



Cadavers, Burials and Infections – a hygienic interpretation of Numbers 19:1-21 against the backdrop of African women in the face of pandemics

Mwandayi Canisius

Institute of Theology and Religious Studies, Africa University

Research Fellow: (RITR), College of Human Sciences

University of South Africa, South Africa

canisium@gmail.com

Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3896-8346>



<https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.206>

Abstract

In Jewish culture, the marking of tombs was almost a mandatory practice for fear that priests would walk on them and incur ritual impurity. This practice is alluded in Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees when he says: "Woe to you! You are like unseen graves over which people unknowingly walk" (Luke 11:44). The custom itself stems from laws regulating ritual cleanliness in Numbers 19:1-21. Wholly, this chapter contains regulations pertaining touching a dead human body or a human bone or a grave or being in a tent with such a body as well as regulations on how to cleanse a defiled person. Similarly, in African traditional religion, one finds injunctions which regulated contact with corpses and graves. Though in both cases these regulations originally address the spiritual realm aiming to uphold ritual purity, hygienically, such laws when observed resulted in the prevention of infectious communicable diseases. It is in light of this that this article seeks to invite present generations to reconsider the resources that the ancients used to minimize the spread of communicable diseases. Using sociological criticism to analyze Numbers 19:1-21, it is the argument of this article that there are noticeable positive effects on human health that are connected to the observance of regulations enshrined in this text. In the same way, there is also something of positive value on human health behind the prohibitions that African women tell their children in matters relating to the dead. Leveraging on women agency, one observes that being vanguards of culture, African mothers try their best to warn children against tampering with graves, but their advice seems unheeded as the younger generations attending funerals hardly take time to clean themselves after handling coffins and randomly walk or sit on graves especially during burials. As the pandemics continue to take a huge toll on lives in our contemporary times vis-à-vis SDG 3 which aims at ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all, there is serious need for a mentality shift, especially among the younger generations and to pay heed to the wisdom of our mothers. As the world continues to face an unprecedented threat of new pandemics, this article is a wake-up call to seriously rethink where we are possibly going wrong. It is an invitation to reconsider the resources that ancients used to minimize the spread of communicable diseases.

Keywords: Communicable diseases, Jewish people, Priestly writers, ritual cleanness, Shona people, the dead, tomb marking, women and the pandemics

Introduction

In 2022, the United Nations Health Department released the following data:

- In 2020 and 2021, 14.9 million people were estimated to have died due to COVID-19 and its impact on health systems and the society.



- Between January 2020 and May 2021, the pandemic may have claimed the lives of 115,500 health and care workers worldwide.
- In 2020, an estimated 1.5 million people were newly diagnosed with HIV and 680,000 people died of AIDS-related causes.
- TB deaths increased from 1.2 million in 2019 to 1.3 million in 2020 due to disruptions associated with the pandemic (UN SDGS Report, 2022).

From the above information, one can deduce that the threat of infectious diseases is unprecedented. While historically one can talk about devastating outbreaks such as Black Death (Cartwright, 2023), or influenza viruses (WHO, 2024), such threats were not global and so varied as is now. Though the fast spreading of infections today is partly attributable to international travels between continents, it appears there is something amiss in the manner contemporary society is handling possible sources of infection especially matters that have to do with the dead. Among the critical means used by the ancients to ward off infections was the strict legislation against tampering with cadavers and graves as evident from the Priestly source – Numbers 19:1-21. Elders in African traditional religion had similar injunctions which they bequeathed orally to future generations with the hope to safeguard them from death-related infectious diseases.

It is the sharp decline in adherence to strict legislation on tampering with cadavers and graves in our contemporary times that this article bemoans. Whereas in the traditional society it was unthinkable to casually walk around or sit on graves, nowadays, it appears as if society has normalized the tendency of either sitting on graves or walking randomly across graves during burials. As the world grapples with the alarming rate pandemics are striking human societies and the threat they are posing to achieving good health and well-being for all by 2030, there is perhaps a need to think seriously on how we have departed from the regulations meant to ensure minimum spread of infections and other communicable diseases. It is against this background that this article embarks on a mission to probe Priestly injunctions meant to regulate ritual cleanness from corpses and grave defilement as well as African customs which were used to safeguard people from death-related infectious diseases. The discussion is conducted against the backdrop of African mothers who often end up shouldering the burden of pandemics despite having done everything to forewarn younger generations about the dangers of ignoring cultural values. The first part of this article addresses the Priestly injunctions in Numbers 19:1-21. This shall be followed by a discussion on injunctions in African traditional religion. The third section is on the unrelenting efforts of African women who, being vanguards of culture and caregiving, often find themselves caught between what years of experience have taught them concerning possible communicable infections from dead bodies and graves, and what appears like a heedless generation.

Methodology

In analyzing the Priestly injunctions in Numbers 19:1-21, the article banks largely on literary criticism which is basically a reasoned consideration of literary works and issues. It is important to note however, that there are several approaches a literary critic can take when closely examining a text. This article is strongly biased towards the sociological criticism approach, given that it examines Numbers 19:1-21 in the cultural, religious, economic and political context in which it was written and received by its audience. Focus here is put on the culture of handling deaths within the camp and the ritualized action of cleansing defiled persons.

The second approach used in this study is that of women agency. Agency can simply be defined as the capacity to act within the context of specific social structures. In relation to women, agency refers to their capacity to act in the face of restrictions imposed on them by a patriarchal society as well as their resilience and ability to come up with surviving strategies in challenging circumstances. As argued by Lee and Logan (2017), theorizing agency leads



to a consideration of the specific ways in which women have organized themselves and have participated as activists to challenge, resist, overthrow or gain entrance to social structures and institutions that had tended to ignore, disadvantage or penalize them. In this article, women agency is examined in relation to their activism in the face of pandemics that threaten to wipe humanity from the face of the earth.

Numbers 19: 1-21

In brief, the book of Numbers from which this passage is extracted recounts the experiences of a people who were enabled by God to escape from slavery and journey for years through the desert lands under the leadership of Moses and prior to them occupying the Promised Land. In other words, the book is a narrative of the forty years that Israel spent in the desert on their journey from Mount Horeb to the plains of Moab. In terms of its literary composition, the book shows that it is a by-product of four source traditions: the Yahwist tradition, Elohist tradition, Priestly tradition and the Deuteronomist tradition. Whereas each tradition is represented in the book, it is the Priestly tradition that emerges as the dominant source accounting for the large sections of the book, especially the non-narrative portions, the abundant legal instructions, rules and procedures interspersed in the narrative framework (Zinkuratire et al., 1991).

Numbers 19:1-21 which is of interest in this section of study falls therefore within the Priestly tradition as it deals with regulations pertaining touching a dead human body or a human bone or a grave or being in a tent with such a body as well as regulations on how to cleanse defiled persons using lustral water. On the whole, Priestly traditions are found as a block in the book of Leviticus, the book of Numbers itself and are also found scattered in Genesis and Exodus. Priestly traditions are basically matters that were of special concern to and under the jurisdiction of priests hence the identification of this work as Priestly. Though it may be difficult to be precise about the time and place at which this material was composed, it certainly is, as observed by Von Rad (1962:78), a programme for the cult. The common themes that run through these traditions revolve around issues of the sanctuary, its cultic rituals, the system of sacrifices, distinctions between the holy and the profane or the pure and the impure, the forms and furnishings of the tabernacle, the investitures of the priests and Levites and their offices and duties et cetera (Ademiluka, 2009).

Numbers 19: 1-21, can better be understood in the context of what had come to pass in the camp of Israel. The preceding chapters (11:33; 14:37; 14:45; 16:33-35, 49) bring to light that many deaths had occurred within the camp, and it was almost inevitable that people would have touched the corpses whether accidentally or intentionally. The holiness of the camp had thus been jeopardized. The ritual impurity resulting from contact with the dead, in other words, was viewed as a major threat to the holiness of the people. Hence, according to the Priestly writers, God provided a ritual that would cleanse people who had been contaminated so that they could be able to approach the Tent of Meeting without the fear of death. When a person touched a corpse, he/she was considered unsuitable to approach and worship God in the sanctuary. Defilement from a dead body was ranked among the worst of all defilement as death was viewed as the final result of sin (Genesis 2:17; 3:14-19).

The preceding context thus accounts why Numbers 19 begins by detailing the ritualized action of slaughtering a red heifer that is free from blemish and defect and on which no yoke had ever been laid. Acting as the *sine qua non* element to the purification process was the beast's red colour. The stress on the red colour, as observed by Bonoface-Malle (2006) may have been meant to emphasize the significance of blood in cleansing the unclean. Other cleansing agents such as scarlet yarn/wool, cedar wood and hyssop were essential for the purification ritual as these were to be added to the fire of the burnt offering. It is of importance to note that each of the added agents served a special function. As for the hyssop, the first biblical reference to this plant occurs in Exodus 12:22 whereby an instruction is given to dip a bunch



of hyssops in blood and sprinkle the lintel and the two doorposts. One finds it again mentioned in Leviticus 14:4,6 & 52 and this time around, it is used in the ceremony for cleansing lepers. It also appears in the penitential Psalm of David (51:7) whereby the Psalmist prays: "Cleanse me with hyssop, that I may be pure, wash me and make me whiter than snow" (The African Bible). Though hyssop could be interpreted as serving a symbolic function in the Old Testament ceremonial law, the continual reference to this plant may indicate that it could have possessed some general cleansing properties and may account therefore for its preferred usage to other plants in purification ceremonies. As opined by Dudai and Yaniv (2014:41), due to its association with cleaning, hyssop was thought to possess powers of spiritual purification hence its usage in cultic language. While hyssop was thrown into the fire as the symbol of purification from the corruption of death, cedar wood symbolized the incorruptible continuance of life. As for the scarlet, this was a red dye which came from the blood of a *coccus ilicis* beetle and used to dye fabric. As observed by Pierce (2015), this dye was commonly used in ceremonial rituals. As a result of its red color, it brought to mind sin, which like blood, draws attention to itself in a cry for healing.

The animal's blood was to be sprinkled towards the front of the Tent of Meeting and the ashes from its burnt carcass were to be used in the preparation of lustral water or water of cleansing (19:13, 17, 21). It was this water which was then sprinkled over unclean people and furnishings by a ceremonially clean person. As alluded earlier, the purpose of this ritual was to cleanse people of their uncleanness and thus enable them to approach the Tent of Meeting to worship God.

Numbers 19:1-21 is addressed not only to those who had been defiled due to the deaths that had occurred in the camp, but it extends to everyone who, in the open country, touches a dead person, whether he was slain by sword or died naturally and to persons who may touch a human bone or a grave (19:16). Such persons were considered unclean as long as lustral water had not been splashed over them and they remained a danger not only to the holiness of the community but also to that of the sanctuary of the Lord (19:20). Failure to submit oneself for purification resulted in the need for excommunication of such persons from the community of the Lord since they defiled the sanctuary.

Hygienic Interpretation of Numbers 19:1-21

While the regulations in Numbers 19:1-21 were primarily meant to uphold ritual purity, hygienically, they helped to prevent infection and the spread of communicable diseases. There are noticeable positive effects on human health that are connected to their observance. The fact that human health was not, in other words, the primary purpose of the regulations in this chapter does not deny the potential public health benefits of these regulations (Uhlmeier, 2022:7). Some texts in the Priestly legacy in fact show that Priestly writers were to some extent microbiologists with public health knowledge beyond their time (Hart, 1995). The dietary laws found in Leviticus 11 pertaining what is permissible for food among land animals, birds, insects and fish can be understood within the context of public health as they address issues of food hygiene.

The same would apply to other regulations on ritual uncleanness (Leviticus 12 – 15) caused by contact with dead animals, uncleanness resulting from childbirth as well as unclean emissions from certain skin diseases. Gerhard Hasel (1983) was thus quite right when he observed that though the concepts of 'holiness' and 'health' appear almost unrelated in contemporary culture, the ideas were tightly connected in the eyes of the Priestly writers. For him, the connotations of health in the Old Testament were much broader than they are today, communicating a holistic sense of wellbeing. To the Priestly writers, worship of God entailed the wholeness and interwovenness of every aspect of life. Since matters of public health were part and parcel of the definition of what worship of God entailed, one cannot be wrong to conclude that the regulations put together by the Priestly writers for the restored community



in Judah were indeed a proof that they were microbiologists way ahead of their time. As reflected in the Priestly writings, science has come to confirm that contact with certain animals, dead or living, graves as well as even contact with certain body emissions might cause diseases (Ademiluka, 2009). Scientists validate that there are many viruses that exist today and among them are animal viruses capable of infecting humans and have the potential to rapidly spread around the world.

It is in light of the above discussion on the tight connectedness between holiness and health in the Old Testament worldview as well as the known potential of certain diseases to replicate and mutate more than all other life forms on our planet that one can appreciate the emphasis and significance that was placed on tomb markers in the religion of Israel apart from them being mere signs of filial love towards the dead.

Burial mounds in Israelite and Shona cultures

Israelite Culture

Burials which took place outside of the family tomb in ancient Israel were often characterized by a mound erected over the dead and this was usually accompanied by the erection of a memorial marker on the tomb at the end of the burial process. A few examples can be used to illustrate this common practice. After the death of Rachael, for example, Jacob is said to have erected a pillar upon her tomb (Genesis 35:20). During the period of the reforms in northern Israel by King Josiah, he is said to have come upon a mound with a monument of an unnamed prophet buried near the altar at Bethel (2 Kings 23:15-18; 1 Kings 13:20). On a separate note, possibly as a result of fear that no one would remember him in life since he had no son, Absalom is said to have erected a pillar after his own name in the King's Valley (2 Samuel 18:18).

As for those who were perceived as enemies of the Jews, unique mounds (a great heap of stones) were placed on their tombs as a sign that they were being chastised in perpetuity. After the capture of Achan, King of Ai, a great heap of stones is said to have been raised against him (Joshua 7:24-26). The same thing happened to the five kings of the Southern coalition: the King of Jebusite, the King of Hebron, the King of Jarmuth, the King of Eglon and the King of Lachish. After their capture and termination of their lives, these kings were thrown back into the cave where they had earlier hidden themselves and a great heap of stones was set against the mouth of the cave (Joshua 10:22-27).

Shona Culture

As was in Jewish culture, the process of interment among the Shona is marked by the setting up of a burial mound. This is largely driven by the belief among the Shona that when a person dies, he or she has departed in the flesh, but the spirit will always linger hence the burial mound becomes the point of contact between the living and the dead (Omoregie, 2007). While for some it is accompanied by setting up a head pillar of stone on the grave, others plant a shrub or a tree either on the four corners of the grave or just on the front corners of the grave.

As for the graves of the members of the royal families among the Shona, these are usually marked off by dense trees some distance off human habitation. These burial places popularly known by the Shona term *Dzimbahwe* (house of stone) are jealously guarded as no ordinary persons are allowed near them save for persons reserved for conducting rain-making ceremonies *maganzvo/mukwerera* 'rain sacrifice' and such persons are known by the term *churu* 'rainmaker.'

With the attainment of political independence in Zimbabwe, those who had played a critical role in the liberation history were accorded a special honour of being buried at the National



Heroes Acre. State of the art granite and marble stones are used to mark the graves of these fallen heroes. Another key distinguishing mark of the National Heroes Acre was the erection of the tomb of an Unknown Soldier, a great monument in honour of the heroic men and women who perished fighting for the liberation of the land but whose graves are unknown.

The hygienic function of burial mounds

The above discussion underscores the value that was placed on burial mounds in both traditions. Not only did they help to meet a filial attachment to the dead, but they also served a spiritual function whereby they acted as points of contact between the spirit of a deceased person and its living members.

When interpreted from a hygienic point of view, one sees that grave markings serve as a warning to the public of the existence of graves, hence, to be avoided. During rabbinic Judaism, Tannaitic rabbis instructed that Jewish graves were supposed to be marked with whitewash especially during pilgrimage seasons so that travelers might not unwittingly contact corpse impurity (McCane, 2003:51). According to the belief system of these rabbis, corpse impurity could radiate outward through any tiny gaps and across shadows so that even if a person were to walk near a grave and his/her shadow happened to fall upon the grave then automatically the impurity would move through that shadow onto the person. There are noticeable positive effects on public human health that are connected to the observance of this teaching. Apart from helping to safeguard the ritual purity of the community, the observation of this injunction helped to prevent infection and the spread of communicable diseases. In as much as corpse impurity could radiate outward through any tiny gaps, the same can be said of certain bacteria and viruses that can pose a challenge to public health. As argued before, the concepts of holiness and health were tightly connected in the Old Testament worldview, so what could be said of the sources of ritual impurity could equally be taken as sources of ill-health.

The above Old Testament worldview is not so divorced from the African especially Shona worldview. Though the Shona would not whitewash the tombs of their deceased relatives, they share the belief that cadavers and graves in general defile and this explains why certain groups among the Shona prescribe ritual purification with water for all who participated in the burial upon their return from the cemetery. A mixture of water and crushed *muzeze* or *mushozhowa* tree leaves are used to purify the people (Muchemwa, 2002:43). It is not only those persons who came into contact with the deceased who need purification, even the hut too in which the corpse was lying in state. As observed by Chitakure (2020:142), for most groups among the Shona, the purification of the hut using water mixed with certain herbs is usually one of the many responsibilities of the daughters-in-law. While on the surface one observes a spiritual overtone of the Shona purification processes, underneath, matters of public health come to the fore also. Once death has struck, the Shona undertake every precaution to prevent future occurrences of death. Hence, it is not only the spiritual aspects that they are worried about but everything else that helps to achieve and maintain a holistic sense of community wellbeing. Ritual purity and health, in other words, are not divorced from each other among the Shona as was for the Israelites.

Sitting on a tomb or playing with anything that is taken from the tomb is regarded as a taboo hence Shona women, being vanguards of culture and care would from time to time teach their children to watch out for grave markers in the veldt and keep away from them. If mothers realized anything strange in the behavior of a child who might have tampered with a tomb, they were quick to alert the father to take the child to a diviner for *kupumhwa mamhepo* 'cleansing evil spirits.' Maya Morsy cited in Umuholo (2023) articulates well the unique role of women when she alludes that women, as custodians of cultural, social and religious values, have been uniquely positioned to transmit these ideals and ideas to future generations. It may need to be admitted, however, that times have changed and due to work some mothers may



not entirely find time to impart these cultural values and practices to their children, but still, this does not erode their role as primary social and cultural reproducers. Their special place in the transfer of customs and traditions remains paramount in social expectations as they are the child's first contact with the culture, traditions, language and mores of the society. This finds echo in Muzuru and Nyambi (2012) who aver that Africana women have an influential position as custodians of Africana cultural values, as first teachers and co-partners in the Africana struggle for well-being, survival and transcendence. Though African societies, as observed by Umuholo (2023), have largely remained patriarchal, an African family is centered around the mother and her ability to indelibly connect her family to the traditions of the elders. Given the inevitable winds of change that now characterize today's life, it is pertinent for mothers to keep pace also through unlearning and relearning some values and practices so that they keep bequeathing life-saving values to the present and future generations.

While the teaching on the need to keep off from grave markers by African women may partly stem from the fear of *kuhakira Shavi* spirits 'being possessed by alien spirits,' one is able to observe the potential public health benefits of this taboo. Just as with many other taboos of the Shona, the elders were concerned about the holistic wellbeing of their societies hence the institution of taboos. This finds echo in Omobola (2013) who avers that taboo is a sacred term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance and objectivity to protect sanctity of shrines and ensure the well-being of their worshipping communities.

Cemeteries and Public Health

Scientifically, it has been proven that cemeteries produce necroleachates which are potential sources of soil and groundwater contamination. In places where there are no systems for collecting and treating necroleachate produced from decomposing corpses, the infiltration and flow of contaminants in shallow aquifers becomes high, creating thus dangers to humans and wildlife. As opined by Zychowski and Bryndal (2015), a decomposing body releases 0.4 -0.6 litres of leachate per 1 kilogram of body weight and this leachate contains bacteria and viruses that may contaminate groundwater and cause diseases when used for drinking. Apart from contamination of groundwater, there is also contamination of the soil itself. In their 2000 study, Spongberg and Becks checked for potentially harmful contamination levels in samples of soil they took from a cemetery in northwest Ohio, USA. They examined twenty-three samples from the cemetery itself and fourteen from the surrounding area. The study found a sharp rise in arsenic, which suggested that leachates from the cemetery had contaminated the area.

A similar study in search of contaminants was conducted in Zandfontein, South Africa by Jonker and Olivier (2012) who managed to observe the presence of heavy metals such as Cu, Zn, Fe, and Pb. Following this observation, Jonker and Olivier (2012) called for the need for monitoring in and around cemeteries as they contain high levels of hazardous soil and potential groundwater contamination. High levels of metallic elements in the bloodstream pose a great danger to humans. Cu is said to create problems for the human neurological system while Zn ingestion results in liver diseases. Fe is known to cause erosion in the gastrointestinal tract and liver cirrhosis and the other metal, Pb, is scientifically known as a potent neurotoxin that can cause problems in the central nervous system (Franco et al., 2022).

Similarly, Morandi and collaborators (2024) investigated the presence of chemical contaminants in cemeteries in Brazil and reported high quantities of copper, cobalt and chromium above the maximum allowed values at multiple depths. The presence of these chemicals indicated contamination of the soil through necro slurry, and this had the potential of contaminating populations living close by. According to Idehen (2020), necroleachate can easily pass from the graves to the soil through cracks and decomposition during the infiltration and water translocation process and chances are high when the corpse is in direct contact with the soil. What all these results show is that populations that live near cemeteries have



high health risks as they are more subject to contamination. The same can be said therefore when people sit or lie on graves as direct contact with the soil is inevitable.

The Dilemma of African Women

As alluded earlier in the discussion, there appears to be so much laxity in our contemporary societies when it comes to handling cadavers, burials as well as the general behavior when people are performing rituals around the cemetery. In the name of modernity, many aspects of African culture are being taken lightly and hardly is there an attempt to seriously reflect on the consequences of missing out on the traditions of our elders. These days, graves are usually cemented such that people sometimes sit or even sleep on them; that is in cases where burials are done around homesteads. The practice is becoming common also during the process of grave digging as well as during the delivery of speeches at the grave site by the *sabhuku* (village head). It appears there is no harm in relaxing oneself whilst seated on a grave of a known relative.

Old bonds between the deceased and a living member appear to take primacy over issues of ritual purity and health. Without taking proper care to wash one's hands after carrying the casket of a deceased relative, some proceed to consume fruits or take sweeteners such as sugarcane as they proceed home after the funeral. The possibility of infections from viruses or bacteria that could have eventually claimed the life of the deceased relative or other deceased persons in the cemetery is either denied or hardly comes to the minds of many. Such laxity is indeed dangerous as it may result in the contraction of deadly viruses as proven by science as well.

Having been brought up in the traditions of their elders which were characterized by the observation of death-related taboos, many African women today find themselves caught between a changing world and what years of experience have taught them. From experience, they know the dangers associated with tampering with graves and improper handling of cadavers, but it is hard to impart more meaningfully this knowledge to the younger generations. Though they make such effort, the speed at which society is changing often times leaves them without a voice. Younger generations are more open to receive and believe information coming from the technological gadgets that they daily interact with than listening to the voice of their mothers whom they often consider as old fashioned and backward in terms of technological advancement.

It is unfortunate, however, that when a new pandemic strikes, it is these same women who are made to shoulder much of its burden and the new generations would be looking up to them for care and guidance. While younger generations may appear way ahead of their mothers in terms of technology, deep down in their hearts, they know that there is no gadget which surpasses the care of a mother. This is evident in the oft called out word '*mhai/yo'or 'mama kani'*' (Oh! Mother) each time a person is faced with grave danger. This finds expression in the Shona proverb: *Baba muredzi mwana kuchema anodaidza mai* 'A father is just a nurse to the child, when it cries, it calls out to its mother' (Muzuru & Nyambi, 2012).

The word '*mhai/yo'*' comes naturally which is an indicator that mothers hold an important place in the life of every individual, hence, they ought to be listened to as they advise us in their wisdom. The wise words of Chinua Achebe will forever be cherished when he said: "It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good, and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you...And that is why we say mother is supreme" (Achebe, 1958:94-95). If only the world could heed to the voice of our mothers, pandemics could be greatly reduced and good health and well-being for all achieved as women are ever committed to the security of their families, communities and nations.



Conclusion

As we continue to face the threat of new devastating pandemics vis-à-vis SDG 3 which aims at ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all, there is indeed a need to look back into our traditions and salvage everything that ensures and safeguards public health. Numbers 19:1-21 which was used as a reference point of this discussion revealed that matters of holiness are closely tied to the issues of health and well-being. In the same way, death-related taboos in African culture, with particular reference to the Shona, underscore the same point that matters of ritual purity are not so divorced from public health. These are resources that need tapping into if we are to survive the scourge of new pandemics. There is a need for newer generations to learn from the wisdom of our elders, especially our mothers if we are to fight off the repeated occurrences of pandemics. What the lesson of life has taught us is that there is nowhere we can go without our mothers, hence they ought to be respected and listened to.

References

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*, African Writers Series: Nairobi.
- Ademiluka, S.O. (2009). An Ecological Interpretation of Leviticus 11-15 in an African (Nigerian) context, *OTE - Old Testament Essays*, 22(3), 525-534.
- Adeyemo, T. (eds et al). (2006). *Africa Bible Commentary*, Nairobi: Zondervan
- Boniface-Malle, A. (2006). 'Numbers,' in Adeyemo (eds et al), *Africa Bible Commentary*, Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, pp. 419-424.
- Cartwright, M. (2023). 'Black Death,' *World History Encyclopedia*, viewed 19 June 2024 from, <https://www.worldhistory.org>
- Chitakure, J. (2020). *Death Rituals among the Karanga of Nyajena, Zimbabwe: Praxis, Significance and Changes*, Pretoria, University of South Africa.
- Dudai, N. & Yaniv, Z. (2014). 'Endemic Aromatic Medicinal Plants in the Holy Land Vicinity,' in *Medicinal and Aromatic Plants of the Middle-East*, Vol.2, London: Springer.
- Franco, D., Georgin, J., Campo, L.A.V., Mayoral, M., Goenaga, J.O., Fruto, C.M., Neckel, A., Oliveira, M.L. & Ramos, C.G. (2022). The Environmental Pollution Caused by Cemeteries & Cremations, *Chemosphere*, 307, 136025, www.elsevier.com/locate/chemosphere.
- Hart, M. (1995). Moses the microbiologist: Judaism and social hygiene in the work of Alfred Nossig, *Jewish Social Studies*, 2(1), 72-97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4467461>.
- Hasel, G. F. (1983). *Health and Healing in the Old Testament*, Andrews University Seminary Studies, 21(3), 191-202.
- Idehen, O. (2020). A Comparative investigation of groundwater contamination in typical dumpsites and cemetery using Ert and physicochemical analysis of water in Benin metropolis, Nigeria. *Journal of Geoscience and Environment Protection*, 8(1), 785.
- Jonker, C. & Olivier, J. (2012). Mineral Contamination from Cemetery Soils: case study of Zandfontein Cemetery, South Africa. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 9, 511-520, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph9020511>.



- Lee, C. & Logan, A. (2017). Women's agency, activism and organization, *Women's History Review*, 28(6), 831-834, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2017.1346880>.
- McCane, B.R. (2003). *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus*, London: Trinity Press International.
- Morandi, L., de Borba, W.F., da Ros, C.O. et al. (2024). Soil contamination in a cemetery area: a case study in Nova Hartz City—RS, Brazil. *Environmental Sciences Europe* 36, 95 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-024-00864-2>
- Muchenwa, B. (2002). *Death and Burial among the Shona*, Harare: Pastoral Centre.
- Muzuru, M. & Nyambi, O. (2012). Celebrating Africana Motherhood: the Shona proverb and Familial and Social roles of Mothers as First Teachers, Cultural Bearers and Co-Partners, *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 2(5), 596-601.
- Omobola, O.C. (2013). An Overview of Taboo and Superstition among the Yoruba of Southwest of Nigeria, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2). <http://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2013.v4n2p221>.
- Omoregie, F. K. (2007). Language and Communication in the Kurova Guva Ceremony in Zimbabwe, *Marang: Journal of Language and Literature*, 17, 53-69.
- Pierce, G. (2015). Hyssop, Cedar and Scarlet: Symbolism in the Mosaic Law, Blogs, viewed 19 June 2014 from <https://www.blogs.org/exploringtheword/hyssop-cedar-scarlet.php>.
- Spongberg, A. L. & Becks, P. M. (2000). Inorganic Soil Contamination from Cemetery Leachate, *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*, 117, 313–327 (2000). <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005186919370> 313 – 327.
- Uhlmeier, M. (2022). *Mosaic law and Human health: The effects of Mosaic law observance on human health*, Virginia: Liberty University.
- Umuholo, O.W. (2023). Mothers as Custodians of African Languages and Cultures, viewed 19 June 2024 from, <http://www.localizationafrica.com/mothers-as-custodians-of-african-languages/>.
- United Nations: The Sustainable Development Goals Report (2022). viewed 19 June 2024 from, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Goals-Report-2022.pdf>
- Von Rad, G. (1962). *Old Testament Theology*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- World Health Organization (2024). 'Global Influenza Programme,' viewed 18 June 2024 from, <https://www.who.int>.
- Zinkuratire, V. (eds et al). (1991). *The African Bible*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence CC BY: credit must be given to the creator, the title and the license the work is under. This license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator.

