

The effects of Burial Ceremony in Kenya in the Period of Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case of the Kipsigis Community Bomet County

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Abstract: This paper explores death and burial rites among the Kipsigis community of Kenya vis-vis the understanding of the nature and impact of the covid 19 pandemic. The Kipsigis community is one of the eight sub-tribes of the Kalejin people who hail from the Rift Valley region of Kenya. According to Orchardson (1970), this community make is the largest among the Nilo Hamitic group in Kenya. With the invasion and colonization process, the Kipsigis cultural practices have undergone major transformation being influenced by not only western civilization but also cross community cultures. Christianity is one of the major external forces that have brought major transformation to this community in terms of their traditional worldview. However, the traditional values and practices like burial rites, which have since endured the scourge of modernism is an indication that traditional values still play an influence in the lives of this community. This is evident in the manner in which they understood and reacted to the Covid 19 pandemic where despite the Ministry of health guidelines a number of traditional practices contrary to the Ministry's guidelines were done in some areas to send off and counter the disease and this was done through certain traditional rites. Among the customs that has endured to our times despite the Christian influence, include burying the dead towards the sunset. No burial is to be effected before noon. This is because, the time from dawn is considered sacred and a sign of life and prosperity. All other Kipsigis ceremonies begin at dawn except those which pertain to death.

Keywords: Burial Ceremony, Kipsigis Community, Covid-19 Pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to University of Missouri Journal of Undergraduate Writing (2014), all cultures of the world try to find explanations for death and the afterlife. The journal further states that in the Christian faith, when believers of Jesus Christ and his Holy Father perish, they will have everlasting life in Heaven. The Hindu faith also believes that when one dies, he or she resurrect (reincarnate) into a new form. Death is therefore one phenomenon that scares humans, so we try to find ways to clarify it and make it seem less terrifying. The eventual fact, however, is that no one can truly explain what happens after the death of a human being. At the University of Missouri Museum of Art and Archaeology, the many artifacts available in the African art collection were used in the burial of men and women, and they provide us with an interesting look at the concept of death in early African societies.

2. BACKGROUND

According to world mark encyclopedia of cultures and daily life (volume 1page 304), the Kipsigis live primarily in Kenya, East Africa and belong to the Kalenjin ethnic grouping which is composed of eight culturally and linguistically related groups or "tribes" namely the Kipsigis, Nandi, Tugen, Keiyo, Marakwet, Pokot (sometimes called the Suk), Sabaot (who live in the Mount Elgon region, overlapping the Kenya/Uganda border), and the Terik. Traditionally among

the Kipsigis community like other Kalenjin sub tribes, there were no ostentatious ceremonies when a person died. This however should not be mis-understood to mean that the pain caused by death was not real to the community. Their sense of loss and grief is very real and deep as manifested by the many small customs that are performed in relation to death. Orchardson, (1971) states that at times the rituals are so severe that they are followed by suicide or a mild form of madness.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

- a) Establish the effects of Covid19 on the burial rights among the Kipsigis Community.
- b) To identify the challenges faced by the community in coping with the COVID 19 burial rules set by the government.
- c) Identify the coping mechanisms that have been embraced by the community since the advent of COVID 19 burial rules.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was a survey, and the target population consisted of people who had lost relatives since the advent of Covid19 rules. Purposive sampling was employed to draw out 50 families whose close relatives had died during the said period March 2020 to February 2021. The families were identified from registrar of births and deaths Bomet County and their consent to participate in the study gained after they agreed voluntarily to respond. The study constituted of 50 male and female house hold heads. The instruments used to elicit data included oral interviews and participant observation.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Mbiti (1969), birth is the first rhythm of a new generation, and the rites of birth are performed in order to make the child a corporate and social being. He further states that burial rights continue that process, and make him a mature, responsible and active member of society. Finally comes death, that inevitable and, in many societies, most disturbing phenomena of all. Death stands between the world of human beings and the world of spirits, between the visible and the invisible. There are many, and often complicated, ceremonies connected with death, burials, funerals, inheritance, the living dead, the world of the departed, the visit of the living dead, the world of the departed, the visit of the living dead to their human families, reincarnation and survival of the soul. Mbiti goes ahead to state that death in African society concerns everybody, partly because sooner or later everyone personally faces it and partly because it brings sorrows to every family and community.

Chepkwony (2012) on his parts state that death to many African societies is the last phase of an elaborate celebration of the life cycle. It is widely regarded as a rite of passage that prepares the spirit of the deceased to journey on to the next land. Among the ndembele people of Zimbabwe in a study done by Mbiti (1969), when a person falls seriously ill, relatives watch by his bedside. These relatives must include at least one brother and the eldest son of the sick man, because the two are the ones who investigate the cause of illness, which is generally magic and witchcraft and take preventive measures against it. If the sick man lingers on in pain, his relatives kill what is known as the beast of ancestors. This is generally an ox or a goat (for a poor man), and its killing is believed to hasten death. The presence of the eldest son at the deathbed is a sign that the dying person is nevertheless alive in his children, and this assures him also that there is someone to remember him to keep in personal immortality when he has disappeared physically.

To the Kalenjin community, death per se does not actually exist but the two extremes that being life and death are united according to Kalenjin communities he further state. It is also a belief among the community that the dead have a permit to visit the world of the living during special occasions. The ancestors need to be remembered at all times. The living, do this by pouring libations. Death rituals among the Kipsigis are more important when a man dies than when a woman or a child dies. The major events subsequent to a man's death are: the burial itself, which takes place on the day of death or the morning, following; the ceremony of chasing away death (*Kopuntoyet ap meet*), or purification rite, which normally takes place on the fourth day after the death; and a final release of the widows and from mourning. Goldsmith (2020) says that the persons chiefly involved with the death are the widows, full brothers, and sons of the man, but extends to all his

clansmen, the wives of his brothers, his mother's clans and the people of the village, in diminishing importance as the relationship becomes more remote.

According to Huntingford (1953), if a Kipsigis man dies in the morning, he may be buried in the same day; but if it is later in the day it will be delayed until the following morning, as the stock should not be released from the kraal until his body has been disposed of and because it is desirable that his brothers and sons have an opportunity to view the body if witchcraft is suspected. The Covid 19 ministry of health guidelines has totally interfered with this cultural practices by limiting even the coming close to view the body by the close relatives. According to Chepkwony (2012), the Kalenjin community detests bachelors and spinsters and when they die no child is supposed to be named after them. This is because the society condemns them for not contributing to further procreation. Even a child or a young person who has died is not remembered because he did not sire any child. In ensuring continuity, when there is a dispute on the name to be given to newborn, the elders call out all names until the child sneezes. The name that brought out the sneeze is said to be the right one. "You would then hear elderly person saying Kenduiywo or Chepkutaor any other has been reborn.

When someone succumbs to death, relatives make a quick move to keep the body where tradition requires. Among the Kipsigis, a bachelor or spinster's body cannot be allowed to spend a night at home. It is kept at the mortuary until the day of burial when the body arrives and is buried directly. "Kipsongoiyat (the unmarried) is not allowed to spend a night at a family house and not even his own and must be buried upon arrival. However with the Covid 19 pandemic hitting the world hard, the community has been forced to ignore some of these cultural practices. For instance bachelors and the married men are no longer accorded different treatment in terms of time for burial. The government has placed a limit on the number of people attending the funerals hence making both the same in the eyes of death though not the community.

On the same note, when a married man dies, a supporting stone (goitab maa) at the fireplace in the kitchen is removed for a day before it is replaced preferably with the same stone. Similarly, the other stone is also removed when the mother of the home dies. The third stone is not removed because it symbolizes children and death does not befall them at once in ordinary sense. A stone at the right side at the cooking place symbolizes the father and the mother. Each stone is removed depending on who dies first. When the father of a home dies, kimonjok (the wooden pointer at the tip of the hut) is cut so that the society can know that the head of the family is no more. Nowadays, however, it is rare to do this because many homes have iron sheets for roof.

5. FINDINGS

The study came up with the following findings:

Covid denied the respected accorded to the dead in that staying for a week which in the Kipsigis community is called *kigire* where all forms of work is supposed to stop within an area where the death occurred. This is in contrary to the regulations of the ministry of health of the 72 hours requirement in which the body has to be interred.

The reason as to why the customary practice of *kigire* was observed was in order to give respect to the dead. This is an indication that life for the African people was very much valued. Another reason was in order to let all the next of kin to be informed hence to arrive at an acceptance of what had happened. It was also a moment to give the dead a good sent off. For the African people it was taboo doing important things hurriedly. This confirms with the popular saying among the Kipsigis people; *kipendi mutyo amachei geldo* (lit.go slowly so that the foot may not cause an alarm).

With the coming of Christianity, the Kipsigis community have also adopted the tradition of not burying the dead all-over-certain. Just like in the traditional way, Christians take some days before they bury their loved ones. This allows families and their religious leaders humble time to plan for an appropriate burial time. It is becoming almost an accepted tradition and a routine among catholic Christians in Kenya to bury their loved ones on Mondays. This has nothing to do with the liturgical rubrics but rather a day set apart for the priests to rest from the busy liturgical activities which culminate on Sundays.

Another tradition that is evolving is one in which a body of a Christian being brought to the church for a requiem mass on the eve of the burial day. Theses researchers observed that some Roman Catholic priests do not permit such a practice done on a Sunday. This is because of two of the following reasons; one is due to the fact that, Sunday is a busy day for all priests being a day set apart for several Eucharistic celebrations for a larger congregations of Christians as compared to a

burial which is more of a family and a specific community. Hence, bringing the body to the church on a Sunday could coincide with other Eucharistic celebrations of other communities. Again some priests argue that it is not fitting for a burial to be conducted on a day of Sunday considered as a day of solemnity in which Christians consider as a day of resurrection and not a day to commemorate the dead. However, no theological or biblical reference which explicitly indicate that the dead ought not be buried or brought to church on a Sunday. This objection may simply be due to the practical reasons indicated.

Despite the burial days being solemnly observed by Christians at our time, it is worth noting that the ritual of burying the dead is a new practice among the Kipsigis people. Apart from the very old and infant members of the family all others were carried and placed several distances away from the homestead. Again that practice was accompanied with special customary rituals including following; the mother was transported by the last born child and the father was transported by his first born. The dead were also supposed to be carried naked at dusk and one transporting was not supposed to rest till the spot where the body was to be placed. Only the family members were present at home waiting in a quiet mood. Then when the person approached the homestead he picks two handy sticks and hit against each other to signal his arrival. Then he is given water to wash his mouth.

In the case of the very old, they were buried outside the homestead at the place where sheep and goats dung were heaped. Such a dead was referred to as *kolil* (name is archaic but could mean one without stains or the shining one). Infants were also buried like the very old members.

Why mourning is important

Traditionally, the Kipsigis community never had the elaborate funeral ceremonies characteristic of modern day's practices. Funeral was strictly a family affair. In fact the family members were not supposed to be in contact with the public members within the time of *kigire*. A similar practice was when a mother gave birth where she was to be indoors for three days if the baby was a girl and four days for a boy child. It seems dead and birth had common beliefs and mysteries. This was a form of seclusion which was also done with the initiates after they were circumcised. They were to be on their own with their trainers for period of time. The three parties namely; those who were mourning, the mother who had just given birth and the initiates were considered to be in a state of ritually uncleanness and anybody coming in contact with them could be ritually contaminated as well. This practice has two implications in the modern practice namely; religious and medical. In the latter, it can fit quite well with the regulations of the ministry of health in regards to the practice of not coming in contact directly with those who died of covid 19 or secluding the infected ones.

Mourning is important as this is a moment to make the bereaved to accept what has happened and to move on with normal life. As a demonstration of acceptance, the Kipsigis community performs the ceremony of *kureet* (recalling). This is where the spirit of the dead is now recalled in the new born within the immediate or extended family. The *kureet* has a strong bond not even compared to the Christian practice of baptism. In this regard, the newly born baby was even seen to have some physical characteristics with the dead person. At the same time, the practice was so strong such that people addressed the baby as if it was really that very person come back to life.

If people are not given time to mourn then the family members and those close to the person who has died will suffer the post-traumatic stress (PTS). This is what the present society and especially the ministry of health has to address with regard to the 72 hour regulation of those who die due to covid 19 virus. Despite the health implications on the living, programmes of counseling should be intensified in order to fill this health gap created due to the arrival of this pandemic.

Viewing of the Body

Among the emerging traditions that accompany burials at present is the viewing of the body. Although this is a very heartbreaking moment, the process assists in the management of stress which emanate out of the loss of the loved one. Some are seen falling down vigorously in an uncontrolled way. But all the actions exhibited are an indication of the acceptance of the loss which is a remedy for the PTS.

This is also a time to ascertain that the right person is being buried as cases of wrong person have ever been reported in some instances. It is an opportunity for family members to meet and review family issues in order to reconcile where they

may have gone wrong. Families used the occasion as a time to encourage one another on issues pertaining to religion and economic development.

During this time of the covid pandemic, shaking of hand as a form of greeting has been discouraged. Yet the gesture which has been accepted as a sign of respect, peace and acceptance especially in the African tradition. Waving as a sign of greeting is rare among the African communities. Those who may be affected negatively with the new practice of not shaking of hands are particularly the elderly. This new practice will take time to be internalized and accepted.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendations as pertains to the general guidelines with regard to the findings;

1. Counseling of the immediate family members should be enhanced. This is to guide them on the dangers posed by this emerging covid 19 pandemic especially if they continue the normal routine without observing the regulations.
2. People should embrace the new culture and traditions as culture is dynamic and the new situations dictates such an acceptance.
3. They should be guided to accept the immediate burial and to disregard all the beliefs on the impact on the unceremonial burial of the death. This is a history repeating itself as the in the Kipsigis tradition burial was not done to the dead.
4. The public health officers in charge of the burial ceremonies should be guided to understand the culture and customs of the people regarding burial rites.
5. Education on the dangers of family meetings during funerals and burials should be done by the ministry of health and the local leaders.
6. Family members and community should be educated on unnecessary fund raisings during funerals as this can lead to misuse of resources which could be directed to family use like education and health.
7. The old members should be guided about the dangers of shaking of hands at present as this is one of the ways of contracting the covid 19 virus.

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