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## Critical Contextualization: A Case Study of Lobi Funeral Rites in Burkina Faso

I spent the month of May 2014 in Burkina Faso doing field research in three Lobi communities concerning their funeral rites of passage. I conducted interviews with both Lobi religious leaders and Adventist Church members, and also observed a burial service. My findings broadened my understanding of the sociocultural significance of the Lobi funeral rites, the challenges they pose to Christian mission among the Lobi, and the need for a biblical and missiological framework for responding to these challenges.

Because of the general belief among the Lobi that there is life after death, funeral rites are elaborate ceremonial occasions as they are considered to be the indispensable means by which human beings pass from the land of the living to that of the ancestors (Alenuma 2002:9). Funeral rites are part of a series of rituals that vividly express the deepest concepts the Lobi have about life. They speak of death as a departure, a setting out on a journey, and a transition to ancestorhood. Nevertheless, whenever it occurs, “the soul of the deceased must undergo a series of spiritual adjustments if he or she is to find a secure place in the afterlife and continue to remain in contact with the family left behind” (Ray 1976:140). Funeral rites are performed to reduce the effect of the sudden loss as well as a means of facilitating the process by which the deceased joins the community of the ancestors. A traditional funeral is believed not only to help the deceased reach their “fathers” (i.e., enter the ancestral world) but also to “have a tomorrow” (i.e., a continuation of life in the lineage) (Abasi 1995:448, 450, 451). This is the community’s expressed desire for kinship continuity and solidarity even in death. The community’s survival is crucial and rests on the strict observance of proper burial and funeral rites to help the deceased make a good and successful journey to the ancestral world to join those who ensure life and well-being, and who become intermediaries between God and the living.

Although there are clearly non-biblical elements associated with Lobi funeral rites, some Lobi Adventists still fully take part in them. All my interviewees who did so said they were told from a young age that this was the right way of being a Lobi. A true Lobi was described to them as one who strictly follows the traditions handed down to the community by the ancestors. Full participation in one's parents' funerals is the clearest way for a child to demonstrate that he/she truly honors them. Any individual's failure to undergo the prescribed funeral rites brings not only shame on their family, it is also believed to put their family and community in danger of the ancestors' wrath. As the representatives of law, order, and ethical values in the community, the ancestors are believed to chastise any violation of their commands. Therefore, misfortune, illness, and death in the family and community are often interpreted as signs of the ancestors' anger because of an individual or family's misconduct that compromised harmony with the ancestors. Such beliefs put a lot of pressure on some Adventists to syncretize their faith.

### **Addressing the Challenges Lobi Funeral Rites Pose to Adventist Mission**

My research showed that the following features of Lobi funeral rites are major issues from a biblical standpoint: divination associated with finding the cause of death, throwing cowries at the feet of the deceased to fund their afterlife, carving an ancestral shrine for the deceased at the end of the funeral rites, shaving the heads of the deceased's close relatives, and whitewashing the orphans, widows, and the widower (Sanou 2015:148-150). Each of these elements of their funeral rites needs to be dealt with biblically through the process of critical contextualization. "Critical Contextualization" is a term coined by Paul Hiebert in his attempt to answer the following question: "What should people do with their old cultural ways when they become Christians, and how should the missionary respond to these traditional beliefs and practices?" (Hiebert 1985:171). In doing critical contextualization, he suggests that "old beliefs and customs are neither rejected nor accepted without examination. They are first studied with regard to the meanings and places they have within their cultural setting and then evaluated in the light of biblical norms" (186).

The recognition by a local congregation of the need to deal biblically with certain aspects of their lives is the prerequisite to doing critical contextualization. This need was expressed by my interviewees during my field research. They felt that the church was not doing anything to help them deal with this cultural issue. Critical contextualization is done following four main steps as outlined by Hiebert: exegesis of the cultural

issue, exegesis of Scripture, critical response, and functional substitutes (186-190). The members of the local congregation directly affected by a change should be actively involved in the whole process because of their knowledge of the deeper and hidden meanings associated with their cultural practices. This is the reason critical contextualization should never be attempted in solo by a pastor/missionary on behalf of a local congregation.

Prescribing specific functional substitutes for the traditional Lobi funeral rites is against the philosophy of critical contextualization and was beyond the scope of my field research. This process needs to involve the Lobi believers as a hermeneutical community. However, the following tentative suggestions were arrived at after my interaction with key church leaders as to what a Lobi Adventist is to do in the event of the death of a relative or during the traditional funeral rites?

### **Divination to Find the Cause of Death**

The divination to determine the cause of death needs to be completely discarded because the Bible clearly condemns any attempt to contact the dead (Lev 20:6, 27; Deut 18:10-13). Instead of using nonbiblical methods as a means to come to terms with the loss of a dear one, members should be encouraged to put their faith in God and the hope of the resurrection of the dead. It also should be emphasized that as the result of sin, death is inevitable in this life.

### **Throwing of Cowries at the Feet of the Deceased**

Throwing cowries at the feet of the deceased assumes that people take on another form of existence after death and that the living relatives should ensure the deceased's journey to the land of the ancestors by giving them cowries to pay for whatever is needed during this journey. The practice of throwing cowries could be modified as follows: At the end of the mourning period, a freewill offering could be collected and prayed over for the welfare of the widow/widower and orphans in place of providing cowries to the dead for their journey to the land of the ancestors. If the deceased could see what is being done, they would be very gratified to know that their family is being cared for.

### **Carving of an Ancestral Shrine**

A Christian memorial service could be organized, after which a picture of the deceased could be framed and kept in a designated room of the family house to encourage the living relatives of their heritage and what

they learned from the life experiences of their deceased loved one. If the deceased had indicated any special instructions for the welfare of the family, such as the need to live in unity, solidarity, and commitment to God, such desires should also be framed and placed beside the picture of the deceased.

## **Shaving the Head of the Deceased's Relatives**

Shaving the heads of close relatives of the deceased is another practice that needs to be discarded on the basis of Deut 14:1-2 "You are the children of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." Although shaving the hair is not completely forbidden by Scripture, as a holy people, the Israelites were not to cut their hair in connection with mourning rites for the dead. Any attempt to establish contact with the dead is deemed by God as defiling (Block 2012:344-345). Because many people shave their head as a sign of mourning to prevent any kind of retaliation from the deceased, a special time of prayer and dedication should be observed to ask God to protect the deceased's relatives against any form of attack from the evil one.

## **The Practice of Whitewashing**

Traditional Lobi people believe that whitewashing close relatives of the deceased is necessary to protect the widow/widower and orphans against the attack of evil spirits. The widow/widower and orphans are whitewashed because it is assumed that any association with death is a threat to the whole community. As such, those connected with the deceased (surviving spouse(s) and orphans) have to be cleansed of the defiling effects of their contact with the deceased. The whiteness of the clay is seen as counteracting any death-related uncleanness. Sexual intercourse and any close relationship between husband and wife are viewed as the sharing of the dirt of each other's bodies. Whitewashing is said to free a surviving partner and orphans from any defilement received from the deceased. Unless the rite of whitewashing is performed it is believed that the dirt of the deceased partner will kill the surviving partner if he/she becomes involved in sexual intercourse with another partner. Whitewashing must be done to cleanse the dirt of the dead partner in order to enable the surviving spouse to have sexual intercourse with any future partner without risking death. Orphans whitewash their foreheads and wear strings of cowries over their shoulders (Goody 1962:101, 183-193).

To meet this cultural need of protection, the widow/widower and orphans could be dressed in white, symbolizing their protection by Christ's righteousness. A special prayer session also should be organized for them. During this special time of prayer, the pastor and church elders should lay their hands on the widow/widower and orphans, anoint them with oil, and pray that the power of the Holy Spirit will surround and continually protect them. In addition, the widow/widower and orphans should be encouraged to make a spiritual recommitment to God, regularly study the Bible, and attend church service. In its various services, the church should earnestly pray for the bereaved in their midst.

Two of my interviewees (a woman and a man) who stood firm to biblical principles despite strong social pressure said they were able to do so because of their faith in God and also because they had already experienced God's power as superior to that of local deities. I asked them to relate how they experienced God's power. The female interviewee had lost her husband and refused to perform the traditional funeral rites such as having her head shaved and her body whitewashed. Not long after that, she fell critically ill. People started saying that she was sick and would soon die because she refused to submit herself to the ways of the ancestors. She requested that the church pray that God would use her illness to glorify his name by showing the whole community that God saves those who trust him from the curses of other gods and ancestors. The church prayed and she was completely healed to the amazement of everybody in her village. She told me that she has never been threatened again. She continues to use her story to encourage others to remain faithful to Christ.

The male respondent told me that one of his clan's taboos forbade him from touching a monkey. To make ends meet, he asked an Adventist missionary to employ him as his house helper. The missionary had several monkeys and one of my interviewee's duties was to take care of them. One day as he was feeding the monkeys, one broke loose and ran into the village and took refuge on top of the idol that was in his father's shrine. When he tried to enter into the shrine to catch the monkey, onlookers told him that he was going to die. He stopped right there, said a prayer, and went in and caught the monkey and went back to the missionary's house. Early the next morning, people waited to hear news of his death. Seeing him alive and well, they realized that he serves a powerful God. That incident strengthened his faith and continues to help him stand firm for his faith.

## Conclusion

It is very difficult to be relevant in our Christian witness if we do not know and address the issues with which the people we are trying to reach are wrestling. For the gospel to meaningfully engage recipients with the purpose of transforming their worldviews, Christian witnesses must always encode the biblical message in such a way that its content remains faithful to biblical principles but also makes sense to its receptors in terms of its relevance. Such new experiences often challenge them in their social location. The rationale for this is that because the gospel is always received from within one's own cultural identity, people cannot be confronted with things that are beyond their frame of reference and be expected to respond positively to them.

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