



*Lovemore Togarasei*

# 11 THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHRISTIAN HANDLING OF DEATH, BURIAL AND THE PROCESS OF GRIEVING: CASE STUDY FROM ZIMBABWE<sup>1</sup>

## *Abstract*

Every society has its own death related rituals. The advent of Christianity among the people of Zimbabwe saw certain changes in the way death-related rituals were practiced traditionally. The advent of COVID-19 beginning March 2020 saw the introduction of measures that seriously affected the practice of death-related rituals. This paper will investigate the impact of COVID-19 on Christians' handling of death, burial rituals and the whole process of grieving among the Shona people of Zimbabwe. This paper investigates the impact of COVID-19 on Christians' handling of death, burial rituals and the whole process of grieving among the Karanga people of southern Zimbabwe. The paper is based on an ethnographic study of one family that I studied closely from the time of the death of their beloved one up to about a year later during which time most of the death-related rituals would ordinarily have been undertaken. This data is complemented by findings from literature and other observations and informal discussions I had with various people during the time of study. Christians generally want to be informed by the Bible in their practice of their religion. The paper investigates how the Karanga Christians interpreted certain biblical texts in their own cultural context as they either violated or observed the COVID-19 protocols.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, death, rituals, grieving, Shona, Zimbabwe

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<sup>1</sup> While I am responsible for any shortcomings in this paper, I would like to acknowledge the input of my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at the Zimbabwe Open University and participants at the VAD 2022 conference held in Freiburg, Germany to whom the draft paper was first presented. Thank you for your comments that strengthened the paper.

## Introduction

The advent of COVID-19 beginning in March 2020 saw the introduction of measures that seriously affected different facets of life. Guided by the World Health Organisation (WHO), different governments introduced measures to stop the tide of the pandemic. The need for social (physical) distancing, the need to stay at home, prohibition of huge gatherings, the use of masks to cover the nose and mouth were some of the measures introduced. These measures affected the day to day lives of people in many different ways. Muyambo (2021) accuses governments of failing to contextualise these measures as they took them as ‘one size fits all’. Whilst studies are already coming up on the efficacy of the measures introduced by WHO (Muyambo 2021) and many other aspects of the Corona Virus (Sibanda, Muyambo and Chitando 2021; Makamani, Nhemachena and Mtapuri 2021), more academic work needs to be done. One such area that requires academic attention is that of death and death related rituals. Death, though a natural certainty, is never accepted or even understood among many, if not all, societies worldwide. Indeed, it is because it robs people of the beauty of life making all the toiling and labouring we undertake in life seem meaningless. For these reasons, death is feared and many beliefs are associated with its causes and meaning. Chitando (1999:10) describes the enigma of death thus, “Human beings everywhere are subject to the sting of death. This fact has troubled poets, confounded mystics and disturbed scientists.” Resultantly, several rituals are also associated with it to lighten the pain it causes, to try and give it meaning, to honour the dead, to ‘tame’ it, among many other reasons for conducting death related rituals. Indeed, every society has its own death related rituals (Gordon 2015). Focusing on the Karanga people of Nyajena in southern Zimbabwe, Chitakure (2021) identifies three groups of death related rituals: pre-burial, burial and post-burial rituals. The advent of Christianity among the people of Zimbabwe saw certain changes in the way death-related rituals were practiced traditionally. Indeed, in his study, Chitakure (2021) rightly observed that in Zimbabwe there are now two types of death-related rituals: traditional and Christian. However, whether traditional or Christian, death-related rituals are meant to help the bereaved with healing and different ways of handling grief (Mortazavi et al., 2021). The question at the centre of this paper is: To what extent and in what ways were death-related rituals affected by the COVID-19 measures introduced from 2020? Proceeding from the assumption that the COVID-19 mitigation measures had tremendous effects on people’s practice of

death-related rituals, this chapter investigates the impact of COVID-19 on Christians' handling of death, burial rituals and the whole process of grieving among the Shona people of southern Zimbabwe. The paper is guided by Van Gennep's (1966) theoretical view that death as one of a number of life cycle crises commands ritual observance as well as Smith's (1987) theory of ritual. Considering the number of Christian death-related rituals practiced by the Shona, how did the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic with its accompanying restrictions affect Shona Christians?

## **Methodology**

The chapter is based on an ethnographic study of one family that I studied closely from the time of the death of their beloved one in early 2021 up to about a year later during which time most of the death-related rituals would ordinarily have been undertaken. My research journey with the family started in February 2021 when I attended the funeral of their son as a close acquaintance of the family<sup>2</sup>. I visited the family three times during the time of study. It was largely a participant observation study with very few questions posed to the subjects of study. This is because research on death and funerals need to be conducted delicately considering the trauma experienced by the bereaved. Through participant observation, I therefore avoided continuously reminding them about their traumatic experience. The few questions I asked to establish their feelings were done on the basis of my relationship with them. It was only after a year of participant observation and informal interviews that I asked them if I could use their experience to write an academic paper. They consented on condition that I was not going to mention their names and the family name. I have also tried to present the findings in such a way that it is impossible for readers to be able to identify the family. This data is complemented by findings from literature and other observations and informal discussions I had with various people during the time of study. Christians generally want to be informed by the Bible in their practice of their religion. The paper, therefore, investigates how the Christians interpreted certain biblical texts as they either violated or came to terms with the dictates of COVID-19 protocols.

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<sup>2</sup> By family here, I am referring especially to the father and mother of the deceased.

To achieve the objectives of the chapter as stated above, the chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I give an outline of Christian death-related rituals as they have been practised before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second section, I present the findings of the study based on the ethnographic study. The third section then gives a general discussion of the impact of COVID-19 on death-related rituals highlighting biblical readings and theologies that arose as people dealt with COVID-19 in relation to death rituals. The last section closes the study.

## **Christian death-related rituals in the Church of Christ Zimbabwe**

Christianity is practiced differently among the Shona people of Zimbabwe depending on one's denomination. This is also true of the practice of death-related rituals. When it comes to death rituals, the situation becomes even more complicated as their practice is not only dependent on Christian denomination but also on the culture of the people as it remains influential despite one's Christian identity. The death-related rituals that I focus on in this chapter are, therefore, as practiced within the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe to which the family studied belonged. I also chose this church because, not only do I belong to it<sup>3</sup>, but at one time served as the pastor of the Harare congregation and, therefore, related with the death rituals very closely. I am, therefore, familiar with the death-related rituals making it easier for me to investigate how these practices were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While studies on death-related rituals among the Shona of Zimbabwe abound, they are generally limited to traditional practices like *kurova guva* (home bringing ceremony of the spirit of the recently dead) (Banana 1991, Cox 1995, Vambe 2009, Saidi 2017). Studies on Christian death-related rituals are limited with most of the publications on this subject focusing mainly on tombstone unveiling (Gundani 1999; Zwana 2000; Togarasei and Chitando 2003) and debates on cremation (Chitando 1999; Shoko 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> Fully aware of the inherent problems of subjectivity associated with the 'insider' research approach, I try as much as possible to be objective. I also make use of the views of other scholars to balance my personal views.

### ***At the point of death***

Death rituals can be traced from the time that relatives feel the illness of their relative is likely to lead to fatality. This is the case with terminal diseases and also the severity of the illness. From the time they realise that there are little chances of survival for their patient, relatives call upon the prayers of the pastor or other Christian leaders. The biblical text, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14), though referring to any kind of illness, is often remembered and implemented when the patient becomes critical. My own studies in Botswana (Togarasei, Mmolai and Kealotswe 2016), which are likely to present the same results in Zimbabwe, show that when Christians have mild illnesses, they seek the services of bio-medical practitioners while they seek spiritual and traditional healing and advice when the illness becomes complicated. Whilst the hope is the healing of the patient, the search for prayers at this point is also meant to spiritually and psychologically prepare for the departure of the loved one. In the event of the death of the patient, many other rituals follow. It is very difficult from this point to isolate those rituals that are Christian from those that are traditional and cultural. This is because, as Chitando (1999:15) correctly observed, "...it is upon the death of a member that one witnesses how indispensable and enduring is traditional culture. Close relatives oversee burial rites, with church officials usually playing a supportive, though subsidiary role." Even on occasions where the relatives are also Christians and give Christians the full rights to bury their member, it is still difficult to separate the two. This, in my opinion, underlines the undeniable influence of culture over one's practice of any religion. Be that as it may, I will attempt to limit my discussion to what is generally agreed to be Christian death rituals.

### ***At death***

Upon the declaration of the death of the patient, relatives play a key role engaging in some of the rituals that are limited to the family. These include the closing of the eyes of the dead and the preparation of the body to assume the right posture, the washing and the dressing of the body. I have observed that even in the case of those who die in hospital and are taken to the mortuary where some of these rituals are done by the undertakers, a relative has to be there or in some extreme cases, the rituals have

to be redone when the body reaches home. The Church of Christ does not teach against these practices and so relatives are free to perform the rituals.

### ***Masofa panze: pre-burial prayer meetings***

As soon as news of death is announced, it is tradition that people gather at the home of the deceased, a system that has been described by the Shona as *masofa panze*, as couches have to be taken out to create room for more people in the seating room. The practice of *masofa panze* is prevalent in urban areas while in rural areas the gathering is in the kitchen.<sup>4</sup> This is where the body of the deceased has to lie in state for at least one night. However, even before the body arrives, fellow Christians, relatives and friends meet here daily until the dead is buried. In cases where the body was at the funeral parlour, a prayer service is conducted there before the body is taken to lie in state. It is believed that there must always be mourners with the bereaved family until burial. In view of escalating costs of catering for the mourners, in some cases, this process is now open only to close relatives and friends, while the rest of the mourners come during prayer times that are conducted daily for a specified time<sup>5</sup> until the day of burial. Fellow Christians play a key role during this period. Not only do they visit the family for prayers, they also conduct the ‘prayers’ that involve singing and preaching. Common Bible texts read during the prayers are 1 Thessalonians 4:1-13, 1 Corinthians 15, Revelation 14, all of which are meant to assure the bereaved family that the dead is not gone forever but is ‘asleep’ waiting for the day of resurrection. In fact, according to the Church of Christ pastor’s manual, *The Church of Christ Book of Service*, all the church’s death-related rituals are done in fulfilment of Romans’ (12:15) command that Christians should ‘mourn with those who mourn’. Christians are not only involved in worship but help with all other funeral logistics including making financial contributions through a system called *chema* in the vernacular.

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<sup>4</sup> This is often a rondavel, which is used as a combined kitchen, dining room and lounge.

<sup>5</sup> The time varies depending on family logistics. In Zimbabwe today, where a number of families have family members in diaspora, they have to give them enough time to travel. Nevertheless, this period rarely goes beyond a week.

## **Burial**

Following the prayer rituals which we can describe as the pre-burial ritual, comes the burial ritual<sup>6</sup>. This ritual begins where the body lay in state before the day of burial. The *Church of Christ Book of Service* gives the following outline of the ritual:

### **Appendix B: Funeral programme**

1. Before leaving home/funeral parlour, pastor or his representative to pray for God to lead the whole process.
2. At the grave site, pray thanking God for the guidance. Give sermon on God's plan concerning human life from birth to death, the meaning of death and such other fitting topics.
3. After the sermon, pray before the coffin is lowered down and then ask those responsible to lower it down.
4. Some families want to participate in burial by throwing some soil into the grave, this can be allowed before the grave is completely covered.
5. After the covering of the grave, make a prayer thanking God for the guidance.
6. Ask the Master of Ceremonies to dissolve the gathering.
7. Christians should continue helping after burial in activities like feeding the mourners and such other tasks.

As outlined above, the ritual may start at home or at the funeral parlour. It is important to note that in some instances, the funeral process proceeds from home to the church and then to the burial site. There are many other rituals not mentioned in the above programme that vary from family to family. As long as they do not contradict the church's theology, the church leadership does not interfere. One example is the carrying of the casket to the grave. In some cases, especially where the graveyard is close to the homestead as is the case in many rural areas, the journey to the final resting place has many stations. Friends and family are responsible for carrying the casket from one station to the other. The process can be dramatic as the *sahwira* (close friend) and the *varoora* (daughters-in-law) perform various hilarious acts that are meant to, in the words of the legendary Zimbabwean musician, Oliver Mutukudzi, "*kurerusa ndima*" (to lighten the moment). Another ritual not mentioned in the book of service,

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<sup>6</sup> Although I speak of it in singular terms, there are actually many rituals involved.

but that is practiced at all funerals, is the giving of eulogies. Various relatives of the deceased are given time to say something as they bid farewell to the deceased. It is another light moment as speakers reminisce the late highlighting moments in their life: their achievements, memorable events, their last words, wishes, and so on. Often, the deceased is addressed as if s/he is alive underlining the fact that s/he is still with the living.

### **Post burial**

The church teaches the importance of journeying with the bereaved family during their time of grief. The church leadership and the whole congregation are urged to visit and encourage the family. Besides this, two other rituals are very important for the bereaved family. These are *nyaradzo* (memorial service) and tombstone unveiling. The Church of Christ endeavours to support all its teachings and practices with biblical texts. Therefore, concerning *nyaradzo* the book of service highlights, "This is a service that we do not have a teaching of in the Bible" (*Church of Christ Book of Service*, 2006:5). The church, however, observes this practice. The timing of *nyaradzo* varies from one family to the other. When the practice began among Christians, it was held a year after the burial of the deceased and therefore coincided with the practice of *kurova guva*. For this reason, some Christians are still not comfortable with *nyaradzo* as a Christian ritual. In fact, the *Church of Christ Book of Service* (2006:5) cautions the pastor, "The pastor must make sure that traditional rites of *kurova guva* are not disguised as memorial service. When that happens, the church must not be part of this process."

In the Church of Christ, *nyaradzo* is conducted over a period of two to three days. People gather either on Friday or Saturday evening and conduct prayer services until after the Sunday service. The gathering is characterised by singing, teaching and preaching centred around the theme of death and resurrection. The whole idea, "...is to encourage the family of the deceased to keep the faith reminding them that the deceased has completed his journey, is awaiting the resurrection and the task is now upon them to also successfully run the Christian race" (*Church of Christ Book of Service*, 2006:5). *Nyaradzo* has become such a key post-burial ritual, not only in the Church of Christ, but also in other Christian churches that those who would not have conducted it, feel that the mourning process is still incomplete.



Beginning in the early 1990s, a new death related Christian ritual was added in the form of tombstone unveiling. Togarasei and Chitando (2005) give an elaborate discussion of this ritual. In short, this is a ritual in which the deceased family unveils to the invited, the tombstone they would have erected for their late relative. Some Christian families combine it with *nyaradzo* but due to the cost of the tombstone, others hold it a long period after burial giving themselves enough time to put together resources for the tombstone. The tombstone unveiling ritual is conducted almost in the same way that *nyaradzo* is conducted serve for the fact that the participants will view the tombstone and prayers are made at the grave site to thank God and to ask God to allow the spirit of the deceased to continue resting in peace.

Although some families will occasionally<sup>7</sup> continue to visit the graveyard to put flowers on the grave of their relative and clean the area, *nyaradzo* and/or tombstone unveiling officially mark the end of the mourning period. It can, therefore, be concluded that the mourning period for a typical family is one year. It is also after one year that the widow or widower in the case of the deceased having been married, are free to begin other love relationships. With this in mind, let us now look at how the family studied for the purposes of this project handled the death related rituals in the context of COVID-19.

## **Study findings: how a family dealt with death and related rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic**

My research journey with the family started in February 2021 when I attended the funeral of their son as a close acquaintance of the family. As I state below, the deceased was a married young man and sadly, the wife and two young children were not there at the time of death. The son fell ill two days before he died while on extended holiday caused by COVID-19 lockdown. He had visited his parents from one of the neighbouring countries where he was a migrant worker. He just woke up one morning with a terrible headache and they rushed him to the nearest clinic that referred him to the provincial hospital. This was at the height of the second wave

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<sup>7</sup> Some families will do this annually on the death anniversary of their beloved.

of the Corona Virus in Zimbabwe<sup>8</sup>. On arrival at the hospital, he was isolated even before he was tested for the virus.<sup>9</sup> That was the last time the family had contact with him. The next they would hear from the hospital, two days later, it was to inform them of his death. They received the body from the hospital tightly wrapped and with the instruction that they were not supposed to open it. Two family members were given instructions on how the funeral process was to proceed and that only a few people were to have contact with the casket. The family was to organise their own transport from the provincial hospital to their village, some 80 km distance. The instruction from the hospital was that the body was supposed to be buried on arrival. There was no disclosure on the cause of death as the few doctors at the hospital were said to be busy.<sup>10</sup> With a lot of unanswered questions on the cause of death, some family members insisted on autopsy. Attempts to have autopsy were, however, unsuccessful as personnel responsible for this were said to be unavailable. Eventually, the family agreed to take the body for burial with their many unanswered questions. To this point, ordinarily several rituals would have taken place. First, the local pastor would have been called to pray for the young man while he was in hospital. Unfortunately, when the pastor tried to visit together with some family members, a day after the young man was admitted in hospital, they were denied access as they were told that the young man was in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and COVID-19 protocols did not allow visitors. Second, prayers would have been conducted at the hospital parlour on collection of the body. Again, COVID-19 protocols did not allow such rituals.

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<sup>8</sup> About a week earlier, the government had banned traditional funerals and the movement of bodies across towns and villages for burial. Police Spokesperson, Paul Nyathi, had advised the public, “Police will only clear body movements for burial straight from a funeral parlour/hospital mortuary to the burial site” (Mutsaka 2021).

<sup>9</sup> At the height of COVID-19, all patients entering hospitals were suspected to have the virus. While protocol dictated that they be tested, it did not happen in all cases due to various reasons such as understaffing.

<sup>10</sup> Due to the prevailing economic challenges in Zimbabwe, public health is failing to deliver quality health care. Health procedures are often not followed due to understaffing and the frustrations of the few health workers due to being overworked and poorly remunerated. Sophia Chirongoma captures the situation perfectly when she says (as cited by Ponde Mutsvedu and Chirongoma (2021:107), “...strained health care facilities are often staffed by very few medical professionals who were already sighing under the heavy yoke of long working hours, coupled with very poor remuneration, long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic.”

On arrival home, though the grave had been dug according to the instruction from the hospital officials, the family elders denied that the body be buried on the same day. Although the reason advanced was that it was already too late (around 8pm), others also felt that they needed to observe the culture to allow the body to lie in state at the family home before burial. There were, of course, serious arguments with each decision to be made as family members were not in agreement. Those who interpreted the tight wrapping of the body and the whole process the late was handled from admission to release of the body, to mean that he had died of COVID-19, wanted to follow the burial protocols the hospital authorities had instructed. Others who supported immediate burial also used the cultural argument saying the grave had been dug and it was uncultural not to bury on the day the grave was dug. Eventually, the argument to have the body lie in state for the night was upheld and to handle the dug grave issue, it was agreed that some people were to spend the night there taking guard of it.

Although, gathering was prohibited, on hearing news of the death, relatives and neighbours from nearby gathered and several who exceed the government limit, attended the funeral. I observed that social distancing, masking and other COVID-19 protocols were not observed. However, relatives from distant places and from the diaspora, including some brothers and sisters of the deceased could not attend the funeral due to the imposed travel restrictions. Quite painful was the absence of the wife and children whom the late had left outside the country where the couple was residing.

As mentioned above, despite restrictions on gathering, several people gathered over night and the following morning for the burial. Although the family pastor was absent during the night, preaching and singing proceeded. Self-appointed teachers preached and taught the Word of God. The pastor would arrive the following morning. He attempted to speed up the burial process by avoiding certain rituals such as body viewing and elaborate pre-burial sermons and eulogies. However, this created problems as some family members resisted this. It was almost dramatic at the grave site when the deceased's senior uncle declared that his nephew would not be buried before body viewing. All arguments on the need to observe the instructions of the hospital authorities came to nothing as he and other relatives insisted on body viewing or they would walk away before the burial process was over. Eventually, the casket had to be opened by those who were putting on some protective clothing and a few people viewed the body before it was buried. Contrary to COVID-19 protocols,

food was also served after the burial. I noticed that there were extra hygienic practices<sup>11</sup> compared to usual practice but still the protocols were not observed.

Of course, being at the height of the second wave of COVID-19, the mourners engaged in debates on the reality of the pandemic. I listened to the debates by the fireplace where the mourners were gathered the night before burial. With the majority of the mourners being Christians who fellowshiped with the family, the Bible prominently featured in the discussions. The sceptics argued that since God is in control, they were not to be afraid of the pandemic as one dies according to God's plan. They made reference to texts like Ecclesiastes 3:2, "there is a time to be born and a time to die..." and Job 14:15, "...thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass." These were interpreted to mean that whether there is COVID-19 or not, when the bounds set by God come, one dies. Those who took COVID-19 seriously also found support from biblical texts that mention days when people will experience pandemics, "...and there will be famines, pestilences and earthquakes..." (Matthew 24:6-8).<sup>12</sup>

Since church gatherings were not allowed in Zimbabwe for the greater part of 2021, the church did not organise *nyaradzo* for the family, let alone the fact that almost everyone left soon after the burial. Discussing their experiences with me, the family also noted that after burial, few church members visited to console them. The same also applied to their relatives most of whom could not visit due to travel restrictions. The wife of the late only managed to come to pay her condolences a month later. This means the parents of the deceased had to mourn their son without the usual support of relatives and friends.

The sudden nature of the death, especially after the young man had just visited home from the diaspora where he was employed, meant that some family members would suspect witchcraft.<sup>13</sup> The lack of declaration

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<sup>11</sup> For example, everyone had to wash their hands with soap and running water and each person was given their own plate of food contrary to the practice of a having a number of people sharing food from the same plate.

<sup>12</sup> There were various readings of the Bible that emerged during COVID-19. Fortune Sibanda, Tenson Muyambo and Ezra Chitando (2021) note the use of the Bible for security and individual/communal salvation (Numbers 31:49), for encouraging prayer and fasting (Ezra 8:21-23) and also to explain the death of political leaders as divine judgment (Proverbs 11:10). Sonene Nyawo (2021) on the other, noted the reading of the Bible that concluded that COVID-19 was God's punishment of errant humanity.

<sup>13</sup> Witchcraft beliefs are quite common in Zimbabwe. The successful in life are often thought of as targets of witchcraft by, especially, jealousy relatives.

of the cause of death and the failure to have autopsy conducted divided the family between those who suspected witchcraft and others who suspected COVID-19. While relatives departed after burial, the family remained with these questions with no one to direct them to. The grieving was, therefore, not only caused by loss of their son, husband and father, but also unanswered questions and lack of the usual social support due to COVID-19 restrictions.

## **Discussion: the impact of COVID-19 on Christian handling of death, burial and the process of grieving**

Our case study clearly demonstrates the effects of COVID-19 on death-related rituals. The family could not undertake the traditional death rituals from the time death threatened to post burial. Psychology has long established the emotional value of death related rituals in the process of grieving (De Oliveira Cardoso et al. 2020). As theoretically argued by Van Gennep (1966), death as one of a number of life cycle crises, commands ritual observance. Grieving is an important process that should follow loss if one is to heal and attain closure. Psycho-social support is necessary in helping the grieving process. As stated above, all societies have rituals that accompany the grieving process and for healing to be successful, the rituals should be followed. Although derived from ordinary human actions (Smith 1987), “rituals are symbolic actions, repetitive, standardized, and highly valued behaviors that help individuals to channel emotions, and share beliefs and transmit values” (Mikles 2022). The family could not visit their son when he was at the point of death. They could not get the support of the pastor, who ordinarily would have accompanied them to visit and pray over the patient. This process could have prepared the bereaved family to accept the eventuality. There was also no time for ‘prayers’, a ritual that allows family and friends to accompany, comfort and console the bereaved in preparation for burial. As outlined above, from the time of the announcement of death, ordinarily Christians would have started gathering at the home of the diseased to offer them psychological and social support. The funeral was rushed and gave little opportunity for this ritual even against the COVID-19 protocols. Although the family observed the ritual of having the body lie in state before burial, it was in violation of COVID-19 protocols and caused dissensions among family members who ordinarily should stand together during this time.

Due to COVID-19, the normal body viewing ritual was not conducted. It was only conducted in an unusual manner due to the protest of the uncle. Again, instead of the ritual serving as the last ‘goodbye’, it caused disagreements among family members almost making burial profane. Among the Shona, burial is a sacred ritual to be done when the family is in perfect harmony. The belief is that each and every individual should be given a peaceful and decent send off, thus the Shona saying, “*wafa wanaka*”, which implies that the dead should not even be held accountable for whatever wrong they may have done in life. Ordinarily then, burial is also a time to celebrate the life of the deceased. As described above, the *sahwira*, would have entertained the mourners, reminiscing the life of the deceased with *varoora* also doing their part to lighten the moment. The church would have led in singing the favourite songs of the deceased, reading his favourite scriptures and pastors and teachers reassuring the deceased relatives and friends that the dead has transitioned into another life. Friends and relatives would have given their eulogies and reminded people of the late’s naughty moments, memorable days and other stories of his life. This could not be done at this funeral held under COVID-19 protocols. The pastor, in obedience to the government gazetted guidelines on conducting funerals, rushed the whole process. The pastor was even absent from the prayers conducted the night before the burial as he was aware that it was illegal to do so. Thus, instead of the celebration of the life of the deceased, there were disagreements among family members even among fellow Christians. As we have seen above, while some family members wanted to observe the COVID-19 protocols, others wanted to respect the death rituals and while some Christians quoted biblical texts to support the observation of COVID-19 protocols, others cited those texts that trivialised COVID-19 declaring that it is God who gives and takes away life not observing COVID-19 protocols.

The worst effect of COVID-19 for the family studied was the church’s failure to provide post- burial support, especially failing to conduct the *nyaradzo* ritual. The sudden nature of the loss and the fact that this was a young man in the prime time of his life, left the family with many questions that needed spiritual, psychological and social support. With some family members citing witchcraft as the cause of death, one can only imagine the trauma felt by the immediate family. The Church of Christ does not encourage witchcraft beliefs. Although this is true for the official teaching of the church, it is not so in practice. As Banana (1991:27) correctly observes about the people of Zimbabwe, “The pain of parting with

their loved ones in the physical form leads them to speculate upon the causes of the fatal break of their physical ties in their family.” Ordinarily then, the pastors and church leadership provide post burial counselling which helps the bereaved to accept their loss and not locate the causes in the sphere of witchcraft. Such support was not there for the family studied.

While in more developed societies some death related rituals got to be conducted virtually (Mikles 2022), this could not be done in the case of this family given that they stay in the rural areas where there is no internet. It is, however, my opinion that even if there was internet, it is still a long way before ordinary Zimbabweans accept the veracity and efficacy of online rituals. Besides, African life is communal and thus the disturbances caused by COVID-19 affected all communal activities including death related rituals with devastating consequences. This communal life guided by the philosophy of *Ubuntu/Unhu*, explains the reason why, even in view of death dealing COVID-19, people gathered at the funeral. Attempt to practice this communality through modern media technologies, as argued by Lucia Ponde-Mutsvedu and Sophia Chirongoma (2021), is inconsistent with the spirit of *Ubuntu*.<sup>14</sup>

We have so far focused on elaborate rituals but among the Shona people, there are many other short rituals (I would like to call them ritualites), that are associated with funerals that Christian love actually dictates but are against COVID-19 protocols. These include handshakes, hugs, individualised conversations with the bereaved as one offers his/her words of condolences. It is the tradition among the Shona that when one arrives at a funeral, s/he goes around shaking hands with all in attendance. It is a tradition called *kubata mavoko* (literally handshaking but a sign of paying condolences). Equally, hugging the bereaved is a common practice of comforting the bereaved. In the process, one shares words of encouragement and comfort. In the case of funerals during COVID-19, all these ritualites were discouraged. Problems arose when some observed the protocols while others did not. I noticed at the funeral that those from urban areas and the more socially informed would try to observe COVID-19 protocols while those from the rural areas and less socially informed would not. Denying one’s handshake, one’s hug or reminding someone to keep the social distance, is considered a sign of pride and social aloofness. It is strongly disparaged especially at a funeral. COVID-19 funerals therefore

<sup>14</sup> Lucia Ponde-Mutsvedu and Sophia Chirongoma (2021) reached this conclusion analysing the use of tele-evangelism, tele-health services and other non-direct physical space sharing as necessitated by online platforms during COVID-19.

created conditions of uneasiness that divided instead of uniting families. This resulted in the bereaved emotionally bruised and taking long for them to heal and experience closure.

## Concluding remarks

While the COVID-19 protocols introduced by governments to stem the tide of the pandemic were well meant, they had other negative social consequences. This article has focused on COVID-19 restrictions' impact on Christian death related rituals. Using the case study of a family that lost a son during the height of the second wave of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, the article has demonstrated that the restrictions altered the way death rituals are conducted among the Shona in general and in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe in particular. The dictates to bury the dead directly from the hospital, to limit the number of mourners, to limit the length of the burial programme resulting in rushing of the process, all went contrary to Shona funeral rites as practised in the Church of Christ. Travel restrictions, restrictions on gatherings and the need to maintain social distance in general meant that deceased families did not receive the usual social support needed following the loss of a loved one. This resulted in bereaved families experiencing emotional pain with no one to share it with. It is not surprising that a year after their loss, the family studied for the purposes of this article was still grieving.

We recommend, therefore, that while governments come up with scientific measures to address pandemics, there is need to also think of the social and psychological impact of these measures. As noted by Muyambo (2021) a one size fits all approach is not recommended. Attention needs to be given to developing mechanisms to address the negative social impact that may result from scientific measures. We also recommend that churches, traditional leaders, civic societies and other organisations that provide psycho-social support be involved in the formulation of mitigatory measures. The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that allow virtual social support is commendable (Ponde Mutsvedu and Chirongoma 2021). However, a lot needs to be done to make sure all in Africa have access to ICTs. In developed countries such as the United States of America, Mikles (2021) notes that religious groups such as Jews quickly adopted ICTs for contacting funeral rituals and these were providing the needed support. It is probably the way Africa needs to go as it is almost certain that once in a while, humanity experiences health



and other natural pandemics that alter the way we ordinarily do things. Religious and traditional leaders should also be encouraged to adopt ICTs in their rituals but this can only be possible following massive civic education so that their people accept the 'new normal' of contacting rituals.

Gudhlanga and Madongonda (2021) also suggest practical ways that would allow people to conduct death related rituals safely. They suggest, for example, not limiting the number of those attending funerals but insisting on physical distancing, the consistent use of masks even at prayer meetings, the use of sealed glass caskets that allow body viewing and other measures. While some of the suggestions they make have their own challenges, such as making sure that hundreds of mourners maintain physical distance, their recommendations underline the fact that current COVID-19 protocols prohibit the conduct of funeral rituals leaving the bereaved grieving and without closure as they do not allow people to render the usual psycho-social support.

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