

## **Grief and Bereavement Practices Among Igbo People of South-Eastern Nigeria: Implications for Counselling**

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### **Abstract**

*Death is as old as human kind, but always appears in minds as fresh as a new born when and wherever it occurs. Death or loss of loved one/valuable items is a tragedy, disastrous and difficult to swallow within a short period of its occurrence. The unpredictable psychological feeling called grief is usually accompanied with emotional setbacks like; anxiety, depression, insomnia, anger, feeling of guilt, sadness, despair and yearning among others determines the level of attachment to the loss and so the likely period of bereavement. The unfortunate circumstances seem to manifest themselves even among animals particularly mammals for example; chimpanzees exhibit silence behavior around the dead member, gorillas use sign language and even expressing sadness about the deceased member, elephants display destructive unusual habit on seeing motionless member, some deer mostly sniff and poke while looking at their lifeless deceased among others. However, this paper attempts to define the concepts of grief, mourning, counselling and bereavement practices by various groups around the world, with much emphasis on Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria as well as its counselling implications.*

**Keywords:** grief, bereavement, Igbo people, counselling

According to Similes Dictionary (1988), grief refers to intense sorrow caused by loss of a loved one (especially by death). It is a natural response to loss and the emotional suffering one feels when something or someone the individual loves is taken away (Melinda 2012). Grief is also a reaction to any loss. The grief associated with death is familiar to most people, but individuals grieve in connection with a variety of losses throughout their lives, such as unemployment, ill health or the end of a relationship. Loss can be categorized as either physical

or abstract, the physical loss being related to something that the individual can touch or measure, such as losing a spouse through death, while other types of loss are abstract, and relate to aspects of a person's social interactions (Center, 2007).

Every step of the grief process is natural and healthy. It is only when a person gets stuck in one step for a long period of time that the grieving can become unhealthy, destructive and even dangerous. Going through the grieving process is not the same for everyone, but everyone does have a common goal; acceptance of the loss and to keep moving forward. This process is different for every person but can be understood in four or more stages, depending upon the theory that is being used (McDonald, 1985).

The word *bereavement* comes from the ancient German for 'seize by violence'. Sometimes when someone dies, it can feel just like that - like that person has been forcibly taken away. Today the word 'bereavement' is used to describe the period of grief and mourning we go through after someone close to us dies.

The term *mourning* is often used to describe the varied and diverse social expressions of grief. Its effects can range from pain and sadness to humor, pleasure, and joy. Actions, rituals, and emotions observed during mourning are shaped and controlled by the beliefs and values of a society or cultural group and are intended to be for the benefit of griever(s) and/or the community. In countries in which hundreds of cultures are represented (such as the United States and Canada) one might expect that cultural expectations for mourning would evolve in a manner that represents the many co-cultures. However, Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson, 1976 found that overt expressions of crying, fear, and anger were common, acceptable, and encouraged in most parts of the world, except for some Western cultural groups. This suggests that the United States and Canada have never truly been "melting pots" beyond some of the early European nationalities in terms of cultural, ethnic, and religious attitudes toward grief, loss, and mourning (Irish 1993).

Mourning is, in the simplest sense, synonymous with grief over the death of someone. The word is also used to describe a cultural complex of behaviors in which the bereaved participate or are expected to participate. Customs vary between different cultures and evolve over time, though many core behaviors remain constant. Wearing black clothes is one practice followed in many countries, though other forms of dress are also seen. Those most affected by the loss of a loved one often observe a period of grieving, marked by withdrawal from social events and quiet, respectful behavior. People may also follow certain religious traditions for such occasions. Mourning may also apply to the death of, or anniversary of the death of, an important individual like a local leader, monarch, religious figure, etc. State mourning may occur on such an occasion. In recent years some traditions have given way to less strict practices, though many customs and traditions continue to be followed.

*Counselling* has generally been accepted to mean a form of assistance that is offered to an individual or a group of individuals who have experienced an emotional problem for which they are unable to cope alone.

### **Igbo People of Eastern Nigeria**

Igbo is the language spoken by the people who are mostly known as "Ndi Igbo"; their community is known as "Olu no Igbo" ("those in the lowlands and uplands"). Before European colonialism, the Igbo-speaking peoples, who shared similarities in culture, lived in localized communities and were not unified under a single cultural identity or political framework, although unifying processes were present via expansion, ritual subordination, intermarriage, trade, cultural exchange, migration, war, and conquest. Villages and village groups were generally identified by distinct names of their ancestral founders or by specific names such as Umuleri, Nri, Ogidi, Nnobi, Orlu, Ngwa, Ezza, and Ohaffia. There are several theories concerning the etymology of the word "Igbo" (wrongly spelled "Ibo" by British colonialists). Eighteenth-century texts had the word as "Heebo" or "Eboe," which was thought to be a corruption of "Hebrew." "Igbo" is commonly presumed to mean "the people." The root -bo is judged to be of Sudanic origin; some scholars think that the word is derived from the verb gboo and therefore has connotations of "to protect," "to shelter," or "to prevent" – hence the notion of a protected people or a community of peace. According to other theorists, it may also be traced to the Igala, among whom onigbo is the word for "slave," oni meaning "people." (Isichei, 1976).

The present Igbo-speaking peoples can simply be categorized into five geographically based on their subcultures background: northern Igbo, southern Igbo, western Igbo, eastern Igbo, and northeastern Igbo. Each of these five can be further divided into subgroups based on specific locations and names. The northern or Onitsha Igbo are divided into the Nri-Awka of Onitsha and Awka; the Enugu of Nsukka, Udi and Awgu; and those of the Onitsha town. The southern or Owerri Igbo are divided into the Isu-Ama of Okigwe, Orlu, and Owerri; the Oratta-Ikwerri of Owerri and Ahoada; the Ohuhu-Ngwa of Aba and Bende; and the Isu-Item of Bende. The western Igbo (Ndi Anioma, as they like to call themselves) are divided into the northern Ika of Ogwashi Uku and Agbor; the southern Ika or Kwale of Kwale; and the Riverrain of Ogwashi Uku, Onitsha, Owerri, and Ahoada. The eastern or Cross River Igbo are divided into the Ada (or Edda) of Afikpo, the Abam-Ohaffia of Bende and the Aro of Aro. The northeastern Igbo include the Ogu Uku of Abakaliki and Afikpo (Uchendu, 1965).

Today, Igbo-speaking individuals live all over Nigeria and in diverse countries of the world. As a people however, the Igbo are located on both sides of the River Niger and occupy most of southeastern Nigeria. The area, measuring over 41,000 square kilometers, includes the old provinces of Onitsha, Owerri, East Rivers, Southeast Benin, West Ogoja, and Northeast Warri. In contemporary Nigerian history, the Igbo have claimed all these areas as the protectorate of the

"Niger Districts." Thus began the process of wider unification and incorporation into wider political and administrative units. Presently, they constitute the entire Enugu State, Anambra State, Abia State, Imo State, and the Ahoada area of Rivers State; Igbo-speaking people west of the Niger are inhabitants of the Asaba, Ika, and Agbo areas of Delta State (Encyclopedia, 1996).

In most modern societies across the continents, bereavement practices are either influenced by religious belief or completely engulfed by its laid down rules and regulations. Some of these religions include; Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism.

### **Islam**

Mourning is observed in Islam by increased devotion, receiving visitors and condolences, and avoiding decorative clothing and jewelry. Loved ones and relatives are to observe a three-day mourning period. Widows observe an extended mourning period (Iddah), four months and ten days long, in accordance with the Qur'an 2:234. During this time, she is not to remarry, move from her home, or wear decorative clothing or jewelry. Grief at the death of a beloved person is normal, and weeping for the dead is allowed in Islam. What is prohibited is to express grief by wailing (mourning in a loud voice), shrieking, tearing hair or clothes, breaking things, scratching faces, or uttering phrases that make a Muslim lose faith (Sahih Muslim, Vol. 2).

Allah (SWT) prohibits widows from engaging themselves for four lunar months and ten days after the death of their husbands. According to Qur'an:

“And those of you who die and leave widows behind, they should keep themselves in waiting for four months and ten days. Then when they have fulfilled their term, there is no blame on you about what they do with themselves in accordance with the norms [of society]. And Allah is well acquainted with what you do. And there is also no blame on you if you tacitly send a marriage proposal to these women or hold it in your hearts. Allah knows that you would definitely talk to them. [Do so] but do not make a secret contract. Of course you can say something in accordance with the norms [of the society]. And do not decide to marry until the law reaches its term. And know that Allah has knowledge of what is in your hearts; so be fearful of Him and know that Allah is Most forgiving and Most Forbearing. ” (Quran 2:234-235).

Islamic scholars consider this directive a balance between mourning a husband's death and protection of the widow from censure that she became interested in remarrying too soon after her husband's death. This is also to ascertain whether or not a lady is pregnant (Shehzad, 2004).

Among the Shia Muslims, the most significant mourning practices are held annually in the month of Muharram, that is to say, the first month of Islamic Lunar calendar. This mourning is held in the commemoration of Hussain bin Ali, who was martyred along with his 72 companions by Yazid bin Muawiyah.

Muslims especially Shia Muslims wear black clothes and take out processions on road to mourn on the tragedy of Karbala.

### **Christianity**

Orthodox Christians usually hold the funeral either the day after death or on the third day, and always during the daytime. In traditional Orthodox communities the body of the departed would be washed and prepared for burial by family or friends, and then placed in the coffin in the home. A house in mourning would be recognizable by the lid of the coffin, with a cross on it, and often adorned with flowers, set on the porch by the front door. Special prayers are held on the third, seventh or ninth (number varies in different national churches), and 40<sup>th</sup> days after death; the third, sixth and ninth or twelfth month; and annually thereafter in a memorial service, for up to three generations. Kolyva is ceremoniously used to honor the dead. Sometimes men in mourning will not shave for the 40 days. Forty seems to have recurring pre-Judaic origins e.g. in the Rites of Persephone. In Greece and other Orthodox countries, it is not uncommon for widows to remain in mourning dress for the rest of their lives.

When an Orthodox bishop dies, a successor is not elected until after the 40 days of mourning are completed, during which period his diocese is said to be "widowed". The 40th day has great significance in Orthodox religion. That is the period during which soul of deceased wanders on earth. On 40<sup>th</sup> day ascension of his soul occurs. Therefore, it's the most important day in mourning period, on which special prayers should be held on the grave site of deceased. This custom originates from old Slavic pagan religion and it was incorporated into Orthodox religion, during the Christianization of old Slavic nations (Clark, 2000).

While in the Roman Catholic Church, the Mass of Paul VI, adopted in 1969, allows several options for the liturgical color used in Masses for the Dead. Prior to the liturgical reform, black was the ordinary color for funeral Masses; in the revised use, several options are available. According to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, violet, white, or black vestments may be worn at Offices and Masses for the dead. Christian Churches often go into mourning symbolically during the period of Lent to commemorate the sacrifice and death of Jesus. Customs vary among the denominations and include the covering or removal of statuary, icons and paintings, and use of special liturgical colors, such as violet/purple, during Lent and Holy Week. In more formal congregations, parishioners also dress according to specific forms during Holy Week, particularly on Monday, Thursday and Good Friday, when it is still common to wear black or sombre dress or, as mentioned, the liturgical color purple (Clark, 2000).

### **Hinduism**

Death is not seen as the final "end", but is seen as a turning point in the seemingly endless journey of the indestructible "atman" or soul through innumerable bodies of animals and people. Hence, Hinduism prohibits excessive mourning or lamentation upon death, as this can hinder the passage of the

departed soul towards its journey ahead: "As mourners will not help the dead in this world, therefore (the relatives) should not weep, but perform the obsequies to the best of their power."

Hindu mourning is described in dharma shastras. It begins immediately after the cremation of the body and ends on the morning of the thirteenth day. Traditionally the body is cremated within 24 hours after death; however, cremations are not held after sunset or before sunrise. Immediately after the death, an oil lamp is lit near the deceased, and this lamp is kept burning for three days. Hinduism associates death with ritual impurity for the immediate blood family of the deceased, hence during these mourning days, the immediate blood family must not perform any religious ceremonies (except funerals), must not visit temples or other sacred places, must not serve the sages (holy men), must not give alms, must not read or recite from the sacred scriptures, nor can they attend social functions such as marriages, parties, etc. The family of the deceased is not expected to serve any visiting guests food or drink. It is customary that the visiting guests do not eat or drink in the house where the death has occurred. The family in mourning is required to bathe twice a day, eat a single simple vegetarian meal, and try to cope with their loss.

On the day on which the death has occurred, the family does not cook; hence usually close family and friends will provide food for the mourning family. White clothing (the color of purity) is the color of mourning, and many will wear white during the mourning period. The male members of the family do not cut their hair or shave, and the female members of the family do not wash their hair until the 10<sup>th</sup> day after the death. On the morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> day, all male members of the family shave and cut their hair, and female members wash their hair. This day is called Dasai or Daswan. After "Daswan", some vedic rituals are started. If the deceased was young and unmarried, the "Narayan Bali" is performed by the Pandits. The Mantras of "Bhairon Paath" are recited. This ritual is performed through the person who has given the Mukhagni (Ritual of giving fire to the dead body).

### **Judaism**

Judaism looks upon mourning as a process by which the stricken can re-enter into society, and so provides a series of customs that make this process gradual. The first stage is the Shiva (literally meaning seven), which consists of the first seven days after the funeral. The second stage is the Shloshim (thirty), referring to the thirty days following the death. In some special cases there are more extended periods of mourning which can last three months and even one year. Each stage places lighter demands and restrictions than the previous one in order to reintegrate the bereaved into normal life.

The most known and central stage is Shiva, which is a Jewish mourning practice in which people adjust their behavior as an expression of their bereavement for the week immediately after the burial. In the West, typically, mirrors are covered and a small tear is made in an item of clothing to indicate a

lack of interest in personal vanity. The bereaved dress simply and sit on the floor, short stools or boxes rather than chairs when receiving the condolences of visitors. In some cases relatives or friends take care of the bereaved's house chores, such as cooking and cleaning. English speakers use the expression "to sit shiva". During the Shloshim the mourners are no longer expected to sit on the floor or be taken care of (cooking/cleaning). However some customs still apply. There is a prohibition on getting married or attending any sort of celebrations and men refrain from shaving or cutting their hair. However, despite religious domination in determining how grief and bereavement are observed by many people in different part of the world, traditional practices still play a significant role in many isolated communities worldwide.

### **Igbo Belief about the Death (Reincarnation)**

Traditionally, the Igbo people are polytheistic, meaning they worship more than one god. Their gods are on one of three levels. The Supreme Being at the highest level is called Chukwu. The lesser gods are called "Umuagbara" and the third level gods are called "Ndi Ichie." Ndi Ichie are thought to be the spirits of dead people. Many modern Igbos have a Westernized sense of heaven and hell adopted from Christianity, however, traditional Igbos believes in reincarnation.

Culturally, Igbos believe that death is a transient position between life and a world of spirits. When someone passes away he starts a life in this spirit world. As time goes on, those who have passed away are born again as babies back on earth. As in many African cultures, the Igbo handle different circumstances of death in different ways. Someone in the spirit world may return to earth to finish fulfilling his life's purpose, especially if he was still a child when he passed away. The Igbo consider a child's death to be attributed to his usefulness in the spirit world. A witch doctor is called upon to read the future of the child through "oracles." A child passing away is considered an act of the gods. But death through suicide is regarded as an obvious taboo, it is the worst way to die in Igbo society. Someone who commits suicide is more looked down upon than someone who commits an act of murder. To commit suicide brings shame on one's family, village and friends. Female survivors of the deceased, such as sisters, will have a difficult time finding a good marriage. A person who died by his own hand will never be able to reincarnate, according to Igbo tradition. Suicide is a "bad death," and only those with a "good death" will be reborn. The scorn of suicide could be an influence of Christian beliefs that have merged with more traditional religious notions (Marisa, 2015).

Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, death is traditionally a highly ritualized event filled with deep mourning. The traditional burial rites involve not one, but two funerals whose main intention is to safely escort the deceased from the realm of the living to the spirit world. Only after a successful

second funeral can the deceased pass from the time of "ita okazi" – a period of torment – into a state of peace and contentment.

According to "Igbo Funeral Rites Today: Anthropological and Theological Perspectives," when an elderly man or woman dies, the corpse is immediately stretched out on plantain leaves, sponged down thoroughly and rubbed with cam wood dye to mark it as sacred. After the cleaning, the body is laid out in the living room, lying down with the feet facing the entryway – though if the deceased is a woman, she is often seated upright. Women are also carried in a stretcher back to their ancestral village for burial (Echema, 2014). Culturally, the funeral rite among Igbo communities comprise the following; wake, first burial and second burial.

### **The wake**

Once the body has been prepared for its passage from the world of the living into the spirit world, a wake is held. The eldest son of the bereaved family welcomes the community into the home with kola nuts and palm wine. Prayers and libations are spoken to beckon ancestral spirits into the home to escort the spirit of the deceased. The wake lasts the whole night until gunshots are fired early the next morning to alert the surrounding village of the death that has occurred.

### **First Burial**

After the wake takes place, the body is immediately buried in a grave dug in the living room. Also enclosed are a large quantity of cloth and some of the deceased's most valued possessions in life. Men are often buried with their tools, gun or fishing gear, and women with their pots and dishes. The body is then placed in the grave by young men and encased in wooden planks. Burial usually follows within 24 hours of death.

### **Second Burial**

The first burial, however, is not the end of Igbo funeral rites. Several months or even a year after the body is buried, a second funeral is held, but this time, it is accompanied by feasting and merry-making rather than mourning. Visitors dress in their best attire, and sing and dance to alert the community of the event that is about to be held. After the second funeral, the deceased is said to have been sent off to take up a new place in the land of the dead. (Echema, 2014). After a death, the body of a prominent member of society is placed on a stool in a sitting posture and is clothed in the deceased's finest garments. Animal sacrifices may be offered and the dead person is well perfumed. In the 21st century, the head of a home is usually buried within the compound of his residence. Different types of deaths warrant different types of burials. This is determined by an individual's age, gender and status in society. For example,



children are buried in hiding and out of sight; their burials usually take place in the early mornings and late nights. A single untitled man is buried in front of his house and a single mother is buried in her place of origin: in a garden or a farm-area that belonged to her father. In the 21st century, a majority of the Igbo bury their dead in the Western way, although it is not uncommon for burials to be practiced in the traditional Igbo ways (Onwuejeogwu, & Angulu, 1981).

### **Five Linear Stage and Dual Process Models of Bereavement**

Therapy is an effective way to learn to cope with the stressors associated with the loss and to manage symptoms with techniques such as relaxation or meditation. Each experience of grief is unique, complex, and personal, and therapists will tailor treatment to meet the specific needs of each person. For example, a therapist might help the bereaved find different ways to maintain healthy connections with the deceased through memory, reflection, ritual, or dialogue about the deceased and with the deceased. In addition to individual therapy, group therapy can be helpful for those who find solace in the reciprocal sharing of thoughts and feelings, and recovery results are often rapid in this setting. Similarly, family therapy may be suitable for a family whose members are struggling to adapt to the loss of a family member (Melinda, 2012).

Psychologists and researchers have outlined various models or phases of grief. In 1969, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five linear stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Kubler-Ross originally developed this model to illustrate the process of grief associated with death, but she eventually adapted the model to account for any type of grief. Kubler-Ross noted that everyone experiences at least two of the five stages of grief, and she acknowledged that some people may revisit certain stages over many years or throughout life (Kubler-Ross, 1996).

As an alternative to the linear stage-based model, Margaret Stroebe and Hank Schut developed a dual process model of bereavement as cited by Kubler-Ross (1996) and identified two tasks associated with bereavement viz:

*Loss-oriented activities* and stressors are those directly related to the death. These include crying, yearning, experiencing sadness, denial, or anger, dwelling on the circumstances of the death, and avoiding restoration activities.

*Restoration-oriented activities* and stressors are associated with secondary losses with regard to lifestyle, routine, and relationships. These include adapting to a new role, managing changes, developing new ways of connecting with family and friends, and cultivating a new way of life.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) does not define bereavement as a disorder, but preexisting conditions like major depression, or repercussions associated with the trauma of a death, such as acute stress or posttraumatic stress, can complicate bereavement. Normal symptoms of bereavement can mimic those of depression, but these symptoms typically pass within two months of the loss. For those who may be vulnerable to depression, grief has the potential to precipitate a depressive episode, and for those who

already experience depression, the bereavement process can be prolonged and worsened by the depression. What distinguishes grief from depression is that the feelings of grief are specifically related to the loss or death, and depression is characterized by a general sense of worthlessness, despair, and lack of joy (Wakefield, 2013).

### **Counselling implications**

The experience of a loss as a result of death invites different reactions from individuals who have experienced it. The Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria respond to the loss in various ways. Some of their responses call for some counselling interventions if the bereaved is to cope with the loss successfully. Globally, the occurrence of a loss of a human being makes individuals to develop feelings of guilt, regret, meaninglessness, sadness, anger, yearning and some bereaved individuals develop irrational thoughts. The great question remains, what can be done to help the bereaved individuals to cope with the loss as a result of death?

First, the grieving individuals need a lot of psychological support for them to go through the bereavement period successfully. They need to be helped to express their emotions such that the counselor can base on the expressed emotions to render the relevant help.

Secondly, for those bereaved individuals who develop irrational support, the counsellor should help them to develop new relationships through use of a behaviour modification technique termed as cognitive restructuring. The counsellor should help the client to accept the reality of the loss by informing him or her that death is inevitable and that it is part of the life cycle.

Thirdly, the counsellor should equally focus on the physical symptoms expressed by the bereaved individual. The counsellor should encourage the client to take care of his or her health by engaging in healthy eating behaviours, relaxation exercises and seeking medical attention in case any sickness develops.

Lastly, the client who has experienced the loss should be encouraged to maintain health connections with the deceased through reflection, memory and dialogue. As this occurs group and family therapy for those who are attempting to cope with the loss is highly encouraged.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that the extent to which people grieve and overtly express acts of mourning will differ from culture to culture, from person to person, and from situation to situation, the actions, rituals, and emotions observed during mourning are shaped and controlled by the beliefs and values of a given society. To understand the processes following loss, it is important to consider the individual embedded within the family, family embedded within community, and community embedded within social and cultural systems. However, a grieved person is said to complete his/her mourning when he/she start to experience normal life with pleasure as the remembrance of the deceased will no longer cause

any psychological upset. It is the primary duty of a bereavement therapist to assist individual to complete the mourning period by going through the processes and stages of grief adequately and successfully.

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