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Home Burials, Church Graveyards, and Public Cemeteries: Transformations in Ibadan Mortuary Practice, 1853-1960

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Introduction

The issue of death and burial was, and still is, important in Ibadan as in other Yoruba communities. Previous scholarship on the introduction of Christianity to Yorubaland has emphasized the theme of “clash of cultures,” but this paper goes beyond clashes and tensions to explore negotiations and compromises, especially those made in mortuary practices. Ibadan history dates from the nineteenth century, when it was founded as a military camp in 1829. From there, it grew to be the most powerful Yoruba state. Its capital, Ibadan, was a cosmopolitan center that attracted fortune seekers from other parts of Yorubaland and even beyond. Ibadan had no *oba* (king), and therefore no cult of royalty, but was ruled by a military oligarchy in the nineteenth century. It retained many aspects of Yoruba culture, particularly those concerned with mortuary practice.

Although we have no direct figures for the nineteenth century, it is fair to assume that death rates were significantly higher than those in the opening years of the twentieth century. This was due to several reasons. First were the incessant wars fought by Ibadan from the 1830s to 1893. Ibadan, as an aggressor state, had little respite from wars with sometimes-high casualties. Added to these were regular outbreaks of civil strife, which also claimed lives. There were also periodic outbreaks of epidemics like smallpox and cholera. Infant mortality was high, and occasional fire outbreaks in a community of thatched huts left many dead. Compared to other Yoruba communities, it would appear that Ibadan experienced more than a fair share of deaths. Christianity was introduced to Ibadan in 1853 and despite the fact that it made few inroads in the community, it immediately instituted its own burial practices. Colonial rule, imposed on Ibadan in 1893, also came with its own blueprints for burial in the twentieth century, planning elaborate public cemeteries.

This paper argues that the eventual popularity of the idea of the cemetery among the Christian community is due to the religious privatization of the graveyard through a Christian discourse, whereas colonial cemeteries remained distinctly secular and “public,” far removed from personal and domestic engagements and impervious to any form of privatization. This brings into relief the “public” versus “private” debate and also underlines popular irritation at what was perceived as the intrusive policies of the colonial authorities. This paper starts by examining traditional Yoruba beliefs about death and the practice of home burial in nineteenth-century Ibadan. It then proceeds to discuss the mortuary practices of early Christians and the significance of a “proper” Christian burial. The efforts of colonial authorities to set up public cemeteries as well as the local response are juxtaposed in the following section. The last part of this paper reviews the socio-cultural impact of these changing practices.

Yoruba Beliefs about Death

Yoruba beliefs about death inform their mortuary practice. Death is seen not as absolute extinction or the end of life, but as a transition to a spiritual realm. *Aye* (the visible world of the living) and *orun* (the spiritual and invisible domain of ancestors, gods, and spirits) are the two realms that make up the Yoruba cosmos.¹ These two realms are closely connected because the inhabitants of *orun* regularly intervene in earthly affairs and are in fact considered important elements in human communities. Death is thus merely a “dematerialization of the vital breath or soul, a transformation from earthly to spiritual existence ... where the dematerialized soul may choose to stay forever ... [or] make periodic returns to earth through reincarnation.”² This belief in an afterlife and in reincarnation assures the Yoruba of social immortality. Those who live to a ripe old age and die “good deaths” become ancestors, and their intervention as well as that of other ancestral spirits of the lineage and town are solicited regularly by their descendants. However, the utmost desire is to

¹ Henry J. Drewal, et al., “The Yoruba World,” in *Death and the King’s Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Context Criticism*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 69.

² Babatunde Lawal, “The Living Dead: Art and Immortality among the Yoruba of Nigeria,” *Africa* 47, no. 1 (1977), 51.

be commemorated as an individual through an *egungun* (masked ancestral spirit). An *egungun* is regarded as the “spirit of a deceased person who has returned from *orun* ... to visit his people.” Hence, he is called *ara orun* (visitor from *orun*).³ Shortly after the burial of the aged deceased, an *egungun* dressed like him visits his household, admonishes them, and blesses them. The important function of this ceremony, according to Peter Morton-Williams, is the “restructuring of the set of social relationships that had centered on him during his life, and the general social recognition of his replacement by his heirs.”⁴ Some families go beyond this last simulation of bodily appearance to actually institute an annual *egungun* in memory of their fathers. Such *egungun* will regularly appear at community festivals and “in certain emergencies, when a diviner may advise its summoning.”⁵ However, regardless of whether an official *egungun* is instituted, the children of the deceased would continue to offer periodic sacrifices at his grave and invoke his blessings on the household. Thus, even after death, an aged parent continues to be a part of the family.

These are just broad principles. There are variations among different Yoruba groups in terms of specific rituals associated with different types of burials, details of *egungun* outing, and gender roles. However, there are other areas of general consensus in terms of dealing with the dead. First, the Yoruba distinguish between a “good death” and premature or “bad deaths.” A “good death” is that of a person who has lived to a mature age before departing peacefully without violence or trauma. “Mature age” is not only a function of chronological advancement in years, but also depends on other factors. In the words of J. A. Atanda, “anyone whose parents have died and who is survived by children old enough to celebrate his funeral” is considered mature, and his death would be celebrated, after a brief period of mourning, with a lot of merriment.⁶

There are different categories of “bad death” called *oku ofo*. First is the death of the young. These are youth who die before having children or before their children have grown up. Most times, their parents survive such premature death. There is also the death of infants. A series of dying infants is called an *abiku* (born-to-die), and these are not given decent burials to discourage them from dying prematurely if they ever come back again. They are often mutilated at death and thrown into the bush. Nobody mourns them.⁷ There is also *iku ojiji* (sudden death) resulting from calamities, such as death by thunder, by drowning, and from accidents. All these require special rituals before they are interred, mostly outside the home to prevent a recurrence. The same applies to those killed by *sonponna* (smallpox) and also by suicide. Lepers and lunatics are never buried in the house, while corpses of criminals are thrown into the bush.⁸ While the bodies of the premature dead (excluding *abiku*) are buried within the compound, others are interred outside. Those whose deaths are considered “good deaths” are buried in the house, sometimes in their rooms, in the verandah, or in the parlor.⁹ The type of rituals performed depends on the gender of the dead, his or her lineage group, religion, status in life (whether highly placed, e.g., chief, or a common man), membership in secret societies, age group, other associations, occupation (whether hunter, warrior, diviner), and several other variables.

³ Ade Dopamu, “Traditional Festivals,” in *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture*, eds. Nike S. Lawal, Matthew N. O. Sadiku, & P. Ade Dopamu (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), 656; Peter Morton-Williams, “Yoruba Response to the Fear of Death,” *Africa* 30, no. 1 (1960), 36.

⁴ Morton-Williams, “Yoruba Response to the Fear of Death,” 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ William H. Clarke, *Travels and Exploration in Yorubaland, 1854 – 1858*, ed. J. A. Atanda (Ibadan: University Press, 1972), 251.

⁷ Akin Oyetade, “The ‘Born-to-Die,’” in *Understanding Yoruba Life*, ed. Nike Lawal, et al. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), 97-112.

⁸ A. K. Ajisafe, *The Laws and Customs of the Yoruba People* (London: Trubner & Company, 2003), 80.

⁹ William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 66; G. J. Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis* (Ife: University Press, 1966), 192.

One issue on which the various anthropological studies of Yoruba society agree is the expense incurred by funerals. A lot of resources are expended on sacrifices and feasting, which last several days.¹⁰ A second burial is even carried out among some Yoruba groups where additional feasting and celebration is organized.¹¹ Those who could not afford this ceremony borrowed money for which they had to pawn their children. The repayment of such loans could take several years.

Burials in Nineteenth-Century Ibadan

There is a dearth of studies on Ibadan mortuary practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The only work that sheds some light on the nineteenth-century practice is J. D. Y. Peel's magisterial study of religious encounter.¹² Though its focus is on the entire Yoruba region, it has a few scattered references to nineteenth-century Ibadan burials, especially in Peel's discussion of "burial palavahs" between missionaries and different Yoruba groups. The bulk of the data used in the following reconstruction is from original Church Missionary Society (CMS) documents. The CMS native agents (pastors and catechists) in Ibadan whose journals and annual reports have yielded valuable information in this respect are Daniel Olubi, James Okuseinde, W. S. Allen, and Samuel Johnson.

It is clear from these journal entries that Ibadan people, like other Yoruba groups, buried their dead indoors. The graves, dug by the in-laws of the deceased, were mostly three feet deep and placed close to a wall. Before burial, the corpse was washed and wrapped in fine cloths. Drummers beat out rhythms suitable to the occasion while guns were fired at intervals. Relatives, neighbors, and friends came in to express their sympathy and later partook of the feast prepared by the children of the deceased. This feasting went on for several days.¹³ According to Daniel Olubi, the Ibadan CMS native pastor, if the dead person was a man, the initial festivities would be held for nine days, seven days for a woman, and "after certain days again, the ceremony is recapitulated."¹⁴ The graves, in the missionary narrative, were transformed into domestic shrines because the people made regular sacrifices on them, especially in times of hardship. W. S. Allen describes a sacrifice performed on the grave of a woman who had been buried three days earlier. A goat was killed and its blood sprinkled around the grave, while a male relative said a long prayer for the children of the deceased who knelt by the grave.¹⁵

Due to the military nature of Ibadan as noted earlier, the burials of war chiefs were much more expensive and elaborate in terms of rituals and the scale of feasting than those of ordinary people. For instance, on March 29, 1869, the death of Bashorun Ogunmola, Ibadan's head chief, was announced by several gunshots. Seven women, one boy, and a horse were killed to accompany him to the other world. It is not clear if all of those were interred with him in the same grave. They were meant to wait on him in the afterlife. Meanwhile, during his illness (he had died of smallpox), a boy and a girl had been offered in sacrifice. On the eve of his death, sixty sheep and goats were killed in sacrifice, "each tied in a bundle and thrown about in front of his house supposing that, when death comes and sees these victims, he will feed upon them and return and so the diseased life would be

¹⁰ Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 68.

¹¹ Morton-Williams, "Yoruba Response to the Fear of Death," 36.

¹² J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

*The CMS Archives are held at the University of Birmingham, UK. I am grateful to John Peel for his suggestion of particular references I needed to find.

¹³ H. L. Ward-Price, *Dark Subjects* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1939), 199.

¹⁴ Journal of Rev. Daniel Olubi, March 21, 1867, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

¹⁵ Journal of W. S. Allen, June 24, 1885, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

spared.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, he was not spared. It is important to note that *Sonponna* (cult of smallpox) priests could not carry off the corpse of the head chief, as they would have done to an ordinary person killed by the same disease. No doubt, they “officiated” during the cleansing rituals, but Ogunmola was given a state burial as evident in the number of people sacrificed upon his death and the scale of the accompanying festivities. He was laid to rest in his home.

Sometimes military chiefs died on the battleground, and if their corpses could not be sent home immediately for burial depending on the distance of the warfront, they were interred somewhere close to the scene of war. This was because military engagements sometimes lasted several months. However, immediately after the war came to an end, their bones were exhumed and brought back home for a proper burial. On August 29, 1873, Allen records that the bones of “an influential chief in this quarter who was killed in the last Ijesa war were brought ... for burial at home.”¹⁷ He was given a full military burial with guns fired in every direction and all the necessary rituals and ceremonies observed.

Perhaps at this point, we should consider the significance of these home burials and their associated rituals. Generally, burial rituals were meant to assist in the transition of the dead into the realm of the ancestors by ensuring his/her ritual purity. Moreover, the rupture created in the social fabric by the departure of a member was also repaired through such rituals. Social relationships were symbolically restructured and the heirs of the dead empowered to replace them. Seen from another perspective, funeral rites were celebrations of the “patriarchal and gerontological principles of Yoruba life.”¹⁸ In this sense, funerals “redefined kin groups through assertive acts of power over those of lower status.” For example, a dead man’s wives were reallocated to new husbands (mostly without the consent of the affected women); children were pawned as interest on loans taken to finance an elder’s burial; and most significantly, slaves, who represented the helpless class, were sacrificed to ease the passage of the deceased or to wait on him in the afterlife. All these show that even during these end-of-life rites, the survival and stability of the social order were paramount, and no price was considered too high to be paid for it.¹⁹

Home burial was central to all these aspirations. It ensured that the dead had a smooth transition to the afterlife aided by potent rituals supervised by their survivors at home. It also guaranteed that the graves of the deceased were within easy reach for regular contact and offerings. Sacrifices were made on the graves, and serious conflicts within the kin group were resolved at the graves of their ancestors. The mutual contact between the living and the dead was thus mediated, to some extent, by the physical grave located in the house. A burial where all the necessary rituals had been observed, ceremonies and feasting carried out to match the status of the dead, and the dead set up for this long-term relationship with his or her kin was thus seen as a “befitting” or “proper” burial. Such a well-executed burial would not only attract the approval of the community, but also the benevolence of the departed spirits.

However, it appears all this symbolism and concern for social equilibrium were lost on the CMS agents whose descriptions and narratives of these burials reek, not surprisingly, of prejudice and disapproval. The people are presented as “heathens” who worship the dead. On an occasion when Daniel Olubi interviewed a neighbor on the purpose of the elaborate feasts put up to celebrate the dead, the man was alleged to have responded, “Yes, to be applauded of men, if even

¹⁶Journal of Rev. Daniel Olubi, March 29, 1867, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

¹⁷ Journal of W. S. Allen, August 29, 1873, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

¹⁸ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of Yoruba*, 62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

we have to put our children into pawn for it, and this is praiseworthy.”²⁰ Again, when Allen attended the burial of the war chief whose bones were brought home, he was not impressed by the fact that the chief’s remains had been brought home for a proper burial, but appeared rather piqued by the fact that a stump of banana (plantain stem) had been carefully wrapped with clothes and laid in state for visitors to pay their last respects. This to him was deceitful conduct.²¹ Perhaps the bare bones should have been displayed!

Early Christianity and Church Cemeteries

The German CMS missionary, Reverend David Hinderer, introduced Christianity to Ibadan in 1853. He had earlier been to Ibadan in 1851 on a reconnaissance visit. His arrival on May 16, 1853 is commemorated in local traditions as *Esin si 'keje lo mu 'gbagbo wo 'Badan*.²² (The horse was the seventh in the party that brought Christianity to Ibadan.) This was because Hinderer entered Ibadan on horseback followed by five other men, namely, Messrs, Phillips, Dalley, Marsh, Olubi, and Okuseinde.²³ For about forty years, the CMS were the only missionaries in Ibadan. Other denominations joined them only in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The CMS pioneers labored hard but got little return. Traditional religion and Islam proved to be very formidable rivals; the latter had been introduced some two decades earlier. The first Christian converts were slaves, poor widows, and other individuals on the margins of society. It was considered a thing of shame for a titled man or anyone of social significance to associate with the Christians. By 1875, the CMS had three congregations at Kudeti, Ogunpa, and Aremo, all Ibadan suburbs. The total membership was 398, of which 169 were communicants with one native clergy and four lay teachers. There were two schools with a total population of 69 pupils and 5 teachers.²⁴ This was in a city of over 100,000 inhabitants.²⁵

Again, early converts suffered a lot of persecution. The slaves were beaten up mercilessly, maltreated, and left to die without care when they took ill. The freeborn were also ostracized. Betrothals were broken when either party converted. Christian women were beaten up and locked indoors by “heathen” husbands. “Heathen” wives abandoned Christian husbands. Young people who converted were tied up and beaten by their parents. The journals of the missionaries and native agents are replete with records of these “persecutions.” But the Christians persevered, a few paid the supreme price, and the church grew, albeit slowly, until the establishment of colonial rule in 1893, after which it gradually became much easier to practice Christianity.

Death featured significantly in the experience of Ibadan Christians. First, it was articulated in the preaching and discussions of mission agents with the people. A common way of starting off conversations aimed at conversion was to ask individuals what would become of them after death. The people always had a ready answer that indicated they expected to become ancestors and probably reincarnate. This was very different from what missionaries had in mind. The Christian message was then preached with its emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and His victory over death. Believers were therefore not to entertain any fear of death, as this is what would

²⁰ Journal of Rev. Daniel Olubi, March 21, 1867, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

²¹ Journal of W. S. Allen, August 29, 1873, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

²² Rev. G. L. Lasebikan, Sr., interviewed by author, January 27, 1993; Chief H. V. A. Olunloyo (Otun Balogun of Ibadan), interviewed by author, January 27, 1993.

²³ Lasebikan, interview.

²⁴ Rev. Daniel Olubi to Rev. C. C. Venn, December 28, 1875, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

²⁵ Journal of Rev. David Hinderer, October 23, 1851, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

usher them into eternal life.²⁶ Almost immediately after the first church was established at Kudeti, a graveyard was created. The first of the dead to be buried there was one of the White missionaries who had come to assist with the work—Reverend J. T. Kefer, who died in May 1855.²⁷ The church cemetery thus developed as a part of the landscape instituted to facilitate a Christian burial. What did this entail?

A Christian burial was devoid of all the sacrifices and rituals associated with “pagan” burials. It was also shorn of all the celebrations and festivities that characterized the latter. It was a solemn affair marked by Christian prayers and hymns. Finally, the dead person was interred in the church cemetery. This had a dual significance. First, it was to separate the Christian dead from “pagan” relations at home. Second, it was to unite the Christian dead with the community of other Christians, dead and alive, within the spiritual ambience of the church. The Christian dead, together with his new religious kin, thus awaited his resurrection from the dead. An important artifact of this new burial culture was the wooden coffin. Hitherto, the dead had been wrapped in cloths and sometimes in expensive mats before interment. The church then introduced the coffin made by its members. The leading carpenters in the Ibadan Christian community were James Okuseinde, Jacob Oja, and F. L. Akiele (who later moved to Ogbomosho).²⁸

This idea of burial in a church cemetery kicked against everything that traditional burial represented. It was seen as a heartless and insensitive separation of the living from their dead kin, who could never become ancestors because the necessary rituals had not been allowed. Initial reaction to this practice was therefore very hostile. In Abeokuta, where Christianity had been established before it got to Ibadan, disputes over where and how Christians should be buried were quite rampant. James Barber, a CMS agent at Abeokuta, records an incident concerning an old woman. Her “pagan” relatives “would not suffer the body of the old woman to be taken away by the oiboes [Christians] and to be interred in the cemetery which they called thrown into the bush.”²⁹ They invited the Ogboni (an esoteric cult devoted to worship of the earth but which also exercised judicial powers) to perform the burial. In fact, the idea of burying one’s parent “in a box in the bush,” as the non-Christians saw it, was deeply disturbing if not outright offensive. No doubt, the missions wanted their converts buried on “holy ground,” but this new practice of separating the dead from their family “challenged the very process of social reproduction in its moral as in its physical aspect.”³⁰

Burial conflicts in Ibadan were not as serious as the Abeokuta, Ondo, or Ogbomosho cases reported by CMS missionaries in those areas. However, sometimes relatives protested the burial of their dead in the Ibadan churches. Allen records on August 4, 1874 that the relatives of a man he had buried in the church were not pleased with the action.³¹ He promptly explained to them the significance of a Christian burial and ends his narrative with the submission that he believes he has convinced them of their errors and that they were satisfied. However, since this is a one-sided account, there is no way of verifying if the aggrieved family was actually pacified. Perhaps, because

²⁶ See also Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan, “Death and Dying in the History of Africa since 1800,” *Journal of African History* 49 (2008), 352.

²⁷ R. B. Hone, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer* (London: Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, 1872), 123.

²⁸ Journal of James Okuseinde, August 20, 1872, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK; Journal of Rev. Daniel Olubi, June 22, 1875, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK; Diary of F. L. Akiele, July 8, 1888, Akinyele Papers, Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan.

²⁹ Journal of James Barber, October 27, 1853, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

³⁰ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 237.

³¹ Journal of W. S. Allen, August 4, 1874, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

of the general hostility to Christians in Ibadan society, the mission was very careful not to aggravate matters. Civil issues in nineteenth-century Ibadan were as volatile as its external affairs. It was as if the entire community sat on one big keg of gunpowder. Any slight pressure could spark a spate of civil disorder.³² The missions certainly were not prepared to be the ones to provoke any crisis. Even when they needed to bury converted slaves, they sought the permission of their masters before doing so.³³ Where permission was withheld, the mission allowed the matter to rest. The majority of the burials in the churchyard were, therefore, not controversial.

A few more White mission agents who died in Ibadan were interred in the church. Individuals identified as the pillars of the Ibadan Christian community and their spouses were also given church burials. The case of Comfort Phebe Oyeboode is recorded in the journals of both Allen and Daniel Olubi.³⁴ She died of post-delivery complications and was buried in the churchyard beside her father, who was the late scripture reader at the Aremo CMS church.³⁵ Her husband later became the first indigene of Ibadan to be ordained a priest in the Anglican Church. Perhaps more touching were the cases of children. There were probably as many children's deaths recorded in the missionary narratives as adults. Infant mortality was particularly high in nineteenth-century Ibadan. The families of the native agents too had their share of the scourge. Allen, for example, lost two children to smallpox (one ten months old and the other eighteen months) between 1868 and 1869.³⁶ He also recorded burying several children from the Christian community who had died of diarrhea in 1874.³⁷ All these children were buried in the church cemetery. A touching story was told by Daniel Olubi in 1876 of a female slave belonging to an Ijebu master who died while the man was away on a journey. None of the neighbors were willing to bury the woman because her owner was a particularly cantankerous character. Instead, they deposited the body outside the city by a brook and placed her three-month-old infant in a calabash beside her. The infant was exposed to heavy downpours before Christians discovered her and took her in. She died after eight days, probably of pneumonia. But because she had been baptized after her initial rescue, she was given a befitting Christian burial in the churchyard.³⁸

This incident shows that baptism in the church was a major qualification for a Christian burial. But it did not always guarantee it. Any baptized member that fell into apostasy was denied a space in the cemetery and ultimately a church burial. This was the sad case of Abel Oderinde. His father, James Oderinde, had been the "headman" of Ibadan Christians from the mid-1850s until he died in 1877 and had contributed significantly, as a lay leader, to the survival and expansion of

³² This theme is explored in detail in: Ruth Watson, *Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan: Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Yoruba City* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003).

³³ Journal of James Okuseinde, October 2, 1871, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

³⁴ Journal of Rev. Daniel Olubi, November 23, 1877, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK; Journal of W. S. Allen, November 23, 1877, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

³⁵ Journal of W. S. Allen, November 23, 1877, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

³⁶ Journal of W. S. Allen, October 4, 1869, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

³⁷ Journal of W. S. Allen, March 17, 1874, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

³⁸ Journal of Rev. Daniel Olubi, October 6, 1876, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

Christianity in that early phase.³⁹ After his death, his two sons turned away from Christianity. John Oderinde became a Muslim and took the name Bakare while Abel, his brother, became very wayward and immoral. The latter eventually died of what missionaries called a “female disease.” His mother wanted him buried in the church cemetery so that he might “sleep near his father and that he might be where his father is in the next world.” The clergy declined because Abel had clearly denied the faith before his death. His brother then sent for Muslims, who buried him.⁴⁰

In all Christian burials, the wooden coffin, as noted earlier, played a central role. But the coffin gradually started to make its rounds in the wider Ibadan society. It eventually became a symbol of respectability and prestige. Evidence from CMS narratives shows that the social class that first embraced the use of coffins outside the church was that of the traditional chiefs. In July 1874, *Balogun* Ajobo, after he had been asked to commit suicide by the traditional council, ordered a coffin for his burial from the Christian Masons.⁴¹ However, he did not kill himself, but fled the town in the dead of the night.⁴² The second example is that of Chief Aiyejenku, the *Foko*. He committed suicide in 1877 at the insistence of the head chief. His family approached the Christians to make a coffin for them, and after the masons got a clearance from *Aare* Latoosa, the head chief, they made the coffin.⁴³ It is interesting that the first recorded instances of chiefs requesting to be buried in coffins were suicide cases. Politically motivated suicide in Ibadan attracted no trace of stigma or shame. In fact, it was the height of heroic honor to take one’s life in the heat of a political contest. Such chiefs were given state burials and their descendants celebrated them for their bravery, courage, and dignity.⁴⁴ The Christian coffin was thus an appropriate artifact with which to celebrate this passage. It helped to advertise the honor of the deceased. It is, however, not clear if there were any ritual dimensions to this material appropriation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, many more Christian denominations had joined the CMS in Ibadan. Not all developed cemeteries immediately. However, the Roman Catholic Mission and the Wesleyan Methodists had graveyards within their church compounds. As more people converted to Christianity with ease, the use of the church cemetery became more popular as an indicator of a “proper Christian burial.” It was not uncommon to find two denominations sharing a cemetery. The Ogunpa CMS church (later known as the St. James Anglican Church) had a large cemetery at Oke-Bola adjoining the site of its new church building. The Agbeni Methodist Church also used this cemetery. The Methodist cemetery, established around 1908, had become congested by 1924.⁴⁵ In 1936, the two denominations eventually worked out an arrangement whereby they contributed equally to the maintenance of the cemetery.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the graveyard adjoining the main Methodist Church at Elekuro was also full.⁴⁷ The distance between Elekuro and Oke-Bola

³⁹ Journal of Rev. Daniel Olubi, March 17, 1877, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

⁴⁰ Journal of Samuel Johnson, May 14, 1881, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

⁴¹ Journal of W. S. Allen, July 22, 1874, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

⁴² Olufunke Adeboye, “Iku Ya J’Esin: Politically Motivated Suicide, Social Honor, and Chieftaincy Politics in Early Colonial Ibadan,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 41, no. 2 (2007), 189-225.

⁴³ Journal of Rev. Daniel Olubi, January 21-22 and February 12, 1877, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, UK.

⁴⁴ O. Adeboye, “Iku Ya J’Esin,” 208.

⁴⁵ Ibadan, District Officer, Ibadan, to Senior Resident, Oyo, November 6, 1924, National Archives, Ibadan; Principal, Wesley College, Ibadan, to Secretary, Southern Provinces, June 22, 1925, National Archives, Ibadan.

⁴⁶ A. T. O. Odunsi, *The History of the Cathedral Church of St. James, Oke-Bola, Ibadan* (Ibadan: SN, 1979), 152.

⁴⁷ District Officer, Ibadan, to Resident, Oyo Province, June 27, 1934, National Archives, Ibadan.

made it inconvenient for members there to patronize the CMS cemetery. They immediately resorted to home burial, inviting their pastors to bless the portion of the compound intended for the grave before the interment. The expatriate missionaries of the Methodist Church were not comfortable with this arrangement and so mounted intense pressure on the colonial authorities to either expedite action on plans for a public cemetery from which a portion could be allocated to them, or to allow the mission to acquire its own separate cemetery.⁴⁸ The politics of the public cemetery are discussed in the next segment.

Meanwhile, Methodists from the Agbeni area continued to patronize the CMS cemetery at Oke-Bola, and it appears they got the better of the deal. This was because despite the anticipation, especially from the CMS side, that the cemetery would quickly become congested, it lasted well beyond the 1960s. Many of the members of the Ogunpa CMS church were immigrants.⁴⁹ At death, their remains were taken back to their hometowns for burial, as was the Yoruba practice, especially for individuals of high status.⁵⁰ In fact, such individuals, before their death, would have been participating actively in their “hometown” churches, like attending special programs such as harvests and anniversaries, and making generous donations to building projects. This meant that fewer members of the Ogunpa church were buried at the Oke-Bola cemetery. The case of the Agbeni church was the exact opposite of this because it was located in the indigenous core of Ibadan, which ensured that the majority of its members were indigenes of the city. Fortunately, this scenario did not produce any major friction between the two denominations. The Roman Catholic Mission, however, maintained an exclusive cemetery, which it would not share with Protestants or any other group.⁵¹ As these church cemeteries became congested, the efforts of the affected denominations to acquire new spaces for burial became subject to various policies of the colonial state.

Meanwhile, the various attempts made by colonial authorities from 1917 to 1943 to establish a public cemetery in Ibadan ended in frustration. In fact, two major attempts were made with extensive plans—first in 1925 and later in 1929—but not a single deceased was buried on those sites. This shows, among other things, a lack of public enthusiasm for the project. Headway was made in 1943 when the colonial government handed over the entire process of planning, establishing, and administering public cemeteries to the Native Authority. A site was identified on Oyo Road, close to the railway line. With the help of local health officials, the Native Authority published the Ibadan Division Native Authority Burial Rules in 1944. These rules were adapted from those used in Accra, Gold Coast. They differentiated between vaults and graves, specified the number of bodies to be buried in a grave and the depth of a grave, prescribed the dimensions of vaults, laid down the operating procedure for the cemetery, and charged a five-shilling fee for each interment.⁵² This fee was later increased to 15 shillings in 1949.⁵³ When the populace saw the involvement of the traditional authorities in the new public cemetery, they began to patronize it. However, this response was initially very slow, and the most frequent users of the cemetery were immigrants. No chief was ever buried in a cemetery—whether church-owned or public—during the

⁴⁸ Principal of Wesley College, Ibadan, to District Officer, Ibadan, May 17, 1928, National Archives, Ibadan; Rev W. F. Mellor, Methodist Mission, to District Officer, Ibadan, January 26, 1935, National Archives, Ibadan.

⁴⁹ The Ogunpa CMS Church was the most endowed in terms of material resources and was the first of all Ibadan CMS churches to be made a cathedral and seat of a bishop.

⁵⁰ Odunsi, *The History of the Cathedral Church of St. James*, 153.

⁵¹ District Officer, Oyo, to Senior Resident, Oyo, November 23, 1923, National Archives, Ibadan.

⁵² District Officer, Ibadan, to Senior Resident, Oyo, November 26, 1943, National Archives, Ibadan.

⁵³ Amendment to the Ibadan Division Native Authority Burial Places Rules of 1944, March 14, 1949, National Archives, Ibadan.

colonial period. Olubadan I. B. Akinyele, the first Christian ruler of Ibadan, was interred at the churchyard of St. Peter's Anglican Church, Aremo in 1964.⁵⁴

Why was the public cemetery project unsuccessful before 1943? Several reasons could be given for this, the most principal of which was the cultural factor. The idea of a public cemetery was considered unacceptable for more or less the same reasons for which the church cemetery was shunned in the nineteenth century. Even in the twentieth century, non-Christians were not at all willing to entertain the idea. This was not uncommon in Ibadan. In late-nineteenth-century Accra, the local populace initially resisted the idea of a public cemetery, but they were eventually compelled by the colonial authorities to use it.⁵⁵ Another reason was that the idea of a public cemetery was an imposition. The people were neither consulted nor carried along until the 1940s. If they were consulted, they would most likely have objected to the idea. However, continuous dialogue would most likely have broken the ice much earlier than 1943.

Again, how does one account for the growing popularity of the church graveyard at a time when the idea of a public cemetery was becoming increasingly distasteful locally? The answer to this can be found in what is here termed the "religious privatization" of the church cemetery. In the Christian imagination, the church graveyard was not seen as a public space. It was a private resting place where one expected to rejoin other members of the Christian community who had gone ahead. In fact, the idea of double vaults became very popular in church cemeteries. Many couples, family members, or friends chose the double vault. After the first interment, the second space was reserved until the death of the other occupant. Moreover, the residential pattern and geographical spread of Ibadan Christians revealed high concentrations of Christian families around the early CMS churches; e.g., Kudeti, Aremo, and Yemetu. Again, the fact that many families acquired Christian identities in the twentieth century made the idea of burial in a church cemetery particularly desirable, as family members anticipated with perfect equanimity their own final repose in the churchyard where they could join their kin in preparation for the final resurrection of the dead, as postulated by Christian theology. The public cemetery could not be located within this discourse. It had no spiritual ambience and no way of connecting departed souls with their loved ones. To make matters worse, the early sites were far removed from human habitation. It was also possible, as was the case among the Ga in Accra, that many of the elders converted to Christianity because burial in a church cemetery was seen to be more respectable and closer to home than burial in a public cemetery.⁵⁶

The attitude of Muslims to all these was slightly different. At the inauguration of the management board of the aborted 1929 cemetery, the Chief Imam, who was also a member, made it clear that Muslims would prefer to have their own exclusive cemetery. Therefore, it would seem that Muslims, in principle, were not against a public cemetery as long as they did not have to share it with other groups. Since this was not immediately granted to them, they continued to bury their dead in their compounds, just as traditionalists continued home burial until such a time that they encountered the forces of *olaju* (enlightenment, progress, development) driven by education, travel, modernity, and exposure to outside influences.

Socio-Cultural Impact of Changes in Mortuary Practice

Transformations in burial practices also produced other widespread changes in Ibadan society. In other words, the impact of Christian burials went beyond the confines of the Christian community. First was the issue of social prestige. Within the Christian community, interment in the churchyard

⁵⁴ J.A. Ayorinde, *Itan Igbesi Aiye Oba Akinyele* [A Biography of Oba Akinyele] (Ibadan: University Press, 1974).

⁵⁵ John Parker, "The Cultural Politics of Death and Burial in Early Colonial Accra," in *Africa's Urban Past*, eds. David M. Anderson & Richard Rathbone (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 205-221.

⁵⁶ Parker, "Cultural Politics," 214.

was the ultimate marker of Christian identity and respectability. The use of the coffin also enhanced this prestige, and as noted earlier, this was widely adopted by others outside the Christian community. Later in the twentieth century, beautifully designed and imported caskets were brought in to publicize the wealth and status of the deceased or that of their survivors. Early church leaders in the nineteenth century had frowned against elaborate feasts and the conspicuous display of wealth at burials. However, gradually some elements of traditional funerals crept into Christian burials. Some of these were later adopted and regulated by the church.

First was the traditional watch night, locally called *aisun*, which took place a night or two before interment. Various rituals and the chanting of the oriki of the departed marked this; all of these were interspersed with music. The Christian version called “wake-keeping” took place on the eve of the burial, and was characterized by the singing of hymns, Bible readings, and prayer for the family of the deceased. Thereafter, guests were fed.

Second was the *ijade* (outing), which took place after burial. In traditional settings, this took place several days after the burial when the children of the deceased, dressed in their best, danced around their neighborhood with friends and their *egbe* (association) members, stopping at various homes to thank those who had helped or visited them during the burial. During this outing, gifts were also presented to them. The Christian version was more of a thanksgiving service where the family of the deceased came to thank God and other members of the Christian community for their contributions toward the success of the burial. Many guests from out of town who could not attend the actual burial due to short notice or other reasons usually came for the outing service, and they were usually treated to a feast in the home of the deceased after the service.⁵⁷

Third was the “second burial” in traditional practice. This was euphemistically called *pipa-oku-legbe-da* (turning the side of the dead). If a man or woman was considered not to be “properly buried” because his children were too young to fulfill all necessary obligations at the time of his/her burial, a “second burial” could be organized after the children came of age and were well able to shoulder the responsibilities of the burial rituals and feasts. The space between the first and second burials could be anything from two to fifty years! In many cases, the “second burial” was simply a display of wealth and lavish feasting, coupled with the renovation of the grave. Christians did not undertake “second burials.” However, they appropriated the memorial service, which was a universal practice among Christians, and engrafted upon it aspects of the “second burial.” The memorial service was a church service held in remembrance of the departed. No special period between death and the memorial service was stipulated, although the logic of the idea was to make it an annual event. However, the choice of when to organize the service depended on the financial strength of the children of the deceased. This is because the church expected them to make a generous donation to it in honor of their parents. Such donations ranged from the installation of new pews or pulpit, the purchase of choir robes, a church organ, other musical instruments, or contributing cash toward a new building project.⁵⁸ The entertainment of guests that followed the service was not expected to be a lavish affair, but in the spirit of the traditional “second burial,” it was, in most cases, turned into an occasion to advertise the “coming of age” and wealth of the children of the departed.⁵⁹

It was not in all cases that the family of the departed organized memorial services. Sometimes, church societies, clubs, or other organizations to which the deceased belonged arranged memorial services in their honor. A remarkable case was when the Freemasons of St. David’s Lodge organized a memorial service for five of their departed “brethren” at the St. James Anglican Church, Oke-Bola, on June 25, 1944.⁶⁰ Such a service would have been frowned upon

⁵⁷ For example, see *Yoruba News*, August 2, 1938 and *Southern Nigeria Defender*, June 28, 1948.

⁵⁸ Odunsi, *The History of the Cathedral Church of St. James*, 153-154.

⁵⁹ *Western Echo*, February 3, 1948.

⁶⁰ Odunsi, *The History of the Cathedral Church of St. James*, 155.

today, given the unpopularity of Freemasons and other such “secret societies” in Christian circles. However, in the period covered by this essay, it was quite a normal thing, as many of the clergy were popular masons, active in various lodges all over Nigeria and even in other parts of West Africa.

Finally, there remained an aspect of the funeral that the church found difficult to regulate. That was the scale of the burial feast and ostentation displayed by the family of the deceased. Any opportunity to display wealth was seized by many of the people, be it “first burial,” “second burial,” “outing,” or “memorial service.” While the average Christian ensured that the burial of his or her departed parent was a non-lavish affair, there were still a few who went all the way. One such example is provided by the children of a dedicated member of Agbeni Methodist Church who celebrated the first year anniversary of her death “in style.” The memorial service held on February 1, 1948 at the church was actually preceded by what a local newspaper called a “Grand Waking” (all-night party) on Saturday, January 31, 1948.⁶¹ It appears Ibadan Christians were never able to completely shake off the Yoruba emphasis on ostentation and lavish display as an important component of a “proper burial.”

Conclusion

The transition from the practice of intramural sepulture to public cemeteries was characterized by intense tension and negotiations as demonstrated in this study. The assaults on traditional cultural practices by early Christians and how church burials and the use of coffins gradually became popularized have been seen. The social implications of all these occurrences have also been discussed, particularly those in the area of prestige and respectability.

In addition, other inferences could be made from this study. First, the encounter between traditional and Christian mortuary practices did not generate only tensions and conflicts, but over time promoted mutual appropriation of desirable elements. Second, there was a changing definition of what constituted a proper and befitting burial. This emphasis on propriety underscores the concerns of the people (Christians and non-Christians) regarding a smooth transition of the deceased into afterlife. It also demonstrates the fact that society considered the burial of aged parents as an occasion for their children to advertise their wealth and confirm their social status through conspicuous consumption and display. Third, the experiences of both colonial and traditional authorities in Ibadan show that compulsion is an irrelevant tool in administering cultural matters such as burial practices. The remains of a departed kin was, and still is, considered the property of the living, and religious considerations play a crucial role in the way the remains are laid to rest. Any regulation that ignores this and treats burial as a mere disposal of human remains with no respect for cultural and religious sensibilities is bound to remain unpopular. Finally, the impact of Christian burial on the landscape is immense. Unlike pre-Christian times when the traditional mode of burial left little noticeable mark on the townscape, the same cannot be said of Christian burials. Extensive graveyards were situated close to church compounds with well-laid-out and whitewashed or brightly painted tombstones. It was as if a church’s design was not complete without the adjacent graveyard. That imprint on the city’s iconography has remained indelible.

⁶¹ *Western Echo*, February 3, 1948.