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Funeral Rituals and Practices: The Quest for Missiological Approaches of Witnessing to Mwami Church Members in Zambia

Introduction

Zambia has 73 ethnic groups whose diverse funeral rituals and practices are important to reflect on in relation to God's mission. Among these ethnic groups, the Ngoni people reside around the Mwami Mission Station. The Ngoni people migrated from South Africa to Zambia between 1820 and 1840. Some went to Tanzania and others settled in the Malawi area. This ethnic group is perceived to be very religious since it usually defends its funeral rituals and practices in their communities and ensures that every person living in the vicinity adhere to its rituals and practices whenever a funeral occurs. The problem for Adventist mission is that these funeral rituals and practices teach the community that the dead are still alive.

The gospel message came to Mwami in 1927 when an eye and leprosarium hospital was established at Mwami Mission Station. At the end of 2019, the Mwami district of the Seventh-day Adventist Church comprises 22 congregations with a total membership of 2,600. Even though the Adventist message came to Mwami 92 years ago, the church is still struggling to help its members and the community in knowing how to participate in funeral rituals and practices that compromise the biblical understanding about the state of the dead. What role should the church take without losing its relevance in such a society? Should the church be silent over this issue? How should the church evangelize in this area? These are some of

the implicit questions this paper seeks to explore in looking for missiological approaches to address the issues connected with funeral rituals and practices.

It has been observed that some Mwami community leaders overreach their authority in telling local churches what they can and cannot do during funeral ceremonies. For instance, when one member of the Ngoni community who was a Jehovah's Witness died in March 2018, the community leaders stopped the church from burying its member. The community alleged the church was taking the role that belonged to the community on what to do concerning the burial of a Ngoni member. What the church prescribed was not in line with the cultural practices of the local community. Another incident occurred when one of the retired Seventh-day Adventist pastors died in December 2018. The community complained bitterly after the church went ahead in burying the pastor without allowing the deceased body to sleep in the house where the funeral was held a day before burial. What was interesting was that several Adventist members were in the forefront siding with the community over the funeral rituals and practices. This was an eye-opener—showing that folk religion and animistic practices are not easily discarded in the lives of many members of the church. Edward Taylor defined folk religion or animism as the belief that the world is saturated by spirits and powers (1970:9). These spirits are feared by many people in this community and as a result many are reluctant to go against the old ways of doing things.

When I probed about the significance and meaning of having a deceased body remain in the house, I was told that the dead needed to bid farewell to the occupants of that house or else the spirits of the dead would torment the living if that was not done.

Another important funeral ritual involves wailing performed by men mourners. This ritual is enforced during all funerals in Mwami territory for all local residents and is conducted to ensure the spirit of the dead person is appeased. If this ritual is not performed, then the family of the deceased will be charged and expelled from the village for abrogating the laws of the community.

It is a widely known fact that many African Christians remain immersed in their folk religion and that “the African is notoriously religious” (Mbiti 2008:2). No matter how long a person has been a member of a Christian church or how educated they might be, the old ways of the local folk religion has left a big impression on their lives, especially when dealing with rites of passages such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death. Even though many Christian leaders openly oppose the local folk religions, the majority of people throughout Zambia are still influenced in many areas of their lives by the folk tenets and practices.

The Local Setting

The 2017 population census indicated that Zambia had a population of 16,405,229 and the Eastern Province had 1,910,782 (CSO 2018:10). Chipata, where the Mwami Mission is situated, is the fifth largest city in Zambia, behind Lusaka, Ndola, Kitwe, and Livingstone. Chipata comes from the Ngoni word “Chimpata” meaning “large space,” in reference to the town situated in a shallow valley between hills. The central neighborhood of Kapata, the original center of town, comes from the Ngoni phrase meaning “small space” (Chipata 2019). Chipata is the capital of the Eastern Province of Zambia and has a modern market, a central hospital, shopping malls, universities, colleges, and a number of schools. Chipata is the business and administrative hub that serves the region. The town boasts a four-star hotel, a golf course, an airport, a mosque, and many Christian churches.

The town is the regional center of the Ngoni tribe, and as such, is the primary language, although Nyanja and English are widely spoken. Nyanja, like Chewa culture, is mainly matriarchal and matrilineal while Ngoni culture is patriarchal and patrilineal. Chipata is located near the border with Malawi and lies on the Great East Road, which connects the capitals Lilongwe (130 km) and Lusaka (550 km) (Chipata 2019).

Socio-Historical Cultural Setting

The socio-historical context and the cross-cultural mix of the Mwami district impact the funeral rituals and practices in the city. The various ethnic groups living in Mwami belong to both matrilineal and patrilineal cultures. Even though others may argue that Chipata is a Ngoni city, demographically the Ngoni are a minority compared to the local people they defeated when they came from Southern Africa. That hindered the Ngoni from completely changing the way of life of the local people. Over the last 200 years Ngoni men married local women, which has contributed to the process of assimilating the two cultures. The children of such marriages usually were taught the language of their mothers (Chondoka 2017:82-84); however, in spite of the loss of the Ngoni language, Ngoni people succeeded in having their cultural practices predominate among the people they lived with.

In the Eastern Province the Chewa ethnic group is the largest community with 39.7% of the population and with 34.6% speaking the Chewa language. The Ngoni ethnic group comprises 15.3% with only 4.6% of the population speaking the Ngoni language (CSO 2014:57). The Chewa language is widely used in schools and churches and other public functions

followed by Tumbuka, a factor that has caused other languages in the Eastern Province to gradually die out.

Religious Context

In Zambia, an estimated 85% of the population professes some form of Christianity. Another 5% are Muslim; 5% subscribe to other faiths, including Hinduism, Baha'ism, and traditional indigenous religions; and 5% are atheists. The majority of Christians are either Roman Catholic or Protestant. Currently, there is also a surge in new Pentecostal churches, which have attracted many young followers. Muslims tend to be concentrated in parts of the country where Asians have settled along the railroad line from Lusaka to Livingstone, in Chipata, and in the Eastern Province (Zambia Religions 2019).

Rituals

Rituals are religiously meaningful acts people perform in appropriate circumstances usually by adhering to prescribed patterns (Lugira 2009:74). Africans feel their beliefs should be expressed in some concrete way. A ritual, as defined by Bronna Romanoff, is a device created by a culture that serves to preserve social order and provide a means of understanding during complicated times (1998:697-711). In the African context, rituals continue to connect people with their ancestors and the old ways of doing things.

Worldview Values in Funeral Rituals and Practices

Mission history offers many examples of the need for the early introducers of Christianity to learn the language and culture of those they are sharing the gospel with. Without such an understanding, tragic mistakes are often made with gross syncretism and dual allegiance the result. "The worldview of a culture describes deep philosophical assumptions about the purpose of life and the nature of reality" (Plueddemann 2009:71). Worldviews are like the air people breathe—very important but taken for granted. Worldviews are, in many cases, largely implicit, which requires the missionary to spend time and effort to discover the implicit to make it explicit (Van Rheenen 1991:33). Worldview and culture are so intertwined that culture is thought of as the "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from another." By "collective programming," Lewis perceives it as a process to which one has been subjected since birth (2018:15). This means that every person has

a culture, worldview, and lifestyle that is affected by general customs and social behavior of their particular people group.

It is true that worldviews are more about the deep hidden values and assumptions that shape beliefs and behavior. Thus, those who are interested in doing Christian mission in the Mwami district need to pay attention to various cultural events as practiced by the Ngoni people to better understand how folk religious elements continue to influence Christians in the area. The syncretistic and dual alliance realities are especially noticeable during times of crises or death in the community. It is also during such times that even long-time Christians continue to practice elements from African Traditional Religion that are in direct opposition to biblical teaching.

In the Mwami district there is the belief that when people die they enter into a new relationship with the living; hence, great care is always taken to ensure peace and harmony with the ancestors. A proper burial, following the traditions of the ancestors, is necessary in order to avoid trouble in the family and community; therefore, funeral rituals are required to be performed in the proscribed way to appease the spirits. If funeral rituals are ignored, people believe that the dead will come back as ghosts to torment the family and the community. In addition, failure to perform the required death rituals could also cause mental sickness and mysterious deaths among the family members.

I have noticed during Adventist funeral and memorial services that the words “soul” and “spirit” frequently are used in a way that causes confusion. People insinuate that the dead continue existing as a living soul. This position strengthens the old beliefs that the dead continue to live as the living dead—the ancestors who continue to influence the living. For example, almost all tombstones in the Mwami Mission District have an inscription that says, “May his/her soul rest in eternal peace (MHSRP).” This seems to indicate that the soul is thought of as an independent entity from the body—a view that perpetuates the view of ancestors as the living dead who continue to influence the living and who, if not treated according to cultural customs, can bring harm on the family and community.

Death and Funeral Rituals and Practices in the Bible

Death and funeral rituals practiced in the Old Testament are similar to those practiced in the New Testament in many ways. There was a fear of defilement by coming in contact with a dead body (Num 19:11-16) since Jewish law stated that being in the presence of a dead body causes ritual uncleanness. That is why a member of a priestly family was not to be in the presence of a corpse, and those who had been in contact were required

to wash their hands before entering a home, whether or not they had touched the body (Lev 21:11; cf. Num 19:13-14). Mourning practices in Judaism were extensive, but they were not an expression of fear of death. Jewish practices relating to death and mourning had two purposes: “to show respect for the dead . . . , and to comfort the living . . . , who will miss the deceased” (Jewish Virtual Library n.d.).

One important point that the Old Testament did not stress was the belief in the resurrection. A complete mortuary ritual is not described in the Bible; however, some texts indicate that the dead were kept in a house (1 Kgs 17:19; 2 Kgs 4:18-20). Once a person died, the Hebrew practice required that the eldest son or a near relative close the eyes of the dead, “I will close your eyes when you die” (Gen 50:1, cf. 46:4). After the body was prepared, the Hebrews put the body inside a room (2 Kgs 4:21, 17:19), followed by wailing and weeping, which alerted the community about the death (2 Sam 1:12; Jer 9:17-18; Micah 1:8). The Hebrews had specific days of mourning. Joseph observed seven days of mourning for his father (Gen 50:10).

The Hebrews showed their grief by tearing their garments and putting on sackcloth (Isa 20:2; Gen 37:34; 2 Sam 13:31). Job—who is called a friend of God, blameless, and upright—after he learned of the death of his children, not only tore his robe but also shaved his head, then fell to the ground and worshipped (Job 1:20). Job knew that a person was nothing but dust and ashes, which is a phrase that occurs in only three places in the Old Testament (Gen 18:27; Job 30:19, 42:6).

The Mystery of Death

There are so many myths about death; however, the Bible gives a glimpse of the origin of death. It is clear that death came as a result of disobedience. God explicitly commanded Adam and Eve, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Gen 2:16-17).

The failure of the first couple to obey this command resulted in death entering the human family, regardless of the assertion of the serpent when it said, “You will surely not die” (Gen 3:4). This verse succinctly explains the origin of death. The explanation may not be comprehensive but at least it allows us to see where death came from and its cause. The Bible also teaches that the dead are not conscious and have no part in the activities of life under the sun (Eccl 9:5). Ellen White writes, “Multitudes have come to believe that it is spirits of the dead who are the ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (1950:551).

She says that these spirits are not the spirits of dead people but agents of darkness, the fallen evil angels.

When looking at the origin of death through a folk religion lens, Mbiti suggests that “even though people believe that death came into the world at a very early date, in the history of mankind, they believe also that every time a person dies, this death is caused” (1991:117). In African folk religions the idea that sickness and accidents are always caused has a very strong hold on just about everyone. The causes of death are either by witchcraft, curses, or by unhappy, angry ancestral spirits. Even when someone dies from a known disease or sickness that has been diagnosed by a doctor, people still believe that someone or something caused the death in that way and at that time.

The Implication of an Immortal Soul

The concept of an immortal soul independent of the body is popular and widely believed. People believe that the body may die but the spiritual soul is freed from the constraints of physical matter, and then goes to its eternal reward. Such an idea appears to be comforting; however, what does a body animated by such a soul mean? Some suggest that the physical body creates a soul as it grows and develops, impressing upon its invisible substance the individual’s personality. The soul, being the imperishable record of the physical brain structures, can then survive physical death and wait in God’s presence until the resurrection.

Some have offered evidence for a belief in a soul distinct from the body by arguing that God created a physical body for the preexisting Son of God (Heb 10:5; Wheeler 2009:50). Others think that a body can exist without a soul, while some Christians believe that a soul is never independent of a body. What does the Scripture say?

Soul and Spirit in the Bible

The New Testament counterpart of the Hebrew word *nephesh* is the Greek word *psyche*. The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) employs *psyche* in the same wide range usages (Laurin 1960:91, 492) as used in the New Testament. In both the Old and New Testament it states, “The first Adam became a living thing” (1 Cor 15:45). Also both OT and NT refer to people as individual souls (Acts 2:41; 7:14). James says that “he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (Jas 5:20). If the word soul is substituted by person, it still makes sense (Schwartz 1981:25).

The word spirit in the Greek comes from the root *pneuma* and is indicated by *pneu*, meaning to blow or breath. The root *pneu* and the suffix *ma* refers to air in motion as a special substance that empowers one's being. In the New Testament, *pneuma* has also been translated as mood (1 Cor 4:21; 2 Tim 1:7; Rom 8:15). *Pneuma* is the power that God gives to energize or the life principle found in human beings (25).

When Jesus was about to die, he cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46, cf. Acts 7:59). Jesus died echoing the words of the Psalmist who said, "Into your hands, I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord God of truth" (Ps 1:5).

In relation to the life of a human being, *pneuma* must be understood as the life principle found in the body when a person is alive. This is in agreement with the Old Testament writings as depicted by Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes that at death the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it (Eccl 12:7). At death, the life principle, *pneuma*, ceases and returns back to God. *Pneuma*, returning back to God does not mean it is an entity. *Pneuma* going back to God is recognition of God's creative power that he imparts and takes it back at death.

The New Testament also uses soul and spirit interchangeably as indicated in the book of Luke. "My soul magnifies the Lord. And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). When compared to the Old Testament, the New Testament adds some unusual elements that may at first appear puzzling. For instance, Paul prays that (his readers) "may your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess 5:23). The text has created a lot of debate over the significance of these terms.

The vocabulary here is certainly tripartite—body, soul, spirit—but that the emphasis is on the sanctification of the whole person, and that in the future coming of Christ. In popular thought, the point of making a sharp distinction between body and soul is the assertion that something else must die. The text teaches that every aspect of being human is to be kept for the coming of Christ, which contradicts the reason for dividing up human beings. Paul is free to speak of being human from different aspects, but avoids any obscuring of the unitary reality we find in Christ, seeing it as headed toward greater fulfillment in Christ, not division. (Sherlock 1996:218)

A living soul is a living person and a dead soul is a person who has died. It must be understood that it is pointless to pray for a dead person's soul for it cannot exist separately from a dead body. The correct position is that a human being does not have a *nephesh* (soul), for the person is the soul. This view is in agreement with the suggestion that the death of a

nephesh means a loss of personhood. Thus it is not what Adam had, but what he was (Bromiley 1982:587, 588). The Bible says, “For every living soul belongs to me, the father, as well as the son—both alike, belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die (Ezek 18:4). Interestingly when the word *nephesh* is referred to a corpse or a dead body (Num 6:6, 11, 9:6, 7, 10), that forces a conceptual change in many cultures. The term soul does not translate easily because it represents the concepts of reality that may differ widely from culture to culture and because it reflects the philosophical history of each particular culture as well (Petersen 2005:9).

Immortality Belongs to God Alone

In addition to ruling out that a soul cannot exist independently of a body (Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid 1993:767), the Bible equally does not endorse immortality as being something belonging to human beings. God is the only one who is immortal (Ps 90:9-14; 1 Tim 6:15). The view of immortality that predominates in Western, Folk religions, and Christian thought is Platonic, where the term signifies an in-built characteristic of every soul with persistence after death (Plato 1981:78b-80b). However, the granting of immortality to human beings is clearly stipulated by Paul when he says “For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this incorruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality.” The New Testament defines human “immortality” as the immunity from decay and death that results from sharing the divine life of the resurrected state (Harris 1986:47-52). The promise of immortality is to “those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor and immortality” (Rom 2:7).

Burial Activities in the Old Testament

During the Old Testament, there were activities prior to burial. Individuals of high status in society would frequently be clothed in linen garments. The affluent individuals enjoyed burials with elaborate funerary collections that included robes, jewelry, furniture, weapons, and pottery (1Sam 28:14; Isa 14:11; Ezek 32:27).

After preparation of the body, the procession to the grave or tomb began with the corpse being carried on a wooden platform, usually by friends, servants, or relatives (2 Sam 3:31). The procession was led by professional mourners, followed by family members who filled the air with cries of sadness and agony (2 Sam 3:31-32; Job 21:33; Eccl 12:5; Jer 9:17; Amos 5:16) (Achtmeier 1985:145, 146). This special treatment of the body of the deceased signifies how the families perceived death. The treatment given

to a dead person was a demonstration of respect for the living. It has been observed that the time between death and burial witnessed the intensity of respect the people accorded the deceased, and the special treatment given the body demonstrated how the family perceived the dead person.

The Hebrews practiced burial in the land of the ancestors. Abraham purchased a burial place for his wife Sarah, and his descendants were also buried there (Gen 47:29, 30, 49:29-32; Exod 13:19). The Old Testament practice was to bury the dead in family tombs or a family sepulcher (Gen 49:29-33).

There were two types of burials among the Hebrews—temporary and permanent. After time had elapsed, the bones were moved from the temporary burial place to a permanent one (2 Sam 21:12-15). The Hebrews had a great fire when Hezekiah died (2 Chr 16:14). The fire was built as a memorial and was an honorific rite customarily granted to Kings (Freedman 2000:205). The origins of such fires for dead kings are not known.

The Hebrews did not end their funeral activities with the burial. After burial and weeping and mourning the bereaved family continued to receive comfort and care. They had seven days of intense mourning when a close relative died (Gen 50:10, cf. 1 Sam 31:13; Job 2:13). There was a period for intense mourning, normally between death and burial. During that time the mourners did not receive greetings of peace (Ezek 24:17). The mourning was extended for thirty days when the Israelites grieved the death of Moses. Aaron too was mourned for thirty days when he died (Deut 34:8; Num 20:29). When Jacob breathed his last, Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. This process required forty days, during which time the family mourned. In fact, the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days (Gen 50:1-3).

Funeral rituals were part of the Hebrew cultural practices; however, when Ezekiel's wife died, the Lord told him not to mourn in the traditional way. The Lord said to him, "Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with one stroke, yet you shall neither mourn nor weep nor shall your tears run down. Sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead, bind your turban on your head, and put your sandals on your feet; do not cover your lips, and do not eat man's bread of sorrow" (Ezek 24:16-17). The Lord's command to Ezekiel indicates there were ritual practices common to the Hebrew people. But Ezekiel was to mourn differently because he was a lightbearer for the Lord.

Burial Activities in the New Testament

The Old Testament provides the foundation of the burial activities in the New Testament. After a death was announced, burial had to take place

within twenty-four hours (Acts 5:5-10). This was necessary because there was no way to preserve the body. Quick burials also acted as a means to reduce excessive grief and to reduce the amount of time a dead body was kept in the house (Benjamin 1983:246, 254).

As soon as the individual expired, the eldest son or nearest relative present would close the eyes of the deceased (Gen 46:6), which helps explain why Jesus called death a sleep (John 11:11-14). The mouth was bound shut (John 11:44), the body washed (Acts 9:37) and then anointed with aromatic ointments (John 12:7, 19: 39; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1). The body was usually wrapped in a linen cloth (Matt 27:59; John 11:44). Then the body was put on a platform and carried on the shoulders to the grave site (Luke 7:12-14). Professional mourners would accompany the body to the grave (Matt 9:23; John 11:31-33). Jews located their burial tombs away from towns in Palestine.

Most Jewish communities had a special group of volunteers, whose duty it was to care for the dead. They had the responsibility to wash the body and prepare it for burial according to Jewish custom (Lamm 1969:93). The Jewish people also had a practice of moving the bones from one part of the tomb to another. After a body had decomposed the bones could be piled in one area or put in a small box called an ossuary, and then shelved (Hallote 2003:123-126).

Jewish law required that tombstones be erected on graves so the dead would be remembered and to ensure that the grave was not desecrated. People who could not afford expensive rock-hewn tombs were placed in the ground. After the body was placed in the ground, earth filled the grave and a heap of stones was put on top to preserve the body from depredations of beasts or thieves (White 1948:557).

Missiological Suggestions

The missiological approach that I suggest to be applied to funeral rituals and practices in Mwami is a process known as critical contextualization. Funerals are just as significant today as they were in biblical times. They also offer the church great opportunities for sharing God's perspective on death, the resurrection, and the hope for spending eternity with God in heaven. Thus, during the funeral service, preaching is not done to the dead but to the living who attend the funeral.

The issues of death and funeral rituals in the Mwami District should be handled using Paul Hiebert's critical contextualization process, which comprises four steps: First, the people must have a deep appreciation for the Word of God and a willingness to deal with all areas of their lives in a biblical way. This would entail a willingness to discuss the funeral rituals and practices and relate them to what the Bible says.

Second, the people should spend time looking uncritically at the cultural item or practice (in this case funeral rituals and practices) so they understand the meaning and implications of each action. This step would help the faith community analyze the cultural meaning and significance of each aspect of the funeral rituals and practices. During this second step no judgment should be made as to the rightness or wrongness of the practices.

Third, the faith community applies applicable biblical passages and principles to the cultural item in question. What aspects of funeral rituals and practices are incompatible with the principles of the Word of God? What aspects are in line with the biblical principles? During this third step the district leader, the local pastor, and elders are resource people helping the larger group access the Bible passages that offer suggestions on how to deal biblically with the issue.

Fourth, the group, led by the Holy Spirit, decides what they can do and what they cannot do in light of the biblical principles they have discovered. There may be aspects of the ritual that can continue to be used since they do not go against biblical principles. There may be other aspects that can be slightly modified by having biblical meanings added to the practice, and there may be some areas that need to be totally discarded. (Hiebert 1985:186).

Too often church leaders have just told people what to believe and what to do. By engaging the faith community in the process of looking at what God's Word says and having them actively involved in deciding what can remain, what needs changing, and what needs to be discarded, there is a group buy-in. When the group makes these kinds of decisions the pastor or district leader no longer has to try to force people to act in a certain way—they have agreed to a course of action so they willingly follow the decision.

Conclusion

The conflict between Folk Religion and Christian beliefs is as old as the Church in Zambia. Folk Religion when mixed with God's ways for his people leads to dual allegiance—the very thing that caused the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Mwami Mission District has been in existence for ninety-two years but many of the believers are still tied to folk religious practices. It is true that “the Lord . . . is patient toward you not wishing for anyone to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Similarly, church leaders must learn to exercise patience as they guide their members into a deeper understanding of God's Word and as the people learn to apply the principles of God's Word to their cultural practices. The second step in Hiebert's critical contextualization process is

important since many people never stop to analyze their cultural practices or understand how the deep meanings are in direct opposition to biblical principles (Hiebert 1999:21).

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