

ANTHROPO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL YORUBA AND JEWISH FUNERAL RITES

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Abstract

Obsequies form the summit of rites of passage for human beings. It is in that light that proper disposition of human corpse is a hallowed tradition of all cultures. This paper examines traditional Yoruba and Jewish funeral rites and offers a comparative analysis. The rites of passage are well enunciated among the two cultures, in which birth and death form the hinges of human existence. The Jews and the Yoruba have elaborate funeral rites and they both consider burials as sacred duties which the community owes the dead. Methodologically, the study employs anthropological and archaeological data for analysis and they also form the basis for the conclusions drawn from the study. The data for the study were retrieved from the researcher's firsthand archaeological fieldwork experience in Israel and among the Yoruba. Findings indicate that both the Yoruba and the Jews place premium relevance on funerals. Obsequies among the Yoruba and the Jews portend sociological significance because they are considered as dutiful services to the dead and the community. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the anthropological relevance of funeral rites among the Yoruba and Jewish people.

Keywords: Anthropology, Archaeology, Funeral rites, Jews, Yoruba

Introduction

Archaeological and anthropological studies of funeral rites have been made by scholars like Collin et. al. (2015), Gundu (1988), Hoy (2013), Okpoko (1993), Sommer (1999), Tubi (2019) and Umoren (1993). These scholars and others assert that funeral custom is present in all cultures and that it is performed in complex rituals as a result of peoples' perception of its values. Death presents the sense of finality to human existence. This hard reality is confronted by the observance of funeral rites, which show a continuum of life after death in some form that is not clearly spelt out. This study of funeral rites among the Yoruba and the Jews offers scholars the best suited means of understanding the anthropological and sociological relevance of burials. The study concludes that death has a density of meaning among the Jews and the Yoruba, which goes beyond biological demise. This, therefore, engenders a scholarly comparative study.

Death and funeral rites

Different cultures have funeral rites that carry their cultural stamp. Scholars like Gundu (1988) and Okpoko (1993) have pointed out that there are several types of funeral rites. The most prominent ones being earth burial and cremation, others are maritime burial, aerial burial and

surface burial. The Jewish and Yoruba funeral rites involve earth burials.

Death is here defined as the cessation of life on earth. The fact of mortality that frontally confronts human beings. Archaeological data indicate that funeral rites have long antiquity among the homo species. From Neanderthals, people have been disposing of the dead with deliberate actions (Sommer 1999). Anthropological studies show that funeral rites are found in all cultures of the world and funeral practice is strictly anthropocentric as only human beings are known to practice it. All cultures, however, have varying degrees, modalities, formularies and beliefs that are associated with obsequies. Data of traditional African funeral rites indicate varying richness and immense diversity with underlying deep spirituality (Gundu, 1998; Okpoko, 1993). This paper examines burial practices by making a comparative analysis of the Yoruba and Jewish funeral rites.

Yoruba and Jews practice extensive funeral rites (Ernest, 1970, Dopamu, 2006). This paper identifies the various reasons for extensive funeral rites among the groups as follow:

(i) Religious purposes: Religion and its beliefs perhaps provide the most compelling the most reason for funeral rites among most cultures. The scriptures of both groups made funerals to be accorded primium in their cultural milieu. For the Yoruba, ifa, their sacred scripture attest to proper funeral rites. Thus, for the Yoruba, they provide aid to peaceful rest among the ancestors and reincarnation. While for the Jews, the Torah prescribes it as service to Yahweh, from whom we come and to whom we go.

(ii) Sociological purposes: Funeral rites also serve sociological purpose among the Jews and Yoruba. The Yoruba and the Jews engage in mourning and sympathy, giving support to bereaved family, and celebrating life. All aspects of funeral rites such as mourning, dirge, music, etc play sociological roles. Every funeral rite is meant to assuage the grieve of mourners and provide succor and comfort in their loss. Importantly, in both cultures, funeral rites also has enlightenment or educational purpose, in which the living are taught to live virtuous life so as to receive appropriate funerals.

(iii) Health purposes: Necrophoresis is essential in human society. Proper disposal of the dead is a serious health issue among all peoples. The Yoruba and the Jews also have this inculcated into their cultures. Burials are primarily done to avoid open decomposition of unattended bodies. The improper disposition of corpses will result in severe health hazards. To achieve this purpose, the Jews and Yoruba bury their dead some feet under the ground with mound raise over it, the Jews during some periods of their history also placed their dead inside sarcophagus, a culture which resulted from Greek and Roman influence in ancient Palestine.

Jewish-Yoruba worldviews about death

The Yoruba and Jews practice extensive burial rites which bear reasonable simulacrum on several points, (Idowu, 1994; Ige, 2006; Lamm 2002; Riemer, 1991; Schmidt, 1970). The followings are identifiable:

(i) There is resignation to death in both cultures: The Yoruba and Jewish perceive death as the final termination of human life on earth. They have no control over it and so there is final

resignation in the compelling reality of death. In the eventuality of death, the people resign to the facticity of cessation of life as we know it. Though human life continues in the after-life, in some form, it does so in a way and manner which are not completely clear to anyone. This resignation becomes enigmatic when the “wicked” live while the “good” die, the young die and the old live.

(ii) The burden of death: Death is seen by both cultures as the most grievous burden that confronts mankind, the heaviest burden that weighs down human existence, the most inevitable condition of all. With the belief in after-life prevalent among the Jews and Yoruba, yet, both cultures still carry on the burden of death. Death is the final adversary of human beings. Death frontally confronts human beings with the finiteness of earthly existence. When death threatens, they wished it could be avoided.

(iii) Life after death: Jews and Yoruba believe that death is not the ultimate end of human beings. Both Jewish and Yoruba traditions do not see death as giving finality to human life. Life exists in some form after death.

Death among the Jews

The Jewish word for death is *mavet* or *maweth* which connotes demise, departure or latter end. *Kevura* refers to burial. Archaeology, biblical and extra-biblical data reveal that ancient Palestine's mortuary practices were held with high premium placed on giving due respect to the dead (Ernest, 1970; Lamm, 2002). Jewish funerals begin with the *tahara* (preparing the body) which include washing the body by water and shrouding. Interment takes place within shortest possible time after demise. Embalming is forbidden, and the greatest importance was attached to what was called, “the Jewish burial custom” (Jn. 19:40). A typical ancient Israelite tomb is dug out of a rock or a natural crevice. The researcher also noticed that some bones of deceased Israelis are placed in sarcophagus. Poor families, however, buried their dead in the ground. Jews were interred, usually with their ancestors (1 Kgs. 13:22). Immediately after burial the *chevra*, a traditional prayer of forgiveness is recited. *Kaddish* is a prayer said by mourners, (Reimer, 2002; Lamm, 2000).

The New World Dictionary-Concordance to the New American Bible, (1970), observes that great importance is placed on right relationship with Jewish Supreme Deity, Elohim YHWH, in relation to life and death. YHWH is the only immortal Being, who is the absolute sovereign Lord over life, fecundity and death. From Genesis, it seems that death was not part of the original plan of God for His creation, whereas cessation of life came as a result of an eponymous evil manipulator and destroyer (Gen. 2:17), who is in perpetual opposition to God (1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 6:8). This evil is personified as Satan who has a huge empire (Heb. 2:14). Among the Jews, death is the most common destiny of man. The expression, “We must all die, we are like water spit on the ground” (2 Sam. 14:14), is the grim reflection of mankind. The inevitability of death is pronounced in the Bible (Josh. 23:14; 1 Kgs 2:2; Eccles. 9:5, 12:7). It is, therefore, considered fortunate when men/women live to old age. Hence “old of days” and “good old age” (Gen. 15:15, 25:8; 2 Chron. 15:15; Judg. 8:32) were praised in the Hebrew Scripture.

The Jewish cosmological consciousness lives in the fear of death, hence Schmidt (1970, p. 181) writes, “Death is never glorified, not even by Christ and the apostles”. Death was taken as the inescapable destiny of all living beings. Since cessation of life was not part of the original design of God, the Bible presented the idea that death was a divine punishment inflicted on humanity. Death became inevitable due to the fall of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:17; Sir. 25:24), in which it became the primary and utmost punishment for the disobedience of human beings to the command of God (Rom. 5:15; 1 Cor. 15:21ff).

In the Old Testament, the continuance of life after death is ambiguous. Jewish beliefs and practices of life after death can be encapsulated as follows: (i) The dead go to *sheol* and are cut off from YHWH (Job 10:21). (ii) The dead cannot praise God. (iii) The dead are gathered to the “fathers”. (iv) Embalmmment was not practiced among the Jews. It was mentioned in the Bible as an Egyptian custom (Gen. 50:2-3, 26). (v) Pagan rites are strictly forbidden in the funeral rites of the Jews (Lev. 19:28, Deut. 14:1ff). (vi) Necromancy was totally forbidden. Thus, it was forbidden to interact or conjure the spirit of the dead. (vii) To be abandoned without burial was feared by the Jews and it was seen as the greatest of all misfortunes that even an enemy was spared as far as possible. All Jews must be given decent burials. In fact, decent burial of the dead is considered a sacred duty (2 Sam. 21:12ff; 1 Kgs. 13:29ff). (viii) Cremation pertains to pre-Israelite, Canaanites and the Greeks and this was abhorred in Jewish funeral rites (Josh. 7:25; 1 Kgs. 13:2). Only on rare cases was cremation allowed, for instance in the case of Saul and his sons (1 Sam. 31:12) and as an exceptional measure of punishment (Gen. 38:24; Lev. 20:14; Josh. 7:25).

The Hebrew scripture presents the fate of the dead as turning to dust and eaten by worms (Job 34:15; Sir. 19:3). However, there are scriptures that ameliorate the sombre picture above. The epochal events of Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:11) clearly point to the survival of the soul after life on earth. These events offer hope of the continuum of life after human existence has ceased on earth. Job presents the picture of a faithful Jew who trusted in God that the grave will not claim him forever. Samuel opines that God is the one who brings man to hades and raises him up again (1 Sam. 2:6). In Psalm (73:23ff), the Omnipotent God is the Supreme Being who alone can snatch man from death and annihilation. The prophet Isaiah (26:19) sees God as the one who has power to command death to surrender its booty. Apart from the above glimpses of life after death, the book of Daniel gives the most explicit Old Testament view of the resurrection of the body after death (Daniel 12:2). In the Maccabean era, there were evidences of the belief in life after death.

In the New Testament, the Hasideans/Essenes and the Pharisees were advocates of life after death. They believed and advocated the resurrection of the dead. The problem of death changed radically in the New Testament with the coming of Christ, through whom God has destroyed death forever (Heb. 2:14). The continuum of life after death is one of the greatest news of the New Testament (1 Cor. 15). Yet, death remains the most potent adversary of mankind which must be conquered (1 Cor. 15:25ff; Rev. 20:14), for death the common enemy of human beings has not been removed, despite the death and resurrection of Christ. For Christians, death has lost its frightening reality and poisonous sting (Rom. 14:7ff; 1 Cor. 15:55ff), as it has become the path to eternal life (1 Cor. 15:8; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 14:13; Rom.

8:38ff).

Death among the Yoruba

Iku (death) in Yoruba means the end of corporeal existence. It means cessation of life, mortality and absence of breath. Death is a daily reality which the Yoruba have tried to respond to in their cultural milieu. Names like *Ikukoyi* (this one was rejected by death), *Ikugbayi* (this one was taken by death), *Ikubolaje* (death has ruined wealth), *Ikusika* (death has done evil), *Molomo* (don't go), *Durojaiye* (wait and enjoy life), *Durosola* (wait and be wealthy) *Kasimawo* (let us watch this one), *Kokumo* (this one will not die), are Yoruba psychological responses to the fact of death. According to Akande (personal communication), the chief priest of Ogidi-Ijumu, burials are principally undertaken to aid the reincarnation of the deceased and to make life hereafter comfortable for the dead.

In African cosmology, life does not cease with death. Life is a continuum, in which death is a call to higher service on a higher plain. The dead, for the Yoruba, deserves appropriate and correct funeral rites so as to avoid being a wandering ghost. As a result of this fact, there are elaborate funeral rites among the Yoruba (Dopamu, 2006; Opeyemi and Omigbale, 2019). The first common indicator of death is the outburst of wailing (*ekun*).

The locale of burial is important among the people. From the researcher's observation of the Okun of Northeast Yorubaland, the locale of burial is determined by several factors like age, status, and nature of death. When anyone dies of epidemics like small pox or leprosy, he/she is buried outside the community in a forest. Age is also a determinant of burial sites. The status of the deceased also determines the type of burial rites. Grave goods form important part of traditional necrology of the Yoruba. In recent past, grave goods were included to accompany the dead and ease his journey to *orun* (heaven). Grave goods include foot-wears, beads, clothes, snuff box, sponge, lantern and his/her favourite food/drinks. In the past, slaves and attendants were buried with the deceased, if the deceased was a slave owner. Also, burials are done with expensive clothing for the rich. The indigents too are given relatively expensive burial cloths which are provided by relatives and friends. Mortuary practices include ritual bathing, shaving and dressing suited for an interment for an eternal journey. Embalming is also practiced among some Yoruba groups. In the past, some Okun-Yoruba communities like Illah and Ejuku in Yagba, and Okebukun and Ofere in Bunu, engaged in ancient embalming practice of fire-drying of corpses, (Otitoju, 2004).

The completion of funeral ceremony is called the final rites which make the dead to be numbered among the ancestors. It is necessary that the funeral rites be followed in detail so as to arrive at this final stage. The post interment processes can be longer and tasking. Masquerades, in African cultures, are expected to take part in the burial rites so that the deceased may enter the league of ancestors. Mbiti (1990) and Olomola (1988) opine that without these rituals, the dead might not be able to join the ancestral spirits. Widowhood is practiced among the Yoruba. Husbands and wives are expected to mourn their late partners over a period of time determined by the families of the deceased.

Life is a continuum in Yoruba cosmology. From birth to death and hereafter, the Yoruba have a

carefully guided explanation to life. Upon death, the immediate possibilities for an individual varies. This depends on his/her age, circumstance of death and his/her conduct while on earth. The good go to *orun rere* (good heaven) while the bad go to *orun apadi* (heaven of pot sherds). The man, who died at old age and is considered as having lived a good life and is celebrated with masquerades, is considered to have died a good death and will be regarded as an ancestor, while a youth who is considered to have died prematurely is assumed to be hovering around (Akande, personal communication; Ibrahim, personal communication).

Among the Yoruba, reincarnation is an important principle of life after death (Ige, 2006; Idowu, 1994; Opeyemi and Omigbale, 2019). This takes two forms: (a) The dead can reincarnate in form of a new baby. The birth of a male child after the death of a father or grandfather is considered the reincarnation of the dead person and the child is given the name *Babatunde* (father has come back). The birth of a girl after the death of a mother or grandmother is regarded as the reincarnation of the deceased and she is called *Iyabo/Yetunde* (mother has come back) or *Yewande* (mother visits me). The birth of any child is scrutinised by *ifa* to know if he/she is a reincarnated person. (b) The other form of reincarnation is by means of masquerades (*egungun*). For the Yoruba, masquerades are ancestors (Akande, personal communication; Ibrahim, personal communication; Obahun, personal communication).

The tables below show the comparison of basic funeral beliefs and burial practices among the Yoruba and the Jews.

Comparative analysis of basic funeral beliefs of Jews and Yoruba

S/N	Jews (Old Testament Period)	Traditional Yoruba
1	Earthly life is the best.	Earthly life is the best.
2	Life after death is not praised: it is in sheol (pit)	Life after death is attainable when one dies at old age with virtuoso deeds. He enters the college of the ancestors.
3	Deep attachment to life on earth	Deep attachment to both life on earth and hereafter
4	Total dependence of life on God, who gives and takes life	Total dependence of life on God who gives and takes life, and deities who control the affairs of the world

S/N	Jews (Old Testament Period)	Traditional Yoruba
1.	Wailing	Wailing
2.	Shaving of hair (Deut. 14:1)	Shaving of women's hair on the death of their husbands
3.	Anointing of the dead with oil (Jn. 12:7, 19:39; Mk. 6:1; Lk. 24:1)	Anointing of the dead with ochre and traditional pomade
4.	Rolled up in linen and bandaged (Mt. 27:59; Lk. 23:53; Mk. 15:46)	Rolled up in white linen and bandaged
5.	Face covered with shroud and tallit (Jn. 20:7)	Face covered with shroud
6.	Personal objects and some dishes are placed beside the body	The deceased is accompanied with personal objects like clothes, shoes, dishes, and beads.
7	Tombs marked with commemorative pillars	Tombs marked with commemorative pillars, monoliths or wood

Grave Offences that Affect Funeral Rites Among the Yoruba

Some offences are viewed as weighty and deserve serious considerations in deciding funeral rites among the Yoruba, because they pose great threats to the community. They affect the socio-religious fabric of the society and they pose grave consequences. These are serious misdemeanours which are classified as abominations and they attract severe sanctions. The Yoruba refer to these collectively as *ewo*. Consequently, an offender might not receive the appropriate funeral rites.

i Death in incestuous relation: Sexual contact within a near kin network is termed incestuous among the Yoruba. Sexually-related taboos include coitus with one's own immediate family members and it even extends to the members of one's lineage. As a result, marriages between members of the same family and lineage are not tolerated. There are severe sanctions attached to this because the earth has been polluted. Incest is a grave taboo that is viewed as very shameful and a direct affront to the bond that binds the family and lineage together. Punitive measures involve the use of masquerades to inflict punishment on offenders in order to purify the land, while derisive songs are rendered against offenders during *oro* festivals. Persons who died in incestuous relationship may not be accorded the usual burial rites unless heavy fines are paid to appease the goddess of the earth, (Akande, personal communication; Ibrahim, personal communication).

ii Desecration: It is considered an abomination to desecrate religious sites, ceremonies and persons. Persons, materials and sites that are associated with *Oro* are considered to be holy. *Ebora* (deities), *oju ibo* (shrines), *igbo ebora* or *igbo egun* (groves) and *egungun* (masquerades) are related to *Oro*. It is considered forbidden to uncover the face of *Egungun*, fight *Egungun*, prevent the outing of *ebora*, and to see *ebora* without being initiated into *Oro* cult. Among the Okun-Yoruba, it is equally impermissible to molest women who are initiated into *Aruta*, *Ofosi* and *Imole* occultic groups. It is an abomination to fight the *Aworo* (chief priest). Equally too, it is a taboo to molest kings or titled chiefs. Offenders, according to *aworo* of Ogidi (personal communication), are promptly anathematized by being ostracized from the community. Desecrators are denied public celebration of funeral rites.

iii Theft: Theft is another grave offence among the Yoruba. A thief is despised and ostracized. His family rejects him and friends abandon him. It is even more so for someone known to be a hardened thief. There are traditional ways of handling theft. The common punitive measure is that the thieves are paraded around the town with children and youth chanting abusive songs against them. In Yoruba communities, serial thieves and hardened criminals are subjected to the most severe humiliation. One of the punishments meted out to them is to call out masquerades to denounce them and inflict heavy beatings on them. Another punishment is banishment from the community. A hardened thief still deserves burial, but there will be no public celebration (Oba Joledo, personal communication; Oba Alaniyo, personal communication).

iv Murder: To kill a human being with premeditated malice is abhorred by the Yoruba. Homicidal persons, bloodthirsty individuals and wicked persons are considered as pariahs. A murderer/murderess is usually viewed as a wicked person or a demented person. Culpability in murder cases attracts severe punishment from the traditional court. For practical purposes, murder cases are now guided by statutes of Nigerian state laws. Convicted murderers are buried quietly by their relatives and friends.

v Witchcraft: *Aje* (witch) and *oso* (wizard) are the personifications of evil among the Yoruba. For this reason, the Yoruba will do all within his/her power to overcome witches/wizards. Those involved in witchery and wizardry are considered wicked and heartless. They are construed as *oni ibi* (evil persons) who cause hardships, pestilence, accidents, misfortunes and deaths in the community. To underline the wickedness of witchcraft, the Yoruba believed that it is only a witch from one's lineage who can harm or kill someone. Witchcraft and wizardry are considered as the apex of evil and people who are accused of such crimes are ostracized (Akande, personal communication; Ibrahim, personal communication; Obahun, personal communication). Such people are not celebrated at death, but they are buried by their families and relatives.

Conclusion

Jewish and traditional Yoruba notions of death are derived from the anthropological existential reflection on life and death by the adherents of the two religions. Death imposes itself on us and human beings have responded to it in different ways. The study notes that both Yoruba and Jews believe in the continuum of life after death. They do not interpret cessation of

life on earth as the finality of an individual. The richness of the funeral rites points to a strong belief that human life continues to exist in some form even after the cessation of all physical activities. The care for the dead among the two cultures reminds us of the inherent value of human life. For these groups of people, the accepted norm is that death is inevitable and must be accepted. These cultures recommend courageous resignation to death. Death is conceived as a heavy burden which imposes itself on humanity. It is seen as a departure for human beings, though details about the destination have not been clearly explained. As Barry (1982, p. 456) writes, “the belief in an afterlife, inspired by religious conviction, will undoubtedly persist, and many people will continue to live their lives with one eye on this world and one on the next”. Both cultures place premium on deceased members and accord them the best funeral rites. The paper notes that Jewish and traditional Yoruba religion accord the dead maximum respect with elaborate funeral rites. Under the onslaughts of westernization and globalization, Islam and Christianity, traditional Yoruba funeral rites have been altered substantially, as only few elements of their pristine culture of burials remain.

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