

## **A Christian Response to the Neo-Traditional Death and Burial Rites among the Luo Community in Rarieda**

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### **Abstract**

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This study explores the current death and burial practices and rituals among the Luo community of Kenya. An ethnographic methodology was used to collect data through well-structured interviews among the selected population in Rarieda within Siaya County in Kenya. Participant observation of a funeral ceremony was also incorporated into the study. The data was then recorded, transcribed, translated, and analyzed using Weft QDA. Whenever a death occurs in the Luo community, people typically respond by inquiring about its actual cause. This study uses Hiebert's four steps of critical contextualization: phenomenology, ontology, critical evaluation, and missiological transformation. In this approach, one critically studies a ritual by listening to the people's ways of life, judging the rituals through the Scripture, and then critically evaluating the Scripture and the practice. In so doing, a transformative ministry is developed to help the affected individuals, that is, coping with bereavement and caring for widows and orphans.

**Keywords:** Luo; Death Rites; Burial; Funeral; Ritual; Widow Inheritance; Bereavement.

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### **Introduction**

Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou<sup>1</sup> point out that the search for meaning is a fundamental human craving and that meaninglessness is worse than death. They further argue that in formal religion, meaning is given by answering questions of ultimate reality- dealing with cosmic origins, nature, purpose, and the end of the universe, humankind, and the individual. Death is not simply a personal matter. It must be socially recognized and handled, and this is done through funeral rites. Further, Hiebert et al. analyze the essential functions of death rites.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul, Hiebert, Shaw Robert, and Tite Tiénou. 1999. *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 95.



First, they point out that death rites give meaning to life by recognizing the challenge of death and ritualizing people's responses to it. In their clarification, they assert that no society discards the bodies of the dead-on waste heaps. Second, funerals ritualize the separation of the living from the departed, "They set apart a time for mourning, demonstrations of sorrow, and processing grief, friends and extended family members gather to pay respect to the deceased and hold awake because it is unthinkable to leave the corpse."<sup>2</sup>

Luo people believe death does not just happen; there must be a cause. It could be a general ailment or caused by humans. In this worldview, there is no "natural death," especially at a young age. There must always be a cause that has to be ascertained. While analyzing the neo-traditional death and burial rites amongst the Luo community in Rarieda, this study used Hiebert's four critical contextualization processes because they appropriately address the aspects of religion and culture. The four steps of critical contextualization are (1) Phenomenological analysis (exegesis of the culture)- studying the cultural practices phenomenologically and uncritically. (2) Ontological critique (exegesis of the Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge)- studying the Scripture and what it says about a practice. (3) Evaluative response (critical response)- evaluate the cultural practice in light of the new understanding in the Scripture and (4) Transformative ministries (new contextualized practices)- incorporating new contextualized practices.<sup>3</sup>

While choosing Hiebert's four processes of critical contextualization, this study understands that this process should endeavor to remove unnecessary cultural trappings that may produce negative outcomes. According to Hiebert, contextualization must not rob the gospel of its prophetic voice. The overall focus of this study is to develop an understanding of the Luo Christian experience of death and burial among the Luo community in Rarieda with a view toward contextualization of these practices. The following section reviews relevant literature regarding death and burial practices in the Luo community.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Meaning and Causes of Death**

Human life has rites of passage, which begin at conception. After birth, a naming ceremony is performed for the newborn. According to the Luo community, the baby is given an ancestral

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<sup>2</sup> Hiebert, Shaw and Tiénou, "*Understanding Folk Religion*," 95.

<sup>3</sup> Hiebert, Paul, Shaw and Tiénou, "*Understanding Folk Religion*," 95.



name linked to the ancestors and the divine. The name given, therefore, must have a meaning attached to it. The other significant stages of life after the naming process include adolescence, marriage, and death. In Luo's traditional religion, life does not end with death but continues in another realm.

In any African society, death marks the beginning of an elaborate rite of passage for both the dead and the living kin. Just as there is a celebration when a child is born, death is honored whenever it occurs. It reveals Luo's deep-seated belief that death does not end life and, at the same time, that there are certain things that the dead cannot do by themselves and for which they depend on the living. Furthermore, they believe that after a person has died, he may occasionally come *ng'amaotho ok kuodhi* (literally, to warm himself) in his family's company in the evenings.

Although a dreaded event, death is perceived as the beginning of a person's deeper relationship with all of creation, the reality of life, and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death.<sup>4</sup> It is why every person who dies must be given a "proper" funeral, accompanied by several religious ceremonies. If this is not done, the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable "to live" properly after death and thus pose a danger to the living. It might be argued that "proper" death rites are more a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dying.<sup>5</sup>

It is believed that when an elderly person passes away, it's an invitation from their ancestors to undertake additional responsibilities. There is also a concept that Chira must have caused death.<sup>6</sup> Death of the young people is believed to be a curse, and that of the stillbirth is regarded as an abomination. Prescribed customs usually accompanied the death of a newly married man. According to Achieng:

When a man died, leaving a young wife who had not given birth, on the day that the grave was swept, she got a guardian. This was the fourth day after the pre-burial, *tero buru*, ceremony. If she did not have a house...a house was built for her, and she did not wear mourning garments, *tweyo chola*. The

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<sup>4</sup> Allan, Anderson. "African Religion-Rituals, World, Burial, Body, Funeral, Life, Customs, Beliefs, Time." 2014, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, 2 .

<sup>6</sup> Chira is a kind of sickness that was believed to have been caused by being disobedience to the laws of the land. It's signs and symptoms included; loss of body weight, skin colour turning pale and sudden death.



ceremony of getting a guardian, *tero mon*, for her did not have to wait for those of the elder wives, as she was the youngest wife in the polygamous home.<sup>7</sup>

The death of an old man was accepted, especially when it happened at night since the community would be present to express their sorrow openly, audibly, and collectively. Achieng discusses what happens when an older man dies:

It was at this time that the first wife stripped off her clothes and remained naked, followed by her co-wives because their husband, who had clothed them, was now dead. The sons and their wives, the married daughters, his sisters, the young and old sisters-in-law also stripped...the next day, the body was carried out and put on the veranda of the house of the first wife and, on this day, the deceased's pre-burial ceremony, *buru*, was performed.<sup>8</sup>

Most people spend their resources to appease the dead and fulfill all the rites and rituals so that they don't fall into the snare of the curse of their ancestors. Odhiambo adds, "Anything including sickness that eventually leads to one's death always raises questions regarding the circumstances under which such death has occurred...A curse from an elder is also believed to cause death."<sup>9</sup> These laws are observed during home building, planting season, childbirth, wife inheritance, death, and burial seasons.

In the Luo community, some deaths were termed as "bad death" because they were unusual. In such an occurrence, cleansing of the land became appropriate and necessary. Every "bad death" needed cleansing lest the whole land receive a curse.

### **Burial Ceremony**

The burial ceremony is a special rite among the Luo's. In this inference, Malo asserts, "The clan goes for a pre-burial ceremony, *tero buru*, in the forest. If they meet enemies, a fight might ensue for them to avenge the dead man. As they return home, the wailing and weeping peaks, and the women come out to meet them."<sup>10</sup> He further narrates, "The clan and family members keep vigil in the home of the bereaved until burial. The family and clan members prostrate themselves on the body as they weep and wail. If the dead person has died of a

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<sup>7</sup>Jane, Achieng. *Paul Mboya's Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi*. (Nairobi, Kenya: Atai Joint, 2001), 123.

<sup>8</sup> Achieng, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Oseje, Odhiambo L. "A Study of the Influence of Islam on the Traditional Death and Burial Rites of the Luo Community in Kendu-Bay: Implications for Christian Witness" (MTh. Thesis, Nairobi Evangelical School of Theology, 2009), 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> Sahrack, Malo. *Luo Customs and Practices*. (Nairobi, Kenya: Sciencetech Network. 2003), 79.



disease that spreads, many people can get it and die. Even then, the close kinship of the Luo stays forever."<sup>11</sup>

Before the burial day, elders meet to organize the ceremony by looking into details such as food, burial site, seating area, and burial program. If the deceased is a woman, they would slaughter a cow, but if a man, then a bull would be slaughtered. The burial is a community affair. Usually, people would stop working to attend the burial ceremony. Jindra and Noret assert, "In many African societies today, funerals and commemorations of death are the largest and most expensive cultural events, with families harnessing vast amounts of resources to host lavish events and try to regulate them, often with little effect."<sup>12</sup> Funeral ceremonies have become the most expensive ceremonies, and that is why when one dies, two cries emerge in the loss of the dead and the fear of meeting the financial expenses of the funeral. It is noted that "Funerals are tearful, yet fearful: the rituals attempt to assuage grief through the induction of the deceased into the collective memory, yet at the same time they are a means to bid farewell."<sup>13</sup>

The announcement is made through wailers and the beating of the drums in the traditional setup. Sometimes, the family employs wailers who are always women if the deceased is a respected person in the community. Shiino explains how the death announcement was made among the Luos, "People come to know of death by hearing the woman's long, quivering wail, followed by the sound of drums. The death is always announced in the early morning or in the evening."<sup>14</sup> Also, "The close relatives of the deceased, such as the spouse(s), parents, step-mothers, brothers and sisters, and first and second patrilineal cousins, must stay within the compound of the deceased throughout several nights until the burial day. Two to four days pass before the burial because relatives living in cities have to return to their rural homeland."<sup>15</sup> The Luo "expresses their lament or anger over death verbally as they mourn their dead. While listening carefully, one would hear words like; *Yawa jojuogigi onegonua ngatwa mwageno* (this evil person has killed our own whom we

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<sup>11</sup> Malo, "Luo Customs and Practices," 79.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Jindra, and Joel Noret. *Funerals in Africa: Explorations of a Social Phenomenon*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Jindra, and Noret, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Wakana, Shiino. "Death and Rituals among the Luo in South Nyanza." *Africa Study Monographs* 1, no. 18(1997): 213-228, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Shiino, "Death and Rituals," 2.



have depended on)."<sup>16</sup> Such lamentations point to a human cause of death rather than a natural or supernatural cause.<sup>17</sup>

Elders choose the burial site. An appropriate site is marked either in the family's graveyard or elsewhere. If the deceased is *migogo*, (unmarried woman), the burial site is off the homestead. There are extreme instances when the dead would "refuse" to be ferried back home from the mortuary. This is when the vehicle fails to move completely, or a bad accident happens on the way. A spiritual intervention must be made by bringing a diviner or a medium who shall talk with the dead or some sacrifice offered on his/her behalf.

Many rituals accompany the preparation period. During the mourning period, the dead man's wives do not cook. It is expected that the clans would bring food over the morning period. Rituals and rites were performed to strengthen the relationship between the living and the dead and avoid unpleasant events.<sup>18</sup>

The funeral ceremony is highly attended. It becomes a center stage for politics and a party bazaar. Achieng describes the burial of an old man,

As the body was lowered into the grave, there was absolute silence because they parted with him in peace. The faces of those present showed grief, and their heads were bowed. Those who were holding spears held them with the spearheads pointing down. The filling of the grave with soil took place at sunset when the cattle had come back home from grazing; meanwhile, the grave was covered with a skin hide or with a shutter. When the grave was being filled, the first son from the eldest wife was the first to throw soil into the grave, and then all other sons followed according to their mother's seniority in order of marriage.<sup>19</sup>

It is also believed among the Luo's that one's might is known by the number of people who attend their funeral ceremony. If only a few people showed up during the burial and no prior preparations were made for the ceremony, then people would conclude that the person was either not loved or did not love his people. In the case of a mammoth crowd, it would show the kind of impact the deceased left in the community.

### **Rites at Death and Burial**

The burial of the deceased is not always the end of the entire ceremony; some rites and rituals must be performed in the aftermath. Once the corpse is buried, the cleansing process starts

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<sup>16</sup> Odhiambo, "Death and Burial rites," 18.

<sup>17</sup> Odhiambo, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Odhiambo, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Achieng, 108.



with a sacrifice. There are also death dances to recognize the transition. Shiino narrates how the shaving of the head is done to launch the mourning period, "Four days after the burial, people shave their heads. A razor blade is usually used. The first shave is supposed to mark the beginning of the mourning period. At the end of mourning, those who were shaven are shaven again, which marks the beginning of their new life."<sup>20</sup> The head shaving was a clear sign that one was bereaved, and the entire community was to be empathetic and care for them.

The burial of an older man was marked with many rituals, and even after the ceremony, numerous rituals were performed. Achieng explains what happens immediately after the burial of an older man:

...on the third day of celebrations, members of the family of the deceased were shaved. At ten in the morning, before the celebrators came, a close cousin of the deceased uprooted a pillar that supported the veranda roof of the first wife's house. The women, girls, and unmarried men, and boys carried this post on which a creeping herb, *obunde*, was tied. They carried it through the gate while they were completely naked, without even a thread on the waist.<sup>21</sup>

Odhiambo discusses wife inheritance as a vital ritual among the Luo. He states, "In the case of the death of a husband, his wife being inherited is almost done immediately following the burial. The wife of the deceased is regarded as unclean, and only the ritual of inheritance through sexual contact can cleanse her. Until that inheritance takes place, the wife of the deceased cannot freely mix with other women or carry somebody else's baby, lest the baby dies suddenly."<sup>22</sup> He further notes that there must be a ritual cleansing of the deceased family for them to be accepted entirely as members of the community. If a man dies, then many rituals follow; the wife is inherited, the bereaved are shaved, and a memorial service follows after the burial, among others. If a woman dies, then the man will be allowed to marry another woman to fill the gap. The HIV pandemic has worsened the situation further. The inherited widows are infected with HIV if the inheritor is HIV-negative or vice versa. Children are left as orphans, and some die of hunger; the widows/widowers' resources are spent haphazardly, and some are forcefully taken.

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<sup>20</sup> Shiino, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Achieng, 110.

<sup>22</sup> Odhiambo, 36.



Glenn points out that "death is not our friend. Death is not a celebration. Death is not natural. Death is punishment. Death is the horrendous separation of body and soul. Death is that climatic enemy whose tentacles reach back into our lives in so many hostile ways through sin and demonic evil."<sup>23</sup> It is a reality that harms human beings. Many people are not willing to experience the reality of death because of its agony.

### **A Christian Response**

Death is a subject discussed in the Bible. Apostle Paul declares, "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death."<sup>24</sup> Glenn asserts that "A focus on the physicality of the death of the body necessitates the redemption of the body. Death is not fully undone when the soul goes to be with Jesus. The death that consigns the body to decay and dust needs to be defeated as well."<sup>25</sup> This means that death does not destroy completely; even though the human body dies, our soul does not die. Glenn describes the biblical hope after death: "It is a time of refreshment and joy. It is far better than what we experience now in this life. It is a blissful consciousness of our Saviour's loving and protecting presence."<sup>26</sup> The Bible is colored with verses about life beyond death, encouraging Christians to have hope after physical death. Jesus' words sound encouraging: "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."<sup>27</sup>

Ministering to the bereaved family is an opportune time for evangelization. Since death is inevitable, Christians should do something about the fear of death by bringing hope to those dying or bereaved.<sup>28</sup> In times of loss or inadequacy, one tends to come closer to God. Bereaved people need someone to comfort them by bringing them closer to God. Kubler-Ross describes the feelings of one in grief, "Persons in grief have a whole jungle of emotions in their guts which need to be expressed in some way. Sometimes openly, sometimes by talking, sometimes by crying, sometimes poetically, sometimes through ritual: there are many ways,

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<sup>23</sup> Glenn, Nielsen, "Things We Do Not Fully Preach About Preparing to Die," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014). <https://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss1/3>, 23-24.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Cor15:26, NKJV

<sup>25</sup> Glenn, 24

<sup>26</sup> Glenn, 25.

<sup>27</sup> John 6:40, NKJV.

<sup>28</sup> Janet, Ramsey L. "Dying and Fear: Implications for Pastoral Care." *Word & World* 31, no. 1 (2011): 57-64, 57.



but people must have the opportunity to express real feelings because unresolved grief is a destructive horror.<sup>29</sup>

## Methodology

### Ethnographic Research

This study used a qualitative approach highlighting "participants' views about a particular phenomenon."<sup>30</sup> The interactions, participant observations, and interviews with bereaved couples, counselees, pastors, widowers, and widows highlight the issues Christians face. The research site was in Rarieda, Siaya county, in Kenya. The data research was conducted in 2022 between January and September. The selection of these members entailed both genders aged between 20 and 60. The table below shows the age/gender distribution.

| Age          | Male     | Female   | Total     |
|--------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 20-29        | 1        | 1        | 2         |
| 30-39        | 3        | 1        | 4         |
| 40-49        | 2        | 3        | 5         |
| 50-59        | 1        | 1        | 2         |
| 60>          | 1        | 1        | 2         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>8</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>15</b> |

### Data Collection Method

The researcher used two methods to collect his data: structured questions for the interviews and participatory observation of a burial ceremony. The interviews were structured to allow the interviewees to narrate their experience because "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience."<sup>31</sup> Interviews to gather data were helpful because rituals and oral narratives are the key sources from which scholars obtain the people's religious beliefs in Africa.<sup>32</sup> The interviewees were all community dwellers. All of them were Christians, and their ages ranged from 20 years to 60 years. I conducted individual interviews, each lasting about 20–30

<sup>29</sup>Elizabeth, Kubler-Ross. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 2005, 93.

<sup>30</sup> John, Creswell and Creswell. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Creswell and Creswell, "Research Design," 15.

<sup>32</sup> Tiénou, Tite. "African Traditional Religions" In *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 15.



minutes. Participant observations at funerals enabled me to observe rituals associated with death.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher recorded, transcribed, and translated the data from Luo to English. This data included the researcher's participant observation notes immediately after the observation and the interviews. Later, the data was analyzed according to theories emerging from the data. LeCompte & Schensul<sup>33</sup> assert that analysis "turns raw data into 'cooked data' or 'results.' Results describe what happened in a study and are critical steps leading to the end product." After transcribing the data, the researcher organized the data into themes and sub-themes and assigned codes to various categories that were generated. According to LeCompte & Schensul,<sup>34</sup> "coding involves organizing data into categories related to framework and questions guiding the research so that they can be used to support analysis and interpretation." The data was coded using a computer program called Weft QDA.

### **Findings**

The study investigated the Luo community's traditional death and burial rites. The following are the findings related to pre-burial, burial, and post-burial ceremonies.

#### **Pre-Burial Ceremony**

According to the study, the pre-burial ceremony immediately begins after one dies. The death announcement is made through any means that can reach the relevant people the fastest. Some people respond in various ways, such as crying, wailing, and ululating, while others remain silent. After this, the family and friends gather to arrange for the burial ceremony. The following are some of the related events to the pre-burial ceremony.

#### ***Announcement of Death***

When one dies, the news of death will be brought to the concerned people through the available means. In the first instance, people respond with loud cries, which becomes a means through which the news of death is spread. One respondent who had lost a loved one narrated, "The news reached us when I was at home through someone who had come from the hospital. People cried when they heard the news. Many were asking what might have killed her since

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<sup>33</sup> Margret, LeCompte D. and Schensul J. *Analysis and Interpreting Ethnographic Data: A Mixed Method Approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press. 2013), 45.

<sup>34</sup> LeCompte & Schensul, "Analysis and Interpreting Ethnographic Data," 45.



she had not been sick for long."<sup>35</sup> Studies done by Hiebert et al. have shown that funerals ritualize the separation of the living from the departed.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Condolence Meetings***

After the announcement of death, the next stage is the condolence meetings. The main purpose of these meetings is to solicit funds for the burial process and to make the arrangements for the burial, including food, hosting visitors, seating arrangements, transporting the body back home, and paying the hospital bill, amongst others. Occasionally, the meetings are organized more than once, depending on the organizers' needs or the funeral's size. In some occasions, permission is sought from the chief to get a burial permit; a church is requested to come and preside over the burial ceremony.

### ***Digging the Grave***

Identifying where the deceased would be buried is a critical concern. The elders who understand the tradition are responsible for this process. Once the place is identified, digging the grave begins immediately, either by volunteers or hired people. In one case, a long debate erupted as to where and the position of the grave. One respondent pointed out what ensued in one of the funerals attended, "There was a long debate on where he would be buried. Some people suggested the position where his head would face since he was an elderly person, while others pleaded that the burial should show respect to the departed elderly man. We unanimously agreed on the place and looked for some young men who helped us dig the grave late in the evening."<sup>37</sup>

### ***Burial Ceremony***

The burial ceremony completes the funeral process of the deceased. Most funeral ceremonies are highly attended, and numerous activities happen. This study examines the following aspects: collective mourning, giving of testimonies, church ceremonies, burial disputes, and celebrations.

### ***Collective Mourning***

The burial ceremony is usually marked with mourning of the bereaved. There are moments of wailing and crying, mainly by the women, while men are somber. Painful deaths attracted

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<sup>35</sup> Interview #2, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Hiebert, Paul, Shaw and Tiénou, "Understanding Folk Religion," 102.

<sup>37</sup> Interview #3, 2022.



more extended mourning periods, even after the burial had taken place. Collective mourning indicated that the deceased was respected and loved by the community. The funeral function is marked by singing, crying, weeping, ululating, and chanting. People sometimes carry clubs and tree leaves, swinging the coffin as a sign of mourning. In some cases, professional mourners were hired to help with collective mourning.

### ***Giving Testimonies***

Giving testimony about the deceased person was common in almost all the burial ceremonies in this study. It was when people either praised the deceased or talked ill about them. In most cases, the testimonies were positive messages offered to the departed soul. There is an order in which such testimonies were given. One respondent remarked, "On the burial day, we had a list of those who would give testimony (*nano*). These people included the family members, those who had married his daughters (*ochene*), those whom he had married their daughters (*merene*), his brothers (*owetene*), and his close confidants."<sup>38</sup> From such testimonies, people would generally speak well about the deceased person. The deceased is praised as a good, humble man who is jovial, loving, and merciful, renowned by his people, maintains good relationships, and is development-oriented. On rare occasions, people spoke negatively regarding the deceased, mentioning traits such as being high-tempered, very strict, a bad person, and a drunkard.

### ***Church Ceremony***

This study found that most of the bereaved Christians interviewed opted for the church burial rather than the traditional burial ceremony. Even the deceased who were not attached to any church were buried by the church after the family members made a requisition. This is because many people felt that the church provided hope during death. This finding is supported by Ramsey, who pointed out that the church can have the great privilege of helping bring Christ into the rooms of dying.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Burial Disputes***

This study included many incidences where a burial dispute occurred. A respondent narrates one such incident:

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<sup>38</sup> Interview #5, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Ramsey, 57.



There was a woman who adamantly refused that her co-wife be buried in their homestead. There was a fight that broke out at the funeral that night. The co-wife closed the gate, went to her room, and adamantly refused to open it. Young men who were prepared for the confrontation came forcefully and opened the gate, allowing the vehicle to enter. When this woman saw the scenario, she screamed and started throwing stones at people. The conflict attracted many people who came to watch the free wrestling performed at the funeral. Some mourners turned to cheer the people fighting while others intervened to restore peace in the home. After some time, the police came and calmed the situation.<sup>40</sup>

Most burial disputes arise when people want to take the deceased person's property. In most cases, they are resolved by the church, family members, elders, or court of law.

### ***Caring for Visitors***

The welfare of the visitors is given attention. Arrangements for food and refreshments were made depending on the ability of the family, friends, and relatives to provide. Some take the funeral as a celebration mood and a social gathering where people would meet to eat and drink together. Jindra and Noret's studies have shown that most funeral ceremonies are costly, terming two cries in one.<sup>41</sup>

### **Post-Burial Ceremony**

Some ceremonies were performed immediately or some days after the burial ceremony.

### ***Celebrations after the Burial***

Even after the burial of the deceased, celebrations continued for some time. One respondent said, "After burial, music played at night attracted people to stay with the bereaved family. Many people came to dance, eat, drink, and be with the family."<sup>42</sup>

### ***Widow Inheritance***

The widow inheritance ceremony was performed at some funerals. A suitable man who was a relative of the deceased man was identified to inherit the bereaved wife. Gifts were always given to this man as a sign of appreciation before he performed the inheritance exercise. Such gifts would include the deceased man's belongings. The man had the task of taking care of the woman and the deceased man's children, including the homestead. In most occasions, the man was required to have sex with the widow as a cleansing ritual.

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<sup>40</sup> Interview #6, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Jindra and Noret 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Interview #15, 2022.



After the memorial service, it was a solemn moment to look for one who would inherit the widow of the deceased. A decision is made on who among the close brothers or cousins of the departed would inherit the wife. The man is given clothes and gifts, which include the old man's stuff. The remaining clothes of the deceased are distributed to the uncles and close friends of the family.<sup>43</sup>

### **Memorial Service**

A memorial service is a ceremony often observed after the burial. Some do it immediately, while others may take months after the burial. This ceremony is always marked with events as the bereaved family and the members of the community congregate to remember their loved ones. Food and drinks are always prepared enough for the visitors. Occasionally, people chant, ululate, and sing, praising their departed one. One informant narrated,

After six months, there was yet another ceremony known as *sawo* (memorial service), which was celebrated in a big way. Our family members came from different places a day to the ceremony. Gifts and presents are brought on that material day. Some brought the local brews, and food. Women came singing and ululating while men were chanting and dancing. People then ate to their full.<sup>44</sup>

## **Discussion**

This study employed Hibert's four critical contextualization steps to analyze the Luo community's death and burial rite. The four steps include phenomenology, ontology, critical evaluation, and missiological transformation.

### **Phenomenology**

The first step in critical contextualization is phenomenology. It seeks to study the situation as we see it and understand how people see it. Hiebert et al.<sup>45</sup> argue that "studying culture means understanding the categories, assumptions, and logic the people use to construct their world." The present study looked into pre-burial, burial, and post-burial ceremony stages.

In the pre-burial ceremony, different practices were observed, such as death announcement, mourning period, arranging for the burial meetings, fundraising, grave digging, praying at the grave, rites with the corpse, preserving the body of the deceased,

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<sup>43</sup> Interview #7, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Interview #8, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Hiebert, Paul, Shaw and Tiénou, "Understanding Folk Religion," 95.



chanting and singing, slaughtering an animal, escorting the body of the deceased back home, and renovating the deceased house. The practices at the burial ceremony included preparing food for the guests, giving testimonies, collective mourning, fundraising, making a big fire, praying with the bereaved, carrying the casket to the grave, and pouring soil into the grave. In the post-burial, the following practices were narrated: casting away the spirit of the dead, clearing the grave, memorial service, and wife inheritance.

### **Ontology**

The second step in critical contextualization is to examine the phenomenological claims in light of reality checks and Scripture and to judge the situation. Having studied the rites that happen at the three stages (pre-burial, burial, and post-burial stage), this study identified the theological and socio-cultural issues involved in these cases. A few of these cases included:

- Should Christians participate in the collective mourning? What about chanting and singing?
- How should Christians talk about the deceased?
- How should the bereaved care for their guests at a funeral? Should the celebration be philanthropic?
- How should the church deal with the issue of widow inheritance? How should the church care for the orphans and the widows?
- Is memorial service sinful? What does it mean? How should it be practiced?
- Who causes the death of people? Should we accuse others of having caused the death of another person?
- How should the Christian community treat the accused persons?

The next step was to analyze the scriptures to determine the principles guiding our judgments. In this place, the study examined how the character of God informs our judgment. God is so loving and caring. God is compassionate;<sup>46</sup> hence, the decision must take into account the bereaved, widows, widowers, orphans, and the accused persons who are the real victims. God is concerned that none should perish even in times of death; therefore, the door to reconciliation, care, and salvation is open to all.

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<sup>46</sup> There are several scriptures that supports that God is loving, caring, and compassionate: Psalms 121:3; Isaiah 49:5; Matthews 10:30-31.



The next stage was to examine specific issues that arise in this case. The question of mourning the dead is well illustrated in the Bible. When people were asked why the grave should be prayed for before the digging began, the response was that they feared that without the prayer, they would soon die if they dug the grave. Thus, the fear and spirit of death were cast away by praying.

Giving testimonies about the dead was also examined. The Bible does not condemn giving testimony of what the deceased did when they were still alive. However, it categorically speaks against idol worship or worshipping the dead.

### Critical Evaluation

The third stage is critical evaluation. Hiebert et al.<sup>47</sup> argue that the church needs to critically evaluate its existing beliefs and customs in the light of its new biblical understandings and to make decisions based on this newfound truth. This study assessed the recurring concepts of death and burial rites and the implications and motivations behind the practices.

The Bible talks of the resurrection of the dead<sup>48</sup> and explicitly explains that those who die in Christ will be resurrected. Christians should not be ignorant regarding these scriptures; they should not mourn as hopeless people. Giving testimonies of the deceased is a good concept that should encourage the living to live a good life. Good virtues should be emulated, while vices should be avoided. Celebrations made to the visitors of the bereaved should be re-examined. The Bible encourages Christians to welcome strangers to their homes because, in so doing, some people welcome angels. However, the bereaved should accept and host the guests who come to console them but within their means.

Widow inheritance is a practice where a widow is cared for by a brother or a paternal cousin of her late husband. Among the Luo, a woman whose husband has died is called *chieliel* (literally, the wife of the grave), implying that she continues to be officially married to him even after his death. Agot<sup>49</sup> argues that an inheritor must take care of (*rito*) and not take over (*kawo*) his brother's home and family. The widow refers to him as the one brother-in-law "I live with" or "who takes care of me" rather than "my husband." This has become one of the practices where women are abused and disinherited.

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<sup>47</sup> Hiebert, Paul, Shaw and Tiénou, 96.

<sup>48</sup> As recorded in Acts 24:15 and 1 Corinthians 15.

<sup>49</sup> Everylenes, Agot. "Widow Inheritance and HIV/AIDS Intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa: Contrasting Conceptualizations of 'Risk' and 'Spaces of vulnerability.'" Ph.D. diss., University of Washington. 2001, 80.



### **Missiological Transformation**

The final step in critical contextualization is ministry transformation. Transformation is an ongoing process that requires time. Hiebert et al. postulate two levels of transformation; on one level, transformation is personal, where people become new creatures. In this regard, this study suggests missiological transformations in individuals and the community.

### ***Coping with Bereavement***

This study established the importance of coping with bereavement. The study discovered different responses that occur when one is bereaved. Some families had a lot of sadness and anxiety about how to take care of their loved ones. Some suffered depression and pain as a result of the death of a loved one. There were occasions when the properties of the deceased were taken, which created tension. Some families had a normal life after the death, but some experienced major changes. Some feared that death might come back to them again. This study also found that bereaved children suffered a great loss after the death of their parents. This study adopts Kastenbaum's<sup>50</sup> suggestions for adults helping children cope with bereavement.

- i. Develop and maintain an open communication pattern with children.
- ii. Give children the opportunity to decide about attending the funeral.
- iii. Find what the child is thinking and feeling, not assume that we know what death means to them.
- iv. Encourage the expression of feelings.
- v. Provide convincing assurance that somebody will always love and look after the child.
- vi. Professional counseling should be considered if the bereaved child is at special risk.

### ***Caring for Widows and Orphans***

This study shows that the bereaved were not cared for much. Most of these bereaved were women who became widows and children who became orphans. Some widows suffered humiliation by traditional practices like widow inheritance. Some lost their properties when the people redistributed them. One child who became a total orphan faced threats from the community who informed him they were going to appropriate the land and the wealth of his late grandmother.

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<sup>50</sup>Robert, Kastenbaum and Moreman Christopher. *Death, Society, and Human Experience*, 12<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315232058>



The study showed that fear gripped the lives of most widows and orphans either because of loneliness or because of another death that might occur again. Some of these people thought that what killed their loved ones might also come to them, so they feared death. Sometimes, mourners accused the bereaved of being responsible for the death of the deceased, while other people did not offer any bereavement support. For this reason, this study recommends that the church care for the widows and orphans.

James 1:27 is relevant while caring for the widows and orphans; "Religion that God our Father considers pure and faultless is this: that you visit orphans and widows in their distress and keep yourself unstained by the world" (NKJV). Sherman<sup>51</sup> points out that our 'visiting' of orphans and widows in their distress involves a ministry among them that imparts life.

### Conclusion

This study examined the Luo traditional death and burial rites while highlighting the church's need to contextualize traditional practices. The research indicated that the church in Rarieda has limited theological knowledge related to traditional death and burial practices to contextualize the gospel's purpose. The church, therefore, needs to apply theological knowledge in engaging and responding to the practices of death and burial rites.

Although several studies have already been carried out to apply and adapt Hiebert's four critical contextualization steps, further investigation and evaluation of each are recommended. For example, an inquiry can be made to determine what kind of hermeneutical procedures best suit the ontological critique needed in critical contextualization.

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<sup>51</sup> Army, Sherman. "Visiting orphans and widows." *Family And Community Ministries* 22, no.2 (2008):26.



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