



Ancient Embalming Methods Among The Nsukka Igbo Of Southeastern Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

A review of ancient embalming practices and a survey of contemporary development in Nsukka Igbo and Idomas was carried out. The research was conducted using oral interviews to obtain data on 121 elders in 36 communities of the sample area. Results showed that the Nsukka and Idoma people practiced embalming using hot oil, alcohol, low fire roasting and surgical methods. The extents were categorised. The reasons for embalming were also categorised and it was found that settlement of the affairs of the dead ranked highest. Although variations exist, the present observation compare favourably, in some cases, with the findings of other workers on embalming procedures in ancient Egypt, Greeks, Babylonians, Sumerians and Romans.

Key words: Ancient embalming. Nsukka Igbo. Idoma people.

Embalming is primarily done to disinfect and preserve remains. Embalming of bodies dates back to the time of ancient Egypt, Greeks, Babylonians, Sumerians and Romans. Other ancient people that practiced embalming of sophisticated nature as evidenced by archeological findings are the prehistoric Paraca Indinas of Peru, the Guanches (aborigines of the canary Islands) the Jivaro tribes of Ecuador and Peru, and in Tibet. Puckle (1968) mentioned that the beginning of the art and techniques of embalming are associated principally with ancient Egypt, where, as in parts of Asia and South America, a dry soil and climate encourage its development. He maintained that the naturally preserved mummies in Egypt were believed to have influenced the religious doctrines of Egyptians because they seemed to prove that the individuals existed after his death. Lamm, (1969) posited that although embalment practices are not Jewish custom, some few cases were noted among the Jews long before the birth of Jesus Christ. For example, Joseph ordered embalming for himself and his father. Also Rush (1941) noted that even when embalming was confirmed to be a pagan practice, notable Christians like Charlemagne and El-cid were properly embalmed for a long period of time.

The ancient methods of embalming according to Puckle (1968) and Curtis (2001)

include charcoal and sand use, use of Nitre and purging of intestine and surgical procedures. These were ancient Egyptian methods. Other methods by other ancient people were the use of salt box, superficial embalming with perfumes, spices and unguents, use of honey, and brandy (alcohol). The Jivaro tribes of Ecuador and Peru used methods similar to ancient Egyptians in addition to roasting in low fire. (Waddel, 1912).

Curtis (2001) stated that the reasons for embalming by ancient people were religious, sanitation, transportation of the distinguished dead to their ancestral homes. He cited other reasons as prevention of premature burial (by Greeks and Romans), research (dissection purposes – Leonards da Vinci (1452 – 1519) dissected a number of bodies for research. Also Strub & Frederick (1959) posited other reason as timing of burial rites, settlement of affairs of the dead while Rush (1941) cited desire to keep in touch with the beloved dead as a reason for embalming.

Evidence also abound that ancient Igbo in old Nsukka division preserved bodies of their kings for seven years. Other categories of the dead receive shorter preservation period. The same practice was also observed among the Idomas of the middle belt region of Nigeria who settled as a community in Ikem of old Nsukka division. The ancinet Igbo

also lived among the Idomas of now Benue State. Although it is widely acknowledged that embalming was an ancient tradition, the extent to which it was practiced among the Nsukka Igbos and its environs still remains unexplored.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research employed a descriptive research design in the conduct of this study. Based on findings during the fieldwork the various ancient embalming practices were described. The study was conducted within the Nsukka Igbos and its environs like the Idoma tribe of Benue State who lived among the Nsukka people. The area of study comprised the six Local Government Areas of old Nsukka division. The population for the study comprised all the elderly people of the communities in the six Local Government areas. The sample for the population used for these study comprised six communities in each of the six local government area. Three elders were randomly chosen from each community. A total number of 118 elders were therefore interviewed plus another three from the Ikem-Idoma settlement. Total number of elders interviewed were therefore 121 elders. Data for this study were collected using oral interviews. The oral interview was drafted in the form of a rating checklist with which the various ancient embalming methods and reasons for embalming were rated. The rating on the extent of practice of the various methods and reasons for ancient embalming by the researcher depended on the responses of the elders during the interview session. At the end of the interview sessions data based on their responses were collected and analyzed descriptively using percentages.

RESULTS

Data collected on the extent to which each of the embalmmnt methods is practiced were analyzed and summarized in the Table 1 and 2.

Table 1: Extent of Practice of Ancient Embalmmnt methods among the Nsukka Igbos and its Environs

S/N	Embalmmnt practice	%Practice
1	Charcoal and use of sand	-
2.	Use of salt box	-
3.	Superficial embalming with perfume and spices	4
4.	Use of honey	-
5.	Use of alcohol	23
6.	Venous injections	-
7.	Arterial injection	-
8.	Low fire roasting	42
9.	Surgical methods	31

Summary of result presented in the Table 1 showed that within Nsukka Igbos and its environs the major embalmmnt methods include use of hot oil, alcohol, low fire roasting and surgical method. As revealed during the fieldwork there is a little practice of superficial embalming with perfume and spices and the method is highly restricted to temporary preservation of the dead, usually in a seated position.

Also during the oral interview it was noted that the surgical procedure within Nsukka people involves many stages. The procedure is as follows -: soon after the death of the royal father, the body is kept away and opened up for removal of the viscera. Then the body is treated with hot oil. The body is then washed with alcohol and stitched. After washing with alcohol the body is then put into a platform with sieve (i.e. on top of mat made of bamboo). Low fire is then applied for three days after which the body is wrapped with bamboo mat. The wrapped body is then smeared with clay oil mixed with palm nut fibres. Then the body is smoked for a long period of time usually up to seven years before official announcement of the death and burial.

Among the ancient Idoma of Benue State there is a slight variation between their embalmmnt practice and those of the Nsukka Igbos. Among the Idoma people immediately after death the intestine or viscera are removed, a pit is dug, a wooden platform covers the top of the pit, then a mat of palm stick is placed on top of the wooden plat-form and covered with sand. Then another mat is placed above the suspended

body with sand again on top of the upper mat. Ropes are applied to different parts of the suspended body to allow free rotation from time. The low fire is sustained for as long as desired.

Table 2: Reasons for ancient Embalming Among Nsukka Igbos and its Environs.

S/N	Reasons for Ancient Embalming	%
1	Religious	10
2	Sanitation	-
3	Settlement of Affairs of the dead	45
4	Transportation of the dead to their ancestral homes	30
5	Timing of Burial rites	10
6	Desire to keep in touch with beloved dead	5
7	For Research and learning	

Table 2 presents the reasons behind ancient embalming by Nsukka Igbos and the Idomas which are settlement of affairs of the dead and transportation of the dead to their ancestral home. Others include religious, timing of burial rites and desire to keep in touch with the beloved dead.

DISCUSSION

The revelation that Nsukka Igbos and the Idomas' major embalment methods include use of surgery, use of alcohols, hot oil and low fire roasting agree with ancient methods as cited by Curtis (2001) and Puckle (1968).

The use of alcohol in preserving human remains dates from the old Egyptian times. Emery & Marshal (1991) maintained that it was a traditional method with the British sea forces for many hundred of years to bring their deceased commanders and distinguished dead home encased in a barrel of rum (alcohol). Also roasting in low fire in addition to the ancient Egyptian methods were practiced by Jivaro tribes as stated earlier. Use of hot oil can be likened to roasting. Curtis (2001) showed that the Romans who did not practice embalming as such washed the body daily for seven days with hot water and oil. He maintained the delay was to prevent premature burial. The superficial embalming noted by Puckle (1968) for temporary preservation of the dead was also practiced by the ancient Bablonians, the Sumarians and Greeks. He showed that these people seldom practiced

any but most superficial kind of embalming; anointing the body with unguents, perfumes and spices to prevent decay or minimize its effects. This practice was also observed among ancient Nsukka Igbos who did the same but with the dead usually seated. In fact, it is still in practice by the poor who may wish to delay the burial for a few days (usually one to four days).

The major reasons for embalming by Nsukka Igbos and the Idomas agree with the reasons of other ancient Egyptians and Babylonians. Curtis (2001) wrote that embalming in Egypt was done for two reasons: religious and sanitation. For religion, he cited the Greek historian Herodotus who maintained that the Egyptians were the first people to believe in the immortality of the soul. They believed that the soul would never fully forsake the body as long as the body remained intact. Just as Nsukka Igbos believed that as long as their king's body remain intact he would not have died, thus the family will continue to enjoy the trust-holding as long as the body is not buried, usually lasting for seven years. It is worthy to note that within the seven years, the affairs of the dead (personal and family) would have been settled. This account for 45% of reasons for embalming by Nsukka Igbos. For the Idomas who settled among the Igbos in old Nsukka division, their distinguished dead must be transported to their ancestral home in now Benue State just as the distinguished Igbos who settled in Benue State must be returned to old Nsukka division. Thus, long distance transportation was a reason that informed the embalming of bodies by the Idomas. This factor agree with the ancient British and Greeks as noted by Emery and Marshal (1991) who wrote that British sea forces returned home Lord Byron and Nelson from war fronts as the Greeks returned the body of Alexander the Great to Greece in a container of honey.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that ancient Igbos and in-deed ancient people of Nigeria also practiced ambalming. The ancient methods and reasons for embalming agreed with those of other ancient peoples of the world. In most cases, it could be seen that even modern embalming methods are direct offshoots of the pre-historic (ancient) methods.

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