

MOURNING AND FUNERAL RITES IN THE OROKO CLAN OF THE SOUTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Mourning and funeral rites are central institutions in Cameroon, reproducing cultural values and economic relations. This ethnographic study investigates these practices among the Oroko clan in Ndian Division, South West Region of Cameroon. The study has the following objectives: to document the structure and sequence of Oroko mourning and funeral rites, with particular attention to the “mokayan” (pig rite), “etorotoro” (hair-cut) and “epange-pange” (end of funeral); to examine the socio-cultural significance of these rites for kinship obligation, ancestral relationships and communal solidarity; and to analyse the economic consequences of these obligations for bereaved households, including patterns of debt, asset sale and farm pledging. The research draws on empirical data collected through 35 semi-structured interviews, four focus group discussions, and participant observation of seven complete funeral cycles. Integrating ritual studies with economic sociology, the analysis explores how this post-burial rites reinforce communal bonds and cultural continuity while imposing heavy financial burdens on households. Communities respond through adaptive cost-sharing strategies within kin networks. The study argues that Oroko funeral rites represent a dynamic arena where cultural obligations are continually renegotiated to balance ancestral transitions with economic survival amidst modern precarity.

Keywords:

Mourning, funeral rites, Oroko, economic sociology, Ndian Division, Cameroon.

Introduction

In Cameroonian societies, mourning and funeral rites operate as complex collective processes that actively reflect broader socio-political structures, ancestral cosmologies, and economic obligations (Nkwi 2006, 88). Within the Oroko clan of the Ndian Division in Southwest Cameroon, these practices are not static remnants of the past. Instead, they constitute an elaborate, shifting cultural institution where ancestral transition directly



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collides with contemporary economic precarity. Death in Oroko cosmology is understood as a critical liminal transition into the ancestral realm, referred to in this study as *melimo* (the land of the dead and its ancestral inhabitants); some informants also render this concept as *Molimo*, a dialectal variant used interchangeably by certain Oroko subgroups. This study adopts *melimo* as its standard term throughout, noting the variant where it appears in direct quotations. The deceased transitions into an active ancestor who mediates family health, land fertility, and communal moral order. Traditional custodians and chiefs facilitate this process through structured libations, material offerings, and protective rites (Tangwa 2020, 142). Consequently, these rituals fulfil vital socio-economic functions, binding the living to ancestral networks through material sacrifice.

While existing scholarship explores the symbolic dimensions of Cameroonian funerals (Fombad 2021, 53; Nkwi 2006), a critical gap remains in understanding how local communities navigate the tensions between ancestral expectations and material limitations. This study addresses that gap by analysing Oroko mourning rites as an intertwined socio-cultural and economic framework, and by examining how these practices are transformed by the combined pressures of rural-urban migration, economic austerity, and Christian conversion.

Building on this problem statement, the study is guided by three research objectives and their corresponding research questions. First, to document the sequence and content of contemporary Oroko mourning and funeral rites: What are the principal stages of the mourning process among the Oroko, and how are the *mokayan*, *etorotoro* and *epange-pange* performed today? Second, to investigate the socio-cultural significance of these rites: How do these practices structure kinship obligation, ancestral relationships and communal solidarity among the Oroko? Third, to analyse the economic consequences of these obligations: What financial burdens do these rites place on bereaved households, and how do families and communities respond to those burdens? A fourth, more exploratory line of inquiry considers contemporary transformation: how migration, economic austerity and religious change are reshaping these obligations. These objectives structure the presentation of methodology, findings and discussion that follow.

Contemporary cultural scholarship highlights how mourners continuously renegotiate relationships with the deceased through evolving symbolic economies (Walter 2015, 21). Across Anglophone Cameroon, this renegotiation is increasingly shaped by monetization (Fombad 2021, 59). Escalating costs associated with body preservation, commercial transportation, ceremonial feeding, and elaborate grave construction place considerable stress on bereaved networks. The coexistence of traditional and Christian funeral practices reflects processes of cultural adaptation and syncretism. Scholars have noted that African societies often negotiate between indigenous traditions and modern religious influences (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993). These hybrid practices demonstrate that cultural systems are not static but evolve in response to changing social and economic conditions.

Among the Oroko, these financial pressures manifest directly during extended post-burial periods. Because cultural obligations remain largely non-negotiable within the kinship network, failure to execute them invites social sanctions, loss of lineage status, or accusations of spiritual neglect toward the *melimo*. This article draws on 35 semi-structured interviews, four focus group discussions and observation of seven funeral

cycles to examine how Oroko communities deploy adaptive cost-sharing strategies to manage this tension.

Theoretical Framework: Social Embeddedness and Postcolonial Ritual Economies

This study adopts Granovetter's (1985) concept of social embeddedness as its principal theoretical lens. Embeddedness theory holds that economic action, such as the monetization of ritual obligations, farm pledges and asset sales among the Oroko, is not autonomous market behaviour but is shaped by, and answerable to, ongoing networks of kinship solidarity and ancestral accountability. Within this framework, money is not treated as a neutral or disruptive market force; rather, it is earmarked and renegotiated to serve social and spiritual ends, a process further elaborated by Zelizer's (2011) account of the social meanings attached to money.

Two complementary lenses are used to sharpen this principal framework rather than to compete with it. Classic formulations of rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969) supply the structural vocabulary for describing the liminality of ancestral transition during the *etorotoro* and *epange-pange*. Comaroff and Comaroff's (1993) perspective on ritual as a site of negotiation with modernity is drawn upon, more cautiously, to interpret why heavy material investment in the *mokayan* persists under conditions of economic precarity, without extending this interpretation beyond what the empirical material can support.

Methodology and Ethnographic Field Site

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design to capture the lived experiences, performative complexities, and internal economic negotiations of Oroko mourning institutions. Fieldwork spanned a 12-month period, from December 2024 to November 2025, within the Oroko clan in N'dian Division of the South West Region of Cameroon, the primary historical homeland of the Oroko ethnic group. To capture variation across the dialectal and geographic landscape of the clan, purposive sampling was deployed across village communities representing the four principal Oroko subgroups: Balondo, Bima, Ngolo and Batanga. Villages within each subgroup were selected in consultation with traditional authorities to ensure that at least one community from each subgroup was represented in both the interviews and the observed funeral cycles, allowing the findings to be read with an awareness of possible sub-group variation rather than treated as uniform across the entire Oroko population.

Data collection relied on participant observation across seven complete funeral cycles, capturing both public ceremonial performances and private, backstage kinship discussions where financial responsibilities were negotiated. The seven cycles were purposively selected to capture range rather than a single funeral type: they included funerals of ordinary lineage members and of sacred-cult members, across at least three of the four subgroups, and across households of varying economic means, so that the observed material would not be limited to a single socio-economic profile.

This observation was supplemented by 35 semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions, segregated by gender and age cohort, with each focus group comprising between eight and ten participants. The interview sample comprised 12 traditional authorities and village elders, 8 ritual specialists and local clergy, and 15 members of bereaved families actively managing funeral-related debts. Interview participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, on the basis of direct involvement in a recent funeral, willingness to discuss the financial dimensions of mourning, and, for the bereaved-family category, first-hand responsibility for meeting ritual costs.

Interviews were conducted in a mix of Cameroonian English and Pidgin, and local Oroko dialects, depending on the preference of the informant. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the researcher. The data were analysed using inductive thematic coding following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006): transcripts and field notes were first open-coded line by line, after which related codes were grouped into candidate themes through axial coding and constant comparison across interviews, focus groups and observational notes. Candidate themes were reviewed against the full data set and refined into the final analytic themes presented below. Interpretive disagreements were resolved through a second reading of the disputed transcripts against the surrounding field notes, and preliminary themes were discussed with a small number of key informants to check that the interpretation matched their account of events (a form of member checking). Data collection continued until no substantively new themes emerged from successive interviews and observations, indicating that thematic saturation had been reached.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved bereaved families, sacred societies and sensitive financial disclosures, and was conducted with corresponding ethical care. The study did not undergo formal ethical review by a university or other institutional ethics board. In the absence of such review, ethical safeguards were secured directly with the communities involved: explicit permission was obtained from the heads of the relevant sacred societies, the custodians of the land, and the heads of the bereaved families before any observation or interview took place, and no household or ceremony was approached without this prior community-level authorisation. Informed consent was additionally obtained orally and, where appropriate, in writing, from all interview and focus-group participants before data collection, following prior explanation of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the participant's right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given that Cameroonian English, Pidgin and local Oroko dialects were the languages of most interviews, consent procedures were conducted in the participant's preferred language. The author acknowledges that formal institutional ethical clearance is normally expected for research of this kind, and recommends that subsequent studies in this line of research seek clearance from an appropriate university or national ethics review body in advance of fieldwork.

All names attached to interview quotations in this manuscript are pseudonyms; village of residence is retained, where relevant to the analysis, only with the participant's consent, since some accounts touch on debts, sacred societies and spiritual beliefs that could identify individuals within small communities. Where a participant's account risked identifying them even under a pseudonym, identifying village-level detail has been generalised to the subgroup level. Written consent for the publication of the fieldwork photograph reproduced as Figure 1 was obtained from the individuals depicted and from the family whose mokayan is shown.

Findings

The findings are organised around five themes that emerged from the coding process: the transition from communal labour to monetised funeral obligations; the material economy of the mokayan; the social and symbolic functions of the etorotoro and epange-pange; funeral-related household indebtedness; and emerging strategies for negotiating ritual costs. Ethnographic description and participant accounts are presented first within each theme, followed by interpretation.

From Communal Labour to Monetised Funeral Obligations

Historically, mourning within the Oroko clan of Ndian Division functioned as a mechanism of mutual aid and social cohesion. Elders recall that critical tasks, such as grave sinking, were carried out as collective demonstrations of kinship solidarity, compensated only with symbolic offerings of local afofo (a locally distilled spirit) and palm wine. Contemporary ethnographic observations, however, reveal a shift from shared labour toward more formalised financial accounting.

Before the grave-sinking phase begins in present-day Oroko funerals, community committees in the villages observed check attendance records from prior village funerals. Non-participation triggers financial penalties, most often set as the cash equivalent of multiple crates of commercial beer, whisky, local afofo, and palm wine:

"I was fined double for not taking part in the sinking of the grave of others even though I don't live in the village. This was an unexpected added expenditure to my burden and grief. I had to borrow money at a high interest rate from a local njangi (rotating savings and credit association) house to pay the fine. It was hard to accept, but I had to comply in my grief to avoid further sanctions." (Mr. Penda, Ikassa Town village, Balondo, interview, 2025).

In the villages observed for this study, this system of accountability extends beyond the geographic borders of the village itself: it holds urban migrants financially accountable to rural traditional structures, turning the funeral into an occasion of monitored obligation as well as of collective grief.

The Material Economy of the Mokayan

The most financially demanding post-burial institution observed among the Oroko is the mokayan rite. In the funeral cycles and interviews for this study, the mokayan was consistently performed for deceased individuals above the age of eighteen and was described by participants as a binding ancestral obligation on the surviving lineage; whether this threshold and framing hold with the same force across all four Oroko subgroups, and across differences of gender, marital status, religious affiliation and social position, was not fully established by this study and would benefit from targeted comparison in future research. At the centre of the rite is the slaughter and communal consumption of a pig, which at the time of fieldwork cost a minimum of 300,000 FCFA. Participants in this study were consistent that the pig cannot be substituted with another animal such as a cow or a goat; whether this substitution rule holds without exception across all Oroko communities was not independently verified beyond participant report.

The pig is subject to inspection by village elders, notables, and custodians of sacred cults; any perceived deficiency in its size or condition can result in rejection of the offering and the imposition of a second pig as a fine. The financial strain this creates is acutely felt by lower-income households:

“Just for my sister, who was not married, we spent close to 500,000 FCFA for this rite alone. We sold her farmland just to meet the mokayan offering. It was a heavy burden on the family budget, yet we had no choice.” (Mama Bekaka, Mundemba, Bima, interview, 2025).

These costs escalate further when sacred-cult obligations apply. As one informant described:

“My father belonged to a sacred traditional cult, the malle and the ngayan juju dance, and he took part with seven neighbouring villages. We had to feed the sacred cults of all seven villages too. We had to pledge the farm for six years to raise 7,000,000 FCFA for his mourning and funeral rites. It was obligatory, for fear the juju spirits would bring repercussions on us.” (Mr. Ezikiel, Toko village, Ngolo, interview, 2025).

Within the Oroko ritual economy documented here, currency and kinship sentiment are closely intertwined. Participants did not describe the mokayan as an optional or discretionary expense but as material infrastructure understood to be required to honour the melimo (ancestors) while sustaining the family’s standing within the local kinship hierarchy.

Figure 1 Distribution of cooked pig meat (mokayan)



Figure 1: Distribution of cooked pig meat (mokayan) during the mokayan rite.

Source: Author's fieldwork, 2025.

As shown in Figure 1, the cooked pig is sliced into small portions under the supervision of the custodians of the land, and mourners take a share from traditional plantain-leaf trays placed on the ground. It is accompanied with drinks. Elders and custodians ensure that every mourner present at the mourning ground receives a portion.

The Social and Symbolic Functions of the Etorotoro and Epange-Pange

The etorotoro, also known as the four-day (or five-day, among the Batanga) celebration, marks an important transitional phase in the mourning process. It involves the ritual shaving of hair for family members and close friends, as well as the levelling of the grave. These symbolic acts signify the gradual release of the deceased from the liminal state and the mourners' movement toward reintegration into everyday life.

The epange-pange, or twenty-day rite, brings the formal mourning and funeral ceremonies to a close. As early as 5 a.m., the family and close friends proceed to the end of the town road and/or the start of a bridge, symbolically accompanying the deceased on their final journey to the ancestral realm, melimo. Key actions include distributing the deceased's clothing to family members who wish to keep items, removing the bed where the corpse or coffin was laid, sweeping the house with a traditional broom to send off the spirit, and dismantling the palm-branch and Indian bamboo shade. These gestures collectively facilitate closure and the re-establishment of normal social order. The event concludes with food, drinks and dancing, often lasting through the night.

During the twenty days that precede the epange-pange, close family members are traditionally expected to remain within the household and refrain from ordinary economic and social activity. Participants described this restriction as a further point at which financial negotiation enters the mourning process, since family members who cannot remain inactive for the full period, particularly those living and working in cities, must negotiate an early release from the obligation, typically through an agreed material or financial contribution to the family and village elders overseeing the rite:

“For family members not to remain inactive for the twenty days, we had to renegotiate a material and financial arrangement for such freedom, especially for family members who live in the cities.” (Mama Njibili, Lipenja village, Batanga, interview, 2025).

This demonstrates how the etorotoro and epange-pange function not only as symbolic bridges to the ancestors but also as points at which economic negotiation is embedded within kinship hierarchies and spiritual obligation.

Funeral-Related Household Indebtedness

The table below sets out typical monetary obligations across the phases of Oroko funeral rites observed during this study, in FCFA. These figures are researcher-calculated estimates derived from the costs reported by participants and observed across the seven funeral cycles studied; they represent typical ranges rather than a fixed tariff, and are not cumulative across every row, since grave-sinking without fines and grave-sinking with fines are alternative rather than additive costs, as are the ordinary and sacred-cult versions of the mokayan.

S/N	Rite Phase	Key Items	Estimated Cost (FCFA)
1	Shade construction	Drinks, palm wine, food	50,000 – 80,000
2	Grave sinking (normal)	Drinks, beer, goat, food	150,000 – 180,000
3	Grave sinking with fines	Additional drinks, beer, goat and food	200,000 – 300,000
4	Coffin	Drinks	15,000 – 30,000
5	Mokayan (pig rite, ordinary members)	Pig, complementary food and drinks	300,000 – 800,000
6	Mokayan for sacred cult members	Pigs, complementary food and drinks	800,000 – 2,000,000*

7	Etorotoro & Epange-Pange	Entertainment, drinks, food	200,000 – 400,000
	Average total expenditure per funeral		1,000,000 – 4,000,000

Source: Author's fieldwork, 2025.

NB: Costs for sacred-cult mokayan vary considerably with the number of affiliated cult villages involved; the extreme case reported by Mr. Ezikiel's family, in which obligations to seven affiliated villages required a six-year farm pledge to raise 7,000,000 FCFA, lies above this typical range and illustrates how quickly costs can escalate once multiple cult networks are implicated.

Reported total funeral expenditure for the households in this study, ranging from roughly 1,000,000 to 4,000,000 FCFA, is substantial when set against the predominantly agrarian, smallholder livelihoods of rural Ndian Division, where palm plantations and food-crop farming provide the principal source of household income. Several participants linked funeral-related debt and asset loss directly to subsequent strain on household food security, children's school fees, and agricultural productivity, since pledged or sold farmland is no longer available to generate income in following seasons. This suggests that the economic consequences of these obligations extend beyond the funeral period itself into the medium-term wellbeing of the household, a connection that future research with a larger, income-matched sample could quantify more precisely.

Emerging Strategies for Negotiating Ritual Costs

Participants also described the coexistence of Christian and indigenous funeral practices, most often as a church service held alongside the traditional rites. This coexistence was not always described as harmonious: tensions can arise between religious institutions and traditional authorities, particularly in cases involving membership in a sacred cult.

"The church doesn't conceal the rites but rather accompany the bereaved family to mourn for their loss especially if that one was baptized and a communicant. But sometimes we meet disagreement from a Christian who though baptized and a communicant, belong to a sacred cult. The church in such case abandoned the funeral to the cult and no burial sermon is giving". (Pastor Martha, interview, 2025).

At the same time, families adopt adaptive strategies such as cost-sharing, postponement of rituals, and selective participation in certain rites, indicating that while cultural norms remain powerful, they are not applied rigidly but are continuously negotiated within the constraints of economic reality. These patterns are interpreted further in the Discussion below.

Despite these pressures, households and communities in this study were not without recourse. Families drew on njangi and other rotating savings associations to spread costs over time, pooled contributions from urban and diaspora relatives ahead of anticipated funerals, and, in some cases, negotiated reduced fines or extended timelines directly with village committees. Some participants also described selectively incorporating Christian elements, such as a church service alongside traditional rites. Evidence regarding the specific role of rural-urban migration in reshaping obligations is similarly suggestive rather than conclusive in the current data set: migrants' financial accountability to village structures was documented, as in Mr. Penda's account, but the broader claim that migration is transforming the scale or character of obligations across the Oroko population would require a comparative sample of migrant and non-migrant households to substantiate.

Discussion: The Political Economy of Liminality and Spiritual Enlistment

The ethnographic data collected across Ndian Division indicate that mourning within the Oroko clan operates as a heavily monetised ritual economy in which ancestral continuity and material precarity are closely bound together. Rather than reading the mokayan, etorotoro, and epange-pange solely through a functionalist lens of social equilibrium (Durkheim 1995), the findings suggest these sequenced practices combine symbolic meaning with structured financial accounting. The stages of separation, liminality, and reintegration (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969) are marked not only through symbolic actions such as hair shaving or house sweeping, but through the financial arrangements documented above.

As the institutional penalties levied against urban migrants such as Mr. Penda illustrate, the boundaries of Oroko ritual accountability are not confined to the village itself. The tension between public ceremonial performance and private, backstage financial negotiation (Goffman 1959) is consistent with how village elders in the communities studied maintain participation. Money in this setting is not experienced as a secular, individualising force; rather, as Granovetter (1985) and Zelizer (2011) suggest, it is embedded within kinship structures. The half-million-FCFA expenditure by Mama Bekaka's family for a single mokayan pig illustrates how currency is earmarked to preserve lineage standing and honour the melimo.

This material investment can also, more tentatively, be read alongside Comaroff and Comaroff's (1993) account of ritual as a site of negotiation with modernity: the insistence on the mokayan pig may be understood as an assertion of Oroko ontology and continuity in a context of broader socio-economic change, in which the deceased remains understood as an active participant in land fertility and family prosperity. This interpretation is offered as a plausible reading of the pattern observed rather than as a claim directly evidenced by participant testimony, and should be treated with corresponding caution.

This same material investment carries a real cost. Consistent with Fombad's (2021) account of the financialisation of grief in Anglophone Cameroon, the findings here show how these obligations can produce acute strain for lower-income households. When families such as Mr. Ezikiel's are required to pledge farmland for several years to meet

ritual debts, mourning takes on an economic dimension beyond its role in grief resolution (Afolabi 2014; Walter 2015): households with less liquid capital appear to bear a disproportionate share of the burden. The adaptive strategies described above, cost-sharing through njangi networks and, in a smaller number of cases, selective incorporation of Christian practice, indicate that families are actively working to manage these obligations, even as the underlying obligations themselves remain largely intact.

The coexistence of customary rites and Christian practice, including the tension described by Pastor Martha between church accompaniment and sacred-cult obligation, points to a further layer of institutional negotiation beyond the purely economic: religious and traditional authority do not always align on how a funeral should proceed, and families navigating dual membership must reconcile both. Read together, these findings support treating Oroko funeral rites as socio-economic institutions in which ritual authority, communal ethics, religious affiliation and economic pragmatism are worked out simultaneously, rather than as a fixed cultural template applied uniformly to every death.

Conclusion

Mourning and funeral rites remain a central pillar of Oroko cultural life, providing infrastructure for communal solidarity and cosmological continuity in the South West Region of Cameroon. This study set out to document the structure of these rites, examine their socio-cultural significance, and analyse their economic consequences for bereaved households; the findings show that the mokayan, etorotoro and epange-pange cannot be understood solely as symbolic or religious practices, since they carry substantial and, for some households, destabilising financial obligations.

For these institutions to remain sustainable without pushing rural households into prolonged debt or the loss of productive assets, several practical avenues merit consideration by traditional councils, religious institutions and diaspora networks. These include community-based funeral solidarity mechanisms that pool costs across a wider kin or village network rather than concentrating them on the immediate bereaved family; collectively agreed ceilings on contributions and fines, so that penalties for non-attendance or perceived deficiencies do not compound an already heavy burden; targeted provisions for economically vulnerable families, such as reduced obligations or extended payment arrangements administered by village committees; and structured dialogue among traditional authorities, religious leaders, women's and youth associations, and diaspora networks on culturally acceptable ways to moderate the scale of funeral expenditure without abandoning the practices' social and spiritual functions. Future ethnographic research should track how these negotiations evolve across the different Oroko subgroups and diaspora nodes, and should aim to quantify, with a larger and income-matched sample, the medium-term household consequences of funeral-related debt.

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