

The Changing of African Traditional Celebration of the Living Dead and the Effects of Cremation in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the effects of cremation on African traditional celebrations of the living dead in Kenya. The study examines bereavement and mourning practices in communities, with a particular focus on traditional modes of mourning, grieving, and remembering the living dead. According to the study, African traditions, the spread of Christianity, the influence of the Hindu culture, and Islamic beliefs all conflict with the changing culture that is slowly embracing cremation. The methodology for this study involved secondary data. The conclusion drawn from the study is that even as the scarcity of land pushes societies to consider the option of cremation, cultural and religious perceptions have painted the practice unethical and term it “un-African.” In Kenya, the majority of the population still opts to bury their dead in their ancestral homes in order to perform ritual and religious burial rites.

Keywords: African, Traditional Celebrations, the Living Dead, Cremation, Hindu Culture

INTRODUCTION

Death is often looked at from both religious and cultural perspectives in Africa. Based on this system of belief, those who are dead are part of the community and reincarnate through the newborns. Africans seem to have more objections to cremation and give little serious thought to this means for disposing of the bodies of the dead. There are different possibilities: it could be because of a resistance to major innovation in the sacred rituals and secular customs surrounding death or the emotional reaction against the thought of burning the dead. The rapid destruction of the body or mental picture of the process deters some persons from giving consideration to cremation. Africans traditionally hold during cremation the view that the sacredness of the body belongs to God, and one does not tamper with God’s creation (Masango, 2005).

African traditional cultural practices do not have any form of cremation. The living dead, and ancestors have influence among the living, and demand to be respected. They are always accorded respect through proper burial rites in a grave that is constantly taken care of. The traditionalists hold that cremation in African belief is a taboo because it is associated with the complete destruction that interferes with the concept of afterlife. The interpretation is that cremation stops a person’s spirit from joining the living dead and the ancestors. It inflicts suffering and entails a sad disconnection between the living and the living dead. Depending on various cultures in Africa, the spirit remains part of family within the community. As a result, most graves of the deceased are located within or near homesteads in various communities. Cremation is considered “un-African” by cultural and religious perceptions, a practise borrowed from Hinduism. The Zulu community in South Africa believes a deceased relative joins the ancestors in watching over the living family members, which is a common belief among the majority of African societies. The dead are involved in times of need by either their family or community this affirms the reason why cremation is not embraced fully among African societies. Funeral rites and ceremonies draw attention to this permanent separation, and particular attention is paid to the funeral rites to avoid undue offense to the living dead.

The introduction of new technologies such as mortuaries and photography, cemeteries and cremation have had major effects on funerary rites, as have social turmoil and diseases in some areas. In Kenya, some communities, such as Ameru, used to throw dead bodies in the bush. Persons who were expected to die were thrown in the bush with a long rope tied to them, and after a few days, the rope was pulled towards the homestead to confirm if the person was dead. However, if the sick person responds by pulling the rope back, the person will be returned home with the certainty that he or she will recover and live. But the majority of the Kenyan communities buried the deceased. In this paper, we detail how these interrelated changes have significantly and, in some cases, radically transformed funerary practices among Kenyan communities. The study of celebrating the living dead in Kenya is thus important because some aspects of culture are revealed only when there is death in society. This study thus explores the ways in which the African traditional celebration of the living dead is conducted and the societal responses to cremation.

Traditional African Beliefs in Rituals and Death

According to Arinze (2001), death in Africa is a departure, not the complete annihilation of a person. The deceased only moves to join the company of the departed. The only change here is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit or soul moves to another state of life (Nwokoha quoted Arinze, 2020:73). Rituals are needed to progress into the other phase of life, which is called the hereafter. The Africans' belief in life after death is so strong that they can communicate with deceased relatives. Mbiti (1975:133) affirms that "death marks a physical separation of the individual from human beings. In this regard, a person is made up of two parts: the body and the soul. Meticulous care is taken to fulfil the funeral rites and avoid causing offence to the departed. Death rites are performed to send the departed peacefully away, to sever his links with the living, and to ensure that normal life continues among the survivors (Nwokoha, 2020:74).

Thus, if a family feels that its living dead are dissatisfied, it immediately takes measures to harmonize the situation and avoid its deterioration to the point of actual death. Conversely, the Lugbara of Sudan believe that the leaders can invoke the ancestors and the spirits to cause harm to those who contravene societal taboos (Douglas, 1988). Munday (1981) and Kavulavu (2014) argue that among the Luyia of Kenya, the living dead are actively involved in matters concerning the living. It is through the living dead that the spirit world becomes personal to human beings (Mbiti, 1969:83). The living dead return to human families from time to time and share meals with them, but only symbolically. When they appear, they are generally recognized by name as "so and so." They inquire about family affairs, and they may even warn of impending danger or rebuke those who have failed to follow their special instructions. If the living dead were improperly buried or were offended before they died, it is believed that they will bring suffering and misfortunes to their living relatives. People are, therefore, careful to follow the proper practices and customs regarding the burial or other means of disposing off dead bodies (Geertz, 1964). This implies that most societies in Africa believe that life continues after death, and this is shown in some societies through the pouring of libations on the dead. Furthermore, it explains why, when a person dies, he or she is described as having gone home. Such a person specifically moves to join the company of ancestors.

The preference in most African cultures is for burial. It is a common belief that when people die, they join their ancestors. Thus, the body of the living dead should be respected. The practise of cremation in Africa is taboo. It is widely accepted that after death, life continues, and the living dead continue to be part of their families and communities. Therefore, cremation is associated with the complete destruction of a person, including their spirit. The next world is only separated by virtue of being invisible to human beings yet very present in the everyday affairs of the community (Mbiti, 2015). Africa's cultural settings believe in the afterlife. Cremation stops one's spiritual form from joining the ancestors. It also exposes their loved ones to spiritual and psychological suffering. Thus, the common way of disposing of the dead is by burying them in the ground, that is, up to five to six feet deep or deeper. There are customs associated with the grave and the way the body is supposed to be laid on the grave. The side on which the body is laid depends on the sex of the dead person, which is reminiscent of the sexual position of either gender. The fear of dying a bad death

is very significant to every adherent of the African Traditional Religion.

Death rituals were religiously arranged to promote good behaviour (Nwokoha, 2020:76). Death rituals ensure the comfort of the dead person during his journey. Many societies in Africa frown at the deaths of children and youth because they were unable to complete their cyclic rites of passage. This will equally destroy their chance of becoming ancestors themselves and possible re-incarnation because such a person did not contribute much to society's well-being. Many of the African societies are patriarchal in nature, hence the rites and rituals for men are more pronounced than those for women. When titled men like chiefs or the elderly die, many cows, goats, and chicken will be killed as a mark of honor to the deceased. These rites are not specific, but they must be memorable. People who commit suicide or die at night in mysterious circumstances are buried at night in an unusual ceremony that is done by specific people. They are buried at night because the way they ended their lives is not acceptable and further to avoid bad luck or demons haunting the remaining members of the family. The night also gives them a chance to perform a ritual that condemns the deceased for committing suicide and makes sure they don't haunt any person who is alive.

Prior to the invention of mortuaries, bodies of the deceased were preserved by placing the naked body on top of wet sand or charcoal with a 10-cent coin on the forehead, which is said to have worked because the body was good for up to a week before burial (Namuliro, 2014). Animal skins were used to wrap bodies, which were later put in reeds that acted as the casket. It takes three days for a child's funeral and about a week for the funeral of an adult to be held, and during this whole period, people usually camp in the home of the deceased to sooth the bereaved. Weeping and crying out loud when the news of the death of a loved one is announced is still practiced and everyone is expected to wail and weep on top of their voices to show their love for the deceased. As such, mourning and funeral dirges reflect the feeling of temporary physical separation. They are articulated in a sorrowful tone, narrating the good deeds of the departed, his genealogy, his praise names, and his farewell, only to show how the dead will be physically missed. In the effort to accord good escort and farewell to the deceased, colourful funeral ceremonies are organized with great dance as well as the display of some culturally heroic eulogizing and incantations, particularly for the elderly and heroes / heroines.

The remembrance of the dead is also paramount in some communities in Kenya. Where after, the dead have been buried, a date is set for memorial services. During the memorial service, there is enough food and drinks in plenty as they celebrate the life of the deceased. Personal belongings of the deceased are shared among family members. Traditional drumming grace the occasion as the family reminisces about all the merry moments they had with the deceased. Other communities expect bereaved people to shave their heads and brows (Namuliro, 2014).

Other religions

The Bible is silent on cremation and neither permits nor forbids it. Denominations view cremation differently as a matter of conscience and an individual's choice. The Roman Catholic belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is influenced by a belief in the eternal future of the body and soul. Cremation, according to the Greek Orthodox, is discretionary and the destruction of the purpose for which God ordained and created the body. Judaism strictly forbids cremation because the body and the soul have to reunite after death. Hinduism considers cremation an offering to be made as a sacrifice to Agni, the God of fire. It also quickens the separation of the body from the mind. Cremation is forbidden by Islamic law because it diminishes the dignity of the human body, which is incompatible with equal respect in both life and death. Cremation is supported by Buddhism, which believes that life and death are part of a cycle of reincarnation in which the deceased person is liberated from all desires and notions of self and can achieve enlightenment.

Technological changes and the material culture of death in Kenya

As colonisation stimulated increased urbanisation in many areas of the continent, the subsistence activities

of elites changed, rural-urban relations progressively evolved, and new social strata developed within the cities as a new “formal” system of education arose and economic opportunities and the job market diversified. The postcolonial regimes added still more to this “cultural complexity” with the end of colonial impediments for new African elites and the appearance of new African ruling castes (Ukwamedua: 2018: 17).

The cities’ specific colonial and postcolonial histories help us understand African funerary practices. In Kenya, the massive long distance migrations of workers engineered by British colonial authorities helped establish the local working class to the extent that an important part of the urban population today has only loose ties with their rural origins. In the Mount Kenya region, for instance, more and more bodies are not brought back to their towns or villages of origin but are simply buried in the city to which they migrated. However, new migrants maintain strong ties with their places of origin, but are becoming weaker as the generation of those who migrated to the new colonial and postcolonial economic centres recedes.

Kenyans who live in the western part of the country are often expected to provide the required resources for large funerals or secondary rites, and thus new communication technologies also play an influential role in organising funerals. In many places, funeral rites, as well as succession rites still serve their long-lasting function of drawing people close together and reproducing society, as well as forming part of an international reaction against social change that threatens to weaken clan solidarities and moral orders. Being buried “at home” is still very important in Kenya. Membership in an association is still often tightly associated with funerals and support for members facing death-related expenses. In urban contexts, the roles that associations of people from the same region play, notably in bringing corpses “home” for burial, have been documented in various regions, including the West, East, and Southern Africa. By the 1960s and throughout the 20th Century, many communities in Kenya could not allow their loved ones to be buried far away from their indigenous homes. Burying the corpses in a cemetery was and continues to be thought to deprive deceased the opportunity to interact and associate with the rest of their family and the community as a whole. To them, such an act would be a great taboo. The announcement of deaths has been progressively transformed by developments in public media, from printed obituaries in newspapers (restricted to a literate elite) to posters publicising funerals in towns, as well as the growing prevalence of obituaries on radio and even on television in several African countries. In parallel with the development of African diasporas in the last decades (and the growing movements for corpses to be “brought back home” from the Western world to Africa), electronic obituaries now appear on the websites of immigrant associations or churches.

Modern communication facilitates such activities as funeral advertisements through the use of printed documentation, mass media, mobile phones, and internet announcements, enabling funerals to be advertised far and wide. In recent decades, the advancement of printing capabilities and technologies has also actively encouraged the development of new culture. The culture of living death, involving the distribution to funeral or post-burial ceremony attendees of pieces of clothing and T-shirts printed with images of the departed member of the family (or, more recently, similarly printed plastic bowls and fans). Less directly personalized, now, families and the social networks of the deceased have worn uniforms during funerals or at a later event, which offers a novel way of marking group affiliation as well as a new material way to evoke memories of the dead.

Morgue was gradually put in place. There was a major technological change that is influencing African ways of caring for the living dead when mortuaries were gradually adopted in various regions of the continent. For the last few decades, mortuaries have enabled kith to modify the time structure of funerals and to delay burials for weeks or even months. The extra time allows people to gather resources, communicate the news to distant parties, and organise a grand occasion for the burial of the corpse. This new funeral time structure has, of course, had ramifications for the entire cycle of “traditional” rites, at least

in the regions where it was maintained. However, it has been unequally appropriated throughout Africa, and the existence of mortuaries does not necessarily imply delayed burials. In many Muslim regions and countries, for instance, delayed burials are still avoided since burying the deceased as soon as possible is a fundamental Islamic duty. In Kenya, the main motivation to avoid delaying burials seems to be economic destitution, since the huge majority of households have neither the resources to gather and organise grand events nor enough to pay expensive mortuary fees in the city's "economy of precariousness." In many regions, the internalised norms and social pressures of today often convince the vast majority of social actors to organize obsequies beyond their means. The desire for family prestige and status is undoubtedly a major driver of the extravagances seen at many funerals in modern Africa.

Worsening the financial situation during mourning is the fact that Kenyans do not like preparing for death in advance, for instance, by saving for their funeral costs, because contemplating death is taboo and breeds bad luck. The western world, on the other hand, takes it as a norm to save for their funerals so that they save their kin from carrying their burial burden. Families continue to suffer as a result of this expensive culture, as death zaps the life out of individuals and places the relatives on financial hold. (Chepkoech: 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic, to some extent, changed the norms, with health protocols demanding fewer guests at the burial events and sometimes no food to be served to prevent the spread of the virus. Sunlife 2021 observed that the pandemic changed perceptions of the funeral industry dramatically, to the extent that it is now considered different. Most notably, direct cremations, where family members do not attend the cremation but can arrange their own, separate service, are becoming ever more popular. "This increase in direct cremations cannot be solely because of the pandemic." "But the lower cost and the fact that many people couldn't organise a more traditional funeral due to government regulations are likely to have been significant factors" (Chepkoech: 2021). The church, on the other hand, declared that "cremation was cruel, barbarous, inhuman, and dishonouring to the body, and it was assumed to be subverting the faithful" (Musango: 2005). The coffin is of course the result of western and Christian influence, but its universal adoption seems to be connected with the new practice of viewing the corpse and having a large number of people attend the burial. In other words, the coffin can be seen as the responsibility of the immediate kin because of the public nature of the funeral; they are showing an audience of concerned outsiders that they are taking proper care of the corpse according to new standards of care.

World religions and the changing meanings of funerals

In Kenya, the quick disposal of bodies in the bush was common among the various ethnic groups such as the Maasai, Ameru, and others, along with strong notions of fear of the corpse and pollution. However, the fear surrounding death pollution has not necessarily been equally strong everywhere, and there may have been early changes in notions about death in areas where religious cosmologies have been influenced for centuries by contacts with the broader "Atlantic World." Delayed burial (along with mortuaries, as discussed above) also indirectly indicates that corpses are not surrounded with much fear, as has historically been the case in many regions. The decline of fear is also manifested in the decline of purification rituals, which in previous times most often involved sweeping, washing, or shaving, and which today have generally changed their focus from eliminating the presence of death to other concerns such as socialization. This decline surrounding the potential for contagion related to death in many areas of the continent where these religions have taken hold is rather remarkable. In general, one sees this shift in the mortuary cycle, where the initial fear of the dead has declined, while the hope for benevolence of ancestors remains, which may also involve a stronger focus on celebration. This marks a significant change as many societies and cultures around the world have long held (and some still hold) strong fear of the spirits of the recently deceased.

In precolonial Africa, the social ranking of an ancestor was most often based on age, gender, marital status and especially the existence of children. This was reflected in beliefs about the immortality of the dead and

thus also in funeral rites. The unmarried men, children, women (especially those without children) and those whose death were defined as “bad deaths” were denied immortality as ancestors. This often meant minimal or nonexistence burial rites and no secondary rites for them. In general the influence of world religions has caused a certain universalization of the afterlife. With Islam and Christianity, individuals could be sure on the one hand that their religious community would arrange their burials. On the other hand, the Christian promise of an afterlife was attractive to women and to other who were not offered afterlife under the traditional cosmology. Part of the attraction of the world religions, particularly for people of lower status, has been in these world religions’ funerary rites, the final statement of a person’s life.

Funerals in most nations in Africa are organized to mourn and celebrate the life of the deceased. There are many elaborate events, often the most important events in a person’s life, to which families devote vast amounts of resources, as well as lavish events for large crowds. The people who attend a funeral may reveal information about the deceased’s personality financial status, community standing, and social status prior to his or her death. Most funeral ceremonies in Kenya take place on weekends, usually on Fridays and Saturdays to ensure the presence of more mourners, well-wishers, and elaborate events. However, in the western world, funerals are very private ceremonies, reserved for family and the closest friends of the deceased (Abidemi: 2020: 81).

Kenya has three major religions: Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). These religions have unique burial rites and traditions. The Christian community leaves the deceased in the mortuary for days, weeks, or even several months, while making preparations for a “befitting” burial. After the burial of the aged parents or rich individuals, there is heavy feasting accompanied by singing and dancing to a mix of African rhythms. Many families return a few years later for a “death remembrance celebration,” which is essentially a second burial or memorial in honour of the dead. They perform rituals and organise celebrations during which family members and friends gather to celebrate. This practise is common among the Luo and Luhya communities

According to Islamic law (“Shariah”), the body should be buried as soon as possible from the time of death, which means that funeral planning and preparations begin immediately. Embalming and cosmetology are not allowed unless required by state or federal law. Because of the prohibition on embalming and the urgency with which the body must be buried, it is not possible to transport the body from one country to another. Cremation is forbidden for Muslims. Generally, the mourning period lasts 40 days, but depending on the degree of religiousness in the family, the period may be much shorter. Crying and weeping at the time of death, at the funeral, and at the burial are all acceptable forms of expression. Wailing and shrieking, tearing of clothing and breaking of objects, and expressing disbelief in Allah, on the other hand, are prohibited (Abidemi: 2020: 81).

Cremation views from culture and society in Kenya

Corpses are not disposed of in the same way in every human society and community. Some are either cremated or buried according to some form of premediated cultural tradition or some religious and sociological ideologies. In places such as the US, India, Nepal, China, and Varanasi, cremation is practiced. In India and Nepal, for example, all dead bodies are cremated. Some of those ashes are buried, and some are kept in urns in people’s homes. However, many are lost in the mountains, the river, or the sea. Bodies are rarely cremated in African societies (Biwul: 2014; 18). It is a general phenomenon among African peoples to bury the dead in their ancestral land. Those that die in some African countries other than the country of their ancestry, and even those who are domiciled outside the continent, when they die in the diaspora, their corpses are brought “home” for proper burial in their ancestral lands. For instance, when Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and Nelson Mandela (Madiba) of South Africa died, they were buried in their ancestral lands.

Cremation views from culture and society in Kenya

However, the impact of modernization is causing some concerning paradigm shifts in this African philosophy of burial in one's ancestral land; a ceremonial practise that goes along with its funeral rites. For instance, in some communities in Kenya, the corpse of a deceased family member may remain in the mortuary for a very long period of time to allow for such elongated preparations for the funeral celebration. Rather, such flamboyant ceremonies and rituals have become an avenue to display the wealth and fame of the family of the deceased. But the underlying motivation for such a paradigm shift as putting up an expensive funeral is to show off and impress people rather than out of cultural respect for the dead. A lot of the waste and misuse of resources that one notices during funerals and other ceremonies in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa is also for the same reason. It would have been sociologically and economically more productive if the sponsors of such expensive funerals had put their resources to a more meaningful use by going back to their village and digging a borehole, building a school or clinic for the community, or even giving scholarships to enable the children of the less privileged to get an education. Their public display of wealth during funeral ceremonies to show off is only to achieve self-ego, which in a way helps no one when the money could have been used to help the person or the family have a better life.

Questions linger in the hearts of many people: is cremation enshrined in the Bible since the majority of Kenyans are Christians? Is it holy? Should the church embrace it? Does it resonate well with African cultural values and ethics? Funerals are guided by the African view of the existence of life after death and the role of the ancestor among the living. Christianity, too, shares the same concept of life after death. However, the Bible and African Traditional Religion do not agree on the entire cremation model (Esilaba: 2021). "Cremation" comes from the verb "cremate," which means "to reduce to ashes by burning." (Esilaba: 2021; 317). Though the practice of cremation is starting to receive attention in Africa, it presents the fact that both Christians and African cultures should seek research on the topic. Many church patriarchs are believed to have written more about death, burial, and resurrection. Their faith in the resurrection of the body could have informed them that they are discouraging the practise of cremation, for it was believed to be a pagan act (Esilaba: 2021; 318). The Bible demonstrates that biblical characters exhibited great care and respect for the bodies of their loved ones. The Bible (both the Old and New Testaments) contains no specific direction on the concept of cremation.

This would lead one to wonder how you can return to dust when a body is cremated. It is thus, important to note that the stand of the church has influenced people to view cremation as a negative way of disposing the body, which explains why cremation is a problem in many communities in Kenya, it has been observed that cremation is one of the options now available for the final disposition of the body at death, especially for the rich. The country has experienced some prominent people being cremated. For example, in 1996, former minister: Peter Okondo, was cremated. In 2011, the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate: Professor Wangari Maathai, was cremated in the Eastleigh crematorium according to her wishes. Later, her ashes were buried at the Institute of Peace and Environmental Science. In April 2018, the former politician and multiparty hero: Kenneth Matiba, was cremated at the Lang'ata crematorium. In 2019, the late Safaricom CEO: Bob Collymore, was cremated according to his wishes at Kariokor Hindu Crematorium. Further, in January 2022, former politician and Attorney General: Charles Njonjo was cremated.

Cremation is not: an African concept in its originally. African cultures prefer the burial of their loved ones. They believe that when people die, they are promoted to the world of the living dead and ancestors. Therefore, the body of the dead should be treated with respect so that they transition to the next stage and arrive as a whole (Esilaba: 2021; 322). Though not of African origin, cremation has become common in many African countries, and cemeteries set out for the public are considered to have reached full capacity.

The increase in population, especially in the city, puts a lot of pressure on land, hence making it difficult to dedicate more land for cemeteries. As a result, people are only left with cremation as an option. In Kenya, the influence of the Hindu culture has seen some people accept cremation (Esilaba: 2021; 322). The

majority of people, however, continue to bury their dead in their ancestral homes in order to perform ritual and religious burial rites.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that, in the historical context, cremation encounters massive opposition with support for burial as the most favoured form of disposing of the body. Furthermore, many Kenyan ethnic groups still find it difficult to accept cremation, there are possibilities of it being a new idea embraced by the elites and a few rich people whose agenda is unclear. It is a result of the so-called modernity and civilization of the current world. Though a few have already undergone cremation, rejected by Kenyans who value the dead and the afterlife. The study recommends that there is need for a dialogue between the church and African Traditional Religion and that they should frequently talk about the subject for members to understand its implications for the family, society, and generations yet to come from a historical perspective.

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