



The Socio-Religious Perspectives of Cremation in Yorubaland

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Abstract

Cremation is a funeral method that uses extreme heat to reduce the human body to its fundamental parts. Recently, people have started cremating the corpses of their loved ones, yet the issue of cremation is a trending but controversial topic in Yorubaland, especially in Lagos, Nigeria, as there are lots of cultural and religious issues surrounding it. Therefore, this research focuses on the religious perspectives of cremation in Yorubaland. It also examined cremation from philosophical, Islamic, Biblical, and African sociological perspectives in Yorubaland, with little or no references to other tribes in Nigeria or Africa. This research adopted a descriptive sampling methodology with 280 respondents from two main religious organisations and several ethnic groups in Lagos State, and the data were analysed and discussed. It discovers that most of the Christian denominations in Yorubaland do not have a specific official statement that either endorses or condemns cremation, hence leaving the choice to individuals and families. Islamic scholars also believe that cremation is forbidden by God in the Quran and that the only acceptable manner of disposing of a dead body is Islamic burial. The study reveals that, in the religious and ethnical context, cremation faces huge opposition, with traditional burial being the most preferred method of body disposal in Yorubaland.

Keyword: Cremation, Religion, Islam, Christianity, Yorubaland, Sociological



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Introduction

Burial can also be referred to as interment or inhumation, is a form of ultimate committal of a deceased to mother earth in the graveyard or memorial park or cemetery, frequently with artefacts, generally by creating a pit or trench. It is seen as a symbol of respect for the departed, since it prevents open decomposition of the body of the deceased, provides closure to grieving family of the deceased and most times irrespective of religious subscription particularly, Christian burial is modulated cultural sensibilities. Burial is viewed as a vital step in many cultures for the departed to return to the cycle of life.¹ Human burial rituals reflect the human urge to show "respect for the dead." Several rituals, such as dawn, service, merriment, dramatic acts, music, and other activities,² cultures differ in their manners of respect:

1. Respect for physical remains: Some cultures, like Tibet and Zoroastrianism, encourage the scavenging of human remains to return them to nature.
2. Closure to family and friends: Burial can lessen the pain of losing a loved one by removing the body from plain view.
3. Believe in an afterlife: Burial is often seen as a necessary step to reach the afterlife in many cultures.
4. Living customs: Many religions prescribe customs related to the disposal of the dead.
5. Preventing smells: Burial is seen as a way to prevent unpleasant gases from escaping the body.

Cremation, burial at sea, and cryopreservation are all alternatives to burial. Burial at sea is the practice of transferring human remains to the sea for final resting, typically performed by Royal Navy personnel when on voyage outside their territorial waters due to lack of facility for preservation of the dead on the sea. However, anyone can be buried at sea with proper procedures. Family members can choose a

¹Gire J. "How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying", *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 6 (2), (2014), 1.

²Davou S.Y. & Davou D.P. "Burial Rites among the Berom People: Focus on Gyel Traditional Burial System and Related Issues", *Greener Journal of Art and Humanities*, Vol. 9 (1), (2022), 17.



location near the shore or on the ocean.³ Sky burial is a Buddhist ritual in Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Inner Mongolia, as well as in Mongolia, Bhutan, and parts of India such as Sikkim and Zaskar⁴ where bodies are left outside for birds or animals to eat, allowing the soul to depart and embracing life's cycle.⁵ Sky burial, a Western term, is not used by Tibetans, who refer to it as "giving alms to birds" or "carrying to the mountain."⁶

Cryonics involves low-temperature freezing and storage of human remains, with the hope of resurrection in the future. Despite being viewed as a pseudoscience, cryonics procedures can begin within minutes of death and use cryoprotectants to prevent ice formation. However, it is not possible to reanimate a corpse after vitrification due to brain damage. The first frozen corpse was James Bedford in 1967. As of 2014, 250 US bodies and 1,500 people have arranged for cryopreservation of their remains.⁷ This is a recent development that has yet to gain traction in Africa but is gradually being utilised in Western Europe and North America.

Cremation doesn't require embalming chemicals, including direct and green cremation. Embalming fluids, which contain dangerous substances like formaldehyde, pollute land, water, and soil. Direct cremation and green cremation don't require embalming for public display, ensuring a more environmentally friendly choice for both individuals and loved ones. In summary, cremation prevents dangerous chemicals from seeping into the earth, saves energy and natural resources, provides environmentally favourable storage, and conserves more land.⁸

³ What is burial at sea?, <https://www.coop.co.uk/funeralcare/advice/what-is-burial-at-sea>, accessed 2024.

⁴ Sulkowsky, Z., *Around the World on a Motorcycle*, Cambridgeshire: Whitehorse Press, (2014), 114.

⁵ Newcomb T., 7 Unique Burial Rituals Across the World, <https://www.britannica.com/list/7-unique-burial-rituals-across-the-world>, (2023), accessed on 21/02/2024

⁶ Wentmore K. J. *Eaters of the Dead*, London: Reaktion Books (2021), 27

⁷ Moen O.M. "The Case for Cryonics", *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41 (18) (2015),

493–503; Miller K. "Cryonics Redux: is Vitrification a Viable Alternative to

Immortality as a Popsicle?", *Skeptic*, 11 (1) (2004), 24; Hendry, R. & Crippen, D.

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⁸ 4 Environmental Benefits of Cremation,

<https://www.simplycremationaz.com/4-environmental-benefits-of->



Frouz asserts that plant matter decomposes in several phases. The process starts with leaching by water, which releases the most soluble and quickly lost carbon molecules. The physical fragmentation of the plant material into smaller bits, which increases the surface area available for microbial invasion and assault, is another early phase. Whereas bigger plants mostly rely on parasitic life forms like fungus and insects to break down materials, few detritivore species aid in this process. In tiny dead plants, the process is predominantly carried out by the soil invertebrate fauna.¹² Wood decomposition involves fungi transporting nutrients to scarce wood,¹³ allowing saproxylic insect fauna to develop and affect dead wood, contributing to decomposition and nutrient cycling in the forest floor.

The Concept of Cremation

Humanity must deal with the topic of death. The more man attempts to comprehend it, the more veiled its procedures appear. Men throughout history have done everything they could to keep the death sting from destroying their loved ones. In the South Western part of Nigeria, it is said that death is a bill that all must pay; it is unavoidable, and hence no one may say that he or she will not die. Recently, the subject of burial rites, particularly cremation, has been a source of contention in Yorubaland. Cremation is a funeral or post-funeral rite used to dispose of the deceased, unlike traditional burial in Yorubaland. It is a long-standing custom in countries like India, Nepal, and Kenya, offering practical advantages such as being less expensive and having no environmental or ecological burden. Some people prefer cremation over traditional burial due to personal reasons,¹⁴ quick disposal,¹⁵ ease of mobility, and the ability to move remains for interment or distribution among surviving relatives.

Cremation is a funeral method that uses extreme heat to reduce the human body to its fundamental parts. The majority of the body, including tissue, is vaporised, leaving just bone behind. The residual bone fragments are typically known as cremains or ashes. The

¹²Frouz J. "Effects of Soil Macro- and Mesofauna on Litter Decomposition and Soil Organic Matter Stabilization", *Geoderma*, 332 (2018), 161–172.

¹³Filipiak M., Sobczyk Ł., Weiner J., "Fungal Transformation of Tree Stumps into a Suitable Resource for Xylophagous Beetles via Changes in Elemental Ratios", *Insects*, 7 (2), (2016), 13.

¹⁴Aiken L.R. *Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (2000), 131.

¹⁵Sublette K. & Flagg M. *Final Celebrations: A Guide for Personal and Family Funeral Planning*, Liverpool: Pathfinder Publishing (1992), 53



cremation process involves placing the deceased body in a masonry-lined chamber, which can withstand temperatures between 1800°F and 2000°F. The body is vaporized and reduced to bone fragments, which are then removed from the chamber and a table to remove metal debris. The fragments are then pulverized into a fine powder, and stored in a plastic bag within an urn or temporary container. The cremains are then returned to the deceased's family. The process is a crucial step in the funeral process.¹⁶

Warren and Maples assert that roughly 3.5% of the initial mass of the body is represented by the residual ash (2.5% in infants). The weight of dried bone fragments varies significantly between individuals due to the strong correlation between the fragments and skeletal mass. A person's height and sex, which indicate skeletal weight, can be used to predict the weight of their cremated remains more accurately than their simple weight because many changes in body composition, such as loss or gain of muscle and fat, do not affect the weight of the remains. Adult ashes range in weight from 876 to 3,784 g (1 lb 15 oz to 8 lb 5 oz), with women's ashes often weighing less than 2,750 g (6 lb 1 oz) and men's ashes typically weighing more.¹⁷

The Hindu faith favors cremation as the primary funerary practice due to beliefs about the soul and body. The body is seen as a container for the soul, and cremation is believed to release it for reincarnation. Only pure members are buried, while babies, children, and saints are buried. The process begins with waking, white dress, and a white and red sheet covering the body. The remains are scattered on the Ganges River. Buddhists often practice cremation as a funerary practice, inspired by Buddha's death. Burial is also practiced by some followers. A waiting period of four days is observed after death and before cremation, as Buddhists believe the soul remains in transition.¹⁸

Cremation in Yorubaland and its Religious Dimensions

The Lagos State Government has just enacted legislation allowing for the voluntary burning of claimed and unclaimed remains or corpses in the state. The decision was taken due to a multitude of

¹⁶Carter J. The FAQs: What Christians Should Know About Cremation, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-faqs-what-christians-should-know-about-cremation/>, (2017) accessed on 19/12/2023.

¹⁷ Warren M. & Maples W. "The Anthropometry of Contemporary Commercial Cremation". *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 42 (3), (1997), 417–423.

¹⁸Fortiino D. What the Major Religions say about Cremation? <https://eirenecremations.com/blog/major-religions-cremation>, (2022), accessed on 12/02/2024.

circumstances, including land shortage, population increase, decomposing and unclaimed remains at mortuaries, and towns' unwillingness to offer space for burial of unclaimed dead. This law sparked several heated debates.¹⁹ Some of the funeral companies that offer cremation services are:

1. Ebony Funeral Services, No. 7 Igbosere Rd, Lagos Island, Lagos State
2. TOS Funerals, Gbagada General Hospital Mortuary, Gbagada, Lagos State.
3. Heavens Casket & Funeral Undertaker, 50 Agege Motor Road, Moshalashi Bus Stop, Surulere, Lagos State etc.

The information on "the socio-religious perspectives of cremation in Yorubaland," particularly in Lagos State, was presented below. The opinions of the respondents exposed the diversity of religious perspectives on this subject matter. Additionally, the findings were discussed and the results were displayed in the tables and structures below.

Philosophical Perspective of Cremation

Cremation, in its neoclassical form, was on the side of progress; however, it was not always on the side of revolution, secularism, materialism, or the new religion of reason. Frederick the Great, always eager to demonstrate his intellectual prowess, allegedly requested that he be "burned in the Roman fashion." Of course, it did not happen, and he was not buried as he had requested—with his dogs—on the grounds of Sanssouci. However, one of his aunts fared better: in 1752, she was burned "for burial aesthetic reasons." It might have been the first documented cremation in Western history. In 1849, philologist Jacob Grimm argued that pre-classical antiquity's cremation marked a significant advancement in spiritual cultivation, distinguishing humans from animals and connecting humans to gods. He argued that cremation was practical, rational, and honoring antiquity. However, Grimm did not argue that , which was deeply rooted in the Christian symbolic system of the sleeping dead rising into eternal life, was retrograde or easy to return to.²⁰ In Africa especially Nigeria,

¹⁹ Is Cremation Against Nigerian Culture? <https://omegafunerals.com/is-cremation-against-nigerian-culture/#:-:text=In%20recent%20years%2C%20the%20Lagos,Population%20growth,> accessed on 20/12/2023.

²⁰Laqueur T. The Burning Question - How Cremation became our Last Great Act of Self-Determination,



death is perhaps one of the most important subjects in African philosophy, and by marginalising it through cremation and related practices, we deprive ourselves of its traditions, didactic and social values.²¹

Islamic View of Cremation in Yorubaland

Table 1: In Lagos, cremation is acceptable in Islam.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	0	0
No	30	100
Undecided	0	0
Total	30	100

Source: Field Survey, December 2023.

Table 1 shows the position of the respondents who are scholars and imams on cremation, with 30 respondents representing 100% of the total sampling population saying no and that cremation is not acceptable in Islam. Therefore, Islamic belief views cremation as "haram," or impure custom. They argued that cremation is forbidden by God in the Quran and that the only acceptable manner of disposing of a dead body is Islamic burial. It is a religious requirement that the body be ritually washed and draped before burial, which should be as soon as possible after death. Those carrying out this duty should be immunised against hepatitis B and be aware of the hazards of AIDS.²² They use two Quranic passages to back up their claim: 5:31 and 17:70.²³ Proper burial of deceased remains was necessary to prevent wild creatures from preying on their bodies and allow families and loved ones to visit their graves. Islamic law also dictates individual burial for each deceased body,²⁴ with collective graves used during

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/30/burning-question-how-cremation-became-last-great-act-self-determination-thomas-laqueur>, (2015), accessed on 13/02/2024.

²¹ Saad T.C. "The Moral Inadequacy of Cremation", *The New Bioethics*, 1387, (2017), 388.

²² Gatrad A.R. "Muslim Customs Surrounding Death, Bereavement, Postmortem Examinations, and Organ Transplant", *BMJ*, 309 (6953), (1994),521.

²³ Mohamed A. Is Cremation Prohibited in the Quran? [https://www.quran-islam.org/articles/part_5/cremation__\(P1503\).html](https://www.quran-islam.org/articles/part_5/cremation__(P1503).html), (2023), accessed on 18/12/2023.

²⁴ Al-Dawoody A. Respect for the Dead under Islamic Law: Considerations for Humanitarian Forensics, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2018/11/01/respect-for-the-dead-under-islamic-law-considerations-for-humanitarian-forensics/>, (2018), accessed on 18/12/2023/

insurgencies or massacres due to space constraints or high costs in Yorubaland.

Christian Theological Perspective of Cremation in Yorubaland

Table 2: In Lagos, cremation is acceptable in Christianity.

Variable	Yes	%	No	%	Undecided	%
Anglicans	30	20				
Methodists	30	20				
Roman Catholics	30	20				
Pentecostals	20	13.3	8	5.4	2	1.3
Aladuras (Indigenous Churches)			30	20		
Total Number of Respondents	150					
Total Percentage	100%					

Source: Field Survey, December 2023.

Table 2 reveals that the Anglicans (30:20%), Methodists (30:20%), and Roman Catholics (30:20%) agreed that cremation is acceptable, while 20 Pentecostal respondents representing 13.3% agreed, 8 Pentecostal respondents representing 5.4% disagreed, and 2 Pentecostal respondents representing 1.3% were undecided, and 30 Aladura, that is, the African indigenous Churches respondents representing 20% of the total sampling population disagreed entirely. When it comes to biblical support for the anti-cremation perspective, it's often mentioned that Abraham bought a burial plot for himself and his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:9). Joseph directed that his bones be removed from Egypt (Genesis 50:25). Moses' burial was provided for by the Lord Himself (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). The burial of John the Baptist (Mark 6:29), the Rich Man (Luke 16:22), Lazarus (John 11:17-19), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:6-10), and Jesus Himself (Mark 15:46) followed the same pattern. Cremations are not mentioned in the New Testament. Leviticus 20:14 and Leviticus 20:14 indirectly mention cremation, since they involve capital punishment that requires the offender to be "burned with fire". The first mention of cremation in the Bible is 1 Samuel 31, where Saul and his sons are burned and then their bones buried:²⁵

²⁵ Carter J. The FAQs: What Christians Should Know About Cremation, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-faqs-what-christians-should-know-about-cremation/>, (2017), accessed on 19/12/2023.



But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days. (1 Sam. 31:11-13)

Some believers contend that it is incongruous for Christians, who have been saved from the coming judgment of fire via faith, to burn the remains of their dead. The burial customs of ancient Israel may have reflected the cultural environment of the Bible. The Resurrection of the Body is an important part of Christian salvation (1 Corinthians 15:42–57); however, all physical bodies disintegrate due to deterioration or fire (Genesis 3:19). Because the resurrected body is a new spiritual creation, God does not require our exact ashes or chemical components to bring about resurrection. Cremation is controversial among Christian churches in Yorubaland, with most orthodox denominations like Catholic, Methodist and Anglican favouring it and certain Pentecostal groups opposing it. African indigenous Churches like Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Celestial Church of Christ emphasising the importance of following Yoruba funeral rituals, which are identical to the Bible from the Old to the New Testament. Unfortunately, most of the Christian denominations in Yorubaland do not have a specific official statement that either endorses or condemns cremation, leaving the choice to individuals and families. Although entire or cremated remains may be buried at sea, the Roman Catholic Church officially favours traditional casket burials over cremations. According to Church doctrine, burial at sea entails lowering one's body to the bottom of the ocean in a suitable container for ultimate repose. While it's not illegal, it's not preferred and shouldn't be the norm for people to be buried at sea in an urn or casket.

Sociological Perspective of Cremation in Yorubaland

Table 3: Cremation is acceptable among individuals in Lagos.

Variable	Yes	%	No	%	Undecided	%
Yorubas	4	4	21	21		
Igbos			25	25		
Hausas			25	25		
Others			25	25		
Total number of	100					

Respondents	
Total Percentage	100%

Source: Field Survey, February 2024.

Table 3 shows that 4 Yoruba respondents representing 4% of the total sampling population believes that cremation is acceptable among individuals in Lagos state, while 21 Yoruba respondents representing 21% disagreed. 25 Igbo respondents representing 25% of the total sampling population believe that cremation is unacceptable especially among their tribes, 25 Hausa respondents representing 25% of the total sampling population also emphasized that cremation is not acceptable among their tribes and others.

Isinku (burial) refers to funeral rituals, which are the final measures taken for or in memory of a person or individuals who have died. Someone who has lived a good and long life is remembered with dancing, merrymaking, and gladness. Other sorts of death, such as the deaths of children, are considered as particularly heartbreaking. There is no pomp or celebration when a tragic death occurs; the deceased are buried promptly, and people grieve. Unfortunately, in the present day, burial-related events are heavily influenced by Christianity and Islam, and not every traditional element is retained.²⁶

Nigerian burial customs vary based on the deceased's life and religion, with Muslim or Christian rituals depending on the tribe. Following the deceased's wishes is crucial, as Nigerians believe in rebirth and reincarnation, as not fulfilling wishes may hinder the soul's journey to the afterlife. In Yorubaland, cremation is a sensitive topic; most people find the mere suggestion of it upsetting. Emotions rooted in culture and religions have also been influential. Cremation is prohibited in Yorubaland traditional burial practices; however, cremation is permitted for the souls of infants who die before reaching maturity in the instance of an *Abiku*. Because it is believed that the spirit of an *Abiku* (predestined to death) would return to the same mother multiple times to be reborn without regard for the parent's sorrow or anguish. Therefore, burning some parts of the dead body of an *Abiku* will be a sign to know if an *Abiku* is being reborn. And sometimes, after necessary rituals, the entire corpse of an *abiku* will be burned or carried into the evil forest in order to prevent his or her return to the family. Cremation of a body might cost as little as

²⁶Wuraola T. Ìsínkú – Burial, <https://yorubalessons.com/2022/02/24/burial-and-funerals-in-the-yoruba-culture-isinku/>, (2023), accessed on 19/12/2023.



₦700,000 Naira; this is much more expensive than most burial expenses in other parts of Yorubaland, aside from Lagos State.

Conclusion

The study reveals that, in the religious context, cremation faces huge opposition, with traditional burial being the most preferred method of body disposal in Yorubaland. Though some have already been cremated recently in Yorubaland based on western exposure, the Yorubas, who honour the dead and the afterlife, still reject cremation. The study proposes that church leaders, Imams, and African traditional leaders engage in discourse on the matter on a regular basis so that religious adherents understand the implications of embracing cremation from a religious perspective for the family, society, and future generations.

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