

RESILIENCE OF ANCESTRAL LANDS CULTURE IN KENYA: A RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Africans in Africa and in the Diaspora have consistently insisted on being buried in their ancestral lands in Africa. Ancestral lands are associated with origin, identity, values, livelihood and culture. The significance of ancestral lands culture in Africa cannot be gainsaid. The article examines the resilience of ancestral lands in Kenyan society in particular and Africa in general. It is argued that although Kenya is amongst African countries most influenced by modern changes, especially by Christianity, western culture and Islam, belief in the sacredness of ancestral lands has persisted. The article is mainly based on library research and views of African scholars, including African Christian theologians. The article found out that despite the introduction of Islam and Christianity which together have adherence of over 90% of the Kenyan population, majority of Kenyans due to the influence of African Religion and culture still view ancestral lands as sacred and would like to be buried in their own ancestral lands, whether purchased or inherited. Some Kenyan Christian elites have diversified their beliefs and largely been influenced by modernity and secularization hence a few of them have opted for cremation or burial in public cemeteries, yet, the ancestral land culture is not about to die. It is concluded that in Kenya, like in some other African countries, the question of ancestral lands is still significant, as most Kenyans still occupy ancestral lands which are still viewed as sacred and indicative of the resilience of traditional African influence.

Keywords: Sacredness, African Religion, Islam, Christianity, ancestral land.

Introduction

Ancestral lands are universally recognized as sources of identity, livelihood and culture. There has been a call for preservation and protection of ancestral lands. The African Commission on Human and Peoples rights ruled that indigenous peoples should not be evicted from their ancestral lands. The decision was adopted by African Commission in

2009 and approved by African Union in 2010.¹ In Africa, ancestral family lands were intricately connected with rites of passage. Ancestral lands among Africans have religious symbolism. Due to the connection between ancestral lands and African beliefs, including belief in God, ancestral spirits and rites of passage, they ended up acquiring a lot of religious sanctity. The ancestral lands constitute home bases which are significant for the socialization and survival of individuals and communities.

Nowadays, the situation is changing more rapidly. Some prominent personalities are leaving written wills indicating where they should be buried. Some are buried in public cemeteries. For example, when a Kenyan environmentalist, the Nobel Laureate, Wangari Mathai died, to the disbelief of her family members, she had written a will which indicated that she wanted to be cremated. The family reluctantly accepted the reality, despite the practice that members of the family are buried in the family's ancestral land. The family had to settle for burying a banana stem in place of the corpse, signifying attachment to the ancestral land culture.

When Prof. John S. Mbiti, a renowned philosopher and theologian of African Religion, died in 2019, he had written a will indicating that his body be cremated and part of the ashes retained in Switzerland where his family lived, and the other half to be buried in his ancestral land in Kitui County in Kenya. The burial of part of his remains in his ancestral land denotes the significance and veneration attached to ancestral lands in Africa, with particular reference to Kenya.

Despite the impact of modern changes which have occurred in Africa in more than 100 years, some Africans still retain deference to ancestral lands. This article analyses the resilience of ancestral lands culture in the midst of rapid changes in Kenyan society in particular and in Africa in general.

The article is based on library research. It utilizes literary and research works by African scholars on African Religion and theology. It analyses their findings and views on resilience of sacredness and religiosity of ancestral lands culture amongst different African communities.

African Religion and Ancestral Lands in Kenya

Mbiti calls how it is said that "Africans are notoriously religious."² Wherever traditional Africans went and settled, they were accompanied by their religiosity. Although from historical records, Kenyans who are Bantus, Nilotes and Cushites settled in Kenya not too

long ago, they have humanized their ancestral lands to the extent that one would think that they have lived here for many centuries. For example, the Kikuyu society which consisted of immigrant groups settled in Muranga in the sixteenth century and spread to Nyeri and Kiambu.³ Wherever they settled they developed their home bases. The Kikuyu being agriculturalists were more attached to their ancestral lands than pastoralists who are always on the move in search of pastures.

The pastoralists, such as the Masai occupy huge areas as their ancestral family lands. The occupied lands are owned communally. On the other hand, the agriculturalists seemed to own land individually. Although initially among some Bantus, the dead used to be disposed by being thrown or taken into forests, they later adopted burial system in the homestead. The Akamba and Kikuyu used to toss the body to the forests to be devoured by hyenas. They later developed or borrowed burial rites in ancestral lands.⁴ And this led to the preservation of family burial sites in the homesteads.

The Kenyan traditional belief systems were crucial in making family ancestral lands sacred. African myths hold that God created the earth before creating humans. For example, the Kikuyu myth of creation states that *Ngai* (God) created the universe and then created *Gikuyu*⁵ (the founder of the Kikuyu community). God gave *Gikuyu* the land while at the top of Mount Kenya⁶. In the East was Aberdares, West Mount Kenya, in South Kilimambogo- and in the North Ngong Hills. This shows that God even determined the size of the land. This myth may not be historical or even factual but it shows the overall Kikuyu understanding of God-His creation of the land and even giving it boundaries which have persisted to the present. Therefore, in the occupation of the land, Africans created narratives which legitimized their taking possession of the land. The land acquired its sacredness in the fact that it was created by God. Traditional Africans also believed that God was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Ancestral lands were seen as having been created and sustained by God. Idowu argues that the absolute control of the universe and all in it belong to God and that all beings exist at God's behest.⁷

Homesteads or ancestral lands constituted primary places of worship. Some sacred trees were planted in the ancestral lands, at the feet of which traditional Africans worship: Mugumo (fig tree) among the Kikuyu, and Kayas (forests set aside for worship) among the Mijikenda. Belief in God, direct linkage with communities and the occupied land ended up making the peoples and the areas they occupied to be sacred. The environmental features on the land, such as some trees, rocks,

mountains, hills, and lakes were seen as associated with God, and that marked the sacredness of the land.

Belief in ancestral spirits contributed to enhancing the sacredness of the ancestral lands. Africans believe that ancestral spirits abide with them in their ancestral lands. On the significance of ancestral spirits, Eka writes, “The ancestors are the elder members of the family”, and that “As spirits, they have enhanced powers which they are believed to use to protect the interests of their families.”⁸ During social gathering in homesteads, it is believed that the ancestral spirits are in attendance. So, the ancestral lands are central in continuing the association with the ancestral spirits. Magesa argues that to become an ancestor is the goal of African peoples.⁹ The ancestral spirits are believed to keep watch over the communities living on ancestral family lands.

Of crucial significance in making ancestral family lands sacred are rites of passage. These ceremonies are held to mark transition from birth, initiation, marriage and death. In most cases they are held at the homestead on family land. All the rituals associated with a born child are performed on the family land. During birth, the blood from birth of a child trickles into the ground while the placenta is buried in the ground, thus bonding the child to the ancestral family land. The child is given names associated with the ancestors or circumstances prevailing in the environment.¹⁰

When a child attains puberty, circumcision of both boys and girls was done in the homestead or outside the homestead where it was done communally. During the circumcision ceremony, the blood from the initiates was allowed to trickle on the soil of the homestead. It was believed that the blood symbolically joined the ancestors whose bodies were buried in the family land. This was seen to be extension of relationships.

Marriage ceremonies are also held at the homestead where a goat is slaughtered and its blood is allowed to drop on the family land. The blood and goat were seen as symbols connecting the two families to an alliance. The life of the slaughtered goat was seen to ascend to heaven where God was believed to live with other spiritual beings.¹¹ The food and meat that was shared cemented the union between the two families and the ancestral spirits.¹² It was believed that the ancestors attended the marriage ceremonies. This created a spiritual union between the families of the bride, the groom and the spiritual world. Since the marriage ceremonies are held at the family of the bride, the land was the medium and platform that facilitated the ceremony.

At the death of a person, burial ceremonies are conducted at the homestead. The burial rituals that are performed are connected with the family land. During the burial of an elderly person, there is slaughtering of a bull. The blood is allowed to trickle into the family land. This is believed to join the deceased person with the ancestors who were buried in the same land. Commenting on the significance of honouring the dead among the Turkana of Kenya, Magesa writes “The point here is to separate without creating animosity between the two parties”, and “It is very important for the community and its welfare that the deceased is well treated.”¹³ There is another ritual, such as among the Luo, called *teroburu* (chasing of spirits) which was supposed to cleanse the spirit of the dead to the spiritual world.¹⁴

To maintain cordial relationship with the spiritual world, when there is breakdown of cordiality, some cleansing ceremonies are effected at the homestead. For example, when things are not going well, a diviner may indicate challenges, and the ritual to perform to appease the spiritual realm, at the head of which is God. In case of a curse, a cleansing ritual would also be effected at the homestead. Among the Ngonde of Malawi, to remove a curse by a father, a cleansing ritual has to be performed at the grave of the father. Mlenga writes that “When one’s life is darkened he is taken to the grave of an ancestor so that the elders can talk to the ancestral spirit.”¹⁵ During a time of an epidemic, rituals are also performed to expel the disease from the community. As such, family homesteads are purification centers, for the religious sacredness that is associated with them.

Christian Views on Family Ancestral Lands

Christianity was introduced in Kenya towards the end of the nineteenth century. Various missionary societies were responsible for introducing Christianity in Kenya. Before the introduction of Christianity in the country, African Religion was the dominant religion. Islam was only visible in the coastal area. By 1920 most parts of Kenya had embraced Christianity. With the introduction of Christianity came Western education and practices. Due to the influences of social Darwinism, western missionaries viewed African culture negatively. The evolutionary notions led some missionaries to think that African cultures were less evolved than western culture¹⁶. African culture was despised by the western missionaries who operated in Kenya. They took the view that with the introduction of Christianity, African culture was going to die

gradually. The western missionaries started introduction of western education, health, hygiene, agricultural methods among others.

As Africans became converted to Christianity, they were urged to abandon African culture. Some missionary societies created Christian villages which were intended to separate African converts from African ancestral lands and practices. They were brainwashed to think that African culture was inferior. Christianity discouraged African practices such as circumcision of girls¹⁷. The missionaries also encouraged circumcision of boys to be done in hospitals. The missionary education produced (and is still producing) a new group of westernized African elite *athomi*¹⁸.

By and large, the missionaries looked at African practices as being barbaric and repugnant which was in fact erroneous. Pertaining to burials, African Christians were encouraged to use Christian burial rites which reflected the Christian beliefs in eternal life, resurrection and communion with saints¹⁹. The Christian funeral was a new cultural experience for the Africans. Despite the negative attitude adopted by the missionaries to African culture, some Africans still mix traditional African burial rites with Christian burial rites.

Africans, many a times, perform the traditional burial rites secretly and then invited the Christian clergy to complete the ceremony. Regarding burial rituals Mlenga argues that Africans practiced dual religiosity, to the effect that “Appropriate funeral services have to be conducted if people want to live peacefully after burying the dead”, and that “Neglect of proper form of funeral services can lead to illness or people would lack peace due to frequent visit of the spirit of the dead.”²⁰ Many Africans still prefer being buried in their homes as opposed to being buried in cemeteries or church compounds.

As it were, the introduction of Christianity marked the origin of the disregard for sacredness of ancestral family land. African Christians started building modern homesteads straight with western architectural designs. Foreign burial practices were introduced such as cementing graves, use of flowers, coffins, and unveiling of the cross.²¹ As argued earlier there was a mixture of African and Christian burial practices, but the western practice has become dominant. The different Christian denominations have different preferences. Each denomination emphasizes its own doctrines. The issue of ancestral lands was not emphasized by some Christian missionaries, and so their members are free to be buried wherever they wanted, provided it did not violate the doctrines of their Church. Elaborate burial ceremonies in churches were ushered in by Africans who had converted to Christianity. The materialization and

secularization of burials, including use of coffins, was mainly borrowed from western societies.

Muslim views on Burial on Ancestral lands

Islam was the first international religion to be introduced in Kenya. It was introduced in the East African Coast in the ninth century. Islam is said to be a religious way of life which guides Muslims in all aspects of their lives. The interaction between Islam and African culture ended up producing a Swahili culture²². By and large, Islam was introduced in Kenya as an urban religion. Islamic communities were created in urban centers with dotted mosques. Due to its urbanization, Islam did not spread widely in the rural areas. Islamic culture was closer in nature to African culture than Christian culture. Muslims who are in rural areas prefer to be buried in their ancestral lands following the Islamic burial practice.

Since most Muslims reside in urban centres, they created cemeteries in towns. The cemeteries are communal hence both African Muslims and people of other nationalities are buried there. Unlike in Christianity, Muslims are not buried in a coffin. Most Kenyan Muslims follow the Islamic law, Sharia. Muslim corpses are not transported to their ancestral lands but buried in public Islamic cemeteries where death finds them²³. Muslim burial rites are characterized by modesty and the dead are buried within 24 hours after death. The body is prepared by performing Ghushl which is full body purification ritual and wrapped in *kafan* (a piece of cloth) and then taken to mosque for prayers and it is carried by young men to the cemetery where it is interred.²⁴

The mosque to the Muslims has become a social gathering place where marriage, burial and other social activities are conducted. Most Muslims in Kenya are not attached to land. Majority of them are town dwellers, and this has led to their disregard for the sacredness of family ancestral lands. It is important to note that most of the Muslims who were converted into Islam from African Religion continue to regard ancestral land as sacred. For example, Muslims in western Kenya are mostly buried in their ancestral lands.

Impact of Modern Change and Government Policies on Ancestral Family lands in Kenya

Modern change was introduced in Kenya by colonialism and missionary enterprise. Before the coming of the missionaries and British colonialism Kenyans lived communally in the areas they had settled after migrating from elsewhere. They had developed their own cultures. Each

Kenyan community had its own area and each family had established its homestead. Belief in God, ancestral spirits, and practice of rites of passage acquired sacredness.

Kenya became a British protectorate in 1895.²⁵ The British government exercised in-direct rule over Kenya. It created the position of a chief, which was used to administer people in the lowest level of administration. The British government took some of the most fertile lands and gave them to British settlers. Africans who were removed from their ancestral lands were placed in the so called reserves, which in most cases were the worst pieces of land in terms of production. The colonial masters enacted laws which controlled land ownership.²⁶ The White settler land-owners were given leases of 100 years. The Kenyan populace was not allowed to own land, apart from living in the reserves which were set aside for them.

On the other hand, the missionaries also started their operations in Kenya by setting up mission stations all over the country. The colonial government granted the missionaries as much land as they wanted. The missionaries used the lands granted them for setting up mission stations, hospitals, farms, schools and other social amenities. The presence of the British colonialists and missionaries had long lasting effects on Kenyans. Through the British colonial rule, Kenyans lost their rights; most of their freedoms were curtailed. They lost the right to own land. They were engaged in forced labour. Many of them had to move away from home to work in settler farms or urban centers where some industries were started, to be able to pay taxes imposed on them. The introduction of urbanization to a large extent removed them from their ancestral lands and gave them a different lifestyle of dwelling in urban centers or in large settler farms, in addition to being forcefully removed from their ancestral lands and lumped together in reserves.²⁷

Colonialism disenfranchised Kenyans. The missionaries together with the colonialists started the process of introducing western culture and Christianity through schools and evangelization. The Africans were now exposed to new changes which were contrary to their traditional practices. Total adherence to African Religion suffered a severe blow. Those who went through government and missionary schools acquired new mannerisms and a new outlook on life. African cultural practices were denigrated and relegated, giving birth to a new class of people.

Through political struggles, Kenyans started pursuing their political independence. The Mau Mau movement was in the forefront of the struggle for Kenyan independence. The chief grievance of the Mau

Mau movement was land.²⁸ The Mau Mau fighters went into forests to fight and to demand return of Kenyans' freedom, independence and return of their land. The Mau Mau rebellion lasted from 1952-1959.²⁹ After the Mau Mau movement, the British government granted Kenya independence in 1963 and the people regained their sovereignty.

After independence, the Kenyan government started the process of returning land to its original owners. Most of the settler farms, apart from a few owned by multinational companies, were taken over by the government, which classified land into three types, namely: government or county, community owned-land, and private land. Government also started issuing title deeds. Many Kenyans formed land buying societies and companies, through which people acquired land originally owned by settler farmers.

Currently land has been commercialized. It has become a commodity of sale. Through willing buyer and seller, land transfers have become a common feature. Due to purchase of land in new areas, some individuals have moved away from their original ancestral lands. To some extent the frequent exchanges of Land has secularized land as a commodity of sale and as a tool of production among many Kenyans. Despite the changes in land ownership there are still many communities and individuals who still retain their ancestral lands.

The Legality of Burial in Ancestral Land

Burial of Kenyans in their ancestral lands became a subject of litigation in the epic burial court battle in 1990. It involved the burial of a leading Kenyan criminal law advocate, S.M. Otieno who died intestate.³⁰ The legal struggle for Otieno to be buried in his ancestral land was led by his uncle and clan. Gehman writing on the argument of the clan states as follow:

... that Otieno was born at Luo and died at Luo. Though he had married a Gikuyu wife, he was a baptized Christian and though he lived in Nairobi as a metropolitan, and never owned land back home, and seldom returning to his roots, his clan said he should be buried in the traditional Luo manner at his ancestral home.³¹

Otieno's widow and the nuclear family wanted him to be buried in his farm in Upper Matasia near Nairobi city.³² There were two diametrically opposed sides. One side of the argument maintained that in "modern Kenya", the old fashioned customs were difficult to perpetuate and were

also a hindrance to decent etiquette³³. The opposing side was categorical on praising those customs on the grounds that African identity was grounded on them. According to Mugambi, what the two sides did not acknowledge is the fact that at all times society is characterized by both conservative and transformative tendencies which are crucial for maintenance of harmony in society.³⁴ Both the High Court and Court of Appeal ruled that the remains of S.M. Otieno be interred in his ancestral land in western Kenya.³⁵ This case strengthened the long held belief that bodies of the dead be buried in their ancestral lands.

In contemporary Kenyan society, as may be the case in some other African societies, maintenance of ancestral lands as sources of identity and survival is an issue that will persist for a long time to come. Writing on the significance of being buried in ancestral lands, Komakech avers that Africans assert their origin, history, identity, and ownership of land rights.³⁶ And, “According to Africans, the proof of one’s belonging is evidence of where his/her ancestors are buried.”³⁷ Moreover, “Ancestral lands link the deceased to the ancestors who are believed to be a continuing influence on society.”³⁸ The presence of the graves of the deceased accords the living the opportunity to pay their respects to the dead. It provides a sense of continuity. The graves of the dead also play a psychological role to the living by giving them assurance that the living and the dead are connected and united in life and death. Many Africans do not seem to find Christian burial rites satisfying, psychologically and spiritually. That explains why many Africans prefer to be buried in their home compounds. Among the rites of passage in the traditional society, death is the only ritual that has been continued by the majority in the contemporary Kenyan society.

The African belief system is the carrier of African values and aspirations. During burial among many Kenyan communities, there is hybrid of practices, from traditional society, from one imported religion or another, and from modern secularity. Among many communities in Kenya, such as the Luo, Kamba, Luhya, and Kisi, majority opt for burial in ancestral family cemeteries. In fact, corpses are moved from long distances at a very expensive cost to be buried in their ancestral homes. Some are even flown from abroad. The resilience of African ancestral land culture underscores the African traditional belief system that has refused to die. As Mbiti notes, African Religion is the African way of life.³⁹ Since culture can be very conservative, despite the rapid changes that have occurred in Africa, during crucial moments such as death, the African religious beliefs prevail.

Notwithstanding that some leading Kenyan personalities, such as Wangari Mathai, a former minister, Peter Okondo, Prof. J.S. Mbiti, the former Safaricom CEO Bob Claymore, and a former Anglican Archbishop Kuria opted in written wills to be cremated, their families secretly performed some death rituals, such as by burying their ashes or a banana stem which ensured that the African traditions were maintained. Magesa observes that most converts to Christianity and Islam publicly find themselves professing the new faiths, but their inner motivation is African Religion, which they practise unconsciously.⁴⁰ He concludes by stating that African Religion has persistent influence on black Africans.⁴¹

Factors Influencing Burial Choice in Kenya

Death can be an emotional, personal and psychological affair, or a private/communal affair. Several factors are currently influencing the way Kenyans are being buried. Due to the allure of modernity and secularization of funerals, families and communities are spending huge amounts of money to bury their dead which cost can easily be minimized. This to some extent is creating social differences in society. People are talking of the best funeral, depending on food served; size of motorcade following the corpse; clothes worn by the kindred of the bereaved; cost of the coffin; and decoration of the grave.

Influence of culture, with particular reference to belief in ancestral spirits, is also affecting burial in contemporary society. Stories have been heard of how vehicles have refused to move until the dead are placated and taken home where their ancestors are buried. An Islamic lady from Western Kenya went to court and requested to exhume the corpse of her son buried in an Islamic cemetery, because she claimed that she was being haunted by ancestral spirits who were insisting that the corpse be buried among his people in Kakamega.⁴² When the court granted her the permission and the body was exhumed and buried in the ancestral land, the lady said that she started experiencing peace. In fact, these beliefs in ancestral spirits prompt many communities to move bodies from far distances so that they are buried in their ancestral lands for fear of being haunted by ancestral spirits. As Mugambi notes, culture can be highly resilient, and people may superficially appear to have accepted the culture of their conquerors, but the submerged culture resurfaces as soon as there is an opportunity.⁴³

A visit to some homesteads in Kenya showed that burial is done in family compounds, to a large extent. In some homes in Taita-Taveta in the Kenyan coastal region and western Kenya, family compounds are filled

with several cemented graves of grandparents, parents and children. This explains the resilience of ancestral land culture where Kenyans, generally speaking, have continued to uphold traditional religious belief, notwithstanding the influences of the imported religions of Christianity and Islam.

Kenya has gone through Christianization, Islamization, modernization, urbanization and secularization which have influenced a sizeable number of people. The number of Kenyans who strictly practice African traditional beliefs is dwindling with time, yet during times of crises, such as death, some Kenyans still resort to observance of some of the traditional beliefs. Death is dreaded and as soon as it strikes a family, African religious and cultural practices are still observed, to some extent. Kenyans move from urban areas and even from abroad to go and mourn with bereaved families in rural areas. Despite some Kenyans disregarding some aspects of African Traditional Religion during normal times, when death strikes, funeral rites are usually observed. In contemporary Kenyan society, there are still a considerable number of people who uphold the sacredness of family ancestral lands and insist that they must be buried where their ancestors are buried.

Conclusion

This study examined the resilience of ancestral land culture in Kenya. It found out that despite modern and contemporary influences, with particular reference to Islam and Christianity, African religious beliefs still hold sway on burial in ancestral lands. Although Christians and Muslims have largely embraced Christian and Islamic doctrines, when it comes to where to be buried, the African ancestral land culture is largely upheld. Kenyans, like some other Africans still consider ancestral lands to be sacred.

Due to the influence of ancestral land culture, when Kenyans die their corpses are transported from abroad and other places to be buried in their ancestral lands. Although modern change and new religions have led to disregard of some African religious beliefs, ancestral lands are still largely venerated. Ancestral lands are associated with origin, values, identity and culture. A sizable number of Kenyans and Africans when they die anticipate to join their ancestors who are buried in the ancestral lands. Cultures are normally conservative hence African ancestral lands culture will continue as a testimony and a pointer of African religious experience.

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