



# The Evolution of African Funerals in Democratic Dispensation- Some Perspectives from Kenya and South Africa



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## ABSTRACT

Death, dying, and funerals have been processed and conducted within the frameworks of particular cultures and religions around the world, and Africans are no exception to this practice. This paper examines how the adoption of the colonial agenda led to the displacement of certain African epistemologies regarding funeral practices. It exposes why Africans are burying their own people outside the confines of their cultures and religions. The scope of this study has been narrowed to South Africa and Kenya to explore the erosion of traditional burial and mourning practices, which resulted from the colonial agenda and led to the dislocation and discarding of African practices. The qualitative data utilised in this paper were amassed through participant observation of several burials witnessed in both Kenya and South Africa, combined with a critical review of secondary resources. It is argued that the transformational agenda of decolonisation does not ignore or undermine the voices of all people within rural communities, regardless of age or social status. The paper thus recommends an inclusive engagement with the shifts affecting burial rites, to the extent of including the gatekeepers within the community and incorporating these phenomena into teaching curricula. It should be noted that this article is part of an ongoing research project entitled *Erosion of African Burial Traditions*, based in Limpopo, South Africa. The intention of this study is not only to make a comparison but also to argue how African identity has been influenced and to chart new pathways towards decolonisation in the face of inevitable change.

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## INTRODUCTION

The African perspective, as a journey to join the family of ancestors, is a belief that gives solace to hearts pinned in pain after the demise of a loved one. Human burial practices manifest how people would like to show respect for the dead. There are many traditional ways by which the dead are buried, which are being dynamically changed over time. One of the examples is how the wearing of black-coloured clothing has become common as a symbol of mourning. These traditions differ between cultures and religious bodies within communities.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a cultural shift in how people have adopted new traditions and practices. In modern-day funerals, a trend has been observed where some people are choosing to livestream funerals, are

<sup>1</sup> G.T. Siswana, "Traditional African Burial Rites in Modern Age," 2017, <https://www.power987.co.za/news/traditional-african-burial-rites-in-the-modern-age/>.

choosing to be cremated, and are having a more coordinated, themed funeral. In the same breath, funerals continue to be events where fashion, style, and expensive cars are showcased, leading to a move towards a demand for one-stop services. In response to the recent trend, the funeral industry not only registers the death with either the Department of Home Affairs (South Africa) or Civil Registration Services (Kenya), but they also offer the hearse and assist with the grave itself. Furthermore, some funeral undertakers also provide catering services, decorations, comfortable cars to transport the immediate bereaved family, as well as church services, which adds to the conviction of having a dignified send-off for the loved one.<sup>2</sup>

The article argues that due to Western influence, many Africans have abandoned their roots and adopted a new way of life. The elders do not fully accept this as they feel funerals are no longer respected since people (especially what we consider as the new generation) do as they please. Funerals have turned into party events instead of adored ritualised services to send off the deceased in a dignified and respectful manner.

This research intends to explore the burial practices and beliefs of some African people in South Africa and Kenya. More broadly, it examines the African people's life, especially the Zulu tribe in South Africa, and their practices of grief, mourning, and after-death rituals. The study showcases factors and trends that have emerged and influenced how funerals are conducted. Throughout the study, there is a comparison between traditional funerals during the pre-democratic times, pre-democracy and post-modern funerals. Taking the body to a crematorium, which has become an option for some African people, especially in urban areas, will also be explored and analysed. The term "Africans" in this article is used to refer to black people.

## METHODOLOGY

The method followed in this study is the scientific-theoretical research approach.<sup>3</sup> The scientific-theoretical research approach includes a desktop study, which aims to critically and analytically review existing secondary sources, including a literature review through a library search on burials and funeral practices. Furthermore, qualitative data were also amassed through participant observation notes on funerals and burials in both Kenya and South Africa, as well as published material on the subject under study, which was then analysed. Other circular readings from social media, such as newspapers and television news, were incorporated to compare and isolate recent developments from a cultural perspective. Traditionally, this study falls within the indigenous knowledge systems, which have been less researched because of the colonial dislocations of native epistemologies, leaving us with few sources to obtain information from. This method interacts with some literary reviews where there is an element of analysing and relating to existing knowledge, these are the building blocks of all academic research activities, regardless of discipline.<sup>4</sup>

## DISCUSSION

### Selected Factors Influencing African Funerals

Culture is a way of living and is directed by socially transmitting knowledge, beliefs, customs, attitudes, skills, and language. The two world views, the Western and the African, seem to be in competition with each other for a cultural change to take place.<sup>5</sup> The idea of life beyond death did not come with missionaries or religion; African people always believed in another life after death, although the details of such life are not expounded on in this article due to spatial constraints.

A difficult lifestyle and ideological choice are what many Africans are faced with today. Those who are enlightened or educated think culture is dynamic since they feel that they have to adopt Western values because of modernity, civilisation, progress, and development, which is another way of separating

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<sup>2</sup> A. Lechman, "New and Emerging Funeral Trends: Live Streams and Themed Funerals," 2023, <https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/economy/new-and-emerging-funeral-trends-live-streams-and-themed-funerals-e1d68874-fdbc-45bc-9588-51cf40ae3825>.

<sup>3</sup> HJC Pieterse, "Scientific-Theoretical Research Approach to Practical Theology in South Africa: A Contemporary Overview.," *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017): 1–9.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (2019): 333–39.

<sup>5</sup> V. Ruddock, "Death Rituals in Africa: Cultural Beliefs and Burial Traditions," 2019, <https://www.lovetoknow.com/life/grief-loss/death-rituals-africa>.

themselves from their own traditions, norms and values.<sup>6</sup> The evolution of culture is influenced by the notion that human culture must keep evolving with time. Western ideology has influenced African culture, as more and more people are slowly abandoning their African culture and adopting Western beliefs. Due to modernity, urbanisation, migrant workers, and other factors that push people to move into urban areas, they become vulnerable and abandon their own culture. Generally, people who are left in rural areas are often financially stranded when it comes to burying their dead. Since people are exposed to platforms such as social media and the internet, it is easy to access information which infiltrates the minds of consumers, especially in cities, where people are more educated and exposed to such an extent that they end up neglecting their cultural norms; hence, changes are seen in funeral practices. People in rural areas or villages are not extensively exposed to Western ideology and practices; therefore, certain areas still follow their African practices.<sup>7</sup>

There is nothing conventional about funerals today. The final sending off of the dead has faced significant changes over the past few decades. A typical Christian funeral is usually attended at home under a tent(s) with most mourners dressed in all black. In most cases, the casket, most of which will be expensive, is placed openly with the deceased's body inside, just in front of the crowd. The service at home ends with the hearse taking the casket, while the other cars and walkers (if not far) make a procession behind it to the cemetery for burial. This is how a "typical funeral" is conducted. In modern times, funerals have taken a different approach, which will be discussed further below.

### Evolution of Funerals

The cultural change in the twenty-first century, as experienced within democratic South Africa, can sometimes be complex. There is evidence that Western culture is continuing to play its role in influencing and dominating African burial systems. Modern traditions of burying have been normalised, particularly in black townships and cities. Some of the traditional practices. Like burying the person with his/her belongings, spitting on the grave, slaughtering an animal to get the skin to cover the body of the deceased, and throwing sand over it, are now rejected as primitive.<sup>8</sup> There has been a transition from the traditional burial to the Western funeral practice. The growth of the population and the resulting scarcity, in and around the cities, of unused land for burial grounds has also influenced burial practices.

In many parts of Africa, the events of remembering the dead and funerals themselves have been enlarged and made public over the years. This contrasts with the West, where death is still normally kept as a private and family affair. In most parts of Africa, funerals are treated as the centre of a life cycle event, very important and costly, in which families use large amounts of money and resources, which turn the funeral into a lavish event for multitudes who would come from different sections of the country, especially dependent on how the deceased person was known or connected.<sup>9</sup> Funerals are now very costly, to such an extent that people with low incomes can no longer afford them. Contemporary urban funerals are characterised by expensive cars in funeral processions, as well as lavish coffins.<sup>10</sup> Funerals have become an event to display wealth, competing with events such as weddings and birthday parties. An editor for *Times India* revealed that people now have expectations of how they are supposed to be sent off. Thus, funerals are currently being used as the last display of power and wealth.

Van Niekerk highlights major comparisons of how funerals nowadays differ from traditional funerals.<sup>11</sup> Traditional funerals never allowed noise or any of the activities that people partake in at funerals now. Baloyi explains how the African culture encourages mourning in a group.<sup>12</sup> If a person passes away in a village, all the neighbours would support that family. They would help with preparations for the funeral; the ladies would prepare meals for guests and clean, while the males would slaughter an animal and

<sup>6</sup> G. Cocks, "How Have Funeral Traditions Changed?," 2020, <https://www.scandbscocks.co.uk/how-have-funerals-changed/>.

<sup>7</sup> L. Ndeleni, "Cultural and Western Funeral Traditions, A Cultural Exploration by Lunga Ndeleni," 2016, <https://www.blc.co.za/cultural-western-funeral-traditions-cultural-exploration-lunga-ndeleni/>.

<sup>8</sup> C. Eze, "The Traditional Burial Rites in Some African Societies. The Guardian Nigerian," 2021.

<sup>9</sup> M. Jindra and J. Noret, "Funerals in Africa," 2013, <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/JindraFunerals>.

<sup>10</sup> S. Ngubane, "Death and Burial Practices in Contemporary Zulu Culture, South Africa.," 2019.

<sup>11</sup> J. Van Niekerk, "Ubuntu and Moral Values," 2013, <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/755432f6-5b72-4e74-9af7-f6e1d815d1d2/content>.

<sup>12</sup> Magezi E. Baloyi, "Distance No Impediment for Funerals: Death as a Uniting Ritual for African People □ A Pastoral Study," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 1 (January 14, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i1.1248>.

prepare the gravesite for the burial. African people practice the spirit of *ubuntu* even during the mourning period. In the Zulu culture, people bring “isipheko”, which is groceries or money for the grieving family, to comfort them during this time, as they may be financially constrained.

Many researchers and traditional elderly people argue that funerals should be dignified and respected. The after-tears and celebration of life are the opposite of how African traditional funerals are conducted, since, currently, they create a happy vibe, contrary to a quiet, mourning atmosphere. Having access to freedom can influence one’s life, as seen above, in that people are exposed to new things, and subsequently, they have the power to choose what they want. This may negatively affect the culture, as they shift from traditional norms to post-modern ones.

### **The Shift in Traditional Funerals amongst some South African and Kenyan Tribes**

Traditional funerals often focus more on religion and cultural rites and are typically held in places of worship. The proceedings usually align with established sermons of a particular religion or faith. Although traditional funerals are still present, people opt to have a celebration of life service instead, focusing on the type of person the deceased was. The service would pay homage to the things the deceased enjoyed, like music, hobbies, and stories.<sup>13</sup> Whilst dead bodies were indigenously preserved at home using sand, salt, and distinct herbs by socially accepted elders, bodies are now taken to the mortuary by funeral undertakers in South Africa, while in Kenya, the family arranges for the transportation. Currently, it is not mandatory for bodies to be buried in ancestral homes.

It is common in Kenya to bury an elderly person’s remains in cemeteries in the city centres. The careful handling of bodies, as culture dictates from an indigenous perspective, is not adhered to at all. Other funeral rituals and rites that have been discarded include shaving one's hair once a spouse passes on and loud wails by community women, among others. However, funerals continue to hold strongly to their conceptualisation as communal events. Community welfare, in monetary terms and grieving solace, continues to be embraced in contemporary times. However, social media platforms have come in to support community welfare groups, and social media platforms, such as WhatsApp groups, are being used to collect funeral support finances.<sup>14</sup>

The South African Zulu tribe, as an example, has a rich culture which has changed a lot, but they are still unique in their beliefs and customs when it comes to funeral rites. Much of the Zulu traditions, when it comes to funerals and spirituality, have been heavily influenced by Christianity. The Zulus believe that a body must be buried in the ground out of respect. Many of the funeral traditions also call for the burial of the deceased's personal belongings with them. It is thought that if the ritual is not performed correctly, the dead will come back to haunt the living.<sup>15</sup> Christian funerals are characterised by ecclesiastical rites by which the body of the deceased is buried in the ground. Most Africans, particularly the Zulu people, believe that it is a well-accepted gateway to the ancestors if someone is respectfully buried. Zulu-speaking people have words like *ukugoduka* (home going), *ukuya kobabamkhulu* (going to the forefathers), *ukudhula* (pass on), *ukuya kwelamathongo* (ascend to the land of ancestors). These words imply that death is a way to rejoin the friends and relatives who have already passed on. For Ngubane, “When departing this world, one must return home with respect, dignity, through a proper burial.”<sup>16</sup> Most people who were respected, according to Zulu culture, were buried at home, at the side or behind their huts inside the family kraal, while the head of the family was buried in the cattle kraal. Missionaries, under colonial influence, introduced cemetery burials in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Amongst the Pedi-speaking people, there is little leniency regarding their traditions and beliefs. While they have many similar traditions, customs and beliefs with their surrounding tribes, their belief structure has a different variation. Like many African tribes, they also believe that their communication with their gods is through their ancestors. MayFuneral has noted that because of the link between their

<sup>13</sup> Cocks, “How Have Funeral Traditions Changed?”

<sup>14</sup> Telesia Kathini Musili and Fancy Cheronoh, “The African Value of Communitarity in Virtual Space amidst Covid-19: The Case of WhatsApp Welfare Communities in Nomiya Church, Eastleigh,” in *Law, Religion, Health and Healing in Africa* (African Sun Media, 2022), 365–78, <https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991201911/24>.

<sup>15</sup> A. Solomon, “Funerals Have Changed Since the 1960s. Here’s How,” 2023, <https://people.howstuffworks.com/culture-traditions/funerals/funeral-have-changed-since-1960s-heres-how.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Ngubane, “Death and Burial Practices in Contemporary Zulu Culture, South Africa.”

<sup>17</sup> Siswana, “Traditional African Burial Rites in Modern Age.”

ancestors and the gods, it is important that they follow and adhere to the details of funeral rites.<sup>18</sup> They usually wait seven days before burying the body. During this time, preparations are made for the funeral, and time is given for the family to visit.

The body is covered, and everyone is given an opportunity to see the body one last time before burial. Often, if the deceased was not living in their birthplace, his/her body should be taken back to their ancestral home for burial, regardless of distance. It is usually expected that some of the elderly members of the immediate family of the deceased should sit, or even sleep, in the room where the deceased's body, in a coffin, will spend the night before the burial. Besides the differences between these African cultures, one of the most interesting things is the similarities. Most cultures in South Africa will have some form of funeral ritual that includes sacrificing an animal. Almost every tribe has a tradition of burying the body while keeping the concept of an afterlife in mind.<sup>19</sup>

There is, however, a creeping practice of an entrepreneurial lifestyle being experienced in hosting funeral events, especially regarding transport, where sophisticated cars have been customised to transport caskets. Fresh flower suppliers have benefited from burial ceremonies, supplying diverse shapes of burial carnations. Mega tents, seats, red carpets, and podiums are now a thriving business once death occurs. The privacy of the mourning and grieving family is completely shattered by the pomp and colour that these businesses offer, under the guise of offering a decent send-off. With this kind of orientation, funerals in Kenya have, as a result, been turned into political arenas where politicians advance their political ambitions without an iota of respect for the grieving family. Instead of concentrating on development issues, much money is spent on burying people to create a platform to popularise his/her political party and ambitions. Respect for the dead is now carried through a cosmetic gesture of bowing one's head before a casket for less than a minute.

These days, in some black townships, instead of the solemn and quiet time for the family to mourn, the mourning rituals are accompanied mostly by festivities and public activities such as dancing, feasting, and wailing in announcing death as a fatality in a community. Death distorts the orderliness and peace that community members enjoy. It opens a conscious moment of relating with spiritual realms, both from a religious and moral front. Most Kenyan ethnic groups have elaborate taboos that set rules on how to handle the dead and how to behave in case death knocks closely. Some of the rituals include head shaving<sup>20</sup> and sexual taboos, which suspend sexual activities in the family.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes, disowning houses associated with death, as well as smearing bodies with substances, were practised.<sup>22</sup> The observance of taboos was understood to enable the bereaved to resume normal life (coping), as much as it helps the dead to depart "peacefully" from "the living" without hurting the ancestral spirit world, the bedrock of our morality.<sup>23</sup>

Normally, the cleansing ritual would follow when mourners arrived back home from the cemetery. This would happen at the gate, where everyone will be expected to remove the graveyard dust by washing their hands before entering the house. The period of mourning starts immediately after the funeral and continues for three months. Ceremonies and sporting activities are avoided during this period. Family members are not allowed to shout or sing loudly in the house. Married men and women, within the immediate family where the death occurred, would usually be forbidden from sexual engagement for some time. If it is the death of one's husband, a black dress would immediately be brought for the widow to wear for at least a year, or any length of time as arranged by the family. During this period, the widow is not allowed to travel long distances and must avoid meeting other people.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> MayFuneral, "Funeral Traditions in South Africa, Blog Posts Uncategorized," MayFuneralhome, 2018, <https://blog.htmayfuneralhome.com/2018/02/funeral-traditions-south-africa/>.

<sup>19</sup> MayFuneral, "Funeral Traditions in South Africa, Blog Posts Uncategorized."

<sup>20</sup> S. B. Obbo, "African Death Rite Of Passage, Dialogue And Inculturation" (Tangaza University, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> L. S. B. Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Academic Press, 1977); John S. Mbiti, "Challenges Facing Religious Education and Research in Africa: The Case of Dialogue between Christianity and African Religion," *Religion and Theology* 3, no. 2 (1996): 170–78, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157430196X00176>.

<sup>22</sup> Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903*; Mbiti, "Challenges Facing Religious Education and Research in Africa: The Case of Dialogue between Christianity and African Religion."

<sup>23</sup> Mbiti, "Challenges Facing Religious Education and Research in Africa: The Case of Dialogue between Christianity and African Religion."

<sup>24</sup> Ulwazi Programme, "A Zulu Burial," <https://www.ulwaziprogramme.org/a-zulu-burial/>, 2014.

Social norms relating to the place of funeral rites and rituals, as well as the reverence accorded to the spiritual world, are eroding at a fast rate. Several aspects point to this emerging scenario, either as necessitated by advancements in communication technologies and/or grounded in Christian socialisation and conceptualisation of an afterlife that tramples upon the Indigenous conceptualisation and understanding of life after death.

The aesthetic pampering of funerals stands out in contemporary times. Both the dead and the living are dressed in thematic attire, with young people, especially grandchildren, adorning shirts and T-shirts with photo prints of the dead person. The blending of colours is done in detail, with red carpets and fresh flowers covering the entire casket. Jubilation and celebration of a well-lived life, be it of an elderly or a young person, engulf burials. Either the yearning for a long life remains a distant desire for the elderly, or young persons are so overtaken by the desire for a lavish life that a long life is no longer desirable.

The casualness with which burials are being conducted in current times, especially among young people, draws a lot from prescriptions in secular music. A case in point is the song *Enjoy* by Nasibu Abdul Juma Isaack, whose stage name is Diamond Platnumz. The song prescribes a short life full of fun compared to a long life full of suffering, which most ageing Africans swear by. Transitioning to ancestorhood is a venerated phase of life among most African communities. In Kenya, it is now the norm that such classic musicians are invited to burials to entertain the mourners.

Furthermore, catering services, jubilation, dance, and loud music have become the order of contemporary burials, eroding the serenity that grieving and mourning ushered in. It is not uncommon that a whole hotel delegation is hired to prepare sophisticated meals at funerals, not just among the well-off but also for middle-class citizens. Social media welfare groups have necessitated the affordability of such services, as these WhatsApp organisations supplement the meagre collections from community welfare groups. It is either escapism or the fastness of the entrepreneurial lifestyle, which has engulfed contemporary societies and invaded the once-revered rite of passage to ancestorhood. Veneration of ancestorship is no longer a priority for the young generation, as it is unfolding in today's funerals.

Renowned politicians and wealthy individuals have opted for the cremation of their bodies, underlining it in their wills. It has been argued that most people enrich themselves upon their relatives' deaths, as enabled by these social media groups. People accumulate finances out of sympathy from their social networks and fail to use the finances for the purpose for which they were collected. In retrospect, the wealthy have opted to be cremated minutes after their death, probably to avert such shame. The Nobel laureate and environmentalist Wangari Maathai was cremated in 2011 in a private ceremony at the Kariokor crematorium in Nairobi, Kenya. The family of the environmentalist and the government agreed to cremate the body to honour her wishes and her legacy of environmental conservation. Thus, grounding reasons for cremation attune to the preservation of Mother Nature.

Furthermore, burial services do not receive the respect and solemnity they once enjoyed. In most burial services, politicians take over an hour politicking at burial ceremonies, displaying little or no respect for the dead. For instance, the superfluousness in respecting the dead was witnessed in the burial of a renowned Kenyan TikTok sensation, Brian Chira, where social media content creators flocked to the burial site to create content for their platforms. Little or no respect for the dead was witnessed at this burial, prompting the village elders to perform rituals appeasing the gods of Agikuyu. The elders decried extraordinary misconduct by young mourners during Brian Chira's send-off, which passed as a taboo. Among the issues that shocked the elders included the weird dressing, drinking of alcohol, and smoking of bhang, among other ills, without sheer respect for the elders and ministers present.<sup>25</sup> Other misconducts include limited time for the word of God. The ministers carrying out the funeral rites and service are given a maximum of half an hour to inter the body, compared to the length of periods accorded to politicians. The irony in the tributes printed in mourning pamphlets shared during burials, dotting the life history of the deceased, and the pomp and colour of such burials, further offer a huge contrast to the expected sombre and serene mood that burials invoke. Life's sacredness and interconnectedness are paramount to humanity and contrary to the casualness displayed in current funerals.

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<sup>25</sup> C. Ouma., "Why Special Ritual Was Performed at Brian Chira's Home on Friday," *Pulselive*, 2024, <https://www.pulselive.co.ke/entertainment/why-special-ritual-was-performed-at-brian-chiras-home-on-friday/pj17wgr>.

On the other hand, people who die in car accidents, those stabbed with sharp objects like knives or shot with a gun, those who drown, those who die through lightning or burn to their death, are said to have died prematurely. These deaths have not been celebratory in the past. In such cases, these bodies were not culturally accorded a decent burial, as it was believed to be a bad omen that would claim the lives of the existing members of the family. To ward off the omen, the elders circumvented it by interring the body at the spot where the unfortunate death took place. In cases where the body went missing, the clothes of the deceased would be buried as a representation of his/her body.<sup>26</sup> In modern times, however, it is insisted upon that the body be brought home regardless of how the death occurred. Nevertheless, caution is taken, as the body is not kept in the house but outside within the homestead. This is a clear indication of holding cultural tenets on burial norms. If the body of the deceased is unfortunately not found, his/her clothes are symbolically kept in the house in place of the actual body. Through the examples from these African tribes, one notices that there was so much order, and the African people took funerals seriously in the past. Their culture enabled them to be respectful and understand that this is a period of mourning. Therefore, there are certain activities one should abstain from as a sign of respect for the deceased and the grieving family.

### **Celebration of Life**

The modern funeral “celebration of life” is the total opposite of what occurred in the past. The current trend includes playing loud music and drinking alcohol, and the atmosphere often feels like a party rather than a funeral. It is rare to find these types of funerals in the villages, as the rural folk still believe funerals should be about mourning, peace, and devoid of noise. Celebration of life is often practised in cities, and the African people adopting this new trend do it wrongly, as it is not part of the African identity.<sup>27</sup> This is a Western culture that is foreign to Africans. According to Baloyi, “the dignity and sadness that gives the family an opportunity to mourn their loved ones had been derailed by this new culture... If we visit our rural villages, there are still places where even getting to the graveside is monitored so strictly that no man is allowed to enter without a jacket, as a sign of respect.”<sup>28</sup>

The discussion of celebrating life in African funerals needs to be understood from the perspective of having death as a point of departure for one’s ability to communicate between the invisible and visible worlds. From this argument, one can understand that not everyone’s life can be celebrated, but only people who have made an impact on the lives of others should be celebrated. Most African communities anticipate death only in old age. Any premature death, usually happening among young people, is deemed an awful death,<sup>29</sup> and does not warrant any celebration but varied rituals to avert this misfortune. In many parts of Africa, mourning and rejoicing go together when an aged person passes on. In most African societies, the death of an aged person is celebrated in a varied emotional atmosphere characterised by both rejoicing and mourning. Several activities precede death in most African communities, including Kenya: the announcement of the death, lying in the morgue, preparation of the corpse for burial, the interment burial ceremony, community death rituals, partying, and varied jubilation events accompanying the interment ceremony. Even though death is seen as a tragic enemy, there will be room for some celebration if an elder who is understood to have lived well departs.<sup>30</sup>

For Ekore and Lanre-Abass, this is accompanied by the view that if the burial celebrations do not go well, it may result in an individual not resting but becoming a wandering ghost, which would endanger the lives of those still alive.<sup>31</sup> While traditional funerals are more orderly and often spiritually defined events, a celebration of life is more concerned with telling the story of the deceased. The celebration of life differs from a funeral or memorial in that it is often a more casual and less structured service. Dubbed memorial services, celebrating a departed member of the family paints a jubilant atmosphere,

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<sup>26</sup> Jindra and Noret, “Funerals in Africa.”

<sup>27</sup> Baloyi, “Distance No Impediment for Funerals: Death as a Uniting Ritual for African People □ A Pastoral Study.”

<sup>28</sup> Baloyi, “Distance No Impediment for Funerals: Death as a Uniting Ritual for African People □ A Pastoral Study.”

<sup>29</sup> S. Van der Geest, “Dying Peacefully: Considering Good Death and Bad Death in Kwahu-Tafo, Ghana,” *Social Science & Medicine* 58, no. 5 (2004): 899–911.

<sup>30</sup> Lesiba Baloyi and Molebogeng Makobe-Rabothata, “The African Conception of Death: A Cultural Implication,” 2014.

<sup>31</sup> R. L. Ekore and B. Lanre-Abass, “African Cultural Concept of Death and the Idea of Advance Care Directives,” *Indian Palliat Care* 22, no. 4 (2016): 369–72.

remembering crucial moments in the life shared with the departed.<sup>32</sup> In this case, the sombre mood that engulfs burial services may be non-existent in these services, though the family's discretion may take precedence in such cases.

A memorial service may take place at any location, either a church, a family member's house, or a place of significance. Outdoor areas such as a riverbank and a park are also popular locations for these services.<sup>33</sup> However, a more formal person with strong beliefs around death will be best remembered in a more traditional funeral service. A memorial can be appropriate for someone who chooses to be cremated but would prefer the structure of a service. It is believed that this growth in popularity is due to having more freedom to conduct a personal funeral.

### **New and Emerging Funeral Trends**

A funeral service ten years ago and a funeral now would be conducted differently. Social and cultural norms are slowly being adjusted as people create new norms for themselves. The following are some trends that have emerged in this new age and are becoming more popular at funerals. Immediately after a relative or a member of a community passes on, his/her family members form WhatsApp groups to raise funds for their funeral expenses. Emerging welfare communities have not only helped shoulder burial expenses, especially in most communities in Kenya, but have also formed borderless and normless welfare societies unfamiliar with cultural expectations. In this regard, young people have replaced the elderly in managing funeral rites and rituals. Interment of bodies, whether of the elderly or young people, is done without cultural norms surrounding funeral rites and is characterised by pomp and colour. Statements like “according to a decent burial to a loved one, befitting send-off, or decent send-off” have thus overtaken the sombre mood formerly experienced during burials.

### **Live Streamed Services (4IR influences)**

Many dimensions of human life have become increasingly digitalised, from self-driving cars to smart homes, and funerals are no exception, as tech-friendly services necessitate their execution. The COVID-19 era, which deterred close socialisation, owing to the contagious nature of the virus, fuelled the technological shift. As long as the country is open and everything is back to normal, live streaming of burial services will continue undeterred beyond the pandemic. Distance and time constraints in physically attending burials in the village have been cushioned by livestreaming the burial services. The funeral services are video-graphed, packaged as short clips, and uploaded to YouTube Channels for future reference. Technology has indeed transformed funeral services, depicting great quality and professionalism.<sup>34</sup>

### **Personifying the funeral services for the deceased**

Another trend that seems to be emerging is that funerals have become personalised now. People plan funerals as if it were their wedding day. People request mourners to dress in a particular manner, defying the commonly used black clothes; others play music/songs that the departed liked during his/her funeral, and tombstones are crafted in a way that pays homage to the dead person's hobbies.<sup>35</sup> Laderman opines that consumer culture started taking a shift in the 1960s, when it accorded people opportunities and options for customisation according to their preferences and tastes.<sup>36</sup> Such instances affect the ways in which the departed persons are handled. Before, it was unheard of for people to plan their funerals, whereas now they include recommendations in their wills of how the ceremony must be conducted. Personalisation and personification in someone's death and, hence, burial are now evident in such ceremonies, as alluded to by Laderman.<sup>37</sup> The known norms, practices, rituals, emotions, and values embodied in the then-African burials have changed with the passing of time. Solomon states that previously funerals were called a “funeral service”, but now that has changed into a “memorial service” and, finally, a celebration of life

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<sup>32</sup> B. Milne, *Memorial Service vs. Celebration of Life: Differences and Definitions*, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Lechman, “New and Emerging Funeral Trends: Live Streams and Themed Funerals.”

<sup>34</sup> Cocks, “How Have Funeral Traditions Changed?”

<sup>35</sup> Solomon, “Funerals Have Changed Since the 1960s. Here's How.”

<sup>36</sup> Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195183559.001.0001>.

<sup>37</sup> Laderman, *Rest in Peace*.

meant to showcase the deceased's life, personality, hobbies, and accomplishments.<sup>38</sup> People are shifting from cultural practices guiding burials with funerals to taking a personalised approach.

With each passing day, people are becoming more comfortable with the once-revered death. Family members are discussing it casually, with many going so far as to plan their own burials. Individualism is prevalent as people take control of their funeral and memorial service planning, as well as the legacies they embody, way before their death.<sup>39</sup> There is an increase with more people, especially the younger generation, planning and getting the right funeral cover to ensure they have a decent and glamorous burial. Whilst it may sound foreign to most Africans, Zeeman lauds it with an assertion that it helps members of the family in decision-making, as well as alleviating financial burdens during the mourning period.<sup>40</sup> Thus, prior planning of one's funeral is no longer perceived as a taboo; hence, the growth in the trend of prior planning of one's burial celebration.

The planned burials depict the personality of the deceased as it is drawn from his/her passion in terms of favourite colours, music, films, cars, and special places, as well as internalised character traits. It is not astonishing to find caskets that resemble a preferred animal or motor vehicle model. In South Africa, for instance, people who are passionate about models of cars or motorcycles are escorted in a procession by these particular models to celebrate and honour his/her passion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations can be made for researchers and the broader community. Firstly, cultural change should be inclusive of all people, both young and old, and open discussions around this should occur within communities. The researcher and the research team should seek ways to engage with the community through open discussions with relevant community members, aiming to raise awareness about cultural change and its dynamism. This necessitates that the research be community centred. Researchers should explore ways to utilise cultural changes to influence the teaching curriculum as part of a decolonisation effort. This will assist the younger generations in discovering knowledge about themselves before foreign methods of doing things impact them. Secondly, the involvement of elderly individuals in cultural change is crucial for teaching young people about their own culture and illustrating how culture influences the education curriculum. Educational or academic decolonial projects should not overlook the involvement of relevant communities.

## CONCLUSION

Philosophical and ontological conceptualisations of burying the dead differ across cultures. For instance, in Western cultures, cremation and less crowded burials are widely acceptable. However, in most African cultures, cremating a loved one would translate to disregard and disrespect for one's life. Loving and respecting one's kin among Africans goes beyond death. Thus, in spite of the shifts in burial culture, the adoption of new methods of interring the dead, at the expense of the socialised culture, is detrimental to societies. An embrace of the shift calls for a consultative agreement since the sensitivity of the subject affects the core of the intrinsic value of the person as conceptualised by the African people. Societies are held together by religious and cultural tenets that foreground people's identities beyond death. As such, most African people harbour negative perceptions and attitudes toward embracing emerging burial practices that are not in tandem with their culture. Exercising sensitivity and caution with these life-meaning tenets is paramount, even in instances where change is inevitable.

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<sup>38</sup> Solomon, "Funerals Have Changed Since the 1960s. Here's How."

<sup>39</sup> Laderman, *Rest in Peace*.

<sup>40</sup> K. Zeeman, "After Tears: Are We Going Too Far with Parties at Funerals?," Times live, 2019, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/tshisa-live/tshisa-live/2019-11-06-after-tears-are-we-going-too-far-with-parties-at-funerals/>.

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