

African Funeral Ceremonies as African Humanism in Action

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ABSTRACT From arranging the ‘coming out’ of a new-born baby and/or initiates, the sending out of *bommaditsela* (marriage negotiators), and the eventual the marriage of a daughter, the programming of all events and so on, Africans have constantly displayed a heightened sensitivity towards cordial interactions, especially amongst themselves. It is at junctures such as funerals that the concept of African Humanism, which, by the way, is part of living, is made explicit. This paper focuses on the process Africans undertake from the time death is announced, through the night vigil, the population of the funeral day programme and the actualisation of the service to its completion. Beyond mere description, this article is focusing on the philosophical and the methodological issues that are taken into consideration during the process could be harnessed for modern day application.

INTRODUCTION

Most scholarly accounts on African funeral ceremonies are written by anthropologists and ethnologists who are largely of European descent, and as such, they are ethnographical in nature. But the prefix “ethno-” invariably evokes emotions and consternations, especially amongst scholars from the previously marginalised communities. In his book, *Knowledges: What Different Peoples Make of the World*, published in 1997, Peter Worsley asks; “Why characterize other people’s sciences with the prefix “ethno-”? Concepts such as *ethno-musicology*, *ethno-science* or *ethno-medicine* suggest ‘something’ of a lesser prestige compared to, say, *musicology*, *science* and *medicine* respectively. The latter category is deemed canonical and therefore a standard for evaluating the former (Hviding 2003). In relation to Africa, the *ethno-this/ethno-that* paradigm inevitably implies something only applicable, or in reference to African phenomena. Further implications are that writings emanating from this paradigm are primarily a product of some fieldwork, and Africanists (scholars of European descent, self-declared experts on Africa) seem to be in the forefront of this particular mode of enquiry. And as scholars such as Steady (2004) and Mills (2007) contend, the root of anthropologic writing seems to depict the image of the ‘savage’ to the so-called ‘civilised’. But what happens when the ‘savage’ begins to write? Does he or she continue with

the depiction of the ‘savage’ as per the pre-prescripts of, say, anthropology; particularly when the piece is about Africa or an African phenomenon? Or should the African write anyway even when the piece might be discredited on the basis of subjectivity, a notion that supposedly contradicts the art/science of fieldwork, and by extension scholarship? Can an African writer forsake the non-existent comfort zone of scholarship and go into fieldwork to taste, as it were, an African phenomenon before attempting to write about an African phenomenon? These are some of the questions African scholars face today.

With these questions lingering, the researchers proceed with caution to write, choosing rather to document aspects of the funeral ceremonies from an African perspective, the researchers do so hoping that the milder definition of the resultant piece qualifies as “a written account of the cultural life of a social group, organisation or community which may focus on a particular aspect of life in that setting” as proffered by Watson, (cited in Humphreys and Watson 2009). Most importantly, perhaps, is the fact that our participation in funeral ceremonies informing the present paper was not rationalised from the fieldwork point of departure, but rather predicated by our race, age, responsibilities, and situational relations in the milieu of family, clan, nation affiliations, and so on. Understandably, whilst attempting a scholarly description of such an experience, the researchers cannot claim objectivity or emotional detachment, since these notions were long discredited by Africologists (Akbar

1984; Reviere 2001). Rather the greater incentive for us is, capitalising on our situated-ness, to respectfully push the limits of culture-ordained silence on some philosophical aspects of the concept of the ‘funeral ceremony’, but still remaining within the paradigm of African Humanism. As it will become clear in the ensuing sections, to be awake to African-ness and to procedures in the province of African Humanism is not to romanticise, but to appreciate the resultant harmonising effect of such intentions. Besides, not doing so is tantamount to turning a blind eye, or worst still, colluding with the forces responsible for what Lebakeng et al. (2006) describe as ‘African epistemecide’. The price for such negligence would breed a knowledge-less nation with a poorer moral compass.

METHODOLOGY

Inevitably, initial readings surveyed on the subject were ethnographic accounts written by Africanists about the African funerals. In addition to these secondary ethnographic accounts, notwithstanding the negative connotations of some, we elected to rely on data gathered through what Mapaya (2013) captures as *dipolelišano* (Africa-sensed mode of dialogue) that could be explained to the non-Africans as convergent interviews and discussions (Mugovhani 2007). These were conducted with a number of elders from the three interrelated communities, namely scholars and elders from the Bahananwa, Vhavenda and Balobedu cultural groupings. Moreover, we draw from personal experiences accrued from partaking in a number of funeral events in our life. Notably, the nature of funerals is so dynamic for any particular group of people to be able to account for all occurrences, let alone the fact that the funeral are sombre occasions, which lay in the periphery of discursive interrogation. This level of sensitivity is borne out of the respect for the elderly, the bereaved, and more significantly the dead.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

This paper continues to discuss the African funeral ceremony under three organising principles; namely *protocol, procedure and custom*. Primarily, the researchers focus on “philosophical and methodological issues that are taken into serious consideration during the entire process.

These are motivated by the quest for expressed meaning. Accordingly, under protocol, we will dwell on three observable aspects pertinent to the handling of the announcement of ‘fresh’ death across the section of a community. For procedure, the study paid attention to how certain tasks are negotiated and carried out pre, during and after the funeral (Jindra 2011). The population of a funeral ceremony programme is provided as an example. Lastly, we seek meaning from certain common practices that, notwithstanding *meilo* (what others equate to taboos), have so far been receiving less explanations. By so doing the paper shall have given currency to the adage that says, *rutang bana ditaola; le se ye le tšona badimong!* (purportedly: teach the children how to throw the bones, so that you do not take the knowledge with you to the grave!).

Protocol Regarding the Announcement of Death

In most African communities, death imposes a set of protocols shrouded in customs and tradition. With regard to announcing fresh news of death, it is generally expected of the older members of the society to be able to handle such matters with the utmost sense of compassion (Musehane 2012). In other words, one should have the ability to assess and to adjust the message according to situations, while also being considerate of custom dictated protocols and procedures. All these epistemologies are supposedly commensurate with one’s age, social standing, cultured-ness, and the general level of maturity necessary to manage this ultimate sense of loss. It is considered immature, irresponsible or even uncultured, for instance, to spread the word about death prior to informing the nucleus family of the deceased. Even within the nucleus family itself, it is advisable to identify the most mature in most cases the father, the husband or a senior male member to break the news to. Where the deceased is a married woman the principle; *hlogo ke ya rena, mmele ka wa lena* (the head is ours; the body is yours) highlights the critical importance of consulting the family of the wife prior to taking any step relating to the bereavement (Mpya 2013). Where children are concerned, adults are still compelled by custom to follow certain protocol in announcing (rather than informing them of) the bereavement. Whilst the child is fast asleep, for instance, the elected elder, usually *rakgadi* or *makhadzi* (the paternal

aunt), would whisper the announcement of death in its ear (Ramaite 2013). It is believed that by doing so, the message is stored in the subconscious mind and would come handy when at a later stage the child begins to wonder about the whereabouts of his or her departed loved one.

Other issues that need to be managed stem from conflicts that normally arise during the period of death. These conflicts are predicated on the Northern Sotho adage; *letlalo la motho ga le bapolelwe fase* (purportedly: a person does not die without a reason or man-induced cause). Most Vhavenda and Vatsonga communities have not ceased from also subscribing to these beliefs and customs. Often the widow is accused of having killed her husband so that her family can gain access to the 'riches' of the husband. In the case of a widower, his concubine, imagined or existent, is suspected of having a hand in the death of a wife for wanting to move in with the widower. *Dikgadi* (female siblings of the widower), especially those who are not married, may exploit the (death) situation to also lay claim to a stake in the estate of their deceased brother (Makgopa 2013). The most outrageous but equally prevalent of these suspicions/accusation is the insinuation that the mother may have killed her own son in order to benefit from his estate. Regardless of the nature of death, witchcraft is central to the accusations. Luckily, though, African elders are all too knowledgeable about how to handle such dynamics.

Procedure and Functionaries Relating to Preparation and the Actual Service

Since African funeral ceremonies are communal events, different stakeholders are expected to play their respective roles as a commitment to humanity. After the family shall have received the news, the next step, which is now driven by the family or their elected representative, is to inform, amongst other parties, the burial society through its leader or representative, *gota* or *ntona* (the headman) who is the embodiment of the village community. And if the diseased belonged to any particular church denomination, the pastor is also informed. At this point all communal functionaries would be activated.

Family Functionaries and Responsibilities

Central to all preparations, the family would, amongst other things, start compiling a pro-

gramme for the day of the funeral ceremony. Light as it may seem, this involves careful placement of kin members. Failure to accommodate any of these constituencies would result in a tumultuous event, the ramifications of which could remain the talk of the village and visitors alike. A typical programme, more or less, accommodates these constituencies:

Table 1: Represents a typical programming of a funeral service

a) First Session (at Home or Church)	
Constituent	Primary task
<i>Moswaramarapo</i>	Opens, gives remarks and house rules
<i>Baruti</i>	Administers opening prayer
<i>Balapa/Batswadi</i>	Welcomes the guests
<i>Ba ga rakgolo</i>	Gives word of condolence and support
<i>Ba bogwe/ba bogadi</i>	Gives word of condolence and support
<i>Baagišane</i>	testify to neighbourliness and humanness
<i>Bašomimmogo</i>	Attests to collegiality and humanness
<i>Bagwera</i>	Attest to the character of the deceased
<i>Ditlogolo</i>	Reading of wreaths, reading of obituary and inscriptions on during tomb stone unveiling
<i>Moruti</i>	The pastor conducts the sermon
b) Second Session (at the Cemetery)	
<i>Moruti</i>	Opens with prayer
<i>Moruti</i>	Conducts interment
<i>Bamošate/civic</i>	Give vote of thanks at village level, sometimes even makes village-specific announcements.
<i>Diphiri</i>	Give vote of thanks specific with specific reference to the populace conduct in the graveyard
<i>Balapa</i>	Give vote of thanks and announcements

Running the Service Program

After the programme (Table 1a) is confirmed by the family a night before the funeral service, it is surrendered to the elected programme director. The programme director then assumes authority for the duration of the service, but occasionally ceding such powers to the pastor during the sermon and to *diphiri* in the graveyard. Otherwise, all that happens within the programme remains subject to his authority (this role has always been played by men).

A few decades ago, the sermon at funerals had death as its theme, and how the living should understand and relate to it. Recently, though, and perhaps owing to the proliferation

of Pentecostalism, the preachers seem to see such gathering as captured audiences. More and more, the preaching has little to do with comforting the bereaved but concerned with “capturing the souls of living” as it were.

Apart from the sermon, which may not necessarily address itself to issues of death, the discourse occurring during the service is generally *cliché-esque*; all speakers have to generally be consolatory and short. *Moswaramarapa* normatively introduces himself and make housekeeping comments, which include the instruction to switch off cell phones. *Moruti* (pastor) opens the service by saying a short prayer while *moe-medi wa lapa* welcomes the congregation, and generally give them the freedom of movement. This is often epitomised by the adage that *lea-mogetšwe dimpša di kgokilwe* (the dogs are chained).

Since *ba rakgolo* (the maternal family) are not necessarily the owners of the homestead, theirs is to confirm death; using phrases such as *bjale kage le rebona, re lahlegetšwe* (as you can see, we suffered a great loss). They may also and thank the gathering for their sympathy and a show of support. In the case of the death of a spouse, the *ba bogwe/ba bogadi* (the in-laws of either the male or the female spouse) echo the same sentiments of loss and appreciation of support.

Moagišane (the neighbour) always attests to the neighbourliness of the deceased, sometime asking a rhetorical question *re tlo bona re dirile eng a se gona?* (How are we going to live without him or her? *Mošomišanimmongo* (co-worker) also attest to the collegiality of the deceased; and how they will miss seeing him or her in his or her spot at the place of work. *Mogwera* (friend) attests to the character of the deceased from the friendship point of view; the sentiment of loss is also expressed.

During the first session of the service, affected school-going-aged children, be they children of close family members or grandchildren, are often given the role of reading the wreaths gifted by close family members and the obituary. Apart from affording the young an opportunity to play a role, consideration is made because of their level of reading proficiency. Then the sermon will follow after which the entourage will leave for the graveyard. Although unscripted, it is common for *rakgadi* (aunt) to occasionally ululate and recite the praise poem of the clan in

honour of the departing body during the proceedings.

Burial Society Functionaries and Responsibilities

Almost as a rule of thumb, every responsible adult has to belong to some burial scheme or society. Rationalised by the need to repatriate the dead body from faraway places of work to home, the burial scheme has also become a feature in rural communities. Such societies provide predetermined material support in the event of death.

Meanwhile, the burial society, upon proper notification, would forthrightly convene a meeting of the executive to activate a series of constitutionally enshrined services. This may include instructing the associated mortuary to collect the body from wherever it may be for the purposes of storage until the day of the funeral, releasing funds for the procurement of a coffin, a bag of *mielie-meal*, and a beast for slaughtering during the ceremony. Apart from these tasks, the society should be seen to be involved in the running of certain responsibilities.

Village Community Functionaries and Responsibilities

Meanwhile, the *gota* or *ntona* would sound *tšhipi* (a bell that replaces *phalafala* - kudu horn) to summon members of the community to a special sitting of *kgoro* (A village gathering that almost invariably occurs under a big tree to addresses civic or village matters). From *kgoro*, three constituencies of the village would be engaged. Women would fetch water to fill the tank placed in the homestead of the deceased, men would start collecting firewood, erect the tent (which has accrued some significance in relation to death), and get themselves ready to slaughter the beast on the eve of the funeral service. The last constituency, *diphiri* (able-bodied boys and young men), would convene their special meeting in preparation for the major task of digging the grave the night or the day before the inhumation. Additionally, once the funeral procession enters the graveyard, *diphiri* assume authority enforceable by fines in case one of their rules is broken. They dictate dress code, monitor the use of cell phones and generally prohibit side chatting amongst all within the graveyard; in short, they maintain order.

Customs Beliefs and Meaning

Most customs that are related to the funeral ceremonies are not adequately explained even though they are almost always adhered to. In this section, I shed light on some of the most common of these customs.

Customs and Belief Relating to the Death of a Spouse

Nowadays most married people sleep in beds as opposed to sleeping on *magogo* (grass-knit mats, singular= *legogo*). For this reason, one of the early acquisitions for a Mohananwa young man who intends marrying is to buy a bed. On this bed he is expected to share love and procreate with his bride. In a way, the bed represents vitality and productivity emanating from consummate lovemaking. When the husband dies, though, the mattress is removed from the base of the bed and put on the floor, sometimes with *legogo* underneath. And this has become a symbol of *go roula* (mourning), even though such an act may have been necessitated by the need to create more space to accommodate sympathisers and/or comforters, normally elderly women who customarily prefer sitting on *magogo* than in chairs. From then on, the widow is now spared the trauma of arranging the funeral of the husband herself. This also marks the beginning of *goilela mohu* (abstinence from sexual engagement in honour of the deceased husband and his family).

In the case of a widower, the bed remains intact. Rather the man, together with his male comforters sit on the chair. The widower is expected to wear a woollen hat that specifically covers his ears. It is believed that *moriti wa gagwe o kgaugile* (his shadow has snapped) and therefore he is susceptible to 'catching the air' through his ears. In addition, *ngaka* (traditional healer) or one of the elders in the family would perform the ceremony of *go mo phurela dithaka ka ditsebeng* (chewing the seeds close to his ears so that he hears the crushing sounds of the seeds). This is also marks the beginning of the mourning period. It also serves as a kind of a preventive measure without which the widower will within a year of the death of his wife die.

Customs and Belief Relating Nature of Death

Generally, the deceased should depart from his or her house, especially the room they had

been sleeping in. In case the deceased die in faraway places or on the road due to a road accident, for example, his spirit is repatriated along with his body to home. In the case of death by a gun shot or an axe, the body and the spirit, whereas this will be repatriated to his or her home, is not allowed to enter the yard, let alone the house. This is believed to be a precautionary measure aiming at preventing such kinds of death from entering the homestead.

Customs and Belief Relating to the Handling of the Coffin

The carrying of the coffin is done in a particular manner. It is generally believed that when entering the house the direction of the feet should enter first, the reason being that the dead would have entered the house feet first. Similarly, when the coffin exits the house the direction of the feet should be the one to emerge first.

Most graveyards are planned in such a way that the departed, especially Vhashavhi (the black Jews) who constitute a significant section of Vhavenda and other related clans face the East. Otherwise, most clans, especially *Bakgalaka*, and *dinoko*, bury their dead with their heads facing west. To these clans, it is believed that a person takes clue from the sun, which rises from the east and setting in the west. Day light represents life and nightfall represents death. Others attribute this to the movement direction of the ancestors as they fill other parts of the continent. Interestingly, there has not been any reference to the south or the north even though some of the cemeteries are planned with less consideration of these practices.

Another custom associated with the coffin involves the blanket. Almost always, the coffin is covered in a new blanket before it is lowered into the earth. This gesture seems to be the relic from a tradition where the deceased is covered in a cowhide. In the olden days, giving a person a beast for the purpose of their burial is the ultimate gesture of love and affection. The beast, apart from providing the meat during the funeral, it also clothes, as it were the deceased.

CONCLUSION

It is during funerals that African humanism is made explicit. The observance of protocol, pro-

cedure and customs obtaining during these kinds of gatherings help nations in reaffirming their identities as human beings. Often shrouded in conflicts, love, reverence, compassion and all other extreme emotions, African communities show a type of person and event management skills bequeathed to them by proud cultural sensibilities of African ancestry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, the researchers have scratched the surface, but hope that in line with the African renaissance sensibilities, African funeral ceremonies are perceived not only as rituals, but sites of *doxa*, *ontology* and *epistemology* requiring further research.

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