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ABSTRACT

Embalming is the art and science of temporary preserving human remains to forestall decomposition. It was first practiced by the ancient Egyptians dating back to 4000BC. This research was carried out to study the traditional method of embalment by the Ogonis, a tribe in the Southern part of Nigeria. A total of 140 elders from the various communities in Ogoni land were used for this study. It was done by oral interview because the elders who knew about the tradition were illiterates and no written document was available. The results showed that the ancient people of Ogoni predominantly used large quantities of alcohol concentrate (dry gin), potash, herbal leaf (*Ocimum gratissimum*) and kernel oil. The reasons for embalment were to have enough time for burial rites, giving the dead last respect and to transport the dead to their ancestral home. The preservation could only last for 2 to 3 days. Findings were compared with the ancient embalming techniques of other people such as Egyptians, the Greeks and others.

Key words: Ogoni, Embalment, Alcohol, Burial rites.

Embalming is the art of preserving dead bodies from decay by means of antiseptic agents. It is also the art and science of temporarily preserving human remains to forestall decomposition till the time for burial. It dates back to the time of ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and the Babylonians. Others like the Ancient Sumerians, Romans, the Indians, and the aborigenes of the Canary Island also practiced embalming evidenced by archeological findings.

Puckle (1968) recorded that the first act of embalment was practiced by the Ancient Egyptians and it dates back to 400BC, they embalmed dead bodies in the form of mummies and this was because of their belief that the individuals existed after death. Lam (1969) also recorded that the Jewish tribe before the birth of Jesus Christ practiced embalment, and after the death of Jesus Christ embalment was still practiced on notable Christians like Charlemagne (Rush 1941). The Ancient Egyptians embalmed the dead by allowing the corpses to be dehydrated by sun or fire first, then carried out the embalming art by removing the internal organs of the body and refilling the body cavities with substances such as myrrh, alcohol,

natural spices, perfumes and salt to prevent the dead from decomposing, others used charcoal and sand. (Curtis 2001, Puckle 1968). The ancient Babylonians, the Persians and Syrians preserved their dead by placing them in jars of honey and of wax while the Romans embalmed their dead by washing the dead bodies daily for 7 days with hot water. (Mayer 2000). The Jivaro tribes of Ecuador and Peru used similar methods to that of the ancient Egyptians in addition to roasting the corpse in low fire. (Waddel, 1912).

The reasons for embalming included religious, hygiene, sanitation and transportation of the dead to their ancestral homes (Curtis 2001). The Egyptians also believed that preservation of the dead body empowered the soul after death to return to the corpse. The Greeks and the Romans needed to embalm so as to prevent premature burial and have enough time for burial arrangements. In Europe during the "the dark ages" embalment was practiced because of the need for dissection of cadavers for medical research.

Other reasons include timing of burial rites and settlement of affairs of the dead (Strub and Fredrick 1959). The desire to keep in touch with the beloved dead is also another reason for

embalming. (Rush 1941). in a study done on ancient embalming methods among the Nsukka Igbo of Nigeria by Ezugworie (2002) recorded that the main reasons were settlement of affairs after death and transportation of the dead to their ancestral homes.

The Ogonis are one of the largest tribes in Rivers state of the southern part of Nigeria. They have distinct cultures and traditions. The act of embalming was practiced as an ancient tradition among the Ogonis and other tribes in the Niger Delta.

The aim of this study was to find out the ancient method of embalmment that was practiced by the Ogonis as no document, written or otherwise exist about their method to the best of our knowledge.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research was conducted in Ogoni land and the area of the study covered three local government areas namely, Khana, Gokhana and Tai local government areas of Rivers State. The sample for this study was drawn from elders in six communities in the population. A total of 140 elders were randomly selected.

The study was by oral interview as no written document could be found and also because the elders were not literate enough to fill questionnaires. The elders were asked methods of embalmment, reasons for embalmment and how long the corpses were kept before burial in their various communities. The study lasted one month and at the end of the process, data based on their responses were analyzed descriptively using percentages.

RESULTS

A total number 140 elders were interviewed for this study. The elders all stated that embalmment was only done to prominent people, wealthy people or people of the royal lineage. Children and poor people were buried immediately without any form of embalmment. Summary of the results presented in Table 1 showed that use of alcohol was the commonest technique used(70%), and this is done by pouring into the deceased's mouth a quantity that is determined by the size of the person but

enough by their assessment to fill up the body.

The use of local herbal spice, *Ocimum gratissimum*, popularly known as scent leaf mixed with water and rubbed on all parts of the body taking particular region and the nostrils, anal region and the eye was also practiced by 20% of the Ogonis. All the respondents added that the embalmment process also involved massaging the body from the throat downwards to allow the mixture flow easily to other parts of the body for better preservation.

The embalmment process was always done immediately after death and was done in a room that had corn cobs burning within it, the aroma from the roasted corn to their belief would neutralize the repungent odour emanating from the room. The reasons given for the embalmment were varied. Table 2 showed the various percentages, half of them said the reason for embalmment was to have enough time for burial rites to take place. 45 of them (32%) said the reason was to give the dead their last honour while the rest gave transportation of the dead to their ancestral home as their reason for embalmment.

The corpse during embalmment was always kept in a sitting position, however after the embalment, the body was then kept in the lying position until the time for burial.

Table 1: Practice of ancient embalmment methods among the Ogonis in Southern Nigeria.

S/N	Embalmment Practice	Percentage
1.	Use of alcohol	70
2.	Use of alcohol mixture and Superficial application of kernel oil	10
3.	Use of mixture of the local herbal spice	20
4.	Surgical methods	-
5.	Use of charcoal, sand or salt	-
6.	Low fire roasting	-

DISCUSSION

The ancient method of embalmment by the Ogonis, which was done immediately after death was mainly by infusion of highly concentrated alcohol into the mouths of the dead, a smaller percentage of the Ogonis rubbed the external parts of the bodies with kernel oil, the other method which

Table 2: Reasons for embalming among the Ogonis in Southern Nigeria.

S/N	Embalmmnt Practice	Percentage
1.	Timing of Burial rites	50
2.	Giving honour to the dead	32
3.	Transportation of the dead to their ancestral homes	18
4.	Religious	-
5.	Settlement of affairs of the dead	-

is least practiced (about 10% of the population) is by the use of a herbal leaf *Ocimum gratissimum* mixed with water.

The use of alcohol which is the main technique by the Ogonis was practiced to a lesser degree by the Nsukka Igbos of South Eastern part of Nigeria (Ezugworie 2002). The Nsukka Igbos also practiced low fire roasting and surgical methods where the body is opened up and all the viscera removed. The Egyptians also practiced this technique. The Ogonis never removed the internal organs as a form of embalmmnt and also did not practice low fire roasting.

The British were also known to have practiced the use of alcohol for embalming during war times, a method they used to bring back their dead marine forces (Emery and Marshal 1991). The ancient Babylonians and the Greeks did more of superficial embalmmnt which did not last for many days (Puckle 1968). The Nsukka Igbos also had a few percentage of them that practiced superficial form of embalmmnt (Ezugworie 2002).

The main reasons the Ogonis embalmed their dead were timing of burial rites and giving honor to the dead, these reasons were in total contrast to the reasons the Nsukka Igbos and the Ancient Egyptians embalm, they had sanitation and religious grounds as the main reason why they performed surgical removal of the viscera so that the bodies could last for up to seven years due to their belief that as long as the body is intact, the dead was still with them. The Idomas who settled among the Igbos in the old Nsukka division on the other hand had a different reason just like a few of the ancient Ogonis (18%) that believed that the embalmmnt was necessary to keep the body intact till such body could be transported to their ancestral

homes, in the case of the Idomas to their homes in the present Benue State of Nigeria (Ezugworie 2002).

CONCLUSION

The Ancient Ogonis also practiced embalmmnt for their dead. The methods and the reasons however differ slightly from the ancient Egyptians and the Nsukka Igbos. The embalmmnt practiced had a high efficacy but only could keep the body for 2-3 days before burial.

These days modern methods of embalmmnt are now practiced and bodies are kept for much longer time.

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