

## **LEADERSHIP FROM THE GRAVES: THE CASE OF THE BUKUSU TRADITIONAL SOCIETY**

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The Bukusu people inhabit Bungoma District of western Kenya. A number of them have since independence spread into most parts of Trans Nzoia district. In the pre-colonial period, these people lived in small communities made up of walled villages. Each walled village usually consisted of one clan. The Bukusu society was stateless and had no specialized common political organization. The clan was the largest basic unit. Leadership of the society rested in the hands of the elders who were seen as the custodians of the traditions of the society.

Babukusu believed in the Supreme Being, Wele, who was seen as the creator of the world and men. He formed the apex of a kind of hierarchy of ancestral spirits who, like Wele himself, were the helpers and the protectors of the living who were below them in the hierarchy. The ancestral spirits were a fundamental force in the well-being of the Bukusu society. They were a constant and compulsory frame of reference for all activities in this society.

The belief in ancestral spirits was based on the concept that there was life after death and that physical death was not the end of existence. The limits between life and death did not really exist. Life was born from death and death, in turn, was the prolongation of life. The dead continued to be part and parcel of their communities and to play important roles. The Bukusu traditional society, therefore, consisted of both the living and the dead. For them, death does not terminate the existence of the human individual and his spiritual life but rather transforms the nature of his existence. The transformed individual simply moves over to join the company of the departed in their

abode, the hereafter. In the hereafter, life continued more or less as it is in its human form. Personalities are retained, while wealth and poverty remain unchanged as they were here in the world of the living. The departed are thought to possess most qualities of the living; they think, feel, talk and act like the living persons. The dead, however, gain more social and political powers. The transformation from the living to the dead involves an increase in the vital power of the dead.

The dead, sometimes referred to as the ancestors or the living dead because of their continued membership and participation in the activities of their communities, were perceived to be the most powerful forces in the religion of Babukusu. They occupied the ontological position between Wele and the living. Not any dead person, however, could become an ancestor. Old age, wisdom, physical and moral integrity, passage through life without deviating from its normal course, and communal identification with one's society, constituted the attributes of becoming an ancestor. They wielded unlimited power over the living. Their power was immeasurably magnified and made sacred and therefore removed from the controls of cooperation and reciprocity, conscience and love as they work among the living. The supernatural status accorded to the ancestors exhibited major difference for, although one could argue to a point with an elder, no one could question the authority and wisdom of their ancestors.

When these ancestors were alive they were accorded respect and this is continued and enhanced when they die. The living honour them through sacrifices and offerings and by adhering to their society's beliefs and practices. It was believed that the dead demanded not only proper handling and burial of their bodies,

but for many years were sensitive to the way their living relatives lived and related to them. Ritual ceremonies carried out before and during burials as well as those after burial were meant to ensure that the dead were happy with the living and that they arrived safely in the hereafter. The living were expected to maintain close ties with these ancestors, to adhere to their guidance and to meet their wants. The belief in ancestors extended unchallengeable supernatural authority to the ancestors over the living. The goods and ills of life were in their hands. To break ties with the ancestors was tantamount to threatening the living community with destruction. When the ancestors felt offended, neglected and disobeyed, they became angry and demonstrated their feelings by vindictive actions.

In the belief that the ancestors were capable of doing anything, blessing and assisting in times of difficulties, punishing injustice or any vicious crime, Babukusu adhered slavishly to traditions and performed their religious obligations sincerely and devoutly. In the Bukusu traditional society, the existence of the ancestors and their power was not in any doubt; it was as real as the existence of electricity and magnetism in the modern world. Babukusu did not doubt anything about their ancestors and, as such, their power and authority over the living was real. Although this power and authority, and even the whole question of ancestors, was a matter of faith, it never occurred to Babukusu that the whole belief may be an illusion that was not real. Nobody would dare challenge this belief for, to him, it was real.

Each clan had its own respected ancestors. There were no common ancestors for the whole society apart from, perhaps, the founding fathers of the Bukusu society. Each clan and family believed that everything, from health and fertility to taking of right decisions, was of interest to their ancestors. It was upon them to provide everything the living needed for survival, such as the fertility of the soil and the

reaping of plentiful harvests, good weather conditions, the fertility of women, and the success of all their endeavours (Wafula 1992). Any signs of ill health or abnormality in the family, clan or the whole society necessitated appropriate measures to avert the situation. The ancestors were seen as the causal agent of the deteriorating situation, and as the agents for remedying it.

The leadership provided by the ancestors in the Bukusu traditional society tended to be authoritarian and conservative. The living had to obey or submit to whatever was believed or said to be the wish or demand of their ancestors. They were also required to live according to the manners established by their ancestors who were seen as the guardians of the society's customs and traditions. They guarded the preservation of old methods, norms and values. The ancestors could not smile favourably on any kind of change unless they wished it. The force for conformity and conservation characterised ancestral leadership. Life had to be lived and things done in strict adherence to the traditions and customs of the society which basically constituted the experiences and wisdom of the ancestors. It was not the task of an ordinary individual to alter the established practices of his society. Anyone who attempted to do so would suffer grave consequences. Where changes were necessary, the ancestors could make their will known through their representatives. This conservatism is against the spirit of freedom and development.

J.S. Mill argues against this form of conservatism when he states:

Every age had held opinions which subsequent ages should not be forced to uphold. Many opinions now general will be rejected by future ages, as the present must have rejected the past (Mill, 1948:11).

According to Mill, there is always the need for people

not only to discover new truths, and to point out that what was once held as true was no longer, but also to commence new practices and set the examples of enlightened conduct and better taste and sense in human life. Forcing individuals to live in accordance with old standards blocks their development. It blocks the development of their reason and critical capacities. The individual faculties are not put into proper use and, consequently, the individual loses enterprise.

Every generation ought to be free to determine its own destiny as required by the changing circumstances. When a man dies, his power and his wants cease with him, and such a person, as a matter of fact, loses any participation in the concerns of this world and should have no authority controlling or directing the living. Those who have quit the world of the living cannot in actual fact have authority over the living. There is much we can learn from their ideas but they should have no authority the way the ancestors did.

T. Paine opposed such a system when he wrote:

Every age and generation must be free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generation which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies (Mendel, 1942:115).

A system that allows a man or a group of men to continue ruling long after death is a form of tyranny over the living. This is more so when their believed authority overrides the authority of the living elders and when there are no provisions for one to appeal against the ancestors.

The ancestors exercised coercive power over the living and were able to make the living do as they wished. This was largely due to the fear of the consequences of disobedience. The living are obliged or forced to obey. They can still not obey it but since

the consequences of disobedience are usually thought to be even more undesirable than the alternative course of action, the former is often said to be inevitable or forced upon the living.

The ancestors enjoyed a lot of power comparable to the Hobbesian Leviathan. It is as if the forefathers of this society made a covenant, surrendered their power to the ancestors and agreed to act in accord with the will of their ancestors. This covenant was made on behalf of future generations. Apparently, this power of the ancestors was made great enough to create security, great enough to inspire such fear of supernatural punishment that no one in his right mind could want to disobey. The ancestors' power was made great enough to enable them, by the supernatural terror thereof, to frame their will towards unity and concord amongst the living.

Yet the whole concept of ancestorship and their powers was a mere creation of the living. This was a mere belief that existed in the minds of believers. It was an imaginary power that may have served the society well at a time when there were no policemen. It managed to keep the society peaceful and closely knit together. The efficacy of the ancestral power was, to a large extent, boosted by the fact that everybody in the Bukusu traditional society was religious and no one therefore doubted this power.

The belief in immortality has always been held in one form or another by a larger majority of mankind, but critical reflection brings forth a number of apparently strong reasons to regard the belief as illusory. To say that death is merely a transition to another form of existence is indeed to express a significant metaphysical proposition. This is a dualistic belief which pictures a person as consisting of a body and a mind or soul. This belief holds that the mind or the soul survives after the body dies and disintegrates. When the body disintegrates in the grave or is burned to ashes or eaten by wild animals, the mind which is non-

material survives and continues to exist.

A person, however, is identified by his body, not by his soul. One, in fact, wonders whether the soul can be a sufficient identity of a dead person or whether it is possible for the soul to exist without the body. The existence of the soul depends on the presence of a functioning nervous system and, as such, it is not logical to think of the soul in the absence of the body. It is impossible for a person to have no physical body but be able to think, feel, have memories and sense the way it was believed in the Bukusu traditional society. Every step towards the belief in life after death is riddled with obstacles. It is not just that we are accustomed to think of people as having bodies and cannot get out of this habit. The fact is that to imagine the dead doing things and controlling the living, as they did in the Bukusu traditional society, is logically impossible.

But the fact that this belief ensured the survival and peaceful existence of this society is worth noting. As guardians of the moral and religious norms and values of the society, the ancestors played a positive role though this was achieved at a great sacrifice on the part of the living.

Ruling from their graves, the ancestors were out of reach of the living and their demands were unending. The sacrifices and offerings made to them were a great economic cost to the living. This, and the fact that their authoritarian control covered even the most minute human activity, left the living powerless.

In this paper, we hold the Bukusu traditional society responsible for such beliefs that surrendered authority from the living to the dead. Since every Bukusu was religious, these beliefs affected everybody in this society at each step and decision in life.

Religious beliefs have always been on the side of the status quo, resisting any rational inquiry into them.

Stout believers rarely take kindly the activities of researchers and seekers of truths. But as long as religious beliefs and practices affect human life, rational inquiry into these beliefs, their relevance and consequences should be encouraged.

The belief in ancestors and their role in the society was a major religious belief among the Babukusu. The effect of this belief on these people's way of life was real and great. It is basically because of such consequences that we cannot shy away from a rational re-evaluation of some of our traditional beliefs and practices. Society ought only to hold on to those beliefs and practices that do not infringe on an individual's struggle to self-development. The ideal way forward for Africa is to encourage a spirit of rational inquiry in all areas of thought and belief. Only this spirit has the force to undermine anachronistic and backward beliefs and practices that still linger on in our rural villages.

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