THE RELEVANCE OF IGBO-UKWU GRAVE GOODS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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Abstract
In many cultures of the world, death is seen as a stage in the life cycle which every mortal must pass through. In the event of death, the dead is buried alongside some items that are either dear to him/her or those that have direct bearing to his occupation and status. Grave goods therefore evolved very early in human history as a means of according the dead a befitting burial. The practice (grave goods) though no more in vogue, due partly to westernization and foreign influence; the archaeologists rely on it to make useful interpretations. Thus, Igbo-Ukwu grave goods unearthed at “Igbo Richard” burial chamber by Thurstan Shaw form the premises upon which this paper is anchored.

Keywords: Grave goods, Dead, Archaeology, Burial.

Introduction
Human evolution and progression have with history of consistent and conscious efforts by man to bury its deceased relatives with items that are considered dear to the deceased or those who have cultural, religious, political and social values within various societies. These items are termed “grave goods”. Smith (2013) defines grave goods as objects which are buried or cremated with a body. They are also offerings to the dead or to the gods. Grave goods are mostly personal possessions which are interred with the corpse to accord the deceased a smooth journey to the world beyond. These items are made of either organic or inorganic materials. To this lan (1992) affirms that grave goods consists of inorganic objects such as pottery, stone and metal tools but there is evidence that organic objects that have since decayed were also used.

Death means different things to different people. To the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria, death is not an end of life, but only an accident in the eternal like circle (Tallbot 1032: 25). In like manner, Basden (1966) believes that the Igbos see death as temporary separation, “thus when a man dies, he is said to have gone to the land of the spirit which is not a final farewell”.

In Igbo tradition, death occurs in two forms: the natural and unnatural death; otherwise known as good and bad death, respectively (Okpoko,1993:106). Death at old age is often regarded as natural. In this case, the deceased receives very elaborate funeral ceremonies and rites, including interment with grave goods. Such person, according to Okpoko (1993:106), is accepted as one of the ancestors, and he receives the privileges of being re-incarnated. In another dimension, Okpoko (1993) views bad death as those caused by unnatural afflictions such as small pox, leprosy, death at child birth, suicide or those caused by drowning or lightning. Bad deaths do not attract burial rites, because it is believed, by the Igbos to be punishment from the gods.

Interestingly, grave goods form important aspects of data required by archaeologists to interpret their findings and make public presentation of their researches. In this regard, therefore, this study examines the relevance of 9th Century A.D grave goods un-earthed at “Igbo Richards” burial.
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chamber of Igbo-Ukwu; with a view to interpret its socio-economic, religious and political implications within the context of the findings. Hence, this paper is based on published materials on Igbo Ukwu burial chamber and other burial practices.

The Beginning and Practices of Grave Goods

Hartle (1978) traces the beginning of burying a deceased with material possession to the Middle Stone Age period of about 40,000 and 10,000 years age. In like manner, Okpoko and Ekechukwu (2012) describe the beginning of grave goods tradition during the Middle Stone Ages as “intentional burials with offerings that indicate basic religious beliefs or at the very least suggest increasingly complex way of thinking and pattern of social life”. In effect, man at this stage started nursing the belief of life after death.

As time went by, especially during the Neolithic era, grave goods assumed the more important role in class distinctions. For example, in the Ancient Egyptian civilization, the pyramids and royal graves were decorated and accompanied with enormous grave goods as against the graves of ordinary citizens. Also in Ancient China, evidence of excavated grave shows that the remains of a middle aged man and an old woman, dated to about 18000 years, were accompanied with goods like household items and ornaments such as flints for lighting fire, stone-made tools, and animal teeth with pierced holes. www.china.org.cn/.../115026.htm.

Also, the 6th century B.C chieftain’s grave at Hotchdorf, Germany was accompanied by a rich array of accoutrements, symbolizing his wealth and authority. Just like a late Neolithic cemetery at Varna in Bulgaria of about 4000 B.C had numerous grave goods like golden axe, bangles, sheets (Renfrew and Bahn, 1991).

The spreading and entrenchment of Christian values across Europe and parts of Africa at a time changed the perception of Europeans and Africans about grave goods. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English folklore, Christianity abolished those practices associated to the common people, while the ordained men in the church such as priests, monks, nuns, bishops etc were allowed to be buried with their religious vestments and other paraphernalia at office. It went further to note that in modern times, military and state funerals are usually accompanied by flags, uniforms, insignia etc to be laid on the coffin.

In Nigeria, the earliest recorded evidence of intensional burials are traced to the archaeological discoveries of human bones found in rock shelters at Iwo-Eleru dated to 9,250 ± 200B.C(Shaw,1969) and that of Rop Rock Shelters (Fagg, 1972). However, one issue that arises from the burial is the fact that there were no grave goods accompanying them. Hence, Fagg (1972) and Shaw (1978) conclude that both burials can easily be described as abandonment or better still, shallow burials.

However, the foremost example of deliberate attempt of grave goods in Nigeria comes from the mound of Diama, located in the Lake Chad Basin of Bornu State. Diama is a sub-circular mound measuring 250 m long and 170 m wide, situated near the Shore of ElBeid River, a late Stone Age site (Okpoko, et al 2012). Furthermore, they observed that the late Stone Age people of Diame, buried their dead with “grave goods such as tools, personal ornaments and other items such as red and yellow ochre used for body decoration”. Other items of grave goods found in Diama, according to Connah (1968), were beads, bones, bracelets, lip plugs, ostrich, egg shells, pottery with elaborate decorations dated to 5th – 6th Century. Gundu (1988:89) in his write-up of the “architecture of the
death” observes not only the personal items accompanying the corpse at Diama, but also ceramic coffins (pot burials) used.

The archaeological discoveries by Graham Connah in Benin burial sites, particularly at Clerk’s quarters and Benin Museum site, remain one of the outstanding breakthroughs in the reconstruction of human history. Gundu (1988) quoted from Connah (1975) observes that some of the human remains were discovered without traces of graves, while some were in constructed cisterns, that were designed to take many people at death. Gundu (1988) further notes that the available records from Roth (1988) which captured the testimonies of early travelers like Captain J. F. Landolphe and Dr. Olfert Donpper on the burial customs of Benin people, indicate that “some servants were buried to ‘accompany’ the king at death in order to provide him with essential services”. Also, that grave goods, mostly of brass produced by Oba’s artists, were equally interred with the King.

The Ogbudu-Aba burial site in Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State presents another example of burial chamber associated with grave goods in Nigeria. This site was accidentally discovered in 1978 during the road construction in the area. The discovery was reported to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Immediately, archaeologists from the University headed by Professor V. I. Chikwendu went to the site for excavation work. According to the report:

The site according to Chikwendu (2002) “comprises subterean structures (catacombs) in which the pre-historic population disposed of their dead: The deceased had their head placed in pottery bowls with some perforations. These holes were probably designed to let the decaying flesh drain”. However, in conformity with the traditional practices of the era, these burials were accompanied with varieties of grave goods, depicting the social and religious status of the deceased. Such grave goods include axe-blades, numerous barbed spear heads, dagger, “mpom” (local agricultural tool), ceremonial staff of office and pottery.

However, other places in Igboland, had instances of burials accompanied with grave goods. For instance, the Ezira in the 15th Century AD, burial site was discovered with grave goods that were mostly made of bronze. There were some cases of burials found with grave goods in Eke in Udi Local Government of Enugu State and Ibusa in Delta State. The Ozo titled holders were buried sitting on stools and other personal items (Okpoko 1993). Likewise, the Eze Nri was buried, wearing his coronation regalia such as leopard skin, white cloth, a crown, beads, bronze anklets (Okpoko, 1993).

In the contemporary Igbo Societies, this practice still subsists, as was widely reported in the burials of Late Dim Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Eze Igbo 1 and Eze Igbo Gburugburu who was buried in an American gold mixed with bronze casket among other things. Also, the Late Samuel Mbakwe, former Governor of old Imo State, Nigeria was reported to have buried his wife in a gold casket stuffed with precious objects, including trinklets, wrappers and other materials. (Nigeriaworld.com/..021.html)

Among the Yorubas, Eluyemi (1977) notes that there is a general belief that the deceased, having specialized in a particular occupation, would continue with his or her trade in the world beyond, hence the dead were occasionally buried with the artifacts of their trade. He further observes that there is a difference between the burial of a commoner and that of a royal person as regards grave goods. In the former, his personal item and gifts from relations and friends could form part of the

grave goods, while the latter had royal items including their messengers or slaves buried along with them.

Gundu (1988) cited in Okpoko (1993) observes that among the Tiv of Benue State Nigeria, grave goods are not interred with the deceased, but rather, they are placed on top of the grave as external grave goods. Also, Jemkur (1987) and Sasoon (1964) report this practice among the Godugodo of Jemaa area in Kaduna, Torch and Beron areas of Plateau State. Here, figurines, potsherds, calabash of water and stick of “Euphorbia poissonii” are placed on top of the grave, so that the dead could have water to drink whenever he feels thirsty. It is important here to discuss in detail the Igbo Ukwu burial chamber.

“Igbo Richard” Burial Chamber


This part of this work is a review from the revised publication by Thurstan Shaw titled Igbo-Ukwu, Eastern Nigeria as Lecture Notes on Nigeria Pre-history and Archaeology, 1975. Geographically, Igbo-Ukwu shares boundary with Ikenga and Ezinifite in the East and South-East respectively, in the South with Ekwulumili, in the South-West with Amichi. It also shares boundaries in the North with Ichida, Oraeri, Aguluzigbo Umuona and Isuofia (Igwilo, 2003).

The town is located in the rainforest belt of Nigeria. However, with the increasing natural and human factors like bush burning, sand excavation, felling of trees et cetera, the vegetative cover has been altered to a mixture of residual forest and grass.

Igbo-Ukwu bronze of 9th Century BC is regarded as the earliest bronze in West Africa (Shaw, 1970). The site was discovered accidentally by Mr. Nwangwu, in 1939 when he was digging a cistern in his compound, and he stumbled upon strange bronze bowls (Shaw 1975). The discovery aroused the interest of people from far and near, including the Assistant District Officer who purchased some of the items and published a preliminary report in an Anthropological Journal. This development drew the attention of the then Antiquities Department and in 1958, commissioned Thurstan Shaw to excavate and carry out further archaeological research on the site.

The first phase of the excavation, according to Thurstan Shaw, lasted four months and were marked “Igbo Isaiah” and “Igbo Richard”. The sites were named because they were situated in the compounds of Isaiah and Richard Anozie respectively. The discovery at “Igbo Isaiah” showed that objects were not piled upon one another; rather they were carefully laid out in a “marvel of craftsmanship”. These objects include large bowls, crescentric bowls, pear-shaped bowls, scabbard supports, pieces of cloths among others.

The second phase of the excavation by Thursan Shaw was in 1964 and was sponsored by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. The site, a pit-dump, is known as “Igbo-Jonah”, since it was situated in Jonah Anozie’s compound. Objects recovered from the pit-dump include bronze objects such as wristlets, rods, jingle ornaments, pottery vessels with different motif and decorations and bones.

The burial chamber in Richard Anozie’s Compound (Igbo Richard) stands out from other sites (Igbo Isaiah and Igbo Jonah) due to its content, purpose and other religious and social connotations. The structure of the grave alongside the position of the deceased in association with the accompanying grave goods indicates that the burial was that of a noble or royal person in the society. Shaw (1975) gave a descriptive picture of the grave as thus:

“the deceased sat upon a stool, the arms supported by the two copper brackets and with the fan-holder and the fly switch set in its hand; it had been dressed in a rich array of beads and with a beaded head-dress, surmounted by a crown, and made with the pectoral plate surrounded on its chest; on each wrist there was a beautiful wristlet some six inches long made up of panels of blue beads set in a copper wire framework. After the corpse had been placed in position, the wooden roof was put on and above it were deposited the remains of at least five individuals”.

However, it is imperative to enunciate or itemize the grave goods as contained in Shaw’s report of 1975. This is with a view to discuss its archaeological relevance. They include over 100,000 beads in strings, two copper or bronze wristlets, ivory tusks, pieces of iron objects, a crown, plaque ornaments, a decorated pectoral plate, a bronze representation of leopard skull, decayed bones and enamels from the teeth of not less than five individuals. Others are fourteen anklets, four wristlets, a decorated fan-holder, two brackets on pointed rods, a beautifully modeled bronze hilt consisting of a horse and rider surmounting a decorated pommel, and a circle of fourteen inches in diameter of spirally twisted copper bosses with spikes protruding them inwards and set in wood. This is replicated eight inches below, suggesting the top and bottom stool.

**Relevance of Grave Goods**

Discussion in this segment is centered around the relevance of the grave goods and the context they were recovered, in relation to their sources, functions/uses and why they were used.

First of all, it is instructive to note that archaeologists rely on data recovered from field research to determine the age of the site. Also that excavated materials are most useful in dating because they are less disturbed by man and the environment. In line with this, the excavated grave goods from Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber offered good sample for dating the site through radio-carbon dating method. Here, pieces of wood samples from the remnant of the stool decorated with two circles of copper bosses were used and it gave a date of AD 850±120 (Shaw 1975:43). However,
dates from “Igbo Isaiah” and “Igbo Jonah” were put together with that from “Igbo Richard” burial chamber to arrive at an acceptable date of 9th Century BC for Igbo-Ukwu bronze (Shaw 1975).

Another archaeological relevance of Igbo-Ukwu grave goods is the fact that it has helped to put to rest the question about the sources of the raw materials especially copper, zinc, tin and lead used in the production of the bronze objects. Hitherto, Shaw (1970) in Okpoko (2006) and Isichei (1976) argued that copper and its alloys did not occur in large and exploitable quantity in Nigeria; therefore, the raw materials for Igbo-Ukwu objects must have come from known copper bearing areas such as Azelik and Agades region in Niger Republic. Apparently, Thurstan Shaw’s position was influenced by the ignorance of the sources and makers of these objects by the extant inhabitants of Igbo-Ukwu. However, archaeological researches by scholars like Onwuejeogwu (1977), Chikwendu and Umeji (1979), Chikwendu et al. (1989), Cradock et al. (1997) puncture this line of argument in favour of local sources and technique for Igbo-Ukwu bronze objects. Interestingly, they pin-pointed local sources where coppers and its alloys were exploited commercially in the pre-historic times up till the present times to Ameka and Amari, Amajim all in Abakaliki area of Ebonyi State. Others in Afikpo and Ishiaigu also in Ebonyi State. Interestingly, the analysis of Igbo-Ukwu grave goods has punctured the claims of external influence on the sources of raw materials for bronze objects.

Closely related to the claim of external sourcing of raw materials for Igbo-Ukwu bronze objects, is also the argument by Shaw (1970) that the production of the bronze objects including some grave goods had foreign influence. This is because of the complex process required for its production “Cire Perdue” lost wax technique. In as much as the Lost wax Technique is a complex process, Craddock and Picton (1986) observed that it was practiced from very early times in Nahal Mishmar Cave, near the dead sea around the 4th Century BC and Igbo-Ukwu 9th Century BC, hence the Igbo-Ukwu bronze is produced locally.

Politically, this study of Igbo-Ukwu grave goods have re-affirmed the presence of a sophisticated political structure in Igbo land as far back as 9th Century BC. This is gleaned from the descriptive analysis of the posture the deceased was buried and the hordes of grave goods especially the paraphernalia of royal status as depicted by the presence of a crown, ivory tusks, beads, decorated bronze pectoral plate. This is in addition to the presence of some decayed bones and enamel from the teeth of not less than five individuals, who were believed to be royal servants interred with their master for continuous service delivery in the world beyond. Lending support to a politically viable Igbo Society, Okpoko and Chukwueze (1993) posit that “Igbo-Ukwu materials depict a well developed society with title taking system or “centralized” systems under the control of important personalities. Furthermore, they opined that the remains of the carved wooden panels from the Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber suggests that indeed it was used by a prominent personality. In the same vein, Basden (1966) in his study of Niger-Igbos observes that carved wooden stools as was excavated at Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber were used by important personalities especially the Ozo title holders.

In the same manner, objects made of brass/bronze are associated with royal authorities. This is highlighted in the study of Benin bronze/brass objects (Connah, 1975). He referred it as “court-art”, which shows that Obas has exclusive preserve for their production. The Oba commissions skillful men who have the knowledge of bronze/brass casting to produce objects in the palace. The presence of numerous bronze objects in the Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber is a status symbol. It is apparent that they belonged to an organized political structure that existed around 9th century BC in Igboland. Consequently, Shaw (1978) and Aniakor (1993) associated these materials to the institution of Eze Nri and the Ozo title system because of the proximity between Igbo-Ukwu and Oreri.
Analysis of some objects from Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber like beads, pottery wares, bronze materials which are not readily produced in Igbo-Ukwu have brought to the fore the fact that, there were trading activities within and outside Igboland as at 9th century BC. The contact with the outside communities is a characteristic of an economical stable and prosperous society. Ibeanu (1989) writing on the probable source(s) of Igbo-Ukwu pottery, alluded to the fact that it had contact with other surrounding communities including “Inyi” potters of Enugu State who he believed were responsible for the production of the ceremonial pot (ite-ike) and other ritual wares. In another development, (Sutton 1991) averred that beads (above 100,000) were sourced outside Igbo-Ukwu from Egypt, India and other middle Eastern Centres where they were probably exchanged with exports like kola nuts and ivory through Trans Sahara trade (Sutton: 1991). However, beads from Bida, Ija yemo and Ile-Ife in Nigeria which have been archaeologically studied, indicates that the industry thrived locally. Therefore, these could have formed part of those found at Igbo-Ukwu burial sites (Aremu 1999:156) and (Eluyemi 1986). In essence, Igbo-Ukwu had trading links within and outside Nigeria by 9th century BC, where beads were exchanged with local items.

Just like beads, textile is another material used as grave goods that were not produced in Igbo-Ukwu. They were probably imported from known Igbo and non-Igbo textile producing towns like Abakaliki, Nsukka, Asaba, Kano, Ikot Ekpene, Oyo-Ile among others (Okeke 1976) and (Afigbo and Okeke 1985).

The belief in life after death especially among communities in Igboland is reaffirmed with the presence of grave goods as unearthed from Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber. Okpoko (1993) notes that among the Igbos and some ethnic groups in Nigeria, “life is seen as a continuous process and that when someone dies, especially an elderly, he/she merely goes to the spirit world of the ancestors to continue his normal life. Hence, a befitting burial would be organized with lots of grave goods so as to make the dead to be fully accepted in the land of the ancestors. Okpoko (1993) also averred that among the Igbos, ancestors are believed to be good representation or guardian of the living in the spirit world. Therefore, efforts are made by the relatives of the deceased to accord him or her wonderful burial that would make the dead take rightful place in the world beyond so as to provide good guidance for the living. In addition to making elaborate burial preparations, the comfort of the deceased in the spirit world is guaranteed with the provision of assorted grave goods which he or she would use. The above assertion, were exemplified by the way Igbo burial chamber was constructed. The deceased was buried with paraphernalia associated with his status. These includes bronze objects, pottery vessels, beads, elephant tusks and his servants to continue rendering services to him in the world beyond.

Conclusion
Since death is an inevitable phase in human existence, different people across the world have devised means of either getting prepared for the eventual death or making plans to accord the deceased, befitting burial, which in some cases includes interment with grave goods. Death in Igboland is seen as transition from earth to the world beyond; hence Anigbo (1987) observed that “whatever status a man has in this world he takes with him to the world beyond”.

Therefore the use of items as grave goods is as old as the origin of man on earth especially in Africa and Igbo in particular. However, as time went by, changes in customs/traditions especially in Nigeria occasioned by some external influences have continually affected the world view of the people including death and its associated rites. Particularly, the practice of burying the deceased with
grave goods is affected, making it unfashionable and un-sustainable in the contemporary times, except for some religious sects and cult groups. The Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber and the grave goods form the discourse in this study, by highlighting the values inherent in the practice.

However, grave goods are of utmost importance to archaeologists, because they give him the opportunity of interpreting the artifacts of the extinct and extant societies. The grave goods excavated by Professor Thurstan Shaw and his team from Igbo-Ukwu provide a typical example of this. Analysis of these grave goods helped to put to rest the questions about the sources of the raw materials used to make the goods, why the deceased was interred with enormous grave goods and the socio-political and religious connotations derivable from the grave goods.

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