

## **Luhya Burial Rituals versus Biblical View of Life after Death: Finding a Balance**

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### **Abstract**

*The Luhya traditional burial rituals were complex, and involved several people and many activities. Death was understood to have been caused by sorcery, curse, witchcraft or other similar forces. To ward off death therefore, the Luhya prescribed rituals that were to be performed by all. The arrival of Christianity in early 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in silent conflict between Luhya culture and Christianity. The problem has been that majority of Christians practice both Christian faith and cultural burial rituals; compromising their faith, and weakening the church. The clergy who have been trained in theology, and who understand Luhya culture have been conducting their ministries variously. This study sought to find out how those pastors managed to remain true to their faith, and maintain family bonds. The central question in this paper was: How has Biblical understanding shaped Luhya Christian leaders' perception of how burial practices should be conducted? This study found that the underlying assumption dictating how Luhyas practice rituals include aspects such as the sharing of sorrow and the respect for the dead. The Luhya clergy practice their activities towards burial rituals in three different ways: confrontation, selective participation, and developing a complete Luhya Christian theology. This paper suggests that modern theologians need to come up with a well-developed African Christian theology that can help address these burial rituals, in a way that is biblical and relevant to the African context.*

**Key Words:** *Rituals, burial theology, ceremony, wife, husband, grave, community, Luhya*

## **Introduction**

### **Introductory Background**

John Mbiti said that Africans are notoriously religious (1991, p.1). Religion touched every aspect of their lives, including practices that accompany last respects, burial and post-burial rituals. The cultural system was complex and advanced, providing answers to human questions, solutions to every problem, and explanations to all situations. Among cultural/religious practices that were common in most African cultures were naming of infants, circumcision, marriage rituals, death of spouse and wife inheritance, funeral rituals, rain making, cursing perverts and cleansing from curses. Of all these practices, the one that held utmost significance in most of the communities were rituals associated with illness and death. According to Mbiti (1991), most of the people viewed death with fear. Unlike the Nandi community, where very old people would commit suicide to allow the younger generation to get a new age set, most of the people in Africa expected long lives, full of enjoyment and strength, such that if somebody died, he/she must have been killed by someone. Death seemed to have been caused by sorcery, curse, witchcraft or other similar forces. To ward off death therefore, most African communities prescribed rituals that were to be performed by all.

Among the most conspicuous rituals are the cultural and religious practices performed in respect to the dead. Among the Luhya people of Kenya, these rituals included “bringing the shadow” of the dead person from wherever the deceased lived or died, and accompanying it to the grave. The spouse must stay besides the body for three or four days before burial. All close relatives must be shaved a few days after burial (three days for a woman, and 4 days for a man). Some animals must be slaughtered in the process. Certain rituals must be performed, depending on the social status, age, sex, and marital status of the deceased.

These practices are at the heart of the community bond, and culturally no member of the community dared to stay away. Participating in the practices was expected. Every member of the community had well stipulated roles, which also influenced relationships, harmony, and raising children, among others.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the arrival of Christian missionaries among the Luhya community. This dealt a blow to most of their cultural practices, hence confusing, destabilizing, weakening, or even obliterating other practices associated with this culture. Traditional Luhya burial practices have been demonized by most of the Christian denominations, and the Christians are being instructed by their spiritual leaders to abandon those rituals and act as “children of the light.” These denominations emphasize the Biblical teaching that people die once, and thereafter move to a spiritual phase, either with God in heaven, or a spiritual world, where they cannot affect or influence the living. Activities done in respect to the dead are to these denominations, satanic, and a practice of devil worship, which all Christians should shun. The greatest challenge has been with an ordinary Luhya Christian, who gets pushed from both sides: culture and Christianity. The culture demands continuity of the burial rituals, while religion demands abstinence.

### **Biblical Teaching about Life after Death**

Questions concerning traditional burial rituals, and whether they are acceptable for a Christian, also raise further questions related to biblical teachings of death and life after death. Questions such as whether there is a biblical guidance on how to conduct burials and whether there are aspects in Luhya burial rituals that are totally unbiblical became very crucial and demand answers, in order to have a workable Christian theology of burial and afterlife.

This study will first of all focus on biblical teachings on what happens when people die, and later biblical teachings related to last respects.

According to Grudem (1994:816), the souls of believers “go immediately into God’s presence.” A believer upon dying on earth goes to the presence of God “with rejoicing” even though the body physically remains and is buried. In II Corinthians 5:8, Paul says that it would be better to be “away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Furthermore, in the conversation of Jesus with the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43, we read that Jesus promised the thief to be with him in paradise that evening. In Hebrews 12:23, it is said that when Christians come together in worship, they come into the presence of God in heaven, and into the presence of “the spirits of just men made perfect.” Revelation 6:9-11 and 7:9-10 also teach that the spirits of those who have died in Christ go to heaven and are worshipping God. The souls of the dead Christians therefore, are conscious, but in heaven.

The souls of the unbelievers who die go to a place of damnation and eternal separation from God. Their final destiny is a result of their rebellion and ignorance, choosing to be right in their own eyes, rather than obeying God’s invitation to faith. In the story of Lazarus and the Rich man in Luke 16:24-26, Jesus presents a picture of what happens to the souls of sinners once they die. The Rich man is depicted as being in a place of anguish and flames. Yet even in this place of anguish and flames, he can still recall his past misgivings and pride (Ibid). The bodies of unbelievers will be raised just before the final judgement, and get reunited with their souls. They will then “stand before God’s throne for final judgement to be pronounced upon them in the body according to Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; and Revelation 20:12, 15( Ibid, 824).

According to Grudem (1994:814), it is not wrong to express sorrow when a loved one dies. Crying, wailing, mourning, and other similar emotional expressions can be done. The Bible however abhors certain practices done to the dead. According to Leviticus 19:31, Deuteronomy 18:10-12, Galatians 5:19-21, and Leviticus 20:6, the Bible warns against turning to the spirit mediums of dead people in communication, veneration or even worship. In I Samuel 28:7-25, the greatest sin of Saul was in trying to communicate with the soul of Samuel who had since died. This sin, was regarded worse compared to all other evils he had done, including disobeying God's command to kill the Amalekites, and trying severally to kill David. This shows that a Christian should not practice rituals that involve communicating with the dead.

Concerning the burial of the dead, the Bible does not give instructions on how to do it, but practices in the early church offer guidance. First, Christian burial follows the example of Christ, who was buried, and resurrected in the same body (Matt 27:57-61; John 19:38-42). The fact that human bodies are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27; 2:7) suggests that human body, though dead, should be treated with dignity. The fact that humans will be resurrected in body forms to meet with God in the final day, helps to provide guidance on how Christians should treat bodies of their dead friends and relatives. Practices in the Early Christian church, as in the case with Stephen, Ananias and Sapphira supported burial. Burial was a Jewish practice just like circumcision. However, unlike circumcision, burial was continued among the Christians with no indication of rejection anytime in the early church. Psychologically, burial allows proper memory of a dead relative and an understandable imagination of resurrection during rapture.

**Definition of Term: Luhya**

Although this paper is written from the perspective of Bukusu thought, the term Luhya shall be used to mean and include the entire and the diverse subgroups including: Bukusu, Maragoli, Tiriki, Isukha, Marachi, Samia, Nyala, Tachoni, Logoli, Marama, Idakho, Kisa, Kabras. It is recognized that some of these subgroups are conspicuously diverse, yet there are some ritual aspects that make them similar. The intention of this paper was to find a general trend of how the diverse Luhya ministers find a balance between their varied burial rites, and the biblical teaching. Specific rituals mentioned, for instance shaving of the hair after the death of a relative, are believed to happen in all Luhya subgroups, unless specifically indicated to be happening in particular subgroups only. The background reasoning remains that of the Bukusu, and this could mean that some things mentioned are missing in some of the other subgroups. Research participants were not necessarily Bukusu. They were clergy from diverse Luhya sub-groups and they were asked to respond to how they reconcile traditional and Biblical burial rituals.

**Statement of the Problem**

The struggle between keeping Christian values and maintaining community unity through participating in community rituals is wearisome and confusing to an ordinary Luhya Christian. The church leaders do not understand the complex nature of the Luhya rituals and family bond, and the Luhya traditional leaders do not care about individual Christian values of their members. It is extremely difficult for a Christian to detach oneself from the community. Pope John Paul II maintained that there is need to synthesise culture and faith (Waliggo et al, 1986, p. 7). It is equally challenging for a Christian to abandon one's faith and church. Christian faith cannot exist except in a cultural form (Shorter, 1997: 12).

Most of the Christians end up living in two worlds: trying to be true to culture and true to Christianity at the same time. It is not uncommon to find people offering prayers in church and at the same time consulting witch doctors, mediums, or medicine men during the time of crisis. The main problem has been that the Church leaders for a long time have either been White Missionaries or people from other communities, who did not understand or value Luhya culture, and the Luhya traditional leaders have not been Christians. With the recent rise of Luhya clergy, some with advanced training in theology, it is hoped that they will have a workable Luhya Christian theology of dealing with the dead, based on how they conduct themselves during these practices.

### **Research Questions**

The central question in this paper is: How has Biblical understanding shaped Luhya Christian leaders' burial practices?

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the Biblical teaching concerning Christian participation in burial rites?
2. What are the underlying assumptions behind Luhya burial practices?
3. How have Luhya clergy defined their role in burial rituals based on their biblical understanding and cultural worldview?
4. How can a Christian Luhya continue performing the rituals without compromising his faith?

## Data and Methods

### General Background<sup>1</sup>

The Luhya people of Kenya occupy four counties formerly within what was called Western province. These counties include: Vihiga, Busia, Bungoma, and Kakamega. Before settlement in these current counties, the Luhya people are believed to have migrated from Uganda, and even further from interior of Africa, together with other Bantu speaking people groups in Africa. According to the population census of 2009, the Luhya are the second most populous ethnic community after the Kikuyu. They have however intermarried and mingled with other ethnic communities such as the Kisii, the Maasai, and the Kalenjin. Luhya names have specific meanings. Children are named after climatic seasons, and also after their ancestors, often their deceased grandparents or great-grandparents.

Traditional religious beliefs of the Luhya, especially the Bukusu sub-tribe include creation myths, where *Were* (God) is believed to have created heaven, earth and human beings. Black people were created from top soil (black), brown people from intermediate soil (brown), and white people from the soil deep down (white). The Luhya also believed in the existence of the spirits, which have considerable benevolent (positive) as well as malevolent (destructive) power and therefore they need to be appeased through animal sacrifices and libation. Closely related to the belief in spirits, the Luhya are alive to the presence of witchcraft, which operates in the same realm and ubiquity as the spirits.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000101635/mourning-luhya-style>



## **Methodology**

This was a mixed method research, involving both survey and ethnography, which was conducted between August and September 2017, among Luhya ministers attending training at Africa Theological Seminary in Kitale, and 8 other key informants that were accessed through snow balling. We chose sequential explanatory design, since we wanted to get that quantitative data first, then explanations later. First, a survey was conducted involving Luhya ministers undergoing further training at Africa Theological Seminary in Kitale. Using stratified simple technique, 20 ministers were selected for interview, representing about 10% of the total population of the Luhya students in the university roll. This institution was selected because it brought together several ministers who had already been in the ministry for some time, and who had only come for further enhancement training. It was envisaged that such ministers would be useful for the purpose of this paper, because they would talk about their experience in handling burials as part of their ministry. The decision to do a survey was informed by the desire to first establish figures of ministers participating in the Luhya ritual. After the survey had been completed, and after the analysis had demonstrated the need for explanation, a further qualitative study was done. Ethnographic method was used to get the explanations from the same respondents, on why they acted in the manner they did. Furthermore, these pastors were required to explain how they practiced their ministry of the burial of the dead, based on their biblical understanding. Secondary data from books and journal articles were used to corroborate primary data. The ideas were synthesized and the themes coded to generate descriptions, and to develop a narrative, clearly showing Luhya ministers' new way of burial practice.

## Findings

### a) Survey

The survey conducted involved 20 ministers. The purpose of conducting a survey was first to get information on what the pastors did, and what they did not do, and the number and percentage of those still involved in traditional rituals as they were performed. It was hypothesized before the survey, that ministers with biblical understanding would shun certain rituals. The results of the survey were as indicated in the table below:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral/ Someho	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I usually participate in cultural burial rites of my relatives, and I cannot avoid because that is culture	0	2	13	4	1
If my mature unmarried girl dies, and the culture demands that some sexual activities be done on her, I cannot do anything because that is culture	0	0	4	6	10
If a relative dies, and I am required to participate in the process of bringing the shadow from wherever he lived, I must, otherwise that shadow will disturb people.	4	9	4	2	1
I sometimes go to greet my dead relatives in their graveyard (just to see them to make them feel good)	0	3	5	7	5
During burial ceremonies, some animals have to be slaughtered. I must do it because it is required of me by my culture.	3	10	5	2	0
I shave my hair when a relative has been buried as required by culture.	3	5	7	4	1
I observe the required days of waiting that are required by culture before and after burial of my relative	1	5	8	5	1

The study shows that majority of the ministers are neutral to the idea of participating in the burial of their relatives (or somewhat practice it) because the culture demands so. The key informants that were asked to explain this, thought that there was nothing evil in the practice, only that they did not do it because of culture, but because they needed to show mercy.

Concerning sexual activities to the dead, majority of the ministers interviewed strongly disagreed with participating in this ritual. The practice of ‘bringing the shadow’ seems to be practiced in some way by the ministers. Four of them (25%) actually strongly agreed to the practice, 9 (45%) agreed, 4 (25%) were neutral to the idea, or somewhat practiced, 2 (10%) disagreed while only 1 (5%) strongly disagreed that they should participate in the ‘shadow’ ritual. This means that majority of the Christian ministers did not consider the practice very evil. The key informants explained this. One of them said that they did not see any problem in the practice, and would do it with understanding that their relatives were really watching them. They said that they were aware that the Bible teaches that the soul of a human being never dies. The practice of shaving one’s hair was also practiced by the ministers. Those who strongly agreed, agreed or were neutral to the idea were 75%. Those who explained why they did this revealed that they did it as a form of showing solidarity to their kin, and to show that they felt the loss. Majority of the people were neutral to the idea of waiting for certain mourning days. They explained that they did so for the Christian reason of showing solidarity and mercy.

#### **b) Underlying Assumptions behind Luhya Burial Rites**

The following section discusses what is generally assumed among the Luhya, and which guide these people in performing the rites of burial. Firstly, it is important to describe the entire burial practice, in order to provide a background for discussing the assumptions.

### **Oneness in the Community: Sharing**

The survey findings showed that majority of the research participants had no problem with participating in the burial rituals of a relative, because the culture determined so. The cultural bond was noted to be strong. According to one of the clergy interviewed, in the event of death, close family members and relatives must abandon all other day to day activities to mourn, and receive mourners. He indicated:

*Death is an opportunity for us Luhyas to show our unity. Any person who does not participate in the process is perceived to be a foreigner, a witch, or an enemy within. There are prescribed activities for each member of the family, and established patterns of grave direction, position et cetera. For a Luhya, there is nothing like extended family. Every member of the whole clan behaves as though we are all members of one big nuclear family. The concept of differentiating between nuclear and extended family is Western. Matanga (entire burial and mourning process) is public.*

As indicated above, death and funeral rites are a whole (extended) family activity, following prescribed already established patterns, where each member of the family and society know their roles. Burial often takes place publicly and openly in the homestead of the deceased, and the position, depth, and direction of the grave follow well established patterns. Khaemba (2017) agrees that among all Luhya, funerals and burials are public and open events, involving slaughtering of animals, serving of food and drinks to feed the mourners.

## Sharing in pain

Another clergy shared that in the past, before mortuaries were introduced, the Luhya community would preserve bodies of the deceased relatives on top of wet sand or charcoal. Before the use of coffins, bodies would be put in reeds known as *mayambo*. A child would be buried after three days, while an adult took one week, during which relatives, neighbours and friends would camp in the home of the deceased to sooth the bereaved. He added:

*As soon as the man dies, his wife was expected to burst into wailing joined by children and other relatives, crying “ye, ye, ye,” and “woi, woi, woi” for men and women respectively. While women cry with their hands on back of the heads, men move around crying and beat grasses and bushes with sticks and clubs. Wailing and weeping were compulsory practices, failure to which one would be suspected to have been the cause of the death.*

It therefore means that members of the clan have an obligation to demonstrate that they care for their bereaved kin. They do so by participating in mourning, to show that they share in their pain.

## Faithfulness

If a husband dies, the wife first goes to her parents to inform them of the death. She comes back accompanied by her parents, and/or other elderly relatives. She then sits near the husband for a few days before burial. If she had been faithful, she would sit near the head of the deceased husband for four days, immediately preceding burial. According to one lady clergy:

*The culture prescribed ways of ensuring faithfulness among the women. Once a married man dies, his wife is subjected into well prescribed tests of faithfulness. A faithful wife would be expected to sit near the head of the corpse, while the unfaithful wife would sit near the legs, otherwise they would die.*

The clergy further noted that after burial, the wife is expected to continue mourning for six months, weeping and wailing in the morning and in the evening. This will be done until the husband visits her. This visit will free her to look for another consolation, without the guilt of unfaithfulness. She would then pick a man at random to have sex with, and from then she could be inherited in a ritual known as “*Ohuhalaka Makhola*” that means the ropes are broken and her cultural burden with the deceased had come to an end. This is done before the end of the *Chinganyiro* (memorial) of her husband.

### **Respect for the dead**

The survey findings showed that 15% of the participants agreed that they visit the dead, and 25% were neutral about the idea, which means they did not see any problem with it. This tells of how Christian clergy demonstrated their respect for the dead. A clergy interviewed asserted that one underlying assumption behind Luhya burial rites is that people do not die. They just move to the next world, but can still see what is happening. As observed by a Bukusu among the Bukusu people, death or dying is described as ‘sleeping’ for an old man who dies peacefully, ‘falling by oneself’ if it is through suicide, ‘stepping into the sheet’ since the body is wrapped or covered with a skin or banana leaves before burial, ‘wearing a sweater’ if killed by another person. Death among Bukusu people is a mystery. How their bodies are treated is a major concern for the people that have died. If the living people are to have peace, they need to treat the bodies of the people that have died well, and accord them necessary respect.

The actual practice of burial included other specific steps depending on the status, sex, and age of the person. A king would be buried at night while seated, an unmarried girl was buried in a banana plantation, an uncircumcised man would first be circumcised before burial, a victim of suicide would be buried at night, the husband would be buried in front of the main house on the right hand side as their spouses are buried on the left hand side besides their husbands.

In the event of impending death, especially of an old person, some rituals would be done. If he was a married man, he is moved to the centre of the house of his first wife, and all relatives are informed. When the relatives come, they prepare food, mostly slaughtering a goat and invoking names of ancestors, calling them to partake in the meal. The sick man, together with relatives will eat the meal and imagine they are with the spirits partaking together. This was seen as an opportunity to build rapport with the ancestors, so that the dead man will be received well. Women and uncircumcised persons were not allowed to dig the grave. Neither was a man allowed to dig the grave for his child or his wife. Burial would normally take place in the afternoon, unless in special cases discussed above. The body is buried facing west, just like the sun sets in the west.

Connection between the living and the dead is also seen in the direction of burial, among most Luhya subgroups. Graves are dug in a way that allows burial of people to face west. It is believed that all people, like the 'moving' sun are heading to the west. The destiny of humans is in the west, locally called "*mumbo*."

## Cock Efficacy

The survey findings above show that majority of the research participants (90%) strongly agreed, or did not have a problem with slaughtering of animals as a burial ritual. Among the diverse Luhya subgroups, especially the Bukusu, Marachi and Samia, there are a number of things that usually stand for the head of the house: the cock, a roof-stick on top of the house called *Lusuli* and one of three cooking stones. A clergy research participant observed that after burial, there is traditional preaching ritual commonly known as *khuswala kumusee* which is usually conducted on the third day after burial of a man (father), among Samia and the Bukusu community. Before this ceremony, while people are sitting round a fire warming themselves, clan elders strangle a cock and roast it whole (with feathers). The elders eat the cock while making prayers. After strangling of the cock, the elders then agree on who will remove *Lusuli* (the stick erected on the roof top of a traditional hut) and one cooking stone at probably midnight when people are not around. Another efficacy of a cock is related to a ceremony called *Khukhala kumulindi* which is discussed later. This is where a widow uses a man who is a stranger to her to seek sexual detachment. When a man realizes that he has been used by a woman for the cleansing ceremony, he knows that he carries the guilt. To cleanse himself, he takes a cock and goes to the exact bush where the woman screamed and left him. He will strangle, roast and leave it at the scene.

## Fear of *musiro*<sup>2</sup> and the tormenting Spirits and death

As discussed above, a cock signified a head of a home (man). According to a clergy research participant interviewed, if a cock is witnessed standing on one leg, it is perceived to be inviting the death of the head of the family, and should be slaughtered and be eaten immediately. Furthermore, if *Lusuli* is not removed, or if a fire stone is not removed, death would result.

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<sup>2</sup>Musiro is a kind of curse that comes because certain ritual was not performed properly, and usually would lead to death.



Either people will continue cooking using the stone, leading to a curse and even death. Unremoved *Lusuli* means that the family live with continued danger of someone climbing the roof of the house, where wood chippings could drop to the house. If the chippings drop in the water, anybody who drinks that water in any form would die.

After burial, the following day involved a 'cattle drive' ceremony intended to drive away the shadow of the dead man, so that it does not linger around the homestead disturbing people. In this ceremony, people dress in war attire of leopard skin, carry spears, clubs and shields, and smear faces with white soil. These people go to a river and come back driving cattle into the homestead singing and dancing.

This is followed by the hair shaving ceremony. Every person that would have had contact with the dead person in bed, in life, or even during burial ceremony is shaved. This is to avoid possible disease causing impurity breathed out by the deceased, and which was believed to stick in the hair. Finally the relatives share the clothes of the deceased, kill a goat or chicken and eat, and thereafter leave for their respective homes.

It is also important to note that the ceremony of *Lusuli* and the cooking stone removal, are to be done by people who can be trusted. In case for some reasons a non-relative is chosen (*Omukulo*) he/she can use these items to kill the remaining relatives. To avoid such a possibility, an *Omukulo* is paid heavily for his/her services. These items also need to be hidden far away from where the relatives of the deceased will not reach. If they reach it, they die.

### **Sexual Detachment**

According to a clergy participant, Luhya burial rituals also include requirements for a widow even long after the husband has died. The widow is expected to mourn for a stipulated period, until she has been set free by her husband through a dream. She then has to perform sexual detachment ceremony, where she gets completely detached from her husband, and can engage in intercourse with someone else. After she has been set free, she would normally travel to another village, far from her home to practice the ritual of *Khukhala kumulindi*. She would then find a male stranger whom she would accept for sex. She would accept all foreplay activities but when the man is about to enter her, she would scream aloud, complaining of something, and while the man was confused, she would run away, leaving any sexual attachment she had with her former husband there. She would then be free and detached and could do any sexual activity with a man of her choice. If a woman who is not married dies, a man is sought to have sex with her before burial. This is meant to appease her spirit, so that she departs with fulfilment and joy.

### **New Beginning**

Among the Bukusu subgroup, the desire to begin life afresh, and with newness is usually evident. Tools used during burial must be cleansed in order to be free for other duties. Elders take beer or porridge sprinkling some on the tools as a way of cleansing, in a ceremony called *Khubitakimiini*. This ceremony signifies new beginning. Failure to practice this ceremony will mean that the tools carry an attachment of death, and can cause even crops to wither, or potatoes to rot. A clergy research participant noted:

*All the pickaxes, mattocks, jembes, spades, axes, pangas, and other tools used in the burial process must be cleansed for a new beginning. It also includes ropes used to lower the coffin. In case these things are used before cleansing, and if the proper rituals are not performed, they would, through attachment, cause death of other living things or people.*

This means that the Luhya valued detachment from death, and beginning things afresh.

### **c) Role of Luhya Clergy in Traditional Burial Ritual**

Burial rituals among the Luhya are part of an extensive cultural system. Christian Luhya find themselves tightly attached to these cultures, and cannot escape participating in most of these rituals. Some are in total flagrance of the biblical teachings and Christian values. As noted earlier, Christians end up practicing both the cultural rituals and Christian faith in different circumstances, based on when they come. This however is hypocrisy, which the clergy cannot afford to practice. During this study, clergy were asked to share how they manage this conflict.

#### **Confrontation**

One strategy employed by some clergy is outright confrontation of cultural practices, outlawing them in totality. Clergy that hold this perspective cite scriptural direction such as II Corinthians 6:14 which teaches that there is no relationship between Christians and non-christian practices. The strength of this strategy is that the clergy can easily determine what to carry out and what to avoid. The challenge of this strategy is that it leads to total detachment with one's relatives, and risking being sidelined in other activities, especially which require relatives to put together money and effort. Activities related to traditional burial are seen as outright abomination, for example returning to the grave 40 days after burial to escort the spirit of the dead to the site of the grave.

### **Selective Participation**

Some of the clergy that were interviewed confessed that they practice other rituals that are not entirely biblical, and avoid others that are in total contradiction. What makes this strategy very attractive to many clergy is that rituals such as returning to the grave after 3 days or 40 days, holding women's only ceremonies and rituals after several months, visiting the graveyard to "greet the people" and conducting memorial services several years after burial have nothing inherently sinful in them. According to clergy that hold this view, Christianity should not totally obliterate a complex culture like that of the Luhya. Instead, Christianity should allow its members to practice rituals that matter to them, as long as they are not sinful. Some of the practices that are considered not sinful include mourning over the dead. The clergy that supported this activity say that the Bible has no problem with any kind of mourning. The Luhya mourning includes wailing, beating the grass and loud weeping, which is required of every person within the compound of the deceased. Slaughtering of animals is also acceptable to these clergy. According to them, slaughtering of certain prescribed animals, such as a bull, a cock, or an old cow have nothing sinful in them.

Sharing of pain, and joining a bereaved family to mourn together, including wailing are seen as acceptable. Similarly, these clergy find no problem for a wife to sit in a room where the corpse of her dead husband is kept. According to these clergy this practice is even advisable, since it promotes faithfulness of women to their husbands, when they are alive, and when they are dead. Observance of determined days before burial and after burial is seen to have no problem. This is because waiting for 3 days for women, and 4 days for men is not demonstrating any kind of disobedience to God.

Digging graves to face a certain direction, depending on the status of the dead person, positioning graves within a homestead, or positioning a grave in relation to existing graves are not a problem, and therefore should continue. Some of these clergy also confessed that they had no problem with removal of *lusuli*, fire stone. According to some of them, the head of the family deserved a prominent position in a homestead, and should therefore be signified by *lusuli*. Finally, some clergy accepted the practice of cleansing of tools used in burial, because they needed to be used to do other farming activities.

Practices that needed to be avoided because of their blatant sinfulness included sexual rituals, most of which are considered adultery, fornication or dirty acts. Communicating with the dead is also abhorred, since it is in total disregard of God's guidance. The Bible detests communicating with the spirits of the dead (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6). Shaving in respect to the dead, is also prohibited in Deuteronomy 18:11, God directly commands Israel that no member of the holy community is to be found communicating with the dead in any way. This prohibited act of communicating with the dead also includes avoiding meals meant to be partaken with the dead.

These clergy were also against activities that demonstrate fear of the dead. Activities done because of fear of death demonstrate human weaknesses and may lead to worshipping of death, rather than worshipping God. The Luhya burial practices and rituals are majorly done because of fear of the dead, that they could cause death. The dead are believed to be alive, and potent. They are seen to have supernatural power to cause death or pain. Clergy, who thought this practice should be avoided, understood that communicating with these spirits of dead people was sinful, and the fear is evil.

Observing a memorial of the dead person, and activities that accompany memorial, such as visiting the grave, invoking the name of the dead person, and praying to them for favours and forgiveness, are to be avoided, according to some of these clergy. Practices that are accompanied with shedding of blood and pouring of libation to appease the spirits of the dead are also to be avoided.

The challenge of this strategy is that these clergy portrayed themselves as hypocrites, because they are present in others, and ‘technically absent’ themselves during other rituals. In dealing with a similar scenario in Corinth, Paul writes in I Corinthians 8, asking the Corinthians to avoid meat completely, if by eating it they would cause young Christians to fall into sin. If a person says that he is a Christian, but will continue participating in some of these rituals, technically excusing himself from some other activities he considers evil, he is participating in hypocrisy.

### **Developing a complete Luhya Christian Theology**

According to Baur (1990, p. 234-235) African Christian theology is a scientific study of the incarnation of Christian doctrine to the African community, an interaction of the Bible and the African cultural heritage, as the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ meets African thought. Some other clergy shared that they developed a Luhya Christian theology that helped them understand and communicate the right course of action. This is not an act of Christianizing activities. It is redefining them in light of biblical instruction. According to these clergy, developing a new theology first requires understanding of Luhya worldview and underlying assumptions, and trying to address those problems from a biblical perspective in a way that relevantly deals with those problems.

These clergy think that Christians need to be allowed to conduct burials in a way that addresses their felt needs. The entire Bukusu burial ritual system was meant to give meaning to life. It was meant to communicate to the living that one's life is important now and even after one dies.

This helps to build an understanding of human dignity. When a Christian has died, these clergy call Christians to mourn with the bereaved family, and during this period, songs are sang in worship to God, the giver of life. These clergy shared that when they do this, they give meaning to the value of life by allowing the living to stop all activities and congregate at the house of the bereaved. This act gives confidence to the living that their lives are worth living. They are not like plants or animals. The clergy said that they take advantage of these opportunities to teach their members about future life in the presence of God.

Another aspect of this theology is to understand that the entire burial ritual style was to communicate the meaning of spiritual oneness. According to these clergy, oneness of Christians is also emphasized in the Bible, where if one member of the body of Christ is grieving, the rest need to offer support. When somebody dies therefore, these clergy used that opportunity to encourage other Christians in their spiritual family to participate and work together as relatives. This raises the value of mourning, so that it is not just grieving over the dead person, but building a Christian fellowship, giving meaning to Christians. Another unspoken purpose of the Luhya burial ritual system was to get an opportunity to 'eat.' There are too many instances where animals need to be slaughtered. In this era, and even in the future, economic pressure has increased such that it becomes a double loss for a family to lose a loved one. It is double loss because when somebody dies, resources 'die' too. These clergy confessed mobilizing Christians

to attend mourning but ensure that they carry food and other resources, so that the bereaved family does not have to pay for hosting mourners.

To free a widow to get a new husband, the clergy mobilized Christians to assemble in the home of the widow for a worship service. During this service, relatives are invited and prayer of freedom is done, declaring that the widow had freedom to accept to be remarried. The clergy reported that they emphasized that remarriage must be done to a free man, either single or a widower, but not to a married brother-in-law. This was to show discontinuity from the traditional wife inheritance.

Concerning the ceremony of “bringing the shadow” from wherever the deceased lived before death, the clergy confessed that they conduct burial services, where they sing facing up, imagining that the spirit of the deceased is ascending as Jesus did, and is received joyfully in heaven. They believe that this mental exercise is both biblical and helpful. Christians who have done that, have a reason to skip other ‘shadow’ rituals because they can explain that their Christian deceased relative is already in heaven.

### **Conclusion**

The question of continuity or discontinuity of cultural burial rituals is a very serious concern for modern Christians. Christians cannot afford to be living in two worlds, changing religion like clothes. According to cognitive dissonance theory propounded by Leon Festinger (1957) human beings have an inner drive to hold all their attitudes and beliefs in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance). Cognitive dissonance refers to a state of tension or situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviours, which produces a feeling of discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviours to reduce the discomfort and



restore balance. In summary, if for instance there is dissonance between the attitudes and behaviour, a person tends to change either the attitude or behaviour so that there is harmony.

For example, if a person who smokes learns new information about dangers of smoking, he will either quit smoking, or disregard the new information pertaining to dangers of smoking. This is because people first seek consistency between their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour, without which they cannot be stable. This theory is relevant to this study because it explains the importance of attitude change in order to achieve social behaviour change. Trained theologians therefore need to work on a Luhya Christian theology, putting together practices that have already been used, some of which are discussed in the findings of this paper, in order to help worshippers live in a situation of spiritual harmony.

Practices that accompany those rituals, such as prayers, music, dances and shouts as is done among the *Bukusu*, need to be redefined, so that it does not create dissonance (Khaemba 2017). All Christian clergy also can review some of the African cultural practices to see what needs to be discontinued. The church can rise above cultural powers, if the clergy can work together systematically demolishing every altar raised for idolatry. The Bible clearly says that we should not conform to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. One of the strengths of Asa and Jehoshaphat in the book of II Chronicles was in dealing with the Ashera poles and Baal alters. Christians have to make an effort not to compromise with some of these retrogressive rituals. The argument that Paul used, that he became all things to all men, is not a licence to become participant in demonic practices. Yet it is equally important to be wise, so that the ‘baby’ does not get thrown away with the ‘bath water’ as the process of rethinking African Christian theology gets underway.

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