

The Materialism and Pornography of Death! Questioning the Conformity and Conflict in the Funeral and Burial Practices in Zimbabwe with Particular Reference to Mutare Urban 2007-2011

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Abstract

Death is a constant fact of life and in most societies, a great deal of attention is paid to preparation for death, ceremonies surrounding death, memorials commemorating death and speculation as to what happens to a person after death. Death is marked by a funeral. The study argues that funerals are neither new nor indicative of people whose moral fibre has decayed. Instead, the study shows how mortuary archaeology and related funeral and burial practices, have remained pillars upon which the socio-economic and cultural changes of a community or local area have been communicated over time. This study draws upon historical analogies to refute the celebrated claim that contemporary funerals and burial practices have ceased to be occasions for somber dignity and respect for the dead. The study maintains that the good and bad that people lived, lives after them, and funeral and burial practices are the theatre of action.

Keywords: Death, emotions, funeral rites, dignity, respect, cemeteries, mortuary archaeology

Introduction

Archaeologists would agree that when they excavate burials, they are not only exposing the remains of individuals but material remains of burials which provide information about the structure of the societies whose members they contain. Attention has been focused on burials as reliable indicators of social ranking in prehistoric societies. This has risen from the assumption that within the same society, emotions provoked by death vary in intensity according to the social character of the deceased. Ethnographic observations make it clear that emotional responses to the death of a king or chief will differ from those of the death of an ordinary man, woman or infant. If emotions vary according to status, then, it may be expected that this be expressed in different ways. To understand the funerary patterns and traditions of a culture would require a culturally specific viewpoint that assesses the material, economic and historic context, as well as

knowledge of how the practices of that culture have changed through time. In a bid to create generalizations about funerary traditions, this study drew varied practices which tended to confirm that material and economic life has always had a greater effect on burials than emotion. The fulcrum of this study was to show that while some funeral rites might have already been dropped entirely, their traces were indeed resurfacing. The trend became most prevalent in Zimbabwe's Mutare city suburbs where at the height of the Chiadzwa diamond rush claims were made that funerals had turned into re-enactments of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. People complained over the level of immorality associated with funerals to such an extent that the police ended up arresting some mourners for public indecency. It is against this background that this study has attempted to show that social practices of disposing of the dead are of a kind with fashions of dress, luxury and etiquette. While burials provide the most consistent opportunity to understand adornment practices and attendant objects in contexts that are specific to individuals, the study revealed how cemeteries (which are the earthly physical destinations of the dead), provide an enormous amount of concrete and credible data that can shed light on the socio-economic status of a community or local area.

Conceptualizing death

Magesa (1997:156) considers death as the beginning of an individual's deeper mystical relationship with the whole universe. For Hertz (1960:197, 203), "death was more than a biological end point, but a complex mass of beliefs, emotions and activities", adding that it (death) is "not a mere destruction but a transition...which is not completed in one instantaneous act". In African traditional religion, death is perceived as a change of status, where an individual enters into a new and deeper relationship with the clan, ethnic group and family and continues to exist after death. The deceased is remembered by relatives and friends who knew him/her and who have survived him/her. They call him/her by name; they remember his/her personality, character, words and incidents in life. In some cases, the deceased's name can be given to any newly born baby, to try to keep the name, memories and acts alive (Mbiti 1969:25). The ability by the dead to bring disaster to the living is an outright signal that the dead are 'living'. The deceased ancestors are believed to play a critical and active role in the lives of those on earth and in the ongoing life of the community. This explains why they have been referred to as the 'living dead' Mbiti (1969:25). The pouring of libations (beer, milk and water) to the dead are actions and symbols of communion, fellowship and remembrance.

Since the dead do not bury themselves, it is important to study not just the deceased, but also the bereaved. By taking a perspective that focuses on the agents

behind the burial, we can begin to have a better understanding of how the living perceived the dead. Equally so, a cemetery, being a community of the dead, created, maintained and preserved by the living should reflect the local historical flow of attitudes about the community. At least, a cemetery should have some hints for us about acceptable implications of life and death, intensity of status differentiation and relative values of kin and other social interactive relationships.

There are varied elements of standardized funeral rites whereby the family gives public notification of death by wailing, pasting up banners, tagging pieces of red cloth around the homestead and other acts. The family members would also don mourning attire; make food offerings and transfer various goods to the dead by burning or placing in the grave; pay money to ritual specialists so that the corpse can be safely expelled from the community (and the spirit sent forth on its otherworldly journey); arrange for music to accompany movement of the corpse and to settle the spirit and finally expel the coffin from the community in a procession to the gravesite that marks the completion of the funeral rites and sets the stage for burial (Aschwanden 1987, 1989).

The stages of burial, including the primary location of the body, as well as movement of the body throughout the process of the funeral, until its final burial necessitates that we view the deceased body not as a biological entity made up of the disarticulated bones in the barrow, but rather as an ancestral presence. Knowing this process has become extremely important in interpreting mortuary archaeology sites. As Hertz (1960:207) observed, 'death is a complicated socio-cultural and biological process, and the form that it takes has ideological implications for the deceased and surviving individuals'. In studying the process that occurs from death to burial, and how the living behave, Magesa (1997:157) advises that we should not forget that death is the loss of a social being grafted upon the physical individual and to whom the collective consciousness attributed different values, identities and importance. Therefore, the interpretation of a burial invites not only an understanding of the local customs but also the departures of reality from the ideal. It is not a question of forcing one's own religious or mortuary beliefs onto the people.

The historicity of materialism in funeral and burial practices

As noted earlier, attention was focused on burials as reliable indicators of social ranking in prehistoric societies. Fagan (1985:474) noted, 'the greater and more secure a ruler's authority becomes, the more effort and wealth is expended on burial'. Following the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, with the establishment of the First Dynasty (3000 B.C), significant changes in tomb construction became

apparent as people of higher social status were buried in monumental structures or facilities manifesting greater energy and expenditure. Another expected indicator was the accompanying grave goods. On the basis of grave goods archaeologists can draw a distinction between people of high status and those of low status. The archaeological assumption was that where a burial was discovered accompanied by valuable goods, then the grave belonged to a high status individual. Conversely, burials accompanied by poor goods reflected low status individuals. The assumption also applied when observing goods accompanying an infant. If status was acquired at birth rather than different stages in life, goods would also vary. Hilda Kuper (1963) made this observation among the Swazis. One can therefore argue that there is a direct correlation between rich grave goods and high status then poor grave goods and low status. In the archaeological context, the above assumption was confirmed by studies carried out in the Gerzean cemetery of Upper Egypt, where a late prehistoric brick-lined tomb was decorated with coloured drawings, plastered with mud and covered with a coating of yellow ochre. On it, hunting scenes, combats, and ships were painted in red, black and white, with the designs resembling those on the pottery of the period found in the tomb, together with a flint lance and a small limestone vase. According to James (1957:37), although there were no traces of the body, it (the body) could hardly have been other than that of a chief in view of the proportions and decorations of the sepulchre.

From uniform burials, archaeologists have been able to deduce the presence of egalitarian societies. In East Africa uniform burials have been seen as indicators of a classless society and this has been used as a basis for reinforcing ideologies like socialism. Burials are also informative on past religious beliefs. The idea that death may not be the end of all things has been evident in Egypt. At the Badari graves in Egypt, bodies were found adorned with ornaments and clothed. Some graves had glazed beads while others had cooking pots and food bowls, either empty or containing grain (James 1957:35). It also used to be a common practice among the Shona to equip their dead with worldly goods like dishes, plates and stools and at times offerings of food bought by relatives and friends to comfort and satisfy the departed spirit (Ashwanden 1987). Thus, the prehistoric belief that the dead lived in or at the tomb which must be adequately equipped as an 'everlasting habitation' is most impressively expressed by the goods like dishes, pots, plates and food bowls. Grave goods also provide clues on the dead person's occupation. At Kalembe in eastern Zambia, Phillipson (1985:72) observed that grave goods in the form of tools, items of adornment or other personal belongings were present, indicating that the dead had some use for such objects.

In some social systems, mode of death and a person's behaviour before death were determined by the manner in which the individual was buried. Phillipson

(1985:126) noted that royal burials such as those of Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamen absorbed the energies of thousands of people in their preparation because they were for the Pharaohs. These tombs reflected the great wealth and concentration of human and material resources at the pharaoh's disposal. As already alluded to there is correlation between status in life and death. Among the Zulus, while respectable people were buried at home, anybody dying of chronic chest disease, even though himself a kraal head was never buried at home but was conveyed away and buried near some distant stream so that his chest-complaint might go off with the water (Bryant 1949). Among the Nika in Kenya, the criminals and friendless people were simply thrown away in the woods. Should a small child die, the body would be buried near a stream or in a wet place to wash away the ill-luck. A sky-doctor (rain or lightning specialist) had the unique honour of being interred with his right index-finger poking out above the surface of the ground (Bryant 1949:716). According to Leca (1981:71), bodies which showed evidence of hanging and in some cases, the marks of a cut made by some weapon were not mummified as would have been customary at that time, but they were crudely wrapped in poor quality cloth. Bringing together the unusual manner of burial on the one hand and the prevention of mummification on the other, one is bound to conclude that these people had breached a normal relationship in society and were therefore accorded an unusual burial (Talia Shay, 1985:234). Among the Shona, an adult male who died unmarried was usually buried with a rat tied around his waist even though at present no study has confirmed that.

Research Methodology

The research is a product of a total of eight keenly observed funerals largely involving some middle-aged (35-50 years) men located in the two suburbs of Sakubva and Dangamvura. A study sample comprising informants representing, men, women and youths from within the bereaved community was selected. Purposive or convenience sampling was used in order to identify relatives and friends of the dead. Potential informants, among whom were professional mourners, were identified through their distinctive roles in the entire funeral processes. Data collection took place in a series of in-depth interviews and group interrogations of clubs of *gwejas* (illegal diamond dealers) like the Vahombe Crew and Ngoda Boys largely involved in coordinating funeral activities. These ensured rigour necessary to establish a qualitative measure that would validate and capture the personal, contextual and holistic nature of informants' experiences and perceptions on funeral and burial practices. The services of research assistants in the form of free-lance journalists were sought with the aim of eliciting deeper reflections and further elaboration of views offered during some funerals in the suburbs under study. The research assistants were tasked to identify pertinent background information related to the dead person's standing within the given community. Interpreting and

deconstructing the funeral texts (eulogies and songs) were found to be largely a qualitative activity. This study, being a reflection of a multicultural social constructionist view of developments at funerals, acknowledges that opinions and attitudes that constituted the social processes are argumentative, subjective and in some cases contradictory.

Setting

Mutare was established by the Pioneer Column, a group of white British settlers from South Africa, in 1890. Mutare's residential areas can be divided into three broad categories based on socio-economic stratification. These are high, medium and low-density suburbs. Most low income people live in high density suburbs, which are dominated by small, crowded houses. The high density suburbs used in this research are Sakubva and Dangamvura. The period under study covered years during which Zimbabwe experienced both a serious economic meltdown and an economic resurgence following the signing of the global political agreement (GPA). The diamond rush in Chiadzwa, Marange during the same period sent tremors in the city of Mutare, particularly in these two suburbs. Hordes of commercial sex workers descended upon the suburbs. People whose lives were dramatic turns from rags to riches were easy to spot. While change represented a time of turmoil and social disruption, it also provided the opportunity for people's economic self-determination. Weekend garden parties, street car racing, hiring of bodyguards, sumptuous weddings and lavish funerals became as much a mark of status as the ownership of BMW or Mercedes Benz cars became rife. Conspicuous consumption came to define changing lifestyles.

Funeral and burial practices: The Mutare experience

As already noted, attitudes towards death (*rufu*) differ from one group to another. As a result, the dead are treated in different ways by different cultural groups in different geographical settings. The expectation is that similar cultures will exhibit similar ways of treating their dead. Thus, burials are useful in separating different cultural groups. Along this line of reasoning, burials are seen potentially informative on culture change and different cultural beliefs. While variations in type of burial associated with a single people help to establish the divergence of belief and custom, a change in burial pattern within the same cultural group may also indicate culture change either as a result of diffusion, migration or internal change.

In Mutare, Zimbabwe's eastern border town, funerals were characterized by pomp and fanfare specifically during the period under study. As Mtisi (2011:pw11) puts it, 'they (funerals) were dominated in terms of attendance, by showy actors and

actresses who came to display one or more of their clothes and fashion tastes, their money, their beautiful cars, their 'compassion' and 'generosity'. The funerals of diamond dealers, who became very rich during the Chiadzwa diamond rush from 2007, on different occasions brought the city to a standstill with more than 100 cars taking part in a single funeral procession. All vehicle types from the slickest sports cars of the Lamborghini prototype to the Sport Utility Vehicles (SUV) in the class of the Range Rover sport, Discovery 4 and Land Cruisers would grace the funeral. The mourners would make a long procession, visiting all the places which the deceased frequented. They would dance around, skidding vehicles as if they were re-living the deceased's daily experiences. The body in a casket worth \$3 000 would finally be taken to the cemetery (Weekender Reporters 'Bling, Bling at Dealers Funeral' *Manica Post*, 19-25 August 2011:p.W3).

Funerals in Mutare urban were made more memorable. A funeral industry had evolved to satisfy the demands of families that wanted to organize a grand funeral. One aspect which was particularly significant in this context was the filming of the event. Videos that recorded the attendants and repeatedly zoomed in on the dead person's body lying in state contributed to the person's life after death. The above referred points on funerals in some respect tended to serve the glory of the (living) family more than the honour and memory of the deceased.

Arguably, with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, funerals were no longer the mysterious and somber events of the previous years. However, as an exception the researcher observed that even children attended and openly discussed funerals with the same awe as they attended and openly discussed weddings. While a lot changed about society's conception of death and funerals, what appeared not to have changed was the role of men and women at funerals. Most women mourned and wailed, each according to their style and inclination. Some, especially the close relatives, became inconsolable and just like in the days gone by; they would roll themselves in dirt, take off their head gear in public and display their grief for all to see. Men, on the other hand did not mourn (Mtisi 2011). Women gathered at funerals to comfort and assist the family of the departed. This they did by ensuring that female members of the immediate family were relieved of daily domestic chores and had enough time to grieve and deal with the death of their beloved. Hlahla (2011) observed that women attending a funeral organized themselves into groups according to religion or relationship and took turns at cooking and feeding the bereaved family and the visitors. Women also sang and danced throughout the night or nights between death and burial. The funerals of diamond dealers in Mutare

attracted strange women, most of them spotting dark glasses, miniskirts and heavy make-up. These women would be more of beauty contestants who neither came to weep and mourn in characteristic loud discordant wails nor throw themselves in the dirt (*Manica Post* 19-15 August 2011). They were cool mourners conscious of the indignity of loud cries. These were civilized mourners especially young fashionable dudes or city-slickers. They would take a few photos of the cars, casket or coffin with their state of the art cell phones. This they did, possibly to update those who may not have made it to the funeral. Scriptures were read and explained during these all night vigils according to religion and faith. Men did not sing and dance throughout the night. If the funeral was of a relatively wealthy person, men would be roaring drunk by supper time and immediately thereafter find warm corners to sleep off the alcohol. If the beer was not free-flowing at the funeral, they would disappear or melt into the dark, find their way to their favourite drinking holes, only to be seen the following morning.

Different versions of the deceased's life were given during the funeral. Diamond panners and dealers engaged in mock drills, exhibiting how the deceased would acquire the precious gems. Shovels and picks used by the illegal diamond panners were also brought to the funeral and in the majority of cases these were thrown into the grave to accompany the deceased. Ucko (1969) discusses the use of grave goods in different rituals, where they can serve as identifiers of social status, or be provisions in the afterlife. In contrast, he also notes that in some cultures the wealth of grave goods that are attributed to the individual may not be included in the actual grave, but rather destroyed during a ceremony or passed onto relatives. In Mutare, tycoons (large measure diamond dealers) were buried with their *zvombo zvebasa* or tools of their trade.

Mourners' dramaturgy

Mbuya Mwakaitireni (2010) conceded that culturally, closest friends and relatives especially *varamu* (sisters-in law) entertained crowds with impromptu renditions of funeral drama and music to depict the life style of the deceased. However, interesting observations were made in Mutare that the 'actors' were no longer relatives or *varamu*. Some strange people invaded the funerals. The invaders went through their dramatic performances with amazing graphic detail of how much the 'mourners' knew and remembered about the deceased. That as it may, we can hardly suppose that this joy and sorrow cry of modern Mutare urban dwellers is their own invention. There are traces of professional mourners in African societies. With reference to Ancient Egyptian women, Maspero (1892:139,240) says, 'the family hire mourners, whose trade is to

cry aloud, to tear their hair, to sing their lamentations, and conscientiously to portray the utmost despair'; while in Ancient Assyria, he says the same women 'rend their garments, scratch their cheeks and breasts, cover the head with dust and ashes, and utter loud howls of sorrow'. Such wailing was in common use in Egypt already in 2778 B.C., and no doubt long before. From the Bible, the Hebrews too derived their custom. Writes Jeremiah 9:17-21, "let them make haste and take up a wailing for us; for death is come up into our windows." Thus, we find the African and Mediterranean world joined up in one same cry of grief and joy, from Zululand to Italy, from Mesopotamia to the Sahara (Bryant 1949:727).

Hlahla(2005) observed that at the funeral of Mutare's soccer icon Blessing Makunike, some mourners brought to the funeral shields and medals, football kits, and even wore the number 10 jersey. These mourners mimicked the deceased's dribbling wizardry and fancy foot-works. Similarly, at the funeral of a musician, they would play the guitar, blow the saxophone and imitate the stage dance antics. For an academic, they would wear the graduation gown and cap of knowledge and also imitate the deceased's eloquence most preferably in the English language. At the funeral of a referee, they would bring along yellow and red cards, Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA) whistle, the booking note book and pen then officiate an imaginary cup final game in front of the mourners.

An increasingly growing feature was that the funerals of diamond dealers were graced by several girlfriends who would dance to the rhythm of drums or loud music played from the posh cars. At one funeral in Sakubva, Muponerei (a professional mourner), ordered his colleagues to stand in a circle, singing, drinking and dancing. Two ladies got into the middle of the circle and started dancing, rotating and shaking their hips and posteriors. Men later jumped into the ring and danced around their partners. They would do so with lurid songs and dirty bedroom lingo. Be it that these were professional mourners or the deceased's girlfriends, their actions, according to Mtisi (2011:W3) were 'found to be accurately consistent with the deceased's voracious appetite for women'. The fact that they would not hesitate to offend and annoy anyone present who had the barest of morals to protect was considered indicative of the deceased's life and that is what the mourners remembered the deceased for. Breaking all the rules of sanity at the funeral of their sexual client, the professional mourners congregated without underpants (Sister Melody 2010). They would come around the coffin, swaggering and swaying their bottoms. In Sister Melody's words, '...we would take turns to stand astride the coffin and make our sexually suggestive dances while colleagues sing our popular song *Zunza Mazakwatira* (Shake your bounty bottom)'. The professional mourners would publicly wave their colourful knickers and bikinis in the air and also use them to dust the casket (Sister Melody 2010). At one funeral in

Dangamvura suburb, the ladies stripped and simulated sexual acts in full view of the mourners (Hlahla 2011: W3). In one of the bizarre incidents, a couple had sexual intercourse right in the yard where other mourners were gathered (Hlahla 2011:W3; Chamwaita 2011). The obscenities continued to the cemetery where two men stripped and ran stark naked in front of the procession to Mutare's Yeovil graveyard. People later complained and seven of the mourners were nabbed by the police (Hlahla 2011:W3).

Professional mourners insulted, verbally abused and threatened relatives. The relatives especially from a poor background would not be given the platform to either mourn or perform the rites normally performed at funerals. Even ministers of religion would be subjected to abuse and embarrassment by the 'friends of the deceased' who would take it upon themselves to turn funerals into scenes from pornographic movies. A Pastor with a local Pentecostal church who had been invited to conduct the burial service for a believer's daughter described the dances as lascivious or obscene. He went further to label them Satanists who needed to be delivered from sin (Pastor Kamukamu 2011).

The funeral parade would visit all the beer halls in Dangamvura and Sakubva suburbs where the procession would briefly stop and give a performance. In some cases, coffins ended up cracking. Friends of the deceased revealed and further confirmed that some funeral attendants came to celebrate the deceased's flamboyance and crazy money-spending fever. This view explained why, in the deceased's own fashion during his lifetime, they spotted expensive Chinese suits, drove the latest models of luxury cars and splashed money around.

Conclusion

The study established that death and funerary ceremonies emphasize two characteristics of the death-event, namely the sending away and the amplification of earthly life. These remain important in studying religious affiliations, social organization, professions, way of death, age, sex and marital status to enhance our understanding of both prehistoric societies and contemporary practices. It has also been confirmed that historically, funerals were as elaborate as possible to show respect for the dead person and to emphasize the part one had played in the society. Eulogies were read, cataloguing all the real or fictitious virtues that the dead person had displayed. The study has also established that weeping is just an expression of the grief at the unwanted separation. The singing of obscene songs has always been a common practice. These songs do not only speak of the dead person's good and bad qualities, but also refer to one's former profession. Of importance however is that the atmosphere of one's funeral is a mirror image of a life once lived on the

earthy world. People would remember somebody for what he/she did, or did not do. Legacies are made by the dead, but epitaphs and obituaries by the living. A life lived determines whether people paid last respects or disrespects when candles of life burn out. Hence the good and bad that we live, lives after us.

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