

## **Making Meaning in Lamentation: A Cultural Appreciation of Death in *Ìgbálá*, an Ègbá Funeral Lore**

Abayomi Adeigbe  
*University of Lagos*

### **Abstract**

Death is a universal phenomenon that signifies the expiration of life in any form and at any stage. For the Yoruba and indeed the Ègbá people as captured in this study, death is a transcendental occurrence which aggregates communal, social and philosophical aspects of its meaning. However, this cultural knowledge is found to be increasingly diminishing over different generations thus creating concerns for cultural preservation. This paper highlights and examines the idea of death in Ègbáland as portrayed in the traditional *Ìgbálá* funeral lore and dirges. The paper employs a philosophical approach as entrenched in hermeneutic phenomenology. It engages textual extrapolations underlying the literary and semiotic appreciation of death as an existential occurrence relatable at both universal and specific contexts of culture. As part of its findings, the paper offers a revisionist perspective for understanding and appreciating death for its culture-specific imports which implicate biological, folkloric, spiritual, existential and philosophical aspects of the human existence. It concludes that new understanding and appreciation of *Ìgbálá* funeral tradition reposition the folk practice and offers new grounds for its preservation and cultural sustainability.

**Keywords:** *Ìgbálá*; Ègbá-Yoruba; funeral lore; dirge; culture

---

Abayomi Ibrahim Adeigbe  
Department of Linguistics, African & Asian Studies  
Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos, Nigeria  
Phone: +234 08034314166; Email: [ibrahimadeigbe@gmail.com](mailto:ibrahimadeigbe@gmail.com)

### **1. Introduction**

Ìgbálá is indigenous to the Ègbá people of Yorùbáland. It is said to have been developed in their homesteads and brought along with them to new settlements during a war which led to their exodus in the early nineteenth century to their new home in their present abode. *Ìgbálá* is a song of lament or dirge performed for the obsequies of any person, male or female, who attained old age before demise. During the performance, the singers and mourners dance round a wooden mortar, turned upside down. A clay lamp (*fitilà*) is placed on the mortar while another one is placed on the burial ground of the deceased. This is done in the compound of the deceased. At the end of the performance, the clay lamp is removed. Its flame is put off by a child of the deceased and the mortar is turned face-up. At the beginning of the next performance, the position of the mortar is reverted and the clay lamp (*fitilà*) is lit. This exercise continues until the last performance.

*Ìgbálá* performance is largely dominated by women who sing the dirges in turn from night till daybreak. In some cases, the male audience may take over from the female singers, especially when they are fuddled with alcohol. They will pass on untoward comments to the women folks, while the female singers retort against them. The scene where the performance takes place is dominated by wives (with their friends), children, members of the deceased family and friends. The women dance round the mortar while men join in singing the chorus to the dirge. The participants in *Ìgbálá* introduce an *Ìgbálá* song in turn in no particular order. Each dirge is sung three times while dancing round the mortar. At the end of a song, another one is introduced until all the participants have taken their turns or have exhausted all the songs they have, or at best get tired of singing and dancing.

The parents of the deceased, members of the family who are older than the deceased, wives of the deceased and his friends are among the people traditionally restricted from participating in *Ìgbálá*. It should be noted that, for an aged person who is succeeded by his parents, the performance of *Ìgbálá* will not take place in the vicinity of the surviving parents. *Ìgbálá* is not performed as part of the funeral rites for young adults and youthful members of the society, as the Yorùbá believe that such death is untimely tragic.

The performance commences after the burial of the deceased person. The session will hold for seven consecutive days. Some oral accounts have it that, if the deceased is a female, the session will last for seven days while it will last for nine days for a male deceased. After the period, it is taboo to continue singing *Ìgbálá* for a deceased person. The composition of various themes and ideas within an *Ìgbálá* piece by those participating in the singing of the dirge is very much similar to the action of the craftsman at work with beads or threads.

In case of death of an aged affluent member, the family may invite seasoned professional performer of *Ìgbálá* to sing at the ceremony, especially at *ita* (3<sup>rd</sup> day), *ije* (7<sup>th</sup> day) and *ikànlélógún* (21<sup>st</sup> day).

The data for this study are gathered from a series of field trips to Ègbáland from where the funeral dirges analysed subsequently are collected *in situ*. These are subjected to theoretical interpretations through the lens of phenomenological theory at large and hermeneutical phenomenology in particular.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

The term *phenomenology* is formed from the Greek roots *phnomenon* and *logos*. Phenomenon is frequently translated as *appearance* while the meaning of *logos* varies depending on the context. Typical English renders it as ‘word’, ‘argument’ or reason. Sembera (2007 p. 1) defines phenomenology as giving an account of appearance. It is a theory of life that allows people to be free from their assumptions and biases in order to understand life experiences as truthful as possible. It is a revelation of the world that is forgotten by science and “objective thought” in general (Bertoldi, 1997, p. 242).

Silverman (1980 p. 706) opines that “the meaning of being human is understood most fully through phenomenological interpretation. Our perception of things brings together events that underlay any given human experience. He states further that phenomenology is an interrogation of language of experience. This experience entails pictorial, psychological, and political as well as spoken language. According to Silvermen, language is not a fulfilled reality; it must be interpreted, thought and understood. Experience tends

to bring multiplicity of meaning of language in the activities of human life. The concern of phenomenology is to reveal the structures or consciousness that underlines all experience and this makes knowledge or “experiencing” possible. Phenomenology claims to have a method for analysing the essential structures of “mental events” (Bertoldi, 1977, p. 239). It seeks comprehensive and accurate description of acts of consciousness which make every hidden structure of the everyday world clear to us (Sembera, 2007, p. 30)

Smith (2018 p. 6) claims that there are seven types of phenomenology as listed in the Encyclopedia of phenomenology: Transcendental constitutive phenomenology; Naturalistic constitutive phenomenology; Existential phenomenology; Generative historicist phenomenology; Genetic phenomenology; Hermeneutical phenomenology and Realistic phenomenology. The concern of this study will be on hermeneutical phenomenology. This is a combination of two different broad fields – hermeneutic and phenomenology. Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur are the foremost proponents of the movement of hermeneutical phenomenology (Forster, 2005, p. 5; Davidson, 2014, p. 316).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived (Shahbazian, 2015, p. 1). Basic concern of hermeneutic phenomenology is interpretation, textual meaning, dialogue, pre-understanding and tradition. Hermeneutical phenomenology studies interpretive structures of experience, how we understand and engage things around us in our human world, including ourselves and others (Smith, 2018, p. 6). Phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be interpretive rather than purely descriptive. Polkinghorne (1983) describes interpretive process as concentrating on historical meanings of experience, development and cumulative effects on individual and social levels (p. 46). Interpretation is seen as critical to the process of understanding (Lavery, 2003, p.4).

### ***Ìgbálá* and the Loric Idea of Death**

The idea of death is a universal concept although the words referencing it go by different names and significations across world cultures. Death

is referred to as *ikú* in the Yorùbá language, *mutua* in Hausa, *onwu* in Igbo, *almawtu* in Arabic, *smert* in Russian, *mort* in French. As the names vary, so also do the conception, perception and loric appreciation of death across cultures, traditions, peoples and religious beliefs. Growth, aging, death, decay and extinction are the inevitable characteristics of the material or corporeal life of this world. An extensive body of works exists on the concept of death in religion, sociology, philosophy, social anthropology, theology, art history and medicine. Hence, this subject can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. The Yorùbá believe that the dead are powerful and sacred. The Yorùbá as well as other cultures of the world consider it a moral and social duty to mourn their deceased through different types of oral arts, which are often complementary to traditional rites and rituals that accompany the burial of the dead. An example of such oral art is the below *Ìgbálá* song:

Ó n kéré rere, yé è é è	She is crying profusely
Ó n bènà wò	She gazes at the road
Ìyá yì ó kú o	the old woman that died
Ó ɣe báwa ò wá mọ o	thought we would not come after all
Ó n kéré rere	She is crying profusely
Awá mà dé o	We have surely come.

The traditional and cultural practices connected with death have been in place from primordial times. Yorùbá people are endowed with rich cultural values passed from one generation to another. They have poetry or oral arts attached to every incident occurring within the context of their cultural life. Every activity gives an opportunity to exhibit their oral prowess and also entertain their audience. This living tradition has survived through the ages in spite of the effect of Western civilisation on their culture. Funeral rites are performed throughout Yorùbáland although the rituals are referenced by different names from place to place. The performance is known as *Ìgbálá* in Ègbáland, *Ògbéré* in Ọyọ, *Ohun arò/orin arò òkú* in Oñdó, *Èkún GànẸ̀n* in Kàbà/Búnú, *eré ògàgò/orin arò* in Ìkàré, Ìpelè, *ràrà òkú* in Ọyọ, Ìràgbìjì, Ìkìrun, Ìlobùú, *Alámọ* in Èkìtì and *Oro Ìkẹ̀yìn* in Ìlálẹ̀.

Aging and extinction are the inevitable characteristics of the life of this world. An extensive body of work exists on the concept of death in religion, sociology, philosophy, social anthropology, theology, art history and medicine. Hence, this subject can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. Death is the termination of life on earth; the human life goes on beyond this physical mortal existence. The notion of death is well established in Yorùbá culture, thoughts and beliefs. It is a debt owned by every human being. No matter how long a man stays on earth, he will eventually die. Death is a no respecter of any human being, young or old, male or female, black or white. It is the end of life. It is the permanent cessation of all biological or organic process in a living creature or plant (Pelaez, 2015, p.7).

A living person has unique individuality – the structure of his or her personality, emotions and thoughts. But, once he dies, all these are lost and the individual fades into nothingness. Lastly, death is what resides beyond life, afterlife, outside it. However, the objective of the death drive is to bring us back, as aforementioned, to a primordial, inorganic state, the state from which life originally emerged. Death becomes not an unknown end to life, but a return, a restitution of an earlier basic state.

Similarly, Taylor (2011), citing Hertz (1907), further highlights a point of distinction between three different sources of human anxieties, namely the horror of death as an event; the shock of any particular death; and fear of the dead. Taylor notes further that death marks the point where the active human subject becomes the object whose volition is *de facto* absent, but whose wishes may remain potent projections in the minds of those left alive, in whatever relation to the deceased.

Solberg (2017, p. 8) observes that death can refer to at least three different things: a process, an instance, and a state. Solberg explains further that the process that leads to death is something that happens within life and should be more accurately be refer to as dying, while the state of “being dead” is after death has occurred. The third, which is the instance of death, is the moment when a life ends.

Ọlátúnjí (2005, p. 141) claims that, traditionally, Yorùbá believe that all things, animate or inanimate, and even divinities, have

secret primordial names and that whoever knows these names can control their bearers and the powers immanent in them. Thus if one knows the secret names of death and grave, one would live till a ripe old age. This belief is encapsulated in *Igbálá* song thus:

Ikú ti láwa ò kú mọ o nílé wa  
Ààrùn ti láwa ò nírùn o níran wa  
Títí ayé lá ó ma wà tàwa tòmọ wa o  
Àwá ò le tàrò mọyẹn  
Ká mà bÓlú şeré  
Awó lọ,  
Olele

(Death has assured us nobody will die in our home  
Disease has assured us no member of our family will be afflicted  
We shall forever, we and our offspring  
We cannot for the sake of this  
distance ourselves from the Master  
The initiate has gone  
O yes)

Ajayi (2002, p. 2) opines that *Òrúnmilà* is the most important deity in Yorùbá society. He is assumed to be the one guiding man's destiny as he is present when man was created. He has a fore knowledge of everything happening in human's life whether good or bad and he can prescribe remedies where necessary. He notes that: 'This is why *Òrúnmilà* is described as *Èlérì-ìpín* (the witness of destiny or lot), *Òbìrikítí A-pa -ọjọ-ikú-dà* (the great one who alters the date of death'.

This statement shows that death, though is inevitable, can be altered. The Yorùbá people usually pray against premature death which William & Ladwig (2012, p. 13) refer to as *bad death*, "untimely death", or *violent death*. Gbádébò (2017, p. 177) notes that premature death or the death of a young man is considered to be a tragedy. He argues further that death in the Yorùbá worldview signifies most – existence. It is a transition from this physical earthly existence to another existence in the land of the spirits.

In a Yorùbá-centric ideology and belief, premature death can be prevented through sacrifice. Ajayi (2002, p. 40) claims that

Principally, rather than a person who should have suffered certain discomfort or death, the sacrifice saves the person who offers the sacrifice, substituting him or her with life animal, or any other object.

Orímóògùnjẹ (2004, p. 106, 164) reports that the Yorùbá people do not regard death as the end of life, but a transition between terrestrial world and the celestial abode. He notes that *Ọrun* (heaven), represents the opposite of physical existence on the terrestrial world... It signifies death, that is, a point of no-return". The below *Ìgbálá* song exposes this belief:

Ó n wò wẹ̀n	Staring helplessly
Àjàlé ọ̀run n wò	The roof of heaven just staring
Èní kú mè bá ẹ̀ şeré	The deceased am not playing with you
Ó n wó wẹ̀n	Staring helplessly

This implies that death is a fact that everyone should be prepared for; the occurrence of death is not expected to be seen as sudden. Rather, it is a stage in rite of passage, an inevitable fate of all things living. The focus of friends and families of the deceased will be to understand the transiency of life, thinking about one's own mortality as an impetus to make life a meaningful and performing good deed on behalf of the deceased person. It is a transformation into a higher spiritual state (Fahm, 2015 p. 3-4).

### **The Causes of Death as Portrayed in *Ìgbálá***

There are a number of causes of death. However, to explore all is outside the scope of this paper. We therefore limit our analytic scope to causes of death based on the Ègbá perception of death as shown in the *Ìgbálá* dirge under study. Based on our findings, the causes of death can be classified into two broad categories, namely natural and unnatural.



### Natural Death

Death strikes with agonies and pains to the bereaved, and no human is spared in this existential sense. Death is one of the great themes of literature, perhaps even more frequent than the theme of love. A Yorùbá adage encapsulates the inevitability of death thus:

Ikú pa babaláwo bí ẹni tí ò gbófá  
Ikú ponísègùn bí ẹni tí ò moògùn  
Ikú pààfàà bí ẹni tí ò m'Ọlórùn Ọba

(Death killed the herbalist like a novice  
Death killed the medicine man like an ordinary person  
Death killed the cleric like an unbeliever.)

Death has neither regard nor respect for political or economic status of anyone. Everyone has an appointed time, period and day. Yorùbá people do hold the belief that nothing can prevent the occurrence of death when its time is due. This view is expressed by a popular *Fuji* musician, *Alhaji Sikiru Ayindé Barrister* in his record titled *Fantasia Fuji*:

Bikù ẹ lágbara tó o	Powerful as death is
Kò sólóògùn tó le rí tíkú ẹ o	No herbalist can conquer death
Bíkú ẹ lágbara tó o	Powerful as death is
Bíkú ẹ lágbara tó o	Powerful as death is
Kò sólóògùn tó le rí tíkú ẹ o	No herbalist can conquer death

This excerpt supports a similar view expressed in Ègbá funeral poetry and it affirms their philosophy on how powerful death is:

A jáwéjáwé	We pluck leaves a number of times
A wagbòwagbò	We pare the stem of trees a number of times
Bòlòjò báá dé	Once death comes calling
Kò ò gbégbògi	There is no remedy

Ègbá people never lose sight of death in their beliefs and philosophy. They believe that the passing of time often presents thought of death, thus unsettling this realization as a reason for hopelessness. They never

overlook the fact that time moves human beings towards death. For them, life is characterised by endless variety and movements. Its exquisite beauty is enhanced by knowing that we humans live short lives and lose everything when we die aside from the love of the children left behind. The issue is addressed in the following Ìgbálá song:

Ijọ n bá kú	The day I die
Kẹ má dárò mi	Do not mourn me
Ma fọmọ sáyé ma lọ	I will leave an offspring behind
Òròjọ dẹ yá ó ẹ má dárò mi	Whichever day it happens
Ma fọmọ sáyé ma lọ	I will leave an offspring behind
Ma mú ìpóró lọwọ ọtún	I will held ìpóró in my right hand
Ma mú ìké lọwọ òsì	While I hold ìké in the left
Ma lọ fọba lẹmẹrẹ lóri ẹ o	While I behave like a king

This implies that death is a fact that everyone should prepare for; the occurrence of death is not expected to be seen as sudden. Rather, it is a stage in rite of passage, an inevitable fate of all things living. The focus of children, friends and families of the deceased will be to understand the transiency of life, thinking about one's own mortality as an impetus to make life a meaningful and performing good deed on behalf of the deceased person. Death creates meaning in life and, without death, there would be nothing to cherish and nothing to live for.

### **Unnatural Causes of Death**

Alembi (2002, p.78) notes that “the majority of death among the Abanyole are blamed on people exercising mystical powers”. In many cultural beliefs, there are causes of death that are not attested to in science. According to the African belief system, becoming an ancestor after death is the desirable goal of every individual. Such feat is only achievable if an individual dies naturally. As it is said: *ká kú lẹmọdé kó yẹ ni, ó sànjú ká dàgbà láiládiẹ ìràná* (it is honorable to die at a younger age than to age without a sacrificial hen in one's possession). Supernatural forces that can cause death are multifarious according to the belief and philosophy of the Yorùbá. When death occurs in a place, families, friends, relatives and colleagues of the deceased are more

concerned with the cause(s) of the death. Hence, people tend to enquire or probe the causes of death. The enquiry is not to negate the Yorùbá people's belief on death. It is rather to affirm their awareness that different things can lead to death. Preternatural causes of death include witchcraft, sorcery, curses, evil magic, diseases, evil spirits, breaking of an oath, failure to perform certain taboos, and offending the ancestors, among other possible causes. People believe more in death occurring as a result of mystical powers and it is expressed in Ègbá funeral poetry, as captured in this example:

Lead: Eni ẹ pa a, èée ya	The person you killed, Whao!
Chorus: È wo ẹni ẹ pa	Look at the person murdered
Lead: Òún re dúró gogorogo lóhùn yẹn	He is the one standing firm there
Chorus: Eni ẹ pa a, èée ya	The person you murdered, whao!
Lead: È wo ẹni ẹ pa	Look at the person you murdered
Chorus: nàà re dúró gogorogo lóhùn yẹn	He is the one standing still over there

This excerpt reveals that the deceased was murdered and, while the performance is on, he/she is looking at those who had cut short his life. Another example that reveals such belief goes thus:

Ayé ò jẹ ó loşo ò èé	People do not allow him use his attire
Ayé ò jẹ ó loşo ò àà	People do not allow him use his attire
Bàbá fi lésèè kó o	Father, has the lace fabric in his wardrobe
Ayé ò jẹ ó loşo o	People do not allow him use his attire

The *Ìgbálá* song above shows that the deceased has variety of dresses in his wardrobe, but he has been murdered and, as a result, he will not be able to use them. When someone dies due to suspected murder, members of his family will try to avenge his death through what is known as *òkú-ríró* (reprisal burial rituals). Technological development and advancements have revealed in modern day that a number of death ascribed to supernatural power are not in most cases spiritual. For instance, what is believed to be *egbò-àdààjiná* (unhealed wound/diabetic foot) in traditional society is in actual sense an adverse effect of chronic diabetes. Also, *àpèta* (a deadly spell) may be cardiac

arrest or hypertension. Cancerous growth in any parts of the body may be confused for *ata* (*spell*). In essence, it is better to subject an ailment to proper medical examination before ascribing spiritual meaning to it. More so, autopsy can reveal the actual cause of someone's death otherwise, occurrence of death due to malevolent spirit cannot be explained scientifically.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has described and analysed *Ìgbálá* as a funeral dirge in Ègbáland. These include how it is performed, terms of engagement, and conditions and circumstances surrounding its performance. It analysed the natural and unnatural causes of death as revealed in the Ègbá funeral poetry using hermeneutic phenomenology for textual interpretation. It presented a clear perception of the Ègbá people's worldview on the causes of death through the dirge. The study concluded that new understanding and appreciation of *Ìgbálá* funeral tradition reposition the folk practice and offers new grounds for its preservation and cultural sustainability.

### **References**

- Abraham, R. C. (1970). *Dictionary of modern Yorùbá*. University of London Press.
- Àjàyí, B. (2002). *Ifá divination: Its practice among the Yorùbá of Nigeria*. Shebiotimo Publications.
- Àjùwọ̀n, B. (1977). *The Yorùbá hunters' funeral dirges*. Doctoral Thesis, Indiana University.
- Àjùwọ̀n, B. (1989). *Ògbéré*. University Press Limited.
- Akporobaro, F. B. O. (2001). *Introduction to African oral literature*. Lighthouse Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Alembi, E. (2002). *The construction of the abanyole perception on death through oral funeral poetry*. DataCom.
- Annels, M. C. (1996). "Hermeneutic phenomenology: Philosophical perspectives and current use in nursing research". *Journal in Advanced Nursing*, 23, 705-713.

- Bello, A. (2016). "Vision of ancestorhood and apotheosis in alter-native Yoruba music", *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies*, 8 (1), 199-217.
- Bertoldi, E. F. (1977). Phenomenology of phenomenology. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40230688>
- Davidson, S. (2014). "Is a hermeneutic phenomenology wide enough? A Ricoeurian reply to Janicand's phenomenology 'wide enough'", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 28 (3), 315-326.
- Fahm, A. O. (2015). Die before you die: Death in Rumi's mathnawi. Doctoral Thesis, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, International Islamic University, Malaysia
- Forster, M. N. (2005). Hermeneutics. <http://humanities-web.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com>
- Gbádébò, M. D. (2017). "The existentialism of Yorùbá traditional Religion", *Current Studies in Yorùbá Culture, Language and Literature*, 164-180.
- Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodology considerations. <http://doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200303>
- Ọlátúnjí, O. O. (2005). Features of Yorùbá oral poetry. University Press Limited.
- Orímóògùnjé, O. C. (2004). The significance of verbal art in the Yorùbá indigenous health care delivery system. Doctoral thesis, Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan.
- Peláez, J. A. (2015). Death, death ineffable. *Esqira Kevista Magazine*.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1983). "Phenomenological research methods", R. S. Valle and S. Halling (eds.) *Existential phenomenological perspectives in psychology*, 41-60, Plenum.
- Razinsky, L. (2010). "Driving death away: Death and Freud's theory of the death drive", *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 97 (2), 393-424.
- Sartre, J. (1969). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*. Methuen & co. Limited.

- Sembera, R. (2007). The Origins of Phenomenology.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.cttlckpcrp.5>
- Shahbazian, M. (2015). An introduction to hermeneutic phenomenology. [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net)
- Silverman, H. J. (1980). Phenomenology. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40982669>
- Smith, D. W. (2018). "Phenomenology", Edward (ed.) *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.
- Steineck, C. (2003). "Brain death", death, and personal identity. 10.1163/156852403322849260
- Taylor, T. (2011). "Death", T. Insoll (ed.) *Oxford handbook of ritual and religion*. Oxford University Press.
- Ụzochukwu, S. U. (1981). Traditional elegiac poetry of the Igbo: A study of the major types. Doctoral Thesis, Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies, University of Lagos.