



# The Evolving Politics of Death in Kenya

By Patrick Gathara



The [cremation](#) in August of the body of popular Kibra MP, Kenneth Okoth, who died of cancer, is the latest challenge to Kenya's conception of not just death, and the handling and disposal of bodies, but also of the place of tradition and culture in contemporary society.

It came barely a month after controversies surrounding other high profile deaths. In July the passing of Safaricom CEO, Bobby Collymore, attracted unprecedented media coverage and dominated [all the front pages](#), with the country's biggest newspaper, the Daily Nation, dedicating 24 pages to a special report on his life and achievements. While as head of what is by far the largest company in the region, he was undoubtedly a major figure - dignitaries at his memorial included President Uhuru Kenyatta and former UK premier, Tony Blair- the media-driven public hype around his demise, from stories about his captaincy of the so-called "[Boys Club](#)" to his heroic stoicism in the face of cancer, seemed a bit over the top. One struggles to find parallels in Kenya's past. Few local political or cultural figures have merited similar treatment. It may have been partly paid for by Safaricom, and provided an opportunity for the media to further ingratiate itself to one of its largest advertisers, but regardless of its merits, the episode opened a window into how the Kenyan media, and the society it serves, deal with death.

Around the same time, controversial blogger, Robert Alai, was [charged with treason](#) for posting online a picture of the bodies of police officers killed in a terror attack in the remote north east of the country a fortnight prior. For those officers, there was no public mourning. A passing mention in

the papers, no names, and a forbidden photograph of their bodies dumped in the back of a pick-up truck was all they would get.

This raises questions about which deaths are worth noting, why and how? Which ones should go unmentioned and unmourned? Which bodies are we allowed to see and which ones are to be hidden? How have attitudes to death and bodies evolved?

When, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Europeans arrived in what is now Kenya, they did not find “tribes” as we now know them. Some of the ethnicities they found were confusing and fluid. As [described](#) by John Lonsdale, no “tribe” had a unified government; none had a unified line of descent or even an agreed upon origin myth; none practised just one form of subsistence; and none had a standard language – just clusters of dialects that shaded into each other. Within we encountered a variety of beliefs and practices governing death. Few of these survived colonialism. “[TheAgikuyu] traditional mode of burial and funeral rites ...has disappeared and has been replaced by methods and practices from other cultures, English culture being the largest contributor,” [writes Prof Johnson Mbugua](#) in his book *Funeral Rites Reformation for Any African Ethnic Community Based on the Proposed New Funeral Practices for the Agikuyu*. As described in his [Amazon bio](#), during his PhD research which formed the basis for the book, Prof Mbugua found “that the mode of coping with death of virtually all African ethnic communities has taken propositions and turns that are neither cultural, scriptural nor necessary”.

This raises questions about which deaths are worth noting, why and how? Which ones should go unmentioned and unmourned? Which bodies are we allowed to see and which ones are to be hidden?

In essence, what Prof Mbugua is saying is that much of what passes for “traditional” funeral practice today is anything but. Which should not be surprising given that, as Bruce Berman has noted in his paper, [Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau](#), many popular ideas of tradition and culture are not based on what actually existed but rather on a combination of the myths of British anthropologists and officials as well as the interests of small African elite. He writes: “It has been clear for many years that the concept of “traditional society,” and its particular expression in Africa, ‘tribal society,’ represent idealized constructs which very imperfectly reflect what is now understood about the character of pre-colonial African societies. In particular, the dominant image of traditional society as highly integrated, stable, relatively unchanging, and largely free of disruptive internal conflict has been challenged by increasing evidence of the fluidity of political boundaries and ethnic identities and the significant levels of internal conflict revealed in contemporary historical research. The concept of traditional society was not in any case based on substantial and systematically collected empirical evidence”.

In short, any appeal to tradition as a justification for particular funeral rites should be taken with a rather large helping of salt. The Kikuyu provide an excellent example. Today, burial of the dead accompanied with elaborate, supposedly traditional, rituals, is the norm. However, these have little resemblance to the burial rituals associated with the societies the Kikuyu of today are supposedly descended from. Prof Mbugua notes that in the time before the colonial upheaval, cultural practices differed considerably between groups as well as social and economic classes of Kikuyu. In some cases, folks of high status had elaborate funeral rites involving burial, beer, ceremonial sexual intercourse between widows and hired men (known as *sendia-ruhiu* or sellers of swords – a reference to penises), as well as the slaughter of livestock. Other less-favored individuals were simply left out in the bush to be devoured by wild animals, at times being led out when sickly to a clearing to die. It would thus be reasonable to surmise, as Dr Yvan Droz of the Graduate Institute, Geneva notes in his

chapter on Transformations of Death among the Kikuyu of Kenya: From Hyenas to Tombs in the book [FUNERALS IN AFRICA: Explorations of a Social Phenomenon](#), “Kikuyu people very rarely buried their dead”. In fact, in describing the internment of an elder in the Agikuyu Guild, one of the groups that made up the Kikuyu (the other being the Ukabi Guild), Prof Mbugua notes that “the funeral was not attended by close family members, including wives or even friends. Agikuyu feared and avoided burials”.

Despite their aversion to dead bodies, the Agikuyu viewed death itself with equanimity and fatalistic acceptance. “Though death was never in ordinary circumstances welcomed, the Agikuyu did not have the haunting fear of [it] which grips people of other civilizations,” Prof Mbugua writes.

And just as they accepted death as a necessary transition to the spirit world, they also seem to have been keen to make the most of their time in the flesh. As narrated by Prof Mbugua and suggested by the *endia-ruhiu*, the Agikuyu of pre-colonial times were not as stuck up on sex as their proclaimed descendants of today would like to believe. In fact, it was remarkably liberal in some aspects. Widows could keep their *endia-ruhiu* lovers if they wished, even after they were inherited by their dead husbands’ relatives; pre-marital and extra-marital affairs were the norm, including wife-sharing practice of *kuhandaitimu*, in which a visiting agemate planted a spear outside the hut of one of his host’s wives and got to spend the night with her.

Folks of high status had elaborate funeral rites involving burial, beer, ceremonial sexual intercourse between widows and hired men as well as the slaughter of livestock. Other less-favored individuals were simply left out in the bush to be devoured by wild animals...

Anyway, back to funerals. So why and when did burial become universal? Well, as Dr Droz notes, it all happened in the colonial era and was driven by one event in particular. The British, he says, had been trying to get the Kikuyu to stop tossing bodies into the bush without much success until, in February 1933, Senior Chief Koinange wa Mbiu was able to demonstrate to the Carter Commission, set up a year earlier to investigate African land claims and grievances, that land grabbed by an English settler actually belonged to his family by exhuming the remains of his grandfather. Suddenly bodies were no longer just the unclean detritus from a one-way ticket on the ancestral plane, but were now effectively transformed into a title for land, and burial “into a means of ascertaining control over property...Burial became a means to assert one’s modernity and to mark out inherited property: a new concept of land ownership was born”. Where land was once a communal resource, it now became the basis of private wealth and completely transformed social, economic and class relations within the society with attendant consequences that Kenyans continue to pay for to this day.

An interesting parallel is evident when one looks at the contemporary meaning of graves to the Luo. In his book, [Mortgaging the Ancestors: Ideologies of Attachment in Africa](#), Prof Parker Shipton of Boston University writes that “Luo people, and especially men, have made graves into tools of territoriality, and anchors of being”, meaning that where once it was claimed that “Luo did not look upon particular pieces of land, or ancestral traces on them, with great reverence,” today “graves, ancestral homestead sites, and cleared fields make the focal points for land claims”.

But burials denote not just ownership but also belonging, as highlighted by the famous case of SM Otieno, whose intestate death in December 1986 sparked a huge, bitter and very public 6-month legal battle between his widow, Wambui and the UmiraKager clan over who between them had the right to bury him. As Prof Shipton puts it, “not anyone may be buried anywhere, and contests over

the disposition of bodies can become as intense as competition over land”.

In February 1933, Senior Chief Koinange wa Mbiu was able to demonstrate to the Carter Commission, that land grabbed by an English settler actually belonged to his family by exhuming the remains of his grandfather.

Similarly, when it comes to rituals and forms associated with funerals, like with the Kikuyu “traditional” has been a moving target. For example, as Prof Shipton notes that “elders in the mid and late twentieth century spoke of earlier times when Luo buried their dead beneath earthen floors of houses, but by the 1980s, all or nearly all were buried outside.”

In 1903, Charles William Hobley, then a 36-year-old Assistant Deputy Commissioner in the East African Protectorate published a second tranche of results from his [research](#) into the habits and beliefs of the people of what became the Protectorate’s Kisumu Province. He took a note of a “curious” customs that one would be hard-pressed to find in today’s “traditional” funerals.

Among the Jo-Luo when a person dies, for days, perhaps months after, the whole village wails with great fervour, and at stated intervals according to the conventions laid down for the case. If however, a barren woman dies, the people of the village at once commence to wail in the usual way, and the brothers and sisters of the deceased proceed as quickly as possible to the village where the death occurred. The first blood-relation of the deceased who arrives on the scene takes a sharp acacia thorn, sticks it into the sole of the foot of the corpse and breaks it off; immediately this is done all wailing ceases at once, nor is it renewed as in the case of an ordinary death.

“Elders in the mid and late twentieth century spoke of earlier times when Luo buried their dead beneath earthen floors of houses, but by the 1980s, all or nearly all were buried outside.”

[A]mong, the Awa-wanga [the Luhya “tribe” hadn’t been invented yet]... if a young girl, a virgin, dies, her female relatives, whose duty it is to bury her, artificially deflower the body before burial; this is always done by the forcible insertion of the pointed bulb of spathes which cover the immature flowers at the lower end of a growing bunch of bananas. If this is omitted, it is believed that the sisters of the deceased will not be found to be virgins on their marriage; this would be considered somewhat of a disgrace.

The point here is not to simply take as gospel truth the observations of a young British official who may or may not have understood what he reported. Rather, it is to underline the fact that what we call “tradition” may not be as clear cut -or even as desirable - as we sometimes like to think it is.

It is thus clear that fulminations, such as those of “Luo elders” against the cremation of Ken Okoth cremation, need to be viewed with a fair degree of skepticism when grounded on the shifting sands of “tradition”. Even if his body were to be transported to Nyanza, any burial he would get would not be “traditional”, if by that we mean it would be carried out in a way the pre-colonial folks of Kavirondo would immediately recognize as upholding a belief system which was undermined and eventually swept away by a perfect storm of Christianization and Kenyanization.

The realization that “tradition” and “culture” have (and have always been) little more than inventions, products of former generations’ struggle to understand and cope with the world and to pass on what they learnt - imperfectly at best - to us, is a freeing thought. We do not need to be

defined by what and who came before. We should learn from them but also have the courage to write our own chapters in the book of life, to define, reinterpret and reshape “tradition” as we see fit. And if that means someone prefers to be cremated rather than buried, then that should be fine too. Perhaps decades from now, a new generation will grow up thinking, as we do today, that that is tradition.

It is also clear from the historical record, that even in death there have always been discriminations when it came to the treatment of the high and mighty compared to the hoi polloi. That perhaps is the one true tradition that has survived as evidenced by Alai’s prosecution for showing bodies that should be kept hidden. The same was the case with those accused (however inaccurately) of showing the corpses of Kenyan soldiers at El Adde and Kulbiyow in Somalia. It is borne out in the subsequent government attempts to erase the victims of these attacks from the public memory in a bid to hide its culpability.

The bodies we are allowed to see and grieve have always been hostage to power. Decisions over who is to be feted and buried and who is to be forgotten and tossed to the hyenas (literally and figuratively) are less about tradition and more about control. After all, if you control narratives, you can control society. This is how we end up with a mausoleum for Kenyatta’s dad and an unmarked, forgotten grave for Dedan Kimathi. And why so much attention is lavished on dead MPs and businessmen and relatively little on KDF dead soldiers. It is a marker of whose lives are important and whose are disposable.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

THE  
ELEPHANT