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Ngoni Funeral Burial Practices amongst Christians in Northern Malawi

Sangwani Tembo & Edwin Phiri

Abstract

This chapter explores the significance, understanding, and meaning of the Ngoni traditional funeral burial practices among Christians of the Roman Catholic Church under the Traditional Authority Mtwalo of Mzimba in the Northern Region of Malawi. The qualitative research methodology was used, which included in-depth and group interviews, as well as observations. This study has revealed that despite being Catholic Christians, when it comes to the burial of the deceased relative, the Ngoni of Mzimba observe, respect and follow their traditional religious rituals. Among the reasons they give is the need to live in harmony between the living and the dead. The Ngoni believe that ancestors dwell both in the graveyard and among the living in the village. To appease ancestors, their descendants are expected to inform them when one of their children has passed away, mourn the kin's spirit together and offer sacrificial beer to the deceased. The burial rites are believed to help the spirit of the departed kin to be properly welcomed to the ancestral world while at the same time preventing misfortunes among the living. This chapter significantly contributes to our comprehension of African Traditional Religion within the context of Christianity. It elucidates the enduring presence of traditional practices, emphasizing the profound significance of ancestor worship. Furthermore, it highlights the crucial role played by rituals in preserving a delicate equilibrium between the living and the deceased within the Ngoni community of Northern Malawi.

African Traditional Religion and Christianity

Africans are religious people. Many millions of Africans are followers of more than one religion, even if they may register in the census as adherents of only one religion (Mbiti, 1975, p. 30). During British colonialism in Malawi, although ATR was widely practised, most Christians practised it in secret (Adamo, 2011, p. 1). The reason for the secret practice was that

the missionaries, in the 19th century, were aggressively opposed to traditional African practices which they considered to be barbaric and based on superstition (Denis, 2006, p. 310; Mills, 1995, p. 160, Chakanza, 1989, p. 44). Until now in the 21st century, ATR and its practices are still condemned by some sections of the Christian community. However, despite the condemnation, ATR continues to be practised. After the advent of democracy in Malawi, ATR has occupied an important position in public life (Chakanza, 1989, p. 40; Kishindo, 2002, p. 213; Chibwana, 2023, p. 1; Lost History Foundation, 2023, p. 2). Similarly, in South Africa and Nigeria, ATR has been increasingly acknowledged as an essential aspect of traditional indigenous knowledge systems. Several steps have been taken by health workers and in Parliament to give recognition to African indigenous healers in Africa. For example, in South Africa, Christian churches openly advocate dialogue with ATR (Adamo, 2011, p. 3; Denis, 2006, p. 310).

In the 21st century, mainstream mission churches such as Presbyterians, Methodists, and Dutch reformed, and Catholics are characterized by their acceptance, or at least tolerance, of ancestral practices. However, they generally avoid openly discussing these rites and instead maintain a neutral stance regarding ancestral practices related to death, bereavement, and burial rites. This reticence often stems from their historical and theological positions, which prioritize Christian doctrines over traditional beliefs. Conversely, African Independent Churches openly embrace and engage in ancestral rituals by integrating traditional African beliefs with Christian teachings (Ntombana, 2015, p. 104), which are some of the contested spaces within the Christian community (Makhutso, 2019, p. 1). In many African countries, churches differ in their understanding and interpretation of which practices should be accepted and which ones should be rejected. During funeral ceremonies, a parallel system exists in the sense that the clergy conduct some practices, while others are conducted by family members themselves, without the involvement of the church or church ministers. Such rituals are practised with an understanding that they are related to the family and clan ancestors. These burial rituals are often practised privately; the church is neither invited nor involved in that process. After family members have performed those rituals, the church's service and presence are still required in the funeral service and proceedings until burial. The church is expected and requested to perform Christian rituals that involve burial services led by a clergyperson or laypeople who are trained to conduct such services (Makhutso, 2019, p. 6). However, the funeral burial practices do not end upon burial, but continue through rituals

which are related to the family members. The study was conducted among the Ngoni people in the area of Traditional Authority Mtwalo under its Group Village Headman Fwiramthondo in Mzimba North. The study, therefore, explores the significance of Christian funeral burial rituals and practices, ancestor worship, rituals for ancestor appeasement, harmony between the living and the dead, and coexistence of Christianity and Ngoni Traditional religion.

African spirituality concerning the dead

Death is one of the most universal and mysterious human experiences. According to African theologians like Mbiti, death stands between the world of human beings and the world of spirits. The logical departure of someone requires rituals that are intended to unite the two worlds (Mbiti, 1991, p. 3). There is a close association between the living and the dead because the living connect with the dead for as long as they are remembered (Osore, 2021, p. 23). Funerals in the African context are often considered to be a spiritual journey, not only for the dead but also for the living. The natural relationship between ancestors and earthly descendants is usually likened to that of parents and offspring (Khosha-Nkatin et al., 2021, p. 3). Children consider their parents and grandparents as direct ancestors. It is also believed that ancestors automatically acquire some kind of supernatural power or sacred status (Magesa, 1997, p. 52). Munthali (2006, p. 372) reveals that the spirit of the ancestor is merely a personal power reigning over some 'holy or sacred' domain to Africans. Ancestors are not gods but intermediaries between the living and the dead. Therefore, maintaining good relations with the ancestors is vital. The ancestors have to be regularly appeased through a variety of ritual offerings and the appropriate observance of burial rites. Within this relationship, they are not worshipped but venerated by individuals and the community (White, 2015, p. 2; Hageman and Gluckman, 2016, p. 40).

In various parts of Africa, dead bodies are considered to be in a liminal stage. This understanding brings with it the need to observe and conduct proper burial rites as required by the community (Tshoba, 2014, p. 55). The ancestors thus become a source of blessing or curse to the family according to how they were buried. According to Munthali (2006, p. 370), Africans believe that when someone dies, the body is buried, but the spirit departs from the body. If the transition is not carefully managed, there is a chance that the deceased's *mzimu* (spirit) can be captured by evil spirits.

According to David (2008, p. 50), the quest for life and its security is the central motivation for observing proper burial rites.

Death from a Christian perspective

Many Christians view death as a consequence of sin. Sin is primarily seen as disobedience to God, who is the ultimate source of goodness. Because of sin, death becomes universal (Matthew, 2012). Every human individual dies, either through accident, natural calamities, sickness, old age, or perhaps suicide. The Bible has described the human condition as “living in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79). From one Christian perspective, the universality of death is based on the belief that all humans are sinners, and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). Humankind became separated from the living God and became subject to death and suffering. Yet, in a sense, death is not as much a punishment for sin but as an inevitable consequence of choosing to be separated from God, who is the source of life. Hence, the Christian view of life and death is that death was not previously part of the human situation. Instead, human beings were created for life together with God, while sin and death are seen as aberrations (Tan, 2020, p. 2). Death marks the final stage of a person’s journey in this life. When death happens to the body, a person dies. In death, something happens to the person as a whole, which has significant consequences for the soul as well. The ability to live has been curtailed definitively, and the life journey has come to an end. From one Christian viewpoint, death also means that one’s decision for or against God as reached during one’s lifetime becomes final and unalterable (Dale, 2016, p. 120).

Many Christians describe death as the separation of body and soul. When one regards death as the separation of soul and body, this does not mean the soul has now entered a new state where it is freed from the encumbrances of the corporeal body. Instead, the Christian view of the person is a unity of body and soul (Tan, 2020, p. 6). This assertion, however, is not meant to suggest that there is no afterlife in which further developments could occur after death. Instead, it is meant chiefly to affirm that death does not mark the full stop of life but rather it signifies a new beginning (Albert, 2007, p. 232).

The way we see it in African Traditions, Catholic Christians also practise some things in preparation for what they call a good death. The practices based on Jesus’ healing of the crippled, blind, and variegated people inspired Christians to serve in patient care. In contemporary times, almost

every church has hospitals, both to serve in their region and within the framework of mission activities. For example, the Catholic Church has established Extreme Unction and Viaticum. These practices began in the first centuries as emergency support services carried out to prepare a person on the deathbed for his/her last respect. The blessing prayer is called the “sacramental blessing of patients” since the Second Vatican Council. The Extreme Unction is performed by the Priest who puts oil on the patient and blesses him/her by putting his hands on him/her. It is believed that this brings healing and a comfortable death to the patient (Flinn, 2007, p. 25, Kucuk, 2014, p. 440).

Catholic Christian burial rituals are not that different from those of ATR. Catholic Christians also perform various applications related to the deceased body. They prepare the dying person with some rituals after death, which include washing, cleaning, closing the eyes and clothing the deceased body. (Hartland, 1971, p. 471). Christians have diverse ways of burying the deceased for example, in trees, the sea, or land, and putting the body in a cave (Kucuk, 2014, p. 310).

A Brief History of Ngoni-Tumbuka Ethnic Interaction and Christianity

The study was conducted among Catholic Christians who belong to the Ngoni ethnic group. The Ngoni are a group of people found in the Mzimba District, in the northern part of Malawi. The Ngoni, migrated from South Africa with Zwangendaba as their first leader (Mtenje and Soko, 1998, p. 2, Madise, 2015, p. 5). The Ngoni actively sought to suppress the cultural practices of their subject peoples. One example of this suppression was the disappearance of the old Tumbuka religious cult centered around the spirit *Chikang’ombe*. The loss of formal religion among the Tumbuka captives in Mzimba made them receptive to the new religion brought by the missionaries (Vail, 1972, p. 156). In the 1880s and 1890s, the Ngoni leadership invited missionaries to live amongst them for economic and political reasons. However, they discouraged their children from acquiring Western education due to the impact of Christian teachings on their ethics. Instead, they allowed the children of their Tumbuka slaves and serfs to attend the mission schools. As a result, the Tumbuka were the first to be converted to Christianity (Vail, 1989). As the Tumbuka embraced Christianity and Western education, their language gained respectability.

Because they had been the first to grasp the new educational opportunities, their language could no longer be seen as the language of slaves and serfs only. Rather, it was the language of a rapidly expanding group of educated people (Pachai, 1972, p. 520). Moreover, because Tumbuka was the language of most of the Ngoni ruling elites' wives and concubines, it became the language that even Ngoni young people learned as they grew up (Kishindo, 2002, p. 215). Currently, there are a lot of Tumbuka people in Mzimba who identify themselves as Ngoni due to the assimilation process. As a result, the Tumbuka culture dominates among the Ngoni. This is partly evident from the fact that the Ngoni language is almost lost. However, it is also indisputable that the Ngoni culture and language have in turn greatly enriched the Tumbuka language in vocabulary and other traditions, including funeral burial rights, and vice versa (Mtenje and Soko, 1998, p. 4).

About the Study

The data upon which this study is based was collected using in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with old as well as young men and women who are members of the Roman Catholic Church and also observe traditional Ngoni religion on funeral burial rites. A total of 40 respondents were interviewed. Three FGDs were conducted; one group was a mixture of men and women. For the other two groups, one consisted of men only and one was comprised of women only. One norm of the Ngoni culture is that a father-in-law or elder brother-in-law cannot speak to the daughter-in-law or young brother's wife (Kottack, 2015, p. 204). The mixed FGD only included men and women who were allowed to talk to each other. The decision to have FGDs that separated men and women was meant to include the voices of women who could not speak in the presence of elders according to kin superiority. Key interviews with Group Village Headmen and Village Headmen were also conducted. This qualitative study was conducted among the Ngoni people of the Traditional Authority Mtwalo under Group Village Head Fwiramthondo in the Mzimba North between January and May 2023. The study's overall objective was to explore the significance of the Ngoni traditional of funeral burial practices amongst Roman Catholic Christians. The significance of these practices was to be explored in relation to the parallel funeral burial rites practised by Christians.

The Significance of Christian Funeral Burial Rituals and Practices

Most of the informants of the study indicated that Christian funeral rituals are significant to them. This is because the church plays a central role throughout the funeral service. One of the informants said that church members come in large numbers and comfort the bereaved family through prayers, singing hymns by the church choir, food contributions and cooking, from the day of the funeral until the burial. Christian funeral rituals involve a church gathering where family and friends praise God for Christ's triumph over sin and death. The mourning period includes prayer services, a vigil, and words of comfort and encouragement to the bereaved family. A lay preacher or priest leads the rituals following Christian traditions. The informants also indicated that the lay preacher or a priest is in charge of the burial service. One of the informants said that:

[Nyifwa yambulaŵa tchalitchi yikuzirwa yayi. Watalitchi wakutivikirila m'mapemphero kweniso Yesu ndiyo ndi nthowa ya ufumu wakuchanya]

“A funeral without the church is not respected. The church soothes and comforts us through prayers, and Jesus Christ is the way to heaven.”

The above quote demonstrates that the involvement of the church, the reading of the Bible, the preaching of the word of God, hymn singing, and other rituals conducted by lay preachers or clergy during funerals are indispensable. This perception of the church mirrors Erdman & Kok-Mun's (2010, p. 131) observation that during challenging times, individuals gravitate towards an established individual or institution perceived as better equipped to navigate the complexities of the world. Therefore, the Church serves as a body that nourishes the spiritual well-being of the deceased or bereaved family with its rituals plays a significant role (Mokhutso, 2019, p. 73). One of the informants said that:

[Pala nyifwa nja Katolika, Ise ngati watalitchi, tikwiza kuzapangiska mapemphero na umo ndondomeko ya nyifwa yachikhristu yikwendera. Pala pakuchitika midawuko yakuti yikususkana na chi khristu yayi ise tilije nayo suzgo]

“When the deceased belongs to the Catholic Church, priests or church elders offer prayers. If family members perform traditional funeral burial rituals that are not against Christian beliefs, then we don't have a problem.”

The informants said that the funeral program set by the church does not conflict with the traditional funeral rituals because some rituals are conducted by elders only, sometimes even before the arrival of church leaders or in a space where church leaders are not invited. Yet other traditional funeral rituals are conducted after the burial, meaning that these rituals are conducted in the presence of family members only.

Opening of the Graveyard

The informants said that when death occurs in a Ngoni village, three or four elders headed by the Village headman go to the graveyard and say:

[Tawodila wapapi, pepani tamusuzgani tasangika namasuzgo tataya mwana winu. Tikupempha kuti mutizomerezge tinjire mu muzi kuti timuperekezge munyithu]

“We are knocking on your door, our parents, sorry our ancestors, for bothering you. We have lost one of your children, and we ask for your permission to allow us to enter the graveyard so that we bury one of your own.”

According to Munthali (2006, p. 371), the Ngoni also believe that ancestors have a role to play in the lives of their descendants, and that they have to be informed when misfortunes happen, so that they should not be surprised that a lot of people are going to the graveyard. After they plead to the ancestors, they enter the graveyard, and the village headman shows the elders where they will bury the deceased. When going to the graveyard, the elders carry a stick which, they say, is used to carry the spirit of the dead person; and one of the elders strikes where the deceased is going to be buried meaning that the spirit of the deceased has been transferred to his next home (*Kusamuska mzimu*). One of the informants said that failure to do this results in the spirit of the deceased person appearing in the dreams of the relatives and saying, “*iwe unilondezugenge kumalalo*” (You are also going to die and follow me at the graveyard). The informants revealed that even though they are Christians, they still observe these burial rituals because of the fear of ancestors and the spirit of the deceased who continues to play an important role among the living. Thus, when a Catholic Christian dies, the church and elders are notified, and subsequently, a funeral program is arranged. However, this program integrates both the church's protocols and the observance of Ngoni funeral burial traditional religious rituals (*Mudawuko*). In this case, each religious tradition is honored both individually and concurrently.

Mourning of the Deceased Person

When there is a funeral, all people in attendance are expected to mourn and sleep at the mourning house (*pachivumbi*). This might be done at the house of the deceased, the deceased's parents, or at the residence of elders with direct family connection to the deceased person. As is the case with the Tumbuka, the Ngoni of Mzimba believe that the spirit of a kin or an ancestor plays an important role in the lives of the descendants. Therefore, the spirit of the deceased will be directed to the house of his direct descendants (Munthali, 2006, p. 71). In the past, as informants indicated, people slept at a deceased person's place for almost a month and were fed by the relatives of the deceased person. Nowadays, after realizing that this long period is too costly to manage, people do *Chivumbi* for three to four days. A wife of a deceased person is expected not to take a bath for four days while still *pachivumbi* so that she should be pure as her husband's spirit is still settling at the graveyard. This practice is similar to one observed by Awolalu and Dopamu (1979, p. 267) among the Yoruba of Nigeria whereby the relatives of the deceased may not wash or change their clothes as a sign of mourning.

Informants of this study said that on the first morning, after the burial, the village head and elders go to the graveyard to see if nothing has disturbed the resting of the deceased person. For instance, someone might have dug up the place where the deceased has been buried. It is not everyone who goes to the graveyard to look at how their relative has stayed overnight. Some people remain in the mourning house, so that they should welcome those returning from the graveyard and ask them how the deceased has stayed (*Mwayendako wuli?*). Immediately after the overnight status report of the graveyard has been given, all women start crying deeply.

People in the village are expected to mourn together with those who have lost their loved one, until the body of the deceased person starts decomposing or bursting. This mourning of the dead can last for a month. The informants said that every morning, the woman who has lost her loved one is expected to go and cry under the tree and mention the name of the husband. In the case of the husband who has lost his wife, he is expected to go to the river (*dambo*) every morning and cry. Both are expected to do that so that they should not have time to think about other partners, but they should always remember to go to their respective places and mourn their loved ones. This practice differs from what Daramola and Jeje (1995,

p. 153) found among the Yoruba. According to them, the wife of the deceased person was expected to go to the graveyard three times a day for seven days to weep and to pay respect to the deceased husband. No expectations were reported for the husband who lost a wife.

According to Kottack, in the patrilineal society of the Ngoni, marriage and payment of bride price (*malowolo*) mean that a woman's reproductive rights, obligations and responsibilities are transferred to the groom's kin. Therefore, when she dies, she is buried in the graveyard of her husband's kin (Kottack, 2015, p. 204). My informants told me that, after burying the woman, her relatives can decide to mourn her in their home village, and they communicate publicly that "Tawakuchanakazi chivumbi tinyamulenge" meaning to say that the relatives of the deceased wife will symbolically carry her spirit and mourn in her village. This is usually the case when the village of the deceased wife is far from where she got married. The relatives of the husband will give maize, flour, and meat to the relatives of the deceased wife as a sign that they have symbolically carried the spirit. When they arrive in her maternal village, the mourning will be done in the house of her parents, and people will equally cry as if she has been buried in that village. All the relatives who missed the burial will go to that particular house to continue mourning the deceased

Shaving of Hair of the Bereaved Relatives

The Ngoni, like many African societies, recognize that death is the rite of passage that all human beings must go through to complete their life journey on earth (Appel, 2011, p. 138). While still at the graveyard, burying the deceased, the village head or one of the elders announces the schedule for sweeping the house (*kugothola*), which is typically set for a day or two after the burial. During *Kugothola*, family members convene, usually in the morning, to emphasize the importance of unity, providing comfort to the grieving family, assisting with household tasks, and encouraging villagers to continue supporting the bereaved by staying at their home until the day of hair shaving (*Chimeto*). The chief, in consultation with village elders, determines the date of *Chimeto*, which usually occurs about a month after the burial. *Chimeto* signifies the conclusion of the mourning period and the start of a new phase for the bereaved relatives. The initial task during *Chimeto* involves cleaning the area around the mourning house and ensuring all ashes are cleared. Subsequently, family members shave their heads, and the shaved hair is ceremonially burnt (Ritcher, 2005, p. 1010).

According to our informants, in the past, the bereaved relatives needed to shave their whole heads. This applied to both men and women. However, these days, a woman who has lost her husband can just shave part of her head. If a man has lost his wife, the razor blade is just shown to the people symbolizing that the shaving has happened. Like the Zulu and the Xhosa of South Africa, the Ngoni indicated that they practice *kumeta* meaning shaving of hair, as a way of honouring the spirits of the dead and relinquishing ties with them. The informants said that in circumstances where family members fail to practice this ritual, they are bound to witness unusual events such as nightmares, ailments, and other misfortunes. One of the respondents said that:

“Although it takes time for one to completely wipe out memories of their gone kin, it is not advisable to mourn past the day of *kumeta* or *kugonthora* because of the need to liberate the soul of the deceased kin to go in peace since they now exist in another world away from the living.”

Offering Libation to Ancestral Spirits

The Ngoni believe that ancestors dwell both in the graveyard and among the living in the village. One key informant said that when they want to be among the living, the house of the elder of particular descendants tends to be a dwelling place for ancestors of that particular descent. It is believed that an elder person is old enough to be staying with the spirits of the dead. The same house is also used to keep the body of the person who has died in the village (*nyumba ya Chivumbi*). One of the informants said that:

“The offering of sacrificial beer to ancestors (*moŵa wamizimu*) symbolizes the transition of the spirits from the graveyard to the spirit’s house and the deceased’s spirit meets other kin spirits in the ancestral house. The Ngoni believe that it is only the body that dies not the spirit so they want the spirits of the dead to be staying within the village.”

On the day of *Kumeta*, the village head together with village members set a day to brew beer (*moŵa wamizimu*) to appease the spirit exactly one month after the deceased kin was buried. The beer is brewed at the house where the dead kin was mourned, and women who are known to be the best at brewing beer are identified within the village. When preparing the beer, the women use maize which is showing some signs of germinating (*chimera*). After it has been brewed, the beer, which is called *masese*, is stored in big clay pots.

When going to the other village (*malalo* or *mawono*), meaning the graveyard, one person is chosen to carry a one-meter stick (*Mntowa*) that will be used to hit the tomb of the deceased person, and everyone going to the graveyard on this day is expected to have a piece of cloth (*Chinwazi*) tied around his or her waist. *Chinwazi* is a wrapper that is used to cover the body of the deceased before burial. The tying of *Chinwazi* symbolizes the connection between the living and the dead. The stick is struck at the tomb to awaken the spirit of the dead. One of the respondents said that all the people are asked to surround the tomb. Everyone is expected to taste the beer, then pour the remains of the beer on the tomb and say:

[pepani tati timuwuskeni timutoleni mukawothereko moto ku nyumba]

“We are sorry to bother you, we would like to wake you up and get warmth through fire at the village.”

This means asking the spirit of the deceased kin to go with the people to the village so that it might not feel cold at the graveyard as all the relatives will be drinking sacrificial beer at the village as part of the ritual indicating that the deceased has now joined the ancestral world. The pouring of beer on the tomb symbolizes that the people have now accepted that the person is in the world of ancestors (*Mizimu*) where he now belongs and can go back to the village as *muzimu* and the relatives need to offer sacrifice to appease his spirit. During this time, the deceased spirit is taken to the village for the sacrificial beer ritual. When coming back home from the graveyard, no one is expected to turn back for they believe that doing so will make the spirit of the dead person go back to the graveyard. In case one of the people looks back, the process starts again because, according to my informants, it means the spirit went back to the graveyard. Women are then asked to prepare another supply of beer so that no one dreams of the dead person’s spirit, worrying that it is feeling cold and it needs to be where the rest of the other ancestors do reside within the village. The remains from the beer of the spirits are also poured on the clothes of the deceased person, because the people believe that doing so will chase the spirits from the clothes, and there will be no contact between the kin’s spirit and the clothes. After that the clothes are ready to be shared among his or her relatives. The findings echo a claim by Matandiko (1996, p. 29) that the Ngoni of Zambia prepare beer when they have offended the ancestral spirits, so the beer is used to ask for forgiveness from the ancestral spirits.

The Existence of Parallel Systems of Funeral Burial Rituals and Practices

All the informants indicated that they are Christians belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, and that they believe in salvation through Jesus Christ. The informants said that as Christians they have to observe the Christian funeral rituals which guarantee the salvation of the deceased and brings hope and comfort to the bereaved family. However, they also have obligation and responsibility to observe Ngoni traditional funeral rituals. The informants did not refer to the traditional rituals as a religion like Christianity. The informants explained that these funeral burial rituals were practiced and taught to them by their forefathers through oral traditions. One of the informants said:

[Palakwachitika nyifwa, watchalitchi wakutlongozga kweniso tikulondezga mudawuko uwo wapapi wakatilekela chifukwa pala taleka kulondezga mdawuko ndikuti mizimu yawapapi withu yikwiyenge nase.]

“When we have a funeral, the church leads the program of the funeral, however, we also follow our tradition because if we don’t, our ancestors will not be happy with us.”

Other informants felt that these funeral burial rituals were their culture. Culture for them is who they are, therefore, these traditional funeral burial rituals define their distinctiveness as Ngoni. Some informants in the study noted that they practice these rituals out of respect for elders in their families, who often are the ones giving direction on the performance of the rituals during the funeral. It was also indicated that the Ngoni funeral burial rituals are important for the deceased to be received and accepted in the world of ancestors. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the bereaved family members to observe these rituals which help to avoid misfortunes in the form of illness, or disturbing appearance of the deceased in dreams of the bereaved relatives.

CONCLUSION

The Ngoni of Mzimba recognize the existence and vital role of ancestors in the lives of their descendants despite their overwhelming conversion to Christianity. They believe in the observation of Christian funeral burial rituals while at the same time maintaining their relationship with their

ancestors. Their ancestors' existence is manifested in different burial rituals with the aim to help the spirit of the deceased kin to have a proper burial and peace in the ancestral world. What is apparent from this paper is the descendants' desire to appease the ancestors through continued observation of the customs, which in turn assures the living to live in harmony and avoid misfortunes. To guarantee peace and protection from the ancestors, the descendants are expected to inform them when one of their children has passed away, mourning the spirit of the kin together and offering sacrificial beer to the spirit. The burial rites are believed to help the kin's spirit to be properly welcomed to the ancestral world. The Ngoni, though most of them are members of the Roman Catholic Church, do not perceive a conflict between their Catholic burial rites and the traditional ones. They do not see these burial rites as religious but rather as part of their traditions and culture.

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