

Cremation: Views from Culture, Society and Church in Kenya.

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Abstract

This paper sought to investigate the cremation views from culture, society and church in Kenya. The paper is based on information derived from a synthesis of studies and data gathered from interviews and observations from Pastors and Church leaders in Kitengela, Kenya. Fifteen pastors from selected churches and ten leaders from Celebration Church Kitengela community were involved in the research. The population was chosen randomly, and a random sampling technique was used. In-depth interviews were the primary data collection tools. The population was selected based on their knowledge of the subject. In addition, the author once attended a cremation service at Eastleigh Crematorium in Kenya, where he engaged some friends on the subject. The author shared and discussed with members of the Christian faith at Celebration Church Kitengela hall. Deep involvement in the face-to-face interactions and dialogues through social media forums gave the study dynamism. The study concluded from the historical context, cremation encountered massive opposition with support on burial as the most descend form of disposing the body. In addition, the bible is silent on how to specifically treat the dead; however, the general feeling from the numerous passages shows support to burial. This study recommended that there is a need for a dialogue that shall address this issue in light of the Church and African ethics. Both Church and ATR should frequently talk about the subject for members to understand its implications to the family, society, and the generation to come from a historical perspective.

Key Terms: Cremation, African traditional religion, burial, church

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Introduction

Some time back in a personal experience, a question arose of someone wanting to know the position of the Church on the whole issue of cremation. Having no substantive answer yet the issue being core, I resolved to discuss in Church to hear leaders' views around. Later, I interviewed selected pastors and church leaders within the region to establish their thoughts on the topic (Author, personal experience).

It has been evident, and though it is a new issue in the African setting, most prominent people prefer cremation to burial as a means of disposing of their bodies. Questions linger in the hearts of many people: Is cremation enshrined in the Bible. Is it holy? Should the Church embrace it? Does it resonate well with African cultural values and ethics? It is evident that death and funeral rituals in Africa are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, African and indigenous traditional religions. Funerals are guided by the African view on the existence of life after death and the role of the ancestor among the living. Christianity, too shares the same concept of life after death. However, the Bible and African Traditional Religion (ATR) do not have a common stand on the entire model of cremation. This paper, therefore, addresses the whole concept of cremation and if at all, it makes any sense for Christians today and ATR. This paper aims to offer the reader relevant information that would enhance the development of an informed principle of cremation. Further, the author proposes a general and informed position on the subject under discussion.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on information derived from a synthesis of studies and data gathered from interviews and observations from Pastors and Church leaders in Kitengela, Kenya. Fifteen pastors from selected churches and ten leaders from Celebration Church Kitengela community were involved in the research. The population was chosen randomly and total random sampling technique was used. Total random sampling is a type where the whole population of interest is studied.

In-depth interviews were the main data collection tools. The population was selected based on their knowledge on the subject. In addition, the author once attended a cremation service at Eastleigh Crematorium in Kenya where he engaged some friends on the subject. The author shared and discussed with members of the Christian faith at Celebration Church Kitengela hall. The theoretical basis for this approach was people-centred and their genuine view on the subject as both Christians and Africans. This helped participants to discuss the topic in their own African and Kenyan contexts as born again believers. Deep involvements in face-to-face interactions and dialogues through social media forums gave the study dynamism. This method was relevant because it generated deeper insights that were necessary for the entire concept of cremation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cremation

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word cremation comes from the verb cremate which means, "to reduce to ashes by burning." The Macmillan Encyclopedia defines Cremation as the process in which the human body is burnt by the fire until the body soft parts are destroyed. The ash residue (cremains) and the skeletal remains are often used as the religious rites object, one for the bones and one for the body. The Encyclopedia of Cremation defines cremation as the practice of intentionally heating a deceased human body to "between 1,400 and 2,100° F to consume ... the body's soft tissue and reduce the skeleton to fragments and particles. This process, then, produces several pounds of ash that are stored, buried, or otherwise dispersed. It continues to describe the process of cremation, "The remaining substance, the cremains, may be processed further by mechanically breaking the larger particles down, producing a consistent mixture of grain and powder, to be scattered or stored in an urn" (Davies & Mates, 2005, p.131). All these definitions bring out the fact that cremation is reducing something (dead or alive)

to ashes. In this context, this paper addresses the reduction to ashes of the corpse.

Kuijt et al. (2014) note that cremation is an important, widespread, and often overlooked means of dealing with death, the body, and the social world. In other words, cremation provides a means of fragmenting the body and creating a new form of human remains (p.322). Jupp locates the reintroduction of cremation in the 1840s when a combination of population pressures, health anxieties, commercial aspirations and ecclesiastical demands for parity of provision brought to an end the monopoly of the Anglican churchyard. He further avers the many attitudes of all the Churches while noting that William Temple was the first archbishop to be cremated - on the one hand, and shifting public attitudes to death on the other (Jupp, 1990). Though the practice of cremation is starting to receive attention in Africa, it presents the fact that contemporary Christians should seek to research on the topic. However, it might be that those who have consented to the practice and facilitated it may have done so without understanding its more profound implications.

Historical Context

In discussing cremation, historical context and customs of biblical characters are key. Phipps notes that the Greeks and Romans preferred cremation, especially among the upper classes (Phipps, 1988). However, the Jewish people did not advocate for cremation. As stated in the *Mishnah*, cremation is an unacceptable heathen practice (Danby, 1933, p. 437). It comes out clearly that the Jews preferred to bury than to cremate as a means of disposing of the bodies of their dead people. As Jones (2010) notes, despite the Greco-Roman milieu of the biblical world, with the coming of Christ, general disregard for the act of cremation was carried over from the Jewish to the Christian faith. This is related to Schaeffer avers that it is possible to trace the spread of the gospel across the Roman Empire by focusing upon cremation; for a while, the Romans buried their dead, the Christians buried theirs (Schaeffer, 1976).

One of the reasons why Christianity spread in the Roman World was because they cared for the dead. Christians' display of "decency to the human body" in showing care for the dead is one of the main reasons for the church's rapid conquest of the ancient world (Atkinson & Field, 1995). Many Church Patriarchs are believed to have written more about death, burial and resurrection. Their faith in the resurrection of the body could have informed they are discouraging the practice of cremation. As it is observed, Tertullian was the first Christian theologian to unequivocally denounce cremation (Carl, 1973). Many Christians after that disfavored cremation, for it was believed to be a Pagan act. The Church and State would unite to treat cremation as a capital offence. It was declared "anyone following pagan rites to cause the body of a dead person to be cremated shall pay with his life" (Loyn & Percival, 1975, p.52). At some point, the Roman Catholic Church banned cremation, but later the decision was revised. They permitted cremation on the condition that it will not demonstrate the denial of faith in the resurrection of the body.

The Bible on Cremation

The Bible demonstrates that biblical characters exhibited great care and respect for the bodies of their dead loved ones. The Bible (both Old and New Testament) contains no specified direction on the concept of cremation. Further, it commends neither burial nor cremation of the dead; it remains silent on its position on the disposal of the body. Nevertheless, it is open that the Bible reports instances of God's servants burying their beloved ones. For instance, Abraham secured a burial site for his wife-Sarah and his family. Genesis 23:2-20; 49:29-32. John also notes in his Gospel that burial was the preferred custom for the Jews (John 19:40).

On the other hand, there are incidences where persons burned the remains of the dead. For instance, when King Saul and three of his sons were killed in the battle, their corpses initially remained in the territory of the enemy, where they were treated dishonourably. Upon hearing these, Israelite warriors retrieved their bodies, burned them, and buried the remains. It is indicated that

the incidence was acceptable to treat those remains that way, and even King David was pleased and blessed them. 1 Samuel 31:8-13, 2 Samuel 2:4-6. It seems, then, that the burning of the bodies of Saul and his sons was not a formal cremation per se; rather, "it was an act designed to conceal or avoid further desecration of their previously mutilated bodies" (Walvoord & Zuck, 1983, p. 455).

Another form of cremation in the Bible is found in Amos 2:1-3. This is one of the ambiguous references to cremation in the Bible, for it does not come out clear. From this reference, God seems to be condemning the act of cremation. However, this scripture is limited to information and the event in question not being recorded elsewhere in the Bible; it is challenging to make any conclusions on the position of cremation drawn from the text. In Amos 6: 8-11, he pronounces judgments upon Israel as he prophesies certain cremations that will occur in the land. Like in Amos 2:1-3, it is not easy to get a position on cremation from the prophetic pronouncement in Amos 6:8-11. It is therefore clear that the Bible is silent on the specifics of how to treat the body of the deceased. However, biblical examples from characters like Abraham's and his family, Moses, Aaron, Samuel, David, Jesus, among many others, were buried.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concerns from Christians

Christians were more concerned about how the bodies of their loved ones would be disposed. Their reasons for their concerns are fourfold: First, the body of every human was created by God, bore his image, and deserved to be treated with respect. Second, the centrality of the Incarnation; when the Word became Flesh, God uniquely hallowed human life and bodily existence forever. Third, the Holy Spirit indwelt the bodies of believers, making them vessels of honour. Fourth, as Jesus himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, so Christians believed that their burial was a witness to the resurrection yet to come (George, 2002). Cremation is not openly supported in the Bible; this brings about concerns from Christians. First, they

believe cremation will make it difficult when Jesus comes to rapture people, for it would become difficult to resurrect where there are no bodies. However, since creation, all bodies whether buried or cremated are dust and cannot be identified. This issue is however elaborated in the Bible and it comes out that the body to be resurrected would be new. Apostle Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians 15: 35, 39, "But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"... But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body." This would probably be a different body from the one that is cremated.

John in Revelation 20:13 notes that "And the sea gave up the dead, which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead, which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works." From the above scripture passages, it means that, during the resurrection of the dead, it will not matter to God whether one was cremated, buried, lost at sea, or eaten by wild animals. Apostle Paul postulates that "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it, we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to himself." Philippians 3:20- This reveals that since God is big and mysterious, He can produce a worldwide resurrection by making a spiritual body from a speck of dust. What stands out is the 'when Christ will return, it will not matter the state of one's body; the righteous will be transformed into immortal bodies (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:54; Philippians 3:21).

Further, Christians because the Scripture talks about dust returning to dust. This would lead one to wonder how you can return to dust when a body is cremated. Though it is true that those who die to return to dust, it naturally happens to a corpse when it decomposes. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Genesis 3:19. It is

believed that cremation speeds up reducing the body to ashes or dust though that is not clearly stated here.

Additionally, Christians believe that only people who were disfavoured of God in the Bible were cremated after death. Though some exceptional cases of unfaithful persons like Achan and his family were burned after death, it is not a rule. "And Joshua said, why hast thou troubled us? The LORD shall trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones." Joshua 7:25. On the contrary, the bodies of even faithful people like Jonathan, King Saul's son, were burned after death.

Factors to consider before choosing cremation or burial

There are numerous factors to put into consider before choosing how to dispose the dead. They include:

a. The will of the dead

Before people die (especially) elders, they normally write a will to guide how they will be buried and the family's life thereafter. On the other hand, those who are illiterate might speak their wishes as opposed to writing. The deceased's wishes are supposed to be followed and respected to the letter, no matter how contrary they are. The Bible addresses incidences where family members respected the will a person gave on how his body would be treated upon death. "When the days of mourning had passed, Joseph said to Pharaoh's court, "If I have found favour in your eyes, speak to Pharaoh for me. Tell him, 'my father made me swear an oath and said, "I am about to die; bury me in the tomb I dug for myself in the land of Canaan." Now let me go up and bury my father; then, I will return." Genesis 50:4-5. "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place." Exodus 13:19. If any family member chooses to be cremated, the will should be respected even if the family does not buy into it.

b. Culture and beliefs

Every group of people have a culture as a way of life under which their beliefs are enshrined. In the African setting, the culture is clear on how dead people should be treated, putting in mind that they believe in life as a transition. Burial is common in the ATR, with a few modern people starting to prefer cremation. In the entire Bunyore-a sub-dialect of the more prominent Luhya tribe in Kenya, cremation is taboo though we have one person named Opanga in history, who chose to be cremated to the amazement of the community. In the bible, the Jewish and Roman customary preferred burying people. Jesus Christ too had to be buried because the customs dictated so, "Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs." John 19:40

Further, Abraham, the father of faith and his family were buried, "There they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and there I buried Leah." Genesis 49:31 Further, Samuel was buried according to the day's customs, "Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him and buried him in Ramah, his city. And Saul had removed from the land those who were mediums and spiritists." 1 Samuel 28:3 Like in the Bible, people are free to choose to deal with the remains of the dead according to the customs. Nevertheless, for Christians, such customs should not in any way conflict with the teachings and principles of the Bible.

c. Legal issues

In some circumstances, those who choose to write their will on how they want their bodies treated after death do so legally with their lawyers. The Bible encourages everybody to be obedient to local authorities and the law. In Romans 13:1 (New King James Version), Apostle Paul states, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God." There are places where authorities enact laws concerning dead bodies and how they ought to be treated. In case the law restricts cremation, then it should be followed. Above all, anybody deciding on how his/her body should

be treated needs to consult with and notify the family. It is unfair for one to make a sole decision without knowing the family, friends, and most importantly, the Church. Recognising the individual's power to make a decision and choose, these parties need to be involved.

d. Opinion of others

In the African setting, no one exists alone. Humanity is believed to exist in the concept of *ubuntu*, "I am because we are." Therefore, as stated, before one considers to be cremated, he/she must see the interests of others, especially family and friends. The following critical questions should be asked; how will the family feel about it? What will the community perceive of us after the act? What impact shall cremation leave in the lives of the bereaved family? Where is the place of Church, Word, and God in cremation? The Word teaches us to seek the interest of others, "Let each of you look out not only for his interests but also for the interests of others." Philippians 2:4

In all these, it is essential to note that the body of a deceased person should be respected. People throughout the bible and in ATR treated the dead with the utmost respect and often showed deep concern about disposing of the remains, as seen in Genesis 49:29-31. Embalming was noticed both in Old Testament and in New Testament as seen in Genesis 50:26 and Mark 16:1. The Bible also emphasizes that it is a disgrace not to have a proper burial. Ecclesiastes 6:3

Cremation in Kenya in modern times

Cremation is one of the options now available for the final disposition of the body at death, especially for the rich in our society. In Kenya, for example, we have experienced some prominent people being cremated. For example, in 1996, former minister Peter Okondo was cremated. The final burial rites after the disapproval of cremation by some family members brought argument. On the day of interment, relatives arrived at the morgue to collect the body at morgue only to find it already cremated by his wife. In 2011, the late Nobel peace prize laureate Professor Wangari Maathai was cremated in the

Eastleigh crematorium according to her wishes. Later her ashes were buried at the Institute of Peace and Environmental Science. In 2009, former Sports Administrator Joshua Okuthe was cremated. They later buried his empty coffin in a mock funeral in Tamu, Muhoroni. In 2015 Africa's Classic Professional golf champion Peter Njiru was cremated at Kariokor. Further, in April 2018, the former politician and the multiparty hero Kenneth Matiba was cremated at the Lang'ata crematorium.

History tells us that there are servants of God who have been cremated in Kenya. In 2002, Mary Nyambura Kuria, the wife of the late Anglican archbishop Manasses Kuria was cremated at the Lang'ata crematorium, two days after her death at the Nairobi Hospital. The encyclopedia of cremation notes that the cremation of Mary sparked controversy in Kenya (Davies & Mates, 2005). The Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) members were shocked to hear of her cremation. Further, her husband, the former Anglican archbishop Manasses Kuria died in 2005 and was cremated. Most recently, in July 2019, the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Safaricom Company, Bob Collymore, was cremated at Kariokor crematorium (Nyamai, 2019). In all those cases, funeral and requiem masses were held either before or after cremation.

While thinking about the whole issue of cremation and the other choices available, Christians ought to critically reflect on how the family would be affected by their decision. It is likely that loved ones who may have strong feelings on cremation may be negatively affected. It would be unrealistic for someone to bring unnecessary distress to any member of the family. Consequently, one would think otherwise before deciding to be cremated. The attitude of the heart of Christians should show respect for the body that God created in His image. "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." Psalm 139:14.

Cremation in the African context

Cremation is not an African concept in its origin. Most African cultures prefer the burial of their loved ones. They believe that when people die, they are promoted to the world of living dead and ancestors. Therefore, the body of the dead should be treated with respect so that they transition to the next stage and arrive as a whole.

Though not of African origin, cremation has become common in many African countries, for cemeteries set out for the public are considered to have reached full capacity. The increase in population, especially in the city, puts a lot of pressure on land hence making it difficult to dedicate more land for cemeteries. Consequently, it makes people be left with cremation as an option. Though this is so, the practice has not been fully accepted by many African people. African cultural and religious perceptions have negatively painted cremation and term it not African. Ritual and religious rites must accompany death and burial in the African context. According to Laurenti Magesa, funeral rites simultaneously mourn for the dead and celebrate life in all its abundance. Funerals are a time for the community to be in solidarity and to regain its identity. In Kenya, for example, as Robert Mbaraga reports, the influence of the Hindu culture has seen some people accept cremation. However, the majority of the people still opt to bury their dead in their ancestral home to perform the ritual and religious burial rites (Mbaraga, 2017). Mbaraga continues to note that, in Tanzania funeral service professionals offer cremation services; apart from Hindus, not many people choose to use these services mainly because of traditional and religious reasons. Though Tanzania is dominated by Christianity and Islam religions, burial is mostly preferred (Mbaraga, 2017).

In ATR, when people die, they go to meet their ancestors, and therefore their bodies ought to be treated with utmost respect until they arrive. This would then discourage the idea of cremation, which reduces the whole body into ashes. Raymond Nzimana, a Burundian journalist, states that Burundian culture says that when

someone dies, people only talk about their good side even if the person was bad. This signifies respect for the dead, and so a cremation is difficult to embrace (Mbaraga, 2017). On the other hand, the Zulu people in South Africa grow up knowing that a dead relative joins other dead relatives, and they watch over the family members who are still alive. Many people groups in Africa whose deceased relatives still visit the families to provide security hold this. The dead relative can be consulted in times of need and mediate for them with God. This means that they would be unwilling to cremate a loved one.¹ This is the same position held by the people of Bunyore people of Western Kenya.

In some communities, the dead may be wrapped in his clothes for burial thereafter covered with the slaughtered animal skin. The dead is wrapped in a linen shroud in some group. The deceased is often buried with his personal items; this is believed to help him on his journey. The Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, for example, they included food, clothes, fowls or other animals, while other tribes include spears, shields, or pots and pans, so the deceased has all he needs in the afterlife.

Briefly, cremation still has a long way to go when it comes to being fully accepted in many African people groups. It is a new idea embraced by the elites and a few rich people whose agenda is unclear. It is a result of the so-called modernity and civilization in the current world. Though a few have already undergone the same, it remains to be rejected by Africans who value the dead and life after.

Similarity between cremation and the burning of hell

The Bible prepares Christians to do good to inherit the Kingdom of God. Those who do contrary will spend eternity apart from God, for instance, in hell, where they will be eternally consumed with fire. Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 25:46, "These shall go away into everlasting punishment but the righteous into eternal life." Further, He states in Mark 9:43 that, "And if

your hand makes you sin, cut it off. It is often better to enter into life maimed than having two hands to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched." In addition, John in Revelation 14:11 puts it in a very scary description, "And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name."

The above connotation seems to be different in many measures because the tribulation described for sinners after the rapture is everlasting, but cremation only takes place for a few minutes. When the rapture happens, those who will be resurrected in righteousness will be given new bodies. It is not known the kind of bodies that will be consumed in eternal fire and if they will be different from the ones people have today. What stands is, both cremation and the future burning have implications of torture though one is short term and the other eternal.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: Cremation remains an issue that will be discussed in this and other generations to come. From the paper, the following conclusions can be made. First, from the historical context, cremation encountered

massive opposition with support on burial as the most descend form of disposing the body. Second, the bible is silent on how to specifically treat the dead; however, the general feeling from the numerous passages shows support to burial. Africa Traditional Religion and society have not fully accepted cremation except a few examples of elites who have chosen to be cremated.

Recommendation: There is a need for a dialogue that shall address this issue in light of the Church and African ethics. The Church should have a position that is clear to members on the place of cremation in order to give direction and orderliness. Both Church and ATR should frequently talk about the subject for members to understand its implications to the family, society, and the generation to come from a historical perspective. However, the Church should not be at crossroads in mentioning cremation in her teachings and preaching in Church. Furthermore, seminars and conferences should be encouraged in order to rubberstamp her stand on the same. Elders should be vocal and talk about it and, if possible, write books and avail materials on the same subject to be read.

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