

DEATH, MOURNING AND BURIAL RITES AMONGST THE KHOISAN PEOPLE OF BOTSWANA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Perceptions of death and burial practices in African societies vary from one ethnic group to the other. While in some societies they may be accompanied by different ritual performances and some period of mourning, in others they are not. This study discusses ways in which selected groups of Khoisan people in Botswana dealt with death and burial in their different societies in the past. The discussion will confine itself to the Shuakhwe of Kachikao and Lesoma and the Danisa of Nata and the Xhong of Bere. These groups were selected mainly because compared to others researched on they were more elaborate in their discussion of issues pertaining to death and burial in their societies. Taking a comparative approach, the study will draw similarities and differences in how these groups dealt with death, mourning and burial. It will further assess how co-existence with other ethnic groups of Botswana may have impacted on the traditional burial procedures of the Khoisan.

Keywords: Death and burial, ritual, mourning, Khoisan tradition, cross-cultural influences.

1. Introduction

Death takes place in every society and is conceived differently. The meanings attached to death and the dead vary from one society to another. Similarly, death amongst the different Khoisan groups of southern Africa was viewed and treated differently from the way it was in other groups of people in the region and especially among the Bantu peoples whom the Khoisan have lived and interacted with for a long time. However, making a general observation about death among Africans, Mbiti (1970:46) asserts that “For the Africans, death is a separation and not annihilation; the dead person is suddenly cut off from the human society and yet the corporate group clings to him. This is shown through the elaborate funeral rites, as well as other methods of keeping in contact with the departed”. The belief among the Batswana who have lived in co-existence with the Khoisan for a long period of time is that the dead have a bearing on the lives of the living because “both bad and good fortune lies in the interpersonal, community and spiritual relationships and ...the displeasure of a slighted ancestor” (Denbow and Thebe, 2006:38) and angry ancestors or evil spirits may cause death (Chikwekwe, 1997). Maloka (1998) echoes the same idea as existing among the Basotho when she adds that death does not result in the annihilation of the individual

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or his/her identity but rather, graduation into the other form of life. That is, they turn into ancestors whom, it is believed, the living keep contact with, knowing that they can similarly bring luck and misfortune. Baloyi (2014:263) also adds that “death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible or spiritual ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person is not destroyed but moves to live in the spirit ancestors’ realm.”

The above discussed generic views on African conceptions of death did not apply to Khoisan communities of Southern Africa. Generally in the past, death and the dead were not treated as a normal and usual occurrence among the Khoisan. They did not view their dead as transcending beyond the normal human existence into a different realm that they needed to keep ties with. They, therefore, avoided burial sites for they were thought of as harboring the spirits of the deceased who, in one way or another may harm the living than bring good fortune to their lives. Unlike in most African societies where the belief is that neglecting the dead, cutting contact with them or even doing something that displeases them are instances which could bring harm or misfortune to the living, the Khoisan believed that the dead were better off left alone to avoid harm. While in the Tswana view the ancestors keep watch over the living and thus have to be revered, amongst the Khoisan the deceased were believed to move about in the form of ghosts (Schapera, 1930) and those spirits were feared. Contrary to other African or Bantu groups among which most Khoisan groups have been incorporated in their history of coexistence and interaction, there was no link or communication between the living and the dead. The dead and their spirits were feared and avoided because they were all believed to be malevolent by nature. Widlock (1998:121) clarifies that “there was no connection whatsoever with ancestral graves nor any notion of dependency on ancestors.” In addition, the dead were not to be mentioned by name because of the harm the spirits may bring (Barnard, 1992). In many Khoisan groups, ancestral spirits were considered harmful and therefore had to be avoided. Speaking of their deeds, no matter how heroic or prominent they were, was not allowed (Widlock, 1998:117).

Unlike Bantu groups of people in Southern Africa who had permanent settlements and therefore buried their dead in cemeteries, there was no specific place set aside for the dead (cemetery) amongst the Khoisan. Barnard (1992) highlights the fact that in some cases the dead were buried in houses that were later either burned and/or abandoned. This was also echoed by the groups interviewed in the study. Abandonment seems to have been a common practice among the Khoisan groups interviewed. Schapera, 1930; Barnard, 1992 and Lewis, 1997 make similar observations.

As life changed amongst the Khoisan when they interacted with other ethnic

groups in the region, they experienced some changes in their lifestyle including their rites of passage. First of all, their nomadic life in search of game and other resources was altered. Death and burial practices were also not left untouched. The usual short period of waiting between death and burial was more or less influenced by that of the Batswana, according to the groups interviewed. They highlighted the idea that they currently have to wait for some days before burial as the corpse would be taken to the mortuary. However, there seems to have been no or little changes pertaining to other rituals that accompanied death, especially the head shaving and after-death medicinal cleansing of the bereaved.

2. Background to the study

This study is one of the many that emanated from the Department of African Languages and Literature project at the University of Botswana whose aim was a country wide assessment of culture and patterns of languages use in Botswana. Following the research that was basically done through structured interviews and questionnaires where applicable, the researcher decided to do a comparative study of death and burial rites amongst some Khoisan groups of Botswana. The study was inspired by the fact that in general, these groups have been lumped and studied together as either the Khoisan or Bushmen, a classification which was in most cases oblivious of the fact that there existed many ethnic groups within the Khoisan family, each of which has a distinct language and/or culture. Additionally, not many studies have extensively discussed death and burial rites of the Khoisan groups of Botswana.

Another interesting factor that led to the study is that time and again there arose the realization that death and burial were topics that did not take much precedence in the lives of most Khoisan groups. This is underscored by the fact that almost all the groups investigated reported that after the burial of a loved one, the camp had to be deserted and the reasons behind the trend seemed worthy of investigation. Some groups mentioned that after burial, the place is deserted and the name of the deceased will never be mentioned again because of fear of the spirits of the dead, a practice reported in both Schapera (1930) and Barnard (1992). Others alluded to the fact that some children are then named after the deceased so that the deceased are not completely forgotten. The sequence of rites that followed death and burial were also intriguing so much that the assessment of either their preservation and/or changes due to interaction with other ethnic groups became important.

This paper confines itself to the death and burial rites of the Shuakhwe of Kachikau and Lesoma in the Chobe/Kasane area, the Danisa of Gweta in Nata area and the Xung of Bere in The Gantsi District. It is descriptive in nature as it mainly outlines the manner in which the Khoisan groups selected for the study conducted their death and burial practices. The paper addresses the following questions: a)

Have the Khoisan groups in Botswana maintained their death and burial practices to date? b) Have any changes occurred in their death and burial practices over time due to their interaction with non-Khoisan groups of people?

The paper assumes a comparative approach analysis in order to assess whether there are any similarities and differences in the manner in which selected groups conducted their death and burial rites. The aim is to interrogate the universalizing approach whereby Khoisan groups have not been studied in and of their own right as independent groups with their own unique practices.

3. Methodology

As already stated, data used for the study were gathered as part of the Department of African Languages and Literature of the University of Botswana research project on culture and patterns of language use in Botswana. The major data gathering technique was recorded structured interviews. The informants were mostly identified through taking advantage of opportunities of finding groups of people gathered in the villages. This is the reason why most of the interviews took the form of focus groups. At times the researchers would also use snowball sampling where they were referred to possible informants by others. The age group of the informants ranged from 18 – 65 years and beyond and the study loci were the Kasane and Nata areas including neighboring villages in the north and Ghanzi and surrounding areas in the south west parts of Botswana.

4. Death and burial amongst the selected Khoisan groups of Botswana

4.1 The Shuakhwe of Kachikau and Lesoma

Death amongst most Khoisan groups has not been wholly accepted and treated with the spirit of acceptance like in most African societies. Rather, healing a person with herbs when they were ill played a very important role amongst the Shuakhwe of Kachikau and Lesoma. The Shuakhwe of Kachikau state that even illness was something that was not revered or that could be let to interrupt people's daily lives. Severe illness that did not show any signs of healing culminated in abandonment of the severely ill by their family members. More often, the sick would be put in a hut which was then closed and abandoned. This practice is also noted in Schapera (1930) and Lewis (1997) who add that sometimes burial is impossible among the Khoisan and that even old people were at times deliberately abandoned during periods of scarcity of resources like in times of drought. However, when the ill could not be cured and they died in the presence of the people at a given camp, they were buried the same day and the camp immediately vacated. The desertion of the place was due to the belief that the spirit of the dead might affect or harm the living including

causing their deaths. Any other ritual that followed burial such as some healing and cleansing processes was done in the new camp. The relatives of the deceased would be cleansed in herbs and given some medicine to drink. If a child was born following the abandonment and/or death of a family member, they were named after the deceased.

The Shuakhwe of Lesoma echo similar sentiments to those of Kachikau about death. They also place emphasis on the great effort made to try to heal people with medicinal herbs to avert death. However, there seems to be differences in the rituals that accompanied death and burial. In the event of death, a number of procedures were followed, some of which, interestingly were derived from gender relations amongst the Shuakhwe of Lesoma. According to the Shuakwe of Lesoma, there is and has always been a demarcation between the worlds of men and women in the society during their lifetime. This demarcation is derived from their socialization into manhood and womanhood during their puberty rite. When young men and women graduate into adulthood they are taught about their duties as men and women in the society and most of all they are told about the boundaries between men and women's spaces in their culture. For instance, in their lifetime there were places in which only men were allowed to go whereas women were barred from going to such places and vice versa. This was aligned with the rules followed and taboos observed in their puberty rites. These rules were also followed even during their burial. In the Shuakwe culture, men and women had separate places in the bush where they had to relieve themselves if they felt pressed. These are the places that would then determine the direction in which their heads were made to face in burial.

In terms of death, when a person died in the morning, funeral arrangements were made immediately so that they would be buried in the afternoon. People were not supposed to eat or drink anything before the burial. There had to be a cleansing ritual first before food or anything could be touched. A grave was dug in the bush far away from the dwelling place. In preparation for burial, the corpse was wrapped in a blanket/skin, placed on a woven wooden stretcher and then taken to the grave site. In digging the grave, a shelf-like horizontal hole was often made on the side of the grave. It is in this shelf that the corpse would be put and not down at the bottom of the grave. The belief was that when the grave was refilled with soil, it was not supposed to fall directly on and hit the corpse. According to the Shuakwe of Lesoma interviewed in the study, it was a hurtful scene when the soil and maybe rocks were thrown directly on the corpse and hit it. The burial would then be followed by after-death rituals such as treatment and cleansing of all the mourners. This was done through medicinal herbs mixed with water. The following morning all members of the bereaved family had to be bathed in medicine prepared in a bath. There was a stone used to hit the bereaved both in the front and the back to make them forget the

deceased.

4.2 *The Danisana of Gweta*

Just as among the Shuakwe, among the Danisana of Gweta, when someone passed away in the morning, arrangements were made so that they were buried in the afternoon of the same day. After the burial, the place where they died and were buried would be vacated because it was believed that the place was no longer good to reside in. The Danisana stated that they feared the dead and would never visit the place again. However, the bereaved especially the spouses of the deceased would be bathed in herbs for cleansing and were expected to take some herbal medicines for 6 months. This marked the period of mourning and healing. Both the widows and the widowers were healed by the old men to do away with the bad omen associated with death. After the mourning process they would be allowed to remarry if they wished to. Before going into a new relationship, the couple would be given some medicine to enable them to be united afresh as one. Blood would be drawn from each one of them through an incision made in their hands. This would be mixed with medicinal herbs and then the couple's blood would be used to create a bond between them by making the incisions touch one another.

Finally, the informants expressed concern that most of the rituals of the Danisana of Gweta have disappeared and no longer exist. In terms of death and burial, the Danisana have adopted the ways of other ethnic groups such as the Batswana because of interaction and intermingling with them. They bury their dead in cemeteries and do not move away from the locale like they did in the past. However, the ritualistic cleansing of the bereaved is still performed. They still believe that after death the bereaved have to be cleansed of the bad omen associated with death.

4.3 *The Xhong of Bere*

The Xhong of Bere were not as elaborate about the burial procedures in the past as the other groups studied. However, they noted that they buried their deceased two days after the relatives in other places had been notified about the death. The dead were covered in an animal skin and then buried. After the funeral the children, relatives and friends of the deceased were taken early in the morning to be cleansed in water mixed with an herb called *xhang*. They would bath with it and afterwards their heads are shaved of all the hair. They would then leave everything at the place where they bathed. As a sign of mourning, a string would be put around their neck.

The coming of the church and Christian religion proves to have had a major influence on the death rites of the Xhong of Bere .. For instance, unlike in the past, nowadays a corpse is kept for 3-5 days before burial while burial arrangements are made. A night vigil in which prayers are made for the bereaved family are held.

Finally, , instead of burying the dead in a hide, coffins are used.

5. A comparative analysis of the death and burial rites among the groups

As noted by Widlock (1998), the groups of people who identify themselves as the Khoisan today have experienced many changes in their lifestyles. Most of them may not currently necessarily speak any of the Khoisan languages and are diverse in terms of their history, culture and traditional economies. However, they have been noted to still possess similarities and continuity of culture as reflected in their burial rites. For instance, traditionally death was feared amongst most of the Khoisan groups. The Khoisan people believed that the spirits of the dead were dangerous and could be harmful to the living. Talking to or about the dead was something that was strongly discouraged. This culminated in abandonment of the terminally ill, immediate burial of the dead and vacating of the settlement. These practices were echoed by the Danisana of Gweta, the Shuakhwe of Kachikau and Lesoma including the Xhong of Bere. Bathing in herbs after the death and burial of loved ones and the head shaving of relatives are common practices amongst most Khoisan groups in Botswana including those in the study.

The study shows that while the Danisana of Gweta, the Xhong of Bere and the Shuakhwe of Kachikau were not very elaborate and exhaustive in their burial rights, the Shuakhwe of Lesoma explained a lot about theirs. They further added that even in death, gender power relations played a major role in terms of defining how men and women were laid to rest in their traditional culture. Men and women did not face the same direction in their burial place because even in their lives they did not go to similar places because of their differential gender roles and culturally defined spaces.

In general, massive changes have taken place in the lives of the Khoisan. They have been affected by interaction and intermingling with other ethnic groups in Botswana. This has considerably affected their death and burial rites. In other areas such as Bere, the church and Christian religion have been cited as major instigators of change in the way of life of the Khoisan. The Christians' preaching about the death and resurrection of Christ as the savior is cited as one factor that has influenced perspectives on the treatment of the dead. Lee and Vaughan (2008) state that because of this teaching, Christian believers in most African societies "no longer fear death or wrath of malevolent 'shades' or ancestral spirits" (352) as they look forward to resurrection. This influence also seems to have infiltrated into the belief system of the Khoisan groups studied in terms of how they currently view the dead. However, they have not lost the traditional idea that death comes with bad omens that the family of the deceased has to be cleansed of after burial. That being the case, the Khoisan still perform the after- death cleansing and healing rituals involving the family of the deceased.

6. Conclusion

The study shows that a lot of changes have taken place in the lives of the Khoisan groups chosen for the study. Traditionally, death and burial amongst the Khoisan signified an occurrence that was dreaded the most. Because death has never been viewed and treated as an occurrence that was wholly accepted and treated with the spirit of acceptance among the Khoisan groups chosen for the study, mourning and burial rituals were not as elaborate as they may have been or still are in other African societies. In general, death was something that was feared. Treatment of the ill with medicinal herbs to avert death was something that the Khoisan preferred. In most Khoisan societies, the death of a loved one was followed by quick burial and immediate relocation to another place. This move was caused mainly by a strong belief in the danger that the spirits of the dead posed to the living. However, the Shuakhwe of Lesoma have shown that they had a different and more elaborate form of burial compared to the other groups studied. Among them gender relations played a major role in their burial system. Instead of abandonment of their dead after burial, they chose to bury them in the bush far from the camp. Healing and cleansing of the bereaved with medicinal herbs and head shaving were reported as rituals that are practiced across all the Khoisan groups and are even preserved to date.

However, there are changes that have taken place in the death and burial rites of the Khoisan. These are mainly due to interaction and intermingling with other groups of people. Christianity and the church have played a role in this regard especially amongst the Xhong of Bere. New ways of preservation of the corpse have effected changes in terms of the time taken between death and burial of the deceased. Corpses are taken to the mortuary before the date of burial is set and appropriate arrangements are made to lay the deceased to rest. Nowadays, as in many Tswana ethnic groups, death and burial are followed by mourners sharing food; a practice that was never done before amongst the Khoisan groups. There is no longer abandonment of the place where death occurred, a practice which was due to the fear of the spirits of the dead.

Apart from death and burial amongst the Khoisan, there are other cultural issues that call for further research and documentation. While they have lost most of the practices pertaining to the rites of death and burial, the Khoisan culture seems to be rich in other issues that relate to their rites of passage. Their puberty and marriage rites are areas that have been resilient to change. Lastly, studying the Khoisan groups individually without lumping them together as either the Khoikhoi or 'Bushman' could also enrich and enhance knowledge about the different cultural beliefs of the Khoisan groups of Botswana. Generalizations and universalizing approaches to groups that have not had individual indepth study has resulted in lack of preservation of their culture through research and documentation.

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