

AN EVALUATION OF THE ABOMINATION OF ODALEBA DEATH AND BURIAL IN EZZA TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

*The paper is on an evaluation of the abomination of Odaleba death and burial in Ezza traditional society. Odaleba is the most heinous deaths in Ezzaland. This kind of death occurs when someone unexpectedly slumps and dies inside a bush or by the side of the road without any sign of a physical assault. Victims are thought to have acted in a way that was not in harmony with the Earth goddess. This type of death is always buried in a very bare and shameful manner in the location where the person died. The deceased's spirit is excluded from the union of the ancestors and will never reincarnate since he was deprived of the customs of a proper funeral. Unfortunately **slumping and dying in the bush or roadside can be attributed to some notable medical issues which include but are not limited to high blood pressure (HBP), low blood pressure (LBP), diabetics hunger, exhaustion and need to be thoroughly investigated. However, how to differentiate when someone slumps and dies as a result of abominations***

committed and medical reasons is the problem the study is set to solve. *The ethnographic study adopted survey design method. Data were collected using observation and in-depth interviews with twelve (12) respondents purposively selected from six (6) communities of the two Local governments in Ezza, namely (Ikwuato, Amana and Amagu in Ezza South Local Government Area), (Oriuzor, Umuoghara and Umuezeokoha in Ezza North Local Government Area), who have baseline knowledge of the subject matter between the ages of 25 to 60 years and above. Among other things, the study found that Odaleba is a shameful death that is solely believed to befall evil people in Ezza traditional society. The paper concludes that Odaleba will be somewhat reduced if people can desist from abomination, as there will be complete harmony with the living and the Earth goddess. Therefore, in order to ensure proper ceremonial cleansing and make amends, the study recommends that people confess and atone for their abominable acts each time they are committed.*

Keywords: Abomination, Burial, Death, Ezza People, Odaleba

INTRODUCTION

Death shows no regard for anyone. Everyone is powerless once death strikes. Common names in Ezza like *Onwu-Chekwaru* (death wait), *Onwu-meru ejiwhe* (death brings evil), *Onwu-tamadu onye* (Death knows no one), *Onwu-Biko* (death please), and others reflect man's helplessness in the face of death. According to Oyibe (2001), every normal Ezza man is aware that he will eventually pass away and enter the afterlife. He therefore makes an effort to live a decent life in order to die a good death (Okpobe Onwu in Ezza dialect). Those who act in accordance with the Earth goddess and man will die a good death. On the other hand, bad death (Ejo Onwu) awaits those who commit evil. In Ezza traditional society, each of the aforementioned deaths holds great significance. In order to avoid behaving out of tune and dying a shameful death, people invoke the Ala (earth goddess), ancestors and *Chukwu Okike Abiam* (Supreme Being) in their daily prayers to lead them alright (Nwofoke, 2010). In Ezza, like every other part of Igboland, Ala (Earthgood) is an incorruptible judge that does not spare the wicked or allows the righteous to suffer, unlike the Judeo- Christian God (Eccl.7:15).

In their consciousness, Ezza people do not fear death because it is inevitable; rather, they are curious about the circumstances surrounding one's death to determine whether they are connected to abomination. In Ezza traditional society, some deaths are deemed to be abominations such as death by drowning, suicide, small pox (*Igbogbo*), swollen stomach, Odaleba and others. *Odaleba* is a sort of death in which a person suddenly slumps and dies by the side of the road or in the bush without any indication of a physical attack. It is a mocking death that is adjudged to only befall evil people (Ngwuta,

Personal Communication, May 28, 2025). Among the Ezza people anyone who is not ill but simply slumped and died by the roadside or in the bush must have committed an abomination against the gods, the Earth goddess or someone else without anyone's knowledge. This belief, according to Ngwuta, has been ingrained in Ezza, Ikwo, and Izzi culture since the beginning of time, as there is no way a healthy person can simply slump and die while traveling or in the bush without religious undertones. Ngwuta further maintains that it is not considered *Odaleba* if someone passes away in the farm (Ngwuta, Personal Communication, May 28, 2025). It's not termed *Odaleba* if someone is found dead in the bush or by the side of the road with physical evidence of an attack, such as cuts from a machete, bruises, gunshot wounds, or traces of strangulation. Instead, it is regarded as an accident or attack. The body will therefore be taken home for a dignified burial.

When *Ala* (Earthgoddess) strikes an evildoer and he is about to die by *Odaleba*, no one approaches to help the victim stand up; anyone who does so out of sympathy or disobedience to the culture will undoubtedly die, while the victim will live again. In Ezza traditional society, the act is called, *Inafu Ali Onu Oguderu* (saving a prey from Earthgoddess). In light of this, a typical Ezza person does not rush to carry someone who just collapsed on the side of the road or in a bush without any specific physical attack, out of fear of saving whom the Earthgoddess has condemned (Oshim, Personal communication February 25, 2025). It is evident that the corpse of the *Odaleba* victim is considered a taboo. No one dares to handle it, much less take it home, and anyone who does so is automatically condemned to death unless sufficient rites are carried out to appease the Earthgoddess (Orugbala, Personal Communication April 27, 2025).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Ezza traditional society, *Odaleba* is a bad death (Ojoo Onwu). It is believed to occur when someone slumps and dies in the bush or by the roadside without any physical mark of attack. The burial is always unbefitting, with little or no attendants. Slumping and dying in the bush or roadside can be attributed to some notable medical issues which include but are not limited to high blood pressure (HBP), low blood pressure (LBP), diabetics hunger, exhaustion and need to be thoroughly investigated. However, how to differentiate when someone slumps and dies as a result of abominations committed and medical reasons is the problem the study is set to solve

LITERATURE REVIEW

Abominable Death in Igbo Ontology

Abominable death is detestable in Igbo traditional society. According to Achebe (1958) and Amadi (1966) **a victim of Abominable death is described to be an ill fated fellow, who had a bad Chi or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave. His body is evil and only elders handle**

the corpse under the instructions of a great dibia. Among the Igbo, abominable deaths include but are not limited to death from leprosy, chicken pox, smallpox, suicide, and many others, and those who die in such circumstances are not considered worthy of being admitted into the comity of ancestors, even if they had died at old age, living children behind (Izunwa 2016; Ebo 2019; Onah and Leman, 2007).

In Igbo traditional society, abominable death (ajoo onwu) is a disgrace; it is a contamination of the land that requires immediate cleansing. Norbert (2015) characterizes an abominable death (ajoo Onwu) as the worst kind of death, in which the victims are viewed as evil and never at peace with the gods, ancestors and men. Among the Igbo, a man taking his life is evil. A man who does so will not be buried by his clansmen because it is an offense against the Earth. Only strangers are allowed to touch his evil body. The burial of such person is always a shameful one, regardless of his or her strength or social standing (Achebe, 1958; Amadi, 1966).

The death of a person who lived a good life and met the requirements for ancestorhood is a welcomed development among the Igbo people. It is against this backdrop that the average Igbo person tries to lead a good life in order to die a good death and be accorded a befitting burial so that he or she is admitted into the comity of the ancestors (Ubesie, 1978)

Onah and Leman (2007) explain the distinction between the burial of a person who died a good death (Onwu Chi) and a person who died an abominable death (ajoo onwu). They emphasize that the funeral rites of a good person are richly and satisfactorily performed with a mixture of joy in celebration of a life well lived and sadness for having to miss their companionship. There is typically a lot of food, drinking, dancing, and cultural exhibits during these funerals. These help in calming the deceased's spirit and facilitating spiritual communication during their transition. Onah and Leman (2007) further note that in some disturbing cases of bad death, such as *Ogbanje*, the victims are mutilated before relatives in order to prevent such persons from re-incarnating. The burials of those who have suffered unnatural death (ajoo onwu) are typically conducted with ignominiousness, and the burial atmosphere is typically depressing; depending on

the degree, type, or circumstances of such death, there may be a low key burial or none at all. *Ajoofia*, the evil forest, is where some of them are cast into, and their memories are rapidly erased. Particularly when it comes to suicide victims, their bodies are not only despised but also shabbily buried with few funeral rites (Onah and Leman, 2007).

According to Njoku and Nworie (2010), the bodies of people who committed heinous crimes against the Earth goddess or died young are bound to palm bamboo and cast into the evil forest (Ikirikpo). To demonstrate how much the public despises them, their shallow graves are dug with a hoe rather than a pick. Therefore, dying and being cast into the evil forest without any funeral customs is the biggest fear among the Igbo. For them, the tragedy of horrible death entails being shunned by the ancestors; death is followed by an exile from the opposite side of life. If someone dies a horrible death and is buried without a proper funeral, he will not be allowed to join the comity of the ancestors (Isichei, 1976).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Attachment theory is the theoretical framework adopted for the study. The theory was propounded by Bowlby in (1973) in his book titled *Attachment and Loss, Separation, Anxiety and Anger*. Although the theory is greatly influenced by Freud's idea of attachment on external relationships that exist between infants and parents. Bowlby in this theory investigates and bring to bare the strong attachment that people have for each other and the intense emotional reaction individuals have when these attachments are broken.

Bowlby, identified how certain circumstances surrounding the death of a loved one could affect the characteristics, intensity and duration of the bereavement process. This theory according to Bowlby 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 experience 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.

The theory in no small measure is very significant to the study as it serve as an eye-opener to assess how death affect the attachments, which individuals have with each other and various adaptive mechanisms. **Among the Ezza people, Odaleba is a scornful death. Whereas, in other culture, it is not recognized as such. Applying the module of Bowlby attachment theory in the study, mourning the death of a victim of Odaleba is a very brief one because the deceased did not die well. It is an indication that the deceased was an evil fellow while alive. Consequent upon this, friends and the family of the deceased usually find it so easy to separate and detach themselves from every bonds and cope considering that the deceased died a bad death (ajoo onwu) and is**

buried outside home, which has gross socio-religious implications, ranging from losing the right of a befitting burial, losing the chance of reincarnation, losing the chance of admittance into the comity of the ancestor. Since there will be no monument to remember the deceased, his memory in people's minds fade away quickly. Hence, *Odaleba* death has automatically separated the bonds between the deceased and the society.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study extensively examined the concept of *Odaleba* death and its socio-religious implications in Ezza traditional society using survey design method of data collection.

Area of Study

Ezza people live in two large local government Areas in Ebonyi state, Nigeria; Ezza South and Ezza North. The location of Ezza is in the North-East part of Igboland (Isichei, 1976; Ogbalu, 1988). Nwagama (2005) opines that Ezza shares boundaries with the Izzi and Ezamgbo people, Ikwo, Akpoha, Okposi Ugwulangwu and Oshiri. Others, Ngbo, Oriri, Ntezu and Okpoto.

Ezza, Ikwo and Izzi people traced their origin to a common ancestor called Ekumaenyi. Ugoh (2003) describes Ekumaenyi as a reputed huge man of stiff military bearing. A man of quick intelligent mind, a great personal charm and iron will. Ezza people are highly religious. They believe in the concept of the Supreme Being called *Chukfu/Chileke* and other several other gods and other cultural identities that are peculiar to the people (Aliama, 2022). These gods Ezza people believed in are the harbinger of all knowledge and are responsible for solving all sorts of problems (Njoku and Nworie, 2010).

Ezza people are predominantly farmers. They use hoe in cultivating crops. The type of hoe no other Igbo group can use effectively (Isichei, 1976; Njoku and Nworie, 2010)). As farmers, their major crops are yam, cassava, cocoyam, rice, maize and groundnut. They also rear animals such as pigs, goats, cows, and sheep. They are also technicians and wine tapers (Aliama, 2022). These, days, according to Nwagama (2005), a good number of Ezza people are teachers, medical doctors, lawyers, police officers, naval officers, engineers and many others



The study's participants were selected from two Local Government Areas (Ezza South and Ezza North) in Ezza, Ebonyi, Nigeria. From the two LGA, 6 communities ((Ikwaato, Amana and Amagu in Ezza South Local Government Area), (Oriuzor, Umuoghara and Umuezeokoha in Ezza North Local Government Area) were selected because Ezza South and North are homogeneous, the selection process was carried out at randomly. The study's demographics and selections were justified by the fact that Ezza South and North are the only two Local Government Areas that made up of the twelve (12) aboriginal sons of Ezekuna, the ancestor of Ezza people.

From each of the six (6) communities that were selected, 2 respondents were selected for the study, making a total of twelve (12) respondents. The respondents were drawn from different walks of life with varying levels of education between the ages of 25 - 60 years and above, who possess in-depth understanding of the subject.

The researcher used audio recordings and interview guide. The purpose of the interview questions was to elicit detailed answers from participants regarding the factors.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Audio tape, involvement and observation methods of data gathering, oral interview and focus group discussion with six (6) persons.

METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected were decoded in audiotape throughout the discussion and transcribed immediately after discussion. The data generated from oral interview were analysed in prose-like manner.

ODALEBA DEATH AND ITS REMARKABLE SIGNS IN EZZALAND

In Ezza Ezza traditional society, not all deaths are *Odaleba*. Before claiming that a certain death is *Odelaba*, there are visible indicators to take into account. Nwali on January 15, 2025 provided the remarkable *Odaleba* signals that were documented in this study. He points out that in Ezzaland, a death must have occurred inside a bush or on the side of the road in order to be classified as *Odaleba*. When the body is found inside the bush, the wise elders will check to see whether there are any signs of a physical assault. After that, they will also look at the location of the victim's death to determine whether or not he fought before giving up. In Ezzaland it is considered *Odaleba* when someone collapses and dies in the jungle without any indication of an attack (Nwali, Personal Communication, 15, 2025).

It is well established in Ezza that it is an abomination for people to die and place their right hand, known as *Eka Ikenga*, beneath their belly. In Ezza, this hand is symbolic of success and good fortune. For this reason, Nwali asserts that victims of *Odaleba* always fall and die facing the ground while placing their right hand, known as *Eka Ikenga*, beneath their belly (Nwali, Personal Communication, 15, 2025). Whenever there is an incident of *Odaleba*, it is common to hear elders at the scene of the death saying, *Chai! This is Odaleba.*" He died with his lips on the ground and his right hand (*Eka Ikenga*) beneath his belly. In Ezza dialect, it means *Owaa! Ejiwhe Emee oo. Owa bu kwa Ejoo Onwu Odaleba. Odakwaru tsuaa onu la ali, daru Eka Ikenga ya yele ime* (Nwali, Personal Communication, 15, 2025).

No matter the number of days the corpse of one who dies by *Odaleba* lies in the bush or by the roadside, no animal will eat the flesh until the elders see and observe the body belly (Nwali, Personal Communication, January 15, 2025). The Ezza traditional system

of autopsy becomes the last resort when all the observable signs of *Odaleba* are determined, and the family members continued to argue that their loved one was too innocent to die of *Odaleba*. In this scenario, the compound elders will send a delegate to seek *Afa* consultation, known as *Njita* in Ezza dialect. If *Afa* confirms the death to be *Odaleba*, the corpse is not taken home; instead, it is buried scornfully on the spot in a shallow grave (Donatus, Personal communication, February 27, 2025).

SOCIAL IMPLICATION OF ODALEBE DEATH

Odaleba has far-reaching social implications for the victims in particular and their family members in general. When somebody dies by *Odaleba*, nobody mourns him; not even his immediate family members. Anybody who mourns such death in Ezza traditional society must surely fall sick and die within seven days (Abali Esaa), unless ritual cleansings and appeasement to the earth goddess are made (Dibia, Personal Communication, June 30, 2025). During the rituals, the unauthorized mourners are cleansed using a goat, a fowl, the leaves of the sacred shrub (*oboroto*), and the silk cotton shrub (*akpunto*). The eldest man in the compound will order for the killing of the goat and the fowl and pour the blood on the ground. After which he will squeeze the leaves of the *oboloto* and *akpunto* with water in a bowl and sprinkle water from it on the individual (Nwite, personal communication, March 11, 2025). Corroborating the view, Nwangama (2005) explains that the sprinkling is a ceremony of purification that, in a metaphorical sense, eliminates the negative consequences of the sin or the contaminated land. The perpetrator will only be spared the wrath of the earth goddess if that rite is performed.

Victims of *Odaleba* are not buried inside 6 feet grave; the particular point the victims collapsed and died is where the elders will scoop sand with hoe three times and place them on their head, on the chest and on the feet while the rest of the body is exposed for vultures, insects, and other wild animals to feed on. No gathering of people, no cultural and social display as the burial is done in the bush where the victims died. But now because of some innovations, the body of the victim is no longer exposed; rather, it is fully covered with sand on a very shallow grave for health reason (Nwali, personal communication, January 15, 2025).

Odaleba makes fun of the victim's family because no one in the community would want to identify with them. According to Nwezza on May 12, 2025), it is extremely difficult for the children of *Odaleba* victims to get married because no one wants to get married to a man or woman whose mother or father was an *Odaleba* victim. Though, there are some families in Ezza that have instances of *Odaleba*. Such families are believed to be under a generational curse maybe as a result of abomination that is not confessed or propitiated. They are considered *Eri Odaleba* (*Odaleba* lineage). For this reason, any

typical Ezza man or woman planning a marriage seeks advice in order to avoid having an in-law whose lineage is linked to the *Odalebaba* cases.

RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF ODALEBA

Anybody who died by *Odalebaba* is already condemned by *Ala*. By religious implication, the victim is not buried at home. If peradventure, the corpse is buried at home, right from that day, there must be bad omens (Ijere, Personal Communication, March 22, 2025). The vulture will continue to hover and perch on roofs in the compound, the dog will be barking and excavating the grave to bring out the corpse, the owl (known as Mgbashi in Ezza dialect) will be crying in the compound every night. In most cases, thunder will strike the grave and bring out the corpse to the surface (Nome, Personal Communication June 25, 2025)

These bad omens continue unabated until the family takes a stone from the grave symbolically representing the corpse and bury it in the evil forest known as *Ikirikpo*. *Ikirikpo* in Abakiliki dialect is a forest, where people, who die bad death (Ejo Onwu) are buried (Njoku and Nworie, 2010; Aloah, 2014). In Ezza traditional society when people go to *Ikipirikpo* to bury the corpse of one who dies abominable death, at returning home, they don't go to their house straight; rather, they go to any stream close to the *Ikipirikpo* to wash their hoes and in most cases take their bath. By religious implication, the relationship of the victim with the living and the living dead would automatically cut-off. Hence, no child will be named after him. His name is not mentioned in any ritual of breaking of kola nut in Ezza, not even in early Morning Prayers. During the Ezza *Onwa Eke* festival of feeding the dead (Onu Nri le Ilu), his name is not remembered. His appearance in the dream before any of his relatives is always adjudged a bad omen (Nwali, personal communication 15, 2025).

INNOVATIONS ON THE BURIAL AND RITUALS ASSOCIATED TO ODALEBA IN EZZA TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

Before the advent of Christianity in Ezzaland, *Odalebaba* (dying on the road side or bush without any medical issue) was a shameful death. The burial rites of a victim were always on a very low key as he was not meant to be buried at home; instead, at the spot the person died. Regretfully, (Oguta personal communication January 10, 2025) laments that Christians today do not appear to perceive any abomination in *Odalebaba*. They hold that God controls both life and death and has the power to decide how, where, and when a person passes away. They believe that no death is an abomination, pointing out those medical conditions such as high blood pressure and low blood pressure, diabetes, heart diseases, hunger, fatigue, exhaustion and other health issues can cause someone to collapse and die at any time or place. Christians describe *Odalebaba* to be medical than religious. Hence, it is commonplace in Ezza to see Christians burying and

giving victims of *Odaleba* a befitting burial and expose the bereaved family to perpetual physical and spiritual agony. Hence, the spirit of the deceased continues to haunt the relatives unabated until right appeasement is made which involved invoking and taking stone from the grave symbolically throwing it to the evil forest to represent the dead person (Nwezza, Personal Communication May 12, 2025).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Odaleba is believed to befall people who indulge in abominable acts such as black magic, witchcraft, sorcery, and others. **It** has far reaching socio- religious implications. Victims are adjudged to have been rejected by the Earth goddess and man. The burial of someone who died by *Odaleba* is always done outside home in a very scanty manner. By so doing, the spirits of the victims will not be admitted in the comity of the ancestors. They cannot reincarnate. Their memories fade away immediately after death. Christianity has so much affected the observation of taboos associated with *Odaleba* death and burial in Ezza traditional society.

CONCLUSION

Peaceful coexistence is threatened by abominations not propitiated, both in the visible and invisible worlds. The complexities of abomination are always repulsive to the community as a whole as well as the perpetrator. Even sometimes, its consequences spare the perpetrator and punish the entire community. Among the Ezza people, *Odaleba* is one of the various ways the Earth goddess punishes those who commit abominations. It is determined that victims of *Odaleba* acted inappropriately toward the Earth goddess and refused to confess in order to be cleansed and placated. Therefore, the study concludes people should refrain from abominable activities or confess every time they commit them to avert the wrath of the Earthgoddess.

RECOMMENDATIONS

People should refrain from evil and learn to confess their crimes each time they are committed for the sake of atonement, as *Odaleba* is a shameful death that awaits those who commit abominations against the earth goddess and man. **Since** there are remarkable signals and indicators of *Odaleba* in Ezzaland, the study advises people to be aware of them in order to prevent cultural compromise.

The elders should teach the younger generation about the taboo associated with the corpses of *Odaleba* victims. And anyone who unintentionally comes into contact with such a corpse must confess in order for proper ritual cleansing to be performed. **The** study recommends that since mourning *Odaleba* victims is an abomination and anyone who does so dies within seven days (Abali Esaa), such burials ought to take place far

away from home. **Despite** the growth of churches and their beliefs, the paper advises Ezza people to resist letting Christianity infiltrate their culture, which was handed down to them by their forebears.

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