



Intercultural dynamics in Christian and African Burial rites: Challenges and strategies for harmonisation

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ABSTRACT

Burial rites are deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions, shaping how communities understand death, the afterlife, and social belonging. In many rural communities in South Africa, particularly in Shikundu Village, Christian and African burial practices coexist, sometimes leading to tensions due to differing theological, ritualistic, and cultural perspectives. This study explored the procedural aspects of Christian and African burial rites, identifying challenges in their integration and proposing strategies to harmonise these practices through liturgical inculturation. Using a qualitative approach, the research relied on interviews to understand how Shikundu village navigates these religious and cultural intersections. The findings reveal that while some Christian denominations attempt to integrate local customs, conflicts persist, particularly regarding ancestral veneration, ritual sacrifices, and theological interpretations of death. The study recommends fostering intercultural dialogue, reinterpreting theological concepts in a local context, and developing inclusive liturgical frameworks to promote mutual respect and coexistence. This article contributes to the academic discourse on contextual theology and intercultural liturgical practices by critically investigating the challenges between Christian and African burial customs, presenting a detailed analysis of the theological, cultural, and practical issues posed by these differing worldviews. Furthermore, it outlines practical and theological strategies for harmonising them in a way that honours African cultural identity while upholding core Christian principles, thereby deepening the understanding of how cultural integration can foster a more meaningful and context-sensitive expression of the Christian faith, particularly in matters related to death and burial customs.

Keywords: Burial rites, liturgical inculturation, intercultural dialogue, religious syncretism, ancestral veneration, theological adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Burial rites are essential to Christian and African traditional religious practices, reflecting beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife. In many African societies, death is not seen as the end. Still, as a transition to the ancestral realm, where the deceased continue to influence the lives of their descendants

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Conversely, Christianity teaches that death marks the passage to eternal life with God, with resurrection being a core theological principle.¹

The study will focus on the Shikundu community in the Collins Chabane Local Municipality. In the Shikundu community, Christian and African burial traditions coexist, often leading to cultural and theological tensions. The liturgical inculturation process, where Christian worship and rituals are adapted to local cultural settings, plays a crucial role in shaping how these burial rites are performed.² However, the acceptance and integration of African burial customs into Christian liturgies varies among denominations and religious leaders.

The following objectives guide this study:

- To explore the procedural aspects of both Christian and African burial rites.
- To identify the challenges associated with integrating Christian and African burial rites.
- To propose strategies for liturgical inculturation between Christian and African burial practices.

Research Questions

- What are the procedural aspects involved in Christian and African burial rites?
- What challenges arise in the integration of Christian and African burial rites?
- What strategies can be proposed for liturgical inculturation between Christian and African burial practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the challenges and strategies to harmonise these rites in the Shikundu community, where the tension between doctrinal fidelity and cultural authenticity is particularly pronounced.

Christian Burial Rites

Christian burial rites have evolved over centuries, reflecting a rich interplay of theology, culture, and liturgical practice. Rooted in the doctrine of bodily resurrection and eternal life, Christian burial rites have adapted to changing historical and social contexts while maintaining core sacramental meanings.³ In the researcher's view, such adaptability underscores a critical tension between tradition and contextualisation. On the contrary, the form and setting of burial practices may reflect contemporary social and historical realities, but the underlying sacramental symbolism remains a theologically grounded articulation of the Christian hope in life after death.

Historical Evolution

Early Christian burial practices emerged in a Greco-Roman context, influenced by Jewish traditions and characterised by catacombs and symbolic inscriptions that expressed hope in resurrection.⁴ As Christianity gained prominence in the Roman Empire, burial rites became formalised through consecrated churchyards and ritualised ceremonies that reinforced communal identity.⁵ In the medieval period, these rites were further developed with elaborate liturgies including prayers for the dead and processions reflecting evolving theological views on purgatory and eternal life.⁶

The emergence of such liturgical complexity reflects an effort to provide spiritual assurance and communal solidarity in the face of death. Although some of these medieval elaborations, particularly the doctrine of purgatory, remain subjects of theological debate, they signify the Christian's attempt to

¹ Randall B Smith, *From here to Eternity: Reflections on Death, Immortality, and the Resurrection of the Body* (Emmaus Road Publishing, 2023), 2.

² H.P. Khosa-Nkatini, "Liturgical Inculturation of Tsonga Widows' Mourning Rituals.," *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies*. 36 (2020): 155.

³ Lizette Larson-Miller, "Christian Approaches to Death," in *Death and Religion in a Changing World* (Routledge, 2022), 98.

⁴ Maja Borowik, "Funerary Practices in Ancient Alexandria in the Graeco-Roman Period (332 BC–AD 642)," *Funerary Practices in Ancient Alexandria in the Graeco-Roman Period (332 BC–AD 642). Examples for Syncretism in Alexandrian Tombs and Necropolises Bachelor's Thesis in the Field of Archaeology* (University of Warsaw, 2020), 39.

⁵ Sharon Lorraine Murphy Mogen, *Mourning the Dead in Christian Late Antiquity* (University of Calgary (Canada), 2020), 91.

⁶ Lizette Larson-Miller, *Medieval Liturgy: A Book of Essays* (Routledge, 2019), 17.

articulate a more nuanced understanding of the afterlife within its liturgical praxis. These rites served not only as rituals of passage but as theological expressions that sought to bridge temporal existence with the hope of eternal communion with God, thus reinforcing the Christian's sacramental worldview within its historical context.

Theological Foundations

The theological foundation of Christian burial rites is the belief in resurrection, as articulated in texts such as 1 Corinthians 15 and exposed by scholars such as Kham.⁷ Paul's explanation in 1 Corinthians 15 describes the resurrection as both a future expectation and a core principle of Christian identity. This conviction changes burial from the end of life to a sacred journey towards everlasting life. In this setting, burial rituals are more than just memorial gestures; they are profoundly eschatological, representing the end of earthly journeys and the hope for bodily resurrection. This doctrinal focus influences not only the text and substance of Christian burial ceremonies but also how the community responds to death, grounding mourning in hope and enriching sorrow with the assurance of resurrection splendor.

African Traditional Burial Rites

African Traditional burial customs have historically been a key element of native spiritual and cultural practices, acting as a way to honour the departed and significant manifestations of collective identity and worldview. Ephirim-Donkor highlights that in numerous African cultures, burial transcends a mere physical action to represent a profound spiritual journey in which the departed becomes one with the ancestors.⁸ This ritual confirms the connection among the living, the deceased, and those yet to be born, embodying a cyclical perspective of existence and strengthening communal ties.

Ogungbemi contends that traditional African burial customs are rooted in a perspective in which death is viewed not as a conclusion, but as a transition or movement to the spiritual realm, where the departed still influences the community's life.⁹ These perspectives demonstrate that African burial traditions are simultaneously theological and social, reflecting beliefs in continuity of life, respect for ancestors, and the community's shared identity. Burial is a culturally rooted sacramental moment that connects the physical and spiritual realms, reinforcing values, relationships, and cosmic harmony within traditional African belief systems.

Cultural and Cosmological Foundations

Alokwu et al. suggest that African funeral traditions are deeply embedded in native cosmological beliefs, viewing death as a transformation instead of a definitive conclusion.¹⁰ These rituals often highlight the connection between the living and the ancestral world. Ancestor veneration is a common theme, highlighting the belief that the deceased have an ongoing influence on the lives of the living, a perspective that shapes both the ritual and symbolic elements of funerary traditions.¹¹

Ritual Frameworks and Community Interactions

Studies emphasise that African burial ceremonies are generally collective occasions marked by intricate rituals, which feature dance, music, and oral storytelling. These rituals do not solely focus on grief; they also function as transition ceremonies that restore social unity and reinforce shared community values.¹² As noted by Obare, these rituals promote a shared journey of mourning and revitalisation, with designated responsibilities given to family members, community leaders and ritual experts.¹³ The

⁷ Steven Cung Za Kham, "Historical and Theological Evidence of Jesus' Resurrection in Paul's Undisputed Letters," 2025.

⁸ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2021), 117.

⁹ Segun Ogungbemi, "Death, Burial Rites, and After-Life," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion* (Springer, 2022), 166.

¹⁰ Cyprian Obiorah Alokwu, Emmanuel I. Ajakor, and Benjamin C. Nwokocha, "The Astrophysical Cosmology of Death in African Aboriginal Mythology: The Church and Igbo Religious Views at Crossroad," *Ohazurume-Unizik Journal of Culture and Civilization* 4, no. 1 (2025): 84–94.

¹¹ George Shakwelele, *Explaining the Practice of Elevating an Ancestor for Veneration*, vol. 59 (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023), 17.

¹² Muhammad Hasib, "The Role of Rituals in Different Religious Traditions: A Research Review," *Al Haqeeqah* 3, no. 2 (2023): 15–24.

¹³ Phyllis Kemuma Obare, "The Practise of Death Rituals as a Native Healing Method for Grief," *A Study of the Bukusu Community in Kenya*, 2019, 33.

participatory aspect of these rituals highlights their significance in preserving social stability and conveying cultural legacy through generations.

Difficulties in merging Christian and African burial traditions

The combination of Christian and African burial customs poses various difficulties: Theological Discrepancies: Christian beliefs oppose ancestor worship, considering it idolatrous (Exodus 20:3-5), whereas African customs regard it as an essential link to heritage.¹⁴ The attempt to align Christian burial customs with traditional African funeral ceremonies faces various difficulties. One of these is the variation in doctrinal convictions and ceremonial customs that distinctly define each tradition.¹⁵ For example, Christian funerary customs frequently highlight the belief in bodily resurrection, whereas conventional African burial rites often stress the soul's continuous spiritual passage.

The language barrier as a significant challenge in integrating Christianity and African burial rites may require careful consideration.¹⁶ Christian funeral ceremonies are frequently conducted in English or Latin. African burial practices are often performed in indigenous languages or dialects. This linguistic disparity can hinder comprehension and active participation in the rituals. Lebaka stated that attempts to integrate Christian and African burial rites may lead to cultural misunderstanding.¹⁷ For instance, practices commonly associated with Christian funerals, like cremation, may be considered disrespectful in certain African traditions.¹⁸ On the contrary, African rituals involving animal sacrifices or ancestor veneration may be perceived as incompatible with Christian theological principles.

Strategies for Harmonisation

In a diverse religious contexts, harmonisation refers to the process of creating coherence between universal principles and local particularities.¹⁹ Within the field of liturgical inculturation, strategies for harmonisation seek to balance the universal integrity of sacred liturgy with the culturally distinct expressions of local communities.

Dynamic Equivalence and Symbolic Translation

Dynamic equivalence involves reinterpreting liturgical symbols so that they resonate with local cultural narratives. Strategies here include:

Contextual Translation: Translating not only language but also symbolic gestures, music, and ritual forms to align with local aesthetics while preserving theological meaning.²⁰

Synoptic Adaptation: Carefully selecting which elements of the liturgical repertoire may be adapted to express indigenous values (e.g., incorporating local metaphors for spiritual renewal) without diluting core doctrines.²¹

These strategies underscore the need for a hermeneutic that is both faithful to tradition and responsive to the local idiom.

¹⁴ Charlotte Mitta Monnamme, *African Spirituality and Christianity: Revisiting Clashing Worldviews* (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2023), 90.

¹⁵ Paul G Hiebert, R Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, vol. 67 (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2024), 20.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Foster Asamoah, Ebenezer Kpalam, and Emmanuel Asamoah, "Towards Developing African Christianity: An Overview on How the Christian Faith Was Handed down by Western Missionaries to Africans," *African Journal of Culture, History, Religion and Traditions*, 2023.

¹⁷ Morakeng E K Lebaka, "Ancestral Beliefs in Modern Cultural and Religious Practices—The Case of the Bapedi Tribe," *HTS: Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019): 1–10.

¹⁸ Ronald K Barrett, "Psychocultural Influences on African-American Attitudes towards Death, Dying and Funeral Rites," in *Personal Care in an Impersonal World* (Routledge, 2020), 213–30.

¹⁹ Nur Asmadayana Hasim et al., "The Integration and Harmonisation of Secular and Islamic Ethical Principles in Formulating Acceptable Ethical Guidelines for Modern Biotechnology in Malaysia," *Science and Engineering Ethics* 26, no. 3 (2020): 1797–1825.

²⁰ Saya Ojiri, "Rice, Ritual, Relationship: Towards Japanese Ways of Christian Worship" (2022), 56.

²¹ David Lindenfeld, *World Christianity and Global Conquest: A Global History, 1500 2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 27.

Dialogical Approaches: Ecumenism and Intercultural Dialogue

Dialogical approaches to harmonisation stress the importance of inclusive dialogue between Christian and African traditional worldviews, particularly in the context where burial rites intersect.

Intercultural Dialogue: Facilitating conversations among theologians, liturgists, and local cultural leaders can generate mutually respectful adaptations.²² This strategy not only enhances the authenticity of local liturgical practices but also reinforces communal identity.

Ecumenical Cooperation: Joint liturgical initiatives among diverse Christian traditions help establish common ground.²³ Such cooperation can lead to shared liturgical resources that reflect a broader cultural heritage while fostering unity.

These strategies highlight the importance of relational engagement in ensuring that harmonisation is an ongoing, collaborative process.

Institutional and Pastoral Strategies

Institutional strategies focus on embedding harmonisation within the structures of the Church:

Policy and Normative Frameworks: Documents from Vatican II and subsequent papal encyclicals provide guidelines that allow for regional adaptations. Belcher, state that the development of frameworks, such as the Zairean Rite, serves as a model for integrating indigenous music, language and ritual practices.²⁴

Pastoral Involvement: Empowering local pastors and liturgical experts to tailor liturgical celebrations encourages a bottom-up approach to harmonisation. Training programs and workshops can help community leaders understand the theological principles behind liturgical elements while guiding them on appropriate cultural expressions.²⁵

These strategies work within the institutional context to create sustainable models of inculturation that maintain liturgical integrity.

Theological Implications of Liturgical Inculturation

Theological implications have the followings aspects:

Universality versus Particularity

One major implication involves the tension between the Church's universal identity and the particularities of local cultures. On the one hand, a universal liturgical form fosters unity and continuity of faith; on the other hand, adapting liturgical forms to local contexts can make worship more accessible and meaningful for diverse communities. Scholars such as Ojiri advocate for dynamic equivalence in liturgy, a model in which symbols and rituals are reinterpreted in local contexts without losing their intrinsic theological value.²⁶

Ecclesiology and Liturgy

According to Ballano, inculturation directly impacts ecclesiology by underscoring the Church's identity as both universal and incarnate.²⁷ As indigenous expressions are woven into liturgical practice, the

²² Joan Siagian and Supriyono Venantius, "Intercultural Communication for Family Ministry," *Paideia Christiana: Journal of Evangelization, Catechesis, and Religious Education in Asia* 1, no. 2 (2023): 134.

²³ John Borelli, "Liturgical Renewal and Ecumenical Progress," in *Changing the Church: Transformations of Christian Belief, Practice, and Life* (Springer, 2020), 194.

²⁴ Kimberly Hope Belcher, "Ritual Systems, Ritualized Bodies, and the Laws of Liturgical Development," *Studia Liturgica* 49, no. 1 (2019): 89–110.

²⁵ Mark Lau Branson and Juan F Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (InterVarsity Press, 2023).

²⁶ Ojiri, "Rice, Ritual, Relationship: Towards Japanese Ways of Christian Worship," 49.

²⁷ Vivencio Ballano, "Inculturation, Anthropology, and the Empirical Dimension of Evangelization," *Religions* 11, no. 2 (2020): 101.

Church reflects its mandate to be “a temple for all peoples.” This dual focus enriches the understanding of the Church as a living community that both preserves its traditions and embraces the cultural realities of its members.

Sacramentality and Authenticity

The sacramental character of liturgy, its ability to convey divine grace through tangible symbols, is a critical area of theological reflection.²⁸ Inculturation invites debate about what constitutes an authentic sacramental expression. Critics, such as those echoing, caution and warn that excessive adaptation may dilute the transcendent nature of the rites, reducing them to mere cultural expressions.²⁹ Proponents claim that when executed carefully, it can enhance the experiential reality of the sacred by relating it to local stories and symbols.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative research methodology to investigate the intersection of Christianity and African burial rites in the Shikundu region. A qualitative method was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences, cultural beliefs, and practices of the participants about death, burial, and mourning.³⁰ The research examined the liturgical enculturation of Christianity and African burial rites. It analysed how these traditions are negotiated and assimilated within the Shikundu community.

Data Collection Methods

In-depth interviews with pastors and traditional healers were used to gain insights into their views on burial rites. In-depth interviews were used as the primary data collection method to investigate the views of pastors and traditional healers about the liturgical enculturation of Christian and African burial rites in Shikundu.

Selection of Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit four pastors and four traditional healers with firsthand experience in Christian and African burial customs. The participants aged between 31 and 69 years were selected from Shikundu area to provide a broad spectrum of viewpoints.

Interview Process

The interview process involved semi-structured interview guides with a flexible framework of open-ended questions. It enables participants to expand on their experiences.³¹ Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes. They were conducted face-to-face to enhance engagement and capture non-verbal communication. During the interviews, the native language was also used to ensure clarity and depth in their responses.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the study's sample consisted of pastors and traditional healers aged 31 to 69 in Shikundu. In qualitative research data analysis entails the systematic organization, interpretation and understanding of non-numerical data to uncover patterns, themes and meanings.³² This study used thematic analysis as a method that facilitates the identification of recurring patterns within textual data.³³

²⁸ Christopher Carstens, *Principles of Sacred Liturgy: Forming a Sacramental Vision* (LiturgyTrainingPublications, 2020).

²⁹ H. Whitehouse, *The Ritual Animal: Imitation and Cohesion in the Evolution of Social Complexity* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 36.

³⁰ Elizabeth Ayebare et al., “The Impact of Cultural Beliefs and Practices on Parents’ Experiences of Bereavement Following Stillbirth: A Qualitative Study in Uganda and Kenya,” *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 21, no. 1 (2021): 443.

³¹ S. Kvale and S. Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015).

³² Kgope Moalusi, “Numbers Conceal the Intricacies in Categorising Qualitative Research in Organisational Studies: What Lies beneath the Surface?,” *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 46, no. 1 (2020): 1–12.

³³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide,” 2021, 39.

The analysis adhered to six step processes, familiarisation with the data generating initial codes searching for theme, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes.³⁴

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with strict adherence to established ethical principles to protect the dignity, rights, and welfare of all participants. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee, and formal permission to access the research site was obtained from both the Shikundu Community Forum and the Shikundu Pastors Forum. These approvals ensured that data collection proceeded transparently and with the full awareness of relevant stakeholders.

In keeping with the principle of informed consent, participants received clear and accurate information about the purpose, procedures, and expectations of the study in Xitsonga to ensure complete comprehension. They were assured of their autonomy, including the right to voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. This process was supported by cultivating a trusting researcher–participant relationship, which is vital for upholding participants’ self-determination.

Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were rigorously maintained throughout the research process. Access to raw data was restricted to the researcher, academic supervisors, and an independent coder involved in the verification of thematic analysis. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected computer housed in a locked room. To protect identities, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure discretion. These measures collectively ensured that participants’ personal information remained protected and that the ethical integrity of the study was maintained.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the transcripts revealed key themes, including the procedure involved in Christian and African burial rites, the difficulties in merging these practices, and suggested methods for liturgical enculturation between Christian and African burial rites. Through an iterative coding and categorisation process, several significant themes emerged to reflect the insights and experiences of the participants. These are derived from comprehensive interviews that ensured a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences. These are derived from comprehensive interviews that ensured a thorough understanding of the research topic. Identified themes provide insights into the integration of Christianity and African burial rites.³⁵

The processes associated with Christian and African Traditional burial rites

This section examines the processes associated with the implementation of Christian and African burial customs. To explore this topic, a central question was asked to determine if these burial traditions are conducted concurrently or as separate rituals. Most respondents indicated that, notwithstanding the distinctions between them, Christian and African burial rites are often performed during the same ceremony. They noted that Christian rites are usually performed first, followed by African burial practices, which are generally led by the deceased’s family. The following responses highlight this trend: Participants highlighted the coexistence of Christian and African burial rites within the same funeral ceremonies, illustrating how these traditions are integrated in practice.

- *One participant explained that because the deceased was a member of a Christian denomination, the church first conducted the burial rites following Christian traditions. Once the priest concluded the ceremony, the family then performed their traditional burial practices (Participant 2, Male, 35 years).*

³⁴ Muhammad Naeem et al., “A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22 (2023): 3.

³⁵ Natalie Osborne and Deanna Grant-Smith, “In-Depth Interviewing,” in *Methods in Urban Analysis* (Springer, 2021), 105–25.

- Similarly, another respondent stated that a pastor led the Christian burial service, after which a family member initiated African traditional rituals, such as appeasing the ancestors to welcome the deceased (Participant 3, Male, 54 years).
- Another participant described the integration from a cultural perspective, noting that in African tradition, the deceased was honoured with a traditional dance before Christian burial rites followed. This affirmed the belief that all life originates from God and ultimately returns to Him at the end of its journey (Participant 4, Male, 69 years).
- However, the interaction between the two traditions was not always seamless. One respondent recalled that while a pastor conducted the Christian burial service, the family temporarily paused the proceedings to allow those adhering to African customs to perform their burial practices (Participant 6, Female, 41 years).
- Another participant reinforced this pattern, stating that the pastor officiated the Christian burial rites before handing over to the family, who then facilitated the African burial traditions (Participant 7, Female, 35 years).

These findings are consistent with existing scholarly perspectives on burial traditions. Abiose notes that Christian burial rites typically include a funeral service officiated by a priest or minister, prayers for the deceased, and interment on a consecrated ground.³⁶ On the contrary, Ejikeme highlights that African burial rites often incorporate elaborate ceremonies featuring singing, dancing, and, in some cases, animal sacrifices.³⁷ Despite these differences between Christianity and African tradition, they share the fundamental objective of honouring the deceased and providing comfort to the bereaved.

Difficulties associated with incorporating Christian and African burial practices

This section examines the challenges faced in reconciling Christianity and African burial customs. A critical inquiry was made to uncover potential barriers that could obstruct the process of liturgical enculturation. Most of the respondents recognised considerable difficulties in harmonising these two burial traditions. They pointed out that Christian funeral customs are fundamentally based on biblical principles, while African burial practices are intricately linked to ancestral reverence and ritualistic traditions.

Numerous participants highlighted that most of the African traditions are despised by Christianity. This creates a lot of friction between the two religions. A participant that believed more in African tradition mentioned that their methods of burying people follow the inherited generations. The main problem lies in Christianity being perceived as more superior than African Tradition. Other participants noted that Christian burial rites are often regarded as more valid than African burial customs. This fosters a hierarchical relationship that complicates cooperation. The following statements exemplify these challenges

- *'The difficulty in integrating these two burial rites is that Christian practices often label African burial traditions as heathen.'* (Participant 1, Male, 49 years)
- *'A major difficulty arises when one tradition, Christian or African, is considered more significant than the other. This issue becomes more pronounced when those responsible for these rites do not understand the underlying purpose of each tradition.'* (Participant 2, Male, 35 years)
- *"Christian burial practices are based on biblical teachings, whereas African burial rites incorporate rituals such as sending messages to ancestors. Many Christians perceive this as idolatry, making it difficult to harmonise both traditions."* (Participant 3, Male, 54 years)

³⁶ Ogbeifun Oluwabunmi Abiose, "Influence of Christianity on Yoruba Burial Rites in Ogbomoso LGA, Oyo State," *Jos Journal of Religion and Philosophy* 3, no. 3 (2021): 168.

³⁷ Joy Nneka U Ejikeme, "Traditional Burial and Funeral Practices in Igbo Culture.," *IKENGA: International Journal of Institute of African Studies* 21, no. 4 (2020), 93.

- *“The process of integrating these two burial rites is highly contentious because adherents of both traditions often dismiss each other, each believing their own practices are superior.” (Participant 4, Male, 69 years)*
- *“The main challenge is that many Christians consider their burial practices to be holier and more legitimate than African traditions, leading them to dominate the process.” (Participant 8, Female, 35 years)*
- *“Christian and African burial rites should not be merged because they are fundamentally different. African burial traditions contradict Christian teachings, especially concerning ancestral communication, which Christians regard as idolatry. Burial practices should align with the beliefs of the deceased.” (Participant 9, Female, 55 years)*

These results correspond to the current academic discourse regarding the difficulties encountered in merging Christian and African burial customs. Hiebert et al. highlight theological differences as a significant barrier, pointing out that Christian funeral customs typically prioritise bodily resurrection, in contrast to African traditions that emphasise the spiritual journey of the deceased.³⁸ Cultural misunderstandings and conflicts may emerge when efforts are made to combine these practices.³⁹ For instance, Christian methods such as embalming or cremation are viewed as disrespectful or incompatible with African traditions.

Proposed strategies for liturgical inculturation between Christian and African burial rites

This section investigates the potential for liturgical enculturation between Christian and African burial rites, posing a critical question to assess how such integration might be achieved. Most of the participants expressed a sense of hope regarding the feasibility of liturgical enculturation. Of the eight respondents, five affirmed that integration was possible, while three expressed dissent. Proponents argued that since both burial customs aim to honor the deceased and facilitate their transition into the afterlife, a unified ritual could be developed.

Many participants supported this perspective, emphasising that Christian and African burial rites are often performed within the same funeral context. However, some respondents argued that the two traditions should remain distinct, as their ritual elements differ significantly and may lead to theological conflicts. The following responses illustrate these viewpoints:

- *“Yes, it is possible because local cultures are receptive to adopting elements from other traditions. Although Christian and African burial rites differ, their ultimate purpose is the same. African traditions focus on connecting the deceased with their ancestors, while Christian practices aim to reunite the deceased with God. In both cases, the goal is to guide the departed to the afterlife.” (Participant 8, Female, 35 years)*
- *“Yes, liturgical inculturation could be achieved because both burial rites share the common goal of ensuring a dignified farewell for the deceased.” (Participant 4, Male, 69 years)*
- *“I believe liturgical inculturation is already happening in a subtle and spontaneous manner. For instance, pastors frequently officiate at funerals while the family carries out traditional cleansing rituals.” (Participant 3, Male, 54 years)*
- *“Integration is possible because both rites serve a similar function. Despite their differences, it is crucial to focus on their shared objective ensuring the deceased’s transition to the afterlife.” (Participant 2, Male, 35 years)*

Conversely, some participants opposed the idea of liturgical inculturation, citing fundamental differences between Christian and African burial rites. They pointed out that certain African rituals, such as the pouring of tobacco to communicate with ancestors, contradict Christian beliefs and are therefore incompatible with Christian practices. These participants also stressed the importance of respecting an

³⁸ Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, 20.

³⁹ Lebaka, “Ancestral Beliefs in Modern Cultural and Religious Practices—The Case of the Bapedi Tribe,” 4.

individual's religious identity, stating that Christians should be buried according to Christian customs, while African traditionalists should adhere to their cultural burial practices. The following responses reflect these concerns:

- *“No, integration is not possible. Christian and African burial rites rely on distinct rituals that often conflict. For example, African traditions involve practices such as pouring tobacco to connect with ancestors, which Christians regard as unacceptable.” (Participant 1, Male, 49 years)*
- *“Each tradition should remain separate. Christian burial rites are rooted in biblical teachings, whereas African practices include rituals such as burning incense, which contradict scripture. A deceased person's faith should be respected, Christians should receive a Christian burial, and traditionalists should follow African customs.” (Participant 5, Male, 66 years)*

Hiebert et al. propose that incorporating prayers and rituals familiar to the African community could help bridge the gap between Christian and African burial traditions.⁴⁰ However, they emphasise the need for the Church to uphold the fundamental principles of Christian theology in burial practices.⁴¹ Similarly, Carter argues that elements of African burial customs may need to be adapted to align with Christian beliefs about death, resurrection, and the afterlife to facilitate meaningful inculturation.⁴²

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study on the intercultural dynamics of Christian and African burial rites in Shikundu highlights the complex interaction between theological principles and indigenous cultural practices. To address the challenges identified, several key recommendations are proposed.

First, inclusive liturgical guidelines must be developed to integrate local cultural expressions while preserving the core Christian doctrines. Second, structured intercultural dialogue among pastors, traditional leaders, and families is crucial for fostering mutual understanding and mitigating ritual conflicts. Third, clergy should receive contextual theological education to engage sensitively with African burial customs.

Collaborative funeral planning is recommended to ensure that rituals honour both religious and cultural identities. Flexible denominational policies can standardise inculturation principles without limiting local adaptation. Dynamic equivalence and symbolic adaptation should guide ritual incorporation, allowing meaningful integration without compromising doctrinal integrity. Respect for individual religious identity must be prioritised, ensuring Christians and traditionalists receive appropriate burial rites. Continuous community reflection and research can assess the effectiveness of inculturated practices. Collectively, these strategies aim to promote harmonious, culturally sensitive, and theologically faithful burial practices that respect Christian and African traditions.

CONCLUSION

The intercultural dynamics of Christian and African burial rites in Shikundu village in the Collins Chabane Local Municipality reveal both the richness and complexities of integrating religious and cultural traditions. Although Christian and African traditional burial practices serve as essential rites of passage, they are often marked by theological and ritualistic differences. Christianity places a strong emphasis on salvation and resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14), while African traditions prioritise the veneration of ancestors and the importance of communal bonds. These differing perspectives pose significant challenges in reconciling burial customs, resulting in tensions among religious leaders, families and community members.

The study identifies several key challenges, including theological disagreements, ritual incompatibilities, variations amongst denominations, and familiar conflicts. Certain Christian denominations are hesitant to incorporate elements of traditional African burial practices, viewing them

⁴⁰ Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, 26.

⁴¹ Douglas Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Routledge, 2020), 127.

⁴² Jimmy Carter, “The Influences of Christian Beliefs on Death-Related Ceremonies: A Case Study of Naguru 11, Nakawa, Kampala, Uganda” (Diss. Africa renewal university, 2023), 14.

as incompatible with Christian teachings. The diversity within Christianity denominations leads to varying degrees of acceptance of African custom, complicating efforts for integrations. At the family level, disagreements frequently emerge regarding the adherence to Christian funeral rites versus the inclusion of traditional African ritual causing rifts among relatives.

Strategies aimed at harmonisation can promote a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to burial practices. Engaging in intercultural dialogue between Christian leaders and traditional custodians can enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. Adopting inclusive funeral practices such as the incorporation of local languages, African hymns and culturally significant gestures within Christian services provides a balanced method that respects both traditions. The effective merging of Christian and African burial rites necessitates continuous engagement, theological contemplation and community involvement. By cultivating respect for both religious and cultural heritage, burial practices can adapt in ways that honour Christian beliefs while safeguarding African traditions. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of intercultural adaptations in funerals, analysing how changing religious landscapes affect burial customs in African communities. This inquiry will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between religion and culture in burial practices. This will contribute to a broader understanding of liturgical inculturation and its role in shaping religious and cultural identities in contemporary communities.

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