Let's talk about culture! Experiencing a disco funeral in Western Kenya

My humanitarian trip to Kenya was spent working alongside the Kenya Red Cross; the purpose of the trip was to understand public health problems in order to develop solutions and integrate research to confirm successful results. I traveled across Kenya for 2 months, experiencing a myriad of public health interventions addressing various issues or situations. Halfway through my trip, I found myself traveling with a media group, who were interviewing beneficiary populations of an HIV/AIDS American Red Cross and Kenya Red Cross collaboration, in Western Kenya. They were creating a video with stories of local people who described how the program impacted their lives; this video was being sent to the American Red Cross to shed light on the success of the intervention.

The days included conversations of Swahili interwoven with English, video cameras, and an abundance of fruit given to us as gifts of thanks; the nights were spent in a deep slumber due to exhaustion, but one night was different. Around 11 p.m., the group and I drove 30 min into the bush where we met with two local boys on a motorcycle. We were secretly led to a disco matanga located ~30 min deeper into the bush. At this point, we were approximately an hour away from Busia, in a direction that wove in and out of Uganda, but we would never be able to retrace the trail. The only light came from the motorcycle headlights in front of us and our only trail disappeared as soon as the dust settled. I had no idea what a disco matanga was, even up until the point where I exited the parked vehicle. I quickly learned. A disco matanga is a cultural funeral practice of the Luo in the Nyanza province.1

Nyanza province is the most severely affected area in Kenya with HIV rates up to 15%.2,3 Disco funerals create an environment and provide opportunities for adolescents to engage in risky sex and promote HIV/STI transmission.4–7 Wife inheritance also occurs at these events;8 the purpose of a disco funeral was personally described to me as the combination of wife inheritance and a funeral into one event. Because the infection and mortality rate from AIDS is so high in the region, it has become custom that if a husband dies, the brother of the husband takes the wife as his own.8 The culture in the region is accepting of polygamy, so having more than one wife or multiple relationships is condoned; unfortunately, practicing polygamy in an area with significant rates of HIV/AIDS may be unsafe and may increase the risk of HIV transmission. For example, if the brother practices unsafe sexual intercourse with his newly inherited wife, who may have contracted HIV from her former husband, then he has an increased risk of contracting HIV. My example provides evidence to the progression of the spread of disease as a result of wife inheritance; this information has also been confirmed by numerous studies by Nunn, Okeyo and Allen and Taverne.9–11

The purpose of the disco matanga or disco funeral is to help raise money in order to give the deceased husband a proper burial.7 There is usually a specific way to raise money at these events. At the event that I attended, fund raising began with music playing and an MC who started the party, ‘If you are sitting, you either have to pay 20 bop or go out and dance’. Those who want to continue sitting on the bench have to pay 20 Kenyan Shilling (KSh), while those who don’t want to pay, get off the bench and dance. This trend continues throughout the night. The microphone also gets passed to a person who would pay for a dance or suggest for a named individual to dance with them for one song.

Because disco funerals are a cultural tradition, only a few ethnic communities (Luo and Luhya) continue the event. It is extremely unusual for a group of outsiders (especially those of other ethnicities, including Kikuyu, Kisii and Kamba) to attend because invites are typically only extended to relatives or community members; it was even more unusual that a white person would be present. During the disco funeral, when an individual held the microphone and was able to choose a dance partner, words in Swahili nearly always exclaimed, ‘I want to dance with the mzungu (the white person) for 20 bop’. I didn’t want to dance, so I paid 20 KSh, but the attendees insisted on dancing with me, so I eventually got up and danced.

Disco funerals are held in rural settings. The event I attended took place in desolate forest where there was no electricity, running water and only limited phone service. It began very late at night (around 11 pm) and continued until day-light morning hours; in response to the extreme darkness, two single generator-run light bulbs were set near the MC table and provided lighting. The attendees included primarily adolescent and adult men (~16–37 years of age), a few children, the inherited/widowed wife, and a handful of adolescent girls. The men drank homebrewed ‘moonshine’ hour after hour and became intoxicated. Many of the men also smoked...
marijuana and were chewing miraa (an amphetamine-like stimulant). The consumption of local-brewed alcohol and drugs, including khat, cannabis, and tobacco/betel quid is common amongst individuals at disco funerals. I was told the mixture of alcohol and miraa increases sexual aggressiveness or tendencies. I was fearful of the environment and was afraid to leave the miniscule lighting provided by the two small bulbs near the MC's stand.

While dancing was not a big deal to me at the event, I was hesitant and questioned the purpose of the dance. Bidding on dances not only provides alone time with the selected partner of the bidder, but is traditionally used to decide on later transactional sex. Njue et al. provided evidence of this, as an interviewed participant stated, “Once he has bought the girl then he dances with her, so during the dance with her is when they talk and come to an understanding or they agree on where they are going to meet and they just finish their business [have sex] there and there’. I was naïve and unaware the dance would be used in this manner.

Because the attendees kept calling on me to dance, I openly participated in dancing. At first, I didn’t mind it, but one guy started petting my arm as he danced alongside me trying to converse with me in Swahili, so I exited the dance floor and walked to a few members of my group. He followed me, grabbed my arm, yanked me back to face him and said in Swahili, ‘I paid to dance with you!’ He stood right next to me and continued even after a guy in my group told him to stop harassing me; finally, as it was starting to cause a scene, a family member of the inherited/widowed wife approached our group and told him to leave me alone and let me be with my friends. He finally moved to a dark corner, but continued watching me for the remainder of the night.

This experience provided insight to a cultural practice that has a presence in Western Kenya and continues to exist. Njue et al. suggested that disco funerals are held up to three times a week and a single event may be celebrated up to a week. Community members attend because they are a cheap form of entertainment and an opportunity to meet the other sex; unfortunately, casual, forced and transactional sex are often facilitated by the intense atmosphere at the funerals. I am now more understanding of one critical cultural situation in the area contributing to the transmission and spread of HIV/AIDS.

Rapes and gang rapes frequently occur at disco funerals; I experienced how and why these rapes may occur. The attending men are generally intoxicated, high from marijuana or miraa, and typically exude aggressive behavior. The forest is rural; darkness envelopes the area and hides malevolent behavior that may be lurking. Although this cannot be confirmed by current literature, it was explained to me by the members of my group that children as young as 8 years old get raped at these events. Based on the parlous state of the environment, I was able to see how this situation could arise.

Several HIV prevention campaigns have ineffectively tried to eliminate wife inheritance. According to current literature, a successful intervention addressing wife inheritance and disco funeral events, including the rapes, risky sexual behavior and the spread of HIV/AIDS, does not exist. In forming suitable interventions, I believe we should seek to understand the cultural element and its role in human development. One part of culture in human development is socialization, the passing on of traditional norms and values; socialization may be under-appreciated or poorly understood in disco funerals. In the case of disco funerals and wife inheritance, practicing ethnic communities are unwilling to relinquish these traditions; this response is because of the economic benefits provided by guests to help financially contribute to the deceased’s funeral and due to the belief that wife inheritance actually inhibits the spread of HIV by confining the potentially infected widow to one partner. In the case of disco funerals, previous interventions may not have considered traditional values or culture, but instead, primarily focused on the identifiable problem at hand (HIV/AIDS). Intervention development should be multi-faceted and include understanding local traditions and values, socioeconomic conditions, and knowledge or beliefs within the community. Considering culture in public health intervention design may increase the likelihood of intervention success or acceptance within the community, especially in the case of disco funerals.

Tara Rava Zolnikov

Harvard School of Public Health, Huntington Ave, Boston, MA 02215, USA

Address correspondence to T.R. Zolnikov,
Email: tarazolnikov@gmail.com

References


