8-1-2002

Cultural Interpretation of Dying and Death in a Non-Western Society: The Case of Nigeria

Frank Eyetsemitan
McKendree College, Lebanon, Illinois, feyetsem@atlas.mckendree.edu

Cultural Interpretation of Dying and Death in a Non-Western Society: The Case of Nigeria

Abstract

Using Western theories and perspectives as models, this chapter discusses the cultural interpretation of dying and death in a non–Western society. Also discussed, based on the historical, political, and cultural history of Nigeria, are the implications of dying and death for death preparation, the problem of death– causation diseases without external symptoms, and the special plight of widows. Suggestions are made on how to change current practices to alleviate the conditions of widows. The Nigerian experience provides a model for other non–Western societies with similar historical, political, and cultural backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

The difference between dying and death is that in dying, the individual goes through a process of gradual termination before death occurs. In death, this process is absent (like the person who passes away in his sleep) or is relatively short (like the person who bled to death from a gun shot wound). In both cases, the loved ones are left behind to go through the grieving process. Whereas the grieving process begins before death occurs in the case of a dying person, it begins after death has occurred in the case of sudden or unexpected death. In the case of dying, there is anticipation that death will ultimately result. Therefore, the loved one has time to prepare both emotionally and cognitively for death when it occurs. Here, coping after death is easier for the survivors and the dying person has time to take care of unfinished business like preparing a will. However, in the case of death, because such preparation is absent, coping by loved ones is difficult and the deceased person has not the time for taking care of unfinished business like preparing a will.

Most theories and models on dying and death were developed in the West with Westerners in mind. In this chapter, some Western theories and perspectives will be discussed in light of the different experiences of non-Westerners in general and Nigerians in particular. The following topics will be covered:

- A brief description of Nigeria-the triple heritage
- Prevalent causes of death in Africa
- Preparation for death
- Cultural interpretation of death
- Coping with death-the special plight of women
- Conclusion

Nigeria: A Brief Description

Nigeria, with an estimated population of over 100 million people, is Africa's most populous nation. This nation located in the western part of Africa attained independence from the British in 1960 and for most of its post-independence era has been ruled by the military. There are over 250 ethnic groups, but the three dominant ones are the Yorubas to the South-West region, the Ibos to the Eastern region and the Hausa/Fulanis to the Northern region. With a largely Islamic influence in the Northern part, and a largely Christian influence in the Southern part, Nigeria has a triple heritage of Islam, Christianity, and Traditional religious practices that existed (and still exists) before the advent of foreign religions (Mazrui, 1986).

Nigeria's triple heritage of Islam, Christianity, and Traditional religious practices is quite influential in that country's judicial system. There are three legal systems: 1) one based on the Judeo-Christian English law; 2) one based on Islamic laws (Shariah) which operates at the state level, but only in the Northern part of the country; and 3) one (customary laws) based on the customs and traditions of the people in a particular

community which operates at the local government level only. Thus, in governance, Nigeria is not a secular society (like the U.S.), but a multi-religious one.

Death is always placed within a perspective, be it philosophical or religious, but most times religious in Nigeria and elsewhere. Religion can be thought of as a cultural system of meaning because it helps to provide answers to the problems of uncertainty, powerlessness, and scarcity that death creates. Funeral rituals, evolved to acknowledge this phase of life, have a religious quality to them (e.g., Leming & Dickinson, 1994). Therefore, in placing death within a religious perspective, the bereaved person finds meaning for an event that for most people is inexplicable. For example, why should a 5 year old die instead of the 50 year old? It doesn't make logical sense, but perhaps it does from a religious standpoint. Because of Nigeria's triple heritage of Christianity, Islam, and Traditional religion death rituals are therefore varied and so are the mourning practices of the people.

Prevalent Causes of Death in Africa

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) report (1999), the leading cause of death in Africa is HIV/AIDS (19%) followed by acute respiratory diseases like flu or bronchitis (8.2%), and diarrhea (7.6%). By contrast, the leading cause of death in the Americas and Europe is heart disease (which ranks 9th in Africa). The second leading cause of death is cerebro-vascular disease (which ranks 7th in Africa).

Quite interesting is the difference in the leading causes of death in Africa on the one hand, and in the Americas/Europe on the other. Whereas in Africa the diseases have visible symptoms, in the Americas and Europe the diseases do not have visible symptoms.

Since the United Nations (UN) only keeps records of reported cases, the extent to which diseases that do not have visible symptoms (e.g., heart disease and cerebro-vascular disease) account for deaths in Africa, is unknown. Usually diseases without visible symptoms are detected during physician visits. Due to poor medical facilities or to cultural health-seeking behaviors directed toward seeking help from traditional healers, perhaps these diseases go undetected until they cause fatality. Too often in obituary notices, the cause of death is reported as resulting from "a brief illness". Often times loved ones report that the death came as a surprise to them because the deceased had looked healthy prior to death. Thus because the symptoms of heart disease and cerebro-vascular disease are not visible, more attention seems to be paid only to those diseases with visible symptoms that cause death like HIV/AIDS, flu or bronchitis, and diarrhea. Yet heart disease and cerebro-vascular disease might account for a large proportion of the death that occurs in the developing world.

Preparation for Death

The preparation for death could be either formal or informal. In societies where there is a strong entrenchment of the rule of law, the legal dimension to death is very important. In such societies preparation for death is usually done in a formal way. Some of the formal

ways people prepare for death include buying a life insurance policy, drafting a Will, or having a Living Will. A life insurance policy stipulates a certain amount of money to be paid by the insurance company to the beneficiaries named in the policy, upon the death of the policy-holder. Usually the spouse (if the deceased was married) and children are the beneficiaries. This is one way to ensure that, in the event of death, the immediate family members are cared for financially.

A legal will allows a person to state how the estate is to be dispersed upon death. An appointed executor oversees the dispersion of all assets and payment of debts. Another formal legal document is a living will that allows a person to give specific directives to terminate his life should "extra-ordinary" means be taken to extend it. Sometimes an individual gives another person the right to make such decisions on her/his behalf. When this happens, the person with the right to make decisions on behalf of another person is said to have a durable power of attorney.

All these legal measures taken in preparation for death are seen in most Western societies because of their high level of adherence to the rule of law, and the need to protect their individualist values even in the grave! For many individuals however these formal preparations remind them of death and would rather not be reminded of it. Therefore, formal preparation for death only occurs when they go through the dying process. The dying process, unlike sudden death, allows for time to take care of unfinished businesses.

As mentioned earlier, with Nigeria governed by the military for most of her post-independence era, the rule of law is yet to take a proper footing in this country. Thus the legal dimension to death in this country is not as developed as in most Western societies that have enjoyed constitutional democracy for longer periods of time. In addition, when people die from "brief illnesses" they do not have the opportunity to conclude their unfinished businesses, including issues of inheritance.

Cultural Interpretation of Death

I suggest that the cultural interpretation of death is better understood within the frame-work of Nigeria's triple heritage.

Christianity

For most Christians, death is seen as a transition phase to a higher, glorious place called heaven where one is joined with other believers, including loved ones, who have gone ahead. The qualification for entry into heaven is not by one's works on earth but by accepting God's son Jesus Christ as one's savior and redeemer. So there is hope that those who die in Christ will be seen again. It is also because God is sovereign and knows the beginning and end of our lives even before we were born, that the Christian believer can take consolation in his or her beliefs as to why God "allows" the 5 year old to die instead of the 50 year old. God is also a just God who punishes evil. Christian believers

are aware of this, and in the case of the death of their children, are likely to use any of the following three ways to rationalize the death:

1. Reunion-The child is in heaven where parent and dead child will eventually reunite (most frequently used);
2. Reverence-The child's death serves some religious purpose, perhaps as an inspiration for parents to do some good works;
3. Retribution-The child's death is a result of the parents' sin.

Islam

People of the Islamic faith believe that a person's actions will be judged by Allah (God) after death, and that the Koran (the holy book of the Moslems) specifies behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable to Allah, upon which judgment will be based. Like Christians, Moslems also believe in the sovereignty of God in matters of loss and they seek consolation in the phrase that "Allah giveth and Allah taketh."

Traditional African Belief System

The traditional African belief system is also referred to as ancestor worship. Unlike the Christian and Western ways of thinking, the premise for ancestor worship is based on an understanding that the life course is cyclical and not linear. Those who are dead, though not physically seen, are alive in a different world and can reincarnate in new births. Furthermore, to be in the world of the dead is to have supernatural powers over those in the world of the living. Such powers include the ability to bless or to curse, and to give life or to take life. The adherents of the traditional African belief system actively engage the dead through worship (which could take the form of food, alcoholic drinks, or money sacrifices) and through prayers for blessings and protection. Also when death occurs, divination as to the cause of death is sought from dead ancestors with death causes usually attributed to spiritual elements (witchcraft, offending one's ancestors, or gods) rather than medical or physical reasons.

Quite interestingly, some people adhere to more than one religious belief system. For example some people profess Christianity and believe in a Christian God but still indulge in traditional religious practices. This type of "accommodation" behavior has been described in other non-Western societies. In the islands of the South Pacific, for example, Harmon (1996) reported that traditional paganism continued to prosper despite the people's supposed conversion to Christianity. Whereas Christianity was invoked for public consumption, traditional beliefs still ran deep in all the clans and generations.

But "accommodation" behavior could cause a crisis of meaning in death. If, as a Christian, a person believes that God in his sovereign will allowed a 5 year old to die instead of the 50 year old and, as a traditional religionist, believes that the death of the 5 year old was caused by a neighbor's witchcraft practice, then grieving by this individual becomes complicated.

Coping with Death: The Special Plight of Women

Given the three dominant religious belief systems in Nigeria, in addition to the possibility that people could adhere to more than one religion, coping with the death of a loved one could be complicated, as mentioned earlier. However, personality variables (e.g., previous experiences with death, one's gender), the nature of the death (sudden or not) and availability of social support also intersect with religious beliefs, to affect grief outcomes.

Though religious beliefs and personality characteristics are important variables in coping with the death of a loved one, more salient however is the amount of support one has, especially from family members and friends immediately after death occurs. Social support is also important in the ensuing months and perhaps years to come.

Nigeria, being a collectivist society (Hofstede, 1980), with more people likely to live in multigenerational households (Hashimoto, 1991), one would expect bereaved persons to enjoy adequate social support. However, the plight of widows brings special attention to the contradictions in the traditional social support system in this society, in times of death. Unlike widowers, widows experience inadequate social support.

Types of Marriage and Implications for a Widow's Inheritance

Based on Nigeria's triple heritage, three types of marriages are legally recognized. Statutory marriages (based on the Judeo-Christian legal system) are monogamous. The union occurs between one man and one woman to the exclusion of others. It prescribes a nuclear family model like in Western societies. Upon the death of her husband, and in the absence of a will, the widow is expected to inherit her deceased husband's estate.

Islamic law marriages allow a man to marry up to four wives. In the absence of a will (sometimes wills are not recognized even when there is one) the issue is how to distribute the estate among the wives. There are questions if the estate share should be based on seniority or on the number of children that each wife has?

Customary law marriages (based on the various customary laws by the different ethnic groups in the country) recognize polygamy. In the absence of a will, the same challenge is faced on how to distribute the estate of the deceased among the wives. But in some ethnic groups like the Binis in South-Western Nigeria, the eldest male heir of the deceased inherits the entire estate and then decides how to distribute it among the widows.

In Customary law marriages, widows generally have no right to inheritance but can inherit indirectly through their children or the largesse of their deceased husband's eldest son or relatives. Furthermore, wills that are orally made are honored.

In apparent recognition of their multi-dimensional environment (Eyetsemitan, 2002), some persons marry under both the Statutory law and the Customary law or under both the Islamic law and the Customary law, further compounding the problem of widow inheritance. However, for most Nigerians disputes arising from inheritance are rarely resolved in courts of law. Rather, the intervention of family and community elders (who are males and most likely Traditional religious practitioners) is usually sought. Given their

traditional background, these elders are less favorably disposed to women in inheritance issues.

Disenfranchised Grief

According to Doka (1989), Disenfranchised grief is "the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (p. 4). This type of grief is socially disallowed and unsupported, and is manifested in three primary ways: 1) the relationship is not recognized; 2) the loss is not recognized; and 3) the griever is not recognized.

An example of a relationship that is not recognized is the death of an ex-spouse or a mistress. An example of a loss that is not recognized is the case of a perinatal loss or the loss of a pet. Society minimizes the importance of such events. In some cases the losses are recognized, but the griever is not due to the social stigma attached to the death (e.g., AIDS, suicide).

It appears that none of these three forms of "disenfranchised grief" helps to explain the plight of the Nigerian widow who is recognized as a griever, whose relationship to the deceased is recognized, and whose loss is also recognized. Yet, she lacks social support in her inheritance claims. On the one hand, because her loss is recognized, she is made to participate in funeral rituals (usually more demanding of her than her male counterpart) that includes the shaving of hair, wearing black clothes, staying mostly in-doors, not participating in social activities for a long period of time, and not being able to freely exercise her right to remarry whom she likes. On the other hand she is denied her right to an inheritance she has contributed to as a spouse. In addition, as is the case most times, she is accused of being responsible for her husband's death.

Another type of grief, Stifled grief, which is grief recognized, yet denied its full course by others (Eyetsemitan, 1998) appears more appropriate.

Either disenfranchised grief or stifled grief could lead to complicated grief outcomes. One type of complicated grief outcome that appears appropriate here is Worden's (1991) "Delayed Grief" reaction. Here the person inhibits, suppresses or postpones her grief at the time of loss, but later on it appears as an excessive reaction to a subsequent loss or to other triggering events. There is need to study Nigerian widows for the possibility of delayed grief reactions along with suggestions made for appropriate intervention strategies.

Conclusion

As people become more educated about legal and financial ways to prepare for death, and as they face death due to both chronic and brief illness, there is likely to be more attention given to preparation for death in the future. Death (and dying) has multiple dimensions, including religious, legal, and economic. To understand the cultural interpretation of death in any society, it is important to appreciate the religious practices in that society as well as its legal systems.

The issue of inheritance, an important economic aspect in death, appears to be a by-product of both the religious and legal dimensions of death. In non-Western societies, such as Nigeria, some religious and legal practices continue to place women at an economic disadvantage after the death of their spouses.

It will be hard to change religious practices and beliefs that are unfavorable to women, but one way to bring about change will be to make laws that override current customs and practices. This is beginning to happen in some of Nigeria's Southern states. Women can be educated to understand how to exercise their rights in courts. They can be provided with economic opportunities so they will not be too dependent on their late husband's estate for survival.

Unlike Western societies, the challenge posed to non-Western societies is their multi-dimensional environments (Eyetsemitan, 2002). Aggrieved widows can either seek intervention through the courts of law, or through the courts of the elders in the family or community. Although they have choices, how they exercise their choices (with its implications) will depend on which dimension(s) of their cross-cultural environment influences them the most (see Eyetsemitan, 2002 for details).

The Nigerian experience provides a model for understanding dying and death issues in other non-western societies that share similar historical, political and cultural experiences.

About the Author

Dr. Frank Eyetsemitan, Professor of Psychology at McKendree College, USA was born and educated in Nigeria where he served as a full-time faculty member in the Department of General & Applied Psychology of the University of Jos, Nigeria. He was also a Visiting Associate Professor of Afro-American & African Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor before joining McKendree College in 1991, where he currently teaches a course on Death and Dying. A member of both the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology and the Gerontological Society of America, Dr. Eyetsemitan's publications have appeared in Death Studies and OMEGA: Journal of Death & Dying. Email: feyetsemitan@mckendree .edu

References

Doka, K. (1989). Disenfranchised grief. In K. J. Doka (Ed.), *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow* (pp. 3-11). Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Eyetsemitan, F. (1998). Stifled grief in the workplace. *Death Studies, 22,* 469-479.

Eyetsemitan, F. (2002). Suggestions regarding the cross-cultural environment as context for human development and aging in non-Western cultures. *Psychological Reports, 90,* 823-833.

Harmon, A. B. (1996). Ignoring the missionary position (retention of pre-Christian beliefs in the south sea islands). *New Statesman, 12,* 20-21.

Hashimoto, A. (1991). Living arrangements of the aged in seven developing countries: A preliminary analysis. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology, 6,* 359-381.

Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Leming, M. R., & Dickinson, G. E. (1994). *Understanding dying, death & bereavement.* Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co.

Mazrui, A. (1986). *The Africans: A triple heritage.* New York: Little, Brown & Co and London: BBC.

Worden, J. W. (1991). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner.* New York: Springer.

World Health Organization (1999). The world health report 1999: Making a difference. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/whr/1999/en/whr99_en.pdf.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the difference between dying and death?

2. How do people in Western societies prepare for death and why is it difficult for people in Nigeria (and other non-Western societies) to prepare for death in this same way?

3. What are the top three prevailing causes of death in Africa, and what could be the problem with this UN statistics?

4. In order to appreciate the cultural interpretation of dying and death in any society, explain why it is important to understand the prevailing religious and legal practices in that society.

5. What is the special problem faced by the Nigerian widow and how can this problem be alleviated?