

# Gender and the Changing Funeral and Burial Practices among the Gusii People of Kenya

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**Abstract:** In most societies, women and men perform different roles during funerals and burials. Among the Gusii people of Kenya, women and men perform different but complimentary roles during funeral and burial practices. Likewise, there are variances in terms of how funeral and burial ceremonies and practices of deceased men and women are performed. These roles, ceremonies and practices have been changing over time yet available data on the role of gender in Gusii funeral and burial practices are those which were documented by anthropologists many years ago. This seems to suggest that the Gusii culture, as it relates to funeral and burial practices, has been static. This chapter contests this position and goes further to examine the changing funeral and burial practices of the Gusii people in the context of gender.

**Keywords:** Women, funeral, burial, Gusii.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Funeral and burial practices come after death and death is a dreaded event which combines both respect and despair for the deceased by the living (Labeodan, 2008). Befitting mourning and burial rites therefore becomes a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dying (Pillari and Newsome, 1998). Most cultures prescribe befitting mourning and burial practices and the Gusii culture is no exception. Culture itself is a not a static entity and not all members of a social group adhere to the same culture in the same manner. The Gusii people adhere to a dominant culture but within this dominant culture are many other sub-cultures. However, at any one given time, most members of a social group will adhere to an existing dominant culture in its present form.

The culture contact theory stipulates that when two cultures come into contact, each is affected and changed by the other. The Gusii picked some cultural traits from other cultures, more so during the colonial period. However, the contact between the Gusii and the colonial administrators, educationists, capitalists and Christian missionaries did not change the Gusii culture wholesale with regard to funeral and burial practices. Some members of the Gusii society embraced change faster than others and even to-date, some Gusii people still adhere to precolonial funeral and burial practices. Thus, the Gusii did not react to the intrusion of foreign ideas in a homogenous manner (*Kenya National Archives*, MSS/10/187). Some members of the Gusii society changed while others became conservative with regard to funeral and burial practices.

Generally, it is the existing socio-cultural context which shapes the manner in which people grief loss of one of their members (Rosenblatt, 1988; Averill and Nunley, 1992). Like many other cultures, the Gusii culture specify how people grief through expression of thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Range 2006, Doka 2002). According to Kauffman (2002) members of a social group variably internalize these grieving rules. These rules do not apply to all genders in the same way. Men, women and children are expected to behave differently following the loss of a member of their society.

Also, the manner in which funeral and burial rites of men, women and children are observed portray some noticeable variations. In some cases, cultural changes swap gender roles relating to funeral and burial practices so that you find men playing the role that women used to play in olden times and vice versa. For example, in contemporary times, a lot of burden is falling on women's shoulders. It is not uncommon for married female relatives of the deceased to be made to incur huge costs towards the funeral of their deceased member of their family. In their study, Torkula (2004) and Mnda (2005) have observed that sons-in-law (or simply married female relatives) are made to provide material and financial assistance towards successful expensive burials, accompanied sometimes with threats or intimidation.

Changes towards burdensome funeral and burial practices have led many to begin to admire precolonial funeral and burial practices which placed less burden on relatives of the deceased (Lawuji 1988). Even Christian religion has failed to define funeral and burial practices which place less burden on the bereaved (Anderson, 2000; Magesa, 1997; Mbiti, 1969). The impact of expensive funeral and burial practices among the Gusii is reshaping traditional concepts around death, funeral and burial. After death, people are now beginning to care less about what tradition prescribes such as the number of days set aside for funeral, mourning and burial, and abstention from certain engagements such as involvement in sexual intercourse, among others.

In the olden days, societies had put in place conditions that would enable both male and female victims of death loss to cope favourably (Sanders, 1989; Rubin, 1990; Stroebe, 1991; Brener, 1993; Ukeh, 1997; Casdagli and Gobey, 2001; Stroebe *et al.*, 2003). These conditions are increasingly being altered with negative consequences on society as they are increasingly subjecting women to heavy burdens and suffering. This chapter examines the issue of gender in the changing funeral and burial practices of the Gusii people living in Kenya.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Data which was used to inform this study was obtained from archival research, oral interviews and review of relevant existing literature. The researcher also employed participant observation technique of collecting data by attending burial and funeral events. As a member of the Gusii community, the author has been attending funeral and burial sessions in Gusii society for many years and this helped in making some of the observations discussed in this chapter. Archival, oral and secondary data was gathered between May and June 2018. A historical research design was used because the study examined changing burial patterns among the Gusii, over time, and its impact on Gusii women.

### **The Gusii people:**

The Gusii or Abagusii people are a Bantu-speaking people whose present day homeland is a mountain region to the south of the Kavirondo Gulf in Kenya (Kenya National Archives, PC/RVP//11/1/4). Their homeland is cool and fertile. The routine work of agriculture falls on women's shoulders (Mayer 1950). Silberschmidt (1999) observes that the British colonizers changed the name of Gusiland to Kisii in 1907. The term Gusii is derived from the word Mogusii, the person that the Gusii people claim as their ancestor (Wipper, 1977; 24). From a linguistic point of view, the language of the Gusii people places them within the large family of the Bantu-speaking majority of sub-equatorial Africa (Levine, 1979:4). The Gusii claim that they are related to other bantu-speaking communities of Kenya such as the Kamba, Kuria, Meru, Embu, Gikuyu and the Maragoli (Ochieng', 1975). The Gusii can be divided into four main groups namely: Abasweta, Abagirango, Ababassi and Abanchari (Were and Nyamweya 1986).

Gender based division of labour and roles are a common practice among the Gusii. In most cases, the Gusii women occupy the lower strata of society and, thus, they are deemed to be of lower social status compared to men. However, the fact that Gusii women occupied the lower strata of the social echelon does not mean that they were always and everywhere inferior to men. Ideologically, the Gusii society was hinged on separation of the male and female spheres, and by so doing, gave certain limits to male domination as women controlled certain spheres of life. In addition, the fact that men, depended on women for food provided women with a 'counter-control' measure and possibilities of sanctions against men. In spite of all that, there seems to be little doubt that male superiority and dominance is accepted and respected in Gusii society- at least in theory (Silberschmidt 1999).

### **Gender and the Changing Funeral and Burial Practices among the Gusii:**

Different ceremonies marked the death of a man, a woman and a child in Gusii society during the precolonial times. Likewise, men and women played different roles during funeral and burial practices. Also, men, women and children were buried in varying fashions. Therefore, it is important to highlight the differences in ceremonies and roles performed according to gender.

#### ***(a) Changing funeral and burial practices of a man in Gusii society***

In precolonial times, when a Gusii man died, he was buried inside the village, but outside the hut (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2). While the Gusii people buried the dead in precolonial times, other communities in Kenya such as the Gikuyu and the Maasai did not. It was an abomination for a Gusii man, or even women and children, to be allowed to

die in a cattle village (*Egeserate*) and this was very much prevented from taking place. These cattle villages were banned with the establishment of the colonial administration as they encouraged cattle stealing (Silberschmidt 1999). Before their ban, stolen cattle were hidden in these villages and they were heavily guarded by young Gusii men (warriors).

Generally, Gusii funeral and burial practices were marked by simple ceremonies. What differentiated Gusii funeral and burial practices from those of their neighboring Luo was the fact that the Luo had funeral games which the Gusii did not have. Also, another difference is that the Gusii buried their dead outside the huts while the Luo buried inside the hut. However, in both communities, anybody who volunteered to be a mourner at a funeral was not prevented from doing so (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2).

In precolonial times, it was common for men to die from their homes and close to their close relatives unlike today when many of them die in hospitals or away from their homes if they are employed. In the olden days, a Gusii man would be watched over by his close relatives as he died. When a Gusii man was seen to be dying, his womenfolk commenced their ululations. Even today, it is women who weep a lot at funerals than men. A man is not supposed to cry and if he does, he is thought to possess feminine qualities. The discordant cries of women were meant to disturb a man's death (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2). During mourning period the widows of the deceased were expected to refrain from sexual intercourse and work of all kinds (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11).

Unlike in contemporary times when a dead man can be buried after several days or weeks or months, the precolonial Gusii society buried a dead man the same day he died such that if he died in the morning, he would be buried by the close of the day in the evening. This was the norm for both males and females (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2). Things have changed drastically in the contemporary world. Instead of burial taking place on the same day of death, it takes days or weeks or even months. The invention of the mortuary in Gusii society has made these kinds of delays possible.

As Jindra (2005) has shown, burial practices have changed radically and the mortuary is a place where the new experiences of contemporary immigration, intercontinental capital transfers and transnational families intersect with universal and historic emotions of belonging and loss. Formerly people died and were buried immediately. But now, because so many are out in the diaspora, the corpse has to be kept so that the family can assemble to mourn their departed (Huntington and Metcalf 1979; Kaufman and Morgan 2005). In the recent past, the manipulation of the timing of burial has enabled the domestic and international diaspora (who are often footing the bill) to participate in person.

In addition to delayed burials, the funeral sessions are accompanied by elaborate activities which consume a lot of money. Such activities include dances, ceremonies, speeches, gun-firing sessions, Christian services, feasting and drinking. Sometimes several hundred people will be entertained. They can involve hiring seating, marquees, video makers, generators, lighting and sound systems, as well as buying food and drinks. For the rich Gusii families, death celebrations are used to flaunt the economic success of the living whilst also lauding the dead. This stands in contrast to the precolonial times when funeral and burial practices were conducted in a simple manner.

Prior to the 1980s, death was considered shocking, a disaster - especially if the deceased was young and the occasion accorded the rightful solemnity it deserved, while food was not tasted by any grown up person except infants (Moti and Wegh, 2001; Torkula, 2004; Mnda, 2005). Today, festivities during mourning have become the order of the day and the essence of attending funerals seems defeated. Unlike other social interactions, the general tendency of humans to gather and close ranks to provide support and comfort in their mutual bereavement is not restricted by "invitation only." Generally speaking, anyone who wishes may come. The only compulsion is to do something that shows care and concern for the bereaved. Some persons stay only a short while, express their condolences and leave. Others, usually relatives or friends stay longer, perhaps assisting with the preparation of food (only for children and those on food regime), caring for the children, helping with funeral arrangements, greeting visitors and doing whatever else needs doing that bereaves cannot do because of their present state.

Before burial, a grave was dug outside the deceased man's homestead near the hut of his chief wife- the woman he married first- and in it he was laid reclining on his right side. His feet were towards the north so that as he lies he may look back to the old home of his race. The Gusii society was marked by a patriarchal set-up as a result of which men attracted more funeral and burial rites than women. In addition to being patriarchal, it was a common phenomenon for a Gusii man to marry several wives. Monogamy was very much discouraged and a man who had only one wife was ridiculed by his fellow men (Silberchmidt 1999).

It was within this socio-cultural set-up that when a Gusii man died, within the polygamous set-up, he was normally buried close to the hut of his senior wife, on the right side of the house (facing outwards) (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). This signified the importance that the first wife had in Gusii society. In modern times, some men are buried at the home of the youngest wife. The Gusii names which distinguished women's grades are as follows: *Mobucha ibu*- the first wife, *Nyamesanchu*- second wife, *Nyabweri rogoro*- third wife and *Nyageita*- the fourth wife (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13).

In modern times, nonetheless, polygamy is not a common phenomenon and therefore, the importance of the senior wife in the burial of a Gusii man has diminished. Even in polygamous families, a man may be buried near the house of the junior wife. In the precolonial times, the spot of the grave where a man was to be buried was marked by the eldest son of the deceased's oldest son, who would be given a cow (*Eng'ombe yogo tindeka* -burial cow) from the stock of the deceased (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). Nowadays, this is not strictly adhered to especially among wealthy families or families with well-educated members. Christianity has also affected the observance of this custom and a member of the church, who is not even related to the deceased man, can mark the spot of the grave.

In the precolonial times, the cow which was given to the oldest grandson of the deceased man, upon marking the grave was kept for him (grandson) by his mother if he was still a minor until he gained the age of majority (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). This signifies the importance of women as custodians of property of minors (their children). In contemporary times, and especially among poor families, such a cow is not even given. Sometimes money is given instead. This particular aspect of the Gusii culture and customs has been affected by increasing importance of the money economy which replaced the importance of cattle as a medium of exchange. In the precolonial times, all the ornaments of the deceased were removed (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). During the burial no sound is made but as the grave is filled-in, the cries of mourning rise again (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2).

#### **(b) After-burial practices relating to a deceased Gusii man**

After the burial of a man in precolonial times, a male goat from the deceased man's stock was slaughtered and eaten by the people who buried the deceased. If the deceased had no goats, his family contributed one for this purpose (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). This goat was called (*Embori egokendia nyomba*). Nowadays, people who fill the grave of a deceased man with soil can even be given a chicken instead of a goat. Sometimes, meat is bought from a butchery and this is used to feed people who bury a dead man among the Gusii. Wealthy families will even go to the extent of hiring outside catering services. While it is expected, both then and now, that men would provide the food upon which the mourners would feed on, the actual burden of preparing and serving food to mourners falls heavily on women than men. This is especially the case if outside-catering services are not hired.

By the 1950s, some changes had already taken place whereby any expenses incurred in connection with a modern Christian burial came out of the estate of the deceased (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). This signaled the beginning of the spirit of individualism whereby family members were beginning to take little interest in meeting funeral and burial expenses of the deceased. If the deceased was a poor man, he was given a less befitting burial and if he was a man with married daughters, then his daughters were compelled to foot the funeral bills of their deceased father.

Another aspect of Gusii funeral and burial practices which has changed drastically is the shaving of heads of the mourners. As a sign of mourning, the Gusii shave their heads, both for male and female relatives (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2). Hair shaving ceremony (*Amatate*) was performed on the third day after burial, the heads of the members of the deceased's family are shaved except unmarried girls (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). The Christian church has over the years preached against this aspect of Gusii culture with much success. Education of the Gusii people has also contributed to the abandonment of this practice in the contemporary times.

Friends and relatives, both then and now, join the mourners from time to time for purposes of consoling and encouraging the bereaved. However, the two days which had been set for weeping in precolonial times no longer hold water in contemporary world of the Gusii people. From the 1950s, a three-day mourning period began upon completion of the burial rites and during the three days no work was done by members of the deceased's family (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). In the precolonial days, it used to be two days.

Also, in the precolonial times, a bull or a goat was killed after burial, and having consumed, small stripes were cut from the hide or skin. Each member of the party tied one strip, in the form of a ring, upon the middle finger of the right hand and wore it in memory of the deceased. The hide was used by the dead man's wife as a cover to her bed. There is so far as one can ascertain no notion of a sacrifice to the dead man's spirit in the slaughter of a bull- nor is food offered up at any time to propitiate or sustain his "shade". For two months his wives lived alone but at the end of this period they throw aside the skin which the deceased gave them on the day of marriage and the ankle bands (vide marriage). They don fresh skins and nominally pass into the charge of the deceased's brother (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2). This practice has almost completely disappeared from the Gusii cultural bank.

In the olden days, the final day which freed widows from the control of their former deceased husband, was celebrated in drinking traditional beer (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2). All these aspects of the Gusii funeral and burial practices are no longer practiced. The importance of the skin in Gusii funeral and burial practices have been replaced by either the blanket or the bed sheet. Afterwards, a bull from the deceased's stock called (*eng'ombe gosungwa keita*), or a cow if the deceased was an old woman, was slaughtered near the gate of the cattle boma (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). The furniture and utensils of the deceased were turned upright, the family of the deceased would sing and signify the end of the mourning period. The death of a Gusii man, then as now, left behind a trail of issues to be resolved. Two most important issues that were to be resolved after the death of a Gusii man was the inheritance of the widows and property as discussed in the next section.

#### (c) *Widowhood and matters of inheritance after burial of a Gusii man*

As observed earlier, Gusii men were polygamous in the precolonial period and, upon death, a man left behind many widows and property which called for inheritance. In precolonial times, the distribution of the deceased man's property and the future of the widows was discussed by his *eamate* elders (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). The elders discuss, among other things, the inheritance of the deceased by members of his family. The *eamate* elders met one month after the death of the deceased to discuss the distribution of his wealth and the future of his widows. Then they would appoint *omogaka* (head of the family) to administer the deceased's estate.

*Omogaka* had three principal functions namely (i) to be the head of the family and as such represent the family for all legal purposes (ii) to be the legal guardian of the widow and the children of the deceased in certain cases and (iii) to act as administrator of the deceased's property/estate including telling tenants on the land of the deceased to vacate. He would also pay debts owed by the deceased and recover those owed to the deceased. He would also pay funeral expenses relating to the deceased (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). The role of *omogaka* in Gusii funeral and burial practices has almost disappeared. If a rich Gusii man dies in contemporary times, his family members may seek the intervention of the courts of law in matters relating to property inheritance.

Still, the role of *omogaka* and *eamate* in determining the course of wife inheritance has drastically diminished. A widow may even be remarried by a man from outside the clan of the deceased man and still continue using the land that belonged to her late husband. And even though the relatives of the deceased man may want to contest the widow's continued use of her late husband's land and property. Modern courts of law have given widows leverage in matters of inheritance. In the past, Gusii widows were oppressed by men as they were rarely given a voice in matters of property inheritance. In most cases, they were considered as part of the property of the deceased, to be distributed to whoever wanted to inherit them. If a woman was inherited (remarried) in the same clan as that of her deceased husband continued to hold property as she did before the death of her husband and vice versa (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13). Also, in the precolonial times, widow inheritance was almost close to compulsory. However, come the 1950s, persons attempting to take widows by force were prosecuted for indecent assault or adultery in colonial African courts (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13). This marked a shift in matters relating to the women's human rights. Probably, this is one area where the colonial government introduced women-friendly legislation and policy.

As for matters relating to widowhood in precolonial times, a widow was entitled to remain on the land which she was given by her deceased husband, and upon her death, and in the absence of a will to the contrary, her portion goes to the son who would take care of her- normally her youngest son (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). Thus, as stated earlier on, a woman was entitled to remain and use the land which she was given by her husband and, when she died, her land was shared among the sons so that each son received slightly more than the next younger son. Daughters never rushed to share in the father's land (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11).

**(d) Changing funeral and burial practices relating to a Gusii woman**

The Gusii culture, in precolonial times, differentiated between the funeral and burial of an elderly woman from that of a young married woman. An elderly woman was buried more or less in the same way as a married man, except that the grave was placed to the gate of the cattle village. As such, an elderly woman commanded some respect compared to a young married woman. Unless if she was rich, the deceased elderly woman's grandson received a goat. Following the filling-in of the grave, a goat was slaughtered (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). On the other hand, a young married woman was buried near her old hut (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). This practice is rarely observed in contemporary world of the Gusii people.

Women, further, are laid in the grave reclining on the left side and their faces look towards the morning sun (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2). The left side is regarded as feminine and the right side is regarded as masculine. Among the Luhya, the right arm is referred to as male arm (*omukhono omusatsa*) while the left arm is referred to as female arm (*omukhono omukhasi*). Among the Gusii people, mourning ceremonies for a woman lack the dignity of those performed on the death of a man. The slaughter of a goat was indeed sufficient for her and her memory is not marked by abstinence from sexual intercourse on the part of her husband. The man only shaves his head (*amatate*) and that for him ends the matter. The woman's male relatives also shave their heads as do her fellow co-wives. Her daughters do not- as they do not for their father- shave their heads when their mother dies. Perhaps the reason is that a girl is not reckoned to have any entity of her own. If the dead woman was the only wife to her husband, then her husband set about collecting cows for new nuptials with all speed (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/3/2). No animal was slaughtered or given upon the burial of a younger married woman (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). This again underscores the low status with which women in Gusiiland were perceived.

If a Gusii woman died leaving an infant behind, then the grandmothers of the parties or a female relative of the husband usually took temporary custody of an unweaned infant or young child whose mother died until it was 4 years old, or until the father felt that it should be under his custody. If the child was a daughter the father could leave her until she was married when he would then take the brideprice (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13). Unless the daughter got married from under the custody of the guardian, especially the grandmother, no payment of a cow (*en'gombe y'obutugi*) was necessary. If the guardian was a relative just one goat was payable instead. No one could claim custody of a child unless, with the consent of the woman's parents, when he has paid half or full brideprice (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13). All this is not adhered to nowadays.

Currently there is also an attempt to curtail practices associated with widowhood because they are considered 'inhumane'. Widows were expected to eat alone, to sit on the floor, not chairs, and to sleep on plantain leaves. If the plantain leaves were torn in the morning (which is very easily done) it was taken as a sign that the widow was unfaithful to her husband and social sanctions were applied. Widows were expected to walk with one arm across their chest, and not to touch people when they greeted them. These rules were to be adhered to over a period of months or even years. If a man lost his wife to death, and the wife had two births, then her husband had a right to claim for the refund of his dowry but might be given a cow in milk for feeding the children if they are alive. If the women had given birth only once, then the husband was entitled to a refund of the whole dowry... (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13).

**(e) Funeral and burial practices of Gusii children (unmarried) in precolonial times**

Children (both male and female) did not attract a lot of funeral and burial ceremonies. Like adults, children too are buried outside their mother's old hut but a boy was buried a thought nearer the hut than a girl; for had the boy lived he would have spent his life in the homestead but a girl would have married and gone away to her husband. No animal was slaughtered or given upon the burial of unmarried men or women (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). Unmarried girl is buried on the land of her father but at a distance away from the homestead (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). An unmarried man is buried near a hut and if he had none, near the gate of the cattle kraal (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11).

Upon his death, the estate of an unmarried man was inherited by (i) His father, if a life or in his absence (ii) His full brothers or in their absence (iii) All half- brothers or in their absence (iv) All sons of all deceased full brothers in equal shares or in their absence (v) Paternal uncles and in their absence (vi) sons of paternal uncles or in their absence (vii) The nearest male paternal relative determined by the *etureti* (Gusii council elders) (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11). From the foregoing, property inheritance followed the male lineage/patriarchal lineage.

**(f) Funeral Ceremonies relating to people who were murdered**

We have observed the changing funeral and burial practices among the Gusii in cases where the deceased had not been murdered (intentionally or otherwise). However, there were cases where a man, woman or child would die from murder and this invited extra practices relating to funeral and burial. If a man, woman or child was murdered, then there was an issue of compensation paid to relatives or families of the murdered victim. Any person who with malice aforethought caused the death of another person among the Gusii community, in precolonial times, was, if the deceased was his close relative, to pay four heads of cattle and two goats, but if the deceased belonged to another clan, which was by law intermarrying with his clan, he was ordered to pay twelve head of cattle or any amount which was considered enough to cover brideprice or offer a girl for marriage by the relative of the deceased. The woman was supposed to bring up the children of the deceased (in order to inherit his property). The girl if offered, the bridegroom was to pay two head of cattle to her parents or guardians (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13).

**(d) Funeral and burial practices intended to cheat the spirit of the dead**

It was a common practice for most bantu-speaking communities in Kenya to observe certain funeral and burial rites of people who kill themselves. Such an occurrence (suicide) was viewed as an abomination as it left behind a bad spirit which could be harmful to the living. Among the Luhya and the Gusii, for example, people who kill themselves are brought out of the house through a hole in the wall of a house, and not through the door. The reason for this seems to be that this will make it difficult (or even impossible) for the dead person or his spirit to remember the way back to the living, as the hole in the wall is immediately closed. Sometimes the corpse is removed feet first, symbolically pointing away from the former place of residence. A zigzag path may be taken to the burial site, or thorns strewn along the way, or a barrier erected at the grave itself because the dead are also believed to strengthen the living (Douglas, 2005, Parrinder, 1962 and Mbiti, 1977). The Gusii people also observed such practices but they are quickly fading away.

**3. CONCLUSION**

Precolonial Gusii culture had prescribed conditions which shaped human behavior regarding the funeral and burial of men, women and children. As a patriarchal society, men were treated with a lot of respect during their funeral and burial. Men also enjoyed privileged roles during funerals and burials. However, the contact of the Gusii culture with the outside world led to the emergence of sub-cultures and counter-cultures such that it is difficult to describe the funeral and burial practices of the Gusii people as a homogeneous entity. Funeral and burial practices among the Gusii are varied and complex. However, certain practices and roles which were preserved for men only are now being performed by women and vice versa. Within this mix-up of outcomes, Gusii women have come to find a new status from that of the precolonial times which denigrated them wholesale.

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