

Destabilization of African Values and Spiritualities in Covid-19 Deaths and Burials in Uganda

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Abstract: The article interrogates how Covid-19 related burials destabilized African traditional spirituality in Uganda. Burial rites are a tapestry that conveys African religious philosophy of life as continuous, and death as a gateway to the spiritual environment, where ancestors reside. Covid-19 destabilized African ritual systems related to deaths. The cry in many African cultures that their dead were buried as dogs is an illustration of the shock, with which Covid-19 destabilized social-cultural systems. Besides overly securitized, burials were done in uncustomary manner. Using the religio-cultural lens of the Bagisu people, the current study is a descriptive analysis of the destabilizing aspects Covid-19 burials and their stigmatizing impact on the African people. The article derives from data obtained through a one-year study—funded by Kyambogo University, Uganda.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the destabilizing of African traditional spirituality and values in Covid-19 related burials in Uganda especially during the first wave. Like the rest of the continent, the country registered both infections and deaths, with far-reaching and enduring results on the economy and mental health (Lemuel et al. 2021, Us-Salam et al. 2023, Katongole, Yaro, and Bukuluki 2021).

Though bitter in reality, death is an inescapable stage in human life circle. To Africans, it is a gateway to the land of ancestors, and to immortality. It is a rite of passage (Kanyike 2022, Mhaka 2014, Ekore and Lanre-Abass 2016, Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014a), and appropriate burial rites is one of the things which the living owe the living-dead (Nweke 2020, Opong 2004, Kehinde 2015). It further serves a mutual purpose of according respect to the deceased and creating harmony with the spiritual realities by avoiding restless spirits from returning to torment the living demanding for a decent burial (Nweke 2020, Mhaka 2014, Ngubane 2019). Despite the similarities in African worldviews about death, distinct differences exist in the way the dead are handled. For instance, while the Baganda of Uganda would keep the body for some days while performing funeral rituals to escort the living (Kisekka 2022), the Igbo of Nigeria buried their dead immediately so as they join their ancestors as quickly as possible (Echema 2010). Some tribes don't receive bodies of people who died from faraway places back home. For instance, in March 2021, some Ethnic tribes in Democratic Republic of the Congo refused to receive remains of 20 people who drowned in Lake Albert while crossing over to Uganda, from the Ugandan police. The Congolese elders argued that their traditions don't allow them to receive and bury people who died from faraway (MonitorReporter2 2021). This is in contrast with tribes like the Xhosa of South Africa who pay more attention to welcoming their dead as a form of uniting the departed with the place of birth irrespective of the time of their demise (BBCReporter 2013).

1.1. Some Notes on Methodology

This paper draws on extracts of testimonies from informants in a semi-structured field research interview, which was funded by Kyambogo University between 2022 and 2023. The study was hinged on the African worldviews on death and life—using the case study of the Bagisu people, and how the Covid-19 protocols related to scientific handling of deaths (among other things) destabilized the African belief system. Communities and families where Covid-19 deaths and burials took place were visited by the research team, especially in the districts of Namisindwa, Bududa, Mbale and Sironko. This paper presents selected extracts from testimonies of the interviews conducted. The selection of the extracts is on the basis that they concisely represented the ambit of concerns raised by the interviewees in regards to customary rituals involving the deceased's body and mourning.

Interviews were largely conducted in local languages—Luganda and Lugisu. In some cases, English was used. All conversations were audio-recorded. The researchers found that semi-structured interviews offered participants the opportunity for further input and explanation of specific cultural rituals related to the treatment and handling of the body and funerals. The semi-structured interview was sectioned into two schedules: 1) questions pertaining to customary burial practices and rituals conducted on the deceased's body in pre-Covid-19 settings; and 2) questions regarding the alterations in the customary burial and funeral practices and rituals as occasioned by Covid-19. Identities of the dead people are presented pseudonymously, and also identities of some respondents who did not consent to having their names appear in this study. Such respondents are coded as informant I, II, III, IV, V, VI and so on.

Analysis of the transcribed data was conducted using a Thematic Content Analysis and Discourse Critical Analysis. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data (Anderson 2007). TCA is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun and Clarke 2012). Once the data had been collected the researchers familiarized with the data through a series of readings and re-readings, and coded the data according to the themes. The Discourse Critical Analysis (DCA) entails studying written or spoken language in relation to its social context (Luo 2019). Its specific focus is on the discursive reproduction of power and control and the resistance against such power domination (Van Dijk 2015). The Covid-19 burial protocols were perceived by insiders as exert of power imposed upon African values, which impacted on the African spirituality. Africans in a variety of ways employed resistance against government Covid-19 burial regulations in various ways.

2. FINDINGS

The field data collected from the participants, present two broad but inter-related themes, i.e. the general role of a dead body in African bereavement and spirituality, and the reality of Covid-19 pandemic in disorganizing African belief systems.

In the first theme, focus is put on the spirituality involved in the context of a body which is clinically certified as dead.

Among the Bagisu, when death is noticed, the family and society have to own or take custody of the dead body. This is done first by:

- Identifying the body and confirming that death has actually occurred.
- Treating and handling the body of the departed.
- Mourning rituals: Conversing with the dead
- Accord the dead an appropriate burial and funeral rites

In the second theme, focus is on Covid-19 and its destabilizing features on African spiritualities in bereavement and burial rituals. Destabilization as a theme in this context was deduced from a critical analysis of the respondents' narratives pertaining their experiences.

Disrespectful: The dead were buried like worthless animals, and not human beings. Victims are treated like criminals

Uncultural: victims were buried with objects that covered their mouths, in polythene bags with belts and strings which restrict free movement of the spirit; Rituals done on dead bodies as per customs like cutting off hairs and ritual wash/bath etc. were not performed.

Estrangement: The dead are buried by strangers, and are buried in a strange way, there were fears of burying wrong dead bodies, or burying right bodies in a wrong style.

Burials cause spiritual disequilibrium between the living and the dead. So often, the angry spirits of the dead come back in dreams to complain about a number of things.

2.1. The Bagisu Worldview of Death and a Dead Body

Much of the Bagisu understanding of the phenomenon of death is shared among other Bantu tribes in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this region, "death is a separation and not annihilation" of life (Itumeleng 2017, 70). The dead separate from the living, but remain part of the social bond of society (Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014b, Asuquo 2011, Jali 2000, Lagat 2017). To the Bagisu, the dead transcend to a spiritual environment of ancestors, commonly called *Bakuka* and *Bakukhu*, literary meaning ancestral fathers and ancestral mothers (Informant1 2022). Furthermore, life is cyclic and not linear. It is the body (*kumubili*) that dies, but the spirit (*kumwoyo*) continues to live in invisible but active form, and are believed to be reborn as new children. Death is not an end to life, but a departure from the living and

entrance to the spiritual space. The dead remain an integral part of family and society as either ancestors or through rebirth and naming, depending on their age and social status (Ogunlaja 2021, Moahi 2023). People who die naturally when elderly join a team of other ancestors, while those who die young remain children in the custody of those who died mature (Informant1 2022).

Furthermore, the living dead are believed to commune with the living. They visit their living relatives at any moment in the course of night or day. They are believed to bless and protect the living families from danger and misfortunes. The living therefore have a religious responsibility and duty of recognizing and venerating these spiritual elements, by making food offerings, libations, and living ethically approved life. The spirits of the dead constitute the realm of ancestors in African traditional religions and spirituality. In the language of Jacob Olupona, some of the ancestral spirits are believed to be equally powerful as deities (Olupona 2014, Chiorazzi 2015). Forgetting about any dead relative can be very dangerous to the family of the living. At all Bagisu rites of passage and other cultural ceremonies like naming and initiation, the *Bakuka* and *Bakukhu* are “invited” to be present and to grace the occasions. This is done through songs, incantations and enchantments. This is a way of ensuring that the candidates being named or initiated are welcomed and accepted in the wholistic community of both the living and the dead (Informant2 2022, Watira 2022, Khamalwa 2022). These rituals are always presided over by senior members of the family or clan, believed to be knowledgeable about the customs, names of departed relatives and invocation skills in speaking in to the ancestral world (Wangusi 2022).

Due to this conceptualization of life and death, the Bagisu people place great value on morally accepted living. Performative ethical aspects like sexual discipline, hospitality, benevolence, justice, production of children, hard-work, charity and community service, etc. are some of the ethical values cherished among the Bagisu (Mafabi 2023). In order to foster continuity of life, child birth attracted esteem in the community. Great emphasis was put on male child births. It is famously believed that when people give birth especially to male children their dead relatives are reborn and named (through the children). A 57-year-old man informed this study with his own family experience. The father of eight (8) children—5 sons and 3 daughters, who opines that:

Every person should strive to produce! To produce especially male children gives security not only in a home but even after death because children will bury you. But as Bagisu, our departed relatives continue to live among the children we produce. I have eight children, and I have named my grandfather (Woniala), my father (Magomu), my mother Namalea, and many others. Male children shall always remain home to continue with the lineage of their parents. They name children after their fathers and mothers. Girls, unfortunately marry to different places. The children they produce are named after the clans within which they are married. (Informant7 2023).

It is disgraceful, among the Bagisu for a mature person to die childless. Such people, though can be buried by their clan members, are scorned. No honorably befitting epitaphs are accorded to them. The thinking that results to this treatment is that the deceased has not contributed to the flourishing/continuity of society, lived selfishly, has left no legacy behind, he/she is infertile, or had social vices that rendered him/her undesirable for procreation. When such people died, their bodies are not brought out through the main entrance of the house for fear that their misfortunes may affect people who will use the same door. A hole was often dug through the wall, by which the body would be removed. Moreover, childless people are buried alone away from the graveyards where other dead are buried. Furthermore, childless people are not named (Informant4 2022, Informant6 2023, Informant7 2023).

The above demonstrates that, people who have lived productively through child birth and responsible living to community are appreciated by their communities. In this cosmological space the handling of the dead body and rituals there involved are illustrious as means of according respect, and offering a befitting send-off to the yonder world; and a protective measure against the fears that the dead would inflict harm on the living in the event that appropriate funeral and burial details are not made.

2.2. The Dead Body

As a popular saying goes, Africans believe by seeing. Reality of death is confirmed when people view the body of the person presumed dead. The news about the death of someone has to be confirmed by people viewing the physical body. The significance of the body in bereavement in African cosmology has been explored by various scholars (Martin et al. 2013, Shia 2011, Posel and Gupta 2009, Biwul

2014, Bernault 2006). What is salient however is the underlying belief that the body has to be (re)viewed to confirm the death. Some of the testimonies from the interview participants, confirm that:

In my culture—the Bagisu, you must see the body. The dead body must be seen, and ascertain that death has actually occurred. I cannot participate in the funeral or mourning rituals on the death of a person I haven't confirmed. That is when I will know so and so is gone... I would have witnessed. (Masika 2022).

And

The body of a dead person remains an important “person” in all our cultural burials and bereavement ceremonies. We cannot conduct the burial rituals without the body or confirming the identity of the dead person. Bodies especially of people who died away from home must be closely examined. It is a serious matter because our burials are not just disposal of organic matter. It is escorting the dead and doing our cultural protocols to ensure that the dead is welcomed by the ancestors. (Wandawa 2023).

Viewing the dead is part of the African realities of dealing and contending with matters related to death. It confirms that death has happened and informs the responses that are related to the rituals of mourning and burials. In most cases, a dead body is personified. The body is treated as a person who is on the move to the world of the dead. It is thought to have emotions and feelings (Wandawa 2023, Zaidi 2023). For instance, a dead body can be caned in case of suicided deaths (Akinyoade 2020, Mueni 2018), or in the course of transport, travelers transporting the body experience challenges like car breakdown, which is often interpreted as the obstinate refusal by the body to be transported. Dead bodies are believed to hear (although cannot speak), can respond to commands, and can manifest signs of anger or happiness (Zaidi 2023). As part of the mourning, Africans would speak to the dead body. They would also guard it from being ritually manipulated by malevolent people through witchcraft rituals, which can have devastating consequences to the deceased's family. In deaths which happen away from home, or accidental deaths, efforts are made to recover the body and bring it back home. People who drown in water or die due to natural calamities have to be retrieved and accorded appropriate send offs as per the cultural customs. This worldview therefore is not accommodative to alternative forms of burials like cremation, which destroys the body (and partly nuanced with the Christian idea of hell fire after death (Gwisai and Masona 2023, Davies 2017, Orlando 2019)). As part of funeral rituals, the Bagisu people must take hold of the dead body, identify and confirm that death actually happened, and that the dead person is actually the family member. Upon this acknowledgement, appropriate arrangements are made to escort the departed; and both the living and the dead are assumed to be at peace.

2.3. Mourning the Dead

Mourning is always dramatic and performative. It involves communal gatherings, speaking to the dead, viewing and touching the dead body. Women wail and often throw themselves besides the dead body, crying hysterically, while respectably touching and interrogating the dead body: why have you chosen to dissent the family? Why have you gone so early? What did we do wrong to deserve this? etc. Relatives and close family members would further wail and lament:

*[personal name] is annoyed, [personal name] is annoyed,
s/he is not responding...*

My friend has left me... has not said bye to me!

Who will protect me from enemies?

Who will give me food when am hungry?

Who will smile at me? etc.

Mourning takes different forms. Besides the soliloquies and monologues, mourners would often hug each other and cross hands as a symbol of unity and consolation. They would continue crying while moving around the home, the plantations and whole village while calling the name of the deceased (in a symbolic gesture of searching for where the deceased has hidden” (Informant5 2022).

However, if the death happened after a long illness or a very old age, the mourners would sometimes congratulate the deceased and wish him or her farewell. The first lament will be made to inform the community about the death that has occurred, and efforts are invested in appropriate burial rituals for the senior member.

2.4. Handling and Treatment of the Dead Body

Shaving the dead. All the hairs on the dead person's body must be completely shaved, including beards and pubic hairs. This exercise is to be done by the inner members of the family, depending on the gender of the deceased. When asked why the dead must be buried without hairs, one of the respondents informed that haircutting is part of the rites of passage among the Bagisu. It is a transitional ritual—where people cut off of hair as a means of transiting into another stage or phase of life. Hair cutting is not only done to the dead person, but also the family members especially after a senior member of the family has passed on as a symbol of mourning (Informant7 2023). Apart from moments of grieve, hair cutting is practiced during circumcision rituals. During circumcision, candidates to be initiated into adulthood must have their heads and pubic hairs shaved on the day they are to be circumcised, to signal change from childhood to adulthood (Informant7 2023). The practice of haircutting is not exclusive to the Bagisu people. The idea is well rooted in different traditions, although the philosophies and mode of shaving may differ. For instance, the Nupe of central Nigeria shave only male dead bodies (Ademiluka 2009), and among the Yoruba, the widow would not wash or cut off her hair for about three months as a symbol of mourning (Ademiluka 2009). Among the Igbo (Nigeria), the Akan (Ghana) and Xhosa (South Africa), widows, widowers and close family members would shave off their hair, which is disposed ritually (Omotoso 2018, Ademiluka 2009, Itumeleng 2017).

2.5. Washing and Clothing of the Dead Body.

The Bagisu believe that a dead body has to be washed before burial. Body washing is strictly done by close family members depending on the gender of the deceased. Bodies are washed by close relatives of the dead, who are deemed mature enough and expected to exhibit great discipline and respect of the dead. The body is laid on freshly cut banana stems of a particular Banana species called *Lisindalo*. In the past, certain herbs called *naraba* were used like *Datura metel* to wash dead bodies. Some families to day use ordinary toilet soap to wash the body. The idea of body washing is based on the belief that death means departure from earthly life and journey to the world of the living dead, and so, the dead should enter/reach the other world—destination when clean.

After bathing, the dead body is dressed in clean cloths. The cloths are not buttoned or zipped or fastened by a robe. If for any reason this happens, the clothes have to be unbuttoned, unzipped and unfastened before the body is laid into the grave. This is because of the traditional belief that the spirit of the dead needs to be free and not be restricted by buttons, zips or belts in its new environment. The dead who are tied are believed to come back in dreams complaining that they can't move freely. In the event this happens accidentally, the body has to be exhumed and appropriate rituals done, which includes removal of the objects the dead is complaining about.

2.6. Circumcision of the Dead Body

The Bagisu circumcise the dead. If a body of a mature man is discovered uncircumcised, the traditions demand that such a body is circumcised. Similarly, if one of the candidates for circumcision in a particular circumcision year dies suddenly, his body is circumcised. Circumcision of the dead is premised on the belief that the dead is going to meet other dead in the spiritual world. If he goes uncircumcised such a living dead will be discriminated against by the very relatives / forefathers who are supposed to welcome him. Besides, it would become very difficult to name a child after the dead who was not circumcised. Circumcision symbolizes manhood. Among the Bagisu, an uncircumcised individual is not a man but a boy.

2.7. Burial of the Dead

The dead body is buried whole in the grave. Despite the obvious reality that the flesh decomposes, the Bagisu people hold a belief that the deceased needs all the body parts in order to be whole in the spiritual environment. The posture of the dead body in the grave is also a matter of concern: the head is positioned towards the Easterly direction, and faces the right-side. The significance of the Easterly direction is twofold: First, it is the direction of the sun-rise. Sunrise signifies new dawn, and the journey to the spiritual world progresses with the direction of the sun. The sun illuminates the way to the spiritual world. Second, East is the direction of Mount Elgon (Mount Masaba), which is the cradle homeland of the Bagisu people, also known as Bamasaba (people of Masaba). Bodies are buried while dressed and wrapped in clothes. Like in many African cultures, the Bagisu place value to right handedness over left. Right hand is a symbol of strength, cleanness, uprightness and propriety (Wieschhoff 1938, Zverev 2006, Mathias 2017).

Belts and strings are all removed from the dead body before burial. Burial clothes are not zipped or buttoned. This is premised on the belief that strings, robes, belts and buttons impede free movement of the dead in the spiritual world. There are accounts and stories of the dead who complain in dreams to their relatives for being buried with strings or other objects that impair free mobility (Wangusi 2022, Watira 2022).

A grave is believed to be the final home of the deceased. As such, it is made in all ways that make it comfortable for the deceased. In contemporary burials, bodies are buried in accordance to the socio-economic status of the deceased. Wealthy people are buried in expensive coffins, attired in new and expensive clothes, and bodies are laid in cemented, tiled and even roofed graves. In ordinary circumstances, graves are just dug and made of soil; periodically, they are ritualistically weeded by the family members. The grave of a senior family member is prepared within the courtyard or some few meters from the main house. This is to ensure continued presence and membership to the family.

2.8. The Public Gathering

Physical presence of people especially relatives and friends in bereavement is very important. The number of people who attend a particular burial is valued in terms of popularity of the deceased, and possible equal proportion in terms of reception in the spiritual realm. The person who doesn't attend the burial is traditionally viewed as a witch/sorcerer who probably killed the deceased. It is also believed that the dead person takes note of the people who never attended their burials, and would reveal their displeasure in dreams through other people. Upon receiving news of death, relatives and neighbors of the deceased abstain from work, which among other things, include cultivation of fields for some days. They, and Kins located far away would come and participate in the mourning.

Funeral rites don't end with laying the body in the grave. Close members of the family don't disperse. They keep at the funeral home as they conduct other rites. There is burning of the dead person's belongings, and dry banana leaves—commonly called *khukhwosha lusantsa*. The widow has to go through a period of seclusion and cleansing rituals before she reunites with the family. One of the rituals done is to denounce the sexual connection with the dead by having sexual intercourse with a stranger (*khukhala kumusilo*). In doing so, the dead husband would be displeased with her and will have let her alone to begin a new life.

2.9. Covid-19 Burial Protocols

Handling of deaths related to Covid-19 was part of the (inter)national Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in dealing with the pandemic. Other measures put in place (in Uganda) included nationwide lockdown, which restricted movements; curfews, social distancing, ban on social gatherings, shaking of hands and other body related contacts, etc. Disobedience to SOPs was criminalized by the state. All these measures had a profound impact on the African cultural norms and practices especially in contexts of deaths and burials, as shall be discussed later.

According to the ministry of Healthy protocols, annex 5 (MOH 2020) and other international guidelines (Finegan et al. 2020, ICRC 2020), Covid-19 death guidelines begin with the handling of the body once clinically pronounced dead. The body is deemed very contagious, and can only be handled and treated by a specialized team of people called body handlers. Body handler refers to any individual with specialized training, knowledge and skills to handle and dispose human remains in ways that protect other humans (Baller, Coninx, and Eamer 2020). In the context of Uganda, Covid-19 related dead bodies and burials were managed by ministry of health officials, supported by the law enforcers like Uganda police and the Army. As part of body treatment, all cavities in the body such as ear holes, nose, the mouth, anus and vagina openings (in case of women) are to be covered and padded with cotton to prevent discharge of body liquids. The body was then kept in appropriate clothes, wrapped in a double layer polyethene bags and placed in a sealed coffin. No family member was allowed to attend to or touch the dead body during this process. The coffin was sprayed with a chemical disinfectant before transportation to the burial place.

At the burial place, the body was not allowed to be brought into the house of the deceased (funeral home). The body would arrive after the grave had already been prepared by the burial team from the ministry of health, that would have arrived earlier to prepare the grave. No body was allowed to come closer to the coffin or view the body. The coffin was not to be re-opened once the body has been placed inside. No one was allowed to touch or kiss the body, and no funeral ceremonies would be conducted

(WHO 2020). At the grave, few family members were allowed to witness the burial from a far with due respect to other SOPs. Adults of over 60 years of age were discouraged from appearing at the burial site (MOH 2020, WHO 2020). Appropriate religious ceremony would be conducted—but customized to suit the SOPs. After the burial, people were expected to disperse and not gather at the funeral home to support the bereaved family. This was further self-regulated by the stigma, that the family of the deceased is infected with the virus.

To reiterate, the gist of this article is to examine how covid-19 protocols destabilized African values and spiritualities. It should be emphasized that for the Bagisu, death is not the end of life and that the dead become spiritual beings like ancestors and other spirits. Some testimonies gathered from the field data revealed disturbing imaginations about the Covid-19 deaths and burials:

Mzee [Dan] was a famous man here in Mbale. He died of Covid-19 and was buried quietly here in Namabasa. ...you couldn't tell if they were burying a human being or a beast! The whole place was silent. Just a group of white veiled men managed the burial. I prayed so much to God never to be die of Corona! Oh my God, he was buried badly (Zaidi 2023).

In the related testimony:

..... they brought her body from Mbale in an ambulance..., escorted with four (4) armed police men. Nobody was allowed to even come closer to the vehicle. The grave had already been prepared, and as soon as the body arrived, they hurriedly buried. The burial was conducted by some people, veiled in white from head to toe. Totally unrecognizable. They spoke English, Luganda and Lugisu language. I think they came from Mbale town. No one could even identify them. These men, together with their policemen who were also masked were very rude to the whole village, even the deceased's children could not view their mother's body. They red-tapped the grave areas as a danger zone. She was buried typically like a dog or any other animal that didn't have value at all. I have never seen such a thing before. It has taken me time to believe that she is dead. Sometimes I doubt if truly she is the one whose body was buried or simply an empty coffin. If you have ever had a dream of a funeral without a dead body or a wedding but you cannot see the bride(groom), that is the reality I have had to go through. It is as if it was a dream..... But as if that was not enough: We were deserted by the neighbors, relatives and friends. We were condemned. The reproach of rejection became profoundly felt amidst the grief even months after the burial. Children couldn't play with others. [she] died a bad death. Her death was mourned less as though she was criminal. I am sure she must have received no reception in the spirit world (Wepukhulu 2022).

In the testimonies and many others, Covid-19 deaths and burials presented challenging and destabilizing features in African traditional tapestry of life, death and spirituality. In general terms, and on a lighter note, the Covid-19 dead were not accorded proper burials according to the customary standards. It is an African belief that a proper burial enables the deceased to become an ancestor and live in peace, and that wrong burials cause the spirit to return and haunt the community (Baloyi 2014, 5). But these burials made African people have a deeper reflection on what Covid-19 is. In one of the testimonies above, the respondent's assertion that "I prayed so much to God never to be die of Corona!" conveys the idea that to die of Covid-19, is to die a bad death. It is bad deaths that attract bad burials (van der Geest 2004, Agbuku 2022, Adinkrah 2022). Bad deaths and subsequent bad burials are associated with condemned people—condemned by either society or deities. For instance, suicide cases in contexts where suicide is tabooed (K.E Obasola and Omamia 2016, Mueni 2018, Onger et al. 2022, Nkatini and Buqa 2021); death from HIV/AIDS due to the stigma associated with the disease (Nzioka 2000, Kiš 2008, Piot 2000, Alonzo and Reynolds 1995). Further to that, the reproach of bad death in African imaginations, follows the dead even after burial, by either interfering with the journey to the world and community of the dead or impairing the process of metamorphosing to ancestorhood. In relation to the scientific Covid-19 burials, one Mulonzi asked: "How could the spirit of the dead be reached and engaged when it is so trapped? Can the spirit be able to escape its 'plastic prison' and join the ancestors, or remain locked in captivity?" (Okoth 2022).

The expression "buried like a dog" is not special to only Bagisu people. It is a simile which applies to bad burials in many African cultures. In Chinua Achebe's, *Obierika*, in reference to Okonkwo exclaimed: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia... and now he will be buried like a dog" (Achebe 1994, 197), because Okonkwo committed suicide, which was a cowardly and bad way to die among the Igbo people of Nigeria. Dogs don't normally have burial rites and ceremonies. In most cases,

they are buried just to save society of the bad smell that would come from decomposing flesh. According to Casey Golomski whose works are on funerals in Eswatini formerly Swaziland, to be buried like an animal refers to undignified burials, burials which are not in accordance to the Swazi customs. A dignified funeral is one which is well organized and well attended by the kith and kins of the deceased and his/her family. It is one prepared by the family members according to the Swazi customs. In contrast, an undignified funeral is one where the deceased is buried like a pauper, disowned by the family and organized by the state (Golomski 2018). Golomski further connects the idea of dignified burials to the African concept of humanity-*ubuntu* in which human beings draw their identities and dignity in relationship with other community members. In this case, the community, as earlier expressed, constitute not only the living but also the living dead with whom the living ought to establish and maintain peaceful relationship. Accordingly, a human person is to be buried with dignity irrespective of the cause of death or the socio-economic status (Golomski 2018).

It is instructive to note that appropriate burials are meant to ensure a continued connection between the living and the living dead. The burial of animals such as dogs is done in a way that is different from humans, because unlike animals, humans are still expected to be connected. This takes the African *ubuntu* to another level as articulated by Lesiba Baloyi: *ubuntu* refers to quality of being-with-and-for-the-others life. This extends beyond the physical space and include the relationship with the living dead. In living the spirituality of *Ubuntu*, the living dead have a role to play for the benefit of the living. They perform roles such as sustaining family integration, and protection. Death cannot therefore fully be understood outside the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* is inextricably linked to the living dead even in the sharing of meals during funerals. In fact, providing food to the masses of people who come to the funeral including slaughtering an animal is an *Ubuntu* philosophy imperative. The process of burying the dead, the accompanying rituals and the veneration of the living dead constitute performances and conversations as authentic (Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014a). Therefore, to be buried like a human being is to be buried ceremonially, with appropriate rites that take days.

From the field testimonies, in Covid-19 deaths burials disrupted African philosophies of life and death. In these burials, the dead were buried in non-Bagisu and foreign demeanor. According to the respondents, the dead were buried like animals, not humans; they were buried like criminals; they were buried by foreigners (white veiled men—from head to toe, unidentifiable people, who even spoke a foreign language to community members); the bodies were not viewed and inspected to confirm the death. The protocols did not allow families to take custody of their deceased members' bodies in conformity with the customs. It is no wonder that to some family members, the reality of death and burial of their family members has remained an imagination and dream.

Among the Bagisu, and also elsewhere, there were cases of the local people overpowering the security forces and managed burials of their dead. Wanja Samuel in an interview recalls of an incident that took place in Bubita sub-county (Bududa District), in which local people took control of a body of a youthful victim who succumbed to Covid-19 death, from the professional body handlers and the police. Despite the security efforts to disperse the local people by shooting in air, the local people were determined to open the coffin and view the body of their clan member. The body had been brought from Mbale, where the victim was living before his death (Wanja 2022). These incidents were sporadically manifested in other parts of Uganda according to the media reports. For instance, during the burial of a 54-year-old man at Bunyiswa, Bwera Sub County in Kasese district, (Western Uganda), the “crowd stopped the team from lowering the casket into the grave and instead took it back to the house for public viewing in contravention of agreed COVID-19 burial protocols. Before this, the community demanded to confirm if the coffin indeed contained Kabwangana’s remains” (URN-Reporter 2021).

There are numerous accounts of locals exhuming bodies of Covid-19 victims. In Budaka district, a Covid-19 burials were exhumed by the locals at night, who claimed that “the spirits of their deceased relatives harass them at night, demanding decent burial in accordance with their stipulated rituals” (Seebe 2021). The spirits of the dead were also reportedly complaining about too much heat that resulted from the polythene bags—in which their bodies were buried (Seebe 2021). The same case was in Buikwe district in Central Uganda, where bodies were exhumed by the local people with the objective of giving the dead proper burials after customary rituals are performed like cutting of hair and ensuring an appropriate posture in the grave (Kissa 2021). In the neighboring Kenya, the events took a legal twist when the family of late Onyango took the case to court demanding that the body of James Onyango, who had died of Covid-19 be exhumed for appropriate burials. Among other things, the family claimed

that Ministry of health officials denied them custody of the body, the body was buried in a polythene bag, the body was hurried buried moreover at night in an improperly dug grave—while a battalion of police surrounded the family house. The relatives argued that the Mr. Onyango was buried like a stray dog, and demanded that court allows for the exhumation so that Onyango is offered a dignified burial in accordance to the customary funeral and burial practices of the Luo people (Rickard 2020). Although the family lost the case, this article finds relevance in their submissions and argument—as representative of African philosophies of life and death. Covid-19 burials in African philosophical thoughts caused spiritual disequilibrium. The burials were inadequate in maintaining the African tapestry of the journey of life. Exhumation of bodies, as Bank and Sharpley would argue in the context of rural South African communities, is to restore dignity and spiritual security for both the living and the dead (Bank; and Sharpley 2022).

3. CONCLUSION

It appears undeniably that covid-19 was not only a pandemic that inflicted grievous deaths and suffering to humanity but also instituted conditions that were insensitive to African experiences of death and life. As the Bagisu of Uganda context reveals, Covid-19 occasioned bad deaths, and resultant absence of proper burial and funeral ritual. The strict application of the Covid-19 SOPs during the burial of Covid-19 victims with little or no consideration of communities' religio-cultural sensitivities about life and death was tragic not only to the dead but also to the living. It was a foreign influenza, which did not leave Africans with any clue of how to contain its spread within the religio-cultural space of African people especially in respect to the phenomenon of life and death. It should be noted that from the African worldview, deaths and burials are part of life transitions that have particular rituals that must be strictly followed. From this perspective, the reality of Covid-19 and the SOPs seems unimaginable in the African belief system where death is not the end of life, but a gateway to continuity of life in another realm. The irreconcilable Covid-19 with the belief systems concerning life and death in African cosmology estranged the Bagisu people from their norms—both the living and the dead alike. It left expressions like “burial the Corona Style” or “burial the Chinese style” as alternatives to “buried like a dog” to denote undignified deaths and burials.

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