

FACTS ABOUT THE DEAD

DEATH, according to the Scriptures, is the penalty of sin. Once a person is dead the human body is consigned to dust again, and all his opportunities of serving and glorifying God or of having any dealings with the living are terminated. Therefore if only all men had but understood the real state and place of the dead, some people would not have connected them with all sorts of superstitions often manifested in burial ceremonies.

In different parts of the world peoples conceptions and beliefs concerning the dead are various. A great many are unanimous on the view that the dead have supernatural powers and continue their existence in the spirit-world. This is strongly held as a matter of faith upon which have been built customs, traditions and modes of burial which are very inconsistent with the tenets of Christianity.

Superstition

A careful study of the ceremonies that are performed during the burial of the dead by people in many nations, tribes and societies reveals a lot of things that can be summed up in this one word- SUPERSTITION! In the main the customs originated from a desire of relatives, children, friends and yoke-mates to keep the “ghost” of the departed ones from returning; to facilitate his passage to another world; and to provide for his necessities when in that world so as to keep peace with the living.

As typical examples of the customs of people in this regard *JACK’S REFERENCE BOOK* gives the following:

“(1) The Australian aborigines take off the nails of the corpse and tie his hands to prevent it from digging its way out again.

“(2) The Norse warrior had his horse and armour laid in the grave with him that he might ride to Valhalla in full panoply. (*Valhalla, according to the Scandinavians, is the final resting-place of the souls of heroes slain in battle.*) The Laplander placed beside the corpse flint, steel, and tinder to provide light for the dark journey.

“(3) In America the Indian hunter was buried with all the implements of the chase and other articles in daily use. In Egypt we often find the tombs filled with relics of the deceased. This notion that the dead may require things they were wont to use when alive, led in some cases to an attempt to provide them with the services of their former dependants by causing favourite horses and slaves to be slain at their death. In India, the widow was for the same reason, burned with the corpse of her husband.”

Of the many customs of the ancient Greeks and Romans relating to the dead mention may also be made of that of placing a coin in the mouth of the deceased to pay his fare to Charon, who, in classical mythology, was the ferryman whose office it was to convey souls across the Styx-the chief river in the infernal region or “hell”. And by the side of the deceased was placed a honey-cake for Cerberus-the dog which, according to them, guarded the entrance to hades or “hell”, and which was usually represented with three heads, and with serpents round his neck.

Today, some of those ancient customs are still subsisting among the nations of the world but in divergent shapes and forms. Here in Nigeria the beliefs and customs of many of the tribes are similar to those already mentioned. A graphic description of the Yorubas’ beliefs about the dead and burial customs are given in the book written by Dr. J. Olumide Lucas entitled, *The Religion of the Yorubas*.

The reverend doctor wrote: “The Yorubas believe that a man’s deeds in this world will determine his fate in the next, as to whether he will become a *khu* or a *ba*. They also believe that unless the proper rites and ceremonies are performed the spirit will not be able to join the family spirit, but will be compelled to wander about without rest.”

Khu is defined as meaning “a luminous spirit” and *ba* means “a mere disembodied spirit”. A common salutation in Yoruba land, he stated, is “O ku” which means “May you become a Khu,” that is, “a luminous spirit” after death. The opposite of this good wish, he added, is the malediction or curse “Yio ba o” meaning “it will turn you to a ba”, that is, “a mere disembodied spirit”.

At the death of an aged person who is survived by one or more children, joy rather than sorrow characterizes the burial ceremonies. On this point, Dr. Lucas stated: "The reason why the funeral obsequies are more or less of a joyful character, marked with feasting and merriment, is that the spirit of the deceased has gone to join the great family of ancestral spirits." In some cases the eldest son "sends for the babalawo, who will consult Ifa oracle as to whether the death is due to natural causes or to witchcraft, and if the latter is the case, to point out the culprit". The doctor continued: "If the oracle declare the spirit of the deceased to be in danger, the babalawo performs two important ceremonies. He sacrifices a goat or a sheep, and causes the carcass to be carried outside the town and deposited at a junction of several roads, the idea being that the evil spirits endangering the spirit of the deceased will thereby be dispersed in different directions. The babalawo also performs a ceremony of purification, sprinkling the corpse, the room and the spectators with the fluid he had prepared with water, shea butter and edible snails. After this he exorcises the spirit of the deceased from the house, bidding it proceed to its destination in peace."

Among the Edos, Urhobos, Itsekiris, Ijaws, Efiks, Ibos and other tribes in this country customs and practices similar to those of the Yorubas are also prevalent.

Today, burial of the dead has become an occasion for vainglory and extravagance. There is hardly any feeling for the departed ones reflected in the character and doings of some people. All they are concerned with are food, drink, dance and firing of volleys of cannon shots. These excesses sometimes result in tragedies. Take for example the case of one Nwanze Eseanobi, who injured himself with a gun which he shot to announce the death of his brother according to native law and custom, "But he misfired and inflicted severe injury on himself," This incident was reported in the *Midwest Echo* of March 26, 1960.

In Urhoboland there is a set time when male ancestors are served and their spirits invoked so as to give blessing and protection to everyone in their families. The services usually include the offering of sacrifices to the ancestors. The bony frame-work of a goat's head-after all the flesh and the eyes have been removed-with some pieces of yam and plantain is always the portion of the dead father while the people eat the best parts of the palatable meals, and drink their fill.

It is a pity that certain so-called Christians take part in these pagan ceremonies. All worshippers of the true God, Jehovah, are warned to refrain from heathenish customs and practices. As it is written: "Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are vain..." – Jeremiah 10: 2,3.

Sentence of Death

The account of the Holy Bible concerning the dead is quite clear. The sentence of death pronounced upon man by God is, "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.

Our emphasis is on the clause: "Unto dust shalt thou return." Man was made out of the dust and he returns to dust at his death. The dust therefore, is the place of the dead, and it is the force of this divine sentence that works in men to bury the dead in the grave, tomb or sepulchre where they turn to dust again. True worshippers of God do not practise cremation – the burning of a corpse to ashes, neither do they dispose of the dead by exposing them to the ravages of birds and beasts as certain tribes do.

Concerning human beings, King Solomon stated: "I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again." – Ecclesiastes 3: 18-20.

The Bible does not indicate that people who return to the dust are still conscious, rather it states without ambiguity that they are in complete silence having been turned to nothing, knowing not anything and having nothing to do with the living. And so in that condition they can no longer praise God. The Psalmist declared: "For in death there is no remembrance of Thee: in the grave

who shall give Thee thanks?" (Psalm 6: 5) Again he said: "The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence." – Psalm 115: 17.

The Spirit of God never contradicts itself, thus Isaiah the prophet under the inspiration of the Almighty also stated: "For the grave cannot praise Thee, death can not celebrate Thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise Thee, as I do this day...." – Isaiah. 38: 18, 19.

We can see how unscriptural it is for men to believe that the "ghost" of a dead person goes to another world to continue existence from where it can wield power over men on earth. Those who have developed fear for the dead or who do service to them are victims of superstition.

Some people say that the members of God's Kingdom Society do not perform burial ceremonies. This is a blatant lie calculated by our detractors to put the Society in a bad light so as to scare away people from her. We do bury the dead but we always make sure that we are not drawn by unbelievers into doing anything in violation of the Christian faith. So we object to or abstain from ceremonies which do not conform to the principles of Christianity.

Second Burial

Another detestable practice among many tribes in Nigeria is that of according a dead person a second burial-some even go to the extent of the third and fourth. This is pagan and unscriptural. It was never done by the true worshippers of God, and a true Christian must keep away from it. With the Christians, interment for a dead person takes place but once.

The custom of second burial is a waste of time, waste of energy and a waste of money – all in a Vanity Fair. What they do is very ludicrous indeed. When a person dies he is interred quietly, or as it were in secret – without great noise. Then the members of his family set about preparing for the second burial which is usually boisterous – taking the look of a carnival. They gather much

money – and some even owe debts-for this purpose in order to gratify the lusts of carnal men and earn worldly praise.

On the material day of the occasion they carry about, sometimes along the streets, in a vain show, a richly decorated coffin known to everyone to be containing mere relics along with an effigy. But the bearers sometimes gyrate as they go along and pretend to be acting under the power of the spirit of the dead in the coffin. The coffin is then buried and this is followed by feasting in an elaborate scale with a view to exhibiting the wealth of the family. The only reward they can get from this exercise is nothing but the praise of men which brings no blessing.

Apart from the spiritual aspect of these unnecessary obsequies which makes them abominable, it is sometimes observed that while all the money is spent for these ceremonies there are children in the family who for lack of funds could not be given good education or put in some trades.

Those who are thinking that their ancestors are in a position to bless or protect them are living in false hopes. God moved the Psalmist through His Spirit to say: *“Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth, in that very day his thoughts perish.”* – Psalm 146: 3, 4.

As Soon as a person gives up the spirit, he loses all senses of consciousness and feeling. That is why those of us who are living are counselled to make the most of the opportunity of our existence by serving God faithfully and zealously. Said King Solomon: “For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the Sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” – Ecclesiastes 9: 5, 6, 10.

The custom of cutting hair off the head or chin or putting marks on the skin and so on for the dead is also pagan. The law of God to the Jews says: "Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard. Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD." – Leviticus 19: 27, 28; see also Deuteronomy 14: 1.

Sanctimonious Rites

Certain church organisations also indulge in unnecessary formalities and sanctimonious rites which are spiritually meaningless. Christian burial is defined in *A Catholic Dictionary* as "the interment of a corpse according to the church's funeral rites in consecrated ground, if the grave is in a non-Catholic Cemetery it is to be blessed at the time of the burial." (Page 63)

In the Roman Catholic Church funeral rites are elaborate. The priest, vested in a black cope, sprinkles the coffin with, "holy water" at the gate of the churchyard while the body is being conveyed to the cathedral. The *Catholic Dictionary* states: "After entering the church the responsory *Subvenite* is sung with its verse, and if the Office of the Dead and requiem Mass are to be said or sung, they immediately follow... The priest sprinkles the body with holy water and incenses it, thrice on each side; he then says a prayer for the deceased, that he may have everlasting joys." (Page 204).

Some other denominations also do like the Roman Catholic Church.

When Sarah, Abraham's faithful wife, died, her grave was not blessed with "holy water" before she was buried. The ground accepted her corpse quite all right. Abraham, David, Lazarus whom Christ loved and Jesus Christ himself were all buried when they died without "holy water" being sprinkled on their bodies and without their graves being blessed!

The practice of blessing the grave, sprinkling the coffin or corpse with the so-called holy water and incensing it are acts of sanctimoniousness which do no good to the dead and which have no foundation in the holy Scriptures, Wherever a person is buried – even if the corpse is eaten by carnibals or devoured by animals or the person gets drowned in the sea – in the day of resurrection God through Jesus Christ will certainly bring him back to life according to Revelation 20: 12, 13. The blessing of the grave is a useless exercise. Sprinkling of water serves no spiritual purpose either. With regard to the use of incense, there is no precedent laid down by Christ or his apostles. Since the apostate Jews misused it, God condemned the use of incense. The Lord said: “Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me...” – Isaiah. 1: 13.

Moreover, prayers said on behalf of the dead have no effect. No amount of prayer can reverse the judgment of God in favour of the wicked neither can prayer make Him punish the righteous. God is going to deal with every one on resurrection day according to the works he did when alive. – Ecclesiastes 12: 13, 14; Isaiah. 3: 10, 11; Romans 14: 12; 2 Corinthians 5: 10.

It was sin that brought death into the world. (Romans 5: 12; 6: 23.) But Jesus Christ who was not a sinner died in order to redeem sinful mankind from the clutches of sin and death according to God's purpose. (Romans 5: 17-19; Hebrews 2: 9, 14-15; 1 Peter 2: 21-24) So there is the hope of resurrection for the dead and it is this understanding that makes true Christians not to be overwhelmed by sorrow or to mourn for the dead as non-believers do.

St. Paul in his epistle to the Thessalonians said: “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.” – 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-14, 18.

In concluding, we must warn that sumptuous feasting, heavy drinking and dancing at funerals are all unnecessary exercises and they are pagan. Therefore true Christians must not do them. – Ephesians 5: 7-11.

An occasion of the burial of the dead ought to be one of soberness when everyone should reflect upon the vanity of man, and think of himself recalling to mind that he, like the deceased, will one day go the way of all flesh except he is specially favoured by Jesus Christ by reason of his faith (John 8: 51; 11: 25, 26) to pass through this old evil world to the new- the WORLD WITHOUT END.