

## FUNERAL ORATIONS AS INDICATORS OF WHAT A GOOD LIFE OUGHT TO BE

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**Abstract:** The central aim of this study was to uncover, based on funeral orations, what the *Igbo* of South-East Nigeria regard as the good life. Over two hundred and fifty funeral orations/tributes were investigated. These were classified into: tributes by spouses; by offspring; by close family members; by friends, associates and organizations. The study revealed that the notion of the good life among the *Igbo* was based on primary duties and obligations at each of the four levels identified above and on related secondary duties and obligations. The good life was measured by the extent to which these duties and obligations were discharged and in the way their performance manifested in the provision of social amenities, help to educate members of the community and so on. What would ordinarily be regarded as virtues were considered desirable only in so far as they helped people fulfill their primary and secondary obligations, otherwise they were regarded as sterile or “bottled” virtues.

**Keywords:** funeral orations; tributes; close family members; duties and obligations; libation.

### Introduction

An attempt to describe what a good life is would be inevitably beset with a number of perplexing problems. To start with, it would seem important from the onset to be clear whether the use of the term *good* to describe a *good life* is identical with how it is applied to describe a *good action*. Usually when we refer to an action as something good, we mean that such an action is desirable, applaudable, approved of, positively valued and so on. In other words, such an action is considered to be morally sound. Could it then be the case that a good life is one in which all or most of the actions that make it up are morally sound? In this study we investigated fifty completed lives examining what people had to say about such lives in funeral orations, about a *good life*. Among other things, we sought to find out if a good life is one which could in all its ramifications be considered moral. Ordinarily we are easily tempted to think that an answer to this question is straightforward. However, on deeper reflection, problems begin to surface. Take, for example, a man who spends his entire life climbing mountains all over the world or trekking across various deserts all over the globe. How would we classify such a life—as a good life; as a moral life; as an eventful life; as a full life or as what? The significance of the answer to this question will be clear in the main body of this paper. But even if for sake of ease of analysis we take the position that by a *good life* we mean a *morally sound life*, are we not beset by yet another set of problems? Here, we would seem to need to set out in unequivocal terms what moral actions are and also what grounds there could be for their justification. And the enormity of such a task could be easily gleaned from the fact that what people consider

a good act depends on a variety of factors such as moral, religious and cultural values; contemporary societal values; existential exigencies; personality traits.

In this study, in which we investigated some fifty completed lives, we have assumed that the content of such funeral orations faithfully represent the views of the speakers with respect to the deceased persons. On the basis of the analysis of such orations, it was possible to decipher what the investigated group of orators considered a good life to be. Furthermore, an insight was gained into what actions the *orators* considered to be morally sound. Thereafter, an effort was made to provide plausible ethical justifications for such moral acts. The findings provide a holistic picture of what a good life meant not just to the group being investigated but by extrapolation to what the entire community of which the subjects are members.. In the light of the foregoing introduction, a convenient point to start from is to consider what a *good life* is.

### **What does a *Good Life* Entail?**

Generally speaking, we consider something to be good if such a thing impresses us as something desirable, worthy of being chosen in a given situation, something we would advise someone to consider positively, something we would commend to someone else, or something we praise and applaud. And quite often actions that are morally sound qualify to be so designated. For instance, from the utilitarian viewpoint, one yardstick for measuring the goodness of an action is its ability to produce the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' of people. It seems possible though for an act to serve the interest of the greatest number without favouring the individual or qualifying to become a rule. In Kantian ethics, a good act is one which is universalizable in the sense that we would wish everyone to act in a similar way. Of course, it is possible to recommend the universalizability of an act but there may be a problem with connecting that act to particular contexts and situations. However, it is not clear that morally sound actions are the only ones we usually praise. If a man were to use his bare hands to catch a large roaring lion, we could obviously have some praise for such a person; a man who succeeds in getting to the top of the highest mountain in the world without any aid is often applauded; a person who swims across the widest ocean in the world is also highly respected. What this amounts to is that acts of courage are obvious candidates for praise just as morally sound actions are. But this is not all. When we judge a wine to be good, say, we do not merely express our preference for it. The judgement must be backed by our belief that it has a certain bouquet, body and flavour and these are objective qualities. It is then an essential feature of judgements that they are made by reference to standards or criteria. Thus, from the judgemental point of view, a good *X* would need to have properties *a*, *b* and *c* in some specifiable requisite degree. What needs to be added is that care must be taken in the way we relate properties of objects to their functions. For instance, it would not be totally accurate to say that *good knife* just means knife that is sharp, easily handled, durable and so on. What is important is that a *good knife* cuts efficiently at the level and category in which it operates. That it is sharp, easy to handle and so on are empirical and contingent issues. Besides the use of the term *good* to imply *efficiency*, it can also be employed to refer to the application of rules in activities involving skill and requiring rules. Thus, if we say someone is a good cricketer, we mean that he makes a success of the game of cricket by making use of the rules of the game.

Given all these ways of using the term *good*, could it then mean that a good life can be so designated on the basis of moral acceptable principles or on the basis of courageous and heroic deeds or one in which all of life's activities are executed efficiently and skillfully? The way this question is answered by those investigated in this research will be clearer later in this paper. In

the meantime, suppose we based a good life solely on morally acceptable principles, what sorts of principles are likely to be involved?

## Moral Valuations

Moral valuations consist essentially of the ways we classify real, possible and hypothetical actions as desirable or undesirable. These moral valuations are in turn grounded in ethical principles which provide justifications for saying that such and such an action is desirable while another is not. The list of possible general moral and ethical principles are seemingly unending. These include Platonism wherein it is generally held that if we knew what the good life was, we would naturally act in such a way as to try to attain it; Aristotle's doctrine which states that the good life is a life of happiness in which we must always act so as to attain the mean between two extremes; hedonism which depicts pleasure as the sole good; cynicism which exhorts us to reject the fruits of civilization and return to a simple ascetic living; stoicism which prescribes that a man ought to be indifferent to events happening outside of himself; quietism which is an oriental ethical principle that enjoins us to succumb and accept adversity; Spinoza's ethical dictum which is that happiness stems from an understanding of the limits of human power. The calculus of utilitarianism is the paradigm by which an action is considered good by the extent to which it produces excess of beneficial effects over harmful ones. Kant's formulation is based on a dualism that a moral act is one undertaken from a respect for duty, not from inclination or even in accord with duty and that we must always act such that as if such action were to become a universal law.

Besides general ethical principles, religious principles and practice, in particular religion ethics, influence people's notion of what the good life is. In this respect, let us consider first of all our own African religion. For instance, the *Nyakyusa* people of Southern Africa hold that incest, murder, bearing false witness, adultery, theft, failing to honour one's obligations, injury to neighbours, neglecting ones aging parents are violations of moral code laid down by God. They believe that any breach of these rules invites god's punishment in this life (Wilson 1971, 76). As for christian ethics, this is exemplified in the *Decalogue* (i.e. Ten Commandments) and such biblical injunctions as 'love your neighbour like yourself', 'Do unto others as you would like to be done unto', 'As you sow, so shall you reap'. Regarding oriental religions, moral uprightness is based on detachment from the material world of illusion. Hinduism (Prabhupada 1986, 17) lays much emphasis on the four regulative principles namely;

- No gambling
- No intoxication
- No meat eating
- No illicit sex

as a way of extinguishing such detachment. Buddhism, on the other hand, prescribes the eight-fold path of right views, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation. So much for religious ethics. What about culture? Cultural values are often determinants of what a good life is. An example could be taken from *Igbo* people of Nigeria. Among the *Igbo*, when a young person died, it was believed that he or she the man had committed some act which was prohibited by the land. What was more, the formula used by the *Igbo* to bless their children (male or female) at occasions like marriage were communicated in sayings such as *kakwa nka*, *muo umu*, *hukwa umumu gi anya* (may you reach old age, have children and live to see your children children). This means that when people attain old age, when they have children and live to see their children, grandchildren so on, they are said to have lived a good life.

So far we have discussed the notions of a *good life* and ethical theories. What remains to be added before we embark on the important analysis of our primary data ( in this case, funeral orations) is to examine briefly the meaning of death among the *Igbo* of Nigeria and why so much is said about the dead in funeral orations.

## Death and Funeral Orations

Death is a universal though paradoxical phenomenon. The monistic materialists generally believe that the human person is nothing but matter and therefore has no soul. The Buddhists

do not believe in the concept of soul (for them a person is said to be a combination of physical and mental energies constituted by the five factors of form, desire, mental conceptions and ideas; volition and will, such that death results with the disintegration of these elements...) (Christensen 1999, 180).

Apart from these groups above most people are dualists and often hold different accounts of what happens to man after death. Most dualists agree that death results in the separation of the body from the soul or *jiva*. For dualists then, a certain perplexity results from considerations of what happens to the soul even as they largely agree that the body petrifies in the grave or wherever it is eventually deposited. Inability to be assured of final answers to questions concerning the fate of the soul at death is in part responsible for the fears usually associated with death. The *Igbo* people of Nigeria generally fear death like most other peoples of the world. In consequence, they resort to various measures to prevent death. People have been known to seek the protection of *juju* (lesser but powerful gods), to wear protective charms, to import occult charms from India and so on as means of warding off early death, as means of delaying death. Resort is also often made to fraternities, cults, diviners and medicineman to seek knowledge of future with respect to impending death. Such knowledge is necessary so that appropriate action (e.g. sacrifices) can be made to forestall the foretold death. What is even more intriguing is that in *Igbo*-land, the death of a person is never fully accounted for in terms of physical breakdown of organs of the body. Such malfunctioning of the organs of the body may be regarded merely as the proximate cause of deaths, but the remote or real cause of every death must reside somewhat in the evil machinations of some enemy somewhere. Such an enemy may be other human persons, ancestors, spirits or even community gods. The power of such enemies to plant death for an adversary or an offender seems to be boundless. Car and lorry accidents, boat accidents, air crashes, strokes, trees falling down and killing people, heart failures, death at child birth (for mother or child) and indeed all manner of death are ultimately explained in terms of enemy action. Is there then any wonder that Mbiti (1975, 141) claims that

There are always physical causes and circumstances surrounding every death .....But African peoples believe that a particular person will only die from one of those physical causes because some human or other agent has brought curse, witchcraft, magic and so on. These are what one may call the mystical causes of death. People often wish to know both the physical and mystical causes of death: it is not enough for them to find out only the physical causes. They take much trouble to establish the mystical causes as well and this is done through consulting diviners and medicine man...

As if that were not enough, it is common place to observe on death notices the inscription "The enemy has done his worst". Not surprising therefore, this perpetual effort to ward off, to

postpone death concomitantly results in the great esteem in which a long life is held. A long life is held to be a good life, the longer the better. What is more, a long life has a way of providing a fertile base for a person to garner more and more achievements. It enables a person to *see* his children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. And this is embodied in one *Yoruba* prayer: "Let us behave gently, that we may die peacefully, that our children may stretch their hands upon us in burial" (Shorter 1975, 120). This is of course not to say that certain ways of getting old are not to be abhorred. Witness a yet another indigenous *Yoruba* prayer: "That we may not die young, that we may not attain an old age of wretchedness, that we may not scratch the ground with stick" (*ibid.*, 140). Whatever the case, generally speaking all things being equal, a long life is to be preferred to a short life. This classification of life into *long* and *short* is but one way of looking at the effects of death. An indeed more portentous classification of death is breaking death into *good death* and *bad death*.

### Good Death and Bad Death

Good death results when a person dies peacefully even if he had to undergo protracted illness. Bad death, on the other hand, are sudden deaths or indeed any death which results from accidents of various sorts (motor, air, boat); the striking of lightning and thunder, lie-telling when one takes an oath; defilement of the land; offending the gods; engagement in robbery or in sex exploits with another person's wife; treachery at war. At this juncture, one might start to wonder why it matters whether one dies a *good death* or a *bad death*. The implications are many-fold. Firstly, and more importantly, this classification enables us to appreciate first hand what members of a community regard as a *good life* vis-à-vis a *bad life*. A *good death* is to a *good life* what a *bad death* is to a *bad life*. Based on this analogy, an examination of the events in the life of a person who died a *good death* will expose what the community conceives as good deeds and indeed a good life. The same is the case for a *bad death*. Secondly, the type of burial accorded to the dead depends on the type of death. Good deaths are accompanied by decent burial and indeed by grand festivals. In the case of persons who attain old age and had children and grandchildren such deaths merit full burial rights. Bad deaths, on the other hand, could lead to the body of the dead being: thrown naked into a '*bad*' forest where vultures and other wild animals can devour it; thrown into the sea or into a river; dismembered and buried in parts at different spots. As for young persons who die ordinary deaths, their burials are dry, mournful and sorrowful. In any case, whatever the type of death and type of burial, a consideration of what is anticipated to happen to the dead after burial in some sense affects events at the burial. Generally, it is held among the *Igbo* that those who die a good death move on to join other ancestors who preceeded them. Besides, they possess the potential to reincarnate i.e. come back as infants in the family of their beloved. Furthermore, they are expected to provide additional protection and guidance through dreams, divination and so on to those they leave behind. As for those who die *bad death*, particularly those whose demise is sudden and unexpected, their spirits are unable to attain rest and accordingly, they hover around the community, manifest themselves as ghosts at various locations and frighten people particularly those who have access to their property. As a result of the belief among the *Igbos* that the dead can affect our lives over here, certain ceremonies are performed on corpses. In the case of those who die a good death such ceremonies are undertaken so that the family and community members can reap maximum benefit from their death and in the case of those who die a bad death to prevent them from inflicting harm on members of the community.

Such ceremonies are many and varied but what concerns us most here is *talking to the dead* (see Etuk 2002) since this is most akin to present day funeral orations. Talking to the

dead takes a number of forms. Let us consider, first of all, what happens in cases of *bad death*. Firstly, as the corpse lies in the full view of members of the community, the more elderly members of the clan and those most intimately related to the dead person utter words admonishing the dead to act fast to revenge his/her death; to ensure that if (and this is usually a big if) he/she reincarnates, he/she would have a better experience. The belief is that in his/her new status as a spirit, the dead person is more powerful than the living and can now discover the true enemy who brought about his/her death. The second aspect of the *talk* would be to ask the dead not to trouble those among the living who did not participate to plot or execute his/her death. Regarding persons who had died *good death*, the *talk* starts off by showering praises and appellations and so on, on the deceased. This is followed by a listing of their achievements when they were alive. Next a plea is made to them to greet the other ancestors who had preceeded them and whom they were likely to meet in the great beyond. Thereafter, they are requested to offer protection to those being left behind, provide for them and ensure that no negative judgement is passed over them at the great beyond. The belief here is that those who had lived good lives, translate ultimately into ancestors and ambassadors in the great beyond. In that capacity, any decision to be taken in respect of those they left behind would be referred to them. Under such circumstances, they are in a unique and privileged position to intercede for those they have left behind. The final aspect of the *talk* in this case would be to request the dead to come back in reincarnation. How the theory of reincarnation can be sustained in the light of membership in the ancestral roll-call at one and the same time is quite another matter. What is important here is that a request is made for the dead to come back as infant to his/her loved ones. Perhaps at this juncture it is useful to add that before death those who are known to lead good lives often promise their loved ones and special chosen friends that they will *reincarnate* into their families and they go even further to prescribe the qualities they will possess in their next coming and the type of occupations they are likely to pursue when they become adults in the new lifetime.

Talking to the dead goes beyond talking to the corpse. Among the *Igbo*, it is customary to throw libation before any community ceremony as a way of inviting the presence and protection of the ancestors. The libation which beckons the ancestors to come over and participate in the eating and drinking is accompanied with the showering of praises on the ancestors and a recollection of their good works. Might it not be the case that these various ways of talking to the dead have metamorphosized into the present day funeral orations? It is difficult to give a categorical answer to this question since even in antiquity it is recorded that epideictic rhetorics was an art for eulogizing individuals and such art was used extensively in funeral orations in ancient Greece in honour of those killed in battle. An outstanding example was the use of such by Pericles in 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. in honour of those killed in the first year of the Peloponnesian war. Giving this variegated background, it would make a better explanation to say that the current funeral orations among the *Igbo* as indeed among most Africans is an evolutionary combination of various indigenous practices and what has come down to us through our contact with outside religions and the Christian religion in particular. So far then, we have explored to a somewhat significant level the notions of a good life, a moral life, death and funeral oration. It is considered that this background exploration is important if we are to engage in a meaningful investigation of present-day funeral orations and their import in helping us appreciate what is considered to be a good life. We shall move on now to consider the attributes of a good life as gleaned from the funeral orations.

## Attributes of a *Good Life* as Gleaned from Funeral Orations

Funeral oration forms a critical ingredient in any burial in *Igbo* land and indeed in most parts of Nigeria. In the last ten years or so, the proceedings for burials are usually captured in printed burial brochures some of which number about fifty pages. These brochures contain the order of funeral service, messages of condolence and funeral orations/tributes. On average, one funeral brochure contains about five Orations/Tributes. In this research, we randomly collected fifty such brochures and so we had to deal with about two hundred and fifty funeral orations.<sup>1</sup> We broke down such orations into four categories or levels namely: oration by spouses; oration by offspring; oration by close family members; oration by friends, associates and organizations. We considered such categorization important because experience shows that the dead always mean different things to different people and the categories we have chosen to employ represent the primary constituencies from which people usually relate to the deceased. We have also treated men different from women as sub categories in each of the levels, just as what constitutes a *good life* for a man may not necessarily be what constitutes a *good life* for a woman. As part of our methodology, once an attribute appears once in a sub-category, additional occurrences of the same attribute from other brochures for the same sub-category is not recorded. However, the same attribute can appear in different subcategories. Based on the following explanations, four tables are provided below. They represent the four levels of orations by spouses; offspring; close family members; friends, associates and organizations and their accompanying sub-categories (male or female). The tables are as follows:

Table 1: Attributes by spouses

Sex of Deceased	Attributes
Male	Offered protection; offered guidance; journey with him was peaceful and rosy; provided for us; served God and humanity; plea to direct and see us to the end; Strong, responsible, fearless and dynamic, tolerant, polite and optimistic, remembered for his simplicity, love, honesty, friendliness.
Female	Taught commitment and sacrifice, worked tirelessly for the interest of others, strength, dignity, integrity, fidelity, constancy, condour, wise counselling and advice, attracted respect for me, who will care for the Children (cook for them)?

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<sup>1</sup> These funeral brochures are usually expensive to produce. As a matter of fact, the quality of the production of the brochure (in terms of the number of pages, the gloss of the paper used and the number of coloured photographs contained therein) is often taken as an index of the level of material well-being which the deceased had enjoyed in his/her lifetime or of those he/she left behind. So, it is not usual to have such brochures in the case of dead persons who are poor and whose relatives are poor.

Table 2: Attributes by offspring

<b>Sex of Deceased</b>	<b>Attributes</b>
Male	Inspired all around him; taught me to be honest; mentor, confidant and friend; graciousness; humility; caring; understanding; generous; example worthy of emulation. God fearing; humanist; accommodating; courageous; non materialistic; remembered for not encouraging frivolities and undue excesses; remembered for making life seem very easy for his son. Remembered for living a life of happiness and contentment, remembered for telling his children stories or tales. Legacies left behind and hard work will always motivate one; fighting spirit; versatility; loving, charitable and hospitable to all, industrious, diligence, excelled in his trade, lover of ethics and norms of his society; his humanity; obedient; struggling hard to succeed.
Female	Caring, sweet; loving; prayerful; cultured; noble; simple; peaceful; does not quarrel with neighbours; taught siblings to be hard working; accommodating. Diligent; kind. Friendly to all. You gave me beauty; advice did not let us go hungry; wiped my tears and that of others. Great achiever; role model to your generation, mother to all. Blessed with many children; gentle mother; a source of hope and confidence. Honest; generous; taught her children the doctrine of faithfulness; devoted to God and humanity; taught people how to win prizes in competitions; intelligent and outspoken; taught forgiveness; articulate about her convictions; told her daughters stories; cooked for children; had children who are pilots, lawyers, professors and leaders of the society; always ringing the bell for family prayers.

Table 3: Attributes by close family members

<b>Sex of Deceased</b>	<b>Attributes</b>
Male	Thoughtful adviser and counselor; great organizer and planner; took his marriage and his in-laws seriously; source of strength and inspiration; served God and Humanity; education and positions held; honours received; service to community; disciplined; hard work; self denial; dogged; love to others; adhered to Christian and Societal norms; at peace with himself; inspiration to others; loved by his students; got an award in conflict avoidance; bought land for church; helped found a church; helped to feed those who were hungry during the war; great footballer; role model in education in the community; man of integrity; humility; scientist; a maestro; a wise man; excellent leader; entrepreneur; knight; outspoken; held in great awe by students, source of hope; integrity; cordial relationship with everyone; showed an understanding of other people's plight; simple; sponsored younger brothers in school; achiever; neat and jovial; hospitable; philanthropic; business acumen; decreased himself for others to increase; gave the life of his brothers and sister meaning; bound society together, down to earth, hospitable; achievements; versatility.
Female	Remembered for her will and zeal to do good to others; a cheerful woman; dedicated to duty; fearless and courageous; remembered for her preparedness to serve others



Table 4: Attributes by friends/associates/organizations

Sex of Deceased	Attributes
Male	Accomplished soldier and teacher; served the community and the church; God's servant; humble; honest and trustworthy; gave useful and fatherly advice; God used him to communicate his will and love to many people; worked hard to improve and multiple his talents; gentleness; faithfulness and courage; tireless spirit for service; modesty; concerned himself with the concern of everyone, group and relations; source of strength and inspiration; vivacious and industrious; consistent; enterprising; conquering; transparency; resilience; reliability; capacity to take responsibilities; strict in discipline; outspoken; respected those above him; patriotic; encouraged parents to send their children to primary school, secondary school, universities, and read hard; colossus; peaceful; problem solver; amazing personality; endowed with varied traits of excellence and virtue; does not pervert justice and incorruptible, pragmatic administrator; amiable; loving and caring husband; a man of great wit and humour; a knight of Catholic Church; endowed in leadership qualities; endowed with simple and quiet life; detested sycophancy; made contributions to progress of the association; stimulator of youths; remembered for his wise sayings; has a forgiving spirit; fought for progress and development of fatherland; was original; unassuming; highly principled; impeccably; gave solace to all; friend to all; loved all; meek and gentle at heart; life of service and truthfulness; highly principled; modesty; ambitious; enterprising; humorous, trustworthy; inspired pupils to read hard, moral condour, spirit of enterprise, tireless labourer to plant education and discipline, respect those above him despite his advanced age, fair, humorous, impacted positively on religion, family and community.
Female	Charming and bundle of energy; restores peace in the face of storms; loving; Combative; generous; glamorous; down to earth; simplicity; no nonsense realist; a good Christian; hard working; reconciliatory; good, faithful and friendly; smiles; humble; gentle; protective; attractive; strict; nice; warm; calm and pleasant; receptive; encouraged youths; entrepreneur; prevented hunger; gave comfort; tender; conquering life, love of underprivileged, ability, love through good and bad times.

Having extracted the attributes in the fifty funerals (made up of about two hundred and fifty funeral orations/tributes) which we investigated, the next step was to find out whether there were any commonalities in the attributes at the different levels (spouses; offspring; close family members; friends/associates/organizations). Thereafter, an attempt would be made to see if these attributes could be grounded on some moral or other principles.

#### *Attributes by Spouses*

A survey of table 1 above reveals first of all that attributes by spouses are generally more lean than those of other categories. This is particularly so in the case of the few husbands who paid public tributes to their late wives.

*Tributes by wives:* Wives had a little bit more to say about their late husbands. Wives talked so much of their late husbands providing for them (wives and children) and offering them (wives and children) protection. One problem with these sort of attributes is that they portray the *self-centeredness* of those who utter them. A second problem is that they are not adequate to enable us discriminate between a *good life* and a *bad life*. For instance, persons known to be thieves, armed robbers, hired killers, or perennial criminals are also known to provide for their wives and children. Such people are also known to protect members of their household. Indeed, they have also lived peacefully and in friendly atmosphere with their wives and children. Given this sort of confusing situation then, what moral grounding can be provided for these sort of attributes? The answer lies in taking recourse to the doctrine that virtue lies in doing what is one's duty. In this case, a husband is duty bound to provide for and protect members of his household. Whatever may be his occupation (teacher, pastor, thief etc.) the obligation that a husband takes care of and protect members of his household is a primary one among the *Igbos* and indeed among most Africans.

### *Nature of Duty and Obligation among the Igbo*

The essential ethical principle here is *ones duty to discharge one's obligations faithfully*, whatever such obligations happen to be in a given situation. Seen from this perspective this ethical principle may not just be African. Kant's ethics, for instance, as we saw earlier in this essay is built essentially on *acting from a sense of duty*. The same goes for Buddhism. For as Ch. Humphreys (1980, 60) writes

we are here concerned, then with the concept of Dharma as duty ...now duty is concerned with what we owe, for such is the meaning of the term. It is that which an individual owes to some greater unit of which he is part and other individuals composing it.

The family is one such greater unit. *Protection* and providing *for* are, of course, not the only attributes wives bestow on their late husbands. They also talked of the journey together as peaceful, rosy. Other attributes include love, friendliness, simplicity, politeness, being responsible and being tolerant. They also talked of their husbands as being strong, fearless and dynamic. How do we find common grounding for all these? It might be useful to cluster together the following attributes: love; friendliness; peaceful; simplicity; politeness; tolerance; journey being rosy. Among the *Igbos*, there are no moral obligations regarding these values. A man could be known to be harsh, rude, not so simple with respect to his wife. So long as he can protect her against harm and against public ridicule, so long as he can provide for her, he would have been seen to have discharged his obligations towards her. On the contrary a husband who is jobless and cannot fend for his family but who is simple, polite, friendly is regarded as an *ofogori* (a useless person). What this means is that as far as this level of our analysis is concerned, the attributes of love, friendliness, peacefulness, simplicity, politeness, tolerance, being optimistic, journey being rosy and so on do not provide a reliable yardstick for what a *good life* is. As for the attribute of being *responsible*, this can be seen as part of what it takes to protect and provide for one's wife. As for being strong, fearless and dynamic, these are attributes that are not critical at the husband-wife level of relationship. We shall move them over to a more appropriate level of analysis. It is significant to note that of all fifty funerals (comprising over two hundred and fifty funeral orations) only two tributes emanated from husbands in respect of their late wives. The reason is not hard to come by.

*Tributes by husbands:* Firstly, of the total of twenty women in our sample with their ages ranging between 47 and 106 years, fourteen had lost their husbands. Of the others whose husbands were still alive at the time of the burial, the brochure for the burials recorded only two orations from husbands (their wives both died at the age of 49). Of these two one was only asking his late wife who would take care of the children she left behind and who could cook for them. The other talked of his wife's fidelity and respect for him. Obviously, these must count for what is considered a *good life* for a married women (perhaps, not so much for a married man). One man went ahead to enlist other qualities such as strength, dignity, working tirelessly for the interest of others, condour, constancy, wise counseling. In this particular case, the woman in question had a Ph.D. and was a Senior Lecturer in one of our universities. So, it is not difficult to appreciate the fact that such attributes are being ascribed to her. These two isolated cases of tributes by husbands are not enough to give us a reliable picture of what a *good life* means for a woman. In most of the other cases, offspring and close family members did more of the talking with respect to women who had departed (perhaps among the *Igbos* it was not considered customary and manly to pay tribute in the public to one's late wife). This means that we must go elsewhere if we wish to discover what a *good life* means for a married woman. Perhaps then, we should now explore attributes by offspring.

#### *Attributes by Offspring*

*Tributes to mothers.* The attributes that top the list are: caring; loving; peaceful; prayerful; fed us when we were hungry; hard working; kind; friendly; blessed with many children; gentle; source of hope and confidence; devoted to God and humanity. What meaning can we make out of all these? Without a doubt, the attributes of caring; feeding us when we are hungry; cooked for us; told her daughters stories; peaceful and kind are closely related to a mother's obligation to her offspring. In consequence, it is not surprising that offspring regard a mother's life as a *good life* to the extent she is able to fulfill these obligations. So here again, we are concerned with the ethics of *duty and obligations*. As for the other attributes such as cultured; noble; simple; does not quarrel with neighbours; accommodating; diligent; great achiever; devoted to God and humanity; role model; source of hope and confidence; taught people how to win a prize; mother of professors and pilots; articulate about her conviction and so on these do not derive necessarily from mother—children obligations. They rather represent aspects of the late mother's life which the offspring consider deserving not only for mentioning in public but also worthy of emulation. Now let us go over to what offspring say about their deceased fathers.

#### *Attributes by Offspring*

*Tributes to fathers.* Offspring did not say much about their fathers taking care of them; feeding them and so on. They rather concentrated on qualities which portrayed their fathers as role models and mentors. Such qualities included courage; not given to encourage frivolities and undue excesses; being non-materialistic; being inspiring and worthy of emulation; life of happiness and contentment; legacy of hard work. The impression one gets is that for most offspring it is taken for granted that fathers care, sustain and protect their offspring to qualify as having lived *good lives*. In other words, most of these offspring who are themselves adults have beyond *feeding us* and *protecting us* come to value in their fathers such other qualities as:

- (a) a life of achievement;
- (b) a set of spiritual values such as intelligence; being outspoken;

hard work and diligence, qualities that create the enabling atmosphere for making such achievements possible.

Interestingly, some of the attributes included in this listing are that: some of the deceased are non-materialistic; they discourage undue excesses and frivolities; they lived a lives of happiness and contentment. This means that offspring have learnt from their fathers' lives not to bother so much about amassing wealth. They have rather learnt how to be God fearing and humanistic; to be understanding and courageous despite of odds. They value, not huge bank accounts, but leaving a life worthy of emulation. What this amounts to is that when the offspring talk of a life of achievement, they are not necessarily talking of achievement in terms of wealth. What exactly then do they mean? Perhaps, the other close family members may provide some answers.

### *Attributes by Close Family Members*

*Tributes to deceased female.* Most of the women investigated were remembered for being cheerful; preparedness to serve others; dedication to duty; zeal to do good to others; respectful to members of the clan. Very clearly, these attributes emanate from the way the *Igbo* perceives his wife. Any wife in the kindred is considered to be *our wife*. Except for the conjugal rights which belong to her husband alone, in terms of most other aspects of life—caring, cheerfulness, truthfulness and so on she is expected to relate to her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, brother-in-law and indeed all others in exactly the same way that she relates to her husband. Often, the family tribute to be made at her graveside is written by these members of the family. For more often than not, her husband who would have been much older than her would have preceeded her in death. This means that once again that apart from duty to spouse, duty to offspring, there is duty to members of the wider family or clan. And the *good life* for a deceased woman would depend in some measure on how she has discharged these duties, these social roles. Of course as the listing in this sub-category shows, there are other attributes like fearlessness and courage. These are obviously not aspects of obligation to the close family members but are traits which are cherished and which surface from time to time. We shall discuss such attributes later in this paper.

*Tributes to men.* To start with, we will pick those attributes which members of the wider family consider as obligation which the deceased had fulfilled. These include sponsored younger brothers in school, being philanthropic; gave the life of his brothers and sisters meaning; lavishly spending time to build others; profound compassion; shows an understanding for other peoples plights; love to others; decreases himself for others to increase; role model in education for the community. The above attributes once again can be justified in terms of the perceived obligations to ones wider family circle. There are also other attributes such as thoughtful adviser and counselor; great organizer and planner; served God and humanity; education and positions held; disciplined; hard work; integrity; financier, provider of succor; wise man, entrepreneurial ability, distinguished knight, steadfast and outspoken; simplicity; intelligent; lover of sports; truthful; held in awe by his students; loved by his students; helped found a church. These do not pertain to obligations perceived as being owed to close family members. What this amounts to then is that the following level of values are discernable:

- (a) perceived obligations to close family members—brothers, sisters, uncles, nieces, nephews, in-laws, members of same kindred;
- (b) general achievements which impact on a still outer wider society but which ought to make the inner family society proud of the deceased person;
- (c) enabling values such as hard work, truthfulness, intelligence, service to God, simplicity and so on which make the attainment of (a) and (b) above possible.

### *Attributes by Friends/Associates/Organizations*

*Tributes to deceased women.* Friends, associates and organizations saw a *good life* in a deceased woman in terms of her being a reconciliator in times of crises, faithful friend, pleasant and calm personality, conquest of life's enemies, enterprising, passionate encouragement of youth, peace in the face of storms, patriotic, gentle, warm in reception, love of under privileged, down-to-earth, bundle of energy, simplicity, nobility, humane, honest, hard working. Largely speaking, these are attributes, which promote cordiality in the community. In other words, the deceased is assessed on the basis of how she promotes harmony in the community. In *Igbo* land, it is not expected of women that they undertake such projects as building schools, roads, etc.. Rather, they are obligated to the community to ensure that peace and harmony reign to enable the man folk exert themselves fully in developmental activities. A woman who promotes peace in the community is seen as a *good* woman while the one that is always peddling rumour, is involved in witchcraft, adultery, theft etc. brings about disharmony in the community is regarded as a *bad* woman.

*Tributes to men.* Here we have a vast cluster of attributes much of which are directed to service to the community. These include: creditable service to the community and the church; being God's servant; tireless spirit for service; capacity to take responsibility; concerned himself with the concern of everyone and every group; tireless labourer to plant education and moral disciplines; problem solver; adviser to all and sundry; endowed with leadership qualities; incorruptible and does not pervert justice; gave solace to all; struggled for progress and development of the fatherland. Clearly then, a man's worth so far as his associates and the organizations to which he belonged are concerned depends largely on the level of hard work; self-denial; trustworthiness; transparency; incorruptibility and sense of justice which he invested in such relationships and organizations. Those who attribute these qualities to the deceased seem to believe that it is as a result of these qualities that meaningful and sustainable progress was possible in the organizations in question. Essentially then, a new set of obligations arise in respect of contributions towards the progress to one's community and to organizations to which one has freely elected to associate with. Of course, at this level there are other attributes such as: *remembered by his wise sayings*; humorous; amazing personality; worked hard to improve and multiply his talents; gentleness; inspired students to read hard; unassuming; original and so on. These appear to be general characteristics which do not necessarily imply obligations owed to associates or organizations.

### **Core Values that Constitute the Good Life**

Other analysis so far shows that the core values as far as *good life* is concerned can be categorized into;

- primary and secondary duties and obligations at the various levels;
- quantifiable impact of the discharge of such duties and obligations at different levels;
- inculcation and manifestation of certain spiritual values that enable performance of duties and obligations;
- other auxiliary values, so long as they do not impede the execution of one's duties and obligations at the primary and secondary levels.

The table that follows reveals the four primary levels of duties and obligations along with examples of such duties/obligations. The table also exposes the fact that three of these primary levels have adjoining secondary levels. The level of *offspring* has the secondary level of ancestor

attached to it; the level of *close family members* has duties to gods and God issuing from it. The level of *friends, associates and organizations* has duties to humanity linked from it. Once again, we provide examples of such secondary duties and obligations.

Levels of duties and obligations

Primary Levels of Duties & Obligations	Examples of Duties & Obligations at the primary level	Related secondary Levels of Duties & Obligations	Examples of supplementary Duties & Obligations
Offspring	Providing in terms of wellbeing and education; protecting; role model; providing encouragement at all times.	Ancestors	Avoid displeasing the ancestors, seek help from ancestors
Spouses	Being a faithful friend and a good father of the children; working hard to sustain the family; ensuring that the family has a good name; role model.	-	-
Close family members	Extending welfare to other members of the family; helping to improve the lot of close family members; bringing good name to the clan; visible improvement in the clan.	Ancestors, gods, God.	Avoiding anything that will displease the ancestors, the local gods, God (including the Christian God); service to God.
Friends, Associates & Organizations	Defendability; innovationness; and creativity; hard working, honest; firm; investing self to improve society; concrete; measurable achievements for the society	Humanity	Serving humanity by faithfully and assiduously through our chosen calling and occupation; contributing to the overall welfare of society.

But then why is it that there are secondary duties attached to some primary levels of obligations and not to others? To start with, it is a generally held belief among the *Igbo* that only men qualify to be called ancestors. A departed woman could be regarded as an ancestor only in exceptional circumstances such as when she was as exceptionally powerful woman in her lifetime. If we bear this important principle in mind, it is very easy to appreciate why departed fathers who had led good lives are considered to be ancestors. Close family members throw libations to them, make supplications for protection through them since they are following Mbiti’s terminology, regarded as *living-dead*. So, at the level of offspring the deceased father emerges as an ancestor. He is however linked to the other ancestors who operate at the level of close family members—these class of ancestors include departed grand fathers, great grand

fathers and so on. These are ancestors to the wider family circle. As for the level of spouses, a deceased wife does not become an ancestor to her husband. In the case of a woman, her own ancestors would be traced to her maiden home. Her own departed father, grand father, great grand father are her own ancestors. So, she merely regards her late husband, her late father-in-law and so on merely as a minor set of ancestors. She does so because she too needs protection from the community to which she is married. It is instructive to note that it is because of this uncertain status of women who are deceased that in a number of Nigerian ethnic groups, the corpse of woman are carried back to their maiden homes for burial. When such women are buried in their maiden homes, they cannot be considered to be ancestors in the communities in which they had been initially married.

If we now move on to the level of close family members, since they had common grand fathers, common great grand fathers and so on, it is logical to expect them to have common ancestors, common gods. In more recent times, they might belong to the same religious sect or share belief in the existence of one God—hence much talk in the orations about service to God. At the level of friends, associates and organizations, one would now have gone beyond one's local community. Friends, associates and organizations cut across communities, ethnic groups, countries and continents and thus relationships at that level become springboard for service to humanity. When one operates at that level, the funeral orations we have investigated show that friend and associates place high value on how effective the deceased had been. Members of the deceased person's immediate family and indeed his/her close family members, from the funeral orations we examined, expect him to perform creditably in his external relationship and what is more, they expect that his performance be translatable into their own welfare and that of their community.

So much for the justification of the secondary levels of obligations. Might we not consider how the theory of *acting from duty* works among the *Igbo*?

### *Concept of Acting from Duty among the Igbo*

Kant, as we pointed out earlier, distinguished between acting from duty (which he considered moral) and acting from inclination (which is amoral). He also distinguished between *prudential action* and *moral action*. A man who pays back a loan he obtained from someone because of his fear of law-enforcement agencies is not a moral person; he would be moral only if he acted because he realized that he had incurred a financial obligation which he was *duty bound* to repay. Now, these subtle distinctions do not apply in the *Igbo* consideration of the good life as revealed by the funeral orations examined in this study. What seemed to matter was whether or not the deceased has fulfilled his/her obligations at the various primary and secondary levels; whether or not he/she acted out of inclination or for prudential reasons was of little or no importance. At face value then, it might appear that the *Igbo* concept of a good life is strongly linked to utilitarian principles.

### *Igbo Concept of the Good Life and Utilitarianism*

Again, it is important to note the following distinction. Whereas the utilitarian principle emphasises *the greatest happiness of the greatest number* and in consequence runs into a number of problems about how such happiness could be measured, the funeral orations we surveyed were hardly concerned with such intangibles as pleasure and happiness. Indeed in only one out of two hundred and fifty funeral orations/tributes examined was happiness alluded as an aspect of a good life. Pleasure was never mentioned.

Mention was however made of the founding of schools; paying fees for brothers and sisters in secondary schools; founding of churches; providing for persons other than

one's offspring; protecting members of the community; bringing a good name to the community and so on. So we find the concept of a good life among the *Igbo* as some sort of mixture between *aspects* of Kantian Ethics and *aspects* of utilitarian values. But then, where do we place the other values listed in the tributes: values such truthfulness; hard working; diligent; honest; courageous etc.

A through examination of the funeral orations exposes the fact that these were considered principally to be enablers—they helped the deceased to fulfill his duties and obligations. In consequence, such values did not seem to be ends in themselves, their potency lay in their ability to function as means and enablers for the deceased in his bid to fulfill his duties and obligations. Where a man is honest for honesty sake, is truthful for truthfulness sake but abandoned his duties and responsibilities, such virtues are regarded as *sterile or bottled virtues* and a person who exhibits such bottled virtues is usually lowly rated by his community. The same applies to such other values as: fearless; industrious; conquering; detested sycophancy; highly principled; incorruptible; transparency. The basic test for deciding whether such values are aspects of a good life is the extent to which they contribute towards the fulfillment of one's duties and obligations at the various levels.

## Conclusion

Our investigation revealed that for the *Igbo* people, as for most Nigerians, a funeral oration/tribute is considered to be something akin to an examination report card. This report card serves a number of principles including the following:

- it gives us a phenomenological insight into what people consider to be a good life even if they do not practice some of the values they seem to applaud in the deceased;
- it is believed that a good report for the deceased will help the deceased to gain quick entry into the College of Ancestors, After all, is it not held that *Vox Populi, Vox Dei?*;
- it gives those who consider that they owe the deceased some forms of debt an opportunity to make up with him in public;
- it enables those who are sincerely grieved about the demise of the deceased, to pour out their bottle grief in public.

Our study reveals that based on the two hundred and fifty funeral orations examined, the good life for the *Igbo* people comprises essentially in fulfilling ones' duties and obligations to offspring; spouses; close family members; friends, associates and organizations. In doing this, certain values like honesty; courage; truthfulness come into play. They are however valued only to the extent that they enable the deceased to discharge his/her duties and obligations. With respect to the outcome of the discharge of such duties and obligations, little emphasis is laid on pleasure; happiness; accumulation of wealth; possession of numerous houses; cars; fat bank accounts and so on. What matters most is tangible impact on the lives of the offspring, spouses, close family members, friends and associates and organizations. For the sake of emphasis it is important to recollect that in none of the two hundred and fifty orations examined did anyone talk of the amount of money the deceased left in the bank; the number in his fleets of cars; the vastness of his buildings and estate or things of the like. The important question was whether he helped to improve the lot of those he left behind, be they offspring, spouses, friends, associates and so on. Our investigation also revealed that duties and obligations for men are not exactly the same for women.



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