



ECCLESIASTES 6:3-4 IN THE LIGHT OF YORUBA TRADITIONAL BURIAL RITES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

This study examines Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 in the context of Yoruba traditional burial rites to uncover insights and implications for contemporary society. Ecclesiastes 6:3-4, a passage from the Hebrew Bible, speaks to the futility of a life that, despite longevity and progeny, lacks fulfillment and community acknowledgment, ultimately ending in obscurity. This existential reflection aligns with questions about legacy, purpose, and recognition that are deeply embedded in Yoruba burial customs. Yoruba traditions place a high premium on honoring the dead through community-centered rites, ensuring that each person's life is celebrated, remembered, and integrated into the social fabric. Utilizing a qualitative methodology that includes literature review, cultural and theological analysis, interviews with key informants, and comparative analysis, this study investigates how Yoruba burial practices address existential concerns similar to those raised in Ecclesiastes. The findings reveal that Yoruba burial rites, with their emphasis on communal remembrance and legacy, offer valuable lessons for contemporary society especially amid increasing individualism and social isolation. The study concludes that adopting certain Yoruba principles in modern practices could enrich approaches to life fulfillment, legacy, and end-of-life rituals, providing individuals with a greater sense of community and purpose. This cross-cultural exploration encourages contemporary societies to create supportive structures that honor individual lives in meaningful ways, fostering psychological and social well-being through community acknowledgment and enduring legacy.

Keywords: Burial Rites, Yoruba Tradition, Ecclesiastes 6:3-4, Jewish Tradition, Cross-cultural



Introduction

One man may father a hundred children and die at a great age. However, if he is not satisfied with life and is even denied a proper burial, it would have been better for him not to have been born.

If he had not been born, there would have been no purpose in his existence, and he would have lived in darkness. He would not have had a name (Ecclesiastes 6:3-4).

Death is demonized as the enemy of Man. This is borne out of the fact that it brings permanent separation between the living and the dead on this terrestrial (Awolalu, 1980). As such, it is dreaded, and no one desires it. Africans, says Familyusi (2012), firmly believe that 'life here is not without end – death is inevitable, it will come when it will come'. It is found between the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible. Moreover, since men are only sojourners on God's earth, no matter how long a person lives, death must come as a necessary end. Jemiriya (1988) asserted that death is inevitable and cannot be prevented. However, it is believed that death can be deferred by appealing to the divinities, or by the help of the guardian angel or Deity Himself. Although death, according to Jemiriya, is not the end of man's life, it is not often welcome among most Africans, just as we have it in other areas. In most of traditional Yoruba culture, death and funerals are big events; there are so many events that accompany the death of a man. However, for young people, especially, the importance of the rite of passage is high, especially with respect to burial. The ideas of life, death, and legacy were ubiquitous in human societies, and each culture developed its own customs and beliefs to grapple with the mysteries of life and death. The Hebrew Bible text Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 speaks of a life that is long and fruitful yet unfulfilled and unacknowledged. In this philosophical reflection, the question is whether a life without satisfaction or legacy is worth living; it will be an obscure life.

Along with this, the Yoruba world has a culture with deep traditions and values, including unique beliefs about death and people's legacies. Incorporated into their cultural practices and symbolism, the Yoruba burial rites highlight three key points: the well-lived life, the recognition of the community, and meaningful death, which serve to consolidate the individual's presence in the living and spiritual worlds.

In addition, Mbiti (1970) claimed that the ultimate aspiration of the common Yoruba is to transcend into the cult of their ancestors upon death. The living dead are the ancestors. Africans believe that death is not the end of human life. One person will live in the hereafter. The Yoruba believe that the dead do not cease to be a part of the living in the afterlife. They become ancestors. Ancestors are spirits and, therefore, have limitless and free movement. They serve as representatives of the family in the spirit world. In addition, they serve as a bridge between the living people of society and the spiritual world. They occasionally reveal mysteries, give instructions, warnings, or useful information to their relatives in dreams or divination. On many occasions, many impending disasters had been averted. Hence, it is always taken seriously in Yoruba society to receive information from the ancestors.

It is therefore against this background that this study seeks to analyse Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 in the context of Yoruba traditional burial practices and their relevance to modern society. The study also sought to highlight the correspondences among the philosophical reflections of Ecclesiastes, Yoruba burial practices, and a distinctly Yoruba way of thinking about the significance of a full life and ways to engage with legacy, identity, and community memory in societies. It also explores the elements and challenges of decent burial practices in modern society, focusing on community recognition, legacy, and the honouring of a person's life as a crucial cultural value. The study concludes that integrating some Yoruba principles into modern approaches can enhance the concepts of life fulfillment, legacy, and end-of-life rituals and give people a sense of belonging and purpose.

Statement of the Problem

A study of Africans' concept of death from a different perspective has been done before. For example, Nyaoko (2024) examines how death and burial rituals among the Abagusii promote moral behavior, community cohesion, and cultural continuity. Ogbeifun (2025) discusses the impact of Christianity on Yoruba burial practices in the Ogbomoso Local Government Area of Oyo State. The study highlights the beliefs and practices surrounding death and funeral rites in the Yoruba worldview, as well as the changes that have occurred in these practices. Boge's (2023) work highlights the social responsibilities and values instilled in people during the funeral ritual and how this ritual influences the day-to-day experience of death. Nihei et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study on the continuity and negotiation of identity regarding Islamic and traditional burial and funeral rites among Yoruba Muslims in the Oke-Ogun area, highlighting the change and continuity of Yoruba traditional practices under Islamic influence in the context of death and burial. Nihei et al. (2023) also provided qualitative discourse on Islamic and traditional burial and funeral rites among Yoruba Muslims in the Oke-Ogun area, focusing on the continuity and negotiation of identity, highlighting the changes and continuities of Yoruba traditional practices with Islamic



influences in the context of death and burial. However, the works mentioned above were found to be scholastic and relevant to this study; none of the above-mentioned authors, however, examined the Yoruba concept of death in contrast to the Judaic Scripture. The study delved into Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 in the context of Yoruba traditional burial rites to uncover insights and implications for contemporary society.

In today's Yoruba world, particularly in urban and westernized settings, people can feel solitude and a sense of disconnection. As people increasingly lose connection to the community's rituals and customs, their understanding of the purpose of life and how they treat their dead changes. The lack of collective memory or legacy is a concern in this detachment, as in Ecclesiastes 6:3-4, which says, "A man without a seed is a man without a father. The detachment without collective memory or legacy is a concern, as in Ecclesiastes 6:3-4, which says, "A man without a seed is a man without a father. Yoruba traditional burial practices, by contrast, have a communal and purpose-driven aspect that meets these needs and provides a framework for honor, legacy, and collective memory. The challenge is thus to examine how Yoruba practices can provide answers or alleviations to the existential issues raised in Ecclesiastes, and how they can be adapted or used as inspiration to improve how people in the modern world approach questions of life fulfillment, community recognition, and the celebration of legacy. This study seeks to explore the possibilities of incorporating rites and traditional values at the communal level to counter the feeling of meaninglessness which may be experienced in their absence.

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to gain insights from the perspectives of two cultures on death, legacy, and fulfillment in Ecclesiastes 6:3-4, with a view to understanding them in relation to Yoruba traditional burial rites and how they can contribute to contemporary society. To specifically: To specifically aim to:

1. Examine the philosophical issues of Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 regarding the lack of meaning or satisfaction in a life without fulfillment or recognition, even if it is long and fruitful.
2. Review the Yoruba traditional burial customs and their focus on the importance of community recognition, legacy, and respecting a person's life as an important cultural value.
3. Name potential lessons and practices from the Yoruba burial rites that might help to answer existential concerns in Ecclesiastes and offer meaningful frameworks for improving modern practices of death, legacy and community remembrance.

The study aims to identify similarities and differences between these views and to examine how Yoruba traditions may inspire or contribute to modern concepts of life fulfillment, legacy, and community participation in the veneration of the dead.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant and unique in that it uncovered burial rituals and practices prevalent in Yoruba land. The study promotes understanding and acceptance of African traditions while highlighting their relevance to universal human issues.

This cross-cultural study invites today's societies to establish enabling frameworks that pay tribute to personal lives in meaningful ways and promote psychological and social health by recognizing individuals and building community legacy.

This research provides insight into the importance of the collective memory and social recognition in today's world of individualism. With the help of Yoruba traditions, individuals and communities can develop a stronger sense of belonging and history, and promote greater continuity and connection across space and time, enhancing their lives and deaths. Incorporating elements of Yoruba burial practices might promote more wholesome, rich end-of-life rituals, mitigating the sense of disconnection and meaninglessness that Ecclesiastes warns against.

Methodology

The study will be qualitative and comparative, exploring the meaning of Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 in relation to Yoruba traditional burial practices and its implications for the present world. A text analysis of Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 was conducted, taking into account the underlying message of the two sections: fulfillment and futility. The object of this analysis is to gain insight into the existential concerns and wisdom of this passage. An ethnographic and cultural study of Yoruba burial practices was also conducted. This included an analysis of both primary and secondary sources on Yoruba traditions, including ethnographic descriptions, studies of Yoruba culture, and historical records of burial practices. Yoruba cultural practitioners, religious leaders, and elders were interviewed. This facilitates insight into the nature, maintenance, and adaptation of traditional practices in contemporary contexts.



The methods used in this study gave a full picture, respecting both Biblical and Yoruba perspectives and translating the findings into meaningful recommendations to improve the quality of life and end-of-life care today.

A Textual Analysis of Ecclesiastes 6:3-4

Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 is part of the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, written by a teacher of wisdom (Qoheleth), sometimes thought to be Solomon, and reflecting on the meaning of life, wealth, and the apparent vanity of human aims (Bartholomew, 2009). Traditionally attributed to King Solomon, the writer considers the meaninglessness of a world built on life, wealth, and unfulfilled desires. Just as many cultures do, the Israelites placed a high premium on having many children and a long life as signs of blessing and prosperity, as reiterated in Psalm 127:3-5. These are signs of a successful life, according to society's norms. However, the man portraits in this text were devoid of true satisfaction despite these blessings. This suggested that even if a man has a long life with many children, affluence does not guarantee satisfaction or fulfillment. The worldview of Qoheleth is that human endeavors, such as acquiring wealth, building families, or life extensions, are "vanity" because they do not bring him a sense of satisfaction beyond their earthly accomplishments. Ecclesiastes as a whole emphasizes that human effort is futile unless it is in God's plan or for meaning in one's life (Longman, 1998).

The phrase "And he also has no burial" in the text, according to Murphy (1992), reveals the cultural context of ancient Near Eastern cultures, in which receiving an honorable burial was a significant cultural value. Moreover, to be deprived of a proper burial was seen as a disgrace and a sign of ultimate rejection or failure (see Jeremiah 22:18-19). It emphasizes the man's lack of dignity and recognition even after his death.

Yoruba Traditional Burial Rites and Community Legacy

For the Yoruba, fulfillment in life and legacy are very important. Burial rites are an important aspect of affirming and celebrating the deceased, reaffirming their role and presence in the community. It is noted by Adediran (1994) that the act of burying the dead is not only a function of emotional bereavement but a means of strengthening community cohesion and identity as well as the collective memory of the community. The Yoruba honor the dead and commemorate their contributions through ceremonies, songs, and storytelling, ensuring that their legacies live on in the community. The authors share their observations and interactions, which confirm that the Yoruba people's traditional burial practices continue to be practiced. Some of our informants said that it is very essential for them to perform the appropriate funeral ceremony for their dead fathers and mothers as a tribute and appreciation for their fathers and mothers.

The rites also reflect the Yoruba concept of the continuity of life and the importance of community recognition and remembrance, as noted by Idowu (1962). Yoruba cosmology teaches that death is a journey to another reality, and the community's acceptance and respect for the deceased's spirit indicate that it is at peace and revered. Ruddock (2003), while discussing death rituals in Africa, pointed out that there are many complex and even long rituals and ceremonies associated with death. Special attention is paid to performing the funeral rites and ensuring there is no offense. Rituals for death in Africa are to ensure that the deceased is properly put to rest so that his spirit is at peace and he can take his place among the protective ancestors. Rituals are as much a celebration of the role of the dead as they are a mourning of their passing.

To be accepted into the ancestral cult, the ultimate wish of the average traditional Yoruba, there are some conditions or requirements to be met (Okediji, 2016). The criteria include: living a good life, living a fruitful life (anyone who died as barren will not be accepted as ancestor), died at ripe old age, died a good death (anyone who died through natural occurrences- a woman who died during labor, children or young adult, those killed by the anger of deities, death as punishment from wrong doings are categorized as bad death) and last but not the least, such deceased must be given befitting burial rites or rituals.

Traditional Yoruba funerals are important events that help to renew the person's identity in the community. The consciousness of the aforementioned criteria largely determines how Yoruba people live out this moral aspect of Yoruba burial practice. A great wish and hope of an adult in the Yoruba community is to be buried properly after they have passed away.

The Yoruba people go through the process of funerals in stages. If the deceased is a girl or woman, the hair is in beautiful plaits; if the deceased is a boy or man, the hair is clean-shaven. The corpse is then thoroughly washed with warm clean water and a new sponge and soap. It is believed that before one's departure to the other world, one must be pure, from the viewpoint that purity is the order of the day in the other world (Abioye, 2010). After the bath, the corpse is dressed in dignified clothes provided by the relatives. This is followed by lying in state on a well-decorated bed. After this, music, dancing, and feasting begin. The other people spend money on them as gifts, and women



dance around the corpse crying funeral songs. Mama Abeo submitted that the relatives and sympathizers go around the corpse to pay their last respects, according to one of my informants. Typically, they would take the opportunity to dispatch the deceased on a mission to their forbears. Here are some songs that they sing:

Ma sun gbagbe/2x	Do not continue to sleep and forget us
Abiamo ki i sun gbagbe	A caring parent will not sleep and forget her
Omo re l'orun	children in heaven
Ma sun gbagbe	Do not continue to sleep and forget us

After this, there will be what the Yoruba refer to as Adire Irana (Redemptive fowl for the journey). A person will take a live fowl and remove the feathers beforehand from those who brought the corpse. This is to make way for the dead one who is on a journey to the hereafter. The fowl will later be killed and eaten by the people. Thus goes the common Yoruba saying, - adire irana ki i se ohun aje gbe (He who ate the redemptive fowl should know that people will eat his own). This is good for people to remember that death exists. However, this practice is no longer in vogue in most African societies today.

Hence, it becomes their prayer-song that:

Omo mi ni yoo sin mi	My children will bury me
bi mo ba dagbalagba ti mo ba darugbo	when an old and aged person dies

Yoruba has a term, sin mi, which means "appropriate burial". Also, it is always the older men's prayers that the young ones who will eventually honour them should not be killed before them. As a result, the popular Yoruba saying:

eni omo sin lo bimo whosoever is given a befitting burial gave birth to children.

Invariably, even if someone gave birth to many children, but at the end of the day, after his or her death, if he or she is not accorded befitting burial rites, he or she is no better than a barren. This depicts the significance of burial ceremonies among the Yoruba.

Lessons from Yoruba Burial Rites addressing the Existential Concerns Pointed Out in Ecclesiastes 6:3-4

The failure of life without satisfaction or fulfillment, even when having a lot of children or living long enough, is noted in Ecclesiastes 6:3-4. This verse, when interpreted in the light of Yoruba traditional burial rites, holds significant insights. Yoruba burial rites are steeped in significance and honor the individual's accomplishments and social contributions, indicating that death is not the end but the fulfilment of life's purpose, with the individual's legacy celebrated through elaborate ceremonies and remembrances. Living a good life was a significant concern to the Yoruba people. That is why, from the time the child is born, they start looking into the destiny the child is born to fulfil and what the child will be in life. It is called ese-n-taye.

These thoughts highlight the value of purposeful living and community recognition, emphasizing that a meaningful life is one lived with connections, a sense of legacy, and respect. The Yoruba people are communal, as are the Africans generally. Common happiness is more important than individual happiness. Any male or female who failed to contribute to the growth and development of the family, and thus to the larger society, is held in low esteem before and after he passes on. The inseparability of the individual from the whole that constitutes the community has profoundly affected traditional Yoruba society. As Oyeshile (2021) would argue, by reacquainting themselves with such values, communities today could develop more compelling and supportive death and memory practices that serve the lives and contributions of all their members.

Within the Yoruba community, funerals are seen as a celebration of the deceased's physical existence and their continued existence in the social realm through memory, praise, and honor. This reflects the message of Ecclesiastes that life's fulfilment and recognition are important. Because of the rites, the Yoruba dead are treated with respect, and their life is celebrated and remembered, even if it was short or in the long term, thus undermining the feelings of meaninglessness described in Ecclesiastes when a life is not treated with respect.

According to Pa. Olalere, an incident happened in a particular town in Yoruba land. There was a rich man with numerous sons who died. The one that died in his lifetime, though he was known to be very wicked, will not help any of his family or anyone in his community. His children prepared various dishes and made wine at his funeral. That was quite an unusual day. None of the guests who came to the ceremony ate or drank anything; it was a terrible shame. For the Yoruba people, dead people are not part of the culture of ancestor worship; they become ghosts. This is because character and appropriate funeral procedure are required for membership of the ancestral community. The question of character is a personal question of the man himself during his earthly career, and the rites of the funeral,



although very important, are likewise a question of the living man's character when he was on earth. According to Dada (2009), the Yoruba communal self-understanding and the practice of peaceful coexistence are grounded in the concept of *iwa* (character). The Yoruba believe that *iwa* (character) enables man to live in harmony with his fellow men and to control his life so that he does not encounter conflict with supernatural powers. Yoruba. Believe that everyone should try to develop a good way to live a good life in harmony with the forces of the universe and with one another. Whatever an individual has, without character, is nothing, and he or she is a misfit in the family and society at large. Mbiti (1992) opined that once there is a moral breakdown, the whole integrity of society also breaks down, and the end is tragic.

From this study, it is concluded that the themes of fulfillment, legacy, and recognition of life are present in both Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 and Yoruba traditional burial practices. Ecclesiastes is a statement of existential despair; no life without them, while the Yoruba burial ceremonies focus on celebrating the achievements of the deceased and his social roles through communal ceremonies.

The study also found that Yoruba burial rituals are linked to psychological and social health, as they enable the living to find meaning and fulfillment in their lives. It contrasts with the existential issues in Ecclesiastes, which imply that life without recognition is useless.

The study reveals that the communalization of some elements of Yoruba burial rituals can offer greater purpose and fulfillment to modern burial rituals. These rites help create a sense of continuity and shared memory and can mitigate feelings of isolation and existential concerns that can arise in today's world.

Conclusion

From this research, it can be concluded that the rites of burial are Yoruba values that make significant contributions to the questions raised in Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 regarding the purpose of life, legacy, and community recognition. The community engagement, respect, and remembrance of Yoruba culture offer a template for combating the feelings of isolation and futility emphasized by Ecclesiastes. These rituals emphasize the interconnectedness of the community and life, creating a more comprehensive and satisfying way of living and dying that may be valuable in today's society. The attributes presented in Ecclesiastes are: the value of community recognition, legacy, and honouring a person's life.

Recommendations

1. **Emphasis on the Essentials of life:** People should be conscious that a life without communal acknowledgment or an enduring legacy mirrors the sentiment in Ecclesiastes 6:3-4: a life that feels unfulfilled or ends unrecognized. In contrast, Yoruba traditional burial rites offer a communal and purpose-centered approach that addresses these needs, providing a framework for honor, legacy, and collective memory.
 2. **Integrate Communal Elements into Modern Burial Practices:** Contemporary societies should consider adopting communal acknowledgment practices from Yoruba rites, such as public celebrations of life, storytelling, and community support systems for the bereaved, to reinforce the individual's significance within their community.
 3. **Education on the Value of Legacy and Community:** Programs that emphasize the importance of contributing to a community and creating a lasting legacy can help individuals focus on fulfilling lives. Learning from Yoruba customs can inspire people to find purpose and connection in their actions and relationships.
- The recommendations are designed to create a society in which people live more meaningful lives and a community observes deaths with a reverent spirit, thereby bringing greater fulfillment to both individuals and society.

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