Volume 25 Issue 1
Originally issued as G1

Global Journal of Human-Social Science: G
Linguistics & Education
Volume 25 Issue 1 Version 1.0 Year 2025
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

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By Carlos Joseph Mbinda & Farles Ilomo

University of Iringa

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GJHSS-G Classification: *LCC: HF5415.33.I4*



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The Effects of Western Culture on Rites of Passage among the Hehe and Bena Societies: Case Study in Iringa Rural District

Carlos Joseph Mbinda [α] & Farles Ilomo [σ]

Abstract- This study investigates how Western culture impacts the rites of passage among the Hehe and Bena communities in the Iringa Rural district, revealing a complex relationship between traditional customs and modern influences. Interviews with community members, including elders and youth, show a strong commitment to cultural preservation despite economic pressures and lifestyle changes. The findings highlight the need to adapt traditional rites by integrating modern elements to maintain relevance for younger generations, fostering cultural evolution. Western media and educational advancements significantly shape local practices, leading to a hybridization of traditions that reflects both resilience and adaptability. The study suggests that cultural preservation efforts, educational programs, and media engagement are vital to sustaining traditional practices within a modern context, offering insights into a balanced approach to cultural development.

In methodology, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to explore the effects of Western culture on the rites of passage among the Hehe and Bena societies in Iringa Rural. A case study design was utilized to gather data from various sources, including interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys. Respondents, representing different community groups, were selected using both simple random and purposive sampling methods. Data were analyzed using SPSS for quantitative insights and content analysis for qualitative data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the cultural changes occurring in the region.

Keywords: rites of passage, western culture, tourism, cultural tourism.

I. Introduction

Rites of passage are fundamental in communities worldwide, marking key transitions and fostering individual and collective identity. These ceremonies, such as birth, initiation, marriage, and funeral rites, reinforce social cohesion and transmit cultural values. However, globalization and Western cultural influences challenge the integrity of these practices. In Tanzania, the Hehe and Bena societies traditionally uphold elaborate rites of passage integral to their cultural heritage, shaping social roles and community cohesion. Yet, Western influences from colonialism, globalization, and modernization threaten the continuity of these rituals.

Global studies highlight similar challenges. Smith (2018) examines how globalization erodes Native American rites of passage, while Jones (2012) explores how colonialism transformed initiation ceremonies among Aboriginal tribes in Australia. In Africa, Okonkwo (2010) discusses the impact of colonialism on Igbo initiation rituals in Nigeria, emphasizing Western values and education as forces of change. Moyo (2015) links shifts in Xhosa circumcision rites to urbanization and Western ideologies. Although some Tanzanian studies, like Ng'wanakilala (2018), address broader cultural changes, focused research on the Hehe and Bena rites in Iringa Rural is scarce. This study addresses that gap, examining how Western culture intersects with traditional rites of passage among the Hehe and Bena via education, media, and urbanisation.

The study's findings aim to deepen understanding of African cultural dynamics, offering insights into cultural preservation, community development, and intercultural dialogue. They also seek to guide policymakers, educators, and community leaders on strategies for safeguarding indigenous practices amid globalization pressures.

a) Theory of Liminality and Cultural Tourism

Turner's theory of liminality, proposed in 1969, offers a foundational framework for understanding the transformative experiences individuals undergo during rites of passage. The liminal phase, as described by Turner, represents a transitional period between an individual's old and new social status, characterized by a state of ambiguity and fluidity, where traditional social norms and hierarchies are temporarily suspended. During this time, individuals experience a sense of communitas a shared experience of equality and unity, where distinctions of class, gender, and ethnicity dissolve. This phase allows for deep reflection on societal values and beliefs, making it a crucial period for personal and collective transformation. Turner's theory is particularly relevant to this study, as it provides a lens through which to explore how the Hehe and Bena societies navigate the pressures of modernization and the encroachment of Western culture on their traditional rites of passage. By applying Turner's concept of liminality, this study can better analyze how these

Author α: University of Iringa, Tanzania.
e-mail: cajombi2013@gmail.com

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communities experience cultural shifts, adapt their practices, and negotiate their identities in a changing social landscape. His theory has had a significant impact across various disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, and is essential for understanding the broader implications of cultural transitions in both historical and contemporary contexts.

b) The Perception of Rite of Passage in Africa

Rites of passage are an important aspect of African cultures, serving as a way to mark important life transitions and reinforce cultural values. According to (Anyanwu, 2019), this study explores the role of rites of passage in African traditional education and highlights their importance in transmitting cultural values. The author argues that these rites help to instil a sense of identity and belonging in young people and provide a framework for their socialization into the broader community. The study looks at the traditional healing practices of the Hehe people of Tanzania and highlights the importance of initiation ceremonies as a rite of passage for young people. The authors argue that these ceremonies play a crucial role in shaping the identity and social roles of young people within their community. The study by Opoku & Boamah (2019) explores the role of rites of passage in traditional Akan society in Ghana and highlights their importance in shaping social identities and reinforcing cultural values. The authors argue that these rites serve as a way of maintaining social order and providing a sense of continuity across generations This study examines the role of rites of passage in sustainable development among the Maasai community in Kenya. The authors argue that these rites play a crucial role in shaping social identities and promoting sustainable practices, such as conservation and community development. Overall, these studies demonstrate the significance of rites of passage in African cultures and their importance in transmitting cultural values, shaping social identities, and promoting sustainable practices

II. Methodology

The methodology chapter of this study outlines the approach and procedures employed to examine the influence of Western culture on the rites of passage among the Hehe and Bena societies in Iringa Rural. This chapter includes a detailed description of the study area, research approach and design, data types and sources, sample population, sampling technique, data collection methods, data processing, analysis, presentation, ethical considerations, time frame, and budget.

The study was conducted in Iringa Rural District, a culturally rich and geographically diverse area known for its unique blend of traditional practices among the Hehe and Bena communities. The Hehe and Bena people are known for their significant rites of passage, which have been impacted by Western cultural influence. This research used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from surveys and demographic analyses with qualitative insights from interviews and observations, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of cultural shifts. A case study design was adopted to provide in-depth insights and facilitate access to sensitive community data, making this approach particularly suitable.

The target population consisted of different groups within Iringa Rural, selected based on their knowledge and relevance to the study topic. Sampling was done through a combination of simple random and purposive sampling to ensure representation and focus. Data was collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, enabling researchers to capture both broad trends and detailed personal experiences. In analyzing the data, quantitative information was processed through SPSS to derive statistical insights, while qualitative data was examined through content analysis to identify patterns and themes. Findings were presented in both descriptive and tabular formats to provide a clear and organized view of the results.

To ensure accuracy and validity, pilot testing was conducted, and expert reviews were sought. Validity was further supported by the Kaiser- Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure, which confirmed the adequacy of the sample and data. Reliability was addressed by ensuring that the methods and instruments used could yield similar results if applied to comparable groups in similar contexts. Ethical considerations, including participant consent and confidentiality, were prioritized throughout the research process.

III. Results

a) To Assess the Influence of Western Cultural Values on Traditional Rites of Passage among the Hehe and Bena Societies in Iringa Rural

The study results highlight the multigenerational impact of Western cultural values on traditional rites of passage among the Hehe and Bena societies in Iringa Rural, revealing varied responses across different demographic groups. Data from 10 elders (12.5% of respondents) show that older generations perceive Western influences as significantly reshaping traditional practices but resist complete assimilation, emphasizing the need to preserve cultural heritage. Insights from 30 community members (37.5%) provide a broader perspective, noting a gradual incorporation of Western cultural elements into local traditions, though the process is slow and met with varying degrees of acceptance depending on individual and community beliefs.

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Interviews with 20 teenagers (25%) highlight a notable transformation among the younger generation, with many blending traditional customs with modern Western practices due to the influence of media, technology, and education. Additionally, data from 20 individuals engaged with Western media (25%) underscore the significant role of media in shaping perceptions and adaptations of traditional rites. Media has introduced new cultural ideas that bridge the gap between traditional and modern practices, making them more acceptable to younger generations. Together, these findings suggest a future in which traditional and Western practices may increasingly coexist or merge within the Hehe and Bena societies, with different age groups showing varying levels of acceptance and adaptation.

> "Western culture has significantly transformed our view of traditional rites. Many young people are drawn to modern celebrations because they feel more relatable and engaging. While we don't completely abandon our customs, the influence is undeniable, and we often merge the traditional with the modern to create a new way of celebrating."

Teenager, Iringa Rural, 2024

In summary, the study highlights a generational shift in the Hehe and Bena societies of Iringa Rural, where Western cultural values influence traditional rites of passage. Elders (12.5%) observe changes yet largely resist full assimilation, while community members (37.5%) recognize a steady shift in customs across age groups. Teenagers (25%) increasingly merge traditional and Western practices, reflecting a substantial transformation among the youth. Additionally, individuals involved in Western media (25%) emphasize the media's role in shaping these evolving perceptions. Overall, the findings suggest an emerging blend of traditional and Western practices that may shape the future cultural landscape of these societies.

IV. Discussion

The discussion of findings reveals a complex interaction between the preservation and adaptation of traditional rites of passage among the Hehe and Bena societies in Iringa Rural, as influenced by Western cultural values. The results align with the theoretical framework established in the introduction, particularly Turner's theory of liminality, which emphasizes the transitional phase where traditional norms are redefined. Interviews with diverse community members, including elders, teenagers, and individuals engaged with Western media, demonstrate how Western values are reshaping traditional practices. Many elders, particularly those in the study, expressed a strong commitment to maintaining traditional rites, viewing them as integral to cultural identity, community cohesion, and the transmission of values to younger generations. This aligns with the view in the literature that cultural practices are key to sustaining social bonds and continuity within communities (Turner, 1969). However, elders also face challenges due to economic pressures and the influence of Western lifestyles, which echo the tensions described in the literature between cultural preservation and the forces of modernization (Cohen, 2015).

Among younger respondents, particularly teenagers, there is a notable openness to incorporating modern elements into traditional practices. They argue that adaptation could make these rites more relevant and appealing to contemporary generations, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. This perspective reflects the notion in the literature that cultural practices evolve in response to external influences, allowing them to stay relevant and meaningful to younger generations (Hannerz, 2016). The youth's approach suggests a pragmatic outlook, where integrating modern aspects into traditional rites might ensure their continuity by aligning them with the values and lifestyles of contemporary society. Furthermore, the study highlights the significant role of Western media and educational advancements in accelerating cultural evolution, as noted in the reviewed literature. Exposure to global cultural narratives through media and education reshapes perceptions and fosters a hybridization of traditional rites among more educated individuals. Social media and international news expose the community to a wide range of cultural influences, prompting a fusion of traditional and modern elements in ceremonial practices. Respondents involved in Western media identified its role in introducing new cultural ideas, which influence how rites of passage are perceived and practiced. These findings reflect the discussions in the literature about the role of media in facilitating cultural exchange and hybridization (Appadurai, 2016). Ultimately, the findings suggest a dynamic balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modernity, indicating potential future shifts in the cultural landscape of the Hehe and Bena societies.

V. Conclusion

The study was conducted to examine how Western cultural values impact traditional rites of passage among the Hehe and Bena societies in Iringa Rural. By gathering insights from various community members, including elders, teenagers, community members, and individuals engaged with Western media, the research reveals the ongoing tension between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to modern influences. Many respondents, particularly elders and traditionalists, expressed a strong desire to maintain these rites, viewing them as integral to cultural identity, community cohesion, and the transmission of values

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from one generation to the next. Traditional practices are seen as central to the social fabric, fostering unity and imparting wisdom that reinforces respect for cultural customs. However, the study also acknowledges that traditional practices are under increasing pressure from socioeconomic changes and the pervasive influence of Western lifestyles, which challenge the community's ability to preserve these customs in their original forms.

To address these challenges, the study recommends actionable steps to strike a balance between cultural preservation and adaptation. Firstly, it suggests fostering community dialogue across generations to ensure that elders' wisdom and insights are passed down, while also accommodating the evolving needs and preferences of younger generations. Encouraging the incorporation of contemporary elements into traditional rites, in a way that respects core values, could help make these practices more relevant and appealing to youth. Additionally, it is recommended that community leaders collaborate with media outlets to create content that highlights the importance of traditional rites, emphasizing their cultural significance and potential for adaptation. Lastly, there should be efforts to integrate cultural education into local schools and media platforms to raise awareness about the value of traditional practices, ensuring that they continue to thrive in the face of modernization. These recommendations aim to support the sustainability of traditional rites while allowing for a dynamic response to cultural evolution.

Amid these pressures, younger respondents, especially teenagers, suggested that integrating modern elements into rites of passage could make them more relevant to contemporary life, thus ensuring their survival. This perspective reflects a generational shift, where youth see adaptation as a means to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. For the younger generation, blending traditional practices with modern elements, such as contemporary music or clothing, not only aligns the rites more closely with their everyday experiences but also makes the rituals more appealing and accessible to youth. They believe that adapting these practices is essential to keeping them alive and preventing them from becoming obsolete. This approach indicates a pragmatic response to modernization, where tradition is preserved not through strict adherence to old customs, but through modification that honours the essence of the rites while accommodating modern influences.

Additionally, the study underscores the significant role of Western media and educational advancements in reshaping perceptions of traditional practices. Through exposure to global cultural narratives via media and education, community members especially those engaged with Western media are experiencing a blend of traditional and modern values. Western media introduces new cultural ideas that, in turn, influence how rites of passage are understood and celebrated, leading to the hybridization of traditional practices. This dynamic evolution shows a cultural landscape in which traditional and modern values are not mutually exclusive but instead coexist, influence each other, and contribute to a unique cultural synthesis within the Hehe and Bena societies. Overall, the findings illustrate a complex process of cultural adaptation, where resilience and flexibility allow these communities to preserve their heritage while adapting to global cultural influences.

Consent

Ethical considerations, including participant consent and confidentiality, were prioritized throughout the research process.

Disclaimer (Artificial Intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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