

# A reflection on the Contemporary Application and Relevance of Traditional Death Rituals of Christian Maragoli of Western Kenya

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*Abstract- Death rituals in Africa are given a lot of attention. This is because the departed souls are believed to transition to next world where they continue to be in touch and in communion with the living. The rituals are therefore believed to be ways of communication between the living and the dead, but also a way of preparing and ensuring the departed are comfortably ushered in to the next world. The article relied on field data collected from the Maragoli community in Western Kenya to understand the applicability and relevance of traditional death rituals in this community. The article centres highlights the different types of death and although it does not explore the rituals in these types of deaths, it picks a case of “normal death” and aims to explain the rituals that are related to this type of death. Using mainly key informant interviews, the article explains what exactly happens from the time a “normal death” occurs until after the burial ceremony. The idea is to highlight that even in the contemporary society, African communities are keen on the observances that speak to kith and kin while living, and after death.*

*Indexed Terms- Maragoli, Western Kenya, Death Rituals, Luvego, Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG), Traditional Practices, Burial Rituals.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the place of burial rituals among the Maragoli of Western Kenya. Although the article may not venture into all the rituals related to different types of deaths, it picks on what is categorized as “normal death” to highlight the processes through which the Maragoli interact with their dead relatives and friends. Rituals can be defined as a set of fixed actions and sometimes words performed regularly, especially as part of a ceremony. They are therefore

generally regarded as action oriented thus distinguishing them from conceptual aspects of religion such as beliefs, symbols and myths. According to Radcliffe Brown (1952), Gluckman (1965) and Tambid (1979), a ritual refers to the most distinct rhythmic series of symbolic acts that punctuate ceremonial occasions such as births, marriage, baptism, illness, worship and death. Bell (1992) in her write up on ‘Ritual Theory’ looks at ritual as a way through which a people’s beliefs are symbolically expressed or acted out. That it is a definite component of the various processes that constitute religion, society or culture. Odetola (1985) looks at rituals as a necessary and important part of the African person. Rituals in African traditional beliefs and practices are a powerful means of sustaining social order since they dramatize traditional beliefs, values and show emotional content of a people. People’s relationship to nature, society and the supernatural is enhanced in rituals which surround ceremonies such as death (Kweingoti, 2007). Most African communities if not all have rituals that punctuate every phase of the individual’s life including death. These rituals incorporate the individual into the group which gives him or her emotional support and identity.

Gehman (1989) observes that death disrupts the peaceful balance prevailing in the world hence, ritual and ceremony is necessary as a way of restoring that peaceful balance. While examining ritual rites, Gennep (1965) argues that, when proper funeral rites fail to be performed, the departed are unable to enter into the world of the dead and be incorporated into the society established there. They become dangerous and behave like hostile strangers to their living relatives. It is therefore the responsibility of the living to give their dead relatives proper and decent burials according to their customs and culture. This ensures that the deceased are detached from the living and are able to

make a smooth transition to their next phase of life which is spiritual.

Given the relevance of death and funeral rituals among Africans, the article centers on the Maragoli of Western Kenya to show that even though Christianized, the community members still hold dear their beliefs and practices around death and burial rites. This brings into fore the challenges associated with juxtaposition of two cultures – African Religion/traditions and Christianity. Wepukhulu (2024) observes that this kind of interaction led to a syncretic blend of traditional and Christian practices, with some indigenous elements persisting alongside new Christian rituals.

Durkheim (1965) asserts that through rituals collective ideals of a people are simultaneously generated, experienced and affirmed as real by the community and that to understand any religion, one must analyze both its beliefs and rites. This implies that the funeral rites of the Maragoli people are a reflection of some deep-rooted beliefs that they hold as an African community and the understanding that they hold regarding the land of the spirits and the role that they play in the lives of the living. This article contextualizes these views to the Maragoli community in order to establish the significance of their traditional death rituals which have remained persistent in the midst of Christianity.

#### A Methodological Note

The article is part of a larger study carried out between 2019 and 2020, whose data was drawn from 356 PAG churches, members of Maragoli cultural council of elders made up of 12 men, widows, widowers and orphans. Through ballot, a random sample of 10% of churches in each of the nine PAG districts in the two sub counties of Sabatia and Vihiga, Vihiga County-Kenya, was done. This gave a total of 36 churches. The Pastor of each of the sampled churches and the women leader were purposively sampled for the study. This gave a total sample of 36 pastors and 36 women leaders. Twelve elders who make up the Maragoli cultural council were all purposively sampled for the study. For this article, the methods of data collection used were key informant interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

Theoretical Background to Religion and Death Rituals Mbiti (1969) and Turaki (2006) assert that, various rituals connected with death are usually elaborate and complicated because death concerns everybody. The rituals must therefore be followed to the later in order to facilitate the onward journey of the deceased to the city of the dead. Groenwegen (1986) points out that, the many rituals and ceremonies performed are meant to persuade the spirit of the dead not to linger around the homestead and cause misfortunes to the living. Failure to perform these rituals will make the dead feel neglected and this is likely to ruin relationships between them and the living (Levi, 1989). Kilonzo & Rutto (2014) observed that there are several elaborate rites surrounding death in the Nandi community to signify that the deceased person has just moved on to another world and that there is life after death. The indigenous death rituals of the Maragoli people who are the subject of this study are therefore a reflection of their thinking and beliefs about death and are guided by the Africans' view that there is another form of existence after death. That there is need to honor the deceased and facilitate their safe passage into the land of the spirits through performance of funeral and burial rituals. This study illuminated the spiritual and social dynamics of the community's death and funeral culture. This gave a clear understanding of the community's world view and social structures. Olupona (2014) emphasizes that burial rites are significant in maintaining spiritual connections between the living and the dead.

According to Mbiti (1969), some communities bury family heads inside their first wives' houses. For women, unmarried sons, daughters or married men without children or with only up to two children, the graves are dug on the left hand side behind the house. For a rainmaker, it is in the center of his house. People who die of epidemics are buried by the riverside or in the bush to avoid defiling the homestead. Someone with a humped back and one dying from suicide are buried in the backyard of the compound. Burial times also vary from one community to the other.

Magesa (1997) shows that funeral rites simultaneously mourn the dead while at the same time celebrating life in all its abundance. Such funerals are community affairs in which the whole community feels the grief of the bereaved family and shares in it. The purpose of

the funeral rites therefore is to comfort, encourage and heal those who are hurting. Mugambi (1989) points out that rituals concerned with death of an accepted member of the community are a mixture of both sorrow and joy. The funeral rites engaged in are therefore meant to celebrate the life of the deceased member and offer support and sympathy to the bereaved in equal measure. According to Mbiti (1975), feasting follows funeral rites partly to comfort the bereaved and to bring life back to normal and partly to thank those who preside over funeral rites. It is important to note that, death customs in Africa do not end with the burial of the body. There are many post burial rites, just as in the case of the Maragoli.

#### History and general cultural observances: implications for Christian Maragoli

Prior to the coming of Christianity and Western ideas, the Maragoli people lived and understood their existence mainly in terms of the beliefs and ideas of their traditional community. Their death rituals were designed to express their deep-rooted beliefs in African Traditional Religion, ensure smooth transition of their departed relatives to the life hereafter and create harmony between the living and the dead. Liyongo (1972) observed that by the time the Maragoli people settled in their present homeland, their customs and beliefs had already been formulated. They believed in one Supreme Being, Nyasaye whom they worshipped and sacrificed to. They also believed in the existence of ancestral spirits who acted as intermediaries between the living and Nyasaye. This went on until the arrival of Christian missionaries in their area.

These pioneer missionaries assumed that they were introducing their faith to a primitive people without any culture and institutionalized beliefs and practices. They delivered Christianity packaged in a European culture and based on a tri sectional worldview (with a heaven, earth and hell). The African cultural practices and beliefs were thus disregarded and condemned as pagan, heathen and barbaric and were targeted for destruction and eradication. The assumption was that a good Christian was one who aped and embraced western culture.

The PAG church, like all other early missionary churches condemned and dismissed most cultural

practices of the Maragoli people as heathen. Looking at the church's service book however, one gets the impression that the church appears to have swung its doors wide open to most of the cultural practices earlier condemned by its pioneers. In planning a burial service, pastors are advised to consider the wishes of the bereaved family as long as they do not go against Christian practices and principles.

Akaranga (1996) argues that the Maragoli community traces its descent from Muloogoli whose father is believed to have arrived by boat from Misri (Egypt) along the Nile River up to Rusinga islands in Lake Victoria where they made their first settlement. They later on moved southwards leaving behind one of their relatives, Musuva the forefather of the Abasuba people of Rusinga Island. Muloogoli and his family made a temporary stop over on the shores of Lake Victoria before crossing the Kavirondo gulf to the current South Maragoli area of Liamagale. On their way they went through Maseno area and Kima.

The Maragoli community has large well-knit extended families that form the foundation of the community. Mulogoli had four wives; Kaliyesa who gave birth to four children namely Musali, Kizungu, Kilima and Mmavi. The second wife was Mmanga who gave birth to three children namely; Kihayo, Kuvera, and Vasanga. The third wife was Litavali who gave birth to six children namely; Musava, M'mburugi, Muyonga, Tsivwani, Migango and M'muluga. The fourth wife was Musimbi who gave birth to only one child namely Saniaga. These became the founders of the original clans of the Maragoli. The Maragoli people are interwoven together by a common language, *Olulogoli* which gives them a sense of corporate identity and makes them to share common feelings. It also allows them to accommodate personal differences and encourage peaceful life.

For religious matters, one member of the extended family acts as the family leader/priest who guides the rest of the family through rules and other practices. This leader must be one who is fairly aged and is referred to as *Musakuru wi ishiri*. He acts as the link between the living and the dead and wields a lot of powers, not derived from any wealth that he possesses but from his position and age. His greatest role is to ensure the unity of the family by making sure that any

rituals stipulated by the forefathers are adhered to. Care must therefore be taken to fulfill all the funeral and burial rites prescribed by the ancestors through the elders of the community to avoid causing any offence to the departed members of the community and Nyasaye. These rites are not performed for strangers, thieves, murderers, witches and other trouble makers in the community or for those who died abnormal deaths. The Maragoli community is therefore very sensitive to the circumstances surrounding the death of a person in order to perform rituals that are appropriate to any given case. This compares well with their Luo neighbours who only perform prerequisite rituals for elderly men who die normal death (Kodia, 2021). To this end, the article focuses on rituals that relate to “normal death”.

#### Death among the Maragoli

Whenever death strikes in the Maragoli community, people always seek for possible explanations for its causes and remedy. This is because the community believes that death does not just happen. There must be explanations that have deeper meaning within the community regarding its cause and implications. This is reflected in the type of rituals performed and the phrases and terminologies that are used to describe it. The community believes that the deceased assume new roles in the ancestral world. They play a key role of protecting members of their immediate families from all forms of danger and evil. They bless the families and communities from which they belonged with rain, food, livestock et cetera. They warn them of any impending danger or punishment. As custodians of the traditional moral, cultural and religious values of their communities, they help the living to avert consequences of curses and give general guidance and instructions on all family matters. They give names to newborn children besides receiving those who pass on from the world of the living (Mbiti, 1969).

Various terminologies are used to describe death in the community. The deceased is described as having departed or left (*kutura ho*). He takes on a spiritual form of existence never to be seen again in a physical form. The rituals performed by the living are meant to help the spirits of the dead make a smooth and safe passage to the land of the spirits. All the elders referred to death as eternal rest, *kososa*. This phrase is used to refer to deaths of very elderly and weak people who

had challenges executing even the most basic functions of life and were longing to join the world of their forefathers/ancestors. When such people die, they are considered to have rested and taken a break from the struggles of physical life.

Closely related to resting, sometimes one would indicate that so and so *ya kogona* meaning that he/she has slept. This phrase can be used interchangeably with resting. The deceased is assumed to have gone into an eternal sleep, which implies that the dead is not completely destroyed but just a sleep. Those who are sleeping maintain a measure of consciousness and are alert to happenings around them. Further, the Maragoli would also say so and so *ya kumira imiika* literally translated to mean that he/she has stopped breathing. Some people would also talk of the dead person as having shut his/her eyes that is, *ya kumworitsa itsimoni*. This phrase relates to the dead person as having slept (KII, OI:23/07/2019).

According to Mbiti (1975), all over Africa many words are used to refer to the act of dying. People refer to dying as returning home, going away, answering the summons, saying ‘yes’ to death, disappearing, departing, ceasing to eat, ceasing to breath, sinking, fighting a losing battle, refusing food, rejecting people, sleeping, taking one way, saying goodbye, shutting the eyes, being broken up, being snatched away, being taken away, being called away, joining the forefathers, becoming God’s property, and so on. Whichever the case, all the phrases/ terminologies bring out the belief that death is not a complete destruction of the individual but a doorway to another form of existence.

#### Categories of Deaths and Significance of Accompanying Rituals

This section of the article highlights the various categories of death among the Maragoli people in order to establish the specific rituals and practices that go with each. The space will not allow for an explanation of all the types of deaths, but they will be listed here so that the article can focus on the rituals associated with them.

The different types of death as highlighted in the data include: death of young persons and miscarried fetuses; death by suicide; death by murder; death of

hunchbacks; death of children born out of wedlock; death of twins; death caused by lightning; death of eunuchs/bachelors/spinsters; death of a wife without a house in a polygamous home; death of a parent from a daughter's marital home; death of an initiate; death of a child born out of incest; death of a stranger; death caused by a contagious disease; a child choked to death by food; death of a grandchild; death of Epileptics and Lepers.

Not all burial ceremonies in the Maragoli community are accompanied with the glamour and pageantry that graced the burial of an elder of good community standing. Shiino (1997) pointed out that among Luos all rituals are performed only when an elderly man dies. Among the Maragoli, there are special cases where death and subsequent funeral rituals for the deceased are of little significance to the community because of the circumstances surrounding their deaths. Such people are considered a curse unto themselves hence their spirits have no power to harm the living. The living therefore have very low opinion for those who fall in this category because while alive, they did not meet the expected social standards established by the customs of the community as set out and enforced by the forefathers. Rituals of honor are therefore not performed for them. Whenever such people die from their houses, their bodies are not taken out through the front door. A hole is drilled through the rear wall so that the body can be taken out through it. Strangers are contracted to bury their bodies in the backyard of the compound and flatten their graves to erase their memories from the community.

#### Rituals Related to "Normal Death"

Given the many types of deaths, and the specific rituals dictated by the types, this article highlights the case of normal death, in order to enlighten the reader on the rituals related to the same. "Normal death" here refers to death that occurs without someone taking his/her own life or someone else taking their lives. Normal death according to the Maragoli can be caused by witchcraft, sorcery, diseases, accidents, old age, among others. As much as death is viewed as a doorway to another phase of existence, the phenomena of death is feared by all. Whenever it strikes in the indigenous Maragoli society, people always seek for possible explanations for its cause (KII:26/08/2019).

Whenever death occurs in a family, it does not only affect the concerned family but the entire neighborhood. The immediate family is expected to alert the entire village, which responds by halting all the activities on their fields to join hands with the bereaved family in mourning. It is abominable for anyone to continue tilling their land in a neighborhood struck with bereavement. Doing so could imply that one is happy with the death of the deceased or probably he/she had a hand in it (KII:07/08/2019). It is a taboo for a dead Maragoli to be buried away from his/her ancestral land/home. It is believed that burial in one's ancestral land makes it easier for the spirits of the dead to link up with their ancestors. This forces bereaved families to go to great length to ensure that their dead relatives are buried in their ancestral land no matter the distance and the expenses involved. For those who have migrated away from their ancestral land to settle elsewhere, it is important for them to be buried in their adopted homes. Gehman (1989), Kodia (2021) and Shiino (1997) points out the Luo as one community that is deeply preoccupied with burial in one's ancestral land. According to Kodia, a Luo must be buried in Luo land regardless of where he lived or died from. The Abanyole who are neighbors of the Maragoli also insist on burial in one's homestead (Alembi, 2002). How the Maragoli prepare for "normal death"

Death always finds many people unprepared and makes funeral arrangements complicated. The elderly are believed to be much closer to their ancestors and ordinarily it is expected that they would be the first ones to depart to the ancestral land hence the need for them to live in preparedness. The young people or children have a duty to accord their parents/elders decent burials. These parents/elders on the other hand have a duty to prepare themselves and their families for their imminent departure in order to leave behind families that are harmonious besides enabling them to accord them decent burials. They are expected to share their inheritance to their children to avoid wrangles in their absence. Sons should be given their share of family animals to enable them pay dowry for their wives. Land owned by the parents should also be shared out to their children in good time. Traditionally, this would only go to the sons but this has since changed and daughters too are legally entitled to a share of their parents' inheritance.

Some elderly people prepare for their death by identifying their burial sites where they would wish to be laid to rest. Some also ensure that there are some trees and animals in their homes that can be sold and used in case of their death to make it easier for the family. It is important in the modern Maragoli society for people who have property to document their property such as land, animals, business enterprises, bank accounts and even children born out of wedlock and write their wills. This helps in the consolidation of the things that the deceased owned to guard against some disappearing or being stolen. Children born out of wedlock are likely to be disinherited when they remain unknown. Declaration and documentation of one's wealth and resources makes sharing much easier. Parents are encouraged not to wait until it is very late before sharing their inheritance amongst their children. Once they begin to marry and build their own homes and families, it is advisable for the parents to give them what is due to them. That way, they live behind a very cohesive home and family (KII,OI:02/07/2019).

Most of the respondents agreed that it is important for those on the verge of death to be counseled in order to prepare them psychologically for the eventual reality of death. This gives them hope and ability to accept the inevitability of death. They are led into repentance in case they had sinned against God, the ancestors or fellow humans. They are also advised to forgive those who wronged them. This makes their transition to the next world smoother and easier. Family members are also counseled to prepare them for the imminent departure of their loved one. This gives them the courage to begin to alert close relatives who may be far away and children to visit the ailing member before his/her departure. According to Magesa (1997), African funerals are community affairs in which the whole community feels the grief of the bereaved and shares in the rituals that go with them. According to Durkheim (1995) ritual is the way by which people's thoughts and actions are integrated. The entire community comes together to facilitate the transition of the dead and make it easier for the bereaved family to bear the loss. Funerals are therefore not individual affairs since they affect the entire community. Mugambi and Kirima (1984) observed that among the Luyia, when it is certain that someone will die, all his relatives and friends are summoned to hear his last

words and share a meal with him. It is therefore an important ritual obligation for Maragoli people to participate in funerals not only to pay tribute to the dead but to also seize the opportunity to socialize with the bereaved family and friends.

From the above discussion, it is clear that, as much as death is a painful experience which people dread, it is important to prepare for it because it is inevitable and it affects the entire community. Preparing for it helps to avert confusion and embarrassment. Early preparations will ensure that all the prerequisite ritual obligations are fulfilled.

What happens immediately death occurs?

When death occurs in a Maragoli home, the immediate family must first ensure that the body of the deceased is well groomed before notifying the rest of the community. If the deceased is a married man, the wife should alert his brothers or cousins to help clean up the body, dress it properly and ensure that the mouth and the eyes are closed up. According to one key informant, it is wrong for the eyes of the dead to be left staring and the mouth gaping. The legs and the hands should also be straightened up. In case the man died in his sleep without the wife's knowledge, the body should immediately be moved to the sitting room. This is in line with the earlier explanation that a man is expected to die from his sitting room. Long before the practice of laying bodies on their backs facing up, they used to be laid on the side in the sitting room facing outside with the back against the bedroom wall to symbolize his authority as the husband and leader of the home. A woman would also be laid on her side but facing the bedroom to symbolize that she had fulfilled her social obligations of procreation in marriage. This practice has been replaced by the Christian one of the body lying on the back facing up towards heaven, the abode of God (KII,OI:26/08/2019).

According to the widows interviewed, once the body of the deceased has been groomed, an elderly member of the clan/family prays before notifying the entire community through an outburst of wailing. This attracts the rest of the community members and neighbors to the home to join in the mourning of the deceased and making of burial arrangements. Members of the immediate family are expected to convene a meeting to discuss burial arrangements

(FGD,04/6/2019). The elders agreed that, the commonest method of announcing occurrence of death was sudden and violent outburst of wailing by close relatives and neighbors. Women wail with their hands behind their heads. This is blended with elegies punctuated with lamentations expressing the great loss incurred by the family and the community. This draws the neighbors and other community members to the bereaved home. Among the Luos people come to know of death through women's long quivering wails followed by sounds of drums (Shiino, 1997).

In case the deceased was a married man, his wife is required to go to her natal home accompanied by some of her in laws to inform her people that their in-law has passed on. As they approach the home, they are supposed to bust into loud wailing as a way of communicating to her people. Daughters from the bereaved home who are married have also a special way of announcing occurrence of death to those in their marital home. Once they receive news regarding death in their natal homes they have to go and confirm the same before going back to their marital homes wailing to formally deliver the news to their in laws. This act of going back to their marital homes to deliver news of death is known as *kuhara*. Once news about death have been relayed formally to her marital home, the lady must be accompanied back to her natal home by her in laws carrying flour and chicken as support to the bereaved family and an indication that they share in their bereavement (FGD,04/06/2019).

Major activities like cultivation of farms are suspended in honor of the departed member. Neighbors have the obligation of ensuring that there is enough food in the bereaved home. The bereaved may not have the mental and physical strength to look for and prepare food for themselves and the mourners who gather in the home. Apart from the food, some bring beer, firewood, water as well as participate in singing of funeral dirges and dancing. This helps to comfort the bereaved as well as to please the spirit of the dead. All this is also meant to comfort the bereaved family. This resonates well with the Bukusu approach to death where funeral preparations and mourning are elaborate communal affairs that reflect their strong sense of community and collective support for the bereaved (Wepukhulu,2024).

The Maragoli people used to keep dead bodies inside their houses for two days before burial on the third day. Nowadays the bodies are taken to mortuaries to create time for burial arrangements. For those who are ready for burial, the body is transferred from the house to the eaves of the house or verandah where it lies in state for at least two days before burial. The practice of the body lying outside the house on the eaves or verandah in case the house has one was also introduced in 1918 following the outbreak of plague in the area (Luvai, 1986). At the time, keeping the bodies inside the houses was deemed to be a health hazard to the living.

There are instances when someone dies away from the ancestral or marital home. Since the Maragoli people believe that a dead Maragoli must be buried in his/her ancestral home irrespective of the distances and expenses involved, efforts must be made to transport the body home. Upon arrival the body is taken inside the house for some time, before being placed outside under the eaves to await burial. Inside the house, the spirit of the dead is addressed and told that, "We have brought you back to your house where you used to live, as we move you outside in preparation for your last journey, do not come back to disturb those left behind." Those who die from home are equally addressed and told that as they leave their houses, they should not come back to hound the living. It is important to note that, once a body has been taken outside the house, under no circumstances can it be taken back to the house. From the verandah or the eaves of the house, the only destiny is the grave. If a body had been taken outside the house but later on the family decides to take it to the mortuary, upon removal from the mortuary, the body cannot be taken back into the house. It is placed back under the eaves of the house to await burial. However, a body that is taken to the mortuary straight from the house, must be taken back to the house to officially bid the spirit bye before burial (KII, OI:23/07/2019).

According to the elders interviewed, it is during the family and community meetings for funeral arrangements, that young people learn key rites to be observed during bereavement. Family members are assigned roles to play during the funeral. A budget is drawn, discussed, and shared out to family members for funding. A ritual fire known as *chotero* is lit by the

eldest member of the clan present to last the entire period of the funeral. This fire is set up in the front yard of the compound on the right-hand side for men and the left-hand side if the deceased is a woman. According to one key informant, the right hand is a sign of masculinity and power of the man. The fire indicates who the dead person is and their position in the home. For the woman it takes the left-hand side to indicate that she is a helper to the man. Apart from symbolizing mourning in the home, this fire serves to provide warmth at night for the relatives and neighbors who keep vigil in the home during the entire period of the funeral. Luos make a similar fire called *magenga* near the house to keep mourners warm (Kodia, 2021).

Domestic animals in the bereaved homestead also spend nights outside the houses as a sign of respect and mourning for the dead. This ensures that the spirit of the dead does not possess the animals and make them problematic. Houses in the homestead are not supposed to be swept for the entire period of the funeral until after burial. It is believed that death causes ritual uncleanness and that the dirt that accumulates during the mourning period is part of the uncleanness that accompanies death and should be cleaned at once after burial by a chosen widow. The ash that accumulated at the cooking place is collected and disposed off in the banana plantation to symbolize a fresh beginning for the family.

#### Citing and Excavation of a Grave

Disposal of dead bodies among the Maragoli takes place mostly after three days for adults and a day for very young children according to the elders. This gives adequate time for the bereaved family to mourn their loved one and allow relatives who may be far away to travel home to participate in the funeral and burial rites.

According to one of the respondents, long before the discovery of burying bodies in graves, the Maragoli people used to dispose them in caves located in rocky and bushy places with little human activities. Sometimes they would be devoured by wild animals or just decompose naturally. Later on, burial in graves became the preferred form of disposal for dead bodies. Various names are used to refer to a grave; *Kilindwa*, *Imbiira*, *Ingani* and *Inditsa*.

The responsibility of deciding where a grave should be excavated rests with the eldest member of the family present especially the one who lit the funeral fire, *chotero*. He may be a grandfather, a father or an elder brother to the deceased. He must get the tools for excavation that is a *jembe* and a spade from the house of the bereaved family, identify the site and offer prayers before marking out the site. This is done only once because it is believed that marking a grave twice can cause another death in the home. This elder who marks out the grave must be given a small token, known as *kisiuvilu* as compensation. The position of the grave is determined by the gender and position/status of the deceased in the family and community (KII, OI: 05/08/2019).

Excavation of a grave takes place on the eve of the burial day especially in the evenings and it is a predominantly male affair. The bereaved must however give the diggers flour and chicken to prepare a meal for themselves from the ritual fire. A cock if the deceased is a man and a hen if she is a woman. This chicken is sacrificial and a part from being a token of appreciation to the gravediggers, it also serves the purpose of cleansing them from any evil that might be caused by the spirit of the deceased. Women are not allowed to dig graves among the Abanyole (Alembi, 2002), the Bukusu (Lagat, 2024) and Luos (Kodia, 2021). The Luos also prohibit men with pregnant wives from participating in the exercise.

Traditionally, the Maragoli people excavate their graves facing/pointing north because it is believed to be the direction from which their forefathers came. This therefore makes it easier for the spirit to trace the ancestral land and join their ancestors. It is believed that the *Avasali* clan adopted the practice of burying their dead facing east, the direction from which the sun rises from their Tiriki neighbours. The Bukusu bury them facing West (Lagat, 2024) and the Abanyole East (Alembi, 2002). Men are buried on the right hand side while women are buried on the left hand side of the front yard of the homestead. The Tiriki who are neighbors of the Maragoli bury their dead facing East, the direction from which the sun rises (Shiyuka, 2017).

A grave is considered a sacred place closely linked to ancestral worship and veneration. Its location and marking has to be done by an elderly person who is



closer to the ancestral spirits. The positioning of the grave in the homestead is gender specific for those who are married and it's meant to express the masculinity of the man and the patriarchal nature of the Maragoli community.

#### Rituals on the Burial Day

The family of the deceased should ensure that the right ceremonies and rituals are observed before, during and after interment. This is to avoid causing any offence to the spirit of the deceased (KII:14/08/2019). An elder chosen by the family members ensures that, the body of the deceased is appropriately dressed for burial. The clothes in which the dead are dressed during public viewing are just meant for that purpose and must be removed and changed accordingly. For the men, the trousers must be free without a fly, zip or buttons. There should be no inner garments/inner wears worn for both men and women. When the elders were asked to give reasons for that, they all concurred that a person whose dead spouse is buried in inner garments will forever be bound to the dead spouse and can never remarry and lead a normal sexual life. Care is also taken to ensure that the dead are not dressed in tight clothes including suits, belts, neckties, wristwatches, socks and shoes. It is believed that such things interfere with the deceased's smooth transition to the next world. Sometimes the dead are dressed in such attire just for public presentation but must be removed before burial. According to one of the elders, the journey to the ancestral land is challenging and does not require a lot of baggage. All ornaments, talismans and amulets are supposed to be removed before burial.

Once the body of the dead has been properly dressed for burial, it is laid in a coffin on its back facing up. This practice was influenced by the arrival of Christianity, which came up with the idea that the dead should face towards the heavens, the assumed abode of the Almighty God and the anticipated destiny for the souls of the righteous. Before the onset of the era of modernity among the Maragoli, the dead used to be buried naked and without coffins. That symbolized anew birth for the deceased in the hereafter. Burying the dead among the Maragoli is a predominantly male affair. Apart from giving eulogies, singing and preparing meals for the mourners, women have no other role on the burial day. According to one elder, this is attributed to the patriarchal nature of the

Maragoli community. Burying is viewed to be a masculine and considerably strenuous task just like excavation of graves.

Burial program begins with, members of the bereaved family congregating inside the family house where prayers are offered. The spirit of the dead is addressed and informed that time had come for the family to escort him/her from the family house to his/her final resting place. The spirit is beseeched to accept to live the house and never come back to haunt the living. Traditionally an elderly male, preferably the clan leader would lead the procession of the family members out of the house to the graveside and would urge the mourners to maintain silence to allow him conduct the last rites for the deceased. The pall bearers would be allowed to lower the body into the grave first then he would call on the name of the deceased person and state the following, "In case somebody caused your death, sort it out with him or her. But if you died naturally, then rest in peace and don't come back to haunt your relatives." He then takes some soil and casts it into the grave towards the direction of the head. All the male relatives present are also allowed to do the same. This symbolically indicates that the relatives have taken part in the interment of their loved one. It is an act of acceptance that indeed their loved one is gone and that time for physical separation has finally come. The rest of the burial team is then allowed to shovel soil into the grave until it is filled up.

During the shoveling of soil into the grave, in case the deceased or any of his/her children own vehicles or posho mills, their engines are switched on until the grave is completely filled up as a way of bidding farewell to the deceased. Failure to do that will make them cease to operate normally or cause harm to their users. Any tent or shed that had been erected to shelter the body before burial must also be brought down immediately the body is carried away and before the grave is completely filled up so that the spirit does not linger there. Traditionally that would be followed by blasting/blowing of trumpets/horns and loud wailing to signify the final farewell for the deceased. This practice seems to be dying out with the last rites becoming a blend of Christian and traditional African practices. Burial rites are nowadays majorly conducted by the clergy.

The burial of a man of high social standing in the society was expected to take place in the evening. It is considered a taboo and a sign of disrespect to bury such a man early in the day. Such a burial is marked by great fanfare, glamour and pageantry. The elders pointed out that, not very long ago such a funeral would also be characterized by cattle drives and dances (*kelemba*). This was meant to pay homage to the spirit of the deceased as a true hero in the community. It was observed that a whole day would be set aside to give such a person a befitting send off. Mugambi and Kirima (1984) argue that afternoons are considered to be more appropriate for burials of elders and people of high social status among the Luyia. This is because they believe that the dead person's spirit will be more willing to part from his living relatives and friends in the evening, so that he may rest or sleep in the grave and submit to his fate as darkness falls. It is more likely that the Maragoli prefer burials of such people in the evenings for similar reasons. According to Kodia (2021), Luos also prefer to bury adults as the sun sets and children in the morning hours.

Before the Maragoli adopted the practice of burying their dead in coffins, they used to excavate their graves with a special sepulchral cavity at the bottom where the body would be laid on a special grass called *ivembe* which is used for thatching houses. The body would then be held in position by a line of *markhamia platycalyx* tree (*urwuvu*) sticks and then covered with another layer of *ivembe* grass before soil is shoveled in. Inside the sepulchral cavity chamber, the body of a man would be laid on the side with the head resting on the right hand in a sleeping position. The woman would also be positioned in a similar position but with the body lying on the left side and the head resting on her left hand. They made sure that the head lay pointing north towards the ancestral land in the north. The Tiriki who are neighbours of the Maragoli bury their dead facing East (Shiyuka, 2017). The Lugbara of Uganda bury them facing Mount Livu or Mount Eti (Mugambi and Kirima, 1984). Like the Maragoli, this is determined by the direction from which their ancestors originated from. After burial, the grave becomes a symbol of separation between the living and the dead. Those doing the interment must therefore ensure that they heap enough soil on the grave for it to assume a dome like shape to make it visible and conspicuous. It is a common practice for family

members and their relatives to plant flowers around the grave immediately after interment as a sign of honor and respect for the deceased. The growing of new grass around the grave after sometime symbolizes the beginning of new life for the bereaved family. That despite the physical loss incurred, life continues. Graves are revered and People are not allowed to sit on them, eat from there or perform any other duties from there since they are deemed to be sacred places akin to family shrines. Cultivation around them is prohibited. The practice of swearing from graves as it is the habit of some people is highly discouraged. It is also abominable for anybody to scoop soil from a grave and hurl/throw it at another person. It is called, *kukuba ekerova*, this can lead to ritual defilement known as *orovo* which can cause yellowing of the body and eventual death of the victim.

From the graveside, the bereaved family go straight to their family house as a sign of returning to begin new life without the deceased. They are prayed for before they can begin to do any other tasks. Such prayers are meant to protect the family from any nightmares and hallucinations. It is only after this that they can be served with some food to eat and also bid farewell to other mourners who had attended the burial

#### The Ritual of *amagenga*

The most immediate ritual after burial of an adult person is the ritual of *amagenga*. Close relatives, neighbours and family members keep night vigils for another three days after burial. The ritual fire is kept burning for the three days in the homestead as a sign that the spirit of the deceased is still present amongst the family members. This ritual is meant to keep the bereaved family company and socialize them slowly into a new life without the deceased. This ritual is only carried out for adults and by adult members of the community only.

#### The Ritual of Shaving (*Lovego*)

The Maragoli people believe that all family members plus all those who came into contact with the dead in one way or the other became ritually unclean and should be cleansed by shaving off their hair. This takes place on the third day after burial after most of the other major burial rites have been completed. It is the last formal gathering that is meant to mark the end of the mourning process to allow relatives to disperse and

go back to their respective homes to resume their daily activities. Apart from marking the end of the ritual of *amagenga*, the day of shaving has several other rituals attached to it.

The ritual signifies the readiness of the living to begin anew life without the deceased. It is a way of bidding farewell to the deceased member and severing physical links to release him/her to join the spiritual world. The number of those to be shaved depends on the status of the deceased in the society. The clan elder is tasked with the responsibility of availing the razor blade to be used for the ritual. Before neighbors, friends and other relatives can be shaved, a son or grandson to the deceased must be shaved first. The widow/widower is shaved alone by an in-law the following day. According to one of the widows, after the shaving ritual, a widow is expected to organize a day on which to visit her home of birth, with her clean-shaven head, *luhale*, for her family to confirm that she had indeed been widowed. She should be accompanied by two to three people, preferably her sisters in law. The growth of new hair symbolizes the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of the bereaved, a reminder that life continues in spite of the great loss suffered through death of one of their own.

The shaving ceremony also signals that it is time for the ritual fire, *chotero*, to be extinguished. This is done by an elder who removes all the unburnt logs and ash and scatters it in the backyard of the homestead preferably in the banana grove. This symbolically marks the end of the mourning period and allows relatives and other community members to disperse from the home. During this occasion, all the debts that the deceased owed people and those that he/she was owed by people are supposed to be declared for the family to devise a plan on how they are supposed to be paid or recovered. This is also an important day when the inheritance of the deceased is supposed to be shared out amongst his/her children and other close relatives. During this occasion, community members celebrate and feast in remembrance of the deceased. Animals like cows, sheep, goats and chicken are slaughtered and prepared together with other foodstuffs such as bananas, beans and ugali. All the foodstuffs that the deceased person used to farm are prepared for food for that day. This would traditionally be accompanied by traditional beer. The animal to be

used must be slaughtered at the graveside or in front of the family house and the blood allowed to flow freely to the ground to allow the spirits to partake of the same (KII, OI:03/08/2019).

All the respondents observed that in recent history the shaving ritual, *lovego* seems to have evolved and taken on a new shape and meaning in the recent past. It has been de-linked from the hair shaving ritual that takes place three days after burial to an almost purely memorial occasion to commemorate the deceased (*Kwitsulitsa*). Some families take as long as one year to even two years after burial to do it because of the enormous expenses involved. According to one respondent, the ritual to a great extent, still serves the role of a traditional court during which the wealth of the deceased is declared and shared amongst the children or relatives in case he/she had no children. The meeting bestows upon the eldest son the responsibility of taking care of his younger siblings until they attain maturity to be able to manage their inheritance. The occasion is usually presided over by a clan/family elder in accordance with the wishes of the deceased and the customs and norms of the community. Whatever resolutions and decisions are arrived at during such functions become legally binding to all the concerned parties.

Traditionally, after *lovego* a widow would undergo inheritance. A man who inherits her is supposed to give her a greyish goat to take to her parents. Later on he would be asked by the parents to add them a cow (known as *Ingara mwanu*). This was a form of dowry and appreciation to the parents of the widow. The cow was meant to ritually delink the woman from her late husband and the curse of widowhood an indication that she was ready to move on with a new husband. In case an inherited woman dies, the man who inherited her cannot undergo the shaving ritual from the woman's home because he does not own that home. Doing that would wipe out his entire family. He has therefore to go back and be shaved from his own home. It was noted that the practice of wife inheritance is currently declining because of HIV and AIDS and other social concerns (FGD, 09/07/2019).

The key religious concept that underpins the performance of the ritual of *orovego* is to honour and appease the spirits of the departed community

members to allow them settle in the world of the spirits and enjoy the company of their ancestors while allowing the living to move on with their lives peacefully. The ritual of *rovego* brings out the concept of ancestral veneration that is strong among the Maragoli. Idowu (1973) emphasized that, a person for whom due and correct rites are not performed will not be admitted to the abode of the blessed departed ones and therefore will become a wanderer, living an aimless, haunting existence.

Among the Luo, the shaving ritual takes place four days after burial to mark the beginning of the mourning period. The memorial ritual on the other hand serves the purpose of remembering, comforting and pleasing the deceased (Kodia, 2021).

#### The Ritual of *Kusioma (kuhira chiriri)*

Since the ritual of *rovego* has in the recent past come to be associated more with commemoration of the departed, it is no longer strictly tied to the initial shaving ritual which still takes place three days after burial. According to one informant, *rovego* can take place even after a year or two depending on the preparedness of the family. This is unlike the shaving ritual that must take place strictly three days after burial. In between the shaving ritual and *rovego* there is another ritual known as *Kusioma or kuhira ichiriri* which literally means taking the shadow/spirit of the deceased to close relatives' homes in order to bid them farewell.

The immediate family members of the deceased visit homes of close relatives on appointed dates to perform this ritual. And that any home of a close relative that is left out of this ritual is bound to experience misfortunes and calamities. During these visits, the spirit of the deceased is addressed and invited to visit the relatives' homes for the last time to allow him to rest in peace and not disturb the relatives. Some families carry with them portrait photographs of the deceased during such visits to symbolize their presence. A clan/family elder addresses the spirit believed to be amongst them and beseeches it to never come back in any form to disturb the visited family. This ritual has to be performed in homes of all close relatives in order to avert any misfortunes that might befall them. This is because the deceased used to visit these homes while he/she was still alive and the ritual

of *kusioma/kuhira ichiriri* helps to move his spirit away from these homes. Another elder asserted that, a widower could not marry another wife before going to the late wife's home of birth for this ritual. In case he went ahead and married another wife before going through the ritual, when time comes to visit the late wife's home for the ritual, his new wife must leave for her parents' home and avoid partaking of any foodstuffs brought from her predecessor's natal home lest she dies.

Existing literature seem to suggest that this practice is common amongst many other Bantu communities although it takes different forms. Bockie (1993) claims that the practice is also found far afield among the Bantu of Central Africa. Nigel (1981) who researched among the Dawayo of Cameroon, argued that the Dawayo people believe that upon death, the spirit of the deceased moves to homes of close relatives and has to be brought back ritually to where its skull is buried. So unlike the Maragoli who carry the spirit to the relatives' homes to bid them farewell, the Dawayo go to the relatives homes to fetch the spirit back to its burial place. Shisanya (1991) argues that, among the Abanyole (neighbours of the Maragoli) the shadow/spirit of a dead husband is reflected in his widows natal home in form of the cattle he gave as dowry and in the children sired by the widow's brothers. After the burial of the husband, the widow has to be escorted by her co-wives to her natal home to symbolically capture the spirit and take it to his grave. This concept also varies slightly from that of the Maragoli. According to the Maragoli, the spirit is at its place of burial but has to be taken on a tour of the relatives' homes.

The day of this ritual begins with a prayer from a clan/family elder who implores the spirit to accept to be taken on a last tour of the relatives' home. The group sets off singing songs as they journey towards the designated home. On arrival, their hosts receive them ceremonially. A prayer is said in which the spirit of the deceased is welcomed to the home. Traditionally the team would spend the night in the home though this has since changed and the ritual has become a one day affair. On the return trip, the spirit of the dead who is the unseen chief guest is given gifts of brown flour and chicken depending on the gender of the deceased. The visiting party is expected to

journey back as a group file until they have delivered back the spirit to its burial site. No one is allowed to move away from the group before their arrival home. This is another ritual that puts to test the unity of the bereaved family and the clan at large. Every member is expected to participate actively.

From this study, it is clear that the religious concept of taking the spirit of the deceased to relatives' homes is a deeply entrenched one not only among the Maragoli but within the wider Bantu fraternity. Malidoma (1999) concurs with the argument that spirits of the dead are nostalgic about the places that they used to visit. They remember clearly the experience of walking on the earth and visiting their relatives. The Maragoli people perform this ritual because it is important to them as a way of honoring and appeasing their departed relatives.

#### The Ritual of Widowhood (*kukunzakala*)

The rituals of *kukunzakala* are important to both widows and widowers. Like in many other African communities, the Maragoli believe that, a man or a woman who loses his/her spouse becomes ritually unclean and has to undergo cleansing rituals before resumption of normal life in the community. A widow/widower amongst the Maragoli is secluded from the rest of the community members for a period of about three months. This practice/ritual is known as "*Kukunzakala*". It is believed that if one comes into contact with a widow or widower who recently lost and buried a spouse he/she can develop a ritual disease known as *orovo* that causes the yellowing of the body and eventual death. To remedy the situation one must be given herbal medicine by a traditional healer to cleanse them of the ritual impurity and reverse the curse. Widows and widowers are expected to remain within the confines of their homes during this period to avoid endangering the other community members.

During the seclusion period, the widow/widower is not supposed to share meals with other members of the family and society lest they also become ritually unclean. Their shadow should not fall on other members of the society especially small children. It is believed that in the period immediately after burial, the spirit of the deceased is still embedded in the shadow of the widow or widower because of the soul ties established in the course of their union. These rituals

are applied more stringently on the widows more than the widowers because of the patriarchal nature of the community. A sponsor, who is a widow too is attached to her to guide her on what is expected of her during this period until she is ready to be incorporated back in to the society. She is served her food separately and whatever remains cannot be served to someone else. Their children and grandchildren are not allowed to share food with them during such a period. They are also expected to visit a specific spot/place for short call and this is strictly monitored to establish whether grass around the spot is turning yellow or it remains green. The yellowing of the grass would mean a longer period of seclusion. Care is also taken to ensure that other people do not step at such a spot. Her movement out of her home is restricted. Her caretaker clears a new path in the thickets to the river where she can take her bath from. This is meant to avoid contact with other community members. Due to changing times however, widows are nowadays allowed to bath from their homes rather than going to the river. On the third day after the burial of the husband, the widow would wake up very early to go to the graveside to mourn her departed partner loudly. This was a reminder to the entire community, neighbors, friends and relatives that the day for the shaving ceremony had finally come and that they were expected to organize themselves to arrive in the home for the occasion. The rituals of widowhood began in earnest after the shaving ceremony.

When asked about cleansing rituals for widowers, it emerged that, when a husband loses his wife, as part of the cleansing process from the curse of widowhood, he is expected to find another woman and have intercourse with her. This is known as *Kwiravitsa* which literally means to cleanse oneself. It is however a taboo for him to marry the same woman and turn her into a wife or sleep with her for a second time. Likewise, the first man to sleep with a widowed woman becomes ritually unclean and if not cleansed he can suffer from *orovo* and eventually lose his life. This first sexual intercourse with a widow/widower is known as *kukara amakora*. This is because it is tantamount to being the first one to break the curse of widowhood. This ritual is only meant for women who are still sexually active and have the intentions of finding new partners.

The concept of ritual uncleanliness of widows and the need for cleansing is widespread in many African communities. Kunhiyop (2008) points out that a widow may be seen as not only impure but a potential source of danger and defilement. That in some communities the cleansing ritual may involve being bathed naked before the crowd during the funeral ceremony. It may also involve sexual intercourse with a relative of her husband to prevent the spirit of the deceased from coming back to seek sexual union with the widow. It is only after this that the widow can be able to safely enter into new sexual relations.

#### Handling those whose spirits Come Back to haunt the Living

There are cases of spirits who are unable to gain admission and settle in the land of the spirits hence become malevolent and haunt the living. Such haunting spirits are referred to as *vigingi*. Whenever a spirit becomes stubborn, elders begin by flattening its grave as an indication that it is no longer welcome in the society. In case it persists, a decision is made to exhume its body and burn it to ashes. Sometimes whenever there are chronic illnesses or misfortunes in a family, a diviner would point a finger at such a spirit. A decision would then be made to exhume the body and cremate it in case the spirit cannot be appeased. On the day of exhumation and cremation, none of the immediate family members is supposed to witness the bizarre happenings. There are times when the body to be exhumed would be rotten and decomposed. Family members would therefore be locked up in their houses for the whole day to give the cremators time to set up a place for the burning usually far away from the home and exhume the body. After exhumation they would use a basket to ferry all the body parts to the place of cremation and ensure that every part is exhumed and completely burnt up (KII, OI:27/02/2020).

Idowu (1973) argues that the spirits that are likely to become wandering and haunting spirits includes; those whose bodies are not buried with due and correct rites, those who die bad deaths like by hanging or drowning, those who die of bad diseases, those who die during pregnancy, those who led wicked lives, et cetera. He states that such spirits may be found on trees, rocks, rivers and water courses, or hills. Some may even enter into animals or birds or snakes in order to destroy

things or molest people. Different communities have devised different ways of tackling such spirits including the use of magic. To the Maragoli, burning of the body is the most preferred method if the spirit cannot be appeased.

#### CONCLUSION

The traditional death rituals of the Maragoli are of great significance to the community. They are deeply rooted in African traditional religion that is embedded in the indigenous culture of the Maragoli people. This is built on their understanding of the spirit world and the role that the ancestral spirits play in the lives of the living and the life hereafter. These rituals are borne out of the belief that death is a transitional process from physical to spiritual existence and that these rituals are meant to manage this transition in order to appease the dead. This belief therefore necessitates proper preparation for death to ensure that all pending issues are sorted out and that the dying person dies a normal death, from the right place in order to receive all the prerequisite rituals. This ensures that his/her spirit gains admission into the company of the ancestors and assumes apposite role in the lives of the living. For the spirit of a Maragoli person to gain admission into the abode of the ancestors, his/her body must be buried in his/her ancestral land, facing north, the direction from which his/her ancestors originated. For the death rituals to be complete and acceptable, the piece of land on which he/she is buried must have an established house to give it identity. Death rituals cannot take place on an open/unoccupied field considered profane.

The article concludes that, in as much as death is a rite of passage for an individual person, it affects the entire community. Community members are expected to participate in the accompanying rituals to help the deceased to transit smoothly to the ancestral land. This helps to promote social solidarity in the community. The post burial rituals that are performed are of great importance in assisting the spirit of the deceased to gain admission into the ancestral land and settle among his/her ancestors. They also play a key role in cleansing the immediate family members, their relatives and their homes from the defilement occasioned by death. This makes it easier for them to resume normal life in the post burial period with the collective support of the entire community.

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