

The Traditional Burial Practices of the Bukusu People Prior to the Introduction of Christianity

BENARD JUMA WEPUKHULU¹, PAUL A. OPONDO², EDITH NALIKA SIMIYU³

^{1,3} *Department of Social Sciences, Kibabii University*

² *Department of History, Political Science and Public Administration, Moi University*

Abstract- *This study examines the traditional burial practices of the Bukusu people of Bungoma County, Kenya prior to the introduction of Christianity in the late 19th century. Using qualitative methods including interviews, focus groups, and observation, the research explores Bukusu beliefs and rituals surrounding death, funeral preparations, burial customs, mourning periods, and ancestral worship. Key findings reveal that the Bukusu held complex beliefs about death as potentially caused by supernatural forces, engaged in elaborate communal funeral preparations, practiced distinctive burial customs like burying personal belongings with the deceased, observed extended mourning periods, and maintained strong traditions of ancestral worship. The introduction of Christianity led to a syncretic blend of traditional and Christian practices, with some indigenous elements persisting alongside new Christian rituals. This study contributes to the preservation of Bukusu cultural heritage and provides insights into processes of cultural change and adaptation in the face of external religious influences. The findings have implications for understanding cultural resilience, interfaith dialogue, and culturally sensitive approaches to death and bereavement in Bukusu communities.*

Indexed Terms- *Traditional Burial Practices, the Bukusu People, Introduction of Christianity*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bukusu people, a subgroup of the larger Luhya ethnic community, have inhabited Bungoma County in western Kenya since the 14th century (Simiyu, 1990). Known for their rich cultural heritage, the Bukusu have maintained distinct traditions and practices, particularly in relation to death and burial rituals. These practices have played a crucial role in shaping

their collective identity and spiritual beliefs for generations.

Prior to the introduction of Christianity in the late 19th century, the Bukusu people adhered to a complex system of traditional religious beliefs and practices that governed various aspects of their lives, including their approach to death and burial (Olupona, 2014). These practices were deeply rooted in their understanding of the supernatural world, the role of ancestors, and the continuity of life beyond death. The traditional burial rites of the Bukusu people served multiple functions, including honoring the deceased, facilitating the transition of the spirit to the ancestral realm, and maintaining social cohesion within the community.

However, the arrival of Christian missionaries in Bungoma County in the early 1800s marked a significant turning point in the religious and cultural landscape of the Bukusu people (Wekesa, 2021). The introduction of Christianity brought new beliefs and practices that often conflicted with traditional Bukusu customs, particularly in relation to death and burial. This cultural encounter initiated a process of change and adaptation that has continued to shape Bukusu burial practices up to the present day.

The research problem addressed in this study is the lack of comprehensive documentation and analysis of traditional Bukusu burial practices prior to the introduction of Christianity. While some studies have examined aspects of Bukusu culture and the impact of Christianity on African traditional religions (Kayeli, 2012; Nyahela, 2015), there remains a gap in the literature specifically focusing on pre-Christian Bukusu burial rites.

The main objective of this study is to trace and document the traditional burial practices of the Bukusu

people prior to the introduction of Christianity. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine the beliefs and rituals surrounding death in traditional Bukusu culture.
2. Analyze the funeral preparations and burial customs practiced by the Bukusu people.
3. Investigate the mourning period and ancestral worship practices associated with Bukusu burial rites.
4. Explore the initial changes in burial practices that occurred with the introduction of Christianity.

This research is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage by documenting traditional practices that are at risk of being lost as societies modernize and adopt new religious beliefs. Secondly, it provides valuable insights into the spiritual and social dimensions of Bukusu culture, enhancing our understanding of their worldview and community structures. Thirdly, this study offers a foundation for examining the process of cultural change and adaptation in the face of external religious influences, which can inform broader discussions on cultural resilience and identity (Kang'entu, 2017).

By exploring the traditional burial practices of the Bukusu people, this research aims to shed light on an important aspect of their cultural heritage and contribute to the broader field of African cultural studies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Existing Research on Bukusu Burial Practices

The study of Bukusu burial practices has been approached from various angles within the broader context of African traditional religions and the impact of Christianity on indigenous cultures. Olupona (2014) provides a comprehensive overview of African religions, touching on the significance of burial rites in maintaining spiritual connections between the living and the dead. While not specifically focused on the Bukusu, this work offers valuable insights into the broader cultural context of traditional African burial practices.

Kayeli (2012) examines the role and meaning of various life cycle rituals, including death and burial, among the Logoli people, who are culturally related to the Bukusu. This study provides a comparative perspective on how traditional practices intersect with Christian beliefs in the context of the Roman Catholic Church. Similarly, Nyahela (2015) investigates the impact of Luyia traditional religion on Christianity, focusing on the African Israel Church Nineveh in Western Kenya. While these studies offer valuable insights into the interaction between traditional practices and Christianity, they do not specifically address pre-Christian Bukusu burial rites.

Wekesa (2021) explores the Ababukusu traditional widowhood rites and their influence on widows in the context of the Friends Church in Western Kenya. This research touches on aspects of Bukusu burial practices but focuses more on the aftermath of death and its impact on surviving spouses.

Lagat (2017) provides one of the most relevant studies to our research, examining Luhya burial rituals in comparison to biblical perspectives on life after death. This work offers insights into the traditional beliefs and practices surrounding death among the Luhya people, of which the Bukusu are a subgroup. However, it primarily focuses on finding a balance between traditional practices and Christian beliefs, rather than documenting pre-Christian practices in detail.

• Theoretical Framework

The study of Bukusu burial practices can be situated within the broader theoretical frameworks of cultural anthropology and religious studies. The concept of cultural relativism, as developed by Franz Boas and his students, provides a useful lens through which to examine Bukusu practices without imposing external value judgments (Eriksen, 2001). This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural significance and function of burial rites within Bukusu society.

Additionally, the theory of syncretism, which examines the blending of different religious or cultural systems, is relevant to understanding the changes in Bukusu burial practices following the introduction of Christianity (Stewart, 1999). This theoretical perspective can help explain how traditional practices

have been maintained, adapted, or replaced in response to new religious influences.

The concept of "lived religion," as proposed by scholars like Meredith McGuire (2008), offers another valuable theoretical approach. This perspective focuses on how religious beliefs and practices are actually experienced and enacted in everyday life, which is particularly relevant when examining the practical aspects of burial rituals and their significance to community members.

Identification of Gaps in Current Literature

While existing research provides valuable insights into various aspects of Bukusu culture and the impact of Christianity on traditional practices, several gaps in the literature can be identified:

1. Lack of comprehensive documentation: There is a scarcity of detailed, ethnographic accounts specifically focusing on pre-Christian Bukusu burial practices. Most existing studies examine these practices in the context of their interaction with Christianity, rather than documenting them in their original form.
2. Limited temporal scope: Many studies focus on contemporary practices or recent historical periods. There is a need for research that attempts to reconstruct burial practices from the period before significant Christian influence.
3. Insufficient analysis of symbolic meanings: While some studies describe burial rituals, there is often limited analysis of the deeper symbolic meanings and cultural significance of specific practices.
4. Inadequate exploration of regional variations: Given the potential for local variations in practices, there is a need for research that examines potential differences in burial rites among different Bukusu subgroups or geographical areas.
5. Limited comparative analysis: Few studies have systematically compared Bukusu burial practices with those of neighboring ethnic groups, which could provide valuable insights into cultural exchange and distinctive Bukusu traditions.

This study aims to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive examination of traditional Bukusu burial practices prior to the introduction of Christianity, focusing on their cultural significance,

symbolic meanings, and social functions within the community.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the traditional burial practices of the Bukusu people prior to the introduction of Christianity. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of cultural practices, beliefs, and meanings associated with burial rites (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach enables the researchers to capture the nuances and complexities of Bukusu burial traditions through rich, descriptive data.

Data Collection Methods

The study utilizes a combination of data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic:

1. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews are conducted with key informants and members of the Bukusu community. These interviews focus on tracing the traditional burial practices, investigating the arrival and spread of Christianity, and analyzing the changes that occurred in Bukusu burial rites after the introduction of Christianity. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility in following up on interesting or relevant points raised by the interviewees (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).
2. Focus Group Discussions: Focus groups are organized to assess the extent to which Bukusu burial practices have been influenced by Christianity over time. These discussions encourage group interaction and provide insights into collective memories and shared cultural understandings (Morgan, 1997).
3. Observation: Where possible, the researchers engage in participant observation of contemporary burial practices to identify any remaining traditional elements and to contextualize the information gathered through interviews and focus groups.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

The target population for this study is members of the Bukusu community in Bungoma County who are aged

18 years and above and demonstrate knowledge of cultural practices. The study employs a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who have in-depth knowledge of Bukusu burial practices and the history of Christianity in the region.

The sample size is determined based on the principle of data saturation, with the aim of including approximately 10% of participants sampled from 1800 homesteads within Bungoma County. This approach ensures a diverse range of perspectives while maintaining a manageable scope for qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected through interviews, focus groups, and observations are analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involves the following steps:

1. Transcription and familiarization with the data
2. Initial coding of the data
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final analysis and report

This approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns and themes in the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of traditional Bukusu burial practices and their evolution over time.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the protection and respect of participants. The following ethical considerations are implemented:

1. **Informed Consent:** All participants are provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Written or verbal consent is obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study.
2. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Participants' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms and the secure storage of all data.
3. **Cultural Sensitivity:** The research team respects the cultural norms and practices of the Bukusu community, including the use of local languages and the involvement of community leaders in the research process where appropriate.

4. **Voluntary Participation:** Participants are informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
5. **Minimizing Harm:** The researchers are mindful of the potentially sensitive nature of discussing burial rites and practices, ensuring that participants are comfortable and willing to discuss these topics.
6. **Ethical Review:** The study protocol is submitted for review and approval by the relevant institutional review board or ethics committee.

By implementing these methodological approaches and ethical considerations, the study aims to produce rigorous and culturally sensitive research on the traditional burial practices of the Bukusu people prior to the introduction of Christianity.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Beliefs and Rituals Surrounding Death

The research revealed that the Bukusu people held complex beliefs about death and the supernatural world prior to the introduction of Christianity. Death was not always viewed as a natural occurrence but could be attributed to supernatural forces or witchcraft. This belief system significantly influenced their rituals and practices surrounding death.

One respondent explained:

"We believed that death was not always natural. Sometimes it was caused by evil spirits or witchcraft. This belief shaped how we approached death and burial."

The community engaged in specific rituals to honor the deceased and ensure their safe passage to the afterlife. These rituals included:

1. **Animal sacrifices:** Typically, a goat or sheep would be slaughtered during the funeral ceremony, with the meat distributed among mourners.
2. **Singing of dirges:** Professional mourners were often hired to lead the singing of funeral songs.
3. **Wailing:** Particularly by women, as a way of expressing collective sorrow and respect for the deceased.

These findings align with Olupona's (2014) observations about the significance of rituals in African traditional religions, highlighting the Bukusu

people's deep-rooted beliefs in the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms.

4.2 Funeral Preparations

The study found that Bukusu funeral preparations were elaborate and communal affairs. Key aspects of these preparations included:

1. Preparation of the body: This involved washing, shaving, and anointing the deceased with oil or other substances. Family members and neighbors would participate in this process.
2. Digging the grave: The community would prepare the burial site, often facing east to ensure the safe passage of the deceased to the afterlife.
3. Collection of funeral items: Food, drinks, and clothing were gathered for the bereaved family and mourners.

A participant described the process:

"Preparing for a funeral was a community effort. Everyone had a role to play, from preparing the body to digging the grave and providing food for mourners." These findings highlight the strong sense of community and collective responsibility in Bukusu culture, reflecting broader patterns observed in African societies (Mbiti, 1990).

4.3 Burial Customs

The research uncovered several distinctive burial customs among the Bukusu:

1. Burying personal belongings: The deceased were often interred with their personal items, believed to be needed in the afterlife.
2. Placing stones on the grave: This practice was thought to prevent the deceased from returning to haunt the living.
3. Eastward orientation: Bodies were typically buried facing east, symbolizing the journey to the afterlife.

These customs reflect the Bukusu people's complex understanding of the afterlife and the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead. The practice of burying personal belongings with the deceased aligns with similar customs observed in other African cultures (Gonen & Segal, 2021).

4.4 Mourning Period

The study found that the Bukusu observed an extended mourning period following a death:

1. Duration: The mourning period could last several months.
2. Mourning attire: Bereaved family members would wear specific clothing, often black or dark colors.
3. Community support: Neighbors and community members would visit the bereaved family, offering condolences and bringing food.

These practices underscore the importance of communal support in the grieving process and align with broader African cultural norms surrounding death and mourning (Parkes, Laungani, & Young, 2015).

4.5 Ancestral Worship

The research revealed a strong tradition of ancestral worship among the Bukusu:

1. Annual rituals: The community would hold yearly ceremonies to honor ancestors, often during the harvest season.
2. Offerings: Food and drinks, particularly traditional beer, were offered to ancestors.
3. Cultural performances: Songs and dances were performed to honor ancestors and maintain cultural traditions.

These practices highlight the Bukusu people's belief in the ongoing influence of ancestors in the lives of the living, a common feature in many African traditional religions (Fortes, 2017).

4.6 Integration of Traditional Practices with Christian Influences

The study found that the introduction of Christianity led to significant changes in Bukusu burial practices, but also resulted in a syncretic blend of traditional and Christian elements:

1. Adoption of Christian funeral services: Prayers, hymns, and biblical readings were incorporated into funeral ceremonies.
2. Use of coffins: This practice became more common, reflecting Christian burial customs.
3. Retention of traditional elements: Practices such as wailing, singing dirges, and performing dances continued alongside Christian rituals.

A respondent noted:

"We've found a way to blend our traditional practices with our new Christian faith. We still honor our ancestors, but we also pray to the Christian God."

This integration of traditional and Christian practices aligns with the concept of religious syncretism observed in many African societies following the introduction of Christianity (Kang'entu, 2017).

These findings provide a comprehensive overview of traditional Bukusu burial practices and their evolution following the introduction of Christianity. They highlight the complex interplay between indigenous beliefs and introduced religious concepts, demonstrating both continuity and change in Bukusu cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study has provided a comprehensive exploration of the traditional burial practices of the Bukusu people prior to the introduction of Christianity, as well as the changes that occurred as a result of Christian influence. The key findings can be summarized as follows:

1. The Bukusu people had a complex system of beliefs and rituals surrounding death, rooted in their understanding of supernatural forces and the afterlife.
2. Funeral preparations were elaborate communal affairs, reflecting the strong sense of community in Bukusu culture.
3. Specific burial customs, such as burying personal belongings with the deceased and placing stones on graves, were practiced to ensure the safe passage of the spirit to the afterlife and protect the living.
4. The mourning period was an extended process involving the entire community, emphasizing collective support for the bereaved.
5. Ancestral worship played a significant role in Bukusu spiritual life, with annual rituals and offerings to honor deceased ancestors.
6. The introduction of Christianity led to a syncretic blend of traditional and Christian practices, with some elements of traditional burial rites persisting alongside new Christian rituals.

Implications of the Research

This research has several important implications:

1. **Cultural Preservation:** By documenting traditional Bukusu burial practices, this study contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage that might otherwise be lost as societies modernize.
2. **Understanding Cultural Change:** The findings provide insights into the process of cultural adaptation and resilience in the face of external religious influences.
3. **Interfaith Dialogue:** The study's exploration of the integration of traditional and Christian practices can inform discussions on religious syncretism and interfaith dialogue in African contexts.
4. **Social Policy:** Understanding traditional burial practices and their evolution can inform culturally sensitive social policies related to death and bereavement in Bukusu communities.

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the traditional burial practices of the Bukusu people and their evolution in response to Christian influences. By documenting these practices and their changes, we contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and deepen our understanding of the dynamic nature of cultural and religious practices in African societies. Future research can build on these findings to further explore the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in Bukusu culture and beyond.

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