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**Dialectics of Burial and Teritoriality in Barclays Ayakoroma's  
*A Matter of Honour***

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**Abstract**

This paper is conceived to investigate the subjects of death, burial, pride and territorial supremacy in African drama with special focus on *A Matter of Honour* by Barclays Ayakoroma. The study becomes crucial because the question of burial and struggle over rights of possession of a corpse by two parties has become a common thing in post-colonial Africa particularly in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Such a subject has not been given serious scholarly attention in the study of modern Nigerian drama. Thus appropriating the literary investigative approach, which is essentially predicated on critical content analysis, the paper examines the dialectic of death, burial and territoriality in Ayakoroma's *A Matter of Honour*. The paper will contribute clearly to a deeper perception and

appreciation of questions of death, burial, honour, pride and nationalism as it relates to the cultural values in Izon World- view.

**Key words:** *Death, burial nationalism, territoriality, representation*

### **Introduction**

Death is the end of life and the very active beginning of a man's past on cessation of life. Death is the last of the four rites of passage in traditional African society. The others being ritual of Birth, puberty and initiation as well as marriage. Although death is an inevitable phenomenon, the fact remains that when humans die a last respect is given to the dead. Death may be individual or collective. The subject of death has caused many troubles and tribulations both in our local societies, in our nation and even at the international scene. But in core traditional African society, death leads to burial rites and in burial there is communal interest and pride. Death and burial are therefore central to honour in traditional African society from the prehistoric times. It is a clear fact that in contemporary time corpses have been dragged by either two communities or two or more family units within one community particularly in the Niger Delta. In this struggle to gain control of the dead, some individuals are either killed in the process or sustain deep wounds. In some situations, cases of death and burial are litigated in court for numberless years. People spend money and time attending court to secure honour in matters of death and burial. Acrimony rules the relationship between communities in verbal or physical confrontation forms over such struggles. These struggles which may appear absurd may have strong propelling forces and philosophies behind them. The visible reason that can be given is predicated on the right and honour to bury the dead. And this is seen as ethnic or national pride which is more significant in cultural communities. Sullivan, GB defines pride

As an inflated sense of one's personal status or accomplishments, often used synonymously with hubris. With a positive connotation, pride refers to a satisfied sense of attachment toward one's own or another's choices and actions, or toward a whole group of people, and is a product of praise, independent self-reflection, or a fulfilled feeling of belonging. Philosophers and social psychologists have noted that pride is a complex secondary emotion which requires the development of a sense of self and the mastery of relevant conceptual distinctions (e.g., that pride is distinct from happiness and joy) through language-based interaction with others (2007:1).

Pride is honour that sometimes assumes the place of nationalism. It is strongly tied to nationalism and such concepts like ethnocentrism. The primordialist perspective describes nationalism as a reflection of the ancient and perceived evolutionary tendency of humans to organize into distinct grouping based on an affinity

of birth (Motyl 2001: 251). This approach to nationalism shares similar position with territorial nationalism. Territorial nationalists assume that all inhabitants of a particular nation owe allegiance to their country of birth or adoption. (Duignan & Gann 1981: 22). There is no doubt that pride works with nationalism. The Jews holocaust in Germany is a product of cruel pride. Nationalism is national feelings or consciousness. Nationalism becomes a possession of a group acting together in defence of their society. This understanding of nationalism agrees with the postulation of Max Weber who defines a nation as 'a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state' and which holds notions of common descent, though not necessarily common blood (quote in Gerth and Mills 1948: 172). It masquerades as partisanship but is by and large very fanatical; nationalists whether at the communal level or national level almost always have a feeling of resentment. They complain grimly about their grievances, the next instant they become belligerent and vicious. Hence in this paper it is our intention to view the war of death, burial, pride and nationalism which have become part of the burial tradition in traditional African society.

### **Synopsis of the Play**

At Amabiri marriage rites and festivity are on as a young girl is to be married. Suddenly news comes through Egberi-Egberi the drunk that Oweibi their son who lived at Angiama is dead and is about to be buried by the people of Angiama. Abere, Gbaki and Kurokeme are selected by the communal authority of Amabiri to go to Angiama to find out the cause of Oweibi's death and to secure the corpse for burial. Abere, Gbaki and Kurokeme are told by the people of Angiama that in three market weeks the corpse of Oweibi will be buried. This is after a very hot argument they make with the people of Angiama without any resolution. The Emissaries of Amabiri return with the report that the Angiama people are prepared to bury their son. They therefore decide that as a matter of honour Amabiri community will pretend to attend the burial with the ulterior motive of preventing the burial of their son and taking away the body of their son Oweibi for proper burial rites. But the Angiama people who are peace loving and honourable in thought think ahead of their Amabiri people by deciding to bury the late Oweibi before the scheduled burial date. This is a philosophical step taken to eschew bloodletting and war. However, in a gathering of the people of Amabiri, they are told by Egberi-Egberi that the burial of Oweibi is going on at Angiama as a result in anger the people of Amabiri charged for war, go to Angiama where Oweibi is being buried. At Angiama the body of Oweibi has been commuted to mother earth. While the frustrated Emissaries of Amabiri threaten violence and spoil for war the Angiama people sue for peace and the people of Amabiri stretch out their hands of peace reluctantly for the acceptance of peace. This puts an end to the contemplated war between the two communities.

The language of Barclays Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave* is sourced from reality. It is an accessible prose language spiced with colourful indigenous proverbs

and aphorisms. The language is aesthetically engaging, it is grand, easy to get to and serviceable. Interestingly, Ayakoroma appropriates and controls language differentiation. The characters' linguistic exploit bring personality distinction amongst them. We also note that the device of bilingualism is used. Ayakoroma experiments with the use of the western English and Ijaw language in the construction of his dramatic lines. The local flavour and colour of the language of the play is made possible by the choice of proverbs and native maxims used. This is to give the drama its cultural weight and local linguistic identity. This tragi-comedy is thematically founded on cultural identity, family value and communal pride. Besides, the play calls for peace, tolerance and respect for human dignity. The satiric merit of *A Matter of Honour* rests in its vilification of the overindulgence of the society in embracing violence and war because of a dead body. At the figurative plane of presentation the play is a clarion call on warring parties in post-colonial African countries particularly Nigerians to embrace the path of dialogue and peace.

#### **Dialectics of burial and Territorial consciousness in a *Matter of Honour***

*In A Matter of Honour* the issues at the centre of the conflict are death, burial, pride and nationalism. The play dramatises death and puts forward burial of the dead as the major subject of disagreement that sets the dramatic action rolling until it got to its denouement. The conflict is based on the death of Oweibi who is to be buried where he died. Amabiri is his birth place, his fatherland but all through his life, Oweibi lived and died at Angiama, his motherland. According to the ancient Ijaw culture and tradition, a man and a woman, whether they die in their fatherland or outside their fatherland or even outside both father and motherlands within and outside their environment, are brought back to their fatherland for burial. It is therefore a well-built tradition that Ijaws that die are buried in their father land. The value placed on this tradition is so strong that it has the face of pride and the force of nationalism. Thus a community in Ijaw land draws honour, pride and nationalism in burying its own dead people. The same honour is also shared by the person buried. The only reason why a man has to be buried in the land of his father not mother or outside his father is a matter of honour. This is to secure family ethics and identity. The play opens debate on the concept of burial in traditional Ijaw society. The simple question is, if a person dies wherever, where is he or she supposed to be buried? What and who decides where a dead person is to be buried? What are the arguments against the burial of a dead person in his or her motherland? What logic of burial can best be appreciated by contemporary thinking in traditional African society? Does the new tradition of burial in the play destroy burial traditions? These are some of the issues that underpin the discourse in Barclays Ayakoroma's *A Matter of Honour*.

In this drama death becomes a very significant and obligatory defining influence and factor of territoriality. Territoriality as a term means possessive feeling

over places. It is about claim over a defined territory and essentially about how people appropriate space to communicate ownership of area. The whole debate and struggle for supremacy in *A Matter of Honour* is about territoriality. But one interesting thing to note is that the subject of death and burial of the dead is not only used to promote the thesis of territoriality but also to showcase how human geographical and cultural spaces are linked to burial. Death and burial are brought up for public knowledge as reinforcing and defining factors for the occupation of spaces. Death becomes an agency of territoriality. It is a fundamental reason for territorial consciousness. People voice their concern for spaces they occupy through death. In *A Matter of Honour* it is death and the question of burial that generate territorial consciousness between the Amabiri and the Angiama people. Territoriality is the driving force of nationalism. To be territorially conscious is to be nationalistic. Hence Omolewa (1986:182), defined nationalism as “the love and pride in a country shown by its people. The type of nationalism expressed through the enactment of territorialism in *A Matter of Honour* is linked to ethnic nationalism on the other hand, is the type of nationalism that defines the nation in terms of ethnicity, which always includes some elements of descent from previous generations. It also includes ideas of a culture shared between members of a group with common ancestors and language. Membership of the nation is hereditary in this type of nationalism, and also the state derives political legitimacy from its status as homeland of the ethnic group, and from its duty to protect the national group and facilitate its family and social life, as a group (Emeh Chika1, Chikezie Anyalewachi 1; Anyikwa, Chinenye Nkiru, 2014: 55) the Amabiri territorialists are loyal and devoted to their community, especially with a brawny sense of communal consciousness. They exalt Amabiri above Angiama. Death reminds the living of where we come from. Burial as a matter of fact, is a historical, cultural, social and psychological attestation of territoriality.

*Oweibi in A Matter of Honour* dies at Angiama his motherland where he lived. But propelled strongly by the belief that the dead in Ijawland must be buried in his or her fatherland, the men and people of Amabiri, Oweibi’s fatherland, sends emissaries to Angiama to ask for for his corpse. They hold strongly it is their natural and cultural right to bury Oweibi. To them their failure to bury the dead man will assault their psychology, their pride and further subject them to some form of cultural inferiority and colonisation. They therefore muster up the courage to demand for the corpse of Oweibi with cultural pressure and territorial passion. The right to bury their own is unassailable and inalienable, thus it runs straight into their philosophy and psychology as a matter of honour. This fact of honour and communal pride is expressed by Egberri-Egberri of Amabiri, a self-appointed chief informant who said:

I was in Angiama when the death news came. I can only tell you that he is dead. For now it is not important whether he was sick and for how long. What should concern us now is the matter of honour (p.6)

The fact is very clear from the above words of Egberi- Egberi that he is an Amabiri nationalist who is culturally and emotionally affected by the action of the people of Angiama. The words have political and historical implications as well as the desire for autonomy, self-preservation and cultural consciousness. The above position of Egberi-Egberi is supported by the stance of Ebere who says:

It is this tradition that makes us distinct from those machette-carrying brainless people of Angiama. They act without thinking. We think before acting. It is this tradition that differentiates us from apes. You want us to be laughing stock for the whole clan (p.11)

In fact Ebere's reasoning voice geo-cultural concern; it sharply suggests the significance given to death and burial in Ijaw cultural milieu and neighbouring ethnic groups like Urhobo. It is not how important a man is that dictates where he should be buried; all that a man needs to be given burial is a place culturally and biologically considered his place of paternal birth. The pride and nationalism lie in the act and right of the community to bury the dead. In this vision of Ijaw burial held securely by the Amabiri community, a voice or voices of dissension is or are not needed and respected. Hence Dikumo's assertion on Oweibi's death that the corpse should be buried in his motherland where he lived and died was rejected frontally and utterly by the bad-tempered and belligerent people of Amabiri. To them tradition is tradition. In *A Matter of Honour* that love for rigid tradition and what it is capable of causing the community is once again demonstrated. It is this clamour for the maintenance of tradition in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* that leads to the tragedy of General Kurunmi the eponymous hero of the play. Kurunmi like the bellicose men of Ayakoroma's Amabiri is a die-hard defender of tradition who sees and feels change in and or of tradition as a tragedy of communal calamity. The only difference is that while in *Kurunmi*, the Eponymous hero faces destruction standing for rigidity of tradition in *A Matter of Honour*, the rigidity of tradition maintained by the people of Amabiri is logically defeated by the good wisdom of the Angiama people leading to the avoidance of war between the two communities.

The Ijaw and Urhobo world views in the Niger Delta that is strongly demonstrated in the play, expressed by the people of Amabiri indicate logically the content of honour as a critical module of entombment and the right to bury the dead as having xenophobic sentiment. Death is not as important as the subject of burial. In death there is burial and in burial there is individual honour, communal honour, collective pride and nationalism. And in nationalism, a community can go tremendous

length such as war, violent threats and politics of exclusion to obtain cultural justice. The people of Amabiri who act out the drama of territorial nationalism are poised to go to war with Angiama as represented in *A Matter of honour*.

The burial of Oweibi in Amabiri is a matter of honour; a matter of profound communal affection and pride, consequently the subject is given poignant concentration. Gbaki, one of the men of Amabiri states “we go immediately to Angiama and tell those people without brains that we want the body of our brother” (p.10). This position of Gbaki is influenced by communal value on the question of burial and nationalistic dedication. That Oweibi lived and died in his mother land is not the issue. Gbaki is of the strong view that the people of Angiama are not thinking properly for wanting to contravene tradition and scuttled the traditional right of the Amabiri people from burying their son.

The questions of birth, death and burial are dialectically presented in the disagreement of the communities of Amabiri and Angiama in *A Matter of Honour*. Amabiri stands diametrically on the pre-eminence of patrilineal pedigree in this subject of burial. But their thinking fails to convince the people of Angiama community. The Angiama school of thought as far as burial is concerned defers from that held by Amabiri. They hold the vision that that a man or woman can be buried outside the place of his paternal ancestry provided he or she lived and died in his or her mother land. As students of culture we are aware that dead men are also buried in their motherland. Such a burial is also founded in Ijaw culture. Thus Angiama people’s decision to bury Oweibi is logical and does not infringe the cultural practice of the Ijaw nation. The logic advanced by the Angiama people on the burial of Oweibi is considered pragmatic and follows the lane of peace and progress. Their understanding of burial, honour and nationalism is taken along moral lines which eloquently embrace social and intrinsic worth such as veracity, broad-mindedness, honesty, intelligibility, purity of motives achieved by the method of rational reflection and pacification. This position of the Angiama people is valuable and well-designed within the scope of Ijaw tradition since it slopes to the course of peace and progress. While rigidity, violence and pathological defence of tradition characterise issues of death, burial and honour in Amabiri community, the Angiama community presents another angle to the questions of death, burial and nationalism. Their nationalism is predicated on broad mindedness, wisdom, respect for humanity and peaceful co- existence within the confines of the Ijaw culture.

This position of the Angiama people expressed in *A Matter of Honour* indicates clearly that society is not still and culture can be interpreted in such a way that it can benefit humanity. It further presents the clear fact that tradition or culture changes when man changes his thoughts. The nationalistic philosophy of burial found in the Angiama people find support even in the antagonistic Amabiri community. A voice of opposition from Enemo and Dikumo attests to this. Enemo says: “look papa, times are changing.



We have to adapt to the changing times’’ Enemo here opposes the thinking of his Amabiri people in support of the position of their determination to bury the late Oweibi. Angiama holds steadily and unflinching to the traditional principles of logic and compassion to categorize respect as the sole aisle to dignity and standing. The Amabiri position of pride and nationalism is the unconstructive one; this is due to the fact that they classify themselves as superior to the Angiama people. This kind of reasoning generates discrimination, and can often lead to violent and bloody conflicts. On the personal level, individuals may be persecuted because other individuals or groups believe their nationality to be inferior, or that it poses a threat.

### **Authorial Statement on the Subject of Death and Burial**

*A Matter of Honour* is a dialectical drama on culture, tradition and philosophy in post-colonial African Ijaw society woven around the issue of death and burial. It presents a thesis on the question of burial, as well as an antithesis and a synthesis which authorises the position of the antithesis. The thesis is the position on burial by the Amabiri people that a dead man by tradition is buried only in his fatherland. The antithesis is that a man who lived and died in his motherland in Ijaw land can also be buried in his motherland. This is the reason Ayakoroma appropriates death and burial as very topical issues for dramatic construction. This is against the back drop that the tribute and value attached to burial of a dead one in the Niger Delta has become a very disturbing observable fact today. Ayakoroma holds that there have been instances of people ambushing funeral processions or convoys and carting away the corpse for burial if there had been certain differences. He notes further

There have also been instances of people resorting to alternative routes from the mortuary, all in a bid to outwit an aggrieved party. And there have been cases where mortuaries are turned to battlefield as aggrieved parties vent their anger on each other freely. As a consequence of the above, instead of burying one corpse, sometimes the number multiplies, as there are victims in these seemingly senseless exhibitions of irrationality. This is the cultural context under which the play matter of honour should be view. (Ayakoroma 1999: x)

In *A Matter of Honour*, the dramatist presents the beliefs and ideas of the communities and inveigh the unrepressed behaviour and ludicrousness that characterise the unwholesome opposition between the parties. Instead of taking sides with the bellicose people of Amabiri who must stop at nothing to defend honour, shared ideals and tradition, Ayakoroma indicts the idea of struggling and scheming to go to war over a dead person as unreasonable and thus cannot be accepted as a very serious symbol of



pride and act of nationalism. He addresses the question of peace and social control in a luminous literary comportment.

In this drama that antipathy increases, self-importance and nationalistic sentiment mount the middle showground there is the extremely brawny expectation that the struggle to retain honour by the Amabiri and Angiama communities within the dramatic universe of the play would inexorably amount to catastrophic cost. But through a witty manoeuvring of plot, the dramatist makes a passionate plea which puts an end to the war of pride and nationalism. It is obvious that the position of Barclays Ayakoroma in this drama of dialectical contemplation is drawn from the rationalisation of the People of Angiama that a man who lives and dies in his motherland can also be buried by his mother's people. On the position of honour and burial of corpse Barclays Ayakoroma stands on the lane of peace of the communities and the peace of humanity. This is a humanistic and authorial input to the cultural school in the debate on burial that a dead man can be buried in any land of his noble birth. The play submits evidently that where a man lives and dies determines where he should be buried insofar as it is also a place of his birth. A position articulated artistically and intellectually in the manner in which the dramatic conflict is resolved. Ayakoroma deploys the Hegelian Abstract-Negative-Concrete philosophical formula in the construction of his drama. This formula suggests a flaw in the initial thesis.

A great display of authorial/literary nationalism is recorded in this drama. Ayakoroma breathes wisdom and peace into the flaming atmosphere of the play by calming rising tempers amongst the war drumming people in the play. He humanises unbendable tradition to declare interest for peace in human society in preference to the wars they have to fight to secure and defend honour. The play reflects strongly the moral dimension of honour and reminds us very strongly that where there is honour, it must have capacity for peace and human dignity. Pifa's voice of reason is a symbolic expression of the playwright's view of honour and nationalism. This represents the collective definition of communal values. Ayakoroma presents an alternative action and reasoning to the trouble that rule the two communities.

### **Conclusion**

This study puts to epistemological debate the Ijaw view of burial, family pride and ethnic nationalism. It explored the polemic issue of burial in Ijaw land and its clear attachment to pride and territoriality. The research identified territorial nationalism and its rigid flare to fight for right and honour through belligerence. Within the confines of this form of nationalism there is also the contrary school of thought which sees and deploys nationalism as the ability to generate peace and maintain it through individual and collective wisdom. The playwright as a student of culture clearly disagrees with the cultural position that a dead man in Ijaw land should only be buried in his

fatherland. Even though patrilineal possession of a man is more influential than matrilineal control, the fact cannot be invalidated that mother's land is also a legitimate birth place of a man.

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