

# **Investigation of Factors for Failure of Pupils to Attend School during Funerals among Luo Community**

By

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## **Abstract**

*Every culture has a way of assisting its bereaved members to deal with grief. This study investigated the factors for failure of pupils to attend school during funerals among the Luo community in Asego Division, Homa-Bay Sub County. The objectives of this study were to find out why pupils fail to attend school during funerals and the number of days each pupil failed to attend school during the funeral of a nuclear family member, friend, and neighbor. Eight primary schools in Asego Division were sampled for this study. Two hundred and forty Luo pupils in classes four to eight in the sampled schools were purposively sampled as participants and descriptive survey research design was used. Questionnaires were administered to the sampled pupils. Focus group discussions for teachers were held in the sampled schools. They were chaired by the researcher with the assistance of two enumerators. Pilot study was conducted to check on validity and reliability of the instruments. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics such as means, frequency distributions, percentages and standard deviations. The findings of this study were presented in tables and in prose. The findings showed that respondents who had lost fathers absented from school because of the Luo bereavement customs of "padho", suspension of regular activities 0.8%, "iko", burial, 7.9%, "tero buru", a ritual demonstration of accompanying the spirit of the deceased to former battleground, 1.3%, "liedo", shaving, 0.8%, "tedo", serving a meal to the deceased's family by married daughters, 0.4%, while 88.6% were not affected by loss of fathers during school going days. Pupils absented from school for 8 days for mothers, 5 days for fathers, 4 days for siblings, and 2 days for friends and neighbours' funerals. The study concluded that Luo bereavement customs affected school attendance of bereaved pupils. Further research was recommended to investigate how the Luo bereavement customs affected academic performance of bereaved pupils. A similar study can be replicated in other parts of Nyanza region, Kenya.*

**Keywords:** *funeral, bereavement, community, absenteeism and school attendance*

## **1. Background of the study**

Majority of people who lived in Asego Division were members of the Luo community except in urban zone which was cosmopolitan. The main occupation of the Luos in the region was fishing. Some of them practiced subsistence farming or kept livestock. The non – Luos and some Luos were government employees or business persons. The Luos loved their culture especially those on bereavement. Mboya (1997) notes that the Luos believe that after physical death, the deceased will be incorporated into ancestral community. That belief made attendance of funeral ceremonies a must for every Luo. The bereaved members of the deceased family were not permitted to leave home or go to work in the fields. Such prohibitions made bereaved pupils not to attend school until after the deceased was buried and purification done to family members.

Ongon'ga (1982) says that death is not a family affair but involves the whole community. Everyone in the clan come to pay their final respect for the deceased. They participate in "iko"-burial ceremony, "buru"-ritual demonstration and "liedo"-shaving. They also come to console bereaved members of the family. Friends and neighbours share in the work of digging the grave.

Shino (1997) found in his case study of death and rituals among the Luo that the Luos were concerned with the burial place as could be seen in the controversy that surrounded the burial of the famous criminal lawyer S.M. Otieno who had married a Kikuyu wife. Tradition had been set and had to be respected. Thus, when one died away from his ancestral land, the body had to be taken back home for burial in his ancestral land. Ogot (2009) asserts that if buried away, it is believed that people will never stop

mourning, it will be impossible to perform the right ritual befitting him, and that the spirits of the deceased will haunt the living. Ayayo (1989) states that the Luo regard death as a crisis in life—a rite of passage. When people die, they are not separated from their clan; they are only transformed from a physical being into a spiritual being of the same clan. The passage into the spiritual was expressed as an element in the lifecycle of the individual accomplished through a series of funeral customs.

Ayot (1979) notes that in the Luo culture, a person's social status determines how and where he or she should be buried. The burial of a very young child takes place the same day the child dies. For an adult, the burial day is well planned for hence pupils absent from school as they attend the burial ceremony. The place of burial differs according to the sex, place and manner of death (Cohen & Atieno, 1992: 41). Women and young children were not supposed to perform the actual act of burial but were to throw a handful of earth into the grave. When a Luo dies, a funeral fire “Magenga” is lit. During the period when the fire is burning, the sons of the deceased sit around the fire. The Luo do that to prevent the medicine man that might have caused the death of the deceased from getting soil from the grave, since it is believed that death is caused by somebody, and to ward off the ghost of the dead who could come back in the form of a spirit to avenge his death. Some animals are slaughtered during an adult Luo's funeral and these depend on the deceased' socio-economic status (Ayiemba, 1986). These are a bull for the elders, another bull for sons in law, and a bull or goat for wife's relatives. For the son's in law, the ceremony also included a mandatory chicken “gwend magenga” which was eaten at midnight.

Bereaved children participated in mourning rituals and might not attend school for several days. If there were several funerals in the same family, then children would be absent from school for several weeks in a term. That would affect their performance in school. Bironga (2002) found in his survey study of one hundred and twenty students that absenteeism had a negative and profound effect on student's academic achievement. Students who were persistently absent from school had low educational attainment which led to repetition and eventually dropped out of school. There was need to find out factors for pupils' absenteeism.

### ***Statement of the problem***

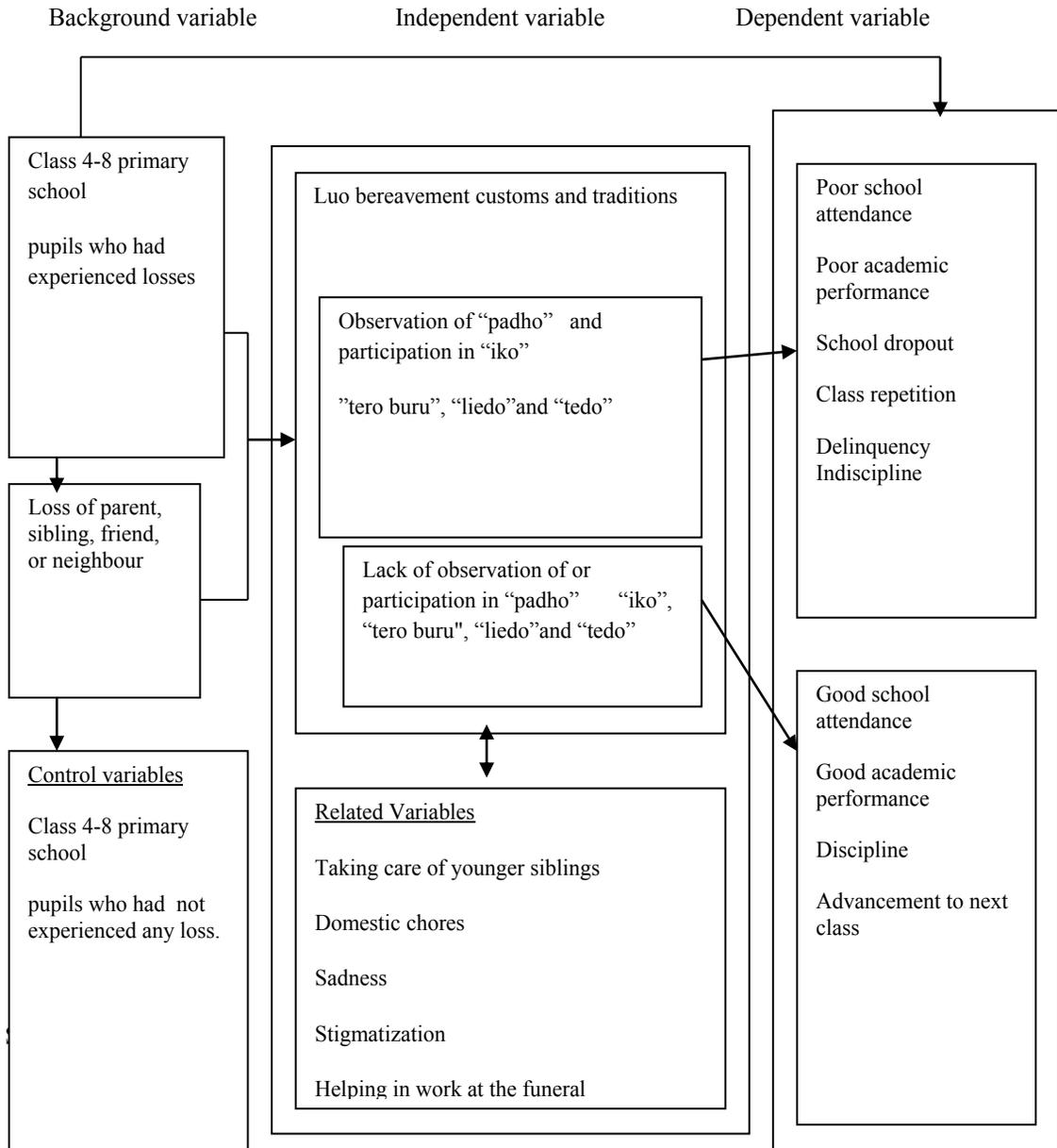
Despite the introduction of FPE in Kenya and making school attendance compulsory, some pupils did not attend school regularly. Mukhongo (2003) investigated the influence of circumcision ceremony on education of primary school pupils in Kandunyi Division and found that circumcision had negative influence on pupil's school attendance, performance in internal examinations, discipline and contributed to school dropout.

Ngwala (1984) analyzed factors that contributed to pupil absenteeism in Central Division of Machakos District. In his survey study of 18 primary schools, he found that the major causes of absenteeism were sickness, family problems, withholding by parents, truancy and school phobia. He found that children who did not attend school regularly were unlikely to be well-prepared to face hard realities of life, there were high chances of performance in examinations being affected negatively, and the child found difficulty in forming friendly links with other children.

The tradition of Luo children being absent from school during funerals was a cause of concern. This study investigated the factors for failure of pupils to attend school during funerals among the Luo community in Asego Division of Homa Bay Sub County since such a study has not been done in that region. Bereaved pupils continue to be affected as they fail to attend school during funerals while their colleagues are being taught at school. There was also need to find out the magnitude of absenteeism.

### ***Conceptual framework***

Figure 1:1 Conceptual framework of influence of the Luo bereavement customs on school attendance of primary school pupils



## 2. Methodology

The study adopted descriptive survey research design to investigate the factors for failure of pupil to attend school during funerals among the Luo community in Asego Division of Homa Bay Sub District. The researcher selected the area of study due to the fact that no study had been carried out on the influence of Luo culture on school attendance of pupils in that region. The target population comprised pupils in primary schools. The pupils must have lost a parent, sibling, neighbour or friend. There were 81 primary schools; 65 were public while 16 were private primary schools, with a total of 622 teachers and 29,021 pupils. The table below shows the target population.

**Table 1.1: Target population**

Zone	School category	Number of Schools	Girls	Boys	Total	Grand Total
Kabunde	Public	20	2486	2743	5229	5229
	Private	0	0	0	0	
Asego	Public	28	5205	5056	10261	10930
	Private	3	330	339	669	
Urban	Public	17	5224	4956	10180	12862
	Private	13	1282	1400	2682	
Grand Total		81	14527	14494		29021

Source: Asego Divisional Education Office (2010).

Stratified random sampling with proportionate allocation was used to obtain the number of public and private primary schools to use as sample. The researcher used purposive sampling to get Luo pupils as participants in this study. Purposive sampling was a sampling technique that allowed a researcher to use cases that had the required information with respect to the objectives of his or her study (Mugenda & Mugenda 1999). Proportionate allocation was also used based on individual class enrolment, as random sampling was employed to get individual pupils that constituted the sample. Convenience sampling was used to get class teachers who were asked to provide class enrolment, assist in identification of Luo pupils, and constitute a focus discussion group together with three other teachers who were randomly selected. There were 30 pupil participants per class, making this study to have 240 pupil participants. Eight teachers from each sampled school constituted a focus discussion group hence 64 teachers participated in this study.

This study used questionnaires and focus group discussions to access information about factors for the failure of pupils to attend school during funerals. There were questionnaires for pupils. Both closed and open-ended questions were used in the questionnaires. Closed-ended questions made data analysis and interpretation easier. Open-ended questions gave the respondents an opportunity to give their own views and opinions. A focus group discussion was composed of 8 teachers who shared certain characteristics which were relevant to the study (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Teachers in the sampled schools were used, hence 8 focus discussion groups were held. The research instruments were pre-tested using identical sample to the specified strata.

Validity in the context of this study was concerned with whether the objectives of this study were well-covered and presented by the items in the instruments. To establish reliability in this study, a test – retest was used to estimate the degree to which the same results could be obtained with repeated measure of accuracy on the same concepts in the test items. The developed instruments were administered to a few respondents identical to the ones sampled for the study. Headteachers of schools sampled for the study were approached with the relevant documents authorizing the study, and permission to carry out the study in their schools was sought. The researcher then visited the sampled schools for familiarization with respondents and to make appointment for data collection. The researcher administered the questionnaires to pupils. The pupils answered the questionnaires as the researcher gave the pupils enough time to complete the work. The researcher also chaired the focus group discussions for the teachers while the two enumerators took notes during the discussions.

### 3. Findings and discussion

#### *Factors for pupils' failure to attend school during funerals*

Some of the respondents had not experienced losses at all. Some respondents had losses when they were still below school going age. Some of the respondents had losses during school holidays. Some others had

losses during school going days. Nineteen respondents lost their mothers, 27 respondents lost their fathers, 17 respondents lost their siblings, 9 respondents lost their friends and other relatives and 16 respondents lost their neighbours during school going days. Results presented on table 4.2 show the frequencies and percentages of respondents and reasons for their failure to attend school during different funerals.

**Table 1.2 Reasons for respondent's failure to attend school during funerals**

Reasons	Mothers		Fathers		Siblings		Friends/ Other relatives		Neighbors	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Luo customs										
“Padho”	3	1.3	2	0.8	3	1.3	0	0	1	0.4
“Iko”	12	5	19	7.9	11	4.6	9	3.8	12	5
“Tero buru”	0	0	3	1.3	2	0.8	0	0	3	1.3
“Liedo”	2	0.8	2	0.8	0	0	0	0	0	0
“Tedo”	2	0.8	1	0.4	1	0.4	0	0	0	0
No response	221	92.0	213	88.6	223	92.9	231	96.2	224	93.3
Total	240	100	240	100	240	100	240	100	240	100

#### **“Padho”- suspension of regular activities until burial**

“Padho” made pupils to absent from school during different funerals. Three respondents who had lost their mothers during the school going days representing 1.3% of the sample did not attend school due to “padho”. For respondents found to have lost their fathers during the school going days, 2 of them representing 0.8% of the sample absented from school to observe “padho”. Three respondents representing 1.3% of the sample absented from school due to “padho” when they lost their siblings. One respondent representing 0.4% absented due to “padho” when he lost his neighbour. Mboya (1997) says that bereaved members of the family are not permitted to leave home. Shino (1997) says the relatives stay within the deceased’s compound as there is suspension of regular activities. Levin (1982) and Namongo (2002) found that family members of the deceased and neighbours gathered at the deceased’s home and farming activities were suspended until the deceased was laid to rest. Some orphans were secluded until some rituals and ceremonies were performed. During “padho”, children of the deceased worked with relatives and friends to erect shades which mourners sat under on the burial day. They slashed the compound of the deceased, helped in keeping safely items that mourners could interfere with or could move out of the compound with without family member’s knowledge. They also looked after cattle especially when it was the deceased who used to look after the cattle. Some bereaved pupils were sent to go and inform their relatives about the death that had occurred if the message could not be passed to the relatives through telephone or mobile phone due to the fact that the relatives did not have a phone or there was no network where the relatives lived. As soon as relatives arrived at the deceased’s compound, preparation of food for the mourners was started. Children in the deceased’s home were involved in running errands. “Padho” made lazy pupils from the deceased’s neighborhood to absent from school even though they were not closely related to the deceased. As bereaved pupils absented from school, their classmates who were not bereaved went on with their studies as usual.

#### **“Iko”- burial**

Pupils absented from school during different funerals to attend burial ceremonies of the deceased. Twelve respondents representing 5% of the sample absented from school to attend their mothers’ burial ceremonies. Nineteen respondents representing 7.9% of the sample who lost their fathers during the school going days absented to attend the burial ceremonies of their fathers. Eleven respondents representing 4.6% of the sample who lost their siblings during school going days absented to attend the burial ceremonies of their siblings. Nine respondents, accounting for 3.8% of the sample who had lost friends and other relatives during the school going days absented to attend the burial ceremonies. Twelve respondents equivalent to 5% of the sample who had lost neighbours during school going days absented

from school to attend burial ceremonies of their neighbours. Ongon'ga (1982) says that everyone in the clan comes to pay their final respect to the deceased.

The burial of the deceased's body took place at the deceased' ancestral land among the Luo. That meant that the deceased body that lied in a mortuary was transported to his/her ancestral land for burial. The body of the deceased who was living in a town was also transported to his or her ancestral land for burial. The transportation of the deceased's body from the mortuary took place a day before the actual day for burial. Before the vehicle carrying the body of the deceased reached home, members of the clan and cattle met the vehicle carrying the body on the way. Some bereaved pupils did not attend school on that day or went to school to attend morning lessons only. There was then night vigil before the burial. On the burial day, members of the clan, relatives and friends gathered under the shade made. One after another, they talked about the deceased. The other relatives, friends and mourners listened attentively. It was after the speeches when the body of the deceased was lowered into the grave and covered with soil. The bereaved pupils absented to bid the deceased goodbye. Some pupils from the deceased's neighbourhood absented from school to listen to the speeches. The burial of an elderly man traditionally took place in the evening. Each close relative threw a handful of soil into the grave. It therefore, became late for some mourners to go back to their homes when they came from far distant places. This made children to miss school on the burial day and the day following the burial for it was on the day after the burial when mourners travelled back to their homes. Some pupils attended burial ceremonies to meet their relatives whom they had stayed for long before meeting. There was a lot of work done on burial days. Children and members of the deceased family brought chairs from the deceased's neighbourhood for mourners to sit on. Animals such as bulls, goats, sheep and chicken were slaughtered on burial days. Preparation of meals was done and each mourner was given the food to eat. The activities done on burial days made bereaved pupils to absent from school as the non-bereaved ones continued to learn.

#### **“Tero buru”- a ritual demonstration of accompanying the spirit of the deceased to former battleground**

This is a ritual performed when a Luo male adult dies. Three respondents who had lost their fathers during school going days, representing 1.3%, absented from school to participate in this ritual. Two respondents representing 0.8% of the sample who had lost their siblings and 3 respondents representing 1.3% who had lost neighbours during school going days absented to participate in the ritual. Bark (2000) found that among the Quaker, after cremation, relatives and friends gathered in the deceased home after a week for a memorial service and the deceased's children provided concluding comments. Shino (1997) notes that the spirit of the deceased is accompanied to former battleground. The day of “tero buru” was a day that all members of the clan, relatives and friends were informed about. Clan members, relatives and friends came back to the deceased's home because of “tero buru”. Young boys and adult males acted as warriors carrying spears and shields to the battlefield together with their cattle. The warriors did that to chase away bad spirits so as not to bring death again in the family. On returning from the battlefield, there was feasting for it was believed that they had defeated their enemies. Music and dances were performed by different groups of people. Males and females entertained members of the bereaved family. The songs and dances attracted some pupils and made the pupils to be absent from schools. Some pupils stayed at home to meet their relatives and friends again. As the children absented to attend the ceremony, others went on with their studies at school.

#### **“Liedo”- shaving**

“Liedo” was done to orphans only. Two respondents representing 0.8% of the sample, who lost their mothers during the school going days absented from school to observe this ritual. Two respondents translating to 0.8% of the sample, who lost their fathers during the school going days also absented from school to observe the ritual. Shino (1997) found that the first shaving marked the beginning of the mourning period while the second shaving marked the end of the mourning period. This study found that it was only one shaving done to the deceased's children. To some orphans, all the hair on the head was shaved. To some other orphans, only a few hairs at the back of the head were shaved. To other orphans,

only few hairs on the head were pulled out. The growth of the hair again symbolized that the orphans were starting a new life- life without the deceased parent. Though the orphans did not wait for their hairs to grow first before they went back to school, they stayed at home on that particular day for “nyamrerwa”, a woman liturgist, was waited for to perform the act of “liedo”. As soon as shaving was done, it marked the end of the seclusion period. Non-bereaved pupils went to school as usual as the orphans waited to be shaved.

**“Tedo”-serving a meal to the deceased’s family by “wagogni”- married daughters.**

Two respondents which translate to 0.8% of the sample, who had lost their mothers during school going days absented from school to observe “tedo”. One respondent representing 0.4% of the sample, who had lost his or her father during the school going days also absented from school to participate in “tedo”. One respondent representing 0.4% of the sample, who had lost a sibling during the school going days, participated in “tedo”. Shino (1997) found that married daughters prepared a meal for the bereaved family. Bark (2000) also found that among the Jew, a meal of consolation was prepared after the seven-day period of mourning. All members of the clan were informed of the day of “tedo” and they attended to eat the prepared food. Bereaved pupils fetched water and firewood for their married aunts and their fathers’ married aunts for use in preparation of food for the members of the family of the deceased. The married daughters cooked for the bereaved family so as to appease the spirits of the dead person. That was done so that the spirits of the deceased could not follow them to their marital homes. Children from poor families attended such an occasion to eat hence missed school.

The teachers took some measures to curb absenteeism during funerals. The teachers established the truth about the funerals. A pupil found to have lied that he or she had a funeral yet was not bereaved, or had taken advantage of a funeral was punished by being made to weed flower beds, slash the school compound, caned or suspended. They advised the bereaved pupils to attend school before the deceased was buried if the burial would take place at a later date. They encouraged all pupils to observe one of the school rules which said “No pupil should be absent from school without permission.” That rule made some parents and pupils to come to school and ask for permission before the absenteeism thus a discussion was made on the number of days the particular pupil could take at home due to the funeral. Head teachers sensitized parents during parents’ meetings on the importance of regular attendance of school by pupils. They also asked the provincial administration to sensitize the community during funerals so that parents could allow their children to attend school immediately after the burial. In the boarding school, permission was restricted to death of nuclear family members only and was granted to the parent or guardian who brought the pupil to school for admission or to a person who bore a letter written by that pupil’s parent or guardian. The teachers set a target score of 70% in every subject for every pupil.

In as much as the teachers tried to curb absenteeism due to funerals, they faced certain challenges. Sometimes the suspended pupils went for good as they transferred to other schools or dropped out. Some uncooperative parents did not turn up when called at school to discuss any issue about their children. Poverty made some pupils who lacked adequate food to absent from school in order to go and eat at a funeral. Sometimes the teachers were viewed as not feeling for or empathizing with the pupils especially when they advised them to attend school before the deceased was buried. The teachers were abused and nicknamed by members of that community, showing lack of support from the community. Some teachers, being Luos themselves, felt guilty when they told the pupils to attend school before the funeral was over because they were aware that there were some rituals that the pupils had to observe or participate in. The teachers therefore, shied away from making moves that could make the bereaved families feel that they were not part of the problem.

The teachers also stood a chance of losing their jobs when they caned pupils from high socio-economic classes hence fear of victimization made them to spare some pupils who attended funerals without permission. Ignorance of some parents on the importance of regular school attendance by their children

also posed a challenge to the teachers as the parents were unconcerned whether their children attended school or not. Some pupils in the boarding school became homesick when denied permission to attend a funeral or became very emotional and switched off from learning. Some sneaked out of school to attend a funeral when permission was denied. At times, permission could be granted but the pupil could stay at home indefinitely. Since pupils' relatives from all places attended the funeral, there was a lot of excitement from the pupils to meet their relatives whom they had stayed for long before meeting thus they failed to attend school even though there were restrictions. The rigid Luo bereavement customs were, therefore, a challenge since relevant rituals had to be performed and rules obeyed.

#### **The number of days each pupil failed to attend school during funerals**

Some respondents had not experienced losses. Some had losses before they reached school going ages. Some had losses during school holidays. Some had losses during school going days. For respondents who had losses during school going days, the results presented on table 4.3 show the frequency and average number of days each respondent absented from school during different funerals.

**Table 1.3: Number of days respondents missed school during funerals**

Variables	Freq	%	Total number of days	Mean number of days	Standard deviations
Mothers' funerals	19	7.9	144	8	1.6
Fathers' funerals	27	11.3	139	5	1.9
Siblings' funerals	17	7.1	69	4	1.4
Friends' funerals	9	3.8	22	2	1.6
Neighbours' funerals	16	6.7	39	2	1.6
No response	152	63.3	0	0	0
Total	240	100		22	8.1

Respondents absented from school for an average of 8 days when mothers died, 5 days for fathers, 4 days for siblings, 2 days for friends, and 2 days for neighbours. Shino (1997) found that among the Luo, the deceased's children could be confined for a period of about one month. In this study, the 8 days taken during mothers' funerals and 5 days for fathers' funerals for instance excluded weekends as only the days the respondents missed school were considered. The standard deviations indicated that there were no fixed numbers of days taken during a given funeral.

The number of days each pupil took during a particular funeral was determined by the pupil's relationship with the deceased. Some bereaved pupils stayed at home from the day the deceased's death was announced because they were busy helping relatives to do some work in preparation for the burial day when there were many mourners to be served a meal. On days when the bodies of the deceased were being brought home from mortuaries, members of the family, friends, relatives and neighbours were at the deceased's home. That made the pupils to be absent for 2 days when a neighbour died for they had to be at home on that day and on the burial day. A pupil who experienced multiple deaths in a close succession, for example, a pupil who lost both parents, a sibling, a friend and a neighbour within a term, absented from school for an average of 22 days. The bereaved pupil who experienced multiple deaths in a close succession absented from school for half a term. That made the pupil to lose a lot of content taught when the pupil was away as several topics in different subjects were covered by those pupils who had good school attendance.

## **4. Conclusion**

The Luo bereavement customs and traditions influenced school attendance of pupils by making them to absent from school during school-going days. Both male and female bereaved pupils absented because they had roles to play during funerals.

## 5. Recommendations

Pupils who have missed schools should be assisted by being made to do exercises missed in order to catch up with missed work.

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