

Burial Poster Speaks: Communications of Age, Bereavement and Grief following Loss of Loved Ones in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

Ekpechu, Joseph Ogbonnaya Alo (Phd)¹, Onuoha, Ogobuchi Onuoha², Bukola Popoola³, Takob Clementine Seh⁴
¹*Sociology Department, Faculty Of Management/Social Sciences, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ebonyi State, Nigeria*

²*Sociology Department, Ebonyi State University Abakaliki*

³*Sociology Department, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria*

⁴*Sociology Department, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria*

Abstract: This study examined the extent to which captions in burial posters communicate age, bereavement and grief of loss of loved ones in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Data for the research were sourced from 32 burial posters found in three locations in the area, and qualitative data on grieving gotten from bereaved family members. It was found among other things that captions in burial posters communicate the age of the deceased depicting death as being timely or untimely. Captions in burial posters convey social status of the deceased upon death. Age is not a major determinant of grieving as expressed in burial posters. Variations exist for premature deaths depicted in burial posters. Age at death of the deceased was the major determinant of the kind of captions found in burial posters. Untimely deaths are captioned differently from timely deaths. Expression of grieving for untimely deaths could be higher than grieving for timely deaths. It was concluded that age at death intervened for the kind of captions found in burial posters.

Key Words: Bereavement, burial posters, captions, communicate age, grief, loss of loved ones

I. INTRODUCTION

Death is a recurring phenomenon in the world. In a bid to let people know the loss of a loved one, date of burial and wake keep one usually communicated to the public using catchy captions usually expressed in burial posters. It is pertinent to note that some people could develop and/or have fear for death more than other people (Momtaz, Haron, Ibrahim & Hamid 2015). The way bereaved members produce burial posters of the deceased at all cost could be a cause of concern to many. Authors had not done enough work on the importance of captions in burial posters communicating the age of the deceased and the extent of grieving following such captions. This study had not been done by many authors in Nigeria. Previous studies had not identified the captions that follow age of the deceased upon death in burial posters. This study tried to fill this gap in knowledge.

1.1 Objectives of the study

This study examined the extent to which burial posters communicate age of bereavement and grief of loss of loved

ones in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Specifically the study sought to:

- i. Examine the extent to which captions in burial posters communicate age of the deceased.
- ii. Examine the extent to which captions in burial posters communicate the extent of bereavement.
- iii. Examine the extent to which captions in burial posters communicate extent of grief of loss of loved ones.

Communications of age, bereavement and grief by burial posters

Burial posters come with different captions usually in expression of the age of the deceased and the extent of grieving expressed therein. Unexpected deaths could be very traumatic (Keyes, Pratt, Galea, McLaughlin, Koenen & Shear, 2015). Powell, Hockey and Clayden (2011) saw natural burials as an extension of cultural endeavours of particular societies. This however, did not consider the impact of captions in burial posters to such natural burials. Meanings made could help in determining how centrality affects bereavement outcomes (Bellet, Neimeyer & Berman, 2016). McClatchey (2017) failed to show the messages that captions in burial posters carry especially as it relates to widowers. Cacciatore, Thieleman and Lieber (2017) did not consider inscriptions in burial posters as one of the factors or otherwise that necessitated the experience of loss among family members who lost their loved ones.

Feeling of appreciation helps in coping process. However, in burial posters appreciation usually goes to the Almighty God (Saka, 2017) which could as well be a coping strategy to grieving. Experiences of grief were higher among children with parental loss than were found among their peers who were not grieving the loss of their loved ones (Koblentz, 2015). The author failed to identify how the children affected with parental loss expressed it in the captions in the burial posters of deceased parents when available. Forgiveness could affect grieving and posttraumatic growth differently. At one

time it could negatively affect grieving while at other times it could positively affect posttraumatic growth. See Martincekoya and Klatt (2016). See also the work of Schenck, Eberle and Rings (2015) in how socio-cultural variables could play a mediating role in helping bereaved individuals to return to their normal state of life.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is hinged on George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism (S.I.) theory. The theory views human beings as living in a world of meaningful objects and other people (Schaefer, 2001).

The major pre-occupation of the theory is that it views human beings as living in a world of meaningful objects and other people (Schaefer, 2001). Symbolic interactionism best suits this study. It best suits the study because burial posters are symbolic objects which make people aware of the burial arrangements. The burial posters which serve as means of invitation make people to converge for such burials which make them to interact with one another. Burial posters seem to communicate the intention and mind of the bereaved families to the general public. The burial poster serves as the medium through which the bereaved families communicate with the public. Even though other scholars had applied it to their works none had used it in expressing how burial posters communicate between the bereaved families and the public. For instance, Author (Date) applied same to oath taking and resolution of issues of death accusation.

III. METHODS

The study relied on secondary materials (burial posters) posted in three locations in Ebonyi State from January 2019 to March 2020. Each burial poster was sighted and the captions and the age of the deceased were copied for further analysis. This was in a bid to reveal the actual intent of the bereaved families in putting up such inscriptions in those burial posters. There was no source to which the number of burial posters could be gotten. Some persons who died could not have their burial information contained in burial posters. The study therefore relied on the information gotten from 32 burial posters in the area. This was arrived at when saturation was reached. This point of saturation was the period when similar captions kept on recurring. For instance, different posters for different families having similar captions such as call to glory, colossal loss and painful exit etc. It was felt that there was no need to continue sourcing for more since it will keep on giving similar information.

We established contacts with members of the society in order to identify the families where the burial posters belonged. If the person asked didn't know another person was asked until the one who had the correct information was located. We explained the intention of the research to the person and he tried to help out. In this way one affected family was located and upon interrogation the person who wrote the manuscript for the production of the burial posters was interviewed. After

the interview he was asked whether he could refer us to other affected families in their respective locations which they did. The people were then located and interviewed. The interview covered only those who consented to be interviewed. Two persons who declined to be studied were not interviewed. Others who were excluded from the study were other bereaved family members who did not participate in the preparation of the burial posters. Sympathizers who came for condolence visits were excluded from the study. This process was used to recruit sixteen interviewees. Further interviewing stopped when the data kept revealing similar things. At this point it was observed that point of saturation had been reached.

Unstructured interview method was used to carry out the qualitative aspect of the study. The Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (TRIG) was carefully read and adapted for the study in the course of asking the unstructured questions to respondents. The findings were transcribed verbatim and represented with pseudonym names.

All the burial posters used for the study were from Ebonyi State. The state is located in South East Nigeria. Many of the inhabitants of the area engage in farming as their major occupation. The area was chosen for the study because there have been recurring incidences of deaths in the area. Most of these deaths are conveyed to the public using burial posters as the major means of communicating the deaths, burial dates, wake keep and other relevant information to other members of the society. It is hard to see any burial for adults not contained in burial posters in the state.

The researcher employed direct observation of the burial posters from one location to another with the help of three trained research assistants. Out of the three senatorial districts in Ebonyi State one community each was purposively selected from each of the three senatorial districts of the state for the study. This was for convenience. Oshiri community, Agba community and Abakaliki metropolis were purposively selected in Ebonyi South, Central and North senatorial districts respectively.

Secondary data were analysed using thematic analysis. Qualitative data on expression of grief in burial posters were analysed using grounded theory. There was coding of data gotten from the study participants. This started with initial codes which were later recoded with actual codes using line by line coding. The actual codes were used to make major constructs which were used for data analysis.

Expression of pain in the burial posters or otherwise and the age of the deceased as was written in burial posters were used to categorise deaths as timely or untimely. Approval for the conduct of the study was given by an institutional review board.

IV. FINDINGS

Theme 1: Age at Death Defines Timely and Untimely Deaths

Captions in burial posters depict the age of the deceased as being timely or untimely. These are defined by various captions as contained in table two.

Table One: Captions in Burial Posters Communicates Age of the Bereaved

S/No	Caption of the Burial Poster	Age of the Deceased
1	Painful Exit of a true Legend	32
2	Exit of a Colossus	79
3	Exit of a Legend	105
4	Mama returns Home	120
5	Mama Lives on	75
6	Painful Exit	67
	Painful Exit	30
	Painful Exit	45
	Painful Exit	56
	Painful Exit	68
7	Ochioha Departs	101
8	Call to Glory	63
	Call to Glory	86
	Call to Glory	86
	Call to Glory	75
	Call to Glory	66
9	Sunset At Noon	34
	Sunset At Noon	47
10	Glorious Home Call	128
	Glorious Home Call	92
11	An Icon of Peace Glorious Transition	93
12	Transition to Glory	78
	Transition to Glory	80
13	Colossal Loss	20
14	Gone so Soon	28
15	Forever in Our Hearts	38
16	Painful Exit of a Great Man	60
17	Exit of a Peace Maker	69
18	Glorious Transition	67
19	Obsequies	62
20	Exit of an Icon	79

Source: Fieldwork (2020)

Table Two: Timely and Untimely Deaths depicted by Captions in Burial Posters

S/No	Caption of the Burial Poster	Age of the Deceased	Type of Death
1	Painful Exit of a true Legend	32	Untimely
2	Exit of a Colossus	79	Timely
3	Exit of a Legend	105	Timely
4	Mama returns Home	120	Timely
5	Mama Lives on	75	Timely
6	Painful Exit	67	Untimely
	Painful Exit	30	

	Painful Exit	45	
	Painful Exit	56	
	Painful Exit	68	
7	Ochioha Departs	101	Timely
8	Call to Glory	63	Timely
	Call to Glory	86	
	Call to Glory	86	
	Call to Glory	75	
	Call to Glory	66	
9	Sunset at Noon	34	Untimely
	Sunset at Noon	47	
10	Glorious Home Call	128	Timely
	Glorious Home Call	92	
11	An Icon of Peace Glorious Transition	93	Timely
12	Transition to Glory	78	Timely
	Transition to Glory	80	
13	Colossal Loss	20	Timely
14	Gone so Soon	28	Untimely
15	Forever In Our Hearts	38	Untimely
16	Painful Exit of a Great Man	60	Untimely
17	Exit of a Peace Maker	69	Timely
18	Glorious Transition	67	Timely
19	Obsequies	62	Timely
20	Exit of an Icon	79	Timely

Source: Fieldwork (2020)

Theme II: Conveyance of Social Status

Captions in burial posters convey social status of the deceased upon death. Painful exit of a true legend (age = 32) portrays a higher social status for the deceased. Exit of a colossus (age = 79) portrays a higher social status for the deceased. Exit of a legend shows a higher social status. Ochioha departs portrays leadership position, a higher form of social status. An icon of peace glorious transition shows the deceased was a peaceful person while alive. This is an evidence of a higher social standing while alive. Age at death did not intervene for conveyance of higher social status for the deceased, rather kind of life one lived did.

Extent of Grief

Captions in burial posters conveyed the extent of grief of loss of loved ones. This was conveyed by the submissions of the informants. For instance, Akam Male 25 said in a response to one of the questions asked, “my mother was 66 years old when she died many months ago.” When asked how he saw the death of the mother she replied:

the death of my mother was unexpected. Just imagine she had a lizard bite and she was treated by giving her some injections at home. I could remember a day she told me that she had a lizard bite. I didn't take it to be a great deal. Surprisingly few days later she was

attending a burial in a neighboring village and she had a fall along the road. She was hurriedly taken back home. Mama was dying slowly. She found it difficult to stand up and move freely. She was later taken to Federal Teaching Hospital Abakaliki where she was diagnosed of stroke. In the first few days it seemed she was responding well to treatment. The reverse later became the case. Could you imagine that we later signed against medical advice and had her transferred to a herbalist. We saw her responding to treatment in the first few days. Few days later he sent his servant to advise us to take her back home. We refused and pleaded with him that my mother should receive adequate treatment and get healed. He went back to tell his master. Surprisingly, the herbalist finally told us to take her home after a week. In addition to that he told us to pluck leaves of some plants (sorry I don't know their botanical names) and use it to sweep off the evil forces causing the disease. We did as we were advised. Unfortunately around 11:30pm the next day my mother gave up the ghost (bowed down his head and felt like crying for about 10 seconds).

After calming him down I warmly asked him is that why you said her death is unexpected? "Yes," he replied. We never expected that she would die at that point in time. I reason that the herbalist tricked us. Why didn't he tell us that she was going to die so that we get prepared for it? He was later asked whether they prepared burial poster prior to her burial. "Yes," he replied. What inscription did you have in the burial poster? "Call to glory. This is because we believe that she was going to have an eternal rest." Does that inscription have anything to do with grieving her death? "The call to glory was just written in order to fulfill all righteousness since we had seen other bereaved families using that caption in their burial posters. As I speak with you I am still grieving her death." You have handed everything over to God by that call to glory, but you confessed that you still mourn her death? Why? He replied:

The call to glory is just a matter of communication. In all situations we should give glory to God. This does not mean that I don't grieve for her death. No one can take the place of my mother. Each time I go home I find it difficult to eat three meals daily because my mother is no longer there to cook for me. Each time I am alone at home and remember my mum tears flow my eyes. I could remember the day I saw her burial poster in front of her house I cried bitterly (became very sober). She had a house built for her by her children which she couldn't live in for one day. This annoys me the most each time I see that house. Whenever I see the caption in her poster and her face and her age I always felt like crying. I keep asking myself why should my mother die now? When I see other mothers around I see the need to still grieve her death.

How do you feel now? "Well today is better than yesterday. But that burial poster, a big flex we kept at home still reminds me of her death each time I see it. I don't know how I can overcome this," he replied.

Nkechi Female 33 observed that "I lost my step brother at an unripe age of 32." Having agreed that burial poster was used for his burial she said further that, "his untimely death made us to caption his burial poster painful exit of a true legend." Does this caption have anything to do with grieving? "Yes it does. It shows that we always feel the pain of losing a loved one. The whole world when they see that inscription in the poster knows that my brother died untimely. Whenever I see one of his burial posters I kept in my room I always felt like crying. ...difficult to sleep for many nights ... caption in the burial poster." Ndidi Female 40 who lost his grand father at a ripe age of 105 years maintained that "it calls for celebration. That is why in his burial poster we captioned it exit of a colossus." Does it make you grief? "No it doesn't. ..., he died at an advanced age. All of us pray to reach that age before we die." Noble Male 28 maintained that, "the most recent burial poster that was produced in our family was that of my mother who died at the age of 75." What was the caption? "We captioned it mama lives on", he replied. Why? "We believe that she will enjoy eternal rest. She was a very good person when she was still alive", he continued." When asked whether he still grieves her death he had this to say, "well as a human being I did. But as I am speaking with you now I have gotten over it. The caption that she lives on can tell the rest of the story. For now I am comforted because I know where she has gone to." Where? "Heaven because she was a well devoted Christian," he replied.

Utara Male 30 noted that, "Hmm! (bows his head). Hmm! (looked at my face sternly). Why should my mother die at an unripe age of 67?" Did you produce burial posters for her burial? "Yes we did," he continued. How did you caption it? "Painful exit." Why painful exit? "Her death causes us serious pain. That is why we captioned it that way so that people would know that we are not happy with her death." What kinds of pain do you feel? "(Bows his head). Chai! I cried like a baby the day she died. That caption is meant to remind the people in our community that I no longer have a mother that cooks for me. I no longer have a mother that gives me pieces of advice. I found it difficult to relate well with my friends when this thing happened initially. That phrase painful exit keeps recurring in my mind. Once I remember it I feel sober", he replied.

Losing some one at an advanced age also attracted some elements of grief. Uche Male 35 confessed that, "my father died at the age of 128. You can see his burial poster (points at one of them) 128 years is boldly written there. We had no other option than to caption it glorious home call. His death was timely. Do you grieve his death? "Yes I did because I have lost him forever. Those things he used to do for me had totally been lost." Like what? "I can no longer feel his company. I can no longer discuss with him. I get upset each time I

remember that he is no longer there for me,” he continued. Colossal loss goes with grief. This was testified by Obinna Male 38 when he said that:

My brother died when he was 20 years old. Just imagine a promising young man dying at that age. The only thing we did was to caption his burial poster colossal loss. We couldn't have produced it but we felt since he was very hardworking we needed to do it. Secondly, people reading it would know that he died untimely. I kept one of them inside my room which keeps reminding me of his death.

Why did you keep the poster inside your room? “It was for me to keep remembering it.

You may not believe that I have caused myself more harm than good for doing that. Come to think of it I feel his loss more each time I looked at that his burial poster (points his hand towards it). Each time I sight it while alone I always felt like crying. I could remember one day that tears flowed out of my eyes uncontrollably. To be frank with you it was unintentional, it kept coming. I later came to realize that it was because of that burial poster and the mental image it created in my psyche.” He continued.

On the other hand grieving is also located with untimely death. This was expounded by Isaiah Male 20 when he said that, “my brother died at the age of 28 which we know was an untimely death. If you look at his burial poster you will see that its inscription is gone so soon. Many of his mates are still living. I don't know why he decided to die now...” Why are you regretting his death so much? He replied in this way:

Besides being a brother he was also a friend to me...he used to buy gifts for me... first person...gave me bean cake. ...he is no longer here to protect me...wash my clothes...iron them...no longer...give me some money. His death always made me to be afraid of this world. ... any person can die at any given time. All these grievances were summed up in that burial poster gone so soon. I never believed he could have died now (looked outside)...

V. DISCUSSION

Scholars on death studies have done extensive studies on bereavement and grieving. This study found that captions in burial posters depict the age of the deceased as being timely or untimely deaths. Powell et al (2011) saw natural burials as an extension of cultural endeavours of particular societies. However, they failed to align it to captions in burial posters. This is a major contribution by this work to knowledge. Coupled with this no author had found that untimely deaths may go with non-acceptance of time of deaths while timely deaths go with acceptance of such deaths as expressed in burial posters. As well no author had found that there could be variations with death being considered painful depending on the age of the deceased. Keyes et al (2015)'s finding that

unexpected deaths could be very traumatic is similar with the finding of this study even though it failed to align it to expressions in burial posters. The finding by Bellet et al (2016) that meanings made could help in determining how centrality affects bereavement outcomes is not in line with the finding of this study. Grief depends on the ability of the bereaved to withstand the loss.

Contentment and/or non-contentment with loss of loved ones could affect the perception of the bereaved regarding whether the deceased has earned an eternal life. Few captions in the burial posters did not depict where the deceased had gone to from the tone of the caption given in the burial posters. Age is the major determinant of this.

No author whose work was reviewed found that age is not a major determinant of grieving as expressed in burial posters. Variations exist for premature deaths depicted in burial posters. Cacciatore et al (2017)'s dwelling on experiences of grieving did not consider inscriptions in burial posters as one of the factors or otherwise that necessitated the experience of loss among family members who lost their loved ones. Apart from experiences of loss which is a central phenomenon it failed to identify the captions in burial posters as one of the factors that show such experiences. Experiences of grief were higher among children with parental loss than were found among their peers who were not grieving the loss of their loved ones (Koblentz, 2015). The only thing that makes this finding different from the finding of this study is that the authors did not replicate captions found in burial posters as the major source of their information.

This study found that captions found in burial posters convey social status upon the deceased while alive. This area has not been delved into by many scholars in Nigeria. This is another major contribution of this study to knowledge. Saka (2017)'s finding that feeling of appreciation helps in coping process is in tandem with the finding of this study with few variations. For instance, in burial posters appreciation usually goes to the Almighty God which could as well be a coping strategy to grieving. This therefore makes it seemingly different from the finding of this study. Martincekoya et al (2016) and Schenck et al (2015)'s findings on coping with grief is not in line with the finding of the study because of the non-use of captions in burial posters in generating the information.

This study is apt because it has added the contributions of captions in burial posters to bereavement and grieving to knowledge. Other authors could have looked at these variables from other directions and/or perspectives but few had actually targeted this area, i.e. burial posters. This therefore makes this work useful to scholarship.

VI. CONCLUSION

Age at death of the deceased was the major determinant of the kind of captions found in burial posters. Untimely deaths are captioned differently from timely deaths. Expression of grieving for untimely deaths could be higher than grieving for

timely deaths. Captions in burial pictures designating timely deaths could imply eternal rest for the deceased. Recovery from loss of loved ones could be higher for bereaved members who captioned their burial posters depicting timely deaths than for those depicting untimely deaths.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

National Population Commission and/or census officials and social welfare officers in Ebonyi state should always document captions found in burial pictures in the state. This would help to document same for posterity and for official purposes. Subtle captions should be used for expressing untimely deaths in burial posters by the bereaved to enhance a normal grieving process.

IX. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Small sample size was used for the study. This may therefore not be representative of the whole bereaved family members in the state. Other studies could beef up the sample size to cover more bereaved members in the state as well as in other locations in South East Nigeria.

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