

THE PLACE OF PUBLIC CEMETERIES IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN ANAMBRA STATE

Obukwelu. Kate O.
Ministry of Environment, Awka, Anambra State.

Abstract

This paper examined the relevance of cemeteries in proper disposal of the dead and for promotion of environmental sanitation in Anambra State. It decried the absence of public cemeteries in most part of the State. The exceptions were Onitsha North, where available public cemetery is unkempt and poorly maintained, and Ayamelum where churchyards were preferred for burial. The paper advocated for provision of well-planned and adequately utilized public cemeteries in the State to ensure sustainable development.

Key Words - *Public Cemeteries, Urban Development, Environmental Sanitation*

Introduction

A critical discussion of Environment Sanitation would not be said to have been done until disposal of the dead is added, because this all-powerful man becomes stinking waste a few hours after life has gone out. When a person dies, the lifeless body which becomes useless is now refuse and constitutes a nuisance if not removed. It becomes unsightly, emits obnoxious odour and brings about fly infestation and contamination of subsoil water. The purpose of proper disposal of the dead is therefore to minimize or possibly eliminate dangers to health.

The issue of disposing the dead is delicate. It has ethical, religious, economic and public health considerations. Customs, beliefs and interests of the people must be taken into consideration in carrying out the duty of ensuring that the dead is properly disposed of. However, public health remains the most important consideration because its ultimate purpose is to control diseases, promote health and prolong life.

Out of the various methods of disposing the dead, burial is the most practiced in Nigeria. The types of burial include:-

- a. Earth Burial or inhumation
- b. Burial in caskets
- c. Water Burial.

In Anambra state, earth burial, which is the most universal and oldest method of disposing the dead, is the vogue. There are two ways of earth burial

- i. Burial in or near houses
- ii. Burial in cemetery

A cemetery is a burying ground. Public cemeteries are burying grounds that are open to all.

The present situation and practice

The idea that people have about life and death determine the practice and beliefs related to disposal of the dead in different cultures. While some people in African and some parts of the world believe that life is a continuum, the Hindus believe it is

transitory. The western culture however holds that death is an inevitable determination and destruction of existence.

The present situation in Anambra state is that there are no public cemeteries. Sustainable urban development should result from adequate planning, but this, for now seems to be lacking. A very pertinent and unfortunate observation is that even when a good plan has been made and provisions made for certain facilities, due to ignorance and greed, the land is sold off or turned to market status.

Information obtained from men and women in various communities in thirteen (13) Local Government Areas of Anambra state show that

1. Only Onitsha North LGA has a public cemetery which is unkempt and unmaintained. In all other places, churches own cemeteries.
2. Apart from Ayamelum LGA (where churchyards are preferred) people bury their dead adults and parents especially titled men inside a room or compound for others.

The purpose is to

1. Accord them respect
2. Enjoy their spiritual protection
3. Prevent their being annoyed in the land of the dead and
4. Prevent indiscriminate exhumation for rituals.

The respondents believed that public cemeteries

- a. Should be patronized when there is scarcity of land
- b. Save non-indigenes cost of transporting their dead relatives home.
- c. Were used for the burial of un-identified corpses
- d. Help to prevent indiscriminate dumping of dead bodies
- e. Help to prevent obnoxious odour

People refuse to use public cemeteries because

- i. They think it is not ideal for the burial of loved relatives
- ii. People who committed suicide and armed robbers are buried there
- iii. They would not want other dead being buried on top of theirs.

While some people accept that public cemeteries are needed, others would rather have good roads, and other amenities from government, than public cemetery.

This is far cry from what is happening in more developed Europe where the public cemetery, as a proper place for burial, originated in the Victorian period. Burying grounds (as distinct from church yards) were started by non-conformists in the 17th century; many more were established in the 18th century. The first public cemetery in London was established in 1827 in Kensal Green –a 79 acre site.

Other landscaped public cemeteries were soon opened at Norwood (1837), Highgate (1839), Nunhead (1840), Abney Park, Stoke Newington (1840), and Tower Hamlets (1841).

Before the middle of the 18th century such cemeteries were generally run as

commercial ventures. But, after the passing of legislation in the 1850s enforcing the closure of urban churchyards, municipal cemeteries became the rule. For examples, East London has 7, South East London -22, South West London -21 and West London -24 (Hitchcock, 2003). even South Western states in Nigeria have better stories to tell. They have functional public cemeteries.

The Need for Public Cemeteries

Earth burial which is the most popular method of disposing of the dead in the tropics has the advantage of being a relatively cheap procedure. It however needs a large expanse of land and may lead to the contamination of ground water, and odour nuisance if not done properly. For sustainable development therefore, the present trend of indiscriminate use of land for burial purpose should be checked to ensure that valuable parcels of land are not destroyed.

Already, some family lands are over-loaded with corpses due to burying near houses, especially where they do not have an abundance of land. Public cemeteries would ensure that the story of 'les Innocents' – the cemetery of the city of Paris, is not repeated. Les Innocents had to be destroyed by Paris officials upon public demand because a "mephitic" or poisonous fowlness started spreading in the air and steadily encroached upon neighbouring area.

On several occasions, unidentified corpses have been abandoned on roads to decay and everybody pretends not to be aware. This is very dehumanizing. In most cases, this situation results from workers (health and Police) being in a dilemma as to where to dispose of the corpses and not having materials to work with. If public cemeteries are available, unidentified and unclaimed bodies would be disposed of more conveniently.

This paper advocates an ambulance monitoring service in addition. This could be embarked upon by volunteers. When a corpse is seen, the police are usually communicated to certify that there was no foul play. The Health Department then buries the corpse properly in the public cemetery, after making all the necessary enquiries.

Public cemeteries would in addition

- Encourage the identification and keeping of accurate records so that in case there is need for exhumation, mistakes are not made. Hitchcock (2003) notes that cemetery records have sometimes been deposited at local record offices, but others are still kept at the office on the site. They usually give the name of the deceased, age, and occupation, the date of death and burial, and the position of the grave. These records are arranged chronologically, and are not indexed alphabetically.
- Ensure adequate supervision
- Help prevent the spread of communicable disease especially in these days of AIDS and other re-emerging diseases.
- Give opportunities to non-indigenes who do not wish to take their dead home.
- Reduce people living in panic and fear

- Prevent lands caving in and
- Create room for development.

The Way Forward

Public cemeteries, if well planned, established, managed and properly utilized would ensure sustainable urban development. To achieve this:

1. There should be integrated approach to town planning. That is, intersectorial collaboration
2. Public cemeteries should be properly and adequately managed
3. Cemeteries should be located at the outskirts of the town so as to make for future expansion; since they are intended to last for many years but must be accessible to the community it is intended for, so that effective use will be made of it. Wilkie (1965) stated that in estimating the space required for a cemetery, one acre (0.5 hectares) of land is regarded as a minimum per thousand populations for a period of fifty years. Cemeteries should be sited on even terrain so as to prevent soil erosion, and pollution of ground air or water.

The site of the cemetery should be well drained, and should not be on the drainage course. Sandy soil is accepted as the best suited for burial.

Cemeteries should be mapped out in such a way that graves can easily be identified. It should also make for a methodical way of burial thereby allowing for a rotational pattern. Cemeteries should be mapped into blocks, plots and graves, which are assigned numbers to make for identification.

Cemeteries are premises according to the public health laws. The cemetery must be kept clean always, as a mark of respect and honour to the dead. The sanitation of cemeteries is as important as the establishment of the cemeteries itself.

Because of the strict supervision that is required in cemeteries, some cadres of workers are employed to see that the cemetery runs smoothly and is not abused. The cemetery staff include: security men (gate-keepers or cemetery guards); grave diggers, and caretakers (gardeners and orderlies who see to the sanitation of the cemetery).

Public cemeteries should be modernized and beautified. There is a growth in elaborate mourning rituals, which is even being experienced locally in our society here. How about the elaborate decorations of rooms where corpses are laid in state, the designed caskets and the dancing undertakers? Our public cemeteries should reflect these.

In the Victorian era, large mausoleums built in the new, beautifully landscaped, park-styled cemeteries began to appear. Some of these cemeteries tried hard to emulate a park-like environment, making a visit to the cemetery a more pleasant experience.

The idea of landscaped public cemeteries came from Italy, France and Sweden. The winding, tomb-lined avenues and well contrived vistas of landscaped cemetery at Pere-Lachaise in Paris was widely admired. Let us make our cemeteries attractive places that we can visit.

Relevant legislation should be utilized to effect proper disposal of the dead. The public health laws and rules in relation to nuisance and infectious diseases are relevant.

By 1850, most London churchyards were so overcrowded that they posed a severe health risk to those people working or living nearby. A pressure group for the abolition of burial in towns was established and two years later, the Cemeteries Act established commercial and subsequently, public centers.

The erstwhile laws of Eastern Nigeria, 1963, Vol. II (Criminal Code), chapter 42, section 246, regulated burial in houses. It states that any person without the consent of the Governor who buries or attempts to bury a corpse in any house, building, premises, yard, garden, and compound or within a hundred yards of any dwelling house, or in any open space situated within a township is guilty of misdemeanor, and liable to imprisonment for six months. Recent enactments in Anambra state have similar provisions.

Conclusion

In the preservation of the environment for the achievement of health, disposal of the dead plays a major role. In order to function effectively and efficiently in a community, the Environmental Health Officer should understand the need for proper disposal, suitability or otherwise of the existing disposal methods, as well as appropriate ways of carrying out certain procedures in the disposal of the dead.

If public cemeteries are well planned, established, utilized and managed, in Anambra state, we shall be happier and the dead shall have more peace.

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