A Study of Participation of Luo Muslim Women in Funeral Rituals in Kendu Bay, Kenya: Implications for Christian Witness

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Abstract

Women have been key players in many of the funeral rituals in Africa. Among the Luo community in Kenya, they have played a critical role right from the time of death until the burial and even after. Among the rituals they are involved with, wailing and wife inheritance are included. While these rituals were considered normal and in order among the Luo women in Kendu Bay, the coming of Islam and subsequent conversion of these women to this religion have brought a shift in their role and participation in the funeral rituals. The shift, however, is such that there is an integration of some Luo traditions with Islamic practices. This synthesis has elicited interest in understanding the kind of Muslims these Luo women are. In an attempt to discover their identity, the researcher begins by first looking at the Luo traditional understanding of death. Second, he explores the perception of the Luo Muslims on death and the kind of rituals that Luo Muslim women practice during funerals and after. He then gives theological and missiological implications to this study. In his conclusion, the researcher draws the attention of the Church on the need to understand the vital role these Luo Muslims play in the funerals and strategically work out a mechanism that will help to reach them with the gospel. The research was conducted in Kendu Bay using interviews between January and April 2020. The findings revealed that both African traditions and Islam have affected the way Luo Muslim women conduct rituals in funerals. The effect is such that they identify themselves as Muslims but with a complete synthesis of both Luo traditions and Islamic practices into one whole.

***Key Words**: Women, Islam, missiological, Muslims, participation, theological, funeral rituals*

INTRODUCTION

Islam has had a very significant influence on the Luo primal practices in Kendu-Bay since it entered the region in the early twentieth century. One such area focuses on funeral rituals among the Luo community. The Luo people are historically known to have elaborate rituals when it comes to death. A good example to illustrate this fact is the death of S.M. Otieno in 1986. He was a lawyer by profession but was married to Wambui from the central part of Kenya. The couple lived in Nairobi most of their lives and had

grown-up children. When Otieno died, there was a court battle between his clan and his wife Wambui that took almost one year to be resolved. The battle was about where Otieno was to be buried.

The claim by the clan for the deceased to be buried in his ancestral land which was granted by the court against Wambui's assertion that Otieno was a Christian and therefore had nothing to do with the traditions, emphasizes the seriousness by which the Luo community views death and its rituals. A study of how Luo Muslim converts grappled with this issue, bearing in mind the strong influence Islam has had over them, could have been very interesting to explore. However, due to limited time and space, the researcher will only seek to study the participation of Luo women in funeral rituals as converts in Islam.

The choice over this area of study is motivated by the fact that in most patriarchal societies, the Luo Muslims in particular, the participation of women in funeral rituals is quite demanding but also restrictive. This paper, therefore, seeks to provide both theologically and missiologically meaningful responses to issues affecting Luo Muslim women in their participation in funeral rituals.

LUO MUSLIM VIEW OF DEATH AND ITS RITUALS

As has been stated above, the coming of Islam into Kendu Bay brought a very significant influence on the way Luo rural society used to view death and the rituals associated with it.

Luo Traditional View of Death

In many rural African societies, including the Luo, death has both meaning and causes. According to Magesa, "death is perceived as a change of status, an entrance into a new and deeper relationship with clan, tribe, and family" (1997, p. 145). Regarding death as a relationship means that one does not cease to exist even though dead. The kind of existence that the dead assumes is a spiritual one. However, the change of status that Magesa speaks about means that the dead can no longer be related to in the same way as the living ones. The kind of relationship that now exists between the living and the dead explains the reason why certain rituals have to be carried out. It is in these rituals that women's participation becomes very central.

The fact that death was viewed as accidental (Gunga, 2009, p. 26) as well as intentional (Beattie,1966, p. 75), helps to explain why death was particularly viewed to have been caused by human agency. Mbiti explains this when he includes sorcery and witchcraft (1975, p. 116-117) as the perceived causes of death. The Luo people used to refer to death as *nindo* (sleep). As it can be recalled, Paul also while writing to the Thessalonians, refers to death as 'sleep' (1 Thess. 4:13, 15). It should, however, be noted that even though the same word, 'sleep,' is used to refer to death as indicated above, the Luo people were very deliberate in using the word 'sleep.' It was hardly possible to refer to death directly. But even if this should have been the case in their view, the Luo people were also conscious of the fact that the dead are still alive though in a spiritual state.

Luo Muslim View of Death

In its cultural interaction with the African traditional views, Sanneh describes what could be reflecting on the current Luo Muslim practices as a result of Islamic influence:

> In its essential nature, Islam threatened no radical secular alienation of African life and custom and was for that reason relatively easy to incorporate into the rhythm of traditional African life…In their encounter with African religions, Muslims brought materials from Islamic sources to complement and supplement traditional techniques of divination, oneirology, astrology, and similar practices. Thus, the Islamic additions to the stock of African religious and cultural thought and practice could be absorbed and used and often were, without destroying the general fabric of traditional society. They modified the fabric, introduced new strands and colors and patterns, and provoked new forms and fashions; yet the overall effect was almost everywhere one of reinforcement and renewal, not of destruction. (1997, p. 30-31)

As Sanneh has reflected above, Islam simply modified the Luo practices which include their view of death without necessarily replacing them. But this could have been so because of the catholic nature of Islam which easily absorbs and adapts to another culture without necessarily replacing it wholly. I.M. Lewis, while writing about some ritual practices that are common among Muslims, also shares a similar sentiment as captured by Sanneh:

> the ritual washing of the corpse to the accompaniment of prayer; the incensing of the body; the use of a bier to carry the corpse to the grave; the standard type and orientation of the grave towards Mecca; the ritual funeral service conducted by clerics; the sprinkling of earth over the grave; the ritual mourning of the bereaved (washing, seclusion, and purification); and observance of the subsequent ceremonies for the dead on the first, third, seventh, and fortieth days. All these elements or the majority of them…are variously combined with indigenous burial rituals. (1980, p. 70)

Although Lewis has pointed out various areas in Islam which have been combined by the indigenous practices, the focus of this research is mainly on those facets of funerals which include women's participation.

In contrast to the traditional Luo view, in Islam, death is believed to originate from God (Suras 6:2; 16:70; 26: 80-81; 53:44; 56:60). In other words, it is God who wills one to die. The Qur'an also concedes everyone is from God and to him they will return (2:256). Terming the death as from God is not in the sense that he allows it to happen but that he creates it (Al-Sabwah & Abdel-Khalek, 2006, p. 34-36). The view by Muslims that death is willed by God is simply part of the wider view that everything is willed by God. This is what Hedayat means when he attests that "Health and illness, life and death

are active processes in Islam willed by God" (2006, p. 1285).

But apart from viewing death as an act of God, Islamic scholars also view death as a transition or segment of a continuous life (Kramer, 1988; Abdalati, 1993; Athar, 1995). El-Aswad also adds that death is a transition from the visible to the invisible world (1987, p. 211). Death viewed from the above context creates a picture that its transition into the next world is an obvious prerogative for every Muslim. However, the transition into the next world is described as a very difficult experience for the wicked (Athar, 1995; Abdalati, 1993; Aziz, 1998; Gatrad, 1994). According to the Qur'an, death is seen as something from which no one can escape (Q 4:78). Lybarger describes death as "divinely inscribed fate" (2008, p. 521).

Having looked at the perspective of death from both Luo traditional and Luo Muslims, a significant issue that arises from all these has to do with women. What are the issues dealing with death as viewed by both traditional Luo and Muslims have to do with women's participation in the funeral? It is by looking at death through those two perspectives that a thorough understanding of the role women play in terms of rituals can be realized.

Luo Muslim Women Funeral Ritual Participation

Just as in many African societies, Luo women are actively engaged in funeral practices. Although there are several areas where participation of women in the funeral is evident, the major areas include mourning and widow inheritance. These two areas as underlined above have been very crucial as far as the Luo perspective is concerned. Their understanding from an Islamic perspective will nevertheless provide very significantly the basis to compare both cultures and the impact they have had on each other.

Mourning by Muslim Women

Since the term mourning might be very broad, the researcher here limits it to refer to wailing or weeping. Psychologically, women are known to weep more than men. Death provides a context where such weeping is expressed. According to Radcliffe-Brown, "death rituals are the collective expressions of feeling appropriate to the situation. In this common display of emotion, individuals signal their commitment to each other and to society itself. Ritual functions to affirm the social bond" (1968, p. 168). Since Radcliffe-Brown focuses on the rituals of death, he points out, though not directly, the weeping element by which emotions and feelings were expressed in a funeral. But also, Radcliffe-Brown highlights the fact that rituals such as weeping not only bring psychological but also social fulfillment. Although Radcliffe-Brown points to the meaning death rituals have in a society, it is Doren who expresses:

> A funeral is a very important social event that is believed to be vital in keeping in touch with the spirits of ancestors of the ethnic group. It was (and is) believed that the ancestors have the power to visit unpleasant supernatural consequences upon the living if burial and other rituals are not properly observed. Such sanctions could include illness, drought and death" **(**1988, p. 337)

Although Doren writes with no particular focus on the subject of weeping, she nevertheless outlines what the Luo people perceive to be a reason for carrying out rituals at a funeral. It is interesting that whereas in the Luo tradition weeping as a funeral ritual is encouraged among the women, the Luo Muslims limit or disregard it. This disregard for weeping as found in Islam has roots tracing back to the time of Muhammad and his followers.

Historical Background to Wailing Prohibition in Islam

According to Goldziher, the many early Islamic traditions point to the fact that Prophet Muhammad strictly forbade wailing, condemning these heartrending cries as an uncivilized, pagan ritual. The prophet was said to be particularly critical of women who tore their clothes, recited funeral dirges, and incited blood revenge and civil unrest (Goldziher, 1967, p. 241). But whereas one can easily understand the reason why Muhammad prohibited Muslim women from wailing from what Goldziher says, it is also important to provide further details of how prohibition came about. Several scholars have argued that: "According to Islam, one's death is predetermined. This is a key factor in regulating Muslim funeral and mourning rites" (Goldziher, 1967; Lane, 2003; Smith, 1980; Yasien-Esmael & Rubin, 2005). This is also in line with what the Qur'an says that death is from God (2:156; 16:70). Abu-Lughod also adds:

> Since all Muslims, hold that a person's time of death is determined in advance by God (some say written on his or her forehead), to wail and lament in grief might be seen as a kind of public defiance or protest against God's will. Bedouin men, who are considered more observant than women, are expected not to lament or sing. Even women must stop lamenting while the men pray over the corpse before burying it" (1993, p. 193).

Wailing is also understood as a risk in exposing Muslim homes to evil. The shock of death was rather to be accepted with a sense of patience and resignation - with *sabr*, that is, a virtue transformed in the Islamic context to encompass fortitude in the face of troubling and inexplicable events precipitated by the incomprehensible wisdom of God (Halevi, 2005, p. 13).

In the light of the above views, it is reasonable to argue that wailing was regarded as violating that (death) which God has caused to happen. But the further discovery also reveals that such a prohibition was not so much a matter of wailing per se but more so on the way women were wailing. Lane provides a contrast of two contexts that could help understand why a prohibition was decreed. He describes female peasants of Upper Egypt performing mourning dances and lamentations lasting for three days or more. These women cover their faces and bosoms in mud, dancing wildly with drawn swords and palm sticks. In contrast, Lane tells of women attending the funeral of a devout sheik:

> …in this case, there is no common wailing (*welwelch*) but rather the more respectful ululations of *zaghareet*, performed by female professionals who

> expertly deliver the ‘shrill and quavering cries of joy in a celebration of the sheik’s passage to *al-akhira* (2003, p. 516).

The reason why women were the only center of focus when it comes to the issue of wailing is interesting because every human is an emotional being and therefore even men ought to wail. But apart from the reasons provided for in the above that particularly touch on Muslim women being prohibited in wailing, there seems to be a difference in the way both men and women were viewed when it comes to this matter of wailing. This difference is highlighted by el-Aswad, who shares that bereaved men show, or are expected to show self-control and endurance. By contrast, females of the deceased’s family cry loudly repeating the name (or title) of the dead person (1987, p. 216). The early view of the Muslim women wailing also seems to suggest that women were often carried away by the way they were wailing as described by Halevi who claims that:

> Not only did women shriek and lament in ululation; they also scratched at their cheeks, drawing blood, and tore at their hair, directing their violent emotions against themselves. The ritual sometimes culminated in the tearing of the front of the garment to expose the area between the women's breasts, as a sign of mourning. Traditionally women had wailed out-doors, during the funeral procession and at the cemetery” (2005, p. 4-5)

Halevi puts it that wailing in itself was not a phenomenon commonly practiced in Islam (Ibid., p. 5). She further adds: “Violence against mourning women occurred often in early Islamic times, and with religious sanction. The Prophet Muhammad himself, according to an oral tradition, once ordered a man to scatter dust in the mouths of wailing women” (Ibid.). Apart from being given such treatment, “women were not allowed to participate in the procession. They follow the procession for a few yards, but men order them to return to the house” (el-Aswad, 1987, p. 218).

But whereas women were prohibited from wailing, and even from the procession to the burial site, as Dubisch puts it regarding Greek Muslim women:

> most of the duties connected with mourning in rural Greek communities customarily have fallen on women (usually wives, mothers, and/or daughters of the deceased). These duties involve not only the wearing of black mourning clothes for a specified period, but also various restrictions on activities (for example, attendance at festive events) and the tending of the gravesite, and the needs of the dead (1989, p. 195)

There is no doubt that Muslim women are quite involved in funeral rituals. However, their participation seems to be limited. The fact that they are not allowed to wail or follow the procession to the graveside begs the question of how they deal with the emotional trauma that comes as a result of the loss of their loved one.

Luo Muslim Women and Inheritance

Another very significant area where it could be interesting to examine how

Muslim women are treated is in the aspect of inheritance. Inheritance here is in two categories. First, there is the inheritance in terms of the division of property. But secondly, there is the inheritance of a wife in case of the death of the husband. In the case of division of property, Mondal explains that:

> According to the Muslim law of inheritance a man's property is divided in the following way: After the death of a person one-eighth of his property is inherited by his wife (if alive), and the rest by the sons and daughters. But the share of the sons is always double that of the daughters (1979, p. 44).

Mondal also outlines what happens in case a woman dies leaving behind property:

> The division of a woman's property is in the following way. After the death of a woman, half of her property goes to her husband, and the rest is divided among her sons and daughters. Here also the sons' share is double that of the daughters (Ibid., p. 45)

Although the idea of women having property of their own was not very common in many African settings, Mondal nevertheless draws our attention to a world where equality in wealth sharing between men and women is very minimal. About the above scenario, one would expect that just as when a woman dies, half of her property is given to her husband, the treatment should have been accorded to the wife in the sense that half of her husband's property is given to her.

But another form of inheritance is wife or widow inheritance. Prince explains this form of inheritance especially as it applies to the Luo community:

> A core area of concern is the practice of widow guardianship or 'inheritance', in which a widow must sleep with another man to 'cleanse' the death of her husband and 'open the way for future familial well-being and growth. Widow Inheritance is a focal practice of ritual regeneration within what has become known as 'Luo tradition'" (2007, p. 85)

Although there is no valid reason to suggest that wife inheritance is enforced among the Luo Muslim women, Islam nevertheless may allow it since it is adaptive to the local practice. However, during his previous research for his MTh thesis (Oseje, 2009), the researcher made a very interesting discovery among the Luo Muslim women. Some of them, particularly the widows, confided to him that they had become Muslims since Islam has little or no demand on widow inheritance as compared to Christianity or their traditional faith. Other than being inherited through cohabitation, these Luo Muslim widows expressed that Islam encourages them to re-marry if they so wish.

The issue of inheritance provides two parallel scenarios as far as Luo Muslim women are concerned. On one hand, there is an equal distribution of property between men and women when either of them dies. But on the other hand, Luo Muslim women welcome conversion into Islam due to its fair treatment as far as widow inheritance is

concerned. In the next section, the researcher will look into these matters, together with the aspects of mourning to provide both a theological and missiological framework by which relevant responses to the issues affecting the Luo Muslim women in their participation in funeral rituals can be addressed.

THEOLOGICAL AND MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As it has been observed in this paper, the participation of women in funeral rituals and their overall treatment is marked by mixed responses. Looking, for instance, at early Islamic history over the subject of mourning, different opinions are being expressed concerning whether or not to allow women to wail during a funeral. In an attempt to find a balance between the requirements of different traditions, the first step should involve reviewing the history. This history should date back to the pre-Islamic period. According to Rippin and Jan, "Islamic prehistory follows the line of the Biblical prophets, incorporating the Jewish and Christian elaborations of these stories along with adding special elements relevant to Islam" (1990, p. 5). The argument presented above shows that Islam as it is with all its practices including funeral rituals must have had its influence from both Jewish and Christian practices. Ayoub also expresses the same feelings when he writes that:

> For the most part, pre-Islamic Arab society had no well-developed religious rituals or belief systems. However, Jewish Arab and Christian Arab community did exist in Arabia long before the advent of Islam; even in the absence of full-fledged communities the beliefs of Jews and Christians were not unknown" (2004, p. 13).

If it is true that Islam has its roots in both Jewish and Christian culture, then it is appropriate to refer to the biblical texts as a basis for theological arguments over the participation of Muslim women in funeral rituals. But while the Bible should be referred to in providing a clear guideline, it should, however, be understood that the Bible does not directly present a clear perspective regarding women's participation in funeral rituals. But mourning as one of the rituals in a funeral is pointed out in the Bible. For instance, David wept bitterly when his son Absalom died (2 Sam.18:33). Widows were weeping when Tabitha died (Acts 9:36). Jesus himself wept over the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). All the above are examples of cases where the dead were mourned for.

The fact that Jesus also wept simply shows that weeping should be regarded as healthy. According to psychologists, people should be allowed to weep as a way of expressing their emotions. They suggest that tears not only cleanse the eyes but also provide emotional relief to the individual. Based on this fact, there is a need to teach and counsel people in such a way that they can release their emotions through the shedding of tears especially in a funeral situation. But also, it should be emphasized that mourning comes from one's heart and therefore it does not matter the duration. However, in any form of mourning the central focus must be on imparting hope and mourning as hopeful people. It was also discovered that there are certain ritual practices like wife inheritance that are still being carried out in some cultural contexts such as among the Luo people. The church should use such occasions as funerals to educate people of the danger of

HIV/AIDS as well as encouraging young widows to re-marry as per the teachings of the Bible. The church should be encouraged to support widows and orphans by providing them with some capital for small-scale business.

The Qur'an teaches patience and moderation regarding mourning (12:83-86). This is a passage that could be a source of inspiration to the Luo -Muslim women. This also takes care of the self-discipline that Muhammad once emphasized and also became the reason for him to prohibit Muslim women from mourning. Funeral rituals should also be viewed from a perspective that brings meaning as a very vital element in the cultural identity of the community. In so doing, funeral rituals, and more so the participation of women, will be more appreciated and encouraged as a way of preserving the cultural identity of the community. Ewelukwa puts it candidly when he says that:

> Burial and mourning rituals are justified on several grounds including the need to pay due respect to the dead, protect widows from the attacks of evil spirits, and even encourage the living toward good deeds. Some have suggested that economic motivations could also account for why women choose to undergo these rituals. In some localities, a feast is held in honor of a woman who successfully concludes the burial rituals (2002, p. 444)

CONCLUSION

Both Luo traditions and Islam view death differently. Women play a very critical role in most of the funerals among the Luo community in Kendu Bay. The two most common funeral rituals that they identify with are wailing and inheritance. Although Islam has affected the way Luo Muslim women participate in funerals, bringing a shift to rituals practiced, the traditional understanding is still evident. This research draws the Church's attention in understanding the role of Luo Muslim women in funerals. This understanding is both theological and missional.

The fact that Luo Muslim women intermingle with other non-Muslim women in funerals is a clear indication that one's identity as a sense of belonging to the Luo community is more important than one's religious identity. The emphasis should therefore be on what unites the community rather than what divides it. Taking the personal initiative to talk and appreciate these Luo Muslim women over the roles in the funeral might help them to open up concerning the challenges that they face during funerals.

Empowering Christian women with business and ministry skills to utilize them in witnessing to their fellow women in Islam would be helpful. The synthesis of Muslim and Luo cultures into a single whole makes Luo Muslim women identify themselves as Muslims. There is more orthopraxis than orthodoxy. In other words, they primarily seek answers on what affects them directly, such as sickness, death, and other calamities of life rather than on the right doctrines in Islam. The ministry of prayer and deliverance is very vital in addressing these areas of need.

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