



Transitional Home in Perspective: A Critical Overview of Burial Practices and Grave Construction among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria

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Abstract: Throughout history, the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria have viewed death as a transition from one form of existence to another. This belief underscores the importance of constructing elaborate structures to house their dead, providing for their needs during their 'everlasting sleep,' which is believed to last for centuries or even millennia. The deceased were often interred with various goods, signifying their social status within the community. The advent of Islam introduced clear and uniform guidelines for the disposal of the dead and other funeral practices. However, significant personalities in society continue to have their 'transitional homes' elaborately built. These 'transitional homes' are well-maintained, featuring plants and trees, and receiving regular upkeep. They are considered an integral part of the human community. This paper examines the belief system, funeral practices, and grave construction among the Hausa people to understand how these elements influence the conception of a 'transitional home' for the dead. The study draws on extensive literature reviews, observations, and discussions with cemetery custodians. This approach aims to illuminate the notion that transitional homes are seen as part of the human community, necessitating construction, frequent visits, protection, and care.

Keywords: Cemetery, Death, Funeral, Hausa, Islam, Transitional home, Northern Nigeria.

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Review Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The certainty of death for all living beings, including humans, has led to the development of funeral practices and procedures in every culture. The variations in these practices between communities are often rooted in deep conceptual and faith-based differences. Some societies practice abandonment, river discards, and fire-burials (Gundu, 2012, p.27). However, most human societies build structures to house their dead, reflecting their underlying ideas and aspirations (Gundu, 1988, p.88).

In Hausaland, from the pre-Islamic period to the post-Islamic era, burial facilities have traditionally been viewed as temporary sojourns for the deceased before reaching their final abode. This belief underpins the concept of the 'transitional home.' Hausaland refers to the region where Hausa culture predominates. According to Adamu (2010), aligned with Smith's (1976) geographical definition, Hausaland stretches from Azbin in the Air mountain area in the north to just south of Kufena and Turunku in Zazzau in the south, and from the

middle of the Niger Valley in the west to the eastern boundaries of the Niger Republic and Northern Nigeria in the east (Adamu, 2010, p.15).

Before Islamic contact, the Iskoki belief system, which involved the worship of various spirits of natural phenomena, was the foundation of the social and political order in Hausaland. The advent of Islam introduced a new religious belief system, which, alongside the traditional Iskoki beliefs, continued to shape the societies in the region (Augi, 1984, p.225).

Burial Buildings

The Hausa people believe that the concept of building applies both in life and in death. Even with the advent of Islam, death is still seen as a mere transition from one form of existence to another. This belief influenced pre-Islamic burial practices in Hausaland, where the deceased were buried in sub-surface rectangular graves accompanied by various goods such as Guinea corn, salt, narrow-necked calabash containers (Goruna) filled with wine, bows and arrows, knives,

cowries, and more, with the belief that these items would help the deceased acclimate to their new environment (Ibrahim, 1982, p.238).

Research on Hausa culture in communities that have not fully embraced Islamic practices indicates a lack of standardized burial orientations or specific directions for the deceased. Burial practices vary based on the size and nature of the burial site, with reports of horizontal and vertical graves where bodies are either standing or lying on their sides (Sarkin Sudan, p.329 & notes). Similar practices have been observed among neighbors of Hausaland, such as the Kamuku, Dakarkari, and Katab, who have not wholly adopted Islamic burial practices (Meek, 1931, p.74; Mansur, 2010, p.87).

Ethnographic studies by Meek and Temple show that pre-Islamic Hausa graves were often shaped like an inverted "T," three to six feet deep. The corpse would be passed through a narrow, well-like opening and laid at the bottom on its side—women on their left facing west and men on their right facing east—then enclosed with a large flat stone and covered with earth (Temple, 1965, p.91; Meek, 1971, p.122). Meek also noted that ancient Hausa kings of Gobir, Daura, and Katsina were buried in a sitting position, a view corroborated by Palmer's excavation at Durbi ta-Kusheyi in Katsina, where earlier kings were interred in sitting or kneeling positions (Palmer, 1922).

Regarding burial sites, Sarkin Sudan (2008) found that non-Islamized Hausa communities do not have specific cemeteries, driven by fear that cultists or enemies might exhume the body for spiritual harm. Adults over 40 are typically buried inside their living rooms, with the floor often disguised to conceal the burial spot, while younger individuals are buried in their backyard or farms (p.327-328). Graves are dug deep and wide, reaching the waist of an average-sized adult, and after the body is laid to rest, it is covered with wood, grass, or ceramic materials before being filled with earth (p.329). Post-burial, animals such as rams and goats are slaughtered over the grave, with the meat shared to show love and respect for the deceased (p.331).

The Coming of Islam into Hausaland

Islam reached Hausaland through trade contacts with North Africa and the Kanem Bornu Empire, a neighboring region with strong political, cultural, and economic ties. Islam was present in Kanem Bornu as early as the 8th century A.D. Additionally, the efforts of Wangarawa, Fulani, and Kunta Muslim migrants and scholars significantly contributed to the spread and consolidation of Islam in Hausaland. Bunza (2014), quoting M.A. Alhaj, states that:

The Wangarawa came from Malle bringing Muhammedan religion. The name of their leader was Abdulrahman Zaitte. Shayk Abdulrahman Zaitte whose original intention was to perform pilgrimage was accompanied on

his journey by very large contingent of followers including about 3,636 erudite scholars. When in Hausaland the Wangarawa first passed the lands of Gobir, Azben and Katsina before they finally settled in Kano. Some followers close to Abdulrahman chose to settle in Gobir and Katsina for one reason or another. (Bunza, 2014 p.11)

The city-states of Katsina and Kano were among the earliest parts of Hausaland to come under Islamic influence. Katsina, situated along the trade route from Timbuktu to Borno and down to Egypt, experienced significant Islamic influence during the reign of Muhammadu Korau in the second half of the 15th century, marking a peak in the Islamization of the kingdom (Ubah, 2001, p.169). His successor, Ibrahim Sura (1493-1498), was an active Muslim. In Kano, the first ruler to accept Islam was Sarkin Kano Yaji (1349-1385 A.D). Following him, Muhammad Rumfa, described by Smith as a Mujaddid (reformer and developer of Islamic society), sought guidance from the internationally renowned scholar Muhammad bn Abdul-Karim al-Maghili on ruling in accordance with Islamic law, resulting in al-Maghili writing a treatise on governance for Rumfa (Smith, 1976, p.190, p.192).

Islam continued to spread to other areas of Hausaland, including Zazzau, Kabi, and Gobir. In Kebbi, Muhammad Kanta (1516-1554 A.D) and some of his chiefs embraced Islam (Balogun, 1980, p.216). By the end of the 15th century, Islam had become institutionalized, with the practice of its tenets widespread throughout Hausaland.

The Impact of Islam

Islam is a comprehensive way of life that regulates all aspects of a faithful person's existence, including economic, social, political, and cultural spheres. Its introduction to Hausaland significantly influenced the traditional life of the people, affecting their norms, values, arts, crafts, social organization, political life, and architectural and space planning practices.

Islam introduced standardized burial facilities and practices, common to everyone regardless of socio-economic or political status. Graves are typically sized to fit the body, as Islam prohibits grave goods. The deceased are usually buried in graveyards, with home burials permitted only in specific cases. Despite Islam's long history in Hausaland, the old practice of burying the dead at the back of rooms or houses continues. Bawa (2011) notes that even in Sokoto, the headquarters of the 19th-century Islamic revolution in Hausaland, the first Muslim public graveyard was established only in the 20th century due to the 1963/64 sectarian crisis (Bawa, 2011, p.11). Prior to this, the only cemeteries were for those who died in Sokoto Hospital without relatives in town and a European cemetery for service personnel and

auxiliary members who died during the World Wars (Bawa, p.17). Efforts in 1945 to establish public burial grounds through a circular from the Secretary to Northern Provinces were unsuccessful (Med/30, no.150/1945).

Islamic influence introduced three funeral rites before burial: washing the body, shrouding, and prayers. The body is washed in three, five, or seven cycles using warm water with ground leaves of Magarya (*Zizyphus mauritania*) or soap, and scented to ward off odors. The body is then shrouded in plain, thick sheets, preferably white, and perfumed with incense (Jibali, pp.96 & 110-111). The shrouded body is placed on a bier (Amuku/makara) and carried to the prayer site. Prayers are conducted in an open space with the Imam standing opposite the shoulders of a female or the middle of a male, with the head on his right side facing east toward the Qibla (the sacred Mosque in Mecca), while worshippers line up behind in rows (Madauci *et al.*, p.24). After prayers, the body is escorted to the burial site by the community to honor the deceased (Jibali, pp.130-133).

Burial grounds are usually allocated by authorities or donated as charity (Sadaqa) by community members. Grave digging tools and materials are provided by individuals or through communal effort (Gayya). Two methods of grave construction are used: Lahad and Shaqq, with Lahad being the preferred method in Hausaland. Lahad involves digging a rectangular grave with another hole under the eastern side for the body, which is laid on its right side with the head south and face east toward the Qibla. In cases of mass deaths, multiple bodies may be buried in a single grave (Muhammad, p.214). The grave is covered with wood or broken pots, then branches or thatches, and finally mounded with soil to prevent it from being flat (Madauci *et al.*, p.250). After burial, prayers are recited for the deceased before the mourners return home to receive condolences (Jibali, p.229).

Cemetery as Home

The Islamic conception of death views the grave as a transitional phase between earthly life and the Day of Resurrection, when all will be raised for final judgment and rewarded or punished for their actions on Earth. This period is often referred to as Barzakh, a waiting place. The Qur'an captures this belief succinctly: "From it (earth) did We create you and unto it shall We return you. And from it shall We bring you out once again" (Qur'an 20:55). This verse signifies that the cemetery serves as a temporary home for the dead, awaiting resurrection and judgment.

Inside the grave, it is believed that life is temporarily restored to the deceased, who is then subjected to questioning about their faith. A saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad explains this belief:

"When a person is placed in the grave after his death, and when his family members and friends leave the grave, the dead person can hear the steps of the leaving crowd. Two Angels come to the person in the grave, they will make him sit up and they will ask him questions concerning his faith. If the Angels found him to be a hypocrite or a non-believer, they will beat him with iron rods. He will cry so much that everything in the universe except Jinn and human beings will hear his crying" (Imtaz Ahmad, pp. 33-34).

The cemetery becomes a place where family members, friends, and well-wishers visit and supplicate for the deceased. Entry into the cemetery is done with respect, and visitors usually greet the inhabitants of the place. The traditional greeting is: "Peace be upon you, the dwellers of believing folks. Certainly, we will follow you when Allah wills. O Allah, forgive the dwellers of this cemetery" (p. 258).

Graveyards of important personalities, such as 19th-century Jihad leaders and later political figures, are well-maintained in simple buildings. Examples include the tombs of Shehu Usman Danfodiyo in Sokoto, Abdullahi bn. Fodiyo in Gwandu, Caliph Muhammadu Bello in Wurno, Ibn al-Sabbag (Dan Marina) and Ibn Takum in Katsina, and Malam Aminu Kano in Mumbayya House, Kano. These graves are often located inside their residences and are marked by clean sand, simple buildings, and sometimes religious inscriptions.

The practice of burying notable figures inside their homes may be influenced by the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, who was buried in his house where he died, or it may be a measure to protect the bodies from desecration. This is a matter for Muslim jurists to decide. However, these graves are typically separated into built spaces for reverence and easy identification, becoming important religious or political centers that attract pilgrims and tourists.

For example, Shehu Usman Danfodiyo's tomb is inside his personal house in a small square room decorated with black cloth bearing Arabic inscriptions. The graves of two of his sons, Hassan Dan Shehu and Sambo, are also in this room, which has small openings in the walls. The room contains a calabash jug (Shantali) that the Shehu used for water. The compound also includes the Shehu's school (Jangirde), where he taught students from various regions. The cemetery (Hubbare) is a revered site where pilgrims from Nigeria and neighboring countries come for blessings and prayers. It has become a public cemetery where several Sultans and prominent scholars are buried.

The overseer of Hubbare (Mai budin Hubbare) holds the key to the site, guides visitors, and reports any issues to the Sultanate council (Bawa, p. 16). The

custodian is assisted by guards to maintain the site's sanctity and order.

Relevance and Significance of Home for the Dead

A cemetery provides a hygienically safe and dignified way of disposing of corpses. The depth of the grave and the manner in which it is constructed prevent discomfort to the living from odor or the spread of diseases through wind or rainwater runoff resulting from improper burial. Additionally, it protects the human body from animal carnivores that could destroy the corpse, which would negatively impact human dignity and security.

In many parts of Hausaland, cemeteries are fenced with walls for security reasons. Wells are often constructed within the cemetery to provide water during grave building. Trees, particularly neem trees, are planted within the perimeter of the cemetery walls because they provide important roofing materials for the graves.

The cemetery is a place meant to revere the dead. It is usually well-maintained with trees, and attendants are assigned to oversee its upkeep. When major maintenance work is needed, attendants inform community leaders who mobilize members to assist. There is a belief in Hausaland that neglecting cemetery maintenance can bring calamities upon the community. In some areas, local or state governments, through the Ministries of Religious Affairs or organizations like the Hisbah, take responsibility for cemetery maintenance. For example, the Jigawa State government recently allocated 1.4 billion Naira for the construction and renovation of mosques and the fencing of graveyards across the state (Vanguardngr.com). Similarly, on May 2, 2024, the Sokoto State executive council approved the construction of drainage systems at Tudun Wada cemetery to prevent gully erosion (Vision FM News, 14-03-2024).

The cemetery is regarded as part of the human community, reflected in the greeting when entering the cemetery gate: "Peace be upon you, the home of the community of believers." This phrase underscores the belief that the living will eventually join the deceased. Thus, the cemetery is highly revered, and the entire community considers it their responsibility to care for it. In Hausa parlance, it is often referred to as "Gidan Gaskiya" (the true home), in contrast to life on earth, which is seen as transitory and deceitful. Members of the community, including relatives, friends, and well-wishers, have a place to visit and supplicate for their deceased loved ones.

CONCLUSION

Since time immemorial, the Hausa people have considered the cemetery to be a transitional home for their deceased, reflecting their belief that death is not the end of human existence. This perspective underpins the

various rituals associated with death and the special construction, maintenance, and honoring of graves with visitations and prayers. Visiting the graves, particularly those of revered religious leaders, is believed to be a means of obtaining favors from God. The cemetery is indeed regarded as an integral part of the living community, preserved and jealously guarded against incursion by any unwanted elements.

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