



# Analysis of the Public Health Implications of Government Policies on Corpse Repatriation and Disease Control in Nigeria During Covid-19

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## Abstract

The study analyzed the policies of government on corpse repatriation into Nigeria during Covid-19, described ways by which government measures ensures disease control in Nigeria during Covid-19, and discuss the challenges of government measures on disease control in Nigeria during Covid-19. The study focused on the outbreak of highly contagious covid-19 virus and the health implications of corpse repatriation was analyzed between 2020-2021 period. Descriptive research design was adopted and information was gathered from purposively selected ten journal articles on the subject matter of the study, and 1 government document. The theoretical framework for the study were the reasons for the obedience of international law and the structural functionalist theory. The study discovered that there are provisions for the repatriation of human corpse into the country prior to the outbreak of Covid-19. The measures of government on disease control during covid-19 included the Community Health Workers, and Border Security system. The challenges noted against government measures included inadequate testing material, and porous border. The study concluded that the failure of government measures is responsible for poor disease control in Nigeria. The study recommend that government should embark on public enlightenment program, review the border security system, and enhance the local government.

**Keywords:** Corpse repatriation, Border security, Disease control, Public policy, Nigeria

## Introduction

The practice of corpse repatriation continues to Nigeria despite the raising cases of communicable viral infections such as Ebola and Covid-19 virus. It is customary for migrants' corpse to be repatriated to their home country for burial<sup>1</sup> and this is because Place of origin burial has been affirmed as one of the significant desires of rural-urban migrants in African cities<sup>2</sup>. Of course, death is a certainty and funeral rite remains vital part of cultures in respect of the deceased person<sup>3,4</sup>. In fact the form of burial rite a human corpse receives is the function of the age, social status, societal belief, and religion of the concerned person<sup>5</sup>. Succinctly, death has been categorized into good and bad, such that while good death is identified as that of someone who has lived to a matured age and did not die of any blemish or infections against societal precepts, whose parents have died, and survived by children, bad death is the opposite of good death<sup>6,7</sup>. The manifestations of bad death has included stillbirth, sudden/underage death, and crime convict, and these attracts little or no burial ceremony in the society<sup>6</sup>. Also, the burial of the corpse of an elderly person in residence is considered as giving back to the concerned<sup>5</sup>. Hence, while bad death corpses may be buried without celebration, good death corpses are buried with full funeral rite including burial in residence. Hence, while the practice of corpse repatriation and burial rites are customary in Nigeria, it remains an issue of concerns to public health especially during the outbreak of Ebola and Covid-19 virus.

It is evident that in Nigeria, respect is accorded to the dead either according to religion or cultural rite. For instance, in the Igbo ethnic group, the widow of the deceased is expected to tie cloth on the remains of her husband<sup>8</sup> and this follows the repatriation of the corpse of an Igbo person back to its ancestral village<sup>2</sup>, that is residential home at place of origin, for burial and the performance of the required rituals. Also, the process involved in the Burial of the dead among the Yoruba involves washing the corpse, dressing it in the best attire, and laying-in-state<sup>9</sup>. Human corpse is buried in residence among the Yoruba's<sup>5,6</sup>. Also, the use of residential houses as graveyard in both Ibadan and Benin city has been reported<sup>10</sup>. In the North-central area of Nigeria, the practice of corpse repatriation and burial in residence is also considered as an honour to the dead<sup>11</sup>. Generally, in West African states, it has been observed that some of the burial rituals for the dead includes touching the face of the dead, laying on the corpse of an important person, and collective hand-washing in a common bowl after touching of the dead<sup>12</sup>. Touching and common hand-washing practice in a bowl brings people in contact with possible contagious infections contracted from touching the corpse or elsewhere, and these

becomes transmittable to others. While burial is supposed to be a demonstration of love and honour for the deceased, it could also be a medium through which disease such as Covid-19 and other contagious viral infections are contracted and spread, making it a necessity for government to take interest in human corpse management.

While public health is of significant interest to government, several measures have been developed to mitigate the spread of disease especially with regard to the management of human corpse. For instance, in Liberia there was government policies on the retrieval of perceived infected human corpse for sanitary disposal during the spreading of Ebola virus and the recurrent death recorded in the state routinely<sup>13</sup>. The policy was aimed at curbing the spread of the infections among population<sup>13</sup>. Hence, while such government policies on the management of human corpse can translate to a long-term psychological trauma for the relatives of the dead person, especially when it was known that their dead was not given the required burial rites, the policy encouraged secret burial practice among the population and jeopardize the public health situation in that infection rate was high among the populace<sup>13</sup>. This follows the administration of customary burial rites on the dead by the people<sup>13</sup>. Hence, the burial form and respect accorded to the dead could enhanced the spread of disease<sup>12</sup>, and this is because the infected human corpse can become a threat to the member of public if they are contaminated with pathogens, such as Covid-19 and Ebola virus, which are highly contagious<sup>12</sup>.

Notwithstanding, the transmission of Covid-19 from human corpse to health practitioner and from one person to the other, especially those who came in contact with infected corpse has been established in literature<sup>14</sup>. In Nigeria, the transmission of the virus has impacted public health because while death is daily recorded in the country, cause is often attributed to witchcraft or in most cases people careless to know, either due to religion perspective or poverty. In a review of cause of sudden death in Nigeria<sup>15</sup>, while hypertensive heart disease, acute left ventricular failure, and myocardial infarction from coronary artery disease are outlined as the leading causes of death in the observed cases, since recently other cause will have necessarily included the raising contagious infections inclusive of Covid-19 and Ebola virus.

The above analysis encouraged the description of the health management system with respect to corpse repatriation in Nigeria. The government in an effort to curtail the spread of disease and ensure public health safety especially through human corpse repatriation ensures

that there is notification, retrieval, storage, and disposal on corpse, which are the burial phase and the last process in the corpse management<sup>13</sup>. In a review on the Nigeria public health in Nigeria<sup>16</sup>, whilst identified agencies of government on public health safety has includes National Population Commission, National Identity Management Commission and Local Government Authorities, health record keeping is poorly administered<sup>17</sup>. The registration of death in the civil registration, for instance, is low<sup>16,18,19</sup>. The reason for the low registration may include religion influence, the rural/urban location of people involved, and high rate of corruption in the country<sup>6,18,19</sup>. Hence, while importance is attached to human corpse informing the continuous repatriation for burial and other customary rites amid the public health challenges resulting from Covid-19, little is known on how government measure is harmonized in responding to the curtailment of the raising cases of Covid-19.

The justification for the study is that burial has formed the focus of different studies and different submissions have been made<sup>11</sup>. Studies have investigated the implications of residence burial or cemetery citation on potable water availability<sup>20</sup> and noted that possible pollution on sources of water. The economic and psychological implication of residence burial on property value has been examined<sup>21</sup>. Also, studies have shown how Covid-19 measures reduced funeral celebration to close coffin method and the possibility of reduction in the spread of diseases from funeral rite<sup>22</sup>. The possibility of alternative burial system has also been examined in Abuja with the discovery that majority has preference for the conventional burial system. However, the continuous practice of corpse repatriation has not attracted much scholar attention and no study has harmonized the findings of extant studies on the subject matter despite the possibility of the spread of disease through the practice. The study is conducted against this noted gap, hence this study.

The study was guided by the following questions; What are the policies of government on corpse repatriation into Nigeria during Covid-19? How are government measures ensuring disease control in Nigeria during Covid-19? What are the challenges of government on disease control in Nigeria during Covid-19? The study specifically; analyzed the policies of government on corpse repatriation into Nigeria during Covid-19, described ways by which government measures ensures disease control in Nigeria during Covid-19, and discussed the challenges of government on disease control in Nigeria during Covid-19. The study was guided by the following assumption, the repatriation of human corpse into Nigeria is poorly attended to by

government or the measure of government to checkmate public health in Nigeria are dysfunctional.

### Scope of the Study

The study analyzed the emerging conflict between burial culture of corpse repatriation and government measures aimed at combating emerging disease such as Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021 period in Nigeria. The period was significant because with the outbreak of Covid-19 virus in China in the year 2019, death recorded daily across the globe soar. In fact, the virus was identified as the highest cause of death across the world during the period, and this prompted its declaration as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, WHO, in 2020. Due to its nature, the Covid-19 virus was highly contagious and as such increased death recorded across the globe. While there are Africans' affected in other countries by the Covid-19 infection, repatriation of their corpse is customary. After all, in most cultures across Africa include those in Nigeria, there is the practice of corpse repatriation for burial, a practice which has the possibility of jeopardizing public health and in contrast with measures of government on the containment of Covid-19. Hence, the critique of the period is important because it will provide insight into how government can harmonies cultural practice especially on corpse repatriation and disease control measures in the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, on disease control.

### Concept of Disease

The concept of disease remains contentious in the contemporary. The reason for the problem in the definition of the term is identified with the old French and Latin origin of the word as 'Dis-ease' which implied absence of impediment to free movement<sup>24</sup>. The word is more used without hyphen in the present and the meaning has also changed. The term disease implies ailment of organs or activities in an animal or plant of such a degree as to produce or threaten to produce detectable illness or disorder<sup>24</sup>. Specifically, the term is defined as a definable variety of such a disorder, usually with specific signs or symptoms or affecting a specific location<sup>24</sup>. The term disease has been defined as the name of a pathological entities that make up the medical model of ill health while illness is the personal response of a person or patient to being unwell<sup>25</sup>. Thus, the cause of illness is direct subject from causes of disease<sup>26</sup>. Hence, in the study disease is defined as object of illness in human body.

## Theoretical Review and Framework

The theoretical framework of analysis adopted for the study were reason for the obedience of international law<sup>27</sup> and structural functionalism. International law is responsible for the regulation of relationships, inclusive of corpse repatriation, between countries in the international system. The question arises on the reasons why nations obey the provisions of international law<sup>27</sup>. The first position was that nations comply with international laws not out of compulsion but as a result of persuasion to act in line with new realities and based on new agreements, which in this case is on the management of emerging disease<sup>27</sup>. This position was shared by Professor Abam Chayes and Antonia Handler Chayes. The position has been tagged the managerial explanation on reasons for compliance with treaties between nations<sup>27</sup>. Also, the success of the treaty regime is conditioned by states involved, and member of the state compliance<sup>27</sup>. More so, Professor Thomas Franck explained that nations act in line with legitimacy and distributive justice while complying with international law. Despite explanations on compliance of states to international law, there is failure to explain the significance of internalization<sup>28</sup>. Hence, the reason for compliance with international law including provisions on corpse repatriation has been identified with the possible outcome of disobedience<sup>28</sup>.

Specifically, states comply with international laws because of the attendant frictions that disobedience may cause. Hence, the policies of compliance are embraced by states to forestall confrontation<sup>28</sup>. Hence, internationalization of international laws is made possible through the process of interaction, interpretation, and internalization. Also, the main factor that facilitate changes from disobedience to compliance with relation to international law is recurrent involvement in international legal process<sup>28</sup> and through this process national interest is framed in a way that it will portrays states as compliant to norms that form parts of the emerging international laws<sup>28</sup>. Disease control and corpse repatriation are international issues which are guided by international laws and the failure of states to comply may prompt confrontation. The theory applies to this study from this perspective.

The second theoretical framework of analysis is the Structural functionalist theory. Notable contributors to the field are August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Talcott Parson and Emile Durkheim<sup>29</sup>. Their contributions ensured the growth of the theory significantly. The central submission of the theory is that different independent parts working together formed the basis of every society and its through these that the objectives of a state are accomplished<sup>29,30</sup>. These

make the functioning of the society to be likened to an organism, in that it is through the parts that the need of the society are meet. It is correct to state that there is part responsible for ensuring public health safety, there is the part that keeps record, there is the part that monitors various human activities in the society, and these works together to ensure the functioning of the society. The part of the society on disease control remain vital during the outbreak of Covid-19 but how did the part exhibit its role during the period. The theory is applied from this perspective.

Hence, the synthesis of the two theories and as applied to the study is that while there are international laws guiding affairs in the relationship between states in the international system, there are parts within a society that ensures that provision of international laws is complied with. With respect to ensuring public health safety in the international system especially on corpse repatriation, there are parts within each country that while acting to ensure compliance to international law within their country, also upholds the safety of other country. Hence, while the functioning of these measures is country specific and affected by diverse factors it remains unclear how they worked to ensured public heath safety, especially in Nigeria, during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. The synthesis is applied to the study from this perspective.

### **Overview on Disease Control and Human Corpse Management in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, 'befitting burial' is the dream of every aged person. In fact, it has been established that all elderly person wanted befitting burial<sup>5,31</sup>. The definition of 'befitting burial' as included the practice of lavish spending at funeral and residence internment of human corpse<sup>5,10,31,32</sup>. In fact, there is the desire for the performance of cultural rites inclusive of bathing and touching human corpse<sup>12</sup>. 'Befitting burial' continue to attract preference against alternative method of corpse management by residents<sup>23</sup>. Despite the fact that death can occur to human being at any point in time, identified causes of sudden death from the review of fifty autopsied cases on sudden death of corpse between the age of 28 and 80 years have been itemized to include cardiac cases inclusive of hypertensive heart disease, acute left ventricular failure, and myocardial infarction from artery disease<sup>15</sup>.

Hence, while death results from cardiac cases, contagious disease such as covid-19 virus and Ebola virus has been noted to be responsible for mass of human deaths<sup>12,14</sup>. The virus because of its contagion nature is able to spread quickly among the people and results in the record of more death. Inadequate testing capacity and overwhelming of health resources in the

country complicated the issue<sup>33</sup>. The challenges confronting the containment of Covid-19 may have informed the call for media support for healthy campaigns in the prevention of infection<sup>34</sup>. Hence, the strengthening of the disease control measures due to the fact that the contemporary measures in that direction are poor<sup>35, 36</sup>. Also, it was noted that Lassa Fever cases reduced due to the synergistic impact of covid-19 pandemic<sup>37</sup>.

The quest by government to arrest the calamity recorded from the Covid-19 and Ebola virus has informed the adoption of diverse approach inclusive of the border security system. The border security system is one of the viable approaches for the management of the frontier of the country. The border security system into Nigeria has been described as poor<sup>38,39</sup>. The challenges confronting the border security system in the country has been attributed to include the free movement of people which the ECOWAS protocol allows<sup>39,40</sup>. Also, there is the practice of corruption by border officials allowing for smuggling, terrorist movement and insecurity<sup>39,40</sup>. It can be deduced that human corpse can equally be smuggled into the country devoid of required check by the appropriate officials due to corruption by the concerned government officials.

Similarly, enhancing the local health security system in the country is one of the reasons for the local government in the country. Of course, the local government is the closest level to the people<sup>41</sup> but the service delivery is poor and limited<sup>41,42,43</sup>. The inability of the local government to discharge its constitutional obligations has been attributed to the poor finance and usurpation of responsibility by the state<sup>42</sup>. The unification of the local government system into one level multi-purpose is conflict generating and opposed to effective management in the utilization of local resources in an ethnically diverse country like Nigeria<sup>44</sup>.

The challenges confronting the above highlighted measures are best explained in the formulation and implementation of government policies in Nigeria. While the execution of formulated policies of government is identified with the bureaucrats<sup>45</sup>, public policy is relevant in the administration of the state<sup>46</sup>, and environmental factors influences the formulation and execution of public policies in Nigeria<sup>46</sup>. The problem of public policy execution in the country has been identified with governance and political leadership in Nigeria has been driven by self-interest and other customary consideration<sup>45,46</sup>. The challenges is evident in the poor registration of death in the country<sup>16</sup>.

## Methodology

This section discussed the research method for data collection and analysis.

### *Research Design*

Descriptive research design was adopted for the study and documents were reviewed. The study made use of qualitative data and these were sourced from secondary materials inclusive of 1 government documents and 10 journal articles in order to achieve the stated objectives of the study. The essence of relying on secondary sources of data was informed by the validity of information's presented in these outlets. Government, for instance, is the custodian of all information in the polity, and also peer reviewed articles are scrutinized before publication. There is documentation for public issues in the country and this affords the study the opportunity of accessing information on governments decision. Hence, in achieving the objectives one, the study sourced for information from government document title 'Requirements for Shipping Human Remains to Nigeria' and available at <https://nigeriahouse.com/documents/HumanRemains.pdf>. The document detained all the provisions of government on corpse repatriation to Nigeria. Information on objective two and three were sourced from extant documents purposively selected on the subject matter. Data collected from the were analyzed using themes.

## Study Area

Nigeria was the study area of the research work. In Nigeria while there are many ethnic groups, it has been argued that the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria is over two hundred. Hence, in term of population, the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria has been categorized into major and minor with the Hausa/ Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba classified as the majority while Efik, Tiv, Birom, etc. are classified as minority ethnic groups. Despite the classification of the Nigerian ethnic groups into major and minor, and possible cultural differences, the promulgation of the extant constitution (of 1999) has adopted a common national culture guided by a common government. Thus, despite difference in ethnic grouping and culture, there is the existence of a Nigerian approach to issues which established a new culture and governance. Thus, the study population for the study are document group.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Objective one- The Policies of Government on Corpse Repatriation into Nigeria during Covid-19*

The finding for objective one is detailed below. There exists policy of government on corpse repatriation prior to the Covid-19 era. The twelve items to be fulfilled before the commencement of repatriation to the country are detailed below<sup>1</sup> to include submission of

copy of death certificate, copy of transit/ burial permit, original copy of Non-communicable disease letter issued by coroners, medical examiner or state/city health agency, original notarized embalmer's affidavit stating how the body has been placed in hermetically sealed metal casket, the deceased Nigerian's passport/ copy of relative Nigeria passport, thirty dollars (\$30) postal money order or certified bank cheque as processing fee, details of receiving party in Nigeria, self-addressed stamped envelope, formal letter from funeral home asking consulate to issue a letter for shipment of human remains to Nigeria

It is evident that there is requirement for original copy of Non-communicable disease issued by either a medical examiner/coroner/health agency and the permission for the immigration of the corps granted by the Port Health Service of the Federal Ministry of Health. The essence of this, is the protection of the public health especially from communicable disease. This buttressed the importance of government decision in virtually every area of the state<sup>46</sup>. With regard to human dead bodies repatriation into the Nigeria, the decision of government has spelt out the requirement to be fulfilled before human dead body is repatriated into Nigeria. The outlined requirements have formed core requirement which must be satisfied before any human corpse may be returned into the country. The requirement has been validated by the submission that environmental or prevailing circumstances informed the decision or position of government<sup>46</sup>. Hence, the adoption and the call for the respect of the steps involved in the

<sup>1</sup> The document is titled 'Requirements for Shipping of Human Remains to Nigeria. It was retrieved from <https://nigeriahouse.com/documents/HumanRemains.pdf> on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, 2022.

repatriation of corpse may necessarily be to protect the health of resident in the country. The policies predate the covid-19 outbreak but take charge of activities during and after the period. This explains the reason government did not introduce a new law during Covid-19 era.

#### *Government Measures and Disease Control in Nigeria during Covid-19*

The measures of government responsible for disease control in the country can be grouped into media of information and enforcement agencies. The role played by the media in the prevention and control of meningitis in Nigeria demonstrates media support for health campaigns<sup>34</sup>. It was further noted that basic functions of media campaign during outbreak of disease is the provision of information which will inform adjustment in way of life among the population<sup>34</sup>. The medium of information' are said to create awareness on the outbreak of disease detailing the sign of the disease on human bodies, the transmission mode, possibility of terminating human life or otherwise, mode of treatment, and the mode of prevention available to victims<sup>34</sup>. It was equally noted that the various media outlets inclusive of television, radio, magazines, newspaper, and social media platforms disseminates information' to the population<sup>34</sup>.

Thus, while media sensitize member of the public, the outbreak of disease requires adequate response and action from appropriate law enforcement agencies. The Community Health Workers, CHW are at the core of the healthcare system in any country including Nigeria during the outbreak of Covid-19<sup>33</sup>. The CHW other than performing such role as immunization of children, and aid in reproductive health service in the country, they also aided in the containment of viral infections such as the Ebola Viral Infection and the Covid-19 outbreak in the country<sup>33</sup>. Also, the establishment of such body as the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, NCDC to coordinate the policies of government on disease management in the country. The evidence of this was witnessed in the creation of the 'coronavirus preparedness group' to screen traveler at the various point of entry into the country<sup>33</sup>.

There is equally the existence of the border security management. To ensure border security, the Nigeria custom service has been created and charged with the responsibility of management border or various entering points into the country<sup>38, 39, 40</sup>. The management of border is aimed at forms of security and safety (including health) for dwellers in a country.

*Government Challenges on Disease Control in Nigeria during Covid-19*

The findings of objectives three revealed the challenges of government on disease control during Covid-19 to included governance and political leadership problem, poor record of corpse repatriated into the country, inadequate testing capacity, porous border management system<sup>16,33,38,39,40,41,42</sup>. For instance, factors militating against the promotion of public good and effective service delivery, inclusive of health services, in the country has been identified as governance and political leadership in Nigeria. Record keeping with respect to the dead in the country is low with only 13.5% of death recorded in 2007 and 10% in 2017 were documented by government<sup>16</sup>. During the Covid-19 era, number of deaths recorded were based on estimated figure in Nigeria. These prevent government from properly monitor of disease spread through corpse management.

The continuous spreading of infection, inadequate testing capacity, and overwhelming of health resources has been identified with public health management in Nigeria during the period<sup>33</sup>. This implies that there is shortage of personnel, adequate funding, and required material. These factors may hamper the capacity of the health sector to perform the function of disease control. Disease control remain challenging because concerned agencies such as community health does not have the required materials<sup>33</sup> for testing.

The place of Local government in the delivery of health service is importance but confronted with challenges<sup>41</sup>. There was limited service delivery by the local government due to poor storage facilities practice by local government in the country, lack of financial autonomy<sup>42</sup>, usurpation of power by the state<sup>44</sup>. The uniformity of local government system is conflict generating and opposed to effective management in the utilization of local resources in Nigeria<sup>42</sup>. In addition, cases of porous border have been identified in Nigeria<sup>38,39,40</sup>. The issues of terrorism, illegal good movement, and human trafficking has been reported and this allows for the believe that human dead bodies are equally smuggled into the country without adequate examination. This allow for the spread of contagious disease in the country.

The foregoing succinctly established the challenges confronting government measures on disease control in Nigeria. Local government system has failed, the appropriate agency lack required equipment and fund to discharge their role, and specialized agencies perform less functions. All of these may be responsible for the inability of government to embark on effective

monitoring especially in local areas to ensure possible outbreak of disease through corpse management.

## Conclusion

The study was executed with the assumption that the repatriation of human corpse into Nigeria is poorly attended to by government and that the measure of government to checkmate public health in Nigeria are dysfunctional. Based on the findings of the study that there are procedure and policies on corpse repatriation into the country, the study also identified the approaches of government to disease control, and identified issues with disease control with failure government measures inclusive of the CHWs<sup>33</sup>. Hence, while policies exist, the measure to implement is problematic. The study concluded that the failure of government measures to implement policy is responsible for poor disease control in Nigeria<sup>33,38,39,40</sup>. Hence, the public health implication of the persistent failure of government measures implies that outbreak of disease in the country is usually untraceable and jeopardizes in public health in the country. The study suggests revitalization of government measures in addressing possible imported diseases into the country.

## Author Contributions

The study was supervised by Rotimi Adeforiti, Ph. D. The supervisor did suggest the methodology, and presented the literature review for the study. Temitope Esther Fasoye assisted in the source for and review of literature, and also aid in the arrangement of the study. Ayooluwa Ajayi presented the introduction and also gathered data for the study.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The study does not have any conflict of interest.

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