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Significance and Misconceptions about Burial Rites in Islam and Christianity: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract
Burial rites occupy a central place in Islam and Christianity, yet popular understanding of them is often clouded by cultural assumptions and by generalisations that ignore internal diversity. This study examines how theological teaching and lived practice diverge, within and between the two traditions, in religiously plural Nigeria. It compares the theological significance, ritual practice, and common misconceptions surrounding burial in Islam and Christianity, and interprets the ritual sequence through Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage (separation, transition, and incorporation). The research is qualitative and phenomenological. Documentary analysis of the Qur'an, hadith, the Bible, church documents and scholarly literature is combined with oral evidence from three Muslim scholars (Sunni, Sufi and Salafi) and three Christian clergy (Deeper Life, Redeemed Christian Church of God and Cherubim and Seraphim), gathered through an online questionnaire, WhatsApp and in-person discussion on 5 June 2026. The Muslim informants agreed on the core rites but differed over women at the graveside, post-burial gatherings and intercession. The Christian informants rejected cremation and accepted embalming, but differed over viewing, ceremony and cost. Documentary sources show that Shi'a, Catholic and Orthodox practice differs further. Several widely held assumptions about women's attendance, funeral cost, burial timing and cremation prove to be contested or dependent on the group. The study recommends interfaith literacy training for chaplains, funeral service providers and religious educators.

Keywords: Burial rites; Islam; Christianity; Rites of passage; Comparative religion

Introduction

Death is a universal human experience, but the manner in which the dead are washed, wrapped, mourned and returned to the earth is shaped decisively by religious conviction. In Nigeria, Islam and Christianity are the two dominant religious traditions. Because no census has recorded religious identification since 1963, the exact proportions remain contested, yet national surveys consistently show Christians and Muslims forming the two largest blocs, in roughly comparable numbers, with the Muslim share rising (McKinnon, 2021). In both traditions, burial is not treated as a private or discretionary matter. Islamic law counts the washing, shrouding, prayer and burial of a Muslim as a communal duty ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.), and Christian churches conduct funerals as liturgical acts of the worshipping community (Marshall and Mosher, 2014).

Yet neither tradition speaks with a single voice. Within Islam, Sunni and Shi'a jurists agree that the funeral prayer is a communal duty but differ over its form, for example in the number of *takbir* (the utterance "Allahu Akbar") ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.). Within Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church prohibited cremation for much of its history and permitted it in 1963 (Holy Office, 1963), while Eastern Orthodox teaching remains restrictive (Preble, 2010). Local custom adds a further layer. A study of Yoruba Muslims in south-western Nigeria found that some post-funerary gatherings called *al-fida'* depart from orthodox teaching and may reflect the influence of African Traditional Religion (Noibi, 2012). These examples show that adherents' practice can diverge from their own tradition's teaching. Whether adherents also hold mistaken beliefs about the other tradition's practice is a plausible but untested premise, and this study treats it as a question to be examined and not as a fact.

This paper therefore undertakes a comparative analysis of burial rites in Islam and Christianity with three aims: first, to set out the theological significance and ritual practice of burial in each tradition, paying attention to differences among sects and denominations; second, to identify and examine common assumptions about each tradition, distinguishing what scripture teaches, what jurists and churches have decided, and what local custom adds; and third, to account for the pattern of convergence and divergence through a coherent theoretical framework, namely Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage.

The study matters in Nigeria for practical reasons. Interfaith contact in marriage, in the workplace, in universities and in neighbourhoods is routine, and an accurate account of what each tradition requires at the point of death bears directly on how hospitals, mortuaries, employers and neighbours respond when a colleague, a classmate or a member of an interfaith family dies. Public debate also shows that burial customs are contested within communities, as when Nigerians question the cost of elaborate funerals among the Yoruba and Igbo (Vanguard, 2021).

The paper proceeds as follows. The literature review identifies the scholarship on which the study builds and the gap it addresses. The theoretical framework explains how van Gennep's theory is applied. The methodology describes a phenomenologically oriented design that combines documentary analysis with key-informant evidence from Muslim scholars and Christian clergy. Two substantive sections then treat the theological significance and practice of burial in Islam and in Christianity, followed by the findings from the key informants, a section on common assumptions and a discussion that draws the comparison together. The paper closes with a statement of its contribution and a conclusion with recommendations.

Literature Review

Death and Funerary Rites in Comparative Scholarship

The comparative study of funerary ritual rests on van Gennep's (1960) argument that rites marking a change of status share a common structure. His work gave later scholars a vocabulary for comparing funerals across cultures, and it remains the standard starting point for studies of ritual transition. The framework has also drawn criticism and refinement, and van Gennep himself stressed that the three types of rite are not always equally elaborated in particular cases (van Gennep, 1960). Studies that apply it to funerals therefore need to say which elements of a given tradition they treat as separation, transition and incorporation, and why.

Christian–Muslim Scholarship on Death

Interfaith scholarship on death has developed mainly at the level of theology. Marshall and Mosher (2014) edited the record of the 2012 Building Bridges seminar, convened by Rowan Williams, in which Christian and Muslim scholars examined what the Bible, the Qur'an and their theological traditions say about death, resurrection and human destiny. The volume includes dedicated chapters on Muslim and Christian funerals, which show that sustained dialogue on funeral practice is possible and productive. Its approach is nevertheless textual and theological, and it does not examine how the rites are actually performed in particular African settings. Maranatha (2024) offers a conceptual and spiritual comparison of the meaning of death in Islam and Christianity, which again leaves lived funerary practice largely untouched. Smith and Haddad's (2002) classic study of the Islamic understanding of death and resurrection supplies the eschatological background for Islamic rites but does not compare them with Christian practice.

Islamic Funerary Practice and Its Internal Diversity

The central sequence of washing, shrouding, funeral prayer and burial is well documented in the legal and encyclopaedic literature. The *Encyclopaedia Iranica* entry on burial in Islam records that the whole sequence is a communal obligation, that one complete washing is the obligatory minimum while three are recommended, and that the funeral prayer is performed without bowing or prostration ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.). The same entry notes Shi'a distinctives, including a five-*takbir* prayer and particular washing materials, and these differ from the four *takbir* that Sunni jurists generally prescribe. Greenberg (2007) shows that moral, religious, aesthetic, and political considerations have shaped women's participation in funerals

and mourning across Islamic history, so women's position at funerals cannot be reduced to a single rule.

Christian Funerary Practice

Christian funerary practice is documented in official church texts that can be read directly. The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* (Catholic Church, 1983, c. 1176, §3) recommends burial but does not forbid cremation unless it is chosen for reasons contrary to Christian teaching. The earlier instruction *Piam et constantem* (Holy Office, 1963) marked the change from prohibition to permission. The more recent instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF], 2016) addresses the conservation of ashes. Orthodox writers continue to teach a restrictive position, grounded in the conviction that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (Preble, 2010). Documentary evidence on Pentecostal and African Independent Church practice is much thinner, and for these groups the available literature points mainly to the interaction between church life and Yoruba cultural patterns (Adogame, 1998).

Nigerian Studies

Nigerian research on funerals is fragmentary but revealing. Noibi (2012) used key-informant interviews with Yoruba Islamic scholars to compare local *al-fida'* practices with orthodox post-funerary duties. Ben Amara (2011) documents disputes between Sufi and reformist (Izala) groups in northern Nigeria, in which the definition of *bid'ah* (religious innovation) is a central issue. Journalistic commentary records public discomfort with expensive burial ceremonies and notes that, by custom, many Muslims bury on the day of death while some Christians delay the funeral (Vanguard, 2021).

The Gap

This body of work leaves four gaps. First, Islamic and Christian burials are usually studied separately or at a high level of theological generality. Second, many accounts treat each tradition as a single voice and give little weight to internal diversity, which in Nigeria includes Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi and reformist Muslims and Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant, Pentecostal and African Independent Christians. Third, popular assumptions about burial are rarely examined systematically against both texts and practice. Fourth, the voices of the custodians of the rites, the imams and clergy who actually officiate, are largely absent from comparative work. This study addresses these gaps through a comparative design that attends to internal diversity and includes the testimony of a small number of practitioners.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage. Van Gennep, a French ethnographer, first proposed the theory in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), translated into English in 1960. He argued that rites marking a change in an individual's social or existential status, such as birth, initiation, marriage and death, comprise three kinds of rite: rites of separation (preliminal), rites of transition (liminal) and rites of incorporation (postliminal) (van Gennep, 1960). In the case of funerals, the deceased is detached from the world of the living, passes through a threshold period, and is incorporated into a new state, while the mourners undergo a parallel passage from ordinary life through mourning and back to ordinary life.

Two cautions shape how the framework is used here. First, van Gennep says that the three types of rite are not always equally important or elaborated (van Gennep, 1960). His introductory discussion associates funerals with prominent rites of separation, whereas his chapter on funerals (Chapter 8) gives considerable weight to the rites of transition and incorporation, so the weighting of the phases should be treated as an empirical question for each tradition and not assumed in advance. Second, the framework is a heuristic. It organises comparison and directs attention to what each tradition does at each phase, but it does not by itself explain why traditions differ.

Applied to Islam, the rites of separation for the deceased are *ghusl* (ritual washing) and *kafan* (shrouding). The funeral prayer, the procession and the act of burial form the threshold period, and incorporation is expressed in placing the body in the grave, facing the *qiblah* (the direction of prayer), and in the continuing supplication for the dead, with the theological

expectation of *barzakh* (the interval between death and resurrection). For the mourners, the mourning period of three days, and the longer *iddah* (waiting period) of a widow, constitute a formally prescribed transition.

Applied to Christianity, the pattern is recognisable but varies by denomination. The wake or vigil can mark separation, the funeral service (Requiem Mass, memorial service or funeral liturgy) can mark the threshold, and the committal can mark incorporation, whether by burial or, where permitted, cremation. How far a given church elaborates each phase, and who is understood to pass through it, are matters that the documentary and key-informant evidence must establish.

The framework helps to explain why a narrow question, such as cremation, can carry great theological weight. Where a tradition's understanding of incorporation depends on what happens to the physical body, a departure from the expected practice is experienced as a disruption of the passage itself and not as a small variation of custom. The discussion section returns to this point.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, phenomenologically oriented design with two components. The first is documentary analysis of primary religious texts and secondary scholarship. The second is key-informant evidence from Muslim scholars and Christian clergy who officiate at funerals. The design responds to the nature of the subject, which is a living practice carried out differently by different groups. Literature alone cannot show how burial rites are understood and performed by those who officiate, and a study that relied on documents alone would risk presenting assumptions as findings, especially given the internal diversity of both traditions.

Documentary Component

Primary sources are the Qur'an, the major Sunni *hadith* (prophetic report) collections, *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim,* and the Bible. Church documents are read directly, namely the *Code of Canon Law, Piam et Constantem,* and *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*. Secondary sources are peer-reviewed or scholarly works, encyclopaedia entries and, where no scholarly source exists, clearly identified journalistic or clerical statements. Commercial funeral-service websites are not used as authorities. Where a claim is contested, it is checked against more than one source, and where no reliable source could be found, the claim is omitted or flagged as an open question.

Key-Informant Component

Informants. Six key informants took part: three Muslim scholars or imams and three Christian clergy, chosen purposively so that different orientations within each tradition were represented. The Muslim informants were a Sunni scholar, a Sufi scholar and a Salafi scholar, and the Christian informants were clergy of the Deeper Life Bible Church, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) Church. They work in Kwara, Osun and Ondo states. Table 1 summarises the informants. Each speaks as a custodian of his own group's practice and not as a representative of an entire tradition.

Data collection. The informants completed a structured online questionnaire (Google Forms) on the topics listed in Appendices A and B, answered follow-up questions through WhatsApp, and took part in in-person discussions in Ilorin. The exchanges took place on 5 June 2026.

Ethics. The informants were told that their responses were being collected for academic research and agreed to take part. They are cited only as Informants A to F, with their tradition or group and their location, and no names are published. All statements attributed to them in this paper come from these personal communications of 5 June 2026.

Analysis. The responses were organised by topic and compared across informants, within and between the two traditions. They were then set against the documentary evidence, with

attention to the distinction among scriptural teaching, juristic or denominational position, and local custom, and to the phases of van Gennep's framework.

Limitations. Six informants, one for each group, cannot represent either tradition, and their accounts are self-reported. The study offers qualitative insight into local theological positions and not statistical generalisation. No Shi'a, Catholic, Orthodox or historic Protestant informant was included, so for these groups the paper relies on documentary sources alone and says so. The Christian informants all come from Pentecostal or African Independent churches, and the Muslim informants are all Sunni by affiliation, so the findings should not be read as describing "Islam" or "Christianity" as a whole.

Table 1

Key Informants

Informant	Tradition and group	Location	Role
A	Islam, Sunni	Ilorin (Kwara); Osogbo (Osun)	Scholar or imam
B	Islam, Sufi	Iwo (Osun)	Scholar or imam
C	Islam, Salafi	Akure (Ondo); Ilorin (Kwara)	Scholar or imam
D	Christianity, Deeper Life Bible Church	Akure (Ondo); Osogbo (Osun)	Clergy
E	Christianity, Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)	Iwo (Osun)	Clergy
F	Christianity, Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S)	Ilorin (Kwara); Osogbo (Osun)	Clergy

Note. Informants are identified only by letter, tradition or group, and location. Statements are dated 5 June 2026.

Burial Rites in Islam: Theological Significance and Practice

Theological Significance

Islamic burial rests on the premise that death is neither annihilation nor a private family matter. The Qur'an states that every soul will taste death and will be brought back to God for reckoning (Qur'an 3:185, Saheeh International translation), and this view of death as a passage toward accountability shapes the rites that follow. The rites are a *fard kifayah* (communal obligation), a duty that falls on the Muslim community collectively and is discharged when enough members perform it ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.).

The Rites

Four rites structure Islamic burial practice: *ghusl* (ritual washing), *kafan* (shrouding), *salat al-janazah* (funeral prayer) and *dafn* (burial). The sources used here are Sunni unless stated, and points on which the schools differ are noted.

Ghusl (ritual washing) is performed by Muslims of the same sex as the deceased, ideally close relatives. Jurists regard one complete washing as the obligatory minimum and three as recommended ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.). The practice is grounded in a *hadith* in which the Prophet instructed the women washing his daughter to wash her three times, or five, or more if they thought it necessary, and to put camphor in the last washing (Al-Bukhari, n.d., Hadith 1253). Shi'a jurisprudence specifies the substances used in each washing ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.). Martyrs who die in battle are treated as an exception in Sunni law and are buried without washing.

The body is then wrapped in *kafan* (a plain white shroud). Sunni guidance commonly prescribes three sheets for a man and five pieces for a woman, although the details differ among

legal schools and in Shi'a practice. The simplicity of the shroud carries theological meaning. The Prophet himself was shrouded in plain white cotton garments (Al-Bukhari, n.d., Hadith 1264), and the use of an identical plain cloth regardless of the deceased's wealth signals that all believers stand equal before God in death. The shroud is fastened simply, without ornament.

The *salat al-janazah* (funeral prayer) is a communal prayer offered standing, without bowing or prostration ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.). Sunni jurists generally prescribe four *takbir*, whereas Shi'a jurists require five, and the Shi'a prayer includes distinctive supplications ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.). Whether women may attend the prayer or accompany the funeral procession has been treated differently across Islamic history, and the debate has been shaped by moral, religious and political considerations as well as by legal reasoning (Greenberg, 2007). This is therefore a question on which practitioners' accounts are especially important.

The final rite, *dafn* (burial), is marked by haste. The Prophet is reported to have said that the funeral should be hastened, because if the dead person was righteous the funeral sends him toward something good, and if otherwise it removes an evil from one's necks (Al-Bukhari, n.d., Hadith 1315). The body is laid in the grave facing the *qiblah* (the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca), and the grave is to remain plain. The Prophet is reported to have forbidden plastering graves, sitting on them and building over them (Muslim, n.d., Hadith 970). Cremation is not accepted in Islamic practice. Contemporary questions such as autopsy and organ donation are not settled by the sources consulted here, and they are addressed through the key-informant evidence reported below and not stated here as rules.

Mourning is regulated by both text and law. The Qur'an prescribes a waiting period (*iddah*) of four months and ten days for a widow (Qur'an 2:234), and a *hadith* limits mourning for others to three days (Al-Bukhari, n.d., Hadith 1280). Loud lamentation is discouraged in the tradition, and grief itself is not condemned (Muslim, n.d., Hadith 934).

Diversity and Local Custom in Nigeria

Two kinds of variation matter in Nigeria. The first is variation among groups. Sunni and Shi'a jurists differ on points of the prayer and washing, as noted. Within Nigerian Sunni Islam, Sufi and reformist (Izala) groups dispute what counts as legitimate practice and what is *bid'ah* (religious innovation) (Ben Amara, 2011), and, as the informants' accounts reported below show, the dispute extends to commemorative gatherings after burial. The second is the influence of local custom. Noibi (2012) found, on the basis of interviews with Yoruba Islamic scholars, that some *al-fida'* (post-funerary) ceremonies depart from orthodox Islamic teaching and may reflect the unconscious imitation of African Traditional Religion. Public commentary similarly distinguishes the speed of Muslim burial from the lengthier, more costly ceremonies common among other communities (Vanguard, 2021). These findings caution against treating "Islamic burial" as one uniform set of practices, which is why the key-informant component includes Sunni, Sufi and Salafi scholars. Shi'a practice is covered from documentary sources only.

Burial Rites in Christianity: Theological Significance and Practice

Theological Significance

Christian burial practice is unified by a shared conviction, the hope of bodily resurrection, but it varies considerably among denominational families. The theological starting point common to them is that death, while understood as a consequence of human sin, is not final. Christian funeral rites are therefore structured around hope in resurrection and not around mourning alone. Scripture supplies the main texts: Paul teaches that the body is sown in weakness and raised in power (1 Corinthians 15:42–44), and Christ is reported to have said, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

Roman Catholic Practice

The Catholic funeral typically has three parts: a wake or vigil, at which family and friends gather, often with the body present, to pray; a funeral Mass, the central liturgical rite; and a rite of committal at the grave or, increasingly, at a place of cremation. The Church's position on cremation changed within the twentieth century. The instruction *Piam et constantem*, issued by the Holy Office in 1963, held that cremation is not opposed in itself to the Christian religion

and that church rites should not be denied to those who request it, provided the choice does not deny Christian doctrine (Holy Office, 1963). The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* recommends burial but does not forbid cremation unless it is chosen for reasons contrary to Christian teaching (Catholic Church, 1983, c. 1176, §3). The instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (CDF, 2016) affirms that cremation does not affect the soul or prevent God from raising the body, and it directs that ashes be kept in a sacred place and not scattered. The same document makes provision for exceptions in grave circumstances, so the rule on ashes is not absolute.

Eastern Orthodox Practice

Orthodox teaching is the most restrictive among the major Christian families. The central argument is that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) and should be allowed to return to the earth through natural decomposition. Orthodox clergy writing for their parishes state that a church funeral is not offered to a person who has chosen cremation, and that exceptions are made only for unusual cases, by *economia* (pastoral dispensation) and with the permission of the bishop (Preble, 2010). Because these statements come from parish clergy and not from synodal documents, and because no Orthodox informant was included in this study, the position should be treated with caution.

Historic Protestant Churches

Historic Protestant churches, such as Anglican, Methodist and Baptist, are less centralised than the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Funerals typically include readings, hymns, a sermon and a tribute to the life of the deceased, and local congregations have considerable freedom over the details. The documentary sources reviewed here do not give a reliable account of the position of these churches on cremation, embalming or the presence of the body in the church. No informant from these churches was included, so these matters are left open and are not stated here as assumptions.

Pentecostal and African Independent Churches

Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and the African Independent (Aladura) churches, such as the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Celestial Church of Christ and the Christ Apostolic Church, are numerically important in Nigeria, and they are the groups on which the documentary evidence is thinnest. Scholarship on the Celestial Church of Christ describes a Christianity that has close affinity with the Yoruba cultural world while insisting on its distinct Christian identity (Adogame, 1998), which suggests that funeral practice in such churches may combine church liturgy with local custom. Because the documents say little about burial in these churches, the study relies on its key informants from the Deeper Life Bible Church, the RCCG and the C&S Church, whose accounts are reported in the next section.

Findings from Key Informants

This section reports what the six informants said. All statements come from personal communications with the informants on 5 June 2026 and are cited by informant letter. The accounts are those of individual practitioners and are set against the documentary evidence in the sections that follow.

Muslim Informants

The core rites. Informants A (Sunni), B (Sufi) and C (Salafi) described the same four obligatory steps as a communal duty (*fard kifayah*): *ghusl* (ritual washing), *kafan* (simple white shrouding), the *janazah* (funeral) prayer, performed standing without bowing or prostration, and *dafn* (burial facing the *qiblah*). All three grounded these steps in the Sunnah. Their agreement matches the documentary account.

Women. All three informants said that women may join the funeral prayer, standing behind the rows of men. They differed on the procession and the graveside. Informant C (Salafi) strongly discourages or forbids women from following the bier to the cemetery or visiting the grave, citing traditional prohibitions in the *hadith* and the aim of preventing emotional wailing. Informants A (Sunni) and B (Sufi) generally permit women to take part in the procession or to visit the grave, provided they observe Islamic modesty (*hijab*) and avoid *niyahah* (wailing).

Timing of burial. The informants agreed that prompt burial is a strict injunction and that delay without real necessity is discouraged. They gave legal or coroner requirements and waiting for the immediate family as examples of acceptable reasons. Informants A and C strongly condemned delays of several days to organise elaborate gatherings.

Autopsy, organ donation and embalming. The informants regarded autopsy and organ donation as permissible only under legal compulsion or absolute necessity, such as saving a living person. They differed in emphasis. Informant C stressed the integrity (*hurmah*) of the deceased's body more rigidly, while Informants A and B stressed the overriding duty to save human life. All three disliked embalming as an unnecessary alteration of the body, unless the law requires it for long-distance transport.

Post-burial gatherings and intercession. This was the point of sharpest disagreement. Informants A and C rejected the practice of invoking deceased saints and spiritual leaders, such as Shaykh Ahmad Tijani or Shaykh Ibrahim Nyass, as intercessors (*tawassul* through the dead), and held that all supplication must be addressed to Allah alone. Both regarded cooking food for crowds at funerals, and holding formal *Fidau* (post-burial) gatherings, as unsupported innovation (*bid'ah*). They said that, according to the prophetic tradition, neighbours and relatives should bring food to the bereaved family, and not the reverse. Informant B (Sufi) accepts seeking blessing (*barakah*) through revered spiritual guides (*awliya*), and upholds formal prayers on the third, seventh or fortieth day, with Qur'an recitation and communal charity meals, as beneficial to the deceased.

Cost. Informants A and C described heavy spending and lavish catering at funerals in south-western Nigeria as a cultural practice that conflicts with the Prophetic example of simplicity and moderation, and they described reformist pushback against it led by Salafi and mainstream Sunni scholars.

Christian Informants

Cremation. Informants D (Deeper Life), E (RCCG) and F (C&S) all rejected cremation. Informants D and E based their rejection on the doctrine of bodily resurrection modelled on Christ and on the view of the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit that deserves a dignified burial in the earth. Informant F also rejected cremation and maintained burial in the earth based on the Christian doctrine of resurrection.

The body, embalming and viewing. All three said that the presence of the body at the service is essential. All three accept embalming, and they said it is universally practised in their churches to preserve the body during extended planning and family travel. They differed over viewing. Informant D keeps viewing austere and focused on scripture and solemn reflection, while Informants E and F regularly include structured lying-in-state sessions so that members, groups and well-wishers can pay their last respects.

Wake, mourning and local custom. Informants D and E conduct solemn services of hymns, scripture reading and sermons on eternity, and they ban alcohol, traditional drumming and non-Christian cultural rites. Informant F includes lively liturgical elements, choir ministration in white garments, night-vigil elements and songs particular to African Independent churches. All three disallowed syncretic practices, such as traditional cult or secret-society burial rites.

Cost and scale. Informant D strongly advocates tight budgeting, avoiding debt and using modest caskets. Informant E promotes moderation in principle but noted that larger, well-funded celebratory send-offs ("celebrations of life") often occur among members from the upper-middle class. Informant F described rich communal celebration, with uniform attire (*aso ebi*) and heavy musical deployment, which mirrors local cultural celebrations.

Common Assumptions about Burial Rites: What the Evidence Shows

Several assumptions recur in public discussion of both traditions. This section examines the most consequential, using the documentary evidence and the informants' accounts, and it distinguishes the cases in which the evidence corrects the assumption from those in which the question is genuinely open.

"Islamic funerals exclude women"

This assumption is too simple in both directions. It is inaccurate to say that Islamic teaching uniformly excludes women from all funeral roles, because all three Muslim informants said that women may join the funeral prayer. It is equally inaccurate to say that the matter is settled, because the informants differed over the procession and the graveside, and the documentary literature shows that women's participation has been treated differently in different communities and periods (Greenberg, 2007). The accurate statement is that practice varies by group and that the reasons should be established group by group.

"Muslims agree on what happens after burial"

The informants' accounts show that this is not so. The Sunni and Salafi informants rejected formal *Fidau* gatherings and the invocation of the dead as intercessors, while the Sufi informant upheld both. This divergence fits the documentary evidence that Sufi and reformist groups in Nigeria dispute what counts as innovation (Ben Amara, 2011) and that local post-funerary ceremonies may depart from orthodox teaching (Noibi, 2012).

"Islamic burial is invariably expensive"

The textual evidence points the other way. The Prophet was shrouded in plain white cloth (Al-Bukhari, n.d., Hadith 1264), and graves are to remain plain (Muslim, n.d., Hadith 970). Informants A and C attributed costly funerals to local culture and described reformist opposition to them. The Sufi informant, by contrast, supports communal charity meals on commemorative days, so the cost of a funeral may also depend on a group's view of such gatherings. Public commentary suggests that the cost of elaborate funerals concerns Christians and Muslims across several ethnic groups (Vanguard, 2021). Among the Christian informants, the scale also varies, from the austere approach of Deeper Life to the large celebrations described by informants from the RCCG and the C&S Church. Cost is therefore best understood as a matter of custom and group and not of doctrine in either tradition.

"Islamic burial must take place within twenty-four hours"

The texts command haste (Al-Bukhari, n.d., Hadith 1315), and many Muslim communities bury on the day of death (Vanguard, 2021). The informants described swift burial as a strict injunction and gave legal requirements and the waiting of the immediate family as acceptable reasons for delay. Neither the documentary sources consulted nor the informants gave a fixed hour. The accurate statement is that prompt burial is strongly urged and that the practical limits are a matter of necessity and communal judgment.

"Christianity prohibits cremation"

This assumption is partly right and partly wrong, depending on the group. The Catholic Church prohibited cremation until 1963 and has permitted it since, subject to conditions (Holy Office, 1963; Catholic Church, 1983, c. 1176, §3; CDF, 2016). Orthodox teaching remains restrictive, with exceptions by *economia* (Preble, 2010). The three Christian informants, from the Deeper Life Bible Church, the RCCG and the C&S Church, all rejected cremation. The assumption therefore describes these Nigerian Pentecostal and African Independent groups accurately but does not describe Christianity as a whole. The position of historic Protestant churches could not be established, because no informant from them was included.

"Cremation makes bodily resurrection impossible"

On this point, Christians themselves disagree. The Catholic instruction teaches that cremation does not touch the soul and does not prevent God from raising the body (CDF, 2016). Informants D and E, by contrast, linked their rejection of cremation to the doctrine of bodily resurrection and to the dignity of the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. The relationship between cremation and resurrection is therefore a point of disagreement within Christianity and not a settled doctrine.

Embalming, viewing and the presence of the body

The informants' accounts show a real difference between the two traditions. The three Muslim informants disliked embalming and permitted it only where the law requires it for

transport, whereas the three Christian informants accepted embalming and said it is universally practised in their churches. Both traditions treat the body as deserving dignity, but they differ in how far they accept its preservation for a longer period before burial. Among the Christian informants, viewing was austere in one church and a structured lying-in-state in two, so it is better understood as a matter of church custom than as a requirement of Christian teaching.

Discussion: Convergence and Divergence through the Lens of Rites of Passage

Read through van Gennep's framework, the documentary evidence and the informants' accounts show a pattern of convergence and divergence that is more differentiated than a simple contrast between Islam and Christianity.

Convergence

Both traditions treat the funeral as a passage that the community, and not only the family, carries out on behalf of the dead. In Islam, this is explicit in the doctrine of *fard kifayah* (communal obligation) ("Burial iv. In Islam," n.d.), and all three Muslim informants described the four core rites in these terms. In Christian practice, it appears in the gathering of the worshipping community at the wake, the funeral service and the committal. The Christian informants said the presence of the body at the service is essential in their churches. Both traditions also organise the threshold period around communal prayer, the *salat al-janazah* (funeral prayer) in Islam and the funeral service in Christianity, in which the dead are commended to God.

Both traditions also express the equality of persons before God at the point of death. The plain white shroud, which does not distinguish rich from poor, and the Prophet's own plain shrouding (Al-Bukhari, n.d., Hadith 1264) give ritual form to that equality in Islam. The Christian hope of resurrection, offered to all believers alike (1 Corinthians 15:42–44), expresses it in a theological register. In van Gennep's terms, both can be read as stripping the dead of their former social markers as they pass toward a new state defined by the tradition's theology.

Divergence between the Traditions

The sharpest divergence between the traditions concerns the incorporation phase and, specifically, what must happen to the physical body for the phase to be properly completed. Islamic practice treats burial in the earth, facing the *qiblah* (the direction of prayer), as the settled mode of incorporation, and the Muslim informants disliked embalming. The Christian informants also rejected cremation, but they accepted embalming and, in two of the three churches, a structured period of lying-in-state before burial. In the groups sampled, then, the traditions agree on the importance of burial in the earth, and they differ over how far the body is prepared and displayed before it. Catholic teaching has concluded that the mode of disposal is separable from the certainty of resurrection (CDF, 2016; Holy Office, 1963), while Orthodox teaching remains close to the Islamic position in insisting on natural decomposition (Preble, 2010). Where a tradition's understanding of incorporation is tied to the fate of the body, a departure from the expected practice is experienced as a disruption of the passage itself and not as a minor variation of custom. This helps to explain why cremation carries such weight in interfaith discussion.

Divergence within the Traditions

The evidence also shows that the more useful comparison is often between groups. Among the Muslim informants, the main disagreement concerned the period after burial. The Sunni and Salafi informants end the formal rites at burial, with neighbours supporting the bereaved family, while the Sufi informant extends the rites through prayers on the third, seventh or fortieth day. In van Gennep's terms, the Sufi practice prolongs the transitional period for the living and keeps a continuing relationship with the dead, whereas the reformist position closes the passage at the grave. This corresponds to the dispute over innovation that Ben Amara (2011) documents between Sufi and reformist groups in northern Nigeria, and to Noibi's (2012) finding that local post-funerary ceremonies may depart from orthodox teaching.

Among the Christian informants, the difference lies in the elaboration of the earlier phases. The Deeper Life informant keeps the viewing and the service austere, whereas the C&S

informant described night-vigil elements, white-garment choir ministration and lying-in-state, which lengthen the period of separation and transition. Local custom therefore cuts across denominational lines, as public commentary on costly funerals among Christians and Muslims also suggests (Vanguard, 2021). It is more accurate to speak of scriptural teaching, juristic or denominational position, and local custom as three layers that combine differently in each group.

The Mourners' Passage

The framework also draws attention to the mourners. Islamic law prescribes a mourning period of three days for most relatives and a longer *iddah* (waiting period) of four months and ten days for a widow, grounded in the Qur'an (Qur'an 2:234; Al-Bukhari, n.d., Hadith 1280). The informants' views on women at the graveside show that the passage is gendered in practice and not only in law. The Christian informants did not describe formal mourning periods, and this matter remains open.

Limits of the Framework and of the Evidence

Van Gennep's scheme is a useful way to compare, but it does not predict which phase a tradition will emphasise. The evidence also has limits. Six informants cannot speak for their traditions, and no Shi'a, Catholic, Orthodox or historic Protestant informant was included, so the findings for those groups rest on documents alone. The patterns described here are therefore best read as hypotheses that fuller fieldwork can test.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes three contributions. First, it applies van Gennep's theory in a structured way to two scripture-based traditions, attending both to the deceased and to the mourners and to the internal diversity of each tradition. Second, it brings together in one design what is usually separated: documentary evidence on the rites, an examination of common assumptions, and the testimony of practitioners from different groups in each tradition in Nigeria. Third, it records the positions of Sunni, Sufi and Salafi scholars and of Deeper Life, RCCG and C&S clergy on questions that the written sources do not settle. The contribution is deliberately modest. It does not claim to settle questions beyond the evidence, and it identifies them for further inquiry.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has compared the theological significance, ritual practice and common assumptions surrounding burial rites in Islam and Christianity, using van Gennep's theory of rites of passage as an interpretive framework, and it has supplemented the documentary evidence with the accounts of six key informants. The evidence shows that both traditions treat burial as a communal passage that affirms human dignity and equality before God. It also shows that each tradition is internally diverse. The Muslim informants agreed on the core rites but differed over women at the graveside, post-burial gatherings and intercession. The Christian informants all rejected cremation and accepted embalming, but they differed over viewing, ceremony and the scale of cost. Several popular assumptions, including those about women's attendance, funeral cost, the timing of Islamic burial and Christian attitudes to cremation, prove to be oversimplified or dependent on the group.

On this basis, the study makes four recommendations. First, theological and religious studies curricula in plural societies should teach the funerary practice of the main traditions with attention to internal diversity, and should distinguish scriptural teaching, juristic or denominational position and local custom. Second, hospital chaplaincy services and funeral service providers should be trained to ask families which group's practice they follow, and not to assume it from the family's religion alone. Third, religious leaders in both traditions are encouraged to distinguish clearly, in their teaching, between what their tradition requires and what is custom, particularly in relation to costly funeral gatherings. Fourth, further research should extend the design to Shi'a Muslims, to Catholic, Orthodox and historic Protestant Christians, and to other traditions in Nigeria, including African Traditional Religion, with larger numbers of informants.

The study has clear limits. It rests on documents and on six informants, and its findings are qualitative and exploratory. They show what these practitioners said on 5 June 2026 and should not be read as describing every Muslim or Christian group in Nigeria.

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