

**TANGAZA COLLEGE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

**TOPIC: DEATH AMONG THE LUOS OF KENYA: A PASTORAL
CHALLENGE**

**A PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF
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STUDIES.**

STUDENT: DOMINICK OKWADHA.

DATE: FEBRUARY 7TH 2001.

SUPERVISOR: SR. MARGARET ARINGO, F.S.J.

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION:

I hereby declare that the material used herein has not been submitted for academic credit to any other institution. All sources have been cited in full.

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DEDICATION:

I dedicate this work to my dear mother Christina Otieno Okwadha, who taught me how to love and to serve God in His beautiful "vineyard", and may the name of the Lord be praised.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Acknowledgement.....	1
Introduction	1.
Chapter 1: The origin of death	4.
1.1: Myths about death among the Luos	5.
1.2: Causes of death	7.
1.3: Effects of death	11.
Chapter 2: The Luo Death Rituals	13
2.1: The meaning of Rituals	14.
2.2: Death as a pre-Liminal rite	17.
2.3: Death as occasion for Limited rites	18.
2.4: Post-Liminal rite after death	20.
2.5: Rites and ceremonies that unveil death as a rite of passage..	21.
Chapter 3: Inter-cultural understanding of death	23.
3.1: The moment of death	23.
3.2: The question of burial	27.
3.3: Who has the right to bury who	29.
3.4: The inheritance of the deceased's property	31.
Chapter 4: Pastoral approach	33.
4.1: Biblical doctrine of death and eternal destiny	33.
4.2: Aids and pastoral approach	34.
4.3: Widow "Inheritance"	37.
4.4: Death and pastoral approach	40.

4.5: Conclusion 44.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....46.

APPENDIX I 49.

(I)

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Luo are a Nilotic people with a rich base of traditional knowledge about their cultural beliefs, practices and environment. The Luo of Kenya inhabit the territories bordering Lake Victoria— to the North and South of Nyanza gulf, extending into Tanzania. The Luo are both agriculturalists and pastoralists. Grain, fish and milk make up their main diet. Cattle used to be a chief criterion for judging wealth but today it is scarce. Sheep and goats are also kept.

For the Luos, nothing is done without having in mind the Supreme Being (Nyasaye). There is always religious meaning and implication to everything. All things, events and phenomena alike are interpreted in terms of the divine will. Accordingly, nothing happens simply by mere chance. Death too does not just strike a blow without a reason. There must be something communicated by each and every kind of death. The rituals on the other hand are not performed just at the surface level as such. They directly bridge the living to the spiritual world.

This essay is focused on the basic principles that underline the Luo understanding of death, the relevant and common rituals and other contemporary issues which need to be addressed in the present society.

“Death among the Luos of Kenya: A Pastoral Challenge” is centred on a few questions which seem to be common among the other ethnic groups of Africa. These are the questions on the origin of death and its meaning; what will come after death. It should be emphasized that the concept of death, the destiny of human being and life after death, has been, among the Luo, a

part of an orally transmitted wealth of proverbs, songs, myths, prayers, religious ceremonies and various rituals of daily life.

The insight I have in order to write this essay is basically to explain that the Luos conceive death as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. The person moves to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of existence. Some of the words describing death imply that a person goes “home”, which means that this life is like a pilgrimage: the real “home” is in the hereafter, since one does not depart from there. Death is cruel, it “stiffens”, “cuts down” or “evaporates” a person, even if he / she continues to exist in the hereafter. This explanation doesn’t contradict any Christian teaching. In this case, the way the Luos view death is in line with biblical understanding of death. My main concern is the question of rituals. Some rituals are “beautiful” and in line with Christianity. The problem is that of feasting at the time of death, levirate union, the question of where someone is to be buried and the famous present epidemic AIDS. Feasting after the death of someone brings poverty not only to the deceased’s family, but also to the whole society. Due to the expense in transporting the body when someone dies should be looked at because it also brings poverty and misunderstanding in the community. AIDS is a serious problem that should be dealt with in a careful way. The mass spread of AIDS in Luoland is mostly due to levirate union and the society being adamant in accepting the real essence of it. Levirate union which most people call “wife inheritance”, violates the biblical standard of marriage, which is one – man – with – one – woman affair. It

also conflicts with the Christian belief that death means the end of the marriage union. It denies a widow's right to decide her own future and also puts a heavy financial burden on the widow. This is because the way levirate union was practised in the past is totally different to how it is contemporarily practised.

I have tried to give some pastoral approach in various issues and some biblical references, which I do hope can bring several insights in dealing with this problem.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the Luo traditional society, death originated from at least somewhere. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss how death originated, dealing with myths about death, causes of death; death caused by spirits, death caused by a curse, natural causes and effects of death.

THE ORIGIN OF DEATH

The Luos of Kenya believe that death originated either from animals or human beings. They believe that the Supreme Being is also having an upper hand in it. This is because He used animals or human beings to cause death. It is a belief that a Luo person cannot die without a cause. A Luo has sometimes looked upon death as unreal or even unnatural. In other words a Luo cannot die a natural death. There must be blame from either human beings or animals. This is found basically in their myths and their relationship with each other in the community.

1.1 . MYTHS ABOUT DEATH AMONG THE LUOS

Myths emphasized that death came almost by mistake. The blame is laid upon people themselves (especially women), animals and in some cases spirits or monsters.

According to John S. Mbiti, “a myth is a means of explaining some actual or imaginary reality which is not adequately understood and so cannot be explained through normal description”.¹

This is to say that myths should not be taken literally because they are not in themselves facts.

Referring to Jude Ongonga’s article on the River-Lake Luo phenomenon of death, he says that “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, tall to reach the moon. They gave the piece of meat to 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. As a result of this, the moon became very angry and condemned humanity that they have to die as a punishment”² . Thus death came and when people die they don’t return. Some myths explain the origin of death as a result of negligence of a woman. One of them says that “God promised humanity that they would not die unless they helped Him fight death. So one day, God was hunting for death and a woman was in the field digging. Death ran up to where the woman was and requested her to hide it. The woman hid it inside

¹ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*. (N.Y: Praeger Publishers, INC. 1975) , p. 77.

² James L. Cox, (Editor) *Rites of Passage in contemporary Africa: Interaction Between Christian and African Traditional Religions* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998), p. 225.

her belly. When God came, He realised that the woman had hidden death. God got angry and told the woman that because of this; humanity must die"¹. So from that particular moment humanity started dying. It is a pity that there are no myths that speak of how death one day may be removed from humanity.

There are several myths all over Africa which is similar to Luo myths about how death came to be. "It is said that God forbade the first people to eat either a certain fruit, or eggs, or animals. When they ate this forbidden food, death came to them."²

Others also have stories which say that " God gave people a bundle or vessel with a secret in it, and forbade them to open it. Overcome by curiosity, or through a mistake, someone opened this vessel or bag, and out came death."³

Death as such is a separation of God from humanity thus it is related to sorrows and agonies which can never be removed. It is interesting to note that humanity therefore dies because of its own disobedience and negligence. This is because God gave options but because of curiosity or carelessness, humanity did not respond to the warning or responsibility that God gave. It is said among most Luo myths that the spirit of death never laughs and it is not supposed to be blamed because its work is to kill, take away, terrorize people everywhere and mostly to destroy.

¹ Interview from Rwanda and Burundi's Traditional custom about death from Mzee RUKUNDO 16TH JUNE 2000.

² John S. Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion. (N.Y: Praeger Publishers, INC. 1975) , p. 110.

³ Ibid, p. 111.

1.2 CAUSES OF DEATH

There are circumstances surrounding every death. Death as such must have a cause. It is believed that either individuals or bad spirits mostly cause death. An individual is able to use "vital force" in order to cause the death of another individual.

There are several causes of death among the Luos of Kenya namely:- Death by sorcery, death caused by spirits, death by a curse, natural death which includes physical causes; that is sickness, disease, old age, accident, lightning, earthquake, flood, drowning, animal attack, and snake bite.

DEATH BY SORCERY

Sorcery refers to witchcraft or magic. In Luo traditional society, the question, which is often asked, is : Who has caused death not what has caused death. A person may use magic to cause death of another person. Among the Luos it is called "NAWT". "NAWT" is a destructive medico-charm".¹ "Nawi" is an object invested with medical power .The person who brings harm to his enemies by the anti-social and illegitimate use of destructive magic is called "JANDAGLA". It is worth noting that "ndagla" i.e. an object, usually a dead creature or rotten eggs containing magico- medicine, are placed by the roadside, beside the house, at the gate entrance or in the opponent's field.

¹ A.B.C. Ochola Ayayo. Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo(Uppsala :1976), p.153.

“JANDAGLA” brings his magic-medicine with a dead creature, that is, it may be brought with a dead snake, usually black cobra, or it may be put on a dead wild cat, rotten eggs and the like.

This person performs rites in these objects to make them destructive. It is believed that he does them at night or very early in the morning when no one sees him. The person whom he wants to kill can meet this particular object on the road. After meeting this object, then the effect takes its course immediately. The person may start feeling headache and die immediately or any sort of simple accident.

As a result of sorcery a person may die mysteriously. Among “UYOMA” people, that is, the Luos of central Nyanza; the “Jandagla” may use objects like crocodile or hippo to kill the opponent since the place is near the lake. “Jandagla” can organize his “Ndagla” in such away that even if you are in United States, the “Ndagla” will force you to come back home and you meet your unceremonious death. It can also happen where you are. It all depends on how he has organized his charm-“Ndagla”. Among the Luos, people do not welcome “Jondagla” - “Jandagla”¹ in the society. “In some cases the suspect may be beaten to death, fined or thrown out of the district. Relatives of the deceased may also take other types of revenge which are less open”²

¹ Jandagla is singular and Jondagla is plural

² John S. Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion:p.111.

DEATH CAUSED BY SPIRITS

If the blame is not put on the use of sorcery or magic, then people normally blame death on the spirits of a dead person. It can be spirits of some people who had a grudge against the person or may be they were not properly buried according to their wish. Their wish may be according to their customs. Referring to the case of S.M OTIENO; Kenya's unique burial Saga: Mr. Siranga told the court that if the late S.M OTIENO was buried in Ngong, "It would be like delivering his body to hyenas and a curse would befall the clan".¹ Death caused by the spirits is rare because people normally suspect at least someone in the village to be the cause.

DEATH BY A CURSE

Curses, broken taboos or oaths are sometimes believed to cause death. A curse can be from an immediate elderly relative or any elderly man or woman in the society. Ones' father or mother can cause death of the person by to a curse. Among the Luos, there are several taboos if broken, then it is believed that they could cause death of a member of the society. "If Luo adults die and are buried outside Luoland, everybody in his family including children, will be in problems. Evil spirits will follow us who are married (meaning those who are married into other families)...the whole family will be affected."² This implies that a Luo cannot be buried outside Luoland. If it occurs, then a curse can befall the people or society. In case someone is lost or a wild animal eats the body, then the society would bury a fruit of a certain special tree

¹ A Nation Newspaper Publication, "S.M. Otieno, Kenya's Unique burial Saga."(Nairobi: 1987), p.54.

² Mae A. Reggy-Mamo, WIDOWS; The challenges and the choices(Nairobi: Salamta Pub. 1999), p. 22.

called "YAGO". There are other occasions when banana stem is also buried instead of "YAGO".

NATURAL CAUSES

Although most parts of Luoland do not believe that death can be natural, some believe that God may call old people to leave this life and join their ancestors. A Luo cannot think that God can be the cause of death. "God is normally left out of the picture, even though people believe that if He did not allow it, the person would not die"¹

There are also physical causes and circumstances surrounding every death. These include sickness, disease, old age, accident, lightning, earthquake, flood, drowning, animal attack, and many others.

It is interesting to note that the Luos believe that a person can only die from one of these physical causes because someone somewhere has caused it to happen. It can be by means of a curse, witchcraft, magic and so on.

When a person dies, the community may ask themselves the real cause of that particular death. In most cases they try to consult diviners and medicine men, by suspicion and sometimes they just have the guesswork.

¹ John S. Mbiti., Introduction to African Religion: p, 112.

1.3. EFFECTS OF DEATH

After death, the Luos believe that one goes to the world of the spirits hence joins the ancestors.

“The ancestor is a departed spirit who stands in peculiarly close relation to the tribe or the family.”¹

When one joins the ancestors after death, he/she is to have responsibility to protect the community. Death is considered a loss in the family. The Luos believe that death is a change of status of life where the dead leaves the living and goes to another world. The dead also acquires different or new higher status although it interrupts the flow of life. Death brings sorrow in the community because it is new every time it occurs, hence, death is not accepted.

“Therefore people combine their sorrow over the death of someone with the belief that is not the end and the departed continues to live in the hereafter.”²

As a result of death, the living dead is realized in Luo traditional society. A new born baby may be named after that particular dead person.

In this case, the Luos believe that the dead person is living in that particular newly born baby. To prove this: the name of the dead person is given. The mother or the father or even a close relative may dream that they saw “so and so” that is, the living dead of their family in a dream and that person wants to be named.

¹ Idowu E. B., African traditional religion. A definition (London: SCM, 1973)p. 179.

² Mbiti J.S Introduction to African Religion:p. 113.

In this case the child may get its name as a result of that particular dream. "People regard it as being much as a human being although it is dead."¹

Death can easily bring poverty among the Luos. During the mourning period, people feast and sometimes they only feast on the deceased's wealth. It is unlike the past when people used to take foodstuffs to the deceased family and to be shared among the mourners. It is worth noting as "Mae Alice Reggy-Mamo" puts it, that among the Luo community, "Death is not private affair; it involves the whole community and beyond."² In this case, death as such is something, which must be accepted as a reality in human life. It is worth noting that death is the conclusion to human being's earthly existence. It stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible.

For the Luo community, though death is conceived as a rite of passage, it is ultimately attributed to the deities. The efficient cause remains another person, a member of the natural phenomenon, but as a strange unnatural phenomenon, the normal sequence of events due to violence, hatred, grudge or malpractice of sorcery which tend to reveal human failures.

In this case, the Luo community is very serious in making sure that death rituals are performed in order to be in harmony with the dead and the spirits.

¹ Ibid., p. 119.

² Mamo, p. 11.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

Since death does not occur by chance, the Luo community is very vigilant in how death rituals are performed. In this chapter, I would like to explain the Luo death rituals in general, the meaning of rituals, death as a pre-liminal rite, death as an occasion for limited rites, post-liminal rite after death and Rites and ceremonies that unveil death as a rite of passage.

THE LUO DEATH RITUALS

The Luos of Kenya have specific rituals/ activities, which take place immediately death strikes the society. There are, therefore, many complex and even long rituals and ceremonies associated with death. The Luos are very sensitive to what is done when there is death in the family. They are more concerned with who does what, when, how, and where? In this regard, there are significant aspects concerning rituals namely: water, shaving, fire, animals, refrain from work, refrain from sex and many others. By ritualising death, people try to explain it, understand it and come to terms with it. It is worth-noting that according to the Luos, if the rituals are done right, there is contentment for the living and about the dead. Therefore, normal life continues and the dead person is accepted in the hereafter.

2.1. THE MEANING OF RITUALS

Referring to John S. Mbiti, “ a ritual is a set form of carrying out a religious action or ceremony. It is a means of communicating something of religious significance, through word, symbol and action. Therefore a ritual embodies a belief or beliefs”.¹ Among the Luos, the rituals are to make the community understand death as a separation between the living and the other world i.e. the world of spirits. It is also to signify that normal life is to continue despite this separation.

During the time of mourning, there are four days, which is supposed to be observed. It is a period where people are to sleep outside. As “Ochieng” puts it in the “S.M. Otieno, Kenya’s Unique Burial Saga”, “We spent four days without sleeping with our wives.”² The Luos have a specific way of sending messages in case someone is dead. Women wail openly and drums are beaten. In case someone who had married dies, “ widows were allowed to grieve in the open, contrary to the repression common in the west. As soon as someone died, women gathered around and begin wailing loudly. This loud wailing attracted all the neighbours. Other women entered the compound and joined in the wailing.”³ In the past, a widow expressed her grief with mournful cries called “Dengo”. This may go on for weeks. The reason why this was

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969), p. 126.

² A Nation Newspapers Publication:p. 64

³ Mamo,p. 12.

required is simply to show how painful it is to lose a loved one. At the same time, it was to show the community that she is alone without the protector (husband).

There is a concept of digging the grave. It is not supposed to be dug by any "Jack and Jill". The deceased cousins were the ones responsible or any close relatives. There is the breaking of the soil by an appointed elder. What is important in grave digging is that; "the grave should not be done by a brother or a cousin who had been moving around with the man's widow. If he does so, he will die"¹. There is also a ritual of washing the body. A day after the death of someone, the body is to be washed using salt and water. The reason is to preserve the body from rotting because of the tropical heat. The body is washed by elders especially the brothers of the deceased. Women are not supposed to see the body of the man naked. Worst still the pregnant women were completely forbidden to see the man's dead body. In case of a woman, the sisters- in- law had to wash the body, no man was allowed to be present during this activity. During the burial, in case of a man, his wife is the one to throw the earth first. In case the man is polygamous, the first wife first, then the second wife, the third, fourth and in that order. Then follows the children from the eldest son to the youngest then the girls. The elders are the ones to decide where the man is supposed to be buried. This is generally near the hut of the first wife if the man was polygamous. "He is laid to rest on his left side, leaving his right hand (male hand) free and facing the hut. In the case of a wife, she would be laid to rest on her right side with the left hand (female) free"². All these are decided by the customary law and no one

¹ A Nation Newspapers Publication:p. 64.

² Ibid., p. 81.

is to question them. Another ritual is that of "TERO BURU". "This is done the day after the burial to chase away evil spirits. It is done with cows and bulls"¹. This ritual of "TERO BURU", everyone is expected to participate unless one is not physically able to do so. This is basically to chase away the evil spirits, which may befall the family in a later state. After four days of the burial, there is a ceremony of shaving.

Mostly razors are used. "In the Luo tradition, the close family members had their heads shaved after the burial. An elderly widow who was barren and whose husband had died a long time ago shaved their heads. If such a person could not be found nearby, they looked for someone outside their community, and paid her for her services"². Today, it is worth noting that Luos don't shave their heads although some still do. Nowadays most people shave a small portion of hair behind the ear, or around the forehead. This is called "TITO WICH". There is another ritual of fire called "MAGENGA". This is lit after the burial. Since people are not to sleep in their houses for four days for a man's funeral and three days for a woman's funeral, people use it to warm themselves. On the last day, a ceremony known as "YWEYO LIEL" (sweeping the grave or cleaning or purifying it) is done and the people disperse.

¹ Ibid , p. 81.

² Mamo, p. 38.

A few relatives are left behind to console the bereaved. After some days, weeks, months, or years, another ceremony, "NINDO E LIEL" is performed. This is a big ceremony and if it is not carried out, the spirit of the dead will haunt the people.

Many people come, bringing gifts for the ceremony. After some days, weeks, months, or years, another ceremony "TERO TIPO" (bring back the shadow) is performed. The daughters of the deceased and other womenfolk who are married far away from home mostly do this. They do this to "bring back the shadow" of their dead mother or father. During the past, there was also another ritual of burying the dead man with his belongings. This was done especially if that person was a very rich man or a chief. It was basically to have company with his things as he was on a journey to the world of the spirits. Sometimes he would be buried with his wives and workers (slaves). This is not done nowadays because it is against human rights and it is repugnant. The rest of the rituals are very much in line with Christianity and contemporary life.

2.2. DEATH AS A PRE-LIMINAL RITE

Another name for pre-liminal rite is the rite of separation. Death indeed separates the individual from the rest of the community. This is what makes death not only personal but a lonely event. The separation starts from the moment one dies. Among the Luos, they have different ways of announcing the death of another. In the past, some communities separated a dying person from the community and sent him/her away from the homestead. But a string was tied on the ill

person's leg and each time this string is pulled and the ill person pulled back, it gave an indication that the person was still alive and food was passed over to him or to her.

For the Luos, when death occurs, people wail, blow horns, beat drums or sing lamentation songs. The death of an adult is ever announced far and wide. This separation is extended to the chief mourners as well. Chief mourners are those who are known to be mourning the dead. It may not necessarily be that they belong to the bereaved family. For women they have a way of mourning called "DENGO". The handling of the dead body or corpse in the house imposes taboos on those who were closely associated with the deceased. This is why the gravediggers and anybody who handled the corpse had to wash before doing anything else. The washing is not only hygienic but is also a cleansing ritual meant to remove any possible contamination by death. In fact, fear of death as a contagious phenomenon explains why the chief mourners are usually seen as those who are ritually set a part. They put on different clothes, leave their hair uncut, stay in the house and / or homestead and they do not shake hands with the other members of the community. The ritually set a part are treated as outcasts. They cannot eat or share dishes with the rest of the members of the community.

2.3. DEATH AS AN OCCASION FOR LIMITED RITES

For the Luos, the period of liminal is characterised by various taboo prohibitions. During this period, soon after the burial, the living do not know for sure the whereabouts of the soul. The

Luo are not sure exactly when the spirit of the deceased finally leaves the material world. Some feel that the soul may linger for a while to watch how the rituals associated with its dead are being conducted.

This goes on to indicate that nobody knows for sure when the soul joins the world of the dead. "According to the Luo beliefs concerning afterlife, everyone goes to "PINY JUOK", (the land of the spirits) to join the ancestors of his /her clan"¹. According to the Luos, the liminal period is the time soon after the actual burial or the period proceeding the final rite after death. It is like purgatory stage for some Christians, a moment of purification. It is believed the soul must purify itself before joining the ancestors.

The activities carried out at this moment are primarily meant to separate the spirit of the dead from the living. Some of the deceased's animals may be slaughtered not only to feed the mourners but also to destroy other lives and act out the death of the individual on what he or she owned. There are certain activities that the ritually set a part cannot perform lest they defile the community or those around them. A widow or a widower or a woman who has buried twins may not socialise freely with the other members of the community. They are barred from entering common places or to carry certain duties in the community. Widows generally are barred from entering the pond to fetch water. They are to remain outside and someone else can fetch the water and give to her or to them.

¹ Ochola Ayayo, p.171.

To set them free from this ambivalent position, certain rituals have to be performed. For example: going to the river for a ritual bath, shaving the hair and putting on new clothes. For the Luo community, these ritual prohibitions and obligations are more demanding on the widows, and the impact and duration may depend on the social status of the deceased. The liminal rituals may last for a week or so before the chief mourners are free to resume in the normal communal activities.

2.4. POST-LIMINAL RITE AFTER DEATH

This particular rite is very elaborate and one which is still celebrated under various names today such as anniversary, unveiling of the cross or cementing the grave. In Luo traditional society, it is called “duogo” (coming back). This is a very expensive affair. A single family depending on its own resources would certainly find it hard. Hence, it has always had a collective character, even though the family must take the lead. The ritual is always characterised by feasting, sharing of the possessions of the deceased, and incorporating him or her into the world of the dead. It provides a complete separation between the deceased and the living. It is the sealing of the mourning period. From then on, the deceased is given a new status of a mediator between the world of the living and that of the dead. He or she may be expected to protect the living or intercede for them. It is believed that the feast changes the condition of the soul of the deceased

and puts an end to its anxiety by solemnly introducing it into the society of the dead. The celebration fulfils the common Luo belief that one-day they will be re-united with the ancestors. It is this re-union and the need for complete incorporation of the deceased that gives the meaning to the post-liminal rite.

2.5. RITES AND CEREMONIES THAT UNVEIL DEATH AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

For the Luos, rites and ceremonies that unveil death as a rite of passage are very important. As I said earlier in this chapter, for the Luos, each and everything goes on smoothly without question. The Luos are more concerned with who does what, when, how, and where. It is a dream to see “a tug of war” as concerns ceremonies and other rites. As Jude Ongong’a puts it in his article of: “The river –lake Luo phenomenon of death: a base for Religious interlocutors”, “the actors and participants do not deliberately announce that now we are being authoritative or instructive; rather, it is left to a particular ritual to impress upon the community the intended lesson”¹. A Luo funeral rite provides such an occasion because for a Luo, the funeral is the most obligatory celebration of the theme of life that every kin member and all relations are expected to attend. A funeral is a sacred event, a rite of passage that reveals not only the religious values and faith of the Luo, but above all their notion of death and the relationships established between the dead and their descendants.

¹ James L. Cox, (editor), Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction Between Christian and African Traditional Religions (Great Britain Cardiff Academic Press, 1998), p. 230.

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 explain that the dead are welcomed in the world of the ancestors. The survivors are adequately protected from any possible revenge by the dead.

In these long and elaborated funeral rites, the Luo impress upon the living that the spirit of the deceased does not leave the physical world immediately and that to join and be settled in the land of the dead is a gradual process that takes time. In other words, for the Luos, death is not a mere destruction but a transition, a rite of passage, an initiation into the world of the ancestors.

It is worth-noting that, how the Luo view death and its rituals is almost the same with other cultures. The only difference is how other cultures treat or handle the dead and other rituals.

CHAPTER 3

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I would like to discuss how other cultures view death and various rituals. It is worth keeping in mind that most of the things are similar with that of the Luos. I would like to discuss briefly the inter-cultural understanding of death in general, the moment of death, the question of burial, who has the right to bury who and the inheritance of the deceased's property.

INTER-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Among most of the African traditional societies, they understand death almost in a similar way. "To the Abaluhya of Kenya, death is a paradox. The dying person is being cut off from human beings, and yet there must be continuing ties between the living and the departed"¹. The way most African societies view death is similar but also different as far as rites and rituals are concerned. The Luos of Kenya have their own way unlike other ethnic groups.

3.1. THE MOMENT OF DEATH

The Luo people interpret certain signs and symbols as the foreboding of death. When there is a halo encircling the sun, they believe that soon a person of high social status will die. I do remember my grandmother used to tell us that when members of a family have dreams in

¹ Tokumboh Adeyemo, Salvation in African Tradition (Nairobi: Evangel Pub. House) , Second Edition, 1997, p. 60.

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.

As I said earlier, death for the Luo is a public event. To die alone or to be found dead is a disgrace to the community. There must be someone to close the eyes of the dying person, fold his / her fingers, hold his / her legs together, finally turn the dying person on his / her back. This is why there is a saying in Luo language that "MISUMBA THO KOMORO WANG'E" (unmarried man dies with his eyes wide open). Death is not only a family affair, but it is for the whole community. Normally, a dying person is placed on a mat. The legs are stretched out together, the arms placed at his / her side and the head supported on the lap of an immediate relative. As soon as the individual becomes unconscious, cold water is poured on him / her as a sign of life. If there is no sign of life, those who have been sobbing all a long burst into wailing, howling and crying at the top of their voices. The wailing, the beating of drums, the blowing of horns and the uttering of war cries, are some of the Luo methods of announcing and spreading the news that death has occurred. All the chief mourners (mother, father, sister, brother, widow, widower, daughter or son) are fully aggrieved. To express this grief, they may weep for hours, especially when they can still see the body. Burial normally takes place on the third day after death, to give time for the important members of the family who are distant to receive the message about this event and come. Until burial, a vigil is kept over the dead.

It is worth noting that among some communities, this moment of death is almost the same as the Luos. Among the Abaluhya people: "The dying man gives instruction concerning the

distribution of his property; and all the people sit around him, silently waiting for him to die. As soon as he dies, the wife bursts out with wailing, and is joined by the sons, daughters and other men and women. The cry for a dead man is: "YE, YE, YE —; YE, YE, YE——!" and for a dead woman: " WO-I, WO-I, WO-I ----; WO-I, WO-I, WO-I -----!" While wailing, the wife touches and rubs her husband's body. She then goes out, followed by other people, and continues to wail from homestead to homestead, from river to river, from bush to bush, as far as her natal home if it is near. The women put their hands on the back or the head, while the men beat grasses and bushes with sticks and clubs, and old men blow horns"¹.

It is worth noting that most African cultures portray their grief for the dead openly. The treatment of the dying person consequently differs as far as some cultures are concerned. Some communities did not respect the dead. Among the Kikuyus of Kenya, Nandis, Kambas and many others, "if a man died in his hut, his body was left inside for hyenas to devour. If this was not done, then his body was taken out and payment had to be made to the person or people who did the job and they had to be purified after taking the body to an uncultivated place for the hyenas to devour"². Luos as such see this as disrespect to the dead and most of Luo scholars' view this as repugnant. This was the culture of some of the communities that existed during the time. This was very beautiful for them and there would be no question about it says one of my Kikuyu friends. It should be noted that "no culture is superior to the other".

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969), p. 152-153.

² A Nation Newspapers, *S.M. Otieno*, p. 97.

In each culture, mourning rituals have a distinct purpose. They openly acknowledge the reality of death. They allow for the open expression of grief, but in socially acceptable circumstances and forms. Many African communities are known for their loud wailing and mourning. “On the other hand, in some communities in Europe and North America, widows are more likely to engage in solitary mourning or silent grief”¹.

For the Luos, widows were obliged to mourn openly and loudly. In circumstances where a widow could not mourn openly, then there would be a lot of suspicion. People would be suspicious that she could have been not faithful to her husband. As if this was not enough, if a widow could not throw earth during the time of burial of her husband, then the people could know for sure that she was not faithful to her husband. This also could apply in a case of a widow not touching her husband’s body after death. If she does not, then people could know too that she was not faithful. In order to avoid these suspicions, “a clever widow”, if she was not faithful would go to herbalist and be given “MANYASI” (a herb mixed with soil and water). She would drink this and be safe from any calamity and suspicion. If not, she stands a risk of being at loggerheads with the community and customs as a whole. After this “MANYASI”, she is able to do the necessity of a widow. As “Mamo” in her book “Widows” puts it, “Luo customs seem to be more sympathetic to the widow. However, a Luo widow

¹ Mamo, p. 12

may also find herself bewildered and confused. On one hand, her brothers –in – Law will seek to console her, and bring her closer to them (“Don’t cry too much. We’re here!”). On the other hand, the dead man’s married sisters (WAGOGNI) may be convinced that she “killed” him, and express their views openly. At the time of grief, they do not see the widow as part of them; she is regarded a stranger”¹.

In this regard, the moment of death is a crucial moment in the Luo culture and thus can even bring division among the family and the clan at large. As I explained in the first chapter of this essay, a Luo cannot die alone without someone having an upper hand.

3.2. THE QUESTION OF BURIAL

Among the Luos, the question is not where someone is going to be buried but rather when is the person supposed to be buried. The decision vividly rests on the customs that are not written but passed orally. The burial depends on the status of the person and how he / she has died.

It is worth noting that the person who died abnormal death like “NG’AMODERE”, (a person who commits suicide) was not buried with dignity. The Luos believe that such a body may house “JACHIEN” (evil spirit). The body had to be beaten by whoever comes to his / her funeral.

¹ Ibid. , p. 17.

This was done to remind his "TIPO, literary means shadow (spirit) that it was the fault of his own man, and not someone else. Suppose he /she died in the house, that house would no longer be used. It has to be burned with immediate effect. If he / she used a tree to commit suicide by hanging using a rope, that tree must be cut off and burned immediately. During this type of burial, people may not participate in the rites and they would be in fear of other circumstances, which may befall that particular family. The circumstances may be that his /her spirit may come back and haunt the members of his / her family if not treated well. It is also interesting to note that: "The soul of a person who dies in the water is considered to have chosen to live in the world under water, and it would be offending his "JUOK" (spirit) to bring his / her body back to the earth. It is therefore necessary that a body of a person who dies in the water, "JAPT" must be buried by the lake or river side"¹. But presently this is not done. The person is just buried at home but there is no burial respect accorded. In this case, someone who dies unceremonious death is not only accorded un-respectful burial but also the family who are left behind may suffer other consequences. The spirits of the dead man may follow those who are left behind. It is often said that if ones father was killed because he was a thief, then one day one of his lineage would also be killed because of the same act. The Luos are very sensitive concerning the burial of the dead. All rituals must be performed accordingly putting in mind that if the spirits are not happy, then they would come back and disturb the community.

¹ Ochola Ayayo, p. 178.

Some communities do not bother to bury their dead. As I mentioned earlier about the Kikuyus, Kambas and Nandis of the past, they could leave their dead in the forest for wild animals to devour. Presently, some communities do not care where the person would be buried. Once someone is dead, that is the end and life continues. They often prefer to bury in public cemetery than their homes. This is really contrary to Luo customs, which is still being followed up to date. It is rare to hear a case of burial dispute in Luo culture. It is always very clear where someone is to be buried. Surprisingly, there was a case of burial saga in 1987 when a prominent criminal lawyer, S.M. Otieno died and the widow who is a Kikuyu by ethnic community, wanted her late husband to be buried outside his ancestral land. It was a court case and the clan won the case and the body of S.M. Otieno was buried at his ancestral land. This was not only because of inter-marriage but also the widow was very adamant in accepting the reality of the Luo culture and traditions. (cf. Nation Newspaper, Kenyas Unique burial Saga: S.M. Otieno, from December 28, 1986- June, 1987). Even at present, the Luos do inter^s-marry but the question of burial rites is always clear and any dispute is not welcomed. Customary laws guide burial rites and other rites and mostly they are not questioned.

3.3. WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO BURY WHO

Among the Luos, there is no question who has the right to bury who. Everything is very clear. The burial business rests in the hands of the clan. It is interesting in Luo culture that even if someone dies in America, the clan is ready to collect millions of shillings in order for the body

to be brought back home for the burial according to the customs. It is interesting to note that even if a Luo man or woman is eaten by a wild animal and only a small portion remains, the portion will be treated with respect and accorded respectable burial as any other body. Even though the widow is the next of kin, she is not allowed to participate in burial matters. The clan members are the ones with the responsibility to decide when the person would be buried not where. As "Tago" (a witness in the case of S.M. Otieno's burial saga) explained: "The wife will sit and mourn."¹ In this case she can decide on nothing concerning burial. In other words the widow has no role to play concerning the burial. Her main responsibility is to sit and mourn her dead husband. Everything depends on the clan.

Among other communities, the widow is the one who has a total say as far as burial is concerned. They are the next of kin, therefore everything is entitled to them.

The clan or the in-laws have no say when and where the deceased is supposed to be buried. The widows may just inform the family members what she has planned to do. The widows as the next of kin are the ones responsible for the family. This is contrary to Luo customs. The Luos believe that when you marry, your wife belongs to the society. In this case everyone in the clan has the responsibility to protect her. The Luos always say that "MA CHIWA"(this is our wife). In this case, one marries for the community and therefore she is considered as any other woman in the society. So the question of burial rests on the hand of the clan not the wife or the woman if so to speak.

¹ A Nation Newspaper, S.M. Otieno's burial Saga:p. 65.

3.4. THE INHERITANCE OF THE DECEASED'S PROPERTY

The inheritance of the deceased's property entirely depends on the deceased himself. During the past, "the dying man gives instruction concerning the distribution of property; and all the people sit around him, silently waiting for him to die."¹ This means that he was the one responsible to distribute wealth to those whom he liked. This was done in order to avoid quarrels among his family after he had gone. Most of the people do not wait until they are about to die.

They distribute their properties when they are still alive and strong. In case of land, they distribute at a very early stage such that people know very well that this land belongs to so and so. In most cases even title-deeds are given in early stages.

In case a man dies, the widow is entitled to the property. It defeats logic in some parts of Luo land where the in-laws or relatives could take all the belongings and leave the widow empty-handed. This was not the case in the past. It is just because of greed, which brings that. The widows were very much protected and the properties that were left behind were protected too. This is why a widow was supposed to be levirated. "Under the levirate union, a widow retains her status as wife of the dead husband. A close relative of the dead husband cohabits with the widow, but he is merely a substitute husband and any children born of the union are considered the children of the dead husband who continues to be the legal father".²

¹ John S. Mbiti, p. 152

² Mamo, p.85.

The next husband was supposed to help her and defend the properties which are left behind. Even though Luos are very adamant in some cultural practices concerning the question of burial, who has the right to bury who and even the inheritance of the deceased's property, there are various things which need to be changed more especially where the people are to be buried and the one who has a right to bury that particular person.

However, it is upon the people themselves to judge the expense of the present burial cost and the society's own development.

As pastoral agents, it is our responsibility to advise the society how to deal with these problems in amicable way. There are some beliefs which are good and in line with christianity and contemporary society as a whole. Others are basically "milking" the society of her own development. It is a pastoral concern which is worth addressing as follows in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

PASTORAL APPROACH

As concerns pastoral approach, I would treat it in two different ways. I would explain what is good as per the rituals and Luo customs and where change is necessary. I would also base some of my arguments in reference to the bible especially when dealing with complicated issues like AIDS (Acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and the so called "wife inheritance".

4.1. BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF DEATH AND ETERNAL DESTINY

Physical death is the separation of the spirit from the body (cf. James 2:26). It is also spoken of as a putting off a tent, a temporary dwelling place (2 Cor. 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:13,14). It is said to be an exodus (Luke 9:30,31; 2 Pet. 1:15), an absence from the body (2 Cor. 5:8; 12:2), a state of silence (Psalms 31:17; 115:17), a condition in which there is no knowledge (Eccle. 9:5; 9:12), and finally as a penalty for sin (Gen. 2:17; Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 6:23; James 1:14,15).

Unlike the traditional view that attributes the causes of death to natural and physical causes alone, biblical revelation makes it abundantly clear that death in the human realm is the direct result of sin. Man would have lived forever had he not sinned (Gen. 3:22). Death in the Old Testament almost always has reference to the physical aspect, though the spiritual aspect is included in the first commandment given to man in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15-17). Death in the biblical view, whether physical, spiritual, or eternal, is basically a separation; and its

ultimate cause is sin. This is what we get in Romans 5:12 that “for by one man, sin entered into the world and death by sin”. (cf. Also Isaiah 59:2).

Jesus plainly taught that there would be both a resurrection of life and a resurrection of damnation (cf. John 5:28,29). Jesus said that unless the grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remain alone (cf. John 12: 24). We should note also that according to Paul, this is the whole Kerygma. He shows that “if there is no resurrection, then Christ is not risen, our preaching is in vain, our faith is in vain, the dead in Christ have perished, and we are of all men mostly to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:12-19). All these biblical references support the idea that death itself is, from time memorial. We have to accept the reality of death even though it is painful. The result of death is beyond our own limitation. I would say that it is God- given reality and we have to accept it when it “knocks” at our doors.

4.2. AIDS AND PASTORAL APPROACH

AIDS is a deadly disease caused by an unseen germ known as HIV (Human immune deficiency virus). This germ stops the body from fighting against sickness’ and the people with AIDS suffer many different illness’. Eventually people with AIDS die.

Most people get AIDS through having sex with a person who has HIV. Some infants get AIDS from their mothers before birth if their mother has HIV or in rare circumstances through breast milk. The only other way to get AIDS is through direct contact of your blood to another person’s blood infected with the virus. This can happen through blood transfusions if the blood

has not been tested or from sharing needles or other instruments that draw blood. It is hard for people to be convinced that the use of condoms can prevent the infection of the virus. Scientists have proved that condoms cannot prevent AIDS and it is wrong for various governments to advocate for it. The only way to prevent it is by being faithful to one particular partner.

It is sad too to note that, among the Luos, AIDS is spreading at an alarming rate. The study that I carried out among the Luos of "UYOMA" people in CENTRAL NYANZA, almost each and every home is having a victim of AIDS. It is very unfortunate that they do not accept the reality of AIDS. One old man told me that there is nothing known as AIDS. He said that even before, people were getting slim, vomits, diarrhoea and other symptoms of the virus. He said that indiscipline among the youth, might lead them to be haunted by the spirits. He termed it as incest and the result is "CHIRA". "CHIRA", generally is a mysterious ailments, which come as consequences of great sins one may commit in the society. In other words, that old man had all the reasons to convince me that AIDS is "CHIRA" and AIDS can therefore be treated in early stages.

I also interviewed another old man how the Luos now understand death because people are dying at an alarming rate. He said that; the ancestors are not happy with the people as far as behaviour is concerned. When someone dies now, though the spirit goes to the land of ancestors, it has to get punishment especially the spirits of the youth. This is because the young people are not willing to follow the pieces of advice they are given by the "JODONGO"

(elders). The young people do not know whether so and so is the father or the mother or close relative. They indulge themselves in sexual intercourse and thus they are haunted by the spirits of the clan and die.

It may take time for the Luos to be convinced that AIDS is a reality and it is with us. It is the responsibility of everyone more especially the church to come forward to inform everyone about this deadly disease AIDS. This is because; "Historically and traditionally, by the church's very nature and mission, churches are community-centred and service-oriented, preaching and practising love, compassion and care for the disadvantaged and under-privileged in the society. Dealing with AIDS and its implications at a personal and communal level would, therefore, be in consonance with its very divine essence and call¹. Therefore it is the responsibility of the church to speak openly and teach the society about AIDS as the worst epidemic. Publishing the articles alone cannot help but it would be advisable that the church's pastoral work should be geared to preaching this epidemic door to door where possible. Let us all note that the only sure way to avoid AIDS is God's way: Faithfulness within marriage and no sex outside marriage.

¹ Mary N. Getui and Emmanuel A. Obeng (editors): Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1999), p. 177.

4.3. WIDOW “INHERITANCE”

In the Luo tradition, marriage involves both the individual and community. Marriage is personal and at the same time it is social alliance between the two communities, that is, the community where the man comes from and that of the wife. So when one gets married, the wife is not only for the husband but also for the community. The Luos call that wife: “CHI OWADWA” (our brother’s wife) and “CHIWA” (our wife). The only difference is that sexual rights are reserved to the husband alone.

As “Mamo” explained: “A woman got married once in her lifetime; there was no dissolution of her marriage due to the death of her husband; the widow continued to be regarded as a functioning wife”.¹

In Luo traditional society, once you have married it is once and for all. There is nothing like “until death does us part” as Christian marriage portrays. Even after the husband’s death, the widow still is considered the “wife of the grave” (CHI LIEL).

Marital union is still intact. Traditionally, she is taken over by another man chosen as a husband for her by the elders. If she is of child-bearing age, she can get children with the man and name the children after the deceased. Otherwise, if she is past childbearing age, a brother or a cousin of the deceased can offer her “NDAWA” (cigarette or tobacco) which signifies that she has been formally but not practically married.

¹ Mamo, p.85.

The term widow “inheritance” is not a welcoming term among the Luo traditional society. To inherit means to take over. It is a kind of property. Strictly speaking, the correct term for widow “inheritance” is the levirate union.

“Under the levirate union, a widow retains her status as wife of the dead husband. A close relative of the dead husband cohabits with the widow, but he is merely a substitute husband and any children born of the union are considered the children of the dead husband who continues to be the legal father”.¹

In the levirate union, the substitute husband had the responsibility to protect the widow and the children, cater for her domestic, sexual and procreative needs and more so was to look after the properties the husband had left behind.

This was the reason why the substitute husband had to be her in-law or a close relation with the husband. In Luo traditional society, they portrayed that the widows needed protection and their sexual needs had to be met even though they may be old. It is interesting to note that the widow was not allowed to re-marry.

If this would happen, then the custom has it that she would have divorced her dead husband. As a result of this, the bride- wealth was supposed to be returned; there would be separation of the woman from her children who remained with the husband’s family and there would be fear of being bewitched by the dead husband.

¹ Ibid. , p. 85.

Presently, it is not levirate union as it was in the past. Most of the substitute husbands are no longer responsible to protect and support the widows. Their own motive is to have a good life, eat good food and even gain from the little wealth the dead man left behind. The substitute husbands are not committed at all. They move from one home to the other. It is very sad that this has brought a great spread of AIDS among the Luos. Specialists in "TERO" (substitute husbands) move from door to door without even knowing the consequences this might cause. Suppose a man dies of AIDS, then a man goes and levirate that person's wife, definitely he will have AIDS and spread it to other families too. Among my own people; the Luos of Uyoma: there is a say that "JATER ONYIEWO RADIO WINJOGO KAMA CHUO MON OTHOYE" (a substitute husband has bought a radio to listen to where someone has died) so that he can go and levirate the dead man's wife.

It is sad too that levirate union can bring a lot of damage to the society. Suppose the dead husband left three children. Now when the substitute husband comes, he again leaves another three children. It is unfortunate that he cannot even lift a hand to support that family. When there is a burden in that family, he moves away to another one. It is very painful to the widow who is left behind. It puts a heavy financial burden on the widow.

In the Old Testament, there are some passages, which allowed the levirate union that was practised, and it was by law. (cf. Genesis 38:6-10; Deuteronomy 25:5-10; 2 Samuel 11:26-27, 1 Samuel 25:39-42).

In the New Testament, there is a complete reverse of values concerning the levirate union. Levirate union violates the biblical standard of marriage, which is one-man -with – one – woman. This also conflicts with the Christian belief that death means the end of the marriage union. In Christian marriage ceremony, it portrays clearly in Romans 7:2 a view that marriage is “until death do us part”. The woman is also bound by law to be faithful to her husband until death.

The church as such allows re-marriage. If one's husband dies she can be re-married with someone who has not married and their marriage can be blessed in church. If this is not the case, the church often advises the widows to remain chaste (cf. Matthew 19:1-9). In this case, the church can help the society in “a strong” way in order to avoid unnecessary deaths due to AIDS and other related calamities like “uncared” families. The only sure way to avoid AIDS is God's way as I said earlier: Faithfulness within marriage and no sex outside marriage.

4.4. DEATH AND PASTORAL APPROACH

The Luos understanding of death has a lot of pastoral advantages. It serves more – or – less as a permeating ground for understanding the Christian religion, its basic tenets and doctrines.

The Luo interpretation of death here is not very much different from the ancient Semitic belief in which the death of the individual and death in general is considered to be a punishment inflicted by God for the sin of disobedience committed by the first human couple. (cf. Gen. 3:10-19). Most of, if not all the Luo myths are nearly identical in their conclusions. They claim

that the human person is responsible for the event of death. It is something that should have never been, but came to be through man's carelessness. It is the end of earthly life, but also a transformation, a transition to a life that is other worldly. This belief in a new status acquired after death explains it (death) as a stage of spiritual growth, rather than as the extinction of life. Death and its denial – immortality, have always formed, as they are today, the most poignant theme of man's foreboding. The dead is never forgotten completely by those who knew them. The living dreams about and receives messages from them. The ancestors are included in ritual activities of the living. This is why the Luo conceive death as the final rite of passage or social transformation. These parallels bring out clearly the Christian understanding that physical death is not the end of life.

The relationship between the dead and the living according to the Luo is the same as the present day relationship between the saints and the living. He or she may be expected to protect the living or intercede for them the way a Christian saint does for the believers. The understanding of this would be a great break – through to pastoral workers from outside the community. "Rituals often take the form of dramatic presentations among African people. By means of objectifying their inner fears and perplexities, the people are enabled to deal with them in a more meaningful and constructive way."¹ Some of the practises have so far been abused. Most of the Luo death rituals have provoked a lot of criticisms and / or misunderstanding. Most of our communities in Kenya today see funeral occasions as days of

¹ Thorpe, S.A., African Traditional Religions (Pretoria: University of South African, 1991), p.121.

feasting where one can eat without considering the expenses. This should be discouraged since the meaning of the celebration is diluted and the ritual reduced to a mere feast. This would help in ensuring that what had a religious rite and significance is not turned to a secular satisfaction.

This is what "Shorter" confirms when he says that; "Accordingly, a good working principle should be that no African cultural element should be rejected unless it can be proved that it is altogether incompatible with the modern way of life"¹.

The understanding of death according to the Luo prepares them for a good moral ground and a free acceptance of death. Alertness in the face of death is the condition for all-moral alertness and exertion. The entry of the believer into the death of Christ takes hold of this basic experience and gives it a final and unsurpassable meaning, as it mediates a basic attitude of eschatological expectation, which hopes for the comprehensive and definite fulfilment of one's own life in death. There are some practises which do not make meaning to the present society. The society is changing rapidly and only what is applicable and beneficial today should be carried forward. Some celebrations, however, require elaborate preparations and expenses which often reduce the family of the deceased to extreme poverty; animals are slaughtered, beer prepared and the villagers freely converge for a feast. This can at times result into poverty by the community to an extent that they can no longer support themselves. The so called "wife inheritance" should be stopped immediately. It is bringing a lot of harm to the community because it is no longer levirate union but greed for sex and wealth. It is even going against

¹ Aylward, Shorter, African Christian Spirituality (New York: Maryknoll, 1980), p. 104.

Christian values that the husband and the wife are united until death. In this case, the widows should be given opportunities to re- marrying and be united once again in the church. This can help the society from unnecessary deaths like contacting AIDS' virus and other contagious diseases.

Death is a reality in every humanity. The question of how someone would meet his / her death should be the real issue. Many of our brothers and sisters do meet their unceremonious deaths through negligence and fear of the consequences in the name of customs and traditions. It would be better to take some precautions and to be in harmony with the society.

4.5. CONCLUSION

Whatever efforts we may make against death, we must admit that it is inevitable, that none can escape it. It is a sociological as well as biological necessity. Accordingly, it is difficult to envisage our own death or that of a loved one as a natural phenomenon. It is only when we speak of death in general or the death of a stranger is when we tend to consider it perfectly natural. The experience of death on the other hand as a basic human experience lays the foundation for all the experience of values. An endurance in the face of this experience generates all moral endurance.

We are all mortal; whether we die at sixty or one hundred years of age, our mortal condition remains unchanged; and because death is certain and inevitable, we should no longer resent death. The Luo conception of death paraphrases the Christian understanding and teaching. While the Luo uphold that all that is paralyzing about death has been removed by belief in the after life, Christianity teaches about eschatology, removing the fear by faith.

Whatever may be said about death and whatever rituals may be used to interpret it or give it meaning, it remains a mystery. Both death and birth are correlative facts; both imply a mutation of an essential state. Even mythological explanations blame death on humanity's own fault which goes on to explain that its origin cannot be satisfactorily given.

Death rituals indeed bring out the religious beliefs of a people. It is through such beliefs and rituals that death is conceived as a rite of passage, a social transformation. Some communities

in Kenya have turned the occasion of death to be a moment of getting money or occasions of feasting. This should be condemned because it takes away the religious impact of funeral rites. The Luo conception of death I would say is very rich as a pre-condition to understanding and interpreting the Christian concepts and teaching. To be precise, their explanation of death is just a different version of the present Christian understanding of death and its rituals. The first missionaries got problems in propagating the faith simply because they downplayed the basic principles underlying the Luo beliefs. In fact I would say that these people saw religion as a package whereby they can just bundle up the old and automatically bring in something new to replace it with. In the present time where AIDS is a question of reference, it would be good that the Luos take heed of this fact that AIDS is a reality which is got through sexual contact and other forms not "CHIRA" (because of traditional sin). Levirate union should also be avoided at all costs and if there can be no re-marriage in a Christian way, then all the same it should be "null and void" and chastity be practiced.

Even though we have myths explaining how death came about, there are no myths in Africa about how death might one day be over-come or removed from the world.

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APPENDIX I

Questionnaire for the interview with Mzee Rukundo on 16th June

2000.

Question: Mzee Rukundo, How are you?

Answer: I am fine.

Question: How old are you?

Answer: I am not very sure, but people say that I am 77 years old.

Question: Why are you not sure?

Answer: Because during those days, people were not keeping the dates or years.

Question: Now Mzee, what can you say about the concept of death among the Rwandese?

Answer: We have one tradition with Burundi. So it is not only about the Rwandese as such but a combine tradition. All in all.....(refer to pages 5 and 6 about myths about death).

Question: Any way thanks a lot. I will come again one day.

Answer: Thanks too for coming.