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When I die, bury me at home in Africa! U.S African immigrants' preference for burial in ancestral land

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Abstract

African immigrants highly regard their ancestral land and many of them are faced with a longing for home in the native country, the need to maintain their African identity, as well as adapt to American life. Many African Immigrants are committed to their ancestral land as can be seen by the extent to which many of them prefer the bodies of their loved ones and themselves to be buried in their ancestral lands upon their death in their diaspora homes. The location of burial is important with attached symbolic significance to African practices. Many communities in Africa place great emphasis on burial location as the basis for asserting land rights, origin, identity and belonging.

This article explored the perceptions of burial in ancestral land. It exposed a greater understanding of and answers to where African Immigrants prefer to be buried and why, the meanings African immigrants attach to their preference of burial location and how has African Immigrants, who have lost their relatives through death handled the experiences of burial, given the fact that they are in another continent. The majority of African Immigrants expressed the preference for burial in their ancestral land due to cultural, religious, social and economic factors.

I used ethnographic participant observation and unstructured interviews to collect and analyze data during fieldwork. My level of participation in the daily activities of the African immigrants was moderate, a balance between participation and observation, or outsider and insider. To facilitate my entry into the community and build rapport with immigrants, I live in a residence belonging to a Liberian immigrant in the Eastern Knoxville which has the highest concentrations of African immigrants. I build a good rapport that enhanced a comfortable relationship that encouraged informants to talk freely and to eventually confide in me because they trusted me and I was able to ask sensitive personal questions. I actively engaged in the activities of African immigrants to gain an understanding of their daily life experiences in Knoxville. I accompanied my informants to the Churches where they go for prayers. I will frequent social establishments of African immigrants like University of Tennessee African Students Association, as well as agencies that deliver services to the immigrant community.

I used open-ended semi-structured interviews to allow for minimum control of informants' responses, asked the same questions to ease comparison across informants. All the interviews were tape recorded with the permission of each informant. I used various techniques to record my observations. I carefully documented daily observations, conversations and informal interviews by tape recording interviews and events with the permission of informants to supplement my field notes. I maintained a detailed record of both my objective observations and my subjective feelings in my field notes.

Introduction

The United States has witnessed a significant influx of Black Africans over the past several decades. U.S. immigration policy change in the 1960s, notably, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, allowed for family reunification and skilled immigrant labor. The Refugee Act of 1980 allowed more immigrants from conflict areas. The Immigration Act of 1990 that opened the opportunity to immigrants from underrepresented countries allowed more Black immigrants to gain entry into the country.[1]

A combination of economic and political factors led Africans to turn to the United States as a destination (Hipsman and Doris, 2013). A total of 3.8 million Black immigrants live in the United States today as per Census Bureau data. African immigrants gained entry into the US through the diversity visa program accounting for 19%, refugees or as asylum seekers fleeing political turmoil in their countries of origin 28%, immediate relatives of US citizens 39%, family sponsored 0.6% and employment based 6%. The Census Bureau 2015 projects that by 2060, 16.5% of Blacks will be immigrants.

Among Black immigrants from sub-Saharan African ancestry, Nigerians have the largest sub-Saharan African community (226,000) followed by Ethiopians (191,000) according to a Pew Research Center analysis report (Anderson 2015). In this article, African immigrant refers to individuals who are recent immigrants to the United States of America from the African continent with a national origin indicating recent African ancestry. It excludes African Americans who survived slavery in the United States and those from the Caribbean. African immigrants have varied immigration experiences, as they stem from different countries, with diverse cultures, languages, and religions.[2]

The aim of this article is to explore the perceptions of and preferences for burial in ancestral land by US – based African immigrants, I seek a greater understanding to where African immigrants choose to be buried and why, what meanings African immigrants attach to their preference of burial location and how have African immigrants, who have lost their relatives through death handled burial, given the fact that they live in another continent?

Death and burial tradition among Africans and African immigrants

African immigrants have high regard for ancestral land and many of them look back longingly to their native country as part of the need to maintain their African identity, even though they strive to adapt American life either by visits or electronic connection. Many African immigrants continue to actively relate with their relatives back in Africa in one way or another. Many African Immigrants are committed to their ancestral land as can be seen by the extent to which many of them prefer the bodies of their loved ones and themselves to be buried in their ancestral lands upon their death in their diaspora homes (Odhiambo 1992).

Parker Pearson (1999, 5), in his study of mortuary practice, defined the term burial as "synonymous with the act of disposing of the corpse in Western society ... it is one of the many ways in which the dead are removed from the domain of the living". Human burial practices are an expression of respect for the dead and a lot of importance is placed on proper burial for the

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[1] The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act ended nationality restrictions for immigrants and instead focused on reuniting families and attracting immigrants who were highly skilled workers.

[2] Data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security show that among the top 10 countries by refugee arrival in 2013, five were from Africa: Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. These figures, however, are not broken down by race or ethnicity.

deceased. Archeological study of burial can be interpreted to understand the different cultural practices associated with burial, views on death and burial, how death and burials affect individuals, and how a given society treats its members.

Traditionally, for burials to be considered proper according to most African societies, the dead are supposed to be buried in their ancestral land. Many communities in Africa place great emphasis on burial location as the basis for asserting land rights, origin, identity, and belonging. According to Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000, 435) many Cameroonians consider burial locations as a key determinant of belonging. In this regard, the proof of one's belonging in a given society is to show where one's ancestors are buried, and failure to show where ancestors have been buried means that one does not belong there.

Traditionally, Africans have cultural practices and rituals of communicating with ancestors and paying respect to the dead, based on their belief that the dead can influence the present reality and the lives of those who remain behind. Burial in the ancestral land is thus viewed as linking the deceased to the ancestors for a mutual relationship with the living. Burials on ancestral land allow the deceased's remains to be near the relatives also buried there and allow the relatives who are alive to pay their respect to the deceased.

In the life of traditional African people, the ancestors are believed to control domestic productivity, luck, wealth, and fertility (Lalande and Bonanno 2006). The ancestors are held to give blessings to the living, but they may also punish the living with misfortunes for failure to perform the necessary rituals. The dead person is considered at rest when buried in the ancestral land, his or her spirit is believed to have joined the ancestors and as such they watch over the village, but failure to accord him or her a decent burial means his or her spirit can harm the relatives; happy ancestors are considered essential to the living society.

Deceased are viewed as actively participating in the lives of the living (Adams and King 1999, 4). Many societies and cultures worldwide have long held (and some still do) strong fear of the spirits of the recently dead persons (Taylor 2002, 27–28). In most African communities, the burial of a family member outside of his or her ancestral land is considered a taboo which can be compared to throwing away the corpse of the deceased person and it carries a lot of stigma. Cremation in Africa is regarded as an "insult" and that is considered a threat to discontinuity in the future (Jua 2005, 346; Ngubane 2004, 175).

Burial location preferences

During the interview process for this article, people born outside of United States of America from different African countries of origin were asked regarding their preferred choice of place for burial and their experiences regarding death and burials while in the US. Out of the twenty respondents, 15 showed interest to be buried in their ancestral land, 2 in the US and only 3 made no choice. Those who preferred to be buried in the US, have for example given these reasons: *"I don't think it matters where you are buried, to me as long as your body is buried in a proper way. I prefer to be buried where I die after all we are not conscious of anything when we die and this limits funeral expenses related to transporting the dead body to the ancestral land for burial."* According to a respondent from Ghana, there is a provision for being buried where you die in a distant land but the relatives should fulfill some cultural obligations. He stated, *"when you die far away from home in Africa your hair, finger nails, and toe nails are always sent back to your home or village and your body can be buried here in the United States of America".* Additionally reluctance to be buried in the home country was much more

common among respondents who fear political, ethnic or religious persecution and those with ongoing war and conflict in their home country.

Factors influencing burial location preferences

Culture is clearly a major influence on the burial location preferences of African immigrants. Most African immigrants have a shared knowledge and way of thinking about burial in their ancestral land. Those who preferred their body be repatriated to the home country had several cultural reasons, for example, these respondents had this to say;

> *"A grave is a memory. It is our tradition to bury in ancestral land, this is a value we inherited and pass on through socialization, and it depicts a sense of continuity and belonging. To some culture, it may not be seen as important, but to us it is an essential point of reference. That is why many cultures have made an effort in maintaining burial sites because it is our cultural heritage that we pay homage to".*

> *"It is our tradition as Africans to bury our loved ones in their ancestral land. This is to bring the dead nearer to his or her ancestors more so if the dead person is an adult. It is, therefore, important to take the body to be accorded full traditional or religious rites".*

> *"In Ghana it is believed that if you are buried away from home (ancestral land), your soul will wander about in the world and would need to make new friends which I think makes it miserable".*

The most remarkable result was the high proportion of three out of four respondents preferred their body to be returned to their home country for burial, one out of ten would like to be buried in the United States, whereas 15 percent of the respondents were hesitant to show preference for where they want to be buried especially the younger generations. Respondents born in the US, as children of African immigrants, prefer to be buried in the US, compared to a proportion of 75 percent among those populations who were born in Africa and who preferred to be buried in their home country. So generation is clearly a significant factor in choice of burial location.

Also, the burial location preference as indicated in this study was influenced by kinship ties that the African immigrants want to maintain. The presence of children, siblings and other family members in the home country of origin had a major influence on burial location preferences. The majority of respondents who preferred to be buried in their ancestral land said it was because that is where their deceased parents and relatives are buried. This was evident in most responses. For example: *"Actually, I do not want to be buried anywhere except my home village close to my father so that my descendants know where I am buried, my family and friends are able to visit my grave. I have considered going back home, I do not want to die here in the United States of America".*

The acquisition of US citizenship, expensive properties like a house, or having little attachments or no connections back in their home country was another important factor influencing the wish to be buried in the US. The majority of those who owned homes preferred burial in the US over burial in the ancestral land compared to renters who showed a preference for burial in their ancestral land. The purchase of a residence is an indication that home owning immigrants desire to spend their old age in the US, unlike renters who showed the desire to return to their country of origin. A case in point as an immigrant from South Africa narrates, *"A friend of mine died three years ago here in the United States, he was buried here*

because he owns a house and all his family members are here there was no need to take him to his country of origin in Africa for burial".

The high cost of repatriating a dead body to the home country was a highlighted factor that influenced burial location preference, since it is more expensive than being buried in the United States of America. Repatriation of bodies to the home country and other related funeral costs is costly, although many respondents indicated that income level should be an excuse to avoid burial in their ancestral land because even in the United States of America here, there are funeral expenses to meet. The most touching interview was with my host Liberian family who shared the family experience of losing her husband in 2010 and since then he has not yet been buried because they want to accord him a decent burial in his ancestral land. This is what the widow had to say

> *"five years ago I lost my husband due to cancer and before he died he told me and the children that he wants to go back in Liberia so that he may die at home and even if he dies before going back home, his family should take his body and bury him next to his brothers and sisters. Unfortunately he passed away before going back to Liberia and since then they have not raised enough money to take his body home for a decent burial and they are hoping to take his body for burial at the end of this year. We are being criticized by relatives in Liberia for not taking the body of my husband for burial at home yet it is because the process demands a lot of money. We do not want to bury him here in the United States of America here because it will be against his will".*

Religion also played an important role in the choices concerning the place of burial. Christianity and Islamic teachings have helped to shape beliefs about dead as they consider the dead to be harmless to the living contrary to the ancestral beliefs that the dead can be harmful. According to the Pastor of Imani African Church in Knoxville, *"the burial location is important but when we consider what the Bible tells us in Psalm 24:1 that the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein so Christians can be buried in any place".* Religion has helped believers to clarify some of the myths about the dead person harming the living and the stigmas attached to burial outside ancestral land and associated failure to perform burial rituals which are always performed by the elders of the native community in Africa. Religion also provides emotional support to cope with the loss of loved ones through counseling by the believers in their visits to the mourning family and even making financial contributions to cover mortuary fees and other funeral costs.

The biblical story of Sarah and Abraham has been used by many African Immigrants to support burial in ancestral land. When Sarah died, Abraham bought a burial plot for Sarah and subsequently Abraham himself was buried in that land (Genesis 23:1-20). The death of Joseph after his instruction to his children to bury him with his father Abraham in Canaan and not in Egypt (Genesis 49:29-51:14), is yet another text cited from the Bible. As one respondent told me in an interview, *"burial in the ancestral land is something that Africans hold very dearly and it should not be taken to mean that we are satanic, barbaric and backward because there is example of Joseph whose body was not buried in Egypt but repatriated to Canaan where he was finally buried".*

It is advisable to bury the dead body as soon as possible after death, ideally within 24 hours, and because of this some respondents preferred to be buried in the United States of America because of the time constraint. In Islam, cremation, preservation or other methods are not permitted, hence the choice of burial is the only option. Instead of undergoing traditional burial rituals in their country of origin, the deceased are buried according to Muslim norms that demand that burial should be without casket, the body to be washed and wrapped before burial in the cemetery. This was a response from a Gambian on the burial preference:

"for the Muslims, the preferred place for burial is where your relatives and community members are because your relations can visit your grave, pray and intercede to Allah for your forgiveness because they know you. The challenge, however, that is the Prophet detests going around with dead body since the soul of the dead person should not be delayed. I prefer to be buried with my relatives because if I am buried here in the United States of America, my people back home will just assume I am dead when I am not buried at home because my grave is not there for them to see".

Deceased repatriation challenges and way forward

Repatriating deceased members who faced death away from their ancestral land back to the homeland to be accorded with proper burial and rituals according to their traditions is important to many Africans and the well-being of the living. To fund repatriation for the dead, African Immigrants have formed informal associations for example "Saidian" coming from a Kiswahili word meaning help, is an Association in Knoxville that seeks to support one another when death strikes its members because not many immigrants have the ability to invest in burial insurance while in the United States of America. African Immigrant Association members come together at the deceased's home to show support as soon as possible if someone dies in the United States of America. This association provides solidarity among their members and mutual help for the repatriation of the dead to Africa for burial by making financial contributions to meet death related expenses. It takes family members, friends, community members and well-wishers to mobilize enough resources to repatriate the body of Africans who have died in the United States of America.

Conclusion

Preference of burial in ancestral land is high among Immigrants and the significance is attributed to strong socio-cultural attachment of African Immigrants to their families and country of origin; religious affiliation; age; acquisition of United States of America's citizenship; and economic wealth among other factors also play a crucial role in burial location preference. It should however be noted that although high cost is involved in repatriating a dead body it does not seem to be a significant factor in the decision of immigrants regarding their place of burial and that cultural factors seem to be more important. This is because of the existing social networks that help the immigrant families of those who have lost their relatives with transport of their deceased relative. There is need for further research on how Christians and Islam reconcile their preference for burial location in ancestral land. Further research conducted in African would also contribute in-depth information on burials in ancestral land.

About the author:

Wilfred Luke Komakech is a Masters student in Cultural Anthropology program (Disaster, Displacement, and Human Rights) concentration in the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Wilfred was born and raised in Gulu district, Northern Uganda a region that has undergone nearly 21 years the insurgency of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony. He attended Makerere University Kampala Uganda where I received BA in Social Sciences majoring in Sociology and minoring in Public Administration in 2010 in 2010 before he enrolled for MA Anthropology in the University of Tennessee Knoxville.

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Abstrakti

Afrikkalaiset maahanmuuttajat pitävät esi-isiensä maata tärkeänä ja monet heistä kohtaavat ikävää synnyismaataan kohtaan, tarvetta ylläpitää afrikkalaista identiteettiään, kuten myös tarvetta adaptoitua amrikkalaiseen elämänmalliin. Monet afrikkalaiset maahanmuuttajat ovat sitoutuneita esi-isiensä maahan, mikä näkyy heidän halussaan tulla haudatuksi ja haudata lähinmäisensä kotimaahansa. Hautauspaikalla on iso symbolinen merkitys. Sen perusteella voidaan ylläpitää maaoikeuksia, alkuperää, identiteettiä sekä kuuluvuuden tunnetta.

Tämä etnografinen tutkimus käsittelee kokemuksia hautaamisesta esi-isien maahan. Se paljastaa suurempaa ymmärrystä sekä vastauksia siihen, minne afrikkalaiset maahanmuuttajat haluavat tulla haudatuiksi ja miksi sekä mitä merkityksiä he kinnittävät hautauspaikkansa sijaintiin ja miten he käsittelevät kokemuksiaan haudata läheinen asuessaan toisessa maanosassa. Valtaosa afrikkalaisista maahanmuuttajista ilmaisivat halua toimittaa hautauskäytänteet esi-isiensä maassa kulttuurisista, uskonnollisista, sosiaalisista ja taloudellisista syistä.