

The Impact of Indigenous Burial Services on Adventists' Faith in Tanzania

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Introduction

Tanzania is one of the largest countries on the continent of Africa in terms of land area and the number of tribes within its territory.¹ It is among the four African countries with more than 100 tribes and ethnic groups.² Roughly, 120³ tribes have been documented in Tanzania, each speaking their own language, none exceeding ten percent of the country's population.⁴ These tribes pose a number of challenges for Adventist faith and practices; however, burial services are one ritual which receives a great deal of attention. This is partly because Adventist practices run counter to common traditional burial practices, but mostly because the spread of Adventism in Tanzania touches all groups, from the small Hadza tribe to the large Sukuma, who have elaborate burial services venerating their ancestors.

Adventists came to Tanzania along with the colonial German regime in Tanganyika. The colonial mentality regarded everything African as evil and *ushenzi*, or barbaric. This was the prevailing attitude when Adventists arrived in Moshi's Pare Mountains in Moshi. While Adventists were establishing themselves in the Pare Mountains, Muslim influence was growing in Kihurio. Adventists encountered resistance at Kihurio because the Muslim approach to indigenous practices was accommodative. Most indigenous practices were assimilated into Islam making this religion easier for the indigenous people to embrace.

Indigenous religion did not die with the introduction of Christianity. Consequently, some believers practice both Adventism along and their indigenous religion. The former is practiced openly, while the latter is practiced in secret. In times of difficulty, some Christians find themselves practicing indigenous religion. Practiced by more than 7 million people, indigenous religion burial services differ greatly among the tribes of Tanzania; however, in all tribes the dead are alive in a way that they hear, see, and are able to cause pain, suffering, or happiness to the bereaved.

The Luos are the most notorious tribe in Tanzania with more elaborate rituals in matters related to death, the grave, the deceased, the bereaved, the widow or widower, the orphan, the wealth of the deceased, and more. This article, therefore, will explore in detail, matters of the burial services in both the Luo and Kuria tribes of

Tanzania. The author lives among both of them. He is married to a Kuria of Serengeti whose father and mother are both natives of the Mara region. Both Kuria and Luo live in the Mara region of Tanzania. While both are more connected to indigenous religion, the Luo are more traditional in the matter of the dead.

Burial Services Among the Tribes of Tanzania in General

The burial service practices among the tribes of Tanzania move progressively from those lacking any common practices to those with elaborate practices. The Hadza are among those who ignore the dead or do little for the dead. Sometimes the Hadza leave the dead without burying them, instead moving to another place, although they may instead choose to bury the corpse and harden the soil to prevent animals from feeding on the human remains.⁵ Several other tribes join in this practice, especially the pastoralists like the Dakota, Barbaiki, Akie, and some Maasai, because they lack permanent dwellings. Traditional Sukuma burial services are elaborate and many tribes practice the same. It involves burying the dead in a grave, mourning for the deceased for some appointed days, cleansing the widow, and finally, a celebration for the dead to join or to be invited to the realms of the ancestors. These practices are shared with several other tribes with some variation in what is offered to the dead. Among the Haya, the male firstborn, or *musika*, is crowned as the family head and leader following the death of his father. On coronation day, the *musika* offers coffee beans to the family members including his own mother and other attendees. Then other rituals follow to crown the exercise. Before eating any meal, the *musika* throws a little food while invoking his ancestors and his father who has just joined the order of the ancestors.⁶

Burial Ceremony Among the Kuria

The Kuria are among the first tribes to have settled in East Africa.⁷ The territory of the Kuria straddles the Kenyan and Tanzanian border. They live in the Tarime and Serengeti districts in the Mara Region of Northern Tanzania.⁸ The Kuria of Tanzania are both farmers and pastoralists.⁹ Notwithstanding their constant mass slaughter due to constant fighting within the tribe, the Kuria are one of the larger tribes in Tanzania.¹⁰ They are known for their ritualistic rites of passage marked by circumcision of men and women. The circumcision of women¹¹ is done in secret because the government prohibits it. During the burial ceremony, the life history of the deceased indicates when she was circumcised and people wait zealously to hear whether the deceased observed the traditions. As an Adventist pastor, who has conducted burial ceremonies since arrived in Kuria territory, I have heard numerous life histories which include the circumcision rite for both Adventist and non-Adventist women in spite of asking church elders not to include this information. The response is negative. This indicates that the practice exists and is valued. It is done in secret to avoid both government and church disciplinary actions.

The Kuria burial ceremony is elaborate and executed with strict observation of traditional obligations. Wangwe Muhere, aged 91 years, was circumcised in 1947 and his age group, or *saiga*,¹² is Wajapani.¹³ That means he was circumcised around the time the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. He narrated to the author how the Kuria perform burial ceremonies: The father of the family is buried in the cow shed known as *obholi* in Kuria. He is buried on the right side while the mother is buried on the left side. The deceased joins the ancestor or *abakuru*. This event is validated by the deceased speaking in a dream or vision at night to confirm to their living relatives that they have joined the ancestors and have been accepted. The appearing of dead ones in visions or dreams is considered proof that the dead are alive and continue to patronize family affairs.

Burial services are complicated depending on the nature of death and the status of the deceased. For elderly men, the traditional officiator invokes the ancestors to accept the spirit of the dead which longs to join them. This invocation is not spoken for children and women. If the death is caused by an unknown person, then the deceased is buried with a traditional herb in order to cause calamity for the perpetrator. If the deceased is a divorced woman whose ex-husband paid a traditional dowry, he is responsible for her burial. The second husband has no right to bury the dead. Any children born to the woman after her divorce will be taken by the ex-husband who paid the dowry. If her dowry was not paid in full, then the husband will be asked to pay the remaining dowry before being allowed to bury his wife. If the husband refuses to pay the dowry, then the deceased will be brought back to her father's home, although buried away from her father's household borders. If she had children, the family purchases a plot where a temporary house is built, and she is buried there with anticipation that a permanent house will be built for her children.¹⁴

The Kuria ceremony for those who die by animal attack or drowning is considered a bad omen for the family. If a person drowns, his or her grave is dug near the river where he or she was found. It is believed that if you bring the body home, other members family will also drown. Likewise, if the deceased was killed by an animal attack, he or she is buried in the same place as the animal attack in order to protect other members family from dying the same way. Customarily, the deceased are not wrapped in burial clothes like modern practices. Instead, both legs and hands are folded together and then the body is buried with men lying on the righthand side and women lie on the left, both facing the east because the ancestors are thought to be in the east. In the past, the dead were buried one or two hours after death because people were scared of decease. However, this has changed and the family may decide to wait longer. Indigenous religion operates in the background; however, no matter what the Kuria burial ceremony is, it is not as elaborate as that of the Luo.

Luo Tribe Burial Ceremony

The Luo are found in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Sudan. The Luo are among the Nilotic ethnic groups.¹⁵ The Luo of Tanzania number 232,000.¹⁶ The indigenous Luo of the Mara region, as well as the Bantu, originated

in Sudan.¹⁷

The author had the interview with Pastor Musa Magau¹⁸ from Washuba ethnic group living among the Luo people at Bubombi Rorya and Pastor Zefa Ayugi a Luo. Both have a rich Luo background and are all well versed with Luo practices. They both affirmed that the central part of the Luo burial service is the traditional belief that the dead are living. Whatever is done in Luo burial ceremony reflects the African traditional religion major teaching on the state of the dead. The deceased enters into another world of the spirits, who later visit the home to bless, protect, or harm its residents. In this case, the dead are honored in order to appease them. The burial ceremony is divided into four categories: the elderly, married, unmarried, and pregnant.¹⁹

Older people receive more attention in terms of the number of mourning days. During the burial, the dead are buried with the head facing home. The location of the tomb must be dug in a position to allow the head of the deceased to face his home, while at the same time allowing the whole torso to face east. The deceased must face home because he or she is still a part of the family and can at any time intervene in home affairs. Moreover, the deceased along with the ancestors promote the prosperity of the family.²⁰

The Luo burial ceremony for unmarried women is so complicated and in violation of core Adventist beliefs. An unmarried woman who dies has no place to be buried until she is married to someone. One man is chosen to marry the dead woman. The chosen man is asked to have sexual intercourse with the dead woman while the elders are watching to ensure that the act is successful. Elders of the land measure the successfulness of the act when the man ejaculates. The man who performed the act is now considered the husband of the deceased. At the same time, the deceased is now considered married and moved to her "husband's" home. Usually, that man is paid or the family of the deceased gives a wife (a living woman) on behalf of the dead. If no one volunteers to marry that deceased woman, her body is taken away to the wilderness to be buried there.²¹

There are general restrictions that involve the members of the family. No member of the family is allowed to have sexual intercourse with his or her spouse during the days of mourning. After the mourning period is over, the elderly member of the family shall declare that spouses are allowed to have sex. If the cause of death was due to one of the family members, the killer undergoes rituals before the deceased is buried. But, if the cause of death is due to an accident, and if the body of the dead cannot be found, a small stone wrapped with clothing is buried on behalf the deceased.

Death announcements are considered true until proved otherwise. The call to attend a funeral is highly prized. All family members are obliged to appear without fail. The call is specifically compulsory for married women. The obligation goes to the extent of resulting in divorce if a married woman fails to attend. Burial ceremonies are used as occasions to resolve family matters.²²

After the burial of an unmarried boy, regardless of the age, a wife is found who will be married on behalf of the unmarried boy in order to preserve his name. The widow is not allowed to remarry until she is cleansed from the curse of death. The widow's only freedom is to choose from the boy's family any man who will be her

husband on behalf of the deceased. If her choice is an unmarried man, he is first allowed to marry a wife of his choice, but is expected to take the widow as well.²³

A serious case which reveals the Luo fundamental belief that the dead, or *kitundu*, are living is illustrated by how a widowed husband receives permission to remarry. If the wife dies, she is the only one who can give her husband permission to remarry. How can a dead person continue to patronize the family affairs? The husband must wait a number of days until he receives a dream from his late wife that “we are now together in the world of spirits enjoying sex, you can now remarry.” Then the husband will narrate the dream before the clan elders, who will examine its validity and allow the husband to remarry. If the elders discover that the husband did not receive any dream but lied, he will be asked to pay a number of cows as punishment.²⁴

The burial services are followed by mourning music. The music is meant to hasten the admission of the dead to the world of the ancestors. It is the celebration that signifies that the living joins the living dead (*ancestors-wahenga* in Swahili) in bidding farewell the dead from the world of the living, but also welcoming the dead to the world of the living dead (*ulimwengu wa wahenga* au *mizimu* in Swahili). In 1990, clan members accused, cursed, and rejected Musa Magau, then an Adventist for not joining the clan in music celebration following the death of a family member. He remembers how his own family, who had then become Adventists, joined the celebrations in fear of being cursed and rejected. He remained alone, while the rest of the clan waited in vain to see the fulfillment of their threat. The climax of the burial ceremony is marked with the eradication of death. Normally, after the burial services, the clan goes out with their cattle to spend a day apart from the family where the death occurred. Then, in the evening participants cover their bodies with white mud, carry forest branches, put on forest attire, and come in heroic voice chanting a Luo tune as warriors. The participants charge with their spears around the home where the death occurred in an act called *ten’go*. *Ten’go* is meant to completely eradicate death from the Luo community. With their spears, they chant while piercing the ground, roof, and any place where they think death hides. They continue dancing until the last day of mourning when the last person goes home after the funeral.²⁵

Effects of Traditional Burial Services on Adventists in Tanzania

Elements of traditional burial rituals exist in day-to-day life of some Adventist members regardless of Adventist teachings on the state of the dead. Once in a canoe crossing Mara River, the people on the board were given razor blades to administer simple cuts on their fingers for the sake of releasing a drop of blood into the river to appease the spirit of the living dead whose lives ended in that river. It is believed that the act notifies that they are passing their home, at the same time recognizing their guidance in safeguarding the sail through waters. I rejected the ritual, but all people on board, including the Adventists, harassed me, calling me all sorts of names. Pastors in Kuria communities frequently encounter indigenous burial challenges. Normally indigenous burial ceremonies may be avoided at the cemetery, but members continue to practice other rites that they believe will

affect their lives. Members' private practices do not reflect what the Adventist Church teaches. Sometimes, members insist that the head should be shifted to the east. If the pastor refuses to yield to their demand, they reject his services and decide to do what they think the deceased needs.

The indigenous burial services impose difficult decisions on pastors. Depending on the status of the deceased, the pastor and the church must be prepared to contend with people who demand the inclusion of traditional burial rituals which are opposed to Adventist beliefs. Although the church sometimes takes disciplinary measures, especially when abuse of the deceased is noted, all too frequently indigenous members overcome the church and the pastor in furthering their agenda.

Church members who stop practicing indigenous rituals are threatened with the loss of livelihood and wealth when their property is confiscated as a penalty for not participating. A church treasurer from Kwanja lost all local church funds and Mara Conference trust funds following an indigenous penalty for noncompliance. Members have been brutally flogged, their property destroyed, and some property confiscated, but no action taken by authorities.²⁶

Lessons Learned From the Effects of Traditional Burial Services on the Adventists

Faithful Adventists continue facing problems from the community because they reject the indigenous beliefs. Some church members struggle to accept God's words, "thereof *thou shalt surely die*" (Genesis 2: 17). Yet, it is impossible for Christians to reach their destination while trying to follow both "pathways." Jesus Christ said "No man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6: 24).

The issue of who speaks through spiritual media is solved by answering the question, who spoke through the serpent? The Bible includes several incidences where the Devil (*ibilisi* in Swahili or *diabolo* in Congolese Swahili) invades and uses an individual as a medium for communicating his message. The husband, waiting to receive in a dream the message from his dead wife, is actually waiting for a message from Satan who longs to deceive him. The scenario is the same as of King Saul asking the "woman that hath a familiar spirit from Endor" to help speak with the dead prophet Samuel. King Saul was in the actual sense seeking to receive a message from the devil himself. Saul reveals from his own words that God had left him and closed all means of communication with him (1Samuel 28:15).

Luo death rituals violate other biblical principles as well. The act of having sex with the dead for unmarried woman is devilish and abusive. On one hand it is a violation of human rights, and on the other hand it is a violation of health principles as advocated by Adventists. In the Bible, sexual intercourse is between a living male and a living female.

There are contradictions in the Luo practice of chasing death and dancing in celebration of the deceased joining the living dead. If the Luo dance because they are happy for their loved ones have joined the living dead, then why chase death or attempt to kill it? One would think death is a means of joyfully joining the living dead and meeting former friends and relatives. The fact remains that there are unanswered questions to which indigenous religion fails to give adequate answers and which reside at the subconsciousness of the Luo. Such questions are those pertaining to life after death and who can break the power of death.

Notwithstanding the practice of *Ten'go* or chanting for killing death, death is still happening in Luo land and the Luo people are still dying. Failure of indigenous religion is the avenue through which Adventists can teach the biblical concept of death and establish correct burial practices.

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1. David Lawrence, *Tanzania: The Land, Its People and Contemporary Life* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: New African Press, 2009), 7.

2. Ibid., 5.
3. "Tanzania—Ethnic Groups," African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania, n. d., accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.africa.upenn.edu/NEH/tethnic.htm>.
4. Philip Briggs, *Tanzania with Zanzibar, Pemba and Mafia: The Bradt Safari Guide* (Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequest Press Inc, 2009), 21.
5. David Sharman, *In A Strange Room: Modernism's Corpses and Mortal Obligation* (New Yor: Oxford University Press, 2014), 209.
6. Personal knowledge of the author as a pastor in the Mara Conference.
7. Jens Finke, *The Rough Guide to Tanzania* (London, UK: Rough Guide, 2003), 496.
8. David Lawrence, *Tanzania and Its People* (Scotts Valley, CA: Custom Books Publishing, 2009), 108.
9. Ibid., 108.
10. John Ndembiwe, *Tanzania: Profile of A Nation* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: New African Press, 2009), 149.
11. Female circumcision, known as female genital mutilation by activists, is the practice of cutting a part of the clitoris—the sensitive erectile female sex organ at the front junction of labia minora in the vulva. The church condemns it, members seem to abstain, and leaders know that the practice is abolished. However, during burial service, the reading of life history includes the year when the deceased woman was circumcised.
12. *Saiga* is the Kuria traditional term given to male age group who are circumcised on the same day and year. Usually, circumcision is not done at a hospital, but traditional experts perform the rite. Those circumcised at hospitals are not valued and are considered a coward. After the rite, the participants are named after great events of the hour. In this case, Wangwe Muhere Saiga was named *Wajapani* following the great event of an atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
13. Lucas Wangwe Muhere, Kuria Traditional Leader of Nyamongo, Tarime, Mara Since 1994-2017, Interview by Lucas Nzungu Rugemalila, A Pastor at Kiribo District-Nyamongo, Tarime, Mara, and Charles Mete Mwitakichonge the Church Elder of Nyarero-Nyabichune-Nyamongo, Tarime, Mara, 2nd September 2018.
14. Personal knowledge of the author.
15. John O. Okokwaro and Timothy Johns, *Luo Biological Dictionary* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Ujuzi Educational Publishers Ltd, 1998), 1.
16. "Luo in Tanzania," The Joshua Project, 2021, accessed March 25, 2021, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13157/TZ.

17. Zedekia Oloo Siso, Grasp *The Shield Firmly, The Journey is Hard: A History of Luo and Bantu Migrations to North Mara (Tanzania) 1850-1950*, ed. Jan Bender Shetler (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Mkuki na Nyota Publisher, 2010), 3.
18. Musa Magau, Adventist pastor from the Shuba Ethnic Group, living in the vicinity of Luo Land, a Luo traditional leader 2006-2007, and assistant pastor at Kamageta-Luo Ward 2008-2009, interview by author.
19. Zefa Ayugi, interview by author, Mara Conference office, January 2021.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Bubombi Rorya, interview by author, Mara Conference office, January 2021.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Personal knowledge of the author.
26. Ibid.

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