

Religion and Death Among the Bukusu During the Precolonial Period

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Abstract

Death and dying is a very interesting topic to study. It has however attracted very little historical, socio- cultural and anthropological interrogations. Among the pristine Bukusu people of Western Kenya, death was accorded numerous socio-cultural rituals that constituted coded meanings which may have only been understood in the realms of religion. This paper thus attempted an examination on how traditional religion was a key determinant in conducting death rituals in the precolonial setup of the Bukusu community that was devoid foreign cultural influence. The findings in this paper were however extracted from a Doctor of Philosophy Degree (History) thesis which will be submitted to Graduate School of Laikipia University by February 2023. The broader objective of the thesis has interrogated mortuary and funerary rituals of the Babukusu of Kenya from 1895 to 2010. Being a historical research, relevant information in the study was collected in the field through extensive Oral Interviews (abbreviated as O.I in the footnotes) which was corroborated with other secondary sources to ascertain the relevance of the information.

Keywords: Religion, Death, Funerary, Rituals and Mortuary.

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INTRODUCTION

Africans are notoriously religious and each people has its own religion with a set of beliefs and practices [1]. Right from the time an individual is born to the time the same fellow dies, significant cultural routines are always conducted by the society and the manner in which these rituals are religiously observed affirms Mbiti's claim. Moreover, the expression of these rituals related to death and funerary practices demonstrate the essence and the significance of religion in death. This notion seemingly relates to the fact that most rituals and practices observed in the event of death communicate religious connotations and values attached to such cultural routines.

Perhaps, this explains why Lee and Vaughan [2] correctly reasoned that death ushers in physical, spiritual and social rapture in the society, which in turn calls for the renewal and continuity of life through the observance of related rituals that have the audacity of cleansing people from impurities arising from death. Hence, religion and death in an African perspective are intertwined concepts that should not be disassociated

¹J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (New York; 1969), p.1

²R. Lee, and M. Vaughan, 2008

whenever studying death on one hand and religion on the other hand. The concept of life after death in many African communities is a standard proof in terms of reflecting the meaning and the importance of religion especially when attempting to speculate on the occurrences of the after death incidences.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objective in this paper was to examine the meaning of Death and Mortuary concepts in terms of the traditional religion of the Babukusu. This objective was however domiciled in the broader aim of explicating the dynamics experienced in the Bukusu Mortuary and Funerary rituals (1895 - 2010) in a historical perspective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research relied on Oral field Interviews (abbreviated as O.I in the footnotes) in which the informants were selected using purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. The informants (See the list of informants attached) were interrogated to generate the findings in this paper. However, such information was corroborated with other information that was collected from secondary sources and from the Kenya National Archives (KNA) to ascertain the relevance and the

reliability of such informants.

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Meaning of Death and Mortuary concepts among the pristine Bukusu people

To understand the concepts of religion and death explicitly, it is prudent to put into perspective the veneration of ancestors and the worship of God among the Babukusu that has been practiced for so long. Makila seemingly accepts this assertion by contending that the Bantu speaking people including the Babukusu have historically been known to have had ancestor cults associated with the belief in the Supreme Being [3]. Huntingford [4] contends that ancestor veneration is a very old religious custom among the Bantu, which must have developed before their dispersion and movement from their primary areas in central Africa. The background of ancestor veneration among the Babukusu was God the Supreme Being (*Wele Khakaba*) whose native linguistic name means God the provider or giver. Therefore, ancestral spirits and God are intertwined among the Babukusu in the sense that the world of the spirits is likened to heaven or paradise where God influence the conduct and actions of the departed ancestors. In this regard, ancestral spirits were ranked below the messenger God (*Wele Murumwa*) and according to Makila, [5] ancestral spirits are comparable to the saints in Christianity today.

Being a universal phenomenon, the God of the Babukusu has a very close resemblance with the God of the Christians who possess attributes of threesome otherwise referred to as trinity in the theological perspectives of most Christians. Thus *Wele Mukhobe*, *Wele Mwana* and *Wele Murumwa* constitutes the supreme God among the Babukusu and in relation with the God of Christians, the Trinitarian nomenclature of the Bukusu aspects of God coincides with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy spirit respectively [6].

As the epicenter of religion among the Babukusu, God is the sole source of life and the provident. He is the creator of the universe and the maintainer of all forces and things, which are good and helpful to man [7]. The outstanding irony is that the same God has the powers of making someone to die at His own discretion. In this case, however, death and dying would imply the transition of an individual from the earthly state into a spiritual world state. That is why Wasike [8] argues that death only redefines changes and alters the personality of an individual. Similarly, Horton

³ R. Oliver, and G. Mathew, *History of East Africa vol. 1*, (Nairobi: 1982), p.92

⁴J. W. B. Huntingford, *The Western Tribes of Bantu Kavirondo*, (Nairobi; 1944a), p.62

⁵F. E. Makila, (1982), p.174

⁶ G. Banda, *The Impact of the Inter-Christian Fellowship Evangelical Mission among the of Kimilili Constituency, 1988-2012*, (Kenyatta University; 2017), p.65

⁷E. Mukhwana, (Kampala; 2021), pp.159-160

⁸J.C.C Wasike, (Johannesburg; 2013). p. 29

[9] posits that death presents an opportunity for a person's transition from mortality to immortality as an ancestor and it is through death that new ancestors emerge.

Besides the benevolent God among the Babukusu, there existed an evil god who was traditionally called *Wele Kumali* (black god). From oral sources, the said god once lived in heaven but *Wele Khakaba* expelled him for being noxious and evil minded. This concept of evil among the Babukusu resembles the Biblical teachings, which states that Satan was among the senior angles of God in heaven and he was expelled from his position after he attempted to usurp the powers of the almighty. This evil god is responsible for causing harm to humanity among the Babukusu using pernicious agents like ghosts, phantoms and even human beings and sometimes animals [10]. This god is the genesis of witchcraft and other evils that are castigated through human beings. However, *Wele Khakaba* was so benevolent to humanity in making people to have the ability of defending the evil gods using medicines, charms and by ritually cleansing themselves.

When death occurred among the Babukusu, the deceased person changed into *sisambwa*, which also meant a ghost or a soul. This *sisambwa* moved and hovered around the homestead of the deceased in form of the unseen spiritual being and according to Makila [11], *sisambwa* is a replica of the normal shadow (*sisinini*) of a human being. For this reason therefore, *sisambwa* is the unseen form of the shadow, which required the performance of various religious functions, and rituals before it would finally find rest in the spiritual world. Hence, it was upon the living clan members to honour, observe and perform all rituals that were in harmony with what ancestral spirits demanded [12].

Upon completion of all rituals associated with death, the *bisambwa* spirits found peace at their home, which is also referred to as *emakombe* or *emaali*. As such therefore, the appearance of a person in *emakombe* was known as *simakombe* or *omumakombe* [13]. Similarly, there existed *kumakombe*, which was an evil ghost and sometimes, the similar phantoms were called

bisime, bisieno, binaninga, binamutinga or *binanyenje*. At *emakombe, bisambwa* are said to be leading parallel lives to those experienced by people on earth and it is

⁹ R. Horton, (1970), “*Ikpataka Dogi: A Kalabari Funeral Rite*,” (1970), p.68

¹⁰ O.I, John Chikati Baraza at Sitabicha Village in Kimilili

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conjectured that this place eventually formed the home of the dead thus making it the home of the ancestral spirits.

For this reason therefore, death among the Babukusu constituted an integral aspect of the religious realignment in this community. It is argued that the cult of the ancestral spirits in this community was entwined with the divine hierarchy in which the spiritual world was equivalent to the place where sanctified souls lived after death. In other words, this place is the paradise in which God influenced the conduct and the actions of the departed ancestors who were ranked below the messenger God (*Wele Muurumwa*) and in Makila’s [¹⁴] words, ancestors are the equivalent of the saints in the Christian religion. What is debatable in this observation is that God’s abode among the Babukusu was in the sky whereas the departed ancestor’s spiritual world was considered to be underground. However, their frequent mobility in transcendental form enabled them to be with the God who was supposed to be everywhere [¹⁵].

To clearly underpin the significance of religion in death, Babukusu developed several sacrificial rituals related to death, which were observed in totality during different occasions that were dictated by the nature of the death and the age of the deceased individuals. In other circumstances, elderly people whose sickness grew seriously attempted to seek divine intervention by slaughtering a sacrificial animal (*eye kamakumba*) according to diviners’ advice [¹⁶]. The essence of such sacrifice was meant to seek peace with those that surrounded them as well as calling for God’s divine intervention and realize reconciliation and forgiveness from Him.

In the event of the death of an expectant mother, an operation was always conducted to separate the foetus from the mother before burial took place. Burying the expectant mother with the foetus inside the womb was considered a taboo and the individual who conducted the operation was lustrated from the impurities that accrued during the operation [¹⁷]. For this to be achieved, a sacrificial sheep was offered after which the operator smeared himself with cud from the entrails before she entered her house.

Similarly, if one twin died, an ox was often offered as a sacrifice and its skin was cut into equal parts for enfolding the dead twin in between at burial

constituency on 27 December 2021

¹¹ F. E. Makila, p.158

¹² O.I, Dinah Nabangi Mayende, Interviewed at Sengeli village in Kimilili constituency on 27 December 2021. ¹³ O.I, Moses Banda Wafula, Interviewed at Kibisi Village in Kimilili constituency on 27 December 2021.

¹⁴ F. E. Makila, p.174

¹⁵ O.I, Omukuka Muambane Natembeya, Interviewed at Khamulati village in Kimilili constituency on 9 May 2022 ¹⁶ O.I, Florence Kisaka, interviewed at Matunda village in Webuye west constituency on 10 June 2022.

¹⁷ O.I, Gabriel Murutu Wamalwa, interviewed at Lukhuna village in Tongareni Constituency on 20 April 2022.

[¹⁸]. In such circumstance, the surviving twin was not permitted to see the corpse of his twin sibling. Occasionally, buried bodies were exhumed for several reasons and reburied immediately after correcting the noted problem to the corpse. This ritual was usually done at night and individuals who performed it sacrificed a sheep upon which they stepped into the cud to separate themselves from the ritual impurities. At the same time, it was culturally forbidden to prepare a grave and fail to bury a dead body in it for whatever reasons. In the event of the occurrence of this observation, a banana shoot (*enjekhele*) was buried in that grave and elders who performed this ritual slaughtered a sheep and stepped in its cud as well.

In the course of the entire mourning period that lasted for about five years, different sacrifices were offered depending on the respective rituals with significant religious purposes. Before the burial of any elderly man or woman for instance, an ox was slaughtered to provide the hide in which the corpse was enclosed at burial [¹⁹]. During the ritual of *mulufu* (pertaining to death), another cow or bull was sacrificed and the meat which proceeded thereafter was distributed to the deceased daughters. On the day that followed the *mulufu* occasion, another bull or cow was customarily sacrificed in memory of the deceased parents (*khufua*) and this sacrifice enhanced the establishment of the status of the deceased in the spiritual world [²⁰]. This claim should however be subjected to further interrogation because other accounts contend that this kind of sacrifice of *khufua* was observed in later days after the burial.

Another very important sacrificial animal was offered forty days after the burial during the commemoration of the return of the deceased shadow (*sisinini*) in his former home. There was also a cleansing ritual to the widow three months after the burial of her husband. On this occasion, the widow was purified from the *bukhuchakali* impurities, which prohibited her from engaging in any sexual intercourse [²¹]. As usual, a

sheep or a cow was slaughtered and the cud was used to symbolically cleanse the widow from these impurities. However, other oral accounts contend that the purification of the *bukhuchakali* impurities was realized through the maiden sexual intercourse after the burial of the deceased.

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- O.I, Dinah Nabangi Mayende, interviewed at Sengeli

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Likewise, a polygamous man who lost one of his wives washed off the *bukhuchakali* four days after the burial of his wife. A sheep was sacrificed to cleanse him and children by stepping into the cud. Thereafter, he was at liberty to engage in sexual intercourse with any of his wives. Nevertheless, a widower who was not polygamous observed a four- month continence period from the burial date of his wife after which he sacrificed a cow or a bull for the cutting of the *kimikoye* (robes) ribbons. Upon accomplishing this ritual, the man pulled down the living hut and later moved into a new one where he had the freedom of getting another wife [22].

Close to twelve months after the death of a man, there was the performance of *khukhala kimikoye* (cutting the ribbons) whose sole purpose was to demolish the discarded hut of the deceased (*likubili*) [23]. During this ritual, an ox was sacrificed a day after the cattle drive, most often in the morning and the meat was used to entertain visitors. Again, the occasion of *khuyya lianga* (transferring the skull) was significantly marked by offering sacrifices at the shrine of the new homestead the family would have relocated to.

CONCLUSION

From the above foregoing discussion, death and religion are intertwined concepts and the conceptualization of peculiar rituals related to obsequies in the pristine state of the Babukusu was meant to give explicit indication of this assertion. At the center of death and religion was God who was understood to be the sole source of life and at the same time, He had the powers of taking away the same life. Though the argument raises ironical and contradicting statement about life and death, the cessation of life generally implied the transition of individuals from earthly state to the spiritual world state. In other words, death only redefined the personality of individuals from mortality to immortality to generate the religious concepts that were understood in the occurrence of death.

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²⁰ O.I, Omukuka Muambane Natembeya at Khamulati village in Kimilili constituency on 9 May 2022

²¹ O.I, Priscilla Lusike Namwenya at Kibisi village in Kimilili constituency on 27 December 2021.

²¹ O.I, John Chikati Baraza at Sitabicha Village in Kimilili constituency on 27 December 2021.

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b) List of Informants

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ii. Florence Kisaka, interviewed at Matunda village in Webuye west constituency on 10 June 2022.

iii. Gabriel Murutu Wamalwa, interviewed at Lukhuna village in Tongareni Constituency on 20 April 2022.

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