Perceptions of death and preparations for afterlife among older adults: The role of social workers in Lagos, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores death and afterlife beliefs on human existence, focusing on the human awareness of mortality and the role of religion in providing explanations for the afterlife. It delves into the perceptions of death and preparations for the afterlife among older adults in the Kosofe local government area of Lagos State, Nigeria. Emphasis on the involvement of social workers in supporting them through this existential process was brought to the fore. The study aims to understand the interplay of cultural, religious, and social factors that shape the perspectives of older adults regarding death and their preparations for the afterlife. It also seeks to identify the challenges encountered by them. This paper is anchored on the strength of Kübler-Ross's stages of grief theory. The qualitative research approach employed in this study provides a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences. Findings show that adherence to religious doctrines is a key preparatory strategy for the afterlife. The study contributes to a deeper comprehension of how beliefs about death and the afterlife shape the experiences of older adults, offering insights for social work practice in supporting them through this life transition.

Keywords: Afterlife, death perceptions, older adults, preparations, social workers

Introduction

Death is a perfectly, natural and inevitable occurrence in the course of human life. Death is the most certain thing for any living entity. It may come early or later in life but the inevitable will certainly happen (Okonkwo & Okafor, 2018). As people age, they often become more contemplative about the end of life and what comes after. For Nigerian older adults, these thoughts and beliefs are particularly significant as they approach the later stages of life. Understanding how Nigerian older adults perceive death and prepare for the afterlife is crucial for providing appropriate support and care to this group of people. The subject matter of life after death is of great interest to every individual, not only because

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death will surely triumph over every individual, but far more because there can scarcely be anyone among older persons, except perhaps the very young ones who have not lost by death someone or more of those who are near and dear to them.

Certainly, death will surely come, yet so little is known about it (Jones & Smith, 2018; Adegbite, 2014). Death simply refers to the end of the life of a person or organism. So understanding death will enable humans to live happily and fruitfully as well as prepare for the afterlife. Death may become less of a taboo topic of conversation (Jeyagurunathan et al, 2017). In such conversations and media examinations, the significance of each person's mortality and inevitable demise is routinely displaced by modernist narratives of death, including dominant sociological understandings of death, this disregards its significance in the motivation of human conduct. Even with the increase and advancement in technology, death cannot be negotiated, it is certain that death will come to reality (Umoh, 2012).

In Nigeria, like in many other cultures, perceptions of death and preparations for the afterlife are deeply rooted in religious, traditional, cultural, and social beliefs. In the religious realm, death could be understood from the Christian and Islamic perspectives. To the early church fathers, belief in the immortality of the soul was connected with the belief in the resurrection of the body. According to Christian doctrine, Jesus is the son of God, who was crucified, who died and was buried. On the third day, he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. It is widely assumed that religiosity is related to belief in the afterlife (Adekanle & Nwonwu, 2018). Hence, older adults tend to develop a new kind of attitude such as constantly meditating on the word of God which is the Bible, participating in the holy communion, having a friendly relationship with others, observing praise and worship to God, asking pastors to constantly pray for them to gain an entry to the afterlife (Ogunwale & Smith, 2017). The Islamic version of death perceives heaven as a paradise for those whose good works have outweighed the bad as determined by the Quran. Moslem belief guarantees human beings entry to the afterlife based on what they refer to as the five pillars of Islam. Older adults who believe in the Islamic religion believe that observing the five pillars of Islam guarantees an entry to the afterlife and not just trying to fit in around their secular lives (Ogunmefun & Smith, 2017; Arokoyu, 2018; Kellehear, 2007).

Also, Nigerians are generally and greatly influenced by traditional religion. Concerning the African concept of death, Ogunsola (2019) noted that the common Yoruba belief is that death is a creation of "Olodumare" the creator while Ikechukwu, Bassey and Onyechuke (2019) see death as a process that removes a person gradually from the "sasa" period to the "zamani". The sasa period means the time of physical existence on earth and the period after death

within which the departed now enters the zamani which is the complete death. An analysis of the above views shows that over the inevitability of death, they also agree that death removes people from the world after a specific time. Ajibade and Amoo (2019) emphasize the role of Olodumare as the originator of death while Ajuwon and Olaleye (2017) highlight death as an event that must occur as time moves on. All the great monotheistic religion such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam recognizes doctrines of an afterlife.

Furthermore, Nigeria is a culturally diverse country with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its own unique customs and traditions related to death and the afterlife (Duru, Oluwole & Betiku, 2016). In many Nigerian cultures, death is seen as a transition rather than an end, and there is a belief in an afterlife where the spirits of the deceased continue to exist in another realm. The Yoruba people, for example, believe in reincarnation and the concept of "ancestral spirits" who continue to play a role in the lives of the living. Among the Igbo people, there is a belief in the "spirit world" where the souls of the departed reside, and rituals are performed to ensure a smooth transition to the afterlife (Ajayi & Akpan-Idiok, 2018).

In addition to cultural and religious factors, social factors also play a role in shaping perceptions of death and preparations for the afterlife among older people in Nigeria. The family unit is central in Nigerian society, and the care of older adults, including their preparations for death and the afterlife, often falls on family members. This reliance on family support means that older people's attitudes towards death and their preparations for the afterlife are influenced by their family dynamics and relationships (Afolabi, Kola & Guruje, 2008; Adekola & Olonade, 2015).

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Kübler-Ross' theory. By applying the theory, social workers can provide compassionate and effective care that honors the individual's beliefs, values and wishes as they approach the end of life. Kübler-Ross's stages of grief provide a framework for understanding the emotional responses older persons may experience when facing death, which can be helpful for social workers in providing appropriate support and interventions. The first stage in Kübler-Ross's model is denial, where individuals may initially refuse to accept the reality of their impending death or may minimize its significance. Social workers can help older adults move through this stage by providing empathetic listening and gentle encouragement to explore their feelings and fears. The second stage is anger, where individuals may feel resentful or angry about their situation. Social workers can support older adults by validating their emotions and helping them find healthy ways to express and cope with their anger, such as through counseling or support groups. The third stage is bargaining, where individuals may try to negotiate with a higher power or seek ways to postpone or avoid death. Social workers

can assist older adults in exploring their beliefs and values, and in finding peace and acceptance within their spiritual or religious framework. The fourth stage is depression, where individuals may feel overwhelmed by sadness, grief, or a sense of loss. Social workers can provide emotional support, help older adults identify sources of meaning and purpose in their lives, and facilitate connections with loved ones and community resources. The final stage is acceptance, where individuals come to terms with their mortality and find a sense of peace and readiness for death. Social workers can assist older adults in finding meaning and closure, and in making practical arrangements for their end-of-life care and legacy.

Existing studies such as Gureje et al (2008), Okafor and Brown (2018), Eze and Umeakuka (2019) have primarily focused on the physical and medical aspects of aging, neglecting the psychosocial dimensions, particularly concerning death and the afterlife. While some researches (Agbawodikeizu et al 2018; Gavrilović & Spasojević, 2018; Ebigbo & Omorogbe, 2017; Umoh 2012), acknowledges the importance of cultural and religious beliefs in shaping these perceptions, few studies have delved deeply into the lived experiences and challenges faced by older adults in this context. Additionally, the role of social workers in addressing these psychosocial needs remains underexplored. Consequently, this study is designed with the following research objectives namely: (i) to identify the factors contributing to anxiety about death among older adults, (ii) to investigate the challenges facing older adults in preparing for the afterlife and (iii) to examine the specific role of social workers in addressing anxiety about death in this demographic.

Materials and Methods
Study design and area
The study adopted a qualitative research design to ascertain the opinions of the older adults, also known as the senior citizens living in Lagos State and relied majorly upon primary data using qualitative approaches of in-depth interviews (IDIs). The study was carried out in Kosofe Local government area of Lagos state, South-Western Nigeria. South West (Lagos) is dominated by the Yorubas majorly and other tribes with Islam and Christianity as the most commonly practiced belief systems although few others are adherents of African Traditional Religion. Yoruba is the major language of communication and English. The study adopted a non-experimental research study design, which is also known as phenomenological research design (Van, 1990).

Sampling and data collection procedure
The study employed purposive sampling techniques, specifically snowballing and availability, to select participants. Snowballing involved one participant suggesting another, leading to a chain of referrals. Availability sampling targeted easily accessible participants. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were

conducted with older adults to gather rich, qualitative data for analysis. Consent was obtained from all participants, following ethical guidelines.

Ten IDIs were conducted, with two households per street surveyed across five major streets in the study area. If no older adult was found, the next household was selected through snowball sampling, resulting in a total of twenty participants. Additionally, five social workers were purposively selected. The IDIs were administered by the researcher and two research assistants who had recently completed their undergraduate studies at the University of Lagos. The study spanned five months, from April to August 2022.

A pre-defined interview guide directed discussions, but participants were encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives freely. This approach provided insights into how older adults perceive death, prepare for the afterlife, and how social workers understand their clients' needs.

Data analysis
The researcher who administered the research instruments to the participants transcribed verbatim the data generated with the help of the two research assistants. To ensure that no response was missed, the transcribed data was compared to the notes to ensure understanding and accuracy. The transcribed data was entered into the Nvivo9 software for thematic analysis. The researcher checked the themes that emerged for uniformity. Diverse perceptions of death and afterlife; various strategic preparations for the afterlife, challenges faced by older people in preparing for the afterlife, and the role of social workers in supporting older people in afterlife preparations are among the major themes that emerged. The research questions guided these themes, which in turn guided the presentation of results. To underscore the points made by participants, illustrative quotes from the transcripts were used.

Ethical considerations
Verbal consent was obtained from the older adults after clarifying issues such as participant's consent and freedom to withdraw from this study at any time without fear. The confidentiality of the participants and the information given were emphasized and observed.

Results
The study findings on perceptions of death and preparations for the afterlife among older people are organized according to the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Firstly, the socio-demographic characteristics of participants are shown below:

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants:

S/No	Participants (pseudonyms)	Age (Years)	Gender	Level of Education	Ethnic Group	Marital Status	Religious Affiliation	Professional Status
1	Mrs. Ta	67	Female	Primary	Yoruba	Married	Christian	Self-employed
2	Mr. Pa	82	Male	Secondary	Igbo	Married	Muslim	Retiree
3	Mrs. Ny	76	Female	Primary	Yoruba	Married	Christian	Retiree
4	Mr. Ch	74	Male	Primary	Yoruba	Married	Muslim	Retiree
5	Mrs. Ly	80	Female	Primary	Igbo	Married	Christian	Retiree
6	Mr. Op	65	Male	Secondary	Yoruba	Widowed	Muslim	Retiree
7	Mrs. Bx	86	Female	Primary	Yoruba	Married	Traditional	Retiree
8	Mr. As	71	Male	Secondary	Yoruba	Married	Traditional	Retiree
9	Mrs. Uo	74	Female	Primary	Yoruba	Married	Muslim	Retiree
10	Mr. Pt	82	Male	Secondary	Igbo	Married	Christian	Retiree
11	Mrs. Ab	83	Female	Secondary	Yoruba	Widowed	Muslim	Retiree
12	Mr. Ik	63	Male	Primary	Yoruba	Married	Christian	Self-employed
13	Mrs. Ju	78	Female	Primary	Yoruba	Married	Muslim	Retiree
14	Mr. Wq	79	Male	Secondary	Hausa	Married	Christian	Retiree
15	Mrs. Er	75	Female	Secondary	Yoruba	Married	Muslim	Retiree
16	Mr. Vs	80	Male	Secondary	Yoruba	Widowed	Christian	Retiree
17	Mrs. Ko	74	Female	Primary	Igbo	Married	Traditional	Retiree
18	Mr. Gh	76	Male	Primary	Yoruba	Married	Christian	Retiree
19	Mrs. Kl	66	Female	Secondary	Yoruba	Married	Christian	Self-employed
20	Mr. Qw	73	Male	Secondary	Hausa	Married	Muslim	Retiree

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Table 1 provides the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants in the study in terms of age, gender, marital status, and ethnic background. These characteristics provide insights into various aspects of the participants' lives and other relevant factors that shape their social and demographic identities with respect to the findings of the study as showcased below in this section.

Older adult's perceptions of death and the afterlife
The study found that older people in Lagos metropolis hold diverse perceptions of death and the afterlife, influenced by cultural, religious, and personal beliefs. Many participants expressed a belief in an afterlife that is shaped by their religious teachings, with variations based on their specific religious affiliations, such as Christianity, Islam, or traditional African religions. Some older people viewed death as a natural transition to another realm of existence, while others emphasized the importance of living a virtuous life to secure a favorable afterlife. These perceptions often influenced their attitudes towards death and shaped their preparations for the afterlife. According to one of the participants:

> Death occurs once in the life time of an individual and when you die, that marks the end of life of an individual. The end of life of an individual also marks the end of enjoyment, the end of relating to family arid friends. Since death only occurs once in the life time of an

individual, everybody should also prepare and be ready for death same day **(Mrs. Uo, 74 years old).**

Another participant said:
Death is compulsory in every life of a person. Some death comes prematurely on certain individuals while some people die at the right and expected time. Premature death of loved ones, especially the bread winner of the house is always seen as shocking and the funeral is not always celebrated in style because of the nature of death, i.e. premature death. Death of other individuals at the right time is always seen as an expectant by the deceased, the deceased family and friends because of old age **(Mr. Ta, 67 years old).**

Death is certain and everybody believes death is a reality. Death presents one of the most formidable challenges to the idea that human life has purpose and meaning. Deaths of family members and friends, in particular, are frequently major life events or critical situations that prompt deeper reflection upon the value or direction of life projects and the priority given to competing commitments and often have major ramifications worthy of sociological examination. The responses of the participants on the perception of death are as follows:
I believe that human beings are not supposed to die but our forefathers brought death upon us, who are Adam and Eve. Death only occurs once in the life of an individual i.e. you only live once and dies once **(Mrs. Ab, 74 years old).**

I see death as death and as something inevitable that affects both young and old. It also affects the herbalists, who claim they have the power to capture death. Nobody on earth has the power to subdue death except God because only Jesus died and resurrected the third day self **(Mrs. Bx, 86 years old)**.

After death, that is all. Human beings are not given more than just one life. I believe that with one life given to every individual, reckless life should not be observed such as excessive smoking, fighting others with brutal objects such as broken bottles, knife, cutlass, etc. Since everybody will only live once, gentility and humility should be a feature of every human on earth **(Mr. Ik, 74 years old).**

Preparations for the afterlife among older people
The findings revealed that older people in Nigeria engage in various preparations for the afterlife, which are informed by their cultural and religious beliefs. These preparations may include engaging in religious practices, such as prayer and fasting, seeking forgiveness from others, making arrangements for

their funeral and burial, and passing on their wisdom and values to the younger generation. Participants described these preparations as important for ensuring a smooth transition to the afterlife and leaving a positive legacy for their descendants.

With respect to the Christian perspective, death is not the end of life, but rather a transformation. On the other hand, Muslims believe that the purpose of life is a test from God with the objective of full obedience, the outcome being the purification of the soul and the resultant judgment afterlife to be directed to heaven or hell. The Muslim goal is to live and die in accordance with God's will, as revealed in the Qur'an and practiced by the Prophet. When the participants were asked how they are preparing for the afterlife having known the inevitability of death, their responses were actually based on their religious understanding.

Some of the participants' responses are as follow:
> Exhibit a good behavior and love your neighbor as yourself. This will enable an older person to prepare well for afterlife and to relate with others freely without having any grudges against anybody (**Mr. Op, 65 years old).**

> Meditate on the word of God and follow His commandments. Meditate on it day and night so that you will be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (**Mr. Pt, 82 years old).**

> Living a charitable and a godly life! Charitable behaviour can lead to benefits for the giver. Giving to others can make you feel good about yourself and may improve your sense of well being knowing that you sacrificed something such as time, finances or property in order to help others who are in need (**Mrs. Ny, 76 years old).**

Challenges faced by older people in preparing for the afterlife
Despite their efforts to prepare for the afterlife, older people in Nigeria face several challenges in this process. These challenges include limited resources to fulfill cultural and religious obligations, conflicts within families regarding the distribution of inheritance, lack of access to adequate healthcare and social services, and concerns about the welfare of their dependents after their passing. These challenges can cause emotional distress and anxiety among older people, highlighting the need for supportive interventions. Here are some of their responses:
> Navigating the complexities of religious rituals and spiritual preparations can be challenging as we age. Finding the energy and resources to fulfill these requirements while dealing with

> health issues and limited mobility are a significant concern (**Mrs. Ly, 80 years old**).

> Finding meaning and purpose in our later years is crucial for preparing for the afterlife. Many of us struggle with feelings of loneliness or a lack of purpose, and this can impact how we approach our spiritual and emotional preparations for what comes next(**Mr. Qw, 73 years old**).

Role of social workers in supporting older people in afterlife preparations
The study found that social workers play a crucial role in supporting older people in their preparations for the afterlife. Social workers provide emotional support and counseling to help older people cope with existential concerns related to death and dying. They also facilitate access to resources and services that can assist older people in fulfilling their cultural and religious obligations. Additionally, social workers work with families to address conflicts and ensure that older people's wishes regarding their afterlife preparations are respected as revealed below:

> As social workers, we recognize the importance of cultural sensitivity in our approach to afterlife preparations. We strive to understand the diverse cultural beliefs and practices of our older clients, respecting their individual perspectives on death and the afterlife. By acknowledging and honoring their cultural traditions, we can better support them in their preparations and ensure that their wishes are respected (**Social worker #2**).

> In our experience, the role of social workers in supporting older individuals in afterlife preparations is multifaceted. We often find ourselves providing emotional support and counseling to help them navigate their fears and uncertainties about death and the afterlife. Additionally, we assist in facilitating discussions about their spiritual and religious beliefs, helping them find comfort and peace in their faith traditions as they contemplate the afterlife (**Social worker #5**).

Overall, social workers contribute to the holistic well-being of older people by addressing their spiritual and existential needs in the context of their preparations for the afterlife.

Discussion
The study revealed that older adults in Lagos hold diverse perceptions of death and the afterlife, shaped by cultural, religious, and personal beliefs. Many participants expressed a strong belief in the existence of an afterlife, which influenced their attitudes towards death and dying. Some viewed death as a natural transition to the afterlife, while others expressed fears and uncertainties

about what awaits them after death. These findings are consistent with previous research by Adegbite, (2018) and Ogunlana and Akinpelu, (2020) who noted that there is a cultural and religious perspective on death in Nigeria.

The study also identified various ways in which older people in Lagos prepare for the afterlife. These preparations often involve religious practices, such as prayer, fasting, and participation in religious ceremonies. Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of leading a morally upright life as a preparation for the afterlife. Some older people also engage in activities aimed at securing their legacy and ensuring the well-being of their families after their passing. These findings align with studies like that of Oladele and Oloidi, (2019), Ogunlesi, (2015), Chatters et al (2015) and Berg-Weger et al (2020) who highlighted the role of religious and moral beliefs in shaping end-of-life preparations.

Older adults face various challenges as reported by Ibe and Smith, (2020) Ajibade and Amoo, (2019) Adedayo and Owoaje, (2019).and these include health-related issues, financial constraints, and lack of social support. In the present study, many older people expressed concerns about their physical health and the financial burden of preparing for their funeral rites as supported by social action theory. Additionally, some participants highlighted the lack of social support networks, especially in urban areas where traditional community ties are weakening. These challenges underscore the need for holistic support for older people in their preparations for the afterlife.

The findings also emphasized the crucial role of social workers in supporting older people in their preparations for the afterlife as provided by Kubler-Ross theory. Social workers according to Adegoke, (2016); Kadushin and Harkness, (2014) Ibeagha and Ibeagha, (2018) can provide psychosocial support to address the emotional and spiritual needs of older people as they confront death and dying. They can also assist older people in accessing healthcare services and financial resources to alleviate the practical challenges they face. Additionally, social workers can facilitate the formation of support networks and community-based initiatives to strengthen the social support available to older people. Social workers understand the importance of addressing the holistic needs of individuals within their social contexts.

The findings have several implications for social work practice in Nigeria. Firstly, social workers need to be sensitive to the cultural and religious beliefs of older people regarding death and the afterlife, as suggested by the terror management theory. This requires cultural competence and the ability to engage with older people in a respectful and non-judgmental manner. Secondly, social workers should adopt a holistic approach to supporting older people, addressing not only their physical needs but also their emotional, spiritual, and social well-

being. This may involve collaboration with religious leaders, healthcare providers, and community organizations to provide comprehensive support. Also as suggested by Gassoumis et al., (2017) social workers can play a role in advocating for policies and programs that address the unique needs of older people in their preparations for the afterlife, including access to healthcare, social security, and end-of-life care services.

In light of the research objectives, the study makes the following recommendations. Firstly, it is recommended that social workers engage older adults in open and respectful discussions about their perceptions of death and the afterlife. By understanding their beliefs and fears, social workers can better tailor support services to meet their psychosocial needs. Secondly, social workers should assist older adults in making practical preparations for the afterlife, such as creating wills, establishing healthcare proxies, and making funeral arrangements. Additionally, they should provide emotional support to help them come to terms with the end of life. To address the challenges faced by older people, social workers should provide education on end-of-life issues and available resources. They should also advocate for policies that support older adults in making preparations for the afterlife, such as affordable healthcare and housing options.

Social workers play a crucial role in supporting older people in afterlife preparations by providing counseling, linking them to community resources, and advocating for their needs. They should also collaborate with other professionals, such as healthcare providers and legal experts, to ensure comprehensive support for older adults. The findings can inform the development of tailored social work interventions and support services to help senior citizens navigate this important phase of life with dignity and peace of mind.

While this study has its limitations, such as its small sample size of only 20 participants in Lagos State, which restricts the generalizability of the findings in Nigeria, and its qualitative nature, the insights gained remain valuable. The findings are particularly relevant to humanitarian and social service providers, including social workers and other professionals, aiming to enhance the well-being of older adults.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into how older people in Nigeria perceive death and prepare for the afterlife, emphasizing the crucial role of social workers in supporting them. The findings reveal deeply ingrained social, cultural, and religious beliefs that influence these perceptions and preparations. Many participants firmly believe in life after death, with varying views shaped

by their religious backgrounds. The study also identifies challenges older people face in preparing for the afterlife, such as limited resources and support networks and the complexities of family dynamics and cultural expectations.

The role of social workers emerges as pivotal in addressing these challenges and assisting older individuals in their preparations. Social workers can provide emotional support, facilitate discussions on death and dying, and connect them with relevant resources. The study emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive approaches in social work practice with older people in Nigeria, given the diversity of beliefs and practices regarding death and the afterlife. It contributes to the literature on aging, death, and dying in Nigeria, with implications for social work practice, policy, and future research in this area.

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