

# Cultural practices on burial and care for the sick in South Sudan

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## Question

*Carry out a rapid literature review on cultural practices in South Sudan on burial and caring for the sick, focusing on differences in practices across different ethnic groups. The main linguistic groupings and ethnic groups in each that are predominant in areas considered to be at highest risk of Ebola outbreak in South Sudan are:*

- Bantu-speaking – Zande and Baka
- Bare-speaking – Moru, Kakwa, Pojulu, Kuku and Bare
- Others – Acholi, Madi, Lotuko, Toposa and Didinga

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## 1. Summary

**Literature on cultural practices for burial and care for the sick among individual ethnic groups in South Sudan was very limited. However, it clearly points to the importance of proper burials among all ethnic groups: these typically entail washing the body of the deceased; it can take several days before burial takes place; and graves are often located within or close to family homesteads.**

South Sudan is incredibly diverse with over 60 different ethnic groups, within each of which there are further subdivisions. The largest ethnic group, the Dinka, for example, are divided into at least 25 ethnic sub-groups that each have their own distinct cultural practices, dialects and traditions (Cultural Atlas, n.d.). Given the exceptional diversity of the social landscape of South Sudan, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a dearth of literature on the cultural practices of individual ethnic groups. Moreover, much of the ethnographic literature on South Sudan dates back several decades, notably the work by renowned anthropologist E. Evans-Pritchard who died in the 1970s.

This review found some material on burial practices of different ethnic groups in South Sudan, but virtually no information on practices of caring for the sick. Overall, the literature highlights that proper burials in South Sudan are seen as critical both for the deceased and for the living. The majority of tribes in South Sudan practise either Christianity or syncretisms of Christianity and traditional African religion. Ancestors have a significant role in all ethnic groups. Graves are generally located within or close to family homesteads: they are important for maintaining connections with ancestors and family land, and increasingly, as proof of land ownership.

Findings for individual ethnic groups are as follows:

- Zande – relatives gather before the death of a person, staying with them until they die. Bodies are buried in a sitting position with a low roof over it, and covered by a pile of stones;
- Pojulu – burial usually takes place in the early morning or evening. There can be delays as traditional requirements have to be met before burial can occur;
- Kuku – burial takes place between 24 hours and 2-3 days after death and the body is laid out until then;
- Bare – before burial can take place, certain dues must be paid by the family to the maternal relatives of the deceased. The latter mount guard over the body until these are cleared;
- Acholi – funeral rites take place very quickly after death, but it is considered important that the deceased be buried in family compounds, where shrines to ancestors are maintained;
- Madi – proper burial of the dead is considered vital both to give ‘peace’ to the deceased and to prevent negative consequences (e.g. infertility, mental illness) for the living;
- Didinga – the dead are buried with their heads facing east in a deep grave outside the village.

No material was found about burial practices among the Baka, Kakwa, Lotuko and Toposa ethnic groups. The Lotuko<sup>1</sup> and Toposa each number around 235,000 people, representing the sixth and seventh largest ethnic groups in South Sudan, and both are found in Eastern Equatoria (Joshua Project, n.d.). The Lotuko's religion is based on nature and ancestor worship; the Toposa believe in a Supreme Being and ancestral spirits.

This review also found a number of briefs/guides on funeral practices and caring for the sick in the context of the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The Ebola Response Anthropology Network (<http://www.ebola-anthropology.net/about-the-network/>) carries resource material from the last Ebola outbreak in West Africa, much of which would be relevant to the current outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (and to any future outbreak in South Sudan).

## 2. Burial practices by ethnic group

### Zande<sup>2</sup>

The Zande form the third largest ethnic group in South Sudan, numbering around 812,000 (Joshua Project, n.d.). Most live in Western Equatoria. Traditionally, the Zande practised indigenous African religion.

The Zande were the only ethnic group for whom mention was found in the literature about practices in caring for the dying. A respected Zande headman with vast experience of directing burials described what happens (Siemens, 1990: 232-233):

The first thing is when illness catches a person. It begins to greatly trouble him. Relatives begin to gather. Then they begin to send messages to other relatives and tell them to run (hither); this person is dying. Then they all begin to come beside him. He may last two days. He may last many days. They will be beside him constantly until the time when he dies. When he is about to die, they all come to hold his body (lit. skin). He will die just among them. After he dies and cools, then they begin to close his eyes. Then they begin to straighten his arms, to let the person dry just like wood. They then keep quiet. They cannot speak. They keep quiet until they say they go to wash him. If there is someone here who cries because he died, many of them stop that her. No one should cry yet. Let her allow that person's spirit to go far. They allow it and wait.

The Zande place the dead in seats above ground with a brick cone built over the top (expert comment, September 2018). Burial practices among the Azande are described as follows (Gurtong, n.d.) (see also Mckulka, n.d.):

There are no outward signs of mourning except for widows. At the moment of a husband's death a woman tears off their clothes and ornaments and remain so until his burial... All his personal domestic articles are broken up. In the old days people were buried in a sitting position with their chins on their knees. Immediately over the body a roof of wood and grass was placed and the grave then filled in, a pile of stones being

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<sup>1</sup> Also referred to in the literature as Lotuho and Latuka.

<sup>2</sup> The names 'Zande' and 'Azande' seem to be used interchangeably in the literature. Evans-Pritchard (1965), for example, uses both terms in the same paper.

placed on the top. The men are buried facing east and the women facing west. The explanation for this is that a man, when he gets up in the morning, always looks first to the east to see if dawn is near, and a woman, when the sun is about to set, goes to fetch wood and water to prepare for the evening meal.

This description echoes Evans-Pritchard's much older account of burial and mortuary customs of the Zande (Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 3-4):

At the present time in Sudan a corpse is buried under a side niche in a rectangular shaft, and over the grave is erected a low hut with a ridged roof which is eventually replaced at a mortuary ceremony by a high heap of stones. The construction of this heap forms a central part of a complex of rites and festal observances.

## **Moru**

The Moru number over 174,000 (Joshua Project, n.d.), making them the 10<sup>th</sup> largest ethnic group in South Sudan; they are found primarily in Western Equatoria, and are highly educated. This review found no description of burial customs other than one stressing the importance of community participation: 'Death or sickness is the biggest event that brings together even enemies. The Moru believe that non-participation in such occasions may result in one's boycott. They are very particular about attendance' (Gurtong, n.d.).

## **Pojulu**

The Pojulu live in Yei and Juba counties in Central Equatoria. A description of burial customs suggests there is scope for delays (Wikipedia, n.d.a)<sup>3</sup>:

In the Pojulu, death is treated with caution and respect for the deceased. A burial is normally done in the morning or evening – in the cooler hours of the day. Before any burial of the dead, maternal uncles have to be consulted and cleared of their requirements. The funerals can be peaceful if the traditional requirements are fulfilled otherwise, abrogation of the traditions/demands causes chaos. Christianity, though, has had quite an impact so much so that some traditional requirements considered evil in the Church are no longer being practiced. Today, many funerals are conducted in a Christian way.

## **Kuku**

The Kuku are found in the south-eastern part of central Equatoria, and number around 39,000 people (Joshua Project, n.d.). Their burial customs are as follows (Gurtong, n.d.):

The news of death is announced by loud wailing of women followed by the beating to a sad tone of a drum and the performance of funeral dance in a war-like demonstration. A bull is sacrificed. The burial takes place after 24 hours. Before the entombment, the widow or widower is led to the nearby stream and kept there until the burial has been completed. The body is laid with the head facing eastwards. The widow is led out of the house by the wife of the blacksmith to the adjacent stream and has her head shaved. She is stripped of all ornaments.

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<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia would not normally be included in reviews due to worries around rigorousness of the evidence. But in this case - given the extremely limited literature available - it was felt justifiable to include it.

Another account suggests that burial does not take place for a few days (Wikipedia, n.d. b):

After a person has died, the people are always gloomy, especially the family. They bury the deceased and then have a community meeting to bless the person and give him or her a good life with the spirits and God. They bury after two or three days normally. They talk about the cause of death with the relatives. If they come to a decision, the person is buried. This ceremony lasts for about a week.

## Bare<sup>4</sup>

Living in Central Equatoria, the Bare number about 578,000 (Joshua Project, n.d.) and constitute the fourth largest ethnic group in South Sudan. Traditionally, they believed in one god along with good and evil spirits, but today most Bare are Christian. One account describes the following traditions when someone dies (Gurtong, n.d.) (see also Mckulka, n.d.):

Regardless of the cause of death of a married woman, her relatives would not allow burial until the in-laws release a final part of the dowry called 'kasik' (consisting of goats). To enforce this step, the relatives of the deceased woman would symbolically mount an armed guard over the corpse until the fine is paid. An equivalent ceremony is performed for a deceased man, but the maternal uncles usually mount the armed guard.

## Acholi

While the majority of Acholi live in Uganda, some 66,000 (Joshua Project, n.d.) are found in the western part of Eastern Equatoria. Most Acholi are Christian.

Kaiser (2008) describes how the Acholi people typically bury family members on the family compound, maintaining a shrine to the family ancestors nearby. She highlights the significance of this by describing what happens when important people died in refugee camps: 'because of the ritual significance of deceased individuals, great efforts have been made to transport the body back to Sudan so that burial can take place on home ground and where shrines are expected to be maintained in perpetuity' (Kaiser, 2008: 384). This is echoed by Mckulka (n.d.: 62) who notes that, 'It was thought unlucky for a man to die and not be buried at home'. However, funeral ceremonies are conducted quickly (Kaiser, 2008: 384):

the funeral rites or *lye/* which take place immediately after death are mainly limited to family members and members of the immediate community who gather to pay their respects. Burial normally takes place quickly after death and there is neither the time nor the inclination to organize large-scale social activity at this time. Burial practices and their ritual accompaniments are carried out without fuss at the homestead of the deceased, and the burial itself nowadays takes place either there or in one the settlement's cemeteries. Approximately one year after the bereavement, however, the family of the deceased hold a much bigger and more public event; a 'third-stage funeral rite'.

## Madi

The Madi number 26,000 people in South Sudan and are found in parts of Central and Eastern Equatoria (Joshua Project, n.d.). A member of the Madi tribe and a pastor in Eastern Equatoria

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<sup>4</sup> Also referred to as Bari in the literature.

described the relationship between the dead and the living as follows: 'Here in South Sudan...funerals are really (an) honour. There's no way of throwing any dead person away'. He added that, at least in Eastern Equatoria, the socioeconomic status of a person did not matter when it came to laying them to rest: 'All must be given a proper burial' (cited in Kelly, 2015). He further elaborated:

The community must come together and bury that person in the right way, in an honourable way, because people have (the) belief that if you don't respect the dead – if you don't bury that person in the right way – then that will cause problems for the family (cited in Kelly, 2015).

The pastor explained that many believed 'the lingering spirit will possess people' and cause mental illness, infertility and even death. 'Not only that, the dead will also continue crying' (cited in Kelly, 2015). 'To appease the unsatisfied spirit and heal the afflicted, family members will perform rituals. In some cases they will cook food for the dead and place it on the grave. If they don't have the remains then they will demonstrate a "right burial" by planting an object – a stone or a piece of wood – in the ground and covering it in dirt' (Kelly, 2015).

## Didinga

The Didinga number 76,000 people occupy the Didinga Hills region in the central part of Eastern Equatoria (Joshua Project, n.d.). They practise traditional beliefs and religious practices, and place great importance upon the worship of dead ancestors. According to one account, 'The dead are buried with the heads facing the east in a deep grave outside the village' (Gurtong, n.d.).

## 3. Other relevant findings

Compared to other ethnic groups in South Sudan such as the Dinka and Nuer, the burial practices of those included in this review tend to take longer (expert comment, Sept. 2018):

In terms of the practices that may make different communities vulnerable to disease transfer – this varies a lot, but...communities in the Equatorias/Western Bahr-el-Ghazal regions would be more susceptible because they have more elaborate and longer mortuary customs. Dinka and Nuer...aim to bury the body as quickly as possible and few people have contact with the body. Their funerary practices are more focused on animal sacrifice than on the dead body – which people don't like to be around.

Writing about the impact of civil war on South Sudan, Nathaniel Kelly states that many South Sudanese will be unable to find the bodies of their relatives and give them a proper burial. He highlights the importance of this (Kelly, 2015):

One of the most common funeral rituals in South Sudan involves family members and friends gathering at the home of the deceased. They mourn, they reminisce, they pray, and they eat together. Sometimes they remain at the home for a few days or even an entire week. In rural areas throughout South Sudan, families inter the bodies of their loved ones near their homes. The dead and the living exist side by side. The nearness of a grave to the front door of a house demonstrates to everyone in the community that the deceased is still loved, still cared for, and still considered a family member.

However, Kelly notes that traditional funerals also reflect inequalities in South Sudanese society. Disproportionate attention is given to male funerals, while those of women and children are often short and devoid of ceremony, especially if the family of the deceased is impoverished (Kelly, 2015).

In South Sudan the dead are often buried on or close to family land: graves are important to honour the dead and maintain a relationship with the soil, but also increasingly as proof of land ownership. This is particularly so among the Kuku and Kakwa tribes in the southernmost parts of Central Equatoria (expert comment, Sept. 2018):

As in many parts of South Sudan, relationships with deceased relatives and ancestors remain very important to living people, and the dead are still buried within or close to the family homestead whenever possible... graves form important markers of land ownership, in the absence of any formal land registration - most of South Sudan is governed by customary land tenure systems... Within the clan territory, individual families often also have long established rights to the particular pieces of land on which they live and farm. Graves are seen as evidence of both these more individual/family and broader clan land rights, because in general people have avoided burying relatives anywhere except on their own land, where they have a special spiritual relationship with the soil. Nowadays land disputes have become increasingly common as land competition and value has risen. Often in these disputes, people point to graves as evidence to support their claims to customary land ownership - since no one has paper land titles in the rural areas. This has if anything given a heightened significance to graves, which are increasingly covered in substantial, conspicuous concrete structures (by those who can afford it) within family homesteads.

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