

Traditional Methods of Preserving Dead Human Bodies in Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Traditional methods of preserving dead human bodies have been of immense importance in many societies. This practice has been sustained for thousands of years for cultural, religious and socio-environmental reasons. Although there is dearth of literature on the preservation of dead bodies in Nigeria, ethnographic evidences revealed that the tradition is still practised in parts of Igboland. This paper examines the traditional methods employed by the people of Southeast Nigeria in preserving dead human bodies and argues that the tradition can be harnessed for cultural tourism, while promoting the culture of the people.

Key Words: Traditional preservation, Dead human bodies, Embalment, Southeastern Nigeria.

Introduction

In Southeastern Nigeria, death is not seen as the ultimate end of life; but the beginning of new life in the spiritual world – the land of the ancestors. Thus, death is a transition (Talbot 1932:25; Okpoko 1983; Okpoko 1993:105). Death is classified into two categories – bad death (*ajo onwu*) and good death (*onwu chi*). The former is believed to be caused by infectious diseases like leprosy, swollen stomachs, small pox etc. and therefore does not attract funeral rites of any kind, neither are the corpses preserved. Instead, they are usually rapped in cloths/mats and thrown into the bad bush (*ajo ofia*). The latter refers to death at old age; thus, the privileges of being re-incarnated are accorded to those who died a good death. *Onwu chi* attracts funeral rites and the corpses can also be preserved.

Preservation of dead human body or embalment is the act of treating the dead human body in order to reduce the presence and growth of micro-organism, to retard decomposition and to restore an acceptable physical appearance (Frederick 1989). In pre-colonial Igbo societies, as in many parts of the world, corpses are preserved traditionally for some days before burial to enable family members and relations/friends plan a befitting burial for the deceased. The traditional mortuary rites are still being performed mainly by non-Christians in Southeastern Nigeria. In many instances, the modern methods are complemented by traditional ones and there is the fear that the latter may become extinct in our study areas, since the adherents to traditional religion are increasingly reducing. This explains why there is need to document this tradition.

Background Information of the Study Areas

Southeastern Nigeria comprises the five Igbo speaking states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, all of which constitute one of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. It is located between latitudes 4⁰40' to 7⁰20' north of the equator and longitudes 6⁰00' to 8⁰20' east of the Greenwich Meridian. The culture area occupies about 50,000km² of Nigeria's total area of 923,768km² (Okeke, *et. al.* 2006). Southeastern Nigeria is bounded to the north by Benue and Kogi states, to the south by Rivers state, to the east by Cross River state and to the west by Delta state. It covers a landmass of 22,525 square kilometers (Madu, 2006).

The study area may be classified into two broad relief regions namely lowlands, and cuesta landscapes. The lowlands have heights of less than 400 meters and are made up of the Niger-Anambra lowlands in Anambra state and the undulating lowlands and coastal plains located along the Bende-Ameke-Umuahia axis of Abia state. The cuesta landscapes of more than 350 meters high comprise the Nsukka-Okigwe cuesta and Awka-Orlu uplands (Ofomata, 1975, 2002a). The Nsukka-Okigwe cuesta is made up of the Enugu escarpments formed by the resistant sandstone in the lower coal measures and in the lower parts of the false bedded sandstone. It has a height of between 370-550 meters and is found in Enugu and Udi areas of Enugu state. The Awka-Orlu uplands are found around the Agulu, Nanka, Oko, Ekwulobia and Onitsha areas of Anambra state and the Bende-Ameke areas of Abia state.

Southeastern Nigeria has a tropical wet and dry climate. It usually experiences an average of eight months of rainfall between March and October and four months of dry season between November and February. On average, rainfall volumes vary between 1800 meters and 2000 meters (Monanu 1975b; Anyadike 2002). It also

experiences high temperatures all the year round with an average value of 27⁰C, while the average relative humidity ranges between 60-70% and 80-90% in January and July respectively (Monanu, 1975a).

Her vegetation is mainly rainforest-savanna eco-tone. This vegetation zone comprises more than 60% grass with *Hyparrhenia*, *Andropogon* and *Pennisetum purpureum* as the predominant species. The soils of the area is composed mainly of iron rich tropical soils, which may be in the forms of loamy, clay, sandstones and sandy clays; and is further classified based on geological formation, landscape features and degree of profile development into lithosols, juvenile soils, ferralitic soils and hydromorphic soils (Onokala and Phil-Eze 2001, Umeji 2002, Ofomata 2002b). Thus, soil is an invaluable asset within the study areas. The population of the study area according to the 2006 population census is 16,381,729 persons. This number is made up of 8,306,306 males and 8,075,423 females (NPC, 2006).

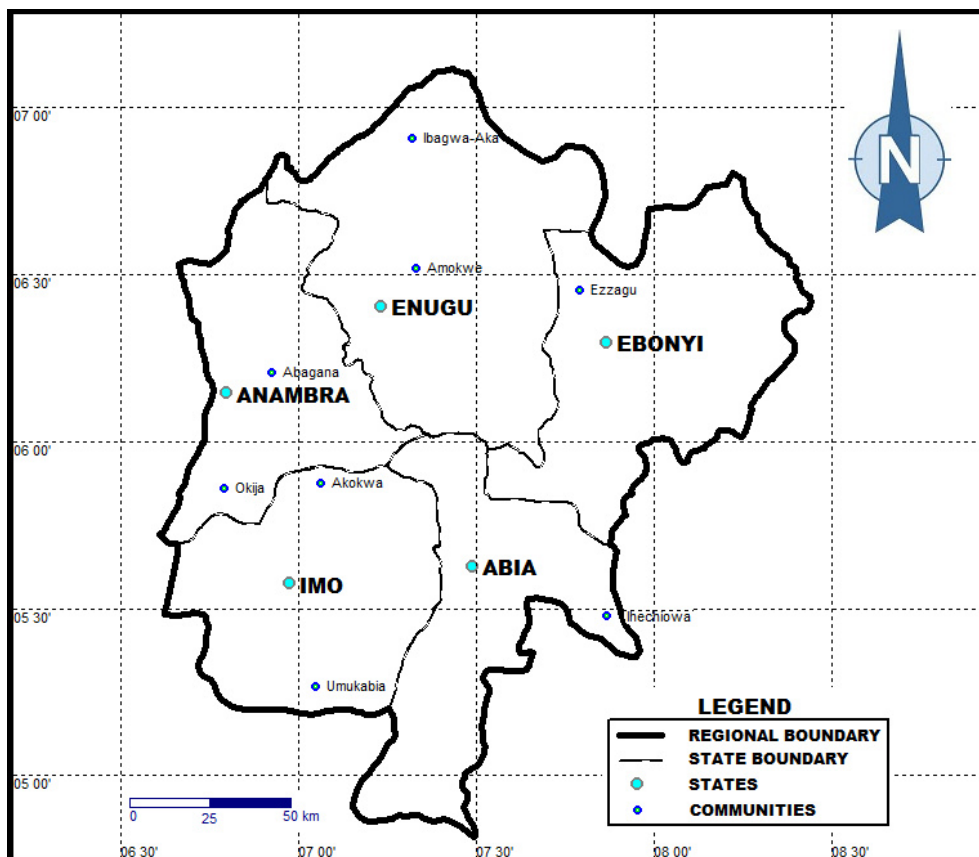


Fig 1: Map of Southeastern Nigeria Showing the States under Investigation

Methods of Data Collection

The researchers used both primary and secondary data to prosecute the study. For the primary data, three instruments were designed to gather data viz key informant interview, participant-as-observer and in-depth/semi-structured (face to face) interview. As argued by Okpoko and Ezeh (2011) in-depth interviews entail the collection of semi-structured or unstructured data through interviewer–interviewee verbal interactions or conversations. This research method provides opportunities for respondents to talk freely and in detail on the subject of interest. On the other hand, semi-structured interview involves “a conscious effort to guide and steer the discussion towards the particular interests of the researcher by either using a series of written or memorized prompts, or a carefully planned interview guide consisting of a list of items, which must be covered during the interview” (Okpoko and Ezeh, 2011:69). Key informants gave us detailed information on the background information of the study areas and local embalment processes; while participant-as-observer enabled us to participate and observed the various procedural stages involved in traditional embalment. The data were collected with tape recorder as well as field notes. Photographs, documents and field observations were also made during this inquiry. Secondary research was useful because it provided the theoretical anchor for the study.

Library materials, books, journal articles and conference proceedings were useful for the study. Finally, information collected from secondary sources were used to supplement that of primary data.

Traditional Methods of Preserving Corpses in Igboland

Before the introduction of Western culture to Igbo society, our forebears preserved, and still preserve corpses of loved ones for days, weeks and in some cases months. However, the tradition is mostly practised in rural areas where there is no accessible mortuary or modern chemicals for preserving corpses. In Southeastern Nigeria, corpses are treated and/or preserved by women (*Umuada* –female relations). In some cases, some women are known to specialize (as a profession) in corpse treatment/preservation. Such women are either called to service by supernatural forces or obtained their calling through dreams. Corpses are preserved using local materials sourced within the immediate environment; thus, the culture and behavioural pattern of a group are modeled to suit the dictate and environmental behaviour of the people.

Table 1: Materials Used for the Preservation of Dead Human Bodies

S/No	English Name	Local Names	Botanical/Scientific Name
1	Local gin (Ethanoic acid)	<i>Kai-kai</i>	Locally brewed alcohol
2	Hog plum leaf	<i>Ichikara</i>	<i>Spondia mombin</i>
3	Kerosene	Kerosene	<i>Ozothamnus ledifolius</i>
4	Kolanut leaf	<i>Akwukwo oji</i>	<i>Cola acuminata</i>
5	Scent leaf	<i>Nshuanwu/Ahiji/ Ushakrusha</i>	<i>Ocimum grattissimum</i>
6	Bay laurel	<i>Ojiro Osisi</i>	<i>Laurus Nebiles</i>
7	Camwood leaf	<i>Aboshi</i>	<i>Baphia nitida</i>
8	Palm frond	<i>Omu nkwu</i>	<i>Elaeis guineensis</i>
9	Palm kernel cream	<i>Ude-aku/-aki</i>	-----
10	Metal coin (money)	<i>Ego-igwe</i>	-----
11	Firewood	<i>Nku</i>	-----
12	Salt	<i>Nnu</i>	<i>Acacia farnesiana</i>
13	Piece of cloth	<i>Akwa</i>	-----
14	Plantain leaf	<i>Akwukwo jaara</i>	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>
15	Fruitless palm head	<i>Ohuruihu/akwu mbe</i>	<i>Elaeis guineensis</i>
16	Natural spring water	<i>Mmiri okwute</i>	H ₂ O
17	Mysterious/electrifying tree leaf	<i>Anunuebe</i>	-----

The above items were identified to be materials used in preserving corpses in the study areas. Nevertheless, the uses of these materials vary from community to community and some have religious undertone. Three methods of preserving corpses were identified: washing and dressing, washing and smoking, and washing and wrapping. In some cases, combinations of two methods are employed in order to achieve effective result. These methods are examined below.

1. Washing and Dressing Method:

Ethnographic sources revealed that in Anambra state, a corpse is washed with natural spring water and subsequently laid on plantain leaves '*akwukwo jaara*'. The corpse is then massaged with '*ude aku*' (palm kernel cream) in order to soften it. Thereafter, the corpse is incised above the navel to drain the fluids. This is swiftly followed by 'mouth-spraying' with locally made gin, '*kai-kai*'. It is the belief of some embalmers/corpses attendants that 'mouth-spraying' will prevent the usual decay often associated with the use of hand in rubbing local gin on a corpse. *Kai-kai* is further introduced into the body through the mouth and nose after which cotton

wool is used to close the nostril to prevent air from entering. It is pertinent to note that in Anambra state, *anunuebe* leaves – that are believed to be efficacious in driving away evil spirits/witchcrafts – are placed around the room where the dead body is laid.

The corpse is dressed on a daily basis at the end of which the attendant uses kola-nut leaf to clean her hands amidst some incantations. What the embalmer simply says is that: “she was not the cause of the deceased death and thus, will neither see the corpse in her dreams, roads; nor will the deceased person smite her” (Per. Comm., 2012). It should also be noted that the corpse attendant must take backward retreat upon the completion of her daily assignment as a mark of respect to the spirit of the deceased believed to be present in the room. The embalmer finally washes her hands in a bowl soaked with Camwood (*Aboshi*) leaves. This signifies that she has drawn a dividing line between the dead and the living. It should be noted that in parts of Igboland, Camwood ‘*Aboshi*’ is used to demarcate boundaries.



Plate 1: Plantain leaf ‘*Akwukwo jaara*’
Source: google picture



Plate 2: Palm kernel cream ‘*Ude-aku*’
Source: google picture



Plate 3: Palm Frond



Plate 4: Mysterious ‘*Anunuebe*’ tree
Source: google picture

2. Washing and Smoking Method:

This second method, observed in Anambra and Enugu states, entails digging a hole and making a fire place upon which the dead body is hung using two stakes of about two feet above the fire. The smoke is believed to have a protective coat that prevents further decay. The practice is continued until the corpse is dried. Kerosene is often sprinkled around the room to ward off flies. The ‘*anunuebe*’ leaf is also kept in the room, and the embalmer on completion of each day’s smoking, washes her hands with water in which ‘*aboshi*’ leaves are soaked. This method has been found effective in preserving corpse for months and even years. A good example is the archaeological site at Ogbodu-Aba (Enugu State), which was excavated in 1979. The burial chambers that were unearthed showed traces of soot and charcoal suggesting that the chambers were intensively smoked probably to preserve the contents. Again, in Obimo (Enugu state), ethnographic sources revealed that dead local chiefs are

preserved for a period of seven years before burial. This interregnum enables the community not only to settle royal issues and prevent power tussle, but also to plan for a befitting burial.



Plate 5: A Fruitless Palm Head '*Ohuruihu*'



Plate 6: The Metal Coins '*Ego-igwe*'



Plate 7: Scent leaves '*Ushakrusha*'



Plate 8: Clay Bowl '*Akere*' Use in Mixing Preservative Substance

3. Washing and Wrapping Method:

In some parts of Enugu state, embalment begins with the washing of the corpse and rubbing of local gin, after which a piece of cloth is tied on the head and two legs of the deceased person. It is assumed that this practice soothes the body and helps the dead to rest in peace. A dry fruitless palm head (*ohuruihu*) is then lit to heat the traditional mat (usually made of mud) where the deceased is laid in state. Thereafter, a metal coin (*mkpuru ego*) is inserted in between the teeth of the deceased person for two days or more. This has spiritual undertone as it is believed to absorb and/or keep away offensive odours from the deceased mouth. It is the custom of the people that the relatives of the deceased should stay with the corpse till dawn to prevent rodents or insects from coming in contact with the corpse. This practice continues until the burial proper.

In Imo State, the tradition is the same. However, they occasionally use smoking method (locally called '*mgbashi ozu*') where the corpse is laid near the fire. Corpse attendants mostly make use of palm fruit fiber as well as scent leaves (*ushakrusha*) as smother. The smoke coming from the burnt mixtures prevents the body from infections, smelling and swelling. Ethnographic sources revealed that the people equally use locally made salt in dressing the corpse. Firstly, the dead body is washed and dried, and a given quantity of salt is used to rub the corpse. Sometimes, the salt is mixed with dried/heated local herbs in a clay bowl, '*akere*', and applied on the corpse while hot. This method preserves the corpse for upwards of three days as they await the actual burial ceremony.

A combination of these three methods is used in Abia and Ebonyi states when preserving corpse. However, there are procedural differences when compared to other states, particularly at the early stages of the process. Ethnographic sources revealed that corpse attendants usually protect themselves through spiritual/ancestral bath with boiled kola-nut leaf before embalming commences. This approach is believed to protect them from stroke, protracted illnesses, strange dreams or sudden death.



Plate 9: Pieces of cloth



Plate 10: A Preserved Corpse Ready for Burial

Reasons Why Dead Human Bodies are Preserved:

Embalment or preservation of dead human body has a very long and cross cultural history. Ancient Greek, Egypt, Babylon, Rome etc. had developed embalment to perfection. While some cultures attribute religious meaning to the processes of embalment, others attach cultural values, norms and customs to it. In Southeastern Nigeria, many reasons have been adduced as to why the traditional practice of preserving corpse is still extant. These reasons are similar to the views shared by other ancient cultures worldwide and perhaps have contributed to and/or guaranteed the continued survival of the tradition in the face of orthodox embalment methods. As argued by Baker (1992), preservation of dead human body is practised for the purpose of disinfection, to protect person coming in direct contact with a corpse that may have been infected with pathogenic micro-organism, and to prevent flies from transmitting the disease to other human beings.

In some Igbo communities, burials are prohibited during certain periods (festive periods) in the traditional calendar of the year. Cases are reported where bereaved family members were refused clearance because the timing coincided with local festivities. Such family members are left with no other choice than to preserve the corpse(s). The corpse of a prominent man in a community like a chief priest, a titled holder or the eldest in the community is treated/preserved, usually not more than two market days. The aim is to allow enough time for families/relatives and relevant cultural groups and associations to be notified before burial. This enables them to accord the deceased a befitting burial rite. For non-Christians, inquiries on the cause of any strange or suspicious death through divination and consultation of oracle before burial may form another reason for preserving dead body. It should also be noted that some Christians accept the practice and thus, patronize local embalmers. Perhaps, the biblical record of embalment of Jacob and Joseph may have led to their acceptance of the tradition (see Holy Bible: Genesis 50 vs2-3, v26).

In some Igbo communities, (Ezugworie, *et. al.* 2009), the ancestral home of a married woman determines the day she will be buried. Such culture holds that the woman cannot be buried unless approval is granted by her kinsmen, usually after inspecting the corpse of their daughter and ascertaining the true cause of her death. This of course does not end in a day; thus, the corpse is preserved. Again, in exceptional cases, few dead bodies such as married women were required by tradition to be buried in their ancestral homes. Such corpses were treated/preserved before being transported to far distances. The same practice is true of ancient British and Greeks tradition of embalment to enable them transport their dead home from war fronts (www.nmfh.org).

Traditional embalment may be the only option for rural dwellers where orthodox medicine, hospital and mortuary are not available. The practice is more prominent in hill-top settlement areas of Obimo, Udi, Ezeagu, Agwu, among others. Elsewhere, the people practice local embalment because of lack of modern methods. A place like Sukur Kingdom in Adamawa State is a good example.

Other reasons for practising traditional embalment include its low cost compared to modern methods. It equally serves as an income generating avenue for corpse attendants. The tradition of preserving corpses is economically viable in that the practice attracts low fee as against the modern methods. Cases are reported where family members of a deceased person had to borrow money from financial institutions in order to complete the payment for mortuary services before corpses were released to them for burial. However, such cases are common mainly when corpses were left in mortuary for too long. Some informants are of the view that traditional methods are environmentally friendly when compared to the harmful chemicals used in the modern methods. Thus, the local methods has continued to survive in the face of modernity.

Problems and Prospects of Traditional Embalment

Prior to western contact, Africans thrived virtually in every endeavour when judged from traditional point of view. Over time, western influence permeated African way of life, mainly in the form of civilization/modernization and Christianity. This new belief made Africans and Nigerians in particular too gullible to protect their heritage and with time, our ingenuity started dwindling to the favour of western culture. Consequently, the peoples' perception of traditional embalment began to change. Most people now give preference to modern methods not just because of civilization, but to show their affluence. An average Igbo person, for instance, prefers to be associated with the huge amount of money used for modern mortuary services in contradistinction to the paltry sum charged by traditional embalmers.

Religion has also given its own blow on traditional embalment in our study areas. It is instructive to note that Southeastern Nigeria is dominated by Christians; hence, the religious undertone associated with traditional methods does not augur well with some Christians. Cases have been heard of some churches that are vehemently opposed to dead body preservation (whether modern or traditional). According to their belief, once a person dies, the next step is burial and any postponement will make them abstain. It is pertinent to reiterate here that a few Christians patronize traditional embalment. Another issue that poses a problem to traditional methods of preserving dead human body is durability. It is obvious that a corpse preserved using modern methods last longer than traditional methods. This perhaps explains why people give preference to modern methods.

However, there are ways through which the aforementioned problems can be ameliorated. Firstly, Christians should be encouraged to embrace Christendom more in the positive sense and not to the detriment of our cultural practices. They should not canvass against our heritage, which has been handed down from many generations. At the same time, even as we embrace modernization/civilization, we should note that a man without history is like a foreigner in his own land. In the same light, medical institutions should be encouraged to investigate and research more on the traditional methods in order to encourage them, allow the existing practice to run side by side with modern methods and complement each other in places where one is not available. Also, standard chemicals and equipments should be used and encouraged to prevent decomposition and desiccation of the dead body. The people should also be encouraged to use materials that conform to their belief, norms and customs to ensure continuity.

Traditional Embalment and Tourism Development

Dark tourism (also black tourism or grief tourism) is the movement of tourist to sites associated with death and tragedy. The term is popularly known as 'Thana-tourism' in academia, and is derived from the ancient Greek word '*Thanatos*' or the personification of death. In the words of Dallen (2011:444) "...people visiting sites where death occurred are motivated by a morbid curiosity about death or uneasiness about their own mortality". Furthermore, travel to certain sites takes on the aura of a spiritual pilgrimage, where tourists mourn and grieve the loss of life, and pay respects to the deceased. One of the recent settings, which attract visitors and are associated with death are the traditional methods of preserving dead human bodies in parts of southeastern Nigeria. Tourist motivation for visiting communities where the tradition is practised could be for educational purpose or to satisfy their curiosity. It should be noted that traditional embalment is practised with the materials inherent within the environment that depict the culture and belief system, and can arouse the interest of tourists, researchers, adventurers, and the like from different countries and regions of the world.

It must be remembered that in time past, tourists traveled to watch the gladiators at Roman Coliseum battling until one was killed; or the onlookers at the sacrificial religious rites of the Maya. In the Middle Ages, pilgrims also traveled to tombs, sites of religious martyrdom, and public executions. However, the interest in death intensified during the Romantic period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries with attractions like Waterloo and the ruins of Pompeii, which an early dark tourism researcher, Tony Seaton, called the greatest thanatopic travel destination of the Romantic period (Mark 2012).

The traditional embalment/preservation processes and the associated religious rituals are significant learning points for tourists who may wish to know about aspects of the culture of southeastern Nigeria. Dark tourism has been seen as a form of exploitation; entrepreneurs may attempt to use the emotional reactions of the visitors in the communities practicing traditional embalment to generate profit. Traffic to communities in southeast Nigeria where the tradition is upheld could enable commercial activities related to dark tourism and thus, may prompt visit to purchase merchandise/souvenirs. Egypt has recorded high number of tourists trooping in to see the mummies preserved over the millennia and this has greatly improved their tourism industry and earnings. The same can be achieved in Nigeria if the traditional embalment is harnessed for tourism development.

Again, in countries like Switzerland, assisted suicide cases totals 400 yearly with 135 of the cases occurring with patients who travel there specifically in order to engage in death tourism (Lee 2011). This practice has made Switzerland known worldwide for its death tourism. While Nigeria is not being recommended as a place for assisted suicide practices, we believe that she can harness the cultural practice of preserving dead human body traditionally for tourism purposes. In this case, tourists motivated solely because of traditional embalment would visit the communities either to satisfy their personal interests and/or curiosity or for educational purposes.

Other tourism products that can be harnessed alongside the traditional embalment practices include the host community's cultural diversity such as cultural festivals/ceremonies, cultural dances, local arts and crafts, diets and a host of nature-based resources like caves/rock-shelters, streams/lakes, waterfalls, etc. It should be noted that development of tourism in rural areas would alleviate poverty, create job opportunities, improve local economy and living standard of host community, lead to infrastructural development and income generation.

Conclusion

This research has been able to examine the traditional methods of preserving dead bodies among the people of Southeastern Nigeria. Research findings revealed that like the Tibetians, Ethiopians, Egyptians and Romans, dead human bodies are still being preserved traditionally by the Igbo people. While most people prefer modern methods of preservation because of its long lasting nature; the traditional methods on the other hand are still favoured because of its low cost and accessibility, particularly in the rural areas where the modern mortuary is generally not available.

Even though the researchers have been able to document the traditional methods of embalment in the areas under investigation; more works are needed in such topical issues as categories of death and burial rites as well as the politics of dying, death and burial. Notwithstanding, this work has been able to bring to limelight the materials, methods and procedures employed in traditional embalment in southeastern Nigeria. The reasons why people embalm dead loved ones were further identified along with the problems facing the practice. We also recommended solutions to those problems besieging traditional dead body preservation in the study areas.

Also, of very importance is the need to empower the practitioners in the profession to continue and ensure continuity of the tradition so as to boost tourism development in the study areas as exemplified in some countries. This practice as we have seen reflects the true belief of the people and hence, the practice will no doubt attract adventure tourists as well as those that may wish to learn other people's culture. Thus, harnessing the potentials of traditional embalment for tourism will increase tourism activities in southeastern Nigeria and ultimately impact positively on the regional income, economic and infrastructural development, to mention but a few.

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