



Mourning the Covid Way: Effects of COVID-19 on Abatura Funeral Rites and Practices

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ABSTRACT

Corona virus-19 is a disease of the respiratory system that has to date claimed the lives of 5684 Kenyans. The Luhya community had detailed funeral rites and practices that brought together many people performing different activities. Death was not caused by microorganisms but by the evil eye', curses, witchcraft, and others. The World Health Organization's guidelines for handling deaths are clearly stipulated. Mourning went on for days to bring some kind of closure, bring families and friends closer, and allow remembrance of the departed, who are now a thing of the past. The COVID-19 disease had significant effects on the burial rites and practices of most communities. The paper attempts to find out how COVID-19 affected the funeral rites and practices of the community. Adopting qualitative methods in data gathering, analysis, and interpretation, the researcher sought to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Luhya funeral rites and practices. Key informant interviews were the methods of data collection. The aim of this tool was to unravel the dire experiences of the family members of the departed. The respondents were purposefully selected. Data analysis was done thematically. The preliminary codes were generated, swapped, demarcated, and named. The final report was produced. The results show that COVID-19 changed the funeral rites and practices of the Abatura people of the larger Luhya. From the ailing process, to the announcement of the dead, to who made the announcement, to the mourning period, to the preparation of the body for burial, the burial site, positioning in the grave, burial programs, and the entire interment process. These results show that the changes have caused psychological distress. It is recommended that relevant authorities put in place measures to safeguard funeral activities, as they have effects on people's physical and mental wellbeing. Furthermore, community focal persons should be consulted in the making of such guidelines on funerals so that they positively embrace the guidelines. Community members should also be sensitized to the importance of embracing change for their own good.

Keywords: Abatura, Effect of Covid 19, Funeral Rites and Practices, Mourning the Covid Way

I. INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic, COVID-19, traced back to Wuhan City in China (WHO, 2020), has triggered a profound impact on societies across the world. The disease is spread mostly through respirational droplets in close, face-to-face interactions (Shereen et al. 2020). The infection may also be spread via asymptomatic, presymptomatic, and symptomatic individuals (WHO, 2020). The number of affected persons and deaths has kept on increasing globally to 672,043,451 and 6,734,149, respectively (WHO, 2023). In Kenya, approximately 343,955 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed, with an average death rate of 5689 (WHO, 2023). Such devastating effects have prompted public health measures, including repeated hand washing with soap and water, frequent use of hand sanitizers for a minimum of 20 seconds, covering noses and mouths when coughing and sneezing with tissue or a flexed elbow, avoiding close contacts with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms, and social distancing, to curb the spread of the virus (Wiersinga et al., 2020).

The brunt effects of the pandemic were and are still heavy on governments, communities, and individuals; in fact, most government services are seldom back to normal (WHO, 2021). In Kenya, learning calendars and modes were negatively affected due to the nationwide closure of schools; families went through the pain of losing loved ones; marriage was also affected as many couples also experienced job loss (particularly women). In addition, immense stress is a result of parenting kids through remote learning (Burrell & Selman, 2022). The religious sector was not spared by the stoppage of church services (Harapan et al., 2019).



The political arena was equally affected; public gatherings were banned in efforts to curb the spread. The myriad cultural elements of most communities in Kenya have also changed since the emergence of COVID-19. For instance, changes in elements of culture such as language, beliefs, music, art, laws, and customs, including funeral practices and rites, were eminent. The national and county governments in Kenya issued several orders and directives to curb the spread of the disease. The guidelines included the instant suspension of social events such as funerals, marriage ceremonies, sports activities, disco and clubbing activities, and seminars (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2022). The churches, mosques, temples, and other social gatherings were polished as individuals and communities were forced to follow the directives. (Thiga, 2021)

Over several decades, African communities have had diverse rites and practices for death and funeral ceremonies (Cottle, 2006). In fact, among traditional African communities, death is never an event but a process.

On the other hand, the WHO (2021) spelled out the infection prevention and control measures to be undertaken in cases of COVID-19 and even for COVID deaths (WHO, 2021). They include respect and protection of the cultural and religious beliefs of the dead, avoiding burying the dead hurriedly, and allowing the family to conduct an autopsy to establish the cause of death under some guidance. With these guidelines in place, Luhya funeral rites and practices in particular had to change. Kakamega County, for instance, enforced the removal of corpses from the mortuaries and burial within 48 hours. Furthermore, fewer than twenty immediate relatives are allowed at the burial site, with none of the pomp and circumstance that characterize Luhya funeral ceremonies. The night vigils and funeral discos that were held for several days before burial are now a thing of the past. Funeral rites and practices such as *obukoko* and *lisabo* are dead like death itself. The Luhya community's funeral rites and practices have suffered at the hands of COVID 19.

The Luhya communities, also known as the '*abaluhyia*', reside in Western Kenya, across Vihiga, Kakamega, Busia, and Bungoma counties (Were, 1967). The Luhya have sub-categories that are different in some ways but agree on a number of rites and practices. The sub-categories include *abawanga*, *abatsotso*, *abamarachi*, *abasaamia*, *abanyala*, *abakhayo*, *abamaragoli*, *abatiriki*, *abanyole*, *ababukusu*, *abasukha*, *abaidakho*, *abatura*, *abakabras*, *abatachoni*, *abamarama*, and *abakisa*. The subtribes differ linguistically but share similarities in their funeral rites and practices (Were, 1967). Certain rites and practices, such as shaving the head, seem to occur among all Luhya sub-tribes. The intent of this paper is to establish the effects of COVID-19 on Batura funeral rites and practices. The Batura subtribe of the Luhya has five clans. The clans are *Bakhibe*, *Batsoye*, *Bamukwe*, *Bamwaka*, and *Bamakunda*. They are the most widespread subtribe of the Baluyia. Population estimates show that there are close to 200,000 people in the Batura subtribe. For the Batura people, funerals were detailed events. The five clans have similarities in their funeral rites, but the Bakhibe have unique funeral rites and practices (Chaungo, 2015).

Literature shows that funeral rites are a worldwide phenomenon (Rawlings et al., 2022). Among the Batura community, funerals are communal and open events (Chaungo, 2015). Several activities are undertaken from the time a person dies to several days post-burial. During the mourning period, food and drinks are readily available to the mourners. Just like in the larger Luhya community, Batura funerals are filled with pomp and color. Some funerals are branded good and bad; good funerals are those where there is plenty of food and scores of mourners (Were, 1967).

The rites performed in the Abatura funerals start from the point one is near death to several days after burial. The various rites involve the immediate family members and the entire community, depending on the age, gender, and social status of the deceased. The family members were at times expected to weep in a berserk style by means of weapons. This was in retaliation for efforts against death and to prevent it from claiming more lives (Chaungo, 2015).

It is also important to note that burial was a community affair among the Batura. For the Bakhibe clan of the Batura, they would bury their male dead while in a sitting position. They believed that any male buried in the normal lying position would torment the family, and as a result, modifiable coffins were made by special people in the community (Chaungo, 2015). Although these rites and practices are still being practiced, they have undergone various modifications. The funeral rites are now puzzled, destabilized, and fading, and other practices have completely eroded. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly contributed to those changes that this paper seeks to find out.

II. MATERIAL & METHODS

This study adopted qualitative methods to gather data from ten purposively selected persons from the five clans of the Abatura subtribe of the Luhya tribe who had lost their relatives during Covid 19. The researcher purposively selected the eldest member from the families who lost relatives during COVID-19. This was on the presumption that they had foreknowledge of how funerals were conducted in the past and could tell the changes that have occurred. Data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis and presented as verbatim. For the data analysis process, the researcher



first familiarized with the data, created preliminary codes and themes. The researcher later reread them, well-defined and named the themes. A report of the data was then produced.

III. RESULTS

The respondents were asked questions that were informed by the literature reviewed. The questions ranged from the effect of COVID-19 on ailment and near-death experiences, the announcement of death, the duration of the mourning period, the burial process, and post-burial. These were also the themes that informed the data presentation. The results are presented in the themes below, supported by verbatims.

3.1 Covid-19 Effects on Ailment and near Death among the Abatura

The results emerging showed that Abatura believed that death was not only caused by disease-causing microorganisms and accidents but also by 'evil eye', curses, witchcraft, and others. The Batura believed in death prevention by performing different practices. One respondent noted that: -

When a person is taken ill, efforts to visit a traditional healer, an exorcist are undertaken. Hospitals were a last resort after several attempts had been made. In a case where a person is taken to hospital first and they seem not to get well we usually reverted to our traditional healers (Key informant 3).

When the person is dead, the respondents noted that they would still make attempts to bring the dead back to life. They would make attempts to bring the dead back to life, as one of the respondents said below:

We are not quick to announce a person's death. We wait for some time before and even when we call the relative, we tell them that the ailing is very sick and in bad condition. We don't just mention death to them. We urge the sick to hold on to life. Sometimes, we pour cold water to the person in a bid to make them wake up. During the pandemic, we were not allowed to even come close (Key informant 7).

On how an ailing person was handled, the common theme among the respondents was that family members were involved. As quoted below: -

An ailing person was not left on their own, whether in the hospital or at home. A married man was nursed by the wife, and a sick wife was nursed by the female relatives. There was always a person close to the ailing person to provide care, like bathing and feeding. The caregiver was also to give an account of the last moments of the departed to the mourners. During Corona times, only doctors were allowed to come close (Key informant 1).

3.2 COVID-19 Effects on Announcement of Death among the Abatura

The results showed that the Abatura announced death in a unique way and at a specific time. It was not the case during COVID 19. One informant noted that,

For us, a grown-up's death was announced in the evening, even if it occurred in the morning or broad daylight. A person who dies at noon, we believe, is not a straight-forward person. Good people die in the night (Key Informant 4).

The findings also revealed that:

When a married man died, the widow announced the death to her people in person, and she would be given foodstuffs 'simwero' to bring to her home. On her arrival at her home, she would begin wailing and crying aloud. This was the general way of announcing death to the entire community, which would gather at the homestead (Key Informant 3).

The findings further revealed that on the announcement of death, the whole family is expected to weep.

We, the family members, weep bitterly and earnestly to show love to the deceased and express sorrow. The weeping need not be tearful; sometimes it's about weeping the loudest. Others wept, rolled on the ground, and made utterances about the deceased. All these have been eroded by the coronavirus (Key Informant 5).

One respondent aptly noted that:

Today, a death announcement was made in the media by Ministry of Health officials in the event that it was a COVID death. Death announcements are done in the media. Families and relatives may get this information from third parties, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and so on (Key Informant 2).



3.3 COVID-19 Effects on the Mourning Period among the Abatura

The advent of Christianity in the Luhya communities shortened the mourning period, which was normally forty to sixty days (Were, 1967). All relatives, including those who are far away in other countries, were given time to travel and attend the burial. COVID-19 changed this practice among the Abatura:

Relatives and the community camped at the homestead of the deceased for an entire week and kept night vigils to condole with the bereaved. Right now, not so many relatives come (Key Informant 10).

With the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, camping and night vigils have been stopped as a directive to curb the spread of the disease. There are law enforcement agencies and the local administration that are enforcing the implementation of these government directives.

We saw that during COVID-19, our relatives and friends from abroad and counties such as Nairobi and Mombasa could not make it to the burials. I saw a woman who had children in the UK. They never attended the burial. They only read their messages to the mourners on Facebook (Key Informant 3).

During that time, funerals were restricted to fifteen people only.

I saw a widow in my village who traveled all the way from Nairobi in a hearse with her three children, the mother-in-law and the driver. Not even her brothers in Nairobi could accompany her. Immediately after the burial, she was whisked into the house with her children by the local administration, and off they left for Nairobi. She just left her husband alone in the cold. This is so unlike us, the Abatura (Key Informant 3).

The once elaborate event that united people from far and wide is now an event for the few close family members. During the mourning period, relatives lit a fire called makenga, and the mourners would sit around it in the homestead of the deceased. Funeral plans and discussions were also conducted around the fire. This was not allowed because the local administration struggled to enforce social distance. The community members were also just scared to contract the disease. The shortened mourning period and the limited number of mourners measures of curbing the spread of coronavirus mean such practices are abolished. In the case of the coronavirus, death, where the body is buried for a short time, means that such practices are irrelevant.

The Abatura community had ways of preserving a dead body before the emergence of the mortuaries, and these are still practiced in some situations. The deceased could at times give instructions not to be taken to the mortuaries. This happened, especially among the elderly.

In cases where the deceased gave instructions not to be refrigerated, we would preserve the bodies by putting them on charcoal or on top of wet sand. A coin was placed on their forehead, and this would keep the body for close to a week (Key Informant 1).

With the advent of mortuaries, the Abatura kept their deceased there for a longer time as they planned the burial. COVID-19 death meant that bodies can't stay at the mortuaries as families please, as it had to be done by the healthcare workers.

During COVID 19, families were directed to bury their dead within 48 hours. If someone had COVID-19, I saw a case on the news that the doctors themselves buried the corpse (Key Informant 9).

The respondents reported that the viewing of bodies was restricted.

At the mourning time, just prior to the burial, every mourner present views the body as many times as they please and pays their final respect in any way they deem fit. Some mourners wail to the point of fainting; others tear down their clothes and the banana plantations to convey their grief (Key Informant 8).

With the emergence of COVID-19, we were not allowed to view a COVID-19 death except for the healthcare workers who prepared the body and buried it.

During the mourning stage, a widow was supposed to sit by the coffin from the time they came from the morgue to the point of burial. This was meant to easily identify her (Key Informant Interview 7).

The mourning period has also been reduced significantly, and when the respondents were asked how they managed the burial expenses, this was their response:

You know, in the past, funerals were a community responsibility among us. We would contribute towards the foods that people fed on during the burial. For instance, when an adult died, all her married children would bring a cow and a sack of maize. This was used to feed the mourners. Nowadays, things have changed. I have seen families begging for monetary assistance on social media platforms such as WhatsApp groups for the so-short burials (Key informant 2).

3.4 COVID 19: Effects on the Burial Process and Practices among the Abatura

The coronavirus epidemic has brought changes to the preparation of the body for burial, the burial site, positioning in the grave, burial programs, and the entire interment process. As noted by one respondent:



There was a sacred significance placed on activities such as the position of the grave, the time of making the grave, who was to be involved, and the time and mode of burying the dead. Adult relatives of the departed and immediate clansmen had the responsibility of digging the grave. The grave diggers were also the people who lowered the corpse down the grave. The graves took on rectangular or oval shapes. The walls were dug vertically to a distance downward of about five to six feet (Key Informant 3).

In the case of a COVID-19 death, the healthcare workers were, in some instances, reported to be the grave diggers. The Abatura also had a specific way of preparing the body, as reported in the excerpt below:

Before a body was buried, it was washed and properly dressed. A set of new clothes 'isanda' for burial was bought. The washing of the corpse was done so as to send it off clean and show the worth of the deceased. This never happened, as bodies would be brought home already packed and sealed for burial in case it was corona. In cases where death occurred abruptly, everyone feared coming close as it was assumed to be COVID 19 (Key Informant 5).

These duties are now performed by undertakers, although in the presence of family members. In the case of a coronavirus-positive death, health professionals carry out these responsibilities. The findings indicate that the Abatura performed prayers and some rituals at the mortuary before going home. This was performed as presented in the quote below:

Before departure from the morgue, a close family member would beseech the late to allow a smooth journey home. The body was then transported home. In the hearse sit the widow(er) and close relatives (Key Informant 2).

This has since changed since COVID-19 because body preparation is now an activity of the morgue attendants. The washing of the corpse is done by the mortuary staff, the ferrying of the body is done by those available, and beseeching of the dead is no longer undertaken. The researcher then asked what happened after the body arrived home. The response provided is as follows:

A procession of the relatives and community follows the hearse to the home, where, upon arrival, there is wailing and lamentation. Anyone suspected to be in bad blood with the deceased can't board the hearse, as they are likely to cause double tragedy. The deceased would then spend two to three days in their homes before they were buried. For instance, the body would be brought from the morgue on a Thursday for burial on a Saturday. This has since changed, as we now bring the body this evening for burial the following day. Authorities have prohibited night vigils, and, in some instances, bodies were brought from morgues and buried instantly (Key Informant 6).

On where the grave was positioned, the responses were as follows:

The position of the grave depends on the gender of the deceased. Men are buried in front of the house, while their wives are buried on the left. A man is buried with their heads facing the gate, as they are believed to be watching over the homestead even in death. The head is turned once the coffin is lowered to the grave. Our graves were dug on the morning of the burial day. This was by the male relatives (Key Informant 1).

Another respondent had this to say about the single and unmarried:

Unmarried girls, either single or divorced, are buried outside the homesteads, in the banana plantations, or at the edge of the fence. This is because they are considered strangers, to ward off the spirit from the home and to discourage a repeat of the same habit among other girls (Key informant 10).

The same respondent also shared experience with a man who didn't have children when he died:

If a man died and was childless, there was the piecing of his scrotum preceding his burial in the night so as to appease the ancestors on behalf of the deceased. These things were not observed during the pandemic (Key Informant 10).

On the events of the day of the burial, the respondents had this to say:

Before burial, the family members would give tributes to the moments they shared with the departed. This would happen from morning to afternoon, depending on the age of the deceased. The body of the deceased was then carried by him and given a final tour of his compound. They would march from the house, then stroll up to the gate of the compound. The deceased was then taken around to visit the areas he used to like around the home (Key Informant 5).

Another respondent also said this:

I really miss the big crowds, the lengthy eulogies, the warm embraces from relatives, and the celebrations of lives well lived, save for the funeral teams that raised money for it all. Now the family has to carry the burden alone (Key Informant 8).

All this was meant to please the spirits of the dead. Another respondent said this:



In the burial chamber, the body was laid on one side, with the head resting on one hand as if one were asleep. A man was laid on his right-hand side while a woman was on his left-hand side (Key Informant 1).

One respondent from the Bakhibe clan had this to say:

A lot changed for us during the COVID time. You know for us; we bury our men in a sitting position. But this did not happen during that time, because you know our coffins are made in a special way, so by the time you look for them, the period given within which the government has given you would have lapsed (Key Informant 4).

Another respondent from the same community had this:

You know our men are buried in sitting positions; even some women who wish are also buried in this position. This did not happen during COVID-19. I saw a woman who had wished to be buried in this position buried in the normal position. Now the family says that she is haunting them (Key Informant 2).

3.5 Covid-19 Effects of Post Burial rituals

The researcher asked the respondents what happened after the burial. The varied responses were as shown in the excerpts:

After burial, the family members of the bereaved would then bathe in the river so as to keep off the smell of death. They would then shave their heads on the grave so as to dissociate from the dead. There were other family duties after three to four days after burial. For instance, there was “Khweya Masika” which literally meant to wipe tears. The family of the deceased would gather with the larger community so as chat the way forward (Key Informant 10).

For the Batura people, that did not mark the end of a funeral. There were other events that followed after some time. These events were more important to those who remained behind. After burial, there was a celebration that allowed the family members to gather and check on the wellbeing of those who had lost their beloved. Food and alcohol, particularly the local brew ‘Busaa’ made from finger millet, and prayers were served.

You see, we would come together after forty days or so for some commemoration. In this event, the family would again assemble in a practice known as Khukalusia Makumba," which literally translates to gathering the bones. We believed that by the end of the forty days, the corpse would have had a ceremony held about 40–60 days following burial. We believed that the body had been putrefied, thus the need to assemble them (Key informant 6).

IV. DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 has indicated a painful shift in the mourning process and burial rites and practices. The findings here on the near-death experiences agree with a study conducted by Cottle (2006) on mourning among Ndebele natives of Zimbabwe. He established that when an individual is so close to death, the family attempts to bring them to life by pouring cold water on them or making the person draw in smoke from some specific herbs. The findings also showed that the sick were left on their own. With COVID 19, this practice has changed (Cottle, 2006). Once a person tested positive for COVID-19, they were put into quarantine to get healed or to die on their own. The attempts to resuscitate in the traditional way are nonexistent in the COVID-19 case. With COVID-19, the person was left in the hands of the medical practitioners or themselves. The families have been left in a vacuum. The family remains with the previous memories before testing for coronavirus because individuals are separated from the family immediately, and they are tested positive.

A study conducted by Asatsa (2015) among the *Abatsotso* sub-tribe found that fire was meant to bring unity among the bereaved, to keep the mourners warm, and to unite the deceased with the living (Asatsa, 2015). All these practices had a psychological healing effect on the bereaved (Asatsa, 2020). The findings of this study show that these practices have since changed. The findings of this study on weeping concur with the findings of Goldade (2019) that during the bereavement period before the burial, all and sundry views the deceased, mourns, and gives their respects. Other griever may as well tear down banana fibers on the homestead to express their grief. An article by Panda (2020) agrees with the findings of this study on the burial events of a childless man. Panda noted that this rite was executed to warrant a reduction of anger vented by the ancestors for the failure of one of their lineages (Panda, 2020). The findings of this study indicated that death was a communal affair, and this agrees with a study done by Lagat (2022), which agreed that death and funeral rites are a whole (extended) family affair, ensuing already laid down patterns and that everyone understood their roles.



V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The Abatura sub-tribe of the Luhya people, just like other communities in the whole world, fear death. This sub-tribe has faith that death is a result of annoying the ancestors. The opposite is that death is unavoidable for every human being. Although they had several rites and practices around death, times and events are slowly eroding or changing them. COVID-19 is one such event that has changed how the Abatura announced death, how they mourned, how they were buried, and the post-burial rites. Despite family and relatives bidding farewell to the physical body, there is continuity via their children by means of these rituals, which bond the two worlds. Some families may even keep graveyards as shrines for generations to come. All these activities have been affected in some way by COVID-19.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that relevant authorities put in place measures to safeguard funeral activities, as they have effects on people's physical and mental wellbeing. The study further recommends that community focal persons should be consulted in the making of such guidelines on funerals so that they positively embrace the guidelines. Community members should also be sensitized to the importance of embracing change for their own good.

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