

*The African Funeral Ceremony:  
Stumbling Block or Redemptive Analogy?*

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Death had come peacefully to the old Jita in his sleep last night. Today most of his relatives and neighbors were at his home to help out in the week-long funeral ceremony, called the *kilio*.<sup>1</sup> Burial had been in the late afternoon, and now, as the shadows grew long, people sat and talked in small groups. Just before dark, two additional relatives and a shabbily-dressed stranger arrived. Everyone knew that the stranger, clearly from some distant tribe, had come to sleep with the widow that night. The *kilio* was about to begin.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPT FULFILLMENT

It is not uncommon for African rituals to baffle new missionaries and heighten their culture shock. Because of culture shock, pride, or ignorance, missionaries have sometimes needlessly opposed customs they did not understand. Could some of these customs—rightly understood or sensitively modified—have served as bridges for the gospel? Could they be used today as redemptive analogies?

In New Testament times, when some accused Christianity of destroying Jewish culture, God directed the New Testament authors to depict how Christ actualized the central components of Jewish culture—priesthood, tabernacle, sacrifices, and even the wedding ceremony. Don Richardson suggests that these are "concept fulfillments" that find their reality in Christ and salvation. Their God-ordained purpose was to prepare the Jewish mind to recognize Jesus as Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

Concept fulfillment is an important strategy for today's missionaries as well. Redeemed individuals should come to saving faith with an awakened sense of God's activity in their culture. Salvation should give the new believer a new sense of belonging and the opportunity to be a powerful witness in his culture.

Most of us can remember the steps that led us to faith in Christ. In retrospect it is often easy to see how God brought a series of preparatory events into our lives, building a frame of reference for a subsequent decision for Christ. We can now recognize that God's grace prepared us to meet the Savior. Seeing these divinely placed steps, Romans 8:28 burns brightly in our hearts. However, if we affirm that God's word and work is equally powerful in other cultures, we must be prepared to address some difficult questions.

During my years as a missionary in Tanzania I came to believe that the rites of passage are the areas of African culture least touched by the gospel. Reinforcement of such a conviction came from a discussion I recently had with Dr. John Gration of the Wheaton Graduate School. He told me that while conducting a seminar for national pastors and evangelists in central Africa, he asked the participants, "What area in your culture has the gospel least penetrated?" Although many areas were cited, the most frequent was the funeral ceremony.

Nevertheless, my thesis—based upon my experience with and observation of the Sukuma, Jita, Kerewe, and Zinza tribes—is that African rites of passage may be employed as powerful gospel communicators. Used as such, they may enhance the converts' understanding of and growth in the Christian life. The funeral ceremony, or *kilio*, is a prime example. In this article I will focus on the *kilio* conducted after the death of a married man.

## THE DEATH RITUAL (*KILIO*)

The relatives remove the dying man from the main house to a temporary hut built by the family about fifty feet away. Burial takes place the same day as death. The *Mwesi*, the oldest brother of the deceased, comes to direct the funeral. He first takes a short-handled hoe and scrapes two parallel lines on the ground. For a man<sup>3</sup> the first line is drawn from west to east, and the second is drawn in the opposite direction.

The *Mwesi* takes out the first two and the last two scoops of sand with a short hoe. Family and friends help dig the grave with hoes of normal length. The male relatives then kill a cow and skin it to the leg joints, leaving bone in the skin below the joints. The cow hide is cut in two, with one piece placed under and the other over the body. The corpse is placed in the grave on its right side, facing the rising sun.

After the grave is filled the *Mwesi* throws the short hoe into the forest or down an anthill and then bathes in the river. Next the other men in the burial party bathe, followed by the widow, who bathes only below her waist, and the other women. (Throughout the *kilio* bathing will be permitted only when the group bathes communally.) After the group returns to the home, the women sprinkle cool water from the river on the deceased's furniture, personal effects, and food, all of which have been moved outside for this purpose. Finally, by the night of burial, the relatives fetch a *Mwasha* (sanctifier) from a remote tribe to sleep with the widow.

The official mourning starts the day after burial and continues for 5-8 days. Some of the mourners play the traditional African "Ubao" checkerboard, and others pass the time talking in small groups. However, the general atmosphere is subdued silence. On the first morning the *Mwasha* comes out holding his throat as if he were choking. The widow remains seated in the house, with head bowed and eyes looking at the floor. She is not allowed to talk with anyone except the widows who are serving her. Late on the fifth day the *Mwasha* returns. That night he shaves the heads of the widow and all her sons and then sleeps with the widow again. He leaves the next morning.

The *Mwesi* then tells the widow to bathe all her body in the river in order to rid herself of her husband's sweat. She returns to the house and once again bows her head as the *Mwesi* declares that "the house has been overcome." The widow's bed is now let down to the floor.

On the sixth day all the mourners bathe. A white cock is killed on the threshold of the house, and the fresh blood is sprinkled inside. The feathers are taken to the crossroads of two paths and left there. That morning the widow emerges with head up and grief over. The *Mwasha* returns again. That night he takes the widow out to the bush and sleeps with her for the third and final time. After a short ceremony, in which the widow is inherited by her husband's brother or by one of her children, all are free to go home. The funeral is over.

## THE THREE STAGES OF THE *KILIO*

Van Gennep defines "rites of passage" as rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age.<sup>4</sup> Found in all societies, they are more clearly seen in small-scale, relatively stable societies. They show a man's movement through his lifetime from his mother's womb to his grave.<sup>5</sup> Van Gennep has demonstrated that all rites of passage have three stages: (1) *Separation*, indicated by symbolic acts depicting detachment from an earlier state; (2) *Transition*, in which a person passes through a middle realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or of the coming state; and (3) *Incorporation*, shown by symbolic acts indicating re-entry into social visibility.

My contention is that the funeral wake shares with other African rites of passage a common profile—a three-part structure highlighted by Van Gennep's insights. The first phase—death—separates the widow from the profane world.

The second phase—burial, transition or transformation, recognized by an expression meaning "to stay inside"—continues the widow's seclusion from secular life. The third phase—incorporation, called "to come out"—is a celebration of the removal of the pollution of death and the restoration of normal social relations.

The transition period is especially important. Turner suggests that transitional people are threshold people, outsiders, who elusively slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Such people are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by routine standards, custom and ceremony. Such an ambiguous or indeterminate status is frequently described in African societies by a variety of symbols—death, being in the womb, invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, or the wilderness.<sup>6</sup>

Within the *kilio* transition is indicated by the declaration that "the house has been overcome" and by the lowering of the widow's bed to the floor. Such actions are symbolic of the widow's condition of complete devastation and powerlessness. Like a corpse, she is totally dependent on those around her to supply her needs. She is only a receiver of what the community desires to give her. The role of the humble widow is an example of a recurrent theme of transitional situations—the stripping away of preliminal and postliminal attributes. She is being reduced to a condition in which she can be fashioned anew and given additional powers to enable her to cope with her new position in life. In addition, an important side effect of the widow's humbling is a leveling effect which creates a true community or commonality between the widow and the mourners. They, too, are in transition.

#### RITUAL AND SYMBOL

In African culture there are at least four major rites of passage: rituals of birth, puberty or initiation, marriage, and death. These rituals, developed by each society to varying levels, always are characterized by the surface structure—what is seen—and the deep structure—the meaning of what is seen. It is not unusual in ritual context that almost every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, and every unit of space and time stands for something other than itself.<sup>7</sup>

Although Leach feels that people "engage in ritual to transmit collective messages to themselves,"<sup>8</sup> some scholars argue that they also engage in ritual in order to communicate with the spirits. In either case, the underlying idea in African ritual systems is communication intended to change human situations.<sup>9</sup> In this respect the whole ritual system becomes a positive force in an active arena. If the ceremony is done incorrectly, there is a resultant insecurity and loss of power, a loss of vital force. When ritual is followed correctly, the force is increased. Inflexibility is the key.

Symbolic rituals are also considered highly efficient means of information storage and transmission—"computer" systems featuring inflexible rites rather than floppy disks. Some societies ordinarily store information by patterned arrangements of a small number of simple signs marked on paper or recorded on magnetic tape. Other societies use ritual in analogous ways. The message is not carried by ritual alone but by the arrangement and sequence of events.<sup>10</sup> In African societies almost every ritual is a salvation event in which human experience is re-created and renewed in the all-important Ritual Present.<sup>11</sup>

#### PRESCRIBED OBSCENITY

Obviously, the most problematic aspect of the *kilio* for the Christian is the extramarital sex between the widow and the *Mweshu*. In African societies death is associated with pollution, and pollution is often believed to be removed through the ritual sex act—a prescribed obscenity for a special occasion. (The killing of the cock is another attempt to remove the pollution. The feathers are left at the crossroads; any passerby needs only to come to the crossroads to be counted as carrying away the spirit of pollution.) In these societies pollution is distinguished from sin. Pollution is a quality of

impurity and danger, while sin is an act against the moral order which places the actor in danger from the community. Pollution may result from accidents or events beyond one's control, while sin is an intentional act.

After the first sexual liaison, when the *Mwesh*a comes out of the hut squeezing his throat as if he were choking, he is symbolizing a picture of the sacrificial goat killed by suffocation. Suffocation keeps the now-polluted breath of life inside from escaping to the outside. The pollution has been imputed to the *Mwesh*a, who now carries it away for the first time. After the second sexual contact, the *Mwesh*a takes the rest of the widow's pollution to the distant, unknown outside world. She, but she alone, is now clean. In the third and final sexual contact, the widow, as symbolic representative of the village, takes the pollution away from the village by sleeping in the bush with the *Mwesh*a, conclusively transferring the defilement to him. He once again carries the pollution to the remote, undefined outside world.

Evans-Pritchard observes that the occasional withdrawal of society from its normal prohibitions gives special emphasis to the social value of the prescribed obscenity. The obscenity channels human emotion into prescribed avenues of expression in periods of human crisis.<sup>12</sup> In the *kilio* we see an attempt to tame those aggressive sexual drives which the Lacustrine cultures believe common to man and beast. These powers exercised in sexual symbolism are "channeled toward master symbols representative of structural order and values that uphold that order." Turner argues that "every opposition is overcome or transcended in a recovered unity, a unity that, moreover, is reinforced by the very potencies that endanger it. Ritual is shown by these rites to be a means of putting at the services of the social order the very forces of disorder that inhere in man's... constitution."<sup>13</sup>

#### MISSIOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS

Despite the difficulties presented by the role of the *Mwesh*a, I believe that the *kilio* and most African rites of passage are clear-cut pictures of death (separation), burial (transformation through union), and resurrection (incorporation). This is the Biblical portrait of regeneration. Like the bereaved in the *kilio*, the Christian is separated from the former way of life, transformed by union with Christ, and then incorporated into the body of Christ for fellowship and dynamic growth.

In Romans 6 the apostle Paul describes the believer's identification with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. The apostle declares,

... All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.... We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection (vs. 3-5, NIV).

The picture here is of the believer's union with Christ through baptism (out of sight, under the water or in the Spirit), which happens at the moment of saving faith. Christ's death is imputed to the believer, and the sins of the believer are imputed to Christ. Such a mystical union occurs in the seclusion of the believer's heart and soul. He is cleansed from defilement, and Christ carries his sins far away—as far as the east is from the west.

The arrangement and segmented order of events within the *kilio* carry the message that is understood as regeneration. I feel that this may be why Africans, including those who reject the claims of Christ, seem to have a ready grasp of the new birth. Such an understanding is apparently imbedded in their subconscious mind. Regeneration is seen as a natural part of life.

However, in considering the *kilio* as a potential redemptive analogy, we obviously face a real danger of syncretism. There is no way we can condone the ritual act of removing the pollution of death by the prescribed obscenity. I would propose that missionaries reexamine the death ritual, consult with tribal elders, and suggest functional substitutes for the prescribed extramarital sex. Then the *kilio* can be cited in preaching as a parallel to the process of salvation.

I witnessed and participated in such attempts during my twenty years in Tanzania. Majogoro (Roosters), an old Jita elder who became my best friend, regularly preached at two or three *kilios* a month in order to relate the gospel to the funeral ceremony. I remember one notable funeral, with 200 present, when this kind of presentation of the gospel commanded unprecedented attention. The impact of the message was so significant that the widow listening from inside her hut invited Majogoro and me to share a meal with her within the hut—a humbling experience for us since we knew such an invitation was highly unorthodox.

The missionary or pastor willing to try such an approach could point to Leviticus 16, where Aaron was instructed by God to put his hand on the head of a live goat, confess over it the sins and transgressions of the children of Israel, and then send the goat away into the wilderness. Here is an excellent functional equivalent to the *Mweshu*. The preacher should note that although a scapegoat or the *Mweshu* must be summoned again and again, now we have access to a Redeemer who at the cross took away the pollution of sin and death forever. A careful examination of the rest of this passage in Leviticus will yield many other parallels with the traditional African funeral service, and many other Biblical references could be used.

#### POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

Undoubtedly some objections could be made to my observations and suggestions. Some, for example, might protest, "The funeral ceremony for most African Christians has already changed. The local pastor is in charge, loud wailing is a thing of the past, and other changes have taken place. The *kilio* is a thing of the past. Don't bring it up again!" I would respond with the reminder that my African brothers themselves are raising these issues and noting that the gospel has rarely penetrated all aspects of the *kilio*.

Even if we were to focus for a moment on the needs of existing African Christians, rather than on the needs of the unevangelized, we must acknowledge that the *kilio* is very definitely *not* a thing of the past. If every Christian who died had only strong evangelical believers in his family, there would be no problem, for the family would not be plagued by doubts about the pollution of death clinging both to the bereaved and to the entire village. But what about a Christian schoolgirl who gets pregnant and dies in labor? Her family is not Christian, but her uncle's family, with whom she lived while going to school, *is*. How is her uncle, who is in charge of the funeral, going to prevent her father from performing rituals at the gravesite to prevent all the pregnant women of the family from dying before giving birth?

What about a widow, a lone believer in her family? How is she going to prevent her brother-in-law from insisting that she fulfill the ritual acts in order to take away the pollution of death? If she refuses to comply, how will she respond to the family's accusations that her failure was the cause of subsequent deaths? Since the widow's children now belong to her brother-in-law, will she ever see them again if she refuses?

Missionaries and national pastors might object, "It's very well for the armchair missiologist to suggest from a distance that the arts and other cultural expressions can and should be used to communicate the gospel. However, we have to live with the complexities and the consequences. Have all the facts been considered?" As a missiologist with mission field experience, I can fully sympathize with such a response. Nevertheless, I would invite us all to courageously explore new options and then listen carefully to each other in our evaluations.

Finally, others might object, "You talk a lot about *pollution*, but what about *guilt*?" When I first arrived on the mission field, I was told by seasoned missionaries that the local languages had no word for guilt, and so the concept had to be explained circuitously. Later, I discovered that while there is a word for guilt in some of the local languages, it does not carry the Biblical meaning. Perhaps this is why I have never heard an African give a testimony of thankfulness for forgiveness of sins and removal of guilt unless he had learned these terms in a Bible school. African testimonies generally focus on other aspects of salvation.

Some African Christians and a few missionaries have been able to deal successfully with the issues surrounding the *kilio*. Each Christian funeral is different, and the diversity of ways in which these funerals cope with the aspects of the traditional service is broad. The central questions are: Can preaching on the *kilio* be used to bring non-believers to Christ and to strengthen believers? Has God provided us with a cultural bridge? What can we do to facilitate the penetration of the gospel into every corner of these societies? May God give us grace to learn together.

## NOTES

1. This is Kiswahili for funeral. It is a generic term used by the Sukuma, Jita, Kerewe, Zinza, and a number of other tribes.
2. Richardson, Don, "Concept Fulfillment." In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: a Reader*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne. Pasadena: William Carey Library (1983:416).
3. The order is reversed for a woman.
4. Van Gennep in Turner, Victor W. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press (1967:94).
5. Turner, Victor W. in *Forest of Symbols* (1967:28-29).
6. Turner, Victor W. in *The Ritual Process*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press (1969:95).
7. Turner, Victor W. in *The Ritual Process* (1969:15).
8. Leach, E.R. in *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected*. London: Cambridge University Press (1976:45).
9. Ray, Benjamin, in *African Religion: Symbol, Rituals, and Community*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. (1976:78).
10. Leach, E.R., "Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development." In *Reader in Comparative Religion*, edited by W.A. Lessa and W.A. Vogt (1979:229-232).
11. Ray puts it this way: "Through ritual man transcends himself and communicates directly with the divine. The coming of divinity to man and of man to divinity happens repeatedly with equal validity on almost every ritual occasion. The experience of salvation is thus a present reality, not a future event" (1976:17).
12. Evans-Pritchard, "Some Collective Expressions of Obscenity in Africa," in his collection called *The Position of Woman in Primitive Society* (1965:101). Cited in Turner (1969:92).
13. Turner, Victor W., in *The Ritual Process* (1969:93).

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