

# Motives for Lavish Funerals Among the Nembe People of the Niger Delta Region in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Rachel D. Uche\*

Department of Educational Foundations Guidance and Counseling Faculty of Education University of Calabar, Nigeria

\*Corresponding author: [riciuche@yahoo.com](mailto:riciuche@yahoo.com)

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**Abstract** This study examined the motives for lavish funerals among the Nembe people located in the creeks of the Niger Delta in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The ex-post facto design was employed. Using a non-probability quota technique, 120 respondents were sampled. A scale comprising three subscales: 1 Nembe Culture on Funerals, 2 Propensity for Lavish Funerals and 3 Love for the Deceased were constructed and used for data collection. In line with the two hypotheses formulated, the accruing data was analyzed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistics. Results revealed that love for deceased family members and not the culture is the motive for lavish funeral. It is recommended that individuals be counseled to demonstrate such love through the establishment of foundations and other philanthropic gestures, to assist the less privileged in society, as memorials for loved ones who have gone on.

**Keywords:** funeral, lavish, mourning

## 1. Introduction

Funeral is a very crucial aspect of mourning in many cultures, including Nigeria. The culmination of the funeral is usually the disposal of the corpse. The practice here in Nigeria is usually disposal by burial. In some cultures, such as the United States, approximately 80 percent of corpses are disposed by burial, the remaining 20 percent by cremation [3]. The importance of funerals is sometimes reflected in the pace of adjustment to the loss by individuals, in many cultures. In a study by [4] bereaved individuals who were religious derived more psychological benefits from a funeral, participated more actively in the rituals and adjusted more positively to the loss. Though cultures vary in how they practice mourning, after the death of individuals, in virtually every culture, the immediate response is some kind of funeral or planning for the funeral [1].

Culture, religion and tradition play significant role in stipulating rules and regulations governing funeral rites and rituals; in some cultures, ceremonial meal is held after death, in others, a black arm-band is worn for one year following a death [9]. There are therefore roles and expectations for family members, friends and acquaintances and also for the community at large. Such rules stipulate what the individuals should wear, whom to consult, what plans to put in place and who should be fed, for instance [1]. In Nigeria, for instance, the Muslims bury their dead within 24 hours, devoid of elaborate ceremonies. Thereafter, forty days of mourning is observed where friends and family members gather in the deceased's home to offer daily prayers, at the end of which the final prayers are offered for the deceased and the mourning house is disbanded. However, in the Christian and non-Christian

traditions, funeral rites take elaborate forms. For them, upon the death, the corpse is deposited in the mortuary, where it remains until the family can conclude arrangements for *befitting* burial. In some cases, corpses could be kept in the mortuary for as long as six months and even up to a year.

Funerals form a crucial aspect of mourning because they serve some very significant functions [4]. It gives survivors opportunity to experience the feeling that they have given their loved ones befitting burials, thus providing a therapeutic effect. The occasion also provides a forum for reunion of family members, clarifying new lines of authority and influence, strengthening family ties as well as opportunity for spiritual renewal and closure as family members say their goodbyes to the departed loved one [8].

Nonetheless, the funeral industry has been a source of controversy for years because the growing belief that there is a lot of commercialization, unnecessary extravagance and deception promoted by the growing funeral industry [6]. Grief stricken relatives may be persuaded to do the *right thing* which is to say that no expense should be spared for the funeral [7]. Pressures from without for extravagance may be present, however bereaved individuals seem to have bought into it as well. Infact, the tendency is for families to out-do one another in elaborate funerals. It is more like a competition, such that, the cliché now is *send-forth* instead of funeral, as a way of rationalizing the extravagance.

The bereaved go all out to splurge on exotic wines, food and beverages for entertainment, expensive casket which sometimes are imported for as much as \$50,000 on the average and expensive clothing and jewelry for the corpse as well as family members. Family members are usually decked in *uniforms*, that is, clothing made of the

same material worn by every member and friends of the family. There are usually different uniforms for each stage of the funeral ceremony. It is also expected that the Chiefs (Leaders) of the community be *informed* in a special way about the death and funeral events, with money, exotic drinks and food. There could also be an array of professional mourners, caterers, suppliers of different items, who are ever present, mounting their own pressure. The pressure for *befitting* funerals is therefore from within and without and since most bereaved families would not want to be objects of ridicule by failing to measure up to expectations, they usually would conform. Appraisals of funeral rites reveal that, they gulp a lot of money which results in poverty and indebtedness of the bereaved family [2].

Thus, funeral rites in some Nigerian cultures have become occasions of pomp, grandeur and ceremony. Components of such funeral rites include:- opening of *mourning house*, often splendidly decorated, the wake or vigil, the rites and ceremonies, the memorial service and continuation of festivities in the *mourning house* that could last for between one to six weeks depending on the financial capability of the bereaved and the status of the deceased. In all these stages, people have to be lavishly entertained and family members and friends may have to wear different uniforms.

Indeed, funerals have become such materialistic and ostentatious ventures that the solemnity of the event is often lost on the people involved [5]. In fact, one could hardly hear people cry and wail these days in funerals. In contrast to the years when the researcher was growing up, when corpses were buried within 24 hours after death, with people wailing and weeping, with deep sense of mourning and very little entertainment. Nowadays corpses are kept in mortuary for months in order to make *adequate* burial arrangements. People spend stupendous amounts of money burying the dead such that after the event, some find themselves deep in debt. Some go as far as building *befitting* houses for the dead before the burial. Fortunately, in some places, some churches have stepped in to stipulate rules of funeral rites. How far these rules will be adhered to, is yet to be seen. The posers therefore are:- Why do the bereaved go to these outlandish extent to bury their deceased loved ones? Could it be demonstration of love for the deceased family members? Is it just a matter of following the trend set by others? Does it have to do with the culture?

The purpose of this study therefore is to explore the motives behind the extravagance in funerals among Nembe community in Niger Delta region in Bayelsa State.

## 2. Hypotheses

1. Love for deceased family members does not significantly influence lavish funerals among members of Nembe community.

2. Culture does not significantly influence lavish funerals among members of Nembe community.

## 3. Methodology

The ex-post facto design was employed for the study. The population consisted of all adult members of Nembe town. Nembe is the headquarters of Nembe Local

Government Area (LGA), one of the eight local government areas that make up Bayelsa State, located in the creeks of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. The only means of transportation is by small boats which makes accessibility difficult and frightening. Most of the people live in the cities, coming home only during festivities and special occasions like population census and elections. Hence, the population on ground, most times, is often sparse. According to the 2006 national population census, the state has a population of about 3 million, the LGA about 130, 931, and Nembe town itself has about 23, 295, with 11,838 males and 11,157 females.

Through a non-probability quota sampling, 120 respondents were drawn from the 6 distinct zones of the town called 'polo' in the native parlance thus, 20 subjects were drawn from each zone of the town for the purpose of the study. Essentially, they were made up of civil servants, businessmen and fisherman, most of whom are illiterates.

The instrument, *Scale for Measuring Some Dimensions of Funeral Motive*, comprised of three subscales: (1) *Nembe Culture on Funerals*. (2) *Propensity for Lavish Funeral* and (3) *Love for the Deceased*. The three subscales were preceded by a section requesting for such background information as age, gender, occupation and zone of the town to which they belonged. The first subscale, *Nembe Culture on Funerals* had five statements on several dimensions of Nembe culture regarding funerals. The respondents were required to rate each of these statements on a four point scale indicating the extent to which the statement is consistent with Nembe culture. The second subscale, *Propensity for Lavish Funerals* is a six point subscale in which subjects were to rate each statement on a four point scale on the degree to which they would engage in specific but expensive funeral practices. Finally, the third subscale, *Love for the Deceased* consisted of five items on actions and practices that are indicative of love for someone. Respondents were to rate each statement according to the extent to which they will engage in such love related behaviours or activities.

The validity of the three subscales were ascertained through the scrutiny of four experts in the areas of psychology and measurement. After due modification and refinement of the items, the experts expressed satisfaction in terms of the capacity of the items to measure what they claimed to measure. Items were administered on 60 adults in a neighbouring town, but in a different LGA, and their responses on analysis, gave Cronbach Alpha reliability indices of 0.63, 0.68 and 0.73 respectively for the subscales.

The instrument was administered personally by the researcher and two assistants and because of its brevity, the respondents were able to complete and return immediately. Thus, there was no instrument attrition. The data collected were then duly coded and analyzed, using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Summaries of results are presented in the following tables.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Hypothesis 1

Love for deceased family members does not significantly influence lavish funerals. Pearson Product

Moment Correlation statistics was utilized for this hypothesis and the results are presented on [Table 1](#).

**Table 1. Pearson Product Moment Correlation of family members' love for the deceased and lavish funerals (N=120)**

Variable	$\bar{X}$	SD	r	r <sup>2</sup>	Sig. level
Love for the deceased	11.83	1.91			
			0.272**	.07	0.01
Lavish Funeral	12.32	1.97			

\*P<0.05, df=118; critical r=.195

r<sup>2</sup>=Variance accounted for

The result in [Table 1](#) indicates a positive relationship between love for deceased family members and lavish funeral with a calculated r-value of 0.272. Since the critical r (.195) is less than the calculated r value, it means that the calculated r is statistically significant at 0.01 significance level and 118 degrees of freedom. However, the variance in propensity for lavish funeral that is accounted for by the love for the deceased is 7%. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

### 4.2. Hypothesis 2

Culture does not significantly influence lavish funerals. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was employed to analyze the data for this hypothesis and the results are as shown on [Table 2](#).

**Table 2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation of culture and lavish funerals (N=120)**

Variable	$\bar{X}$	SD	r	r <sup>2</sup>	Sig. level
Love for the deceased	12.73	1.60			
			0.272**	.158	.02
Lavish Funeral	12.32	1.97			

P>0.05; df=118; critical r=.195

The result on [Table 2](#) shows a calculated r of .158 which is less than the critical r (.195). This means that the calculated r is not statistically significant at 0.05 significance level and 118 degrees of freedom. There is therefore no relationship between culture and lavish funerals for deceased family members. There is therefore, no relationship between culture and lavish funerals for the deceased family members. The variance in propensity for lavish funerals that is explained by culture r<sup>2</sup> is only 2%. Hence the null hypothesis is not rejected.

### 4.3. Discussion

The results for hypothesis 1 reveal a positive relationship between love for deceased family members and indulgence in lavish funerals (r=0.275; critical r=0.158). That is to say the greater the love for the deceased, the higher the tendency for extravagant funerals and the lesser the love for the deceased, the lower the tendency for extravagance. Extravagant funerals are therefore the ultimate demonstration of love for the deceased family members for whom the bereaved had strong attachment and related with intimacy, based on the results. Perhaps it is a demonstration by the bereaved to the observers that the deceased is so dear that no expenses should be spared. To the bereaved, the right thing to do is to spare no expenses for the funeral of their departed loved

ones [7]. It is like saying the final goodbye and this is the very last thing one can do for this loved one and as such nothing should be deemed too much. It is the belief of Papalia et al [8] that funerals are very significant for survivors as they afford such family members opportunity for closure and saying final goodbyes to their departed loved ones.

The indications from the result in hypothesis two is that culture of the people does not significantly influence lavish funerals for the deceased family members (r=0.158); critical r=0.195). What this means is that there are not necessarily cultural requirements in place for extravagant funerals in the Nembe community. According to [9] culture along with tradition and religion play a major role with regards to rules and regulations concerning funeral rites. However, based on the results of this hypothesis, culture does impose or speak for funerals of outrageous cost in this community. It could be borrowed culture as people travel far out and come face to face with other cultures displaying extravagance in their funerals. For instance, the Yorubas of western Nigeria are known for their penchant for colourful, elaborate and flamboyant funerals that cost survivors astronomical amount of money [1]. It may well be a trend therefore, that has crept slowly into this community. In the study of [2] of the *preference for funeral rites* among undergraduates of Nigerian universities, 61.4% of respondents preferred elaborate funeral rites. People travel out and interact with other cultures and practices and eventually transport same to this community to the extent that it becomes the norm.

Another explanation could just be that the motivation for such lavish funerals could be purely psychological. Deriving pleasure in doing something stupendous for a departed loved one. It may help to fill the void, mitigate the ache and pain of the loss. The rationale of extravagant funerals, according to [1] include, need to achieve psychological, social and emotional fulfillment and contentment.

### 4.4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study has demonstrated that the motive for indulgence in lavish funerals is that of love for the deceased and not cultural imposition among members of the Nembe community in Bayelsa state. The trend is for people to go to outlandish extents and do preposterous things all in the name of giving their loved ones *befitting* burials. For instance, dressing up a corpse in resplendence with expensive jewelry and ornaments, only to rot away six feet under, all in the name of elaborate funeral is rather ridiculous and outrageous. It is more like competition to provide lavish funerals for loved ones and in consequence the survivors become financially crippled, deeply indebted and distressed.

Hence, it is recommended that counselors and psychologists liaise with churches, family oriented non-governmental organization and governmental agencies such as Ministry of Social Welfare and the National Orientation Agency to put in place the following

- Some churches have done well by stipulating the number of days a corpse can be kept before burial. However, they need to go further by placing tougher restrictions on expenditure in funerals, on items such as casket, burial clothes, food & drinks.

- Since most of the respondents are Christians, churches could be used as fora to reiterate the futility of materialism and ostentation especially as regards the dead who can neither hear nor see anymore. Elaborate memorial services and unnecessary prolonging of funeral events should be discouraged.

- Funeral education and guidance should be mainstreamed into the curricula of educational institutions so that the younger generation would come to understand early enough that once the individuals are deceased, whatsoever the living does, is all waste of resources.

- Reorientation of collective psyche regarding funerals is needed through seminars, workshops, symposia and debates. Less emphasis should be placed on so called befitting burials.

- For the individuals who are rich, they could be encouraged to direct that elaborate-funeral-money to establish foundations in memory of their loved ones. Such foundations could give scholarships, provide pipe borne water, equipped hospitals and food for the poor among us.

- Pressure should be brought to bear on traditional rulers to help tone down the funeral expenditure because they are part of the problem as they place such high expectation on the survivors.

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