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THE BURIAL RITES IN THE THREE RELIGIONS IN NIGERIA: THEIR IMPORTANCE TO THE NIGERIAN NATION

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ABSTRACT

According the dead burial rites has been surrounded by a lot of controversies in the three major religious in Nigeria. Some people are of the opinion that the burial rites should be seen differently from the cultures whereas some held that they are together. In the three major religious in Nigeria, burial rites are seen and seen tied to the religious. However each religion has its own ways of according respect to the dead thus, in this work these different ways were x-rayed and it was made clear that each religion has its own way of according respect to the dead. It was also discovered that practically that they are the same, though may have a slight changes and also nomenclature differences; but following the meaning or essence, they are the same both in purpose and in meaning. These burial rites are also important both for the living and the dead in the Nigerian society. The work in the x-raying employed cultural approach which enabled the researcher to arrive at some conclusions.

Keywords: Death, Burial rites, Religious Pluralism, Eschatology, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

It is customary for man to seek religious explanations in matters of absurdity and consequently respond to the situation in certain ways. Death is one of those concrete life experiences that pervade the mind of every religious person especially as it generates a feeling of uncertainty and absurdity. All world religions have various interpretations or ways they respond to the reality of death. As a matter of fact, each has a tradition of funeral rites (documented or unwritten), in which their perceptions of death and eschatology are seen clearly. In other words, "'funerals are occasions when a society's beliefs about life and death and the sacred and profane are most visible and when the bonds that hold people together as families and communities are affirmed and tested" (Campo. 2009:250), Hence, the major concern of this paper is to comparatively discuss burial rites and its essence as seen in the three major religions in Nigeria, namely: African Traditional Religion (A'T'R), Christianity, and Islam. It will also try to discover whether their common conceptions could be harnessed for social cohesion and nation building.

2. Burial Rites in African Traditional Religion

2.1 The African Experience Of Death

for the African, death evokes, on the one hand, a sense of estrangement and disruption, and. on the other hand, an urgent longing to join one's forebears (Chukwuelobe, 2014:86). Death

becomes a "going-to-the-spirit land" (ala mmuo). This ideology is aptly captured in Okoli Ukaehukwu's wise saying: "Uwa bu ahia, onye zuru nke ya olaa." This means that we are all pilgrims on earth; death constitutes the pathway to our final destination. Also, Okoli's idea parallels Abanuka's (2012:33) position that the dead are not considered as very far removed from the living those who are still living are conscious of their journey to join those who have gone before them to the land of the dead.

2.2 The Actual Burial Rites in Atr

2.2.1 Announcement of the Death of the Deceased

in tins section, we shall narrow down the discussion to the account of a community where research was duly conducted, that is, Akokwa community in Imo State, Nigeria. There arc customary ways of announcing the death of a person in Akokwa. Ndi ime nne (the immediate family members) are the first to be told. Afterwards, the extended family is told. Informing the deceased mother's family (ikwunne} should be a special event. Before a woman is told about her husband's death, emissaries (fellow woman) are sent ahead to encourage her to hear the shock. The announcer usually begins with proverbs, exhortations and other soothing words to prepare the mind for the devastating news. If the deceased is a woman, the husband's family, at a set time, sends representatives to the woman's paternal home to announce her death to her people. They are then given a date to visit her husband's family and learn exactly how the death occurred and also the burial plans. Chief Biere admitted that apart from the human agency, there are other signs that point to the imminence of death. The appearance of certain birds like owl, and animals like chimpanzee or the unassisted falling of a big tree could engender in people's minds the suspicion of death.

2.2.2 The Actual Burial

There are two ways to bury the dead. The deceased can he buried immediately alter summoning the extended family. The elaborate burial however comes up as soon as the family is ready for it. These are referred to as first burial and second burial, Nowadays, the remains of the deceased may be preserved in the mortuary pending when the family is ready for the burial ceremony. There is a belief that families who delay the burial of their own kin risk their well being. Since the dead cannot be given a rightful place in the ancestral world, the spirit continues to hover around and disturb the family members. The dead is buried not far away from the family home. If the deceased is a male, he may be buried in his ala obi (patrimonial land) irrespective of the location. Nowadays people try as much a« possible to put up a structure at the location where the person would he buried. On the burial day, cannons are shot at the arrival of the corpse, to announce the presence of the deceased (corpse). The cannons are heard again when the corpse is lowered into the grave to mark the passage from earthly existence to the world beyond, The burial rites start with vigil on the eve of the burial, most times without the corpse being present. The actual burial begins the next morning with igba nkiri - the dead is displayed right inside his home for family members* relatives, in-laws, friends, etc. to pay their last respect and bid him/her farewell. This gives people the opportunity to confirm that the corpse being buried is that of the deceased. Akokwa people are known for elaborate entertainment at burial ceremonies.

It is expected that in-laws, friends, work/business associates, etc, would come for condolence. Each group's food is preserved and kept until they arrive. Any group that comes with a cow for condolence is given a goat. If they come with a goat or ram, they are given a fowl or tubers

of yam. They are received accordingly and are taken to a designated place for entertainment. It is shameful to ignore people on condolence visit that is, having them go without entertaining them. Burials in Akokwa can last as much as the family can afford. However, the actual burial takes place on the first day. The rest of the days are for condolence visits and further entertainment.

2.2.3 Sponsors of the Funeral

In Akokwa, any relative, male or female, can sponsor the funeral financially. However, the eldest male in the family takes the lead in all traditional matters. The extended family and Ndi umunna (kinsmen) are expected to make their own contributions. The immediate family alone does not bury the dead; it is essentially regarded as the affair of the larger kindred/clan. Modernity has however brought changes in this dimension of burial.

2.2.4 Burial Rites and the Status of the Deceased

The deceased is buried according to what his/her status requires - Igwe, Ozor, Ichie, Ogbuehi, etc. Nobody who is not an Ogbuehi dares to participate in the igbu ehi ritual. Again, one does not go for a burial condolence with a cow when he has not first killed a cow for his dead father(s).

Otherwise, his father(s) will strike him dead. The cow in question must be a local breed (ehi tgbo).

2.2.5 The Widow's Place in African Burial Rites

At the death of the husband, the widow is not supposed to appear in public places and events like market, burial ceremony, traditional wedding, etc, until the burial of her husband is over. Even after the burial her movement in a sense remains restricted until the expiration of six months -iyipu akwa uju. Normally, the widow is shaved by fellow Alutara-di, and dressed in white garment until six months after the burial. However, Christianity and western civilization have altered some of these rites.

2.2.6 Those Eligible for African Burial

It is important to note that not all the deceased are accorded a befitting burial in Akokwa. Some deaths are perceived as fitting and in consonance with the ideals of the community while some are understood as unfitting and abominable. The character Unoka in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart captures this belief properly. Unoka was ill-fated; he had a bad chi or personal god, and died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess (2008:14). Chief Biere revealed that Akokwa people do not grant a befitting burial to someone who committed suicide. Other persons who fall under this category include infants, outcasts (osu), banished/ excommunicated persons, taboo suspects, one who is not a member of umunna or umuada, one whose parents have not been buried, etc. Anyone who attends the burial of an excommunicated person/family is seriously fined by the Umunna.

3. Burial Rites in Christianity

3.1 The Christian Meaning of Death

Biblical testimony reveals the Christian belief that humanity was the only creature made in the image of God, and was also given dominion over other creatures (cf. Gen 1:26-27). The Roman Catholic Church interpreting the symbolism of biblical language in an authentic way

teaches that our first parents, Adam and Eve, were constituted in an original state of holiness and justice. This grace of original holiness was to share in divine life (CCC. 375). This background serves as clue to the Christian understanding of death. In the book of Genesis, we find a narrative of how the first parents of humanity disobeyed God and attracted unto themselves and the rest of humanity the consequences which culminate in death. Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy (cf. Gen 3:1-5, CCC 391). This is simply known as the fall from "original justice" to "original sin" - the universal condemnation due to sin. In the New Testament, there are several passages that announce hope and remedy for this condemnation. Among them are the Pauline lines that speak of victory over death through the merits of Christ's redemptive acts (cf, Rom 5:1.9-21; I Cor 15:57). In summary, the Christian who dies in Christ Jesus is 'away from the body and at home with the Lord* (CCC, 1681). This Christian indoctrination concretely shapes the nature, purpose and proceedings of Christian burial.

3.2 Christian Burial Rites

Even though all Christians profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, variations abound in their rites of worship, ceremonies and liturgy. In other words, to articulate a unifying rite for Christian burial would be almost impossible. Hence, this discussion would focus more on burial rites as it is in the Catholic Church - the proto-Church from whom others separated. Generally, Christians bury a deceased member in a consecrated ground. Until recent times, Christians never welcomed cremation of corpse on certain theological (eschatological) grounds. In the modern times, this objection seems to have disappeared. Nevertheless, Christians forbid cremation when it is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching (Can. 1176.3).

3.3 The Structure of Christian Burial

The different funeral rites are in keeping with the situations and traditions of each region. From the past, Christian funerals followed a predictable pattern. The vigil, the funeral Mass, and that rite of committal farmed a familiar threefold structure (Turner, 2001:xi). The vigil is the principal rite celebrated by the Christian community in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy (OCF, 54). The funeral mass is the central celebration of the Christian community for the deceased (OCF, 128). The rite of committal is the conclusion of the funeral rites, the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member (OCF, 204). In Catholic liturgy, the funeral celebrations follow* a common order: The greeting of the community, the liturgy of the Word, the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and final commendation, final commendation is the last farewell by which the Christian community greets one of its members before his body is brought to its tomb (CCC, 1690). After the burial an entry is to be made in the register of the dead, in accordance with particular law (Can. 1182).

3.4 Place of Burial

The funeral of a Christian takes place in the Church (parish) where he/she belongs. However, those in charge of the deceased person's funeral, with the consent of the parish priest, may choose another church (Can. 1177.2). If a parish has its own cemetery, the deceased faithful are to be buried there, unless another cemetery has lawfully been chosen by the deceased person, or by those in charge of that person's burial (Can. 1180.1). The prevalent practice among African Christians is burying the deceased in the family (ancestral) land, after the Holy Mass or Funeral

Service has taken place in the Church.

3.5 Those Eligible for Christian Funeral

Catechumens and children whose parents had intended to have them baptism but who died before baptism, may be allowed Church funerals by the local Ordinary (Can. 1 183). Unless they gave some signs of repentance before death, these categories of persons are not accorded Christian burial: notorious apostates; heretics and schismatics; those who for anti-Christian motives chose that their bodies be cremated; other manifest sinners to whom a Church funeral could not be granted without public scandal to the faithful. If any doubt occurs, the local Ordinary is to be consulted and his judgment followed (Can. 1184). Christian funeral is arranged in such a manner that it brings honor to the deceased and bestows hope on the mourners (Turner, 2001:xi).

4. Burial Rites in Islamic Religion

4.1 Islamic Experience of Death

Muslims believe that death is a departure from the life of this world, but not the end of a person's existence. Rather, eternal life is to come, and Muslims pray Allah's mercy to be with the departed, in hope that they may find peace and happiness in the life to come (Wikipedia). Consequently, when a Muslim is in a near death situation, those around do their best to have him/her make the declaration of faith, which is otherwise known as Shahaadah: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the prophet" (Ihewulezi, 2020:12). Whoever says these as last words before dying will enter Paradise one day, even if he is afflicted before that by punishment (Wikipedia).

4.2 Islamic Funeral Rites

In Islamic communities, as in Jewish and Christian ones, funeral rituals involve different kinds of activities: preparations for death and burial, interment of the body, mourning, and memoralization. The funeral prescriptions which are based on the interpretation of the Quran, Hadith, and the consensus of the I llama, include: pronouncing the testimony of faith prior to death and turning the dying person's face toward Mecca; ritually washing and shrouding the corpse; performing funeral prayers; conducting the body to the cemetery; burial of the corpse on its right side, with the face turned to Mecca; mourning and visiting the grave (Campo. 200Q:250), One striking thing about Islamic funeral is the impoverished or inexpensive style it adopts. The corpse may be dressed in ordinary but not expensive clothing, Burial should be performed at u nearby cemetery within twenty four hours of death, Muslims usually bury the deceased in the location where death occurred instead of transporting the corpse to another region or country. A historical instance is the burial of former Nigerian Head of State. Late Sani Abacha. There were no ostentatious colorings to mark his funeral as that of a Head of State. The living does the deceased the charity of reciting basic articles of faith as a way to prepare him/her for this interrogation. This is called the talqin. When the corpse is rolled into the grave, people come in turns to throw mud into the grave. As they do this, they pronounce prayers on behalf of the deceased, especially the verse "From it (the earth) we created you, then we put you back into it, and from it we will bring you forth again" (of Q 20:55). Usually, it is the Imam's responsibility to lead in the funeral prayer. These prayers are commonly held outdoors, in a courtyard or public square, not inside the mosque (Wikipedia).

4.3 Islamic Mourning

The duration of Islamic mourning for the dead is three days. This is marked by intensified devotion, receiving visitors and condolences, and avoiding decorative clothing and jewellery.

It is obligators for widows to observe an extended mourning period (iddah): four months and ten clays long, in accordance with the Quran. It is forbidden for the widow to remarry, move from her home, wear decorative clothing or jewellery, before the expiration of the mourning period. Just like Christians, the Muslims believe that when one dies, everything irt this corporeal existence is left behind, and there are no more opportunities to prepare for his/her eternal salvation, This is the reason why the living keeps making intercession on behalf of the deceased so that he/she may meet with favor in the beyond.

Some of the Rites Include:

4.4 Bathing the Body

The corpse is washed (ghusl, bathed), with the purpose to physically cleanse the deceased. The exact manner, method, style and accessories used for bathing the corpse may vary by locale and temporal position, except that it is to be done with heated water. Bathing the dead body is an essential ritual of the Sunnah of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, and therefore a part of the Islamic Sharia. This should occur as soon as possible after death, preferably within hours. The "washers" are commonly adult members of the immediate family, who are of the same gender as the deceased. In cases of violent deaths or accidents, where the deceased has suffered trauma or mutilation, morgue facilities mend the body and wrap it in a shroud to minimize fluid leakage prior to surrendering it to mourners for washing.

4.5 Shrouding

The corpse is typically wrapped in a simple plain cloth (the kafan). This is done to respect the dignity and privacy of the deceased with the family sometimes present. The specifics of this ritual, including the material, style, and color of the cloth, may vary between regions. However, the shroud should be simple and modest. It is for this reason that Muslims have generally preferred to use white cotton cloth to serve as the shroud. Men may use only three pieces of cloth and women five pieces of cloth. The body may be kept in this state for several hours, allowing well-wishers to pass on their respects and condolences.

4.6 Funeral Prayer

The Muslims of the community gather to offer their collective prayers for the forgiveness of the dead. This prayer has been generally termed as the Salat al-Janazah (Janazah prayer Supplication for the deceased and mankind is recited. In extraordinary circumstances, the prayer can be postponed and prayed at a later time as was done in the Battle of Uhud, It is required for every Muslim adult male to perform the funeral prayer upon the death of any Muslim, but conventionally and in practice the Janazah is performed by few people so it alleviates that obligation for all.

4.7 Burial

The body is then taken for burial (al-Dafin). The exact manner, customs and style of the grave, the burial and so forth may vary by regional custom. The grave should be perpendicular to the direction of the Qibla (i.e. Mecca) so that the body, placed in the grave without a coffin lying on its right side, faces the Qibla. Grave markers should be raised, not more than about 30 centimetres (12 in) above the ground, so that the grave will neither be walked nor sat on. Grave markers are simple, because outwardly lavish displays are discouraged in Islam. Graves are frequently marked only with a simple wreath, if at all. However, it is becoming more common for family members to erect grave monuments. The corpse is then fully buried

by the gravediggers, who may stamp or pat down the grave to shape. Commonly the eldest male will supervise. After the burial the Muslims who have gathered to pay their respects to the dead collectively pray for the forgiveness of the dead. This collective prayer is the last formal collective prayer for the dead. In some cultures, e.g. in South-East Asian, the relatives scatter flowers and perfumed rose water upon the grave before leaving the grave.

4.8 Mourning

According to Sunni Islam, loved ones and relatives are to observe a three-day mourning period. Islamic mourning is observed by increased devotion, receiving visitors and condolences, and avoiding decorative clothing and jewelry in accordance with the Qur'an. Widows observe an extended mourning period (iddah, period of waiting), four months and 10 days long. During that time, the widow is not to remarry or to interact with non-mahram (a man she can many). This rule is to confirm that the woman is not pregnant with the deceased's child prior to remarrying. However, in case of emergencies such as visiting a doctor because of a health emergency, the widow can interact with non-mahram. Sunni Islam expects expression of grief to remain dignified, prohibiting loud wailing (bewailing refers to mourning in a loud voice), shrieking, beating the chest and cheeks, tearing hair or clothes, breaking objects, scratching faces or speaking phrases that make a Muslim lose faith. Grieving is allowed and a part of the death and burial process to allow one to come to terms with the loss of a person passing away as long as it respects the above.

5. Evaluation and Conclusion

In these three religions one discovers an essential point of convergence: a place where they all meet in their conception of the essence of life and the eschatological implications of death. All of them, in their care and attitude towards the dead, manifest the belief in the life after death. The eschatologies of Christians and Muslims fundamentally possess the dogmatic principles of heaven and hell. The just ones will be rewarded in eternal happiness as God willed, while the unjust (infidel or sinners) will face damnation. Likewise, the African conceives death as a passage to the beyond. Hence, the deceased is given a befitting burial by the family or community so that he/she may journey well into the ancestral realm. On the other hand, one discovers some level of discrepancy in the way burial ceremony/rites are being conducted in these three religions. They differ in their conception of the Supreme Being and in the salvific plans characteristic of each religion. Some thorough-going Christians go as far as condemning most of the practices in ATR, dismissing them as fetish and uncivilized. For the Christian, the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is the first decisive step towards salvation - victory over sin and death, The Muslims hold Jesus as an upright man but vehemently reject the divine status and the salvific role he assumes in Christianity, For the Muslims, the Quran (Allah's revelation to Muhammad) is the end of revelation, and this all must accept. Those who fail to heed Allah's instruction through His prophet Muhammad will be destroyed afterwards. The two major things that funeral rites in these religions exemplify are "communal living" and 'belief in two realms of existence. Abanuka (2012:59) and Chukwuelobe (2014:86) agree that the individual does not exist for himself alone. Rather, he derives vitality and life-force from his immediate community, II' Christians. Muslims and traditionalists could see beyond the peripheries and practice communal living, some amount of social cohesion will be achieved in Nigeria, If these three religions believe that the living have duties/obligations towards the dead, then they should alt work tor obligations and responsibilities towards the living. Logically speaking, anyone who cannot care for the living lacks the very least

intimation towards canny, for the dead He/she might however participate in the burial, but that would amount to nothing but hypocritical act. If Nigerians can learn the culture of common good today, nation building would be an easier realization. Finally, it behooves on every Nigerian (traditionalist, C'hristian or Muslim) to find out the common values or the meeting point of these religions, in terms of burial rites and life in general, so as to avoid the situation where one disdains or rejects the other as unaccepted, revolutionary, fetish, heathenish or uncivilized. We have more in common than that which separates us.

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Denial of Catholic Funeral Rites and Irregular Marriages in Igbo land

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