

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The return of the woman corpse in the funeral rites of the Urhobo and Isoko culture of Nigeria in historical perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper aimed at interrogating the changes and continuity in an aspect of the Funeral rites of the Urhobo and Isoko of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. It critically examines the practice of returning the corpse of the married woman to the homestead of her family rather than bury her in her husband's homestead. This practice has over the years been questioned and interrogated and calls for scrutiny. The paper argues that social change factors and processes have introduced continuous changes in the Urhobo and Isoko with regards to the funeral ceremony and have greatly been affected. The practice has been perceived as that which promotes Patriarchal dominance. The paper adopts the historical and analytical model, deploying both primary and secondary data in interrogating the practice of returning the corpse of the married woman to the homestead of her family rather than bury her in her husband's homestead and avers that if not properly handled, it could affect intergroup relation. The paper, therefore, concludes that this trend is posing a serious threat to peaceful and harmonious intergroup relation among families that indulged in inter-tribal marriage. It recommends among others, that the Urhobo and Isoko should be re-socialized properly to flow with modernity in this aspect of their culture.

**Keywords:** cultural practice, family bonding, intergroup relation, Patriarchal dominance ritual, Niger Delta

## 1 Introduction

Extant literature on the returning the corpse of the married woman to the homestead of her family rather than burying her in her husband's homestead as an aspect of the Urhobo and Isoko culture is very scant. While much of the culture and tradition of the people have been examined, to the knowledge of this writer, there seems to be a paucity of literature or article that deals with this aspect of the culture in depth. It is, therefore, the aim of this article to shed some light on this phenomenon in historical perspective. The aim is to asseverate that, the practice has promoted Patriarchal dominance and could pose a serious threat to peaceful and harmonious intergroup relation among families that indulged in inter-tribal marriage.

Burial ceremonies in Africa are well established in their socio-cultural, customs, and religions. They are directed by the Africans' perspective and belief on life after death and the power and function of the living ancestor. Thus, investigating from womanist perspective, the place of burial, which is the preoccupation of this discuss reveal the dissatisfied position of the African woman buried in her father's compound. Answering the question of where and why should a deceased woman be buried in her father's homestead and not that of her husband's homestead goes a long way to determine the level of liberation required from the dominating influence of the man after death. However, many of the arguments presented in this paper are applicable to many other communities and cultures in southern Nigeria (Okpevra, 2005), with the Urhobo and Isoko as the test case to shed light on a larger trend.

Burying of people in every culture is a practice that varies from one culture to another. The twin elements of culture and tradition are the defining characteristics of any group of people all over the world. Culture and tradition which includes a corpus of practices such as the way the people dress, the type of food they eat, the burial and marriage practices, their songs, festivals, the belief system *etc.* have been with the people for ages and are handed over from one generation to another.

Here, the paper interrogates an aspect of the culture and tradition of the Urhobo and Isoko people as it relates to the burying of a wife married by a man. At death, the age long tradition or practice of the Urhobo people and some communities in Isoko is that the wife no matter the number of years she had spent in the marriage, no matter the love she had for her husband while alive, no matter the investments she had in the marriage, whenever she dies, it is mandatory

that she be taken to her father's homestead for burial. This funeral custom, to most observers is strange, repugnant and disgusting.

However, the subaltern position of the women to men has been a debate in the world of literary scholarship around the globe for some decades now (Ogini & Darah, 2018). This paper in addition to the above, seeks to address the dead woman *testamentary rights*, which have been a major issue raising controversies and debates over the years among the Urhobo and Isoko people of Delta State, Nigeria, in line with womanist perceptions of womanhood after the death of the woman. Secondly, the paper also seeks to underscore the erroneous impression by demonstrating that the practice had been ingrained in the sociological and philosophical episteme of the people from the precolonial period.

## 2 Burial rites of the Urhobo/Isoko

Among the Urhobo and Isoko there is a unique way of burying their dead and loved ones (Idogho, 2015). The Isoko and Urhobo believed in good and bad death. Deaths were associated with bloated lips, legs and stomach; death during childbirth; through drowning, and suicide, while the good death was that at a ripe age. Those who died the bad death were discarded into the bad bush, called *Aghwarode* and *Ahon* in Urhobo and Isoko respectively; while those accepted to have passed away decently were given acceptable and befitting burial and funeral ceremony. When a man died at old or relatively old age, the eight "families" – four from the father side and four from the mother side, with the children would meet to guarantee a befitting burial for such an individual. While the eldest son provide the casket, the sons-in-law customarily dug the grave (Okpevra, 2020). (see Figure 1)



Source: Culled from Ethnic & Local Government Area Map of Delta State, Nigeria. <https://images.app.goo.gl/rgQsiwGRkvZ7inWEA>

**Figure 1** Map of Delta State showing the Isoko and their Urhobo Neighbours in Nigeria

After the interment, the funeral procession often lasted for at least four days. The wife(s), children, and other family members of the deceased are supposed to shave their heads in remembrance of the deceased on the final day, which served as the grand finale. A goat known as *Evwe Ewun* or *Ewe-AhO* was butchered the night before the final day. On the final day, the remaining meat would be divided among the eight families in the morning while a portion was utilized to prepare during the night. One intriguing aspect of this goat to be slaughtered is that only those who are awake at night that partook in the eating. On no account should anyone who was asleep at that time be awoken to partake in the feasting. The final burial ritual, known as *Oghe-Oria*, was the following phase. It was performed in the late afternoon as the deceased's whole family and other relatives gathered in their compound to execute the last rites (Ekeh, 2005).

The children of the dead extended a second invitation to the eight households three months after the funeral in order to share in the inheritance known as *uku-oghale*. The spouse(s) of the deceased, were inherited by the family members on either the maternal or paternal side; the youngest wife was typically given to the deceased's eldest son. The eight families split up the deceased's other possessions equally. The family's oldest member would then conclude by praying for the children.

## 3 The return of the corpse of the woman to her paternal homestead for burial: Issues and challenges

In the cultures of the Urhobo and Isoko, marriage entails prayers to God and the living ancestors (*Eriwvinl Esemo* and *Oghene*). The bride's ancestral house or the home of a patrilineal relative of

the bride serves as the location for the marriage ceremony. The groom visits the bride's father's house with his family and friends and brings drinks, salt, kola nuts, and occasionally food that the bride's family has requested. In addition to the customary traditions of pouring gin, which the groom brings, as a tribute to the father's ancestors in order to bless them with health, children, and prosperity, formal is presented by the bride's parents or whoever is representing the bride's family. If the marriage does not work out after this marriage rite, the husband is entitled to a refund of the money (bride price, dowry, or earnest). Only the physical body that is sent to the husband in the marriage, the *Erhi* (spirit double), remains in the family house, where it is thought that the ancestors saw the marriage. This explains why a deceased woman is transported back to her family's residence for burial. The man's eldest relative welcomes the wife into the family in his ancestral house. If she had any affairs while or after becoming engaged to her husband, she is required to come clean about them and receive forgiveness. After this procedure, she becomes a complete part of her husband's family and is believed to be under the protection of the supernatural (*Eriwvin*). This custom represents a contract between the woman and the *Eriwvin* (Ejobee, 2021).

According to the holy writ in Ecclesiastes chapter 6 verse 3 "A man may have a hundred children and live many years; if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he" (NIV). And among the Hebrews, there is high regard for burying the dead with "his fathers" which is the main ancestral home, land of nativity devoid of "other country" seen as foreign land. The Genesis 48:29-30 account of the satisfaction Jacob desired concerning his burial reads, "When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, "If I have found favour in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not burry me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried".

In Isoko, the Emevor, Umeh, Enwhe, Owhe and Iyede communities, the syndrome of "nativity burying ground" seems to be very relevant and entrenched in their culture. Thus women married outside their communities upon their demise are brought back home for funerals and burials. However, certain communities where this is practiced do financial negotiations to be granted permission to bury the deceased married woman in her husband's community but, among the Emevor people nativity burial is never compromised like their conservative Urhobo neighbours (Oral evidence gathered by the author. This work relied heavily on oral evidence. Oral Data for this work were elicited from different burials and marriages conducted within some selected kingdoms/communities in the Urhobo and Isoko land. These were collected through personal observations and personal interviews with people between the age brackets of 30 to 80 years).

The practice of the return of the woman corpse is not only peculiar to the Urhobo and Isoko alone. It is common among the Esan (Ishan) of Edo State, the Itsekiri, Aboh and some Ukwuani communities and especially, the Idoma of Benue State. This tradition no doubt is clear indication of the people's belief in the supremacy of paternity over maternity. Despite the fact that the culture permits the wife to be regarded as the man's precious property or chattel, who bears the husband's name, and upon demise she is not allowed by that same culture to be buried in her husband's homestead (News: Daily Post. <https://dailypost.ng/2016/09/03/idoma-culture-threatened-women-protest-change-burial-rites>)

## 4 Arguments arising from burying Urhobo and Isoko married woman in their marital homes

When a married woman dies, the culture demands that such a woman be returned to her family compound or her home to be buried for several reasons as the culture demands. Some of the reasons are:

- (1) The female children are not slaves and they are not sold out for many reasons including marriage therefore, they must be returned home at death.
- (2) Because of the influential nature of women to bring/influence development in the communities, culture demands that, at death, they must be returned home.
- (3) Because of the fact that they (women) know that upon their death, they must be brought home; they develop their communities and bring their children to their father's home town for visits or residence.
- (4) In order to avoid mal-treatment by their husbands and in their husband's houses, and in case of any marital challenges, they (women) have a home where they can claim and they will not be treated as slaves or a second class citizen but have the sense of belonging as a member of their parental families.

Over the years, however, the return of the woman/wife corpse at death for burial has been questioned and interrogated and call for scrutiny. Above all, social change factors and processes

have introduced continuous changes in the people's culture and tradition with regards to the age long funeral rites and has been greatly affected. There are arguments at different fora in Urhobo and Isoko land that the women can and should be buried at their husbands' homesteads considering the fact that some religion/culture regards that the husband and wife are one and for convenience sake, both can be buried in the same place. Also that both the husband and wife lived and laboured together so, they should be buried in the same place. This is becoming the new normal in the Urhobo and Isoko land against the above reasons that had been there in the culture from the beginning. Remember that when a married woman according to the culture is to be buried, the corpse is first of all taken to the family compound of her husband before the corpse will be taken to her father's home and in the process; there are some incantations and rendition of songs to accompany the corpse.

## 5 A critical analysis of the corpse return tradition/ practice

The reason(s) for this tradition has/have over the years been questioned and interrogated (<https://www.nairaland.com/3586067/it-right-return-womans-corpse>). After all, a woman who had spent all her life in her husband's home (family), only to be taken back to her father's home for burial at death actually calls for a reconsideration. Investigations/researches have revealed the following reason(s) as responsible for this age long practice or tradition of the Urhobo and Isoko people – taking a wife at death back to her father's homestead for burial.

During the marriage ceremony of a woman, according to the Urhobo and Isoko culture, whatever the amount the family requests for as bride price must never be paid in full. This is so because on payment of the bride price by the in-laws (the man's family) the money is immediately accepted with a small fraction of it given back to the in-laws. This is according to the belief and tradition of the Urhobo and Isoko people that their daughter unlike an article on shelf, is not for sale but on a marriage escapade who after all her activities in the man's house would be brought back to the family even at death. This, therefore, makes it unlike an article on shelf which on being bought and paid for, is never returned to the seller (former owner) by the buyer (new owner). This is why the marriage system of the Urhobo and Isoko people is cheaper than those of other cultures around them (Ekeh, 2005).

(1) It is also believed that taking the women home for burial has the advantage of the children always remembering or seeing the need to associate as relations with the mother's relations.

(2) It gives them the sense of belonging to the mother's family as it is the tradition of the Urhobo people that every Urhobo person is from two families – the father's and mother's families.

(3) It compels the Urhobo and Isoko man or any other suitor from outside Urhobo or Isoko for that matter to take proper care of his wife as on death, the husband or the husband's family would be made to defend the death by wanting to know, how she died, how long she was sick, what efforts were made before she gave up, was there any information to the wife's family about her illness before her death *etc.*

(4) It makes the wife to participate in the activities of her father's family rather than absolute concentration in the husband's family. This, she is aware that without her participation in the father's family activities such as burials and marriages, she too will not be given a befitting burial and her paternal relations may not honour her invitation to attend her children's marriage ceremonies.

From the above reasons, it becomes plausible to defend this time tested practice of burying married women in their father's homestead instead of their husbands.

However, criticism has continually trailed this practice as other cultures around Urhobo such as other Isoko communities, the Ijaw, Ukwuani and Delta Ibos do otherwise with the following reasons!

(1) That a wife who all her life has been with the husband, worked all her life for the husband and her husband's family need not be taken to her father's home for burial as they are two in one and as such, the woman by marriage is deemed to have completely crossed over from her father's family to the husband's.

(2) That while all along when the woman was useful, vibrant and hardworking, the father's family did not request for her. Why then at death should the wife's (woman family) request for her corpse when already she is of no practical use to them?

(3) That it reduces the cost of burial for the children as both the husband and the wife will be buried in one house instead of the Urhobo culture wherein land would /may have to be bought by the children and possibly a building erected on it for the purpose of just the mother's burial – a practice, the opposing cultures see as sheer waste or profligacy.

From the foregoing, it becomes very clear that both cultures have convincing reasons why they carry out the two different burial practices. It has been vehemently argued that every culture is

amendable to slight or notable change. This, therefore, is the reason for the present agitation by a cross section of Urhobo and her Isoko neighbours that the trend or practice be reversed.

Also, some wrongly buried mothers have in dreams revealed themselves to their children on the need for reversal of such burials. For example, it is claimed even among the Idoma of Benue state that changing the tradition has spiritual implications and the importance of this tradition cannot be overemphasized. According to Sylvester Onoja Ben:

“the change has traditional implication. For me, I am not in support of that change. My mother was buried in her family compound and it further cements our relationship with her family even after death. We could always go there to see our mother’s grave and doing that unites us together with her family. But if she was buried in my father’s compound, there would be no cause for us to visit her family because after all, our mother is no more alive.” (<https://dailypost.ng/2016/09/03/idoma-culture-threatened-women-protest-change-burial-rites/>)

On the contrary, it is believed that the Children will be pleased viewing their mother’s burial tomb in their father’s family homestead. Accordingly Cletus Egbo, remarked

“expunging the obsolete culture is a welcome development, saying that children will be happy seeing their mother’s grave in their family compounds. He said, “It is a welcome development that I feel everybody should embrace without any form of sentiment. I see no reason why corpses should be carried, in most cases, on the head from the deceased’s matrimonial home to her family for burial.” (<https://dailypost.ng/2016/09/03/idoma-culture-threatened-women-protest-change-burial-rites/>)

Therefore, it is an issue that requires deep thinking. Opinion of those who for long have been practicing it must be sought. And above all input by the Custodians of the traditions and cultures such as Council of Elders, Council of Chiefs, Council of the Eldest person in the case of a Clan or Kingdom and must be supported and decreed on agreement by all stakeholders by the King/traditional ruler who is deemed the first among equal in the traditions and culture of the people with bad (dire) consequences or far reaching negative implications that should be considered for a change with strong support of the people. Anything short of this approach smacks of impunity and lack of respect not only for the living but even the ancestors and deities of the people who when they (ancestors and deities) are offended react on the offenders, usually with grave and bitter consequences of unimaginable magnitude.

The Urhobo and Isoko people who are still neck deep in this practice should move with time and change their ways and allow married women to be buried in their husband’s homes.

(1) Since the beginning of this century, those old, obsolete and archaic cultural practices and beliefs are now being polished or transformed by modern technology and innovative ideas. For example, use of gong “*agogo*” by town crier now use of loud speaker (Public Address System) and even the social media.

(2) Christianity has transformed many of the old cultural practices and beliefs, e.g

(a) No more Human sacrifices to the deities;

(b) Burial system has been modified such that there is no more wake keep.

(3) Education of the girl-child, which was like a taboo in those days.

(4) Mode of dressing in those days which has changed drastically most men no longer put on wrapper.

(5) Medical awareness, which has affected female clitoridectomy. This practice was a thing of glory in those days.

All the above mentioned practices have undergone changes, which the Urhobo and Isoko nations had accepted. In the same vein, they should also accept the change being advocated in this discourse.

## 5.1 Points why women should be buried at the husband’s homes

(1) To avoid being strangers back home after many years of marriage;

(2) To enable them benefit from the fruits of their labour after suffering with their husbands;

(3) To avoid undue financial exploitation of the children by the maternal family;

(4) Since they had earlier been discriminated against in the sharing of their fathers’ heritage;

(5) Since there was no pledge or binding prayer to return the women to the families during payment of bride price.

## 5.2 Reasons for the current practice of returning women to their families

(1) Marriage of many wives. where to bury them in their husbands’ compounds;

(2) Lack of respect for the woman folk – Patriarchal dominance.

These reasons may not be authentic as they are opinions expressed during interactions. The women should have the choice to be buried in their husband’s homestead. In other words, the



Urhobo and Isoko should modernize their ways of treating women and allow the wishes of married women who want to be buried with their husband's families.

Finally, it should be noted that some of the ethnic groups outside Urhobo and Isoko practice this burial at husband's home system.

## 6 Implication for intergroup relations

Afigbo (1987) depose that, there is the need to recognize the fact:

"...that inter-group relationship is a multifaceted and dynamic concept. Among its more common facets are the political (which might be war-like or peaceful), the economic and technological, the cultural (which later include art, dance and music, marriage customs, modes of dress *etc.*). Other facets include interaction between legal and judicial systems, language and folklore, religion, philosophy and cosmology."

Given the foregoing, it follows that the study of intergroup connections between the Urhobo and Isoko and their neighbors in the Niger Delta and elsewhere should be interested in recognizing the close ties that exist between the various groups and all of their neighbors. For instance, one group may give and receive its finest and worst qualities from other groups through conflict, commerce, marriage, and other types of intergroup contact (Okpevra, 2017).

Intergroup marriage is a common phenomenon among the Nigeria peoples. Thus as it is said that one man's meat is another man's poison, calls to mind in interrogating the aspect of the burial of the Urhobo and Isoko in review. In interrogating the practice of returning the corpse of the married woman to the homestead of her family rather than bury her in her husband's homestead and avers that if not properly handled, it could affect intergroup relation. The paper, therefore, concludes that this trend is posing a serious threat to peaceful and harmonious intergroup relation among families that indulged in inter-tribal marriage.

Examples abound. The late Henrietta Kosoko, wife of the veteran Nollywood actor Jide Kosoko was brought back to her home town in Urhoboland to be buried amidst controversial circumstances. In some Igbo communities across the Niger, if the first daughter married outside her community, at death, the corpse must be returned to her family.

The late Stella Obasanjo who hails from Iruokpen in Esanland Edo State before she was allowed to be buried in her husband's place elicited a lot of crisis. Among the Idoma of Benue State it is a veritable source of intergroup conflict. The practice of returning the woman's corpse to her father's property is said to have violated the conventional marriage oath, according to those who favour ending the practice. It is merely a manifestation of the masculine gender's domination over women. The argument is that since the universal institution of marriage sustains the perpetual union of two different genders, and since the Urhobo and Isoko marriage tradition must be in accordance with that institution, why should the relationship terminate upon burial? They questioned, "Why must women's corpses be removed from the home that they helped to create."

## 7 Conclusion

It must be noted that various practices of the culture and traditions of a people change or are influenced overtime if seen that a particular practice is done better by the other culture(s) around them. Cultural practices or traditions can also change as a result of mere imitation, which in most cases can't be convincingly defended by those doing the imitation if they are requested to do so.

It is, therefore, important to look very well before a change(s) is/are made in the culture and traditions of a people as some of these practices and traditions have ancestral and spiritual roots and implications. Some people who go against the practice to buried their mothers in their husbands' homestead without absolution from the woman's family have not only be taunted with it but had continuously experienced misfortunes such as premature death, unidentifiable illnesses *etc.* until they had to exhume the corpse of the mother to her father's place for proper burial.

By and large, in life the only constant phenomenon is change. Thus what one is trying to put across is to allow the husband bury his own better half (wife) anywhere he pleases. If we are to go by burying the woman where she came from, ordinarily her corpse should be physically taken to heaven because that is where she came from. The husband owns her living and dead body. Till death do them part means the husband can now remarry since death has parted them. This is 21st century. Some ethnic groups are already changing their culture due to the effect it has on them all because of ignorance. A culture that does not permit the female child to partake in the inheritance of her parents but requires the corpse of the woman to be returned after death is fraudulent to say the least.

The Urhobo and Isoko are not just known for the practice of returning the corpse of the married woman to the homestead of her family rather than bury her in her husband's homestead. They are a

friendly and warm people, whose smiles you will remember for a long time. Indeed, it is said that a good wife is from God while a good husband is from Isoko. It is therefore the recommendation of this paper that studies of this type on African cultural practices should go beyond shallow assumptions to a more deeply searching investigations on the collective mind/rituals of the people.

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