

Karanga-Shona Funeral and Post-Funeral Rites in the COVID-19 Era: A Case Study of the VaDuma in Bikita, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the death of an individual is a communal loss. Normally relatives, friends, and loved ones will make all the necessary efforts to attend the funeral in order to express their condolences to the immediate family members and more importantly, to bid farewell to the departed loved one. They also make financial contributions to cover expenses for funeral rituals. Death automatically marks a transition into the ancestral realm, hence, the Shona strive to diligently observe several rituals surrounding the handling and disposal of the body. Handling the corpse, burial rituals, and logistics are a preserve for the blood relatives of the deceased. However, the emergence of COVID-19 has reconfigured the religio-cultural terrain and inevitably created new novel and innovative funeral procedures like virtual funeral attendance, video recording, and professional handling of the corpse and funeral event management. Even the most resilient religio-cultural and social aspects to do with funeral, burial, and post-burial procedures are seemingly giving in. Changing the way funeral rites are conducted has become imminent and inevitable. Drawing insights from the Karanga-Shona people in Zimbabwe, this chapter uncovers the COVID-19-compliant practices that arose in relation to funeral, burial, and post-burial practices. This study's main thrust is to address the scholarly gap in literature, which explores how indigenous communities are reconfiguring their funeral rituals in line with COVID-19 protocols. In undertaking a revelatory case study of the vaDuma from Bikita in Chief Ziki's chiefdom, we employed two-phased mixed methods sequential transformative strategy design and a variant model that is largely qualitative. Applying the social reconstruction theoretical framework, the study's findings reveal a reconfigured landscape of the vaDuma funeral and post-burial rites in the post-COVID-19 era. Our conclusion is that even after the COVID-19 pandemic, the funeral, burial, and post-burial rituals might possibly not revert to the pre-COVID-19 state. Based on our findings, we therefore recommend that apart from the COVID-19 responsive strategies to do with funeral, burial, and post-burial rituals in Chief Ziki's chiefdom, similar studies should be conducted to provide empirical evidence on other African indigenous communities in order to establish how the pandemic has impacted on long-held cultural norms and practices.