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The Dead Never Die: An African Traditional Religious Perspective.

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Abstract

This paper, therefore, analyses the concept of death, its meaning and significance, philosophy, cultural, and social aspects from an African perspective. The study applied narrative theory in order to make sense to the readers. For this matter, the object of study is the story itself. It focuses on how people or groups make logic of events and actions in their lives. This narrative theory addresses the vagueness, complexity and dynamism of a people, group or individuals. In the African Traditional Religion worldview, the narrative theory is used to tell the story of a particular group or culture. The author establishes that Africans still value death and life after it in the sphere of ancestry and that there is a close association between the living and the dead; hence the concept of 'the dead never die'. Further, it was found that the African social and communal being has affected the relationship between the living and the 'living dead'. Notably, death is treated with a lot of seriousness because Africans 'never die'; instead, the living connects with the living dead for as long as they remember him. The living dead thus become a source of blessing or curse to the family according to how he lived and how he was buried.

Key Terms: African philosophy, Africa traditional religion, concept of death, narrative theory, theological perspective.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Do Africans die? Do we have natural death in Africa? What is the concept of death all about? What is the meaning and significance of death in Africa? What is the African philosophy on death? What is the African concept of death from the social and cultural perspective? Those are some of the critical questions that ring in the mind of Africans today whenever they associate with death. Some religious scholars believe something or someone causes death in Africa. For instance, Tempels (1969) describes every calamity encountered by Africans simply as attenuation of crucial force. He states that sickness and death are caused by some external force, an individual, something, or condition that makes people weak due to the agent having a superior life drive. Death does not only change or end life or an individual's personality but also changes their conditions. This is expressed in the entire concept of ancestors, where dead people continue to live in the community and that are in communication with their relatives. This paper seeks to explain more about death in the African context and why Africans' dead never really die with special references to the *Abaluhya* people of Western Kenya.

Materials and Methods

The study applied narrative theory in order to make sense to the readers. According to Mitchell and Egudo (2003), narrative is an interpretive approach that involves storytelling as a methodology. For this matter, the object of study is the story itself. It focuses on how people or groups make logic of events and actions in their lives. This narrative theory addresses vagueness, complexity and dynamism of a people, group or individuals. This method was the best because it addressed different points of view and helped interpret the outcomes while identifying variances and comparisons in the happenings concerning death and life. In African Traditional Religion worldview, narrative theory is used to tell the story of a particular group or culture. For instance the story in this study of the dead in Eldoret “refusing” to go home as later narrated, sets the parameters of this methodology in order to make sense and guide the way people behave and make them meaningful. Through narration of a story, knowledge is produced and transferred to the next generation orally. The Luhya funeral and rituals create space and conversation that reveals how Africa has diverse cultures. Therefore, the act of listening to cultural stories imparts knowledge to people hence sealing the relationship.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the Macmillan English Dictionary (2007), death is defined as a state of no longer being alive or not working. From a theological perspective, death is defined as the separation of soul and body. This definition, according to the author, is insufficient for Africans who hold the notion that “*seeing is believing*”, yet no one has seen a soul practically depart from the body. Further, the theological definition is limited in demonstrating the explicit element of humanity's death. In most cases, the above description seems contrary to what most Africans believe in and, more importantly, the aspect of life as an ancestor. To most African theologians, death is not the end of life but simply a transition to another form.

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Philosophically, death is defined as the termination of the integrated operation of the human organism. Actually, this definition is similar to the theological definition above, which still does not make sense to Africans. According to Dancy and Davis (2006), death is a worldwide, usual, unrelenting, unavoidable, inescapable, inevitable, and undeniable life fact. When death emerges, it usually has a lot of impact on the family of the deceased. Its extent is frequently pegged on whether it was predicted or unpredicted. A dying individual on his deathbed goes through anxiety, anger, and sometimes anguish when the bereavement predictability becomes evident. Though those definitions have some truths in them, they fail to categorically mention the place of ancestors and how the soul departs the body becomes insufficient and limit contemporary understanding. For that matter, death in Africa could easily be defined as the graduation of life to ancestry or simply continuing life in another state.

African philosophers like John Mbiti and Bolayi Lesiba have viewed death from a different perspective, but each one of them mentions the idea of life after death. This may mean that there is no real death in Africa if it is a continuation. The Macmillan English Dictionary (2007) defines continuation as a situation in which something begins again at a point at which it was interrupted. If this definition is something to go by, then in discussing death in Africa, it means life never stops, and so death never happens. It was just an interruption of life that continues from where it left, but now in another form. This is the position of most philosophers in giving the meaning of death in African philosophy. King (2013), though not an African philosopher, views death as a natural evolution from the visible to the invisible or spiritual world. In this incident, a person's spiritual essence is not shattered but goes to live in the realm of ancestors.

This attached meaning of death coincides with most African cultures, history, epistemology, and methodological dimensions. Various perceptions about death and life in any culture and traditional systems are based on definite philosophical deductions and worldviews, as mentioned above. Therefore, the commencement of death in the native African contexts is understood through the dimensions mentioned earlier. It is worth noting that cultures differ in their conceptions of a person, which can easily lead to conceptions of humanity on the same to vary across different cultural contexts. This variance leaves little room for presumptions that Africans envision death only in accordance with the above dimensions. The meaning of death in Africa has to be interpreted and understood within three-fold dimensions; the philosophical, social, and cultural contexts (Mbiti, 1990).

Further, King (2013) views death in African philosophy as a natural transition from the visible to the invisible or spiritual ontology where the spirit, the person's essence, is not destroyed but moves to live in the ancestral spirit realm. The meaning of his connotation is what is held by many African cultures, historical epistemology, and other conceptions of life and death. It is therefore not right to assume that all Africans conceive death in similar dimensions. As Baloyi (2014) notes, death should be understood within its philosophical-socio-cultural context for its meaningful interpretation and understanding. From it, life experiences and death are inseparable according to the prevailing context. For instance, when people die, they transcend to the world of the spirit where they accompany the ancestors and living dead. According to King (2013), ancestors and the living dead

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provide protection and guidance to the living, and therefore they are highly venerated and respected in the community of the living. Therefore, the living and the dead are always in a constant and continuous communication relationship. This can be through dreams.

Buju (1998) avers that there is a need to approach the African person in his/her religious understanding of the two-dimensional community of the living and the 'living dead'. Mbiti (1990), on the other hand, insists that people do not cease to exist once they are physically dead; instead, they transcend to the spiritual world to live in the community of the living dead. Therefore, death introduces a further means of development and transition to growth in a different phase. This leads to the ever-present acknowledgement of the spiritual being of the dead. That is why in some communities, they communicate and address the dead and not his/ her spirit as if he/she is alive. Among the Abanyole, you will hear them say, "*Papa, ochende bulahi, nakhulolane khandi, nebutswa oliinde litaala.*" (Father, go well, we shall meet again but take care of the family). This is clear evidence that the dead are regarded as sincerely and realistically living with the living and influencing them in society.

Mbiti (1990) brings forth a different taste in African understanding philosophy. He states that the philosophy of Africa is the understanding, mind, attitude, reason, and perceptions that guide the manner in which the people of Africa act, think, or converse in diverse situations in life. An African does not exclude the spiritual connection with the 'living dead' world. His statement suggests that the spiritual existence for the living or in the company of ancestors/ living dead is a state of personal eternity. In other words, it has its inception in the living world and continues in the ancestry world.

According to the ancient African philosophy, experiences of life and phases of development, death included, are not disconnected from each other, outside of their immediate perspective (King, 2013). For example, when a person dies, he/ she rises above the world of spirit to join the world of ancestors. Similarly, ancestors safeguard and guide those in the material realm. Consequently, they are highly treasured, venerated and regarded as a very significant living community (King, 2013). This means there is incessant and indestructible communication and a solid connection between those alive and their ancestors.

In African Traditional Religion, the dead, who is believed to be living invisibly and intangibly, is very powerful in engaging with visible beings and things. Though invisible, the dead are always believed to be closer to the members of society, just like the living. The living dead are believed to have an influence on the living and their lives in general. Despite the fact that they are invisible, the impact of the ancestors is felt in the spiritual disposition. This means that the ancestral spirit is personified in space to discharge its force in the cosmos. In African philosophy, therefore, the spirit remains part of life forces that affect the living and the entire cosmos. It is upon this that Africans view life and death melodiously as a dependant (Mbiti, 1990; King, 2013).

The two dimensions of the Africans, i.e. the living and the living dead, play an integral role in understanding their philosophy and religion. Consequently, the African connectivity between the living dead and the living is a strong

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philosophy, but the impact varies from the vast African cultures and people. For example, among the *Abanyore* of Western Kenya, the spirit of a dead old man is considered to be of great influence to the living as opposed to the spirit of a child or unmarried. The deceased must visit the family three to four days after burial in the assurance that all is well.

3.0 RESULTS

The African Concept of Death with Specific References

In Africa, death is not the end of life but a continuation of life in another realm. As Mbiti (1990) holds, Africans view death as an incorporated and ceaseless life developmental process that is inseparable from the interwoven connections between the invisible (living dead) and visible (living) world. Hence, humankind does not stop living once they die physically; alternatively, they transform to the world of spirit to live with the living dead as a community of ancestors. For indigenous people of Africa, death marks an extra developmental landmark that does not disconnect from the developmental processes of life stages. For this reason, death is simply a transition to a different stage in life. The dead transcends to a communal immortality state, existing in the company of spirits (Mbiti, 1990).

Death in Africa is celebrated through a number of rites of passage and rituals. Though they vary from one community to the other, the rituals are expected to continue for the mourning period and even beyond. The rituals continue as long as the community remembers the dead and how he/she influences the life of the living in the society (Mbiti, 1990). The process of mourning is not limited to as long as rituals are performed to connect the living and the dead. From an African point of view, death does not terminate life but ushers the beginning of another phase of life in a different form; hence death is not death per se (King, 2013).

Among the *Maragoli* people of Western Kenya, death is feared, and whenever it occurs, they mourn and gather around a fireplace until after the burial. The dead are always buried in the afternoon, three days after death, with the body facing north. The grave is dug in front of the house except for people who commit suicide, those who die of epilepsy and those who have not given birth (Barasa, 2011). In the context of *Abanyole*, people of Western Kenya, Alembe (2002) states that they believe the spirit of the dead person advances to join the spirits of other departed members of the community, which congregate in *Emakombe*, the world of spirits. From the foregoing discussion, it comes out clearly that death is just but a rite of passage or an opening to another form of life.

The cartoon in Figure 1 below demonstrates how a typical Luhya funeral is pegged on a number of rituals. From the figure, it is obvious that the funeral of a man in the Luhya community is characterised by a number of things. First, songs and dirges from the choir(s) and other music groups are sung to console the family and praise the dead. Second, there is a lot of drinking of local brew (*chang'aa* or *busaa*) by mourners, which is considered to be part of mourning and bidding farewell to the deceased. Third, there is the presence of fire, commonly known as

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Esitioli in Bunyore. This is where elders sit at night to keep themselves warm and talk about serious issues on how the dead should be buried. Fourth, the casket of the dead must spend a night inside one of his huts with the wife beside it. A respectable person, like the one whose funeral is being demonstrated in the figure below, must be buried with utmost dignity and honour. This would be demonstrated by dressing him in a proper suit he would be buried with. However, the community does not permit one to be buried in a tie and with shoes.



Figure1. Demonstration of a Luyia funeral with a number of rituals extracted from Abeingo Community networks Source: (Namuliro, 2014).

Weeping and crying out loud is compulsory among many people groups and tribes in Africa up to date. Among the *Abaluyia* community in Western Kenya, when news of the death of a family member is announced, everyone is expected to break into weeping and wailing on top of their voices not only to demonstrate their affection for the deceased but also to alert the community. Close family members are expected to weep more than anyone else, and it can even go as far as crawling on the ground, tearing of clothes while weeping, and cursing death and those who might be involved (Namuliro, 2014).

Namuliro (2014) points out that the neighbours are also expected to help the bereaved family weep uncontrollably to show unity and feeling with the bereaved family. This shows that if the bereaved family is on bad terms with neighbours, they may not assist in weeping and to an extent; they might even skip attendance at the funeral. In addition, if members of the bereaved family never interact with people, the community will not be part of it and even not participate in the digging of the grave.

It is worth noting that death is also meant as a test of the faithfulness of spouses in some communities in Africa. Between the *Kisa* and *Bunyore* of Western Kenya, when a husband dies, a faithful wife is supposed to sit near the head of the deceased husband while the unfaithful one is to sit near the legs. The wife will then mourn for close to six months until the dead husband visits her in a dream to tell her to stop weeping and look for an inheritor.

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Such communication shows that the ‘living dead’ is still connected to the family to show concern and care for the living.

Africans seem to embrace an eternal connection with the dead by remembering and acknowledging the spiritual being of the ancestors through dreams, a manifestation of character, or vision. The dead in Africa is as good as the living, even before burial and even at the graveside. The latter connect by talking and addressing the dead as if they are alive. This is an indication that the ‘living dead’ indisputably lives among the living and influences them greatly.

On 17 December 2013, one of the major Television Networks in Kenya: Kenya Television Network (KTN) reported an incident in Eldoret town where the body of a 25-year-old casual worker was stuck on the town streets for not less than 20 hours. The close relatives of the deceased claimed that it had "refused to be taken home for internment". The vehicles set aside to ferry the body developed mechanical breakdown, the relatives had to plead with the deceased, and the journey eventually progressed. In an African setting, such news proves the influence of the living dead on the living and the ability of the living dead to listen to the cries of the living. Following this incidence, there is a need to ask some critical questions to prove the point, i.e. why did both vehicles develop mechanical problems? Why for 20 hours? Why did the vehicles progress successfully after pleading with the dead as if he was alive? In answering such questions then one will understand the African concept of death in relation to how the living dead is always in touch with the living.

Cultural Aspect of Death in Africa

The cultural aspect of an African holds that when a person dies, then he/she continues to live in the spirit world by superior forces to operate as an ancestor (Baloyi, 2014). However, when children die, it is seen as a bad omen and a heinously evil act. Mbiti (1969) brings forth another school of thought that emphasizes life here and now as opposed to the future. He writes that a belief in the continuation of life after death for African peoples does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter. His thoughts, though, appears to focus on here and now; it is worth noting that how one lives now determines a great deal how he will live after death as an ancestor.

Eyetsemitan (2002) affirms that the belief system of Africa tradition, also known as ancestor worship, is anchored on a belief that the life path is cyclic and not linear. Because of this belief, the deceased are living but in a different sphere and appearance and can reincarnate and revisit this world in new forms. Some scholars view death as a continuation of rite of passage but only on a particular age limit. Omoregbe (1993), for instance, opines that death is a rite of passage for those who die at an acceptable old age. Since all death in Africa is caused, when it occurs, its cause has to be established with massive consultation from the living dead.

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In most cases, death is always credited to supernatural elements like witchcraft, offending the living dead and gods as opposed to physical explanations. African cultures hold that being in the world of ancestry is of significance for it confers forces to the living, hence enable them to operate while alive. Eyetsemitan (2002) continues to assert that it is an African cultural belief that to be in the world of the dead confers supernatural powers over those in the world of the living, such as the ability to bless or to curse, and to give life or to take life among others. As stated earlier, to become an ancestor after death is a pleasing objective of an African, but for it to be achieved, one has to live a meaningful life. Every African prefers to grow to old age and die a natural death to undergo the process of admission into the world of spirits. Therefore, any death in Africa apart from the very aged is considered abnormal, untimely and premature (Lanre-Abbas, 2008). Living a meaningful life as an ancestor, there are a number of things that need to be done.

One of the last processes is for the dead to be given a proper burial ceremony. If this does not happen, the dead will be a wandering ghosts which will cause more harm to the family members. Such ghosts do not live properly after burial and instil danger to the living, and cause a lack of peace. If, by any chance, anyone goes against the advice of the elders at the fireplace, as shown in Figure 1, and burry the deceased with shoes and a tie, it is likely that he may come back and cause trouble to the family members. Dancy and Davis (2006) give credibility to the concept of death in Africa by asserting that death signifies the physical parting of an individual from other humans. Funeral ceremonies and rites serve to draw concentration to this lasting separation, and specific attention is given to the respective rites to evade unwarranted offence for the deceased.

The Social Aspect of Death in Africa

Africa is a continent known as a social society and views issues on a social facet, and an individual exists for the community. One of the famous Ubuntu statement can sum the African view of a person, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am (Mbiti, 1990, p. 141). From this statement, one can deduce that as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes priority over the reality of individual life. The issue of communion does not only happen when a person is alive but also when a community member dies. Death rituals and mourning are communally spearheaded. When persons are born in Africa, they are always nurtured in a way that promotes relatedness and community-mindedness. Such persons have an obligation to the entire community. This communal sense manifests when a person is alive, but its final fulfilment is when one dies. Family is key to understanding African culture, and that is why Africans include a well-built circle of people as family members. Even at death, the deceased’s relatives remain connected with their family as ancestors; this shows that the ‘living dead’ is not dead but alive and always in memories of persons and respective families.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Death is part of the African community, and its occurrence affects the entire society in both ancient times and now. Death does affect not only the bereaved family but also the neighbours and society. The opinions of family and the society are considered in planning for a suitable burial, which ushers the dead to a good ancestry. It is evident that in Africa, death is not the end of life but a continuation of life in another realm. Any

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person, who lives a good life here, is expected to live a good life when he dies and joins the ‘living dead’. Consequently, it is imperative for the family members to be sensitive to the culture in handling the living, the dead and ‘living dead’ because life in Africa is cyclic as opposed to linear. It is for this matter that the author suggests that Africans in all spheres of life should acknowledge and respect the communal nature that African families exist in.

Recommendation: The 21st Century African should take life and death seriously, for they mean a lot for this and the next generation. Death in Africa should be treated with a lot of respect because, after all, ‘Africans never die’, though “dead” they are not dead but alive, they only transition to another level in life where they can still reincarnate and take care of their families as living dead. Therefore, it proves the statement that life is as good as a death in Africa and should be embraced by all communities and people groups. The contemporary African should embrace cultural conversations and listen to oral traditions on how death was conducted in order to carry them forward. Though African culture is diverse, the relationship between the living dead and the living should be contextualized according to cultural, social, and religious orientation and setting.

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