

Honouring the Bukusu dead - *Khukhala kimikoye* ritual

By Nandemu Barasa, 21 December 2011



The thatched hut that was left after the death of the man of the home to fall on its own and to be fully demolished after the ceremony. **[Photos/ Barasa Nandemu/ West Fm]**

As Christmas approaches many clans among the Bukusu clan of Luhya tribe in Bungoma and Trans Nzoia counties are busy performing several ceremonies for their departed ones.

Among the Bukusu traditions related to the death are normally conducted during the odd years, *Musikumanya* while those ones related to the living were conducted during even years. Long time ago Bukusu people did not have calendars just like many other communities so they would count even and odd years using drought seasons which they called *Simiyu*.

Circumcision was done during even years because they believe it is related to the living while anniversaries for the dead and any other traditions related to the living dead and the ancestors were done during odd years. Bukusu people argued that they would not mix the dead and the living because that one would attract calamities in the clan such as sudden deaths. That belief also explains why among the Bukusu if one had come from funeral, he or she would not be allowed to attend a circumcision ceremony because they argued that would spoil the initiate. If one was found, he or she would be faced with a heavy penalty.

Among the traditional practices going on especially in this December include *Khukhala kimikoye*, and *Khumala bilindwa*.

Hundreds of Bukusu people from the clan of *Bawambwa* gathered at the late Mzee Pepela's home who passed on in March 2008 for the function of *Khukhala kimikoye*.

According to Mzee Situma Manyasi who also attended the function among other elders from the clan of *Bawambwa* plus the neighbouring clans, *Khukhala kimikoye* is meant to cut links with the dead and therefore give the widow(s) an opportunity to get married if she wishes.

Khukhala kimikoye, cutting of the ropes as I can put it directly involves cutting of thin skins cut and given to the widow(s) and the deceased daughters during the burial ceremony. Remember that on the burial day among Bukusu, the skin from the bull that was slaughtered was cut into long pieces and those who were given would tie it around their necks and heads with the widow(s) tying it around their stomachs until the day of *Khukhala kimikoye*. On the day of *Khukhala kimikoye* those skins were taken and physically cut. In addition *Kumuchuuru* was also shaved.

Kumuchuuru was the long hair that the wife kept after burial of her husband. She could not shave it until the ceremony of *Khukhala kimikoye*. This also explains why Bukusu people were advised not to take long before they performed the tradition.

It is important to note that the ceremony of *Khukhala kimikoye* was only conducted if the dead had children who had given birth to grand children and also if his son had initiated the grand child to the late. If that one was not so they would also compare the age of the late with his age set who had initiated their grand children to allow the ceremony to go on.

Traditional preaching, *Khuswala kumusee* as I explained in my earlier articles which you can still get on this website under the column of culture was also a must before *Khukhala kimikoye* could be conducted. [Read: [Khuswala Kumusee http://westfm.co.ke/index-page-news-bid-2026.htm](http://westfm.co.ke/index-page-news-bid-2026.htm)]

Also, the practice of applying clay soil on the grave, *Khumala silindwa* had to be conducted to pave way for the tradition of *Khukhala kimikoye*.

Back to *Khukhala kimikoye*, a day before the real ceremony, relatives would gather in the deceased homestead where they will take beer already prepared as they feast and know each other more for those one who did not know their relatives. Beer that they drunk that day was called *Kemurwe* meaning the head and they would finish the rest the following day.



The cattle being taken to the field to be grazed.

Early in the morning on the real day, sons and daughters of the deceased will lead others in going out to graze cows in a far place from the homestead. The cows were from the late's herd but other family members could also bring their cows to be mixed with the ones for the late.

As they left, they sang songs while teasing anybody they found on the way using spears, masks, skins which they had carried. They tease people especially ladies and non Bukusu people who could not understand the tradition. On one occasion, a certain clan was going to graze near Chwele town sometimes back and one man teased an administration police who was not a Bukusu until he dropped his gun and ran away thinking Bukusu people had descended on him and wanted to spear him. However, the gun was taken to the nearest police station and given back to him later.

Going out to graze meant the bereaved were tracing the late's roots as they would follow all the ways that he used when he took out his cattle for grazing.

Initially they would take their cows in any grass they found on the way even if the owner had kept it for another use and nothing could happen but currently law has taken a strong course and if you are found doing so you will be taken to court. This according to the late Mzee Pepela's clan has really affected the Bukusu culture of *Khukhala kimikoye* because many people fear running into problems when conducting the ritual.

In the grazing field they would also take the animals to the river where a cow that had already been chosen would be smeared with mud. That cow was to be slaughtered the following day so that relatives can share all the meat and it had to come from the late's cows. This also explains why the practice had to be conducted early so that it gets the late's animals alive. In addition Bukusu people used this requirement to encourage people to be hardworking and ensure they kept cattle that would be used during their own ceremonies.



The granddaughter of the home with the clan stool smeared with mud at the river where one of the bulls will be smeared with mud to be slaughtered.

However, if one messed and applied mud on a different cow, there was no reverse and therefore that cow would be slaughtered even if the owner tried to object. This explains why a certain artist sang a song advising those going to graze to spare his only cow by not applying it with mud.

It is important to note here that not every bull would be used because Bukusu people did not slaughter deformed animals to their dead. They argued that it would appear as disrespect to the dead and who would revenge by causing havoc in the clan.

In addition a thin striped cow, *Eng`enda* was not used during such ceremonies as it is believed it was a cross of Zebras and cows that were grazing in the field which were on heat and lacked bull that gave rise to the said cow. As a result of that, many clans among Bukusu people do not rear or even eat meat from such cows. *Basila ng`enda*. Hornless cows were also not used during such ceremonies as they were seen as disrespect to the death.

On the way back home after grazing, they sang songs one being *Wobilo* and when they reached near the homestead they sang *chabuyabuya*. In my earlier articles under the column of culture on our website, I fully explained the meaning of those songs. [Read: [Widow re-marrying among Luhya's Bamasaba people westfm.co.ke/mobile/index.php](http://westfm.co.ke/mobile/index.php)]

They would then be received by those who were left behind especially the aged and children who could not manage to walk for a long distance upto the grazing ground. They run around the grave as they rotate the cows round the grave teasing people and praising the deceased. They would later spear their on the grave and leave those spears there for some time.



The grandchild seated on top of the grave as cattle are made to rotate around it.

At that moment clan members are also so vigilant that no stranger, *Omukulo*, took away any cow by force. *Omukulo* came from the clan that was initially related to a given clan but the relationship has no blood linkage. People from those clans insult each other as if they would fight but they don't. Back to rotating the cows around the grave if *Omukulo* manages to run away with the cow(s) no penalty was taken against him. If the clan insists on the cow(s) being taken back then they would be attracting a curse.



After moving round the grave and leaving spears on it, they would gather to have meals and continue drinking alcohol until early in the morning the following day when they would demolish the deceased house and pick the kingpin, *enjeko* which they placed on the grave awaiting remembrance day for the deceased when they split it in the ceremony called *Khukhwasaka enjeko*. It was also at this point that the cow that was applied with mud was slaughtered and the whole meat shared among the relatives.

Source: Westfm