

GAIUS A. UMAHI

Cultural Actions toward the Dead in Selected Cultures in Africa: Missiological Implications

Introduction

The death of loved ones is always a cause of pain and grief and usually precipitates some kind of interim or permanent dislocations in a family's socioeconomic life. While the discomfort generated from the occurrence of death is most acute, is it possible that some of the actions performed on behalf of the dead are capable of questioning and challenging our Christian theological and biblical foundations? Is it possible that in our bid to placate death and the dead, that mirrored in the personal names given to people at birth are found underlying values that have the potential of undermining obedience to God's Word? For example, in the Nigerian Igbo culture are found personal names which seem to personify death. These include Onwubiko (death, please), Onwukwe (if death agrees), Onwumere (death caused it) and Onwuka (death is greater).

In the Yoruba culture are found names such as Ikumapayi (death don't kill this), Ikuforiji (death pardons), Ikudaisi (death spare this), Ikubolaje (death spoils wealth), and Ikuesan (death is not good). When certain cultural practices tend to question or erode clear biblical teachings, should Christians in those cultures cling to their cultural practices or remain obedient to the Bible? It is good to respect the traditions and wishes of the people concerning cultural practices, but such practices should also not be consistent with Scripture (Sulfridge 2011:26, 27) and/or the writings of Ellen G. White.

In my many years of doing pastoral ministry I have attended and officiated at some funeral services where some of these issues were evident.

Sometimes, the traditionalists threatened to abandon the corpse if some of their demands were not met by the bereaved family or church group. The church people also threaten in some situations to abandon the burial of the body if un-biblical actions were performed. Thus, fights between villagers (traditionalists) and Christians occur over perceived violations of cherished traditions or teachings. Oftentimes, the ensuing confusion over performing a particular action for the dead tends to impact negatively on the church's evangelistic mission in the community. Therefore, I am suggesting that the cultural practices dealing with death and funeral ceremonies should be re-examined, streamlined, and especially made congruent with biblical injunctions.

Methodology

A combination of methodologies were used in this study namely, the historical, phenomenological, and participant observation methods of inquiry. Historically, the article traces the possible origin of some of the cultural practices relating to the dead. Phenomenologically,

I examine and evaluate the actions that are carried out on behalf of the dead and correlate such actions and observations with the participant observation method. In addition, a structured interview was utilized. The first part of the interview dealt with selected post graduate students from across Africa who were studying at Babcock University. The other interviewees were selected from among Christians and traditionalists in the selected cultures who were fifty years old or older.

Selected Cultures

The countries and cultures selected for this study included Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and Cote d'ivoire. In Nigeria, I interacted heavily with the Igbo people in the southeastern part of the country while touching lightly on the Yoruba and Hausa cultures. In Ghana, the focus was more on the Ashanti tribe who are believed to be the custodians of Ghana's rich cultures. In the two other countries, I dealt with information generated by students I interacted with in this research project.

Actions toward the Dead

There are many actions that are usually performed on behalf of the dead in most parts of Africa. Some of these include, but not limited to, firing of cannons, tying pieces of cloth on a bamboo pole, the place of interment (inside the house or outside), the position of the head of the deceased on the casket, the insertion of articles or money in the coffin, a

second burial, paying last respects, and a the minute silence. Each of these items are discussed below.

Firing of Cannons

In many African cultures cannon shots are fired as part of the final rites of passage on behalf of the dead. Measured quantities of gunpowder are inserted into iron holes which are half buried and arranged in such a way that a fairly uniform rhythm is maintained when the powder is lit and the sounds begin to go off. To show the prevalence of this cultural practice, in his *Songs of Sorrow*, Kofi Awoonor, who died recently in the Kenya mall blast, noted in his lament, "I have no sons to fire the gun when I die And no daughter to wail when I close my mouth" (Alakam, Kalu, and Babatunde 2013).

In some of these cultures not everyone qualifies to be given this honor. It is usually done for those notable sages and leaders in the community who have made remarkable contributions in kind or cash. It is also done for the custodians of the community oracles and deities. Some people believe that there are other esoteric and cultic practices which precede these cannon shots. In modern times, though, the cannon shots are often done to accentuate the fanfare and hilarity of the celebration, but in ancient times they were used to evoke a kind of parting of the dead and a preparation for life in the netherworld. Cannon shots also inform the living that someone has gone to join the ancestors and also prepares the ancestors to receive the newly departed. At such times, phrases such as, "let him go home in peace," is usually heard from people within the community who may not be physically present at the funeral. This is so because in most of Africa, "the dead and the living depend upon each other" (Aja 2007:212). This kind of symbiotic relationship is further explained by Newell S. Booth.

On the part of the dead, they depend on the living for their own continuity as existing entities. If any dead person did not leave a descendant on earth, especially a male descendant, he is eventually forgotten. . . . On the part of the living, they depend on their dead, especially their own ancestors, to warn them against any danger that may be coming to them from the spirit world and to help them escape from the impending troubles. (1977:44, 45)

Cloth on a Bamboo Pole

There are also places in Africa where a long piece of cloth will be tied on a bamboo pole and erected by the roadside to signify that someone has died in that compound. The freshness of the bamboo and the piece of cloth show how recent the death is. From my interactions and findings, this

action is purely informational and helps someone who was not at home when the incident happened to have information and possibly prepare for a condolence visit. Thus, this use of symbolism is an information disseminator in the community.

Interment Conditions

In some cultures, the location where the dead person is finally interred often constitutes a challenge. In some communities the dead person has to be buried inside the house, never outside. However, if a house is not available, the space where such a person is buried outside is marked and becomes part of the house that the deceased children will build later. This practice is explained on the grounds that the dead is still “conscious” and should still live in a house as his or her final abode. In addition, the position of the head in the coffin is also an important matter. Some literally insist that the dead person’s head must be placed towards the entrance of the house or the compound if the person was not buried inside the house. The reason for this insistence suggests that the dead should be able to see people who come and go in order to perform part of his or her duty of protecting the “earthly family” from malevolent spirits especially when he or she has been accorded all the rights including the second burial. In this way, the dead person acts as a guard over the compound.

There is also the custom of placing some items inside the casket or inside the grave ostensibly for the use of the dead person to use in the netherworld. Some of these items could include money, cutlery, wrappers, pillows, and any of the most cherished articles the person used while they were in the land of the living. The LoDagoa tribe specifically believes that the money given to the dead person is meant to pay for the toll at the river of death (*italics mine*) before being granted access (Ray 1976:140, 141). Sometimes, rich caskets and tombs are filled with expensive jewelry which in recent times have attracted tomb robbers.

There is also the custom of the person “lying in state” at which time people are called to view the dead person and “pay their last respects.” Usually, a roomy place is tastefully decorated with white laces with the dead laid at the centre in an open casket. As people file past, different emotions are expressed—mostly silence or outright wailing. Such times also provide opportunities for people to closely examine the way the dead person “was taken care of” which is often determined by the kind of dress he or she is wearing and the quality of the coffin used. In some cultures, the deceased’s immediate family members will later be commended or condemned for the way they dealt with the dead person. Depending on the location and “worth” of the dead person, this tradition becomes “very

important” to the extent that fights have ensued because some groups or people were left out or were not allowed to “see” the corpse before final interment. It is important to note that most of the cultures in the northern part of Nigeria (among both Christians and Muslims) have nothing to do with most of these practices. Instead, they bury their dead as soon as possible without most of the issues being discussed in this article.

Second Burial

According to Benjamin Ray the performance of the second burial in Africa is the “family’s final settlement of the dead” (1976:144). It is believed that after this ceremony the “dead” can now relax in the society of the ancestors. In the thought of Awolalu and Dopamu, the second burial helps the dead to secure their place in the abode of the ancestors (1979:258). It is also believed that if this is not done, neither the dead nor the living will be happy. On the one hand, the dead person is angry that he is still “wandering” and on the other hand, the living are also losing his services because the dead person cannot intercede for them until he settles down. In Nigeria, the Igbo and Yoruba groups perform this ceremony which takes a lot of money. In some parts of Igboland, this ceremony is called *Ikwa madu* (second burial) as against *Ili madu* (first burial). Some other cultures still perform specific sacrifices at specific times for the dead all with the hope of placating them.

At a typical second burial ceremony, the rites done at the first burial are repeated in a grander and larger scale. For instance, if one was required to slaughter one goat during the first burial, the person has to provide two or more for the second one. The high cost of performing burial ceremonies probably gave rise to the Igbo proverb: *Onye ji aka kwa nna ya n’ihi na obughi di okpara gburu ya*, let the one (among the children of the deceased) who has money perform the “befitting” burial for his father because it is not the first born that killed him. The time lapse, before the second burial, which sometimes runs into years, allows the family to gather adequate financial resources before embarking on the project. During this ceremony, several sacrifices and dances are performed for the dead and the living. This ceremony is often a public display of one’s arrival in the financial world. It is a statement that one has made enough cash and therefore can do “anything.” Traditionally, it is believed that a man cannot perform this second burial rite for his father if his father did not perform it for his own father. But if he insists on it, the elders will advise him to perform one for his grandfather first before embarking on one for his own father.

A Minute of Silence

Observing a minute of silence for the dead has been made popular in Africa and other parts of the world in the last few decades. It is not an indigenous cultural practice but seems to have been foisted on many of the African people by the educated ones among them. In fact, the minute of silence thing is believed to have started with an Australian journalist, Edward George Honey who served with the British troops during the First World War according to *The Independent* (2008). He was born in Melbourne in 1885 and later died in England in 1922. He had published a letter in the *London Evening News* on 8 May 1919 and recommended that those who died in the war be honored with five minutes of silence. To him, this national remembrance was to be “a very sacred intercession” and “communion with the glorious dead (italics mine) who [had] won us peace.” Thus, the call for a minute of silence for “our departed colleague,” brother or sister is yet another action that is done for the sake of the dead. Strangely, these calls have emanated from both church and unchurched people. To carry out this action, someone asks the group or congregation to stand up for a minute of silence in honor of the dead person. There are times when church leaders got it right and instead called for prayers on behalf of those who were bereaved instead of for the deceased. Often, the minute of silence does not last a full minute and is typically followed the leader saying, “May her soul rest in perfect peace.” Somehow, it seems to me that this call often functions as a ritual for the dead irrespective of the kind of life that the person lived.

Other Actions

In addition to the internment aspects raised and discussed above, my interview with a number of Doctor of Ministry and MA in Religion students revealed some other issues they were aware of. The students came from Ghana, Liberia, Cameroon, and Cote d’Ivoire. The interviewees from Liberia, Cameroon, and Ghana mentioned challenge of knowing how to deal with pouring of libation, periodic visits to the cemetery to weep and deposit wreaths, prevention of the widow from seeing the corpse, and performance of other rites on the dead before burial. In some cultures the family speaks to the dead person in the coffin and asks “it” to discover and deal with those who killed him or her. A Cameroonian told how the dead person if he is the head of the family is covered with animal skins one day before the burial while his wife sits behind him. In another culture food is also prepared and given to the dead person if it is during harvest time, for they believe that the dead are more powerful than the living. In some places, widows are expected to scrap their hair and wear black clothing

for several months in order to show sorrow. In some extreme situations, widows are even required to drink the water used in bathing their dead husband (Iwuoha 2011:115, 116).

In some cultures if the dead person departs from the living “hungry” the group is concerned with the fact that he or she did not have the opportunity to prepare for the “journey.” Among the Ndikinimeni of the Bafia tribe in Cameroon a fetish priest performs a type of ritual especially if the person died in a car accident. The interviewee who mentioned this ceremony suggested that this ritual transcends denominations and described his experience during a Seventh-day Adventist burial in the community with the priest performing his many hours of rituals interspersed with incantations.

In some cultures in Ghana the casket used in burying the dead has to evoke and reflect the kind of occupation of the person while he or she lived. For example, if the person was a fisherman, the coffin will be designed to resemble a fish. Though nothing may be intrinsically wrong with this creativity, it may constitute an unnecessary distraction from the lesson which death not the dead should ideally teach the living. The “glory” or goodness of the dead person does not lie in the fanfare displayed at the funeral nor in the type of coffin used but in the relationship the person had with his or her Maker before death.

The questions that need answers include the following. Do these actions for the dead have any biblical certification or authentication? Are they neutral and harmless cultural expressions or can some of them actually impede the proclamation of the gospel in those areas where they are practiced? Can the culturally harmless ceremonies be refined and used by Christians while the ones that go against biblical principles are discontinued? With these questions in mind the next section briefly offers a theology of the dead from the biblical perspective as understood by Seventh-day Adventists.

A Theology of the Dead

A theology of the dead is one of the least talked about areas in the Adventist Church today, and yet it seems that in the African context it is one of the most needed since there are so many practices that were briefly discussed above that are incongruent with the biblical message concerning that state of a person in death. Seventh-day Adventists believe that one of the foundational arguments about death is found in Gen 2:7 where death is the reversal of being alive. The coming to being of the first man was a function under the total control of God. He molded man with clay and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a

living soul or being. The reversal of life involves the withdrawal of that breath of life. When this happens, a man or woman becomes a dead soul or a dead being. Some people have alluded to Eccl 12:7 where it says that “the spirit shall return unto God who gave it” as evidence that the spirit of a dead person still lives on. Such a view suggests that “this verse says that man’s spirit is immortal; it does not die nor sleep in the grave” (Study-light.org). However, the author had earlier posited in Eccl 9:5, 6: “For the living know that they shall die but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished: neither have they any more portion forever in anything that is done under the sun.” David agrees with Solomon that from the day that a person breathes his or her last, he or she has no more knowledge of love or hatred, for “his thoughts perish” (Ps 6:5; 146:4).

Concerning this biblical declaration that the dead do not know anything, Ellen White posits that “the dead do not hold communion with the living. But true to his early cunning, when in the form of a serpent he deceived the mother of our race, Satan employs this device to gain control of the minds of men” (1969:3:426). When explaining the apparent “reality” of the dead communicating with the living, she provides this information:

He [Satan] has power even to bring before men the appearance of their departed friends. The counterfeit is perfect; the familiar look, the words, the tone, are reproduced with marvelous distinctness. Many are comforted with the assurance that their loved ones are enjoying the bliss of Heaven; and without suspicion of danger, they give ear to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils. (White 1969:4:370)

An Evaluation of the Various Actions toward the Dead

Looking at the list of actions usually performed on behalf of the dead, only one may be absolved completely from any negative projection or implication, namely, the tying of a piece of cloth on a bamboo pole. This action is used to communicate and disseminate information concerning the occurrence of death. It goes against no biblical principles. This is partially true for the firing of cannons. While cannon shots are used to disseminate information about a death, they also tend to project affluence and signals other esoteric practices that are not congruent with the biblical principles concerning the dead. While some Christians see nothing wrong with these cannon shots for the dead, most Seventh-day Adventists have raised objections when they are used for a deceased member.

In connection with the position of the head of the dead person in the casket, the place of burial (inside or outside the house), the insertion of

money and other items in the coffin, the second burial, and observing a minute silence on behalf of the dead—all these practices lie outside the realm of authentic biblical teachings and practice. Each of these actions tends to clearly or subtly endorse the consciousness of the dead which is against the biblical declaration that dead people do not know anything. For instance, when Christians “quarrel” over the position of the person’s head in the grave or where the person should be interred, this indicates that the African Traditional Religion (ATR) is still embedded in the psyche and seems to have more influence than the biblical concept that dead people do not know anything and have no part with what takes place among the living.

[There are those who] believe that the dead come from their graves and communicate with them and they declare that they see them and talk with them, and all through the night there is carousing and singing and loud voices going through the streets, calling upon the dead to appear. Oh, what ignorance and heathen superstition! I saw the most extravagant display of wreaths, beautiful bouquets, and flowers arranged in the form of a cross. These were taken to the graveyards and in honor of the dead placed upon their graves. I learn that they believe the dead respond and reveal themselves. This is Spiritualism. (White 1993:3:63)

When this truth about the dead is established, the position of the head, the place of burial, whether or not a person has a second burial, inserting gift items into the coffin, and observing a minute of silence becomes immaterial.

Implications for Mission

The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is so important that nothing should be allowed to compromise or derail it. Therefore, in light of the thoughts shared above, what are the likely missionary implications for un-reached peoples or for the retention of old members in the church?

First, if most of these rituals and practices discussed above are not discontinued, it will be harder to reach the traditionalists with the good news of eternal life. The reasoning is that if the dead are already enjoying all the benefits of life after death and can intercede and bless the living (which is actually the concept of eternal life in ATR), then there is no need to declare the coming of God’s kingdom. It is also hard to reach people who somehow suspect that the Adventist Church has compromised its faith by allowing ATR concepts to remain.

Second, the continuation of these apparently harmless cultural actions for the dead can also engender among existing church members a spirit of indifference toward cultural practices that go against biblical principles. It could cause so to not see any difference between their church members' way of life and those of non-members. This apathy and lack of difference can cause some to leave the church.

Third, if Christians continue these practices in their communities they are legitimizing un-biblical teachings about the dead. This is precisely what the devil is seeking—to convince as many as possible that dead people are still conscious.

The mysteries of heathen worship are replaced by the secret associations and séances, the obscurities and wonders of the sorcerers of our time. Their disclosures are eagerly received by thousands who refuse to accept light from God's word or from his Spirit. While they speak with scorn of the magicians of old, the great deceiver laughs in triumph as they yield to his arts in a different form. (White 1974:139)

Fourth, notwithstanding the challenges that these practices pose to the Seventh-day Adventist mission, care must be exercised in the way the Adventist Church in Africa deals with the various cultural practices so as not to violate any biblical principle. As mentioned above, there is nothing inherently wrong with tying a piece of cloth on a bamboo pole for the purpose of informing people of a death in the family. The church leaders should never discipline a member for engaging in such a cultural practice if he or she wishes to do that. For instance in my part of Igboland I have heard of local church leaders who threaten that if a gun or cannon shot is heard during the burial of a Seventh-day Adventist, they will immediately leave the funeral ceremony and go home. This plea for tolerance should also apply when someone is buried in a coffin that is customized to mimic the occupation of the person. My point is that the church should carefully appraise each cultural practice from a biblical perspective before disciplining church members who practice them. There are also practices that may be personal conscious items that should be left to the discretion of each family or individual. If such a policy were followed it would go a long way towards reducing internal tensions in the church which are sometimes generated by these "minor" issues.

Conclusion

In Africa, many actions are carried out on behalf of the dead. These include firing of cannons, tying of pieces of cloth on a bamboo pole, the place of interment either inside or outside the house, the position of the

head of the deceased inside the grave, the insertion of articles in the coffin, a second burial, and observing a minute of silence. This article observed that most of these actions are clearly incongruent with biblical teachings as understood by the Seventh-day Adventist Church and should be dropped from Adventist funeral practices. The overriding evidence lies in the univocal declaration of the Bible that the dead person does not know anything. And since such issues like inserting gifts in the coffin, doing a second burial for the dead, and honoring the dead with a minute of silence suggest that the dead person has not really died, such practices should be discontinued. However, it is important for church leaders to be winsome in the manner in which these un-biblical practices are discussed. The goal should be the teaching of biblical principles with the emphasis that cultural practices that do not follow those biblical principles should be discontinued.

Works Cited

- A Brief History of Silence: When No Noise Is Good Noise. 2008. *The Independent*, February 9. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/a-brief-history-of-silence-when-no-noise-is-good-noise-780200.html> (accessed 1 October 2013).
- Aja, Paul O. 2007. *African Traditional Religion*. Uburu, Ohaozara, Nigeria: Truth and Life Publications.
- Alakam, Japhet, Uduma Kalu, Jimoh Babatunde. 2013. Ghanaian Poet, Kofi Awoonor Killed in Kenya Attack. *Vanguard* (September 23). <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/09/ghanaian-poet-kofi-awoonor-killed-in-kenya-attack/> (accessed 25 September 2013).
- Awolalu, Omosade J and Dopamu, Adelumo P. 1979. *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Onibonje Press and Book Industries.
- Booth, Newell S., ed. 1977. *African Traditional Religion*. New York: Nok Publishers.
- Iwuoha, Clara M. A. 2011. Violence Against Women: The fate of Igbo Women of Nigeria. *Insight 7* (December):110-121.
- Ray, Benjamin C. 1976. *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- StudyLight.org. Ecclesiastes 9. <http://www.studyLight.org/com/bcc/view.cgi?bk=20&ch=12> (accessed 22 December 2013).
- Sulfridge, Jay. 2011. The Erosion of Funeral Customs and its Impact on Ministry. *Ministry* (May): 26-27.
- White, Ellen G. 1969. *The Spirit of Prophecy*. 4 vols. Washington, DC: Review and Herald.
- _____. 1974. *Sketches from the Life of Paul*. Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald.
- _____. 1993. *Manuscript Releases*. 21 vols. Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate.



Gaius A. Umahi is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Babcock University and the Director of the Pre-Degree Program. He holds a PhD in New Testament Studies from Obafemi Awolowo University.