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## **The African Tradition of Burial in the Ancestral Land<sup>1</sup> and Its Implications for the African Church Today**

by

**Joel Kamsen Tihitshak Biwul, PhD**

The biblical account states that God made the provision of a garden for Adam and Eve as their habitat after they had been created. It states, in regards to the divine restriction of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that “for when you eat of it, you will surely die” (Gen 2:17b)<sup>2</sup>; and obviously physical death became a reality of humanity following the account of the fall in Genesis 3. Also, the writer of the book of Hebrews states, when contrasting the principle of Old Testament sacrifice with the salvific efficacy of the propitiatory death of Jesus Christ, that “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Heb 9:27a).

From the preceding scriptural passages, it is obvious that death is a common human phenomenon, acting as “the implacable enemy of man”,<sup>3</sup> that is, of all human beings. It is the cessation of all vital human functions, certifying the loss and end of human existence. Death is described as “the natural end of life”<sup>4</sup> and “the inevitable end of man”<sup>5</sup> on earth. Roland Murphy says death “casts a fatal shadow over all human existence”<sup>6</sup> and makes the experience of life to be futile and worthless when it strikes. Burial on the other hand is the act

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<sup>1</sup> We are aware that some use the term *ancestral land* to mean the land, world, home, place or domain of the African ancestral spirits. Our usage here refers rather to the physical land of the living human beings, that is, the land of a person’s indigenisation and domicile.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>3</sup> Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEB International Private Limited, 1978), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Philip S. Johnson, “Death and Afterlife,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (eds. Bill T. Arnold and Hugh Godfrey Maturin Williamson, Leicester/ Downers Grove, 2005), 215.

<sup>5</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 133.

<sup>6</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 23A: Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word, 1992), lix.

or process of disposing of a corpse. This may vary from culture to culture and from one religious or some ideology to the other.

In African tradition generally the dead are not buried away from their land of ancestry. Burial, to be considered proper, honourable, meaningful and acceptable in most African cultures, has to be done in the deceased's ancestral land. This traditional ideology forces on Christians to strive, against all odds, to also bury their relations, Christians and non-Christians alike, in their ancestral land. But tension exists between such traditional insistence on burial of dead persons in their "home land" and the Christian understanding of the concept of the resurrection. How are Christians who fail to bury their dead according to traditional rite perceived by the people in the culture, and will dead African Christians that are not buried in their ancestral land not resurrect? This article examines the traditional philosophical reasons propelling the African insistence on the observance of burial in the ancestral land even today. It points out the attendant implications of such cultural insistence for the Church, particularly where living Christian relations fail to bury their dead according to required traditional rites. The study advances grounds why African Christians today, as transformed persons, are not obliged to such traditional observances.

### **Death and Burial Tradition**

The occurrence of death "disturbs the harmony, cohesion, and solidarity in both family and community."<sup>7</sup> John S. Mbiti sees death as "that inevitable and, in many societies, most disrupting phenomenon of all."<sup>8</sup> This is particularly so because death is no respecter<sup>9</sup> of persons; it has no regard for gender, age, status, creed, wealth, achievements in life, or any form of sentiments for that matter. It also does not respect the ideology of segregation whether on the basis of continental or country divides, or on tribal, ethnic group, racial, colour, or lineal origin. Death does not even discriminate between the rich and the poor, those who are free and those who are bound and oppressed, the powerful and the weak, the sick and

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<sup>7</sup> Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, "Ecumenical Burial Societies in South Africa: Mutual Caring and Support that Transcends Ecclesiastical and Religious Differences," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (October 1990), 465.

<sup>8</sup> John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (2d ed., England: Heinemann, 1990; repr., 2008), 145.

<sup>9</sup> Within the context of social injustice against humanity, death has no respect either for the oppressor or the oppressed. See Sarojini Nadar, "Gender, power, sexuality and suffering bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the characters of Esther and Vashti for the purpose of social transformation," *OTE* 15/1 (2002). It does not respect socio-political divides in society, see Efthimiadis-Keith argues. See Helen Efthimiadis-Keith, "Genesis 2:18-25 from a Jungian and Feminist-Deconstructionist Point of View," *Old Testament Essay* 23/1 (2010): 45-65. Kofi Asare Opoku adds that death does not respect human beauty or intelligence. Since death owes no one any respect, all human pride and boasting must ultimately surrender to death as human beings are incapacitated to "intervene when it comes." Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 134.

the healthy, those who are majority and those who are minority, et cetera. Since no category of human beings is insulated from death, it is a reality that all peoples must face up to and be prepared for in this transitory and very brief earthly life.

Death comes to its victims without notice when it is time; it gives neither option of choice nor opportunity for negotiation. It is a perfect timekeeper as it neither wastes nor loses time. Death is a close friend and an active participant in every human community, yet no one ever gets used to it. The way in which death snatches its victims, sometimes violently and suddenly, and the manner in which living humans react to its effects make death a mystery that defies overfamiliarity. Its effects, most times, can be electrifying as reactions<sup>10</sup> to its occurrence are always irresistible and irreversible, and sometimes emotionally demoralising, and psychologically and economically incapacitating. The theology of death should move the living into some sort of contemplative reflection on the essence of living, how life has been lived so far, and how it will end. This is to help the person reflecting to achieve a productive morally upright and godly life before his or her exit from the scene of earthly life.

Corpses in every human society and community are not disposed of in the same manner. Some are either cremated or buried according to some form of premeditated cultural tradition or some religious and sociological ideologies. In places such as the US, India, Nepal, China, and Varanasi, cremation is practised. In India and Nepal, for example, all dead bodies are cremated—millions every year. Some of those ashes are buried and some are kept in urns in people's homes. But many are scattered in the mountains or in the river or over the ocean. In African societies, bodies are hardly ever cremated. Clearly, among African peoples, burial practices and observances “vary according to ethnicity, clan, kinship and belief system.”<sup>11</sup> Africans bury their dead according to their cultural traditional rituals. While some variations in the observances of cultural methodology of burial rituals and ceremonies exist, it is a general phenomenon among African peoples to bury the dead in their ancestral land. Those that die in some African countries other than the country of their ancestry, and even those who are domiciled outside the continent, when they die in diaspora, their corpses are brought “home” for “proper” burial in their ancestral lands. For instance, when Julius

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<sup>10</sup> Individuals and various cultures react to the effects of death differently, depending on the nature and manner in which a person dies, and the status of the deceased to family and society. Some grieving individuals may commit suicide following the death of a loved one as they despair of hope while some others can momentarily turn violent. Still others can even become insane or suffer some health incapacitation. The pain of losing a loved one to death, especially a sudden one caused by, for example, cardiac arrest, automobile accident, diabolical means, or some other cause, can be inestimably demoralising. Given the shocking and sometimes paralysing effects of death, most sympathisers in Africa would usually use the phrase “take heart” as a consolatory expression of their sympathy to the bereaved.

<sup>11</sup> Tiny Happy Sarah Setsiba, “Mourning Rituals and Practices in Contemporary South African Townships: A Phenomenological Study,” A PhD thesis submitted to the Department of Psychology, University of Zululand, South Africa, n. d., 25. This work is helpful for its much discussion on several post death rituals in a South African context.

Nyerere of Tanzania and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya died, they were buried in their ancestral lands; so also were Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Joseph Mobutu (Mobutu Sese Seko Koko Ngbendu Wa Za Banga) of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Recently, Nelson Mandela (Madiba) of South Africa died and was buried in his ancestral land in Qunu in the Transkei, near Johannesburg, South Africa.

### **Burials in the Bible**

Some African Christians use the burials of Abraham (Gen 23:1-20) and Joseph (Gen 49:29-51:14) as representative biblical prescription to argue in support of burial in one's ancestral land. But are these two examples merely descriptive of an event or are they meant to be prescriptive? Abraham, the ancestor of the Jewish people, had his primary socio-cultural root in the ancient Near Eastern context since he came from Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 11:27-12:5). Before his migration, the practice of the burial of the dead, a general phenomenon of most human societies apart from cremation, had already been in existence. The tradition of burial in Jewish society therefore became an established practice only several years after the day of Abraham when they emerged as a people group and as a nation. Yet according to Johnson, "the Israelites were far more concerned with the living than with the dead."<sup>12</sup> He thinks Abraham's purchase of the field was a reflection of his respect for the dead since "a corpse requires a permanent resting place."<sup>13</sup> Richard S. Hess adds that, "burial was considered essential in ancient Israel."<sup>14</sup> Samuel Kunhiyop explains further that proper burial was essential in the Old Testament tradition because, "Not receiving a proper burial was considered a matter of great shame."<sup>15</sup>

However, to argue for Abraham's case of burying his wife Sarah and Joseph's burial of his father Jacob as ground or as a biblical prescription for burial in one's ancestral land by Christians today is to argue for what the text itself is silent about. Although Abraham buried the wife of his youth and love in Canaan, he was not originally a Canaanite. Equally, even though Jacob refused burial in Egypt and instructed that he be buried in Canaan, both Egypt and Canaan were foreign lands to Jacob's original ancestry. The biblical account is clear regarding Sarah's burial. Abraham admitted, "I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead" (Gen 23:4). The argument

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<sup>12</sup> Philip S. Johnson, "Burial and Mourning," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, Leicester/Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 106. Johnson thinks the focus of the account of Gen 23 is more on the legal transaction than with the burial of Sarah.

<sup>13</sup> Payne, "Genesis (Chapters 12-50)," 130.

<sup>14</sup> Richard S Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic/Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 327.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Bukuru/Nairobi: Hippo Books, 2012), 222.

should rather be grounded on the point that, first, Abraham was not to return to Ur, the land of his original ancestry or to Haran where he had settled with his father Terah in transit (Gen 11:22-32). Secondly, he was also clear about the divine instruction he had received from Yahweh about the land of Canaan.<sup>16</sup> Since Canaan was Abraham's new native land by divine promise, his acquisition of a burial site was preparatory well ahead of the fulfilment of the promise, described by David Payne as "the embryo of a much vaster inheritance."<sup>17</sup>

Burial in one's ancestral land among one's relations was a usual practice in the culture of the ancient Near Eastern peoples and the Canaanites. It was also a worthwhile desire for the Jews, at least in their formative years. In this culture, the desire was normative to be buried with one's ancestors in one's native land. Following in this tradition, Jacob had instructed his children not to bury him in Egypt but in Canaan (Gen 49:29-32). Obligated by this patriarchal last will/wish, Joseph, still serving as Prime Minister in Egypt, buried his father<sup>18</sup> as the latter had desired (Gen 50:4-14). What was so significant about the Jewish people burying their early patriarchs and matriarchs in the field procured by Abraham in the land of Canaan would be assumed only on the basis of Yahweh's allotment of the land on oath to them. Apart from the Abraham and Joseph's burial accounts and a few more in Jewish history, the locations of burial changed with Israel's progressive political development and civilisation. The experience of captivity made burial in Palestine even more difficult.

### **Philosophy of African Burial in the Ancestral Land**

The tradition of burial in one's ancestral land as practised in some cultures in antiquity spread across a wider spectrum of most cultures. Most African societies still hold tenaciously to this practice. Several factors serve as propellants to such philosophy. In the Scriptures, the Hebrew *Qoheleth* is reported to have asserted that when a wealthy person dies and "has no burial" (Eccl 6:3 NRS, NKJ), "doesn't even get a decent burial" (Eccl 6:3 NLT),

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<sup>16</sup> Abraham's initial residence at Kiriath Arba (Hebron – Josh 14:15) in Canaan was among the Hittites. While the Hittites played good hosts and neighbours to him by offering their tombs as humanitarians, Abraham insisted he needed a personally owned graveyard/burial site (Gen 23:5-13). The deed sealed between Ephron and Abraham and the Hittites (Gen 23:16-20) was because of his conviction in Yahweh's promise of the land as his descendant's possession (Gen 12:1-3; 6-9).

<sup>17</sup> David F. Payne, "Genesis (Chapters 12-50)," in *The International Bible Commentary* (rev. ed., eds. Frederick Fyvie Bruce, H. L. Ellison, and G. C. D. Howley, England: Marshal Morgan & Scott Publications Ltd, 1986), 131.

<sup>18</sup> Jacob's directive to bury him in Canaan (Gen 49:29-32) was a mere desire to be buried among his ancestors – where Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah and Leah were buried (Gen 25:8; 23:19) His thought was probably a respect for the primitive ideology that burial among one's ancestors meant joining them in the afterlife. As Payne notes, "The important thing was for the family to be together in death." See Payne, "Genesis (Chapters 12-50)," 147.

“does not receive proper burial” (Eccl 6:3 NIV, NAS), or “have no burial” (Eccl 6:3 ASV, ESV, KJV), he or she is worse than a stillborn. This thought is similar to the understanding of proper burial of the aged in African tradition. In Africa, when an old person dies, it is assumed that the spirit is gathered to that of the ancestors. As such, the tradition makes it mandatory for living relations to accord a *proper* or *befitting burial*, especially when the deceased was not considered evil. Funeral rites and ceremonies usually precede, and sometimes even succeed post-funeral mourning as a “reaction of misery.”<sup>19</sup> As in almost every African tribal society and community, the Frafra of northern Ghana believe that, “the dead are welcomed into the ancestral world after a proper funeral is celebrated.”<sup>20</sup> An improper burial could mean refusal of the dead into the ancestral home. This ideology is similar with that of Mesopotamia where it was believed that “feeding the dead kept them at peace, while failing to take care of them brought out their wrath in plagues among the living.”<sup>21</sup> This could be one of the reasons why the spirits of the dead are both dreaded and revered in African traditions. It is believed that calamity looms over a family that disrespects the traditional funeral rite.

Could the African tradition of burying the dead in their ancestral land be an aspect of *proper burial* in resonance with the *Qoheleth's* philosophical ideology of a life that is worthwhile? According to Kunhiyop, human corpses are disposed of in many ways, but the most common and generally preferred method by Africans is to bury the corpse. He states that the various methodologies of burial for the dead globally are regulated by “religious, cultural, economic, sociological and ecological factors.”<sup>22</sup> In Africa, religious, cultural and sociological factors combine to demand that a deceased person is buried with his or her ancestors because of attachment to one’s ancestral land. Land is a critical commodity globally, and particularly in Africa, because it gives a person his or her stamp of identity and right of belonging. In Africa, ownership of land gives a person a sense of belonging and recognition in society. The recent land reform policies of Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe have triggered political and social antics. Similarly, land issue between the whites and the blacks in South Africa is also a nagging issue today for this same reason. A people without ancestral

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<sup>19</sup> S. O. Ademiluka, “The Sociological Functions of Funeral Mourning: Illustrations from the Old Testament and Africa,” *Old Testament Essays* 22/1 (2009), 10. Ademiluka is not correct in asserting that, “death is accorded the most important significance in the midst of other rites of passage” in the Old Testament. His reference to the varieties and length of funerary mourning rites for the Old Testament case is not sufficient to substantiate his claim. However, he is quite correct in stating that this is the case for the African context.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Ayinbora Atinga, “Death and Dying: A Study of the Mortuary Rites of the Frafra of Northern Ghana in the Light of the Christian Funeral Liturgy An Attempt at Inculturation,” a PhD dissertation presented to Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium (2006), 101. Opoku affirms this when he stated that, “There is . . . a widespread belief in Africa that, unless the proper rites and ceremonies are performed, the spirit of the dead person may not be able to join the ancestral spirits.” Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 329. See his comment in footnote 117 of cited work.

<sup>22</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 221.

land is a people without roots, identity, and essence. Burial in Africa's ancestral land strongly presupposes burial with the deceased ancestors to avoid severance from one's land and loss of identity. This is why part of the will of an aging African, male or female, is to be buried among their ancestors.

The philosophy of African communal life also accounts for such burial tradition in Africa. In old Africa, people value relationship and togetherness far above anything else. Wilbur O'Donovan captures this well when he says, "people and relationships between people are much more important in Africa than almost everything else. People are held in higher esteem than programmes, projects, plans or schedules. Many things can be overlooked, but maintaining right relationships between people . . . is critically important."<sup>23</sup> Village life in an African community portrays a good picture of this point. At dawn, family members move from room to room to find out about the welfare of one another, ensuring that everyone slept well and woke up in good health. Also, people in the community either move from house to house in the neighbourhood or give an early morning call to enquire about the welfare of their neighbours. This daily sociological normative practice is observed before they ever begin any house chores like sweeping the compound, going to the grinding mill, going to the stream to fetch water, or even going to the farm.

Given the philosophy in the preceding paragraph, Africans bury the dead in their ancestral land to ensure that they live among their people and to avoid any severance of relationship and communal relatedness. In the African philosophy of death, "the dead become visibly absent but invisibly present among their family members, and they become visibly present among the ancestors."<sup>24</sup> Failure to observe and respect this long cherished tradition is tantamount not only to hatred for the dead by the family and community, but it particularly means rejection. In some African communities like the Miship people of Pankshin in Jos Plateau, Nigeria, the burial of a family member outside of his or her ancestral land is considered a very serious offense against the spirit of the land. Such an act is construed as a *discarding* of such person, that is, a *throwing away into a far foreign bush* of a dear one. When this happens, such individual is severed from his or her lineage and clan. Subsequent generations of that family and clan would not forgive such treacherous act or treat it lightly. This is crucial because belief in existing relationship between the living and the ancestral spirit world is powerful in Africa. As Kunhiyop points out,

Death and the afterlife loom large in the African world view. At death, one moves into the presence of the ancestors, and so while living here on earth one is taught how to prepare to meet them. . . . it is generally understood that a good life will result in being joined with the ancestors after death,

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<sup>23</sup> Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 213.

while an evil life will result in total oblivion, the idea of which is utterly abhorrent to Africans.<sup>25</sup>

As Ademiluka points out also, evil and lazy people within the community do not qualify for proper burial. As such, “the sociological significance of treating the deceased according to the life he has lived inculcated in the African the desire to live a good life so that he would be dignified when he died, and accepted in the world of the ancestors.”<sup>26</sup> Umar Danfulani states certain requisite conditions warranting acceptance into the ancestral world in Mupun conceptual understanding. Only those who had met certain preconditions during their lifetime qualify to be given traditionally accepted funeral rites and rituals.<sup>27</sup> Following in this tradition, some parts of Africa believe, according to Ademiluka, that “the grander the funeral ceremonies of the deceased, the more acceptance he would be accorded in the world of the ancestors.”<sup>28</sup>

In African belief, the family and communal relationship is not considered as ended at death. Death does not terminate life; it only transposes it.<sup>29</sup> As Opoku explains in the case of West Africans, the dead “do not remain in the grave”; they proceed to the spirit world and continue to live as ancestors. This is grounded in their belief that death does not end life; it only transits it from this present earthly life to another life in the ancestral world.<sup>30</sup> As such, mourning and funerary dirges only reflect the feeling of temporary physical separation. They “are articulated in a sorrowful tone, narrating the good deeds of the departed, his genealogy, his praise names, and his farewell”<sup>31</sup> only to show how the dead will be physically missed. As such, burying the dead in their ancestral land ensures the nearness of their spirits to the living for easy access and interface. This is significant because since the dead only transit to the ancestral world they are believed to exercise control and oversight over their living

<sup>25</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 212-213.

<sup>26</sup> Ademiluka, “The Sociological Functions of Funeral Mourning,” 19.

<sup>27</sup> Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani, “Kum Traditional Religion,” in *Celebrating Njinkook: Studies in the History and Culture of the Mupun of the Jos Plateau in Nigeria Volume One* (eds. Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani and Sati U. Fwatshak, Jos, Nigeria: Lynx Communications, 2012), 83-141.

<sup>28</sup> Ademiluka, “The Sociological Functions of Funeral Mourning,” 19.

<sup>29</sup> Tenson Muyambo and Richard Maposa have correctly observed, “In Africa death is viewed not as an end in itself. Rather, it is regarded as a transitional *rite de passage*, that is, from one stage of human development to the other. When a person dies physically, one transforms to become what has been called the ‘living dead’ . . . It must be noted that the living dead are specifically revered so much that people have to perform a number of rites in order to keep in touch with their ‘living-timeless’. Those rites, *inter-alia*, include some burial and post-burial rites.” See Tenson M. Muyambo and Richard S. Maposa, “The Post-Burial Rite of *Kusemendera Guwa* in the Indigenous Ndau Culture in Zimbabwe: Insights on Enculturation Theology,” *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies (JETERAPS)* 4(4, 2013):589-593.

<sup>30</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Ademiluka, “The Sociological Functions of Funeral Mourning,” 15.

families and relations in the quest to sustain an existing relationship. In discharging this function, “they may reveal themselves in dreams or appear to their living relatives to give instructions, warnings, or information which are normally taken seriously by those who receive them.”<sup>32</sup> During certain rituals, as in Mupun traditions, these ancestral spirits are invited or invoked, “collectively during sacrifices, prayers and offerings, that is, *tok kum*, to intervene in human affairs and crisis.”<sup>33</sup> This ideology indicates that a hitherto enjoyed relationship continues between the living and the living dead even after life’s transposition. On this ground, Oosthuizen submits that “funeral rites, to mark the physical separation of the departed from the living, have to be meticulously executed in order not to offend the deceased.”<sup>34</sup> This parallels the practice of caring for the dead in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian contexts. Hess says, here “the dead were fed not because they were weak and powerless but because they were honored as spirits who could affect for good or evil the lives of the living. Such spirits . . . represented the interests of the family to which the offerer belonged.”<sup>35</sup>

While the exact location of the ancestral abode/world may not be clearly defined in the African conceptual mind, it is considered situated not far from the domain of the living. In the effort to accord good escort and farewell to the deceased, colourful funeral ceremonies are put up with great dance as well as the display of some cultural heroic eulogising and incantations, particularly for the aged and heroes/heroines. Here, as in the Mupun funeral ritual, the deceased is “buried with things which he may use to facilitate his journey towards . . . the good land,” things like a tobacco pipe, tobacco, bowls, cooking utensils, walking stick and so forth.<sup>36</sup> The Miship people share similar traditions. However, great sorrow and wailing is the emotional feeling one gets in Africa when a child or youth dies. Such death is a misfortune and a bad one as the deceased is cut off from the land of both the living and the ancestors. Some African communities neither delay the burial nor publicise such a death on this basis.

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<sup>32</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 137. Given the strong influence of this permeating African conceptual understanding of ancestral spirit world, Turaki points out that, “Belief and reverence in the ancestors is the most fundamental religious creed and tenet.” Yusufu Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Cultures* (Nairobi: International Bible Society Africa, 2001), 61. To be properly guided and adequately protected in life, one must not sever relationship or offend the ancestral world.

<sup>33</sup> Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani and Mike D. Dadok, “Life Crisis Rituals,” in *Celebrating Njinkook: Studies in the History and Culture of the Mupun of the Jos Plateau in Nigeria Volume One* (eds. Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani and Sati U. Fwatshak, Jos: Lynx Communications, 2012), 200.

<sup>34</sup> Oosthuizen, “Ecumenical Burial Societies in South Africa: Mutual Caring and Support that Transcends Ecclesiastical and Religious Differences,” 465.

<sup>35</sup> Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 329.

<sup>36</sup> Danfulani and Dadok, “Life Crisis Rituals,” 199.

When the dead are buried in their ancestral land, their ancestral spirits perform the socio-ethical role among the living relations which plays out in their regulating moral conduct in society. This is in addition to their function of providing security. For instance, punitive measures meted out on a defaulter through some form of misfortune, described as *jakam nda mu ya gurum* by the Miship tribe of Jos-Plateau, is an indication of ancestral regulation of morality. Good moral conduct is rewarded but evil and immorality are repudiated by the ancestors. Turaki notes that, a “good moral conduct and ‘holy’ life will not provoke ancestors to anger. [But] evil and misfortune are signs of both misconduct and impurity”<sup>37</sup> being repudiated.

But the influence of modernisation is however forcing some worrisome paradigm shifts on this African philosophy of burial in one’s ancestral land, a ceremonial practice that goes along with its funeral rites. There seems to be an emerging trend in some parts of Africa regarding burial. This growing phenomenon is noticeably pronounced among the communities of the southeast of Nigeria. For instance, elaborate funeral ceremonies and rituals are connected to death, not necessarily because “death is something that concerns everybody . . . because sooner or later everyone personally faces it and . . . because it brings loss and sorrows to every family and community.”<sup>38</sup> Rather, such flamboyant ceremonies and rituals have become an avenue to display the wealth and fame of the family of the deceased. Some colossal amounts are lavished during such celebrations. Elaborate preparations usually precede the burial. The corpse of a deceased family member may remain in the mortuary for a very long period of time to allow for such elongated preparations for the funeral celebration. Families that are not financially buoyant would usually bury their dead loved ones in shame. Here they painfully bear the disgrace of being a laughingstock in the community as they cannot afford the elaborate ceremony as the families who have relations described as “men of timber and calibre” do. In this case, what the family was unable to do for the deceased, no matter how much he or she suffered under the cruel hands of abject poverty when they were alive, is done when they are dead.

But the underlying motivation for such a paradigm shift of putting up an expensive funeral is to show off and impress people rather than the cultural respect for the dead. A lot of the waste and misuse of God-given resources that one notices during funerals and other ceremonies in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa is also for the same reason. It would have been sociologically and economically more productive if the sponsors of such expensive funerals had put their resources into a more meaningful use by going back to their village and digging a borehole or building a school or a clinic for the community, or even giving scholarships to enable the children of the less privileged to get education. Their public display of wealth during funeral ceremonies to show off is only to achieve self-ego that in a way helps no one,

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<sup>37</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 145.

when the money could have been used to have helped the person or the family have a better life.

### **Implications of African Burial of the Dead in their Ancestral Land for the Church Today**

According to Matthew Michael, the Christian faith in Africa has continually sought to engage the worldviews and traditions of the African people, yet the greatest challenge in recent times is the ability to seriously engage such worldviews, customs, cultures, and traditions at a deeper level of transformational engagement.<sup>39</sup> How are Christians in Africa today to radically engage the culturally imposed practice of burial in the deceased's ancestral land?<sup>40</sup> The answer to this query will have to emerge substantially from sound biblical and theological foundations of the Christian faith. John Stott points out, "As Christians we have to be convinced that we have a Christian worldview and this can only be attained if we have a thoroughly biblical understanding of the basic tenets of our faith."<sup>41</sup> In the Matthean gospel, we read Christ's directives to the disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13a, 14a). He was setting before them the principles of the kingdom (Matt 5-7). Here, he put in place an agenda that was to mark a paradigm shift from the religious and traditional norms of the day. The church as "salt" should savour the earth and as "light" should shine the pathway as it leads the way in society. The mission effort of the church, and in fact the goal for its existence, is to propagate biblical spirituality so as to achieve quality Christian spirituality as a transforming force in society. As such, the church is expected to bring upon society right ethical and moral norms concerning right attitude and behaviour, politics, economics, sociology, environment, and religion.

The African tradition of burying the dead in their ancestral land and the observance of certain funerary rites and rituals (some of which may be against Christian belief) no doubt confront the church in Africa with some theological questions. What is the essence of burial and what impact does it have on the deceased? Quite obviously, a befitting burial accords the corpse and spirit of the deceased proper sociological respect; and this the church should uphold and encourage. Nonetheless, the insistence that the deceased be buried in their home

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions* (Kaduna: Yuty Graphics, 2011), 12.

<sup>40</sup> Africans who die outside their ancestral land (village or home town), by this tradition, even if they were Christians, must not be buried elsewhere. Sympathizers will have to follow the corpse to its burial destination. Experiences have shown that such sympathizers often suffer certain losses such as armed robbery attacks, fatal automobile accidents, damaged vehicles that result in huge costs to fix, health challenges caused by environmental changes, and some other forms of discomfort. In spite of these attendant dangers, failure to attend such funerals is interpreted as a lack of care, an act of unfriendliness, and being evil or wicked.

<sup>41</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (4th ed., fully rev. and updated by Roy McCloughry, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 49.

town, failure of which both the deceased and his or her relatives are considered as outcasts by some communities, needs a socio-religious and theological reinterpretation. Such reinterpretation should retrace its root to Scripture which has always been, for generations, the basis for spiritual transformation. The church must consistently preach and insist upon placing premium on the destiny of the human soul rather than the destination of its burial. As Kunhiyop rightly points out, “the critical issue around death is not the method of burial but the spiritual condition of the deceased.”<sup>42</sup> To act otherwise is lavishing money on a corpse that should rather have been used to support the deceased when he or she was alive. If, as the Psalmist posits, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Ps 24:1), then land is land; and it is good for burial wherever. Any land considered culturally *foreign* does not reject a corpse nor does it degrade the dignity of the personhood of the deceased. What is material here should be the socio-anthropological attitude with which a corpse is treated than the place of its final interment.

The African traditional worldview of burying the dead in the land of their ancestry has no doubt impaired the spirit of Christian conviction and commitment. This is so because the church, for some reasons, has either partially or fully submitted to this cultural demand, or it has been silent on the matter. The power of the gospel is a dynamic transforming force of both human life and human society. We note for instance, that the early disciples of Jesus Christ turned their world upside down because of their belief and conviction in the person of Jesus. When they were rejected and ejected from temple worship, this meant nothing to them because of their commitment to live for Christ and to stand for the truth of the gospel, even to death. In like manner, the African convert must be properly rooted in his or her new faith in Christ to be able to withstand the blowing wind of certain cultural demands that contradict the Scripture. But when the church in Africa fails to clearly pass this message to its followers who stand between the biblical belief and cultural norm of burial, room for doubt is created in their hearts regarding which norm is superior.

The church in Africa today must not forget that culture has its firm grip on the Africans even in their conversion state. As such, the living Christian relatives of a deceased saint whose burial fails to measure up to this cultural norm are likely to cast doubt on the integrity and force of the Christian gospel as well as the authority of the Scriptures. This tension requires adequate biblical and theological response. As Michael argues, “the Christian faith without a true engagement of the African traditions at a deeper level of dialogue becomes not only incapable of transforming Africa, but also incompetent to address the problems of African society.”<sup>43</sup> Turaki submits that the faith of the African Christian is in the unique Christ. He explains that it is this unique Christ who is Lord over the whole universe and who exercises his authority and supremacy over it. This biblically founded

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<sup>42</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 222.

<sup>43</sup> Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, 13.

understanding is to take root in the hearts of believers.<sup>44</sup> The church in Africa today must free itself from the clutches of certain mythic embedded cultural ideologies, one of which is the funerary rite of burying the deceased in their ancestral land to make such burial proper and effectual, in order to help her members develop a deeply rooted Christian belief and conviction and so attain the fullness of grace in Christ. As we mentioned previously, when deep belief and total conviction in the centrality of Christ and the integrity of the Bible is weak or misconstrued by Christians, the church in Africa is likely on her way to becoming nominal at best and syncretistic and heretical at worst.

Since some aspects of African cultures have close affinity to the Old Testament, as we alluded to previously, it is quite easy for some African Christians who are not deeply rooted in the Scriptures to cite relevant passages from it as warrant demanding the church to uphold the traditional insistence on burial in the land of one's ancestry. This raises another theological question whether deceased African Christians buried outside of the land of their ancestry will not participate in the resurrection. Even though burial in specific designated sites became an established tradition among the tribal communities of Israel, such cultural traditions are not meant to be prescriptive but descriptive of a socio-cultural event. It is clear that not all Jews were buried in their tribal sites nor even in Palestine during the exile. It would be a rarity for exiled Jews to bury their dead in Palestine.<sup>45</sup> As such, the church in Africa must not be obligated on this basis to bury its deceased members in the land of their ancestry.

The Scriptures are clear about the final bodily resurrection. Paul tells the saints in Thessalonica about how the appearing of Jesus would be in relation to the dead in Christ,

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the

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<sup>44</sup> Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, 247.

<sup>45</sup> It was a familial cultural obligation for Jews to bury the dead. Exile, however, posed many challenges to Jewish life and culture. The account in the book of Tobit tells of Tobit's effort at burying some bodies of Jewish victims thrown over the walls of Nineveh and allowed to rot away (Tob 1:16-17). Rainer Albertz paints the depressing picture of the exile such that, "Most ha[d] assimilated to the civilization of their alien environment, either out of fear or indifference. They ha[d] so lost their sense of solidarity that they no longer fe[lt] obliged to carry out even the most fundamental familial obligations such as burying fellow Jews or caring for impoverished family members." See Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (trans. David Green; SBL 3; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 31-32.

archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thess 4:13-17).

Paul argues extensively in 1 Cor 15:12-58 to prove the reality of a bodily resurrection at the *parousia*. For instance, he asks, “But someone may ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?’” (1 Cor 15:35). His response is clear in his analogy of the seed and heavenly bodies in the universe, and his contrast between the heavenly and earthly bodies: “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:42-44).

Also, it is clear from Scripture that the bodily resurrection of a saint is not hindered on the basis of the methodology and place a corpse is disposed of. John says, “The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done” (Rev 20:13). It is very obvious from these Scriptural passages that the method and place of burial would be immaterial at the resurrection as nothing would stand as an obstacle to this future event. The dead will certainly be raised either to face judgement to condemnation or judgement for reward. Job affirms this when he said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27).

## **Conclusion**

In Africa, when people die, they are buried with every sense of care and responsibility as a mark of respect for the dead. The fear of the presence and role of the ancestral world in the African worldview further intensifies this respect and the need for proper burial. Much more, the anticipatory importance of the reincarnation of the good spirits of the dead as well as the protection and blessings of the ancestors heightens such practice. However, the cultural insistence that dead Christians be buried in their ancestral land in order to complete the circle of *rite de passage* poses a great biblical, theological and doctrinal threat to the church. This African worldview presupposes that failure to bury dead saints in their ancestral land amounts to denial of their entry into the presence of God in eternity. It assumes severance of relationship when put *pari-pasu* with its view of the ancestral world.

The church in Africa today stands between the world of the African worldview and that of the Christian worldview regarding death and burial. In as much as it is proper to respect a corpse and give it good burial, yet the church must come to terms with its understanding of the essence of burial and what is material vis-à-vis a biblical worldview of the afterlife. The argument from some Old Testament passages in favour of burial in one's ancestral land should also take into account its socio-cultural context and particularly the New Testament implication regarding saints whose corpses were not buried but cremated, eaten up by some beasts, or lost at sea. In this direction, the need for adequate theological education that would achieve for the church a high level of biblical literacy is quite expedient and urgent. Biblical knowledge both equips and prepares the church in Africa to aptly and ably respond to the myriad nagging theological, social and ethical questions as it faces the challenges of contemporary society. The clergy must therefore discharge their ordained ministry to church and society in this direction by teaching their followers the biblical principles of good stewardship. When parishioners are productively taught how to share in the needs of the needy in the family, church and society, it will hopefully enhance meaningful assistance to the needs of a relation before their demise and curtail as well the colossal economic waste during flamboyant funeral ceremonies.