

THE CHANGING PERCEPTION OF DEATH AND BURIAL: A LOOK AT THE NIGERIAN OBITUARIES

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Abstract: Lavish and expensive funerals, long delays before burial and elaborate death notices in national and local newspapers reflect a change in attitudes towards death and burial in Southern Nigeria. The author examines certain features which once characterized funerary practice among the peoples of Southern Nigeria in order to demonstrate the changes which have occurred as a result of economic affluence, technological innovation and foreign religions (Christianity). These changes are documented by means of a content analysis of Nigerian newspapers and data based on 179 personal interviews.

Résumé: Dans la Nigérie du Sud les funérailles somptueuses et coûteuses, les longs délais avant les enterrements, et les pompeux avis de décès dans les journaux locaux et nationaux reflètent une modification d'attitudes envers la mort et les obsèques. Afin de démontrer les changements survenus avec l'influence économique, les innovations technologiques et les religions d'hors-pays (c'est-à-dire les religions chrétiennes), l'auteur examine certains traits lesquels, auparavant, caractérisaient les rites funéraires parmi les peuples du Nigérie du Sud. Ces transformations sont documentées au moyen d'une analyse d'articles dans les journaux nigériens et au moyen des data de 179 entrevues personnelles.

Introduction

In Southern Nigeria, three or four decades ago, death was regarded as a mysterious, inevitable, grief-laden and calamitous event. Rarely (except in the case of very old or very sick people) was death perceived as a welcome event or one to be celebrated. When death occurred, the immediate relatives of the deceased showed visible signs of anguish and inner pain while most often the consolers indicated a distaste for elaborate feasting in the household.

However, in contemporary times, change can be observed in societal attitudes to death and burial. Although death is not regarded as a pleasant event, it seems nonetheless now to present, as Adedipe (1983) rightly observed, a rationale for showing off family wealth, influence, social status and prestige, which are manifested, among other ways, in the form of

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expensive newspaper announcements. It can also be observed that occurrences of death in many parts of Nigeria are now occasions for quite extraordinary expenditure. This is evidenced by (a) the length of stay of the corpse in the mortuary before burial, (b) the extravagant use of burial materials and (c) lavish entertainments before and after burial. All this imposes a heavy financial burden on the bereaved family.

It is no wonder that a certain dying man (whose name is being withheld to save the family any form of embarrassment) is reported to have given his wife a cheque of N15 000 for his burial arrangements. Recently too, a well-known Nigerian confessed he had spent about N300 000.00¹ burying his father when, many would argue, such money could have been better used for charity.

A number of questions naturally arise as to why this observable change in societal attitudes and reactions to death and burial occurred in Nigeria. One is constrained to ask what factors account for the change, and whether the new trend is a passing phase or one that has come to stay. In order to understand these changes one must examine a number of issues, such as societal expectations, economic affluence (especially of the elite), religion and technological innovation.

The research therefore examines the following hypotheses:

1. Societal expectations which rate a family's social status, prestige and wealth by the fanfare with which it buries its dead may have contributed enormously to the observed change in people's attitude to death and burial;
2. Foreign religion and influence (which destroyed the foundations of traditional religious beliefs) seem to have contributed to the observed change; and
3. Technological innovations, as in other spheres, have facilitated the change in Nigerians' attitude to death and burial.

In the first part of this paper, traditional Nigerian attitudes towards death and older burial practices are briefly examined, and a context for them is provided by a brief discussion of some relevant literature in sociology and anthropology. In the second half of the paper, survey data, based both on content analysis of obituary notices in newspapers and interviews with the kin of recently deceased persons, are introduced as a basis for a discussion of the nature and degree, causes and effects of recent changes in burial practices.

Ever since Hertz (1907) wrote in the early part of the century, social scientists have appreciated that the understanding many people have about death affects their acceptance of it and reactions to it. Concomitantly, variations in the rituals and practices surrounding death are linked to differences in such understanding. In the United States of America, Coleman and Cressey (1980)

indicate that death is regarded as “mysterious.” Consequently “people respond to thoughts of it with fear and anxiety.” This appears to be essentially so because, according to Merton and Nisbet (1976), for those who do not believe in life after death, death represents the giving up of “all roles with no new ones taken on. It is a grieving period since death will mean the end of all that one has achieved and all one’s investment in the self.” Such an evaluation of death may have a depressing or saddening effect on the dying person. On the other hand, a brighter and more hopeful picture is presented by the Judeo-Christian belief in God and in life after death. Although the religion recognizes death as “the wages of sin,” it nonetheless provides a way out in the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour. With hope of a life after death, it can be envisaged that the dying person may have something to look forward to vis-à-vis the vision of “nothingness” for non-believers. The Moslems, who regard death as inevitable and nothing to be handled with fanfare, indicate their acceptance of death by the speed with which they bury their dead and the prayers said for the peaceful repose of the dead person’s spirit.

Anthropologists, who have carried out some studies in Africa seem to come out with the observation that Africans believe that death does not mean the end of life but a transition from life on earth to another life beyond. In this regard, Talbot (1926, in Awolalu 1979:53) is quoted as saying that it is difficult for any one to understand the way the Black man feels and thinks about death unless one appreciates the fact that to him the dead are not “dead but living. . . .” In Nigeria generally, the traditional attitude to death is that it is a transition from one phase of life to another. Reasoning along this line Awolalu (1979:53) observes that the Yorubas “. . . believe in the active existence of the deceased ancestors. They know that death does not write *finis* to human life but that earthly life has been extended into the life beyond. . . .” Among the Igbos the same belief prevails. It is given expression at different ceremonial and social gatherings, especially on occasions when the ever-present, socially significant kola nut is broken and eaten. At such times, the ancestors are invoked to partake of the gifts and to bless the gathering.

Invariably the belief in death as a transition to another phase of life has several implications for the understanding of the cause of death, the handling of the dead body or corpse, its burial, and the follow-up ceremonies for the deceased in different societies. With regard to the cause of death, Middleton (1963) writing of the Lugbara of Uganda, notes that sickness or death can be attributed to the actions of God, the wrath of ancestors and the envy of other people expressed in magic or witchcraft. Underscoring this, Olson (1972:307) avers that “Primitive” peoples “attribute death to the agency of gods or demons who are jealous of human achievements.” These observations tend to illustrate the fact that belief in the role of supernatural forces in causing death is widespread. Thus Beattie (1964:75) writes that in many

African societies "... all deaths are thought to be intentional, whether the intention is thought to be that of a living person practising sorcery or witchcraft, or that of a ghost or spirit."

Such an assertion may be off-handedly dismissed as useless or mere exaggeration. However, one can decipher some elements of truth in it. Among traditional Nigerians, the death of the young and middle-aged is rarely accepted as natural. There is the tendency for people to search for proper explanations for such "unusual" happenings. They often will look to human enemies, aggrieved ancestors or gods for an answer. Indeed, as Awolalu (1979:54) aptly suggests, children and young people who die prematurely are regarded as having died "a bad death." On the contrary, according to Meek (1931:passim) "the death of an old man may be regarded among some Northern Nigerian people as a natural event . . .," an example being the Katab (*ibid.*, vol. 2:72) among whom "premature death" may be ascribed to witchcraft. Bradbury (1973:213), writing about the Edos, adds that "the attitude of Edo people to death depends largely on their assessment of how well the individual has fulfilled his social destiny. To them the older a man is . . ., the more acceptable does his death become." Consequently, Bradbury argues that "the peaceful demise of an old chief . . . is as much an occasion for rejoicing in his life's achievement as for sorrow." We note from the above observations that, though Nigerians accept the inevitability of death, they seek explanations when such deaths are premature and therefore cannot easily be attributed to natural causes. Clear evidence of this fact is the appearance in obituaries put out by Christians of such expressions as "your mysterious death," or "the mystery of your death." This is in spite of the general philosophy of Nigerians that "death visits everybody—the rich, the blind, and the lame. [Besides] nobody owns the world."

Since there is the general belief in a continued existence of the dead in another world, the burial of the dead is most often handled with great care and relevant ceremonies or rituals. The proper performance of the rituals is considered very important to enable the dead person to peacefully move into the next world. Failure to do them properly may result in "misfortunes" or ill-luck. Thus Meek (1931) argued that among many of the Northern "Tribes" of Nigeria, everybody was entitled to a ceremonial burial in order that his soul might be finally dismissed to join the company of his forefathers, and that his living relatives might be cleansed from the pollution of death. For the Edos of Bendel State of Nigeria, burial ceremonies are very important. Bradbury (1973:213, 216) says that in Edo belief one who is not properly buried cannot enter the society of his dead kin and associates. His survival as a social being depends upon the performance of the mortuary ritual by his children. To this Awolalu (1979:56, 57) adds that, among the Yorubas, "it was the practice for the corpse of a deceased to be carefully prepared:

washed, dressed and buried in the grave dug in the family compound.”

For the Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria, funerary rites are elaborate and are usually strictly observed. The rationale is similar to those of many other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Funerary rites are performed to enable the spirit of the dead person to travel safely to the world beyond, to establish a continued link between the dead person and his kin, and also to satisfy societal expectations that the family show how virtuous and successful (in terms of personal achievements, etc.) and well loved their deceased kinsman was.

Generally, in Nigeria as may be the case in other societies, mortuary ritual varies according to the social status and circumstances of the deceased (see Bradbury 1973:in particular 215, 216). In addition, as Awolalu remarks of the Yoruba, “circumstances surrounding the death of a person, the age, sex, and the social status of the dead are among important variables that determine the way corpses are treated and buried” (Bradbury 1979:55). Consequently commoners, children, women (especially barren women), suicides, people who die of “bad diseases” (leprosy, elephantiasis, etc.), criminals, slaves and people who die childless may in most cases be exempted from or denied elaborate burial rites.

The onus of burying a dead parent (especially a father) often lies with the first son. He is traditionally expected to step into his father’s position and, if possible, status when the latter dies. Such a favoured position is expected to be reciprocated by according the father a befitting burial. This is one reason most Nigerian parents feel badly treated by fate if they do not have any male off-spring. The social expectations which rest upon the first son are so great that a son who fails to bury his father “well” may be regarded almost as a somewhat foolish, useless person and can be ostracized by members of the society. Besides, his failure will shame him for the rest of his life for he cannot participate fully in such activities when performed by others. Society thus looks down on him. In some cases, when the first son is not in any strong financial position to perform the ceremonies, his younger brothers do help out but he runs the risk of losing his respect and birth right. When it is financially impossible to handle the rituals adequately, the corpse can be buried while the sons set a time in the near future when such rituals can be performed. Until the societal expectations are satisfied, the family of the deceased feels the weight of an unfulfilled obligation. This weight and near public scorn are only overcome when the rituals are eventually performed.

In most cases the burial rites come in two phases. Among the Igbos, the first rites tend to be performed at the time of death and burial. This ensures that the corpse is properly disposed of usually by inhumation. However, the second burial is performed at the socially stipulated period which is usually within a few months, but may occur up to a year or more later. The idea is to give the family time to gather enough materials for the second burial ceremo-

nies. While the first burial rituals help in the proper disposal of the corpse and in ensuring that the spirit of the dead is peacefully sent on its journey, the second burial rites serve different purposes.

It is argued that the deceased soul wanders aimlessly, unwelcomed and unaccepted by the ancestors until the second burial rituals are completed. It therefore becomes a duty for the family, especially the children, to accord their dead parents this respect. Moreover, the children need to publicly confirm that their dead relation died a "good death" and so deserved to be helped to settle down in the world of the dead. It is envisaged that through such rituals the children re-establish a link with their dead father. Once the second burial rites are completed, the children feel relieved that their task has been properly accomplished, and from then on will expect protection, blessing as well as goodwill from their new ancestor. On the other hand, if the rites are not performed, the children might live in constant fear of the wrath or revenge of their ancestor.

Even in death, status distinctions are made. With regard to the elaborateness with which the corpse is buried, differences exist according to whether the deceased was a chief, or a commoner, a male or a female, an old person as opposed to a child or young person and so on. Chiefs, males and old people were accorded special rites (Awolalu 1979:56, 57; for chiefs among the Northern Tribes, Meek 1931, vol. 1: 1-90, 109, 119, 167, 170, 284 and *passim*).

Although males were treated specially, chiefs and divine kings were differentiated from the others. It was not unusual (especially in the recent past) for a divine king or royal personage to be buried with a retinue of servants or slaves, some of his wives and expensive personal belongings (Awolalu 1979:56, 57; Meek 1931, vol. 2:511 on the Jibu, vol. 2:545 on the Kam). Moreover, even ordinary men could have their wives buried with them. Thus women were not accorded very elaborate rites. Indeed, in the case of old women, many traditional peoples in Nigeria had them carried back to their original families for burial. Where women were elaborately buried, other human beings were not interred with them, but some jewelry, items of clothing, cooking utensils, etc. were allowed. It can be deduced from the items enclosed or buried with the dead that the people believed in a life after death that operated very much like life on earth, with the dead retaining their earthly social status and prestige.

The actual disposal of the corpse was usually by inhumation. Meek (1931, e.g. vol. 2:440 on the Jukun) talks about methods of preserving the dead body of special people for several weeks or months. However the general practice was to bury the dead body in a matter of hours or within a day or two. Perhaps one of the most important reasons for this haste in burial may be attributed to inability to preserve the body. Hospitals were few and could

not handle the deposition of the dead bodies for weeks or months as they now frequently do. In those days only a few well-to-do families could afford hand-made coffins for burials. In most cases, the bodies were wrapped with mats or plaited bamboo beds and buried in them. For young people and children, the mats were good enough. Criminals and people who died of infections and 'bad' diseases were quite often thrown into the "bad" bush and the kin purified by rituals of any association with them.

Most of these practices which were prevalent three or four decades ago seem in contemporary times to be obsolete. And although there are still some vestiges of them left, it is easily observed that methods of burying the dead have undergone tremendous transformations. The continued influence of foreign religions, economic affluence, societal expectations and technological innovations may all have contributed to the change.

Identification of Major Variables Used

For this study, the dependent variable is people's attitude to death and burial. Change in attitude will be measured by observable differences in methods of corpse preservation, length of stay before burial, amount of money spent in the announcement of death and quality and quantity of burial items. The independent variables include foreign religions, economic affluence and technological innovation.

The category "foreign religion" comprises the Christian and Moslem religions. Economic affluence will be measured by the amount of money spent on newspaper announcements and the number of times the announcement is made. Efforts will be made to estimate cost of burial wherever and whenever possible. Finally, technological innovation will be indicated by length of stay in the morgue, method of announcing death—the radio, television, the newspaper, etc.—and method of conveying the corpse to the burial site.

Method of Study

The primary source of data was newspapers published in Nigeria. Essentially, nationally based newspapers were perused. The latter included the *Daily Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Business Times*, *Business Concord*, *The Daily Sketch*, *Sunday Sketch*, *Nigerian Statesman*, *Daily Star*, and *The Guardian* will be used. These papers together cover most newsworthy items in the nation. They also contain a large sample of advertisements, notices and personal announcements. Other sources of information were the library and some personal interviews with people who had recently lost, buried and performed funerary rites for their relations.

In choosing the obituaries as a primary source of information, the researcher is aware of possible source bias. The sample is bound to reflect more the affairs of the elite, the educated and the economically affluent. It may also be biased toward the Yoruba ethnic group since most of the obituaries appear in the *Daily Times* which, though a national paper, has its head office in Lagos—a Yoruba dominated area of the country. However, similar obituary notices are to be found in newspapers throughout Southern Nigeria. Another source of bias may come from the fact that children and young people's deaths are not often advertised in the newspapers.

The obituaries could give the impression that mortality in Nigeria is largely an affair of the middle-aged and the old. However, since this study is dealing with change in attitude and not necessarily with demographic variables per se, the information gathered, in the view of the researcher, is quite adequate. In addition, as no effort was made to bias the sample in terms of its selection procedure, it is expected that selection errors may be randomly distributed. In this regard, the sample size is large enough to minimize possible errors.

A sample of 1342 notices were collected from the daily newspapers. Of this number, 981 (73.1%) were males and 361 (26.9%) were females. With regard to religion, there are more Moslems than Christians in the nation but this ratio is not reflected in the sample. The sample, carefully chosen and without any religious bias, includes 1119 (83.4%) Christians and 223 (16.6%) Moslems. The seeming lack of interest by Moslems as indicated by their number in the sample may be explained in terms of their religious ethics. Among all 40 Moslem respondents interviewed, the dead body is variously but similarly described as "a useless material, a covering or a coat" or "a waste matter." The occupant of the "coat" (the spirit) is gone, and therefore what is left is "useless," "mere earth."²

From the sample, it is observed that the deaths of older people (that is, those aged forty years and above) seem to be more often announced than the death of people below the age of forty years. The two groups constitute 84.5% and 15.5% respectively. As already mentioned, old age is venerated among Nigerians (Meek 1931; Bradbury 1973; and Awolalu 1979). Consequently, the deaths of the fairly old are more acceptable than the death of the children and young people. Therefore, there is the tendency to overlook or purposely decline to announce the death of such young people in the dailies. With respect to the ethnic distribution of the sample 743 (55.4%), 403 (30%), 43 (3.2%) and 153 (11.4%) are Yorubas, Igbos, Hausa/Fulani, and other ethnic groups respectively. That the Yorubas predominate can be explained in terms of various factors including their proximity to the sources of publication, their nationally observed propensity for elaborate ceremonies, and their widely assumed advantage in economic affluence over the rest of the country,

which tends to make them live more conspicuously than the other ethnic groups.

In estimating the cost of the obituary advertisements the standard price of the national daily newspaper is used. As at August 25, 1983, the cost of advertising in the national newspapers was as follows:

Table 1
Cost of Obituary Advertisements in the National Newspapers
by Size of the Advertisement

Size	Cost of Advertisement (as at August 1983)		
	<i>Daily Times</i>	<i>National Concord</i>	<i>New Nigerian</i>
Full Page	N1333.50k	N1039.50k	N951.79k
Half Page	708.50k	635.25k	475.90k
Quarter Page	Ne	369.60k	226.44k
6 1/4 x 4 Column	436.80k	Ne	Ne

Source: *New Nigerian*, Thursday, August 25, 1983, p. 11.

Ne = None existent.

Other newspapers' prices fall within the range of *The New Nigerian*. It is worth noting that although *The New Nigerian* is a widely circulated paper, its readers are predominantly Moslem. Its lower prices may be viewed in the light of Islam's negative attitude towards obituaries and In Memoriams. It is not surprising that the *Daily Times* is the most expensive for it is also the most popular and often half the pages are filled with obituaries and In Memoriams.

From the above table it can be seen that Nigerians in 1983 spent on the average about N627.80 on advertising the death of their relatives in the newspapers. Generally a lot more money was spent on announcing the death of a man than on that of a woman (N661.81 and N535.30 respectively). This again appears to confirm the observation that women are generally accorded less respect and status in Nigerian society. Such treatment is not restricted to the living but extends beyond human existence, for even at death women are given negatively differential treatment. Not only were few female vis-à-vis male deaths advertised, but less money was spent on such announcements. This is particularly true of the Yorubas and the other ethnic groups except the Igbos.

Among the Yorubas in 1983 an average of N786.43 was spent on a newspaper announcement of a man's death whereas in that year only N574.16 was spent on the average on a woman's death advertisement. A similar situation is observed for the other ethnic groups except for the Igbos. It appears the Igbos show a departure from this. From the data under discussion, a slightly larger sum of money was on the average spent on announcing an Igbo woman's death (N486.64) than on an Igbo man's death (N441.60). The differential is however, small and may not be very important. Nonethe-

Table 2
Sex and Ethnic Origin of Incidents by Cost of Obituaries

Ethnic Origin/Sex	N	Total Amount Spent	Cost
All Nigerians	1342	842,476.69	627.80
All Nigerian Males	981	649,234.61	661.81
All Nigerian Females	361	193,242.08	535.30
All Igbos	403	182,916.20	453.89
All Igbo Males	293	129,385.32	441.60
All Igbo Females	110	53,530.88	486.64
All Yorubas	743	532,336.76	716.47
All Yoruba Males	498	391,642.66	786.43
All Yoruba Females	245	140,694.10	574.16
All Others	196	123,998.03	632.64
All Other Males	170	112,028.21	658.99
All Other Females	26	11,969.82	460.80
Total	1342	842,476.69	627.30

Source: Nigerian newspapers from January to December 1983.

less, it does point to the fact that among the Igbos, women have achieved a high level of social acceptance and recognition. They most often walk alongside their menfolk.

Aside from differentials along sex lines, a very obvious observation is the fact that the Yorubas far outspend the other ethnic groups in the country in the newspaper announcements of their dead, especially on male deaths. They spent (in 1983) on the average N124.62, N344.83, and N127.44 per case above the national, Igbo and other ethnic figures respectively. This is concordant with the general belief in Nigeria that the Yorubas "love" ceremonies and invest or spend a lot on them. Furthermore, this finding supports the common belief that the Yorubas are the most affluent population in Nigeria given their early exposure to outside influences, their longer and higher level of education vis-à-vis other ethnic groups and their geographical proximity to centres of governmental, business, and commercial powers.

On the question of length of stay in the morgue before burial, it is evident that a major difference exists along religious lines. Thus, the Moslems bury their dead in a matter of hours. Rarely do they keep bodies overnight. On the contrary, Christians have the freedom to bury their dead at their convenience. Consequently, if the effect of Moslem religion is controlled, it is found that generally the deceased, as represented in the sample, stay on the average of 20 days in the morgue before burial. Writing recently on expensive burials in Nigeria (Opara 1985) observes that as soon as a death is announced, the corpse is immediately removed to a hospital for preservation until the family, gathered at meetings organized for the "proper" burial of the relation, have completed the arrangements. This period of stay in the

morgue may be used to renovate old family homes or build new ones, sew family or village uniforms or tee-shirts, organize bands for the supply of music, reconstruct or widen village roads, repaint the church and re-organize the choir. Quite often, it is also partly intended as a waiting period for the return of other relations who may be living or working far away or studying abroad. However, this time is mainly and most importantly used for the acquisition of expensive burial items—laces, caskets (in the case of the rich, imported caskets), various kinds of liquor and of course food and other entertainment items.

It is the contention of this paper that the stay in the morgue for whatever reason is a definite departure from the tradition that obtained just three or four decades ago when corpses were disposed of in most areas within a matter of hours or a maximum of one or two days.

In contemporary Nigeria, knowledge and techniques of preservation have greatly improved. Formalin and other such preservatives are easily available, as are doctors and other medical personnel who render such services, more easily accessible than before. In addition, there is another important factor—the supply of energy. The National Electric Power Authority, although still erratic in its supply of power, has expanded and improved its services, thus making it possible for hospitals to keep dead bodies for long periods. A sad situation results when N.E.P.A. fails to supply power for a few days and owners of corpses have to rush to either remove them for immediate burial or transfer them to other facilities that have private power generators. Perhaps this is an area where technological innovation has been most manifest.

When we compare length of stay in the morgue among the ethnic groups, the Igbos seem to keep their dead a little longer (an average of 21.7 days) than the Yorubas (18.9 days average) and the other ethnic groups combined (16.4 days average).³ Similarly, the sample reveals a sex-differential in terms of days spent in the morgue before burial. Female corpses stay, on the average 17.3 days whereas male corpses stay for 21 days on the average. We have at several stages in this work referred to the low status and esteem generally accorded to Nigerian women. This finding is further supporting evidence.

Returning to the question of technological innovation, one cannot fail to notice the change that has occurred in the mode of conveying corpses for burial. In the recent past, the remains of the dead were carried by a few people on their heads, if movement involved a few kilometres or miles. For longer distances, bicycles were used and occasionally big lorries (medium sized trucks) were hired for the purpose. These days the use of any of these modes will certainly publicize the poverty of the family and mar its public image. Most families, consequently, hire ambulances, whether or not they can conve-

niently afford them, to convey their dead from the hospital to their homes, from the homes to the church and to the final resting place. The obituaries stipulate stopping points where sympathizers should gather to give the dead a warm reception and to join the motorcade following the ambulance. Social recognition is given not only to the length of the motorcade but also to the make of the cars that form it. In addition to these and other measures which heighten social status differences, flag stops, complete with gun salutes, are included for those who are socially important and affluent.

Finally, another source of extravagant spending is the entertainment of visitors. From the vigil night to the day of burial and for weeks thereafter, the bereaved family must entertain people who call on them, especially representatives of any social groups to which the dead person may have belonged. If the entertainment were voluntarily given, perhaps the situation might be controlled but, unfortunately, these groups demand certain items in specified quantities which the bereaved do not really have much option but to give, unless of course they want to "dishonour" their dead.

As pointed out earlier, a few decades ago there was weeping and a show of sympathy (real or not) when somebody died but now, in the words of Opara (1985), "people open their mouths too wide demanding and quarrelling over food," instead of weeping and sympathizing. The author conducted personal interviews with 179 respondents.⁴ More than half of them (people of lowly positions) had spent between N1500 and N5000 burying a relation who recently passed away. About five-sixths of the remainder (mostly salaried and medium range business people) had spent between N5001 and N15 000. The remaining one-twelfth of the respondents (mostly the affluent) had spent upwards of N15 001. Among this last group, some had spent over N50 000 for similar burial purposes.

These expensive burials have continued despite the fact that Nigeria's boom is over and hard times have arrived. Very noticeable, during our discussions with interviewees, was the fact that a lot of people are groaning under the weight of expensive burials, and yet no one seems able to put an end to them or to minimize them—probably because of fear that a social stigma would be placed on the deceased and their kin.

Summary

In this work we examined some of the beliefs about and practices relating to death and burials generally and in relation to Nigeria. It was noted that, although there are still some vestiges of past practices and beliefs, there has occurred a tremendous transformation in people's attitudes to death and burial. In the past there was a period of sombre mourning and reflection with little elaboration; nowadays, expectations of lavish entertainment and fanfare at the burial of the dead often strain the resources of the bereaved's family.

An effort was made to account for the change in terms of the influence of foreign religions, economic affluence and technological innovation. Using obituaries as the primary source of data, it was possible to demonstrate that religion has played a dual role. For Moslems, religion has most probably facilitated low burial expenses and promoted a very simple and non-frightening attitude to death. Thus, Moslems bury their dead with the utmost speed. Coffins are not used. They use the same carrier to convey the bodies of the rich and the poor in any one locality to the burial ground. As long as there is a Moslem group to conduct the burial, no relation may be waited for; the body is buried. For the Christians, however, the belief in life after death seems to require that the dead be *properly* buried. This has been extended so much that now it involves a lot of elaborate preparations.

The data tend to show that the rich (who have achieved social recognition) seem to be perpetuating this practice of displaying extravagance in burials. They also seem to be dictating the trend to most other classes and sectors in Nigerian society.

Overall the factor that appears to be most profound in its effects is technological innovation. It aids the preservation of the dead bodies for long periods, facilitates the conveyance of the bodies in modern air-conditioned ambulances and has greatly improved knowledge concerning the treatment and general handling of corpses.

Appendix A

A Note on Personal Interviews

The sample of 179 was selected on the basis of recency of bereavement, accessibility and apparent social status of the family in the community. It includes mostly people from the Southern part of Nigeria but covers people from varied walks of life. The deaths occurred between 1983 and 1984. Those classified as of "lowly position" (98 or 54.7% of all the respondents) are petty traders, farmers, junior workers in government and private establishments whose annual incomes do not exceed N5000.

The second set of respondents (68 or 34.1%) comprises mostly senior staff of government offices and private establishments (especially university professors), big traders as well as some local leaders who have annual incomes of not less than N5000 but which does not exceed N15 000 and those who have amassed some wealth. The third and last group is mainly made up of chief executives of public and private establishments, big-time contractors and business people. This group is considered to be the wealthy, influential and privileged or upper-class people in Nigerian society.

Aside from interviewing the respondents a few weeks (usually about three or four weeks) after the burial, (that is, when the activities have lessened but the expenditures made are still fresh in the bereaved's memory)

the researchers also attended at least 22 (12%) of the funerals in order to observe things personally. All but five of the funerals took place in the Southern part of Nigeria (where the accompanying fanfare is highest).

From the interviews and observations, one general fact emerged: all of the respondents complained of the heavy financial involvement that is deeply entrenched in the "modern" process of burying in Nigeria. Many (over 90%) of them talked about borrowing money from friends, relations, colleagues, banks and other lending houses to finance funerals for their dead ones. By implication, after burying a relation, the majority of the respondents spend the next few years repaying the debts incurred in the burial activities.

When asked why people would subject themselves to such hardships, respondents answered, "to maintain family prestige and class." In effect, a lot of people engage in such extravagance in order to look "good" before their friends, relations and workmates. Thus, social considerations tend to overshadow those of the future economic welfare of the individuals and their families.

Generally, funds that are raised for burial purposes are spent on embalming and mortuary facilities, the hiring of an ambulance, the purchase of an expensive bed in which the body will lie in state, and the purchase of lace materials and other trimmings for decorating the bed. Other areas of heavy expenditure include the purchase of a casket instead of a coffin; the decoration of the room where the body will lie in state; the hiring of entertainment bands, choirs, and other such groups; the building of a new house or the renovation of an old one where the corpse will be put for viewing and the purchase of a power generating plant if there is no electricity in the area. Whether chickens, goats or cows are chosen for the entertainment of guests depends upon the status of the family and how much of their wealth they want to show off. Even relations-in-law, especially those married to the daughters of the deceased, are summoned to a family meeting at which each person or group is or are told how much to contribute to the funeral activities.

Average burial expenses for the three categories of interviewees mentioned above are conservatively estimated at N1956.00, N9120.00 and N39 692.00 respectively. Differences according to social class are easily observed, especially in the quality and quantity of items used for the burial. When one considers that the per capita Gross National Product for Nigeria for the early 1980s was estimated at about US \$560 (Population Reference Bureau Data Sheet, 1980) which would be about N470 at that time, it is not surprising that many people end the burial of their loved ones with heavy financial problems ahead of them.

At this point, we must hasten to add that those expenses are undertaken only if the dead relative had lived to a good age (that is, at least more than thirty years) and, most probably, had married and produced children. If the

dead person was young and unmarried, the death is considered a tragic one, especially if the parents are still alive. In such situations, there is no necessity to keep his body for a long time in the mortuary while burial arrangements are completed. Thus, in some cases, once the death is announced, the body is prepared for burial.

A few examples will suffice to support this point. In one instance, a young man, just graduated from a university, had a motor accident and died. Immediately news of his death reached the parents, they dispatched a team to convey the body home. When the team left, those at home were ordered to dig a grave for him. As soon as the corpse arrived, it was identified and interred. In another case, a young man who died while studying in the United States, was sent home in a casket. The parents could only open the casket to ensure that it contained their son's body which was then quickly carried to an isolated forest area for burial.

Such premature deaths cause a lot of pain and heartache to the parents who can no longer hope that they will be buried by their children. This type of death is seen as a bad death. The belief is that people who die prematurely should not be buried with fanfare so that such an event does not occur again in the family.

Another exception to the custom of elaborate burial occurs when the very old request that upon their death they be committed to mother earth without being subjected to freezing in the mortuary. They usually specify that they should be buried immediately they die. They reject the idea of their children ruining themselves financially because of expensive burial ceremonies.

Except for these two categories of deaths, burying in Nigeria has become an example par excellence of the extravagant display of individual wealth, "abilities," and social status. It has departed significantly from the deep ritualistic but much less expensive methods of yesteryear. People, instead of concentrating on sympathizing with the bereaved family, now seem to focus attention on the type of casket, the number of tiers of bed decorations, the type of lace materials used especially for room curtains and the extent to which the "death" show room is decorated with flashy and luxurious items which reflect the social class and distinction of the bereaved families.

Notes

1. As at August 6, 1985, the rate of exchange for the Naira was 1.1172 U.S. dollars and 0.8037 British Sterling (see *Business Times*, August 12, 1985, p. 20). Subsequently, the Naira has fallen to less than 15 cents U.S. The older values, however, give Westerners a better idea of cost relative to income.
2. A further illustration concerning Islamic attitudes is provided by a case the researcher observed. A certain young man, a few hours after returning from a visit to his young

undergraduate fiancée (who was studying some four hundred kilometres away from his work place), got a telephone call that informed him that she had been involved in an automobile accident. He quickly bought his ticket and some flowers, and rushed back to see her in the hospital where she was reportedly admitted. By the time he got there (a matter of a few hours) to his utmost chagrin, despair, and disappointment, she was dead and already buried.

With this kind of attitude, it should be evident that such extra expenditures as are incurred by some Christians are generally frowned at or condemned by the Moslems.

3. The Igbos are reputed to be highly competitive and enterprising. This spirit of competition manifests itself in different ways to meet varied situations. It is a matter of pride to show that one's dead stayed for such a long time while elaborate plans were being made for burial. Moreover, the Igbos are a highly mobile people. Therefore, they settle in different parts of the country and indeed outside it. It is usual to wait for the return of relatives before the dead person is buried. This may explain in part the length of time spent in the morgue before burial as shown in the sample for the Igbos.
4. See Appendix A, "A Note on Personal Interviews."

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