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### **Cremation and Burial:**

#### **Which way for the African Christian Context?**

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#### **Abstract**

For a long time, most African Christians have preferred burial as the most acceptable way in disposing dead bodies. However, this method of disposing the dead has been affected by diverse factors such as globalization, various interpretations of Scripture, and the decline of African perception on burial rights among others. In the nature of things, there has been an increase of cremation amongst African Christians. This has created a rift between two contrasting groups regarding the emerging culture of cremation as opposed to burial. Cremation seems to be a new concept that has not been embraced in most African societies. Those African Christians who insist on burial contend that it is the ideal godly way in the disposition of bodies. They cite biblical and African values in order to justify the status quo. For those who believe cremation is the right disposal method of the dead, they argue that it is less expensive and is positively sensitive to land use. In view of this, the article will examine success and challenges regarding burial and cremation. The materials in this presentation have been gathered through interviews, extensive reading of published works, and via general observation of unfolding practices.

#### **Key words**

Cremation, burial, taboo, Scripture

#### **Introduction**

Death is undoubtedly mysterious and a phenomenon where there are no clear answers. This drives us to seek religious, philosophical and medical answers in our bid to unveil the mystery. After death, the process of disposing the dead follows, with different sections of society having their diverse ways of disposing. Some will bury or cremate according to their

respective acceptable norms. The act of ritual burying or cremating the loved ones is an important step in allowing the deceased to transit from the life on earth to whatever lies beyond human understands.

Most Christians in Africa believe that the best way to dispose the dead is by burial ceremonies. Though most Africa cultures treat cremation as a taboo, it is conversely becoming a popular form of disposition of the deceased. From the ancient times, Africans treat their dead with respect and a decent burial is normally expected. Nonetheless, cremation seems to be on the rise in Africa owing to other factors such as globalization, different theologies, expenses and lack of space for burials, an understanding that accounts for the increasing upsurge of cremation in many African countries. According to Shadrack Nyevu, the mayor of Franciston, Botswana, the city's only cemetery is 90% full and some Batswana are opting for cremation. In Zimbabwe, the story is the same, with leaders encouraging residents to switch to cremation ([www.afrik-news.com/article1906](http://www.afrik-news.com/article1906)). In Kenya, prominent people such as the Noble Laureate Winner, Wangari Mathai, politician Kenneth Matiba, and church leaders such as Manasses Kuria, the former Anglican Archbishop, among others, have been cremated as per their will. This has created confusion on what is the acceptable Christian way of disposing the dead.

#### **How Indigenous Africans buried their dead**

Most Africans believe in life after death and fear that if cremated, their friends and relatives will not live in the afterlife. Africans believe that the dead join their ancestors in the afterlife. There are those who live in fear that if they do not give the dead a decent burial, their respective spirits will come and haunt them afterwards (Mbiti, 1994). This leads them to insist that burial must be marked by a grave because it connects the dead with the living (Mbiti, 1997).

Most African people are very keen of what is performed after and during death. (Mbiti, 1994). In traditional African societies, the dead bodies would be disposed through burial or being left in the forest for animals to eat their respective bodies, thrown in the rivers or kept in small houses and/or huts so that it would decompose until the skeletons are left (Mbiti, 1994). The body would be kept for one or several days, preserved in the house before disposal. Today, the body might be kept in the morgue for several days pending the anticipated burial or through any other acceptable form of disposal by the particular family. Death in African context requires several rites to be performed. One of the rites is to observe the 'right burial' practices and procedures; failure to which the spirit of the deceased might come back to trouble the particular relatives who denied it decency deserved.

Many African societies have varied ways of burial practices and/or rituals. These rituals depended on the deceased age, gender, status in the society and how the death occurred. For instance, among the several Luhya sub tribes such as the Tachoni, Bukusu, Kabras, Idakho, believe that burying a respected elder seated is a sign of respect (<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke>). The dead is either sat vertically or laid horizontally. In other communities in Africa, the deceased has to be buried with the head facing upward, sideways or downward. Among the Yoruba, the deceased is buried with food fowls; while others bury with spears, shields and pots so that he or she has all that she or he needed in the

afterlife (<http://dying.lovetoknow.com/native-american-death-rituals>). In some cases, the deceased are buried in a house where they lived. This is interpreted to mean that the spirit of the deceased will take care of the living members of the family.

In some Africa communities, there are no burials. The bodies would be left in the bush so as to be eaten by the marauding animals such as Hyenas. They would believe that the bodies have been taken away by the spirit. In some communities like the Abagusii, the dead were buried naked, with the notion that they will be reborn in the spirit world. According to some other communities, if a person had died and the body is missing, the family would perform burial rites. For example, among the Luo of Kenya, a banana stem would be placed in coffin, and then buried in the grave. It was believed that if this ceremony was not done, the spirit would come back and haunt the family members. Other African communities used varied types of objects to bury as a representative of the dead (Page, 1980).

The time of burial is very important among the African communities. Mostly the burial is conducted between 12pm and 5pm. In some African communities, burial is done a day after a person dies to several weeks after death. This is a sign of respect to the departed. During the burial, there can be pouring of libation as communion with spirits. We also have a returning to the grave after forty days. This was meant to escort the dead spirit to the afterlife. The grave is usually located within the homestead or at the family graveyard. Most African communities the grave is rectangular.

### **Biblical Perspective of cremation and burial**

According to the Christian teachings, the body acts as a Tent to the soul or spirit, depending on whether the theology behind this is either trichotomous or dichotomous. Trichotomous consist of the body, soul spirit (I Thess 5:23) and Dichotomous Body and Soul or Spirit. The human being consists of the immaterial (Soul or Spirit) and material (body). Death occurs when the immaterial separates from the material. The soul or spirit goes to be with the creator or other believer and the body is left either to be buried or cremated or any acceptable form of disposal.

### **Disapproval or Approval of Cremation?**

Though various cremation cases have been enumerated in Africa, it has been difficult to approve it. Since time immemorial, the church has opposed cremation of her members. The Roman Catholic ban on cremation was lifted in 1963; and in 1966, they allowed Catholic priests to officiate at cremation ceremonies. The cremation is allowed so long as it does not oppose the belief in resurrection of the body. This is mainly accepted by the Roman Catholic communities in the western world.

Other religious groupings in Africa such Islam and African traditional religion do not allow cremation. In Islam for instance, cremation is considered "haram". The body should be treated with respect both in life and death and cremation would be considered mutilation. Muslims are forbidden to be part of cremation in a form either by approving it or witnessing. In Islam,

funeral rites are laid down by the divine law (<http://www.neptunesociety.com/cremation-information-articles/cremation> and Islam).

Hindus in Africa cremate their dead. Burning the body to ashes therefore helps the dead person to break the attachment. Young children among the Hindu are buried since it is believed that they have to attachment or connection to their physical body. Fire is the method preferred to dispose the dead because it believed to purify and scare away harmful spirits. Burial was the method of disposition inherited from Jewish traditions, with the best example of Jesus; burial in the Tomb. During the times of the Great Christian persecutions, as in the era of Diocletian, authorities in the Roman Empire had the notion that they could destroy the Martyr's hope of resurrection by cremating their remains, in spite of the church's teaching that destruction of the physical body has no relation with resurrection of the dead. Further, the bodies of Christians were believed to have been baptized; and with the receiving of the sacraments, they were to be treated with dignity that signifies the temple of the Holy Spirit as captured in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17,6:19.

In predominately Christian countries, cremation fell out of favor due to the Christian belief in the physical resurrection of the body, and as a mark of difference from the Iron Age European pre-Christian Pagan religions, which usually cremated their dead. It was a criminal offence whose sentence was death, which was introduced by Charlemagne in 789 (Bregman-Lucy 2001). In the Middle Ages, there was a trend among the aristocracy that when a nobleman was killed in battle, when away from home, the body would be de-fleshed through boiling or any other method and his bones would be transported back home for burial. In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII brought in effect law which excommunicated any person who did the aristocratic way and anyone who had been de-fleshed was to be denied Christian burial (Devlin, William, 1908). In the ancient Greek and Roman context, both burial and cremation were practiced. On the contrary, the Jews buried their dead as exhibited in Deuteronomy 34:6, that no man knows where Moses was buried. According to the early church father, Tertullian, early Christians practiced burial only (Tertullian, *De Corona* (in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* [P.L.], II, 92, 795); cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xi, P.L., III, 266).

According to the Jewish commentary on the Law (Mishna), it denounced cremation as "an Idolatrous practice." The only recorded story of a body being burned in Israel is seen in Joshua 7:5 where Achan and his family were stoned to death and their bodies burned due to sin of disobedience against God. God's fierce anger in Bible days was through punishment by fire (Joshua 7:26). Fire was used to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of detestable sin of homosexuality. In Scripture too, Moab committed an unforgivable sin by burning the bones of Edom's King (Amos 2:1).

### **Burial as the Preferred Method?**

Several Scripture verses mention burial as the preferred method. It is worth noting that the Scripture is Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic or Roman culture. God does not speak in vacuum, but in a culture. So it is not wholesomely burial as a Christian

culture but combination of various communities living within that time. I presume that if they were communities practicing cremation during Jesus' time, the Scripture could have mentioned that.

The Jewish burial serves to bind the dead with their ancestors. The Old Testament expresses statement such as "he rested with the fathers (1 Kings 2:10, 11:43 or he was gathered to his people (Gen 35:29; 49:33). Such statements suggest that this attachment could only be achieved if burial was the method of disposal rather than cremation. The burial was important because it was followed by resurrection. Abraham the great Father of Faith bought land for 400 shekels of silver to bury his wife Sarah (Gen 23:14). When he died, Abraham and other great fathers such as Moses were buried. The Old Testament strictly forbade Jewish people of being like other idolatrous nations and preferred burial as the way forward. The Scripture commanded that the Israelites should bury their dead bodies (Deu 21:23).

In a tough answer captured in Luke 9:60, Jesus says, "let the dead bury the dead." Jesus' position seems to favor burial. This is because in another context, He (Jesus) blasts the hypocrites and compares them with whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outer but on the inside they are packed with dead peoples' bones and making them unclean (Matt 23:27). These two statements beg the question as to why Jesus never says, "let the dead cremate their dead." He had in mind the acceptable Jewish culture of burial, which was wholly acceptable within the context. Jesus could not have talked about cremation because it was foreign within the Jewish context. The Scripture narrates that Jesus was buried in a tomb, which was bought by Joseph of Arimathea (Matt 27:57-60, Mark 15:42-46). Additionally, Annaisa and Saphira were buried by the early church (Acts 5:6-10 and Stephen (Acts 8:2). Further, the chief priests also purchased a field to be used to bury foreigners.

Apostle Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:58 argue that in a twinkling of an eye, those who are dead and living in Christian faith shall be given new bodies. He does not say whether they were cremated or buried upon their respective deaths, but only underlines that the dead shall rise up first. In the context of the Christian teaching on resurrection of the body, the Jewish understanding, and in African religions, burial of the dead has religious significance. It is always punctuated with ceremonies which have deep religious symbolisms. Burial also gives people a chance to come and see the grave for memorial services, and to keep the relation with the dead. The African culture places relationship whether with the dead or living as a priority (Donovan, 2000). To many African Christians, burial practice, as opposed to cremation, has Scriptural backing and appears as the main practice in disposing the dead now and in the unforeseeable future. From my observations as a researcher, it is the westernized elites who have embraced it within the African communities.

### **Why cremation in Africa?**

Though not readily accepted in African context, cremation has various advantages. It is very cheap compared to burial where lots of expenses are incurred. In most African countries, burial is a great occasion and there is feasting and attendance by all members of the community, with or without invitation. It costs a lot of money when bulls are slaughtered, and plenty of

food is cooked during and after the burial ceremonies, especially in western Kenya. Among some Kenyan communities, depending on the status of the deceased in the society, the burial might cost up to over 600,000 Kenya shillings (Ksh) equivalent to 6,000 dollars on decent coffin, transporting the body and food to be eaten in three days before and after burial. Compared to cremation where it is family or invited people affair and costs less than 12,000 Ksh equivalent to 120 dollars.

In some communities the deceased is buried in expensive clothes, accessories such as gold watches and very expensive coffin. Africans believe that clothing the dead in expensive attires is respect. This is a contradiction because the same dead person who is accorded all the expensive accessories during burial might have lived life of poverty including going without the very expensive clothes is dressed during his burial.

Burial is all about space. Land is becoming limited and public cemeteries are getting full. In, the public cemetery in Langata, Nairobi, there is limited space and times graves are dug shallowly to avoid disturbing the other dead beneath. Land is becoming less and expensive. Due to the population boom in most African countries, there is little space to bury the dead. There have been instances where close family members have maimed or killed each other in battle for land ownership. Such instances could be avoided if land was saved for other things. For instance, in Nairobi, the public cemetery in Langata is full and at times you might bury your deceased in a shallow grave because deeper, there is another buried body. The same is replicated in Zimbabwe as described by Mr Thaba Moyo, the city's mayor, said cemeteries were fast filling up and that the council is negotiating with some landowners for more land on which to establish new graveyards or expand existing ones ([www.afrik-news.com/article](http://www.afrik-news.com/article)). Those who support cremation among Christian community's state that since fire is used in cremation, it symbolizes a divine presence. God is represented as fire in an encounter with Abraham and Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:17). Fire is symbolic of God, while cremation can be seen as a symbol that the believer is entering God's presence.

### **Why forward for burial and cremation**

African continent has different cultures which vary. There is a fusion of African culture with the western world, Asian and the contemporary world. The African culture sources originate from oral tradition, myths, legends, stories, songs, proverbs, riddles, wise sayings among many others. Therefore, as Christians struggle to choose between cremation and burial, the big question would be what takes precedence in decision making in the today's society (Kunhiyop, 2008). Despite the African Christian desire to give the dead decent burial, there should be a discussion on what are the economic effects of it. Poverty is on the rise in the African continent and every step should be taken to uplift economic standards of the people. According to the Nairobi County Health Minister, Hiltan Majevdia, the number of burials is on the rise from 119 in April to 122 in May and 131 in June 2018, compared to a decline in cremation of 16 bodies in April and May and six in June 2018 (*Daily Nation* of 19 July 2018). Majevdia noted that in 2008, the cost of burying at Langata cemetery rose from Kenya shilling 17, 400 to 25, 000 and cremation has remained static at Kenya Shilling 9,000. The Nairobi county government cited Africa custom as the major hindrance to cremation and religion can influence the change needed (*Daily Nation*, 2018).

Majevdia urged the church to help change cremation perception so as to encourage people to cremate, since religion is the opium of the masses. Religion can convince people to change their ideals they hold most especially concerning the afterlife.

Despite the expense incurred in burial, cremation has not been accepted in Africa. This is because of the African belief in respect for the dead and life therein. It would be wise for those either for burial or cremation to weigh all perspectives from a sober lens and make an informed decision.

### **Conclusion**

The article set out to examine the different approaches and theories regarding burial and cremation among African Christians living in African continent. It has argued that both burial and cremation have importance to the deceased families. The challenge is that different groupings have reasons to either bury or cremate. Should a third way be considered in Kenya and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa? The findings are that though cremation is favored among the elites in Africa, burial is still the preferred model of disposition of the dead. Despite cremation being less expensive than burial, African Christians still have a lot of attachment to their departed ones and would want to be in communication with the spirits of the dead in through their graves.

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