

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BURIAL RITES IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

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Abstract

Death is the end of human existence and it comes with a sober reflection. However, the distortion attached to how burial rites are done in contemporary times comes with its attendant implications especially among Christians and Muslims and this calls for urgent attention. It is evident that the contemporary funeral rites are alien to both Christianity and Islam culminating in deviation from the acceptable norms. This piece therefore unveils the acceptable procedures for burial rites in Christianity and Islam and unravels the reason for the new trend in contemporary time. It is established that if this new trend is not addressed, it will impel serious misconception of this practice in Christianity and Islam, thereby distorting established norms. The paper recommends how burial rites are conducted in tandem with Biblical and Qur'anic standard.

Keywords: Levaya, al-Janazah, Burial rites in Christianity, Burial rites in Islam

Introduction: Death and Trends in Burial Rites

Burial rite is the last respect accorded to a dead person both culturally and religiously. After the death of a person, the next thing, universally, is to lay the body to rest to avoid decomposition of the body which can become hazardous to the health of people in the society. The idea of putting the corpse in a mortuary is to preserve the body temporarily from decomposing. The universality and continuity of death as a phenomenon that is common to mankind has been revealed by the works of scholars such as A. O. Imasogie, E. B. Idowu, P. Badham, E. I. Metuh, J. O. Awolalu, M. Y. Nafoda, J. S. Mbiti, R. J. Lifton, J. F. Danielli, S. O. Abogunrin and S. N. Adiele. Death is inevitable to everyone on earth; both male and female, young and old, rich and poor. It is observed that death is not the end of man; rather, it is a transition to another life in the spirit world. Furthermore, death does not thwart man's life or personality, it is a change in man's condition.

Africans believe that it is the physical or mortal body of a person that is considered to be lost in this world. This is because the spirit of man departs the body and moves to the abode of the ancestors, where it continues its existence.

Some scholars like J.O. Lucas, P. Mckenzie E. D. Adelowo, W. R. Bascon, S. K Olaleye, G. Smith and O. A. Oyeshile have averred that death is unavoidable for everyone whether one likes it or not. It is viewed as a journey from this earth to a better place of abode. Responses to death and the rituals and beliefs surrounding it tend to vary widely across the world. In all societies, however, the issue of death brings into focus certain fundamental cultural values. The various rituals and ceremonies that are performed are primarily concerned with the explanation, validation and integration of people's view of the world. The response of Christians to death and their views on burial rites differ from that of Muslims and that of the traditional Yoruba society. People's disposition to life and death varies and that is why it is held that:

Africans universally believe that life is sacred and that every person had a right to proper treatment, care in life and death. The vast majority of Africans believed in treating the ill, the injured, the dying and the dead with care. However, different African communities - ethnic, regional, and religious, to mention a few traditionally dealt with matters of illness, death, bereavement, and mourning in different ways. The way the Yoruba people of Nigeria mourned, grieved and remembered their dead is not always the same as that of the Gikuyu of Kenya.

However, the most important thing that demands immediate attention of the bereaved family is to ensure that the dead body is laid to rest properly, while all other ceremonies are secondary. On the contrary, some other people tend to pay more attention to the burial ceremony and so, they take more time to prepare properly for a flamboyant burial ceremony as they make efforts to get money and all necessary items that they would need for funeral funfair.

Biblical View on Burial (*Levaya*) Rites

The idea of burial custom seems to be abstract in the primitive era of the existence of man. This is because, from the time of Adam and Eve, till the days of Abraham, the Scripture is silent as to how the early ancestors dispose their dead. The first explicit reference to burial is in conjunction with the death of Sarah (Genesis 23:3-4). The concept of death is viewed by Christians from the purview of The Holy

Bible. Christians view death as an act of God, which according to Him was ordained to bring the whole of humanity back to Himself. God is the author of death because He created man and equally has the capacity to kill man (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 12:7; Psalm 104:29). No man has power over death and man can only die once with no hope of reincarnation (Ecclesiastes 8:8; Hebrews 9:27). Christians are admonished not to weep or express sadness over the demise of a fellow Christian because of the hope and assurance of life hereafter with God. More so, Christians believe that dying is the end of a person's physical presence on earth, but that the soul lives on in the afterlife. This is one reason why Christians have a strong belief in the afterlife and much of their lives is directed at achieving eternal peace in Heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). This is why Christian funeral rite is such that is wrapped with hope and joy for the community of believers. The hope of meeting again hereafter and to be together again in heaven. This is the kind of hope that is laced with death for Christians.

In the Jewish custom, an authentic evidence of how burial is conducted is explicitly portrayed by their culture and religion. Jodi has substantiated this fact by saying that the Gospel accounts accurately reflect the manner in which the Jews of ancient Jerusalem buried their dead. This fact shows that Jewish culture and Christianity are interwoven. It must also be noted that Jewish burial rites was at par with Christianity, perhaps, that may be the reason it was reflected in the gospel account as justified by Jodi. Fraga asserts that from a deep view of ancient Jewish burial practices, the dead were shown respect, and their bodies anointed and buried, as was Jesus' body after the crucifixion, with great care in anticipation of the final resurrection. Funerary rite had its unique pattern and nature in which the dead body was laid in the grave in the Jewish culture.

Furthermore, Wayne has noted that burial places were located outside of the cities (Matthew 8:28; 27:7, 52-53). En route from the home to the tomb, the deceased was generally carried on a bier (Luke 7:14), which was probably a wooden slab. Some of these burial traditions predated Christianity because some of it were imported from the Jewish culture, as religion and culture are often almost inseparable. The funerary practices were done and carried on by the early believers, which has become the Christian funeral rites and custom.

Burial (*Levaya*) Rites in the Early Church

Historically, in the early Christian communities, the third, seventh, and thirtieth day were memorial days, in which there is a ceremony for the dead. There was

also a memorial service on the anniversary of a person's death and each year thereafter. The date of a saint's death was considered their "birthday" into eternal life and was thus celebrated annually. A saint's day of memorial on the liturgical calendar has always been on the day of their death, not their birth as it is with our modern custom. The third day memorial is clearly a reference to the resurrection; however, there is a modern trend in some parts of Judaism to reduce the period of Shiva to three days.

Traditional Palestinian preference for prompt burial continued throughout the first century. In Mark 5:38, funeral preparations for Jairus's daughter began right away, and in John 11, Lazarus was buried on the day he died. According to Mishnah Sanhedrin 6.6, a corpse should be kept un-buried overnight only on rare occasions. This makes it clear that from the very beginning, the early Christians buried their dead without any delay or merry making. It noted that as soon as death was certain, the deceased's eyes will be closed; the corpse will be washed, and then wrapped and bound.

Thus, male relatives and friends would carry the corpse in a procession toward the place of interment, accompanied by friends, neighbours, and other relatives. Such processions are described in the New Testament (Luke 7:12). Some Mishnaic texts suggest that processions are occasionally halted in order to "make lamentation" for the dead. Members of the immediate family will place the body in the tomb while friends and relatives wait outside. Personal properties of the deceased might be placed in the tomb alongside the body. It is evident that archaeologists have found such properties like an inkwell, jewellery, combs and sandals.

More so, the ceremony of primary burial seems to sometimes include spoken words in appreciation of the dead and in sympathy for the bereaved. After the primary burial, the procession that went to the grave site will return to the family home where expression of condolences continued. Literary sources such as the Gospel of John chapter 11, affirms that rituals of death continue for the first seven days, the immediate family remains at home mourning. After seven days, most aspects of ordinary life are resumed. The death of a parent was an exception: children mourned their parents for a full year, until the time of secondary burial.

Christian View on Burial (*Levaya*) Rites

Burial rite in Christianity is a procedure by which a dead person is being given the final care and funerary farewell. A Christian funeral is a solemn and celebratory

event meant to unite the important people in the life of the deceased. It is where family and friends can mourn a loved one while celebrating his journey home. Christian funeral services are also seen to serve these purposes; to pray for the soul of the deceased as well as to offer comfort and support to the bereaved. The order for funeral rite has been arranged in three sections: The Order for a Vigil keeping, otherwise called wake-keep for the Deceased, The Order for a Funeral Mass otherwise call Funeral Worship service, and The Order for Funerals outside Mass, Funeral Worship service held at the Grave-side.

The Christian funeral takes a religious and solemn form. It is a time when all immediate and extended family members come together to accord a dead person a funerary rite and demonstrate their love and care for the person, even at the point of death. The period is employed to celebrate a life well-lived by the deceased and ponder over the mortality of humanity. In moments like this, Christians pray for a peaceful rest for the soul of the deceased in the Lord. Hence, Christian funerary rite has a systematic order as postulated by scholars and the procedures are;

- a. Cleaning/Bathing the Body
- b. Preparing the Body for Burial
- c. Funeral Wake-Keep
- d. Funeral Worship Service
- e. Final Burial at the Grave
- f. Funeral Prayer at the Deceased's Home.

A deep view at the Christian burial rite from the inception of Christianity shows that there was no religious ethos that postulates merry making funeral as a rite in procedure.

Burial (*Al-Janazah*) Rites in the Qur'an

Death in Islam is inevitable according to the Holy Qur'an, "*Everyone shall taste death (Qur'an 3:185)*". According to Islam, all creatures are destined to die. Death means the permanent separation of the soul from the body. The Holy Qur'an states thus, "Allah takes away the souls of men at the time of their death, and of those also that are not yet dead, during their sleep. And then, He withholds those against which He has decreed death, and sends back others till an appointed time. In that, surely, are signs for a people who reflect." After death comes the preparations to bury the dead person according to Islamic injunctions. The concept of burial rite in Islam is one that is viewed and performed with much care and sacredness. In the generation after the deaths of Muhammad and Fatima, Muslims tried to resolve

the problem of handling a corpse and to sanction or transform everyday urban manners and modes of social interactions. This is because prior to this time, there was no record found which dictates how Islamic burial (*Al-Janazah*) rite were conducted. Hence, the death and burial rites accorded Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatima set the pace and model for Islamic funeral rite. The Islamic faith has a unique set of beliefs towards death and dying. This can be seen in their practices and attitudes towards funerals. This uniqueness is outlined in tandem with the custom of the Arabs and Islamic injunctions. In Islam, burial for a dead person typically takes not more than two days, but it is frequently within one day. For that reason, there is also no preliminary viewing, ceremony, or eulogy. Embalming is not performed and there is no autopsy unless required by law. These restrictions were occasioned based on the Islamic view of death.

Burial (*Al-Janazah*) Rites during the Time of the Early Muslims

The Islamic faith has guidelines regarding funeral services and how long after death a Muslim is buried. Islamic funeral arrangements begin immediately after the death of a loved one, since according to Islamic law, they must be buried as soon as possible. History has shown that the burial (*Al-Janazah*) practices in Islam was followed by the early Muslims beginning with the first caliph, through the Middle Ages and carried on by the succeeding Muslims. Muslims believe that the good deeds they do in life will be rewarded with entry into Paradise on the Day of Judgment. On this day, they believe that the dead will rise and will either live in peace in Paradise or suffer in Hell. Although, this is a common belief among Muslims, there are many different sects within Islam, predominantly the Sunnis and the Shi'ites, the rituals and beliefs may vary from each other. However, the following are the general laid down procedures for burial rite in Islam:

- a. Death Struggle
- b. Washing of the Body (Ghusl)
- c. Shrouding of the Dead Body (*Al-Kafan*)
- d. Funeral Prayer (*Salat Al-Janazah*)
- e. Laying the Corps in a Grave (*Al-Dafin*)
- f. Mourning during Funeral (*Al-Hidad*)
- g. Meals during Funeral.

Contemporary Trends in Burial Rites among Christians and Muslims

The modern funeral rite is changing from the religiously acceptable procedures. In the past, funerals were conducted generally in church buildings and were

sacred occasions, characterized by the singing of hymns, prayers, some reflection upon the life of the deceased, and exhortation from the Scriptures. But things are changing considerably in some places but not necessarily for the better. From the Islamic point of view, recent ton in Islamic burial rite also reflects that due to non-Islamic influences, Muslims have drifted away from the established practice of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and his Companions (may Allah be pleased with them all). Many Muslims no longer know or practice the necessary rites, and often mix in with the funeral rituals some practices that are not Islamic based.

A keen observation of the new fads in burial rite clearly justifies what is evident and being practiced by contemporary Christians and Muslims. This shows that there is a drift from the acceptable burial rite in Christianity and Islam. The justification for this is predicated upon the fact that some lack understanding of the Christian and Islamic burial rite, while others who have knowledge of it, no longer go by the necessary Christian and Islamic funeral rite. Some others muddle up the practices with alien practices. Obviously, among the adherents of Christianity and Islam, the new tide of burial rite is worthy of reflection. This prevailing tendency has given birth to a number of implications such as economic, logistics, undue stress and abuse of government facilities (Roads, Official environments, School facilities and premises). It is very sad to see that the current burial rite cannot be clearly distinguished from some other ceremonies which are being done such as weddings, birthdays and naming ceremonies among others.

A burial rite ought to be marked solemnly, sorrowfully and with grief. But in most cases, the ton has changed. These are the kind of activities that are seen to have permeated the realm of contemporary Christian and Muslim funeral practices. This new trend indicates a deviation from the acceptable burial norms. It is pertinent to note that it will be good to return back to the status quo, otherwise, a distortion in religious beliefs is imminent. If distortion in religious beliefs is unabated, then it may be concluded that the beliefs inherent in a religion is not being practice the same way globally. Hence, it may portend a multiplication of the same religion with varying beliefs and practices.

Concluding Remarks

In view of the fore going, it is hereby recommended that the Clerics of Christianity and Islam should come to the realization of the faulty contemporary turn in burial rite. They must also admit that there is a deviation from the ideal funeral norms. A thorough understanding of Christian and Muslim Funeral should be given to adherents of the two Religion. The distorted contemporary trend of funeral be

discouraged. The implications of neglect of the ideal norms should be emphasized while continued promotion of the acceptable Christian and Muslim funeral rites should be upheld. Life is precious and life is worth celebrating, but the sanctity and sacredness of life at death should not be abused because of the infiltration of alien fads in religious funeral rites.

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