

# Aspects of Impact of Covid 19 on African Traditional Burial Systems.: The Case of the Bukusu of Kenya's North-Western Counties

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**Abstract:** The conjoining of the unforeseen Covid-19 pandemic on the social fabric of the Africans automatically invokes an assorted mix of analytic and philosophic questions. For example: What are the impacts of covid\_19 on the African traditional burial systems pastoral and associated values, customs and traditions? This paper is anchored in the framework of the Sociocultural theory and will attempt an ethnographic analysis establishing the impact of the Covid 19 on the Bukusu nation in Kenya. It is important to point out here that the first Covid 19 death case was a person from Bukusu society in the North western Parts of Kenya. The manner in which the burial was conducted was very different from the normal Bukusu culture and traditions hence the need to study the impact of this corona disease on the African traditional systems. The paper adopted an ethnographic approach in data collection, analysis and interpretation. The qualitative data will involve conducting key informant interviews via phone calls and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in form of Zoom meetings, to explore and hear the experiences of covid\_19 on the family members of the deceased and the impact on the social fabric of the said community. Methodological triangulation ensured that the study analysis and recommendations are sound and built on diverse perspectives. The unit of analysis was the individual household which have experienced a Covid 19 death case. The target respondents of the closed/structured survey questionnaires were based on gender (either a woman or a man household head) in an alternating way. While as a pioneering study, this study will enrich our understanding and advances our knowledge around the impacts of covid\_19 African Traditional Burial systems, that is important in shaping the changes in terms of culture and traditions. The findings suggest that the understanding of death is fundamental to understanding the social fabric and belief systems of 'traditional' societies.

**Keywords:** Covid 19, Africans, burial rights, effect, Bukusu, Kenya

## I. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus has upended the world's operating assumptions. Now, all attention is focused on countering this new and extreme threat, and on blunting the force of the major recession that is likely to follow. In a country like Kenya which is keen on maintaining the traditions and customs of its people, the effect of Covid 19 on the social fabric of these communities is significant and has rapidly changed the ways societies prepare and conduct the burial rites. Many Kenyan societies especially those in the Rift,

South and North Western are disproportionately affected by the pandemic in regards to culture and traditions. This paper explored the effect of the impact of Covid 19 on the Bukusu culture and traditions.

With the understanding that the COVID-19 epidemic is an equalizer in affecting people of all regions, races, nationalities, and social strata, there is evident indication that the impact on African Societies is worst in respect to culture and traditions. This paper was guided by the following questions; what are the impacts of covid\_19 on the culture and traditions of the Bukusu society; How are state and non-state actors in the culture sector suppressing the transmission of the virus to control the pandemic; How does the Bukusu nation embrace the change in the burial rites in order to save lives; and What are the immediate next steps and potential future actions that can be taken to restore Bukusu community way of life and bring the community back to normal? Due to increased cases of Covid 19 death related cases, there is as imminent disintegration of the very social fabric of the African communities as embedded and anchored in culture and traditions hence the communities are highly vulnerable. Therefore, it is important to know the effect of the impact of Covid 19 on the Bukusu traditional systems in order to be able to enhance the adaptive capacity of such societies. Therefore, this study is paramount in providing evidence-based recommendations to help in achieving policy responses to COVID-19. Our goal in this paper is to describe aspects of Babukusu culture and traditions on burial rites and the impact of Covid 19 on the same.

The elaborate burial preparations and ceremonies in Bukusu Society demonstrate that death and funeral rites a mystery in this community. This is so because the Bukusu believe in the cosmology of the living dead and the ancestors. The ceremonies are thus meant to prepare for the dead's departure and life after with the ancestors. Failure to perform such ceremonies thus denies the living and the dead transition right into the next world and the right for the living to cut links with the dead. Therefore, in view of the new guidelines on burial of a Covid 19 dead person, as will be explained shortly, it is evident that the traditional customs and traditions as pertains funeral; preparations and burial cannot be followed. This is a major paradigm shift especially for the Bukusu nation which

has a unique way of sending off the departed as culture demands.

Deaths and burials among the Bukusu are also full of symbolism which essentially underscore the belief cosmology of the Bukusu in regards to the link between the living, the dead and the living dead. Symbolism such as the one in the after-death cleansing ritual for purposes of continuity of life may not be observed after all in the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic.

It is important to mention that funeral preparations and burial rites are performed according to the level of the dead. For instance, this could be according to the gender, social status, leadership, clan from which the dead hails from such as (Balunda, who bury their dead while seated, burial of revered persons like the healers, village elders, medicine men, rainmakers, diviners, prominent people/ social status, age, natural factors such as childlessness, etc). For instance, a person who holds a very high social status is accorded a hero's funeral as a mark of reverence for the virtue that defined his life. A case in point is the Late Hon. Kijana Wamalwa, the former Vice President of Kenya, a Bukusu, who was accorded such revered burial rites, other revered personalities who were accorded heroic burials include, Masinde Muliro, the former FORD-KENYA Party Chair and the founder of FORD party. With this understanding therefore, it is worth mentioning that with the Covid 19 Burial procedures and regulations, such elaborate burial traditions may not be possible. Given the fact that elaborate funeral rites and burial ceremonies as a culture define the anthropological perspectives of the Bukusu, it is regrettable that Covid 19 might have changed or will soon change this perspective. This therefore begs the question of how the society is prepared for the post-covid 19 changes in culture and the possible ramifications.

Most Luhya sub clans have their own unique way of performing burial rites. In essence, there are burial ceremonies that are performed in public or private. It is also important to mention that the Bukusu still conduct ancient customary burial ceremonies hence the Covid 19 burial regulations constrains, restricts and impedes the performance of these ancient customs. Though the Bukusu society has slowly fused traditional and Christian rites at funeral, the two rites usually coexist and it happens in such a way that the Christian rite would only be in terms of the church service or mass but thereafter, the normal Bukusu burial rites take precedence.

## II. THE BUKUSU OF THE NORTH WESTERN KENYA

This work was conducted with Bukusu community of the Luhya nation in Southwestern Kenya. The Babukusu predominantly occupy Bungoma County in western Kenya. They are one of the seventeen sub-nations, or more, that comprise the Baluyia cluster of the Bantu groups of the East African region [16]. The other Baluyia sub-nations are: Baragoli, Batiriki, Bakabaras, Batachoni, Banyore, Bakhayo, Bamarachi, Banyala, Basamia, Babesukha, Babedakho, Bakisa, Barechea, Batsotso, Bawanga, and Bamarama.

Bukusu inhabit parts of Bungoma district in Western Kenya and parts of Trans-Nzoia District of Rift Valley province.

The Babukusu are largely farmers. They predominantly grow maize because their staple food is Ugali (maize flour cooked into a paste for about fifty minutes and when ready it is eaten with indigenous vegetables such as Chisaka (*Cleome gynandra*), Enderema (*Basella alba*), Litoto (*Commelinabenghalensis*), Murere (*corchorusolitorius*) Kimiro (*Crotolaria Ochroleuca*) and Emboka (*Amaranthus sp.*) or with meat, chicken or roasted termites). They also grow millet, sorghum, cassava, bananas and sweet potatoes on a small scale. The Babukusu also keep poultry and animals such as cows, sheep, and goats. The Babukusu also enjoy a traditional drink known as *Busaa* (alcoholic drink fermented from maize flour). *Busaa* is usually drunk using from a common traditional pot using long straws. The Babukusu community also engage in trading activities such as selling and buying of animals-cows, sheep, goat and cereals, maize, millet, sorghum, cassava, bananas and sweet potatoes. With regard to Babukusu cosmology, they worship a god known as *WeleKhakaba* (God the provider) and they believe that their fore parents were Selaand Mwambu.

The Babukusu live intergenerationally in a homestead. The families are extended and marriages are largely polygamous. The Males are the heads of the homesteads and thus the society is male dominated. Although decentralized, it is patriarchal. Authority revolves around an elected headman and notable functionaries in the society such as prophets, healers, diviners, and various performers who as custodians of various traditional values, customs and religion, are responsible for maintaining and assuring their continuity and rightful place in Babukusu life. Only the Bukusu males undergo circumcision. Women in the (traditional) Bukusu homestead, wherever such obtains, still mainly engage in domestic related chores, while the males, considered the owners of productive resources, including the labour of their wives, are the head of the family and leaders of the clan. The chief position or status for women in the nation remains that of wife. Wifehood assures their access to respect and to resources and allows them to fulfil their greatest duty to the nation, childbirth and rearing. They were also responsible for structurally maintaining the homestead. Without marriage, seen as one of the main goals of Bukusu's earthly existence, men are not able to own properties. Comparable to that which obtained traditionally among Yoruba people of Nigeria, marriage is necessary to ensure immortality of the family, continuity of the nation, and it guarantees access to those resources necessary for ensuring the existence of children

A significant work that examines the cultural underpinnings of the Babukusu burial rites owes to Khaemba [6] and Kolala [5] and Wasike [17]. Khaemba [6] explains the causes, rituals and symbols of death and the bereavement among Bukusu sub-tribe of the Luhya Tribe. Khaemba asserts that among the Bukusu people, death or dying is described as 'sleeping' for an old man who dies peacefully, 'falling by oneself' if it is through suicide, 'stepping into the sheet' since

the body is wrapped or covered with a skin or banana leaves before burial, 'wearing a sweater' if killed by another person. Death among Bukusu people is a mystery.

Societies have developed different death and burial rites along the way in different geographical areas [5]. In his study on the death and burial rites of the BukusuQuarkers, Kolala [5] established that burial rites are performed with specific purposes such as to pay last respects to the dead, to console the family, to show sympathy to the bereaved family and to indicate solidarity and companionship. According to Kolala[5], to attend funeral, therefore, becomes one way to show innocence that one is not responsible for the death.

The Bukusu society has what could be referred to as a highly diverse indigenous knowledge system. These knowledge systems are derived from the very existence of the rich Bukusu culture and traditions which has among other communities survived change. For instance, the Bukusu society has a very elaborate ceremonies such as *Khuswalakumuse* (after burial oratory in praise of a departed male). However, as observed in the Covid 19 regulations, this oral poetry may be performed after all. This paper specifically addresses the effect of the impact of Covid 19 on such burial rites among the Bukusu society. Like the respected town criers from traditional Nigerian societies, the Bukusu *kumuse* performer is a praise-singer who extols the virtues, achievements and conquests made by his community [17]. The Bukusu generally look up to *kumuse* as a narrative art form that inspires ethnic patriotism and pride in their culture [10]. Essentially, the *kumuse* performance is a genre that uses the occasion of the death of an elderly man in the society to assemble and narrate sketches of the history of the community, and underline the traditional views and ideals about life and death [17]. But the Bukusu identity is perhaps most distinct from other Luhya ethnic identities in the manner in which they have continued to practice male circumcision and the cultural premium that is attached to the ritual [17]. In fond reference to their cultural pride and solidarity forged through circumcision, the Bukusu not only call themselves *lirango lie enjofu* or the 'thigh of an elephant' but *ashandubasani* meaning a 'community of circumcised men'. As a way of invoking the masculine pride in this initiation rite, traditional Bukusu often swear by the circumciser's knife thus; *nakhubeabakhebakhabili* (If I am lying let me be circumcised again). In traditional Bukusu knowledge systems when a man swears by his circumciser's knife, it is construed not just as a sign of unquestionable commitment and loyalty but irreproachable honesty [8] cited in Wasike[17]. More so declaration of one's clan and pride in its shared social-cultural history is regarded as a fierce pledge to stick to the Bukusu collective past. It is this special attachment to the Bukusu history that is reassembled and retold by the funeral reciter in the after-burial oratory performance.

### III. STUDY OF BURIAL RITES IN AFRICA

The study of Funeral and burial rights for western countries relatively established, however for the peoples of Africa, it is

at its infancy. Some of the earlier studies on burial rites in the continent include:

Ademiluka[1] asserts that funeral mourning is an essential rite of passage in many societies. While there are differences among those aspects' peculiar to each culture, there are certain motifs common to mourning in all cultures. Among such common motifs are the sociological functions which in most cultures are served by funeral mourning rituals. It is important to stipulate that the type of ceremonial funeral mourning which is the concern of this section pertains only to the death of the aged, for, in Africa, death that does not come in ripe old age is regarded as bad death [13], and does not attract any form of ceremony. Ademiluka[1] says that in many places mourning lasts for some period of time, the period varying from one place to another. In some places mourning continues for forty days, and elsewhere even three or four months. This period concerns what can be called the first burial. Those who can afford the expenses would hold a second burial ceremony for their parents. The second burial comes up one, two or three years after the parents' death, depending on when the children can afford the money.

With major or minor variations among the various ethnic groups, the principal stages in the morning of an aged person are: announcement of the death, preparation of corpse for burial, the lying-in state, the interment, and the rituals, feasting and ceremonies of the days following the burial [1]. Among the Kumbuo people of the Midwestern and the Niger Delta area of Nigeria the passing away of an old person is usually heralded by the crying, wailing, weeping, sighs and beating of the breast of the relatives of the deceased [4]. Similarly, among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, as soon as an old man dies, his death is announced by loud cries of mourning and shooting of guns [2].

In South Africa, death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person's deeper relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds [12]. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is why every person who dies must be given a "correct" funeral, supported by a number of religious ceremonies. If this is not done, the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to "live" properly after death and therefore a danger to those who remain alive. 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. There is ambivalence about attitudes to the recent dead, which fluctuate between love and respect on the one hand and dread and despair on the other, particularly because it is believed that the dead have power over the living [12].

With regards to burial and mourning customs Staff Reporter [12]explains that death in African religions is one of the last transitional stages of life requiring passage rites, and this too takes a long time to complete. The deceased must be "detached" from the living and make as smooth a transition to

the next life as possible because the journey to the world of the dead has many interruptions.

If the correct funeral rites are not observed, the deceased may come back to trouble the living relatives [12]. Usually an animal is killed in ritual, although this also serves the practical purpose of providing food for the many guests. Personal belongings are often buried with the deceased to assist in the journey. Various other rituals follow the funeral itself. Some kill an ox at the burial to accompany the deceased. Others kill another animal sometime after the funeral (three months to two years and even longer is the period observed). The Nguni in southern Africa call the slaying of the ox “the returning ox,” because the beast accompanies the deceased back home to his or her family and enables the deceased to act as a protecting ancestor. The “home bringing” rite is a common African ceremony. Only when a deceased person’s surviving relatives have gone, and there is no one left to remember him or her, can the person be said to have really “died.” At that point the deceased passes into the “graveyard” of time, losing individuality and becoming one of the unknown multitude of immortals [12]. Thus, ancient customs are adapted in many South African urban funerals.

A study by Okebiro[9] in his study asserted that the Abagusii like other tribes in Africa, burial ceremony, was the last respect given to the dead body. Burial (Ogotindeka) was anthropologically done according to Abagusii customs and traditions. When a married man or husband to more than two wives (Omogakabwo’omochie) died was buried in the first wife’s house in the homestead if he was a polygamist. The dead body was laid in the reception room at the left side of the room for the whole night. The dead body was removed from the house using the left door (*Omorangwao’gesaku, orbweri*) when the grave was ready in the morning as the animals were off the manger for grazing. This study concluded that the unhonored burial ceremonies lead to curses and as consequence more deaths. It is recommended for harnessing the African traditional knowledge, the Abagusii should follow the burial rituals and customs to suppress more deaths to occur in families.

In the study on Luo burial ceremonies, Shino [11] established that the Luo, a Western Nilotic people, perform a series of rituals and many feasts for the dead because of their strong fear and respect for the dead. The study described several basic features of the rituals especially in connection with Luo gender relationship. There were differences found in the way how those rituals were performed, depending upon personal attributes of the dead, episodes of ancestors, and religious denominations. He established that Luo people Luo people perform a total of about fourteen rituals for one deceased. All rituals are performed only when elderly men died, and a certain number of rituals are omitted depending upon age, sex, and marital status of the deceased. First, I will provide a list of a series of rituals in successive order of their occurrence, and then explain each ritual. 1) Death announcement 2) Vigil (budho) 3) Grave digging (kunyo) 4) Burial (iko) 5) Accompanying the spirit of the deceased to the former

battleground (teroburumatin) 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 (terocholla) 12) Dividing articles left by the deceased (keyonyinyo) 13) Remembrance (rapar) 14) Serving a meal to the family of the deceased by affines (budho). The study concluded that the Luo rituals for the dead provide the people with the occasion to express their feelings of pain and deep grief by bitterly crying and singing their own lamentations. On the other hand, it is also an occasion where the dead person’s richness, greatness, and seniority are displayed.

#### IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted two theories in its endeavour to establish the effect of the impact of Covid 19 on the Bukusu funeral preparations and burial rites. The two theories are the Sociocultural theory and ethnography.

##### A. Socio Cultural Approach

The **sociocultural approach** looks at how a person's experiences, influences and **culture** help shape why they act the way they do. The **theory** was developed by Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky in the 1930s. ... The bifold model takes into account both social and **cultural** influences as well as **biological** factors.

Sociocultural approach is founded on the idea that people adapt to their environments in different ways, which over time, creates and develops culture. Sociocultural relativism is the idea that each culture has its own relative value and importance.

Sociocultural theories are based on the social constructivist paradigm which considers that knowledge is constructed socially through interaction and shared by individuals (Bryman, 2001). Sociocultural theories describe learning and development as being embedded within social events and occurring as a learner interacts with other people, objects, and events in the collaborative environment [14],[15].

This theory is relevant to this study because it relates to the aspects of how culture and indigenous knowledge systems interrelate in conceptualizing reality. The socio-Cultural Theory defines culture as socially situated. The social cultural approach analyses not only analyses form and meaning, but also analyzes all kinds of social cultural factors. This method insists that the speaker as an individual and one entity of a society not only want to transmit information or expresses thoughts, but also attempt to engage in certain social activities in different social situations and social institutions.

##### B. Ethnography Approach

Ethnography is a methodological strategy used to provide descriptions of human societies which as a methodology does

not prescribe any particular methodology, observation, interview, questionnaire, but instead prescribes the nature of the study i.e. holistically describe people through writing. Ethnography is both theory and methodological in design.

Ethnography posits that we need more within social worlds, and that to understand the behaviour, values and meanings of any given individual or group with respect to the funeral preparations and burial rites of the Bukusu, for this matter, we have to take into account the cultural context. In this respect, ethnography pays attention to the sometimes-minute everyday detail of individual lives within wider social structures. Thus, the object of ethnographic approach here is to explore at depth hidden meaning burial rites and inherent symbols held in the minds of the Bukusu people and how the meanings of these covert messages are employed in social interactions and experiences and finally how they are currently constrained by the Covid 19 pandemic.

## V. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology was qualitative. Although the data elicitation involved critically analyzing the existing literature, contextual qualitative data were collected through informal phone interviews, audio-recording. The study was carried out among the Bukusu of Northwestern Kenya. The main research objective was to establish the funeral preparations and burial rites and the effect of the impact of Covid 19 on the Bukusu culture, customs and traditions. Data was elicited from the informal phone interviews, from the Bukusu elders and the *omukamabisi* (the custodian of the Bukusu culture and the sole performer of the ritual) Walumbe Wanyonyi who replaced the late Manguliechi and members of bereaved families. The informal nature of the discussions made it possible for probes and flexibility as the informant could express themselves freely.

The study also made use of author intuition (the first author is a native Bukusu who has lived and been brought up in the village and is therefore very conversant with the burial rites of the Bukusu. she from comes Kimalewa village, Kuywa Sublocation, Bungoma County), oral interviews of the Bukusu elders were conducted to sought understanding on the burial rites and the effect of such rites not being followed due to Covid 19., informal phone interviews from the members of the bereaved family was also done. At this point, it is important to mention that the first Covid 19 death was an engineer from, Kimalewa village, where the first author hails from. The oral interviews were conducted on phone because of the stay at home order /lockdown. The study employed the use of ethnographic analysis which is both theory and methodology. The qualitative data from the oral interviews were recorded for analysis and interpretation. The data from the oral interviews was further corroborated with the data from the document analysis.

Meanings and symbolic interpretations of the Bukusu funeral and burial rites and their rationale were offered both by the informants and by the interpretations of the researchers of both emic and etic perspectives to the results. The emic

approach to studying human culture focuses on the members of the culture being studied. Their words, perceptions, and beliefs are the main sources of information used to understand the culture. For this reason, the emic approach is often referred to as the 'insider approach. Whereas Etic perspective is the perspective of the observer. In this approach the researcher is trying to explain the social realities they observe using the theoretical apparatus of social sciences. In using ethnography as a theory and methodological procedure, this study used both emic and etic approaches in order to give interpretations of the effect of the impact of Covid 19 on the Bukusu burial rites.

## VI. RESULTS

### A. Bukusu Funeral and Burial Rites

The Bukusu funeral preparations and burial are very elaborate as described shortly. There are stages that are followed: Preparation for natural death, Occasion of death, Funeral arrangements, Burial and Post -burial.

#### I. Preparation for Natural Death:

When it seems fairly certain that death is coming, the sick man is placed in front or in the centre of his major wife's house (*in Lubukusu, munjumwomukhayesimakulu*) and all the relatives are informed about the impending matter. Friends and relatives come to bid goodbye. Everyone is supposed to come and those who don't come are suspected to have a hand in the cause of one's dying. Failing to come also shows disrespect for the dying man and his or her spirit might later take revenge. Failure also shows contempt for the dying man. While here, either a brother or elder son of the sick dying man kills a goat at the family shrine invoking all those who have died to come and eat the meat. He mentions the names of the departed example: Wanjala, Wafula, where you are come down and share our meal. Of course, they don't physically come to eat the meat and instead the meat is eaten by the family and the dying man if he can. This animal killed is considered as the final donation of the man to his living dead and the means of requesting them receive him peacefully. At this time, the dying man bids farewell and even apologizes for the offences he might have committed unawares against the members of his family and relatives. If the person who used witchcraft against him eats the meat, it is believed that he will fall sick. The dying man also gives instructions concerning the distribution of his property as all the people sit around him, silently waiting for him to die. The preparation thus involves the rituals of preparing the dead such as *Khulindakumwoyo* (waiting for the dead man's heart to stop beating), *khukhongokhalikosi* (breaking his neck), *khukololosaKumubili* (if it is a man, the male member was pulled outward), *khung'onaesibuno* (cleaning the mess), *khuumbaemunwa* (closing the mouth) and *khuminachimoni* (pressing the eyelids together). These rituals are performed by a close family relative before alerting the neighbours.

## II, Death:

As soon as he dies, the wife bursts out with wailing and is joined by the sons, daughters and other men and women. For men, the crying is “ye, ye, ye,” and for women it is, “Woi, woi, woi”. Women cry with their hands on back of the head while men beat grasses and bushes with sticks and clubs. Normally, a man does not walk without a stick or club in the hands. Men are considered as protectors of a family and this stick or club function as a weapon you can use to protect. It is just symbolic. The body is laid outside a house on an animal skin and covered with it or with banana leaves for two days before burial. The two days allow the relatives to come from a far distance where they move in search of employments. Neighbors and relatives keep vigil at night eating and drinking local beer. Some play musical instruments, others sing funeral dirges and dance. This is done partly to please the spirit of the dead person and partly to comfort the bereaved family.

## III. Burial:

Before the day of burial, a widow goes to her maternal home to inform about her husband’s death. She comes back accompanied by her parents if still alive or any other elder members of her family. On that night before burial, the young and strong clan men dig the grave in front of the dead man’s main house, major wife’s house. No woman or uncircumcised person digs the grave. A father cannot dig a grave of his child or husband for his wife. In this last night, the man is circumcised before being buried if he was never circumcised though you will rarely find uncircumcised man among the Luhya and especially Bukusu sub-tribe.

The Bukusu Funeral; The burial takes place early in the morning or late in the afternoon. This is because great men are buried as the sun rises or sets. The tradition underlying this time setting is that the man is going to rest and watch over the homestead, commonly referred to as *lukoba* in LuBukusu. Usually the male corpse is taken out through the front door-legs first before the actual burial to symbolize that he will never go to that house again and should not come back to disturb the living. In the grave, the male faces the direction believed to be historically renowned route from which the Bukusu community is known to have arrived into modern day location. Further, it signifies that the spirit of the dead is returning to the original cradles of its specific clan. This communicates that the man is the custodian of the lineage of the Bukusu community. Worth noting are the Balunda and Bafuni clans of the Bukusu community. These two clans are revered for their rainmaking skills and they usually bury their dead in sitting positions. The communication underlying the sitting position of the dead during burial is that they are the custodians of the community’s means of livelihood. It also points to being awake to look after the community.

Viewing of the body is also symbolic and with some restrictions. Daughters’ in-law do not view the body nor physical witness the lowering of the body in the grave. This is a show of respect to their father-in-law. In addition, wives of the dead man and men who would not view the body of the

dead were suspected of infidelity. Further, in regards to deaths which were considered abominable such as those of, wizards, thieves, murders, the corpse was taken through the backdoor (if death occurred in the house). Corpses of childless men (*omukumba*) were also taken through the back door. The back door indicated persons who were of no use to the society and therefore nobody would even name their children after such men. They were also regarded as women or small children because such (women and children) upon dead, were also taken through the back door. The Bukusu society also values circumcision of men so much. As such, uncircumcised adults in death are circumcised before burial.

The actual burial takes place in the afternoon and the body is buried facing west. It is believed that we are all heading to the west just as the sun rises and set in the west, it is believed that our destiny is in the west, locally called “mumbo”. People who commit suicide or die at night in mischievous circumstances are buried at night in an unusual ceremony that is done by specific people. The people who carry out this will be from the mother side of the deceased and an animal will be offered to them as a gift for the work they have done. “They are buried at night because the way they ended their life is not acceptable to the society and to avoid bad luck or demons haunting the remaining members of the family.” The night also gives them a chance to perform a ritual that condemns the deceased for committing suicide and makes sure they don’t haunt any person who is alive.

## IV. Post-Burial:

Cattledriveceremony; A day after burial, the ceremony of “cattle drive” is performed. For this ceremony, cattle are gathered and decorated with grass, people paint their faces with white clay and wear war dresses of cow skin or leopard skin and bring spears, clubs, shields and sticks. This is called “*khulondachikhafu*.” They go in a river and come back with cattle in the homestead singing and dancing. The songs include war songs, marriage songs, dirges, praises to the deceased man and appreciation of the contribution he made to his community. This ceremony is intended to drive away the spirit of the dead man, so that he does not linger around the homestead and cause misfortune.

The day following cattle drive ceremony; the hair shaving ceremony is performed. The shaving is done very early in the morning near or on the grave. All those who came into contact with the deceased man, either in his death bed or during burial are shaved. After shaving, the family members go to the river to take a bath and change clothes. It is believed that his breath causes impurity and makes disease stick to the head of the one in contact with the dead body. It is believed that if you don’t shave, you could have some chronic headaches. Shaving starts with a widow, then sons and daughters and other people. A fowl or goat is killed and those taking part in the ceremony share in eating the meat and then people may leave the homestead. On this final day, the family and close relatives share the clothes of the deceased man and

this symbolizes that he is not completely gone but still with us.

Lufu (KhuswalaKumuse); this perspective is essentially applied in the analysis of a special Bukusu after-burial funeral oratory (*khuswalakumuse*) as performed by a famous oral performer John Wanyonyi Manguliechi in Western Kenya. The term *oswalakumuse* in the Lubukusu language means the one who performs *kumuse*. So while the act is *khuswalakumuse*, the 'doer' or person is called *oswalakumuse* or *omuswali* muse. The plural of *oswala* is *baswali*

The Bukusu funeral oratory genre (otherwise referred to *khuswalakumuse* in Lubukusu language) is a cultural discourse that is shaped by masculine nuances and gender power relations. *Khuswalakumuse* (sometimes referred to as *khusenakumuse*), literally translating as 'stepping in the arena', is a special ritual that is performed to celebrate venerable and successful male elders, from clans that enjoy respect from other clans for their leadership qualities, upon their death. The performers of this genre (*baswali* or *baseni be kimise*) literally translate to 'steppers of the arena'. Definitively, the reference and association of the after-burial oratory to *kumuse* (arena or 'platform of performance') alludes to the 'last dance performance' in honour of a deceased elderly male member of the society. Much like the classical Greco- Roman speeches that extemporized and honoured fallen war heroes in ancient times, Dixon, 1971 in [17], *kumuse* congregations are presided over by specially recognized cultural raconteurs or *baswali* (sing. *omuswali*) who are revered orators, spiritual icons and cultural repositories [17].

The ritual is usually performed on the third day after burial (*lufu*). This is to symbolize throngs of mourners to go back to the foundation of the living community. Shaving of the hair on the grave is done to release the dead to the world of the ancestors and to sever ties with the living.

*Performance of KhuswalaKumuse* ;Only circumcised and married men who have sired sons as first borns and have circumcised first born grandchildren from their son's lineage at the time of their death, qualify to be honoured for the ritual. This is because lineage in Bukusu is traced through sons and the act of circumcision cements one to the culture of the Bukusu. This is also the reason why *khuswalakumuse* ritual is never performed for a deceased woman.

The arena is arranged in an oval shape which reflects the foundation of the community as the word *kumuse* means taking the audience back to the essence and core foundations of the community's culture and history. In the arena, men face right by giving the sun the back. This signifies they are the custodian of the land as exemplified in the Bukusu Proverb: *Omwawesechasikolochosilindaekunda* (literary translates to *the man is the custodian of the land*). On the other hand, women sit on the left side and face the sun to pray to God (*WeleKhakaba*) who created them. The women usually follow the boys. The implication is that women are not the custodian of the land and therefore only function to serve the man. In

addition, the women and children sit on bare ground by stretching their legs in front of them whereas men sit on stools or benches. This shows respect to the men and the departed.

The performance is spontaneous. The performer (*omuswali*) must not be bald-headed. Baldness is a sign of a curse to those attending the ceremony commonly known as *khubuniain* Lubukusu. The performer (*omuswali*) is a male and enters the arena while facing the north (*ebunaswa/emasaba*). This indicates the cradle land of Bukusu origin which is Egypt. The performer (*omuswali*) enters the arena (*mumuse*) with the right foot to indicate that he is the custodian of the Bukusu culture. Note that the foot that steps on the arena first is different from the one that steps out. The implication is that he enters the world of the dead to escort the dead to his ancestors and then leave the abode of the dead. Maximum silence is observed with no interruption. There is no walking across the arena and open challenges to the narrator are discouraged. The implication is that the performer and the audience are in the world of the dead preparing to leave to the world of the living and therefore the spirits should be accorded respect.

The performer (*omuswali*) chants and sings the praises of the departed and the Bukusu community at large. The narrator also performs by running or walking in the arena while raising the flywhisk or swinging it. The speed of movement emphasizes that living has to go on and the dead should remain with the dead. No saliva is swallowed as he performs, instead, he spits it out. This is an indication that no impurities are acceptable in the good words he says. This serves as a reminder to the audience to always respect and honour the custodians of the land who in this case are the men.

During the performance, nobody is allowed to enter the arena while wearing shoes, chew grass, relief yourself in the arena (if you have to relief yourself, you go out of the arena and you do not come back), sneeze, breastfeed or cry. Chewing grass and sneezing is tantamount to cursing the *oswalakumuse* (*khubunia*). If any audience in the ritual sneezes accidentally, the *omuswali* will fling his flywhisk towards the sneezer as a sign of returning the curse to him. The gesture will be accompanied by words like *luswalukalukhawamwene*, (literary translated as let the bad omen befall you and your people). All these prohibitions are a show of respect to the dead and the traditions of the Bukusu people. At the end of the performance, all stand at the same time to release the dead to the ancestors.

The Performer wears special clothe known *asekutusi*. The *Ekutusi* is made from the skin of the patas monkey or leopard. The *Ekutusi* also signifies the release of the dead into the living to guard the community. It also indicates the strength of the Bukusu man.

The headgear is made of palm frond leaves and decorated with cowries (*chisimbi* in Lubukusu) with an ostrich feather (*lifumbo lie enjefwe*) inserted at its peak. The headgear symbolizes the wealth both material and in terms of wisdom.

The bracelet (*lichabe*) is made from the elephant tusks, copper or gold. The *lichabe* is worn on the upper right arm whereas the *epokoto* is worn on the left arm. The *lichabe /epokoto* shows the spirit of the forefathers and it also indicates that the performer is the owner of the spirit of the great parents. It is believed that the *lichabe* has miraculous powers. This points to the role of the traditional healers in the Babukusu community, not to mention that *omuwsali* is also one such revered healers.

The walking stick is made from a special tree known as *kumukhendie* tree stem that was uprooted. The motif of the stick is from the Biblical allusion of Moses and Aaron leading the Israelites into the promised land of Canaan from enslavement from Egypt. In a similar way, the walking stick is magical such that if it is pointed at any audience, it will result in instant death. The narrator swings it around to signify authority and power. The implication is therefore arbitrating disputes, admonishing wayward persons. In addition, failure to perform the *kumuse* ceremony impact on the very cultural and historical foundation that the Bukusu community is anchored on. This is so because the arrangement of the arena in an oval shape means taking the audience back to the essence and core foundations of the community's culture and history. Covid 19, has denied the Bukusu living and the death this rite.

## VII. DISCUSSION

This section evaluates the effects of the impact of Covid 19 on the Bukusu burial traditions and customs. The discussion is anchored on the entire process of preparing the dead, funeral, burial and after burial ceremonies among the Bukusu as described in the previous sections in this paper.

According to most African societies, and the Bukusu in particular, burial is a demonstration of life after death. The elaborate funeral and burial preparations, as elucidated in the previous sections in this paper, are indicative of the Bukusu belief cosmology which is highly symbolic milieu. The Bukusu believe in life after death which is actualized in the burial ceremonies. Hence, their view of the next world is solely determined by the way the dead is buried. Therefore, in view of the Covid 19 pandemic, the dead have not been released into the next world and maybe such ceremonies would have to be performed later even if it takes three years.

The Covid 19 patients are usually taken care of in the hospital and they are often in isolation rooms where only doctors enter. Under these circumstances, therefore, the rituals of preparing the dead such as *Khulindakumwoyo* (waiting for the dead man's heart to stop beating), *khukhongokhalikosi* (breaking his neck), *khukololosiKumubili* ( if it is a man, the male member was pulled outward), *khung'onaesibuno* (cleaning the mess), *khuumbaemunwa* (closing the mouth) and *khuminachimoni* (pressing the eyelids together) may not be done and if done, it is by strangers yet these rituals are symbolic and they are performed by either very close relatives, and family members. These early preparations for the dying person are very important in the Bukusu community

because they mark either the continuation of good life or curses after death. For instance, failure to observe these rites might bring curses on that person's lineage such as mental illness (*Khukhwonekhakumurwe*), barrenness (*busumba*) or even worse, early death. In addition, the ritual of *khokololosiakumubili* and any mess cleaned is very deterministic of the future lineage of the dead man. Testicles and penis were released to prevent the man from falling on his generation referred to as *khukwakhulwibulo*. In the event this is not done, the person's lineage is doomed. These are the very serious fears that the Bukusu nation is facing with the burial of Covid 19 victims. The fear and the dilemma are escalated by the fact that the victim is wrapped in plastic bags and no one views the body.

The back door is very symbolic in Bukusu burial cosmology. Further, abominable deaths such as those of wizards, thieves, murders, the corpse was taken through the backdoor (if death occurred in the house). And if it occurred away from the house, upon being brought home, the corpse will be passed through the back door or an opening made through the house wall as it is taken outside for burial. This also applied to Corpses of childless men (*omukumba*). The back door is symbolic of people who are useless to the society. Unfortunately, the Covid 19 victims of such characteristics are not taken through such rituals because of the hurried burial by the government.

In addition, during preparation of the dead, burial and post-burial ceremonies, the people come together to celebrate three main things which the Bukusu refer to as *kamakunda* (stages of life). These are death, burial and after death lives. Therefore, in performing the burial ceremonies, the events provide a platform to celebrate life and its transmission into the world of the ancestors. Failure to honour burial rites will result in the departed spirit taking revenge (African Study Monographs).

It is also important to mention that in Africa at large, burial ceremonies serve to re-unite people. This is because during such ceremonies, the people reconcile life and death through the symbolic rituals that abound. In death, there is a transition into the life of the ancestors. Therefore, the burial celebrations are a communal activity to celebrate, life, death and after life. The *lufu* ceremony is particularly important in sending the death into the afterlife without which, the dead is believed to still live among the living.

The Covid 19 pandemic has and will have far reaching impact on the African burial traditions more than expected. Take for instance in the Bukusu society as explained earlier, we have two clans (Balunda and Bafuni) which are revered for their rainmaking skills and they usually bury their dead in sitting positions. In the event a member of this clan died of Covid 19, the grave won't be dug in the way to accommodate the sitting position of the dead. This is because, the grave diggers are from the government and so a normal grave will be dug. The effect of this circumstance would be far reaching to the community because these clans are the custodians of the



community's means of livelihood and they sitting position guarantees the community of its existence and security.

Further, in the wake of Covid 19 pandemic, the Kenyan Government and Public Health officers have been carrying out burial 24 hours after death. Most often, the country has witnessed burials of Covid 19 victims which take place at night or very strange hours not ever witnessed in the culture of the people. For instance, among the Bukusu burial takes place early in the morning or late in the afternoon. This is because great men are buried as the sun rises or sets. The tradition underlying this time setting is that the man is going to rest and watch over the homestead, commonly referred to as *lukoba* in LuBukusu. Regrettably, the Covid 19 burial cases go against this tradition hence slowly destroying the very cultural fabric which holds the community together.

In Africa, grave digging is another symbolic ritual which is facing an impact from the Covid 19 pandemic. In Bukusu community, the grave is dug on the night of the burial. Women or uncircumcised persons do not dig the grave. However, in Kenya, there are some communities which do not circumcise their males though you will rarely find uncircumcised man among the Luhya and especially Bukusu sub-tribe. The import of this grave digging ritual is that amidst Covid 19 pandemic, it is the public health officers who carry out the grave digging exercise. Based on this, one cannot tell whether they are circumcised or not. This is a dilemma that is facing the Bukusu community given the fact that circumcision is sacred and was handed down to them by the ancestors.

The elucidation of the Lufu (KhuswalaKumuse), after burial ceremony accorded to prominent men in Bukusu society is evident that the society has its own unique way of defining its cosmology. The rituals that accompany the ceremony ensure the sustainability of the community in regards to its customs and rituals surrounding death. However, with the Covid 19 pandemic, such ceremonies and rituals cannot be performed. The case in point in the first Covid case that died in Kenya. The victim was an engineer hence a very prominent person in the society. Such revered persons were accorded the after-burial ceremony (lufu). However, for the case of the deceased Engineer, this was not done at all due to the fact that there was no congregation of more than 15 people in funerals and even after.

The fact that the *lufu* ceremony symbolizes throngs of mourners to go back to the foundation of the living community, the lack of it leaves the dead not at peace and further the family feels that their loved ones will never rest in peace. Further, the shaving of the hair on the grave is done to release the dead to the world of the ancestors and to sever ties with the living. However, in the Covid 19 cases, the dead is never released because the ceremony never takes place.

Further, that only circumcised and married men who have sired sons as first born and have circumcised first born grandchildren from their son's lineage at the time of their death, qualify to be honored for the ritual, the lack of not

performing the ceremony means the loss of the lineage because in Bukusu lineage is traced through sons and the act of circumcision cements one to the culture of the Bukusu.

The *khuswalakumuse* ritual is a ceremony that brings on board all the customs and the traditions of the Bukusu. The rituals performed in the ceremony offer glimpses of socio-cultural practices drawing a clear boundary between men, women and children. It takes into account the patriarchal nature of the Bukusu community. The men are considered as the custodians of the land whereas the women play the secondary role of nurturance. *Kumuse* as a narrative art form that inspires ethnic patriotism and pride in their culture [17]. Drawing on its importance, therefore, it can be stated that Covid 19 threatens the customs and traditions of the Bukusu society in relation to funeral and Burial rites.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to assess the effect of the Covid 19 on burial ceremonies in Africa. The paper narrowed down on the Bukusu Community of Northwestern Kenya in Africa. The paper has elucidated the preparations of funeral and burial ceremonies among the Bukusu. The analysis of these ceremonies reveals a rich symbolic milieu which defines the Bukusu belief system and traditions. Burial rites are epitaphs of the meaning of life after death. On the other hand, the Covid 19 pandemic which has hit the whole world appear to compromise and threaten the very traditions and customs that hold together the Bukusu community. In Africa and Bukusu community in particular, men strive to merit the burial right based on the fact that a befitting burial rite has a way of giving back to the community. Given this understanding and evaluation of the burial rite it can be concluded that Covid 19 has assassinated the traditions which compel men to conduct their affairs with honour, and nobility and in that way build the moral fabric of the community

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