

# The Changing Features and Functions of Funeral Art Forms in Ibibio Land of Nigeria

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## Abstract

Ibibio funeral art form has developed with the ethnic belief system of ancestral veneration. It has been marked with distinctive indigenization of spatial symbolization of forms to the creation of “nwommo” and cement tomb stone in their quest for relevance as an art form. The study was guided by following cardinal objectives; to identify and classify Ibibio funeral art forms according to their form and functions, to justify them as artworks, to mirror their changing features and functions through the influence of Christianity, to achieve the objectives of the study. Primary and secondary sources of information were used as well as photographic materials that captured the various changing features over the period under review. Iconographical analysis, aesthetic value and social function of these funeral art forms have shown that they satisfy the condition as an art form.

**Keywords:** Veneration, ancestor, spatial symbolism

## 1.1 Introduction

On the extreme south-south of Nigeria are the Ibibio speaking people who are located in Akwa Ibom State. Akwa Ibom State is made up of thirty one local government areas and seventeen out of these are identified as Ibibio speaking areas (Wikipedia). The Ibibio ethnic group in contemporary times has been mired in controversy, fragmentation and counter claims on their tradition of origin, their human configuration and common beliefs by many writers and commentators. Against this background it is pertinent to define what an ethnic group is in order to situate Ibibio within such paradigm. Talbot as cited by Etuk (2009) describes an ethnic group as speaking the same language with approximately the same customs, religion and a state of civilization claiming a common decent. He further asserts that kinship is the essential element in the concept of an ethnic group rather than by geographical location. Social anthropologist have studied kinship system carefully in their quest to unravel the complexities of human relationship and by extension that of Ibibio society. Accordingly, it has been found that kinship in such societies constitutes the hub of political, social, economic and religious relationship. Consequent upon this, Peil (1977) gives an insight into kinship as follows: Kinship implies ties of blood, socio-religious belief and people who descend from a common ancestor are referred to as cognates. In addition, Andah (1988) in Kinship studies observed that, the gamut of a people’s culture are considered to determine the degree of affinity and otherwise in a study area.

Consequent upon these arguments, the Ibibio has been identified and justified to be called an ethnic group. The Ibibio ethnic group in present time could be described as in transition between traditional, contemporary and “post modern” era. Umana (2006) in a description of the human configuration in Ibibio area in contemporary times asserts that, they are homogenous in the sense that they are said to come from the same source, speak, understand one general Ibibio language, and share common religious experience and expressions. It may be noted that in the definition put forward to justify the Ibibio as an ethnic group, some elements of religious belief continue to serve as a common denominator.

Central to the Ibibio religious belief is the relationship between the living and the death as occasioned by its ancestral venerated traditions and artistic expression. The belief in life after death is endemic, and largely seen as a manifestation of all religious traditions. However, this is not peculiar to the Ibibio alone; for instance, Nigeria including ancient Egypt, Rome and all other human societies throughout history, there have been evidences of beliefs about religious traditions as having relationship with human destiny. Fiero (1995) noted that since the beginning of life on earth, human beings have tried to ensure their own survival by achieving harmony with nature and have come to terms with the inevitable realities of disease, and death. Bishop (2002) further asserts that, poetry painting, sculpture, music are not generally speaking, products of unstructured leisure or indulgent individuality, rather they are tangible expressions of the human quest about life and death.

This view, though contemporary has antecedent in traditional settings, which if upheld, gives impetus to what is referred to by Glenys (1985) as “classical funerary art”, which examines specific cultural domains in relation to death. The scope includes the various humanistic traditions of funeral arts and art of mausoleums as conditioned by the incident and social perception of death.

Ikwemesi (2012) acknowledges the existence of art forms and drama in African traditional religion and Christian religion funeral rites, mostly the elated artistry and festivities associated with burial ceremony.

## 2.0 Funeral Art Forms

According to Wikipedia, funeral art is any work of art forming, or placed in a repository for the remains of the death. The term also includes cenotaphs, which do not contain human remains.

In Ibibio land funerals and the subsequent memorial festivities for the ancestors are occasions that concern not only the family, but larger social units, these are not only reflected in the cult performances and mortuary rites, but are also enacted in visual terms through art forms placed as repository for the remains of the dead.

Among the Ibibio deities, the Ibibio regarded his ancestors as the greatest, and they also believed that they were surrounded on all sides by the spirits of his ancestors. Udo (1983) maintains that the Ibibio had a firm belief in life after death and regarded his ancestors as the invisible part of his lineage. As a result of the belief in ancestral worship, the Ibibio developed a robust tradition of making funeral art forms as repository for the death ancestor. Consequently, funeral art forms become more complex, just as funerals and burial practices become more complicated in Ibibio land. The preponderance of these art forms affirmed in plastics terms as cement tomb sculpture, architecture, paintings, installation and masking activities makes this study imperative and desirable. It is also a modest attempt to re-examine the contributions of the art forms to the Ibibio artistic heritage, where artist of the present and the future will undoubtedly continue to draw inspiration.

The study seek to establish the facts of the existence of funeral art from pre-colonial to contemporary time as well as the aesthetic or iconographic features and commemorative functions as memorials to the dead. To this extent, the following cardinal objective guided the study.

- i. To identify and classify Ibibio funeral art forms according to their form and functions.
- ii. To justify them as artworks
- iii. To mirror their changing features and functions vis a' vis the influence of Christianity.

The study adopted an inter-disciplinary approach with forays into primary and secondary sources of information gathering as well as the use of photographs in the descriptive analysis.

## 3.0 Pre-Colonial Funeral Art Forms

According to oral tradition, Chief Inyang Edem Edet intimated the study on July 13,2015 that religious practice of the Ibibio people is intimately spelt out in the belief in the existence of a soul, one aspect dwelling in the body and the other, in animal form, dwelling in the bush or water.

Consequent upon this, Akpaide (1982) noted that in material culture utilization, the interaction between the Ibibio and their habitat, culminated in the creation of images used as channels in harnessing spirit forces for individual or communal advantage through religious worship. Generally speaking, religious worship among the Ibibio and its expression are diverse, including the worship of deities, ancestors, and the use of charms and magic. The representation of the spirit forces that are assumed to govern the various aspect of their religious experiences are symbolized in the creation of art that serves as a medium binding the Ibibio to each other and to the cosmic (Akpaide,1982).

The Ibibio have a place for the veneration and worship of minor deities, ancestors and the supreme God. Writers such as Talbot( 1969) has admitted that the Ibibio of Southern Nigeria make cult symbols for the God and erect personal, family and public altars. Moreover, the place of worship of the Supreme Being in pre-colonial time is not a house but a place marked in the open as observed by (Turner, 1979 ). These demarcated spaces are symbolized and include 'Iso Obot', façade of creator, 'Iso Ekanem' façade of principal deity or 'Iso abasi', façade of god, are basically the same in structure and are not movable, but fixed to the ground. The demarcated spaces are bounded on all sides with typically smooth life sticks, which later grow into fairly large plant thus, forming a little circular grove. Such sticks, which grow very easily by cutting and, which by their queer ways of growing are believed to have smoothing spirituality about them are 'itomo', 'mkpafere', 'okono' they are usually collected and pinned in the ground in a circular formation of about thirty to sixty centimeters in diameter. The circle of sticks is then girded, with raffia shoot spread, to obtain he girdle the shoot is opened, spit into halves and the mid-ribs of the leaves are removed, alternatively the girdle may be made of plaited mat as in the illustration in the appendix. Inside the circle of each of these spaces must basically be a small shallow earthen-ware saucer (*usan nung*) and an egg. The structure seems to be peculiar to the Ibibio. According to Effiong Akpan Umoh, an informant, "there is no such spatial symbolization even among the Ibibio neighbouring ethnic groups". He further added that, this development led to the Ibibio practice of planting of flowers and laying of sticks and bottles to demarcate the grave site.

The arrangement of the pinned sticks of the "Iso Obot or Iso Ekanem is synonymous with contemporary artistic style of art installation. Ibibio funeral art, in which sticks of diverse nature are pinned symbolically to create an altar for the priest to complement images with rites in terms of its aesthetic and social roles, constitutes the first tradition of its justification as an art work.

According to Filani (2010) the second tradition of its justification as an artwork is that, art is defined first by its form and not by its intent or function. Therefore, Ibibio pinned sticks with plaited mat is noted as an

installation art because of its artistic form and socio-religious functions.

Ancestral veneration developed further in the pre-colonial era with more elaborate concepts and practices in tangible forms. ‘Nwommo’, the ancestral tomb became the key place connecting the living and the dead.

The ‘*nwommo*’ constituted the deep aesthetic and artistic socio-cultural implications for the celebration of the ancestor and immortalize them as heroes.

Substantiating the above fact, Udo (1983) noted that, worshipping the ancestors begins with the ancestral shrine iso abasi ekong, the core of veneration is *nwomo* a shrine built by a member of the ekong society in his compound.

The spatial symbolization of pinned sticks in Ibibio funeral art practice shifted to the erecting of traditional architecture of ‘*nwommo*’.

### 3.1 Nwommo

‘*Nwommo*’ as a vernacular architecture with its aesthetic attributes of inside walls and ceiling plaited with bomboo splits and decorated cloth wrapped on the inside of the hut. The cloth is imbued with contrasting colours of events and attainment during the lifetime of the ancestor so venerated. The composition is done by cutting into desired shapes of contrasting colours of cloth and sewn them on the cloth to be wrapped. In this way, pictures of animals, objects and war instruments were depicted thus justifying the artistic quality of the appliqué design and the motifs that are used to design them. Leach (1974) asserts that in their spectrum of meaning and implication the motif used, depicted the creative ingenuity of the pre-colonial artist to improve on the effectiveness of funeral poster design.

Furthermore, the earliest ‘*nwommo*’ had the display of grave goods such as cloths, utensils, jewelry, sword and mask (Esema, 1997). As the funeral ceremonies developed, skull of animals that were slaughtered during the ceremonies, were arranged for artistic effect (Bassey, 1976). He further noted that all the items selected for display were by custom beautifully decorated with fingertip dot using ‘*nsang*’ earth colours of red bud yellow.

‘*Nwommo*’ is a symbolic expression of the Ibibio people’s ancestral spirit with motif trajectory link to geography and social practice of veneration of the dead. The social significant of veneration of ancestor by the artist therefore include the visual experiences which the artists transmit to the viewer as an artwork.

From the foregoing, it is clear that from the spatial symbolization of pinned sticks to ‘*nwommo*’ forms and installation as an approach to death and life had been the exclusive preview of the Ibibio funeral art tradition. Trends and perspective arising for over time indicate that, the funeral art forms developed along representational and non-representational styles.

In tandem with the above assertion Filani (2000) maintained that each ethnic group in Nigeria has a peculiar artistic and cultural tradition that is enduring. There was also the recognition by scholars that artistic formulations are done based on ethno-historical Nigeria marked by distinctive indigenization of forms that bear similarities to ethnic orientations of the artist. The observation reflected perspective and approaches consistent with colonial status as observed by William Fagg four decades ago, as quoted by Filani (2000) that “there is no Nigerian art but Igbo art, Yoruba art, and Benin art seems to be plausible today. Since, continuity in tradition characterizes contemporary Nigerian art scene, Ibibio funeral art form from its inception has shown its tradition of evolution in visual form.

### 4.0 Changing Features and Functions of Funeral Artforms

Ancestral veneration has undergone rapid changes with the arrival of missionaries. The missionaries teaching coupled with modernity have brought about the disappearance of the ancestral worship.

*Nwommo* traditional architecture has given way to ancestral cement concrete funeral art form popularly known as tomb stones, ‘*Itiat Udi*’. In spite of these changes the traditional attitude of the living towards the dead still prevails. A participatory observation on the social relevant of tomb stone and the Government Urban Renewal Development Programme actions to the venerated ancestral family members on their removal from construction sites with monetary compensation attest to its socio-religious importance even in urbanized cities like Uyo, Etinan and Eket.

Early in the ‘*itiat udi*’ transition period, it was fashionable to have them erected in front of sacred groves. Today, *itiat udi* is becoming an important feature of Ibibio landscape, particularly in the family cemeteries or on the pathway leading to the compound of the venerated ancestor. *Itiat Udi* of the 1950s has been a combination of indigenous and European traditions of cement tomb, projected on terrace pedestal. The extensive use of the cross symbolism is indicative of the influence of the church in the patronage of tombstone. The cross symbolism were regarded as an embodiment of Christianity existential ideas and meanings relevant to their converts.

However, many indigenous traditional funeral art forms also flourished such as, cement concrete

funeral buildings with murals for the ancestor of ekpo, ekong and ekpo societies with seated figure of the ancestor in polychrome enamel colours. The tomb sculpture was done in burst relief and in three dimensions by additive process and sand cast method. An iconographical analysis of the design elements of the tomb sculpture revealed the social, economic, and aesthetic values of the material content and level of the creative ingenuity of the artist. Analysis of form of these sculptures showed the extensive use of line, shape, colour, texture and composition. How these individual design elements are employed, results in representational or non-representational life size figurine tomb sculptures.

In the 1990s tomb stone sculpture, there is a noticeable presence of conceptualization of ideas. These ideas on ancestral veneration took precedence over traditional funeral aesthetics and material concerns. The strict and focused practice of idea-based tombstone sculpture has resulted in the production of simplified form of Itiat Udi. Representative of this style of tombstone sculpture include Mary Mitchell Slessor tomb stone (see appendix).

Therefore, Ibibio contemporary funeral art as a manifestation of human creativity is considered in this study as an art form, especially when its aesthetic components are spot lighted. Historically, fine arts denote art forms developed primarily for aesthetics, but tomb stone as a funeral art form fulfills social and practical functions besides aesthetics (Johnson, 1988).

It is interesting to note that individuals or the family were at liberty to instruct the sculptor on the aesthetics of the tomb stone sculpture. The sculptor plays an important role having undergone some formal period of training and have acquired skill in the moulding and casting of cements 'itiat udi.' A close examination of contemporary 'itiat udi' in Uyo and its environs is innovative in style with few traditional pattern. Still others mostly public monuments to the commemoration of the Unknown Soldier are representational in style.

A statue, a memorial plaque and a coffin-shaped trough half filled with stones, and lined with marble or terrazzo are typical features of contemporary itiat udi. A statue need not necessarily be the likeness of the person who is venerated, a celebrant may pick any well moulded statue from a sculptor for the celebration. Some of the sculptures were post mortem and the memorial plaques in their various forms were simple and less expensive.

Other artistic accompaniment includes lettering, engraved on a marble stone and fixed on a column. A number of such plaques are sometimes mounted on a wall to venerate an ancestor in situations where there is unavailability of burial site or is expensive for the deceased family.

The traditional notion of the ancestors has been overtaken by modern religious consciousness in Ibibio land and burials are now done honorably in the order of the Christian religious consciousness. It is established that visual imagery of religion and belief system provides veritable material and information source for the study of Ibibio belief system and their funeral art forms. Moreover, the important role the religious experience play in the creative process in a society is endemic. The aggregation of the individual artist's tendencies to make for artistic expression, which facilitate beneficial exchanges between the living and death collectively, enhances the sustenance and development of funeral art forms.

## 5.0 Conclusion

This paper has shaded light on the changing features and function of funeral art forms in Ibibio. In the course of discussion, it has been established that in pre-colonial days their belief in life after death gave impetus to the spatial symbolization of forms in the pinned sticks and "nwommo" an ancestral architecture.

In colonial period funeral art forms was influenced by the advent of the missionaries and Christian doctrine with noticeable use of the cross symbolism, figurative sculptures and cement medium in tomb stones.

Ibibio funeral art like any field of humanistic endeavour has undergone some evolution as a creative enterprise, the funeral artist have been generous with time and skill in their interpretation in tangible form the belief in life after death and ancestral veneration.

Iconographic analysis of the changing features in funeral art form in the area has justified their social and aesthetic functions. As could be foraged from the foregoing, it could be safely concluded that funeral art forms of the Ibibio are about the memory of the deceased, about family hierarchies and social organization. They are also about the maintenance of social order and networks of human interdependence, economy and status of their patrons. At their most artistic level, they are concerned with aesthetic preferences and cultural change.

Therefore, their peculiar socio-cultural milieu of the Ibibio forms the yardstick with which their funeral art expressions are measured as an indigenous art form.

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#### APPENDIX



Plate 1.



Plate 2.

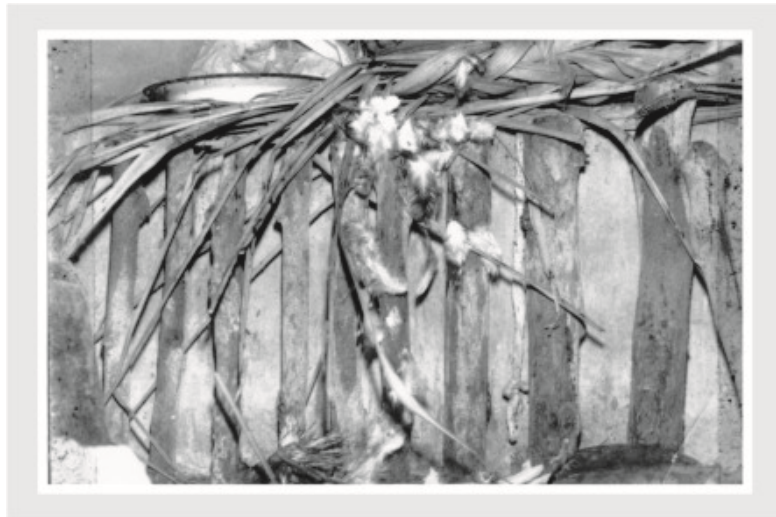


Plate 3.

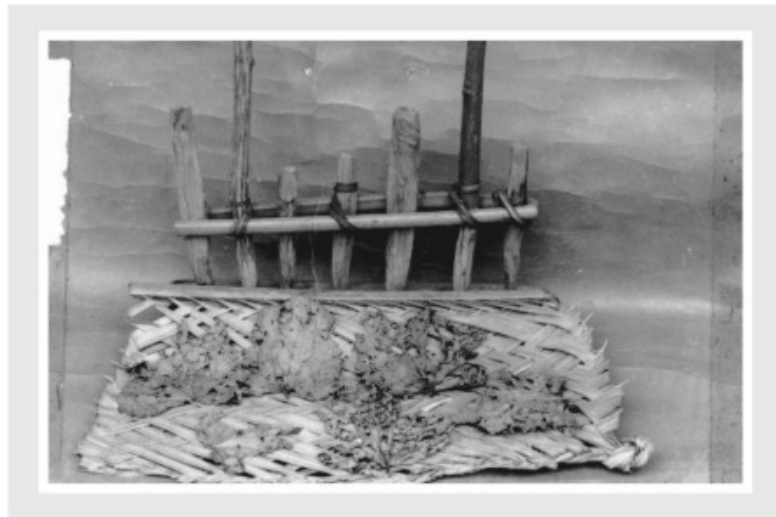


Plate 4. Typical examples of “Nwommo” (Warrior Shrines of Ekong Society)

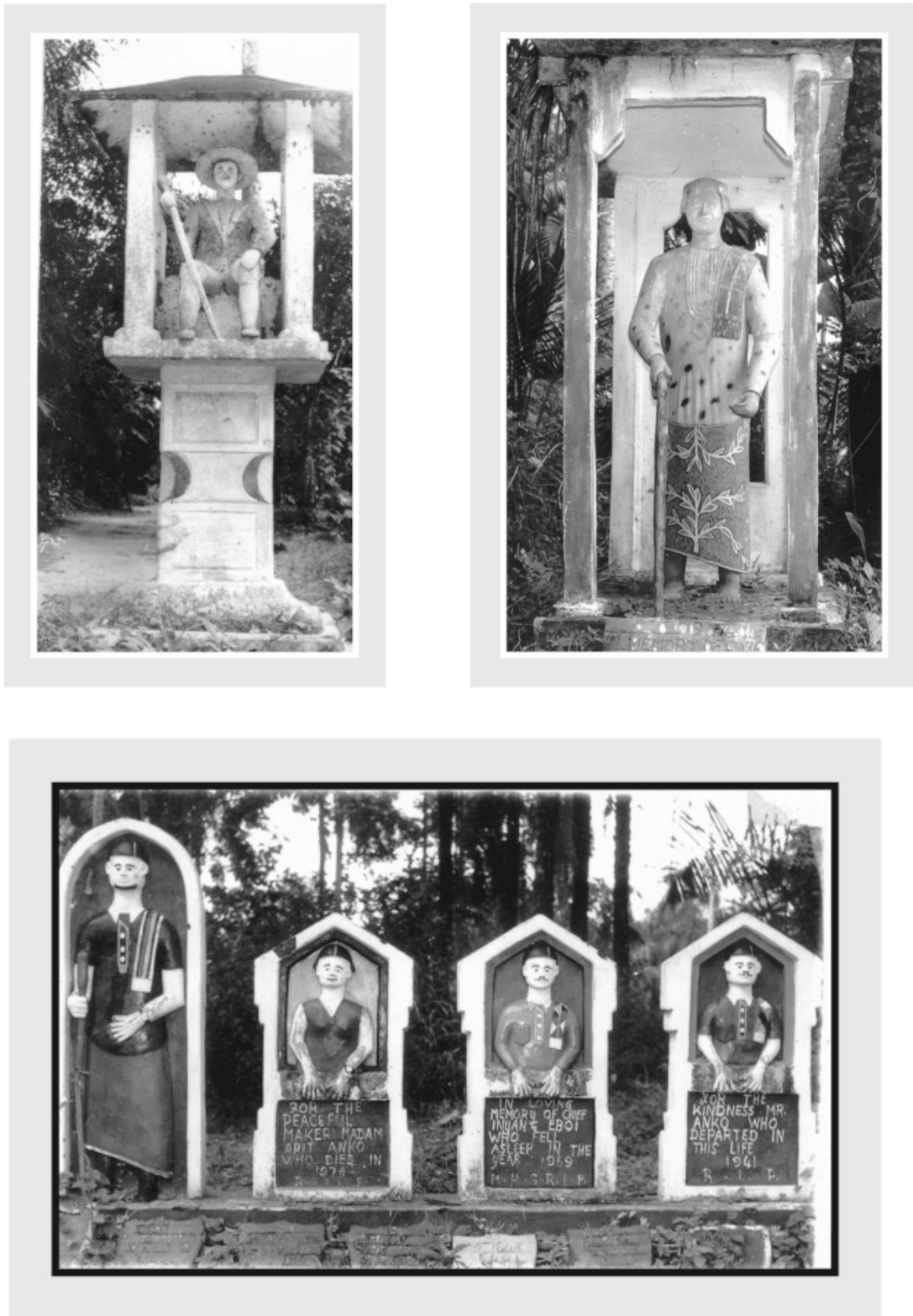


Plate 5. Appearance of human figures and introduction of seated and standing figures





Tomb Stone with Christian Cross Symbol



Plate 6.



Plate 7. Contemporary rendition of tomb stone sculpture