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Adventists and Burial Practices in Kenya

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Burials are cultural events with religious undertones among many tribes in Kenya,¹ and traditions associated with these events present several issues for Adventist believers there.

Introduction

Death remains a critical moment for Africans, as is the case in other religions and cultures; thus, a burial is generally considered an important sociocultural event, and many rituals surround it. Family and community participation and attendance at funerals are highly valued.

Although some cultural practices are fading away because of urbanization and Western influence, rituals and practices surrounding death are still prevalent. In African traditional religions, death is viewed as a transition to the spirit world or the world of ancestors,² a world that is a reality in the worldview of an African. This worldview pervades many of the African cultural practices. In some communities, adherence to burial rites is believed to ward off bad omens for the surviving members.³ Therefore, a befitting send-off for the deceased is deemed necessary because of ancestor veneration and fear of the ghosts of the departed.⁴

Biblical teaching about death has not made significant inroads into the African psyche. Adventists in Kenya, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, are often faced with a crisis on how to conduct burials because burials are community events that involve more than the closest family. Event attendees include the clan and even members of the wider community who may not be Adventists and may insist on having a role in the burial and on performing traditional burial rites. Even Adventists may perform a death ritual in fear of violating a taboo.

African traditional worldview still remains a major reference point when the misfortune of death strikes.⁵ The influence of African traditional religions is so strong that, at times, some Adventists succumb to it and practice burial rituals. This article discusses some issues surrounding burials that are contentious among Adventists in Kenya.

Burial Rituals

The importance of cultural traditions and burial rituals in some communities in Kenya can be observed in the elaborate preparations for burial by the relatives of the deceased. The ritual practices surrounding death and burial differ from community to community in Kenya. Some communities still perform a series of rituals at the time of death and burial, while others have a simple service at the church, at home, and at the graveyard. In the latter group, no major rituals surround burial apart from the issue of whether the body should be brought inside or placed outside the church during the memorial service. The former group comprises mostly communities from western Kenya. These communities have elaborate burial rituals, and many Adventists from these communities find themselves at crossroads during burial services. Some rituals do not necessarily conflict with Adventist teachings, such as the positioning of the grave, the groundbreaking of the grave by the elders, and the vigils before the burial to condole the bereaved among the Luos. On the other hand, some practices conflict with biblical teachings, such as vigils after the funeral waiting to escort the spirit of the dead away and the ceremonial shaving of the head to mark the start of the mourning period in the belief that death has marked the family and put it under a taboo state.

Traditional Funerary Rituals

Several other rituals are performed before and after the burial. This article focuses on the rituals before and during the burial.

From the time of the pronouncement of death until the burial, the deceased's relatives stage a daily vigil in the home of the deceased. In some communities from western Kenya, the body of the deceased is removed from the morgue a day before the burial so that it may "spend a night at home" before the burial.⁶ In other communities in Kenya, the body of the deceased is brought directly from the morgue to the burial place.⁷ This ritual, though not contradictory to biblical teaching, tends to make the burials an elaborate affair and quite expensive for the bereaved family, who often still have medical and other expenses to settle. There are also relatives and other mourners who have to be attended to for an extra day or more before (and after) the burial.

Among the Luo of western Kenya, an unmarried woman or a young girl's body cannot be brought into the home through the gate. Another opening through the fence is cleared in order to bring the body into the home for burial. Among the Luo, the practice of cleansing the widow before the burial is still performed in some isolated places. Although it is a fading practice, it is believed that there must be a symbolic or actual sexual act with the widow in order to cleanse her from the spirit of death.⁸ This is ingrained in the worldview that death brings a bad omen to the family that should be dispelled.⁹ The underlying worldview of these rituals is that at death, the deceased moves into another world. Burial is, therefore, an initiation into that world. Another reason for the elaborate death rituals is the fear of the spirits of the departed and ancestors. Adventists find themselves in difficult situations during the burial ceremonies because of these conflicting worldviews: the biblical teaching about death as a state of unconsciousness is at variance with the belief in spirits that survive a person at death in African traditional beliefs.

Church Memorial Services for the Dead

Another issue about burials arises concerning the memorial service: there is contention as to whether the casket carrying the body of the deceased should be brought inside or placed outside the church during the memorial service. The conflict arises because some Adventists link the practice of bringing the body into the church with the Catholic

practice of a requiem mass. Memorial services where the body is present inside the church are commonplace in urban churches in Kenya, but this rarely occurs in the rural churches. It is probable that communities in the rural areas are in one locale and have been meeting at the home of the deceased, while those in urban centers are dispersed in different residential areas, so the church service affords them the opportunity to gather for the memorial service. In the churches where memorial services are held, the casket is placed either inside or immediately outside the church. In some churches, placing the body outside is purely for practical purposes to enable viewing of the body after the service. Another area of conflict for memorial services is whether it is appropriate to conduct a service for a non-Adventist person. An Adventist believer who has lost a family member who is not an Adventist may request a memorial service. Some are of the opinion that it is proper to conduct a service for the non-Adventist, while others deem it not appropriate.

The two aforementioned issues about the placement of the body during the memorial service and the service for the nonbelieving persons revolve around two underlying opinions: (1) the purpose for the memorial service and (2) the understanding of the state of the dead. The emphasis is that the memorial service is for the bereaved members of the family. The preferences of the bereaved family members are taken into consideration during the memorial service. It is made clear that the journey of the deceased has finished, the service is for the bereaved family, and the deceased is in a state of unconsciousness until the resurrection. The service is then conducted for the bereaved family members to remember the deceased, not for the deceased. The placement of the body inside the church is, therefore, not similar to the Catholic mass because they do believe in a soul surviving the body after death. Nevertheless, the principle of brotherly love should prevail in cases where a section of the congregation takes offense at the body being placed inside the church during the memorial service.

Burial Days

For some time, Sunday has been the day of choice for burials for many Adventists in Kenya. This is because it was convenient for relatives from far and wide to attend the burials, especially those who work on weekdays. Nevertheless, in the Kisi region of Kenya, when the relatives of the deceased comprise both Sabbath and Sunday keepers, they negotiated so that there would be no burials on either Saturdays or Sundays. In western Kenya, especially among the Luos, the practice of the deceased spending the night before the burial at home would necessitate the body having to be brought from the morgue on either a Friday or a Saturday evening. Therefore, some conferences in Western Kenya adopted a policy of having no burials on Sundays⁶ because burials on Sundays encroached on the sanctity of the Sabbath. The involvement and preparation for burial services on Sunday caused some church members to engage in activities that would desecrate the Sabbath, so it is deemed better to have burials on days other than Sundays. Nevertheless, in the case where the bereaved family members are not Adventists, they could be consoled even on Sabbaths.

Expensive and Elaborate Burial Services

In Kenya, an elaborate burial service to reflect the status of the deceased is a common practice. These services can be quite expensive, so it has become a practice to raise funds to cover funeral expenses, most of which are not essential. Though largely practiced in the communities of western Kenya, the practice is slowly spreading to other parts of Kenya. A large portion of the money raised for funeral services is used to feed the funeral guests. Feasting in funerals among the Luos evolved from a simple custom where people from the community of the bereaved would come to the home of the bereaved with food and support them during the time of the bereavement. This still occurs in some formal way by the community members contributing to the funeral kitty. However, the trend nowadays is for the bereaved family to provide food for the funeral guests and the mourners. It has turned out among the Luo to be a feasting session. The funeral service is regarded as successful if a lot of food and drinks are provided. The family relationships among the Luo that make them traverse long distances to condole a bereaved relative have been pointed out as a strength of the Luo community. Having traveled so far, they need to be fed and taken care of. In most cases, the community members also turn up at the funerals for feasting. This practice is difficult to sustain. Other practices that perpetuate exorbitant funerals are the cultural practice of vigils for a period of days and the body of the dead coming from the morgue a day before the burial. The family members keeping vigil and those who have come a day earlier have to be taken care of at the cost of the bereaved. There has been a suggestion to have Adventists from the communities where such practices exist to hold modest funerals, cut down the days of bereavement, and even adopt the practice of bringing dead relatives from the morgue directly to the burial place.

Adventist Response

Concerning these burial issues, the only formal Adventist response has been the Kenya Lake and Ranen Conferences prohibiting Sunday burials because preparations for burials on Sundays encroached on the sanctity of the Sabbath. On the other three issues—burial rituals, exorbitant funerals, and church memorial services—individual pastors have been left to provide guidance, which has led to many voices on those issues. In the case where there have been responses, it has been in reference to general policy statements that have not been contextualized to address the needs of particular communities in Kenya.

Recommendations

For the Adventists in Kenya, several critical issues surround burial ceremonies because of cultural beliefs about death: cultural rituals during the burial, the placement of the body during the memorial service, the day of the burial, and exorbitant funerals. The Church could do several things to address these issues:

1. Educate the clergy about the underlying beliefs about burial rituals to help them conceptualize these practices. Having this knowledge would help the Adventist clergy educate the laity and lead them to discard practices that contradict the Scriptures and find replacement rituals for those practices that do not conflict with biblical teachings.
2. Provide a formal response to issues relating to burials. The church should be proactive in identifying issues, researching them, and presenting the church's position just as Ranen and Kenya Lake Conferences did on the issue of burial days.
3. Encourage the members to conduct modest funeral services and teach members to discard practices that could add strain to the bereaved families. Pastors from the affected communities should lead out on this.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Traditional Religions* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1975), 11–12.?
2. Ibid., 118–119.?
3. Oriare Nyarwath, "Luo Care of Widow (Lako) and Contemporary Challenges," *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya* 4 (2012): 95.?
4. Mbiti, *African Traditional Religions*, 124.?
5. See Festus Felix Gumbo, "Adventist Missiological Response to Traditional Beliefs in Kenya" (D.Min. diss., Andrews University, 2002), 69.?
6. Keeping the body in the home the day before the funeral is a common practice among the Luo.?
7. For the Kikuyus and the Kambas, the bodies are brought from the morgue on the day of the burial.?
8. Nyarwath, "Luo Care of Widow," 105. Nyarwath observes that this practice is a later development in Luo customs. See also Abong'o Ngore Vitalis, "The Socio-Cultural Changes in the Kenyan Luo Society Since the British Invasion and the Effect on the Levirate Custom: A Critical Survey," *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 18 (2014), <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2bb2/94cbc97ac6a091de93bfe8bcc00f0514611e.pdf>.?
9. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2002), 203.?
10. Kenya Lake and Ranen Conferences voted not to have funerals on Sundays.?

