The Post-Burial Rite of Kusemendera Guwa in the Indigenous Ndau Culture in Zimbabwe: Insights on Enculturation Theology

1Tenson M. Muyambo and 2Richard S. Maposa

1African Indigenous Religions and African Theology, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University.
2Church History and Liberation Theology, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Great Zimbabwe University.

Corresponding Author: Tenson M. Muyambo

Abstract
There is a fresh paradigm about how Africans perceive their dead. The early missionaries regarded African rites as fetishistic and primitive so much that the indigenous people felt ashamed in performing and celebrating their traditions and culture. However, with the emergence of African Renaissance studies most indigenous rituals are re-surfacing with vitality. The indigenous knowledge systems of these rites de passage are gaining much currency so much that they must be incorporated in the Zimbabwean formal education. Amongst those rites is the post-burial rite of kusemendera guwa. The study examines the significance of this rite in the context of the surging theology of enculturation in Africa. Accordingly, the principal aim of the study is to expose the nature of the rite of kusemendera guwa (grace cementing) in the context of Ndau culture in Zimbabwe. The study perceives a theology of enculturation to constitute potentialities of making African Christianity authentic. The study guarantees the continuity and resilience of the indigenous rites of passage among the Ndau indigenes.

Keywords: enculturation theology, culture, education, Kusemendera Guwa, Ndau, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION
In Africa death is viewed not as an end in itself. Rather, it is regarded as a transitional rite de passage, that is, from one stage of human development to the other. When a person dies physically, one transforms to become what has been called the ‘living dead’ (Mbiti, 1969; 1975) or the ‘living timeless’ (Banana, 1991:22) metaphorically. It must be noted that the living dead are specifically revered so much that people have to perform a number of rites in order to keep in touch with their ‘living-timeless’. Those rites, inter-alia, include some burial and post-burial rites. Maposa (2011) asserts that a rite is a traditional sacrament which is performed in a socio-religious setting and could be used interchangeably with the term, ritual. Every rite or ritual has prescribed social rules and customs (Ampim, 2003). In relation to the post-burial rites, for instance, there is what is known as kurova guwa or kusemendera guwa (grace cementing). Within the Ndau culture, these post-burial rites function to confirm the interdependence between the people in the present physical world and the living-timeless abode in the perceived metaphysical world. Within the indigenous African culture, this is part of an enduring inalienable connectivity. In this study, the insight is vital in the way it has shaped how Christianity has related with African Indigenous Religion (hereinafter, AIR). In addition, the inalienable connectivity between the people and the living dead has made a great impression on how AIR has imprinted the gospel message in Africa. The ambivalent attitudes that emerged from the interface between Christianity and AIR constitute the basis of the theology of enculturation. The insight is crucial in providing the key framework of the study. The focus of the study is on the Ndau rite of kusemendera guwa.

In the context of the Ndau culture, it must be noted that makuwa (graveyard, graves) constitute sacred places because dead people, or better still the ‘living dead’ are laid to rest in such sacrosanct places. No ordinary person is allowed to mill around at makuwa except family members, or sabhuku (village head) or mambo (chief). A commoner who is found in the makuwa places is heavily fined or excommunicated from the village. In the past in general, once a person died, buried and kurova guwa rite performed, one’s guwa (grave) was forgotten in the memory of the people. The graves from then onwards were left to literally submerge with time. However, it did not mean the complete abandonment of the dead people in the dustbins of oblivion. Rather, it must be mentioned that the Ndau people continue to believe that their ‘living dead’ continue to be watchful over the existential day-to-day affairs of their kith and kins. Nzenza (2011) succinctly captures the foregoing insight through her reminiscences of childhood days singing praise songs to her vadzimu (ancestors) by participating in cultural rituals. In spite of the fact that the graves were long ‘forgotten’, but the people’s living dead within the Ndau culture continue to be remembered through some post-burial rites. One of the most visible post-burial rites done amongst the
Ndau people is the *kusemendera guwa* ritual. Accordingly, this study purports to examine the nature of the rite of *kusemendera guwa* in the context of the extent to which the Ndau indigenous culture has impacted upon Christianity. Therefore, the study will assess the vitality of enculturation theology which is at the service of African Christianity in Zimbabwe.

**FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

In order to put the research in its proper wider horizon, three important issues that provide the framework of the study will be highlighted. Those issues include the interface between indigenous culture and Christianity, enculturation theology and an emerging African Renaissance theory.

**Interface of Indigenous Culture and Christianity**

The interface between indigenous religion and Christianity started with the advent of western missionaries in Africa. In the Zimbabwean context, the Portuguese penetrated the country from the middle of the 15\(^{th}\) century (Mudenge, 1988). More sets of western missionaries made a deeper interplay in Zimbabwe alongside colonial rule. Although Zimbabwe was a British colony, it must be noted that it was the American missionaries who first established Christian missions among the Ndau people in Chipinge district. For instance, the American Board of Foreign Missions established some key mission stations at Mount Selinda and Chikore which patronised the Ndau life in a number of ways. Some Ndau people were converted to the new Christian faith. The people who were converted (makorwa) were told to renounce the forms of African life. For instance, the Ndau were told to observe the social don'ts like: drinking beer, polygamy, smoking, consulting *n'angas* (traditional healers) and venerating *vadzimu* (ancestors). The missionaries derogatorily described these indigenous forms of existential life as heathenish, fetishistic and primitive (Chavunduka, 1978). Instead, the Christian faith was perceived to be the only way towards human salvation. Thus, the western missionaries were confrontational in the way they related with indigenous culture. The Ndau people, like the rest of the Africans, regarded the new Christian spirituality with scepticism. In general, therefore, the indigenous people showed commitment to the new faith during the day but surreptitiously sought after the efficacious well-being provided by the indigenous culture by night. In light of this ambivalence, Amanze (1998:1) pays tribute to indigenous culture, thus ‘...despite the aggressive nature of the early missionaries, who called for its total eradication, it has displayed a spirit of unprecedented resilience’.

**Efficacy of Enculturation Theology**

Given the dialectical relationship which prevailed, the theology of enculturation slowly emerged in Africa. The theology of enculturation represents a process of rooting the Christian faith or earthing the gospel of Christ in the local cultures. In other words, this can be referred as contextualisation of Christianity. From the start, the interface of Christianity and indigenous culture meant for the call towards the ‘creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures’ (Shorter, 1988:11). The implication was the realisation that the Gospel should be preached in terms familiar to the local people, lest they perceive Christianity as something irrelevant to the heartbeat of indigenous existentiality (Beall, 1996).

Nevertheless, in a true process of enculturation there are no winners or losers. Rather, enculturation is a win-win state of affairs that reflects syncretic tendencies due to crossculturalism in society (Maposa, 2011). The direct implication is that Christianity and AIR are influencing each other in Africa. This is the context that the post-burial rite of *kusemendera guwa* among the Ndau is located in the study. The 'fears' that used to be attached to the deceased's grave were beginning to wane the more the Ndau mixed up with the missionaries. The dead were no longer ‘feared’ and more post-burial rites were conducted for a variety of socio-cultural and religious reasons. *Kusemendera guwa* as a post-burial rite is currently on the increase among the Ndau in Chipinge district. The ubiquity of *kusemendera guwa* rites among the Ndau people, whether done as a Christian rite or non-Christian rite, stands to endorse the vitality of the theology of enculturation for African Christianity in Zimbabwe. The dictum by the missionaries that ‘Let the dead bury their dead’ confirms the classical notion that Africans are ‘notoriously religious’ (Mbiti, 1969:01), whether in its pure form or fluid form. This insight is an enduring vis a vis the quest for an African identity in Zimbabwe today.

**African Renaissance Theory**

It is an emerging postcolonial philosophy which envisions reclaiming the glories of the African past. It posits that to think of the African life is to think of the unity of the shared perennial communitarian values. Moreover, the renaissance theory argues that a number of indigenous cultural identities, values and norms which used to be functional for society in the past can still be useful today if properly utilised because they are the building blocks of indigenous existentiality. Evidently, when applied in Christian theology, the connotation is that Christianity in Africa could become vibrant through ‘bridging back’ to indigenous culture. This bridging back is part of an interreligious dialogue (Christianity versus indigenous religion) which the study perceives may make the gospel intelligible in local milieus in Africa. Accordingly, the rite of *kusemendera guwa* is a panorama towards dialogue between Christianity and...
indigenous Ndau culture which may pave way for the emergence of an authentic African Christianity in Zimbabwe.

Methodological Issues
The study used the phenomenological approach which was anchored in the fieldwork. Cox (1996) asserts that the phenomenological method is helpful because, through its principles of epoche and eidetic intuition, it enabled the researchers to respect and investigate people’s particular institutions, social behaviour and aspects of religion like ‘insiders’. This is what Pike, cited in McCutcheon (1999:17) calls the ‘emic’ viewpoint which results from studying behaviour as from the inside of the system. The fieldwork was carried out among the Ndau of Chipinge in southeastern Zimbabwe. A sample of about thirty (30) respondents was considered for interviewing. Bess and Smith (1985:21) argued that interviews are a direct method of obtaining data through face-to-face in order to get access to what is inside a person’s head. The respondents were drawn from a population of elders, men and women of Christian and non-Christian backgrounds. This population was taken to be representative of the kind of the Ndau people. The study also benefited from literary criticism in which a number of secondar...
gratitude to fellow Africans who would have given assistance during the ritual process. In Ndau society, culture there is a proverb that says ‘Ukama igaswa hunodzadziwa nekudya.’ (Human relationship is only half done until food is provided). Evidently, the proverb is an expression of the hospitality, communalism and sanctity of African life. At times, the offering of food is ritualistic, where the food is first offered to the deceased by way of a ‘prayer’ and then made available to the rest. With other families, the food is served with no rituals accompanying it. Both *maheu* (traditional drink) and mazoe juice are served for people to drink and symbolises the Christian aspect of the ritual. Most of these settings are deeply cultural and at some level there is transition to Christocentric liturgical patterns.

In addition, the study observed that in some families, the newly cemented grave is covered with a white cloth for the night only to check it the next day. If the cloth is present and intact, it is a sign that *varoyi* (witches) did not tamper with the newly cemented grave. Where this rite is done, the white cloth is taken to the relatives of the deceased. If the deceased is female a kinswoman takes it. This is a sign that the deceased’s spirit has been rightly ‘taken’ to its family and so the deceased person becomes the family’s ancestor or one of the progenitors of the people in a given village. While the white cloth has some significance for some families, for others it is only used to cover the words inscribed on the grave from the sun.

On many of the *kusemendera guwa* ceremonies observed, most families have flowers on the grave and this becomes more or less a day to commemorate the deceased. It becomes a day of honouring and remembering the ‘living dead’. For some families, such a day is not different from the usual national public days such as the Heroes’ Day in Zimbabwe. It is a commemoration of the heroics of their deceased. These include looking after family members during one’s lifetime and taking part in family matters. What is obtained in this *kusemendera guwa* rite is that it continues to endure on among the Ndau communities. We also observed most of the proceedings done for the *kusemendera guwa* are increasingly being officiated by the local Christian pastor belonging to some Christian church denominations located within the Ndau people today. In most communities around Mt. Selinda and Chikore mission stations, pastors superintend over these indigenous ritual activities. This is how an interface between Christianity and indigenous culture continues to interest scholars in our day. Tite Tienou (1997), the leading Francophone African theologian from Burkina Faso, has delineated a crisis of identity as one of the most important factors in the emergence of African Christianity. As far as we can evaluate, the rite of *kusemendera guwa* is one of the several attempts towards hermeneutical mediation of the gospel faith that does justice to the particularistic realities of Zimbabwe.

**SUMMARY**

The study has established that the rite of *kusemendera guwa* is pervasive in the Ndau communities. This is so because, as Africans, the Ndau people believe that the death does not *write finis* a person’s life. Instead, every stage of human life must be celebrated ritualistically and evokes the religious nature of indigenous existentiality. The rite has become part of the Ndau way of ensuring continued existence and spiritual guidance from the dead. The Ndau feel a sense of insecurity once this rite is not observed and so can cause ancestral wrath. Since the general belief is that death does not alter or terminate the personality of an individual but only change their conditions, the study observed that the performance of rites comes as an obligation.

In fact, a post-burial rite functions as an umbilical cord which unites the living. This indigenous existential conception is part and parcel of a theology of enculturation. This is because the rite ensures that the living dead are kept in perpetual happiness and thereby creating a harmonious co-existence between the physical and spiritual realms of human existence. The happiness expressed by the relatives of the dead immediately after the *kusemendera guwa* ceremony is indicative that before the rite, the relatives were in a state of fear and insecurity. But through the post-*kusemendera guwa* rite, the relatives restore and assume the full vitality of their existence. What is emerging is that *kusemendera guwa* rite among the Ndau people is becoming a *rite de passage*, *sui generis* (authentic stage of human life on its own).

As for clothing, the study revealed that there are no prescriptions as to how people carrying out this rite should dress. Casual wear or church uniforms are accepted for some families while for others they put on black clothes. The black attire is particularly associated with the ‘living timeless’. This is said to bring the deceased’s relatives ‘nearer’ the departed. This is similar to the black clothes that some possessed agents, such as the *masvikiro* (spirit mediums), clad on most ritual occasions. Therefore, blackness is a metaphysical quality of spiritual invisibility and points to sacrificial eminence associated with ancestorhood in Ndau religiosity.

It is also important to observe that during this rite different people play different roles. There is division of labour. The stereotypical representation of roles is conspicuous during the ritual proceedings. Women pre-occupy themselves with carrying water for the builder while their male counterparts assist the builder with mixing sand and cement. Senior women, especially the children of the deceased, sit near the grave itself and at times are consulted when need
arises. The rest of the village women would be singing whilst men assist in cementing the grave, cutting the bushes around the grave yard and other masculine errands. Such an arrangement reflects the patriarchal nature of the Ndau social set-up. In the final analysis, it is critical to point out that this particular kusemendera guwa rite is pervasively located in both the socio-cultural and socio-religious lives of the people.

Therefore, it is suffice to conclude by positing three interlinked insights. Firstly, the post-burial rite kusemendera guwa provides an inalienable link between the living people and the living dead among the Ndau people. Accordingly, the ritual solemnizes the pride that comes with it venerating one’s ancestors. Secondly, the kusemendera guwa must be perceived as a form of heritage reclamation in Africa generation after generation. Accordingly, it is no small wonder that the rite will continue to enhance mutual understanding and co-operation within the indigenous communities as part of hallmarks of Africanness. Thirdly, a theology of enculturation constitutes great potentialities of animating African Christianity in the local panorama in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, blending the gospel message of Christ with particularistic local realities will make Christianity more relevant to the interests and aspirations of Africans as Christians. The culturedness of the society under study makes it plausible for such rites de passage to be incorporated in the Zimbabwean education system.

REFERENCES


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