



Interrogating the African Worldview of Burial Adornment

Abstract

African attitudes toward death and burial often appear contradictory to Western observers. While death is mourned as a rupture in the communal fabric, it is simultaneously celebrated as a rite of passage into ancestorhood. This paper examines African perspectives on burial adornment and argues that lavish funerary practices constitute a ritual and social technology for maintaining communal solidarity, moral order and political legitimacy. Drawing on ethnographic literature from Nigeria and Ghana, African philosophical accounts of personhood and biblical exegesis, the study critiques the charge that Africans neglect the living while honouring the dead, a misreading that is rooted in neoliberal political economy and International Monetary Fund imposed austerity. Through a qualitative and interpretive methodology that is grounded in African philosophy, this paper reads African burial practice through Matthew 14:13 to 21 to argue that communal feasting and care for both the living and the dead are complementary duties that are not in competition. The paper advances a decolonial reframing that recognizes burial expenditure as cultural infrastructure rather than waste. Findings show that funerals function as sites of governance, redistribution and memory where the dead remain active members of the community, and adornment serves as the material language that sustains that ongoing relationship.

Keywords: African philosophy, burial, ancestors, ritual, decoloniality, personhood, _ubuntu_, communal solidarity.

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1.0 Introduction

Across many African societies, the death of an elder elicits a complex performance that combines weeping, feasting, dancing, the wearing of new cloth and the expenditure of several months of savings. To an external observer who is socialized within a Western individualist paradigm, this simultaneity of mourning and celebration appears contradictory. Within the African worldview, however, this simultaneity expresses coherence because death is conceptualized not as

termination but as transition.

Burial adornment, which in this paper refers to the investment in expensive caskets, specialized cloth known as _aso-ebi_, cattle, live musical bands, extended wakes and elaborate feeding of guests, has often been framed in development literature and popular media as economically irrational and socially wasteful. Such framing suggests that African families neglect the living by honouring the dead.

This paper interrogates that framing and examines African perspectives on burial adornment. The central argument is that what external observers read as extravagance functions as a technology of social reproduction that reaffirms kinship, redistributes wealth and integrates the dead into the moral community of ancestors.

The study addresses two guiding questions. First, what ontological framework explains the coexistence of mourning and celebration in African burials. Second, how does burial adornment function as social, economic and political infrastructure. In answering these questions, the paper contributes to African philosophy, death studies and decolonial political economy by reframing burial from waste to cultural infrastructure. The paper draws on African metaphysics of personhood, ethnographic literature on West, East and Southern Africa and the African diaspora, and a theological reading of Matthew 14:13 to 21 to establish this reframing.

2.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology that is rooted in African philosophical hermeneutics. The methodology employs three interrelated approaches.

First, conceptual analysis of African metaphysics of personhood is conducted, drawing on the works of Gyekye (1997), Wiredu (1996) and Mbiti (1991). Second,

synthesis of secondary ethnographic literature on burial practices in West Africa, including Nigeria and Ghana, East and Southern Africa, including Uganda and South Africa, and African diaspora communities is undertaken. Third, decolonial and biblical exegesis is employed, reading African ritual alongside Matthew 14:13 to 21 in the New International Version to develop a theological grounding for communal feasting.

Data sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, survey data from NOI Polls (2022) and the World Health Organization Global Health Expenditure Database (2021). The approach does not involve primary empirical fieldwork but consists of philosophical interpretation of existing ethnographic and economic data, which is consistent with African philosophy's method of critical reflection on cultural praxis.

3.0 Findings: African Metaphysics and Burial Adornment

3.1 Personhood and the Living Dead

In Akan thought, a person, referred to as *_onipa_*, is composed of body, referred to as *_nipadua_*, life force, referred to as *_okra_*, and soul, also referred to as *_sunsum_* in some accounts, as documented by Gyekye (1997). Death destroys the physical body but the *_okra_* continues its existence. Among the Yoruba, the person becomes *_ara orun_*, meaning citizen of heaven, and may

become an ancestor, referred to as *_egungun_*, if the individual lived well and received proper rites, as noted by Wiredu (1996).

Mbiti (1991) argued that Africans are notoriously religious and that the dead are not dead in a final sense but are the living dead who remain members of the community, watching, judging and blessing. The dead therefore remain socially present. From this perspective, burial is not a method of disposal but a process of installation into a new status that carries expanded moral authority.

This metaphysical framework explains the apparent contradiction that was noted earlier, because the community mourns the loss of physical presence while simultaneously celebrating the promotion of the person into a new status that carries greater agency within the community of ancestors.

3.2 The Problem of Neglect

Critics have argued that lavish burial practices demonstrate neglect of the living, as captured in the observation that hospital bills go unpaid while families purchase expensive caskets, as argued by Onuoha (2018). This critique assumes a Western individualist model of welfare that separates the living from the dead and measures value through individual utility.

The critique overlooks the communal logic that governs the funeral, because the funeral is organized for the benefit of the

living as much as for the dead. It is through the funeral that the living secure their own future ancestral support and reaffirm social networks that provide material security in contexts where formal state welfare is limited.

3.3 Burial Adornment Across Africa

In Igbo and Yoruba communities, burial is a multi-stage event that includes immediate burial, second burial conducted months later and annual remembrance. Adornment includes imported caskets, *_aso-ebi_* cloth, live bands and food for thousands of guests, as documented by Okpoko (2005). The second burial is crucial because it marks the full installation of the deceased as an ancestor who can intercede for the family.

In Ghana, the Ga and Akan communities use fantasy coffins that are shaped like fish, cars or bibles to signal the occupation or aspiration of the deceased, as described by Afi (2013). The coffin therefore becomes a biographical statement that narrates the identity of the deceased.

Among the *_Baganda_* of Uganda, burial involves clan gatherings and cattle slaughter, and the head of the clan must be present for the burial site to become a shrine, as recorded by Roscoe (1911). In South Africa, urban funerals blend Christian liturgy with traditional beer brewing and ancestor invocation, and the wake can extend for three days with music, testimony and communal feeding, as observed by Kiernan (1990).

In African American and Afro-Brazilian communities, homegoing services retain the celebratory element that is found on the continent. The term homegoing itself signals transition rather than termination. Jazz funerals in New Orleans begin with dirges and conclude with dancing, as documented by Holloway (1990). The continuity across these contexts is clear. Death is understood as passage, and the community marks the passage with sound, color and movement that affirms communal belonging.

4.0 Discussion: Political Economy, Decolonial Critique and Biblical Reframing

4.1 The Data

A survey conducted in 2022 found that many Nigerian families spend between two million naira and ten million naira on burial ceremonies, while out-of-pocket health expenditure remains high, as reported by NOI Polls (2022) and the World Health Organization (2021). This empirical pattern provides the basis for the neglect argument that circulates in development discourse.

4.2 Rethinking the Trade Off

Framing this pattern as a simple trade off between burial and hospital care is misleading, because state failure rather than cultural preference produces the health deficit. International Monetary Fund austerity measures introduced since the 1980s reduced public health spending in many African countries, as analyzed by Olukoshi (1993). Burial expenditure fills a

gap that is left by the state, because it provides employment for youth who are hired as ushers, cooks and decorators, it redistributes cash within the community and it insures families against social death.

Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) noted that in postcolonial economies, ritual becomes a site of economic circulation when formal markets fail to provide livelihoods. From this perspective, burial is not anti-development but constitutes an alternative form of development, because the money that is spent does not disappear but circulates within the community through reciprocal networks.

4.3 Decolonial Reading

Western media often frames African funerals as primitive excess, as illustrated by a BBC News report in 2019 that described African burial culture as expensive. Such framing reproduces colonial tropes that depict African practices as irrational and uneconomical. Sahlins (1976) argued that Western economics lacks the conceptual tools to read gift economies accurately.

Burial adornment functions as a gift that is offered to the dead and to the community. It creates debt, obligation and memory that sustain long term relationships. To characterize this gift as waste is to apply an inappropriate metric that is external to the culture. A decolonial approach therefore asks who benefits from the characterization of African funerals as waste. The

beneficiaries often include the formal funeral industry and international non governmental organizations that promote financial literacy without addressing structural poverty. A more adequate analysis reads African ritual on its own terms rather than through imported categories.

4.4 Matthew 14:13 to 21: Feeding as Sacred Obligation

The biblical tradition offers striking parallels that illuminate African practice. In Matthew 14:13 to 21, Jesus withdraws to mourn the death of John the Baptist. When he encounters a crowd, he does not send the crowd away hungry but feeds five thousand men, besides women and children, with five loaves and two fish.

Three lessons emerge for the interpretation of African burial. First, mourning and feasting are not opposed. Jesus was in grief, yet he prioritized communal care. African funerals similarly combine grief with the feeding of thousands of guests, and feeding is understood as a form of honour that dignifies both the dead and the living. Second, abundance can emerge from limited resources. The twelve baskets that remained after the feeding demonstrate that community sharing multiplies resources. Burial contributions, including *_ajo_* and *_aso-ebi_* systems, operate on a comparable logic of pooling that transforms small contributions into collective abundance. Third, the dead and the living are linked through care. Jesus honours the dead prophet by caring for

the living crowd. African ontology performs a comparable linkage, because the community honours the dead by strengthening the living community that will preserve the memory of the dead.

This passage provides theological grounding for Christian African societies to defend burial feasting. The practice is not waste but eucharistic in character, representing a communal meal that binds past, present and future within a single moral community.

4.5 Ritual as Social Technology

This paper understands burial as social technology, where technology is defined as a patterned method of solving collective problems through culturally embedded practices.

In terms of governance, the funeral gathering functions as a town hall where chiefs are installed, land disputes are settled and political legitimacy is affirmed in the presence of ancestors, as noted by Mbiti (1991). The dead are understood to witness proceedings, and to provide false testimony at a funeral is to lie before the ancestors who serve as moral guardians.

In terms of care and solidarity, *_aso-ebi_* and contributions that are organized through *_ajo_* systems spread costs across the community, so that no household bears the burden of burial alone. This practice embodies the African ethic of *_ubuntu_*, which is expressed in the principle that a person is a person

through other persons, as articulated by Gyekye (1997). The ethic mirrors the logic of the loaves and fishes narrative, where everyone contributes and everyone receives. Social insurance is therefore realized through ritual practice that is both economic and moral.

This analysis connects to broader themes in contemporary African philosophy, including African communalism, the ethics of care and indigenous governance systems. Burial represents the context where these theoretical frameworks become material practice that is observable in everyday life.

5.0 Conclusion

African burial adornment does not represent confusion between celebration and mourning. It represents the enactment of an ontology in which life and death are understood as continuous rather than dichotomous. Adornment functions as language that communicates to the dead that they are not forgotten and communicates to the living that communal unity remains intact despite loss.

To characterize this practice as neglect is to misread its social logic. To characterize it as waste is to apply colonial economic metrics that are external to the cultural context. Matthew 14:13 to 21 reminds readers that feeding the community in times of loss constitutes sacred obligation. A critical African philosophy must therefore defend ritual as infrastructure that is moral, social, political and

theological.

Future research should quantify the economic multiplier effect of funerals and compare such effects to state social spending. Such quantification would provide further evidence for the reframing that is advanced in this paper and would strengthen the argument for cultural infrastructure as development.

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AI Disclosure Statement

AI tools were used for language editing, formatting to APA 7th edition and reference validation only. All arguments, analysis and ethnographic interpretations are the author's original work.