

Death and Human Sexuality among the Precolonial Bukusu Community of Western Kenya. c. 1895

BY

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Abstract

This paper was extracted from a Doctor of Philosophy Degree (History) Thesis that was submitted to Graduate School of Laikipia University, Kenya in March 2023. The overall objective of the research was to interrogate mortuary and funerary practices among the Bukusu of Western Kenya in a historical perspective and it was contended that death rituals in this community play significant role of aiding the transformation of individuals from the earthly life to immortal state. In this paper, the inalienability of death and human sexuality has been argued from a miraculous perspective of transmitting life through sexual intercourse and the transformation of the same life to immortality through death. In other words, death in itself is not an end to the earthly life but rather a stage at which the said earthly life was transformed into immortal nature that was expected to last forever. Arising from the above foregoing, the Bukusu people were very cautious when handling death and human sexuality and for this reason, they developed important death rituals that guided sexual affairs upon the occurrence of death.

Keywords: Sex and gender, Sexual Abstinence, Sexual intercourse, Immortal, Transformation

INTRODUCTION

The Bukusu are a Bantu-speaking community who belong to the larger Baluhya cluster of the interlucustrine nation of East Africa. They speak the Lubukusu language and Kolala maintains that around 98 percent of the total Bukusu population are Christians out of which 55 percent are from the evangelical denominations.¹ By 2010, most of them largely occupied Bungoma and Trans-Nzoia although a few of them had by then settled in some pockets of Kakamega and Busia regions.² Most of those who had advanced their studies by this time had relocated to cities and other towns within the country while others had gone overseas for further studies and employment as well. Better still, a few of them without advanced studies had also relocated to towns and cities within the country for casual employment.

Death and human sexuality among the Bukusu during the pre-colonial period were important concepts that received due

consideration at the occurrence of either of them. This is according to Patrick Kisaka Muniafu who also asserts that human sexuality resulted to the transmission of life and the enhancement of the societal generations while death on the other hand transformed the earthly life into the spiritual and immortal nature that was far above the normal human comprehension and understanding.³ In other words, the occurrence of death from a Bukusu point of view was a mandatory rite in which the living human being was transformed to fulfill the envisaged immortal nature.

In essence, therefore, the process of transformation from the state of being a human to an immortal being after death can be compared to the manner in which conception occurs during sexual intercourse. Perhaps, this explains why Mbiti argues that the birth of a child from an African perspective is a process which begins long before the child's arrival in the world and continues

¹K. Z. Kolala, *Death and Burial Rites among the Bukusu Quakers of Bungoma County (Minnesota:2014)*, p.16

² F. E. Makila, *The Significance of Chetambe Fort in Bukusu,(Nairobi: 1982)*, p.3

³ O.I, Patrick KisakaMuniafu, interviewed at Webuye town on 21 November 2022

thereafter.⁴ It therefore implies that the transmission of life through sexual intercourse and the transformation of the acquired life to immortality through death are unique and miraculous occurrences that can only be explained in the realms of religious beliefs and thoughts.

Research Objective

The main objective in this paper was to examine death and human sexuality among the Bukusu of Kenya during the pre-colonial period. However, this objective was derived from a broader one which interrogated mortuary and funerary practices among the Bukusu of Kenya, 1895 – 2010.

Research Methodology

This was a historical research that examined death and human sexuality among the Bukusu of Kenya during the pre-colonial period. The tenets of the *ex post facto* and descriptive research designs were used to develop and generate the findings compiled in this paper. The research also relied on Oral Interviews (abbreviated as O.I in the footnotes) while in the field through which informants were selected using purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. The collected information was corroborated with other primary and secondary sources to enhance validity of the findings in this paper.

Research Findings

To demonstrate the seriousness bestowed on the concepts under discussion among the Bukusu people, the occurrence of death in a given family signaled the beginning of sexual abstinence until after the interment of the deceased had been conducted. This was a compulsory ritual that was keenly observed especially by the close relatives of the deceased. Omukuka Muambane Natembeya argues that sexual abstinence upon the occurrence of death was meant to provide a perfect opportunity through which people were expected to mourn the demise of a loved one in the society.⁵ Because sexual intercourse is a pleasurable experience that brings happiness and satisfaction to those that are involved, it would have gone against the prevailing circumstances of mourning and sorrow if sex was permitted soon after death.

To ensure that sexual abstinence was fully observed during the mourning period, concerned people were expected to spend their nights at the deceased's homestead while warming themselves at the bonfire (*khusioso*) to conduct the night vigils. In most cases, this was usually a reserved role for men who were supposed to be away from their wives.⁶ Women were allowed to retire to their houses with the sole intention of nursing their small children who were still dependent on their parents. However, it was not illegal at all for women to spend the entire night at the fireplace. Although there was no formal roll call that ensured total compliance to this ritual, most people adhered to this directive as a way of indicating

their obedience to their traditions. Otherwise, those who were notorious boycotters of this ritual received the same fate whenever death knocked at their doorsteps.

Soon after the deceased was buried, however, sexual intercourse was permitted and it was anticipated that the departed individual would be conceived in a reincarnate form several months after interment. In cases where a parent died, surviving sons were encouraged to resume sex after burial with the hope of "bringing back their father or mother" whose life had been transformed by death.⁷ In fact, children who were born thereafter were named after the deceased to imply that the soul of the departed individual was reincarnated through the newborn children. In occasions where parents had lost their child out of death, they were at liberty to as well resume sexual intercourse after burial, and a child who was born thereafter was usually named *Makokha* regardless of the gender.⁸ Nevertheless, it must be reiterated that night vigils continued until after the *lufu* ritual and it was upon the individual family members to strike a balance between their sexual encounters and night vigils within that period.

The above scenario however did not apply in situations where an individual lost a spouse. Widowship thus attracted special cleansing rituals that permitted the survivor to once again engage in sex. In situations where the husband died, the widow was expected to be cleansed from the *bukhuchakali* impurities before she could remarry or engage in a legal sexual intercourse.⁹ Although this occasion entailed a sacrificial sheep or cow through which cud was symbolically used to cleanse the widow from the said impurities, it was a requirement for her to partake in sexual intercourse away from her home and with a man who was not expected to remarry her.¹⁰ The said man in this case was only a conduit in ensuring the cleansing of the widow. However, there is a cultural lacuna as to what happened to this man having been involved in a ritual that purified the widow from the *bukhuchakali* impurities.

Likewise, a polygamous man who lost one of his wives washed off the *bukhuchakali* impurities four days after the burial of his wife. A sheep was sacrificed to cleanse himself and the children by stepping into the cud.¹¹ Thereafter, he was at liberty to engage in sexual intercourse with any of his wives. Nevertheless, a widower who was not polygamous observed a four-month continence period from the interment date of his wife after which he sacrificed a cow or a bull for the cutting of the *kimikoye* (robes) ribbons. Upon accomplishing this ritual, the man pulled down the living hut and

⁷ O.I, Vincent Nyongesa, interviewed at Bokoli village in Webuye west constituency on 11 June 2022

⁸ O.I, Gabriel Murutu Wamalwa, interviewed at Likhuna village in Tongareni Constituency on 20 April 2022

⁹ F. E. Makila, *Bukusu Cultural Traditions*, (Nairobi; 2004), p.156

¹⁰ G. M. Banda et al, *Religion, Death and Mortuary Concepts in the Pristine Bukusu Community*, (2022) *Saudi Journal of Humanities Social and Science* 7(11)

¹¹ O.I, Patrick Kisaka Muniafu, interviewed at Webuye town on 21 November 2022

⁴ J. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, second edition, (Illinois: 1975), p.5

⁵ O.I, Omukuka Muambane Natembeya, interviewed at Khamulati village in Kimilili constituency on 9 May 2022

⁶ O.I, Ngoni Kireba, interviewed at Mahanga village in Webuye west constituency on 11 June 2022

later moved into a new one where he had the freedom of getting another wife.¹²

Sex and gender are important concepts among the Bukusu people that were given due consideration in determining the nature of mourning and rituals that pertained any funeral. In other words, the gender or the sex of the deceased determined the type of death rituals that were to be conducted. It is observed that the demise of a man occasioned the observance of rituals such as *khusena kumuse*, *khuuya lianga* and *khukwisialikubili* among others while the demise of a woman in most cases was limited to specific rituals that have already been discussed in this chapter. This argument is based on the fact that the male sex was perceived to be a very strong gender that needed numerous rituals to completely finish the funeral process while the female gender did not need so much due to the general weaknesses of women in the masculine perspective.¹³

What must be asserted is the fact that the believe in life after death determined the general engagements of the surviving kins of the deceased during and after the mourning process. Sexual intercourse was equally taken to be a pertinent activity that continued even after death. Aspects of wife inheritance was a common practice among the Bukusu people and in such sexual arrangements, children that were born thereafter were assumed to have been sired by the deceased.¹⁴ In factual sense, however, this was biologically incorrect, and more often, such marriages were subject to conflicts and disagreements in cases where a son was born soon after widow inheritance.

It is observed that the birth of a son soon after such sexual arrangements spelt doom and despair for his step-siblings that were sired by the deceased man and in most cases, secrete plans were always put in place to have the said child killed. Muambane avers that the son in question was traditionally called *omukhalamwandu* who according to other oral traditions took away the blessings of his elder step siblings.¹⁵ In did, historical facts have correctly proved right this observation and most sons of this nature that survived infancy death emerged to be more successful than their elder step siblings. Hence, sexual engagements that involved widows were cautiously entertained while hoping to bring forth a girl soon after widow inheritance.

Conclusion

From the above foregoing, death and human sexuality among the Bukusu people during the precolonial period were always intertwined and they constituted important concepts which humanity passed to attain eternity. The transmission of earthly life was only realised sexual intercourse in a miraculous way after which death transformed the same earthly life to immortal state that was expected to last for eternity. Hence, the occurrence of

death among the Bukusu signalled the commencement of a period that entailed the observation of rituals which demonstrated the relationship between death and human sexuality. Such rituals included; sexual abstinence until after conducting certain rituals, resumption of sex after interment, ritual cleansing from impurities occasioned by death, and remarrying among others.

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¹²O.I, OmukukaMuambaneNatembeya, interviewed at Khamulati village in Kimilili constituency on 9 May 2022

¹³O.I, Dinah Nabangi Mayende, interviewed at Sengeli village in Kimilili constituency on 27 December 2021

¹⁴O.I, Patrick WakwabubiMasoni, interviewed at Likhuna village in Tongareni constituency on 20 April 2022

¹⁵O.I, OmukukaMuambaneNatembeya, interviewed at Khamulati village in Kimilili constituency on 9 May 2022

List of informants

	Name of informants	G	Age	Occupation	Place of interview	Date
1	Dinah Nabangi Mayende	F	86	Peasant Farmer	Sengeli village, Kimilili Constituency	20/12/22
2	Gabriel Murutu Wamalwa	M	72	Retired primary school teacher	Lukhuna village, Tongareni constituency	20/04/22
3	OmukukaMuambaneNatembeya	M	76	A Bukusu public comforter	Khamulati village, Kimilili constituency	09/05/22
4	Ngoni Kireba	M	68	Peasant farmer	Mahanga village, Webuye west constituency	11/06/22
5	Patrick KisakaMuniafu	M	86	Former Mayor, Webuye Municipal Council	Webuye town, Bungoma East Subcounty	21/11/22
6.	Patrick WakwabubiMasoni	M	66	Retired primary school teacher	Lukhuna village, Tongareni constituency	20/04/22
7	Vincent Nyongesa	M	88	Public comforter, Webuye East Subcounty	Bokoli village, Webuye west constituency	11/06/22