

# Some Religious Aspects of Basotho Funeral Rituals

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## Abstract

This article forms part of a dissertation presented to University of South Africa for the degree of Master of Arts in Religious Studies in 'the religious significance of ritual practices conducted at births weddings and funerals in Lesotho'. The researcher combines literature review of scholars who have studied the Basotho socio-cultural life, with personal field study through dissemination of questionnaires, interviews and personal observations. Through this approach he finds out the various ritual practices that dot the Basotho life through the funeral rites and then studies their religiousness in terms of traditional beliefs. He also finds out how these ritual practices have persisted in the face of Christian influence and Western education, and how far they have been influenced by the latter. The study reveals that the religious connotation of the ritual practices lies in how people seek transcendental meaning to life. Reference is made to similar ritual practices in other parts of Africa and even outside Africa, where possible.

## Funeral as a Rite of Passage

In dealing with rites of passage, Van Gennep assembles all the ceremonial patterns, which accompany a passage from one situation to another. He feels that it is legitimate to single out rites of passage as a special category because of the importance of the transitions which under further analysis may be subdivided into rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation. He says that these three subdivisions are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern. Rites of separation are prominent in funeral cer-

emonies and rites of incorporation at marriage. Transition rites may play an important part for instance in pregnancy, betrothal and initiation; or they may be reduced to a minimum in adoption, in delivery of a second child, in marriage or in the passage from the second to the third age group.

He contends that in certain ceremonial patterns where the transitional period is sufficiently elaborated to constitute an independent state, the arrangement is reduplicated. A betrothal forms a liminal period between adolescence and marriage, but that passage from adolescence to betrothal itself involves a special series of rites of separation, a transition, and incorporation into betrothal condition; and the passage from the transitional period, which is a series of rites of separation from the former followed by rites consisting of transition and rites of incorporation. The pattern of ceremonies comprising rites of pregnancy, delivery, and birth is equally involved. (Thus in some cases they overlap). Therefore it is not possible to achieve a rigid classification. He adds that all rites at birth, initiation, marriage and the like are not necessarily only rites of passage because in addition to their over-all goal – to insure a change of condition or a passage from one magico-religious or secular group to another – all these ceremonies have their individual purposes. He again says marriage ceremonies include fertility rites; birth ceremonies include protection and divination rites; funerals, defensive rites; initiation, propitiatory rites; ordination, rites of attachment to a deity. All these rites, which have specific effective aims, occur in juxtaposition and combination with rites of passage – and are sometimes, so intimately intertwined with them that it is impossible to distinguish whether a particular ritual is, for example, one of protective or separation. This problem arises in relation to various forms of so-called purification ceremonies, which may simply lift a taboo and therefore remove the contaminating quality, or which may be clearly active rites imparting the quality of purity.

In connection with this problem he considers briefly the pivoting of the sacred. He says that charismatically the presence of the sacred is variable. Sacredness as an attribute is not absolute; it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations. He cites several examples (1977:12), two of which are: A man at home, in his tribe, lives in the secular realm; he moves into the realm of the sacred when he goes on a journey and finds himself a foreigner near a camp of strangers. Again a Brahman belongs to the sacred world by birth; but within that world there is a hierarchy of Brahman families some of whom are sacred in relation to others. He adds that upon performing so-called purification rites, a woman who has just given birth re-enters society, but she takes her place only in appropriate segments of it – such as her sex and her family – and she remains sacred in relation to initiated men and to the magico-religious ceremonies.

Thus the “magic circles” pivot, shifting as a person moves from one place in society to another. The categories and concepts which embody them operate in such a way that whoever passes through the various positions of a lifetime one day

sees the sacred where before he has seen the profane, or vice versa. Such changes of condition, he asserts, do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual, and it is the function of the rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects. Such changes being regarded as real and important is demonstrated by the recurrence of rites, in important ceremonies among widely differing peoples, enacting death in one condition and resurrection in another (1977:11-13).

### **The Mechanism in Rites of Passage as Van Gennep Finds it Applicable to Funeral Rites in Particular**

With regard to funeral ceremonies Van Gennep says that on first consideration one expects rites of separation to be their most prominent component, in contrast to rites of transition and rites of incorporation, which should be only slightly elaborated. But a study of the data, however, reveals that the rites of separation are few in number and very simple, while the transition rites have a duration and complexity sometimes so great that they must be granted a sort of autonomy. Furthermore, the funeral rites, which incorporate the deceased into the world of the dead, are most extensively elaborated and assigned the greatest importance (1977:146).

He says that it is obvious, that funeral rites vary widely among different people and that further variations depend on the sex, age, and social position of the deceased. However within the extraordinary multiplicity of detail certain dominant features may be discerned. He points out that funeral rites are further complicated when within a single people there are several seemingly contradictory or different conceptions of the afterworld, which may become intermingled with one another, so that their confusion is reflected in the rites (1977:146).

In the purview of his mechanism he asserts that mourning is a transitional period for the survivors, and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into society (rites of the lifting of mourning). In some cases, the transitional period of the living is a counterpart of the transitional period of the deceased, and the termination of the first sometimes coincides with the termination of the second – that is, with the incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead. For example, in the funeral of the Hobe of the Niger Plateau the period of the widowhood corresponds to the duration of the journey of the deceased's wandering soul up to the moment when it joins the divine ancestral spirits or is reincarnated (1977:146-147).

He contends that during mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon the living individuals leave the group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person. Mourning requirements are based on degrees of kinship and are systematised by each people according to their special way of calculating that kinship (patrilineally, matrilineally, bilaterally etc.)

Widows and widowers obviously belong to this special world for the longest time; they leave it only through appropriate rites and only at a moment when even a physical relationship is no longer discernible. He says that the rites, which lift all the regulations such as special dress and prohibitions of mourning, should be considered rites of reintegration into the life of society as a whole or of a restricted group. And that during mourning, social life is suspended for all those affected by it, and the length of the period increases with the closeness of the social ties to the deceased, e.g. for widows and relatives and with a higher social standing of the dead person. If the dead man was a chief, the suspension affects the entire society. There is public mourning and proclamation of holidays (1977:148).

The transitional period in funeral rites is first marked physically by the more or less extended stay of the corpse or coffin in the deceased's room (as during a wake), in the vestibule of his house or elsewhere for a safekeeping and after a certain time, new obsequies are given them and what is due them is completed by further funeral duties.

For others, the transition stage is sometimes subdivided into several parts, and, in the postliminal period, its extension is systematized in the form of commemorations which may be a week, two weeks, a month, forty days, or a year etc. similar in nature to rites of the anniversary, initiation etc (Van Gennep 1977:148-149).

Among rites of separation it is appropriate to include: the various procedures by which the corpse is transported outside, burning the tools, the house, the jewels, the deceased's possessions, putting to death the deceased's wives, slaves or favourite animals; washing, anointing, and rites of purification in general; and tools of all sorts. In addition there are physical procedures of separation: a grave, a coffin, a cemetery, a wicker mat. Closing of the coffin or tomb is often a particularly solemn conclusion to the entire ceremony. There are collective periodic rites expelling souls from the house, the village and the tribe's territory. There are struggles for the corpse widespread in Africa, which might mean that the living do not want to lose one of their members unless forced to do so, for the loss is a diminution of their social power.

Among rites of incorporation, is the meals shared after the funeral and at commemoration celebrations. Their purpose is to reunite all the surviving members of the group with each other, and sometimes also with the deceased. He adds that sometimes also a meal of this sort takes place when the mourning is lifted.

The rites of incorporation into the other world are equivalent to those of hospitality, incorporation into the clan, adoption etc. There are other special rites such as a club blow administered by the dead on a new member's head, the Christian sacrament of extreme unction, or the custom of placing the deceased on the earth. Finally the "dances of the dead" performed by certain American Indians, by the Nyanja of Africa, by members of a secret society, and by other special magico-religious groups (Van Gennep 1977:164).

## A Model of Basotho Traditional Funeral Rite as it Emerges from Basotho Ethnography

The Basotho funeral rite as of old is full of ritual practices that punctuate the ceremonies from sickness to death and burial; and it is needless to say that most of these rituals have religious implications. When a person is seriously sick and on the point of death, the Basotho performed a recovery rite in the form of propitiatory sacrifice to appease the ancestor(s) the sick person might have offended. Concerning such ritual practices Justinus Sechefo (sa.14) says:

A young man, who has been sick for a length of time without showing any hopes of recovery, should be prayed for to try to appease the wrath of the departed ancestors who are the "gods". A sheep, which has remained tied up for some time during the day, is killed for him in the evening. First of all the sheep is led walking to the bed of the dying young man and is shown to him by others. With doleful expressions they say: "Behold this is your beast, by which we pray for thee: O! Ye our ancestors who are our gods, we beseech you, dip your hands for us in the cold water, so that our sick man may find sleep, and arise from his sickness. May it be that on our coming here the next morning, we find him sitting up, sipping some porridge. May his sickness now depart with us." Gradually the earnest compassionate heart of all, sooner or later do the dying man well.

On the other hand an aged person who had been sick for a long time without improving or dying but suffering was given something like a safe journey ritual which is more or less like the extreme unction practised by the Catholics. In this connection too Sechefo (sa.14 -15) says that a sheep was sacrificed to the ancestors to release him. The sacrificial beast was killed ritually with a *'lehlabo*-basket needle, pierced under its armpit. The liver was hastily taken out and roasted on fire. Then the dying person was given only a very small piece of it, which was pressed between his stiffened teeth. In this way he ate his last farewell supper. Then the family members were asked to go near the bedside and express their willingness to part with the dying person, and with feelings of sorrow they would agree to let him go. The dying person then gradually passed away. All the meat of the sacrificed beast was cooked and entirely consumed by the family on the same day. No portions of it remained uncooked for the following day. The atonement applied very much the same for a person suffering from the *maroko* (a sick man who in the course of his illness was heavily assailed by apprehension of death).

## Burial Rituals

In the past, the Basotho burial system was different from the present. The difference may be due to Western and Christian influence. Sechefo (sa.5) says that the graves of elders and owners of cattle were dug in their cattle kraal since the rich should not be separated from their cattle. The stones of the kraal were removed to allow sufficient space for the grave and the kraal was built again after burial. Ashton (1952:104), talking about Basotho burial rite, also says that the graves of the senior members of the family were sited near the entrance of the kraal and those of their young children and their kinsmen just outside the kraal, but those of other villagers just outside the village. Ashton (1952:104) said it was done to prevent enemies and sorcerers from rifling it.

According to Laydevant (1952:72) when the cadaver was taken out of the hut for burial, it never went through the door, but through a hole cut in the wall so that, its soul would not find the door when it returned to visit its former abode. In support of this, Ashton (1952:105) also says: "Formerly it would not have been taken through the door of the *seotloana*, but through a gap made to the right of the door for men and to the left for women". According to Laydevant (1952:72) if a person died in his own hut in the village, it was abandoned. Gill (1993:50) also adds that the body was removed from the house through a hole, which was made in the back wall. Concerning the preparations and burial rituals of the Basotho, Ashton (1952:102) has this to say: 'preparations for burial were begun at the earliest opportunity. According to tradition, the corpse was placed in a crouching position, knees drawn up to the chin and hands clasped in front, and it was tied with grass ropes. If rigor mortise had already set in, the sinews had to be cut, so that the limbs could be bent. The body was washed, dressed, wrapped loosely in a black ox-hide, and lightly bound with another grass rope. Sechefo (sa.6) also adds that the dead body for interment was wound up in an ox-hide, bound with ropes of the 'moli' grass and placed "sitting up" in the grave so as to be able to rise up instantly on the day when it would be called to do so. Again, Gill (1993: 58) also has this to add:

At the grave, the body, which was positioned to face the direction of the primeval *Nts'oana-tsatsi* or the rising sun, that is northeast, was usually wrapped in a black ox-hide from a fleshly slaughtered beast.

During burial, Sechefo (sa.6) says that a few grains of the seeds of *mabele* (kaffir corn), occasionally maize, sugar cane, pumpkin seeds and a tuft of ordinary dog grass twisted into a tiny ring were thrown beside the body in the grave. His or her snuffbox, if any, was also placed at the side of the body. Lesaoana Manyeli (1992:40) also adds beans, fruits and weapons and preferred objects of the dead person to the burial objects. Ashton (1952:106) also says that a few beads, proper

to the deceased's clan were also buried with the deceased. And that a man's milking pot and thong and a woman's stirring rod and porridge stick used to be placed in the grave, but that this is no longer done. Laydevant (1952:72) also adds, thatch offered to build a hut, tobacco to chew or smoke. On certain occasions sacrifices or libation of beer were offered so that they would have food and drink and keep away from the living. Lesaoana Manyeli (1995:116) again adds wheat and sorghum to the burial items.

## Rituals After Burial

After burial, all those who went to the burial ground returned by the same route and washed their hands with water mixed with some herbs for purification before entering the house for the communal meal. Sechefo (sa.8) says that on returning home after the burial, all the men who handled or touched anything about the grave should wash their hands immediately outside the hut of the deceased, with water mixed with the slimy juice of the wild aloes from the mountain. Likewise, the implements that were used were washed in the same mixture. This purification act is followed by the communal meal after burial. Lesaoana Manyeli (1995:117) also adds that all the participants of the burial were obliged to wash their hands with the water mixed with shredded leaves of wild aloes before they shared the sacrificial meal. And that in the event of the meat of this immolated animal being left over had to be buried before the sun rose on the following day, that today this obligation is no more binding. Laydevant (1952:73) also says:

At burials, an ox was slaughtered and it had to be eaten during the night before sunrise. Just before the rising of the sun, the entire village gathered together, each person holding in his hand a little chyme from the animal's stomach, near the grave. As the first rays of the sun shot over the horizon, they cast the chyme on the grave and said all-together "U RE ROBALLE" . . . sleep in peace for us.

A day after burial, another important ritual that follows is the cutting of the hair. It is an important obligation for all mourners. Sechefo (sa.9) says that all the family and nearest relatives of the deceased assembled at the hut of the deceased for the hair cutting, beginning with the immediate heir and proceeding to the least of the family. All hair clipped should be swept up together with a broom and then collected into one heap without losing any. The heap of hair was buried in the ground or concealed under a heavy stone. The smearing of the deceased's hut was done at this time. He adds that the wearing of the 'thapo' or 'mourning veil' followed after the cutting of hair. In the primitive times a slender tiny rope twisted out of the *moli* or 'rush' leaves was worn around the head or the

neck in the case of younger children. This served the same purpose as the mourning veil of today. In addition they observed a number of taboos to separate them from the normal social life.

The funeral ended with the lifting of mourning by taking off the *thapo*. Sechefo (sa.10) says that when the mourning period had ended, the immediate heir called the family and relatives together to take off the mourning *ho rola thapo* or to remove the ban from the family *ho losa khutsana*. On this occasion he slaughtered a beast for the essential and binding function.

### **A Brief Discussion of the Similarities and Differences in the Basotho Funeral Rites in the Past with those in Africa and Worldwide**

There are some funeral ritual practices in other parts of Africa and worldwide which are similar to those of the Basotho. It would be interesting to note a few examples here. Van Gennep (1977:153-154), says,

Since the deceased must take a voyage, his survivors are careful to equip him with all the necessary material objects - such as clothing, food, arms, and tools - as well as those of Magico-religious nature - amulets, passwords, signs etc - which will assure him of a safe journey or crossing and a favourable reception as they would a living traveller, . . . The Lapps, for instance, took care to kill a reindeer on the grave so that the deceased might ride it during the difficult journey to his final destination.

He goes on to talk about how relatives provide money for the deceased's journey and how this practice was found among ancient Greeks, in France and among the Slavs and the Japanese. It could be noted that the provision of a coin for the deceased's journey was also practised among the Akan in Ghana. He goes on to say that among the Lushae tribe of Assam, the deceased was dressed in his best clothes and tied in sitting position on a scaffold of bamboo, while next to him were placed the tools and weapons of his sex. A pig, a goat and a dog were killed and all relatives, friends and neighbours shared the meat; the deceased was also given food and drink. He adds that at night, he was placed in a grave dug next to the house. His nearest relatives said goodbye and asked him to prepare everything for those who would follow and join him.

And the soul, accompanied by those of the pig, the goat and the dog without whom it would not find its way - went dressed and equipped to the land of *mi-thi-hua*, where life was hard and painful (1977:162).

The Lo Dagaa of Ghana, according to Goody (1962:147), also buried the grandparents inside the courtyard of the house they had helped to build. As already



mentioned above, Ashton talking about Basotho burial rite also says that the graves of the senior members of the family were sited near the entrance of the kraal. The Akan of Ghana also used to bury the family heads in the house in the precolonial era. Concerning the burial of chiefs and kings interviewees said that Basotho bury their kings and important chiefs at Thaba Bosiu and that in the olden days one or two warriors were killed to guard the chief or king on his journey to the ancestral world. Similarly the Akan of Ghana bury their kings and chiefs in the royal cemetery *barim*. (Rattray 1955:133-135). In the olden days they used to bury the kings and the important chiefs with some slaves, wives and children to go and serve them in the ancestral world. (Rattray 1954:104-107). With regard to the Ila in the Nanzela area of Bwila, funerals of chiefs used to involve human sacrifices to accompany the corpse to the land of the dead. Some slaves, wives and children used to be buried with the chief to go and serve him (Zuesse 1979:89).

It would be recalled that among the Basotho, when the cadaver was taken out of the hut for burial, it never went through the door, but through a hole cut in the wall so that its soul would not find the door when it returned to visit its former abode as contended by Laydevant, Ashton and Gill above.

The Lo Wiili of Northern Ghana also followed similar procedure. Goody (1962:77) has this to say about it, "For the dead body, however, a special hole had formerly to be made in the wall of the courtyard belonging to the set of rooms in which he died. On the other hand, the bodies of young infants were passed over the top of the courtyard wall, . . ." He goes further to say: "The removal of the corpse by a special exit is of widespread occurrence, and Taylor has associated this procedure with the attempt to prevent the ghost from finding his way back to the house and harming those he left behind. In its most extreme form this belief involved the abandonment or destruction of the house itself". According to Laydevant (1952:72), if a Mosotho died in his own hut in the village, it was abandoned. It is also interesting to note that Van Gennep (1977:156) also says that the Haida also took the corpse out of the house through a hole in the wall. We find that in all instances above the reasons for not taking the corpse out for burial through the entrance is to prevent the deceased from revisiting his/her former abode to harm the living.

The burial rites of the Basotho also have similarities in Africa. Goody (1962:144) says that the Lo Daga of Northern Ghana bury their dead men lying on their right side facing east so that the rising sun will tell them to prepare for hunt or for the farm, like in the case of the Basotho who buried their dead sitting up in the grave facing the primeval *Nts'oana-tsatsi*, the rising sun, so as to be able to rise up instantly on the day it would be called to do so (Sechefo sa: 6 and Gill 1993:58). It will also interest readers to know that washing of hands after burial is practised in Ghana among the Akan, especially in the rural areas.

## **The Findings of the Researcher on the Modern Basotho Funerals: Continuity and Change**

In order to ascertain the continuity and discontinuity in the modern Basotho funeral rituals the researcher conducted some interviews and disseminated some questionnaires to collect data on the issue.

Data collected through questionnaires called for critical analytical approach to interpret them effectively. The approach here is a combination of phenomenological and hermeneutical analysis of the data collected.

### ***Mode of Distribution***

The following areas were considered in distributing the questionnaires:

Sex: male and female

Age groups: from 20 years and above

Religious denomination: Christian and Traditional believer

Residence: urban, semi urban and rural (in this case Maseru is classified as urban and the district centres as semi urban; the others are rural areas.)

Marital status: married, single, widowed, divorced and separated.

### ***Mode of Response to the Questionnaires***

The questionnaires retrieved and accepted as properly filled constituted 55% (83) of the total number distributed. The ratio of male-female respondents was 53% males to 47% females. This could reflect the major role the males play in funerals in Lesotho. On the religion of the respondents, two areas were considered namely: Christian and Traditional believers. Traditional believer here implies citizens who are not Christians and do not belong to any foreign religion but live by traditional ethics and religious beliefs and practices.

### ***Funeral Rituals***

The funeral rites in this study, like in the literature survey begin with rituals performed for a person on the point of death, in other words somebody who is seriously sick. The responses to the questionnaires show the family members' concern for the dying member. Item 1 - a sheep is slaughtered to appease the ancestors - 63% - shows the people's concern for the ancestors and the fact that they are responsible for the welfare of the living. Item 2 - a traditional doctor is called to help, 55% - reveals the family members concern for the dying person. The healing process may imply the use of herbs, roots and sometimes divination. Item 3 - family members meet to pray for the sick person, 47% (14) - usually accompanies item 1 - the ritual sacrifice.

### ***Burial Rituals***

The questionnaire response revealed that burial is the most outstanding rite

performed for the dead. It reveals African belief in life after death. Item 1 - anointing the body with special oil - carries 50% of the respondents. This ritual might prevail among some clans (Ashton 1952:102). Item 2 - relatives pay last respect, 93% - is a popular ritual among the people. Item 3 - a beast is killed and the hide is used, as blanket for the deceased - 100% - is the most popular response. It reveals the people's belief in life after death. Item 4 - the corpse is lowered into the grave after a speech by the local chief, 67% - is a popular response and could be practised by most of the people. Item 5 - covering the grave according to order of seniority, 90% could also be a general practice of the people. Item 6 - the corpse is laid to face the east - 60% - also indicates that it is a popular ritual among the people. Some precolonial practices such as burying people with such material as food items, thatch, snuff box etc. and in round holes in a squatting position have been stopped.

### ***Rituals After Burial***

After burial all those who went to the burial ground returned to the funeral hut or house through the same path or route. Item 1 - washing of hands - carries 100% of the respondents. It implies that it is a general practice. It is a purification rite cleansing the people from any contact with the corpse.

The second item is the communal meal, 100%. Thus it is also a general practice. This communal meal - farewell meal for the deceased - they believe, is eaten with the ancestors. Item 3 - the cutting of hair, 93% - is a general practice. All bereaved members of the family and relatives cut their hair a day after the burial. This ritual is followed by item 4 - the wearing of 'thapo' (a black strip of cloth). It also carries 93% of the respondents. Item 2, is a rite bidding the deceased farewell and a peaceful stay in the land of the dead. Items 3 and 4 are also signs of mourning and segregation from normal social life. The last two rituals go with a number of taboos depriving the mourners of normal social life.

### ***The Postulated Effect of Burial Rituals on the Deceased***

The first item tells us that there would be peaceful rest for the deceased. It represents 53% of the respondents. The second item - 40% - says that it enables the deceased to be welcomed in the ancestral world. The third item - 55% - says that it makes the deceased and the ancestors show concern for the living relatives. And the last item - 90% - says, 'so that the deceased does not cause any havoc to the living relatives.' The last item sums up the reasons for taking the trouble to go through the above rituals. It is done to avoid punishment from the deceased and the ancestors in general.

### ***Postulated Sources of Punishments for Failing to Perform the Rituals***

There were closed ended questions in which the respondent were required to

choose from four possible sources of punishment suggested by the researcher, namely: God, Ancestors, evil powers and society. Out of these only two were chosen, namely: God 20% and Ancestors 80%

Concerning the postulated type of punishment for failure to perform the rituals the respondents were required to select from four possible responses suggested by the researcher, namely: death, disease, poverty and famine. The responses were: death 67%, disease 70%, poverty 50% and famine 40%. Here the percentage was calculated on unit basis.

### ***Interview Results***

Thirty-six people were interviewed and like the questionnaires, the results revealed that even though people generally claim that the old traditional practices have been stopped and that things have changed due to missionary influence, the researcher believes that it is the same old wine in a new bottle. Pula (1990:339) has this to say on this issue:

The experience of the balimo is a very significant religious value among the Basotho, it should not just be suppressed. In fact the missionaries tried to destroy it, but they have failed: because the Basotho continue to give different names to the practice and keep it going.

Thus most of the traditional religious practices have been given social (secular) interpretations probably to avoid censure from the Christian religious leaders. However, social or secular interpretations are not discarded.

### ***Rituals for a Dying Person***

The interviewees confirmed that there used to be a special ritual for a dying person suspected to have been bewitched or being called by the ancestors. They claimed that a sheep or a goat was immolated according to the instructions of a diviner - to appease the ancestors on behalf of the dying person. This ritual may still be practised in some rural areas because there was divided opinion on whether it is still practised or not. While 60% claimed that it has been stopped, 40% said that it is still in practice in the rural areas.

### ***Rituals for a Dead Person***

The assertions of the interviewees on the rituals for a dead person are not different from the findings in the literature survey and the results of the questionnaires on the subject matter. The interviewees confirmed that when a person dies, preparations are made for vigil - *tebelo*. They said that it is a custom that the corpse should be brought to the house for this ritual before burial. They added that the beast for immolation is killed only when the corpse has been brought to

the house, not before or after burial. It suggests that its killing has something to do with the dead person and not merely for feeding the people. They added that the beast for immolation could be a cow or a sheep, according to the strength of the family and the social standing of the deceased. The sex of the beast should correspond with the sex of the deceased. The skin or hide serves as a blanket for the deceased and in the old days it was wrapped round the deceased. They also confirmed that the burying of the deceased with many items such as clothes, food, grains, weapons, tools and even thatch has been completely stopped. The researcher did not witness any such cases in his personal observations.

They confirmed also that the corpse is put in the grave facing the east. And the casting of sod in order of seniority starts from the sons, but the next of kin should be the first to cast the sod. Each male member of the family throws a spade-full of soil into the grave. After that friends and sympathizers could join to cover it neatly. They also confirmed the need to return to the funeral house through the same route, wash hands in water into which has been put shredded leaves of an aloe plant for purification from contact with the corpse, and join in the sacrificial meal. They added that no bone from the sacred meal is given to dogs. The bones are collected and burnt later. They believe that this meal is taken with the ancestors particularly the deceased. Apart from the cutting of hair and the wearing of the *thapo* a day after burial as signs of mourning, clothes of the deceased are distributed among the family members a month later, when the *thapo* is cut to lift the mourning. On this occasion too a beast is immolated and the clothes are washed in a stream, purified with water into which has been put shredded aloe leaves. Others claimed that the blood of the immolated beast is also used to purify the clothes by sprinkling them with it. The widow, they asserted, continues mourning her late husband for six months or even a year. When her mourning period is over, she goes to her parents to take off the mourning dress and a beast is again immolated for the occasion.

### ***The Postulated Effect of the Rituals***

The interviewees confirmed the effects given in the responses to the questionnaires that when the rituals are performed the deceased would rest peacefully, meet with the ancestors and show concern for the living family. Failure to perform the rites, however, would result in calamities such as death, disease, famine and poverty befalling the family. They asserted that they believe that the ancestors are the sole cause of disasters resulting from failure to perform the rites.

### **The Literature Survey**

The study of the literary works of others on the subject matter cited above - both foreign and indigenous scholars - reveal that the traditional and most modern Basotho, like most other Africans, regard funeral as a critical stage in the rite of passage that calls for ritual acts to cement relationship with the spiritual powers

for success and harmony as they pass through the trying stage. Because they do so they conduct ceremonial rites for this and other stages in the passage of life. All these ceremonial rites are dotted with rituals that reveal their belief in life after death and the spiritual world. It is therefore obvious that Basotho ritual practices at funerals had and have religious connotations. Mbiti (1975:19) points out the African religiousness revealed by ceremonial rites of the rites of passage when he says:

Africans like to celebrate life. They celebrate events in the life of the individual and the community. These include occasions like the birth of a child, the giving of names, circumcision and other initiation ceremonies, marriage, funerals, harvest festivals, praying for rain, and many others. Some of these rituals and ceremonies are done on a family basis, but others are observed by the whole community. They have a lot of religious meaning, and through their observation religious ideas are perpetuated and passed on to the next generations.

The study also reveals that most of the Basotho ritual practices at funerals fall in line with other African ritual practices both in the past and at present, for example washing of hands after burial, the wearing of thapo and the cutting of hair to mention but three examples.

It also reveals that some of the practices are more or less widespread, i.e. killing of a beast for a dead person in connection with his journey to the next world, washing of hands after burial, provision of material for the deceased's journey to the ancestral world, and the ancient practice of taking the corpse out through a hole in the wall for burial. There are others, however, which seem peculiar to the Basotho such as casting the sod in special order during burial. It is interesting to note that the widely spread in African and the purely Basotho practices; all have some religious connotations and hence indicate that the Basotho are traditionally religious.

Another important finding from the literature study is that the *balimo*-ancestors- are the custodians of their traditional religion and their socio-cultural life. The Basotho fear and revere them; and they appeal to them at stress situations especially at occasions of the rite of passage like funeral. There are several instances when the people appeal to them during the ceremonial ritual of the rites of passage.

Again there was no mention of burying the dead with several items including food, tools and weapons in the questionnaire and interview response. This shows that such practices have been stopped. Though there are no more crouching positions in the burial as of old, the facing of the east has been maintained.

The corpse lies stretched in a coffin facing the east where the Basotho believe to have originated.

## **The Influence of Foreign Religion and Culture**

The study of the questionnaires and the interview results revealed that both Christianity and Western culture have influenced the socio-cultural practices of the Basotho. The statistical data, collected and analysed, revealed that 98% of the people contacted were Christians belonging to one denomination or other. This may reflect the high percentage of Christians in Lesotho population and hence the degree of its influence on the traditional cultural practices is expected to be high.

The questionnaire results revealed that most of the ritual practices at funerals, described in the literature review, are still in practice. However, in their interpretation, emphasis was laid on their social aspects. For example the immolation of a beast during funeral was given social interpretation such as 'for entertainment.'

What the researcher is driving at is that, among other interpretations, emphasis was laid on the purely social aspects instead of on the religious aspects as the literature review reveals. For example, Ashton (1952:102) says that in modern times burial follows the European fashion in a coffin. He adds that ordinarily, the corpse is not ritually purified in any way, though among important families it is washed with a lotion prepared from various plants, which cleanses the body and is believed to protect it from witchcraft. Close relatives of the deceased, excluding the immediate family, do this work of laying out the body and a doctor should supervise it. He adds that a corpse is generally believed to be unclean. Hence those who handled it must be cleansed by washing with medicines and the hut occupied by the corpse should be purified by fumigation, otherwise crops would fail. The researcher, therefore, believes that attempts to give purely social interpretations are probably meant to avoid censure from their Christian religious leaders who discourage such beliefs and practices. However, the interpretations of other ritual practices revealed that the core of their ritual acts lies in the fear and reverence for their ancestors whom they seek to appease or propitiate in order to bring sanity into the society and to prepare the deceased for life after death.

## **Personal Observation**

The personal observations revealed that even though almost every Mosotho is a Christian, they still keep to their traditional ritual practices that reveal their traditional religious beliefs. This means that the traditional religion is inseparable from the socio-cultural life of the people. Mbiti (1990:2) says, "A person

cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security..." By this assertion Mbiti implies that it is not normal in the context of the African corporate life for one to dissociate oneself from the socio – cultural and religious life of one's community. In the light of this Kiernan (1995:75), talking about the impact of white settlement on African Traditional Religion contends that it is inconceivable that people should abandon their religious systems for another so long as it is anchored in a stable and satisfying way of life. And an alternative religious outlook exercises attraction only when social organization is severely disrupted that individuals become dislocated from it. This explains why, in the early stages of missionary contact, only a handful of refugees, outcasts and the discontented of African societies went over to Christianity. However in the so-called modern Africa where African corporate life is giving way to Western individualism, people can dissociate themselves from some African cultural practices and it does not necessarily mean that it is an African norm to do so.

Again the immolation of beasts during funeral reveals the stronghold of ritual sacrifice as a religious act of the Basotho to appease the ancestors and the spirits concerned for successful and happy life here and now.

One area where the traditional ritual practices thrive most unadulterated among the Basotho is their funeral rite. Observations revealed that the so-called Christian burial rites were mixed with traditional burial rites. There was no funeral, the researcher attended, which was without such rituals as an immolation of a beast, the provision of a farewell meal after burial, the casting of sod in order of seniority during burial, the washing of hands in basins of water into which were shredded the leaves of an aloe plant, the cutting of hair and the wearing of '*thapo*' a day after the burial among other things. This shows the people's attachment to their past tradition and religion. It also shows the importance they attach to funeral as a rite of passage, which must not be traversed without the necessary rituals.

The researcher believes that even though most Basotho claim to be Christians, like many other Africans, they are traditionalists at heart. They cannot profess to be true Christians because Christianity is European acculturated (oriented) and hence discourages those cultural practices. They cannot be truly African traditionalist because they refuse to adhere fully to the traditional religion. An African cannot deny his Africanness.

Even though Christianity is widespread, it is European oriented and does not fully meet the religious expectations of the African and for that matter the Basotho. They can cope better with the tension of life if they could feel free to observe their religious ritual practices, which they obviously do secretly or in disguise (Pula 1990:332).

Does Van Gennep's analysis help us to gain an academically valid, better understanding of the mechanism of Basotho past and present funerals and their



social and religious functions?

Using Van Gennep's mechanism above in the Basotho funeral rites, the mourning period is the transitional period for the bereaved family members and they enter it through rites of separation – separation from normal social life and leave it through rites of reintegration – incorporation into normal social life. The period of mourning is also regarded as corresponding with the transitional period of the deceased's incorporation into the world of the dead – a belief in life after death.

How soon individual mourners leave this transition or mourning period depends on the closeness of their relationship with the deceased. For instance in the case of the Basotho while members of the community may mourn the deceased on the day of burial only, the family members and relatives will have to mourn from the day of death to the day the *thapo* would be taken off or the mourning would be officially lifted. In the case of the widow, as contended by Van Gennep (1977:147), the transition period for a Basotho widow extended up to one year in the past and six months in the present time. The reason for the reduction from one year to six months may be economic. These days, most wives are government workers or are engaged in income generating ventures, which would not permit a year holiday like of old when wives were generally housewives.

Again the period from mortuary to burial is regarded as transitional period, and all the stipulated rituals performed to get the corpse ready for burial such as washing, dressing, applying oil; putting the corpse into the coffin and finally into the grave, slaughtering a beast for a farewell meal and for the provision of a blanket for the deceased, and provision of burial material such as food items, weapons, thatch, snuff box etc. of old are all rites of separation, severing all relationship with the deceased. In this case all physical contact with the deceased is cut and it is done once and for all to incorporate the deceased into the ancestral world.

The provision of weapons, food, crops, thatch etc. and in the case of a king killing a warrior or two to guard him is a rite incorporating the deceased king into the ancestral world. It would be noted that it is believed that these items help the deceased to get settled in the land of the dead and therefore serve as rites of incorporation into the ancestral world. The washing of hands and the tools after the burial with water into which are put shredded aloe leaves, the smearing of the house with ash and the washing and sprinkling of the clothes of the deceased with water and in some cases with the blood of an immolated beast are all purification and separation rites which purify and separate the mourners from any contact with the corpse – regarded as unclean. The wearing of *thapo* and the cutting of hair are also rites of segregation, a sign of mourning and suspension of normal social life. Thus the bereaved members enter into mourning by suspending normal social life through those rituals reinforced with some

prohibitions and taboos.

Now, as stated by Van Gennep, the extension of the transition or liminal period – mourning period depends on the social stand of the deceased. Thus a king or an important chief's death in Lesotho will demand a public mourning and a public holiday. The transition period will be longer. Deceased chiefs and kings are usually kept much longer in the house for more rituals by virtue of their position than an ordinary person and probably because chiefs and kings from far and near may come and pay homage to the deceased king.

The kings and the important chiefs of the Basotho are buried at a special royal cemetery at Thaba-Busiu like the *barim* among the Akan of Ghana

It would be noted that both the interviewee and questionnaire responses to the effects of the rituals cited above were: so that the deceased may rest peacefully, be welcomed by the deceased relatives and to prevent the deceased from causing any havoc to the living relatives. These are the postulated effects of the funeral rituals on the deceased, which the researcher considers as rites of incorporating the deceased into the land of the dead and hence religious rituals.

It is also interesting to note that the interviewees and the questionnaire respondents gave possible types of punishments envisaged for failure to perform the rituals concerned as follows: death, disease, poverty, and famine. They believe that if they fail to perform the rituals the ancestors will punish them but if they perform them they will be blessed with prosperity and long life. Thus they look up to the ancestors for success here and now not hereafter.

The rite of lifting the mourning as outlined by Van Gennep is a rite of reintegration of the mourners into the society. The communal meals involved are rites of incorporation and their purpose is to reunite all the surviving members of the family or the clan and sometimes with the deceased as a way of bringing back the spirit of the deceased into the house.

It is therefore evident that the Basotho funeral rituals have religious connotations.

## Conclusion

It is evident therefore that one way of identifying the religious connotations of ritual practices at funerals is to view them from the perspective of the rites of passage.

Rites of passage involve change of conditions resulting from the movement from one state in life to another, which does not occur without some effects in the life of the society and the individuals involved. The dramatic changes in the rites of passage demand specific rituals to reduce any harmful effect. Such attempts to ward off the possible harmful effects take the form of purification, propitiation, pacification or thanksgiving rituals. These objectives are achieved through immolation of beasts, wearing of charms - amulets and talismans - drink-

ing of medicines and incision and or fumigation.

All such appeals go to one's object of worship or the transcendental powers. Ritual acts in such cases are therefore religious acts. It is at such dramatic points in the passage of life that humans realise their nothingness and hence seek help, support and protection from the spiritual world against untimely failures due to spiritual, witchcraft and sorcery influences. Onuh's (1992:142) assertion on rites of passage also throws some light on the religiousness of ritual acts. He says,

In all spheres, be it on the human or on the cosmic level, the change occasions a period of anxiety and uncertainty as well as danger both for the subject of the change and for all those around. As a result, these changes are marked and accompanied by ceremonies and rituals, whose purpose is to ensure that the transitions are successfully made and to cushion the disturbances involved.

If the rituals involved in the above contention aim at mitigating any attendant evil and disturbing effects then they are no doubt appeals to the transcendental powers for help and support. It may interest readers to note that in African perspective there is no strict dichotomy between the sacred and the secular and Mbiti (1970:2) says, "wherever the African is there is his religion: he carries it to the field where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop: he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony..." And the Basotho follow up graduation ceremonies with parties, which most people deem obligatory because to them it is a means of showing gratitude to their *balimo* ancestors for having helped them to complete their studies successfully. To the Basotho any major success in life must be understood, as a blessing by the *balimo*, and there must be a special celebration for it. (Pula 1990:333). Highlighting on the ceremonial acts that punctuate the rite of passage, Van Gennepe (1977:3) says,

Among semi civilized peoples such acts are enveloped in ceremonies, since to the semi civilized mind no act is entirely free of the sacred. In such societies every change in a person's life involves actions and reactions between sacred and profane - actions and reactions to be regulated and guarded so that society as a whole will suffer no discomfort or injury.

These actions and reactions, the researcher believes, are interaction between the sacred and the profane; and it is the interaction between the sacred and the profane that makes it necessary to establish rituals to deal with the problems involved and thus establish harmonious atmosphere with the transcendence for

success in the community involved. It would be pertinent to comment here that though Van Gennep's contention above suggests that ceremonial acts that punctuate the rites of passage are attributed to semi civilized people it would be noted that the civilized people are not without ritual acts during such occasions. Allport (1967:21-22) says,

Probably no-people on earth, primitive or civilized, believe that incantation, ritual, or prayer will resuscitate a corpse. Yet, as Parsons has pointed out, in no society does death lack ritual observances far in excess of the utilitarian need for disposing of the corpse and for making other practical adjustments. The strong emotions caused by bereavement have everywhere resulted in the development of religious ceremonies that are engaged in simply because minimal practical adjustments are felt to be inadequate. Thus, we cannot concede that funeral ceremonies, whether in the primitive or in the civilized world, are the result merely of an unscientific view of death.

Staple (1981:169) also says that it is the belief in, and concepts of the ancestors that legitimates and shapes the rites of passage. The concept of reality that belief in the ancestors implies forms the matrixes in which rituals have meaning. Thus the rituals themselves are symbolic reflections of aspects of the way reality itself is believed to be constituted. Hence the rituals reflect the religious beliefs of the people concerned.

Funerals also mark another turning point through life. Death is a point at which one leaves this material world to join the spiritual - ancestral-world. Funeral is a ceremonial rite for this passage of life. It is also a critical point punctuated with ritual acts that reveal a people's outlook to death and belief in life after death. African funeral rituals, and for that matter Basotho funeral rituals, give transcendental meaning to death. The practice of providing a blanket and a farewell meal for the deceased are acts that reveal their belief that something of the dead lives on after death. Zuesse (1979:4) asserts that the motive power behind all religious behaviour is the yearning for and experience of transcendental meaning. In this light, looking at the Basotho funeral rituals enumerated above, it is needless to say that they reveal the transcendental aspirations or religiousness of the Basotho.

It is the contention of the researcher that the Basotho ritual practices, at funerals traced under this study, are religious rituals that portray the the Basotho traditional religion, which is not different from African traditional religion in general.

It would be noted therefore that the traditional religious practices of the Basotho as revealed by their ritual practices at funerals, indicate that the Basotho

traditional religion is not a religion of 'salvation,' for life hereafter, but a religion of structure-for salvation here and now because it aims at bringing sanity into this material world of ours. The response to questionnaires and interviews showed that they performed the rites in order to get blessings and avoid disaster and punishment from the *balimo* their ancestors. It also embodies social and religious ethics that aim at correcting social evils. The African believes that life here is the replica of life hereafter – life in the ancestral world, which they hope to join after leaving this world – after death.

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