



African Burial Practices as Havens That Promote the Spread of Cholera in Zimbabwe

Simbarashe Munamati, Murray Theological College and Reformed Church University, Zimbabwe

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4131-3145>

Menard Musendekwa, University of South Africa, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6644-8727>

ABSTRACT

The research presents the results of a qualitative study that investigated the African burial practices as havens that promote the spread of cholera in Zimbabwe which has experienced such outbreaks in 1992/1993, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2008/2009, and 2018. Participants were 10 representatives of 10 families from Machivenyika Village of Zaka District in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe who had cholera-deaths related during the 2018 outbreak. Data collection instruments were semi-structured questionnaires and focus-group discussions. The constant comparative method was used to analyse data for thematic coding. Findings indicated that participants viewed African burial practices as one of the major contributing factors in the spread of cholera in Zimbabwe. Participants suggested ways of improving African burial practices to accomplish positive results. Recommendations were made for the relevant authorities.

KEYWORDS

African Burial Practices, Cholera, Havens, Rites, Rituals

INTRODUCTION

This paper advances the argument that African burial practices are havens that also contribute to the spread of cholera in Zimbabwe. The overarching purpose of the article is to demonstrate a case in which African burial practices had ripple effects on the population of Zimbabwe due to the cholera epidemic. The scope of the paper is on how African burial practices promoted the spread of cholera in Machivenyika Village of Zaka District in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. The paper contributes to the body of knowledge on Public Health and African Burial Practices in relation to combating the spread of cholera during outbreaks. It also provides some recommendations on the way forward in terms of rethinking African burial practices in relation to Public Health.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

This part looks at definition of key terms which are: rituals/rites and cholera. It goes further to an explication of African burial rites, pre-burial practices, burial ceremony practices, post-burial practices as well as an overview of cholera outbreaks in Zimbabwe in the quest to pursue African burial practices as havens that promote the spread of cholera in Zimbabwe.

Rituals/Rites

Rituals/rites are highly symbolic acts that confer transcendental significance and meaning on certain life events or experiences (Mwandayi, 2011). Rites offer opportunity to contain and express emotion as well as confess a particular collective identity. African burial rites give us a collective identity proffering meaning to the meaning of death on the African soil, herein Zimbabwe in particular.

Cholera

Cholera spreads via a bacterium, '*Vibrio cholerae*,' where water supplies, sanitation, food safety and hygiene practices are inadequate where unsafe drinking water supplies predominate (Youde, 2010). Symptoms frequently occur within two to three days of exposure. Youde (2010) adds that the symptoms include: a bloated feeling in the abdomen, generally with no accompanying fever that quickly gives way to very watery stool. Cholera can cause severe dehydration and kidney failure leading to death in as few as eighteen hours. Without treatment, mortality rate can range from 50-90% making it one of the most historically feared diseases.

African Burial Practices

Death stands between the world of human beings and the world of spirits (Mbiti, 1990:145). In Africa, there are many complicated ceremonies connected with death, burials and funerals (Mbiti, 1990, Bourdillon, 1987 & Gelfand, 1962). These can be categorised as: pre-burial, during burial and post burial practices.

Pre-Burial Practices

Although the practices vary from area to area, the general trend includes: gathering around, caring, positioning the dead in the death posture and bathing the corpse. Bourdillon (1987) argues that when one is sick among the Shona people, the person is kept away from the noise of the children and others. In addition, Mbiti (1990: 146. Gelfand, 1962) concurs with Bourdillon (1987) citing that the sick person's closest relatives like the eldest son/daughter in case of a sick father/mother should be always present at the sick person's deathbed as a sign that the dying person is nevertheless alive in his/her children as an assurance to the sick person that there is someone to remember him/her to keep his/her name in personal immortality when he/she physically disappeared. Moreso, the relatives of the sick person have to slaughter the so called 'beast of the ancestors' as a sign of linking both the departed and the living members of the family (Mbiti, 1990). The 'beast of the ancestors', in Mbiti's thinking, also functions as an assurance that the dying person will not go into a foreign hostile country but will move into a friendly festal community.

When the sick person has died, his/her corpse is washed and prepared for burial by close kin as practised among the Karanga and the Zezuru people of Zimbabwe (Bourdillon, 1987:199, Gombe, 1998). In some cases as it is in Ghana, the family's oldest women wash the corpse three times, dry it and dress it. The deceased's clothes and bedding are washed, dried and carefully packed in preparation for sharing by the relatives of the deceased after burial. In the past, in Bourdillon's thinking, there was an agreed position of the corpse whereby the legs were usually flexed against the body but now it is becoming customary to bury a corpse whilst it is stretched out straight. The corpse is wrapped in a new blanket and laid on a reed sleeping mat. Sometimes a beast is ritually killed and its meat is roasted and given to attendants. Bourdillon (1987) adds that food is prepared for all attendants

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