

# Burial Customs in West Africa and Seventh-day Adventists

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DIMGBA DIMGBA ESOWE

Pastor Dimgba Dimgba Esowe, M.A. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A.), Ph.D. (University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria) has served as assistant chaplain, senior lecturer at the Religious Studies Department, and vice president for Student Services at Clifford University, Owerri, Abia State, Nigeria. He is married to Ndidi Udochi Esowe, and they have three children.

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## Introduction

Africa is rated as the second largest continent in terms of both landmass and human population.<sup>1</sup> With its 29,648,481 square kilometers of land and 1.34 billion estimated population, only Asia is larger.<sup>2</sup> Africa is comprised of fifty-four sovereign countries and two disputed territories, Somaliland and Western Sahara. While Algeria is the largest country by landmass, Nigeria is the most populous with more than 211 million people.<sup>3</sup> The number of different ethnic groups in Africa is so large it is difficult to count them. For instance, in Nigeria the actual total number of ethnic groups remains disputable with estimates ranging from 250 to 400.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the multitude of ethnic groups, cultural and customary practices, which make up the life pattern of its citizens, vary widely across Africa. These customs range from life events such as birth, circumcision and naming, puberty, engagement, marriage, age-grade enrollment, and retirement to death-related events such as the announcement of death, pre-burial rites, burial rites, and post-burial activities. There are also customs related to agricultural practices and governance. All of these customs have religious undertones because Africans are essentially religious.

Most of what Africans do and where they do it hinges on their religious beliefs. Akinseye cites Akpabot as saying that "in Africa, [religion] controls and regulates the society. Man has an active attitude towards the gods."<sup>5</sup>

Underscoring this notion, Anibalueze states:

Whatever the African is, there is his religion, he carries it to the field where he is sowing a new crop, he takes it with him to the beer parlor or to attend a funeral ceremony and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university.<sup>6</sup>

Advancing a retrospective analysis, Okweze posits that each community in Igboland (Africa) maintains a traditional system of beliefs and practices in which the people subordinate themselves to a supernatural transcendent supreme being. Despite this, they hardly deal directly with this Supreme Being; instead, they

maintain a system that includes a hierarchy of gods, the ancestors, and numerous spirits.<sup>7</sup>

Since every thinking human being knows that death is a reality that awaits each individual, issues related to death, especially how the dead are disposed, concern the living. In Africa, given their communal life-style<sup>8</sup> and beliefs in the after-life,<sup>9</sup> burial and its related activities are usually handled communally, however, customs among the various ethnic groups include a range of practices. Among Africans, death is a transition to life in another realm that continues to impact life here on earth. African burial customs involve and influence things such as place of burial, day of burial, positioning of the grave, burial rites for maternal relatives of the deceased, the village and the community; corpse dressing, and placement in the coffin, coffin positioning in the grave, and post-burial rites.

## What is Death to the African?

Though understood as an inevitable occurrence that befalls mankind, death is regarded as an event that transits people from this earthly life to the spirit world. For the Akan people of Ghana, "it is the transition point." Death is metaphorically pictured by the Akan people thus: "*owu adar nndow baako*" meaning "death's cutlass does not weed only one individual." They also picture it as a universal ladder by asserting that "*owu atwer baako mmfow*," which means "death's ladder is not climbed by only one individual."<sup>10</sup> The Igbo describe death with the maxim "*onwu zuru uwa*"<sup>11</sup> meaning, "death is universal." The Oripeloye and Omigbule sum up the Yoruba conception of death thus:

... it is often thought of as the beginning of another stretch of existence. Hence, while birth is seen as the onset of life, death is taken for its termination ... death comes within the life purview of the Yoruba as a transition. This perception has been influenced by diverse religious beliefs and cultural norms, though the Yoruba continue to hold on to their traditional cosmological belief in which death is a major factor in the system that the universe is believed to operate.<sup>12</sup>

## Announcement of Death in Africa

According to Julius Ugwu Nnaji, the *Odezuluigbo III* (or monarch) of Nike Igwe, Enugu, in Eastern Nigeria, death is an event that makes humans breathless and lifeless, yet sets them on a journey to the spirit world.<sup>13</sup> To authenticate the fact that one is dead in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria, those around observe the body, touch it, talk to it, and even yell at it to see if there is any response or reaction. In the absence of any response or reaction, the temperature of the body is observed, and if found to be cold and the body is stiff, then it is accepted that the person is dead. Close relatives are invited to confirm the state of the body of the deceased for the avoidance of doubt. According to the Ngwu, this is done to enable the relatives of the dead person to set things such as his property, wealth, documents, and other important items in order before public announcements are made. It is

regarded as an antidote to theft, misplacement, or displacement of those items by other individuals or groups of people.<sup>14</sup> Adu-Gyamfi describes the practice of the Akan people of Ghana thus:

In the quest to inform the general public of the demise of a member, dirges were sung and a gun fired. A pot of palm wine was sent to the Odikro's palace to announce the decease, failure of which attracted a fine!<sup>15</sup>

To gain further insight on customs of burial announcement in Africa, the words of Odigbo suffice: "When a titled man dies, no one announces the death until other titled men are informed ... No one cries before the notification of other titled men."<sup>16</sup>

This protocol is taken very seriously. Quarrels have arisen over cases in which somebody announced the death of a person when he was not authorized to do so. Even today, a medically certified death remains secret until the culturally acceptable person makes the pronouncement. In some places, the paternal and maternal relatives are visited and given specified items such as wine and live animals before they give the nod for the announcement to be made. A case of reference is that of Chinua Achebe.

It was reported by Nwaubani that despite technological advancements and the fact that barely hours after Achebe died, the internet was agog with the news, a member of his mother's family in response to a journalist's inquiry retorted: "We have not yet been informed."<sup>17</sup> Thus Nwaubani submits:

According to Igbo tradition, there is a laid-down procedure for breaking the news of death, especially that of a great man .... The first group to be informed is the deceased's, immediate family. Afterward, the extended family is told. Then the entire community is summoned to an "*ikpo oku*" [a summon to gather together]. The news is broken while presenting them with alcohol and livestock. Only after the "*ikpo oku*" are public displays of mourning permitted to commence.<sup>18</sup>

## Pre-Burial Rites

Customarily, Africans do not just bury the dead. In most cases, there are always suspicions of foul play. Just as Hartland claims that certain cultural areas view even very natural and inevitable deaths as acts of violence caused by supernatural beings such as gods, spirits, or witches.<sup>19</sup> This is buttressed by Kalu's assertion that traditional Africans regard all types of hardship—sickness, failure, death—as resulting from activities of ubiquitous evil spirits.<sup>20</sup>

While Kalu speaks from his native Igbo background, Adebowale represents the Yoruba perspective:

Funeral in Yoruba simply means *isinku* - "taking care of the corpse." This is not just a matter of burying the corpse; it involves series of rituals performed before and after the burial of the deceased, but the circumstances of death and religious affiliation of the deceased largely determine the kind of funeral rites to be performed. The rites also vary from locality to locality. In some communities, the first step taken at the moment of death is to

ascertain the cause of death.<sup>21</sup>

When by their consultations with diviners (*babalawo*), Africans ascertain that someone's death is not natural, they engage in certain rituals before the burial. This they do because they believe it will spare the soul of the deceased from possible molestation by evil spirits on its way to ancestorship. In Yoruba land, this ritual involves sacrificing a sheep or goat, sprinkling the carcass with palm oil, carrying it outside the town or village, and placing it at a spot where two or more paths intersect, called *ikorita meta*. This practice causes the evil spirits to disperse into as many directions as there are paths.<sup>22</sup> After this, the *babalawo* prepares purification water by adding shea butter and edible snails to it. He afterward dips a palm branch into the water in the vessel and lifts it to sprinkle the fluid on the corpse, the room, and the people present in the room. When completed, he invokes the deceased's soul and orders it to leave the house as soon as the funeral rites are completed and proceed peacefully to the land of the dead safely.

Pre-burial activities among the Akan-speaking people of Ghana involve the presentation of articles for the burial exercise. These items are known as *adesiede*?. Those who present the donations are the head of the deceased's lineage and his relatives, the children of the deceased, the paternal relations, the political leader of the unit to which the deceased belonged, widowers or widows, and close friends of the deceased. Items that are donated range from pieces of cloth to rings, sums of money tied in handkerchiefs, mats, pillows, and toiletries.<sup>23</sup>

## Burial Rites

Traditionally, Africans believe that the goal of life is to attain ancestorship at death. To enhance this target, therefore, they believe that burial rites of certain proportions and magnitude must be performed. However, these funeral rites vary slightly from community to community, as well as according to the religious practices of the deceased's religion. The status of the deceased in the society also determines the rites of burial.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps what propels Africans to handle issues of burial the way they do is a mindset that is further expatiated by the words of Izunwa:

The customary right to befitting burial is atypical situate in an atypical customary jurisdiction ... the holder of the right is deceased; the content of the right is joinder with the ancestors but before then, nobility of conduct in the society; the object of the right is befitting burial/funeral rites and person(s) bound by duty are family members or kinsmen.<sup>25</sup>

The ways African societies are constituted make some of these practices thrive. The communities are believed to consist of the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born. This is why, except for very highly incapacitating circumstances, Africans insist on burying their dead in a grave that they can access freely.<sup>26</sup> Thus burial rites in African societies include but are not limited to the place of burial, days of burial, the position of the grave, corpse preparation, and dressing, corpse directional placement in the grave, and material demands by the

deceased's village, community and maternal relatives before, during and after burial.

## Place of Burial in Africa

Africans prefer burying their dead ones in their ancestral land. This is the only way the burial can be considered proper, honorable, meaningful, and acceptable.<sup>27</sup> Nwaubani affirms this view by asserting that "The Igbo bury their dead among the living, within the premises of the family home."<sup>28</sup> To fail in this practice denotes hatred and rejection for the dead by the family and community.<sup>29</sup> Biwul emphasizes this notion by intimating that among the Miship people of Pankshin in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, if a family member is buried outside of his or her ancestral land, those who did it are seen as having committed a very serious offense against the spirit of the land. It is like having thrown their own away into a distant foreign bush.<sup>30</sup> In South Africa, during lying in state, Xhosa tradition requires a family elder to be beside the corpse and explain to its spirit what is happening.<sup>31</sup>

## Burial Days in Africa

Essential to a discussion of African burial activities are the acceptable days for conducting burial service and the laying the corpse in the grave. In Igboland in Eastern Nigeria, the various days on which burials are permitted or prohibited center around four market days called *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afor*, *Nkwo*.<sup>32</sup> On these market days, various communities assemble to buy and sell. Because of their communal lifestyle, the people make laws as to what should be done during certain days of their week.

The laws in some communities forbid any family from scheduling burials on certain market days. In Erinmope-Ekiti in southwest Nigeria, burial is not allowed on the day following the commencement of the new yam festival called *Awo*.<sup>33</sup> In Ibeku, Umuahia, Abia State Nigeria, no burials are conducted on the *Eke* market day.<sup>34</sup> In the Ubakala community of Umuahia South, Abia State, Nigeria, the rule is that while an aged old male corpse is buried on an *Orie* market day, that of a female cannot be buried on an *Orie* market day.<sup>35</sup> In Elu Ohafia, while there are no restrictions as to days of burial, there is the male and female corpse burial dichotomy. If a male corpse is to be buried on any particular day, no female corpse will be buried on that day. There could be several male burials in different segments of the community, but they must all be male. On the day a female corpse is to be buried, as many female corpses as are available for burial can be buried without hindrance.<sup>36</sup> Today in Ebem Ohafia, Abia State, Nigeria, it happens that while male corpses are buried on Saturdays, female corpses are not allowed to be buried on that day. The reason is that there are customary rites accorded male corpses that are performed that day, which should not be accorded female corpses. Such rites include the beating of the *ikoro* (traditional ritualistic talking drum), the firing of several rounds of earth-moving canons, and the display of certain masquerades.<sup>37</sup> Such practices could also be a factor in the Elu Ohafia case as they are found in different shades and forms in several African societies.

Apart from the fact that Africans want their deceased buried in their Ancestral Land, the exact spot at which the grave is to be situated is also a matter of tradition in some places. Africans do not traditionally tolerate cremation because they see it as capable of disrupting reincarnation as well as preventing the dead from reuniting with their ancestors.<sup>38</sup> In Cameroon, “the bodies are buried by the community and it is routine for family members to take the last photograph of the person (corpse), throw soil into the grave, and offer last words.”<sup>39</sup> Africans bury their dead within the family premises. In some places, it is the deceased’s maternal relatives that select the spot where the grave is dug.<sup>40</sup>

It is believed by Africans that how one’s burial activities are conducted when death occurs plays a huge role in one’s journey to the spirit world. It is also part of what determines one’s status in the realm of the ancestors. Igwe Nnaji asserts that lowering a corpse into the grave is not all that constitutes burial. The attire, decorations, animals killed, and ceremonies performed all determine the mode of the deceased’s arrival and reception in the world beyond. He further elaborates that a king who dies and is buried well continues as a king in the spirit world. The type of audience, that is, the crowd and the personalities that grace a burial program, the killing of cows or a horse, the gorgeous dressing of the corpse, and the dances make the deceased’s journey to the spirit world majestic.<sup>41</sup>

The demands of maternal relatives of the deceased in some parts of Africa at times are stressful. Some of these demands include: a cow or cows, crates of drinks, a certain quantity of foodstuff, goats, and so on. In Edem Nru, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria, the natives claim that:

The fun-fare with which some people proceed to their maternal homes in company with a big cow or horse during their mother’s burial gives a consoling sense of achievement to their relatives ... the presentation of the animal gift is seen as a symbolic return of their late daughter. It shows that she was fruitful both in life and in death.<sup>42</sup>

At Eha-Amufu in Isi-Uzo, Enugu State, a set of burial rites takes place that include *itu nri* (collective feeding), *iwella nma ekwu* (returning of kitchen knife), and *ikagbu obubu-onu* (cancellation of curses).<sup>43</sup>

These practices in the Igbo community are performed thus: when somebody dies, a piece of black cloth is taken to the paternal and maternal families informing the in-laws and siblings of the death. Then a gunshot is released to inform the community. If it is a man, *obonyi* traditional music is staged. If the deceased had placed a curse ( *obubu onu*) on a son or daughter before death, there has to be an act canceling the curse before burying the corpse.

To cancel the curse, the eldest son and daughter of the deceased will go to the Ebe River. The daughter will carry a small clay pot of about half a liter, specially designed for that purpose. The son will hold a cutlass. A small boy leads the journey, followed by the daughter, who while carrying the clay pot of water will have an *ogbu* leaf (the leaf of a parasitic live plant) sandwiched within her lips. She must talk to nobody as they journey. The son of the

deceased will follow the procession holding the cutlass. The water brought home will be dropped by the use of the leaf that was sandwiched within the daughter's mouth, into the mouth of the dead person. Four drops of water are required to cancel the curse. Thus, the dead are appeased and the living is loosed and set free.

*Itu nri* (collective feeding) is a ritual burial rite that is performed on the last day of mourning for the dead. It includes a meal of yam *fufu* (soft edible dough made from boiled yam) and *egusi* (melon) soup. The elders of the community are gathered. They say their traditional prayers, pouring libation to their ancestors with a minimum of four gallons of wine. After this ritual, they eat the food collectively and then leave. This ritual prevents the deceased from, when he or she reincarnates, becoming a glutton with an uncontrollable appetite, exhibiting greediness and selfishness.

If a woman with children dies and is buried, the children will perform the burial rite of *iwella nma ekwu* (returning of a kitchen knife). This is done seven native weeks after their mother's burial. They will assemble for the journey to their maternal home and take along a kitchen knife, a piece of black cloth, one tuber of yam, and one large hen. By this act, they become free to eat in their maternal home. On the other hand, if they do not perform the ritual and eat at their maternal home after their mother's burial, because it is believed they will be attacked by the spirits with a serious ailment that will result in their death.

Ozo (elite traditional) titled men receive a special type of burial when they die. Their burial and those of kings in Igboland cost several other human and animal lives. At Ngwo Asaa in Enugu, to bury an ozo titled man requires a special seat to be put into his grave where the corpse is seated as it is not laid flat. His slave will be tied alive to an *ogurisi* (*Newbouldia laevis*) or *okwe* (*Ricinodendron heudelotii*) tree (both tropical trees). While there on the stake, relatives of the deceased will come in turns to give the slave messages he is to deliver to the ancestors in the spirit world, where he will continue his servitude to the titled man whom he served here on earth. After the all of the messages have been delivered to the slave, the people fire a Dane gun.<sup>44</sup> Then the slave is pushed alive into the grave where the corpse of the titled man is seated, and the grave will be covered with soil. Thus, the slave is buried alive with the body of his master.<sup>45</sup>

Elaborating further on the burial of ozo titled men, Igwe Boniface Odigbo of Umuezengwu, Ukpata in Uzouwani Local Government Area of Enugu State intimates as follows:

When a titled man dies, no one announces the death until other titled men are informed. They are always buried on orie market days no matter the day of their death. No one cries before the notification of other titled men. Their graves are always very deep, dug to about 12 feet. They cannot be buried lying down; instead, they are seated on a chair. Before they are buried, a he-goat must be killed at the grave-side by an instant striking off of its head. On their grave, a piped hole is created where a stick is inserted. The stick remains there for seven native weeks (one lunar month). After that period, a woman and a man will go by night, remove that stick and secretly take it to a burying place without looking back on their journey to and from the place of disposal of the stick. They have to make sure that nobody sees them while they embark on the mission of disposing of the stick.

That night, a goat is killed for the duo to consume without leftover, though friends may join them in eating the meat that night."<sup>46</sup>

The burial procedure of an older person who is not necessarily a titled man goes on thus: when an aged person dies, a cloth called *ochikidi* (pure black cloth) is bought and is used to cover the corpse. The length of the cloth is cut and divided into two. One half is given to the parents-in-law or their relatives, the other half to the kinsmen of the deceased. Two animals are brought. The first is *ugodu nbishi n'agada* (ritual burial dog). The second is *mkpi ejjaka* (a ritual male goat). The head of the dog is severed from the body and placed under the laps of the deceased in the grave. The other body parts of the dog, as well as the goat, are prepared as pepper soup and consumed by those qualified to eat it in the community. If the dog head is not placed where it should be in the grave as stated above, it is believed the deceased's spirit will come and kill his children. Eight days after the burial of the corpse, another dog will be killed. It is called *ugodu onyima* (dog of the spirit). The dog is killed behind the deceased's house and hung, legs up and head downward. This prevents the deceased's spirit from disturbing his children.<sup>47</sup>

In another community within the same local government area mentioned above, there is a different practice. If an aged person dies, the *asogwas* or *ozokos* (messengers) are sent to alert the public in rituals called *okatakpa* (masquerade with cane) and *omaba* (masquerade with a cutlass). They will go to the palm wine section of the market. As the *omaba* touches any pot of wine with its cutlass, the *ozokos* will carry away the pot of wine free of charge. Any resistance to the messengers attracts the cane whips of the *okatakpa*; he will flog the people to submission. All the pots of wine that are carried from the market are taken to the house of the community's *onyishi* (the oldest man). *Omaba* will play their different kinds of music at *onyishi's* place. The relatives of the deceased will bring their pots of wine together, and people will gather to drink. Twenty-three rounds of gunshot will be fired, the grave is dug, and the *umuada* (daughters of the community who married within the community) converge and weep. At this point, two branches of *omu nkwu* (yellow tender palm branches) are brought and woven into twine lines. This native *omu nkwu* (twine rope) is then used to tie the corpse at the legs and armpit areas under the arms. Then the corpse is interred into the grave and buried. Eight days after burial rituals began.<sup>48</sup>

Then comes the *obonyi* dance (an occultic dance) which is only partaken of by strong people who have killed people in war. They dress their heads with red eagle feathers called *awo* and bind it around with a black cloth band. The number of human heads one has killed determines the number of *awo* one wears. Furthermore, if someone who has not killed in war dares partake of the *obonyi* dance and its rituals, he will die seven native weeks (or one lunar month) later. If the deceased was an *onyishi*, then human heads are buried with him in his grave.<sup>49</sup>

From the discussion so far, it is obvious that there are many burial rites in Igboland and other parts of Africa. Whereas some are performed before burial, others are done during and after burying the deceased. These all

contribute to informing one that to the Igbo, human beings do not only possess worth when they are living in this world. They are also counted worthy of honor, at times greater honor, at death.

## Burial Place and Posture

Since Africans believe the dead are conscious, worthy of honor, and responsive to things done on their behalf here in this world, their place and posture during burial is important. Men are usually buried in a sitting room, any other spacious room, or in the front of their houses. At Nike Enugu, the men are placed in the grave such that they face the entrance door of the house. They thus are enabled to watch and see anybody coming into the house or compound.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, women are buried to facing westward.<sup>51</sup> It allows them to reincarnate after they arrive in the spirit world and to continue childbearing.

The reason given for internment facing east is that they see the sun as it rises, and at the time of reincarnation, they rise as the light shines forth. If they are faced westward, darkness will not let them see the light.<sup>52</sup> A variant explanation given as to why the man and the woman are placed facing opposite directions in the grave puts it thus: "the man is laid to face the sun and the woman is laid to face westward, to enable the man see the sunrise and get up to work, while the woman who sees the sun at the west-end realizes it is time to prepare supper."<sup>53</sup>

The wicked and hurtful person's corpse is buried faced down.<sup>54</sup> This practice aims to deny the wicked visual ability in the spirit world. Such people's deaths are not celebrated with ritual rites of passage. Some of them are thrown into the forest. If the deceased is suspected

to have been murdered and is a female, she is given Igbo kola nut in the grave and is instructed to use it to pray for revenge.<sup>55</sup> Should it be a man, he is given a cutlass or a razor blade to enable him to fight for revenge.

Prayers are said for him, and he is told not to come and disturb the compound (*ka ukoto azu gi di nma nye anyi*).

<sup>56</sup> There are places where the corpse, be it male or female, is buried facing upward and eastward with the belief that after seven native weeks (one lunar month), the corpse will turn and face downward to undergo judgment before it can reincarnate.<sup>57</sup>

If a corpse is buried inside the house, the head is placed at the door with the legs inward, but if the grave is outside, then the head is placed by the right-hand side as determined by the approaching route to the grave. This is done for easy identification of where the head of the corpse is placed. If a dead person begins to send trouble to the living, it is the head that is exhumed and burnt or used for any ritual.<sup>58</sup> As had been earlier stated, titled men and kings (all kings are titled men) are seated in their graves during burial so that they arrive in the spirit world with all the paraphernalia of their status.

Burial in Africa is a serious business. It involves a many cultural dictates, which put demands on bereaved families. It consumes wealth and takes enormous time. But in all, African people regard the adherence to burial customs as a rite of passage to the deceased and a show of honor performed by the bereaved family members,

friends, and well-wishers. This position is corroborated by the words: "For his good nature and good heart, today I had to squeeze out time from my schedule to honor him by attending the burial of his beloved mom in Obata town, Anambra State."<sup>59</sup>

## The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Burial Practices

Seventh-day Adventist Church members believe that "death is a cessation of life, not a suspension of life."<sup>60</sup> Man's disobedience to God in eating the forbidden fruit brought death not just to man, but to everything over which man had been given dominion. There are two types of death. The first death is both spiritual and physical. Presently, people experience death that leads to their physical burial. The second death is the final elimination and extinction of everything that is unrighteous, but it does not have authority over the righteous.

There is no consciousness at death.<sup>61</sup> The Scriptures say that when life is out of man, he has no more thoughts. Since by this biblical understanding it is clear that man does not transit to another place at this first death, there is no reason to say we are giving him or her this or that rite. We just bury the dead and console the living. The Adventist Church does not believe in the living dead, hence it does not approve of burying any item of property or weapon together with the dead. It does not teach talking to the dead. Archaeology has proved that things buried by ancient people together with their dead were a waste of resources to them. Those things have been exhumed and the non-perishables among them have been applied to economic wealth and other spheres of life.

The posture of the corpse at burial is not relevant. The Adventist Church does not encourage a particular posture for any reason whatsoever, especially since that has no salvific significance. At present, death has no remedy until Christ comes again. Ultimately, the remedy lies in finding the cause of death. Since sin caused death, and sin is contrary to God's law, it is obedience to God's law that will remedy sin and death. Christ has done that and bids us follow him.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has twenty-eight fundamental beliefs. They are discussed in the book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*. Two of these treat the issue of death. Belief number seven, entitled "The Nature of Man," states that man and woman were created in God's image with individuality. They were given the power of choice to think and to do. Despite the freedom, each person is an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit, depending on God for life and breath and every other thing. Due to the disobedience of our first parents, the image of God in man was marred, bringing in death. The offspring of Adam and Eve, which we all are, share in the fallen nature and its consequences. However, God in Christ reconciled the world to Himself and by His Spirit restores in penitent mortals the image of their Maker.<sup>62</sup>

Belief number twenty-six, entitled "Death and Resurrection," states that the consequence of sin is death. Though God, who alone is immortal (1Tim 6:16), will give His redeemed everlasting life, death, for now, remains an

unconscious state for all people here on earth. At the coming of Christ, who is our life, the righteous dead will be resurrected and together with the righteous living will be glorified and caught up to meet the Lord. The second resurrection will be for the unrighteous and will take place a thousand years after the first. Accepting Christ here and now is the only safeguard against the second death that will follow the second resurrection.<sup>63</sup>

## Effects of the Church's Teachings on Its Members in Africa

In some parts of Ghana, certain customs are being adjusted to suit the religious inclinations of church members. Potocnik states that while many people now bury their deceased on Saturdays, "some religious groups like the Seventh-day Adventist Church bury their church members [corpses] on Sundays because they consider Saturday as Sabbath day."<sup>64</sup>

Due to the acceptance of the teachings of the Church, people no longer live in fear of being attacked by their dead enemies. The idea that the weak become strong in the spiritual world, and thereby exude qualities capable of making them great is discarded. The teachings of the church have helped people drop the idea of going to purgatory, limbo, and paradise immediately after death. People no longer perform rituals with the hope of being prayed for after death to enable them to move from one state of being to another. Instead, they have now realized that after death, there is no second chance before judgment. Numerous Seventh-day Adventist church members interviewed affirmed that death is an unconscious sleep from which only the power of God can bring one back to life.<sup>65</sup> They acknowledged that the idea of positioning the head of a corpse in a particular direction in the grave during burial has no meaning to them.

Furthermore, on whether burial rites have any effect on the deceased, church members answered no, stating instead that the dead know nothing and have no portion in anything that is done on earth after death. Most of them, though interviewed separately, agree that the Christian concepts of death have made them trust more in Jesus. This they say is due to their realization that when Christ comes again, those who are dead but trusted in Him in their lifetime will live again. Accordingly, some of these members confessed that the habit of consulting "rainmakers" during burial programs is no longer popular among Seventh-day Adventists in Igboland (Africa). On consultation of mediums to communicate with the dead, they intimated that their biblical enlightenment has enabled them to realize that it is an evil practice and an affront to the Creator God, hence they and other Adventists abhor such acts. In affirming what is stated above, many of them ironically asked, "How can communication hold between a conscious person and an unconscious mind?" Thus, many Seventh-day Adventists interviewed expressed the conviction that death is an unconscious state.

## More Education is Still Needed to Put Belief Into Practice

Although some Seventh-day Adventists in principle do not teach speaking to the dead, in practice many members and even some ministers in Africa still do. This portends danger of public misconception of what the

Seventh-day Adventist Church stands for regarding the state of the dead. Richli estimates, due to current population growth and membership increase in the Adventist Church, that “one out of two Seventh-day Adventist members will live in Africa as early as 2033.”<sup>66</sup> It is, therefore, necessary to emphasize proper biblical education on the state of the dead and make it influence burial practices among members. This will make for a clearer appreciation of the teachings of the Church by the wider populace, both in Africa and beyond, rather than cast shadow on the teachings of the Church in this regard.

Such effort should begin with the denomination's pastors and other workers. They in turn will go and do likewise to their members at various church levels. This is expedient because, as Aka avers, it is the responsibility of pastors to see to their professional and spiritual growth as well as to help their members grow.<sup>67</sup> Given the full-time ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the administrative hierarchy is charged with the authority to train and retrain her workers through seminars and congresses. This Ellen G. White counsels should be planned from time to time and executed without delay.<sup>68</sup> She further states that “the church of Christ on earth was organized for missionary purposes, and the Lord desires to see the entire church devising ways and means whereby high and low, rich and poor, may hear the message of truth.”<sup>69</sup>

In contemporary Igbo (a tribe in Nigeria) society, one study<sup>70</sup> discovered that there is a dangerous practice going on concerning teachings on death. It is dangerous in the sense that various philosophical thoughts are mixed up with some biblical principles and are then presented in the guise of Christian teachings. This confluence of concepts may not be seen in doctrinal publications of some churches. In practice, however, it cuts across all of Christianity's denominations in Africa. It has the following characteristics:

First, during some Christian burial services, ministers assure the bereaved families that their dead ones are already in heaven. Among copies of Christian burial programs surveyed, about ninety-eight percent of the biographical sketches and tributes published, and read both publicly and privately, were found to contain sections wherein Christian authors addressed their remarks to the dead. Those practices go against the counsel of the Apostle Paul that when Christ shall come, the dead in him shall rise first.<sup>71</sup>

Second, some officiating priests at Christian burial services pray for God to forgive sins that the deceased committed while here on earth.<sup>72</sup> This contradicts the Bible, which admonishes people to confess their sins to God by themselves and repent of those sins to receive pardon. How can the dead confess their sins when they are non-existent, their eyes, ears, and mouth having decomposed into dust, and their memory lost until Christ comes again? According to the Bible, this is impossible.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

The truth in this review of African burial customs is that the misconception of the state of the dead leads many Africans, both without and within the Church, to waste resources during burials. The Seventh-day Adventist Church needs to intensify efforts at curbing this deadly misconception and its attendant lavish spending of

means. Thus, it would not only place numerous believers on a better platform for Christ's saving grace, but it would also avail the Church of means that could be applied to missions.

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