

Socio-Cultural Context of Death and Mourning Practices in Rural Igbo Communities of Nigeria

Dr. Innocent A. Nwosu¹, Dr. Vivian Chizoma Njemanze², Dr. Joseph Ekpechu³,
Bukola Popoola⁴

^{1,2,3,4} *Sociology Unit, Department of Sociology/Psychology/Criminology & Security Studies, Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo (FUNAI), Ebonyi State, Nigeria*
Corresponding Author: Dr. Innocent A. Nwosu

ABSTRACT: Death is culturally a sad occasion because it terminates familial bond. However, death, grief and mourning are common life events. All cultures have ways of coping with death and grief. Often times, caregivers are confused when a patient is about to die. This is because they may lack knowledge about the patient's cultural practices concerning death. Therefore, culture has impact on grief. But anthropologists in Africa have not done sufficient studies about death, grief and mourning possibly because death is hard to face. As a result of this dearth of knowledge, the present study was conducted to bring to fore cultural underpinnings of death, grief and mourning among the Igbo of Nigeria. The ethnographic study was conducted using observation and in-depth interviews in six communities of southeast Nigeria. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings indicate that there are cultural beliefs concerning death and grief as well as cultural practices that increase grief in the area. The people also have traditional ways of managing grief. Therefore, death, grief and culture are interwoven. It is therefore important to understand people's cultural beliefs and practices concerning death and grief before planning programmes geared towards the welfare of their bereaved.

Key Words: Cultural Practices, Death, Grief, Igbo People, Mourning.

Date of Submission: 17-07-2017

Date of acceptance: 28-08-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Death has been culturally considered as a sad or unpleasant occasion, due to the termination of social and familial bonds with the deceased or affection for the being that has passed on. Therefore, while the end of life experience is universal, the practices associated with grief and mourning is culturally specific. Death and mourning are normal life events. So, all cultures have developed ways to cope with death in a respectful manner and any attempt to interfere with these practices can disrupt people's ability to cope during the grieving process.

The nature of death and its attendant consequences may have been reasons why scholars have been reluctant to discuss the issue of death. Death is like clay which the potter uses. Whether the clay is black or white, it is the culture of the potter that determines the size, shape and motif on the pot. Thus, even when potters use the same materials and process, the final product can never be exactly the same across culture. Culture would have placed its finger prints on the final products. This same range of diversity applies to the issue of death and dying. In this respect, then, issues of death mirror those of life^[1].

Often times, care givers are confused when they noticed that a patient is about to die. How should they handle the dying patient? How do they break the news to the deceased's relatives? How do they cope with the expected negative reactions of the deceased's relatives? The answers to these and more questions are provided by the deceased's culture. The former belief that grief has a biological base and is universal^[2] has been extensively criticized. Research from various cross-cultural studies have indicated that diversity is everywhere in biological systems and that the response to death may not be universal^[3,4]. Therefore, it appears that culture may impact the experience of grief/mourning and that there is diversity in the personal internal experience that follows the death of a loved one^[5,6].

Death dates back to the beginning of creation and since then death has become a fact of life^[7]. Death as an aspect of human life gives meaning to human existence. Death should not be seen as an enemy to be conquered but rather as a friend on one's life journey and should remind us of our human vulnerability and what is still needed to be done in this lifetime^[8]. Again, Kubler-Ross^[8] went further to note that death at times can be very hard to face and we might be tempted to avoid it and flee from having to confront it. This is possibly one of the reasons most anthropologists in Africa avoid carrying out studies in the area of death, grief and mourning. This in effect has affected the caregivers especially those who are not experienced in the culture of the deceased.

As a result, this study was carried out to explain the cultural assumptions about death and mourning among the Igbo of Nigeria, cultural practices associated with mourning in the area and cultural practices that are used to manage grief among the people. This is because it has been established in medical anthropology that medical systems are also cultural systems. Therefore, clinicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, social welfare agents and even burial managers will extensively benefit from the knowledge portrayed by the study. In other words, the study provides enough cultural and social perspective for understanding, interpreting and solving grief related problems. This is possible because human beings are simultaneously biological and cultural.

As a result of this, social action theory (SAT) and attachment theory (AT) become relevant in explaining death and mourning practices among the Igbo of Nigeria. Social action theory (SAT) is interested in the analysis of the motivating force behind actor(s) in a particular social environment. Therefore, an understanding of social action is an understanding of underlying meaning or motivation attached to such acts as grieving and mourning. However, motivation alone is not enough to explain reasons for actions. The action of an individual during grief and mourning may be integrated with that of another through the cultural patterning of elements. Whether an action is rational or not, the ends which the individual seeks may be set for him by his cultural conditioning^[9]. Similarly, situational factors contribute to an individual's action during grief^[10, 11]. From this standpoint, it can be seen that individuals within the system do grief according to their relationship to the deceased and the nature of the death. Another relevance of SAT is in the analysis of motivation for seeking an end to grief. On the other hand, Bowlby expanded upon Freud's idea of attachment and focused on external relationships that exist between infants and parents. He was renowned for all his work on attachment and especially so far as his famous attachment theory^[12] and the first theorist to base any conclusion on observed evidence. According to Worden^[2], Bowlby studied how the intensity of grief may be influenced by the type of attachment one had with the deceased. His AT provides a means for people to understand the strong bonds of affection that individuals make with each other and the intense emotional reaction individuals have when these bonds are broken. The aim of attachment behaviour is to maintain a bond of affection and any danger to this bond will give rise to very precise behaviour such as crying and clinging^[13].

Grief is conceptualized as a form of separation anxiety and the aim is to retrieve or restore the proximity to the lost object. As a result, Bowlby^[12] categorised separation into three different phases: protest phase, the despair phase and the detachment phase. However, attachments seem to stem more from a need for security and safety and not because of certain biological drives that must be met^[2].

Bowlby,^[cited in 2] identified how certain circumstances surrounding the death of a loved one could affect the characteristics, intensity and duration of the bereavement process. His grief theory explained a cycle of phases the bereaved person experienced, the grief reactions and the time to reach recovery. During the initial phase of grief, bereaved persons experienced a sense of numbness and shock, and may show outbursts of extreme intense distress or anger. In this phase, the bereaved is unable to fully comprehend the impact of the death. In the second phase, the bereaved protests the loss and searches and yearns for the deceased to return. This stage triggers crying, anxiety, self-reproach, confusion and loss of security^[14]. During the third phase, as the bereaved learns to live without the deceased, intense despair is experienced.

Worden^[2] alleged that it is important to express one's grief and detach emotionally from the deceased to recover full function. Worden stated that all human growth and development is influenced by various tasks. Mourning (the adaptation to loss) also involved accomplishing certain tasks. Since mourning was viewed as a process and not a state, the tasks implied "grief work" or the work of freeing oneself from the bondage of the deceased, readjusting to the environment without the deceased and re-investing in another relationship^[2].

Worden's four tasks of mourning are:

- (a) To accept the reality of the loss, that is, to realize fully that the person is dead and that a reunion is impossible.
- (b) To experience the pain of grief.
- (c) To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing. The bereaved must develop skills to cope and redefine the loss in a way that it will benefit the survivor.
- (d) To withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship^[2:11].

According to Worden^[2], mourning is finished when the four task of mourning were completed and when the person can reinvest his emotions back into life and in the living. However, he warned that there is a sense in which mourning can never finish. Therefore, the relationship and the nature of the attachment a person has with others will determine how the person will grieve if these attachments were to be severed^[15].

From all these, it can be seen that culture is a vital aspect of our life and death. Again, different societies develop their own beliefs, values, ceremonies and rituals regarding death and bereavement. The reaction to death is then determined by how death has been assimilated in a given culture. The experiences of an emotion will depend on how an individual interprets a particular social situation. It also motivates the individual to engage in certain social actions^[16].

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study was an ethnographic one and data were collected through qualitative method. The unit of study was the community. Sampling technique used for the study was purposive. This is because information required is specific and could only be provided by those who have lost their loved ones within the last six months before the study. Six communities were selected for the study. Three communities (Ugiri, Nkwere and Abo-Mbaise) were selected from Imo State while the other three communities (Edda, Onueke and Abaomege) were selected from Ebonyi State. All the six communities were made up of the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria.

From each of these communities, five respondents were purposively selected in this order – 2 widows, 2 widowers and 1 child between 10-15 years (who has lost either of his parents in recent time). Therefore, a total of 30 respondents were involved in the study. The field techniques used for the study were structured observations and in-depth interviews. All respondents were asked questions which reflect the direction of the study. The interviews were recorded on tape, transcribed and translated from Igbo language to English before analysis was done. Data were therefore generated through the analysis of emic and etic perspectives. Since the study is an ethnographic one, analysis was done using descriptive statistics.

III. RESULT

The major concern of this paper is to determine:

- (a) The basic cultural beliefs about death and mourning among the Igbo of Nigeria.
- (b) The cultural practices associated with mourning and their effect on grief among the bereaved in the study area.
- (c) Some cultural practices that are used to manage grief in the study area.

The first concern of the paper is explained by the analysis of the opinion of respondents on what constitutes the basic cultural beliefs about death and mourning in the study area.

Table 1: Basic Cultural Beliefs of the People about Death and Mourning

Basic Cultural Beliefs about Death & Mourning	Respondents' Opinion			
	Yes (%)	No (%)	I don't know (%)	Total (%)
Every deceased is killed by humans or gods	26 (86.7%)	2 (6.7%)	2(6.7%)	30 (100%)
There is good and bad death	19 (63.3%)	6 (20%)	5 (16.7%)	30 (100%)
No deceased Igbo is buried outside his village	30 (100%)	-	-	30 (100%)
The spirit of a deceased Igbo must be brought home to join the ancestors	28 (93.3%)	-	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)
Husbands are expected to die before their wives	5 (16.7%)	21 (70%)	4 (13.3)	30 (100%)
Wives are expected to die before their husbands	2 (6.7%)	26 (86.7%)	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)
Parents are expected to die before their children	28 (93.3%)	-	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)
The corpse of a deceased Igbo does not enter another person's house	26 (86.7%)	-	4 (13.3%)	30 (100%)
Burial of a deceased must involve interment and rituals	25 (83.3%)	4 (13.3%)	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
At death every Igbo joins the ancestors	30 (100%)	-	-	30 (100%)
Every accident is caused by humans or gods	27 (90%)	3 (10%)	-	30 (100%)
Mourning is a mark of honour to the deceased	30 (100%)	-	-	30 (100%)
Mourning is a period of gradual disconnection from the deceased by relatives	23 (76.7%)	-	7 (23.3%)	30 (100%)
Shaving of head by married women signifies mourning	30 (100%)	-	-	30 (100%)
Anyone who has no one to mourn him is worthless	29 (96.7%)	-	1 (3.3%)	30 ((100%)

Source: Fieldwork 2017

From table one, it can be seen that out of the 30 respondents who were interviewed, 26 (86.7%) agreed that every dead person was either killed by humans or gods. During the interview, it was clarified that a person can only die when he is very old (that is from the age of 90 years and above). At that time, the gods invite such old person over to join his ancestors. Therefore, anyone who dies before such age must have been killed by fellow humans through charm or witchcraft or the person received the wrath of the gods as a result of his atrocities. However, two of the remaining respondents said that it is not true that every deceased was killed by humans or gods. The remaining two respondents said that they do not know if every deceased died as a result of harm from humans or gods.

Data show that 19 (63.3%) respondents believed that death in the area can be classified as “good” or “bad” death. Six other respondents disagreed with this view saying that all death is bad. The remaining five respondents said that they do not know if there is good and bad death. On the other hand, all respondents agreed that the corpse of every Igbo person must be buried in the deceased’s country home. In the same vein, 28 (93.3%) respondents agreed that apart from the corpse, the spirit of every deceased Igbo must also be brought home to the deceased village or town in case the deceased died outside his village/town. This is to enable such spirit join his ancestors to ensure the protection of the family members. The bringing home of the spirit is usually achieved through certain traditional rituals. However, the remaining 2 respondents said that they do not know if the spirit of a deceased should be brought home.

In another vein, 5 (16.7%) respondents said that husbands are expected to die before their wives because they are usually older than their wives. The other 21 (70%) respondents disagreed with this view. According to them, death does not recognise age or wealth. Similarly, 26 (86.7%) respondents also said that it is not expected that wives will die before their husbands. However, 28 respondents representing 93.3% of the sample agreed that parents are expected to die before their children. And if children die before their parents, it is a “bad” death.

Another cultural belief about death in the study area is that every deceased must not lie in state in another person’s house other than his own house or that of his parents. Data indicate that 26 respondents representing 86.7% of the entire sample agreed to this view while the remaining 4 respondents said that they do not know if such a rule exists. Again, it was agreed by 25 respondents (83.3%) that burial of a deceased usually involves two levels, that is, interment and observance of rituals. Only 4 respondents (1.3%) disagreed with this view. It was also agreed by all the respondents that at death every Igbo joins the ancestors.

In another vein, 27 respondents representing 90% of the total sample agreed that every accident in the area do not just happen. They are usually induced by either humans or the gods. The remaining 3 respondents representing 10% of the entire sample disagreed with this view.

It can be seen from table one that all the respondents agreed that mourning is not punishment and that it is a mark of honour to the deceased. Out of the 30 respondents in the sample 23 (76.7%) believed that mourning is a period of gradual disconnection from the deceased by the bereaved family. Similarly, all the respondents also agreed that shaving of the head by married women signifies mourning. It was also agreed by 29 respondents (96.7%) that any person who has no one to mourn him at death is worthless.

The second concern of this paper is to determine the cultural practices that are associated with mourning with a view of establishing their effect on grief. Data to this effect is presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Cultural Practices Associated With Mourning and Their Effect on Grief

Cultural Practices Associated with Mourning	Heightens Grief			
	Yes (%)	No (%)	I don’t know (%)	Total (%)
Dressing of corpse	-	28 (93.3%)	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)
Burying corpse within 48 hours	7 (23.3%)	22 (73.3%)	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
Burying corpse inside the house	18 (60%)	10 (33.3%)	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)
Burying corpse within the compound	6 (20%)	20 (66.7%)	4 (13.3%)	30 (100%)
Burying corpse in the forest	20 (66.7%)	10 (33.3%)	-	30 (100%)
Allowing relative to throw in sand first into the grave	12 (40%)	20 (66.7%)	8 (26.7%)	30 (100%)
Wailing at the death of loved one	5 (16.7%)	25 (83.3%)	-	30 (100%)
Delaying the announcement of the death of person more than two days	27 (90%)	3 (10%)	-	30 (100%)
Delaying the burial of a deceased	24 (80%)	6 (20%)	-	30 (100%)
Playing music during burial	7 (23.3%)	21 (70%)	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)
Observing night vigil on the eve of burial	4 (13.3%)	21 (70%)	5 (16.7%)	30 (100%)
Serving food and drinks at burial	10 (33.3%)	18 (60%)	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)
Assembly of friends & relatives during burial	-	30 (100%)	-	30 (100%)
Excessive spending during burial	29 (96.7%)	-	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
Wailing by the widow at midnight	30 (100%)	-	-	30 (100%)
Throwing food outside at night by widow to “feed” the deceased husband	21 (70%)	6 (20%)	3 (10%)	30 (100%)
Shaving of the head by deceased’ relatives	2 (6.7%)	26 (86.7%)	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)

Restricting movement of the bereaved spouse for 1 month	12 (40%)	18 (60%)	-	30 (100%)
Wearing unkempt hair throughout the mourning period of 1 year	26 (86.7%)	3 (10%)	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)

Source: Fieldwork 2017

It can be seen from table 2 that one of the cultural practices associated with mourning is washing and dressing of the corpse before non-family members can see it. Data on the table show that 28 respondents in the sample representing 93.3% said that this practice does not heighten grief. The other remaining 2 respondents said that they do not know whether such practice heightens grief.

However, 7 (23.3%) respondents believed that if the corpse is buried early (within 48 hours of death), it will heighten the grief experienced by the bereaved. But 22 other respondents (73.3%) said that early burial of corpse does not heighten grief. Similarly, 18 respondents (60%) agreed that burying a corpse inside one's house heightens grief. This is because the bereaved confronts the grave almost every moment. But 10 respondents (33.3%) believed that burying the corpse inside the house does not heighten grief. In the same vein, 6 respondents (20%) said that burying a corpse within one's compound helps heighten grief suffered by the bereaved. However, 20 respondents (66.7%) believed that burying a corpse within the compound does not heighten grief. The other 4 respondents (13.3%) said that they do not know whether such practice helps to heighten grief. On the other hand, 20 respondents (66.7%) agreed that burying a corpse in the forest helps heighten grief. This is because the persons whose corpses are buried in the forest are believed to have died abominable death. This adds to the grief of the bereaved. But 10 respondents (33.3%) said that such burial does not add to the grief of the bereaved.

It is also a common practice in the study area for relatives of the deceased to throw in sand first before the grave is covered. Data on table 2 indicate that 12 respondents (40%) believed that this heightens the grief of the bereaved. However, majority of the respondents – 20 (66.7%) believed that this does not heighten grief. Another common practice during the death of a loved one is wailing by the bereaved. Majority of the respondents – 25 (83.3%) believed that this is one way of releasing emotion and as such it does not heighten grief. However, 5 respondents said that wailing actually heightens grief.

Again, in the study area sometimes there may be delay in the formal announcement of the death of a person. Data in table 2 show that this practice does heighten grief for the bereaved. This is because the bereaved may not be able to express their grief openly. And when negative emotions are bottled up, they help to heighten anxiety. That is why 27 respondents (90%) said that such practice heightens grief. However, the remaining 3 respondents said that it does not heighten grief.

Similarly, data have also shown that 24 respondents representing 80% of the entire sample agreed that delaying burial of a deceased heightens grief among the bereaved. This is because grief does not really reduce until the corpse is buried. So, the longer the corpse remained the longer the grief period. But the other 6 respondents believed that the delay gives the bereaved time to get materials needed for the burial and as such helps to reduce their grief.

In the study area, music (whether traditional or modern) is one major component of burial ceremonies. Table 2 shows that 7 respondents representing 23.3% of the sample believed that music during burial heightens grief while the other 21 respondents (70%) said that music is actually a therapy that helps to reduce the grief of the bereaved during burial. However, 2 respondents said that they do not know whether music heightens grief.

Data also indicate that 4 respondents in the sample believed that night vigil held on the eve of the burial do heighten the grief of the bereaved. However, majority of the respondents – 21 (70%) said that such night vigil does not heighten the grief of the bereaved. But the remaining respondents (5) said that they do not know whether night vigils before burial do heighten grief.

During fieldwork in the study area, it was observed that food and drinks are usually served during burial of a deceased (except if the deceased is below 20 years). From table 2, it can be seen that 10 respondents (33.3%) believed that such practice heightens the grief of the bereaved. But 18 respondents (60%) said that such practice does not heighten grief because the bereaved at times may partake in the eating and drinking thereby reducing their grief.

Similarly, all the respondents (100%) agreed that the coming together of friends and relatives from far and near during burial does not heighten grief rather it helps in reduction of grief. On the other hand, all the respondents except one agreed that excessive spending during burial actually heightens grief. This is because at the end of the burial, the bereaved will grieve over the deceased and the lost of money/materials. This becomes double grief. The remaining respondent said that he does not know whether excessive spending during burial heightens grief.

In the study area, it was a common practice that the widow of a deceased man must wake up at midnight to wail for the dead husband. Data collected showed that all the respondents agreed that this type of

practice help to heighten the grief of the bereaved (both the widow and her children). Similarly, 21 respondents (70%) believed that forcing the widow of a deceased man to wake up at midnight to “feed” the deceased husband by throwing some food outside helps to heighten the grief of the bereaved widow and her family. Only 6 respondents said that this does not heighten grief. The other respondents said that they do not know if it heightens grief.

From table 2, it can also be observed that 12 respondents (40%) believed that restricting the movement of a bereaved widow/widower for a month after the death of their spouse helps to heighten grief. The other 18 respondents (60%) believed that such a practice does heighten grief rather it helps the bereaved to regain his/her strength properly to avoid further breakdown.

Another common practice in the study area is for the bereaved to leave their hair unkempt (after the initial shaving) throughout the period of mourning usually 6-12 months. Out of the 30 respondents in the sample, 26 (86.7%) believed that such practice helps to heighten the grief of the bereaved. Only 3 respondents disagreed with this view. The remaining respondent said that she does not know if such practice helps to heighten grief of the bereaved.

The third concern of this paper is to determine the cultural practices that used to manage grief among the Igbo of Nigeria. Data to this effect is presented in table 3 below.

Table 3: Cultural Practices That Are Used To Manage Grief

Cultural practices for managing grief	Respondents’ Opinion			
	Yes (%)	No (%)	I don’t know (%)	Total (%)
Dressing corpses before lying it in state	18 (60%)	10 (33.3%)	2 (6.7%)	30 (100%)
Preventing the bereaved from engaging in any physical activity for 7 days	21 (70%)	3 (10%)	6 (20%)	30 (100%)
Continuous assemblage of friends & relatives in the bereaved compound for 7 days	30 (100%)	-	-	30 (100%)
Financial & physical assistance by friends & relatives to the bereaved family during burial	29 (96.7%)	-	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
Observing requiem mass before interment	21 (70%)	8 (26.7%)	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
Sharing experiences of persons who had been earlier bereaved	19 (63.3%)	7 (23.3%)	4 (13.3%)	30 (100%)
Allowing relatives of the deceased to view the corpse before interment	21 (70%)	8 (26.7%)	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
Making burial a communal activity	28 (93.3%)	1 (3.3%)	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
Obeying the written will of the deceased	5 (16.7%)	24 (80%)	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
Burying the corpse inside the house	8 (26.7%)	21 (70%)	1 (3.3%)	30 (100%)
Playing music during burial	27 (90%)	3 (10%)	-	30 (100%)
Performing traditional search for the cause of the death	7 (23.3%)	20 (66.7%)	3 (10%)	30 (100%)

Source: Fieldwork 2017

Data on table 3 indicate that 18 respondents representing 60% of the total sample agreed that dressing the corpse before laying it in state for public view is one way of managing grief. The other 10 respondents (33.3%) disagreed with this view. The remaining 2 respondents said that they do not know whether such act helps to manage grief.

Again, 21 respondents (70%) agreed that preventing the bereaved from engaging in any physical activity for 7 days is one way of managing grief among the people. Only 3 respondents (10%) disagreed with this view. Similarly, all the respondents (100%) agreed that the continuous gathering of friends and relatives in the bereaved compound for 7 days helps to reduce grief. It is also believed by 29 respondents (96.7%) that providing financial and physical assistance by friends and relatives to the bereaved during funeral helps to reduce grief. Only one respondent said that he does not know if such assistance can help to reduce grief.

On the other hand, the respondents who believed that observing a requiem mass helps to manage grief were 21 (70%) while 8 other respondents (26.7%) disagreed with this view. In the same vein, 19 respondents (63.3%) agreed that sharing experiences with persons who had earlier been bereaved helps to manage grief. The other 7 respondents (23.3%) do not believe this view. The remaining 4 respondents said that they do not know whether such sharing of experiences helps to manage grief.

Data has also shown that the respondents who believed that allowing the spouse and children of the deceased to have the last view of the corpse before interment helps to reduce grief were 21 (70%). Only 8

respondents representing 26.7% of the sample disagreed with this view. It can also be observed from table 3 that almost all the respondents – 28 (93.3%) believed that making burial a communal activity helps to reduce the pains and grief of the bereaved. Only one respondent disagreed with this point of view.

It was also found that majority of the respondents – 24 (80%) believed that obeying the written will of the deceased can reduce the grief of the bereaved. In the same vein, only 8 respondents (26.7%) believed that burying the corpse inside his/her house can reduce grief of the bereaved while 21 respondents (70%) disagreed with this point of view.

On the other hand, majority of the respondents – 27 (90%) agreed that music goes a long way in helping to manage grief in the study area. Only 3 respondents (10%) disagreed with this view. However, it can be seen in table 3 that majority of the respondents – 20 (66.7%) believed that performing traditional search for the cause of the deceased's death does not help to manage grief in the study area. Only 7 respondents (23.3%) believed that such search helps to reduce grief.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1 Basic Cultural Beliefs of the People about Death and Mourning

Generally, data have shown that there are basic cultural beliefs about death among the Igbo of Nigeria. It can be seen that the people believed that no one simply dies and that every person that dies must have been killed by humans or the gods. This is in line with the view of Placide Temples as was cited in Anderson^[17] when he said that every misfortune that Africans encounter is a diminution of vital force. He added that illness and death result from some outside agent – a person, thing or circumstance.

There is also a belief that some death is “good” while others are “bad”. The “good” death includes death through sickness and accident. Death through suicide, drowning, thunder strikes and so on are regarded as “bad” death. Similarly, premature death is also regarded in the area as “bad” death because children are not expected to die before their parents and elders. This helps to clarify the confusion of Kastenbaum^[18] when he noted that sometimes when people speak of “the good death”, they are thinking of the dying process, sometimes of death as an event that concludes the process and sometimes the status of “being dead”. Therefore, Kastenbaum was right when he posited that people shift focus from one facet to another. This is because in the study area, death can be “bad” based on process of dying (such as suicide), the cause of death (such as thunder strikes) or the personality of the deceased (such as premature death). In other words, the process of dying, the cause of the death and the personality of the deceased determine if death is “good” or “bad”.

Data have shown that the Igbo believe strongly in ancestral worship. This is the major reason why all the respondents agreed that the corpse of every Igbo is expected to be buried in his country home in order to assist the deceased in joining the league of ancestors. This is why Ruddock^[19] noted that death rituals in Africa are to ensure that the deceased is properly put to rest so that his spirit is at peace and he can take his place among the protective ancestors. He went further to state that if the deceased is not brought home and buried “correctly”, his ghost can remain as part of the world of the living and wander around and cause harm. Therefore, in line with this, the Igbo believe that corpse of the deceased should be brought home for “correct” burial while the spirit of the deceased should be “brought” home through essential rituals to join his ancestors. And this submission supports social action theory in that there is always motivation for people's action. Therefore, whether the action of bringing corpses home for burial by Igbo is rational or not, such action is determined by cultural conditioning as was postulated by social action theorists.

Another cultural belief of the Igbo is that parents are expected to die before their children. This is borne out of the notion that it is the children who are expected to give the parents “correct” burial at death. As a result, there is no cultural role for parents during the death of their children. It is expected that one's children should be matured enough before the death of their parents so that they can be able to perform their responsibilities towards their deceased parents. However, if any of the parents die when the children are not yet matured, he or she may be interred while the “proper” burial will be deferred till the children are matured. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see people carrying out the burial rituals of their parents who died more than ten years earlier. This shows that burial does not end with the interment. That is why the people believe that burial of a deceased is always at two levels – interment and the actual burial (rituals). This supports the view of Grief Speaks^[20], when it noted that cultural perspectives can shape people's reaction to death. In their work among the Native Americans they said that even among Christians, there is an emphasis on the reunion with nature that occurs with death. This reunion is actually accomplished through the rituals of burial.

In line with the view of Anderson^[17] that death does not alter or end the life or personality of an individual but only causes a change in its conditions and also that the goal of life is to become ancestor after death, the Igbo forbids carrying the corpse of a deceased into another person's house. This is because the spirit of the deceased cannot find rest in a strange house. The deceased's dead relatives who are supposed to welcome him into the ancestral world will not be present. This is why it is compulsory that every Igbo must

have his own house no matter its size, shape or structure. Therefore, life does not end with death but continues in another realm within the same environment.

In another vein, data indicate that mourning is a mark of honour to the deceased. It is also believed that mourning is not punishment for the living but a period of gradual disconnection from the deceased by his/her relatives. Mourning, therefore, helps the bereaved to accept the permanent physical absence of the deceased. Mourning is a process of transferring the psychological emotions of lost into physical objects which also depict such emotion. This process helps to reduce the psychological impact of the death by using physical conditions or objects to display the emotion. That is why mourning the deceased is important to the Igbo. This supports the view of Appel^[21] when she posited that it seems that the private and public displays of emotions need to be culturally adhered to. She also warned that if the prescribed grieving and mourning specifications are not appropriately displayed, not only the people but the gods would frown upon such inappropriate responses. This is why among the Igbo shaving of the head is compulsory for every person that loses his/her spouse. This actually supports the view of attachment theory that people need to display emotion when something dear to them is detached especially in death. Generally, married women are not allowed to shave their heads except when their husbands die. Therefore, a married woman with shaved head signifies that she is mourning the deceased husband.

4.2 Cultural Practices Associated With Mourning and Their Effect on Grief

From the foregoing, it can be seen from table 2 that the cultural practices that heighten grief among the Igbo are burying corpse inside the house or forest, delaying the announcement of the death of a deceased, delaying the burial of a deceased, excessive spending during burial, forcing widow to wail at midnight, forcing widow to “feed” the deceased husband at night, disinheriting the bereaved from the family property and leaving the bereaved person’s hair unkempt throughout the period of mourning (6-12 months). These practices are contrary to the view of Ngubane^[22] when he noted that human burial practices are a manifestation of the human desire to demonstrate respect for the dead and thus lessen the pain of the bereaved. In effect these practices instead of lessening the pain of the bereaved add to their grief. Again, Eboh and Boye^[23] in line with this discovery noted earlier that the shaving of the widow’s heads and mourning of deceased husband for up to 12 months negatively affect the health of the widow.

It is as a result of all these that Ojigbo^[24] explained that for a woman who has just been bereaved of her husband, death stings, strips her bare and exposes her to humiliating physical and psychological violence, often in the name of culture usually by those who should console her and support her in her time of bereavement.

From table 2, it can be seen that there are cultural practices that do not heighten grief. One of these is to bury the corpse within 48 hours of death. According to the respondents, this helps to shorten the period of grief. Similarly, burying the corpse within the compound does not heighten grief. This makes the deceased to be close to watch over the compound even when the occupants are asleep or away. This is why the Egbebu Liberal Movement^[25] posited that to die and be buried in a strange land is totally repugnant to the people because the spirit can never find repose in an alien land. In spite of this, Lagos State Government once warned against burying corpses inside people’s compound. Actually, people disobey such policy because it was contrary to their culture. However, the worry of Lagos State Government was that such burial system becomes a challenge when there is road expansion and reconstruction within the area. This is because it will require relocating and reburying of such corpses^[26]. Here, we see development and culture at conflict.

Another significant cultural practice in the study area is that the maternal kinsmen of the deceased man must give their consent as to where the deceased should be buried and do the initial digging of the grave signifying their permission for the deceased to be buried. If the deceased is a married woman, her maiden kinsmen perform similar function before the digging of the grave. Where this permission is not obtained, the corpse may be exhumed by the maternal kinsmen (for a deceased man) or the maiden kinsmen (for a deceased married woman). In the same vein, the relatives of the deceased also give their consent to the burial of their deceased member by being the first set of people to throw sand into the grave. This signifies the giving of permission to the grave-diggers to cover the grave. It was found that at the point of throwing in sand, grief of the bereaved rise so much but begins to fall after the closing of the grave. The person feels relieved that he has performed his traditional obligation to the deceased.

It was observed that wailing was a common practice in the study area at the death of loved one. Respondents explained that wailing at the death of a loved one is necessary to release emotion. According to them, those who did not wail at the death of their loved one, end up having more depression because their emotions are bottled up. And they found expression in different psychological disorder. This is in line with the view of McKissock^[27] when he described tears as painkillers. He explained that when we experience intense emotional distress such as death of someone we love, our bodies produce a number of powerful painkilling chemicals. And tears are one of the ways these chemicals are distributed in the body. Tears carry the chemicals

to the surface of our eyeballs, where they are absorbed and may serve to ease the emotional pain and therefore help our survival. Similarly, Hello Grief^[28] also pointed out that wailing allows us to discharge our pain so we can get healed and that sadness and despair, when repressed do not just disappear. Instead, they go underground in one's psyche where the pain, unfortunately intensifies. Supporting this view, Creagan^[29] has earlier posited that crying is an important part of the grieving process.

Music is one important cultural practice noticed at burial among the Igbo. This music could be traditional music/dance or it could be modern form of music playing from stereo or live-band. It is generally believed in the study area that such music is a tonic that reduces grief. Sometimes, it is noticed that the bereaved pushes aside his grief and joins in singing and/or dancing to the music.

It was observed from the study area that on the night preceding the actual interment of the corpse of a deceased, there is usually a wake or vigil. This is usually done because the people believed that as the period of the interment draws near, the grief of the bereaved increases. Therefore, it becomes imperative for relatives and friends to gather for a vigil in order to lessen the grief of the bereaved. During this vigil, there is usually church service where consoling messages are delivered. These messages and the presence of different classes of people help to awaken the spirit of the bereaved. This finding supports the view of Baloyi^[30] who noted that an African funeral is a very social event for the entire community in which the deceased lived. He stated further that regardless of whether the deceased was a Christian or not, death has always been a reunion for long-separated relatives. In other words, the gathering of relatives and friends at funeral goes a long way to reduce grief.

Other cultural practices that the people believed do not heighten grief are shaving the head of the relatives of the deceased, restricting the movement of the bereaved for one month and serving food during burial. The relatives of the deceased see the saving of their head as their traditional obligation toward the deceased which if they do not perform may make them grieve more. The people saw the serving of food and drinks also as an obligation to their guests and also to prove that the deceased did not die as a result of hunger. However, they believed that excessive expenditure at this level may cause the bereaved to grieve more as result of debts that may follow. They also view the restriction of movement as normal because it helps the bereaved to recover fully before venturing into daily life activities. This finding is in line with the view of Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board Canada^[31] when they stated that in Igboland shaving of the head and at times the pubic and armpit hair is a common practice by widows during mourning. They also noted that there is usually prohibition for widows from leaving the home for 28 days. However, unlike the people studied, they view it as an unnecessary practice which heightens the grief of the widow.

4.3 Cultural Practices That Are Used To Manage Grief

It is important to note that it is necessary to understand how a particular people manage grief in order to know areas in which assistance can be given to the bereaved. It is as a result of this that the study sought to know the cultural practices in the study area that have helped them manage their grief over time. Data show that dressing the corpse before presenting it for public view is necessary. This helps to adjust the horrifying face or posture of the deceased in its battle with death. In other words, the more horrifying the corpse is, the greater the grief, but the more beautiful the corpse, the lesser the grief. This is acknowledged by Echema^[32] when noted that when an elderly man or woman dies, the corpse is immediately stretched out on a plantain leaves, sponged thorough and rubbed with cam wood dye to mark it as sacred. According to him, after the cleaning the body is dressed and laid out in the living room, lying down with the feet facing the entrance.

Another important cultural practice that helps to reduce grief in the study area is that the bereaved is prevented from engaging in any physical activity for 7 days. This is where the relatives and friends that usually gather for 7 days become relevant. This is because they are expected to assist the bereaved in certain domestic chores. This process helps the bereaved to recover from initial shock received as a result of the death of loved one. It is believed that after 7 days, the bereaved would have regained enough strength to carry on with life.

Apart from physical assistance, financial assistance is another aspect of the people's culture that helps to reduce grief. In Igboland, funeral is usually expensive and as such if only the bereaved family is allowed to cater for all the expenses, they are likely to run into serious debts. This can make their grief last forever. However, it was found that relatives and friends usually assist the bereaved family through gift of cash and materials. In some cases, drinks and food are supplied by kinsmen and friends to complement what the bereaved family may provide. This serves as great relief, thereby reducing the grief of the bereaved family.

Other cultural practices that were observed in the study area that help to manage grief are the observing of requiem mass, sharing experiences of those who had earlier been bereaved, allowing the spouse and the children of the deceased to have a last view of the corpse before interment, making burial a communal affair and the use of music during funeral. Data have indicated that all these in one way or the other help to reduce the pains suffered by the bereaved.

These issues are in agreement with the view of Help Guide^[33] when it pointed out the single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people and drawing support from your faith.

It has also been said that participating in the rituals (requiem mass , funeral) and other traditions help people get through the first few days and honour the person who died. Just being in the presence of other people who knew your loved one can be such a soothing balm ^[34].

V. CONCLUSION

Death and grief are interwoven. However, very little is known about the basic cultural beliefs about death and mourning among the Igbo of Nigeria. That the people still believe that no one can simply die unless he is killed by human or the gods, calls for serious attention. And this affects the way they handle burial and grief. Whenever a person is suspected to have killed another, relationship goes soar and more dangerous consequences may result which heightens grief. It can also be said that the people believe in ancestral worship and that mourning is a mark of honour to the deceased. Therefore, only those who had “good” death are given proper burial and mourning. As such the relatives of those who died “bad” death tend to grief more than the relatives of those who died “good” death.

Similarly, it can be said that there are cultural practices that usually heightens the grief of bereaved. These include burying corpse inside the house/forest, delaying announcement of the death of a deceased, long delay in the burial of a deceased, excessive spending during burial and maltreatment of the widow of the deceased. In other words, there is a strong relationship between these activities and the deepening of grief of the bereaved. On the other hand, it has been found that the Igbo have their own way of managing grief to ensure that the bereaved returns to full life early. These actions that they use to manage grief in the area include cleaning and dressing the corpse, preventing the bereaved from engaging in physical activities for 7 days, offering physical/financial assistance to the bereaved, organising requiem mass, playing music and making burial a communal activity in which there is reunion of relatives and friends. All these positive actions help the bereaved to recover from his grief quick.

Based on the foregoing, we suggest that:

- a. It is important to understand people’s cultural beliefs and practices concerning death and grief before attempting to help such people at the time of grief.
- b. It also necessary to educate the people to make them understand that every living thing shall die and that the world is just survival of the fittest. This is important to prevent pointing accusing fingers at innocent persons which may spark off fresh troubles that may prolong the grief of the bereaved.
- c. There should be policy statements by governments and community leaders concerning the length of time a corpse should remain in the mortuary before it is interred. The delay in burial of corpses should not exceed one month. This is to reduce expenses and the duration of grief.
- d. Every effort should be made to encourage and sustain the communal involvement of the people at the burial of a deceased.
- e. Effort should be made at the local government level to set up social welfare agency that may assist indigent bereaved families in the burial of their deceased. This will be more medicinal than taking them to psychiatric homes when depression occurs.
- f. Bereaved persons should be allowed to express their emotion. Those who wish to cry should be allowed to do so because it is therapeutic. However, those who could not cry should not be forced to cry. And they should not be stigmatized or suspected because they could not cry. Nature has made us differently.
- g. Music has been found to be therapeutic during grief and as such should be played during burial to help reduce tension and pain.

REFERENCES

- [1]. M. Greef, Information Collection: Interviewing, in A.S. De Vos, (Ed.) *Research at grass roots: for the social sciences and human services professions*. (Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik Publishers, 2002) 46-68.
- [2]. J.W. Worden, *Grief counselling and grief therapy* (Great Britain: Tavistock Publications, 1991).
- [3]. M. Eisenbruch, Cross cultural aspects of bereavement: ethnic and cultural variations in the development of bereavement practices, *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 8, 1984, 314-347.
- [4]. D. Klass, Response to collin Murray Parkes’ comment on my article “developing a cross cultural model of grief”. *Omega: journal of death and dying*, 41, 2000, 327-330.
- [5]. K.J. Brison, & S.C. Lewitt, Coping with bereavement: long-term perspective on grief and mourning, *Ethos*, 23, 1995, 395-400.
- [6]. G. Catlin, The role of culture in grief, *Journal of social psychology*, 133, 2001, 173-184.
- [7]. The Holy Bible King James Version (Red letter edition), *Holy Bible*. (Nashville Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1976).
- [8]. E. Kubler-Ross, *Death: the final stage of growth* (Prentice-Hall, 1975).
- [9]. I.A. Nwosu, Health implications coping strategies of infertility among Mbano women of Nigeria. African notes: journal of the institute of African studies, University of Ibadan, 28, (1&2), 2004, 152-168.

- [10]. A.S. Ajala, Cultural practices relating to breast feeding and their implication for maternal and child health care in a rural community of Osun state, Nigeria, *West African journal of archaeology*, 32, (1) 2002, 109-129.
- [11]. O.S. Odiagbe, *Gender Responsibility, Reproductive Decision-Making and Fertility among the Esan of Nigeria*. doctoral thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Ph.D, 2004.
- [12]. J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss. Volume I: Separation, Anxiety and Anger* (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1973).
- [13]. C.M. Parkes, Comments on Dennis Klass' article "developing a cross cultural model of grief". *Omega: journal of death and dying*, 4, 2000, 323-326.
- [14]. M. Stroebe, M. Gergen, K.J. Gergen, & W. Stroebe, Broken heart or broken bonds, love and death in historical perspective, *American Psychologist*, 47, 1992, 1205-1212.
- [15]. R. Weis, Loss and recovery, *Journal of social issues*, 44, 1988, 37-52.
- [16]. P.C. Rosenblatt, Grief: the social context of private feelings. *Journal of social issues*, 44, 1988, 67-78.
- [17]. A. Anderson, African religions, [Www.Deathreference.Com>Death.and Dying>A-Bi](http://www.Deathreference.Com>Death.and Dying>A-Bi), 2015, Retrieved 20th May, 2016.
- [18]. R. Kastenbaum, *Death, Society and Human Experience* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2001).
- [19]. V. Ruddock, Death rituals in Africa, [Www.Dying.Lovetoknow.Com](http://www.Dying.Lovetoknow.Com), 2016, Retrieved 20th May, 2017.
- [20]. Grief Speaks. Culture And Grief. [Www.Griefspeaks.Com/Id90html](http://www.Griefspeaks.Com/Id90html), 2016, Retrieved 18th March, 2017.
- [21]. D.L. Appel, *Narratives on death and bereavement from three South African cultures*, doctoral diss., University of South Africa, South Africa, 2011.
- [22]. Ngubane, S. (2012). Death and Burial Practices in Contemporary Zulu Culture. *Mankind Quarterly*. Vol. 53, No. 1: 21-32.
- [23]. L.O. Eboh, & T. Boye, Widowhood in African society and its effect on women's health. *African health science*, 5, (4), 2005, 348.
- [24]. O. Ojigbo, Scrape her head and lay her bare – widowhood practices and culture, gender across borders. [Www.Genderacrossborders.Com/2011/14...](http://www.Genderacrossborders.Com/2011/14...), (2011), Retrieved 18th May, 2016.
- [25]. Egbebu Liberal Movement, *Edda Heritage*, (Enugu: Sapp Publishers Ltd, 2009).
- [26]. O. Akoni, Lagos warns against burying corpses in residential areas. [Www.Vanguardngr.Com](http://www.Vanguardngr.Com), 2013, Retrieved on 23rd May, 2017.
- [27]. A. Mckissock, Is crying important when you are grieving? [Www.Abc.Net.Au/./3367178/Htm](http://www.Abc.Net.Au/./3367178/Htm), 2013. Retrieved on 23rd May, 2017.
- [28]. Hello Grief, It is okay to cry. [Www.Hellogrief.Org>Home>Articles](http://www.Hellogrief.Org>Home>Articles), 2012. Retrieved on 23rd Dec, 2016.
- [29]. E.T. Creagan, Is it possible to grieve the death of a loved one without crying? Mayo Clinic. [Www.Mayoclinic.Org/./Faq-20058274](http://www.Mayoclinic.Org/./Faq-20058274), 2014. Retrieved on 23rd Dec, 2016.
- [30]. M.E. Baloyi, Distance is no impediment for funerals: death as a uniting ritual for African people – a pastoral study, *Verbum Et Ecclesia*, 35, (1), 2014, 3-6.
- [31]. Research Directorate, Immigration & Refugee Board Canada, Nigeria : a ritual by the name of "isiku" that a widow is subjected to upon the death of her husband. [Http://www.Refworld.Org/Docid/3ae6ad702c.Html](http://www.Refworld.Org/Docid/3ae6ad702c.Html), 2000, Retrieved 24th May, 2016.
- [32]. A. Echema, Igbo funeral rites today: anthropological and theological perspectives. [Www.People.Opposingviews.Com](http://www.People.Opposingviews.Com), 2015, Retrieved 24th May, 2017.
- [33]. Help Guide, Coping with grief and loss. [Www.Helpguide.Org/Articles/Grief](http://www.Helpguide.Org/Articles/Grief), 2016, Retrieved 24th Feb, 2017.
- [34]. Kidshealth, 5 Ways to cope when a loved one dies. [Www.Kidshealth.Org/./Coping.Grief.Html](http://www.Kidshealth.Org/./Coping.Grief.Html), 2016, Retrieved 20th May, 2017.

Dr. Innocent A. Nwosu. "Socio-Cultural Context of Death and Mourning Practices in Rural Igbo Communities of Nigeria." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, vol. 22, no. 8, 2017, pp. 47–57.