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The Church and African Mortuary Rites: Towards the Inculturation of *Nyere Za Mwezi*, Agiriama funeral rite in Kilifi County, Kenya

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Abstract

There is no doubt that there is an existential conflict between African funeral rituals with certain Christian religious beliefs and social norms. Conflict over burial rituals and especially among the Agiriama people has led to tension between the community and Christian churches and particularly the Catholic Church in Kilifi, Kenya. In order to avoid such conflicts, this article set out to explore the possibilities of enculturating some funeral rites, such as 'Nyere za Mwezi,' a cardinal post-burial ritual among the Agiriama community. The latter has continued to practice their traditions and culture associated with burial and funeral despite their conversion to Christianity and Islam, the two dominant religions in the region. This article primarily aims to analyze the Agiriama funeral rites, their symbolic meanings, and their significance to the community. It extends the discussion by examining the Roman Catholic Church's interpretation of those rituals such as 'Nyere za Mwezi.' It concludes by examining the challenges and opportunities for inculturation of 'Nyere za Mwezi,' *one of the most significant post-burial rituals* that enhanced the community well-being. The article relied on both secondary and primary data based on informed interviews with 30 respondents, mainly priests, Kaya elders, and lay Christians.

Keywords: Agiriama, Burial, Christianity, Church, Funeral, Inculturation, Nyere za Mwezi, Ritual

Introduction

Religious beliefs, and values and shape the cultural practices of people associated with life and death globally. Yet there is no doubt that there is an existential conflict and inconsistencies between African religious beliefs and social and cultural norms associated with funeral and burial rites with those of Christianity. This article focuses on the emerging conflicts between the Agiriama community and Christians over traditional burial and funeral rites. The Agiriama is one of the dominant and most 'incurably religious' sub-tribe of the Midzi-chenda community from the Coastal region of Kenya. The Agiriama has continued to practice African Indigenous Religion (AIR) although with fear of reprisal from Christianity and Islam, common Semitic religions in the region (Chindogo, 2010). Notably, the Agiriama people value life and at the same time fear death like any other community in the world. Thus, they perform a series of mortuary rites to commemorate and usher the dead into the world of the living dead. Ostensibly, this is triggered by the contagious fear of the dead as well as the respect towards them as corporate members of the community. By contrast, Leakey (1977) observes that other African societies such as the Agikuyu, although accepting death as part of predestination still avoided homes where death had occurred so as not to be caught by the contagion (Leaky, 1977; p. 938). For the Agikuyu, a dead body was ritually unclean and ought to be avoided at all costs. Anyone who accidentally touched a dead body had to be purified immediately, otherwise the contagion of death would be transferred to them (*ibid*). Yet for the Agiriama death does not desecrate the

living from the deceased, rather the community accepted the loss grudgingly as they prepare for the disposal of the corpse.

This article analyses and describes Agiriama mortuary rites such as *Nyere za Mwezi*- one of the cardinal funeral rite and draws its connection to Christian death anniversary rite on the aegis of inculturation paradigm. Arguably, this article observes that certain African funeral rites are still relevant and informs the Agiriama worldview of life and death. Yet the existential differences in ritual performance lies on the personal attributes of the deceased, episodes of ancestors, and religious denominations. On the other hand, emerging socio-cultural changes brought about by globalization, urbanization and Christianity had a great influence to the practice of *Nyere za Mwezi*. By focusing on the Agiriama, the study nuanced religious beliefs, values, and practices that are so intrinsic to their community well-being (*uzima ulalo*). Essentially, the intimacies between African culture and indigenous religion are so interwoven that it is almost impossible to delineate the two streams. Extant literature on African culture and religion treat them as one side of the same coin (Mbiti, 1969 and Chidongo, 2010). By and large, in African Indigenous Religion (AIR), life does not terminate with death, but continues in another realm of spiritual existence and therefore rituals were carried out to usher the dead into their spiritual dome.

Yet the Christian missionaries advocated for a total discontinuity from African indigenous values and practices associated with rite of passage (Muga, 1975). This necessitated a contestation between the missionaries and Africans that led to schism among some denominations. In a study on the church and female circumcision controversy of 1929 among the Agikuyu, Muoki (2009) observed that missionaries considered the practice as barbaric and oppressive to women rights. Missionary opposition to female circumcision was countered by Africans who not only pulled out their children from mission schools but also formed their own African Independent Churches (AICs). Like conflict over the female circumcision, the contention over African funeral and burial rites has proved divisive within African Christianity. Using the Agiriama as empirical case study, this article draws the contention over funeral rites and calls for the inculturation of certain practices such as *Nyere za Mwezi*. The Agiriama funeral rites including *Nyere za Mwezi* among others described in this article have been altered due to globalization and widespread influence of Christianity and Islam. The persistence of some of Agiriama funeral practices and rituals among Christians necessitated this study.

Contextualizing the Study

The African Indigenous Religion (AIR), culture and practices have been treated with utmost contempt as a religion that is backward and fetish by Christianity and other Western cultures (Gehman, 1989; p.1). As I have pointed out, the Agiriama community has been excluded by Semitic religions (Christianity and Islam) due to their cosmological worldview on cultural practices associated with life and death (Chidongo, 2010). Consequently, their culture, religious belief systems and practices continue to face incessant threat from foreign religions. In particular, *Nyere za mwezi* funeral rite has been widely viewed by Christian converts as heathen, archaic and ungodly (O.I. Karisa, 2015). Yet others are also skeptical of the practice of *Nyere za Mwezi* largely considered as ancestor-worship hence demonic (O.I Beja, 2015). However, by contrast, some Christians of Agiriama descent covertly practice '*Nyere za mwezi*' due to the fear of condemnation by the Church. In addition, their voluntary participation in the funeral ritual ceremonies is to avoid offending the ancestral spirits (*k'oma*) and most importantly for the sake of community health (*Uzima wa lalo*). African theologian, John S. Mbiti observed meticulous care of the deceased characterised by elaborate funeral rites is taken as a transition to the world of the spirits (Mbiti, 1969 & 1975). Yet despite repudiation and negative evangelization against such African funeral practices, the Agiriama view such rituals as obligatory and valued aspect of their religious life. Hypothetically, I argue that the dynamic view of the '*Nyere Za Mwezi*' is informed by a number of factors. Chief among them is (lack) of inculturation or assimilation of African-Christians to western Christians rather than adaptation. It appears there is a socio-theological gap in missiological approach towards proselytization of Africans into Christianity. Reflecting on the missiological challenges facing the Church in its relation with local cultures, I conceptually employed inculturation theology in [the] analysis of *Nyere Za Mwezi* funeral rite. What are the prospects and challenges of inculturating *Nyere Za Mwezi* funeral rite into Christianity? Will some consider it syncretism? If this is the case, is there room for Christ to meet the Agiriama community in their own socio-cultural context? And, what about members of the Agiriama community who are against the ritual? The issue in question(s) has cultural, theological, pastoral, sociological and missiological ramifications to the Church.

Theoretical Perspective: Inculturation and Contextualization Models

In this section, I analysed inculturation and contextualization models relevant to missiological praxis on traditions and culture in African Christianity. The process of inculturation and contextualization adopted in this article was based on H.

Richard Niebuhr's conceptual framework on *Christ and culture* (1951), which acted as a filter to distinguish those traditions, beliefs and practices associated with Agiriama mortuary rites which are in tandem with biblical witness and can be incorporated into Christianity. By the same breadth, I also examined those that seems incompatible with the Gospel and how they can be substituted with Christian rituals or abandoned altogether. Thus, Niebuhr's (1951) missiological paradigm found relevance in the context of African Inculturation Theology with regard to Agiriama funeral rituals including *Nyereza Mwezi*. Historically, the discourse on inculturation theology began in late the 1960s and gained momentum in 1980s as the Church sought to be relevant to African societies. However, the application of inculturation theology to the Church is facing numerous challenges especially with regard to globalization and secularization of African societies. Conceptually, inculturation is a "rereading, rethinking, reinterpretation and contextualization of the gospel" in light of the cultural values of the people at a given historical context. It is re-packaging of the gospel in local African cultures. As A. Roest Crolius affirmed:

The integration of Christian experience of a local church (community) into the culture of its people in such a way that this experience not only expresses itself in elements of the culture, but becomes a force that animates, orients and innovates this culture in question but also as an enrichment of the church universals (cited in Waliggo *et al*, 1986, p. 43).

For Crolius, inculturation works itself out on the level of local experience (*ibid*). Thus, human experiences is the locus of God's presence. This affirms South African missiologist, David Bosch claims that theology is a particular discourse on the local experiences of a universal message. In this article, I present *Nyereza Mwezi* as a local experience of Christianity among the Agiriama community. Essentially, every community should repackage the gospel of Jesus Christ within its own cultural milieu. Yet the Agiriama community have been impacted negatively with global cultures which has necessitated conflicts in families and community over burial rituals and practices. By and large, majority of the Agiriama (now) live in urban centres, where [they] have adopted western lifestyle as reflected in their dressing code, language and music among other things such as food. Indeed, the Agiriama like many other communities in Kenya are facing a dilemma between their pervasive traditional life and contemporary culture and belief system including Christianity. This raises critical questions. First, what would be the meaning and shape of inculturation of Christianity in contemporary Africa? Secondly, is the church ready to adopt inculturation as a concept of religious life in Africa? Thirdly, how does inculturation work in multicultural setting and in multi-ethnic societies? Considering these questions, I see a practical challenge to the Church with regard to authentic African Christianity.

Pope Paul VI, in his 1969 public address at Kampala, Uganda, observed that 'You may and you must have an African Christianity' (Africae, 1993). But how is this done? Is it relational and where is the starting point? If Christianity claims to be universal then it is not Africa that must be Christianized, but Christianity that must be Africanized. It is not a matter of African cultural values being imposed into Christianity or mediated through western culture and thought patterns. Rather, the starting point lies on the African socio-cultural context and how the gospel message can become a leaven to it. As Archbishop Anthony Mayala of Mwanza, Tanzania (1980-2002) put it, the church should be a mirror in which the believers see themselves and recognize the true face and feel completely at home in their Christian faith (Mayala, 1988, p.6). Considering Mayala's observation, the study views Niebuhr's (1951) missiological motif as a relevant epistemological approach to inculturation in Africa.

In his book, *Christ and culture*, Niebuhr proposed five models, that include i) Christ against culture; ii) Christ of culture; iii) Christ above culture; iv) Christ and culture in paradox; and v) Christ the transformer of culture (Niebuhr, 1951). According to Niebuhr, Christ is the starting point of any meaningful inculturation. In the first model which Niebuhr identifies as Christ against culture stresses the opposition between Christ and culture. This implied that Christ identified some Jewish cultural practices that were not compatible with his teachings about the Kingdom of God. This paradigm was negatively applied by the missionaries in Africa in their interaction with African culture hence preaching Jesus Christ as one who deprives one of the indigenous frameworks and adopts a Western worldview. Yet in this article, I employ the Christ against culture paradigm to eliminate without purification elements in the Agiriama mortuary practice which are incompatible with the gospel. The second typology of Christ and culture demonstrate that Jesus was not at variant with cultures but a purifier, the fulfiller of hopes and aspirations of the people (Niebuhr, 1951:41). According to Ukpong (1994), Christ of culture trajectory employs the *Logos spermatikos* approach, that is, the 'seed of the word', which has been present at all times, and in all cultures inspiring humanity to godly life (Ukpong, 1994). This paradigm was used to glean and tease out the Agiriama funeral practices that are in tandem to biblical teachings. The study observed that some of the Agiriama funeral rituals were very intrinsic to the community and which deserved inculturation.

The third model Christ above culture raises Jesus above every culture so that he is not monopolized or trapped by

the evangelizer's customs. Hypothetically, Jesus Christ is viewed as superior to all cultures and therefore HE enters from above with gifts that people aspire to acquire. According to Murage (2013) Christ above every culture means that Christ is not opposed to culture or absorbed into it; 'he is rather coming to perfect it' (Murage, 2013). By emphasizing on this model, I analysed how Jesus interacts with the Agiriama beliefs and practices related to death and burial. In Christ above culture motif, Murage observes that Jesus does not need to destroy the core values and beliefs of indigenous religion. Rather, Jesus purify and replace Agiriama cultural values with equally encompassing Christian rituals thereby creating a transformed worldview. Therefore, we draw the interface between this model of Christ above culture and Niebuhr's fourth model on Christ and culture in a paradox in understanding religious duality that the Agiriama community faces with regard to their indigenous faith and Christianity. The nature of the paradox is that Christ has embraced some cultures as good for societal wellbeing and other elements of human culture as sinful and corrupt. In this regard, the study observed that certain funeral rituals among the Agiriama, such as slaughtering on the grave of the deceased, lacked any theological basis, although they served the sociological needs of the community. The motif emphasizes the continuity and discontinuity between beliefs and practices in Agiriama funeral rites and Christianity.

I took more interest in Niebuhr's last model of Christ the transformer of culture. Broadly, this motif provides hope for the inculturation of *Nyere za Mwezi* due to its positive attitude towards culture, implying a need for conversion or transformation. Yet this paradigm also acknowledges the impact of sin on culture. According to Niebuhr, this fact is well articulated in 1 Corinthians 18:23, in which Paul describes the cross as a judgment of culture and resurrection as a resource to a new life. Transformation in this article considers the inadequacies and weaknesses of the fallen human nature. It argues that the resurrection of Christ is enough testimony of the hereafter life, and Agiriama Christians are assured that this life is devoid of some funeral rituals and practices. Yet, in this study, I acknowledge and demonstrate the continuity of *Nyere za Mwezi* as a cardinal post-burial ritual that reinforces the idea of an afterlife.

Methodological Approach

The study employed ethnographic and phenomenological approach to explore the Agiriama funeral rites such as *Nyere za Mwezi* and Christians understanding of the rituals. The Phenomenology as a qualitative research design was originally developed by Edmund Husserl (1970). Husserl was mainly concerned with the discovery of meaning and essences in knowledge by describing the structures and experiences as they present themselves into consciousness (Husserl, 1970, p. 21). Thus, Phenomenologists argue that all human beings are engaged in the process of making sense of their life worlds and experiences. The phenomenological approach was appropriate as it allows the participants to share their stories on how some of their deceased kins appeared to them in dreams demanding for 'proper burial rites', the persistence of such demanding spirits forced them to organise for a 'second burial' for purposes of observing the rituals. Empirically, it is nearly impossible to make sense of such experiences, however, according to Fischer making conscious experience accessible to investigation is the hallmark of the phenomenological method (Fischer, 2006, p.53). I was quite aware that the Phenomenological approach cannot be used in isolation but rather depends on other methods of data generation as well. Subsequently, I employed other methods to collect empirical data ranging from oral interviews, participant observation and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). I conducted face-to-face interviews including Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) with 30 purposefully sampled respondents including priests, and kaya elders in Kilifi County, Kenya. I was interested in understanding their views on the Agiriama funeral rituals and mortuary practice and the possibility of inculturation of some rituals such as *Nyere za Mwezi*. In the course of fieldwork, I interacted with locals and participated in over 12 funeral rituals across the expansive county. The respondents spontaneously described their experiences of different funeral rituals and their attitude toward various religious objects, symbols and practices that marked such ceremonies. The following section is a sociological and ethnographic description of death and the Agiriama mortuary rites.

Death and the Agiriama Mortuary Rites

Traditionally, the Agiriama people believed that death came as a consequence of disobedience to God (O.I, Charo, 2015). Poor relations with ancestors could also lead to misfortunes in the community due to spiritual disapproval of the ancestors or an avenging ancestral spirit eventually leading to death (*ibid*). Subsequently, the Agiriama strove to appease ancestral spirits (*k'oma*) to avoid misfortunes that may befall the relatives of the deceased and by extension the community (Champion, 1967, p. 54). Thus, they make memorial shrines of grave posts known as *k'oma* or *misala ya k'oma* for the deceased uninitiated members of the community and *vigango* (sing... *kigango*), decorated memorial posts for the initiated senior male ancestors (Tinga, 1998, pp 173-184). This was an honor bestowed on the departed ancestors for the sake of

community wellbeing. On the other hand, death could be caused by malicious spirits or *mapepo* (sig. *pepo*), in some quarters they are known as *majini* or *jinni*. These spirits are believed to be roaming in the world but at the same time, there were certain people who instrumentalized them for their own material and spiritual benefit (Tinga, 1998, p. 173-184). Instrumentalisation of *majini* or *jini* for material prosperity was common among the Midzi-chenda although a few traditional experts could maintain them due to their demanding nature (O.I, Charo, 2015). The spirits (*majini*) would demand human sacrifices including close relatives of the host. On the other hand, some community members were also possessed by these evil spirits, which called for propitiation and exorcism by specialists such as diviners, herbalists and witchdoctors. The Agiriama community believed that the existence of such malicious spirits did not only contribute to human suffering and misfortunes but also retarded community progress and human development as hardworking people died mysteriously (Chidongo, 2012, p. 147).

In the Agiriama context, death was not limited to malicious spirits alone but different diseases such as malaria, small pox, polio, tuberculosis, leprosy and measles also killed many people. For Kalume Tinga, the Agiriama considered such as natural problems (*makongo ga Mulungu mwenyewe*), illness from God Himself (Tinga, 1998, p. 176). Consequently, those affected by such diseases like leprosy might have invited the wrath of God (*mulungu*) and ancestors. It appears like a curse from deities and ancestors or the malicious work of witches or notorious wizards. More often, diviners could be consulted to ascertain the source of illness which sometime turned to be witchcraft (O.I, Mtangi, 2015). Upon proper investigation, the culprits were highly reprimanded including being forced to pay a fine as compensation (*k'ore*) and taking an oath of never to kill again. I established that *k'ore* was inclusive of all the costs incurred from divination stage to the burial and funeral expenses as well (O.I, Karisa, 2015). It was a common practice to use cattle and farm produce for such compensation. Generally, in African communities, witches [were] looked upon as dangerous and destructive and anyone convicted of witchcraft was punished by death or banished from the community (Kenyatta, 1938, 77). Broadly, this indicates that witchcraft was not only an Agiriama problem rather it was across many African societies. Today, the Agiriama die from other illnesses such as cancer, accidents, HIV and AIDs, pneumonia and hypertension among others such as diabetes e.t.c. However, claims of death over witchcraft still hold sway among the Agiriama, often leading to mob justice on elderly people as prime suspects.

In view of the foregoing, the study observed that the Agiriama believed that death is not the end of human life but rather a transition from one stage of existence to another (O.I, N. Karisa, 2016). In his observation, Joseph Karisa Mwarandu, one of the Kaya elders interviewed says, "there is no end to life and that when one dies he/she transcends to an eternal realm of life as a living spirit" (O.I, Mwarandu, 2016). The transitory nature of life, therefore, makes the Agiriama celebrate death as well as mourn through a series of rituals. The funeral customs and rituals symbolically demonstrate the significance of life and the inherent consequences of death to the community. At this juncture, we turn to explore the rituals to understand their symbolic meaning to the Agiriama community. By and large, rituals are representations of cultural performances and rites of passage that mark a people's life experience. Properly construed, rituals express people's thoughts, emotions, social organization and cultural identities. Broadly, rituals are viable scientific methods of connections and dialogue. As African theologian, Oliver Onwubiko observes that rituals are effective instruments of education within a culture and thus, of transmission of culture (Onwubiko, 1991, 41). For Baloyi, rituals are forms of expressions and connections performed by individuals, groups of people or communities in communication with the living-dead and the Supreme Being (Baloyi, 2008). The Agiriama developed elaborate rituals to ease the pain of physical separation and to guide the dead into the spiritual world of the ancestors. To this end, it would be appropriate to give a phenomenological account of the Agiriama mortuary rites. Based on my observation, the Agiriama performed a total of about ten rituals for a deceased member of the community. Some of the rituals are subsidiary, hence being performed within cardinal rituals such as *Nyere za mwezi*. The rituals can generally be analyzed into two broad categories; i) Pre-Burial, and ii) Post-Burial rites. Obviously, this is a generic categorization for purposes of understanding specific rituals and [their] significance. The performance of the rituals was invariably dictated by age, sex, marital status and the cause of death. Inversely, these variables determined the nature and site of burial (G.I with Mwanyule, Charo & Karisa, 2016). During my field study, I came across six cases of death and participated in 12 funeral rituals that involved both pre-burial and post-burial rites.

Pre-Burial Rites

In the Agiriama mortuary context, pre-burial rites include cardinal rituals such as death announcement, shaving the deceased, vigil, and grave digging followed by burial. However, within these cardinal rites, subsidiary rituals may be undertaken although not compulsory.

Death Announcement

In African death announcement is so essential that due care and timing had to be put into consideration. The study observed that the announcement of death was dictated by age, marital and social status. The death of an individual was announced by wailing in the deceased compound. However, there are some cardinal rules to be strictly adhered to when a polygamous man died or a community elder (G.I with Mwanyule, Charo & Karisa, 2016). For instance, when a polygamous person died in the house of a second or third wife, the body was immediately transferred to the elder wife's house to take its rightful position. As pointed out by Nathaniel Karisa that 'no one was allowed to wail/mourn until the eldest wife breaks the death announcement by a quivering wail-*kuramuka kifo* (O.I, N. Karisa, 2016). Other community members would join by chanting words in mockery of death. Immediately, an informal meeting was arranged, where elders would provide direction on the burial date and time as dictated by age, status and gender (*ibid*). However, there are no rules prescribing the time of announcement or order of the gathering following death announcement. When a baby dies no elaborate rituals were performed in mourning, its death is announced immediately, and the body is interred as soon as possible.

Shaving the Deceased

After death announcement, the deceased/corpse was shaved by one of the clan members or friends. The body was ritually cleaned in cold water, by the corresponding gender of the deceased. For instance, a male would be cleaned by his brothers, cousins and/or uncles, on the other hand, deceased female by their mothers, sisters or grandmother. Upon cleaning, the body was wrapped in a new white garment (or cattle skin) while the eyes were closed, legs and hands straightened and placed in the right posture for burial. However, Harrison Yaa claimed that when one dies of leprosy there was no need for shaving or a new garment as the body was hurriedly buried (O.I, Yaa, 2016). The contagious nature of the disease made many people to fear and therefore no one could take a foreseen danger (*ibid*). Apparently, the ritual bath was symbolically important as the deceased expected visitors to attend his/her final send off and would not be happy to be found in a pathetic state. On the other hand, the ancestors would not want to receive the deceased to their spiritual dominion in a dirty state henceforth the shaving ritual also marked a transition to the otherworld. The washing of the corpse according to Nathaniel Karisa, a Catholic priest, was one way of 'leaving the sinful world' for a better afterlife in spiritual union with ancestors (O.I, N. Karisa, 2016). Hence, death was a transition from one stage of being to another. Those who died of leprosy were outcast and therefore were rejected by the ancestors hence they were not accorded the elaborate death rituals including shaving and bathing.

Vigil

Among the Agiriama, death was a corporate affair and as Mbiti opined that 'I am because we are since we are therefore I am' was evident when 'pangs of death' strike the community (Mbiti, 1972, p. 26). Close relatives of the deceased gathered within the compound of the deceased to give their condolence messages as well as assist in burial preparation (O.I, Ngala, 2015). In most cases, two to three nights pass before the burial and a bonfire would be lit throughout the vigil. The period was characterised by dramatic episodes of wailing and lamenting over the cruelty of death. Chanting praises over the deceased was also one way of celebrating the deceased life through funeral songs. In recent times, Karisa observes that, Christian songs locally known as *usinireche* are played [if] the deceased is a Christian (O.I, N. Karisa, 2016). Sometime the Christian songs are played concurrently with traditional Agiriama funeral songs.

Most of the vigil visitors congregate in a shade constructed within the compound on a *mikeka/kitseka* (a traditional mat) and will wait to participate in group mourning either in the evening or wee hours of the morning. Based on personalities, those who claimed to be Christians don't wail too much; neither do they lament about death as they view it as a transition to heavenly life. Nevertheless, the vigil is observed until the burial day. It is a common practice among the Agiriama for one not to leave the bereaved family for his/her homestead during the mourning period (O.I., Tsofa, 2015). Clan members and relatives were expected to forego their busy work schedule and condone with the bereaved family but most significantly to show respect and bid farewell to the deceased to the spirit world (*ibid*). Failure to turn up for a funeral without sound reason cannot be tolerated and such persons could be accused of having a hand in the deceased demise. Accusation that no one was willing to bare; and this explained why some could sneak from the compound of the bereaved just for a few hours and come back immediately. In the course of the day, men passed time playing *mbao* while others engaged in economic activities such as weaving of *mikeka/kitseka* (O.I., Tsofa, 2015). Traditionally, mourners were expected to bring meals towards feeding the bereaved family since they were not allowed to engage in cooking activities until after burial.

To summarize on the vigil period, close relatives and clan members were expected to contribute towards funeral expenses in form of food, firewood and money towards buying coffin or burial cloth. On this regard, mourners gather in groups of two to three discussing the funeral programme and the budget of the day, this has changed substantially with technology as contributions are channelled through *WhatsApp* groups and other digital platforms. Contributions towards funeral expenses is/was a voluntary exercise but implicitly obligatory as those who fail to participate were identified and cautioned by the clan elders. The ethics of *udugu/ubuntu* (siblinghood) was highly valued and practiced (G.I with Mwanyule, Charo & Karisa, 2016). Chidongo (2012) argues that the *ubuntu* philosophy allows the Agiriama to address life issues in unity henceforth 'ordering the well-being of the society in a divine way' (Chidongo, 2012, 149). The corporate approach to life ensures that the Agiriama engage in vigil activities until after burial.

Grave digging

Grave digging was determined by a number of variables including age, sex, and cause of death (O.I., Gunga, 2015). Traditionally, grave digging was done during daytime but most people preferred digging in the morning hours. The actual digging begins around 9 A.M. in the morning under strict guidance of one of the relatives assisted by other clan members and friends of the deceased. Approximately, it takes four hours; however, it may take longer depending with the structure of the soil in the area (*ibid*). The grave was dug approximately six inches deep in a rectangle shape. Beverages, food and alcohol would be served to the workers at the grave site. Women don't take part in grave digging, however, they are engaged in ushering of guest to the homestead (O.I., Gunga, 2015). The grave can be dug anywhere in the compound of the deceased through the guidance of the deceased's male kin such as brothers or uncles unless if the deceased left some wishes which had to be implemented to the latter. Yet the nature of death could determine the location of grave site. For instance; a witch, unmarried woman, a thief or one who committed suicide could be buried outside the homestead. This was done in order to chase the evil spirit away from home and to protect the living from being harmed by such malicious spirits. In most cases, the grave was covered with some leaves or a mat (*mkeka*) before the burial, this was important because the relatives had to protect the grave from malicious people who may drop charms to continue harming the family or to cover up for their wickedness.

Burial

This is an essential intermediary rite between pre and post burial rituals. The burial day is a solemn occasion and that burial attendance (*kulaa mazikoni*) was obligatory to the Agiriama as part of their communitarian life, *udugu na umwenga* (Chidongo, 2012, p. 149). In an interview with Karisa Kaingu with the authors, he argues that "when one fails to turn up for other people's funerals within the locality, he/she was isolated by the community when he/she faces a similar predicament (O.I., Kaingu, 2015). He succinctly observes:

In our village there used to be a polygamous man who was always busy with his own businesses and would not attend any funeral. In some situations, he will send the wives to represent him with generous donations as part of his contributions. However, one day he lost one of his wives and the community decided to desert him; he was told to use his money to bury the wife. Therefore, he had to carry out all the activities personally; from grave digging to burial (*ibid*).

In lieu of this experience, African theologian, Mbiti's avers that 'to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community' (Mbiti, 1969, p. 2). This cannot be substituted with money or any other object of economic value. By and large, the ethics of *Ubuntu/udugu* is put into practice on the burial day as the homestead is expected to be full of humanity. Through death one's relations with neighbours and the community could be revealed. In Africa context, the saying, '*mtu ni watu*' (can be literary translated as a person finds his/her sense of being/personhood in others) finds much resonance during calamities such as death (Mugambi, 1989). To the Agiriama, an individual life finds more meaning in the corporate sphere. As the Agiriama would attend the burial no matter the distance as it provided an opportunity to pay their last homage to the deceased and also hold dialogue on the cause of death, *kutsakula kifo* (Chidongo, 2012, p. 152).

The burial was characterised with speeches/eulogies presided over by a senior member of the clan (O.I., Kaingu, 2015). As a practice, Samuel Kazungu argues that such persons selected to preside over the proceedings were good orators and also had better knowledge and relations with the deceased (O.I., Kazungu, 2015). Based on the patriarchal nature of the Agiriama community, the master of ceremony is/was a male adult who is well versed with issues of the clan. For deceased adults, the burial rite was conducted in the afternoon past 2 p.m., although clan elders or senior members of the community were buried past 3 o'clock (O.I., Kaingu, 2015). The burial ceremony included elaborate speeches in memory of the deceased

delivered by close relatives and friends. The clan elders were also expected to eulogize the deceased if he/she was one of them or have contributed significantly in the community (*ibid*). Primarily, the eulogy was to honour the dead, but it was also used to evoke sorrow. Negative talks about the deceased was not tolerated. In the contemporary context, politicians are also given opportunity to address the mourners, however, political discourse is discouraged because the community is mourning (O.I., Kaingu, 2015). Those enlisted for eulogies are explicitly monitored as they are expected to speak with decorum and avoid drama or use of demeaning words to the deceased. The body is laid to rest after the speeches.

Customarily, the corpse was wrapped by an animal skin, mat and later the Agiriama adopted the use of white sheet/garment perhaps from Islamic religion at the Coast (Kazungu, O.I, 2015). However, with modernity coffins have become popular in the disposal of the corpse (*ibid*). The funeral procession had men on the front carrying the corpse, with women following at a distance while wailing. Children were not part of the funeral procession nor were they allowed to view the corpse. Apparently, children were being protected from having nightmares from dead bodies. During burial, the body was laid sideways while facing Shungwaya, the mythical homeland of the Agiriama (Kazungu, O.I, 2015). Bodies could not face upwards, however, gender variability also dictated how the body was laid in the grave, and for instance, male corpse lay on the right side while female on the left. Close relatives throw a handful of soil into the grave as a way of casting away evil and misfortune as well as to say, 'I have buried you, good-bye' (*ibid*). Then, able-bodied men help with the filling of the grave with soil and when that is over a tree could be planted on the grave as a mark or stones arranged on the site.

Another significant feature was the raising of a monument called *kigango* (singular) or *Vigango* (plural) in honour of the deceased especially on the grave site of elderly people. Naturally, *Vigango* or *kigango* was a carved wooden figure ranging from 3-5ft tall and 9 inches in breadth and was placed uprightly at the head of the grave and a coconut bowl was put in front for purposes of sacrifices (O.I., Munyaya, 2016). Anthropologically, these religious symbols animate the power once possessed by the ancestors and it was rare for people to interfere with the objects even [if they] migrate to new sites, as 'the posts must be left undisturbed' (Parkin, 1991, 207-208). Finally, it is important to mention that during the burial, the surviving family members ate normal food and would only slaughter animals after burial. Other normal issues such as bathing or washing hands was forbidden since the entire clan was in a mourning mood. After the burial, women slept inside the house of the deceased while men spend outside. In case of a woman's death, the widower was avoided by all women generally. Even if he was polygamous, he could not go into the houses of any of his surviving wives. He had to live in the house of the deceased wife to mourn and complete all the funeral rituals. In the course of mourning, Agiriama people abstained from sexual intercourse. This could continue until after *Nyere za mwezi* (ritual marking the end of mourning period).

Post-Burial Rites

There are a chain of post-burial rites, however, I have only presented a sequence of a few rituals and left some such as *Nyere za mwezi* and the raising of *Vigango*. The Table 1 provides a sequence of post-burial rites common among the Agiriama.

Table 1 Typology of Ritual-Events After burial

	Days	Event(s)
1	<i>Madzi Mosi</i>	Wailing in the morning Appeasing the spirits of the ancestors by slaughtering a goat/ <i>kulaza koma</i>
2	<i>Madzi hiri</i>	Wailing in the morning No slaughtering of animals/people are eating normal food.
3	<i>Madzi hahu</i>	Wailing in the morning Slaughtering of several animals i.e goats, cattle e.t.c
4	<i>Madzi nne</i>	Wailing very early in the morning/ <i>kuria tswa</i>
5	<i>Madzi tsano</i>	Wailing in the morning
6	<i>Kitseka mosi</i>	The funeral is declared officially closed and mourners' departure for their houses and respective homes Elders and close relatives set the date for <i>Nyere zamwezi/kulaga mbatha</i>

From Table 1, there are two important days that after burial; firstly, the moist soil (*mchangambichi*), it is/was believed

that the grave [was] still wet following the burial and therefore no ritualistic activity took place as people waited patiently for the grave to symbolically dry, and secondly, the day for resting the hoes that had been used in grave digging (*kusindira jembe*). Apparently, the post-burial mourning period began on the third day which is regarded as the first day of the funeral (*matanga*) commonly known as *Madzi Mosi*. On this day, men wake up at the wee hours of the night and goes to the river or any other water point to bath and would announce their return through wailing. The women will follow by wailing loudly in the homestead. Then, a goat would be slaughtered to appease the spirits of the ancestors and implore them to welcome the deceased in their spiritual abode (O.I., Munyaya, 2016). On the second day of mourning (*Madzi hiri*), men would wake up early in the morning and march to the river and would announce their return by wailing and chanting. In a dramatic fashion, women would follow the same procedure by going to the river, taking shower and return while wailing (*ibid*). Slaughtering was not obligatory on this day, although a few wealthy people would slaughter a goat. Majority would continue to feed on normal diet mainly vegetables, milk and beans.

The third day (*Madzi hahu*) was the most important mourning day. As usual people would wake up and wail while chanting in the compound. Customarily, [they] would slaughter all kinds of animals except a sheep on the grave site. The Agiriama avoided slaughtering a sheep since it was associated with divination and witchcraft. As a norm a sheep was not recommended for any ceremony among the Agiriama unless the deceased was a witchdoctor then there would be no harm. The animals for the ceremony were donated by the family members, relatives and friends in honor of the deceased kin. The slaughtering on grave site was quite symbolic as the blood of the animals signified life that the deceased shared with community members (O.I., Yaa, 2016). Equally, blood was a symbol of unity. On this day, the children of the deceased including wives/husbands were shaved at the grave site, however, [they] were expected not to shave again until '*Nyere za Mwezi* (*ibid*). Nowadays, the Agiriama don't prefer shaving, however, a slight mark can be put on the head to signify the actual ritual of shaving.

The fourth day (*Madzi nne*) was marked by wailing in the morning (*kuria tswa*) as usual. There were no elaborate rituals or activities, however in the case of the death of a woman this was probably the last day of mourning (G.I with Chengo & Ngumbao, 2015). The neighbors and relatives from distant places could depart after getting information on the actual date of *Nyere za Mwezi*, which in most cases was two moons away from this day. On the other hand, when a man dies, this day was marked as usual. The elders will gather and partake a special meal mainly boiled meat from heads and other joints of the animals (literally known as *siku ya vitswa*) and mixed with bitter herbs. In the course of waiting for this special delicacy, the clan elders would engage in other socio-economic activities such as weaving of baskets and mats (*mikeka/kitseka*). For a funeral of a male person, *Madzi tsano* was the last day of mourning. As a routine, both men and women will wail early in the morning. Subsequently, they will spend the day discussing family issues and by 3.00 pm, some of the relatives could depart, however, it is not official for one to leave (*ibid*). The next day is known as *kitseka* (ending of the mourning period). In interviews with Samuel Kazungu and Penina Ngumbao, they observed that *Nyere za mwezi* was planned on the sixth day (O.I., Kazungu & Ngumbao, 2015). Contrary to the views of Sidi Mwambire who maintained that setting time for the ritual (*kulaga mbatha*) was done on the fourth day (O.I., Mwambire, 2015). Yet for majority of the respondents, they acknowledged that *kulaga mbatha* was done on the sixth day for deceased men while for women it was largely planned on the fourth day. For deceased men the planning was done by the brothers while for a woman, the husband was entrusted with setting the date with the help of close relatives. Another ritual that was performed on this day was burning of the reeds/rafts of *kitseka*. This was done by clan elders since it was believed that the smokes of death will diminish in the thin air giving the family a break from the brutality of death (O.I., Yaa, 2016). Afterwards, a person from a distant place was contracted to sweep the homestead and burn all the rubbish (*kuocha ng'ongo*). Such a person was given a *kadzama* for the job well done. It was an abomination for a family or clan member to participate in such ritualistic cleaning exercise as it was believed that death would soon strike the family/clan again. Katana Gona in an interview with the authors remarked:

The sweeping of the deceased homestead or house was done by specific people because most of community members feared engaging in such activities. In most cases, elderly women or men were engaged but they must come from far places. After performing the work, I understand that there was a ritual that was done on them before they reunite with their families or clan members (O.I., Gona, 2015).

From the foregoing discussion, the study observed that during the mourning period close family members were not allowed to sleep in their houses neither with their wives nor their mistresses. Apparently, sex was central in the ritualistic life of the Agiriama almost in equal terms to the Luo of Western Kenya. Sex was not limited to biological reproduction but extended to cleansing purposes within the community. Therefore, during the mourning period, the Agiriama avoided sex until after the burial and official departure from the bereaved homestead.

Mourners' Departure

After *kitsekamosi* and *kulaga mbatha* mourners were expected to depart to their respective homes. Thus, mourning was a transition as well as a process. It was a transitional period for the living kinsmen and women as they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into the society (O.I., N.K, 2016). There was no order of departure as mourners left randomly as others continue bereaving the affected family (*ibid*). The whole process of departing may take place for a few days or even one week depending on the urgency to leave. The period between the death announcement day and the *kitseka mosi* called *kuondoa matanga*, which actually refers to the mourning period, and literally means 'sitting without doing anything,' was obligatory. Therefore, *Nyere za Mwezi* which is one of the cardinal funeral rite could not take place without having observed these series of rituals. Unfortunately, the absence of these rituals relegates one to a lower cadre of the community henceforth losing the meaning of life.

The 'Nyere Za Mwezi' Funeral Rite

The term *Nyere za Mwezi* is a construct of two words *nyere* and *mwezi*; the word *nyere* can be loosely transliterated to a Swahili word *nywele* which means hair (O.I., Nyevu, 2015). On the other hand, *mwezi* is a Swahili word for the moon. In strict phonetic terms '*Nyere za Mwezi*' refer to the shaving of the hair (*nywele*) upon sighting of the moon (*mwezi*). Among the Agiriama this was one of the last funeral rite that marks the end of the mourning period (*ibid*). The ritual was conducted according to the lunar calendar. In conversations with Juliana Nyevu, I established that *Nyere za mwezi* was conducted to specific departed people based on marital status and age (O.I., Nyevu, 2015). The rituals would be conducted in honor of mature married adults above 25 years of age to celebrate their life in the community.

Customarily, the ritual was held after sighting the moon, following the month of death or within a range of one to five years after death. Apparently, the date of *Nyere za Mwezi* can be hastened by the surviving members of the deceased (i.e. widow or widower or other clan members) if s/he is tired of *jimbiri*, special cloth worn by widows/widower upon the death of a spouse (O.I., Chengo, 2015). The *Nyere za Mwezi* ritual was quite elaborate. Prior the ritual, the widow or widower was not allowed to comb, trim or shave his/her hair. S/he keeps the long hair to be shaved during the ceremony. Family members waited patiently for the sighting of the moon and would wail dramatically in the compound before laying their traditional mats (*kitseka*). This day is usually known as *kulalia Nyere za mwezi*. The ritualistic performance is of grand significance in maintaining balance and harmony between the living and the living dead. This is the basis on which the connection between the physical and spiritual ontologies is maintained and enhanced among the Agiriama community. The ritual is also intended to purify the participants from the defilement caused by the deceased's corpse, thus preserving the participants' well-being. In Agiriama cosmology, the deceased would transit into the after-world where he or she could transform into a post-mortem *jural* authority over the living lineage members.

Arguably, *Nyere za Mwezi* marked a renewal of life after death. The ritualistic shaving act of the family members 'old hair' (*Nyere mbii*) signify a new dawn as fresh hair grows devoid of the past (O.I., Yaa, 2016). This should not be viewed as a detachment from the dead but rather a transformation and departure from the cruelty of death. Not forgetting that the ritual paved the way for widow/s to be inherited and hence integrate with other members of the community without any further restrictions. It was also license for them to engage in sexual intercourse without breaking any law. The widow had to make a choice of who to inherit her from the husband's lineage through the guidance of other surviving family members. The night prior *Nyere za Mwezi*, community members gather together in the spirit of *udungu* (siblinghood) in the homestead. Musicians are invited to entertain guests through funeral songs such as *kifudu* and *kihoma*. The song below is an example of *kifudu* punctuated with hilarious lyrics to console people in the wake of adversity.

Kifudu Song

Topola ni topo	[[Let's]] screw [penetrate]! It is soft.
Atopolwaye ni mche msichana	An unmarried non-virgin will be screwed [penetrated]
Mkaza mtu ni wari na nyama	A man's wife is maize meal and meat
Ndafa ni ole niriche kutopola	I will die and stop screwing and penetrating (McIntosh, 2005)

Kifudu song: There were a variety of funeral songs among the Agiriama however the common ones included *kifudu* and *kihoma*. The difference in these songs were clearly seen in response and dances. For a detailed analysis on these songs see McIntosh (2001) and Beja Karisa (2000).

Among the Agiriama, funeral songs such as *kifudu* were powerful and influential medium of expression of grief. As a

social norm, Nketia argues that singing a dirge signalled the commencement of the funeral ceremony, although this practice is gradually being overshadowed by contemporary music and dance (Nketia, 1975, p.17). For the Agiriama, singing of a dirge and music in general was essential aspect of mourning and include other rituals such as *Nyere za mwezi* (O.I., Yaa, 2016). However, Harrison Yaa observes that funeral songs such as *kifudu* were punctuated with abusive and sexually charged language but very informative to the community (*ibid*). Janet McIntosh had similar observation in her anthropological study of the Agiriama mortuary rites. She observes:

Women shuffle around the body in a great circle, grinding their hips and clapping their hands while giving free reign to [the] song lyrics so sexually explicit and irreverent that many of them refused to recite them to me outside the ritual context. While a few songs at the beginning of their performance remark upon death ('fly away, housefly. You can't land on this body; it's covered with rashes'), their content becomes increasingly bawdy as the hours pass (McIntosh, 2005).

Despite the ambiguity in most Agiriama funeral songs, they still serve their purpose as they act as 'playful means of distracting the bereaved from their grief. In his anthropolinguistic study of the Agiriama funeral songs, Beja Karisa concludes that [they] function to "appease the dead, voice personal grief over death of a loved one, relative or friend and console the bereaved" members of the community (Karisa, 2000). The ultimate goal of the performance is always borne in mind: to allow people pay tribute to the dead. In this article, I established that the songs such as *kifudu* have some aesthetic impact that includes inducement of sorrowful feelings and sympathy on the audience. The songs make the audience join the bereaved in mourning the dead as a communal religious duty. Moreover, the artistic nature of the songs and their mode of performance to a certain degree weaken the sorrowful feelings thus giving the audience a strain of pleasure and entertainment (Karisa, 2000). In this regard, entertaining moment comes alive in the realm of dance movements expressed in rhythmic fashion by both men and women moving back and forth towards each other. The dancing crew makes a procession to the grave site where they vigorously shake their bodies to the traditional music, often involving rapid movements and leaping to the furious rhythm of the African drum and shaking winnowing trays (*uteo*) filled with glass to produce a nice melody. An exquisite execution draws approval from those in attendance.

In summation, the *Nyere za mwezi* ritual is also marked by slaughtering of animals including goats and cattle. The slaughtering is done at the grave site and blood is poured down on the grave to signify the union between the living and the living dead. After *Nyere za mwezi* celebration, a medicine person is called to cleanse the homestead and family members who might have broken the abstinence rule. The medicine person would kill a sheep where the abdomen slit and the intestines are mixed with a concoction of herbs and sprinkled on the family members. The elaborate funeral rituals among the Agiriama community as witnessed in death annunciation, washing of the corpse, grave digging, night vigil, burial, mourning period and others such as *Nyere za mwezi* corroborates the findings of John Mbiti on the meaning and impact of death among African communities (Mbiti, 1969). Mbiti avers:

It is clear that people view death paradoxically: It is a separation but not annihilation, the dead person is cut off from the human society and yet the corporate group clings to him. This is shown through the elaborate funeral rites, as well as other methods of keeping in contact with the departed (*ibid*, 159).

Mbiti's assertion on African view of death demonstrate the significance of funeral rituals among the Agiriama community. On the other hand, the rituals as T. A. Rando's observes are beneficial to the community in many ways. The series of rituals 'confirm the reality of death, assist in the expression of grief, stimulate recollections of the deceased both corporately and individually, offer a structure that contains grief, and serve as bridge and rite of passage thus providing for the final disposition of the remains' (Rando, 1985). Considering discourses on death and rituals among the Agiriama, humankind is a psychomatic being composed of both material (body) and immaterial (spirit). For the Agiriama, *Mulungu* (God) created both body and soul hence a corpse is treated with great respect and accorded proper rites in preparation for the burial and this continues even after burial as explored in this article. Thus, the funeral rituals among the Agiriama confirmed C. Majawa testimony that, "the rigid dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the secular and the religious, the material and the immaterial, is artificial" (Majawa, 2005, p. 96)." Consequently, for the Agiriama death does not divorce one from the living as they continue to live and work together in the spiritual realm. Yet this understanding is relevant especially to the Church, where majority of the Agiriama fellowship.

The Church Interpretation of *Nyere za Mwezi* Ritual

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in Kilifi County has done little towards inculturation of African cultural practices into Christianity. By and large, the study noted that this was the first empirical study on the interface between the Church and the Agiriama cultural practices and values in Kilifi. This is against the background of decades of evangelization work by the Church in the region. Apparently, this demonstrate inadequate contextualization approach in engaging with the indigenous

cultures and values. I established that many of the respondents had less knowledge and understanding of the concept of "inculturation" with an exception of the local Catholic priests interviewed. This lack of understanding reveal two significant points. First, it demonstrate that the church has practically done little with regard to inculturation; and secondly, it could be a linguistic challenge with many lacking a local version of the term, inculturation. The closest local translation and interpretation of the word inculturation (*kuriya tsoga*), was still not understood especially what it meant and implied in the life of the church and the Agiriama community.

Evidently, the study established that cardinal funeral rites *vis a` vis Nyere za mwezi* has not been widely accepted by the Church despite their expository and explanatory value for the community. The attitude of the Church and Agiriama Christians towards the ritual remained ambivalent to say the least. Contrary to the Church official teaching on inculturation that calls of contextual dialogue with all indigenous cultures, there evident practical and hermeneutical gaps that entrenched discontinuity with Agiriama funeral values and practices. Although, the Church hold that Christian teachings in a new culture must involve an 'adoption' that preserves the essential integrity of culture, its values, institutions, and customs (Kurgat, 2009; 90-98). Yet, I observed that majority of Catholic Christians were against inculturation of *Nyere za Mwezi* citing different reasons. Some opposed *Nyere za Mwezi* on economic terms arguing that it was too expensive to observe. In particular, the slaughtering of different animals is a big burden for the family of the deceased (O.I., Yaa & N. Karisa, 2016). For instance, Joseph Kenga remarked:

When my father died, I refused to observe the funeral rites including *Nyere za mwezi* because as a family we felt it was not a priority compared to other immediate needs by the education. So, instead of giving money for the ceremony, I paid school fees for my two cousins (O.I., J. Kenga, 2016).

Fr. Kenga's case is of primary interest considering his inter-faith background, his family include Christians, Muslims and Africanists (those practicing indigenous faith of the Agiriama community). In addition, Kenga studied and lived in Europe for over two decades. His transcultural perspective of life and death perhaps shaped his views on the Agiriama funeral rites. During [our] conversation, I noted his critique on Agiriama mortuary rites. He claimed the rituals are 'unchristian and retrogressive to community development' (*ibid*). By contrast, his fellow Catholic priest, Henry Katana supported the inculturation of the Agiriama rituals including *Nyereza Mwezi* maintain that they are salvific to the community against malevolent spirits (O.I., H. Katana, 2016). Katana argues that his faith in Christianity has been strengthened over the years by his Agiriama cultural values and heritage. He says:

My father was a great musician who played several funeral songs and entertained the community for years earning him the name- Bishop. In 1970, he was Baptist as Henry hence becoming a Roman Catholic Christian (RCC), but he continued playing his traditional songs. When I joined St. Thomas of Aquinas Seminary, I took one of my father's *skayamba* to the seminary and for the first time, African instrument of worship was accepted. I have played it for the last forty years in my mission of evangelization. During 1985, 1995 and 2015 Papal visit, I played it to the congregations of over 1 million. Therefore, I believe that my culture played a significant role in understanding Christianity (O.I., H. Katana, 2016).

Katana's exhortation demonstrate the interface between culture and religion. It roots for continuity of African cultural values, practices and traditions. Collaborating this was Mohammed Bakari, who used the Swahili saying that '*Dini bila mila siyo dini*' which can be transliterated as 'religion devoid of culture is not a religion' (O.I., Bakari, 2015). The philosophical posture adopted by Bakari reflects African religious and cultural worldview that permeates all spheres of life. Yet the opposition to '*Nyere za Mwezi*' was not limited to economic variables, others claimed that the rituals were mentally and time consuming. It is from this basis that Yaa suggested that the mourning period should be shortened (O.I., Yaa, 2016). On the contrary, Katana and Karisa were against the shortening of the mourning period since it would make the ritual to lose its symbolic meaning in the community (O.I., H. Katana & Karisa, 2016). They proposed that the period should incorporate some Christian practices such as celebration of mass to the deceased family. This is important considering that some people oppose '*Nyere za mwezi*' on theological grounds. In particular, Kazosi Bithuva and Jonathan Charo were against the symbolic shaving on the grave siteterming it satanic and against Christian burial doctrines (O.I., Bithuva & Charo, 2016). Moreover, Bithuva argues that the mourning ritual and grave shaving that characterize '*Nyere za mwezi*' invokes bad memories of death in the community (O.I., Bithuva, 2016). The dancing on the grave was also interpreted as an outdated ritual that has no meaning to the Christians (G.I with Maitha, Ngumbao & Jefwa, 2016).

Ambivalence to Agiriama funeral rites such as *Nyere za mwezi* calls for thorough anthropological and theological debate on how Christianity interacts with local cultures. The theological meaning of the inculturation process extends to the life of a Christian holistically (Adhunga, 2014, p. 420). According to Waliggo, the missiological model of Niebuhr on Christ and culture reminds us how Christian life is drawn by Christ himself and by the very nature, the Church in sending people out to preach the Gospel message to different cultures (Waliggo, 1986, p.19). The Catholic Church has been drawn into this

dilemma of presenting the Gospel to the Agiriama community in their own 'cultural plate.' Yet in their attempt to do so, they face liturgical impediments to inculturation of *Nyere za Mwezi*. The liturgical challenges are due to four major factors. First, the Church is evangelizing in a *multi-cultural context*, a reflection of over forty two ethnic groups each with its social, religious and cultural uniqueness. For Christianity to be accepted in these diversified cultural populations, the Christian message needs to be communicated through specific thought forms, syntax, and symbols familiar to the Agiriama community. Thus making the community to feel as if Christ is ministering to them in their own language and cultural background (Adhunga, 2014, p.420). Yet the cultural pluralism; misunderstanding and conflict often arise due to the different conceptions of African experiences of death and Christian doctrines on the same. This is compounded by inadequate dialogical engagement and conversation between the different worldviews and realities between the Church and the Agiriama Community. As Harrison Yaa observed that by inculturating Agiriama funeral rituals such as *Nyere za mwezi*, the Catholic Church risk propagating ethno-theology and adopting an exclusive approach to evangelization (O.I., Yaa, 2016).

Secondly, the controversial discourse between inter-religious dialogues *versus* cultural blending. During the analysis, I observed that proponents of *Nyere Za Mwezi* are inviting the Church to engage in a dialogue with other cultures and religions (O.I., Mwanyule, 2016). As Mwanyule observes that for last 200 years that Christianity has been among the Agiriama, there is no substantial practical evidence of any attempt to Africanize the Church (*ibid*). This is because the church has failed to enter into a dialogue with the indigenous community. In support of Baya, Mwarandu Karisa argues that African instruments have been incorporated into Christian worship, however, they are overshadowed by western melody (O.I., Mwarandu, 2016). He quickly points out that the acceptance of African instruments in Christianity was brought without properly community engagement, a kind of appeasement policy adopted by the Catholic Church (*ibid*). Arguably, for authentic inculturation to take place, no part should claim authority over the other. The church should not give much primacy to the Gospel as the starting point rather than the people being evangelized.

The third challenge is on *methodology* to be adopted in the process of liturgical inculturation. There are two main approaches, the first placing emphasis on the Gospel as the starting point and the second insisting on culture as the point of references. The first approach is biased as the Agiriama Indigenous Religion (AIR) has no any written text that can primarily be used as a reference point and therefore Christianity takes precedent over African culture (O.I., Mwarandu, 2016). Given the case, therefore, African metaphors, legends, myths, rituals, values and practices associated with life and death should be the comparative basis of argument. The fourth and last challenge is associated with *globalization, secularization and urbanization*, which has significantly influenced African cultural practices as well as Christianity. The Agiriama cultural practices and belief systems associated with death and funeral rituals have not escape from the threat of globalization and the increasing urbanization that have emerged with devolution of resources in Kenya.

In lieu of conclusion: Towards the Inculturation of 'Nyere za Mwezi' funeral Rite

To the Agiriama community, all human actions, thoughts and even natural cosmological events were considered worth if they promoted human life. The study established that such references were made because human life was considered to be sacred and God ordained. Consequently, it was a common practice for the community members to view sick people who have been inflicted by illness from a corporate lens rather than from individual perspective. The patients were considered as community patients. This communitarian approach exhibited by the Agiriama was not limited to the living but also to the living dead. Thus, the elaborate mortuary rituals and the funeral celebrations, in effect, constitute a balancing act between the living and living dead. Respect for the deceased was complemented in the display of popular culture with an understanding that the customary care given to the body and the public commemoration *somehow* safeguarded both the dead and the living.

The Agiriama continued with their religious beliefs and cultural practices associated with death despite condemnation and stigmatization as ancestor worship by Christian denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church. The accusation of Agiriama as practicing syncretism demonstrates the fear that they are superficially attached to the Christian faith and more rooted in their indigenous religion. For the Agiriama, the problem is due to inadequate inculturation of their African values, religious beliefs and practices into Christianity. Indeed, the study established that the Agiriama funeral rites, such as *Nyere za Mwezi*, could potentially be enculturated due to their sociological benefit of helping the community to come to terms with post-loss grief, among others, such as emotional adjustment. The inculturation of *Nyere Za Mwezi* will provide optimal opportunity for the lay Christians to practice their faith along their traditional cultures. Doing so, the Catholic Church can adopt an African hermeneutical paradigm that can strike a balance among the lay

Christians without creating unnecessary division in the community. Finally, yet importantly, the church, through Small Christian Community (SCC), can initiate pulpit conscientization on the benefits of inculturation theology since it is an ongoing process in Africa. They can also revise the Church's catechist training program to incorporate inculturation theology to help in their grassroots missiological work. Furthermore, the Church should develop policy guidelines through the pastoral Coordination Committee on doctrines providing central principles on inculturating Christianity into African beliefs and practices associated with funeral rites, including *Nyere za mwezi*.

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Selected Oral interviews

1. Baya Mwanyule, O.I, 12/01/2016, Kilifi, Kenya.
2. Emmanuel Munyaya, O.I, 12/2/2016, St. Patrick Church, Kilifi, Kenya.
3. Fondo Said wa Mtangi, O.I, 10/12/2015, Bamba, Kilifi, Kenya.
4. Jonathan Charo, O.I, 14/10/2015, Ganze, Kilifi, Kenya.
5. Juliana Nyevu, O.I, 20/12/2015, St. Patrick Church, Kilifi, Kenya.
6. Juma Karisa, O.I 12/12/2015, Mkwanjuni, Kilifi, Kenya.
7. Kahindi Ngala, O.I, 23/11/2015, Miritini Parish, Mombasa, Kenya.
8. Karisa Kaingu, O.I, 23/11/2015, Mkwanjuni, Kilifi, Kenya.
9. Karisa Kalume, O.I, 20/04/2015, St. Patrick Church, Kilifi, Kenya.
10. Karisa Mwarandu, telephonic interview, 15/01/2016.
11. Katana Gona, O.I, 14/12/2015, Mkwanjuni, Kilifi, Kenya.
12. Kavumbi Gunga, O.I, 23/11/2015, Mkwanjuni, Kilifi, Kenya.
13. Kazosi Bithuva, O.I, 20/12/2015, Kilifi, Kenya.
14. Mohammed Tsofa, O.I, 20/11/2015, Mkwanjuni, Kilifi, Kenya.
15. Penina Ngumbao, O.I, 9/12/2015, Mkwanjuni, Kilifi, Kenya.
16. Rachel Chengo, O.I, 20/12/2015, St. Patrick Church, Kilifi, Kenya.
17. Rev. Fr. Harrison Yaa, O.I, 14/01/2016, Kongowea, Mombasa, Kenya.
18. Rev. Fr. Henry Katana, O.I, 26/01/2016, Kaloleni, Kilifi, Kenya.
19. Rev. Fr. Joseph Kenga, O.I, 12/01/2016, Kikambala, Kilifi, Kenya.
20. Rev. Fr. Nathaniel Karisa, O.I, 16/02/2016, Mtwapa, Kilifi, Kenya.
21. Samuel Chengo, O.I, 9/12/2015, Mkwanjuni, Kilifi, Kenya.
22. Samuel Kazungu, O.I, 23/11/2015, Mkwanjuni, Kilifi, Kenya.
23. Sidi Chengo Mwambire, O.I, 9/12/2015, Takaungu, Kilifi, Kenya.

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The researcher confirms that the all data collected was responsibly handled and accurately documented without manipulation of any kind or bias.

Competing interest

The author affirms that this research was conducted without impartially competing interests of any kind financially, professionally and personally that may have influenced the outcome of biased results or interpretation.

Author's contribution

The researcher is the sole author of this article.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this research article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agencies of the authors or the journal itself.

Ethical consideration

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