

## **The Socio-cultural Perspectives of the Bakonzo of Uganda about Death**

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**Abstract:** This article is about the Bakonzo society ideology on death and life after death. Thompson, et.al (2016) argues that the experience of death is largely influenced by the social context in which it occurs. Society exhibits a variety of behavioral attitudes towards sickness, dying, and the death of a person. Such attitudes and practices are determined and influenced by the people's religion, society and culture (Rickens, 2017). Some death rituals are aimed at making the people to be able to cope with the hardships experienced after a death has occurred. The ways in which a given group of people celebrate the death of a person tell much about the society's philosophy and attitude towards death. Due to the existence of various religious and cultural practices among Africans, death rituals and mourning practices are varied (Ekore R.I & Lanre-Abass B, 2016; Gire, 2014). Such practices have been explored in many societies like Buganda (Obbo, 2000), Bunyoro, Kikuyu, Karanga (Mhaka, 2014), Shona (Mwandayi, 2011) and Igbo of Nigeria (Nwosu, et.al, 2017). Mhaka specifically proposes such similar studies to be conducted with other traditional African ethnic groups (2014:1). The Bakonzo, who are principally isolated by the Rwenzori National park and Rwenzori Mountains have received little attention, with relation to such worldviews. Stacey Tom, who visited Bakonzo in the 1950s, described them as a Bantu ethnic community, struggling to cling on a tribal identity that the modern world considers to be obsolete (2003). A descriptive approach was adopted to unravel the conceptions and philosophy of the Bakonzo about death. Key informant interviews were held with clan leaders of the Bakonzo.

**Key words:** Death, Rituals, Bakonzo, Mourning, Burial, Traditions

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Societal understanding and experiences of death are constructed as social phenomenon which is directly informed by religion, language and culture. Thus, death as a social phenomenon is approached differently from culture to culture, and depends on history, social context and religious affiliation (Rickens, 2017). Among Africans, death is not the end of life but life continues even after death. The Igbo of Nigeria believe that death is transition of life from the earthly world to the ancestral world (Nwosu, et.al, 2017). Whereas to the Baganda of central Uganda, death is a threatening event but it is away through which people meet their ancestors, the "Bajajja" and continue new life with them. Both the Baganda and Igbo have elaborate funeral rites which prepare a person to the next world such as decent burials, sacrifices, pouring libations, recantations and important ceremonies accompanied with songs, drinks and food (Ogbuagu, 1989:89). The Banyoro of western Uganda, conceive death as release of the soul to the next world, where it is supposed to dwell in eternity (Doyle, 2008). However, to the Masai, death occupies no central place in their mythology, as the dead are considered to be nothing because of the disappearance of the soul (Fox, 1930:456). In Hindu religious experience, the corpse is burnt and the ashes are thrown into the river (Gire, 2014:4). They believe that for one to enter Nirvana (heaven) it depends on his/ her "Karma"-actions (Pandya & Kathuria, 2018). This implies that even though death is a reality among all races and tribes, different people hold different interpretations of death. There is no single way in which people respond to death even when they die of the same causes and in similar circumstances. Socio-cultural variations in perspectives on death differ among Africans, even though there have been attempts by some scholars to elucidate the homogenous nature of African peoples (Isiko, 2018:12). Attempts to explain the existence of an African epistemology or worldview does not in any way dismiss or deny the differences that exists even between African communities in Africa and elsewhere in the world (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014:234). Differences in perspectives about death are common even among tribes that are thought to be more closely related to each other. For example, the Bantu ethnic tribes of Baganda, Banyoro, and Kikuyu hold differing views about death and will respond to death differently. Understanding the way societies interpret and respond to misfortunes like death helps in not only discovering the intrinsic cultural

values but also ascertain the extent of change such traditions related to death have occurred (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984:385; Gire, 2014:5; Lee & Vaughan, 2008:343). In this article, attempt is made to explore and analyze the perspectives held by the Bakonzo over the years about death and the meaning of the different death and burial related rituals performed by the Bakonzo. Interest is also in ascertaining patterns of change in understanding of death since cultural values and traditions change over time.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Using qualitative research design, key informants were purposively selected and interviewed. The interviews were held with clan leaders selected from the 14 clans (*ebihanda*) that make up the Bakonzo. These leaders had to be aged above 50 years to be able to reflect on the past perspectives of the Bakonzo about death and how these have changed over the years based on personal experiences and observations. It was assumed that those respondents of over 50 years have witnessed several deaths and attended many burials during their lifetime and can adequately tell past thinking of the Bakonzo about death as well as know the changes that may have occurred since then. The fact that traditions, including those connected to death and burial change over time, elderly clan leaders provide an opportunity to dig into the past, compare with the present as well as provide a projection for future changes. Clan leaders were important to the study because they are considered as the custodians of indigenous knowledge and cultural values of their clans. The study was carried out in Bughendera County in the sub counties of Kasitu, Ngamba, Bukonzo, Nduguntu and Harungale. Bughendera is found on the foothills of Mt. Rwenzori, Bundibugyo district in Western Uganda and it is dominated by Bakonzo who are inclined to Rwenzururu kingdom. Using an interview guide, the interviews were recorded with the assistance of a voice recorder. We also had opportunity to attend some burial ceremonies and observed the rituals that are performed for the dead. Therefore, what is discussed in this article are peoples' perceptions and experiences with their own culture and traditions about death and burials in Bukonzo.

## III. THE MEANING OF DEATH AMONG THE BAKONZO

Death is well known among the Bakonzo as *oluholho*, that is, a period when a person stops breathing and he or she cannot do any work. According to the Bakonzo; a person stops breathing and he cannot do normal activities like eating, walking or doing any work. The Bakonzo call a dead person '*omuholi*' and the corpse is '*omulambo*'

Death is known to be non-discriminative as it takes the young and elderly, men and women, the rich and poor, short and tall, beautiful and the ugly, fat and small, slave and the master. It is one of those threatening moments that exist in the life time of every Bakonzo. The indiscriminative nature of death is the cause of Bakonzo's fear of death. The Bakonzo conceive death as existing into different forms, there is 'physical death' and 'walking death', also described as 'social death' in western societies (O'Connor, 2016:6). The nature of death often determines the grief response (Mist, 1998), and this vary from society to society (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984:399). To the Bakonzo, physical death is when a person stops breathing, walking, laughing, eating or speaking. This person is prepared for a decent burial. Physical death is caused by many agents such as murder, sorcery, diseases and others. The concept of 'walking dead' carries three inter-related meanings among the Bakonzo. One could be referred to as a 'walking dead', when suffering from an incurable disease, with no other remedy available, except to wait for the day of death. The 'walking dead' also refers to those terminally ill and the bedridden. The 'walking dead' is taken to be ascending to the next world any time due to the terminal illness. The second meaning of 'walking dead' is in reference to persons who are unable to take care of themselves or their families. Men, who are incapable of fending for their families and spouses are categorized as such. This second meaning is rarely applied to women but to men and it is applied in reference to being unable for one to carry on their social responsibilities as dictated by society. The Bakonzo being largely a patriarchal tribe, construct the male person as the sole provider for his family. Since dead persons are relieved of their roles in society by default, so are the men who fail to live up to their family obligations. Such men are as good as dead since the dead are in no position to provide for their families. The third aspect of 'walking dead' is in reference to those persons that are addicted to bad acts such as alcoholism, prostitution or theft. The Bakonzo think that addiction to acts considered anti-society leads to 'slow death'. Alcoholics, prostitutes and thieves are therefore considered to be 'walking dead' because they hold higher chances of dying than other categories of people. Other categories of people who contravene societal codes of conduct like committing incest, disrespecting elders and one's parents also fall in the third description of the 'walking dead'. The concept of death among the Bakonzo is therefore twinned with that of morality. Observance of moral codes of one's society makes one fully human by earnestly following moral values expected of the individual. On the other hand, the dead are not bound by these moral codes. To the Bakonzo, a person can die in the minds of the people when he/ she is still alive. Bakonzo's description of death is therefore beyond the physical death. This ideology augments the sociological view that death is indeed a negotiated reality, which can be explained according to the social states of affairs (De Vries, 1981:1076).

The Bakonzo also describe death depending on the way one meets his/her death. The Bakonzo conceive death as being good (*oluholho olhubuya*) or bad (*oluholho olhubi*). This ideology has been discussed in several socio-anthropological writings, attesting to the opinion that good and bad deaths are socially, culturally and historically constructed (O'Connor, 2016:4). The Bakonzo description of death means that 'death' can be looked as a 'social construct', as society seem to have power to categorize one as dead, even when neither medically so nor buried. Some people are thought to experience 'good death' whereas others undergo 'bad death'. 'Good or bad death' is constructed depending on the circumstances in which one meets his/her death. Such description provides an impression of the value judgements that societies attach to death, determining quality of death (O'Connor, 2016:3). Determinants for the quality of death differ from society to society and changes over time within and among societies. For example, committing suicide, being killed without lawful justification, also known as murder, constitutes the Bakonzo concept of 'bad death'. Other circumstances like suffering a violent death, and through accidents or mob justice, are taken to be bad deaths. Those who suffer death due to their reckless behaviour or conduct like over speeding, prostitution, being antagonistic with other community members, thereby being bewitched are all categorized as bad deaths. According to Lee and Vaughan (2008), distinctions made between good and bad deaths often reflect moral concerns over the conduct of the living. One major element that defines 'bad death' is the 'unused opportunity' by the victim to avoid death. For example, one could decide to abandon theft that leads to mob justice. One could avoid prostitution or adultery, one of the major causes of the deadly HIV/AIDS in the Rwenzururu region. One can decide to live a harmonious life with other members to avoid enmity leading to actions of sorcery or witchcraft upon them. In some circumstances, bad deaths prevent the deceased from getting a decent burial. On the other hand, good death is when a person dies of old age or prolonged sickness, giving an opportunity to kinsmates to take care of him/her. After such period of long illness, when one dies in his/her sleep, is deemed to have experienced 'good death'. Therefore, 'deaths' become good when they serve the needs of the dying, their survivors and their social order (O'Connor, 2016:8; Okechi, 2017).

#### **IV. THE ORIGIN OF DEATH AMONG THE BAKONZO**

The origin of death among the Bakonzo society is presented in form of a traditional myth (*omuhyo*). This is the myth of a woman who prepared a meal but supplied all, leaving nothing in the cooking pot for the ancestors. That a man was living with his wife in Mountain Rwenzori. On one fateful day the woman cooked food, and when it was ready, she supplied all to people in her household, leaving nothing in the cooking pot. At night when the ancestors from Mountain Rwenzori visited this family looking for food, they found nothing in the cooking pot. The cooking pot was empty. They thoroughly checked the house to find out whether there was something to eat but they found nothing. The ancestors were infuriated. They all agreed that the woman who prepared this food and left nothing in the cooking pot must die such that death can exist, for people to gather and prepare food. This marked the beginning of death among the Bakonzo.

The above story became a basis for the Bakonzo belief that when a person dies, he/she would have been called by the ancestors. The practice of preparing food during one's burial also originated from this myth, to not only feed the mourners but also quench the anger of the hungry ancestral gods. It also became a tradition among the Bakonzo for women to prepare and supply the food but also leave some food in the cooking pot. This tradition is reckoned on the belief that when the ancestors come at night and they find no food, they can bring death upon that household. However, this myth is not accepted by all the Bakonzo since it has received a lot of criticism. Christian missionary activities, education, globalization as well as advancement in modern healthcare technologies in the Rwenzori region have provided alternative models explaining the concept of death. The Christianized Bakonzo accept only the Jewish myth recorded in the Old Testament book of Genesis, chapter three. The Jewish myth contends that death was given as a punishment from God to the first created humans, Adam and Eve, after disobeying him, by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. To the Christianized Bakonzo, the dead person is not called by the Mountain Rwenzori ancestors but would have been taken by God, with power to grant and take away life. Other people hold the belief that death is caused by other agents such as sicknesses, wars, murder, sorcery, accidents but not forces of ancestral spirits from the Rwenzori Mountains, thus disapproving the traditional myth about the origin of death among Bakonzo.

It seems the myth was presented so as to instill good morals among women, especially the spirit of sharing because of its emphasis for women to keep some food for ancestors. The myth further teaches Bakonzo women that in preparation of food they need to plan and cater for unplanned guests like visitors and neighbors who may come to the house when hungry. This was to ensure that everybody was welcome to the house, as availability of food at all times for guests not planned for was a sign of a courteous home. However, just like many other myths on origin of death, this specific myth communicates the gender construction of women as the source of evil in society. Blame is put on the woman for failure to perform their roles to the societal demands as the cause of societal disorder. Since the male folk is virtually absent in this death narrative, men are constructed as innocent victims of death, due to failings of women. The myth translates into different ideologies and

practices held about the death of either gender. More detailed death and burial rituals are observed for men than women in this society. Much of these are explained in the next section. Women activists and gender equality organizations in the Rwenzori region have criticized this myth for not only dehumanizing women but also making them feel guilty for a crime that can be explained otherwise with scientific proof. The inferior position of Bakonzo women to men is deeply rooted in this myth.

## **V. MANAGEMENT OF DEATH AMONG THE BAKONZO**

We were interested in what the Bakonzo do upon the death of a person in society. How is the corpse- 'omulambo' treated? What rituals are performed and under what circumstances do they take place? Death is accompanied with grief, bereavement and mourning (Nwosu, et al, 2017; Eyetsemitan, 2002; Gire, 2014). Gire (2014) has made distinctions between these terms.

Grief is the personal emotional reactions (e.g., sadness, anger, and guilt) that follow a loss. Bereavement refers to the experiences that follow the death of a loved one, while mourning is the process through which grief is expressed. Mourning thus represents the culturally accepted expression of the personal feelings that follow the death of a loved one. There is a wide variation across cultures in how people behave after a death and how they are expected to behave (2014:10-11).

In the following discussions, we demonstrate the Bakonzo lived experiences upon the loss of a loved one and the ways in which they express emotional reactions to death. It was established that expression of grief, bereavement and mourning processes among the Bakonzo largely depend on one's social positioning in the community regulated by age, gender, wealth and social status. Different rituals are performed for men and women. Rituals performed on a widower differ from those for a widow. More ritual demands exist for elderly dead persons than the children. Suicide victims have specific rituals too because of the disapproval of suicide in society. There exist special rituals for a dead twin. More elaborate burial ceremonies and rituals are performed for dead kings and cultural leaders because of their status in society.

### **Death rituals among Bakonzo**

Death is one of the rites of passage in several African societies. But because of fear of death and the dead, several rituals are performed to serve a therapeutic role (Mwandayi, 2011: 56; Gire, 2014:2). The Bakonzo have elaborate management of the dead body that promotes respect of the dead. Immediately after the death of a person is announced, the body of the deceased is highly respected and handled with care. For example, the corpse is washed, smeared with jelly, covered in a bark cloth locally known as *esyongurungu*, the traditional cloth of the Bakonzo. But with increasing scarcity of the bark cloth, dead bodies are currently covered in well vanished blankets or bed sheets. The body is then laid down in a sitting room where other people would find it for mourning. The water which was used for washing the dead body is poured far away. This is because, the water is considered potentially harmful if used by witches against other people. While the body is laid in the sitting room, people start coming to console the relatives. Crying and whispering to the dead is common as a way of sending messages to the departed. People cry because they remember the good things that they will miss about the dead person. The messages in whispers are a sign of farewell to the dead, as they are believed to be on a journey to meet their ancestors. Bakonzo believe that mishandling the corpse could annoy the dead and the ancestors, who can bring calamities to the family, to show their displeasure. Such calamities can be in form of barrenness, famine or death of other family members. The mourners are not supposed to speak bad things about the deceased until after burial. Speaking ill about the dead is believed to arouse the anger of the ancestors. Bakonzo have elaborate rituals performed when a person dies in the society and each ritual has a great significance to the dead, his/her relatives and the wider community.

Though the death of one's child brought untold grief to the parents among the Bakonzo, very limited rituals were performed upon the death of a minor. The mother was expected to tie a thread of banana fiber (*omulitsi*) or any piece of cloth (*omulemba*) around her waist, as a sign of grief over the loss of her child. This thread is also intended to give her strength and support since she loses appetite of food and therefore if not supported, she can collapse over hunger. The father was prohibited from wearing sandals until the last funeral rites were over as a sign of sorrowful moment. The mother sat or slept around her dead child, laid in the sitting room till burial. It was the responsibility of one's children to ensure that their parents received a decent burial. Therefore, the loss of a child is the worst moment, Bakonzo parents go through because it becomes a lost opportunity for them to have someone who will ensure that they are buried decently upon their demise from this earth. On the other hand, it brings glory for children to be able to nurse their parents up to a ripe old age and prepare a decent burial for them, which includes performance of all the necessary rituals expected of them.

With the exception of the death of a child, the Bakonzo had a special way of communicating the death of a family head, a woman or any other mature person in the community. The communication, which was through the beating of a drum for seven times, was solely the responsibility of the clan leader in the area. Once the sound of this drum was heard, it was clear to the whole society that the disaster of death has befallen in the

area. The actual dead person would now be spread by word of mouth from one person to another. The use of the drum was the only and best way of communication to a large community of people in pre-colonial Bukonzo society. Due to modern technology that has been imported in the area, the use of telephones, mobile phones and radio among others, provide a more efficient means of informing the public about any death in the community.

A nephew locally known as *omuhwa* had significant roles to perform upon the death of his maternal uncle. A nephew could perform a lot of rituals among Bakonzo because they believe that the clan calamity cannot affect him since he is not a direct member of the clan. He was charged with the responsibility of destroying the bed of a head of family (*Nyin'enka*), immediately after his death. In this society, heads of families were usually men. The destruction of the bed was to prevent anyone from using the bed on which the deceased head of family used to sleep. It was disrespectful to the deceased head of family if anyone slept on his bed upon his death.

It was believed that non-observance of this tradition could annoy the dead, who were capable of retaliating through sending disasters like barrenness or chronic diseases. This tradition was also intended to confirm to the widow- '*omukwakali*' that her husband, the one with authority over her, had indeed passed away. It was however, not necessary to destroy the bed in case a woman passed away, because the man, who is the head of the family was still alive. The tradition portrayed the patriarchal nature of Bukonzo society as it aimed at emphasizing the authority of a man over his wife and entire household. This was further to demonstrate that the man is a basis upon which a family is formed and once he was gone, the bed had to be destroyed to communicate the disappearance of this authority. Bukonzo society just like several other African traditional societies treasured widow inheritance. The destruction of the bed upon the death of the husband was to send a message to the widow that she was to be inherited by some other man, a relative of the husband, who would now construct or buy another bed, as a sign of new authority over her.

The destruction of the bed was accompanied by a sacrifice of a hen, reared by the deceased such that it should not crow again, since its owner had passed away. In the absence of a hen, a male goat was sacrificed such that it should not mate again because the owner had died. The killing of these animals aimed to alert creatures possessed by the family head that their master and owner had died. Meat of these animals was eaten by the mourners, who slept all night at the fireplace and those who would dig the grave the next morning. Non-observance of the tradition of sacrifice of animals seems not to have any consequences upon the living. What is clear is that pre-colonial Bukonzo society used to keep plenty of goats and numerous chickens which made it easy for people to slaughter them to facilitate the smooth running of the funeral ceremonies.

It was the tradition of the Bakonzo to let the dead body stay for at least a day or two before burial. This was to show respect to the deceased that they still loved them and were finding it difficult to let them go. Postponing burial provided an opportunity to the distant relatives to travel for burial. The desire to bury the dead on the day death has occurred is being appreciated now days. Minors are usually buried on the day they die. Islamic religion which has deeply penetrated the Rwenzori region has contributed to the change in thinking about immediate burial after death. The increasing monetization of society, where people find work very far, along with a highly capitalized society, does not allow relatives working with result-oriented companies to stay away from work for days, attending to the dead.

The Bakonzo bury the dead near the homestead. This is premised on the cultural belief that the dead are still part of the family. Burying near the homestead is to 'send a message' to the dead and ancestors that they are still considered to be part of the family. Burying someone far away from the homestead would imply that the dead are unwanted and therefore being cut off from their family relations. The significance of ancestors and spirits of the dead in the affairs of the living means that they have to be kept near the living, such that they could be consulted as and when it is required. The spirits of the dead are believed to always come at night and intervene in the affairs of the family such as sharing in the same meal. This explains why in the past, any Bakonzo was not allowed to eat all the food without leaving some in the saucepan. The spirit of the dead husband, as though in physical form is believed to continue providing security and protection to his family. A person especially a family head was to be buried in front of the house because it was believed that he was to keep on watching and protecting the family from any danger and in case of any problem he could be called to intervene. Sometimes the spirits of the dead, through possession of the living would demand to be reburied near the homestead. However, increasing urbanization and shortage of land have become a challenge to this tradition, especially in the towns. Town councils have by-laws that discourage town dwellers from burying the dead in prime plots of land in the towns and municipalities. People have resorted to buying land in the countryside purposely as their burial grounds. Urbanized parts of the region now have a generation that has been born and raised up in the towns. The urbanized want to keep their small but highly rated plots of lands valuable, by not having the dead buried in them. It is therefore common in the recent times for families to bury their dead relatives several kilometers away from where they live. This tradition has evolved to keep in line with changing trends of urbanization of the Rwenzori region. Christianity and Islamic influences upon the Bakonzo have not left the tradition of burying the dead near homesteads unaffected. Bakonzo who occupy high positions in the

Christian churches, are buried not on their ancestral burial grounds, in the homesteads, but near church premises. The Islamic faith teaches against movement of the dead from one place to another, and these have established burial cemeteries near the mosques. Ardent followers of the Muslim faith can request during their lifetime or in their will to be buried at the mosque's burial grounds.

The person who has lost his or her beloved one is not supposed to move out of the home until the funeral rite is done. A widow is further prohibited from sitting on a chair until the last funeral rites are over. The widower (*omukwarume*) is likewise expected to remain in the home to keep company of his dead wife till burial. Moving up and down, away from the dead wife or husband is interpreted as fear for the dead, which is condemned. The widower is allowed some exceptions. For example, being the head of family, he is expected to spearhead the burial preparations, which may require him to move to the nearby market to procure goods needed for the funeral. Widows are allowed to move away from the dead body only when going to the toilet. Keeping near your dead husband or wife till burial was one way of demonstrating one's love for the dead spouse. It was a fulfillment of the vows that one made at the time of marriage rite, to keep together in all circumstances, including sickness (*oburwere*), poverty (*obunaku*) and death- '*omwaruholho*'.

As a sign of participation in actual burial of the spouse, the widow or widower were expected to get some soil in their hands and pour it in the grave. This served to bid farewell to the beloved one. In case the spouse died when the partner was far away and unable to attend the burial ceremony, at an appropriate time, she/he was expected to visit the grave, pick some soil near the grave and place it on top of the grave. This was to be done to fulfill the ritual of 'taking part in burying the spouse'. It was believed that failure to participate in the burial of a close relative would bring untold calamities upon the family person in question. It should however, be noted that burying the dead by pouring soil on the dead body in the grave is fast disappearing. It is now seen as being 'inhuman' to the dead. It is also looked as indecent burial. Mourners are filled with '*ensisi*' if a family decides to bury their dead in pure soil grave. The grave is now neatly covered with timber and iron sheets, to cover and protect the dead body in the grave. After pouring the soil in the grave, the widow or widower is taken back in the sitting room where she spends three to four days respectively till the last funeral rite. The Bakonzo believed that staying indoors as a way of mourning for the dead was to show respect both to the dead and ancestors. This pleases the dead who in turn ignite blessings upon the living, in terms of fertility of both animals and good harvests. Funeral services' companies that are employed to take charge of burying the dead, undertake technical construction of the grave with bricks, cement and tiles.

### **The practice of burial among the Bakonzo**

Unlike other societies such as the Indians and the Maasai who do not bury their dead ones in the grave, the Bakonzo do bury their beloved ones who pass away in the grave. The Bakonzo believe that burying the dead person in the grave is one way of showing respect to the deceased and to the ancestors. It is the responsibility of the clan elder to determine and show where the grave should be dug. He is also charged with the responsibility of announcing the burial programme. The grave- *Ekituurois* considered the person's final 'resting' place.

It is the responsibility of the male members of the community to dig the grave. Women were not allowed to dig the grave because they were considered to be weak as compared to men and since the grave was a great task; only men could dig it. According to Kikonzo tradition, it was compulsory for all men to participate in digging of the grave. Failure to participate in this activity, the community would respond by not digging any grave in his home if he lost any relatives. This ensured social order and promoted communalism in the society. Communal digging of the grave is still common among the Bakonzo today. However, a few rich families with financial capacity to engage funeral services companies, that manage and prepare burials, have abandoned this tradition of communal grave digging. These are no longer bothered with the community repercussion of non participation in communal grave digging because they expect the funeral services companies to do it when it is their turn.

The dead body is covered in bark cloth—*esyongurungu*. The bark cloth takes a longer time to rot than ordinary cloth, which would provide protection to the dead body. The use of sticks, also called *esyondara*, would prevent the soil from reaching the corpse and then they would cover the grave with soil. A nephew is the one who leads in bringing the corpse to the grave; this is because a nephew in the family is the one who cleanses a family from any danger including death, since it is believed that any calamity of the clan cannot affect him as is not a direct member of the family. Graves would be demarcated with plant stems known as *ebisongasonga*. Advancement in technology has impacted quite a lot on the way the Bakonzo bury their dead in the recent past. Bark cloth is rarely used but expensive bed sheets and blankets to show off and attain respect from the public but not from the dead and the ancestors. Sticks are no longer used to prevent soil from reaching the dead body in the grave but rather expensive coffins are used to store the dead and are placed in cemented graves. Cementing of graves has made the use of plant stems to demarcate the grave forgotten by the current generation. The Bakonzo who have embraced the Islamic religion continue to bury their dead in pure soil since Islamic teaching

discourages their followers from burying a person in a coffin and cemented grave as it is thought to prevent one's soul from ascending to heaven.

### **Fire place and the last funeral rite**

A bonfire is a very important aspect of mourning for the dead among the Bakonzo. It is the responsibility of the nephew (*omuhwa*) to the family to collect the firewood for preparation of the bonfire. This fire has to burn until the last funeral rite is performed. The fire is very important in the Kikonzo culture of managing death. The bonfire lasts for three days for a woman and four days for the death of a man. The fire is put out by the nephew to the family. The fire is believed to give light to the deceased while travelling to the next world. Around the bonfire men gather to make plans and preparations for the whole death management process, including decisions concerning date and time of burial, actual place of burial, and inheritance of deceased's property. The fire also helps to keep the men warm, as they have to sleep outside until the last funeral rite is performed. The fire also protected the mourners from dangerous animals such as lions and snakes since they stay near Ruwenzori national park. The Bakonzo also believed that the spirit of the dead person keeps wondering around the compound and therefore takes the opportunity to get warm on this fire. Women are prohibited from sitting around this fire place. This is intended to protect secret plans of the men that they share with each other around this fire place. Some of the 'secret plans' revealed and shared among men at the fire place are about plotting to marry several other women, to which the current wives should not be privy to. Men also advise each other on how to deal with their difficult wives at home. At the fire place, men also reveal to their kinsmen, children that they may have fathered out of wedlock. Certainly, such information when heard by their wives or other women in the community would bring family conflicts.

The observance of the last funeral rite marks the end of the mourning period. It also signifies that the dead spirit has now arrived safely to be with its ancestors. The last funeral rite is celebrated after four days or three days for a man and a woman respectively because of the belief that it takes a man more days than the woman to reach the ancestral world. The Bakonzo believe that men continue to be burdened with responsibilities in the spirit world just like in their physical form. Attending to such responsibilities delay them from reaching the ancestral world. The patriarchal ideology prevalent in this society may have influenced a distinction in the number of days for mourning between a dead man and woman. The intention to make a difference of one day was to signify the man as being more important to the family than a woman because he is the foundation of family and its bread earner.

Several activities are performed during the last funeral rites. Among them and the foremost one is the taking of a ritual bath at the river by the relatives. This is premised on the practice of non-bathing for the past three or four days of mourning. The widow is accompanied by fellow widows for the ritual bath at the river just as a widower is accompanied by fellow men who have ever lost their wives. In case of loss of a parent, the bereaved is accompanied to the ritual bath by those who have ever lost their parents. This is intended to give opportunity to those who lost their beloved ones long time ago to remember and respect them. Fellow widows and widowers are believed to have experience on how to handle such unfortunate occurrences, and therefore are in position to provide counsel to the new widow or widower. They have to do so with happiness and rejoicing. The tradition of accompanying the new widow or widower to the ritual bath is believed to make the ancestors happy. They also reciprocate by happily welcoming the spirit of just buried one in their spirit world. The Bakonzo believe that failure to accompany those who have lost their beloved ones for the ritual bath can ignite the wrath of the ancestors upon the community through calamities like famine. The washing of the hoes used in digging the grave is done on this day. This is to mark the end of activities connected with this particular death and a signal to the rest of the society members that they can begin their normal activities. Fire is lit on the banks of the river for those who have had the ritual bath to warm themselves such that they can go home when they are not wet. This is to further illustrate the end of sorrowful moments.

Relatives of the deceased especially the wives and children are required to shave off hair on their heads. The ritual of shaving off the hair was a sign of bereavement among family members. However, this ritual of shaving off the hair is fast changing, with many women abandoning it. Women find it illogical to shave off their styles of hair which are expensive to have. The men find it easy to shave off the hair in modern barber shops, with sterilizing machines, other than using a sharp razorblade. They have also abandoned shaving bald styles as required but simply trim their hair to their wishes but not those of tradition. After shaving off their hair, the bereaved family members are now allowed to dress decently, with sandals in their feet. A communal meal is served to the family members as well as relatives, neighbors, in-laws and others who have come to celebrate this funeral rite. The last funeral rite is climaxed with a traditional dance (*omukuumu*) for men and "*masunduko*" by women to make this celebration entertaining. The music and dance are an indication of no more sorrow as the deceased is believed to be in joy and communion with the ancestors. The members therefore, celebrate for the happy entry of the deceased into the next world. However, two other important elements of the last funeral rite are decisions on inheritance of property and selection of their heir.

### **Inheritance and selection of an Heir**

It is the tradition of the Bakonzo to select and install an heir when a family head has died. The ceremony of giving out the inheritance of the deceased's property is also done along. The selection of an heir and distribution of the deceased's property are presided over by the clan leader in the area. The selection of an heir is done in a secret meeting called by the clan leader. The role of the heir is to continue taking care of the family of the deceased as though he was still in existence. The widow(s) is part of the inheritance to be shared or distributed. The widow is usually passed on as a wife to one of the deceased's brothers. If the deceased was polygamous, the widows are shared amongst the deceased's brothers or among his relatives and friends. This act of widow inheritance among the Bakonzo was to ensure continuity of the deceased's family. It was a taboo for a widow to refuse another man given to her by the clan leaders of the deceased.

It was the responsibility of the inheritor to take care of the widow and the entire family of the deceased, providing them all their essential needs, including giving them security. The wife inheritor was prohibited from sleeping with the widow in the house of the deceased but rather they were supposed to destroy it and build a new house. It was believed that if the wife inheritor slept with the widow in the house of the deceased, calamity could befall them, in terms of dying at an early age, bad dreams, barrenness and sickness. The expectation of the wife inheritor to construct a new house was to show how responsible he would be in providing and caring for the deceased's family. The children produced in this family were to be a continuation on the ones which the deceased had left in the world.

However, the practice of wife inheritance is fast becoming an outdated custom among the Bakonzo. Women activists and Non-governmental organizations concerned with gender equality have vigorously campaigned against this custom, as not only retrogressive but also infringing on the rights of women. The moderately educated population has seen the disadvantages of the custom and educated and empowered women, with adequate sources of income refuse to be inherited upon death of their husbands. The government of Uganda has scorned this custom as it was one of the avenues through which HIV/AIDS was spreading fast in the country.

In case a man lost his wife, the family of the deceased woman organized a secret meeting to choose among the sisters of the deceased the one who will replace the dead sister in order to maintain the relationship between two families. The selection of a replacement for the deceased wife was precipitated if the widower was considered wealthy and of good character. The widow was however not allowed to sleep with her on the same bed of the departed wife. A lot has since changed with widowers having much say on whether to remarry or remain single. The time to consider remarriage is an individual responsibility. In case of decision to remarry, the widower was encouraged to sleep with a prostitute first. Sex with a prostitute was a form of cleansing from the curse of losing the wife. It was feared that failure to sleep with a prostitute to cleanse himself of the curse, the next wife to be married could also die.

The son to the deceased was usually selected as the heir. Male children, especially first born, no matter their age were the expected heirs to their father's estates. The boys were believed to be the ones who could lead to the continuity of the family through production of other children who could automatically become members of the clan. Daughters were barred from becoming heirs because they were expected to get marriage and manage other families, outside their father's clans. The heir was given some instruments as a sign of the inheritance. These included a spear and a hoe. The clan leader hands over the above property with the following words: "This is the property your father please take care of them and the family" The hoe as well as the spear have a unique role to play in this society.

The Bakonzo community has essentially been a 'hoe economy'. The hoe is the main tool for farming to provide food for the family. The spear is used to guard and offer protection to the family. Every family head is expected to have a spear in his house as a tool to safeguard the family. The heir is then supposed to lead a line of his brothers and sisters into the house. This shows that the heir has accepted his roles as leader of the rest and has accepted the responsibility of taking care of his siblings. In case of an infant heir, the brother who inherited the widow has a responsibility of guiding the young boy on what to do. In the event that the deceased didn't have male children, choice of heir is made from amongst sons of his brothers or clanmates. Land is distributed among sons of the deceased man. Girls are not allocated any portion of their deceased father's land. This is because the girls are expected to marry in another clan where they get their share of the husband's land. Married daughters are given one goat each to take to their husband's place. It is slaughtered as a sacrifice and cleansing of the married daughter away from the curse of death she has been attending at her father's home. The rest of goats are shared among sons of the deceased. Women emancipation movement has occasioned many changes in Bakonzo society today. Girl children are now demanding to assume responsibility of being heirs to their late father's estates. This explains why there is a lot of conflict between the children after the death of their parents especially on how to share the property among themselves.



### **Rituals for a suicide victim among the Bakonzo**

The Bakonzo prohibit committing suicide. The most common form of suicide among the Bakonzo is by 'hanging one's self using a rope or any strong material around the neck upon a tree branch. A suicide victim faces fierce repercussions from society. The Bakonzo never accord a decent burial to whoever takes his/her own life at will. The victim is never taken to his/her home for a decent burial but he/she is buried where he/she would have committed suicide from. Committing suicide is believed to be a curse upon the entire family of the victim. The Bakonzo therefore had different rituals that are performed to cleanse the society from such kind of a curse. The clan leader to which the victim belonged takes lead in the cleansing ritual. A sacrifice of five goats is made to cleanse the society of such kind of a curse.

Kikonzo traditions bestow the clan leader as both a religious and political leader of the people. The goats act as a burnt sacrifice as the smoke that comes out of this sacrifice is believed to cleanse the society from such kind of a curse. Committing suicide in someone's land, calls for reparations to the owner of the land. A compensation of eight goats is made to the land owner for 'cursing' his or her land. It also serves as payment to the land owner to accept the suicide victim to be buried at that very point, he/she committed the suicide. The eight goats are meant to entice the land owner to allow the grave to be dug in his/her land. Goats are not only valuable but also very expensive animals to be procured. Demand for this number of goats was meant to scare community members away from committing the vice, as the cost would be high on the family members. The grave is dug in the same direction where the body is hanging and swinging. The grave is dug directed under the tree where the victim committed suicide. The noose used by the victim is cut letting the body fall directed into the grave that would have been dug under it. No one is supposed to touch the body because of believed fear to contract the curse of committing suicide. The clan leader takes lead in 'punishing' the victim publicly. The dead body is whipped by the clan leader 12 strokes of the cane with the intention of causing anger upon the spirit of the suicide victim to run away from this clan because of the nasty thing done. The Bakonzo believe that beating the corpse scares away the evil spirit of committing suicide into the wilderness, never to come back in this family. The Bakonzo believe that failure to beat the corpse encourages the spirit of committing suicide to remain within the family, making it likely for other members to follow suit. The beating of the corpse is intended to warn the living against committing suicide as an evil act. Whereas traditions dictate respectful handling of the dead body, the beating of suicide victims is further to send a signal to the living that their bodies will be desecrated and disrespected if they decided to bring such a curse upon their families. The desecration of the corpse is to alert the ancestors and the gods not to welcome the spirit of the victim in the next world due to the horrible act that the person would have committed.

Again, the nephew in the family has a role to play in case of a suicide victim. He is required to climb up the tree with a panga to cut the thread or rope which the victim used to kill him/herself. This is to let the body fall into the grave. The body is buried in whichever form it would have fallen into the grave, without bark cloth, blankets or bed sheets as traditions demand of decent burial. They are covered fully with soil as no sticks, iron sheets, iron bars or cement are used to protect the dead from soil reaching them. This mode of burying suicide victims is to scare those still living that will never get a decent burial if they committed suicide, as they would be buried in this similar way.

### **Rituals performed on a dead twin**

Producing twins among the Bakonzo is considered to be an important thing. This is because twins take on the status of kings in Kikonzo culture. Special names and titles are bestowed upon a man and woman who produce twins. A woman who produces twins is called *Nyabahasa* and a man is called *Isebahasa*. For this case, special rituals exist for the death of a twin.

The concept of 'death' is not used in reference to twins. The Bakonzo believe that twins don't 'die' but rather 'they go to collect fire wood', also referred to as "*erisenya*" or 'they go to graze animals', also referred to as "*erisisya*". Death of a twin is also described as 'having disappeared', also referred to as "*ahurukire*". Family members are not supposed to cry or mourn for a dead twin because they believe that the cries force the remaining twin to die. They argue that if they say that a twin has 'died' then the other twin is also likely to die or any other twin who will be produced in that family will be dying. The use of symbolic language in reference to activities of kings and twins is to illustrate the special position they occupy in society. They cannot therefore share the same description with the rest of Bakonzo occupying a lower status. This further demonstrates how class divisions based on power and social status continue even after the death of an individual. A twin is buried under a big tree such as '*omutumba* tree' or 'a bark tree'. This is to confirm that the twin is still collecting fire wood. Twins are never mourned for three or four days as is with the other categories of people. Burial and other such funeral rites take place on the day of death. This is because there is fear that even the second twin can disappear. At the time of burial of a twin, the second twin is taken far away from the home. She/he is brought back after death rituals are done. However, if the second twin dies, she/he is described as having gone to help the

other in collecting fire wood or grazing the animals. It is believed that referring to twins as having died, can bring calamity upon the family, as fire can erupt burning all members of the family.

### **The Bakonzo understanding of life after death**

The Bakonzo believe in death and life after death. They believe that when a person dies his or her spirit disappears and goes back to the next world where it resides with the ancestors. Life after death is described as a place where people go after death and they stay safely with the ancestors. The Bakonzo believe that when a person dies, he/ she is not completely dead but continues to exist among his/ her people. Family members may dream about a person who died long time ago. Dreams about the dead provide hope to the living that their ancestors are not dead, with a possibility of meeting them when they also die. However, dreaming about the dead when they are crying communicates suffering in the ancestral world, and this requires a sacrifice in form of a goat, in order to make spirit of the dead comfortable in the next world.

The living, experience physical appearance of those who died. The dead are seen hovering in the gardens, around wells and in the forests while collecting fire wood. The Bakonzo believe that the spirits of the dead reside in mountains of Rwenzori, in Valleys, around rivers, under big trees. These always come back to visit the living in times of happiness and disaster. All the spirits of the dead are headed by *Kithasamba*, the overall head of all ancestors, who are thought to reside in the mountains of Rwenzori. *Kithasamba* controls all the rivers that have their source from this mountain. When the rivers flood among the Bakonzo, it is a sign of anger among ancestors, necessitating a sacrifice to appease them. Because it was known that the ancestral spirits resided among these natural features of the community, it was a taboo to do anything that desecrated them. For example, women were forbidden to go to the well, valley or in the forest to collect firewood alone, unaccompanied. People were forbidden from defecating in the forest or near water sources, as this was believed to annoy the ancestors, who could bring calamities upon society. Big trees were treated with such reverence that it was thought to be housing one or several of the community's spirits. Such traditions helped to preserve the environment pure and sustainable, under the fear of spirits.

The Bakonzo believe that the spirit of the dead keeps moving from one place to another, in search for a comfortable place it is to dwell. They move around nearby gardens and home compounds. Due to the fear of ghosts, children and other family members are forbidden from moving beyond the compound before the end of prescribed days of mourning for women and men. This was to ensure that members do not come into contact with the ghost of the dead family member, as doing so would lead to the death of the victim. Ghosts are known to entice the living to follow them to the spirit world, whereupon they can meet their death in the circumstances. Therefore, until the celebration of the last funeral rites were over, members would not farm in the gardens; neither would they be allowed to perform any productive activities outside the home in observance of these traditions. These traditions may have aimed at instilling the spirit of sympathy and concern among the people, since there were no evidences to any persons who had become victims to violation of these traditions. The Bakonzo believe that death is a transition to the world of the ancestors.

Upon death of a family member, mourners, usually women cry, sending messages and whispers to the corpse. Such messages and whispers attest to the Bakonzo thinking and belief that those who die continue to live, as messages of hope can be sent to them through those going to meet them in the spirit world. The death of a person means the setting off for journey to the next world. It is for this reason that the Bakonzo predetermined the number of days that a male and female can spend until the final destination. The Bakonzo believe that it takes a woman and man three and four days respectively to reach the next world. The celebration of the last funeral rite is attestation that the dead has reached his/her final destination, and that has been received with joy by the ancestors.

The prescribed number of days for mourning, requiring mourners to sleep around the bonfire is a form of escorting or giving company to the dead person who is travelling a long journey to the next world. This is partly the reason for clan members; friends and neighbors to gather and sleep around the bonfire for the predetermined number of days. The dancing by men also known as "*omukumo*" and women also known as "*amasunduko*" are meant to kill boredom to the dead who is still travelling to the next world. Dancing during the last funeral rite was aimed at making the ancestors happy in order to welcome the new comer safely in their world. Tradition demands any true Mukonzo to pour some libations on the ground before they could eat or drink. During marriage and initiation ceremonies, offering of beer to the ancestors, by pouring libations was meant to call upon the ancestors to be part of these celebrations. It was believed that the libations made the ancestors happy and lack of them could annoy them.

The Bakonzo also practice reincarnation of children after the death. The Bakonzo rename their children after their dead relatives to act as a sign of remembrance. This is to show that the dead continues to exist in the family through this child. The Bakonzo believe that the practice of renaming of the dead through newborns appeases the ancestors as they come to learn how influential they are in the affairs of the family. A child who is

named after the dead is expected to possess all the traits of the ancestor, he/she has been renamed after. He/she is taken to be a reincarnation of the ancestor, with all the respect and honor accorded to him/her no matter the age.

## VI. GENERAL CONCLUSION

Sociocultural descriptions of death and dying determine the survivors' responses to death (O'Connor, 2016). Such sociocultural perspectives help in understanding the worldview of the Bakonzo. The Bakonzo have elaborate perspectives on death and death management. Their ideologies on origin of death, and the ritualistic nature of death management are fundamental in understanding their philosophy about not only death but life in general. The different and often contrasting responses to death, involving mourning and dancing attest to the fact that as observed by Mist (1998:1), death involves great changes and adjustment, often inconveniences and pain but may also involve joy, reunion and a new beginning. The social expectations upon all community members to express concern and sorrow for the death of a member, among the Bakonzo serve to portray a collectivized approach to coping with death (Rickens, 2017). Grief, bereavement and all mourning practices help to understand and maintain social relations in a society that would otherwise be torn down with death. These help to maintain kinship ties, the reproduction of communal values, and notions of succession and property inheritance. Lee & Vaughan (2008), have argued that because the death related practices mediate between the world of the living and the world of the dead, death related rituals reveal a society's spiritual and philosophical orientation. However, such death management traditions among the Bakonzo are dying out due to the coming of Christian missionaries and intermarriages with neighboring tribes such as Bamba and Batooro. There are also some death related rituals that need to be reformed such as denial for girl child inheritance upon father's death.

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