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10 Mourning from a Distance: COVID-19 and the Disruption of African Funerary Rites in Zimbabwe

Abstract

Since the year 2019, the world has been grappling with the coronavirus. The virus which was first detected in the Chinese province of Wuhan in December 2019, landed on the African continent in February 2020. The fast spread of the virus threatened the socio-economic well-being of most countries of the world. To contain the spread of the virus, the World Health Organisation (WHO) put in place several measures. Some of these measures were masking up, sanitising, constant washing of hands as well as social distancing. While these measures were noble and seen as effective in containing the spread of the virus, some of them infringed on the African religio-cultural beliefs and practices mainly when it comes to the funerary rites. The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the measure of social distancing. This is done to establish the various ways in which this measure disrupted African ways of mourning and burying the dead. In doing this, the study explores whether it is possible, in the context of COVID-19, to come up with more acceptable ways of mourning that are indigenous to Africa while at the same time paying particular attention to international standards of dealing with the pandemic. Data for the paper were gathered through interviews with people who lost their loved ones in Zimbabwe as well as online media reports of the same. Secondary sources were utilised to support primary data.

Keywords: Africa, cultural beliefs, COVID-19, disruption, distance, funerary rites, WHO, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Grief and mourning continue to be central research topics in the anthropology of death (Robben, 2018:13). The study of death, grief and mourning has been done in various fields such as psychology (Robert, 2000; Klimczuk & Fabis, 2017; O'connor, 2019), medicine (Shear, 2012; Hagan, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2016), anthropology (Kiong & Schiller, 1993; Robben,

2018; Silverman et al., 2021), sociology (Riley, 1983; Walter, 2008; Puri, 2021), pastoral studies (Cox & Fundis, 1992; Cox et al., 2003; Baloyi, 2014; Bregman, 2019), and religious studies (Lloyd, 1996; Filippo, 2006; Setta & Shemie, 2015). Yet more recent publications have focused on this subject focusing specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic death experiences (Mortazavi et al., 2021; Trebski, 2021; Sibanda, Muyambo & Chitando, 2022). All these and many others are important in informing this study focusing on funerary rites in a COVID-19 context in Zimbabwe.

Since the year 2019, the world has been grappling with the coronavirus. The virus which was first detected in the Chinese province of Wuhan in December 2019, landed on the African continent in February 2020. The fast spread of the virus threatened the socio-economic well-being of most countries of the world. To contain the spread of the virus, the World Health Organisation (WHO) put in place several measures. Some of these measures were masking up, sanitising, constant washing of hands as well as social distancing. While these measures were noble and seen as effective in containing the spread of the virus, some of them infringed on the African religio-cultural beliefs and practices mainly when it comes to the funerary rites. The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the measure of social distancing. The study is cognisant of the fact that while the WHO has used the term 'social distancing' some scholars found this problematic. For example, Gudhlanga and Madongonda (2021:157) prefer the use of 'physical distancing' instead of 'social distancing'. For them, "in as much as people are physically distant through geographical location, the closeness of social relations is still emphasised although being exercised through technology rather than through actual physical closeness."[1] The study's focus on social distancing is done in order to establish the various ways in which this measure disrupted African ways of mourning and burying the dead. In doing this, the study explores whether it is possible, in the context of COVID-19, to come up with more acceptable ways of mourning that are indigenous to Africa while at the same time paying particular attention to international standards of dealing with the pandemic. Data for the paper were gathered through newspaper reports and informal discussions with people who lost their loved ones in and out of Zimbabwe. Secondary sources were utilised to support primary data. The chapter foregrounds Ubuntu as the theory informing the study. Ubuntu is premised on the maxim that 'I am because you are'. The Shona believe

[1] For me, this is a technical debate which is not part of this discussion.

that one's humanity resides within a community of persons. Thus '*munhu munhu nekuda kwavanhu*' (A person is a person because of other people). Chasi and Tagwirei (2020:23) argue that death and Ubuntu speak to each other implying that in order to deal with death the Ubuntu ethic is an enabling force. As such, the concept of Ubuntu remains relevant even when people are faced with difficulties in their lives, death included. When the Shona are faced with a seemingly insurmountable task or threat, they expect all hands on the deck. The Shona proverb "*Makudo ndemamwe, musi wenjodzi anorwirana*" (Baboons belong to the same class, on the day of danger they fight for each other) is echoed as well as the need for "*chirwirangwe*" (fighting together like leopards, sic). It is these concepts of togetherness which were challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

African Traditional Funerary Rites: Discoursing Tradition

Africans like other societies conceive death as something that one cannot get used to. It is a fearful phenomenon which Mbiti (1991:145) describes as inevitable and most disrupting in many societies. Ugwu and Ugweueye cited in Nwokoha (2020:70) opine that death stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible as a transition from one state of existence to another. This view is in line with Van Gennep who posits that death is one of the rites of passage. For Van Gennep (1960:2-3), the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. For example, one moves from birth, puberty, marriage, and then death. The Shona in particular categorise some deaths as bad and others as good, some are acceptable while others are not. For example, the death of a child or those who do not yet have children is bad while deaths of the old are good deaths because they would have lived full lives and can become ancestors after the performance of requisite rituals which for the Shona is the *Kurova guva ceremony* (domestication of the spirit). Unnatural deaths due to murder or suicide are viewed negatively among the Shona. Death by suicide is frowned at and the funerary rites are quite different from those of people who die due to sickness or other causes. Suicide leaves a different type of grief for the deceased's loved ones, including a terrible sense of guilt (Cumiskey & Hjorn, 2017: n.p). As such, there is a way in which the Shona in particular 'punish' the body of a person who commits suicide. For example, in some Shona ethnic groups,

their body is cast outside of their home as people mourn and upon burial it is whipped so that the spirit does not dare come back to haunt the living. Hence, while a good death presented the possibility of reincarnation and a welcome influence on the world of the living, a bad death brought only spectre of malevolent ancestral spirits (Lee & Vaughan, 2008:345). Hence, for the Shona, funerary rites are determined by the nature of death as well as age, gender, ethnicity, to mention but a few.

The Shona avoid speaking about death directly. Kaguda (2012:57) observes that the Shona have traditionally felt uncomfortable dealing with the subject of death using straightforward terms. In her analysis, they instead use euphemisms, metaphors and idiomatic expressions. For example, when referring to the death of an individual, the Shona may use terms like *watisiya* (s/he has left us); *waenda* (s/he has gone); *warara* (s/he has slept); *ashaya* (s/he is lost). Terms like *wafa* (s/he is dead) are avoided because they are frightening. Reference is also made to the way the deceased is buried with the use of terms like *tamuchengeta* (we have kept him/her); *tamuviga* (we have hidden him/her); *takamuradzika* (we laid him/her down). If the deceased has not been buried according to proper cultural traditions, the Shona refer to such a burial as *kurasa* (throwing away). The grave is perceived as the deceased's home (*imba yake*). A Zimbabwean singer, Simon Chimbetu used modern metaphors such as '*imba isina hwindo*' (a house without windows) in reference to the grave. Kaguda (2012:57) posits that "these indirect expressions play an important role in revealing the Shona people's understanding of death and how they cope with death and dying." Contemporary Zimbabwe has also witnessed the use of slang as people try to lighten the pain and burden of death. Terms such as '*atila*' (has died), and '*akika bhagidhi*' (has kicked the bucket)[2] have been used. Such terms have been condemned for disrespecting the dead. Shoko (2008:11) says the slang terms are considered too direct and impolite. Mawadza (2000:93) argues that slang is informal and less acceptable among the Shona because it is, generally, regarded as subversive and derogatory, therefore, inappropriate for use at a funeral. The use of appropriate language depending on context is crucial for the Shona. In funeral contexts, language performs an expressive function, to express the Shona people's emotions, feelings and thoughts in connection to death (Kaguda, 2012:58). In concurrence, Davis (2002:1) argues that "language is the very

[2] For more terms see Shoko, 2008 and Kaguda, 2012.

medium through which human beings obtain their sense of self-consciousness that it can serve so well the basis of reaction to the awareness of death." In his analysis, Davis views the use of language as an attempt by people to try and defy death.

The influence of Christianity on how the Shona now understand death is very apparent. While still holding on to the traditional notions of death, the Shona have infused these with the Christian understanding of death. Hence, to cope with death, they now usually refer to the dying of a relative as God's will. In most cases, people utter such statements as '*nguva yake yanga yakwana*' (his/her time was up), '*Mwari vaita kuda kwavo*' (God has done his will). Christian songs such as '*Akanzi mira ipapo nguva yakwana*' (He/she was told to stop there because the time was up, sic) allude to the Christian belief that no matter where one is, once their time to die comes, they cannot escape. Biblical texts such as Job 14:1 which says "Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble" (KJV) are often cited in order to console the bereaved. Christian rituals are combined with traditional ones in order to satisfy the requirements of both religions. At times this has brought to the fore the battle of supremacy of religions as conflict sometimes arises between conservative adherence of tradition and of Christianity.

The coming of colonialism brought changes to the social and political structure of African societies. The introduction of colonial cash economies led Africans to leave their ancestral lands in search of paid jobs in farms, mines and urban areas. Even then, according to African tradition, the dead could not be buried away from their ancestral lands. In Zimbabwe, during the colonial period, a cemetery for the blacks was put in a high-density suburb called Kambuzuma (now Warren Hills) in Harare. However, most people declined to be buried in this cemetery. A song to this effect was composed with the lyrics "*Ini Kambuzuma handidi, ndinonovigwa kumusha*" (Me, I don't like Kambuzuma, I will be buried at home). *Kumusha* for the Shona, when they are in the urban areas, refers to their rural origins, the area where their kith and kin reside and they occasionally visit, while Zimbabwe becomes *kumusha* when one is abroad. When one dies in foreign countries, their remains are transported to Zimbabwe, but the majority are further taken to their rural areas for burial. Though colonialism made most Africans to spend more time away from their rural homes, most of them maintained contact and also established their wives and children in them so that the homes could be taken care of. This was a sure way of ensuring that in the event of death, they had a place

of burial. Such beliefs continue to inform the worldview of African migrants in general and Zimbabwe in particular. Despite some having been in the diaspora for many years they continue to build homes in towns, cities and the rural areas around Zimbabwe. A quick look on Facebook reveals a number of groups (such as Let's build our rural homes) that have been formed to encourage people to build their rural homes so that their relatives will not be ashamed to bring their dead bodies home for burial. In the next section, it becomes crucial for the study to engage with the way post-colonial Zimbabwe has dealt with death and burial practices.

Migration, Death and Burial: Tradition at a Crossroads

According to Lee and Vaughan (2008:357) "in the post-colonial period, the growth of regional and international networks increased mobility (within Africa and globally) and the speed of telecommunications have contributed to a remapping of the ways in which people understand and exercise daily a sense of belonging. For example, in post-colonial Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular, there has been a migration of Africans beyond their countries of birth due either to armed conflict or economic crisis which led citizens of a particular country to look for greener pastures. The effect of globalisation has seen some Africans seeking better opportunities in other African countries and beyond. In most cases, those that die beyond their country's borders are expected to be ferried back to be buried in their country of birth. The Shona of Zimbabwe still hold the belief that one has to lie beside his/her ancestors and for most men as well as unmarried, divorced, single women and children, this is where their umbilical cord was buried when they were born. Married women are to be buried in their husbands' homes except for the Budya of Mutoko whose women would traditionally be buried in their natal families. If this is not possible, still a decision has to be made by the families of the woman and that of her husband where her remains can be interred. To this end, Biwul (2014:18) avers that "those that die in some African countries other than the country of their ancestry, and even those who are domiciled outside the continent, when they die in the diaspora, their corpses are brought 'home' for proper burial in their ancestral lands." At the time of writing this paper, a prominent figure in Zimbabwean politics who was working in the United Kingdom, Alex Tawanda Magaisa, died on the 6th of June 2022. His body was flown to Zimbabwe on the 25th of June 2022. A quick look at Twitter comments showed his followers commenting,

"Musaigwa[3] is now home". This is testimony to the fact that the Shona's conceptualisation of home is not anywhere apart from one's ancestral lands where one's umbilical cord (*rukuvhute*) was buried. For the Shona, if one fails to be buried in the place where his/her ancestors are buried, it is a tragedy. For them, that person is in the forest (*musango*) where the remains have been cast away (*kuraswa*). This is the difference with those whose remains are buried at home because they are kept (*kuchengetwa*) or made to lie down/sleep (*kuradzikwa*). In cases where the body of the dead could not be brought home for whatever reason, the Shona had to perform a ritual in which soil from the place where the person was buried is brought to his/her ancestral home and then it is placed in a grave meant for that person together with a goat's head. This symbolic burial was perceived to be representative of the actual funeral, hence all applicable rituals were performed. The relatives of the dead would mourn in the same manner they would have done if the dead's body had been there. This was very important for the Shona because the spirit of their dead relative had to find rest among his/her people. For them, it was and continues to be dangerous for the spirit of the dead to stay among aliens (*vatorwa*). Kuper, Hughes and van Velson (2017) posit that the Shona, traditionally would refuse burial to strangers. The reason was that they feared that if the dead stranger's spirit turned rogue, they would not know how to tame it. In this case, the symbolic burial of their dead was seen as a transference of the spirit of the dead from the place where the body was interred to the place of symbolic burial. Hence, though the dead body remained buried in alien territory (*nyika yevatorwa*), the spirit was believed to lie at the place of symbolic burial.

The observance of burying the dead in their ancestral lands is necessitated by the desire to follow cultural practices. Biwul (2014:18) argues that Africans follow particular cultural traditional rituals when burying the dead. Writing on the culture and customs of Zimbabwe, Owomoyela (2002:121) observes that the Shona handle a person's death with solemnity and care because they want to ensure his/her spirit a safe passage and happy integration into the community of the ancestors. Among the Shona, the mourning process begins once one is declared dead. In precolonial Shona society, before announcing the death to the public, the body of the deceased was prepared and wrapped in preparation for the mourning process. Before wrapping the body, the Shona would fold the

[3] Musaigwa is derived from his totemic identity of the Dziva (Pool) clan.

body through a process known as *kupeta mufi*. This entails straightening the deceased's legs and arms as well as closing their eyes (Mwandayi, 2011:201). Shoko (2008) alludes to the fact that it is not acceptable to bury the deceased with their eyes open or any of their body parts folded. Hence, the rite of *kupeta mufi* is a compulsory one among the Shona. The hut in which the body was to lie in state was also emptied to create space for the mourners. Once everything was put in place, the closest relatives particularly women present would start mourning through wailing. Traditionally, there was a drum or horn that was used to announce death within a community. Once people heard this drumming and/or the sound of the horn, they would follow its direction to join others in mourning. For relatives that lived far away, messengers were sent to deliver the sad message of death. In contemporary Zimbabwe, the introduction of information technologies has helped in transmitting information in real-time. Hence, once one dies, information can be sent through cell phone calls as well as social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, to mention just a few. While people can still die in their homes in contemporary Zimbabwe, most people now die in hospitals, hence, there have been some changes in the cultural forms of mourning. For example, the bodies of the deceased are now being kept in mortuaries and they are only released to the relatives a day before burial. Unlike in Western culture, mourning was/is a communal activity in most African societies. Jindra and Noret (2011:1) note that funerals in Africa draw neighbourhoods, and family members and friends who have migrated to other areas and countries are lured back. Cohen (2002) notes how family, friends and neighbours respond to a death in structured and patterned ways. It is conceived as disrespectful if one misses the funeral of a relative. In traditional Shona society, one could be suspected of witchcraft. Robben (2018:8) avers that "indifference to a death expresses a lack of moral and cultural unity, and an absence of social cohesion and solidarity." Hence, the ritual of *kubata maoko* (expressing one's sympathy through the mourning handshake) is expected of relatives and neighbours. Apart from the traditional handshakes, in contemporary Zimbabwe, people have also been using hugs[4] as expressions of sympathy and shared pain because of the loss. In

[4] The use hugs has been categorized as too elitist and a departure from traditional modes of showing sympathy. However, the practice has become acceptable even in Zimbabwe's rural areas where cultural practices are thought to be very strong.

Robben's opinion, weeping and embracing manifest the social attachment of the living and the dead as well as enhancing the social solidarity of the survivors, and mend the weakened social collectivity (2018:8).

Mourning through Ritual Performance: Enacting Tradition

The place of rituals during mourning has been analysed by a number of scholars. Baloyi (2014) conceives rituals as representations of cultural performances and rites of passage, which mark a people's life experiences. Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017: n.p) view rituals as sites of imagination for those engaged in their construction and performance. Focusing on death, Hall (2001) cited in Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017: n.p) argues that rituals can be used to promote meaning-making related to loss. They legitimise emotional expression related to grief and loss and allow for a sense of doing or acting upon the grief so as to produce an emotionally cathartic effect (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017: n.p).

As mentioned earlier, among the Shona, funerary rites start as soon as one is declared dead. Mungwini (2017:114) explains that among the Shona, "death is not considered as an end but simply a transition into another phase of being within the cycle of life that connects the yet-to- be born, the living and the dead." Hence, Mbiti (1991) calls them "the living dead." As such, cultural practices that ensure that this bond between the dead and the living is not broken are performed in the event of death. Hence, Robben (2018:7) opines that mourning is not a spontaneous emotion, but a collective obligation manifested in appeasement rituals. Scholarship focusing on death and dying in Africa has established the centrality of rituals throughout the mourning process which begins with one dying and can stretch to up to a year. Hertz cited in Robben (2018:3) argued that the death of a human being is not exclusively a biological reality or confined to the individual sorrow of the bereaved relatives, but that death evokes moral and social obligations expressed in culturally determined funeral practices. When writing about death among the Neur, Evans-Pritchard (1949:62) had mistakenly concluded that funerary rites were meant to cut the dead from the living. He interpreted the cutting of hair by the kin of the dead as symbolic of the cutting off of the dead from the living. In response, Lee and Vaughan (2008) contend that Africans do not cut themselves off from their dead, but live in relation to the world of the dead, which is the world of the ancestors. For them, "in Africa, the living

and the dead together constitute the social world." In sub-Saharan Africa, traditional funerary rituals are deeply rooted and positioned in African cultures (Park, 2020:75). Cohen (2002) observes that cultural guidelines determine the treatment and disposal of the body and prescribe a period of mourning for close relatives. Davies (2002:5) views funerals as symbolising society and death rites as an "inevitable consequence of human self-awareness and death as something that cannot be categorised as 'nature' or as 'animal' in opposition to 'culture' or 'human'. In other words, death rites are an expression of one's culture, which gives both the dead and living their identity. They are a medium through which the living come to terms with their physical mortality and the expectation of life after death. According to Davis (2002:16),

> funerary rites help and assist individuals over the period of their distress as well as expressing the social loss of a member of society. Through death ritual, the affected feel the support of others, many of whom are not directly affected by the death, until such time as they gain a sense of their own ability to cope. Communal support overcomes the sense of hopelessness of the individual who might otherwise have to stand alone.

Viewing funerary rites through the lens of embodiment, Van Wijk and Arendse (2013:46) argue that "African bereavement rituals render death a broadly dialectical process of shepherding the deceased's soul through a series of embodied rituals which steward the deceased's soul to an ancestral-spiritual realm." In his analysis, all the rituals performed are integral to attaining closure for the deceased and the bereaved. Owomoyela (2002:121) had earlier noted that the funerary rituals are important not only for the dying but also for the living. He argues that "for just as the post-mortality well-being of the dying person is at stake, so are the survivors' prospects of receiving favourable attention, rather than neglect or even possible angry visitations from the deceased ancestor." Evans-Pritchard cited in Lee and Vaughan (2008:341) noted that the elaborate rituals performed by Africans in relation to death show that death invoked fear and revulsion and posed a problem for the living.

COVID-19 and Social Distancing: Disrupting Culture

Ripoll (2020) makes a discursive analysis of how public health measures to mitigate the risk of infection during an epidemic infringe on the rights of religious communities to bid farewell to their loved ones in accordance

with their customs. He argues that there is evidence of competition between public health goals and religious rights as well as positionings of power between ethnic and religious majorities and minorities. In his analysis,

> Epidemic response as a secular project prioritises biomedical and epidemiological knowledge and treats it as if it were devoid of religion and culture. Culture and religion thus become residual, a world of meaning and practices outside the real world of disease to be either overcome, subverted, or harnessed (2020:7).

In terms of COVID-19, many of the public health interventions across the world related to death and burials have included banning funerals or related rituals limiting their size and imposing social distancing on them. Within the Zimbabwean context (this applies to other contexts as well), the World Health Organisation prescribed guidelines were embraced. Among these guidelines was the need to sanitise, mask up, regular washing of hands and social distancing. This chapter focuses on social distancing as having disrupted not only social relations, but the performance of funerary rites as well. While the practice was meant for people to leave a distance of between one to two metres with the next person to curb infection, it also meant that those who lived far away from their loved ones could not travel in the event of a funeral due to the enforcement of travel bans. This implied that close relatives were failing to attend funerals of their loved ones. This was resisted by some people who felt that there were certain funerals which one could not miss. Hence, within Zimbabwe, close relatives had to get an authorisation letter from the police after submitting the burial order of the deceased. However, it was not easy getting the police travel permit as some police officers wanted bribes (Gudhlanga & Madongonda, 2021:158).

At the onset of the pandemic in Zimbabwe, the government ordered that only one close relative witnesses the burial of a dead relative, particularly those who succumbed to the virus. Funeral night vigils were banned and dead bodies could not lie in state at home if COVID-19 was the cause of death. On 11 January 2021, Reuters reported that the Zimbabwe government had banned traditional funerals due the increased number of COVID-19 cases. In these new measures, families were banned from transporting their dead relatives between cities, implying that those that desired to bury their relatives in their rural homes could not do so. To make matters worse, the dead bodies were being transported from the morgue straight to the burial place. In cases where the cause of death was

not linked to COVID-19, night vigils were allowed, but the number of those who could attend was limited to thirty. Depending on how the government measures were understood, as the body lay in state, at times only one person was allowed to watch over the body throughout the night, at other times ten people were allowed with strict observance of social distancing. In some rural areas, village heads were innovative as they organised their villagers into groups of ten to give each other turns to attend funerals and express their condolences to the bereaved families. However, the cultural practice of loud wailing while hugging or handshaking was not permissible because of the social distancing rule. Traditionally, food is usually served at funerals in Zimbabwe. However, this was banned because of the pandemic.

The fact that those who died due to the virus were taken from the mortuary to the grave altered the funeral ritual practices of the Shona in a number of ways. The rituals of watching over the corpse while singing and testifying about the dead throughout the night had to be abandoned. The *sahwira* (friend) or *varoora* (daughters-in-law) who traditionally performed recognisable roles in preparing the body in terms bathing it, applying ointment, dressing it and finally placing the casket into the grave, had their roles vanquished by the pandemic. They too became spectators in the whole process which they once dominated. The ritual of body viewing where the final farewell with the dead is done was banned. What this meant was that the relatives could not ascertain whether the person being buried was truly their relative. Even the lowering of the body into the grave which is usually led by the *sahwira* with assistance of relatives and neighbours could not be done. Strangers in the name of medical experts became responsible for all these duties. The travel bans meant that even children of the deceased who were abroad could not travel to attend the funerals of their parents.

Arising from the above, some Zimbabweans devised ways of subverting these WHO and government protocols. Those in the rural areas whose relatives died at home usually had all rituals done because there was no certification of whether they had died from the virus. As a result, it would only become clear that the deceased was infected after those that got into contact with the dead body started showing signs of infection or die from the virus. Hence, attendance at funerals and performing culturally prescribed rituals were some of the many ways through which the virus spread. This was a bit different in cases where someone died at home in the urban areas because they had to be tested to ascertain the cause of

death. Being afraid that once it was ascertained that the deceased succumbed to COVID-19, they would be buried without the necessary rituals, some relatives resorted to bribing pathologists to lie on their reports so that the dead could be brought home for the funeral wake. In cases where burials were taking place in the rural areas, in some cases, where bodies were supposed to be buried upon arrival, they were kept and had some rituals done before they were buried. This shows conflict between cultural expectations and pandemic responses. Ripoll (2000:7) notes that,

> Conflict or tensions with religious communities often emerge when their public health needs are pitted against other needs. In the case of the care for the dead, conflict emerges as the symbolic, social, and emotional aspects of mortuary and funerary practices with which included caring for the dead, may be jeopardised by response guidelines on 'safe burials'.

In such cases, Ripoll argues that "the dead are viewed as bodies to be 'managed' and processed, to be 'disposed of' as quickly as possible" (2000:7). Ripoll views this as a secular view on death because it underlines that the end of individual lives on earth is the end of life itself. From this perspective, there is nothing important that happens to the person beyond death and instead of being viewed as a subject, the body is treated as an object. Hence, "one's body is 'disposed of' becomes a pragmatic decision based on logistics and infection prevention. However, such views are inconsistent with the views of many African societies, Zimbabwe included. The social distancing protocol in a COVID-19 context is not in tandem with the African religious worldview where death "is a crucial step in the journey of the afterlife" (Ripoll, 2000:11).

In order to understand the effects of the WHO regulation on social distancing, I sought views from people within and outside of Zimbabwe who failed to attend the funerals of their loved ones. I sought to understand (i) how restrictions imposed on travel affected them when their loved ones died and (ii) if they devised alternative ways of mourning. Those whose parents or siblings died while they were out of Zimbabwe found it hard to get closure. One woman whose mother died in Zimbabwe while she was in South Africa where she worked said she failed to attend the funeral because of the closure of the borders. She indicated that while the death of her mother was in itself painful, she was disappointed that she could not bid her farewell in the expected cultural way. She only managed to visit Zimbabwe nine months after her mother's death. It was only after she visited her mother's grave that she got some closure.

A man whose father died of COVID-19 while he was on duty in Iraq narrated how he cried all night because he could not travel to witness his burial. As a son, he was expected to lead the funeral proceedings together with his siblings. However, it was not possible. While his colleagues provided the much needed support during the time of his grieving, he said he felt the void of being absent from his father's funeral. For him, it was not possible to get closure for as long as he had not seen where his father's remains were interred. He, however, acknowledged that the video calls he had with his family members and friends assisted him to recover from the pain until the time he managed to go to Zimbabwe and visited his father's grave. As expected culturally, he addressed his father's spirit, asked for forgiveness for failing to be present at his funeral and he performed the ritual of throwing a stone (*kukanda chibwe*) on the grave.

In another case, a woman whose brother's daughter died in South Africa while she was in the United Kingdom narrated how they were all handicapped because of the restrictions. They are Zimbabweans in the diaspora. The deceased had to be buried in Zimbabwe under normal circumstances. However, they could not travel. Only those relatives in South Africa and their fellow church members could attend the funeral. They had to make the most difficult decision in their lives by agreeing to cremate their daughter until such a time as they would travel to Zimbabwe and have their daughter buried according to Shona customs. For this woman in the United Kingdom, it has not been easy to deal with the loss of her niece. She planned to go to Zimbabwe in August 2022, but even then she would not meet her brother who remains in South Africa. During the time of mourning, she found solace in putting the photographs of her niece on her WhatsApp status and writing about how she felt. She was also able to speak with her brother's family throughout the funeral process.

On 1 June 2021, Moyo and Mazvarirwofa of the Global Press reported the case of Isabelle Nyathi who missed her mother's funeral due to travel restrictions. She said "as the eldest child in the family, it was heart-breaking that I could not be present to bury my mother." Her pain emanates from the fact that she could not perform the necessary rituals expected of her by tradition. The reporters think that altering the funeral rituals due to the pandemic results in further diluting Zimbabwe's traditions that have been affected by western influences. Many other cases were reported in the media across Africa where relatives of the dead felt aggrieved by the

social distancing regulations. At times confrontations with health personnel occurred as relatives failed to come to terms with the way the bodies of their deceased relatives were being treated.

The above cases are just a few of the many cases of people who failed to attend the funerals of their loved ones due to the conventional response to the pandemic. Ripoll (2000:11) finds the conventional response to epidemics problematic in that as a secular project, it constructs itself as separate from all religion. As indicated by the cases of interviewees above, the banning of certain ways of preparing the body, or transporting it, or banning ceremonial gatherings, caused much grief and psychological distress when people have not been able to care for their loved ones beyond death (Ripoll, 2000:11). Writing on South Africa, the Transkei region, Bank (2020) notes that restricted access to viewing and interaction with the corpse had been a major source of anxiety. From this, he concludes that the government funeral regulations were colliding with local cultural sensibilities and historically established practices. Muyambo (2022) criticises the social distancing regulation as failing to speak to the African context. For him, it was a one size fits all yet this may not have been the best for contexts such as Africa. Due to the travel bans, those in the diaspora resorted to cremating the bodies of the deceased. Gordon Chavunduka interviewed by Shoko (2009:12) alludes to the fact that cremation is not a cultural practice among the Shona. He argued that since the dead are expected to come back to live with the living as ancestors, it would be difficult for them to do so in ash form. What this shows is that COVID-19 pushed Zimbabweans to adopt foreign cultures on death and mourning. For some of them, cremation was better because they would bring the remains of their loved ones home once it was safe to do so. This is evidence of the need for alternative ways of mourning and dealing with grief caused by the death of a loved one.

Bridging the Gap: In Search of Alternative Ways of Mourning

Death rituals in contemporary societies have greatly been influenced by processes of globalisation and can no longer be taken for granted because in case of pandemics, governments play crucial roles in controlling the disposal of dead bodies (Robben, 2018:9). The discussion above has shown how the interventions of governments through public health personnel disrupted the funerary rites in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in

particular, at times resulting in confrontations or subversion of the WHO regulations. Critical questions arise from such situations namely; (i) how can local expectations of dignified funerals and ritual practices be observed under WHO regulations? and (ii) In what way can COVID-19 prevention protocols be aligned with local cultural and religious practices? Bank (2020) recommends that the state and key stakeholders need to show greater sensitivity to local cultural beliefs in the way the regulations are enforced. Hence, in such situations, scholars have called for alternative ways of mourning during pandemics. In the same vein, Ngade (2021) avers that public health officials must find ways of balancing local knowledge, ancestral customs and global health protocols. For example, during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, Maxmenfor (2015) reports that there was a stand-off between public health officials and the relatives of a pregnant woman who had died due to the virus. Public health officials wanted to bury the woman with a child in her womb, while her relatives insisted that they had to remove the baby from the woman's stomach because not doing so was against their culture. A cultural anthropologist had to be consulted after which he engaged a traditional spiritualist in the community to negotiate with the family for alternative death rituals of reparation which excluded the touching of the woman's body. The family agreed and the rituals were performed with the WHO providing the necessary ritual materials required. The woman was finally buried with the baby in her womb. This case is proof that during a pandemic, it is possible to perform symbolic rituals that satisfy the cultural expectations of affected communities so that they also find closure while public health protocols are followed to reduce the rate of infection. There may not be need for cultural anthropologists all the time because cultures have internal mechanisms to deal with such scenarios.

Gudhlanga and Madongonda (2021:163) recommend prevention measures that do not cause fissures in African cultures. They suggest that consulting traditional leaders when coming up with prevention strategies is crucial. Within the Zimbabwean context, they noted the weakness of the top-down approach which the government was using to enforce these measures which led to resistance or people simply ignoring them. Furthermore, Gudhlanga and Madongonda are of the view that funeral wakes which are the core of Shona funerals can still go ahead. They argue:

> Funeral wakes and body viewing of COVID-19 corpses could still be done provided sealed caskets with a glass cover on the face section are used. The sealed caskets would make it possible to be in the same room with the dead

> body without getting any infection through inhalation of whatever gases that might be coming from the corpse. The glass showing the dead body of their loved one during the funeral service without putting themselves at risk (2021:163).

Maluleke (2020: n.p) acknowledges the importance of psychological, cultural and spiritual resources in responding to the pandemic.

The use of ICTs during the pandemic also became central as travel bans inhibited funeral attendance. However, the use of technological tools in trying to reconfigure the mourning process after a death precedes the COVID-19 pandemic. Lee and Vaughan (2008:342-343) observe that rapid urbanisation in Africa and international migration have given rise to the use of new technologies of death, seemingly far removed from the burial practices described by colonial anthropologists. For Lee and Vaughan (2008:359) "the forces of globalisation and technological change have helped fashion alternative cultural landscapes within which Africans could re-invent their relations to death and the dying process." In other words, technology is assisting in people finding ways of coping with death and mourning. During the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe, online live streaming of funeral proceedings allowed people to be part of the funeral from a distance. In other words, people made use of digital media to create new rites and ways of mourning during the pandemic. Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017) make a discursive analysis of the significance of digital and mobile media in funeral processes. They argue that digital media play a key role in representing, sharing and remembering loss. Christensen and Gotved (2015) allude to the fact that social media has become very influential in the mourning processes. They argue that physical death is now being mediated online and has entered the online sphere (2015:3). For Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017: n.p) mobile media "provide a continuum between older technologies and practices, while at the same time remediating rituals." Hence, it becomes increasingly rooted within place-making and memorial culture. In their analysis, mobile media provide people with ways to understand how death and the afterlife are negotiated, ritualised, and reimagined, especially everyday. Furthermore, the mobile phone is viewed as providing insight into how people process, represent and share practices and rituals around negotiating grief in an age of accelerated, networked and installed digital data (2017: n.p). Hence, the mobile phone can assist in creating a bridge between tradition and social change. For Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017: n.p) the mobile phone "can be part of the ritual as

an activity, it can be present between thought and activity, and it can mediate between the feelings and the acting (and enacting) of the cultural performance." In this case, online memorial strategies in relation to death play a significant social role. During the pandemic, they assisted those mourning from a distance to feel that they were still part and parcel of their social group. Thus, they did not feel that their social identity had been threatened though they failed to reassure their relatives that they still belong with them in the physical sense.

Conclusion

The intention of this chapter was to explain the various ways in which COVID-19 disrupted the death rituals among the Shona in Zimbabwe. It sought to critique the WHO protocol of social distancing in order to show that while it was a noble idea, it was not in tandem with cultural expectations pertaining to mourning. The study, therefore, highlighted the African conception of death as well as the rites that are performed in order to deal with the pain and loss of a loved one. The study argued that for the Shona in particular, death rituals reinforce both individual and collective identity. Up to the time of COVID-19, the death rituals depended on in-person contact. However, the study showed how travel restrictions as well as the fast-tracked burials of victims of the virus altered the traditionally held rituals for the dead. Even for those that were at funerals, the chapter showed that distance was created between mourners themselves as well as mourners and the dead body. In most cases, failure by the living to bath the body, perform body viewing, observe vigils as well as bury the dead themselves left many Zimbabweans without closure. Clinical psychologists have warned of post-COVID-19 trauma in those who lost loved ones and failed to bury them according to their customs. A critical analysis of the burial practices adopted during the pandemic may lead one to conclude that it will take time for people to return to the pre-COVID-19 burial practices. Prince Sibanda of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA) interviewed by Moyo and Mazvarirwofa (2021) sees the impossibility of going back to whole cultural practices unless chiefs do something out of the ordinary to convince the younger generations. It is within this context that the study recommended the formulation of alternative symbolic rituals of death in order to support efforts by public health experts to contain the spread of viruses during pandemics. The use of digital media has been shown to have played a critical role in

ensuring that those mourning from a distance were somehow included in the funeral processes through pictures and live-streaming on online media platforms. Hence, while the pandemic disrupted traditional modes of mourning and rites of burying the dead, it provided people with new ways of dealing with grief and pain due to loss through death. It may be that going forward, ICTs are going to play a central role in the performance of funerary rites.

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