Death of COVID-19, Early Burial and Social Health: Between Preservation of Life and Respect for Culture

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Abstract

**Purpose:** Death is a difficult moment which is managed in a particular way at the individual and collective level. It is synonymous with dysfunction at both the family and social levels. As such, a set of regulatory measures is put in place to restore the balance. In Africa and in Cameroon, the organization of funerals is an important moment for the recognition of the person who has left, but also for the members of the family, social and cultural body who remain. Therefore this paper aims to research the perceptions around early burial in context of COVID-19 and the impact on social life.

**Methodology:** To achieve this, the researcher adopted a methodological approach specific to anthropology with field research based on individual interviews.

**Findings:** This shows that burial is a kind of therapy. This organization responds to and is part of a particular care process. The failure to respect the dead is often the source of other problems of social balance and health.

**Conclusion:** With the COVID-19 pandemic, new rules of life and social organization have emerged. And these are also visible and lived in the management of the deaths of this pandemic.

**Recommendation:** It would therefore be important to give families the possibility of carrying out certain rites related to death and burial for the psychic and social balance.

**Keywords:** Death, COVID-19, burial, social health, culture
INTRODUCTION

While funeral rituals vary from country to country, the importance of mourning and its associated ceremonies must be recognized. Faced with the different causes of mortality, the African and Cameroonian populations have integrated death as a constant to be domesticated. Thus, when a person dies, he or she has not disappeared but has changed status and dimension. The dead, like the sick, are entitled to attention and prerogatives specific to their condition. For this reason, it is possible to realize that in the "house of mourning", the body cannot remain alone. The whole of the family, friends and cultural body must watch over and celebrate the dead person both to pay tribute to him or her and to mark the affirmation of his or her rank in the clan and his or her social anchorage. With COVID-19, these different rules were reviewed and changed. This article therefore aims to read these changes in the cultural body of the management of mourning and the dead, at a time when the whole world was experiencing the universality of the manifestation of new cultural approaches and the experiences of death.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The heuristic posture that was chosen is that of anthropology by adopting a qualitative methodological approach of the participatory type with in-depth individual interviews. The reading of the field notebooks and the transcriptions of the interviews helped in carry out a content analysis. It should be noted that this research work was carried out during the month of May 2021 exclusively in the city of Yaoundé in Cameroon. This booklet is part of the scientific production on the COVID-19 pandemic in the world and in Cameroon. Through an exploratory approach to the new rules of social life imposed by the Corona virus, this article hypothesizes that COVID-19 appears to be a pandemic that is reorganizing social life through a loosening of the cultural body that is becoming deleterious. In order to elucidate the issue of the management of the dead of this pandemic, I carry out a qualitative survey with in-depth individual interviews, with the aim of identifying practices in the field, the different representations of the management of the dead of the COVID-19 and the perceptions of burials in this particular context. The main criteria that were used in the selection of participants were: family ties through individuals and families who had experienced a COVID-19 death, ministers of religion who participate in burials, community elders and patriarchs as guarantors and custodians of customs, and people involved in the economy of death such as owners and vendors of funeral homes.

Through the qualitative analysis of the actors' discourses, the objective of the present methodology was above all to give voice to the actors who are deeply involved in the management and burial of these atypical deaths. On the basis of an ethnography of the uses of the COVID-19 dead, the researchers were given the opportunity to read the influences of these burials of a different kind on life and social health. On the basis of an iterative approach, it allows researchers to immerse ourselves in the essence of a situation, to capture its complexity and to interpret its meaning (Gauthier 2006: 132). This study was carried out to draw up a portrait of the perceptions and representations surrounding the COVID-19 dead. In accordance with ethical considerations, the confidentiality of the data collected and the protection of the sources of information through the attribution of a fictitious nomenclature was respected.
FINDINGS

Mourning: A Social Event

In Cameroon, every death is followed by one or more wakes but also by a burial in the context of the native village or concession of the deceased. This is as true for those who have migrated to the city as it is for those who have moved abroad. The fact is that burying a person somewhere other than his or her home village, property, or without the entire funeral ceremony is considered a failure and a shame. This is even more so when it is an adult, a leader or a dignitary of the locality. This is acknowledged by LULO (57 years old, patriarch, Emonbo - Yaoundé, 23/05/2021) who said “It is inconceivable that a person, an adult, a Nyamoto, a dignitary should be buried like a child. Indeed, when a child dies, there is no funeral ceremony. Even if there is, it is not like the adult. The adult has marked his time and has been a linchpin of social life. When he dies, wakes are organized, and a burial worthy of the name, worthy of his rank and attributes is held”.

From the field data mourning is measured according to the social role of the dead person. Indeed, the mourning or burial of a young child who has not yet acted within his or her group is much more discreet than that of a prominent person, an entrepreneur, a dignitary, or a senior government official who has participated in the enrichment of the clan, the village or the locality. For children, friends, grieving family, the entire cultural body and especially widows, the obligation to express grief must be exemplary, with weeping commensurate with the loss suffered. Death is not a trivial event, it has a cause and consequences in the cultural body. Some deaths are caused by poisoning, the evil hand of witchcraft or the malevolence of a spirit, etc. Today, however, all these social and cultural orientations to death and its management are non-existent. There is only one cause, the corona virus. The management of mourning and burial has become non-existent. “Adults are buried like children. A colonel and head of the family is buried without any ceremony. Not even military honors. Not even a ceremony! The corona affair is really happening,” said a respondent (Priest, Nkolanga-Yaoundé on 21/05/2021).

Impacts of Funeral Rites and Rituals

On the Definition of Rites and Rituals

The terms rite and ritual come from the Latin ritus, itself from the Sanskrit rita, which means order of things, prescribed order of a ceremony. A rite is thus a set of rules, codes, and fixed, organized and repetitive forms. A ritual ceremony is therefore a set of gestures, movements and words that reveal and express a meaning that each person appropriates and makes resonate within him or herself according to their own experience. Rituals are thus symbols put into gestures, movements and words, which each person can feel simultaneously as something universal and personal. Symbolism that everyone can feel as something fruitful and revealing. However, it should be noted that the terms “rite” and “ritual” are often interchangeable. In general, a rite is made up of several rituals. Thus, within a funeral rite, there are several rituals that are organized, such as the gathering at the place of mourning (nsõn awû), speeches about the origin of death (nsîlî awû and ndôn awû), testimonies, religious services, ritual dances (essani among the Beti), the burial (îdzeb nbîm), the collation, etc.
Rites, Rituals and Social Function

The commemoration of the great moments of human existence involves rites of passage such as birth, puberty or death through rites. These rites affect both the human being and society as a whole, marking or celebrating the family, life in civilization or tradition in a holistic way. Death in time and space has always fascinated people. Death is and has always been a moment of questioning about life and its meaning. The phenomenon of death provokes in the individual and social consciousness the emergence of questions about the meaning to be given to it; the meaning to be given to life; is the afterlife and evidence or a utopia?

Faced with these emerging demands, many myths will emerge. In all traditions, myths about death will be invented, told and shared. Thus, the myth will tell the story of the rite through an apparent symbolism. Rites and rituals will always be present to regularly update these myths and reveal the symbols. Through myths, rites and symbols, we have the development of collective consciousness through archetypes. Through the rituals around death, we can see the need and expression of peace and serenity within the social group and the family that is being tested. Breaking this logic of rites and rituals around death is therefore a danger for both. This is what JENÔ (65 years old, Patriarch, Etoudi-Yaoundé, 24/05/2021) recognized when he said “…it possible to think that people can be buried without carrying out the rites relating to death? It is an abomination and a real danger for the community and for the bereaved family. It is through these rites that peace, health and serenity are restored. Without them we can only let pain, evil, disorder and death itself run rampant”.

It should be noted in passing that one of the cultural functions of ritual is to provoke emotion in the individual, to encourage introspection, to provide a sense of calm, inner peace and, above all, to enable the community as a whole to experience the same thing together, in order to encourage rapprochement and communion.

Death: Another Reality with Specific Objectives

Ensuring a dignified tribute to the deceased is paradoxically more important for the relatives than for the deceased. For life goes on, with the living and not with the dead. If the ceremony is a priori intended for the person lying in the coffin, it is above all vital and beneficial to those who attend it. The living, in flagrante delicto of life in front of the dead, are looking for a little compassion, human warmth, a beautiful moment of communion. Through the funeral rite, it is important at the time of a death, to ensure a dignified tribute to the deceased; to mark a special and memorable moment with a ceremony; to constitute the stage of reintegration of the deceased into the memory after the stage of separation of the death; to create a moment of communion, full of meaning; and to touch the scared, a source of soothing, harmony and renewal. This moment of communion, of complicity, of compassion, (of being together), this moment of harmony (all is well) and of renewal mark the real and necessary beginning of the mourning, the source of a new and indispensable energy.

Benefits for the Deceased

Even if the deceased will not be able to experience the ceremony and benefit from it, it is important to do things in his or her favor, to avoid feeling guilty, which is often a heavy burden. It is essential to ensure that the deceased’s last wish is fully met and that the ceremony is in accordance with the demands of their tradition (custom, practice, confession). If the ceremony is mainly celebrated for the living, it is also the deceased who counts and who is celebrated. It is the communion of life
and death, of the aiming and the dead, because in reality for Africans death is not the cessation of life but rather its continuity. This is why it is important to offer him this last rite of passage, this rebirth by placing him in the collective memory. The essence of a funeral ceremony is to make the deceased present both in the past through a few memories and in the present, to mark his or her physical presence, even if hidden, and in the future by imagining the traces and imprints that will remain. Funeral rites are therefore special in that they make the dead person eternal and perpetuate him or her in the collective memory. The use of symbols is important here, through little phrases such as "the melon stem goes and leaves the melons", "he is not dead he sleeps" (Beti adages) or through pictures.

Funeral Rites and Benefits for the (Living) Relatives

In addition to avoiding a feeling of guilt, the ceremony also allows one to say “goodbye” properly, to integrate the separation and thus take a first step on the difficult path of mourning. The memories recounted, the little stories from the past, the experiences recounted, the little anecdotes told, allow the creation of a new myth, a new meaningful story, for the loved ones. There is no question here of wanting to attach oneself to the past. Anyone who is content to dwell on the past will have a difficult path to mourning. It is important to create a new myth that will perpetuate the memory of the deceased in the future through the funeral rites.

A quality ceremony (in terms of ritual and symbolism) has an important impact on both the individual and the community. The loved ones, feeling surrounded, can minimize the terrible feeling of abandonment. The intense emotional closeness creates a strong sense of compassion, a real sense of communion, and almost a sense of celebration. In a way, it expresses the joy of the rebirth of the deceased within the memory of the community. It should be noted that celebration and sacredness are also closely linked.

The inhibition of symbols (brus/genders and grandchildren) is crucial and often shows that 'life' continues, because nothing ends, everything continues, everything is a cycle. Thus, by applying the principles of African epistemology of like-si, actualization-potentiation and microcosme-macrocosme, it is possible to demonstrate the dialectic according to which: “the flower gives the fruit which itself gives the seed and the seed must one day die to give birth to the flower again” (APHA, 50 years old, Patriarch, Etoudi, 27/05/2021) stated. The plant thus survives thanks to the seeds. Our death and associated rebirth play the same role as seeds for eternity.

Funeral Rites and Benefits to the Self

The celebration of a funeral ritual is often the first fundamental step in mourning. It is the initiation of the difficult mourning process by recalling all the good and beautiful moments with the deceased. This period allows people to forget the last, often difficult moments. Through a disconnection from the movements and habits of everyday life, the ceremony can lead to a shift into the sphere of the sacred. One of the participants did not hesitate to say "It is a moment of introspection and questioning that makes us fully aware of the present moment and to immerse ourselves in the elements of the ceremony, the memories, the stories, the symbols that are also revealing. He went further and said that these moments are “all imprints that will remain in the memory. And we also remember the atmosphere felt, the palpable emotion, the harmony of the moment, sometimes also the beauty of the place and the ritual to realize the fragility of life and its ephemeral nature”, noted CESYR, 70 years old, Patriarch Mvog Atangana Mbala, 29/05/2021).
It must be said that it is this funeral ritual that seems so out of place in our so-called modern age, and particularly in the COVID-19 period. This break in the funeral process also breaks the initiatory process of the difficult mourning journey. And so breaks the understanding of our life which can also be animated by a new symbolism. “That of the awareness of our feverishness that to become a fruit there is only a path to follow from the flower to the fruit”, stated (FAMA, 45 years old, priest, 12/05/2021).

Social Approach to Burials of People who succumb to COVID-19

It should be noted that in Cameroon, priests, pastors, Christian laymen and men of culture are opposed to the confiscation of the remains of people who have died as a result of coronavirus contamination by the authorities, who proceed to immediate burial. They demand a right for families to spiritually accompany their dead and to mourn.

It should be noted that in Central Africa, Cameroon is the country that has been most affected by this pandemic. According to the official count of the Ministry of Public Health, on 11 May 2020, there were 2,689 cases, of which 97 died. The remains of all these COVID-19 deaths have not been returned to the families. The Ministry of Health, in the process of protecting the population, has chosen to proceed with immediate burials, sometimes in the absence of the families and relatives. This situation does not meet with unanimous approval because it calls into question societal cohesion and the view of cultural bodies. “We are in the process of experiencing a formidable psychological drama,” responded JEPAU, 45 years old teacher, 29/05/2021). He agrees with a certain Catholic Father, who points out that “…we are in Africa and among Africans, the family needs to mourn with the body of the deceased. Therefore, when the remains are not handed over to the families, people will find it difficult to mourn, especially if they do not know how the remains were buried”, concludes one of the respondent who is a priest (FAMA, 45 years old, priest, 12/05/2021).

Indeed, beyond the character and special status of the dead, the rites and rituals around death are generally synonymous with cosmic health, social health, family health and individual health. It is therefore useful and indispensable that there be religious, social and individual accompaniment. This is what a Catholic Father recognized when he said: “Religious accompaniment of the dead of COVID-19, and psychological accompaniment of grieving families is necessary. Death is not only the end of life but also a rupture with the ancestors, the deities; a rupture between the living and the dead, a psychological, spiritual and physical rupture”. To respond to this situation, the urgent need for support is clear. This confiscation of the remains of the deceased from COVID-19 has health explanations. But it also offers a rupture in the functioning and balance of what underpins the very identity of an individual, a socio-culture, a people. This perspective thus opposes the endogenous vision of death to the biomedical management of the dead of COVID-19.

Burying a dead person in this way is stigmatizing for the families. This is what one of the respondent meant when he said that “this procedure is made up of haste, extreme distancing, and even stigmatization (both of the victims and their families) maintained by a panic fear of a high probability of contagiousness of these corpses”, (SEPA, 50 years old, Patriarch, Etoudi, 27/05/2021). The dead are synonymous with “being alive and lifeless”. The way of dealing with a corpse has different connotations and representations within society and families. “This is why families accuse both certain public and health officials of burying their dead with haste and without regard for the different endogenous and cultural traditions to which they belong. The
corpses are not given attention or compassion because of their supposed contagiousness and are treated as mere wrecks, hence some tensions between the parties”, (ANTO, 50 years old, teacher, 11/05/2021). According to this respondents, certain hygienic authoritarianism should be avoided, which could break the anthropological, social and cultural springs that give meaning to our human communities in Cameroon and on the continent through these summary burials.

COVID-19 and Death: Redefining the Mortuary Experience

COVID-19 redefines the experience of death and provides a perspective on death that is not new to thanatologists. Indeed, as Gaëlle Clavandier¹, a sociologist of death, points out, the coronavirus can be considered as what disaster sociologists call a “collective death” or “mass death”. This term designates events as diverse as attacks, wars, genocides, accidents, catastrophes or epidemics. Mass death is characterized by the number of deaths, not necessarily simultaneous, but caused by the same cause: COVID-19. In this particular context, the workers of death have been forgotten or sidelined.

The Funeral Industry is Forgotten

The funeral sector is an essential link in the health chain. A respondent who is an anthropologist and have worked on funeral markets together with another respondent who is a socio-anthropologist devoting his work to the social treatment of death and in particular to the question of mourning, both believe that the funeral professions have been and are the great forgotten ones in the management of the COVID-19 deaths. Funeral professionals, characterized as “invisible workers” to quote Dominique Méda², are on the front line when it comes to death and, as a result, have been subjected to particularly high levels of stress since the beginning of the health crisis. In the case of undertakers, this invisibility can also be explained by their symbolic function, which consists of making bodies disappear and almost gives them an untouchable status, comparable to the Indian caste of the Dom’s, in charge of funeral pyres.

Death, Rituals and Societal Balance

Ritual makes something coherent that is not coherent, by placing it in another system of representation. This transfer is perceived in the passage from natural and/or biological death to social and symbolic death³. Whether religious or secular, rituals and their rites have several functions: they serve as a rule of organization, making it possible to re-establish the balance in a shaken community by forming a body and expressing the survival of the group. They seek to elaborate a common meaning, assigning a new place to the dead and, in some cases, constructing the destiny of the deceased in the future. People must not lose sight of the fact that they are finally giving meaning to the lives of the survivors.

If the bereaved have reacted well to the changes imposed on the funeral rituals in the context of COVID-19, they are still affected. Family, social and cultural health has been damaged and the absence of funeral rituals is the cause. This perspective is shared by sociologists and anthropologists who, each in their own way, emphasize the vital dimension of funeral rituals, even

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¹ Gaëlle Clavandier, La mort collective : pour une sociologie des catastrophes, Paris, CNRS, 2004
² Propos recueillis par Jean Bouclier, « Face au coronavirus, nous redécouvrons l’utilité immense de métiers invisibles, explique la sociologue Dominique Méda », 20 Minutes, 27 mars 2021
³ Gaëlle Clavandier, Sociologie de la mort : vivre et mourir dans la société contemporaine, Paris, A. Colin, 2009:89.
though everything that concerns death and the accompaniment of the dead has not been deemed essential to preserve.

In the current context of secularization, rites have been and are often reduced to their aesthetic or religious function. Rites, in extremely diverse forms, punctuate time, before, during and after death. There is no single form of rites and they are as numerous as there are socio-cultural groups. Funeral rites, according to Arnold Van Gennep⁴, are characterized by three phases: first we have the separation from the deceased relative. Then we have the phase of margin (the loss of status for both the deceased and the survivor). And finally, there is the period of remembrance (reintegration of the dead and consolidation of the living). It is therefore important not to reduce funeral rituals to simple funerals, any more than to mourning, as Gaëlle Clavandier points out. Martin Julier-Costes, warned against a simplistic reading of the situation. It is not because funeral rituals are being performed that pathological risks are avoided. Instead, to avoid the pandemic a social, cosmic, family and individual imbalance has been created that remains and causes new problems. There are several rites for the same deceased, since there is an instituted and instituting funeral ritualization⁵.

**Impossible Farewell: “Confiscated” or “Prevented” Mourning**

In 2016, Tanguy Châtel, Pascale Hébel and Thierry Mathé produced a study on the posture of (French) society towards mourning. This research work addresses the psychological and social aspects of mourning. It shows first of all that bereavement is not an isolated experience. It is common to a large part of the population. Mourning is a process that takes place over a long period of time. The applications around the dead of the COVID-19 did not allow the populations to live collectively, socially, and in cohesion between the living and the dead the mourning of the COVID-19. This is what justifies the expressions “prevented mourning” or ‘confiscated mourning’ used by several researchers to underline the fact that, because of imperative measures, the work of mourning could not be properly initiated during a health crisis. Tanguy Châtel prefers to speak of “subverted mourning”, since the four elements that make up successful mourning were disrupted, started, modified, or even prohibited, while the funeral chain was deeply disrupted. Firstly, the bereaved were unable to accompany the COVID-19 carrier in his or her final moments.

The more brutal the bereavement, the greater the suffering. The second element of this socio-health frustration of the bereavement experience is the prohibition on seeing the body of the deceased, which is placed in the coffin immediately due to strict health regulations. Thirdly, the funeral, as a social act and a tribute to the deceased, was not allowed and was disrupted in its functioning, since it was limited to relatives. Fourthly, the strict rules of physical distancing during and after the funeral, combined with the confinement, prevented reunions, and did not allow the bereaved to show affection, embrace each other, or even give each other the necessary support in this difficult situation. As the funerals could not take place normally, their function of expressing the survival of the group, when the death of a loved one creates an implosion, could not be fully

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⁴ Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage, étude systématique des rites de la porte et du seuil, de l’hospitalité, de l’adoption, de la grossesse et de l’accouchement, de la naissance, de l’enfance, de la puberté, de l’initiation, de l’ordination, du couronnement, des fiançailles et du mariage, des funérailles, des saisons, etc.*, Paris, É. Nourry, 1909.

⁵ Martin Julier-Costes, « Sociο-anthropologie du deuil chez les jeunes. La mort d’un-e amie-e à l’ère du numérique », in Denis Jeffrey, Jocelyn Lachance and David Le Breton (dir.), *Penser l’adolescence*, Paris, PUF, 2016, : 125-136.
assumed. Sy adds, still according to Tanguy Châtel, the aggravating fact of being alone in one's own home, in a situation of virtual social isolation.

Symbolism and Social Significance

Contemporary anthropological studies interpret funeral customs as the symbolic expression of a society's dominant values. This approach is supported by the fact that almost the entire funeral process is dictated by tradition. Even the emotion expressed during funeral rites can be dictated by tradition. Actors who are not related to the deceased may be hired to express the death. When and where relatives should show their emotion may also be defined by rules dictated by tradition. Custom also associates color symbolism with death. While the association of black with death is not universal, the use of black clothing as a mark of mourning is widespread. Funeral rites allow a society to fight against death. The group affected by the death of one of its members replaces the disorder it causes with an order regulated by repeated practices. Beliefs and rituals soothe the anxieties of the survivors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Death and the dead fascinate and terrify at the same time; they seem to generate a particular energy, which touches the deepest part of the human soul. The deceased thus acquires a new dimension, that of sacredness. The ritualization of funerals brings about a socialization of moments and places, allowing everyone to connect with the new sacredness of the deceased. Funeral rites and rituals are fundamental for the individual and for the community. They reveal the last rite of passage of the deceased, offering a symbolic rebirth, placing him or her in the collective memory. They provide some precious moments of communion and harmony that will be the first beacons on the long and difficult road of mourning. Finally, they offer a few bubbles of the sacred, thus plunging us into the symbolism and universality of things. To deny death through the rites and rituals that surround it would be to deny the identity, or better still, the very essence of a people, a society, a culture, of the being.

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