

# Conserving Culture with Biblical Integrity

*R. F. Gaskin*

*The ethnogenesis of both the Konkomba people of Ghana, and the Pitjantjatjara of Central Australia lies deeply hidden in the past. In the first half of this century both groups were still nomadic hunters and gatherers. Similarities and differences in their cultural patterns are evident, particularly in the area of the 'rites of passage.' Both were adherents of tribal or folk religion and the comparison of their culture affords a unique opportunity to observe universal trends as well as specific differences. This study contrasts the worldview of these two ethnic groups as it is traced through practices and beliefs in connection with their 'rites of passage.'*

## **Rites of Passage**

**C**ulture is a dynamic organism that patterns our way of seeing reality. Expressions of this reality are conveyed through ceremonies and rituals that form the warp and woof of life. Many of these occasions are to celebrate an individual's progress through society from one status to another. The anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) coined the phrase 'Rites of Passage' when he first wrote his book in the French language in 1909. This refers to the special rituals that are practised during the various stages of the life cycle.

These celebrations of an individual's passage through society afford opportunities for people to pause from their busyness and to contemplate and evaluate life's values. "Why am I here?" "Where am I going?" "Who am I?" "How do I relate to those around me?" These questions are often asked as people pause to celebrate.

Van Gennep suggested that in each ritual there are three stages, the first being that of separation. This is when the individual is being prepared for the new status. It often involves separation from the community while the individual is subjected to humiliation and sometimes bodily affliction, as in the case of circumcision rites. The second stage is that of transition and refers to a marginal state when the initiates are taught religious secrets and taboos which prepare them for the higher status they will enter into.

Lastly there is the incorporation of the individual back into society but fulfilling a new role and occupying a superior status. An example of this would be in the installation of a king or chief.

The purpose of this study is to examine the rites of passage related to the life-cycle of the two cultures that are under review. The first of these is the birth process.

### **Konkomba Birth**

The Konkomba people of Northern Ghana see the sexual act as being necessary for conception. They believe God (Owambor) meets the child in the womb at conception (Froelich 1954:76) and the ancestors may also intervene in the conception process. Froelich (1954:76) states that if a couple want children then they pour a libation of water and then ask, "Creator of men, give us a child, I will sacrifice to you a chicken, a goat, or a cow." When the child is born the appropriate sacrifice is offered and the father thanks Owambor along with loud clapping. There are numerous rituals pursued at the time prior to birth and preceding it which elicit the Konkomba worldview.

One preliminary practice is that as soon as a woman learns that she is pregnant it is her responsibility to inform her neighbors who in turn inform the husband that the child is expected. Immediately the expectant mother ceases to eat pounded yam as it is considered this will make the child soft and white (Froelich 1954:76). She is restricted to yam baked on the coals or boiled in a pot. This taboo reveals their belief is in a direct connection between the nature of pounded yam (soft and white) and the nature of a newly conceived child. Nobody has ever given birth to a soft, white child but the belief passed on by tradition is a part of the cultural pattern espousing their worldview.

Mbiti (1975:85) speaks of rituals performed after childbirth as part of the cleansing process. He says that there is a general consensus that childbirth brings impurity which is cleansed only by ritual. Mbiti (1975:85) states, "...the purification ritual prepares the mother for the birth of the child, so that there is no obstacle to the flow of life."

The Konkomba worldview perceives birth as one process in the "flow of life" which must be kept moving by the ritual observance passed down by tradition. After the mother has had time to recover from the birth further rituals are performed. Both mother and child are brought out of seclusion to meet the crowd of relatives that gather. Mbiti (1975:86) says it is like a social birth for them. He goes on to say, "In some places it is believed that even the living dead {ancestors} are also present for the occasion."

A further practice, which in the past mystified the writer, is one in which the new baby's hair is completely shaven. This happens on the "day of his outing" or presentation to society at about one month of age. Mbiti (1975:86) points out that this act is a sign of "purification, separation and newness" from the impurity associated with childbirth. Following the feasting and dancing which the celebration provides, a new cycle begins for everyone (Mbiti, 1975:87) and the society takes the responsibility of integrating the caring for the new member.

The naming of the baby in Konkomba society has aspects which also reveal their worldview. Froelich (1954:77) says:

On the day the child is bathed one presents it to the sun and the father gives him a name if it is a boy, if it is a girl both father and mother give her a name.

Usually the names are very meaningful and are often in line with the particular day of the week on which the child is born. If born on Monday the child will be called a Monday child. If the child's characteristics remind people of the departed clan members the people are happy and as Mbiti (1975:87) says: "...a departed member of the family has 'come back' in part through the birth of the baby."

Thus the birth rituals of the Konkomba espouse their worldview and pass on the traditions of the ancestors. Uniqueness of the society is thereby upheld and the Konkomba culture perpetuated for a future generation.

## **Pitjantjatjara Birth**

The Pitjantjatjara conception beliefs and birth rituals are also unique and reveal their perceptions of life and its beginnings. In this regard the words of Clinton (1985:52) give affirmation:

Worldview refers to the integrated perceptions of life, both its knowledge and experience more or less shared by members of a culture.

According to Mountford (1976:563) men are not permitted to be present at the birth of a baby. If there are complications the medicine man may be called in to "straighten out" the baby and to massage the woman's back and abdomen, but even he must leave before the baby is born. The Pitjantjatjara accept that the birth process is strictly "women's business" and the men wait in the distance to hear the sex of the child announced.

The Pitjantjatjara conception belief is in non-physical paternity. Mountford (1976:580) who has studied Pitjantjatjara conception beliefs documents the following:

The desert nomads believe that all their children come from two oval stones near the Niunja water-hole in the western end of the Mann Ranges. These stones are impregnated with an inexhaustible supply of tiny spirit children, the 'julanjias.' Now and again one of these little spirits will leave its home and search for a mother. On seeing a woman with large breasts and a kindly face it will, unknown to her, enter her body and start life as a human being.

The myths surrounding the mystery of conception are varied but all confirm non-physical paternity and the involvement of spirit-children or spirit entities. These mythical beliefs reveal the Pitjantjatjara worldview at its core and map out for the astute observer the basic values and presuppositions of the desert nomads.

At birth the umbilical cord is cut off with a sharp stone and the placenta is buried after it is placed in a pit and a fire made over it. The child is rubbed with warm ashes from the camp-fire (Mountford,1976:563) which is meant to

clean and dry its body.

The umbilical cord is seen to have magical protective power and Mountford (1976:563) documents this aspect:

When the umbilical cord has dried and fallen off it is tied in a ring, rubbed with grease and red-ochre and hung around the infant's neck on a cord. It is believed that this charm will make the child contented but without this cord the infant may be restless and unhappy. As soon as the child is able to walk the dried cord is discarded and burnt in the camp-fire.

This further elucidates the desert nomad's worldview as the practice is passed down to posterity and encapsulates their central beliefs.

Other birth practices reveal a difference in the value of human life as contrasted with the Judeo-Christian stance. Meggitt submits the following:

The midwife buries a still-born baby without ceremony in the "bush" nearby; and she, or the mother strikes a deformed child on the head or turns it face down in the sand to choke, then buries it at once. Minor disfigurements, such as birthmarks, moles and wens, however, are regarded lightly and vaguely as "dreaming-marks" inherited from a person who possessed the same "guruwari" in a previous incarnation.

At this point it is helpful to summarize the contrast touched upon in this section.

## **KONKOMBA WORLDVIEW**

- *Sexual act is necessary for conception.*
- *'Owambor' meets the child in the womb.*
- *The mother informs her neighbors who inform the husband that she is pregnant.*
- *Primiparous women sometimes helped by men to deliver.*
  
- *Nature of the child deduced from the nature of the food eaten by the mother.*
- *The newborn child presented to the sun.*
- *Child named after one month.*
  
- *Umbilical cord covered with cow dung.*

## **PITJANTJATJARA WORLDVIEW**

- *Belief in a non-physical paternity.*
- *Spirit-entities enter the mother's womb.*
- *The mother informs the husband.*
  
- *Women left mainly alone to deliver or assisted by selected female kinsfolk.*
- *Nature of the child often deduced from the nature of the ancestors.*
  
- *New born child presented to the sociological father.*
- *Child only given a personal name after two years.*
- *Umbilical cord covered with grease and red ochre.*

## **Initiation**

The process of initiation with all its ramifications is often considered the second stage in the life-cycle. It is usually a societal function involving both young and old. Most often it is an action packed series of dramas to mark the promotion from childhood to maturity. It involves colour and dancing, the sharing of secrets and mythologies. It is a time of totemic acknowledgement and the inclusion of the ancestral heritage in the process.

Usually the patterns incumbent in the last of the life-cycles, that of death, are discernible in the rites of initiation. That is to say, the symbolic exclusion of the initiate from society often precedes the "new birth" or resurrection of

the individual back into society. The greatest celebration takes place when the initiate is received back into the community bearing a new status.

In most African traditional societies circumcision plays a major part in initiating the young into adulthood. It is seen as a preparation for marriage and the entrance to the privileges of adulthood.

Mbiti (1975:91) states, "One of the main initiation rites is that of circumcision for boys and clitoridectomy for girls. This is practised in many parts of Africa." It is a painful and blood-letting experience which society demands of all who would become adults. Not to submit to this process with one's age-mates is considered to be shameful.

This, however, is a general statement regarding Africa, but evidence pertaining to the Konkomba people indicates that circumcision, as such, is not widely practised. Froelich (1948:67) clearly states that he questioned the people in Guerin-Kouka and Katchamba at Takpamba and Kidjaboun and the answers have always been negative in regard to circumcision. He concludes by stating, "...if they themselves ever practised initiation [circumcision] they certainly do not do so anymore today."

### **Konkomba Initiation**

The Konkomba philosophy of life affords a less radical view of initiation than many of their fellow countrymen. The initiates who are usually young men past the age of puberty, build their own house slightly separate from the other building in the compounds. This is called the *kenatchipombe* where they meet of an evening to talk and ask each other riddles. They also sleep in this hut. Graduation to the exclusive society of the young men is a sign of their coming of age.

The young men are now encouraged to become skilled in the use of bow and arrow. They are now considered a part of the vital work force and should be able to construct yam heaps with their own hoe at a rate which is satisfactory to the headman (*onikpil*). This the rite of passage at this stage is afforded them as they gradually demonstrate their prowess in farming and archery.

The absence of either circumcision or subincision among the Konkombas underlines their more informal approach to this period in the live-cycle. Blood-letting is not an obligatory feature required of the initiates as a ritual of the rite of passage. There is however, the practice of classic scarifications and on this Froelich (1954:43) comments:

No other mutilation, either of body or teeth, is effectuated. On the other hand corporal scarifications are held in very high esteem with the Konkombas and these are carried out when the individuals have reached the age of twenty or more for the men, and thirteen years for the girls, before the marriage and, at any rate as soon as they are pregnant.

### **Pitjantjatjara Initiation**

Pitjantjatjara initiation, on the other hand, is known as the *inma pulka*, the big ceremony. Aboriginal children are left almost undisciplined during their early childhood but when they approach puberty there is a radical change. The preparations for initiation are long and drawn out. Their education in Aboriginal tribal law begins abruptly at this stage and they begin to learn the tribal secrets and myths and are taught how to endure suffering.

There are different initiation ceremonies among the Aborigines of Australia but both circumcision and subincision are practised by the Pitjantjatjara. Tooth avulsion is a prominent feature among some groups while depilation (the removal of hair) is practised by others. Cicatrisation (the cutting of the initiate's body) according to Elkin (1970:196) is often an indication of graduation to the highest degree. Elkin also mentions an older practice of finger nail removal, "before the highest revelations are made."

These notions all reveal that the Pitjantjatjara employ a radical approach to the initiation of candidates. These severe actions are in keeping with the way they see the universe. There is an aspect of severity placed upon the initiates. The demands and expectations are very high. At the same time the option for initiates to withdraw from these ceremonies is almost minimal, for full initiation is the only door to adulthood and the only way to marriage. The



term *wati* is only applied to a fully initiated man with lesser terms available to those who have not been through the process.

An important Pitjantjatjara circumcision myth reveals the worldview of the people. Mountford (1976:118) documents this extensively and states how that one of the women became distressed over an old method of circumcising the boys. This was with the use of fire sticks. However, many of the candidates died as a result and the myth relates how the concerned women contrived to have the old men use proper flint knives to avoid such suffering.

This element of harshness in the philosophy of the Pitjantjatjara is evident also in the whole attitude towards the initiate. The young men are called *ulpuru* (initiated) and prior to the cutting ceremony are driven from the main camp to fend for themselves. They are not allowed during the whole process to be seen by women who may surreptitiously make food available to them.

The *ulpuru* are also looked upon as semi-outcasts and this whole scene resembles the death of the candidate prior to his new birth or resurrection into the new status of a *wati* (initiated man).

Blood-letting is another important aspect of Pitjantjatjara initiation. Elkin (1970:197) states that:

The tying of arm-ligatures is but a preparation for the duty of blood-letting, and subincision prepares the genital organ for a similar purpose; blood is drawn from it for ritual use, to express emotions in a prescribed ritual manner both in initiation and totemic ceremonies.

Another aspect of the Pitjantjatjara initiation ceremony is the holding down of the candidates by force. A human table is formed by three of the men who lie down in a cleared space alongside of each other. The initiate is placed on top of this living table and *ommari* (circumcisers) perform the operation. An element of brutality is evidenced by Tyndale (1935:219) who reports that as many as twenty-two cuts are made before the operation is completed.

This all indicates the radical approach the Pitjantjatjara have towards this rite of passage. It may be described as severe, even brutal. The candidate is subjected to suffering which must bring him near the limits of human endurance. Banishment, deprivation and loneliness along with the threat of physical death itself, must make it one of the most excruciating rites of

passage practised by humankind. Initiation and especially circumcision in this manner is difficult for outsiders to understand. However, it is a central feature of Pitjantjatjara social life and thereby encapsulates the way they see to be necessary for the maintenance of tradition, the involvement of the ancestors and the perpetuation of their culture.

A characteristic of Pitjantjatjara mythology is that they personify natural species and phenomena as Elkin (1970:222) says, "...this explains them by a principle which man understands, that is a manifestations of personal or spiritual beings like himself, though often endowed with greater powers." This relates to circumcision and to the worldview because some believe the foreskin is changed into a bat which is also a symbol of death.

It remains to summarize the contrasts in worldview in regard to initiation.

### **KONKOMBA WORLDVIEW**

- *No such mutilations.*
- *Not practised.*
- *Relegated to exclusive men's dormitory.*
- *Scarification to identify clan*
- *Prowess with weapons and agricultural tools--a major indicator.*

### **PITJANTJATJARA WORLDVIEW**

- *Tooth avulsion, depilation, fingernail removal.*
- *Circumcision and subincision, arm ligature and blood-letting.*
- *Candidate banished from society.*
- *Scarification as a pass sign of initiation.*
- *Prowess with weapons and tools--a minor indicator.*

## **Marriage**

Many rites of passage take the form of ritual ceremonies whereby society marks a change in the status of a member. Marriage is one of those rituals that prepares members of the society to take on their new role. They are then recognized in their new status once the ceremonies are complete. In almost

every culture marriage forms the basis of the family unit and thereby of society.

Mbiti (1975:98) says of marriage in Africa that it is the meeting point for the three layers of human life. These are the departed, the living and those to be born. This is because the one stands upon the other and is dependent upon the other for its continuation. Not to marry is to interrupt the sequence of life and is looked upon as a failure towards society. Mbiti (1975:98) says, that, "...in effect it is stopping the flow of life through the individual and hence the diminishing of mankind (sic) upon the earth."

In some cultures premarital sexual activities are carried on as a normal human function, but it is usually marriage that legitimizes sexual union and places society's imprimatur upon cohabitation of spouses. Hiebert (1983:167) says that it also, "...assigns then new roles in their relationships to each other, to their offspring, to their relatives and friends, and to society in general."

Mbiti (1975:102) further states that African marriage is not just for the couple involved but includes the establishing of very strong ties between the relatives of the couple being married. He points out the philosophical basis of this and reminds us that people do not exist for themselves but for others. "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am." This is the basis of the African worldview. Individualism is lost in favour of the communal factor.

### **Konkomba Marriage**

In regard to the Konkombas there are some particular factors that prescribe the basic presuppositions of the people in relation to marriage.

Firstly, there is a taboo against eating meat on the part of unmarried women. The reason given for this by De Jong (1983:20) is that the women will become thieves because they will crave after more and more meat, as meat is so expensive they will need to steal in order to supply their craving. However, it would appear from an ethical perspective that the taboo is reinforcing the strong cultural demands for all women to marry for then they are free to eat meat. To remain unmarried is like committing a crime against society. Mbiti (1975:104) says that it is like withholding a uniting link in the rhythm of life.

Latent within the worldview of the Konkomba people is the notion that motherhood is what is really important for women. Marriage has its place but the ability of a woman to conceive and bear a child is considered a precursor to marriage. A woman is not considered fit and ready to marry if she has not first born a child. This gives proof of her fecundity. It demonstrates that she is mature and ready to cohabit with her spouse.

Froelich (1954:74) states that from the age of seven or eight Konkomba girls are no longer virgins. They are usually promised as wives by their mothers from the time of their conception. A suitor, usually a young man of about twenty years of age, will seek out his future mother-in-law (often a woman of his own age) and negotiate the contract for his wife-to-be. It means then, that he will wait for the newly conceived child to be born and to grow to the age of puberty before being able to marry her.

Froelich (1954:74) comments on this process:

The most general custom prescribes that the fiancée has no sexual relations with his fiancée, but no defense whatsoever detains the other boys from seducing the young girl. One waits until the girl has conceived before celebrating the wedding. As soon as her state becomes known, the fiance delegates one of his relations to go and claim the girl, at the same time bringing a loin-cloth as a present.

The first child, therefore, is usually not the biological child of the male who is to marry. He accepts, though, the child as part of the marriage arrangement and thereafter becomes the sociological father. Konkomba worldview sees no problem in this development, in fact it provides the expectation that it will be so.

Marriage appears to be an inevitable process that takes its own course without deference to the girl who has no choice of partners. She is destined to the one she was promised to before she was born and when proof of her ability as a mother is displayed she goes to her husband without further ceremony.

Froelich (1954) comments:

When the girl has given proof of fecundity the mother or aunt of the fiance goes to ask for her three days on end, but her mother refuses.

On the fourth day (four is the feminine number) she accepts and the fiancée offers a loincloth and a sum of money. The mother collects the calabashes and the pots and sends the girl to her husband. There is no special ceremony...

Further, Konkomba marriage philosophy dictates that when a woman marries it is into the clan that she is marrying and not just the individual. If her husband dies she still belongs to the clan and will be remarried to a close relative.

If the girl refuses to marry to man to whom she was promised from birth, her father knows how to deal with her. Froelich (1954:75) states that he will threaten her with the words, "If you refuse our ancestors will kill you." The respect and fear afforded the role of these ancestors is such that the girl will most likely succumb. In this case the worldview is used as a governing agency and to ensure that the tribal machinations are fulfilled according to the wish of the elders.

### **Pitjantjatjara Marriage**

Marriage customs differ from culture to culture but in all Aboriginal societies special status is acquired by this rite of passage. There are certain sociological prohibitions which must be observed if a marriage is to be considered "correct." One of the strongest of these governs a man's relationship with his mother-in-law. This prohibition is often called mother-in-law avoidance.

The need for such a mechanism comes about because of the manner in which a man is often promised his wife before she is born. The other factor is that, a man at the time of seeking to negotiate for his unborn wife, can often be involved with a mother-in-law who is his own age. As Hiatt (1984:183) says, "It follows that if a man were to have sexual relations with a potential or actual mother-in-law, he might beget his own wife." Hence the need for the mother-in-law avoidance mechanism. It is to preserve "correct relationships" as viewed by the culture. The fact that this notion of "correctness" in relationships is built into the culture is sociological evidence of the Pitjantjatjara philosophy of life.

Reciprocity is another factor that reveals the worldview of the Pitjantjatjara. It is an in-built feature that has a part in governing marriage relationships. If something is accepted, its equivalent must be returned, not to accept is to opt out of the social system. The rite of circumcision is involved here. For a circumciser has the right and responsibility to provide a wife for the male he has circumcised. This system is somewhat of a continuum and not to assist in making this provision is to leave the circle of reciprocity incomplete.

The treatment of Pitjantjatjara women as a chattel further defines the worldview of the culture. Elkin (1970:155) states, "...[women are] a means of settling or balancing obligations between individuals or groups, and a method of expressing certain prescribed desires or intentions." They can be used as a pay-off for obligations incurred and this is especially so in the designation of marriage partners. In traditional Pitjantjatjara society little opportunity for choice of a marriage partner was afforded a woman. She was bound to accept the arrangements made at the time her mother conceived her. This meant that very young females were often married to old men who needed another wife as housekeeper and gave the basis for what has become known as gerontocratic marriage.

A further practice within the marriage sphere which expresses basic Pitjantjatjara values is that of wife-lending. In traditional society there is a readiness on the part of the men to loan their wives in order to gain material possessions. This can also be done as a means of renewing friendships or warding off warring parties. This does, however, underline the low view of women that the men have.

Pitjantjatjara marriage is not accompanied by the pomp and ceremony common to most cultures. After the seven or eight years of betrothal, which begins at conception, the husband will ask her father or mother to send her to his shelter. Meggitt (1962:269) comments on this:

The statement that there is no wedding ceremony requires comment. The people regard the initial removal of the girl to her husband's dwelling at his request as the termination of the betrothal and the beginning of marriage. Her walking through the camp to join the man constitutes the public statement of the fact.

As soon as the bride-price is paid to the girl's parents she is regarded as his wife and although only eight or nine years of age she begins to spend short

periods in her husband's shelter. She is then allowed to return home to her parents for some weeks before resuming cohabitation with her husband for longer and longer periods until she is totally taken up in her husband's community.

Marriage is a basic rite of passage in every human society. Both for the Konkomba and Pitjantjajara, it is more a process than a unique event. Rules governing correctness in marriage relationships abound and the observance of them is presided over by the elders who are the preservers of the cultural values.

Sexual activity is prominent in both cultures prior to marriage and is woven into the pattern of the social as well as the spiritual world. The supply of marriage partners to initiated men is seen as a reward for the observance of tradition.

Children born to the female partner prior to her cohabitation with her husband are readily accepted by the husband's clan as legitimate although both societies do have the notion of illegitimacy when couples are incorrectly related.

Basic premises are revealed in the motions of the marriage process which demonstrate a people's values and reveal the way they think in regard to the world around them.

## **Death and Funerary Rites**

The previous rites of passage that were considered earlier do not overshadow the last of these rites that are yet to be discussed. With every phase of human development there are rituals which as Mbiti (1975:126) says, "...generate a sense of certainty and familiarity. They provide continuity and unity among those who perform or attend them."

The rituals associated with death are among the most complex practised by humankind. In fact it seems that these rituals are a paradigm for all the others leading up to this, the final passage of the individual. In all, they help to provide an explanation of the fundamental nature of the universe and of a person's place in it. They enable people to feel they have some control over the invisible world and that they are not just the playthings of fate without purpose and meaning.

## Konkomba Death and Funerary Rites

It is not trite to say that Konkomba people enjoy funerals. It is especially so when they are in honour of an old man (*onikpil*) that it becomes a time of great celebrations. People leave their work and travel far in order to celebrate the passage of the *onikpil* to the place of his forefathers. Having lived a long life his passing is not considered a tragedy so there is dancing and feasting in abundance. His numerous children remain to carry on the flow of life and the whole ceremony speaks of a continuation rather than a cessation. The deceased continues to exist with the living dead, while the younger generation form new relationships which cement ties among the clans.

In contrast, the death of a child attracts no such celebration because the child has not yet enjoyed life, consequently there is no dancing. De Jong (1983:27) states that a woman of child-bearing age is not permitted to witness the actual burial. It is believed that if she does she will be unable to bear further children. In this way the mystery of death pervades their thinking and results in actions which ensure that such a destructive sighting does not take place.

Konkomba traditions insist that the body must be buried on the day of death and as early as possible on that day, allowing only enough time for near relatives to come and for the grave to be dug. This practice is also followed because of the rapid decomposition process which takes place in the tropics.

It is considered imperative for the body to be buried in the home village. There are strong clan links which make this an unwritten law among the Konkombas. It also indicates the strong physical ties, as well as the spiritual associations that people hold in regard to their clan residence.

The Konkomba perceptual world is one that considers the deceased as embarking on a journey to the place of the living dead. As a result of this, the preparations of the body are carried out meticulously. De Jong (1983:28) points out that during these preparations the widows of a senior man remain in the senior wife's room where the women sing dirges while the body is prepared. The women then sleep at night in this hut for two weeks. Froelich (1954:81) describes these preparations and says:

When an old man has died, a cow is killed immediately; during this time the daughters and the sisters of the deceased carry the corpse into



the corner of the court reserved for bathing, they place him on a stool, wash him, shave his head and anoint him with shea butter, then they dress him with a white loin-cloth.

These preparations are an attempt to make the corpse acceptable to his new, after-world environment. Mbiti (1975:115) points out that the shaving of the head is a symbol of separation and at the same time is "...an indication of a people's belief that death does not destroy life, since the growth of new hair indicates that life continues to spring up."

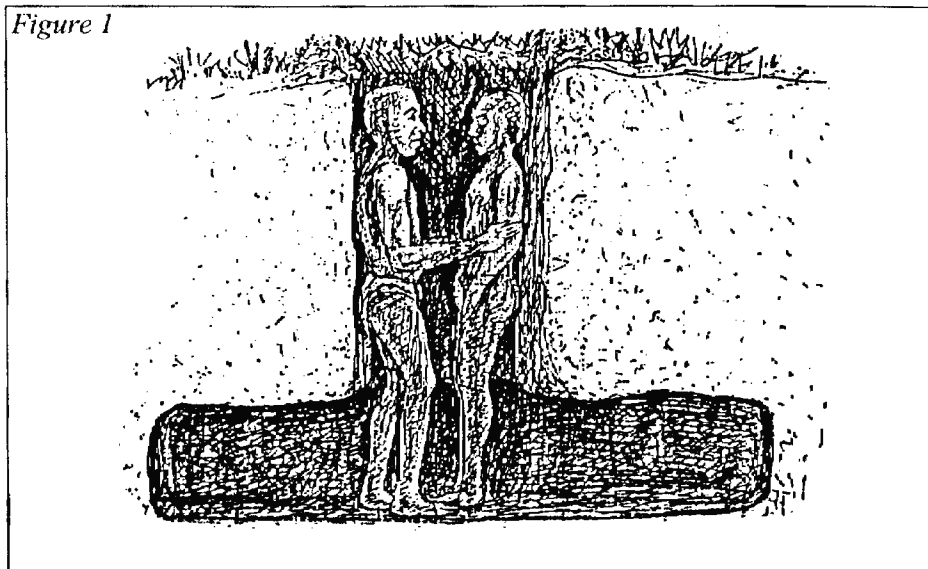
Not only is the head shaved, but while the corpse sits on a small wooden stool the nails are clipped and the body and mouth are washed with water. De Jong (1983:28) points out that the hair and nail clippings are carefully burnt so as to prevent the sorcerer from obtaining these items for medicinal use. To further demonstrate the perceptual world of the Konkombas in regard to death, the words of Froelich (1954:81) are significant:

When a dead man is dressed up, a woman takes a calabash with water with a little bit of earth in it and gives the dead to drink. Another woman kneads some clay with water and places it on a plate; some of this is given to the dead man to eat.

They perceive the corpse to be a personal entity, but in a different sphere. It is the very close sphere of the living dead. They try to visualize death in personal terms and as Mbiti (1975:111) says, regard it as a kind of spirit, but one that never laughs. Every effort is made to keep good relations with the departed hence the offering of food and drink.

An important part of the funeral is the actual burial of the body. While holding the body at the graveside the elders make their speeches to the ancestors and then a near relative enters the upright channel and awaits the reception of the body in a standing position.

De Jong explains : "First the hole is dug, until a person can stand in it while holding the dead body. Then these two sideways are dug, long enough to lie the dead body flat in it." [see figure 1]

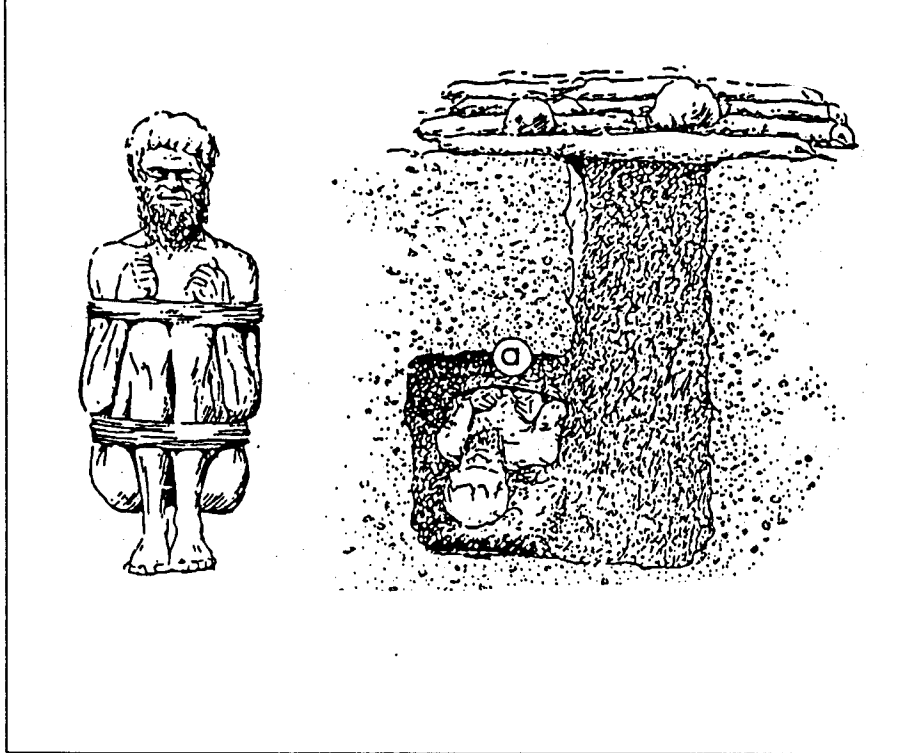


Mbiti (1975:116) sums up these findings and says, "By ritualizing death, people dance it away, drive it away, and renew their own life after it has taken away one of their members."

### **Pitjantjatjara Death and Funerary Rites**

Different assumptions become evident from the acts and comments of the Pitjantjatjara people in regard to death and burial. The rituals associated with these aspects of culture betray their basic presuppositions. While some Aborigines cremate bodies, others leave the corpse on a raised platform until it is dried out. The Pitjantjatjara, however, take pains to bury the body in a deep grave and bind it tightly with "fur-string" made from animal skins. Mountford (1976:565) diagrams this process as follows:

*Figure 2:* "Body with arms and legs bound closely. Cross section of grave showing body (a) placed in cavity, which is then filled with grass and leaves and covered with logs and boulders."



One of the reasons given for the binding of the body is so that it will not roam about and cause trouble to the living.

Expressions of grief in regard to death reveal central beliefs in Pitjantjatjara culture and on this aspect Mountford (1976:580) comments:

The women, cutting their heads with the sharpened ends of their digging-sticks and weeping loudly, throw themselves on the ground while the men, seated on the ground, sob as if their hearts are broken.

Evidently it is important to show excessive grief in order to demonstrate to the "spirit of the dead" their intense sorrow. Not to do this is to place one's self at risk, in as much as the "spirit of the dead" could take revenge on the insincere mourner.

The method of the actual burial is carried out with great care and the person elected to do this is not permitted to exit the grave until the procedure is complete. This is because of the likelihood of interference from the powers of the unseen world. Mountford (1976:580) documents this procedure:

The body of the dead is buried in a deep grave, carefully packed with leaves and grass so that he will be comfortable. The spirit of the dead is then told that he may not leave the grave except to gather his food, but must not, on any occasion, go near the camps of his old companions.

There is this constant effort to appease the unseen spiritual powers so that they may not disturb the living. In fact Pitjantjatjara rituals are considered as being a process to ensure the continued well-being of the living. To release good spirits and life essence the rituals must be pursued meticulously. One further reason for the pursuance of the ritual is that it not only renews the species but it is understood to renew the waning sex drive of the older men.

A second set of rituals is entered upon some months after the initial burying and this is carried out with special spiritual impact in view. Mountford (1976:580-581) comments:

Some months after the death a party of near relatives, accompanied by a medicine man, will visit the grave to capture the spirit of the dead man who, they believe, will be seated on a small mound of earth which had been prepared for him at the head of the grave when he was buried.

He further states that the medicine man is expected to "place the spirit of the dead into the body of a living person of the same age." In this way "life essence" is transferred from generation to generation and thus ensures the maintenance of the culture.

The death rituals associated with the final rites of passage are elaborate and extended. They often involve the whole social structure in preparation, ceremony and celebration. Communication is made with the spirit world when the ancestors are entreated as the recent dead are sent on their way to join the living dead.

The celebrations connected with the human life-cycle have been seen to be often secretive, aesthetic and all-embracing. These "pauses" in the life of a people help substantiate their basic presuppositions. Each person's basic postulates are clarified on these occasions because they help affirm who they are and what is their place in the universe.

### **Implications for Mission**

In many instances the Rites of Passage in the two ethnic groups employ colourful and dramatic ceremonies involving the whole community. There are many good aspects from these ceremonies which can be employed by the church communicator for the benefit of all. At an Easter meeting located in a Pitjantjatjara community the dramatic effect of hundreds of candles being used in a night celebration contained striking resemblance to the description of a part of the initiation ceremony as documented by Tyndale (1935:210-212):

From every side torch bearers began to converge on the second men's camp, and by the time the crowd had passed it and reached a third men's camp, practically everyone had joined the singing crowd; men in front, then the women, with young boys and girls trailing along in the background. ...Probably more than two hundred and fifty torches were burning as the procession moved to the ceremonial ground.... Scarcely had the above song commenced when all the young boys from six to twelve years of age, whom we had seen busily engaged around the distant fires, now came running forward, tossing fire brands through the air at the men who had been seated in the two circles and singing. For a few moments a shower of sparks, burning coals and haavy red-hot sticks descended. The burning brands passed over the heads of the women folk. The men leaped up, shouted `Ah!

Ah! Ah!' in low, deep and husky voices, and dodged the brands as best they could.

This celebration of the initiates entering their new status or life could be paralleled somewhat with the hope of new life and a new status found in Christ. This link is utilized by the Pitjantjatjara community during their Easter celebrations.

The writer received a request from the Pitjantjatjara community to purchase and deliver three hundred candles for the Easter celebration and could not help but see the wisdom in the use of this graphic piece of reminiscence from the past and its relevance to the resurrection of God's Son with His message of hope and eternal life.

The wisdom of avoiding a cultural void among the Pitjantjatjara is to be commended. The communicators of the early contact period were careful not to denigrate such cultural events as the initiation ceremonies but sought to incorporate the good aspects of these festive occasions in the celebrations of the new church community in the manner described above.

Cultural voids occur when an integral part of an ethnic group's activities, such as initiation rites, is denigrated by the cross-cultural communicator who then fails to incorporate any corresponding rite as a replacement. This results in a void and a failure to fulfil the "felt needs" of an ethnic community.

In the sixth century before Christ, the nation of Israel, when deported to Babylon for their seventy-year captivity, was known to have recalled their traditional songs and chants. The practice of initiation was also continued through this long period of trial. It seems that recalling the feasts and ceremonies, the dances and songs gave cohesion to the alien nation. It helped them retain their identity in the climate of secularism and pluralism. Enshrined in these traditional practices was their world-view, their view of monotheism, of humanity and of the universe. The rehearsing of their rites of passage preserved and perpetuated their basic premises.

An interesting event took place at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) during the orientation week of the first term, 1991. A picnic was convened underneath some huge trees on the campus where the college provided a wholesome meal for everyone. There was a wonderful sense of community as the newly arrived students met campus residents and saw the NEGST family in a totally informal setting. Barriers were down and a

call was made for people to form small groups according to the countries they came from. More than fifteen countries were represented and each group prepared a small act to perform at the base of a giant tree for the seated crowd to witness. People had fared well with the meal and there was a relaxed carnival atmosphere as one by one the groups made their national presentations. It was a wonderful sight to behold. Senior students and faculty forgot their status and standing as traditional songs and dances were performed with vigour. Peals of rollicking laughter rang through the trees as improvised drums and sounding gongs were invented and tribal acts recalled from remote village life and childhood days.

It was only afterwards, upon reflection, that many of us realised the implicit value of such a celebration. Each national group was actually celebrating their ethnicity and encapsulated in their songs and dances was their worldview; their basic tribal values. The cohesion that each group felt was enormous. The re-enactment bound them together with the strong cords of their ethnicity and the children stood by captivated as they witnessed their parents play-acting the ancient tribal practices. In this way values are imbibed and passed on to the younger generation. Without such celebrations basic values and tribal practices are easily lost to posterity and secularism and modernity dictate the patterns of life.

Rites of passage, viewed for a long time with negative connotations by cross-cultural communicators, need to be reconsidered in the light of the disintegration of society and loss of traditional values. The intrusion of secularism and modernity calls for a reevaluation of these rites in the light of Scripture and also from the history of the nation of Israel. Wholesale denigration common in the past, needs to be halted and cultural preservation pursued so that the treasures of each ethnic group can be brought into the Kingdom of God, (Rev. 21:24-26) for the glory and honour of our most glorious King.

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