

Abstract:

Death from HIV/AIDS is increasingly common in Kenya. However, the ways in which people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and society more generally make sense of this kind of death has been little investigated. By analysing accounts from a sample of fourteen heterosexual people diagnosed HIV positive and presented for treatment in four specialized clinics in Nairobi, and other accounts elicited from members of the clergy and lay persons, this paper examines how people make sense of death from HIV/AIDS. To be infected by HIV equates to death, and because AIDS acts as a metaphor for moral and physical contamination, HIV infection confers on the individual a spoilt image and identity. This image and identity is projected into life beyond physical death, and is reinforced, popularized and legitimized by Christian and African religious schema in such a way that death from HIV/AIDS is now constructed and experienced as 'permanent'. This kind of death has implications for the way in which people living with HIV/AIDS seek treatment and manage an HIV seropositive status. It is also relevant to an understanding of the ways in which funerals and burials for people dying of HIV/AIDS are now being organized in Kenya.