

Critical Survey of Luo Cultural Practices and their Decline in the Face of Pandemics with Special Focus on COVID-19

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Abstract— The origin, spread and impact of COVID-19 has had a far-reaching effect on the cultural practices of the Luo community of western Kenya. The research findings seek to establish the prevalent rate of COVID-19 amongst the Luo community and also to bring into focus the far-reaching effects of the pandemic on Luo cultural practices. In this paper there are critical observations that I will bring into focus in establishing the ripple effect of the pandemic on some of the practices which for a long time had been defining the Luo identity: greetings through handshake, sharing of meal from the same plate, feasting at funerals, impromptu visits to relatives, overnight stay in funeral places and wailing during funerals or whenever death occurs.

Index Terms— Death, funerals, feasting, COVID-19, burial rites, poverty, culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Luo community of western Kenya constitutes 10.67% of the total Kenyan population according to the Population census report of 2019¹. Even though there is a sizable population of the Luos in Tanzania Mara Region numbering about 1.9 million, the Kenyan Luo is still the majority. Luos are a Nilotic group that spread across East and Central Africa. Proper Luos speak “dholuo”, the language of Luo. Other Nilotic groups who are closer to the Luos are mostly found in Uganda. The Acholis, Padhola, Langi and Alur share a lot of linguistic resemblance. In a region that has been politically disadvantaged thus economically marginalized in terms of industrial development, every cultural practice that might tend to promote wastage of resources may not be allowed. The effect of COVID-19 on the Luo cultural practices is a subject of investigation to be carried out in a manner that would expose the inherent weaknesses and strengths of Luo culture in the face of calamity. Burial and other funeral related costs had been lavish among the Luo community and this had been a worrying practice over the years. Death and flamboyance walk side-by-side in Nyanza and Western Kenya. The colour masks pains of being bereaved but buried in burdens. Tom Mboya, a Political Economy Expert and Political Science lecturer at Maseno University, points out that the cultural practices around funerals have left families impoverished. However, 'Corona funerals' have put costly burials on a deathbed.²

This paper is based on research I carried out on several

funerals and burial ceremonies I have personally gotten involved as a diocesan Bishop during the COVID-19 invasion. Luos are predominantly in four counties of Nyanza with the following rate of cases of COVID-19 by 18th of February 2021:

1. Kisumu -2229
2. Siaya- 572
3. Migori 919
4. HomaBay 365
5. TOTAL 4,085 against the national tally of 103,188³

[1]

II. METHODOLOGY

I took a more qualitative approach with study area limited to both Siaya County and parts of Kisumu where I currently reside. My key informants being my clergy in the field. I built a data base of funeral programs, WhatsApp groups set up specifically to raise funds to meet funeral expenses, evening meetings meant to solicit for funds, vote of thanks given during funeral services and many other observable variables. Vote of thanks is very important at funerals. The person chosen to pass a vote of thanks will always give a summary of how people contributed to meet the cost of the funeral and sometimes mentioning names of huge contributors and the amount raised. Many people like to be recognized for the part they play in the funeral. One would get a vivid picture of the worth of the funeral. I had previously researched on Luo burials and their related costs implication as a cultural burden on development of modernity in a book *Poverty in Grace*, published in 2005. In the book I researched on various death related costs which in my view could be avoided. The cost of sustaining dead body in morgues for long, feasting that appears to be perpetual until the body is buried, transportation of the body which to some families could involve chattered air, special funeral hearse, tailor made clothing for the bereaved, and a five-star meal for mourners especially on burial day. These costs are avoidable but due to the cultural nature or implications on the social dynamics surrounding the person who is dead, Luos believe that this is all meant to give the diseased a “befitting sendoff”.

Luos have numerous rituals associated with death some of which are barbaric, costly and simply outdated to say the least. They are barbaric in the sense that they deprive people of their dignity. For example, in old traditional culture any widow who died uninherited would be treated inhumanly. A person of questionable sanity will be asked to have sex with the dead body before burial rite is performed, the underlying factor

here is that for Luos wife inheritance is such a critical and significant aspect of culture that nothing would be allowed to stop its fulfilment. Wakana Shino comprehensively lists some of the Luo cultural practices related to death which I will expound on abit:

- 1) Death announcement
- 2) Vigil (budho)
- 3) Grave digging (kunyo)
- 4) Burial (iko)
- 5) Accompanying the spirit of the deceased to the former battleground (teroburu matin)
- 6) Shaving (liedo)
- 7) Mourners' departure for their houses (kee)
- 8) Serving a meal to the deceased and its family by married women (yaodhoot)
- 9) Serving a meal to the deceased and its family by married women (tedo)
- 10) Going to the former battleground with the spirit of the deceased (teroburumaduong')
- 11) Visiting the widow's natal home (tero cholla)
- 12) Dividing articles left by the deceased (keyonyinyo)
- 13) Remembrance (rapar)
- 14) Serving a meal to the family of the deceased by affine (budho)⁴

Some of these rites highlighted in Wakana paper, are virtually obsolete and may not attract our focus so much. For example, culture required that once the burial rite is over, the immediate members of the family of the diseased must undergo ritual shaving of the hair. Today no one would dare go through such a ritual. Most of the present generation value their hair so much that they wouldn't allow anyone to interfere with their make up whatsoever. The ceremony of "teroburu" which is done when someone is dead is no longer attainable. It involves running with cattle from one point to another, pushing some into the house of the diseased and charging them to join the people in mourning. There seems to be some inherent "understanding" among the cattle that they are also valued in terms of their participation in burial rites. Today no one would dare to allow cattle in the house. Imagine a descent house with tiles with good seats being turned into cattle field in the name of "mourning" the dead in style.

Luo culture on funerals supersedes their affinity even for development. When death occurs, everyone seems touched and inspired to participate voluntarily. However, there are some people who never corporate with their kinsmen. Such people are regarded as proud and solitary. They never participate in mourning others by contributing towards the funeral cost or simply attending the funerals. Because they know what fate awaits them when they are also bereaved, there are some people in the community who have created groups of "professional mourners", for hire. These mourners are made up of young jobless people who are paid handsomely to participate in the funerals as "genuine" mourners even though they may not have any idea about the diseased. The cultural significance of that is that the spirit of the diseased will be happy to hear the wailings "of mourners" as a sign of love for "him". His spirit must feel loved, as well as missed. **Professional mourning** is believed to have originated from Egypt and some Near Eastern

cultures. Professional mourners, also called **moirologists** and **mutes**, are compensated to lament or deliver aeology and help comfort and entertain the grieving family.⁵

III. REGULATIONS

The Kenyan government had joined the global community in putting in place various measures for controlling the spread of COVID 19. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 on the world scene in December 2019, the first case in Kenya was reported in March 2020. By that time, thousands of people had fallen sick from the disease and some had died especially in the US, China, Italy, Britain, and Spain. Between December 2019 and March 2020, Kenya took several measures in preparation to combat the disease. These measures included training health workers, creation of COVID-19 treatment and quarantine centers, and educating the public on the disease. When the disease hit the country in March 2020 and the number of infections continued to rise alarmingly in Europe and America, further measures were implemented including closing down of learning institutions and certain types of businesses, restriction of movement across the country's international borders and across the borders of certain counties, and introduction of daily curfew hours.⁶ Some of these measures received mixed reaction from the ordinary citizens. It paved way for another conflict between the members of the public and the law enforcers. Some people were killed by police during the war with citizens. The retrogressive approach attracted condemnation from civil rights society and the police brutality once became the focus of attention. Demonstrations against police brutality for offences related to COVID 19 regulations marred the essence of collective civil approach and some demonstrators simply stated that the police killed more people than Corona.⁷

The Inter Religious Council of Kenya was established to among others be a bridge between the government and the people. It is a fully state funded body charged with the responsibility of formulating regulations to be observed during the COVID 19 period. They are charged with the responsibility of monitoring the impact of COVID 19, and in consultation with the government come up with regulations regarding public worship. Despite rising cases of Covid-19 infections at community level in Nyanza counties, residents are still violating government health protocols.

Minimal behaviour change has been witnessed amongst the residents even with officers in Kisumu, Migori, Siaya and Kisii enforcing the measures through arrests.

Not many people wear masks, observe social distancing in matatus and in public places or wash their hands regularly as recommended.⁸

In this research we want to address key issues relating to Luo culture and its confrontation with modernity, and context of our environment where law and order must be maintained at the expense of cultural practices.

IV. THE COVID 19 SITUATION

The emergence and subsequent spread of COVID 19 in Kenya has had a devastating effect on Luo cultural practices to the extent that most people had celebration over the death

of some primitive cultural practices like feasting at funerals, elaborate funeral expenses and more so long duration taken before burials. The time the government introduced measures to control COVID 19 it became very clear that most of the cultural practices related to death would cease completely. It was a new beginning as people were struggling to find their new normal. For the first time online services gained currency and most people realized that church services can as well add more value even through online participation.

The limiting of the number of people attending burial and speedy disposal of dead bodies, changed the entire cultural composition of the Luos. Luo community are known for their elaborate burial arrangements. First on the line is the cost of funeral related items. For most Luos, the real expense begins when a person is declared dead. People would start by visiting the home or the house where the diseased lived. Gatherings would gain momentum and budget to entertain them would follow. In a research I carried out in 2005, we established that the cost of funeral and burial expenses depends on social standing of the diseased in society. The rich are highly placed and would attract more mourners during death.⁹ The costs involve numerous expenses some of which may not be necessary. For example, sometimes it takes a family a whole month before burying their dead. The family is treated to great anxiety during this time, people gather eat and drink, issues arise with tension sometimes rising owing to disagreements on small issues. Fundraisings are organized with major items in focus being the cost of feeding "professional mourners". Professional mourners are the people who have the perennial behaviour of gathering at funerals from the day the death announcement is made till the burial is done. Some even stay at the funeral home for several days after the actual interment. Such people move from one funeral to another. Since the major item in the budget is feeding of mourners, most bereaved families are left in bad shape after the burial. Some items are also stolen by some mourners during the long period of pre-burial gatherings. Other cost items include, the preparation of funeral and burial programs, mortuary, transport, coffin, venue etc. all these will be determined by the social standing of the diseased.¹⁰¹¹ According to Luo customary practice, dead bodies were disposed of immediately. Adults would be buried as the sun sets and the child body in the morning hours. However, all this also depends on when death occurs. Eating was forbidden at the homes where funerals occur. One bull was enough to feed the mourners even though all the arrangements were done in the neighboring homes. The bereaved were given the space to mourn and not to entangle with domestic issues like cooking. The funeral is a major event involving the relatives but also all members of the community. The burial must take place on the Luo land, regardless of where a person has lived his life.

The participation to the funeral is an important ritual obligation for all the Luo, it is the occasion to pay tribute to a loved one but also an opportunity to socialize with family and friends.¹²

The second major item is related to gathering with all the hygienic challenges notwithstanding. During overnight vigils at funerals, very little attention is given to "social distancing"

and the risk of contracting contagious diseases are high. During such night vigils very little is done in terms of protection from cold and many people are left exposed and more often than not they get pneumonia.

With the coming of COVID 19 and government regulations on movements and gatherings, the community has for the first time forced to abandon the feasting and elaborate ceremony during funerals. The first time the regulation was imposed, funeral became strictly a family affair and with time limit also regulated, the first cases of deaths during the phase one of Corona were taking not more than 30min. The following scenarios have emerged :

1. How to respond to the reality of death during the pandemic?
2. When do we consider letting go some of the traditional customs that seem to promote death?
3. How do we measure the impact of customary practices and government regulations on the life of a Luo?

Traditionally, Luo people of Kenya, funeral customs involved **burial rituals** to show their respect and fear for the dead. However, they only practice some of these burial traditions today. The different burial rituals depended on many factors: the deceased's sex, age, marital status, social status, religious beliefs, the circumstance of their death, their actions while alive, how their ancestors performed the rituals, and where they lived.¹³ The fear of death is more real than death itself. Real in the sense that it is everyone's wish to live as long as possible probably forever. The inherent desire to live forever is what makes it imperative for people to take safety measures for their life including but not limited to eating well, having good accommodation, taking medical cover etc. The fear of death has altered the manner and way we respond to many things traditional. Luo's fear for the pandemic (COVID-19) is not based on the dreadful nature of the corona virus, but on the ultimate consequence of contracting the virus. The fear of leaving this life and transiting to the other world is a mystery that is not easily welcome in Luo culture. It is for this reason that much is done including abetting the cultural practices which had been dear to them. When death strikes, dialogue between human beings and God is heightened. Africans regard death as the climax of evil because it takes away life.¹⁴ virus has no equivalent meaning in African language or culture. It is a belief that death is caused by evil spirits that could manifest itself in different forms: accidents, diseases or human hand. Old age is part of the causes which does not raise serious concern. The term pandemic is foreign among the Luos, and for this reason they don't know how to deal with it unlike other causes of death. For the spirits, they have experts who can intervene. Talking about pandemic would thus invoke fear and trembling, absurdity and psychological problem that is beyond human comprehension.

The government regulations during the COVID-19 period have enabled a spontaneous reflection on the efficacy of traditional practices especially in times of pandemic. For the first time, Luo burials could take place within two days and Night vigils completely forgotten. For the first time funerals became strictly family affairs. The fear of being arrested and

the fear of contracting the virus altered the cultural landscape of the Luos as a new dawn emerged.

V. LIMITATIONS OF LUO CULTURAL PRACTICES

The lockdown that the government imposed and stringent rules accompanying it was a clear proof that Luos can as well do without some of the retrogressive cultural practices. If the long delays in burials for the purposes of giving time to raise funds or to give time for other family members living in distant places is anything to go by, then a relook at the significance of a corresponding rite of passage would be necessary. The mere fact that eating at funerals was literary outlawed during the lock down, coping mechanisms were adopted. Handshake has been an old global cultural way of greeting. Luos love handshake, and sometimes some people do it so carelessly that hygiene is compromised. Any failure to extend one's hand for greeting is misconstrued for pride. It is a social offense for one to refuse a handshake, the most valued form of greetings. Among the Luos, there is only one religious group (RohoMusalaba) that is known for clapping of hands other than handshake for greetings. It is therefore viewed as an act of disrespect for one who is not a member of this group to avoid handshake. The mystery of handshake is that it brings into focus a social bonding between people. It is a sign of wellness in a relationship and a visible sign of social engagement. Handshake was once accused of being responsible for the spread of cholera. During cholera outbreak, the community was advised to avoid handshake as a matter of hygiene. Since the government officially issued a guideline that discouraged people from handshake, it is now normal to avoid handshake without being labeled proud. This is another powerful shakeup on a cultural practice that was highly regarded for its social significance.

Having this knowledge at the background, it behooves us to explain that with the coming of COVID-19 and the subsequent government regulations, handshaking has become victimized as one of the agencies for possible transmission of corona virus. It has virtually altered the social landscape in Luo cultural practices. As the global society is struggling to come up with uniform approach to controlling the virus, new normal sort-of-life is being adapted. The significance of handshake has lost its central position in a cultural setting. Waving of hands in the air is slowly creeping in to be the most preferred form of greeting. No one is now charged of being proud anymore.

The other cultural practice that has become a victim of the new normal is feasting at funerals. During the first phase of the pandemic, eating at funerals was outlawed and village chiefs were permitted to ensure that the regulation was followed to the letter. Luos have had a customary practice that allowed feasting at funerals as part of the cultural rites to be observed as part of the sendoff ceremonies. During the mourning period, mourners would be categorized accordingly depending on the relationships with the diseased. This ensured that everyone is catered for according to their status. For example, Luos believe that in-laws, especially from the place where a daughter of the affected home is married are the most respected guests and must always receive the best treatment. With the COVID-19 regulation being enforced,

there is now a new norm that nullifies preferential treatment.

For a community that has been economically impoverished for so many years, one would expect that certain cultural practices with severe economic ramifications would have died long time ago. This statement may sound reasonable only to the extent that one forgets the integral aspect of Luo cultural traits. The story of Socrates indicates that a very common illusion is our tendency to overestimate our knowledge and wisdom. Such an illusion is fatal to intellectual growth. In fact, if one is convinced of knowing everything, it will be very hard for him to continue researching and studying.¹⁵ For the Luos what we today would consider as a waste, is to them a wholesome edification of their culture. Whatever is done as a result of death, is an act of edification. Strangely, these cultural practices are not attributed to non-Christians alone. Even staunch Christians who hold senior positions in the church will be seen at the center of cultural fields. But one forgets, for the sake of preserving his cultural heritage the fact that the entire Mosaic leadership in the bible was a demonstration of a deep relationship with God. Moses died not because he was a failure, but because it was his time to go. No human power could stop this inevitability. Not even prayers as powerful as the one of Jesus at Gethsemane could stop Moses from dying.¹⁶ Contrary to the traditional belief that respect for cultural practices would be a remedy for death, it is an obvious fact that even ardent practitioners of Luo cultural practices die. The most critical area of focus on death related practices is the economic underpinnings associated with them. The low economic activities in Luo Nyanza makes it imperative to refocus on the value addition expected of any cultural practices. Hunger has been looming at most doors in this region. In 2020 when COVID was at its peak, my diocese embarked on massive mobilization of foodstuff to be distributed to many families that were affected. I wish to quote what a Brazilian said of poverty in the slums of Brazil: Sometimes I think, "If I die, I won't have to see my children suffering as they are". Sometimes I even think of killing myself. So often I see them crying, hungry; and there I am, without a cent to buy them some bread. I think, "My God, I can't face it. I'll end my life. I don't want to look anymore!"¹⁷

Even though the picture above of a Brazilian situation was reported way back in the late 1970's, the current situation in Luo land and by extension in most parts of Africa, appears incredibly worse. Many children are dying because of malnutrition, majority cannot make it to school due to lack of fees, most young girls are subjected to early marriages as a way of getting some bride wealth and numerous sad stories of domestic violence reported on daily news some of which are due to frustrations related to poverty. It is on this basis, that this paper tries to bring on board a reasonable argument that some cultural practices are obsolete, irrelevant and abhorrent to modern civilization as well as reality of our time.

VI. CONCLUSION

Social dynamics change from time to time and most practices which once formed the core of our values tend to shrink to give way for new realities to emerge. In my research, we established that traditional cultural practices among the

Luo may not have succeeded in addressing pertinent issues of longevity of life but still it has shown a clear commitment for social edification. Prove of any tangible correlation between the cultural practices and this “sense of edification” does not come out clearly and thus is a subject of another trajectory. Vivid understanding of cultural practices is necessary for us to measure the degree of deepness of every single cultural rite among the Luos. It came out very clearly that some of the traditional practices are actually on the downward trajectory hence paving way for new philosophy of life. Christianity, despite having taken root in Africa, has not minimized the impact of cultural beliefs even among its new converts, but instead, it has provided a new approach, concept and world view. Certain mannerisms in Luo cultural heritage are only deemed irrelevant or unsustainable due to Global cultural revolution and new knowledge.

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Profile

Professor David H Kodia is an ordained minister in the Anglican Church of Kenya where he has been serving as a Bishop in the Diocese of Bondo since 2017. He is an accomplished scholar who has risen to the rank of an Associate Professor of Christian Theology at the Great Lakes University of Kisumu. He obtained a Masters and a PhD degree from Charles University, Prague and Northwestern Christian University in the US respectively. He has authored several books and publications in different referred journals. Some of his publications include: Poverty in Grace, Social Responsibility of the Church and Society in War against

Poverty, Sociology and Politics of Truth, *Towards a ministry of social service and challenges of volunteerism in the church and society in Africa, The Role of the church in democratization processes in Kenya, Mission to the Voiceless, Politics and Theology Confronting Social Injustice in Africa amongst several others.*

Professor Kodia had been a voice of reason in Kenya, always daring the government to observe human rights and civility in matters of administration. He is the first Bishop in East and Central Africa to appoint a female Bishop as his assistant, further proving his respect for gender equality.

He has served in many fields in academia including being an Acting Vice Chancellor of the Great Lakes University in 2017. He has more than 20 years teaching experience in university. He has attended numerous international conferences and done several consultancies in research and evaluation of programs and secured several funding proposals.