nawfia (Ugwu 2021) and the Nabdam of Frafra subgroupings in Northern Ghana (Ba-an *et al.* 2023). In Northern Ghana, funeral practices among the people of Nabdam varies with regard to the status of the deceased. Funeral practices are very elaborate for older persons. Men are buried facing east, while women face west, according to the depictions. Males are facing toward the rising sun, while females face toward the setting sun. The ceremonies allow the living to demonstrate their appreciation for the dead by bringing them food and performing dances.

On another development, studies demonstrate that West African's funeral rites is centered on the belief that it is a means of cementing unity between the ancestors and the living, and to receive spiritual gifts (Park 2020; Ba-an *et al.* 2023). These studies reveal the importance and complexities of mortuary rituals.

Funerals rites are part of cultural practices which serve different purposes in different societies. However, little is known empirically about why Nawfia performs second funeral rites. In line with the foregoing, this study sets out to understand why second funeral rite is performed among the Nawfia of Southeastern Nigeria.

## Literature review

Death related behaviours are crucial issues to many of the central theoretical development in anthropology since its beginning (Borgatta & Borgatta 1992:413). Positions regarding death have always been closely related to anthropology of social life. Anthropology has never been able to study humans seriously without considering the essential fact of their mortality. Geertz (1977) noted that this is because death and its rituals not only reflect social values, but are important forces in shaping them.

The undeniable and often noted universality of death suggest the attractive possibility of an uncomplicated panhuman explanation of funeral rites and death related behavior. Anthropologists have often stressed a certain “psychic unity of mankind”, so postulating that whatever different beliefs people have, whatever different types of societies or environment they inhabit, they nonetheless share the same type of emotion and cognitive qualities (Hurtington & Metcalf 1979).

According to Borgatta & Borgatta (1992:413), death is typically viewed as a transition, as a “rite de passage”. It is a transition from one life to another life. Death is a personal event that man cannot describe for himself. As far back as we can tell man has been both intrigued by death and fearful of it; he has been motivated to seek answers to the mystery and solution to his anxiety. Borgatta & Borgatta (1992:413) noted also that every known culture has provided some answers to the meaning of death; for death, like birth or marriage, is universally regarded as a socially significant event, set off by ritual and supported by institutions. It is the final rite “de passage” (Riley 1968). As final rite of passage, it means that the cycle of life is over. But is this actually final cycle? What

about those who go to heaven or hell in some religious doctrines. What about those who join their ancestors? Noteworthy is that in each of the above, another cycle of life is established with new roles also. For me it is a liminal phase for the joining of ancestors where the whole life cycle starts again but in a different reality. [Riley \(1968\)](#), also noted that the meanings which have been attached to death in most cultures include beliefs in some kind of existence after death; most people – save the non-literate – have entertained theories of personal salvation; and religion, philosophy, and political ideology have provided some answers to man's quest for the meaning of death.

Death is a transition. But it is only the last in a long chain of transitions. In [Hertz's](#) view ([1960](#)), the moment of death is related not only to the process of afterlife, but also to the process of living, aging and producing pregnancy. Death relates to life: to the recent life of the deceased and to the life he or she has procreated and now left behind.

### **Funerals and funeral rituals**

Death is a universal phenomenon. Yet it evokes incredible varieties of responses. [Van Genep \(1960\)](#) recounted that of the rites of passage, funerals are most strongly associated with symbols that express the core of life values sacred to the society in question. This rite of passage follows a standardized pattern in different societies.

[Kottak \(2008\)](#) recorded that Americans regard expensive weddings as more socially appropriate than lavish funeral, however the Bestileo of Madagascar takes the opposite view. The marriage ceremony is a minor event that brings together just the couple and a few close relatives. However, a funeral is a measure of the deceased person's social position and lifetime achievements, and it may attract a thousand people ([Kottak 2008](#)).

Corpses of human persons are either burnt or buried, with or without animals or human sacrifices. They are either preserved by smoking, embalming, ritually exposed as carrions, simply abandoned, or they are dismembered, and treated in a variety of these ways ([Huntington & Metcalf 1979](#)). [Wilford \(2004\)](#) described the archaeological excavations that proved ancient Egyptian practice burying a deceased pharaoh with a number of companions to serve him in the afterlife. This diversity of cultural reactions in the opinion of [Huntington & Metcalf \(1979\)](#) is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; always it is symbolic, and in a number of cases, expensive.

## Theoretical perspective

Functionalism acknowledges cultural relativism and human diversity. Functionalism was presented as a reaction against what was believed to be outdated ideologies. It was an attempt to move away from the evolutionism and diffusionism that dominated American and British anthropology at the turn of the century (Ezeh 2010). Functionalists presented their theoretical and methodological approach as an attempt to expand sociocultural inquiry beyond the bounds of the evolutionary conception of social history. The evolutionary approach viewed customs or cultural traits as residual artifact of cultural history. Functionalists seek to describe the different parts of a society and their relationship through the organic analogy. The organic analogy compared the different parts of a society to the organs of a living organism. The organism was able to live, reproduce and function through the organized system of its several parts and organs. Like a biological organism, a society was able to maintain its essential processes through the way that the different parts interacted together. Institutions such as religion, kinship and the economy were the organs and individuals were the cells in this social organism. Functionalist analyses examine the social significance of phenomena, that is, the function they serve a particular society in maintaining the whole (Jarvie 1973).

Functionalism, as a school of thought in anthropology, emerged in the early twentieth century. Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown had the greatest influence on the development of functionalism from their posts in Great Britain. Radcliffe-Brown named his own strand, structural-functionalism. Functionalism was a reaction to the excesses of the evolutionary and diffusionist theories of the nineteenth century and the historicism of the early twentieth (Goldschmidt 1996:510). Two versions of functionalism developed between 1910 and 1930: Malinowski's biocultural (or psychological) functionalism; and structural-functionalism, the approach advanced by Radcliffe-Brown.

Malinowski suggested that individuals have physiological needs (reproduction, food, shelter) and that social institutions exist to meet these needs. There are also culturally derived needs and four basic "instrumental needs" (economics, social control, education, and political organization), that require institutional devices. Each institution

has personnel, a charter, a set of norms or rules, activities, material apparatus (technology), and a function. Malinowski argued that uniform psychological responses are correlates of physiological needs. He argued that satisfaction of these needs transformed the cultural instrumental activity into an acquired drive through psychological reinforcement (Goldschmidt 1996:510; Voget 1996:573).

Radcliffe-Brown focused on social structure rather than biological needs. He suggested that a society is a system of relationships maintaining it through cybernetic orderly sets of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system. Radcliffe-Brown, feedback, while institutions are inspired by Augustus Comte, stated that the social constituted a separate "level" of reality distinct from those of biological forms and inorganic matter. Radcliffe-Brown argued that explanations of social phenomena had to be constructed within the social level. Thus, individuals were replaceable, transient occupants of social roles. Unlike Malinowski's emphasis on individuals, Radcliffe-Brown considered individuals irrelevant (Goldschmidt 1996:510).

This school of thought has contributed to the concept of culture that traditional usages, whatever their origin, have been shaped by the requirement that human beings must live together in harmony. Therefore, the demands of interpersonal relationships are a causative force in culture (Goldschmidt 1967:17-18).

Despite its theoretical limitations, functionalism has made important methodological contributions. With its emphasis on intensive fieldwork, functionalism has provided in-depth studies of societies. Additionally, the investigation of functional interrelationships of customs and institutions provides a ready-made framework for the collection of information.

Its theoretical difficulties notwithstanding, functionalism can yet be fruitful. Such statements as, "all societies are functionally cohesive," are too vague to be refuted easily. However, these statements can be refuted if they suggest that societies do not change or disintegrate. Therefore, such theories can be considered uncontroversial tautologies. It could be said that functionalism is the integration of false theory and trivially true tautology into a blueprint for fieldwork. Accordingly, such fieldwork can be thought of as empirical attempts to refute such ideas that savages are simple-minded, that savage customs are superstitious, and that savage societies are chaotic, in essence, that savage societies are "savage."

## Methodology

### Area of the study

The area of this study is Nawfia, an Igbo group of South-eastern Nigeria. Nawfia is in Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State of Nigeria. Nawfia maintains cultural homogeneity amidst acculturation. Among the sub-communities that make up Nawfia are:

- (a) Ifite Nawfia (which comprises of five villages) and are exogamous.
- (b) Umuriam (which is made up of three villages) and are exogamous.
- (c) Mmimi (Enugo and Adagbe) which are endogamous.
- (d) Umukwa which is exogamous.

Nawfia Igbo is chosen for this study because of her cultural uniformity. This implies that Nawfia Igbo still maintains parts of her indigenous values and ways of life. Nawfia lies in the latitude of 6 0 11'18N and longitude 70 0'58E. Nawfia is bordered to the West by Abagana, Ukpo Akpu, etc. and to the North by Enugu Agidi, Nogu. In the East lies Umokpu, Amawbia, Nise, etc., and in the South by Nimo, Enugu-Ukwu.

### Instruments of data collection and administration

Participant observation was used as the main instrument of data collection for this study. Participant observation among this society began in 2012 when the researcher conducted a pilot study on Christianity and traditional mortuary rites of this group. In 2018, from March to October, the researcher revisited Umriam, an epicenter of Nawfia cultural relations. This is also where the market, a theatre of social activities, is located.

During this period, the researcher was able to visit many funeral ceremony sites across the villages of the society. Major observed events were properly recorded. Observations that elicited questions were followed up for proper explanations from those with good knowledge of Nawfia culture. Every community has people who by accident, experience, talent, or training can provide the most complete or useful information about particular aspects of life. These people are in the words of [Okpoko & Ezeh \(2011\)](#), "reliable informants". The researcher conducted in-depth interview with people known to

have special knowledge of the autochthonous mortuary rites of the Nawfia Igbo. However, getting to these set of people was not easy as the researcher kept interviewing every person who showed interest. Deriving from [Ember \*et al.\* \(2007\)](#), cultural consensus, an idea that what two or more informants agree on, is cultural, was used for the selection of the informants that the researcher always visited for emic interpretation and explanation of the events observed.

The researcher also made use of Focus Group Discussion (FGD). On the part of Focus Group Discussion (FGD), the researcher used it as a supplement to evaluate the information that was gathered on the course of the study. [Okpoko & Ezeh \(2011\)](#) recorded that there is no agreed number of respondents as well as FGD sessions but all depends on the funding and research objectives. The researcher used the FGD to evaluate the data collected. Following this, the researcher conducted two group sessions of eight participants each. Each group was made up of four men and four women. The researcher chose the FGD participants from the reliable informants. These participants were selected from Mmimi, Umukwa, Umuriam and Ifite Nawfia. The researcher chose the FGD venue and went to the informants asking for their participation. Those who showed interest were selected for the study. With the help of a research assistant trained for recording, the FGD sections were conducted while the researcher moderated. One FGD section was conducted at Ifite while the other FGD section was conducted at Umukwa.

### **Analysis of data**

Data analysis began with the collection of data. Daily field experiences are recorded, sorted for meaning and the researcher coded and grouped into themes the data obtained after each fieldwork to prepare for further field activities. The coding is manual and descriptive, as it suits ethnographic research ([Saldaña 2013](#)). Summarily, analysis of data obtained from participant observation started with deducting excerpts from field notes, and transcription and transliteration of recorded audio tapes, categorization of excerpts into common facts and uncommon facts. Next is sorting and analysis of facts based on different objectives of the research, and writing up the report.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study as presented below are reflections from my participant observation among the society. The narrative is presented in a descriptive manner that reflects the emic interpretation data through the researcher's lived experiences.



### **Second funeral rites (Ikwa Ozu) of the Nawfia Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria**

Death ceremony comes to a climax during the second funeral celebration. This follows the interval of one year from the date of first funeral rites in traditional Nawfia society. In later development, the time interval became dependent on the religious affiliation of the bereaved family. The deceased has already been buried amidst much lamentation but with little ceremony. The second funeral rites normally come after igbukpo ewu (ritual killing of goat on behalf of the deceased) in the case of married dead members of the society. The igbukpo ewu is done at the confirmation of the death, i.e., on the izu ato celebration. The igbukpo ewu is done to pacify the dead person's spirit.

Until the second funeral ceremony is observed, the dead continues to haunt this world, wandering at will in the household. The spirit of the dead is until the second funeral rites regarded as harmful and negatively influences the members of the family. He/she cannot enter the society of his/her dead kin and associates. Second funeral ceremony obtains for the deceased, the certificate of entry into the home of his/her ancestors. In Nawfia, second funeral rites are observed for all people but with variations.

### **Second funeral rites of unmarried men and women**

The death of this nature provokes every member of the society. The second funeral rites accorded to this kind of death presents the picture of immaturity as the items needed for the ritual are always in their unripe ages.

The second funeral rites of persons in this category are observed only by youth. Married people are not involved in any way and it is normally done outside the compound. The items for the funeral are yams, young he goat and she goat (nwa npipi, na ewu aka aturo ime), and a cock that has not crowed for the first time (ofe nku eye onu). These items are given to the youth to prepare outside the compound and share among themselves.

### **Second funeral rites of married men and women**

The second funeral rite of the titled person is not different from that of ordinary person except for the gallantry display of the fellow titled men in the village square in the form of beating and dancing of drums (ikpo abia), and the categories of masquerades that come for the funeral. This always follows twelve days (izu ato) from the actual burial.

At the end of the izu ato (three native weeks – 12 days), people gather at the compound of the deceased to confirm the death. At this time, they would always say urua kwere izu ato aburugo onwu (sleep that lasts for twelve days is no longer sleep). After this confirmation, there is always another set of wailing. It is at this time that the dead is ripe for the second funeral rites.

At the village square, there are always different types of masquerades. This is in the case of a man that has taken title before death. These masquerades bring along cows, goats, cocks etc., depending on the status of the group. These items are for the dead man. As the drums are beaten, (ikpo abia), the dancers will take hoe and dance in a manner that depicts cultivation and keep them. They would also take ram, goat, cocks, while dancing. These actions send signal that the deceased was a wealthy man who provided needs through farming, as farming was the main occupation as of that time.

At this period, ndi nze (title men) will kill he goat and she goat (igbukpo ewu) to appease the spirit of the dead man while imploring it to be calm. The items the dancers used and the goat/ram killed are not eaten by any other persons than the drummers. The belief is that those things have become unclean and any person who eats it will die except the drummers.

At the family level, if the man has given out a daughter in marriage, a he goat and a she goat are killed on the twelfth day. This is called igbukpo ewu. The ritual is done for men only since women were not buried in their husband's house in traditional Nawfia society. But if the man has not given out daughter in marriage, it is only a she goat. This ritual calms the spirit of the dead making it unharmed for the family members until the second funeral rites (ikwa ozu).

Second funeral rites (ikwa ozu), is done at the end of a year before the advent of colonialism and even at some point in post-colonial era but began to lose weight with the wider spread of Christianity. One she goat, yams, palm wine, kola nut, etc are the items required for this ritual. At the center of the compound, the eldest son kills the she goat and notifies the dead by saying “we are calling you to come and dine with us”.

When the cooking is done, the son and other relatives will circle at the place where the goat was killed. The son will now, call the dead father to start coming into the house (nnam batawa). Start coming to protect your compound, your children, your property,

your wife, etc. After this, he picks kola and throws it on the ground and calls his father to come and eat kola to cool his heart. Then he brings roasted yam which is soaked with red oil and calls his father to come and eat with them to quench his hunger and throws it on the ground. He also pours palm wine on the ground and calls his father to come with his friends in the spirit world to join in the drinking. This is to give the colleagues in the spirit world the opportunity to accept their father amidst them. Without this ritual, the dead is neither accepted in the world of the ancestors nor in the world of the living. After this ritual of calling the father home, a cut part of moringa tree (okwe) is buried and cannon fired and people would shout “our father has gone home, he has gone to his ancestors.” Farewell!

## Discussion of findings

Many of the descriptions that have been made in the foregoing tend to indicate that rituals for death have many uses for life, and the study of these rites can illuminate much about culture and society. Second funeral rite is embedded on the general practice of mortuary events among the Nawfia Igbo. The Nawfia Igbo second funeral rites aim at reuniting the dead with the living. Second funeral rites among the Nawfia Igbo not only obtain for the dead an entry into the ancestral folk, but also place the dead in a rightful position in the world of the spirits.

Unarguably, functionalism has provided a platform for the understanding of human culture. This human culture is relative in time and space. Culture of a society provides the principles upon which the society in question is maintained and sustained. Globalization has caused much damage on these practices. This is because they have been massive borrowing of culture traits without thinking the implication of such in the social structure of the society involved. The agents of globalization are indirectly stressing cultural unity. But the question is which culture? Is it the Western culture or the African culture? There is nothing wrong in culture borrowing, but for a particular culture to be seen as the yardstick for other groups to follow is the contestation.

Findings of this study suggest that there is gradation on the funerary rituals of the deceased. This corroborates some studies on mortuary protocols. For instance, [Ba-an et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Adom \(2022\)](#) have recorded gradation in mortuary rites of the Ghanaian groups they studied. This implies that funeral rites may differ with the individual, achievement, and the age of the deceased. [Ugwu \(2021\)](#) in an earlier study has also

observed this gradation in the first funeral rite of this group, during which the deceased corpse is interred.

Like other studies, (Mukuka 2021) among the Zambian, and (Van 2021) among the Vietnamese, this study reinforces the spiritual connotation of second funeral rites. The process of reintegration is embodied with much ritual complexities. This process also validates ancestral mediation between the supernatural and the living.

While some studies like, (Adu *et al.* 2023; Ba-an *et al.* 2023), could not explicitly explain the function that second funeral rituals played, the studies have noted the existence of funeral rites that social and psychological needs. Also, the result of this corroborated the findings of (Park 2020; Ba-an *et al.* 2023), the funeral rites unite the living with the ancestors and provide bases for spiritualism.

This study, a descriptive exploration of second funeral rite among the Nawfia, is ideographic. As such this study cannot generalize on the function second funeral rituals play cross-culturally. However, it provides bases for such comparison. Further studies should be an attempt at cross-cultural studies on why second funeral rites are performed.

## Conclusion

This study set out to understand why second funeral rite is performed among the Nawfia of Southeastern Nigeria. The study is able to establish that there are gradations in second funeral rituals. This gradation reflects the nature of death, social status of the deceased and age. Furthermore, this study has also established that second funeral rituals integrate the dead with living, thereby providing the basis for ancestral spiritual present. Although ideographic, the study corroborates some findings of other cross-cultural studies on funeral rites. This study was able to establish the role of second funeral among this group and demonstrates the complexities in belief systems and how the belief systems reinforce social solidarity among the practitioners. Theoretically, functionalism offers explanation of the usefulness of these ritual processes among this group.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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