# THE RELIGIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *OKWUKWU* IN ONICHA EZINIHITTE, IMO STATE

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## Abstract
In Onicha tradition, *Okwukwu* is regarded as Onicha second burial. Though it begins with what the Onicha people often refer to as pre-okwukwu rites, to which every body, regardless of status, is entitled. But the real *okwukwu* is associated with rites such as *itu-aka ese* (a particular kind of traditional music), *igbu-ewu isi na-ama* (dog killing ritual), *mgba* (wrestling), *ipu nama aga ahia* (taking a life cow to the market), *egoakpara akpa* (locally woven money), etc., which are formally observed in honour of the deceased who lived an exemplary life of emulation; died a "good death" that must occur at a ripe old age. Each of these rites is performed with utmost care and a sense of respect, and they are intended not only to secure a permanent abode for the deceased in the ancestral world of the good departed, but also to enhance his status therein. Data for this study were collected through primary and secondary sources, observations, and the use of oral interviews. On interpretation of the data, the study adopted a phenomenological approach to interpret the ritual practices associated with *Okwukwu*. Findings show that the Onicha people strongly believe in the reality of life in the hereafter. The paper recommends that Onicha people should see *Okwukwu* as one important avenue to sustain the equilibrium between the deceased and his living descendants.

**Key words**: Onicha, Death and Burial Rites, Significance of *Okwukwu*

## Introduction
The place of o*kwukwu* (traditional burial rites) in the religio-socio-cultural life of Onicha, Ezinilitte of Imo State cannot be overemphasized. This is what the Onicha people refer to as the second burial. In Onicha religious thought, *okwukwu* is conceived to be exceptionally unique and peculiar; for the people, its peculiarity lies in the fact it is the honor and entitlement accorded only to men (deceased), especially those who lived exemplary lives

of emulation. Thus, o*kwukwu* is also given only to men of honour especially those who lived up to a ripe (old) age of seventy (70) years and above; it is believed to have impacted positively on the generality of the life of the Onicha people. That is why *okwukwu* is organized in their honour. In Onicha, *Okwukwu* is communal in the sense that during this period the community contributes resources to honour the deceased. This explains why Onicha sons and daughters living outside Onicha town return home during this period to accord the last respect to the deceased.

Three factors motivated the researchers' interest in pursuing this study:
The first was to document for posterity the beliefs and practices associated with o*kwukwu* especially in this era of change and cultural globalization, and the second was to examine the role of *okwukwu* in Onicha and to see how this has helped to enhance the status of the dead in the ancestral world.

**Background of the Study**

Onicha in which this essay focuses, is one of the seven villages that make up Ezinihitte-Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo State. The other constituent towns are Obowo, Ahiazu, Ezeagogu, Eziudo, Obizi and Udo. It is located within the eastern part of Ezinikitte Local Government of Imo State. They experience two major seasons of the year, namely, dry and rainy seasons, which reveal the tropical climatic conditions of the town. The dry season takes place toward the end of September, while the rainy season begins from the end of March and continues through September (Iheagwaram, 2017, p. 43).

With regards to their economic life, the Onicha people are predominantly farmers. The engage in production of palm oil and palm kernels, etc but the most important is cassava. As for their religious life, they strongly believe in the existence of Supreme Being (Chwukwu, Big God / Chineke, the creator God) of the universe. Onicha, like other traditional societies do not approach Him directly rather, He is approached and worshiped through the divinities.

**Methodology**

Data for this study were collected through primary and secondary sources. Primary sources (oral interviews) and secondary sources (published materials). In interpreting the data, the study adopted a phenomenological approach to interpret and describe the ritual practices relating to o*kwukwu*.

**Conceptual Clarification**

**Death and Burial Rite in Africa: An Overview**

The concept of death has been given different interpretations by scholars of different hues. Seeing death from the psychological perspective, (2013) in Moody (1975) captures this thus:

No doubt many people have the feeling that to talk about death at all is in effect to conjure it mentally to bring it closer in such a way that one has to face up to the inevitability of one's own eventual demise (p.17).

Ashe further noted that, to a poor person, a murderer, a suicide bomber, and a reckless soldier, death is the annihilation of conscious experience. The people of West Africa, as he noted, believe that man is a tripartite being consisting of the soul, spirit, and body. According to Egbucha, the soul is self-conscious, the spirit is God's conscious, while the body is the

world's conscious. Thus, Egbucha, quoting Pearlman M. (1937), said that "the solid is the life-giving and intelligent principle animating the human body, using the bodily senses as its agents in-exploration of materials things, and the bodily organs for its self-expression and communication with the outside world." For him, death occurs when the soul leaves the body to continue existence in any world; that is the spirit world. The body, which becomes lifeless, is buried in the sand according to the West African tradition" (p.103).

In the words of Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) death is not only the end of life, but also the state of being dead (p.56). For Awolalu and Dopanm (1979), death is only a transition; a means of passing from the world of men to the world of spirits. In addition, Awolalu and Dopamu further assert that man is made of the physical, tangible body and the personality soul, which is the spiritual substance. The essential personal self is separate from the physical body. the physical body decays, while the personality soul returns to the source of being from which it comes. This belief is practically demonstrated in the importance which West African people attach to funeral rites (p.253).

From the foregoing, therefore, it is obvious that the perception of West Africans regarding death conditions the burial accorded to the dead. In much the same vein, the elaborate burial rites in different West African cultures also indicate a strong belief in the hereafter and in reincarnation. Burial rites, according to scholars, vary and differ from one traditional African society to another. For instance, among the Ikwerre-speaking Weneka (2003) observes that various elaborate death rites are performed at the instance of death. According to Weneka, there are little or significant variations in the rites. As he further noted, it depends the age of the deceased and the nature of the death that has befallen him.

For him, it begins with the rites of washing and dressing the corpse, and this must be done properly before interment. In addition to this is the rites of mouth cleaning and washing, which must also be performed with *kai-kai* local distilled gin. For Weneka, this is to guide not only against mouth odour and teeth decay during the next incarnation, but also it is believed that it will prevent repulsive odour and also give the dead a sense of decency during his next rebirth or reincarnation. According to Weneka, this type of burial rites is associated with the first funeral ceremony. Without these ceremonies, he said, the restless ghost of the deceased could return to haunt and harass his merciless relatives. As for the second traditional burial, especially for the aged, the activities and rites, as Weneka rightly stated, involve the slaughtering of the cow by the first son of the deceased. Though there are other minor rites that are performed, the top of all is the rites of slaughtering of the cow. According to Weneka, the significance of the rites is intended to dignify the dead and make him go into the ancestral plane blissfully (p.101). Similarly, Bina Odogu (2008) stated that the second traditional burial rites among the Kabo-Ibe people are considered to be the greatest of all the rites of passage. For Odogu, prominent among some of these rites include a mock wrestling organized in honour of the deceased, where no participants is expected to throw one another, and the rites of carrying an iron bar which signifies that the deceased was a hardworking person during the time he had lived on earth. He further stated that at death, if a man who was advanced in age was not given this honour the deceased was considered not only halfway to the ancestral abode but also to arrive to the ancestral world of the good departed anytime the rites was celebrated in his honour. In sum, the rites if properly performed, he adds, significantly enhanced the status of the deceased in the ancestral bliss of the good dead; but on the contrary, it weakened their status therein (pp.23-29). For the Isiokpo, of the Niger Delta, washing of the corpse is so

significant. The corpse is washed thoroughly with soap ad stream water, using a wrapper, preferably George as sponge. The mouth is opened and thoroughly washed as also ware the torso, limbs and armpits, so that the deceased may reincarnate without virginal ordour. Equally important is the requirement that water be allowed to drain out of the ear so that the deceased may not have ear discharge in her next incarnation (Tasie, 2013, p.11).

**Rites Associated with *Okwukwu***

In Onicha, *okwukwu* begins on *eke*-market, the first day in Onicha traditional week. It begins with *itu-ese.* (*ese* is a traditional music that is played by a group of seven or nine people. In other words, its instruments are made up of seven to nine small drums. Each of these sets of drums produces its own-rhythm when it is played. It serves as an indispensable medium of entertainment during *okwukwu*. Apart from this, it creates an aura of excitement by enhancing a peaceful transition of the deceased in the hereafter. Though, it is observed in the homestead of the deceased (Nnamdi, S. 05/03/2026 oral interview).

Following closely is *igbu-ewu isi-na-ama* (goat killing ritual). This type of ritual takes place in the homestead of the deceased in broad day light in the full glare of all and sundry. As tradition demands, it is the duty of the *okpara* (first son of the deceased to perform the ritual. First, he adorns himself with a George wrapper, though on his waist. Next, he adorns his right hand and the matchet with strings of palm fronds. Next, he draws the matchet from its sheath and cut-off the head of the goat, a live sizeable he-goat to be precise. Customarily, he is expected to cut - off the head of the goat at one matchet cut. In Onicha religious though, another informant, Nnochiri Peter revealed that, the strings of palm-fronds symbolize peace, love and respect accorded to the deceased while the cutting off the head of the goat at one matchet cut is a symbol of reciprocal gesture of peace and respect by the deceased. The blood of the goat is also significant. Here, its drop on the spot symbolically represents the deceased whose *okwukwu* is being observed or celebrated on one hand, and on the other hand, it symbolizes the presence of the ancestors and other patron gods of the land. Thus, it symbolizes an invitation of these unseen inhabitants of the supersensible world to come and witness and to partake in the ritual (Nnochiri 10/03/2026, oral interview).

In addition to this is in *mgba* (mock wrestling) organized in honour of the deceased. It takes place in the compound of the deceased. Though, it is a broad day ritual as it is always observed just a day. It is called a mock wrestling because no participant is expected to thrown one another as to produce wrestling champion. Although, it is informal since no particular attire is approved; only the first son of the deceased who is expected to tie a George-wrapper on his waist. The youths and the deceased age-grades are the out standing participants in this type of ritual while the elders and other traditionalists of Onicha are there to give directives to compliments the rites. Significantly, it is celebrated to honour a man who was a great wrestler during his time on earth (Ozurumba, 05/04/2026, oral interview).

This is followed by *ipunamaejeahia* (the rite of taking a live cow to the market) by the first son of the deceased. It begins with twenty-four gun shot. According to our interviewee, Nwachukwu James, it has multiplicity of meanings; it indicates that the burial of a notable personality is on-going in the society. It also signifies that a man of high status in the community is dead and has been accorded his last homage and entitlements by his children, wives and relatives. Generally, in Onicha tradition, the rite of taking a live cow to the market

also involves the rite of going to the market with *ego-akparakpa*. At this point, let me remain brief here, since I shall be dwelling more on this in the course of this essay.

At this point, it is a truism to remark that this ritual begins on *eke* but going by Onicha custom and tradition, it actually begins on the eve of *nkwo* with twenty-four gunshots; it signifies that the ceremony has just begun. In the early hours of the morning, the deceased's first son who is adorned with George wrapper and chieftaincy regalia, and wearing a traditional red cap, while carrying the deceased walking stick with sheathed market, to compliment with, takes the cow to the market. He is accompanied by the youths, elders, relatives and respected traditionalist of the community and chanting of traditional burial songs to eulogize the good and memorable exploits and deeds of the deceased. Similarly, nwaada (the first daughter of the deceased) also dressed in her own attire as the same as the first son. She is accompanied by *umuada* (daughters of the land) to the market whose roles are to sing and ululates. Also, nwada is expected to carry *ego-akparakpa*. Like I said earlier, *ego-akparakpa* or *igba - ego* , means woven money, traditionally woven into several designs with sticks. It is this type of money that the Ada goes to the market along with the *umuada*. Before proceeding to the market, another twenty-four gunshots is released to indicate that the party has gone to the market. At the market, the party are expected to go round the entire market singing, dancing, ululating while the Ada brandishes the woven money she carries while dancing. When this is done, the party returns home chanting, singing and dancing as another twenty-four gunshots is released to signify that the party has returned from the market (Nwachukwu, J. 05/04/2026, oral interview).

Taking a live cow to the market, for Onicha people, is that, it is believed that both the dead and the living come to the market to buy and sell. Going by this, it is believed that the ancestors on this day will be present; since they will come to buy and sell in the market; thereby creating a meeting point of the living and the dead. Thus, it also signifies that the deceased children, wife(s) have paid their depts.; hence free not only from the worries of the deceased who may from time to time be demanding his burial entitlements from the spirit world but also from the societal ridicule especially from those who accorded burial rites to their departed loved ones.

As for the woven money, is a symbol of wealth, it also symbolizes that the deceased was rich and wealthy when he was alive. Therefore, for the people, this has to be done to honour the deceased for the last time.

## Significance of *okuwkwu* in Onicha

### Religious Significance

One noticeable religious significance of okuwkwu in Onicha is that it is formally observed in honour of the deceased. Another remarkable religious significance of okuwkwu in Onicha is that it helps not only to secure a permanent abode for the deceased in the ancestral world of the good departed, but also to enhance their status in the hereafter. In addition, it is regarded as a potential gateway into the ancestral abode. This further explains the reasons why the denial of such honour and entitlements to the deceased attracts the refusal of the deceased's passage or entrance into the ancestral world of the good dead. Another important significance of okuwkwu is that it helps not only to sustain the cordiality between the deceased and his near kin, but also between the spiritual realm and the physical realms, since the Onicha people strongly believe in the existence of the two worlds of realities. Another religious significance

of *okwukwu* is that it serves as a means of maintaining a relationship between the living, the ancestors, and other patron deities of the land.

**Socio-cultural significance**

One major socio-cultural significance of *okwukwu* is that it creates an avenue for social integration and peaceful cohesion among the people in the society. In addition to this, it gathers Onicha people together and provides an occasion for communion and communication among the people. Thus, it provides an opportunity in which the people of Onicha exchange pleasantries and renew the bond of friendship among the people. A telling example here is the return of Onicha sons and daughters living outside Onicha town to celebrate okwukwu, which they do with great enthusiasm and unreserved respect. Thus, it is a period when most of the unmarried daughters of Onicha (maidens) marry their husbands; besides this, people also marry their wives during this period. Further, *okwukwu* provides an avenue through which the Onicha youths of the present generation learn the traditions, beliefs, practices, values, and worldview of their forbears.

**Conclusion**

This essay has examined the religio-socio-cultural significance of Onicha in Ezmihitte of Imo State. The essay reveals that *okwukwu* helps not only to secure a place for the deceased in the ancestral world of the good departed, but also to enhance the status therein. The essay portrays *okwukwu* as a vehicle that transits the deceased into the ancestral abode without any assistance. More importantly, the essay strongly maintains that denial of *okwukwu* to a deceased actually means denial of entrance into the ancestral abode of the good dead.

**Findings**

Findings from the study reveal that:

i. Burial rites have played a remarkable role in Onicha by ensuring a continuing relationship between the deceased and his living kith and kin.
ii. It shows the people's strong belief in the reality of life in the hereafter.
iii. More importantly, our findings also show that people believe in reincarnation.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study on the significance of *Okwukwu* in Onicha, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Documentation of *Okwukwu* practices**: There is a need for proper documentation of the history, beliefs, rituals, symbols and practices associated with *Okwukwu* in Onicha people of Imo State. This will help preserve the knowledge of the institution for present and future generations.
2. **Preservation of indigenous cultural values**: The Onicha people should make deliberate efforts to preserve the positive cultural values associated with *Okwukwu*, especially those relating to morality, social order, respect for elders, communal responsibility and peaceful coexistence.
3. **Transmission of cultural knowledge to the Onicha present generation**: Elders and custodians of Onicha culture should enlighten younger people about the meaning and

significance of *Okwukwu*. This can be achieved through storytelling, cultural festivals, community meetings and informal education within families.

4. **Government support for cultural heritage**: The government, particularly, Imo State Government, should support the preservation of indigenous institutions and cultural practices such as *Okwukwu* through cultural programmes, research grants, museums, archives and other platforms for preserving indigenous traditional heritage.
5. **Involvement of traditional rulers and community leaders**: Traditional rulers, elders and community leaders should take an active role in preserving *Okwukwu* and ensuring that its beneficial aspects are not lost because of modernization, Christianity and other forms of social change.
6. **Integration of useful indigenous traditional values into modern society**: The positive values associated with *okwukwu* should be incorporated into contemporary social life. Values such as communal solidarity, respect for constituted authority, peaceful conflict resolution and concern for the welfare of others remain relevant to the development of Onicha society.

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