

Chapter 4

Burial rites of the Lambya

Introduction

For the Lambya's life does not end with death, but continues in another realm. The concepts of life and death are not mutually exclusive concepts and there are no clear dividing lines between them. This chapter outlines in detailed manner how the Lambya organizes funeral when it has occurred amongst them.

Death among the Lambya's- (*imphungo*)

Death among the Lambya traditional is respected. Whenever death takes place whether of a man, woman or a child a series of funeral rites lasting a month or more begins. The first of the series is the burial (*kusyira umuvimba*) which in the case of most adults last three or four days, though for a rich man it may continue for a week and for a child it is over in a day.

As soon as death occurs most of the time women who are present begins wailing and messages are sent to the chief first, the village headman and the dead man's kinsmen and affine to announce the fact and bid them to the burial. The first message is sent to the father or to a senior brother or sister if one is still alive, or calling them to heir of the dead person. The fact about the dead man is announced in the village by the chief, who usually get the consent to do so from the deceased family. In sending the passage to the chief the deceased family also asks the chief permission of a drum which is kept by the chief. This drum is used to send message further in the village and it acts a symbol of funeral. The drumming of the drum has got its rhythm that tells the people about the funeral as a result they easily differentiate the funeral and the entertainment drum styles. To get all these permissions the deceased family basically presents a hen or cock to the chief (*umwene*) and then the message spread.

The dead man is usually buried at his own home village. However, the choice is rest with the elders of the family (*a baluko*). A married woman is usually buried at her husband home that is if her parents received lobola from the husbands otherwise the body is buried at her village. The message must be sent to all the father in law and all the sons in law both

of the dead man's and the senior kinsmen's who buries him to all the dead man's full and half-brothers to the husbands of his sister, to any classificatory brothers with whom he exchanged cows, to his mother- father or brother, to the full and half-brothers of his fathers, and to his sons. If any one of these is forgotten he will be angrily. Deliberately, to refuse to come to a burial for no good reason is symbolic breaking of the bond of kinship and no one ever does either unless there is a serious quarrel and all economic and social relations are being broken off between the two families concerned. The village neighbors are also obliged to come to every burial in the village. They normally wish to do so but even if they do not they still come for shame or for fear of being accused of witchcraft if they stay away.

The Message behind Lambya drums (*ing'oma*)

Drum is one of the commonly used instruments used in music and dances in many societies. In Lambya society drums have got different kinds of message. There are drums of many shapes, size and purposes. Some drums are used only in connection with chiefs, these are royal drums, and these are often considered sacred and may not be played commonly or by anybody. Death is announced through beating of a drum, which is acquired from the village head after giving her/him a cock as a way of condolence. If the village head is not informed then access to the graveyard is denied and there is no support from neighbors. The traditional authorities (T/As) do not attend funerals and are not accepted to see the dead body. They will only come days after the burial to condole the bereaved family. However if they attend burial ceremony they are kept far away from the grave. There are drums connected to chief burial ceremony and drums of dances and general burial rites. In Lambya a drum acts as an instrument of communication specifically, spreading message of funeral in a community. A drum can stimulate dances and entertainment among the Lambya's. The message of funeral that is concerned in drum differs in the way of beating it.

How Lambya drums are made;

The cow skin is used to make the drum membrane, this is also known as *i-chikwela*. The skin is chosen for its durability due to its thickness. Some Lambya drums are made of antelope or goat skins so that they can produce a loud, projected sound. Before fixing it on the drum frame, the skin is left to dry for some days, usually a week, to make it sturdy. It is

then soaked in a well for one night to soften it and make it pliable. Afterwards, it is left in the sun for a short time to allow the water to evaporate completely. The drum maker then cuts off a section of the skin that is slightly bigger than the drum head and fixes it on to the drum frame using wooden pegs. This time the drum frame is partially dipped in the ground and supported by a number of stones. The sculptor then removes the fur on the section of the skin that will form the drum membrane using a locally made knife. When an antelope skin rather than a cow skin is used, the fur is not scraped off by a knife; the drummers hands naturally remove the fur in the process of playing – in this case, the older the drum the better its performance.

The two common type of the drum found in Lambya society are cylindrical and double headed drum. Most Lambya cylindrical drums have tar (*phula*) fixed in the centre of the drum head. The *phula* is made from special tree sap or honey comb. The purpose of the tar is to make the drum head heavier for desired resonance. The drum maker then tunes the drum by passing it above fire flames several times. In the process, he keeps checking whether the drum is properly tuned by beating it at intervals. The tuned drum is sometimes smeared with castor oil for preservation. According to oral traditional this is how the Lambya's make their drums.



Figure 5: The cylindrical drum and the double headed drum found among Lambya ethnic group

The role of a Lambya chief at the funeral

The chief has got a very big role in Lambya funeral rites. It is the chief who act as a mediator, between the deceased family and the society in spreading the message to the church and far wide; the chief act as a leader who give directions and permission to where they can bury the dead. They open the gate of the graveyard and disciplines people at the funeral. The chief provide announcement that are important to the community during the funeral rites and after. The chief also act as a counselor to his people who have immoral behavior in the society.

Burial in Lambya society

It is the custom for the Lambya to bury the dead. There is a ritual concerning the preparation of the corpse for disposal. For the Lambya's the corpse (*umuvimba*) is washed with water, in some cases with combination of some traditional medicine. For all these there are ritual leaders who direct these in each village, of which most of them are women. The preparation for burial may be done ritually or without formality. Usually the disposal of the corpse takes place either same day or three to four days depending on the place where somebody has died. Hence the disposal of the body normally happens in the morning hours. However, these days the burial may be delayed because others keep the corpse frozen in the mortuary, to wait for relatives who live far away. The disposal may take place either at public grave, clan or family burial graves, depending on the decision made by the family elders. It is the custom for the Lambya's to bury some belongings of the dead together with the body of the dead, such items include; traditional small mats (*akalutefu*), ornaments (*uwambo*) and some tools that the dead person used to like them. Some of these items might be placed on the grave afterwards. Formerly, the senior chiefs in Ulambya region were buried by their servants, of which these days the practices does not continue. The Lambya belief behind this was that the departed needs weapons to defend him along the way to the next world or food to eat in the journey. However to the other side the belief is there to show that the departed is wished all well, peacefully to serve the links with those left behind and ensure that life goes on.

When a Lambya senior chief has died it goes a formal ritual of burial. Usually they are buried in the late evening and only men attend to the grave. No women are allowed to attend apart from caring for the kitchen. The reason why women don't attend the burial ceremony of the traditional authority is because in Lambya they are regarded as strangers in the village. This stranger comes in because of marriage system of patrilineal; they leave their respective villages and follow their husbands to stay together in the husband's village. This is done to escort the chief peacefully and observe *mwiho*. There is usually a special dance that is performed known as *sendemule*. This tradition dance is only performed when a senior chief (*umwene*) has died. It is only performed by women. It has its sacred drums and its special rhythm. Previously the senior chiefs were buried while seating similar to the burial of the Ngoni. The *sendemule* dance is only staged with consent from the chief and

that the dancers perform in a circle to the rhythm of three drums and a whistle. There is no hand clapping and that sometimes dancers carry leaves as they move in a circle.

During the burial, the immediate family of the dead person is expected to stay together on one side of the grave at a designated place. Sometimes the dead person's personal properties are buried in the grave. After the burial, the people are invited to the dead person for refreshment. Many people cleanse themselves at the entrance of the house, where everyone must wash off the dust of the graveyard before entering the house; others do it after the burial straight away from the graveyard site.

Traditionally the period of strict mourning usually continues a week or some may even extend to a year, depending on who has died. During this period, the bereaved stay at home and do not socialize or have sexual contact. Some wear black clothes or black cloths fastened to their clothes, and shave their hair from the day after the burial. They believe that life is concentrated in the hair. Therefore shaving the hair symbolizes death, and its growing again indicates strengthening of life and starting a new life.

Feasting and food during funeral

Feasting follows the funeral rites to comfort the bereaved. The food that is used ranges from dry maize, beans, beef and other livestock. Livestock's are slaughtered when a rich fellow has died while dry maize (*inkhanje*) and beans (*amalima*) are gathered whenever in the village there is a funeral or when people are going to attend a funeral in the village. These are gathered by females, who usually have a duty of cooking food at any funeral that occurs in the village.

Weeping ceremony (*Chiliro*)

Chiliro is another mourning time to symbolize the transfer of the dead person spirit to his/her village spirits. Basically what happens is that when someone has died in another country or district and has been buried there. The relatives related by blood (*awaluko*) are asked to transfer the dead person spirit buried in the foreign land to be taken to where their family spirits belongs. The symbolic meaning behind this belief is that they try to avoid violence spirits and they believe that the spirit of the dead person should be received in the ancestor's spirits. The Lambya and other ethnics groups in Chitipa they believe in this

tradition because it helps them put their relatives together in one accord, not only that but also to bring their ancestors close to the village so that they can easily be remembered. There are some few protocols that someone has to adhere. The important one is culture. What do we mean when we say culture? If the custom of paying lobola was not followed it becomes difficult to observe *chiliro* believes. This is very critical to many Lambya people. If she is a woman who was married but no lobola was paid, it means when she dies in any geographical location no *chiliro* is to be observed by the side of the husband who married her, thus if she belongs to the Lambya ethnic group. This simply means that she will be buried at her place of origin where her ancestors lied. If the lobola protocol was adhered to then *chiliro* definitely takes place. If it is a man belonging to the Lambya ethnic then *chiliro* is observed if he dies in a foreign land, here foreign land could mean outside his origin village, district and nation.

How they do it

After the actual burial of the beloved one the same day or after some few days then the relatives of the deceased person gather together and predict who is going to carry the *chiliro* stick. When they agree they all together go to the grave of the deceased person and the one chosen carries the stick that is *chiliro*. Often times the person who carries the stick of *Chiliro* is a very close person to the deceased (*umufwile*). The stick is used to hit the grave to take or transfer the dead person spirit to the required place of burial. The required places in this case are the family graves where his or her relatives are buried.

The chosen person together with some village elders goes to the graves of their deceased whom they want to carry *chiliro* back home and he/she picks the stick and hit horizontally at the grave of their relatives awhile saying words. The words that are said are names of the person buried and the place where they will be reburied. For instance if the person who died was Davie and the origin place to be buried is Chinunkha, then the carrier will say “*Davie twende uye uwone kukaya ku Chinunkha ko kuli abakamu*” (Dave lets go and lie back home in Chinunkha where there are relatives). The moment these words are said the person carrying *chiliro* never looks back; if they look back it’s it is believed that they are leaving the spirit of their departed relative in a foreign land. They usually lap the sticks in a cloth and are treated as if it is real funeral.

When they reach the origin place of the person they announce in the village through the chief about the *chiliro* they have brought in the village. Then the chief spread the message and calls people to attend to. In some cases people cry and shed tears for the *chiliro* while in some parts they don't. If the person who died had some relatives living very far way they wait for them before them burry the *chiliro* stick. On the grave they dig a small whole where they lay the stick and make the tomb to symbolize that their relatives spirits is home.

The Lambya spirit world

The question of spirits is a particular theological language, with its own logic. It is dangerous to draw line before one can translate into the judging language like science. Theologically, the spirits are a way of expressing Gods supremacy and transcendence, but also his imminence through mediator ship. It serves useful purposes like making the supernatural real and concrete in daily life. But it can also bring degradation of religion like avoidance of true divine transcendence by bringing the supernatural to man size and reach. However my concern in this book is to focus on what the Lambya ethnic group does with their spiritual world. As we consider and value the belief of their spirits. I want to take the belief of the Lambya spiritual world from the roots of the Lambya early history so that there should be a good understanding why some customs are happening and others not in present Ulambya region. Therefore, I will excavate deeply into the early history of the Mwabulambya and the Sikwese's.

The Lambya believes in number of spirits, these are categorized into different nature depending on their nature. For instance they believe that some objects are spirits such objects include: storms, fire and other natural forces or objects. They also believe in the spirits of the dead human beings like chiefs (*awamwene*) and other leaders who died long time ago. These are people who were leaders of their clan or some influential leaders who did something great in their clan. For the Lambya they believe that the spirits of the first chief Mwabulambya has got some influence among the clan and the spirits of the counselor Sikwese. The Sikwese's to show respect to their ancestral spirit, as the first counselors of chief Mwabulambya they have made a private shrine where they continue to bury their members of the clan. They have made a shrine at Itongo in Chinunkha Village, close to the graves of their first leaders of the clan. They usually visit the place for invocations, petitions, prayer for forgiveness, consultations and thanksgiving which are accompanied by offerings, gift in form of food, or other objects left for the spirits. This is

not happening often because of some politics that are going on amongst the Sikwese's themselves and the Lambya's as an ethnic group. However, this could be a result of leadership amongst the clan.

Each clan amongst the Lambya's has got its grave or a shrine where they go and offer petitions or ask for forgiveness by offering different kinds of gifts. In these clan graves it's where they continue to bury their members of clan today however there are common graves for everyone, in these graves everyone can be buried. Anthropologically the Lambya's believes that clan spirits have to be respected to avoid being attacked by strange spirits that is why it's their tradition that each clan should have its own land for burying the dead. Some of the notable shrine where the Lambya ethnic group uses as shrine today is in Chinunkha trading centre at *kunsaka*. The site is located close to a hill called *Nakagamba* and in Kafola hill just on top of the hill itself. These are places where chiefs and some influential villagers are buried. Today when you visit these sites it's like there is nothing taking place at these sites. This could be an influence of modernization, modern Christianity or culture being dynamic. The possession of clan graves shows that each clan amongst the Lambya's has got responsible of taking care of their clan spirit.

Sacrifice and offerings (*Ukusumbila*)

The practice of making sacrifices and offerings is found all over the Lambya community. By this material or physical things are given to God and other spiritual beings. The distinction between sacrifices and offerings is this; sacrifices involve the shedding of the blood of human beings, animals or birds; offerings do not involve blood but concern the giving of all other things such as food stuffs, water, milk, beer honey or money (Mbiti 1991: 63). In Bulambya region the kind of situation that calls for a sacrifice may include drought (*inzala*), war (*inkhondo*), insects, pests, and destructive floods. Since these affect the community it is the community which then sacrifices an animal. In past years a human being was also being sacrificed by being buried alive together with the departed chiefs. This customs is no longer being practiced today among the Lambya's.

For the Lambya's offerings which like sacrifices are given for both communal and personal or family needs, includes whatever people wish and are able to give. They can be both expensive and cheap. Communal sacrifices and offerings are normally made at

shrines, or in sacred groves like Kusaka (Chinunkha), Kafola Hill (Kafola), Mwenebanda (Ibanda) and Mbula Hill (Ifumbo). Or other holy places such as small hills, rivers (Mwachiula, Mwambukiro, Mwenebanda), waterfalls, and so on. Personal sacrifices and offerings are normally made in or near the home, and in some areas people have shrines in their homes for this purpose. These are commonly found in clans graves. They may also be made in public places of sacrifice or as the ritual elder or diviner may direct.

Spirits (*Imizimu, vizyuka*)

Spirit of those who died a long time ago (*imizimu ya bsekulu, sekulu*); there are countless number of these. Most of them are no longer remembered in their human form by anybody. People still believe that such spirits must exist in the invisible world. Some of them may be recollected through clan founders, myth, or reciting ones genealogies. For instance amongst the Lambya some remember the spirit of Nyondo (who was once a chief sometimes back) most of such spirits of are no longer within the personal memory of the living. People do not have clear ideas about these spirits of human beings who died in distant past. The spirits of people who were once leaders, heroes, warriors, clan founders and other outstanding men and women sometimes continue to be respected. For instance the clan of the Sikwese's remembers one of the Sikwese's who was a great adviser to the chief Mwabulambya was. The Sikwese's regard him as their can hero, same to Mweniishalikira (the Mtambo's), Mkombanyama, Simphokolwes (the Mambwes).

Fire customs in Ulambya region

As the oral traditions says the tradition contest of fire-making between the Sikwese and the Mwabulambya would appear to refer to the symbolic transfer of power from the former to the latter. Therefore fire symbolically means translation of power amongst the Lambya speaking group. Hence the Mwabulambya's are seen as the inventors of fire and the strong men who defeated the original owners of the land, who in this case are the Sikwese's. The Mwabulambya's, however, could not have established themselves in the new area without the support of their rivals, who were also the main link with the spirits of the earth. The tradition also serves a function in present Lambya social and political life. It explains and justifies the respective roles of the Sikwese's and Mwabulambya's.

The story of the creation of fire is significant in another sense. Fire ceremonies featured prominently in certain rituals of the Lambya royal family. In the past whenever chief Mwabulambya died, all fires in the land were quenched and new ones were lit only after another person had ascended the throne. The new fires were lit from the central fireplace at the court of the Mwabulambya. The tradition that mentions the invention of fire and the fire-making competition probably refers to the introduction of this new royal ceremony into Ulambya.

During this time no one in the land was required to start their own fire without someone getting it direct from the chief's court. If you were found starting your own fire you were either taken to the elders or some misfortunes were supposed to happen in your life. Therefore people in the land were abided in these do and don'ts. At this time people were advised not to eat pumpkin leaves (*chiyungwa*). If someone is disobey this there were taken to the elders for counseling or they were faced with some misfortune like being killed by lightning. Due to dynamic of culture these things are no longer happening in the land as many Chiefs and clans heads are influenced by modern Christianity. The practicing of denying the communities not to take pumpkin leaves is known as *ukusumbira*. This is the time whereby the elders in the village come together and organize an offering to their departed ancestral spirits. When the elders have returned from shrine, then the chiefs and his subordinates makes declaration for people to start eating the leaves. Currently the main common shrines connected with the Lambya's are two: at Kafola hill and in Chinunkha at *kusaka*.