How COVID-19 pandemic is changing the Africa’s elaborate burial rites, mourning and grieving

Abidemi Emmanuel Omonisi1,2,*

1Department of Anatomic Pathology, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, 2Department of Anatomic Pathology, Ekiti State University Teaching Hospital, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

*Corresponding author:
Abidemi Emmanuel Omonisi, Department of Anatomic Pathology, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

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Corresponding author: Abidemi Emmanuel Omonisi, Department of Anatomic Pathology, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria, abidemi.omonisi@gmail.com

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Abstract

There are diverse burial rites in Africa which have been practiced for decades depending on the deceased place of origin, culture, religion and the position held in the community. Unlike the developed countries where burials are usually conducted as private ceremonies, funerals in Africa are elaborate and are usually public ceremonies involving the entire members of families, friends and well-wishers. Religion and culture are usually the deciding factors when decisions are made on how the deceased should be buried but generally cremation is not commonly practiced in Africa. COVID-19 pandemic was generally accepted to originate from Wuhan in China and this pandemic has extended to over 206 countries in many countries of the world. Surprisingly, despite the technological advancement, adequate number of health workers and well developed health systems in the developed countries like United Kingdom, USA and Russia compared with nations in Africa, developed countries had thus far recorded more deaths and were most hit by the COVID-19 pandemic when compared with nations in Africa [4]. Unfortunately, these deaths were not buried conventionally in many countries of the world with the family members of the deceased restricted for performing the usual burial rites and organizing a very "befitting" burial for their deceased members of families from COVID-19 [5,6]. In Ireland, the Irish Association of Funeral Directors advised undertakers not to embalm the deceased,
and to hold closed-coffin funerals instead of open-casket events [7]. The pandemic has ended communal prayer and congregational funeral gatherings at many major churches, synagogues, mosques and temples in most countries of the world including Africa with some family members barred from cemeteries. The United Synagogue, a union of Orthodox British Jewish synagogues, postponed the usual stone-setting ceremonies associated with Jewish funerals in England [8]. All cemeteries have been shut and those sitting shiva, the seven-day period of mourning, have been advised that they cannot have visitors [8].

The concept of death in Africa: in Africa, death is regarded as a dreaded event and seen as the beginning of the communication between the visible and invisible worlds. Some tribes in Africa believe that the goal of life is to become an ancestor after death [9]. This is one of the major reasons Africans believed that every person who dies must be given a “befitting” funeral, accomplished by a number of traditional and religious rites and ceremonies as the deceased migrate to join the ancestors in the invisible world [9]. If this is not done, it is generally believed that the dead person may become a wandering ghost and will continue to torment those still living especially members of deceased family who ought to give the deceased a “befitting” funeral. As part of giving a very “befitting” funeral as experienced in Africa, funeral rites are usually incorporated as parts of the fundamental aspects of the funeral ceremonies and in most cases usually precede actual burial of the deceased. The nature and how complex the various funeral rites are depend on the religion of practice, and the background of the dead or position they held in the community before death and their cultures heritage [9].

Funerals in most nations in Africa are organized essentially to mourn and celebrate the life of the deceased [10]. They are very elaborate events, often the central life cycle events, unparalleled in cost and importance, for which families harness vast amounts of resources to host and lavish events for multitudes of people with ramifications well beyond the event [11]. The number of people and class of people present during a funeral may be an indication of the character, financial status, position in the community and how sociable the deceased was before death. Characteristically in most nations in Africa, these funeral ceremonies often take place during the weekends; Fridays and Saturdays to ensure the presence of mourners, well-wishers and elaborate events. However, in the Western world, funerals are very private ceremonies, reserved for family and closest friends of the deceased [1].

Socio-cultural issues, burial rights and dying in Africa: most Africans do not like thinking, planning, and facing the reality of death. In most nations in Africa, it is a taboo to discuss about one’s own death or the death of loves ones or plan about death. The practice of the living writing wills and budgeting for death is uncommon in Africa. No wonder death is considered by Africans as the last enemy that must be defeated and no matter how hopeless the case might be, life must be preserved [9]. In same Africa, some aged parents usually will give verbal instructions to their children concerning how to conduct their burial ceremonies and where to be buried. It is the tradition in most nations in Africa to bury their love one in their ancestral homes where the deceased died [12]. This explains why corpses of Africans who died in the Western countries were flew back and buried in Africa. There are lot of cultural issues and believes attached to where deceased bodies are buried in Africa [17]. The native religions of Africa, which is the oldest type acceptable in most African cultures, has to be done in the deceased’s ancestral land [17]. The native religions of Africa, which is the oldest type of religion in the continent, life does not end with death but continues in another realm and immediately after death, most African traditional believers respect the transitional period of the deceased during which the deceased is considered to enter into the world of the ancestors [17]. It is now a common practice in Africa especially, in Nigeria that the beheaded families also organize uniforms for the mourners and sympathisers call “asoebi” [13] to make the funeral ceremony very elaborate and colourful when burying their aged parents. In case where a woman loses her husband and wants to be buried with her deceased husband and in some cases shave her entire head hairs during this period as a mark of morning. It is also a common practice that, if a young person dies, everyone attending the funeral is expected to appear in dark colours as a mark of mourning. After the burial the mourners celebrate the life of the deceased through song and dance. After the burial of the aged parents or rich individuals, there is heavy feasting accompanied by singing and dancing to a mix of African rhythms, jazz and brass bands. Many families come back a few years later for the dead celebrity called “death remembrance celebration” some sort of second burial or memorial in honour of the dead. They perform rituals and organise celebrations were family members and friends gather to celebrate. This practice is common among the Yoruba tribe of Southwestern, Nigeria. The burial rites for Muslims are complicated, but all of the rituals are intended to respect the body as much as possible, knowing that this person will soon be presented to God. When a Muslim is approaching death, family members and very close friends should be present. They should offer the dying person hope and kindness, and encourage the dying person to say the “shahada” confirming that there is no God but Allah. As soon as death has occurred, those present should say, “Inna illaahi wa inna ilajhi rajun” (“Verily we belong to Allah, and truly to Him shall we return”) [14]. Those present should close the deceased’s eyes and lower jaw, and cover the body with a clean sheet. They should also make “dua” (supplication) to Allah to forgive the sins of the deceased [14].

According to Islamic law (“shariah”), the body should be buried as soon as possible from the time of death, which means that funeral planning and preparations begin immediately. A local Islamic community organization should be contacted as soon as possible, and they will begin to help make arrangements for the funeral service and burial, assist the family in identifying an appropriate funeral home, and coordinate with the funeral home [15]. Embalming and cosmetics are not allowed unless required by state or federal law. Because of the prohibitions on embalming and the urgency with which the body must be buried, it is not possible to transport the body from one country to another. To prepare the body for burial, it must be washed (“Ghusl”) and shrouded (“Kafan”). When a Muslim dies, the body should be buried as soon as possible after death, thus there is no viewing before the funeral [15]. Cremation is forbidden for Muslims [16]. Salat al-Janazah (funeral prayers) should be performed by all members of the community [16]. After the funeral and burial, the immediate family will gather and receive visitors. It is customary for the community to provide food for the family for the first few days of the mourning period (usually three days). Generally, the mourning period lasts 40 days, but depending on the degree of religiousness of the family, the mourning period may be much shorter. It is acceptable in Islam to express grief over a death. Crying and weeping at the time of death, at the funeral, and at the burial are all acceptable forms of expression. However, wailing and shrieking, tearing of clothing and breaking of objects, and expressing a lack of faith in Allah are all prohibited [16].

In African traditional religion, generally the dead are buried in their land of origin (“Buriul”). To be considered proper, honourable, meaningful and acceptable in most African cultures, has to be done in the deceased’s ancestral land [17]. The native religions of Africa, which is the oldest type of religion in the continent, life does not end with death but continues in another realm and immediately after death, most African traditional believers respect the transitional period of the deceased during which the deceased is considered to enter into the world of the ancestors [17]. It is one of the reasons why different kinds of rites and sacrifices will take place during this period. Although, it is impossible to generalize the concepts of burial rites based the African and religious rites and ceremonies as the deceased migrate to join the ancestors in the invisible world [9]. The number of people and class of people present during a funeral may be an indication of the character, financial status, position in the community and how sociable the deceased was before death. Characteristically in most nations in Africa, these funeral ceremonies often take place during the weekends; Fridays and Saturdays to ensure the presence of mourners, well-wishers and elaborate events. However, in the Western world, funerals are very private ceremonies, reserved for family and closest friends of the deceased [1].
has died in a house, all the windows are smeared with ash, all pictures in the house turned around and all mirrors and televisions and any other reflective objects covered. The dead are removed from the deceased’s room, and the bereaved woman sits on the floor, usually on a mattress. Most Africans believed that deaths are not natural but a spiritual event [18]. During the time preceding the funeral usually from seven to thirteen days are paid by people in the community to comfort the bereaved family and some sacrifices are also performed during this period [19]. The African religion basically adapted the ancient customs in the continent for funerals and the bottom line is that many African burial rites begin with the sending away of the departed with a request that they do not bring trouble to the living, and they end with a plea for the protection of those alive by their ancestors [20].

Coronavirus changes the burial rites, mourning and grieving in Africa: to curb the ravaging menace of coronavirus, several governments across Africa are currently on a lockdown with various laws instituted that forbid mass gathering of more than 20 people in a location at the same time including banning of burial and funerary ceremonies, weddings parties, religious gatherings, imposition of restriction of movement and introduction of social distancing [21]. In Africa, the mortuaries pre-COVID-19 pandemic era are usually crowded from Thursdays as deceased relatives visit the mortuaries to make all necessary preparations to pick their deceased ones for burials usually scheduled for Fridays or Saturdays in most countries in the continent. The ban on mass gathering and movement during this period of lockdown significantly reduced the patronage and significant reduction in the number of corpses released to the beheaded families in most mortuaries. Bodies are now piling up in most state mortuaries across the continent [22]. The mortuaries are now shadow of themselves with the mortuary attendants doing less of releasing bodies and the funeral directors now practically on holidays due to the marked reduction in burial activities across the nations in Africa. Few family members that visited the mortuaries are not allowed to touch or kiss dead bodies as part of the precautionary measures now in place to combat the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, a practice that is very common in some cultures in Africa. The relatives and friends of the deceased are not allowed to visit the mortuary in large numbers during this COVID-19 pandemic. Only few of them usually less than 20 people are allowed to mourn and grief with deceased at the mortuaries. They are also asked to use face masks and also observe the social distancing and other rules associated in curbing COVID-19.

Burial ceremonies are now less elaborate events in Africa because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most Africans that have course to bury their relatives did so with minimal burial rites done during this period of pandemic. The usual elaborate ceremonies with associated feasting are lacking in most burial conducted during this COVID-19 pandemic. These are unusual ways of mourning and burying deceased individuals in Africa. Despite the ban on burial and funeral ceremonies, human beings continue to die both from COVID-19 pandemic and other causes of deaths, leading to accumulation of corpses in the mortuaries. Unfortunately, Africa have communal belief that dead bodies and celebration of the deceased through feasting. There is need for policy makers and health care providers usually members of the burial teams to meet with the families before the burial of corpses of COVID-19. This meeting will serve as an avenue to address all the various concerns by the relatives on how and why the corpses of COVID-19 are handled in line with the protocol on handling of such corpses. This will also enable the families to be in agreement with the burial team and policy makers on the proper way of disposing such bodies in line with the appropriate protocol. However, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, dead bodies of people suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 should be accorded respectful burial through consulting with the deceased families in ensuring the deceased culture, belief system and religion are observed and the bodies are properly handled in a dignifying manner before the burial. It is advocated that adhering to standard precautions including use of appropriate PPEs, hand hygiene before and after the burial procedure should be properly adhered to all through the funeral.

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the various traditional ways Africans mourn grief and bury their love one. The traditional burial rites that may necessitate direct contact with dead bodies are now being abandoned. The various laws enacted and implemented in the various nations in Africa have prevented mass gathering for mourning and praying for the dead bodies and celebration of the deceased through feasting. There is need for policy makers and health care providers usually members of the burial teams to meet with the families before the burial of corpses of COVID-19. This meeting will serve as an avenue to address all the various concerns by the relatives on how and why the corpses of COVID-19 are handled in line with the protocol on handling of such corpses. This will also enable the families to be in agreement with the burial team and policy makers on the proper way of disposing such bodies in line with the appropriate protocol. However, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, dead bodies of people suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 should be accorded respectful burial through consulting with the deceased families in ensuring the deceased culture, belief system and religion are observed and the bodies are properly handled in a dignifying manner before the burial. It is advocated that adhering to standard precautions including use of appropriate PPEs, hand hygiene before and after the burial procedure should be properly adhered to all through the funeral.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors’ contributions

AEO did the conception and design of the study, literature review and interpretation, manuscript writing, and submission of manuscript.

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