

Review of Knowledge Economy

2014 Vol.1, No.2, pp.62-73

ISSN(e): 2409-9449

ISSN(p): 2412-3668

DOI: 10.18488/journal.67/2014.1.2/67.2.62.73

© 2014 Conscientia Beam. All Rights Reserved.



IGBU-EFI: INDIGENOUS PRACTICE AND POLITICS OF AFTER-DEATH IN IGBO CULTURE AREA

Elochukwu A. Nwankwo^{1*} --- Okechukwu Anozie²

^{1,2}Department of Archaeology and Tourism, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Indigenous practice and culture are among the things that make the Igbo distinctive from their adjoining neighbours. Much value is attached to indigenous practice and most adults are expected to be true custodians. In the funeral process of the Igbo, some aspects are given peculiar attention and interpretation. This is mostly attached to the second burial ceremonies where some indigenous practices are sacrosanct for the bidding of final farewell to the departed and the celebration that follows afterwards. The implication is that the act is a necessary distraction and economic desecrate in those Igbo culture areas where it is practiced. This paper examines this indigenous practice in the Igbo culture area; origin, reasons, implications, challenges and prospects, with a relevant case study. The methodology is purely ethnographic with constructive interview sessions organized amongst randomly selected key informants from Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi states of the Igbo culture area of Nigeria.

Keywords: Igbo-efi, Indigenous practice, After-death, Traditional value, Igbo Culture, Traditional burial rites, Traditional belief.

Contribution/ Originality

This study documents the traditional burial practices of Igbos of Southeast Nigeria towards giving a more understanding to the Igbo-Efi which one of the indigenous practices of the people over the ages on issues concerning burial rites for their beloved ones. This would help in proper interpretation and promotion of this particular indigenous practice of the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

In African religious culture, life does not end with death but continues in another realm (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004). Many Africans believe that death does not completely end the

† Corresponding author

© 2014 Conscientia Beam. All Rights Reserved.

existence of life, but only affect its condition. In his work on 'African Traditional Burial Rites', Smith (n.d) informs that Africans believe that anyone who dies, must be given proper traditional funeral ceremony to ease passage to the great beyond and guarantee everlasting rest to the dead.

For the Igbos, life is a continuing cyclic process. Death is not the end station of human life. They believe in the survival of the human person after death and in ancestors as the living dead. Belief in life-after-death is a feature of Igbo religious belief system. In the Igbo Nation, full burial rites are accorded to the dead, in order to prevent the disturbances from the dead, not minding the cost implications on the living (Ossai and Anoruo, 2013). This has made death and fame to form a relationship as was noted by Barry (2008) when studying the funeral of celebrities in the West. Nwoye (2011) writing on Igbo culture and religious worldview, states that in a place where this particular ceremony is omitted the dead will not have a smooth journey to the great beyond rather he/she could come back in visions as ghosts to disturb the living until such a time when they would complete the send-off ceremony, which is the burial rite. With this assertion, it is not enough burying the dead especially full grown adults in the Igbo nation but other rites are accorded to the dead to ensure their complete transition to the ancestral world. "Death begins to concern the now, not the hereafter; it becomes ephemeral, today's news, tomorrow's fish-and-wrapping [as the British colloquialism has it]" (Barry, 2008).

Recognition of after-death is not only of Igbo origin but also has western origin (Carlson, 1999); (Gibbs, 1999); (Kitch, 2000); in (Barry, 2008). Lorna (1978) in his work on 'An Igbo Second Burial' informed that it is a spiritual event of which animal sacrifice, poetry, dance and music combine into a form of drama. It is the ceremony which the first son is obliged to sponsor, in order to assure that his deceased father receives the final rest, by offering oblation and honour to him and his ancestors. (Isichei, 1977) opined that one of the greatest fears among the Igbo is to die and be thrown into the evil forest, receiving no burial rites. For them, this calamity means being banned from the company of the ancestors, an outcast of the other side of life follows death. This symbolizes total rejection and excommunication by both the living and the dead. Isichei further added that "the ancestors – those who live well spent lives, die in socially approved ways, and are given correct burial rites – life in one of those worlds of the dead which mirror the world of the living. The living honours them with sacrifices. Igbos talk of a good death as belonging to those who lived a good life, they see it as natural death in ripe old age, these groups are accorded funeral rites appropriate to their status to enable them to reach the ancestral land, where they believed they continue a life similar to their earthly life and eventually are allowed to reincarnate. The ancestors watch over the living and are periodically reincarnated unlike unhappy spirits who died bad deaths (Isichei, 1977).

It is imperative to note at this point that, the criteria for choosing who to be given a befitting burial defers. (Opata, 2011) asserts that for a man or woman to be regarded as having received full funeral rites from his people and the community, a cow must have been slaughtered for him or her

after death by his or her beloved ones. Opata further informs that in the case of a man, the meat from the killed cow is shared by members of the kindred while in the case of a woman the meat is shared by the members of her father's kindred and not the kindred of her husband (Opata, 2011). (Agha, 2012) also informs that in many parts of Igboland, before a man's corpse is buried, a goat and or a cow, or horse (Inyinya), according to the children's or relatives' financial position and mostly dependent on the man's status in the society, is slaughtered. Furthermore, Agha stated that it is not uncommon to find the Igbo people performing the second burial rites, so as to send forth the dead home to join the ancestors and be accepted as part of them (Agha, 2012). This accounts for the reason why corpses of those who died in foreign lands are most of the time, brought home and buried among their ancestors, mostly when a full grown adult dies. Such deaths are also celebrated during the funeral ceremony with much merriment and entertainments (see **Plate 1&2**). The purpose is to enable for an easy passage to ancestorhood.



Plate-1. Undertakers displaying with the Casket during a funeral at Ogidi in Anambra State.



Plate-2. Traditional Dancers from Ohafia performing during a burial at Ndiowu in Anambra State

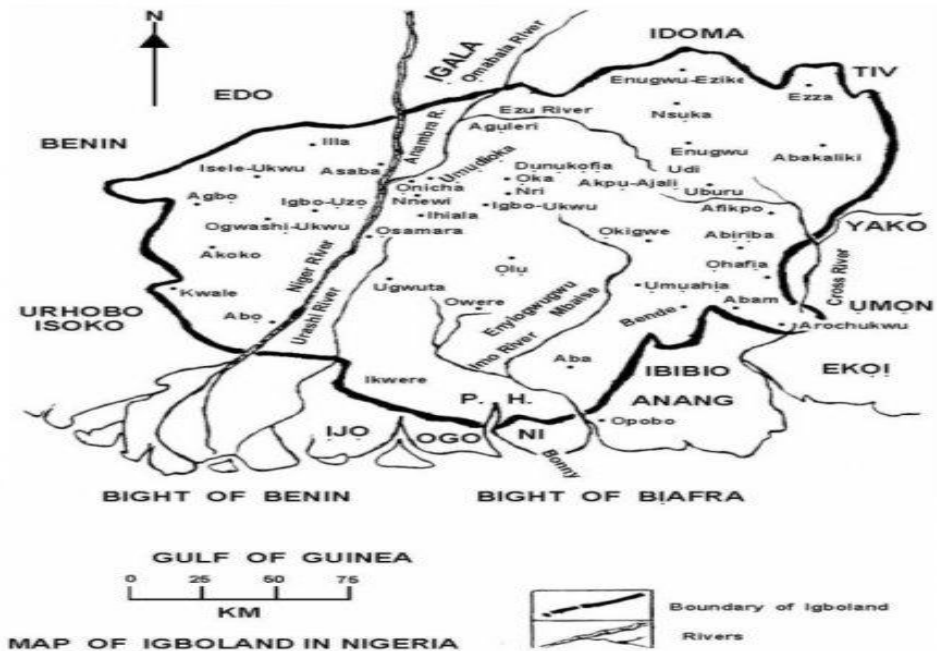
The existence of the ancestors from the world view of Igbo people, have brought about the issue of *Igbu-Efi* which is seen as a passage rite into ancestorhood or proper transition of the adult Igbo man. *Igbu-Efi* simply means 'killing of cow during funeral ceremony in Igboland'. The type of cow used for this ritual is Muturu Cattle (*bostaurus*). This study looks at the idea of *Igbu-Efi* and the politics of after-death in the Igbo cosmology. The study had an in-depth study on the origin of *Igbu-Efi* in Igboland, the various processes involved in carrying out this unique custom, and the various implications of the practice to both the living and the dead. Finally it looked at the various reactions and attitudes of people towards *Igbu-Efi*, particularly at this time that Christianity and Modernity have affected the practice. The Igbo people are one of the most dynamic but with unique culture and tradition. The tradition is unique to the Igbo Nation in which a spiritual transition is done for the dead owing to the belief in after-life and in the transition to ancestorhood.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted qualitative research in its approach to the topic. Ethnography equally aided in the process towards maximizing the potentials of qualitative research method to studies. The scope of the study was on the five core Igbo states in Nigeria; Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi states owing to the origin of the practice from the area. Also emphasis was on the aged- male adults in the region since it is an age long tradition and is losing its taste in the cultural lives of the people. To this regard, purposive sampling was adopted using key-informant approach to select relevant sample from the study population. This resulted to the selection of seventeen (17) male adults aged sixty-five years and above, from those core Igbo states listed above. The choice of male adults was as a result of non-relevant position of women in this ritual practice. Descriptive and narrative methods of data analysis were used for the analysis of the collated data.

2.1. Igbo Culture Area

The land surface of Igboland according to *Ojomata (2002)*, lies between latitudes 4° 15' and 7° 05' North and longitudes 6° 00' and 8° 30' East. It covers a total surface area of approximately 41,000 square kilometers. It is made up of the entire Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States, parts of Delta and Rivers States.



Source: Igbo People (n.d) (www.nigerianwiki.com/wiki/Igbo_people)

The history of the Igbo nation was not reduced to writing, and therefore investigators have had to depend heavily on oral traditions and on evidence obtained from archaeologists, linguistics, ethnologists, paleo-botanists among others. There are a number of inconclusive theories regarding the origin of the Igbo. According to Ijoma (2010), there are three theories postulated to explain the origin of the Igbo. The theories include Oriental theory, Niger/Benue Confluence theory and Igbo Homeland or Independent origin theory. *The Oriental theory* puts forward that the Igbo people came from Middle-East, this speculates that they were either one of the Lost Tribes of Israel or Egypt, such that they migrated or wandered across. *The Niger/Benue Confluence theory* states that the Igbo like their immediate neighbouring 'Kwa' speaking groups probably started off from around the region of the Niger/Benue Confluence. This theory further states that groups of people might speak the same language at one period but the passage of time and their drifting apart might lose contact with each other, develop different dialects and finally acquire different languages. *The Homeland Hypothesis* states that the areas generally identified as primary core area settlement –Nri/Awka, Owerri/Orlu and parts of Okigwe, others recognize Orlu/Owerri and upper Anambra River as core areas and that from the heartland, the people migrated to various present Igbo locations at different periods. This core area is that area believed to have been inhabited originally. Although, these theories exist but most writers of the Igbo culture area concurred with the Homeland hypothesis.

The Igbo people at the early times or pre-colonial era, had lots of economic activities that helped them survive in their environment. The activities include: farming, rearing of animals like sheep and goats. Wood carving even to commercial level, pottery-making of which various rituals and social potteries were made. A special note is that of Iron working, or which they are known to be highly skilled in the art of smelting and smithing. Igbo people have traditional ways of ensuring equity and justice in their communities, and balanced conflict resolutions. Authorities of various traditional heads are highly respected in this regard. Other traditional institutions like the Age Grade, the Titled Men – *NzenaOzo*, *UmuAdas*, *Umuokoros* and *umuagbohos*, also contribute to the smooth running of affairs.

2.2. The Indigenous Practice of Igbu-Efi

Igbu-Efi is an age-long tradition amongst the Igbos. A lot of activities are observed in the course of carrying out this traditional activity. Many views have been projected on the origin of *Igbu-Efi*. It was simply explained to be as old as the Igbo community and transmitted through generations. Another view sees it as being as old as the installation of *NzenaOzo* titles. This means that the origin came up when the *NzenaOzo* title office began, of which at their death, 'Efi (Cow)' is killed as a burial rite for them. A better view states that its origin was when the early Igbo people stopped using human heads to accompany the dead in their coffins. This now made them resort to using cow as a replacement to human sacrifice. One of the informants clearly noted

that *Efi* was used to replace the use of human head owing to the arrival of Christianity and modernity in the Igbo area by 1800 AD. From the available sources, the actual timing for the origin of *Igbu-Efi* cannot be easily deduced but most of the views point towards the idea that it all started when the people stopped using human heads in burying people in Igbo land. As the tradition grew, not only men with special qualities in the communities were buried with cow but also respectable parents who must have left children as part of their legacies. By the end of 1900 AD, adults with children were given full funeral rites on their deaths with the killing of the male local Cow (*bostaurus*) without considering their positive contributions in their various communities. By this period in the Igbo history, outstanding qualities in the community were no longer used as the criteria for the killing of cows for the final farewell but availability of biological children.

2.3. A Case study

The dead has to be a married man or woman with children. This is amongst the qualities of a would-be ancestor in Igbo land. This event takes place usually during the funeral or burial ceremony as the case may be. This case study was a report on fieldwork at Ubaha Village Ndiowu during the funeral rite of Late Mrs. ObiomaNwankwo of Oguagwu-mba family, by her children. This was amongst the places ethnographic survey was conducted in the Igbo area of Nigeria. The *Umunna*(Kindred) were duly informed about the funeral and the readiness of the children of the deceased to accord their dead parent the *Igbu-Efi* rite. On the day of performance of this rite, the *Umunna* (Kindred) gathered and the first son of the dead formally presented to the Eldest man (Akajiofor) in the family a local male cow (*bostaurus*) which was to be used for the ceremony and an accompanying traditional Igbo cola (see Plate 3&4). The Eldest man collected the cow and prayed with a cola, thanking God for the life of the dead and the desire of the children of the dead to accord the dead a full passage rite to the land of ancestors (see Plate5). At this time the cola was broken into pieces and poured on the cow (which was lying on a floor-decorated with leaves from palm tree) (see Plate6) signifying that the spirits should take the cola and not humans. Before the commencement of the ritual, the family of the dead provided a he-goat which was meant to be eaten by the kindred alone. This was assumed to be used in 'washing' the cow [*Igba-IshiEfi*] (see Plate7). Before the cow was slaughtered, the first daughter of the dead was called, given a grinding pestle (*Aka-Odo*) and asked to hit it thrice on the waist of the live cow fearlessly (see Plate8&9). This was followed by the cutting off the outer part of the tail of the cow by the first son of the dead (see Plate 10). This was to be done at a single strike. After which the cut-off part of the cow tail was dropped on the floor (see Plate11) for the first daughter of the departed to pick it up and dance with it (see Plate 12). While dancing she was singing Nnemuo! Nnemuo!! Nnemuo!!! (my mother) or Nnamuo! Nnamuo!! Nnamuo!!! (my father) as the case may be (see Plate 12). She was singing this until other *Umuadas* (married daughters of the clan) came and led her

out of the stage (see Plate 13). These exercises by the first son and daughter of the dead signified that they are true son and daughter of the dead. At the end, the butchers pounced on the cow, killed it and butchered it in the presence of the Umunna (kindred) (see Plate 15&16). The head of the cow was kept for the Umunna, the neck for those youths that dug the grave of the dead, the waist for the Umuada (married daughters of the clan). After killing the cow, the he-goat was also killed to accompany the cow to the land of the spirit (see Plate 17). While the cow was being butchered, any person that did not perform such ritual for his departed parent was not traditionally allowed to touch the meat on that palm tree leave-decorated floor.



Plate-3. The Akajiofor (Eldest man) in the clan receiving a cow for the Igbu-Efiritual from the first son of the dead.



Plate-4. The Akajiofor collects traditional Igbo cola nut from the first son of the dead for prayers.



Plate-5. The Akajiofor praying with the cola nut against premature deaths in the clan and successful transition of the departed to the land of the ancestors.



Plate-6. The cow positioned for the ritual in the presence of members of the clan.



Plate-7. A white he-goat provided by the family of the departed to be used in the traditional washing of the cow.



Plate-8. The first son of the departed handing over a local pestle to the first daughter of the departed to hit on the waist of the life cow.



Plate-9. The first daughter of the departed struck the local pestle three times on the waist of the life cow



Plate-10. The first son of the departed positioned the tail of the cow and cut of the edge at one strike using a sharp machete.



Plate-11. The first daughter picking up a fragment of the cow tail for traditional dance



Plate-12. The first daughter dancing with the fragment of the cow's tail.



Plate-13. The first daughter was accompanied out of the stage by some members of the Umuada.



Plate-14. Traditional tools used in performing the ritual (cutting wood, machete and pestle).



Plate-15. The slaughtering of the cow after the initial ritual.



Plate-16. The butchering of the cow before the Presence of members of the Umunna (clan) to ensure that the traditional distribution of parts are followed.



Plate-17. The goat was then killed to perform the traditional cleansing of the cow.

3. DISCUSSION

In the practice of *Igbu-Efi* in Igbo land, different communities have diverse ways of carrying out the traditional practice. First, it is good to note that when an Igbo person dies, members of the immediate family as well as in-laws have two outstanding functions to perform; to bury the dead and to perform the necessary ceremonies that would enable the dead to transit to another life. The dead to be accorded full funeral rites, has to be an elderly man or woman, who must have married and given birth to children. In such instances, mostly where the dead had attained the

age of 60 and above, the funeral is celebrated (see Plate 1&2). The family or children of the dead are responsible for the *Igbu-Efi* rite. Hence if the dead is not accorded this rite, none of the children will be accorded such a rite on their demise. It was said that if in the course of burying the dead and the children do not have the resources for the rite (*Igbu-Efi*), they would kill a goat to suspend the *Igbu-Efi* until when they are financially capable for the rite. Some views have it that some kinds of rituals are performed in the course of performing the rite (see the case study above). For instance, when the son buys the 'Efi', he immediately informs the *Umunna* (kin's men) with Kolanut and Palm wine and then the cow will be killed with the meat shared amongst constituent traditional units ie, umuada, umunna, maternal home (*Ibenne*), grave diggers, titled men (in some cases), etc. As one of the informants puts it, once the cow is bought, they will conduct a practice called 'ImeUsoro' which takes place at night and the 'Igede' beat which lasts for three days to usher in the act of *Igbu-Efi*. After killing the cow, next is the sharing process, here the various parts of the 'Efi' goes to some people i.e. the *Umunna* will take the head while the *Umuada* will take the waist region, those youths who dug the grave of the dead will take the neck part of the cow, etc.

The practice of *Igbu-Efi* has implications for the living and the dead. For the dead, informants generally agree that it is for proper passage to the ancestral world. It is believed that without this practice, the dead would be punished and be dejected amongst other ancestors. This punishment and dejection is believed to be perpetual. For the living, it has great financial implication as in most cases the living do not cry for the dead but cry for the upcoming expenses resulting mostly in the instance of a titled diseased ([Ossai and Anoruo, 2013](#)). Some informants believe it is to show off affluence, that the dead was wealthy or held a title in the community, hence the *Igbu-Efi*. A major view agrees that it prevents the living from being haunted by the deceased. If not, the dead would be unleashing bedlam to the family such as strange illness, business failures, carrier failures, and even untimely deaths. This pandemonium in the family continues until the surviving relatives carries out this act to grant the dead the eternal rest. The living as well stands to gain respect and dignity before the community. Some of the informants noted that the family that carries out this act will be ushered into the 'Ogbu-Efi Circle'. With the completion of *Igbu-Efi*, the family can now take part whenever a similar practice is taking place in some other families since the tradition has it that a man that have not done the *Igbu-Efi* rite is not meant to touch nor participate in the practice in some other places. Such attracts strange sickness and imminent death. Many individuals have fallen victims of these in the past. This was observed at the venue of the case study above. A man refused to touch the meat while it was butchered, to avoid the deadly consequences owing to the fact that he did not perform the rite for his dead mother.

Some people have mixed feelings or degrees of reactions to this traditional practice of the Igbos. From all indications, Christianity has affected the practice of *Igbu-Efi* in many Igboland. People now disregard this practice since they see it as 'fetish' or obnoxious owing to the ritual

process of killing the cow of which is unchristian. Some of the informants complained that the church have discouraged their members from participating. Other acclaimed Christians in the Igbo culture area practice the act in disguise. During funerals, this group buy the cow, kill it, and invite a Christian priest to pray over it and then it would be used for cooking food for guests during the ceremony. Most of the informants claimed that some people who do not have the resources, shy away in the pretence of Christianity. For the traditionalists, they still believe that misfortune will still visit such families for trying to evade the *Igbu-Efi* ritual for the dead. No matter the length of time, this ritual can still take place so as to put an end to the inherent calamity on the family as a result of initial refusal to undertake the ritual. Modernity have also affected the practice in such a way that in some parts of the area under study, a cow can be killed for three deceased unlike the original 'One dead, One cow'. This assertion was claimed by some informants and not a general view.

Generally, the informants lamented that the practice is gradually obliterated owing to the wave of Christianity. It was indicated that some traditionalists in Igboland still hold tenaciously this tradition and refused modernity and Christianity to efface the practice of *Igbu-Efi*. While it is seen as a prevention of the deceased from disturbing the family from the spirit world, others have the view that the tradition should be sustained and practiced in Igboland. It is suggested that in order to sustain the tradition, the deceased family should carry out the *Igbu-Efi* practice as soon as the deceased is buried. This is pertinent because at that point the departure of the dead will still be fresh in the minds of the mourners; hence much detail will be paid to the practice.

4. CONCLUSION

The indigenous practice of *Igbu-Efi* in Igbo traditional belief stems from the idea that there is the existence of Ancestors, who are believed to be good people that lived and obeyed the traditional norms and have attained high maturity level. Igbo world view sees life as something that does not end with death but continues in another realm, which is expressed in the concept of ancestors (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004). The transition to such realm in Igboland is through a ritual called *Igbu-Efi*. *Igbu-Efi* to some, is inevitable since the children of the deceased can be allowed a considerable time to carry it out, yet to some Igbo people in contemporary times, Christianity have eroded all those belief in the strange visitation of the deceased through sickness, misfortune and other troubles which the traditionalists believe strongly that it still happens. "In all these instances, death seems to create celebrity rather than testing it as more austere demands of posterity once did" (Barry, 2008). The fact still remains that the practice has Igbo origin and common to virtually all the Igbo speaking parts of Nigeria. It is generational and has existed through the history of the Igbo tribe. Considering the fact that rejection of the act has both financial and religious implications, the tradition of *Igbu-Efi* in Igboland will not be totally eradicated in the near future. Even in Britain as noted by some studies, 18th century British

culture witnessed much celebration of deaths and funerals and the practice is not totally eradicated but not pronounced in the contemporary British culture (Olsen, 2003); (Dames, 2001); (McDayter, 1999); (Hazlitt, 1818).

REFERENCES

- Agha, U.A., 2012. Religion and culture in the permissive society. Enugu: SAPS Press (Nig).
- Barry, E., 2008. From epitaph to obituary: Death and celebrity in eighteenth century British culture. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(3): 259-275.
- Carlson, M., 1999. Farewell, John, *time 2 August*: 30-35.
- Dames, N., 2001. Brushes with fame: Thackeray and the work of celebrity. *Nineteen-Century Literature*, 56(1): 23-51.
- Gibbs, N., 1999. The lost horizon. *Time 26 July*: 26-29.
- Hazlitt, W., 1818. A view of the english stage, or, a series of dramatic criticisms. London: Printed for Robert Stodart. (In Barry, 2008).
- Igbo People, n.d. Nigerian wiki. Available from www.nigerianwiki.com/wiki/Igbo_people [Accessed 3rd April 2013].
- Ijoma, O.J., 2010. Igbo origins and migrations. Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers.
- Isichei, E., 1977. The Ibo people and the Europeans. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kitch, C., 2000. A news of feelings as well as fact: Mourning and memorial in American news magazines. *Journalism*, 1(2): 171-195.
- Lorna, M., 1978. An Igbo second burial. Available from www.jstor.org/stable/12143002 [Accessed March 3rd, 2013].
- McDayter, G., 1999. Conjuring Byron: Byromania, literary commodifications and the birth of celebrity. In Frances Wilson (eds). *Byromania: Portraits of the artist in nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture*. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Nwoye, M.A.C., 2011. Igbo cultural and religious worldview: An insider's perspective. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 3(9): 57-68.
- Ofomata, G.E.K., 2002. A survey of the Igbo nation. Onitsha: Africana First Publishers Ltd.
- Olsen, V., 2003. From life: Julia Margaret Cameron and victorian photography. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Opata, D., 2011. Faith, culture and individual freedom. Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Ltd.
- Ossai, J. and C. Anoruo, 2013. The cost of burial ceremonies in Igboland. *Nigerian Tribune*, April 10th, 2013: 28.
- Smith, G., n.d. African traditional burial rites. Available from www.blackethics.com/640/african-traditional-burialrites [Accessed March 9th, 2013].
- Ugwu, C.O.T. and L.E. Ugwuweye, 2004. African traditional religion: A prolegomenon. Lagos: Merit International Publications.

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s), Review of Knowledge Economy shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.