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AFRICAN DEATH RITE OF
PASSAGE, DIALOGUE AND
INCULTURATION

BY

OBBO STEPHEN BENEDICT, O.S.B

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OBBO

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OBBO STEPHEN BENEDICT, O.S.B.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the objectives of this paper is to lead to a deeper understanding of the mystery of death and the rituals surrounding it. The term "death" is commonly understood as "end of life" - and human experience seems to echo this.

From the African context, death is looked at as a moment of passing from the earthly life to another realm of life. It is a rite of passage like birth, Initiation into adulthood and marriage. Philosophically, death is defined as a separation of the intertwine aspects of the human person. That is, the body and the soul. From the christian perspective, death is a mystery which can be answered only by another mystery, the death of Jesus Christ.

From the clinical or biological definition, death is the point when the brain's functioning stops.

Because of the complexity and depth of the African death rites, only a few ethnic groupings have been considered in this paper for the sake of clarity and particularity. These are: The Luo and Abaluyia of Kenya; The Iteso, Baganda, Jopadhola and Bakonzo of Uganda, The chagga, Hehe and Bena of Tanzania; and the Ndebele of Zimbabwe.

An attempt has, however, been made to discern some similarities and differences between the Christian and African Traditional concepts of death. The conclusion proposes the need for dialogue and inculturation of the compatible African death rites with Christianity.

During the course of research, I used certain methods. This includes interviewing aided by a tape recorder. The informants are mainly from Uganda and Kenya and are from different walks of life. I also used questionnaire and library work.

CHAPTER 1

CONCEPT OF DEATH

Africans in general consider death as a horrible and terrifying phenomenon. In most of the African tribes, death is and continues to be a very painful experience. Individuals do not invite the moment of death or wish to die because of the mystery connected with it. For the Iteso of Uganda for instance, death is seen as a calamity and as such, something dreadful. It deprives the society of their beloved ones who leave behind a gap that cannot be filled.

Among the Baganda, although the reality of death is externally expressed by sadness, depression and mourning, it is accepted as part and parcel of life. Here are some Luganda proverbs to illustrate this fact. "Ssekiriba Kyattaka, mpawo atalikyambala (death is universal and since we are all bound to die, it is useless for any one to boast)". The proverb, "Lukuba egyu neruleka omuzima (death sometimes takes away babies and leaves suffering elderly persons)". The latter expresses the unfaithfulness and the unpredictability of death. The saying, "kiyikiti Kirinnyibwa buwaze embwa bagikirinyisaeffudde (Nobody likes to die, but since all human beings must die, death seems to be a sort of violence).

The Luo understand death as a mysterious happening which every body is to experience regardless of one's status, wealth or age in the society. It is for this reason that they say, "Tho ok oyiero ngato (Death does not choose). Kawuono en mara kinyen mari (today is my turn, tomorrow it will be yours)"¹.

¹ Jude Ongonga, "The River Lake Luo Phenomenon of Death: A base for Religious Interlocutors", in Cox L. James, Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa, P.225.

Death of an individual among the Luo, however, causes much bereavement to the community, for it is not only the individual who dies, but considerable members of a particular society. It is for this reason that the Luo always try to prevent unnecessary deaths, especially those caused by illness that can be treated. To cope and guard against the same issue, the Luos have ventured to, "make use of magic and carry protective objects against sorcery; offer sacrifices to the deities and ask for their protection and special favours."²

The Luo believe that death is a departure and not annihilation of a person. The dead person goes to form the company of the departed. Luos often say "Otero oget ne joma nene osetelone" (He takes the blanket to those who went before him) to mean that, he goes to join the dead which includes grand parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, parents, brothers, sisters, friends and other people.

Information from most of the African communities indicates that, although death implies a person's end of participation in a community as a physical being, they also have awareness that it is not the end. In spite of the flesh's decomposition, they hold firmly that the dead person continues to live.

*"The person who has died is believed to have moved to join the company of those who had gone before him and the only major change in this departure is the fact that the physical body decays."*³

² Ibid. P.225.

³ Mbiti J.S., Introduction to African Religion, Second Revised Edition, Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1992, pp.119

This confirms that death for most of the African ethnics is not a total despair. The deceased continue to live in perpetual communion with the living here on earth. It is because of this belief that,

*"Some Africans like the Egyptians formerly buried some belongings such as spears, bows and arrows, stools, snuff, food stuffs, beads, ornaments, money, tools and domestic utensils with the body. Some of these things might be placed on the grave afterwards. The belief behind this custom is that the deceased needs weapons to defend themselves along the way to the next world, or food to eat on the journey, wives and servants to keep him company when he reaches there, and other property to use so that he would not arrive empty handed or remain poor. The greatest treasures ever discovered in a burial place were those of King Tutankhamen of Egypt who died in B.C. 1352."*⁴

The Baganda have a saying that. "Atamanyi mpewo y'emagombe tawa mufu lubugo (the one who does not know the coldness of the grave, is the one who does not give a bark cloth to the dead". So, they believe that one is alive and can feel cold in the grave. Kitaka talya atereka buteresi (Mr. Soil does not eat, but simply keeps). The saying, Agenze (he has gone) among other proverbs and sayings indicates that for the Baganda, physical death is a reality but there is a mysterious kind of life after it.

⁴ Ibid. P. 120.

The great homage and communications through different is a sure hope that death is, therefore, not a complete end of a person, but a passage from this world into the Kingdom of God.

1.1 ORIGIN OF DEATH

In entire Africa, it has been discovered that there are several myths or ideas regarding the origin of death. To begin with, are the Iteso who have scattered legends here and there about the origin of death. However, one of the most common ones is that when God had completed creating man, He sent him to the earth to live there in peace. But before man left, God pointed at two calabashes that He had and told the man to take with him to the earth. The calabashes were full of precious gifts. Man picked one of the calabashes and began his journey, but with a doubtful mind for the thought that he actually might have left behind the calabash full of more precious things than the one he had already picked. So as he was beginning his downward journey, God began too His upward journey to even higher places.

Man still in his mind had the desire for the content of both calabashes and when God was in a safe and hidden distance away, and since His back was turned towards man, man swiftly went back and picked the remaining calabash. And without delay or any deliberation poured its contents into the one he already had. After so doing, he hurried down to earth without knowing that he had in fact poured death into his first calabash.

On reaching earth, man decided to examine the things he had in the calabash before reaching home, this he did under a tree in the forest. When he

opened the calabash, death escaped first and was never to be caught by man again. It remained living in the forest. But from then on, death has followed man into his home.

On the origin of death (olumbe) the Baganda also have a myth. A woman named "Nambi" had gone back to her father's house to collect millet for her hen against the orders of her father Ggulu. Nambi was living on earth, while Ggulu lived in the heavens. While coming back with millet, Nambi brought her brother Walumbe (death) with her. After settling on earth, Kintu (Nambi's husband) refused his children to serve Walumbe (their uncle). Walumbe was annoyed so much so that he started killing Kintu's children. Kintu complained to his in-law who sent Kaikuuzi (Nambi's brother) to catch Walumbe, but in vain. Hence, Walumbe remained on earth consuming people up to today. This is usually called the "sin" of Nambi because it is assimilated with that of Eve in the Bible.

Luos also have a popular folk tale also about the origin of death. That is, "In the beginning, the moon asked humanity to send him a fat piece of meat so that if they died they would come back to life periodically like the new moon. People got the meat: they prepared a long pole to reach the moon. They gave the piece of meat to a chameleon and asked it to climb along the pole and take the meat to the moon. Unfortunately, the Chameleon made the meat very dirty by dropping it in the dust before reaching the moon. Consequently, the moon refused to take it".⁵ This is the mythical explanation for death's origin among the river lake Luo.

⁵ op. cit. Cox. L James, P 227.

Origin of death among most African societies is thus, associated with some kind of disobedience or carelessness towards the commandments of God. Over most of Africa, God is believed to have forbidden people not to eat certain animals and fruits. In other cases, God gave vessels of secrets, but man broke them because of curiosity, and so, death overpowered him. It is for this reason that certain animals and human beings have been held responsible for the origin of death as described in the above mentioned ethnic groups. When the alleged agent(s) of deaths are detected in most of the African cultures, they are rendered harmless either by retaliation or counter magic. Suspects of such deaths are usually badly treated and in many cases, sent away from the village.

1.2 CAUSES OF DEATH

Besides the legends of death's origin, most of the Africans believe that there is always a cause to every death. Despite the fact that some Africans attribute death to deities, the real causes behind the curtain remain someone who in a certain way is connected to the society.

The causes of death among the African societies may be classified as physical and religious or mystical. The latter includes, curses. Among the Iteso, elders were said to have "aitukes naedrak" that is, bitter mouths. A male elder would, for instance, sit naked on the anthill and uttered certain words which could lead to death. For example, "a mail molo, araillem wama si kede adi modigot" meaning that, "I wish you meet with a wild animal and be killed by it".

Among the Baganda, the curses of a senior relative who recently died is said to be very effective. These are believed to curse disrespectful persons and

families. The Baganda also believed that one would die of a curse if one lost the good will of his/her community. That is failure to maintain the good relations with the members of one's kinship group.

Connected with the above, is the breaking of a binding oath. The Baganda, for instance, had systems that asserted or confirmed certain truths about their beliefs or actions by swearing. Such a phrase as, "may I die if what I have said is not true or may my ribs break like twigs if what I am saying is untrue". An oath taken under such established religious circumstances was believed to be binding. To break such an oath meant suffering or even experiencing death.

Broken taboos were also believed to have caused death. If this was found out, a ritual of purification was performed which would, for example, involve offering a prescribed sacrifice for the sake of one's life and the good of the community as a whole.

Sorcery is another cause of death among most of the African communities. When sorcery is worked against a particular person, the sorcerer gets into contact with a victim through nail clippings, hair or the scrapped up dust of the person's footprints. It is believed that at times, the sorcerer can send the victim things like snakes to attack him/her. This is expressed in a Teso saying that, "Igukakitai nesi emun" literally meaning that, "They have sent the sick or deceased person a snake". The latter is acknowledged to have avenging spirits that can kill. Another common and known way of sorcery is by poisoning. This is done normally in the process of eating or drinking.

Witchcraft is believed also to be one of the many causes of death among Africans. Reasons for witchcraft are often either domestic tension or jealousies that grow in closely knit communities. This is the likely reason why bewitching is mostly among relatives and neighbours. Sometimes witchcraft is done to take revenge for some wrong done to a person. For instance, refusal to pay debts, suspect for killing a member of a certain family, land conflict and such related issues.

Connected with witchcraft is the famous "evil eye" among the Luo. The expression in Luo does not refer to any eye which is physically defected or sick, but to the person who through his/her gaze or look, bewitches others. The evil eye caused sickness which often led to death. People with such "evil eye" in Luo are called "Jajuok" or "Jasihoho". Once it was established that somebody in an area had the "evil eye", to find out exactly who it was, people brought in a diviner. The latter would make a concoction of a herb called "kwili" and would make everybody drink it. The person with the "evil eye" or a witch would then fall down into a trance and would name the people he/she had harmed or killed. Majority of people with an evil eye have been realised to be women. A case in point is from somebody's experience in a school at Mfangano Island (on Lake Victoria). He said that

"in that school there was a girl with an evil eye who bewitched another by touching. The moment the bewitched was touched, she became dumb. The parents of the girl were called in to take their bewitched daughter to the hospital. When days passed by and the daughter could not regain her speech, the parents began to suspect that witchcraft was involved. They

*brought the girl back to school and called in the elderly women who knew how to handle such cases. The dumb girl was put in one of the classrooms with one or two of the elderly women.. And then all the girls were forced individually to go and talk with the dumb girl. When the girl with the evil eye showed up, the bewitched girl began to tremble and to sweat. And when the girl with the evil eye began to talk to her, she immediately recovered her speech. This is how the girl with the evil eye was detected and uncovered."*⁶

It has also been realised among the Luo that, if one of the members of a family had the evil eye, it was difficult to know who it was. The Luo, however could suspect that one of their family members had an evil eye when, for instance on a number of occasions while eating they felt stomach aches. Or, when on other occasions visitors who came to see them fell sick. Once the person was identified through divination or self-declaration, which was rare, the family accepted the truth.

It is interesting to know too that many times the family member who had the "evil eye" had no intention of hurting his/her relatives. And so, most of the time when she felt the evil force taking possession of her while people were eating, she would just go out of the house or turn her gaze away from the food. When the evil force reduced (vanished), she would then finish up with her eating.

As noted earlier, the Luo are tolerant with people who have the "evil eye". The reason being that one who kills a witch, risks to have one of his/her children

⁶ Dominic Vincent Nkoyoyo, The Evil Eye as Understood Among the Luo, Research Paper, MaryKnoll Institute of African Studies, Nairobi, 1998. p.8.

dead or become a witch. So, the Luo normally punish such people by taunting them through songs, proverbs or warnings like: "Eo koro wan ka. Kik ngato ang muor". That is, "Now that we are here, let no one get stomach-ache."

Once in a while, however, a person with the "evil eye" could be beaten to death. But generally, most of the punishments for them involved banishment. He would be forced to go to distant places - far away from the former village. Refusal to visit such people was another form of punishment. Very few people visited the home of a person with the "evil eye".

The evil eye, however, works on the same principle as witchcraft. This is the reason for calling a person with an evil eye a witch, that is, "jajuok". The latter has some aspect of witchcraft. And behind all witchcraft, lies the power of the evil spirits which terrorises humanity. It is believed by the Luo that the "evil eye" is something inherited.

Most of the Africans also testify to death in connection to the action of the supernatural beings, that is, gods (spirits). Sabino Odoki in his study on Death rituals among the Luo of Uganda stated that, "the unseen agents of death operate among many other ways, through chien (vengeance by the spirits)".⁷ The latter could apply to the spirits of animals especially domestic ones.

The Luo of Uganda, thus, ventured not to kill certain animals unnecessarily to avoid their avenging spirits in the family and clan members. This clearly shows that, "the Luo people in general believe in God who is just and responsible for all

⁷ Odoki Ocan Sabino, Death Ritual Among the Luos of Uganda, CUEA Dissertation, Jan. 1992. p.70.

his creatures. It also shows that to the Luo, life is a sacred reality which has to be respected.⁸

Death caused by the spirits was (is) also due to the "spirits of people who have had a grudge against the person, or whose bodies were not properly buried, or who have been neglected by their relatives for some reason or another".⁹

In almost all of the African cultures, the physical causes of death included: premature childbirth, famine, accidents, injury in communal or personal disputes, wild animals, diseases and old age among others.

The Iteso identified the different diseases (Adeka) that caused death. These included measles which in Iteso is called "Adek na Ekwam", meaning literary, the disease of the wind (measles). It is believed among the Iteso that this disease mainly killed young children. Other common diseases which caused death among the Iteso were "Adek na Ekodol" (small pox) and "epaganga" (Tuberculosis).

The Africans believe theoretically the possibility of the natural causes of death. The real causes are known to be physical and mystical.

"It is not enough for them to find out only the physical causes. They take much trouble to establish the mystical causes as well, and this is done through consulting diviners and medicine men, or by suspicion and guess work".¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, p.71.

⁹ Mbiti op. cit. p.118.

¹⁰ Ibid, P. 118.

CHAPTER TWO

PRE-BURIAL RITUALS

It was noted earlier that death brings a physical separation of the individual from the others. Because of that, many complex and long rituals are carried out. Those celebrations are not seen as a mark of breaking off the bonds that existed between the dead and his relatives, but as a sign of respect and continued relation in a different mode.

Rites and ceremonies unveil death as a rite of passage. The latter is more evident among the Luo. They have a belief that any transitional exercise to be seen as a rite of passage, the rituals that accompany the change must have features common to other forms of social transformation. That is,

"for the initiates and the larger community to be satisfied the rituals must be corporate, authoritative, instructive, exclusive and physical. For the Luo, these features are transmitted during the funeral rites and ceremonies. In this way, the rituals so carried out bring the past to the present and enable the participants to see the present in relation to the future. The symbols used must be those that exclusively touch everyone's life and dramatise the event. In its rituals, the community is attempting to impress upon the participants that: the dead person must be sent off on his/her journey as an honoured guest and the rites are celebrated to ensure his/her reception in the world of the ancestors. Secondly, the survivors are adequately protected from any possible revenge by the

dead. Thirdly, there has to be a gradual separation of the chief mourners especially widows and widowers from the spirit of their dead husbands/wives and that some rights previously had by the deceased must be passed on to the living especially in succession and inheritance. Fourthly is the need to re-establish status quo that is normally disturbed by death".¹¹

So, in the rituals, the people express their sense of belief in the hereafter, they console themselves for the loss of a member and the bond among the relatives, friends and neighbours.

2.1 PREPARATION FOR DEATH

When death approaches, a number of steps are taken. There is a tendency among the Bakonzo of Western Uganda to prevent death by moving the patient from one hut to another or from one place to another hoping that the sickness will cease. The movement also saves a person from witches who might try to kill him/her quickly.

The second step is to invite all family members to come and support the dying person and also to take part in his last sacrifice to the ancestors. The patient takes opportunity to reconcile himself with the family members seeking forgiveness in case he had wronged some. He also instructs how his property ought to be divided among his children. The family or clan also express their solidarity and through the sacrifice offered, they pray for the acceptance of the deceased in the community of the living dead (ancestors). Such a gathering is also

¹¹ Cox, op. cit. p.231.

an opportunity to detect people who might have caused the sickness and death. An ox is slaughtered and meat is shared among all family members. If a person is responsible for the sickness, he or she will fall sick soon after eating the meat. In case some family members fail to attend, they may be suspected of being the cause of sickness and death.

The Ndebele people (in Zimbabwe) have a belief that, at the bedside of the dying person there ought to be close relatives. Preferably one's brother and a son. The reason for the presence of the latter is a sign that the dying person is alive in his children and it gives him hope that there is someone to remember him and ensure the continuation of the lineage even after his death. The closest relatives also do discern the cause of the illness and this is often, magic and witchcraft. Some steps are taken to deliver the sick from his/her pains. Cold water may be poured over the body of the sick so that he/she may be revived. If the sickness persist, the relatives slaughter the ancestor's beast.

"This is generally an ox or a goat (for a poor man), and it's killing is believed to hasten death. The slaughter of the beast of ancestors is also a sign linking both departed and living members of the family, and an assurance that the dying person will not go into a foreign hostile country, but will move into a friendly (even festal) community. The living dead are present at the death of their human relatives, and may be asked, through the slaughter of their animal, to hasten the death of the sick in order to terminate his pain or suffering more quickly".¹²

¹² Mbiti, op. cit., p.150.

When death is about to happen, the Luo people interpret certain signs and symbols. "When there is a halo encircling the sun, they believe that soon a person of high social status will die. When members of a family have dreams in which they share meat with other people or see a large crowd of people, these are often signs of an imminent funeral within the dreamer's lineage".¹³

The Luo also do pay final respect to the person about to die. The family, relatives and friends gather around in sorrow. "The mutation that the presence of death brings to the living becomes obvious, so radical, so fundamental and painful, that no body can ignore it and remain calm. There can never be adequate preparation of death. Each time it occurs it is a traumatic event."¹⁴

Among the Baganda, when a person is very ill and his/her condition begins to show some signs of death, the last attempt to save the person is made by calling on a medicine man. The latter gives the patient some medicine composed of different herbs or leaves of trees or bark of trees and stones or earth.

Close relatives are called for when one is just about to die. All are expected to stop their work and come to see the patient before he/she dies. It is compulsory that close relatives, blood brothers intimate friends and neighbours be present. If the latter do not turn up, people would suspect or hold them responsible for the death of the deceased person.

The patient (if a man) in most cases invites the sons to his bedside and gives them his last fatherly blessing (omukisa gw'obuzadde). It's also the moment

¹³ Cox, op. cit., p.231.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.232.

he chooses or publicly declares who the heir is to be. The choice of the one to be a heir (omusika) is normally respected by the relatives because of fear of revenge of the dying man's spirit (umuzimu). If the death is sudden or the chosen person has a bad reputation, the relatives then have the right to choose the heir.

Parental blessing (omukisa gw'obuzadde) is considered as very important among the Baganda. The latter believe that success and failure in one's future depends on the blessings of the parents, especially when dying. In the past, fatherly blessing was accompanied with some rites which included: giving the son a spear, a shield and some amulets. The ancestors would be called upon to be the witnesses at the ritual and to bless that particular person. The opposite of the parent blessing is "ekikolimo" (curse, malediction). In this case, the parent wishes his/her son what is evil. The child is supposed to be followed by bad luck.

When the dying person is a married man, his wife, female relatives who sit by his bed side are allowed to cry softly. They are not allowed to wail because people think that, by doing that death may be hastened. It is only when the patient begins to struggle with death that women are allowed or expected to wail. The moment of death is marked by an outburst of wailing of all women sitting in the house and in the courtyard. While wailing the women generally utter short and abrupt sentences and other phrases of sorrow. They call upon the deceased to come back again to them.

2.2 RITUALS AFTER DEATH

Most of the African cultures, however attempt to put the body of the dead person in order soon after death. The eyes for instance are closed, the arms and

legs straightened, the jaws are tied with a piece of cloth and a cloth wrapped around the waist. Among the Baganda, "the rite of washing the body is done by close relatives and friends. Banana plantain stems (ebinyirikisi) are first boiled in a pot and then applied to the body to free it of dirt and other stains in case there are some. The rite called, "Okuyisa Mufu akagogo" follows. This is the washing of the deceased's face. It is a sign of love, respect and bidding farewell to the deceased. The right hand of the deceased is opened and in it, two pumpkin seeds put. The son then picks them with his lips, chews them and spreads them on his father's and mother's bodies. The rite means that the deceased man has survived with male children."¹⁵

Among the Iteso, when a married man dies, elderly women of the clan including the elder wives of the deceased, sit near him. Young people are not allowed to sit next to the corpse. They are instead brought in one by one to touch the corpse so that they do not have strange dreams. Before modern use of beds sheets, the Iteso covered the corpse with cattle skins. The deceased was washed before the burial. This gave a chance to all relatives to touch him/her before being buried. It is a belief among the Iteso that this would help the relatives to forget about the deceased and thus, not have much sorrow. The people who came to see the deceased before the burial would be allowed to look at the face.

In case the deceased had been quarrelsome, the Iteso slaughtered a black goat of which the skin was used for tying his/her mouth. This was done to stop the

¹⁵ Lukenge Juvenis, Death and Heirship among the Baganda of Uganda, Jinja Philosophicum Term Paper, P.,1996.

sharp tongue of the deceased. It is believed that if this is not done, the deceased would come back in the form of the spirit to demand things from the relatives. This is expressed in the saying, "Ekotosi ipolok akokor" the elders need a hen. He or she is believed to be able to return and give great trouble and punishment to the people (relatives). If the deceased was a witch-doctor, a brown goat is slaughtered and skin removed and tied around his waist. At burial time, he is buried while seated and nothing apart from the brown skin is used for covering him. This ritual prevented the would be negative effects to the family resulting from the covenant made between the deceased and the witch-doctor.

Death for the Luo is a happening that involves the public. To die alone or to be found dead is conceived to be a disgrace. The dying persons often have people around them to treat their bodies, fold the fingers, hold the legs together, and to turn the person on his/her back. This is done by certain members of the family or immediate relatives depending on the age and sex of the deceased. As soon as the person dies,

cold water is poured on him/her as a means of re-animation. For the Luo, water is used as a symbol of life. When a baby is born, it is washed with cold water, for, by boiling water one kills its fertility. And now, at death, it is the last element used to test whether life still exists. If there is no sign of life, those who have been sobbing all along burst into howling and crying at the top of their voices.¹⁶

¹⁶ Cox, op. cit., p.232.

Other rituals done after an individual's death is, "cattle drive". It is a ceremony whose aim is to express reverence to the deceased. "Clan members go to the border area of their enemies provocatively to insult and boast of their militant spirit. There is also a "sham fight" which is performed by the age-mate of the deceased using weapons similar to those which the deceased used to fight with. They praise the deceased for his heroic deeds especially for having killed many people in wars. There are some dirges and special songs composed to praise the deceased and regret his death by blaming those responsible".¹⁷

The lighting of fire in the courtyard is a common practice after the death of an individual. Among the Jopodholas, for instance, it is done the same day somebody dies and it is often at night. The fire is lit by a nephew to the family of the deceased. The fire symbolises many things. It shows, for instance, that somebody has died in that particular locality. It keeps careful watch on certain individuals who are believed to steal the body.

As for the death of the King of Buganda, "the sacred fire at the entrance of the palace was extinguished as a symbol of the king's death. The death of a king was not announced by the word "kufa" (to die) but by a euphemism "Umuliroguzikidde" (the fire is extinguished).

The Luo do the lighting during the evening of the day of the burial. The big fire is normally set near the grave. The fire is meant not only to guard against evil happenings, but also to prevent wild animals that may come into the home. The clan members sit around the fire for a

¹⁷ Wagner, Gunter, The Bantu of North Kavirondo, London, Oxford University Press 1949, p. 449.

"a period of two weeks, both to keep the spirit of the dead company and to console the bereaved. During this period, musicians are invited to entertain mourners. Otherwise, other activities in the house remain suspended until liedo (shaving of the hair of the chief mourners)".¹⁸

2.3 SYMBOLISM OF MOURNING

As soon as death occurs among the Jopadholas, an outburst of wailing follows, mostly women. This is important because the one who does not weep can easily be suspected to have caused the death. For some, it is a way of pacifying the spirit of the dead.

Besides the crying, immediate communication is made not only to the relatives and neighbours, but also the whole village, depending on the popularity of the person. This attention has a social dimension. It is rare for people who have no affection (relation of some kind) to bother about the horror of death except in situations of known accidents or publicised situations like the Bombolulu fire accident at Mombasa that burnt about 26 lives students who were sleeping at night in the school dormitory.

Among the Bakonzo (Bantu speakers of Western Uganda, Kasese District on the slopes of Mt. Ruwenzori), the age of the individual plays a significant part to the experience. For example, the wailing or mourning at the death of a child is not as intense as that of a youth, and not comparable to that of a married adult (father or mother). The situation also differs at the death of an elderly man or woman. The mourning is minimal - also today among the victims who die of AIDs,

¹⁸ Cox, op.cit., p.234.

suicide, cancer and other defects like polio, blindness, deafness, numbness, to mention but a few.

What seems to be implied in the differing reactions is that, the potential of the human being is measured in issues of activeness and participation in the life of the society. The child is still a passive member of the community except to the immediate parents and the kin. The society takes the death of a child as loss of many but unknown potentialities. The situation is not alarming as that of an adult. For an old man or woman and at times the victims of incurable diseases, death seems to be a restful (relieving) event. For the elderly, time to be alive or active seems inevitably ended and death is seen as the proper transition into the world of ancestors - a rank above any living human. A similar notion is held by the Yoruba who, "act in the belief that death is meant for the aged and that given the right conditions every person should live to a ripe old age".¹⁹

In common talk people speculate about the cause of a particular individuals' death. People also express whether the death was necessary or not, whether the person is missed or not. Death thus, seems to be a point at which the individual is judged or given identity.

As the mourning continues, different ethnic groups have similar or different ways to express their sorrows and affection towards the deceased. The iteso, for instance, accompany the mourning with drums - if the deceased is a twin. The drums were also meant to prevent people from catching headaches, especially the relatives when they become annoyed. If the deceased had once given birth to

¹⁹ Adeyemo Tokunboh, Salvation in African Tradition, Nairobi, Evangel Publishing House, 1997. p.61.

twins, drums are also beaten while people decorate themselves with yeast flour (aljuk aingeles) and get a certain kind of grass (emurla) to tie around the wrist, head and the waist of the mourners. The mourning continues until the burial.

Eating anything among the Iteso before the burial is conceived not only as an insult, but sign of hatred to the deceased and the relations. The mourners are expected to show their love and sorrow for the deceased by falling down in the course of mourning. Some people fall down so hard that they even faint. This is common among the close relatives of the deceased - like the wives, sisters, the mother and aunts. The attitude of falling hard has led to deaths of some relatives during the same mourning ceremonies. The relatives who do not fall down while mourning are referred to as "Na...egagang etau". That is, the hard hearted. They would even be suspected to have bewitched the deceased.

Among the Baganda, the widow expressed her mourning by wrapping a piece of cloth around her waist. Orphans are wrapped with banana fibres (ebyayi) from a particular type of banana called "Nsowe" or "Nnakitembe" depending on whether the dead is a man or a woman. The banana fibres are removed after burial and secretly kept by an aunt or grandmother of the orphans. Old clothes are worn to symbolise sorrow.

The Baganda have a practice of announcing death to the plantations (okubikira Olusuku). This is because a muganda's livelihood is closely linked with Banana plantations. So, a particular type of banana tree "Nsowe" for a man and

"Nnakitembe" for a woman is half way cut such that it is left loosely hanging on its stem".²⁰ This was to symbolise death and the consequences.

During the mourning moments, sexual intercourse is forbidden among the relatives. To reduce the temptation, women were refrained from returning to their homes until the end of the ritual of installing the heir of the deceased.

Most of the African communities like Iteso, do refrain from their normal working duties during period of mourning. It is considered anti-social and a sign of hatred to do any work instead of attending the death rites. One can easily be suspected of causing the death if discovered.

Close relatives among the Baganda who are to break any of such taboos especially with regard to sexual abstinence, were prohibited from eating the ritual goat roasted for especially orphans and widows. It is note worthy that due to social economic changes, some of these observations are no longer strictly observed in some places. It is also true that most of the Africans live in urban areas and are ignorant about them.

²⁰ Lukenge, op.cit, p.10.

CHAPTER THREE

BURIAL RITES

Burial rituals vary according to age and social status. The time taken to bury a person after death differs between children and adults, an ordinary person and clan leader and between a person who has children and the one who has none. The variation of burial procedures also depends on the nature of death and the physical appearance of a person. For instance a physically handicapped person as it will be realised does not enjoy full rites as those who are normal physically. Likewise, those who die tragically by lightening and other misfortunes are not granted proper burial ceremonies.

Different ethnic groups have more or less similar rituals for burying their deceased ones. The Baganda for instance, do bury their dead in the banana plantation although these days for the sake of honour and respect, the family head is buried near the compound. They use bark cloth for the burial. They are brought by relatives and friends and are called "Amabugo". The latter term refers to the money raised for meeting funeral costs. Corpses of women are wrapped inside the house, for men outside and those of children at the edge of a courtyard.²¹

From the house, close relatives follow the body. The women wail profusely. The leader of the procession carries in his hand a small branch of a "mutuba" tree (*ficus natalensis*). This is interpreted as "The eyes of the dead man". That is "Akulembere omufu gemasoge (He who leads a dead person is his eyes)". The

²¹ Kyewalyanga Francis, Traditional Religion, Custom and Christianity in Uganda, West Germany, 1976. p.89.

body is laid in the grave. These days the deceased is accompanied by religious prayers according to one's religion.

The ritual that follows is, the cutting of the piece of bark cloth tied around the forehead of the deceased. This is called, "Okusala Omulindi". It is done by the deceased's grand son. The latter with his head covered with a bark cloth descends into the grave and cuts a piece of bark cloth with which the deceased is wrapped".²² The ritual signifies that the deceased had grand children. If the grand children lived too far off, the piece of bark cloth (omulindi) is made so long that after covering the grave with soil, a piece of it remained protruding out of the grave till a grand son arrives and cuts it.

The grave was filled up with soil. The close relatives and friends are given the priority to drop a handful of soil in the grave. After covering the body with soil, the relatives gather some banana leaves (essanja) and some dry banana plantain fibres (ebyayi) and stems of plantain trees (ebigogo) to cover the whole tomb (amalaalo). Grass is also used at certain places to cover the grave.

The burial of the king among the Baganda differs from that of an ordinary person. A king (Kabaka) is not buried at his own home or ancestral ground, but at Kasubi. The latter is a tomb where the Baganda kings are buried. It is just a few miles from Kampala city in Uganda. Before the burial the body of the late king is embalmed by squeezing the liquid out of it. Every chief in Buganda had to come and pay honour to the late king and then he is buried in the tomb (masiro).

²² Ibid. p.88.

Murderers, witches and those who commit suicide are buried in the bush among the Baganda. Alternatively the bodies of such people are burnt to ashes. By doing this, the relatives and the clan as a whole express their desire not to consider such persons as members of their family or clan. They in other words, deny such people the burial rites which ordinary people are entitled to have.

It is against the Baganda culture like other African ethnics, to bury two deceased people in the same grave. In cases like say, when a pregnant woman dies among the Baganda, the foetus is removed from the womb and buried in a separate grave. The Baganda believed and still hold that, "if buried together, the spirits would quarrel for priority, and that the worst spirit would wreck vengeance on the living".²³

The manner in which twins are buried is different from the way the rest are buried. The Jopadholas, for instance, bury their twins late in the evening. In the past, it used to be at night. This was done when the other twin brother/sister was still alive. The reason for that time of burial is connected with the intimacy existing between the twins. It is believed that, the surviving twin can get a terrible shock that can lead to his/her death when he/she sees a fellow twin lowered into the grave. It is for the same reason that mourning is forbidden when one twin dies while the other one is still alive.

As for the Baganda, when a young twin died, the corpse is wrapped in a climbing plant called "bbombo" and then its made to dry before a fire place. This is the Ganda way of embalming the bodies of twins. After a few days, Omutaka

²³ Ibid. p.91.

(guardian of clan lands) comes to the father of the twins and carries the corpses of the twins and buries them in the waste-land. Grown up twins were buried normally like any other persons.

Among the Iteso a deceased clan leader was buried with a black cloth known as, "Erinyet". The latter type of burial would happen only if the deceased fought the famous wars which took place long ago among the Baganda and the Europeans who came to Teso land for the first time. This type of burial, however, is now very rare since it was connected with colonialism.

The Africans generally bury their dead between 3.00 p.m. and 4.00 p.m. This time is symbolic. Among the Luos, for instance, "it reveals an aspect of their ontological belief, in that early in the morning, people begin and perform various activities until sunset. Light, therefore, is a symbol of honest existence when those who are well may engage and interact freely in the society. But at night everything goes to sleep. The people in their late burial portray death as sleep. It stops all activities and the individual being buried has ended his physical active days".²⁴

The Luos, "bury their dead not far from the hut of the deceased. A man is buried in his homestead a few yards from his hut with the head facing the gate but on the area left of the hut. The man's responsibility to protect his homestead is reflected in the position of the grave. A married woman on the other hand is buried on the right side of the hut and her head faces towards the hut. The cultural

²⁴ Cox Op. Cit., p.233.

distinction is that while a man may run to the gate to meet the enemy, a woman is supposed to run towards her hut for safety".²⁵

The site for the burial among the Luos is determined by the male chief mourners who are clansmen related and elderly. The grave is dug after the approval of the spot. There are, however, limitations as regards to those who are to dig the grave.

*For instance, "a widower who has not been reinstated in the society, a man who has lost his child, or one of the twins may not dig the grave. A dead body, for the Luo, is a sacred thing treated with profound piety. Even when a wild beast devours a person leaving only a piece of his/her limbs, such remains are treated with great respect and are buried accordingly. The sacredness and piety accompanying death is further demonstrated by prohibiting any of the chief mourners or close relatives from sexual involvement until proper rituals of cleansing are performed."*²⁶

Traditionally among the Luo, when a male adult died, young men put on war clothing, held spears and shields in their hands and their faces were smeared with some white clay soil. This practice was done when the grave was being dug. "This ceremony was originally carried out during ethnic wars following the death of a warrior in battle. The people of the warrior went and attacked the killers and raided their cattle. A warrior would not be buried until this was done. Later on, it was associated by any death of a male adult, for every male Luo was believed to

²⁵ Cox, Op. Cit., p. 232.

²⁶ Ibid., p.233.

have been a warrior. It would, therefore, be incomplete to bury a male adult without his people raiding the enemy's animals in his honour. The actual burial therefore was not expected to begin before the raiding warriors were back.²⁷

The issue of burial in the ancestral land (home soil) is a very sensitive issue among the Luos. The ancestral land in this context refers to the place where one's departed relatives (ancestors) in the family are buried. The Luos believe that there is communion between the living and the spirits of the ancestors. These spirits are acknowledged to be ever present among the living and participate in protecting the family members from unnecessary harm especially witchcraft. To enable the spirits of the ancestors to do their roles effectively burial in the home soil among the Luos became inevitable. Home soil is held to be the common ground where the living and the dead in different ways link through rituals.

This experience confirms the fact that, death for the Luo does not end at the death of the individual, but it continues. It is for this reason that they want their deceased to be buried at their homeland so that they may be remembered by the generations to come. Failure to bury the deceased at home is believed by the Luos to be the root cause of many problems and misfortunes. The ancestral spirits (chien) are believed to retaliate with anger when not appeased. This is one of the reasons why the Luos contribute and spend money at all costs to transport the body even if far away like from Nairobi or even abroad to Siaya.

Burial wrangles are very common among the Luos especially because of the strong traditions they have as regards to the veneration of the deceased.

²⁷ Ibid. p.233.

A case in point is the funeral arrangement for the late S.M. Otieno who had spent most of the latter part of his life in the city. He was married to a Kikuyu lady, Virginia Wambui. Otieno's clan members had arranged that, the burial would take place at Nyalgunga, a remote village in Siaya District. Wambui lost no time in obtaining a court order from a Nairobi judge forbidding the clan from taking the body. This was immediately contested by them, and in January 1987 three appeals issued an injunction in favour of the clan, restraining Otieno's widow from carrying out the burial in any place other than Nyalgunga. Three days later, Wambui filed another injunction restraining the clan pending a full trial before Mr. Justice Bosire. The trial lasted seventeen days and testified to the extreme importance that Africans attach to everything connected with death and funerals. Ancient customs and superstitions were described by witnesses for the benefit of the court and were fully reported in the press. It was alleged that a Luo tribesman could build a house in Nairobi, but never at home; that no genuine Luo was ever buried outside Luo land, that if custom was flouted, the spirit of the deceased would haunt the living and that, a woman had no authority in any of the matters under discussion. The long list of witnesses included a herbalist, a bishop, a professor of philosophy and even a grave digger".²⁸

From this experience one can imagine how much time and money is spent just to have the corpse buried in the Luo ancestral land.

²⁸ Shorter Alyward, The Church in the African City, Great Britain, London, 19991, p.1-2.

It ought to be noted that not all the Luos who die are buried in the ancestral soil. A person who did not live according to the norms of the Luo community cannot expect to be buried in the home soil. An example of such people are those who commit suicide. They are deprived of the normal burial rites accorded to the rest. Instead, "different rituals are used to impress upon the community that the individual in question is being condemned already by the living members and that this judgement will be the same one passed by the ancestors in the next world. The lack of proper funeral rites is a sign of a curse, a judgement cast by the group, that this particular person did not respect and live according to the ancestors wishes. The idea of punishment or recompensation for one's personal conduct during life does not occur to a Luo. Nor do the Luo pre-occupy themselves with the questions of what will become of them in the next world."²⁹

3.1 THE REACTION SOON AFTER BURIAL

Generally, the shock and the bereavement experienced especially by the close relatives begins to reduce after burial. This can be observed from the activities carried out. They are done with a festive mood. People group themselves accordingly. Members who are talented musically entertain the rest. Some may prefer just to share their experiences, while others may be drinking and eating. The entertainment often depends on the interest of the deceased. Plays and dances are often performed by the clubs and societies of which the deceased was(is) a member.

The activities that are carried out coupled with the presence of the people

²⁹ Cox, op. cit., p.230.

“facilitate the resignation and acceptance which are essential for the bereaved. The killing of animals, which is part and parcel of these activities, is always a vital and essential part of the funeral ceremonies. Among the Luo the status of the deceased and his/her social relationship to the community. The more animals are killed at a funeral, the better is for the deceased. In the death of the animals, the person's death is repeated. And, in sharing the meat of the animals, the mourners share in the death of the deceased. Yet above this positive character, the killing of animals depicts death as a rite of passage. As it is in an initiation rite when the initiate freely offers his blood to the ground as a sacrificial act to the ancestors, so is the blood of animals which is believed to represent the deceased's own blood”³³

In general, the third day of mourning is very important. From that day onwards, the rituals that take place are connected with purification and separation. Among the Iteso, for instance, all mourners leave very early in the morning to go and wash themselves at the nearby river. The ritual is known as “Aparan na allong”. That is, the rite of bathing. At times, it is also known as “Alomun” meaning coming out. It is done very early in the morning because they are supposed to be the first to reach and touch the water of the river. The elderly women in the clan wash the family members. The relatives wash themselves. The reason for the washing is to cleanse chief mourners from the calamities connected

³³ Ibid p.234.

with death. When people return home from the river, their hair is cut beginning with the family members of the deceased.

One of the rituals done on the third day is that of separation. The widows, the sons and the daughters of the deceased Luo man, for instance paint their heads with flour of millet grains used for making beer and porridge. They stand in a circle and an elderly lady responsible for the rite brings a he-goat ritually known as "diend gut or diend jachlen", meaning, a ghost goat. Each of the chief mourners hits the goat with their elbows and then kicks it. The goat is then choked to death by the old lady. She finally cooks the meat to be eaten by the mourners.

"The goat in the ritual represents the dead person. Through the ill treatment of the goat, the mourners tell the dead person that a new relationship has been created between them by death. The physical pain of the goat is a re-enactment of the pain the deceased must have endured in order to acquire his/her new status among the ancestors. Like an initiation marked by sacrifice, the dead must go through physical pain. This is why the goat, one of the deceased's own possessions is made to endure the physical pain of the initiate which gradually leads to a normal separation and attainment of a new social status. The Luo know that even in ordinary life, people hate to leave one group to join another. Normally such changes are painful because they reflect a separation from the known or from the familiar to the unknown. Such pains must now be ritually acted out on the occasion of the death".³⁵

³⁵ Ibid., p.235.

For their ritual of purification, the Iteso slaughter an ox if the deceased had been rich. If he did not own a herd of cattle, a goat is slaughtered in the courtyard, not inside the house. Cows and goats besides payment for dowry, play an essential role in the burial rites. The grave diggers are always given an ox to divide among themselves. This is done when the deceased was rich. If he had been poor, a goat or a cock is given to them. If this is not done, it is believed that the curse of the grave diggers can cause another family member of the deceased to die. The ox is however, given to the grave diggers either on the first day of the burial or the third one depending on the clan.

The above rituals of purification are finalized with the consumption of local beer which is prepared after the burial. This is brought and drunk in front of the house of the elder wife first and then any other place in the compound. No musical instrument is to be played on that day. After this ceremony, the relatives may go back to their respective homes. The family members can resume their daily activities but not digging until a month or so which is called "Aitokorir apuserut", that is, "making the widow to dig" is done. This ceremony is significant because of the Iteso belief that the soul of the departed one starts the journey up to the clouds or sky.

The fourth day after the burial in Luo is known as "yweyo liel", that is, cleaning the grave. From the time an individual dies, the hut (house) and compound of the deceased are supposed not to be swept until the fourth day. Before the latter day, rubbish is collected and heaped in a corner. So, on the fourth day, "a sister-in law of the deceased man sweeps the house. She mixes

rubbish with a bit of earth from the grave and pours it near a path. On the same day, the chief mourners go to the river very early to bathe. When they come back especially the widows, the old lady who cuts their hair, anoints their necks as well with ghee. Then she sprinkles each of them with simsim. Both the anointing and sprinkling are meant to reinstate the chief mourners in the community and separate them from the dead. This ritual is believed to remind the deceased that his widows are being proclaimed for further marriage. The anointing is to emphasize to the widows that in the eyes of the community, they are again brides, since death has visited or neutralized their previous relationship. It is the basis for re-marriage among the Luo".³⁶

The ritual of hair shaving among the Luo has some implications. For instance, it signifies mourning. The community can easily identify the chief mourners by their appearances. Another implication is connected with incorporation into the world. When a baby is born, the ghost hair is shaved off to mark its separation from the world that was the mother's womb and thus be initiated into the new world. At the death of a husband this ritual is also repeated.

Jude Ongong'a elaborates further on the same fact by stating that, "the hair is believed to accumulate sweat and therefore dirt. Those who have been together like a husband and a wife, are believed to retain some dirt from each other. To remove it completely, the hair must be shaved. At death, therefore, where a complete separation is ritually required, the shaving of the hair becomes

³⁶ Ibid., p.236.

a must".³⁷ Shaving indicates that the previous life has gone and a new one has started. The latter is realized when the new hair begins to grow. This ceremony to day is not seriously observed by all chief mourners. There is a tendency of some individuals to have their hair trimmed according to their wishes. But whether the hair is trimmed or shaved, the same last respect for the dead is realized.

Among the Luos, the mourning period cannot be concluded once and for all. The Luos do say that, "Liel ok ringi" (the grave does not escape). This implies that, "one can always go for funeral even months or years later if he had not attended. Even though this is true, there also continues to be memorial ceremonies periodically depending on the capability of the family left behind".³⁸

The ritual of shaving avails the opportunity for reconciling the debts the deceased had with the relatives and friends. In case, for instance, the deceased owed some people anything, then a settlement is made. The shaving ceremony is also connected with the distribution of the properties of the deceased. In the past, the belongings of the deceased were given to the sons only. Of recent, however, the daughters are being considered as well. The Baganda, for instance do allocate portions of the deceased's belongings to the daughters. A house, and half of the livestock are given to the elder sons among the Bantu's of Tanzania. The widows also get some belongings of the deceased. The shares of their husband's possession and the role they play depends on the ranks and status they have in their marriage. One gets more things and better treatment depending on the rank.

³⁷ Ibid., p.236

³⁸ Agunja Chrispine, IMC, Concepts of Death and life here after in the Luo Tradition, Tangaza Thesis, 1996, p.23

For instance, a senior widow will get more compared to the junior ones. In some African communities like Chaggas of Tanzania, widows do not inherit the properties of the deceased. They are normally taken care of by the husband's family or by growing up children.

In polygamous families, the deceased had his belongings with each wife in her house. When he dies, the children of each house take their parents' possessions from the mother.

In contemporary times, however,

*"a father can also make a will before his death. As a rule, it will be respected. It may be contested when the customary rights of inheritance are violated. Sometimes a father divides his goods among his sons once they are all married. In matrimonial societies, like Makonde of Tanzania, nephews inherited from their mother's brothers. This custom is however, more and more resented. The tendency of changing it is getting strong and more widespread as it is felt that a father must be able to pass his possessions to his sons."*³⁹

When a mother among the Hehe and Bena of Tanzania dies, her properties used to go to her own mother and sisters. Her children could get a few belongings. Currently, most of the possessions remain with her own children while the household articles are claimed by her mother and sisters. If it happens that she dies childless, the possessions are taken by her own family members. In the

³⁹ Pelt Van, Bantu Western in mainland Tanzania, Tabora, 1971, p.191

polygamous communities, the goods are taken around by the sons of her co wife or co- wives. Only things given to her by her own family are taken back.

Guardians for small children normally take care of their properties given to them after the death of their father. Such guardians are normally members of the family of the deceased. It can be a mother or elder children of the deceased. The rest of the family members, however, also try to be responsible for those possessions and try to observe how the children are being cared for.

3.2 WIDOW INHERITANCE

The ceremony of widow inheritance in some ethnic communities are done after the ritual of shaving. Others as it will be realized , do it during the last funeral rites. The manner in which the practice of widow inheritance is carried out, however, differs from one community to the other.

Among the Abaluyia, for instance, the mother or a close relative of the deceased man takes the responsibility of caring for the widow. The practice is actualized by the ceremony of shaving as noted earlier. "The Abaluyia do the shaving in front of the widow's house by a man chosen for her."⁴⁰ From this example, one can easily perceive that women have no choice of who takes care of them after the death of their beloved husbands. This is common not only with the Abaluyia, but even other ethnic grouping.

There are, however, some possibilities for widows in some African customs to make a choice of whom to inherit them or a choice to remarry elsewhere outside the husbands lineage. Among the Baganda, for instance, a widow with

⁴⁰ Wako M. Daniel, The western Abaluyia and their proverbs, Kenya Literature Bureau, Nairobi, p.32

children may remarry elsewhere with a condition that her clan members repay the bride wealth to the family of her deceased husband. The Luos have almost a similar option. That is, "She must first of all divorce her dead husband in order to be free to remarry elsewhere. If she is married and has children, her parents must pay four cows for every male child she has bore and two for every female. All the animals that were slaughtered during negotiations are counted as well. At times the animals cancelled so that well nothing was demanded".⁴¹

The problem in returning of the bride wealth among the Luo and other ethnic groupings is that, it causes great pain especially to the parents of the widow. It may happen that all the animals might have been used either for marrying wives for the brothers of the widow too or it may happen that they died of some diseases, or were even used for the education of the younger brothers and sisters. It is for this reason that most of the African widows prefer to stay in their husband's place however difficult the situation may be.

In the African context, the care of widows took into consideration many needs. For instance, domestic, sexual procreation, education, just to mention but a few. This practice of widow inheritance is meant to prevent the widow not to get involved in sexual promiscuity in order to meet her basic and procreation needs with somebody outside the lineage of her deceased husband. This practice of widow care has, however, been affected in one way or another by some factors.

⁴¹ Otieno Ojore Aloys, Levirate Unions among the Luo, Catholic University of Eastern Africa Dissertation, 1995. p.47.

The scourge of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDs) dictates, however against the practice of widow inheritance. If the deceased husband dies of AIDs, the person who inherits the widow too is doomed of the same fate. In case that person happens to have his own wife, she too stands a high chance to contract the disease. The children conceived by both his rightful wife and that of the deceased may all become victims of AIDs. Because of the tension and fear of AIDS, widow inheritance in most of the African societies is seen as a risk. The practice is still carried out in those places where AIDs scourge is not acknowledged. I have experienced incidences in which somebody died of AIDs, but relatives said, "he was bewitched".

CHAPTER 4

POST BURIAL RITES

The time for the performance of the ceremony of the last funeral rites (post burial rites) varies from one ethnic group to the other. For the Jopadholas, for instance, it occurs a period of one year after the burial. This last ceremony normally, is done after such a long period of time because of the expenses involved. One family alone may find it very difficult to cater for the relatives and friends who do come for the last funeral rites which lasts for almost a week. It is because of this reason that the relatives and friends also participate in the fundraising or contributing from part of heir harvested food.

Among the Iteso, the moment of the last funeral rites (Asuban or Apunya) is when the relatives and friends are expected to take flour (Akiria) and beer flour (Akiria nu alon) to the home of the deceased. The family of the departed ones are also supposed to prepare plenty of the same. A big black ox is prepared to be slaughtered during the occasion. The beer flour is prepared by some clan elders. The latter sing songs of praise in remembrance of the deceased as they prepare the beer flour. The deceased is asked or requested to come and join in the celebration in good spirit since the feast is in his/her honour.

The consumption begins at dawn of the third day since preparation of the beer flour. All relatives are supposed to turn up for this occasion. If they do not, the spirit of the deceased is believed to be able to do harm to the individual and his/her family.

At the beginning of the celebration, a portion of food and drink is ritually put in a chosen place in honour of the spirits of the dead (ancestors). Once this is done, the people can then start to drink and eat without fear. The ceremony usually lasts a week if there is plenty of beer. The music played are especially the ones which was liked by the deceased.

The dances are accompanied by the praises of the dead. All the people are supposed to be happy on this day so as to encourage the spirit of the dead one to come and join them in the feasting. The ox which is slaughtered during the occasion is divided among the man's clan. Some is cooked and eaten on that very day. The blood and the cow dung is smeared on the relatives at the graveyard. This is meant to bring peace to the relatives and family members. After this ceremony, elders of the clan and other relatives hold a meeting. The heir of the home is chosen according to the wish of the deceased one. This meeting of choosing is what is normally called, "Atuket". People usually chose their heirs before they die. If the deceased did not choose a heir before his death, then the widow(s) are free to choose whom they want to take the responsibility. This only happens if the deceased did not have any elder son, especially among the Iteso. Also, if the widow(s) reject the heir, the clan can do nothing about that, but allow their choice.

The property of the deceased which is usually cattle are shared among the children (normally only boys). After this, the family start the usual home routine.

The last Luo funeral rites like that of the Iteso and other tribes, takes place after a period of approximately one year after the deceased's burial. If it is

delayed, "the family, especially the eldest son, is looked down upon as a disgrace especially by the members of the clan. It is also believed that the delay of the final ceremony makes the life of the spirit difficult among the dead. The ceremony therefore, has to be carried out to the land of the dead to give a title to the spirit of the dead person and family, to confirm the end of the obligatory mourning period".⁴²

When the day of the last funeral rites have been agreed upon, all the relatives are notified and married women of the clan begin to make the necessary preparations for the day. The ceremony is normally elegant. Outsiders are all welcome to drink and eat without restrictions. Songs are sung in praise of the deceased, his/her family and friends. At the end of the ceremony, the belongings or possessions of the deceased are given out and those that cannot be used are thrown away.

The Luo long funeral rites seems to imply that the spirit of the deceased does not leave this world straight away to join the land of the dead. The process is not spontaneous, but a slow one. It has to pass through a certain passage in order to reach that destination.

So for a Luo

"the funeral rites are but the existential proofs of the Luo belief in the reality of the survival of life after death. They portray death as a mysterious occurrence yet at the same time, death is conceived as a sacred phenomenon that is set aside by prohibitions and taboos. And

⁴² cox, op., cit. p.236

*above all, it brings out the common features that are characteristic of initiation rites. These features come out clearly from the moment of death to the final ceremony."*⁴³

Among the Baganda, the last funeral rites "okwabya olumbe" take place three months after the burial. It is a festival in which almost all of the deceased's clan do attend. It is an occasion through which death is driven out of the house. The ceremony also provides chances for family members of the deceased to know the relatives and friends they did not know before or might have forgotten. Most of the affairs of the deceased are attended to during this ceremony. For instance, the possessions of the deceased is shared or divided among the sons, following his testament or his last will. The debts are paid or cleared on this occasion. The person who failed to claim for the debts the deceased owed him/her is not allowed do so any other time after the rite.

4.1 GANDA HEIR INSTALLATION

The installation of the heir among the Baganda is another activity done during the last funeral rites. During the eve of the installation, usually on Friday of the week of the rite, relatives and friends both far and near come together. Food is prepared, animals slaughtered, ritual huts are erected by the nieces and nephews of the deceased.

On the same Friday before evening, clan elders follow a certain rhythm of a drum which announces in a loud voice that what is going to take place are the

⁴³ Ibid. p.237.

last funeral rites of "omutaka" (settler). A special type of drum beat accompanied a mockery song addressed to death. That is, "lwamumala akababba x2 alimutaka abukata" (death , you finished him x2 now dwelling among the dead).

With this mockery songs, they pretend not to be afraid of death. The songs are meant to scare death so that it does not claim more people. Tears are shed as they dance on various mourning hymns. For instance, "Ani, aliyandayanda mu bwange, abasiba embuzi basibira bwereere" (who will mourn for me? Those keeping goats are wasting their time for it is other people who eat them when they die)". ⁴⁴ Such songs enable people not only to think about the deceased, but also to reflect about their own imminent deaths.

Before dawn, women weep bitterly as a sign that the mourning is (has) ended. The mourning also symbolizes or expresses the mystery and pain surrounding death. As people gather around the big fire, a special drum beat is played and this enables people to sing and dance till morning. As it dawns all family members and some close relatives enter the main house and close themselves in as a symbol of trapping death. Different funeral songs are sung accompanied by a sorrowful beat. Such songs console people from the torments of death.

In that excitement, a neighbour of the deceased knocks at the door and calls out "Nze omukuze", (I who comes with dawn). The heir opens the door and

⁴⁴ Lukenge, op., cit p.14

presents him with a gourd of beer. The clan leader and paternal grand mother wrap the orphans with wet banana leaves around their waists. They sing and dance from corner to corner of the house. It is in the act that they collect death and misfortunes from the house. The leaves are then collected by the grand mother.

The rite that follows is 'okufulumya olumbe" (driving death out of the house). One door is opened, people in the house sing, dance and weep bitterly as they go out of the house. By doing so, it is believed death is taken out of the house. The house is cleansed and any trace of mourning is removed. The banana leaves which collected death and misfortunes are taken to a distant place.

The clan head announces the heir in these words, "olumbe wa gundi, ndwabizza" that is, we have performed the last funeral rites of so and so and all the misfortunes cleansed. Now the heir of so and so can be installed. The drum rhythm of the clan is played by the nephews of the deceased to declare that the function is in progress.

4.2 ACTUAL DAY FOR HEIR INSTALLATION.

The following day, that is Saturday is the actual day for the installing of the heir. At noon, the clan head proclaims while showing the people the heir to be. The heir and a female person "lubuga" appointed as a special sister to the heir, have their heads shaved indicating that they have been charged with new responsibilities. This rite is done on the verandah of the right hand side of the main house with the heir standing while the "lubuga" (special sister) seated on a bark cloth. Then the person who performs the rite of investing the heir (omusumisi)

stands in front of the people and proclaims "my grandson so and so died, and now I am going to invest his heir". He turns to the people and mentions his genealogy and that of the deceased. As he does that, he puts a bark cloth with two of its ends knotted together around the heirs' neck. The knot rests above the latter's right hand shoulder. He again says "I entrust this home to your care, never be hot tempered, take care of the orphans, always be honest and upright. He then hands him a spear which is a symbol of defense, a panga which signifies service and a purse as a gift from the grand father which symbolizes wealth. He is expected to be brave, courageous and generous. Then he is seated on his fathers' chair.

The "lubuga" is given a knife to signify her role of motherhood, a gourd with two straws as a sign of hospitality. Then the relatives and friends introduce themselves to the heir and the "lubuga". They offer them different words of encouragement, consideration and gifts are given to them as well. They then kneel down and sip some beer from the calabash in front of the heir with "lubuga" saying "oluganda kulya olugenda enfala terudda". That is, brotherhood is eating and if a person leaves your home without eating he/she will never come back.

While all the rite goes on, the orphans are supposed to be also seated at the verandah witnessing the succession. They are only removed from there by their grandmother who takes them to the banana plantation to be washed with different herbs. This implies washing death away from them. The widow is removed from the scene of installation (kifugi) by her brother who even gives her a calabash of beer to be drunk in her hut.

After all the major rituals have been done, a big feast follows. At the feast
*"beer and food, in particular a hen and a haplochromis fish (enkejje) are
prepared, drank and eaten ritually. The hen is eaten only by men, and the
haplochromis fish by women. Some fish is thrown in the fire as a symbol
of taking leave of the deceased. Formerly, a son of the sister of the
deceased would remove a pole from the middle of the house symbolizing
the death of the head of the family".*⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Kyewalyayanga. Op. cit., p.95

CHAPTER 5

BIBLE/CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF DEATH IN CONTRAST TO THE AFRICAN POINT OF VIEW

Like in African cultures, death for a Christian is a mystery that can be answered only by another mystery, namely, the death of Christ. To have a clear Christian notion of death, it is right and fitting to trace its origins back in the scriptures and to discuss the view of causes, funeral rites and destiny.

The Jews, like the Jopadholas and other African communities had at first a very pessimistic view of death. They thought that death was the end of a person's life. There was no hope in the life after. The dead person was believed to have gone to dwell in a shadowy existence they termed as "sheol" where God could neither be found nor be praised. It is for this reason that the psalmist prayed, "What point is there in my death, my going down to the abyss? Can the dust praise you or proclaim your faithfulness?" Ps. 30:9. In Esther, it is noted that God would lose the praises if he let anyone of his faithful die. As no praise comes from a dead person, somebody pleaded thus, "Hear my supplication, have mercy on your heritage, and turn your grief into rejoicing, so that we may live, Lord, to hymn your name. Do not suffer the mouths of those who praise you to perish". Esther 4:17h-17i. The Jopadholas likewise, had a very negative view towards death. Some of their mourning songs used show that death was an end in life and there was no further hope in life.

The Jewish later believe in a fuller life after death merges well with the Jopadhola believe transition. Enoch and Elijah in the Scriptures are believed, for instance, to have enjoyed a relationship with God which was too strong for death to sever. Formal belief in the resurrection began at the time of the Maccabean wars. People became convinced that God would renew the lives of those martyred. The text makes it clear thus, "Cruel brute, you may discharge us from this present life, but the king of the world will raise us up, since we die for his laws, to live again". 2 Macc. 7:9. The Book of Prophet Ezekiel also gives further evidence of the after life. The life given to the dry bones symbolised not only resurrection, but also hope for the Israelites to return from exile where they had been depressed and rejected. The prophets prophecy was that, "I am now going to open your graves; I shall raise you from your graves, my people, and lead you back to the soil of Israel". Ezekiel 37:12.

Job 19:23-27, shows how the believer dies with hope that God will take care of his/her destiny. Wisdom 3:1-9, indicates how death and earthly misery are a test for the righteous, but God shines them out (gives a happy after life). In Isaiah 25:6-9, the believer is meant to trust that the Lord will destroy death and shed away sadness.

Like most of the African cultures, the Book of Genesis attributes death to man's disobedience to God's precepts. Man was commanded by God that, "You are free to eat all the tree in the garden. But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you are not to eat for the day you eat of that, you are doomed to die"

Genesis 2:16-17. Similarly, disobedience to the norms of precepts of the Adhola tradition was believed to be the cause of death to the individual involved.

The story of Cain and Abel are further evidences to prove to us that death was something created by human beings.. Cain, for instance, out of envy for God's favour on Abel's offering said, to his brother Abel, "let us go out, and while they were in the open country, Cain set on his brother Abel and killed him". Genesis 4:8. Suspects for manslaughter in among the Iteso would either involve dismissal of the victim from the community (village) or a very serious punishment would be given that could even lead to death. God likewise, punished his people to death because of their grave sins. Cain for instance was cursed by God for the murder of his brother. That is, "Now be cursed and banned from the ground that has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood at your hands". Gen. 4:8. God also ordained that, "He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God was man created". Genesis 9:6. God is also portrayed in the Book of Genesis to have regretted for creating man because of his wickedness. Because of the latter, God wanted to kill humanity. Perhaps that could be the reason that Yahweh said, "I shall rid the surface of the earth of the human beings whom I created. Human and animal" Gen. 6:7.

The Bible on the other hand, however, perceives death as a happening not caused by man. The latter was created in the image and likeness of God. And so from the beginning of creation, death seemed not to have been in God's mind. "For God did not make death, he takes no pleasure in destroying the living. To exist - for this He created all things". Wisdom 1:13. The Bible also confirms that

death is an event which is natural. That is, the end of a biological process which involves dying in good old age. For example, "The number of years Abraham lived was a hundred and seventy five. When Abraham had breathed his last, dying at a happy ripe age, old and full of years, he was gathered to his people" Gen./ 25:7. This quotation among others refutes the earlier one which connects man's death with sin or something of his doing. According to some exegetes the death implied in the context is a spiritual one. The Jopadholas and other African communities also hold the same view with the Bible that death is natural and is supposed to happen when one is very old.

In the African context, the death of a person is a life event. It is a passage from the moment of death up to the last funeral rites. In Jesus' life too, some events may be realised which seems to coincide with the African ones. Jesus' death is for instance, presented in the New Testament as a paschal death, a Passover, a transition from darkness to light, a going over into the hands of God in unshakeable hope: "Father into your hands I commend my spirit". Lk. 23:46. The Iteso and other African communities like the New Testament believe that the dead person begins a new journey after the last funeral rites.

The death of Jesus was in weakness and darkness. Although it was a passion he feared, it was also an active surrender which expressed and brought to its fulfilment a life that was an active seeking of the Father's will. It was a free self giving Mk. 15:34. The New testament thus, describes Christian life as dying with Christ. To live the Christian life is to enter daily into the mystery of Christ's

death and resurrection, and to actively surrender to our own death and resurrection. That is why Saint Paul said in one of his letters,

"Do you know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his". Rom 6:3-5.

The Africans also in general hold that death is not the end of life. They believe in the after life. The same Apostle urges for the daily need to try to actively choose the things that are above. The fulfilment of the latter implies real death to self. That is, "Since you have been raised up to be with Christ, you must look for the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at God's right hand. Let your thoughts be on things above, not on the things that are on the earth, because you have died, and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God". Col. 3:2-3. This dying with Christ during life relativizes our final death. "That is to say, if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so that whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's". (Rom. 14:1).

Christianity in general like the Africans, considers death to some extent to be the ultimate consequence of sin. The latter came through one man known as Adam. That is, "Just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, in as much as all sinned. But however much sin increased, grace was always greater, so that as sin's reign brought death, so grace was to rule through saving justice that leads to eternal life through Jesus

Christ our Lord. Rom. 5:10,21. The African myths on origin of death fits well with the story of the original sin in the Bible. In all, there is a belief that death came because of one person.

The early Christians had great respect to the mortal remains of the departed. This was because of the belief that their bodies had been temples of the Holy Spirit. This respect was also derived from the belief that, "The bodies of the departed were to rise and be glorified". When death thus approached, the eyes of the dead were closed, the body was washed, the limbs were swathed, and the whole body would be wrapped in a linen sheet with myrrh and aloes. Later the body was laid upon a couch in a room. Relatives and intimate friends were let in to view the face of the deceased".⁴⁶ The Africans too in general, have great respect for the dead because of the belief that death is not the end of one's life. The deceased continue to be a member of a community in a different way.

Sacrosantum Concilium, article 81, in Vatican Council II states that, "funeral rites should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions". To some extent, the latter statement seems not to have been practiced much in most of the African traditional rites of burial. Most of the African burials often express gloom rather than Christ's resurrection and our own entrance into His life. It is for this reason that Martin Luther insisted in his "work" that, "the funeral should not be an occasion for sorrow. Sorrowful chants, therefore, should not be sung. Christians should sing chants calling for repentance, peace, sleep,

⁴⁶ Op. cit., Kyewalyanya, p.179.

life and resurrection. For Christians funerals should be an occasion to express in words of praise and honour, the article of their faith".⁴⁷ The African last funeral rites conforms to the church's celebration of Christ's resurrection. There is expression of joy and praise.

⁴⁷ Luther Martin, Werke, Vol. 35, pp. 478-479.

CONCLUSION

From the above experience, one may possibly conclude that death is a mystery which is unpleasant and painful. It looks to be a contradiction to life and this leads many people to question the real purpose and meaning of life.

The varied African death rites done from the actual moment of death until the last funeral rites are generally meant to bear with the dread and horror connected with death.

By reflecting on the African Traditional concept of death, I realised some compatibility with the Bible or Church teaching. The two traditions, for instance, agree that death is a happening that is natural and supposed to happen generally at a ripe old age.

On the other hand, however, the Biblical and African traditions attribute death to certain factors. The story of the original sin in the Bible attributes death to man's disobedience to God's commands. The African myths also hold some individuals to be the cause of death as noted earlier.

The African respect for the living dead merges well with the Church honour for the saints. Also the Christian belief in eternal life is in conformity with the Africa belief in the life after death. The celebrations of Jesus' resurrection and the African last funeral rites are both expressions of praise, honour and joy.

It needs to be noted, however that some African death rituals are incompatible with the Christian point of view. For instance, excessive wailing and sorrow after a person's death is contrary to the Christian view. Also, most of the

African rituals done from the actual moment of death until the last funeral rites as noted earlier, are not in conformity to the Christian ideal. The African death rites also takes such a long period of time and many ceremonies are involved. It often ends up being very expensive. The Christian death rites normally does not take a long time and is not very expensive since only a few ceremonies are done.

It can, therefore, be noted that there is a similarity and a difference between the African and Christian or Biblical view on the concept of death. The differences may be attributed to some unnecessary conservatism's that needs to be updated in order to co-exist with the forces of change. The Church is one of the suitable channels through which the African death rites can be improved. In doing so, the Church ought to know that Africans in general dance out their religion and express drama and ritual ideas through symbolic action rather than words. If this is the case, it is inevitable that pastors be in position to confer with Mbiti who affirmed that the old nonsense of looking at African background as devilish and fit only to be swept away by Euro-American civilization is or should be gone by now.

This follows that the Church needs to know and be frequently reminded that, evangelisation does not mean uprooting people from their cultures and traditions, but understanding their way of living, appreciating them and finding means of dialogue.

For a better spread of the Kingdom of God, therefore, it is inevitable that missionaries, pastors and priests, catechists and evangelists adopt in one way or another the Christian message to the needs of their congregations. In this case, to let them understand better the mystery of death as African Christians.

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INFORMANTS/INTERVIEWS

Amuge Tereza, aged 66 years, a retired teacher residing at Tororo Town in Uganda, 3 hours spent.

Atiang Jane, 51 years, former Bank Manager at Entebbe in Uganda, 2 hours.

Nyachwo Margaret, aged 34, a nurse at Kampala in Uganda, spent 2 hours.

Okongo Desideriyo, aged 65 years, a peasant farmer residing at Namayemba village in Uganda, 1 hour.

Okoth, aged 58, a watchman at St. Benedict's Monastery, Tororo Uganda, 5 hours.

Mrs Owor Stephen Justina aged 48, a former employee of St. Benedict's Monastery Tororo - Uganda, 3 hours.

Akiteng Emma Ruth, 67 years, a farmer, Kumi District in Uganda.

Aloys Ochar, aged 29, a student of Tangaza College - Nairobi, 1996-2000, 1 hour.