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THE HISTORY OF UTANI¹ AND BURIAL TRADITIONS OF THE BONDEI PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Utani and burial traditions are the very common practices in the current Bondei community. The traditions have been in practice since the formation of the society. In this study the two traditions are used in attempt to understand the identity of Bondei people. Burial customs of the Bondei has been in constant transformation. In the beginning clan identities played a significant role in attracting people of other clans to come and mourn together. The burial of unidentified stranger was not considered important and may be carried out only by the clan they visit. Burials involved other traditions major identified is Utani. curing witches was another context where Utani was practiced. Convenient with other traditions, Utani was held predominantly in a forty day from the burial date. The purpose of Utani was to create friendship and comfort the clan which relative has died. The coming of world religions probably around 1850s affected the way burial traditions were to be carried out. Islamic and Christian burial cultures were to be followed parallel with the indigenous traditions.

Keywords: Identity, Burial custom, Utani , Bondei, Islam, History

¹ Utani is a term used literary to mean 'joking'.

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INTRODUCTION

In Africa cultural traditions are the enabling tools to disentangle ethnic groups. Each ethnic group usually has traditions unique from the other. Such a uniqueness contributes to identity variation. Among many other cultural traditions, Utani and burial traditions donate to the making of such distinction. During the field work study, I found a great bond between the two traditions of the Bondei people. The Bondei used Utani predominantly in burial customs than other contexts. Therefore, the choice to present two traditions parallel in this account is grounded on such circumstance. There is great body of knowledge explaining Utani and burial customs in Africa. It would not be possible to survey all of them. Only attempt to summarize some important ideas on the topic is made in this study

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative study has drawn data predominantly from the oral testimonies of the Bondei people. The oral testimonies were collected in the march 2022 when a researcher had an extensive study on the history of the Bondei people. The topic under question required people's own experience of the past cultural practices. This decision was also determined by the limitation of written sources on the topic. The few accessed written sources were consulted to countercheck the oral information and support the oral facts

GEOGRAPHY AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION

The Bondei are aboriginal currently occupying low land zones of Muheza District. Muheza is amongst the eight districts that form Tanga region in northeastern Tanzania. The geography of Muheza is bounded to the west and south by Tanga city, to the north by Mkinga, by Pangani in some parts of the south while to the west is bordered by Korogwe district. It dwells between latitude 4 54'18'south and longitude 38 55' 23' east. It constitutes 7.0% out of the total land in the Tanga region that reaches 280055. The district has 4 counties,33 wards and 135 villages. The total area of geographical boundary is estimated to cover 1974-kilometer squire. Being among the tropical settlements, the district receives two rainfall seasons per year. The first starts from late March to May, this is referred to as *masika* and the latter starts from late November and is named *vuli*, the former is longer than the

latter, all with total rainfall 1100-1400mm. Data from the 2012 population and household census indicates that the number of people who permanently lived in Muheza reached 204461. The nature of its population composition is heterogeneous as for a long time the Bondei, Sambia with a minimal number of the Zigula settled in the region. The Bondei and Shambaa contribute 80% of the population in the district. Since the pre-colonial epoch, the high land parts of Muheza were occupied by the Shambala while the lower lands were mostly dominated by the Bondei (Willis, 1992). The ethnic composition became increasingly complex from Germany and British colonial rule.

The introduction of sisal plantations in lower lands areas led to the demand for the local population to offer their labor in them. Hard and poor working conditions made the Bondei, around plantations to resist working. colonialists opted to take labor from other parts of Tanganyika including Njombe and Mtwara and gave them contracts to work (Willis, 1992). Although in the colonial time the labors had separate settlements from the native Bondei villages, in the period after independence most were unable to get back to their homes hence joined nearby settlements and to have lives in Bondei's villages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of cultural tradition common among many African societies is Utani 'joking'. According to Kyando (1993) Utani is a tradition that does not solely aim to jokes the fellow Watani but a tool to attain social unity. According to Mwanuke (1965) The term Utani seems obfuscating when used in scholarly writings. Pedler (1940) warns that Utani should not solely understood linguistically but largely on the basis of how are practiced by the societies. Ngure (2003) mentions Utani to exist between a friend and friends, between the tribes, one clan versus the other, and people of one region with the others. Utani is also claimed to be a colonial creation. In his study on the people of Zambia belt (Mitchell, 1956) position Utani as one the colonial strategies to reduce hostilities among the African communities. He adds that, the fact colonial governments wanted to maintain laws and orders and unify African under the colonial governments Utani was then a proper tool to propel friendship among the communities of Zambia. In Tanzania studies document Utani to take part in ceremonies.

Burial and marriage ceremonies offers chances to the practice of Utani. Mzandi (2001) documented the position of Utani in the burial ceremonies of the Digo along the coast of modern days Tanzania. A study done by Mgakanzi (2010) clarifies the Utani with reference to the Sukuma ethnic group. The author posits that, among the Sukuma Utani is carried out chiefly in marriage and burial ceremonies where the Watani may sometimes disturb people in the ceremony until the fellow Watani give them money. In pre-colonial African history Utani is explained to facilitate trade Leslie (1963) identifies the tradition as one of the very significant thrusts ensured peaceful environments during the pre-colonial caravan trades in Tanzania. Mzandi (2011) stress on the point by precisely reporting the peace existed in the trade conducted between the Hehe and Ngoni in Southern Tanganyika as a result of Utani tradition between the two communities. In pre-colonial Africa Utani is thought to be an important practice

Brown (1940) and Mitchell (1956) mentions Utani as a strategy used by pre-colonial African communities to solve hostilities existed between ethnic communities. The author adds that such hostilities and anger between societies were to be reduced by expressing them in conversation and other peaceful social settings rather than wars. Similar to other African ethnic community the Bondei also had the tradition of Utani. Abdy (1925) and Dale (1896) noted highlight Utani as a tradition practiced in marriage, burial and ritual ceremonies of the Bondei.

STUDY RESULTS

The pre-colonial Burial custom, the Arobaini, joking relations among the Bondei clans and between the Bondei and other ethnic groups, role of Utani on Curing witches and impact of world religions on Utani and burial traditions

Utani and Burial Ceremonies During pre-colonial epoch

Oral testimony reveals the Bondei burial ceremony to have had involve the whole community. If someone died the burial ceremony was principally held at the clan's house where all the relatives and neighbor gathered to accompany that family with burial ceremony (Mama Nyerere, interview). People cooked ate and stayed in the house of ceremony for two weeks and even more. Neighbor and relatives were contributing food which enabled people to mourn. The burial ceremony was normally accompanied with other traditions

Arobaini was among the traditions contributed to the burial tradition. The Bondei people believed that the soul of the relative cannot rest in peace unless a gathering had to be held after forty days from a burial day. After forty days, they gather and sit for the *Arobaini* where several rituals were performed including traditional dances. Dances varied according to *Kolwa* 'clans' traditions. There were others dancing *Tindia* others dancing *Mkwiti* while others danced *Guna*. Some dances such as *Ukaa* was common to all Bondei Clans. The formation of clans at some point probably around the second half of 18th century went together with emergence of varying traditions including dances. Henceforth, in a day of *Arobaini* dances was important to preserve identities (Mama Nyerere, Ibid; Madunda, Ibid).

The function of Utani is claimed to be comforting a family which mourned the death of their relative. Such comfort was normally given in a form of Utani 'jokes' (Mama Nyerere, Ibid). Utani existed into two form in the history of the Bondei people. The first form was that carried among the Bondei clans. Marriage between Clans in the past was one of the means brought Utani tradition between Clans. The Pozwe for example were the *Watani* -'jokers' to Mkina Gembe while all the Msogee were the *watani* to Nkamba. The other form of Utani was carried out between the Bondei versus other ethnic groups. The Digo people were the *Watani* to all the Bondei (Woodward, 1925; Kayamba, 1947). The inter-ethnic war around 19th century between Digo and Bondei is mentioned to be the reason brought Utani tradition between the two ethnic communities (Clerk, 1999;Asha, Interview). During *Arobaini* the *Watani* becomes integral part of rituals

Utani had normally to take place during the *Arobaini*. In a telephone conversation with Mashaka , the informant narrates that, in the night of the forty day there was *nkucha*³performed by one man from the paternal clan of the dead man and the uncle from the maternal clan of the dead man with the presence of *Mtani*- 'a joker' who listens the *nkucha*. At the end of the *nkucha*, the uncle agrees to give a ground to the father to bury the child. The *Mtani* then had to stand, take two pieces of fire woods and led the relatives to round the fire seven times. The last round the *Mtani* had to go onto a direction of *Ntangandei*- a bush nearby the clan settlement, and

³*Nkucha* has variety of meaning in Bondei language. The first, and meant here is, a dialogue between father and uncle of the dead man where a father seek for a ground to bury the body of his child. The *mtani* is also named the *nkucha* by the two men in the conversation. The term also can mean a small bird

throw the fire woods to the bush while saying *hita waka* - 'have a safe journey'. After the nkucha then traditional dances were to be performed whole night where other rituals were carried. In the mourning other rituals were performed by Watani and relatives of the dead man to finalize the burial mourns.

The Mtani had to cry and walk to inside a house where the body of dead man was preserved before burial. This is according to the Bondei an indicator to tell the relatives that their relative is gone and they will never meet again on earth (a conversation with Mashaka, Ibid). Also, a sacrifice was to be offered where a goat or sheep had to be taken and lied down facing the direction of a clan house with a man from paternal side of the dead man holding the right ear while a woman from maternal side holding the left ear. The one holding the left ear uttered some ritual words which were the same repeated by the one holding the left ear then a mtani slaughter the animal (A conversation with Mashaka, Ibid).

Utani on curing of diseases

Utani helped in curing disease and witches to fellow Watani. The Bondei oral testimony tells that, there were some witches cured only by mtani. One informant (Mwanahamisi), mentions *usinga* as one of those witches that mtani had to cure a fellow Mtani while naked. In an interview at Paramba, one informant adds that there are some clans *nkoba*⁴ needed Mtani to clean and lead rituals and if the clan breaches the taboos of the nkoba they usually had to die unless Mtani had to come and lead them to perform the *tambiko*- a ritual usually held periodical or when there is an urgent issue that needs a congregation of the clan members (Woodward, 1925; Salimu, Interview).

World religions and Bondei burial customs

Introduction of Islam had an impact on the Burial traditions of the Bondei people. In the time probably around 1860s Islam had already entered in Bonde. People of diverse clans converted to Islam. Such conversion impacted burial traditions. With the coming of Islam and Christianity, burial customs have more inclined to religious customs. hard to find a clan inclining to the traditional burial customs (Mama Nyerere, Ibid). All these Watani had to joke during the burial mourn of the Watani in anyways and no either of Mtani get angry to the other. Muslim Imams summoned to offer prayers after forty days from a burial day. Islamic citations

⁴ A bag of either witch crafts, traditional medicines and taboos owned by a clan,

were held to pray the soul of a dead relative that the God of Muslims (Allah) may rest him in eternal peace (Madunda, Interview). For the case of the clan of Christian people, *Misa- 'the saying of Christian prayers'* was held parallel with Utani both during the burial day and in *arobaini* (Madunda, Ibid).

DISCUSSION

When there was a burial mourn in any Bondei clan, all the people from other clans gathered to the house that such a clan, whose relative died, hold a burial ceremony. This implies that the Bondei had a sense of cooperation regarding that every clan's problem was equally felt by others. That can be further verified by the way people were contributing food and stay for weeks in that house of burial mourn. This however seems to be different when a man who was not attached to any clan died.

The burial procedures seem to receive some modifications or change with time. The fact the Bondei burial customs were only featured by Bondei customs which included gathering mourning and Utani and the fact there were in later days the inception of some Islamic rituals and Christianity in later times signifies the transformation. Along with Bondei traditions, the rituals of one of the two religions were carried simultaneously in the burial traditions of the Bonde. Henceforth, one can deduce the co-existence of both three burial customs to the Bondei with no occurrence of conflict. Thus, it can be concluded that probably the traditional rituals were flexible to accommodate both Islam and Cristian rituals. Therefore, it was possible for all Bondei to cooperate in burial mourns to any clan regardless variations in religious titles. One of the burial customs very significant was a gathering after forty days of the burial.

The Arobaini as known locally was a tradition which is mentioned to be a day for finalizing burial ceremony of a dead relative. The fact that the Bondei carried arobaini and a belief that the soul of their relative will not rest in peace until forty days from burial day indicates the nexus between the dead and living world. Such a nexus resembles to what Bellman (1975) has discussed, when presenting the burial rituals of Guerze community of west Africa, the author mentions the performance of some rituals for the dead individual not to return and cause trouble to the living community. This can be further justified by the performance of Nkucha, and the throwing of a piece of firewood in the night of forty day after burial which

according to Bondei oral tradition was a day to send off their relative that he will no longer be part of the living world.

I suspect the slaughtering of a goat in a forty day after burial to be for sacrifice which had to remove anger and any problem that the dead probably has to anyone in a living world. Perhaps the Bondei had the same belief with the Guerze community (Bellman, 1975). The Guerze people believe that a dead person may return and trouble people of the living world unless the burial rituals were not properly carried. If so correct, this would stress on the point of nexus between the world of the dead and the living world. Along all these rituals Utani seems to be a very significant tradition to discuss in relation to burial customs (Bellman, Ibid).

Utani formed the integral part of burial ceremonies. The fact that the Bondei defines the purpose of Utani as a comfort stands similar to what Mitchell, (1956) has revealed. The author lists Burial ceremonies as one of the areas where Utani was to be carried. the purpose of Utani is regarded as to improve friendship and relations among the Watani. In that view, Utani was a way to bring together (in a peaceful way) and maintain friendship between clans of the Bondei or between the Bondei and another ethnic group who were the fellow Watani . Utani can also be evident in other contexts out of burial customs

Ending hostile relations between two parts is mentioned as the influence for the existence of Utani. Mikidady (2022) mentions Utani tradition between the Digo and Bondei to emerge after the bitter war between the two communities. Such explanation stands convergently with what Brown (1940) has explicitly discussed where the Utani is argued as a strategy to settle disputes and hostilities in many of the pre- colonial African communities. The fact Utani was to solve hostility in Africa is challenged by (Illife, 1979) who perceived such tradition to be nothing but a colonial creation aimed at maintaining peace in African colonies. Illife's argument squares with Guliver (1957) who when doing a conversation with a native Ngoni an informant argued that Utani did not exist basing on an assumption that people cannot make jokes in the war time. In the second part of 19th century many pre-colonial southern Tanganyika many societies were disrupted by Ngoni invasion which culminated into wars of expansion and formation of states. It is perhaps these incidents that made Guliver's informant in southern Tanganyika to denial Utani as a pre-colonial practice of which is incorrect.

It is my view that Utani existed before colonial occupation in Africa and perhaps was a tool to thrust to peace existence among the pre-colonial African communities. The British had a project of indirect rule which targeted to use Africans to support colonial projects. It is convincing that the British saw a chance to unite people and maintain peace in colonies through Utani.

It seems that Utani in Bondei aimed to prevent occurrence of wars of revenge in future. where such hostility was to be replaced by cooperation and friendship between the communities. The fact Bondei – Digo Utani tradition begun in the time before colonization takes us to a conclusion that Utani has never been a project initiated by colonizers in Bonde. In addition, the fact Utani was the practice used to lessen peaceful environments to caravans' traders, and the fact such trades in east Africa were done in the time before colonization becomes a significant point to deconstruct the argument of Utani as a colonial project. Perhaps it is right position to purport that, colonizers had courage to preserve and use it as a strategy to colonial domination because it was traditional important in uniting African people. The ability of Mtani to cure and remove curse and witches of the fellow Bondei. implies that such a tradition was important and had deep roots into Bondei life traditions. The fact Mtani was able to cure curse from the world of dead ancestors it is perhaps an indication for the ability of Mtani to communicate with the world of spirit and whether the dead ancestors consider Mtani as a friend that advices can be listened and accepted. Further, the possibility for Mtani to cure witches

CONCLUSION

This study dealt with the History of Utani and burial traditions of the Bondei people with a special focus on pre-colonial time. The presentation precisely covered the Burial custom, the Arobaini, joking relations among the Bondei clans and between the Bondei and other ethnic groups, role of Utani on Curing witches and impact of world religions on Utani and burial traditions. Utani was viewed as an important tool for peace keeping and maintain positive relations not only among the Bondei clans but also between the Bondei versus other ethnic communities. Some informants admitted that the two cultural traditions have evolved much in post-colonial period This however seems a very narrow explanation that needs a proper research to understand circumstances for such transformation which I

believe could be well grasped by also having a through look into the practice of Utani from the colonial epoch to recent decades.

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INTERVIEWS

An interview with Madunda(91) held at Mtonga in muheza- Tanga on 3rd March 2022

An interview with Asha Mpapai (74) held at Mpapai- Muheza on 5th March 2022

An interview with Mama Nyerere (103) held at Kwe mkuna- Muheza on 7th March 2022

An interview with Mashaka (63) held at Kivindo on 5th March 2022,

An interview with Mwanahamisi1 (62) held at Mamboleo on 4th march 2022

An interview with Salimu(76) at Paramba-Muheza on 7th March 2022.

