
The Christian Funeral Rites Vis a Vis the Rukuba Burial Rites

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ABSTRACT

The topic for this research work is, " the Christian funeral rites vis a vis the Rukuba Burial Rites. The ceremonies surrounding the disposal of the dead constitute the funeral rites. In spite of cultural evolution and religious factors, the Christians are not able to differentiate the purely Christian funeral rites from the purely Rukuba cultural funeral rites. Some Christian denominations bring in some cultural traits into the Christian funeral rites. There is a breach of culture theology. This research aimed at looking deeper and explaining that the Christian funeral rites are celebrated on the belief in the resurrection of Christ, who was raised on the third day. The method used for the research work is analytical and dialectical exposition. The findings found are that, these are two distinct, static as well as dynamic cultures. While each respects the other for its uniqueness, yet Christianity is on a mission among the Rukuba people. Her mission is to enlighten the people by entering with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration. Christians should witness to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non- Christians.

KEYWORDS: Christian, Funeral, Rukuba, Burial, Rites, Ceremonies.

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INTRODUCTION

Every community or society has certain rites of passage. The Rukuba people have their rites of passage, initiation, marriage and death. This article addresses the rites of passage surrounding death. Death is natural, but the grief period and the eventual disposition of the body are either according to ones religion or culture. The process that leads to the disposal of the corpse and thereafter is known as grieving period and it is occasioned by funeral rites. But there are issues. In the modern society, there is an increasing tendency to deny the reality of death by introducing funeral rites that are alien to our Christian or traditional beliefs. There is so much eating and merriment that the family is saddled with that they have less time to mourn their dead. Preachers try to cover it in soothing phrases and euphemisms. The attempt to deny the reality of death is both dishonest and counterproductive. People must be helped to confront death and to become reconciled with it.

For Christianity, the Christian faith enables us to face death with courage and hope, because we know we can conquer it in Christ.² Hence, in talking about death the Christians can afford to be realistic in their funeral rites. In the Rukuba culture, the funeral rites stretches from the moment of the death of the person right through burial and culminates at the memorial day, which is known *ikun atu* (shaving of heads). Life in the Rukuba culture, just as it is in Christianity, does not end in death, but a continuation in another realm. For Christianity life ends either in heaven or hell, while for the Rukuba culture, life ends in the reincarnation of the soul. For this reason, the deceased is accorded a rich send off to the world of the dead in a ritual funeral. This article examines the principal rituals in Christian funerals and compare them with the Rukuba cultural burial rites. Before we venture in the comparison studies, let us look at the Rukuba people of Plateau state, Nigeria, at a glance.

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² Richard, Rutherford. *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990) 25

The Rukuba People

The Rukuba land is in central Nigeria and it is located on the high plateau about six kilometres west of the town of Jos, the capital of Plateau State, on latitude 10.0666667 degrees and longitude 8.7166667 degrees. The Rukuba are one among the numerous small groups inhabiting the region.³

Most of the Rukuba are farmers. The Rukuba language is classified in the Niger-Congo family, sub family Benue- Congo, Group Plateau A, subgroup 4. None of the immediate neighbours understands this language.

In matters death and afterlife, they believe reincarnation which is given to chiefs, clan chiefs, blacksmiths, diviners, and witches. Their souls stay in a shooting star, or somewhere else, before reentering a pregnant woman's womb. Other people's souls simply disappear; their influence may remain, temporarily, through their bones or through curses uttered when they were alive. Burial ceremonies and mourning practices are aimed at getting rid of the dead as completely and as soon as possible. Details of all these beliefs are detailed in this work. Before the details, however, this article looks at theological bases of the study.

The Biblical Bases of Funerals

Every theological study must be on Biblical foundations. In the study of Christian funeral in comparison with the Rukuba cultural traits, it is essential that begin with the Biblical background. This will be carried out under three themes: the paschal mystery, the communion between the living and the dead, and consolation to the bereaved.

The Paschal Mystery

Christian death is like a Passover (Ex 12:1-28) from the terrestrial world to the world of the living dead. The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land was a prototype or prefiguration of the journey of the dead from this world to eternal life in Christ. That means, death is a sharing in the Paschal banquet of Christ, through his passion, death and resurrection. In Christian death, the Christian passes over from the earthly home to a heavenly home with Christ, who passed on to the Father. For as St. Paul says: Our true home is in heaven and Jesus Christ, whose return we long for, will come from heaven and save us (Phil 3:20). Death is a dying in Christ for the Christian. But after death, the Christian hope is not lost because of the light of the resurrection.

The Communion between the Dead and the Living

The ceremonies surrounding and accompanying the death and the disposal of the body has always had overtones of communion between the departed and the living. For example, the death and burial of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, first brought the notion of the communion between the death and the living. The tombs of the Patriarchs, the mourning period and the act of bewailing to indicate separation, sense of loss, farewell and hope of reunion are mentioned (Gen 23:1-2). Abraham never forgot his wife, such that he asked for a permanent site to bury his dead (Gen 5:60), so that he might continue to be in Communion with her. When eventually Abraham died (Gen 49:29); Isaac and his wife Leah (Gen 49:31-32) and then Jacob (Gen 50:13), all were gathered together in the same land.

When Christ said at the Last Supper, "do this in memory of Me," he added, "...from now on I tell you, I shall never drink wine again until the day I shall drink the new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father (Matt 26:29). According to St. Paul, that is why Christ both died and came to life again, so that he might be Lord both for the dead and the living (Rom 14:7-9). Paul articulates this communion between, first of all, the living who are living in hope of the final communion and sharing in the mansions where Christ says, in my Father's house, there many rooms (John 14:1-3).

Consolation to the Bereaved

Consolation on occasions of bereavement is innate in all cultures and peoples and it is expressed in visits, actions and gestures. In the Old Testament we have an account of the funeral of Jacob that the Egyptians mourned him for seventy days (Gen 50:4). Mourning with the bereaved family is a very strong way of identification with them in grief situation (Gen 50:6-9). It was a huge offer of consolation to the family of Joseph. The death of Moses also drew so much lacrimations from the people (Deut 34:5-7). All Israel too assembled to mourn Samuel, when he died. He was buried at his home in Ramah (1Sam 25:1).

Christ himself demonstrated the ministry of consolation as he walked the streets of Nazareth. It happened when he went to a town called Nain, accompanied by his disciples and a great number of people (Luke 7:11-12). The same condolence visit to Mary and Martha over the death of their brother Lazarus. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) and the Jews said "see how much he loved him." Jesus shows love on occasions of bereavement. The apostle Paul also urges us to console one another on occasions of bereavement (1Thess 4:13-18). This has become a Christian practice.

Let us now look at the cultural practice of the Rukuba people in the face of death.

The Rukuba Concept of Death

The Rukuba language refers to death as "ikwu." According to the Rukuba worldview, life and death are inherent aspects of being human. Thus, death is neither the end of life nor a privation that requires endless life to overcome. Instead, life is a succession of

³ Muller, Jean-Claude. "Republication, Scission, and Territory among the Rukuba (Nigera). *Anthropos* (1976c) 71:738-767.

generations originating from God kuru via each person's heritage. For the Rukuba man, death is therefore merely another phase in the journey from eldership to forebearhood (banati bakukup) and not ancestorhood per se.⁴

The burial ceremony is the focal point of the death ritual and needs to be performed correctly to avoid leaving the deceased in an unfinished and dangerous transition condition where they could not be reincarnated, because they could turn out to be dangerous spirits (bawai or atenatu) that could terrorize or torment the living. Forty days following the funeral, the Rukuba undergo another death ritual, ikun atu. This is supposed to be the last point of separation before departing from the kinfolk and entering the realm of the "living dead." It is thought that the departed individual continued to reside in the home with their relatives or hands around the trees in the grave yard prior to the forty day ceremony.⁵

The concept of life after death

Humans die and their bodies deteriorate much like those of all other organic species. However, there is a common and loose enduring idea among the Rukuba, that there is "life after death," or that death may be survived in some way. This is because when someone dies in a particular family, the family mourns and tells the dead to greet the other members of the family that have died time ago.⁶ For them, there is the physical world (for the living) and the spiritual world (for the deceased). They see death as a necessary end to life in this world but also a new beginning of life with the forebears. This process goes on ad infinitum and in the course of this reincarnation, one may decide to change his or her self, location and social circumstance based on the previous experience.⁷

Announcing Death

From birth to death, the Bace people care for their children. All is done to prepare the person for this inevitable end, death. They know that all people must die and it is God who will decide whether you will reincarnate or not. The Bace people bury their death immediately as soon as all relatives are informed and have arrived to see the corpse. Death is announced indirectly, a messenger upon arrival might not say immediately why he has come. When he comes to it, he says, "I have been sent to tell you, so and so, is gravely ill and your attention is required". The audiences understand.

Nature of Rukuba Ancient Graves

Before the coming of the missionaries, the Rukuba graves were dug like a well, circular in nature with tunnels at the floor for the utu and without tunnels for the ordinary folks. The corpse of the utu was made to sit down to signify royalty. For the ordinary folks their graves were not designed or dug with a tunnel under and so even if they did not fit into the graves, their bones were broken. The circular graves symbolised the connection between the earth and the forebears. The rectangular grave structure is a more recent change, likely influenced by a broader societal trend and modernization.⁸ The modernization is believed to have been introduced by the missionaries to symbolised facing the East, where the sun rises and from where the Son of Man, Jesus Christ will come at the Last Judgement.⁹

The cemetery (agun) is accepted by the Rukuba people as a place of rest for the dead, while those with the Eye (kinshi) reincarnate, those without it remain there as their permanent abode. This implies that the designated place for burying the dead is the cemetery, but the spirit is believed not to die but is born as another life somewhere.

The Spirituality of the Grave

While the cemetery is where the both spirit and body are deposited, there is more to it, going by the spiritual understanding of the Rukuba people. The graveyard is sometimes visited in time of family calamity, misfortune, difficulty, lost or anything adverse. They usually visit their parent's graves and perform some rituals of isang intong (spreading ashes) with the hope that they may get answers to their problems. It also means that there is respect for the dead and belief in an ongoing relationship with their death relatives and honouring the deceased through the visit.¹⁰

The undertone of the rituals for the dead, both at home and at the grave side are for the benefit of both the dead and the living. For the dead, on the one hand, it is for their honour and a preparation for reincarnation, while for the living people on the other hand, it is to reinforce community ties and cultural identity.¹¹

⁴ Ames, G. C. *Gazetteer of the Plateau Province*. Jos: Niger Press for Local Administration, 1934.

⁵ Muller, J. C. "Of Souls and Bones: The Living and the Dead among the Rukuba, Benue-Plateau State, Nigeria. Africa: (1976), pp 258-273

⁶ WhatsApp interview with Jeje Kucha, 4th September, 2024.

⁷ WhatsApp interview with Rev. Seth Amadi and Ayuk Abisi, 4th September 2024.

⁸ WhatsApp interview with Hon. Steven Igmala, 6th September 2024

⁹ Rodney, Hunter, ed. *Funeral in the Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 44

¹⁰ WhatsApp interview with Ati Anga Asukutu, 5th September 2024

¹¹ Hon. Igmala

Rukuba Traditional burial rites

Nowadays, however, burial is not immediate as some relatives may not be readily available. The method of burial has since changed. Now coffins are used instead of the skins of goats and sheep as in olden days. Formerly, men were buried laying on their right side, and women on their left side, after the symbolic sitting in the grave. Today, every dead person is buried with their faces looking upward in the coffins. One thing is sure, the dead must be buried properly and after 30 – 40 days, the deceased personal effects are disposed of, first to his gran children or according to his aged relations.

The right ceremonies and rituals for the departed are determined by a number of essential factors, including the deceased's age, sex, status, and cause of death. In the Rukuba culture, rites and ceremonies for the deceased serve as a powerful reminder to the living to uphold moral principles in addition to burial the deceased.

The theological/Cultural implications of funeral

According to Arnold Van Gennep and John Lukwata, the Christian funeral as a rite of passage is like a doorway into the kingdom of heaven. It is a liminal symbolic stage of life and a doorway to the great beyond. It is a journey which takes place in stages. It begins with the moment of separation, then moving through an in between stage before arriving at a new coming together. It is made up of a complexity of rites at different stages. As a rite, it involves the use of persons and things. It is couched in formal ceremonies of actions and words. It employs time and process. It employs the function of signs and symbols in the expression of the plethora of the realities involved.

The funeral too, is a healing process for the bereaved. It is a passage into a new life or world of adjustment to continue with life without the loved one. The funeral rites are therapeutic because they heal the wounds which the family has suffered for the bereavement of their love one.

Funeral as Initiation Rite

Death separates the dead from the community and the society who wishes to keep a distance from the dead. In the Rukuba culture, like any African culture, one must die of something. In whatever way or manner death occurs, it is believed that the land of the evil is at work, but that is not so for the Christian beliefs.

As a rite of initiation, chibuko outlines various stages from the preparation up to the burial. This includes, the dressing of the corpse in the best clothes which symbolizes a rite of partial incorporation, full incorporation which comes at the ceremony of induction of the death, an incorporation into the spirit land and the burial followed with corresponding sacrifices. It contains details rituals that animate the celebration. There are drumming and dancing (depending on the status of the dead), pouring of libation, speaking to the dead while in state, elaborate wake-keeping and eating of meal.¹²

Death is not the end of life in the African sense but a passage leading into another. This plays out in the funeral rites which are designated to prepare the person for the journey to the next world. It is a transition from one stage of existence to another. The success of the journey depends on the preparation and execution of the funeral. The burial rites and ceremonies are, therefore, the means by which the transition is effected to ensure that the dead receives secure place in the spirit world. The Rukuba culture needs to be evangelized or comes to terms with this belief that the burial guarantees a certain peace -otherwise, one's shade might be doomed to everlasting restless wandering- to be a source of dread in the world of the living. For this reason, burial of the dead is regarded as the minimum of ritual concern. Funeral as initiation rites means to acquire a home for the dead in heaven.

Funeral as Christian Rite

It is not sufficient to end at a burial as a passage to the other life. It is also important to understand where the departed goes to after the burial. The high esteem which Christians attach to the burial of a departed member and the reverence together with the care bestowed upon the body of the deceased are rooted in the hope of the resurrection of the body. According to Emmanuel Asuquo Akpan, every baptized Christian has the right to a Christian burial. At burial the church prays for her children along with the friends of the deceased with the firm conviction that the whole Church is joined together in the unbreakable bond of love. When the church has bestowed the right of burial on the baptized member, nobody is free to impede it. Christian burial is a right and not a privilege for the baptized Christian at the end of life on earth. The right to Christian burial is granted by baptism and protected by law, irrespective of age and social status.¹³ Death as a warrant in every hand and existence itself, as a movement towards the end but for Christian, it is a promotion to a sharing in the glory of Christ

Funeral as a Planting of Life.

Funeral could be seen too as a planting of life, with an anticipation of a harvest in birth in the next world. In other words, death is not an extinction but an extension of life. In the some African cultures, death is seen as planting, to be born as incarnate beings. In those cultures, death is understood as a return of one to the ancestral world, it is a rebirth into another world. The Rukuba culture

¹² Chibuko, Patrick. *The Paschal Mystery of Christ*. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1999) 111

¹³ Akpan, Emmanuel Asuquo. *Christian Burial*. (Uyo: Simon Press, 1997) 34

does not could dig the grave as if to plant a seed, but that Spirituality of given birth to the soul in the next world was not really developed. Some scholarship studies could be done in that direction.

These rites include the actual burial of the deceased among other things. The grave is dug with atuzup, in a circular form as though to plant a pole or to plant a seed. The body is lowered into it, feet first and then the head is left nearer the surface of the soil. In some situations, if the legs are too stiff to fit into the grave, the bone could be broken. The dead having been planted, will be nurtured through sacrifices, so that, they will be harvested in the birth of a new child.

If in the Rukuba culture, prayers could take place at the grave of a dead relative, it means then that death does not separate family members but life continues after death. The union is kept alive through the celebration of rituals that unite the departed and the living together. It means too that the death member of the family still continues to enjoy the care and companionship of the living members of the family. This can be developed as a strategic point explain one of the Christian cardinal belief of the "communion of saints."

Funeral as Ritual for the Dead

The purpose of funeral is to create an environment whereby those who mourn can be taken care of, in particular, through the offer of consolation.¹⁴ Even though this author writes from his standpoint as a Christian believer, the desire to accompany the deceased through a set of rites exists in almost all cultures and religions of the world.

In the typical Rukuba culture, the relatives and friends have to give some physical accomplishment to the bereaved. Every member of the community is obliged to contribute in some way to the burial process, beside friends and sympathisers feed and keep vigil in the mourning house for days prior to the burial. Culturally, therefore, funeral rites brings hope and support to the mourners and the wider community which the deceased belongs because of the need to adjust since life from then would be without their love one. This aspect of the consolation at death is practiced both in Christianity and the Rukuba culture, it should be encouraged.

Funeral as a Celebration

Naturally, man is given to celebration irrespective of the occasion. It may be joyous as in the case of birth or sorrowful as in the case of death. Celebrare, the Latin word for, "to celebrate," suggests first of all, a crowd, in the sense that celebration is never done alone or in isolation. Funeral is never planned and executed alone. It is always an issue involving persons and things. The elements necessarily involved in the celebration of funeral are the roles of the community, the ministers, family and friends, and the liturgy which comprises, the Word of God, music, symbols and gestures. The celebrations are performed or observed in accordance with the religious beliefs about the nature of death and the existence of the afterlife. The use of symbols in the funeral ritual takes all these into consideration. All these make up a befitting funeral. From the moment of death, the preparation, preservation of the body, symbols, songs, processions, these are all couched in the celebration of rituals which vary among peoples, places and cultures.

Modernity in Funeral Rite Practices

Funeral which used to be source of dread and awe has assumed a different dimension with modernity. As social functions, funerals are becoming more commercialised. What used to be the concern of the local members of the community has, over the years been sold as commodity by funeral directors.

As people strive in the face of the mass media society, and as they become more secular, the purpose of funeral is increasingly to celebrate the life of the deceased. It is decreasingly a mourning process and increasingly a celebration of life. This is shown from the moment of the media announcement, the use of language like: Call to Glory, Celebration of Life, the Exit of an Icon. A Rare Gem, Going Home, etc. It is less frequent to use obituary or words that indicate sorrow and grief. These reflect the modern understanding of death and funeral as celebration. It reflects too, in the general preparation and packaging of the event. It is often very colourful, capital intensive and sumptuous. There is generally, the loss of the sense of the community.

A good funeral ceremony disposes the dead body in a manner acceptable in culture and religion. It helps and assists the soul on its way and affirms the faith and hopes of the mourners. It affirms the social bonds of the living at a time when one of their number has been rested from their midst and helps them to mourn with a firm hope of reunion.

CONCLUSION

Nothing has dominated human thought from the dawn of humanity quite like the concept of death. This has shaped man's perspective, beliefs, and attitude toward death. Among other things, religion and culture have emerged as the man's escape route to comprehend and overcome his fear of dying, at least inasmuch as man cannot completely eradicate death. Funeral is the last rites of passage given to the dead as he or she transits to another realm of existence. Funeral Rites are often celebrated in stages condensed in ritual symbols. They serve a number of purposes which include: giving rest to the dead, to avert revenge and dread in the world of the living, in the Rukuba culture. Funeral offers consolation to the deceased family and hope of reunion where, according to the Christian faith, there shall be no more parting. The funeral rites constitute a rite of passage which takes place in distinctive stages.

¹⁴ Thomas Whelan, *Making the Most of the Order of Funeral* (Dublin: The Columba, 1988) 8

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