

Introduction  
organisms or other  
human beings who



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## **Introduction**

Scientifically, death refers to a point in which biological functions of a once living organism become terminated. It could simply be referred to as a cessation of living of a certain biological being, in this case, a human being. The word itself has its origin from the Old English language. Further, it comes from a reconstruction of analysis by etymology of the *dauhtaz* of a Proto-Germanic origin.

All living things, inclusive of human beings, have to succumb to death. In humans, however, there seems to be various causes other than the normal biological aging or the so-called senescence in the technical term. The latter is mostly common in wild animals. Nowadays, human beings do succumb to their inevitable end from such causes as suicide, homicide, war, accidents and malnutrition. There is also the uncommon predation by other living organisms or other human beings who are crazy enough to prey on fellow human beings (GrowthHouse, 2005).

Therefore, no matter how lucky a person can get to survive the many years on this earth; eventually the person succumbs to old age and goes to an unknown afterlife, if at all it exists. However, it is intriguing to note that the proper declaration of whether a person is still alive or dead gets a bit complicated because of some medical reason. A person, declared to be clinically dead, might legally be alive. On the other hand, a person might be pronounced legally dead from the fact that the person is brain dead even if the victims' lungs are still working. Such a person on the contrary is still

clinically alive. Unfortunately, however, the law is just the way it is and so we have no choice but to take the legal option in such matters.

This, therefore, just shows the paradox surrounding this issue (Ashkenazi, 1988).

## **The Luhya**

Away from all the medical and legal terminology to a certain tribe in the Western part of the Republic of Kenya. This tribe is called the Luhya tribe and is one of the 42 tribes of the Republic of Kenya. This Bantu tribe is believed to have migrated from the now Egypt and most of its cultural practices are shared amongst its 18 sub tribes including some of the Bantus'.

## **Death According to the Luhya**

Despite the early introduction of the Christian religion in the early 1902, most Luhya families especially in the rural parts of Kenya still practice their traditional death ceremonies. This has led to most of the tribes mixing the Christian religion with their traditional practices thus leading to syncretism (Ayot, 1996).

This phenomenon has led to a continually weakening of the Christian faith.

## **Superstitions Surrounding Death**

The Luhya have various superstitions with regard to death. This is from their profound believe that an outcome of something or just an undertaking that is very important and which might happen in a future that is not so far could be easily told through various portents or omens.

One of the most common presages in this tribe includes the sighting of an antelope. This to the Luhya people implies that the person will be very lucky on his or her journey. Unfortunately however should one sight a night owl while on a journey, then that is a signal of a looming death in the family. This harmful omen has to be driven away therefore by use of a firebrand. On the same note, should an owl be heard near one's homestead, it would as well be a signal of a looming death in that homestead and therefore a firebrand has to be again used to drive the owl away. This seems to be the only sure way of averting the death in that family. Other superstitions regarding death in this tribe include a belief that if an excessively crying child without any probable cause is an expression of a looming death to the parents.

On the other hand, a woman climbing the roof of a hut is taken to imply that she has a desire to kill her husband. Other superstitions that are more common even in many cultures across the world are trying as much as possible to avoid mentioning death to a severely sick person. Even if the person seems to eventually die given a short time, the Luhya customs strictly prohibit any person from making utterances that might seem to be implying that the said person will die.

## **Death Ceremony**

In the Luhya tribe, there was always enough time that was devoted towards taking care of the sick and in the unfortunate event of occurrence of a death, they always had enough time to bury their dead.

Occurrence of death in a family was always followed by a ceremony to remember the departed person. The great ceremony that was usually

performed in the home of a deceased person used to take up to 40 days. This is because this tribe always did hold funerals with lots of high regards. To the tribe, their belief in spirits and animisms led to them trying to their level best to please the spirits of their ancestors. This is clearly from the fact that a departed person has automatically joined the ancestral world and the Luhya tribe really fears displeasing their ancestors.

During the death ceremony or the mourning period of 40 days, sacrifices would often be made to please the spirits. Although due to influence from other cultures and general change in cultural practices these sacrifices are still made even though the ceremony takes only one week nowadays. Some other practices like uprooting of a big tree so as to bury an influential man in the society are rarely practiced now days. However, the one thing that is still largely practiced despite the high presence of Christianity is the burring of the dead either on their sides while facing east where the sun rises or seated upright. Additionally, the grave has to be always 3 -4 feet deep. All these practices are done with one aim of making sure that the ancestors and the departed spirit is well pleased. Another tradition that is still in practice is the thrusting of a spear on the grave of a person who was a warrior in the society.

Nowadays however, this honor is given to any person in the society that was fighting in any way for example through political means for the rights of the Luhya people.

## **Rituals Surrounding the Death**

It is mandatory that a bull is slaughtered during the Luhya funeral ceremony. Along with it, several chickens are usually slaughtered to feed the mourners. Some pieces of the meat from the bull would then get roasted in a ceremony to please the ancestors and the departed spirit. In this ceremony, only the elderly in the family and the clan that forms that sub tribe of the Luhya would partake of the meal. Children and women would not be allowed to eat the roasted meat or in more know terms the barbecue. It is also customary that if death has occurred in a certain Luhya family, then all the immediate members in that family have a clean shave.

The shaving of the hair can be extended to the extended family if at all they live next to each other. This is because in most cases, the cousins would rarely consider themselves as cousins but would most likely consider themselves as brothers and sister. In that sense, extend families that tend to live next to each other would eventually start functioning as one family with any elder , member in that family being the head of that family.

If the dead individual happens to be a man past 18 years of age and had not yet been married, the Luhya believe that the dead person has to be punished for not making enough efforts towards ensuring the continuity of his tribe. It is almost a crime for any man as long as he has successfully passed through the circumcision ceremony to die before having furthered an offspring somewhere. This is because a clan might actually size to exist due to the death of a man in the society. The main reason is that the Luhya tribe believes that male children are the true members of the tribe and not women.

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As a matter of fact after a lady has been married of to another tribe she automatically seizes to be a member of the Luhya tribe. Therefore dire consequences which involve the piecing of the scrotal suck of a man are performed prior to his burial if he died before producing any known offspring. This procedure is performed one night prior to his burial.

Again this is performed so as to ensure a reduction of anger carried by the ancestors on the failure of one of their descent (Were, 1967).

## **The Bonfire**

During the whole mourning period especially before the burial of a deceased person, a bonfire is usually light. 2 days prior to the burial of a deceased person especially if the person was fully grown and was capable of making his or her own decisions, some matters relating to debts that a deceased person had are discussed.

At the bonfire, it is agreed on who is to pay for any debts that the deceased was holding prior to their dead. Additionally, if someone owed the dead person that is usually the best time to let the people know especially the next of kin. This is because the Luhya tradition forbids that one should complain of debt that a deceased person had after the person has been buried.

Of course with most people opting to write their wills, this practice is has greatly diminished. Instead, the bonfire is only used to keep the mourners warm at night during the mourning period.

## **Effect of the Changing Times**

With most of the Luhya population having moved to larger cities of Nairobi, Mombasa and other great cities across East Africa and the world over, the 1 week ceremony has become unpractical let alone the 40 days ceremony. Therefore especially due to the related pressures of working and other commitments in life, these burial ceremonies would always take 1 week unless if the deceased was very influential in the society for example the death of the form Vice President of the Republic of Kenya, the Late Kijana Wamalwa.

Most of the Luhya's living far away would only attend the official burial day and again return to commemorate the 40th day after the burial ceremony. Another effect of the changing times is the fact that the Luhya tribe initially rarely talked of harmful acts that had been done by the dead. However nowadays, they are more open to clearly lay out the life of a departed person with few exaggerations.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, from the various superstitions and myths present in this tribe, the Luhya people, just like any other person out there, dread death. This tribe believes that death is as a result of displeasing the ancestors or having come in contact with harmful omens. On the contrary, death is inevitable to each and every human being. It ought to be embraced if it comes along. Human beings are probably the only animals who are nowadays in a position to have some form of understanding towards the mortal nature of life. Therefore, we humans ought to have an understanding that as much as we all have wishes as to where we are going after death, no one knows for sure.

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However, one way or another we will all be dead one day (Nuland, 1994). Therefore, death, as much as it impacts on the loved ones left behind, ought not to be such a vital issue. Rather, it should be embraced as an essential passage of each and every one of us (Lienhard, 1997).

Some unnecessary superstitious measures ought to be scraped off. This is because if each one knows the principal causes of death, and if one successfully manages to beat all those famous causes, then old age is always there to provide the last straw.

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