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Ancient Embalming Methods Among The Nsukka Igbo Of Southeastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

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

Key words: Ancient embalming, Nsukka Igbo, Idemans, people.

Embalmimg is primarily done to disinfect and preserve remains. Embalming of bodies dates back to the time of ancient Egypt, Greeks, Babylonians, Syrians and Romans. Other ancient people that practiced embalming of sophisticated nature as evidenced by archeological findings are the prehistoric Paracas Indians of Peru, the Guaneses (aborigines of the carib island) the Jivaro tribes of Ecuador and Peru, and in Tibet. Puckle (1968) mentioned that the beginning of the art and techniques of embalming are associated principally with ancient Egypt from 3100 B.C., and some parts of Asia and South America, a dry soil and climatic encourage its development. He maintained that the naturally preserved mummys in Egypt were believed to have influenced the religious doctrines of Egyptians because they seemed to prove that the individuals existed after his death. Lamant, (1969) postulated that although embalment practices are not Jewish custom, some few cases were noted among the Jews long before the birth of Jesus Christ. For example, Joseph ordered embalming for himself and his father. Also Rush (1941) noted that even when embalming was confirmed to be a pagan practice, notable Christians like Charlemagne and Alfonso were properly embalmed for a long period of time.

The ancient methods of embalming according to Puckle (1968) and Curtis (2001) include charcoal and sand use, use of Nitre and purging of intestines and surgical procedures. These were ancient Egyptian methods. Other methods by other ancient people were the use of salt box, superficial embalming with perfumes, spices and unguents, use of honey and brandy (alcohol). The Jivaro tribes of Ecuador and Peru used methods similar to ancient Egyptians in addition to roasting in low fire (Wadd, 1912).

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

Evidence also abound that ancient Igbo in old Nsukka division preserved bodies of their kings for seven years. Other categories of the dead require shorter preservation period. The same practice was also observed among the Idemans of the middle belt region of Nigeria who settled as a community in Ikem of old Nsukka division. The ancient Igbo
body, with sand again on top of the upper
mail. Ropes are applied to different parts of
the suspended body to allow free rotation
from time. The low fire is maintained for as
long as desired.

Table 2: Reasons for Ancient Embalming
Among Nokuka Igbo and his Enemies.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Reason for Ancient Embalming</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Religion</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Embraces of Embraces of the dead</td>
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<td>ancestral homes</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Drying of burial rites with</td>
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<td>burial rites</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Drying of burial rites with</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Drying of burial rites with</td>
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<td></td>
<td>burial rites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>For research and learning</td>
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Table 2 reasons the reasons behind ancient
embalming by Nokuka Igbo and the Idomas
which is settlement of affairs of the dead
and transportation of the dead to their
ancestral homes. Others include religious,
timing of burial rites and desire to keep in
touch with the beloved dead.

DISCUSSION

The reason that Nokuka Igbo and the Idomas' major embalment methods
include use of surgery, use of alcohol, hot
oil and low fire roasting agree with ancient
methods as cited by Curtis (2001) and Purdue

The use of alcohol in preserving
human remains dates from the old Egyptian
times. Curtis & Mundahl (1991) maintained
that it was a traditional method with the
British sea forces for many hundred of years
to bring their deceased commanders and
distinguished dead home encased in a barrel
of rum (alcohol). Also roasting in low fire in
addition to the ancient Egyptian methods
were practiced by Jibaro tribes as stated
earlier. Use of hot oil can be likened to
roasting. Curtis (2001) showed that the
Romans who did not practice embalming as
such washed the body daily for seven days
with hot water and oil. He maintained the
delay was to prevent post mortem burial. The
superficial embalming noted by Purdue
(1998) for temporary preservation of the
dead was also practiced by the ancient
Romans, the Semurans and Greeks. He
showed that these people seldom practiced
any but most superficial kind of embalming;
ancestoring the body with augments, perfumes
and spices to prevent decay or minimize its
effect. This practice was also observed
among ancient Nokuka Igbo who did the
same but with the dead usually sitted. In
fact, it is still in practice by the poor who
may wish to delay the burial for a few days
(usually one to four days).

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

CONCLUSION

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