MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA & AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

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7

THE IMPACT OF URBANISATION ON BURIAL RITUALS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the significance of burial rituals and land amongst Africans. This will be done through examining burial rites and rituals. For Africans, the significance of land goes beyond the physical activities taking place on it. It is a place to which one has an attachment from the time of the birth rituals that are performed in order to seal the individual to his or her ancestral land. The ancestral land symbolises the relationship between the individual and the clan, the land and the spiritual world. However, the quest to get jobs and formal education has made many Africans move to urban areas, where they established permanent homes and leading eventually to burials in urban areas. Hence, this chapter argues that urban burials have severed Africans from their ancestral lands. The chapter acknowledges that burial in ancestral land always made exceptions for married women who are separated from their ancestral lands by marriage, and their graves linked to their marital homes. Though it would appear it does not matter where married women are buried, the literature suggests that there are rituals performed to reconnect them to their ancestral lands. The chapter adopts the social theories outlined by Wirth (1938), Marrall (2006) and Ayiera (2012). Their social theories provide a framework within which we can understand social communication and forms of connections in urban areas. In the light of the aforementioned theories, urban burials have the potential of severing the ties that Africans have to their ancestry. As a result of this, some Africans have repatriated the remains of their loved ones to rural areas to be buried in their ancestral lands amongst their consanguine as a way of reconnecting them to their ancestral lands.

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Introduction

Land is the greatest heritage of the African people. The health and wellbeing of the people is intertwined with the health and wellbeing of the land.

(Naidu-Hoffmeester, 2018)

This epigraph is relevant to the chapter because it highlights the fact that, for Africans, the significance of land goes beyond the physical activities taking place on it. It is a place one has an attachment to because of the birth rituals that are performed in order to seal the individual to his or her ancestral land. The ancestral land symbolises the relationship between the individual and the clan, the land and the spiritual world. Africans are connected to land at birth, a fact that Naidu-Hoffmeester (2018) describes succinctly thus:

From the time they are born, babies are rooted in their ancestral land by means of a ritual of burying the placenta. From birth till death and beyond, land represents people's spiritual and economic livelihood.

Therefore, Africans desire to be buried in their ancestral land upon death. Biwul (2017) noted that, while the exact location of the ancestral abode may not be clearly defined in the African conceptualisation, it is generally believed that it is not far from the domain of the living. Burying a family member outside their ancestral land is deemed an offence against the spirits of the land and commonly believed to be akin to 'throwing away' the dead by completely separating them from their lineage or clan. Mbiba (2010) concurs with this point when he says that urban burials are frowned upon and stigmatised.

This chapter argues that the interconnectedness described above is severed by the mass movement of the African rural people to urban areas. This is because urban centres have become loci of all income-generating activities, leading to people building permanent homes in urban areas. A consequence has been that Africans bury their loved ones in those areas, highlighting the impact of urbanisation on African burial rituals.

Theoretical framework

This chapter adopts Marrall's (2006) and Ayiera's (2012) social theories of belonging and urban burials. Marrall (2006) and Wirth (1938) describe social theory as a vehicle through which we can explain the social communication and connections formed in urban areas. The diversity of cultures found in towns creates what Wirth (1938) refers to as superficial relationships, which are prevalent in cities to promote social cohesion. Ayiera (2012) describes the theory of belonging as having historical connections to established spaces such as settlements that have a cohesive sense of community and stable social institutions. The theory emphasises that people belong

to a place because they are tied to it by ancestry and the history of residing there. Belonging, therefore, invokes a sense of a claim to a physical space because of defined interests and common identities of culture, nationality, history, and sometimes race and religion. Yet at the same time, urban burials have the potential of severing ties that Africans have to their ancestry, thereby impacting on their burial rituals.

Marrall (2006) used the idea of a social frame to carry out a study on the impact of urbanisation on death and funerary practices in the United States of America. Her findings were that urbanism affects the rituals and ceremonies around death. She gave an example of Muslims who, during burial ceremonies, put emphasis on the body coming into physical contact with the soil, which is not permissible in urban areas as the body must be enclosed in a coffin. Marrall (2006) points out that urbanism attracts people from all walks of life with diverse cultures. In such circumstances, traditional social cohesion is impossible compared to rural settlements, where people live more homogeneously. According to the social framework, urban dwellers then acquire aspects of other cultures that were not inherently part of their traditional norms and values. This theory is important for this chapter as it will help us to identify whether there are burial rituals Africans have adapted from other cultures that have impacted on their original rites. It is argued here that when people move to urban centres, the family structure and ways of doing things are bound to change because of heterogeneity as people are removed from their extended families, which creates a social distance. Following Ayiera's (2012) position, it can also be argued that Africans' strong sense of belonging binds them to their ancestral land. Davison (2000) also argues that people may transport their culture, symbols and rituals to the new place; but all these are watered down as they create new affiliations that lead to significant cultural transformations. Ayiera's (2012) and Davison's (2002) assertions affirm and validates the social theory as appropriate for this research study, because as Africans move to urban cities, elements of their culture such as burial rituals are likely to undergo cultural transformation.

The importance of being buried in ancestral lands

The desire to be buried in ancestral lands is as old as humankind and a phenomenon that is prevalent in many societies the world over. The book of Genesis 23:1-20 highlights a scriptural prescription to be buried in one's ancestral land as a proper burial in Jewish culture. This implies that if one is not buried in one's ancestral lands, then one would not have been accorded a proper burial. It seems a matter of great shame, from a biblical point of view, not to be buried in the land of the forefathers. Walaza (2014) points out that, for Africans, the burial of the umbilical cord, placenta and hair that the child was born with is a ritual that seals the baby to its ancestral home. The burial of *inkaba* (umbilical cord), according to Walaza (2014), denotes

the location of one's ancestral home and symbolises the relationship between the individual and his or her clan, the land and the spiritual world. Buttressing the importance of the ancestral land as a place where people should be interred upon their demise, Walaza (2014) notes that the highest honour usually bestowed upon an accomplished African who has acted in a manner befitting a born leader is to call the person a daughter or son of the soil. Walaza (2014) continues to show that amongst the amaXhosa it is very important that when such a person dies, then he/she be brought home to be buried to join a lineage of ancestors who came before him/her. For this reason, former President Nelson Mandela's last wish was to be buried in the soil near where his *inkaba* (umbilical cord) is buried. This is Qunu, the village Mandela called home (Walaza, 2014).

Post-independent South Africa saw the remains of those who died in exile being exhumed from their host countries and repatriated for reburial in their home country. Feni (2018) points out that the reburials were done so as to reconnect the dead with their ancestors and with the ancestral land. As a result, the remains of Duma Nokwe were exhumed from Zambia for reburial in South Africa, where one of the speakers said, "so let his bones rest back in his ancestral land (Feni, 2018). Moeti (2006) noted that the remains of Onkgopotse Tiro, Mnyele, and Essau Mokgethi were exhumed from the Gaborone Extension cemetery and repatriated to South Africa to accord the deceased persons proper burials with their clan and have family rituals performed to connect them to their ancestors. It is this connectivity that is severed when people are buried outside their ancestral land, as in the case of those who died in exile. The ancestral land is an important abode for the dead and the living in the African world view; connection with the land of one's birth after one's death is spiritually significant. Thus, as Tafira (2015) observes, in the African view, the significance of land extends beyond its economic aspect, because land belongs to the living, the dead and the unborn, making it inalienable. Hambira (1999) also postulates that, for the entire African world view, life is a continuum that links people: the unborn, the living and the departed. This idea is implicit in this chapter: the African world view and spirituality have strong links to their ancestral lands.

Ayiera (2012) thinks that many communities place great emphasis on where and how community or family members are buried. Ayiera (2012) further notes that family members of the deceased would strive to repatriate the remains of their loved ones for burial in ancestral soil, and the performance of burial rituals that reaffirm membership of the community. She describes this as follows: "Burial rituals and customs allow the individual to claim affiliation and express solidarity with a defined community. They give the individual a link that perpetuates his social identity in connection with his ancestors, the living and the unborn."

Ayiera (2012) continues that the experience of losing a loved one away from home (in exile) and burying them in a foreign land does not allow for the performance of the requisite rituals. This evokes a sense of alienation and an acute awareness that the exiles do not belong to the host country. This assertion by Ayiera (2012) affirms what this chapter seeks to show: that African burial rituals cannot be adequately performed in foreign urban centres as a result of many factors, including foreign cultural influences, that limit the performance of traditional death rites. Amanze (2002) also highlights the importance of ancestral land amongst the Basarwa of Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve (CKGR), who have a sentimental attachment to their land, hence making the CKGR their spiritual home. Amanze (2002) argues that relocating them to areas outside the CKGR impacted heavily on their spirituality. The argument raised here is that Basarwa's livelihoods are anchored to their ancestral lands.

The Midweek Sun (Sun Reporter, 2017) published a story in which 69-year-old Modise Motshoge exhumed his mother's remains from Mogoditshane cemetery to be reburied at Phomolong Cemetery in Phakalane. He was quoted as saying: "I want my mother's remains next to mine." The reasons as to why he preferred to be buried in Phakalane next to his mother are not provided, but it can be argued that his decision may have been influenced by the African world view of family members being close together, even in death, to maintain the social bond that existed in their lifetime. However, one notes that Phomolong is a burial site marked by social class and it is a status symbol. As a result of having achieved a high social status and economic advancement, this man wishes not to be buried in a common graveyard that may be his ancestral home. Yet he seems to believe that his spirit would be isolated in Phomolong, hence his desire to exhume his mother's remains and rebury them in Phomolong. Would that not isolate his mother from her ancestral land and lineage? The issue of one's economic advancement as a factor that has possibly influenced and impacted on Southern African burial rites is one of the questions addressed by this chapter.

However, it is worth mentioning that economic advancement and change in one's social status do not necessarily sever people from their ancestral lands. For example, great statesmen such as the former presidents of Botswana, the late Sir Seretse Khama and Sir Ketumile Masire, were laid to rest in their villages of Serowe and Kanye, respectively, despite being known to be some of the greatest leaders of the world. This may suggest that the cultural practice of being buried at home is clearly significant for Africans.

It is important to note that it is not only the aforementioned societies that have their spiritualities and religiosity completely connected to the ancestral land.

Amanze (2007) and Kamenju (2011) both observed that the link between people and land is not only an African issue, but one that cuts across societies because land in many parts of the world is seen as spiritual holding to both ancestors and the living. Manatsha (2012) highlights an important aspect of Bakalanga history when the remains of Chief Madawu Nswazwi (*She*) were exhumed and repatriated from Zimbabwe to be reburied in Nswazwi village in Botswana. Though Manatsha (2012) makes no mention of the ancestral home, it can be argued that home for the Bakalanga means a place to which one has a spiritual connection, a place of identity and belonging as is the case with other societies. Motshwari (2008) corroborates this view by describing Nswazwi as home, a place where Bakalanga ba ka Nswazwi from Zimbabwe reclaimed their rightful place in the land of their forefathers and reconnected with their roots. The aforementioned description of a home points to the fact that, for the Bakalanga, home means far more than the physical structures of houses and huts.

The effects of urbanism on burial rituals

Komoki (2005), who has written on the burial rituals of the Ovambanderu of Sehithwa, observed that death rituals have been affected by modernity, hence changes in all steps or processes of death have been affected in many cultures. Inferring from the above, it may be postulated that African burial rituals may have been affected by this strong wave of urbanism, which is an aspect of modernity. Wirth (1938) posits that the beginning of Western civilisation was marked by permanent settlements in cities of nomadic people from rural areas. According to Wirth (1938), urban life becomes a cosmopolitan condition controlling the locus of economic, political and cultural life, drawing the most remote parts of the world into its orbit. This he calls urbanisation. The shift from a rural to a predominantly urban society is always accompanied by profound changes in virtual every facet of social life. Sharing Wirth's (1938) sentiments, it is argued here that urbanisation has brought people of different cultures, norms and values together, which creates a heterogeneous society. Wirth (1938:10) summarises this new way of life as follows: "[T]he city has thus historically been a melting pot of races, peoples and cultures, and most favorable a breeding ground of new biological and cultural hybrids."

This point is very important to this chapter, because the peoples of Southern Africa are not an exception to rural-urban migration, which I argue contributes to the loss of cultural elements such as burial rites. Marrall (2006), like Wirth (1938), also defines urbanism as a way of life for those who reside in a densely inhabited area with a heterogeneous human population. She further observes that urbanism is a conglomeration of diverse cultures, world views and practices found in urban

areas, which combine in a form of cultural mixing. The study by Marrall (2006) is very important and relevant to this research, because it is about how urbanism has affected funerary practices. Although her research is set within the context of North America, it highlights how urbanism as a global phenomenon affects cultural practices. Marrall (2006) further posits that urban dwellers have different funeral needs than their rural counterparts, owing to the heterogeneity of ethnically diverse residents. This is also true on the basis of my own observations made during funerals I attended in Francistown and Selibe Phikwe, which are urban areas, and Jackalas 1, which is a rural area. In the two urban areas, there was no fire at the entrance; windows were not smeared with ashes to symbolise death, as is the case in rural areas. It was also not easy to separate the chief mourner from the rest of the people who attended the funeral. But in the rural areas the distinctions were clear. This shows that when people move to urban areas, some of the rituals supposed to be performed are watered down. In addition to the aforementioned points, I observed that important rituals like grave identification performed in rural areas are not done in urban areas. This is because in urban areas graves are bought from the council, making a grave identification ritual impossible.

Marrall (2006) seems to have made similar observations when talking about Islamic burials, where the faith decrees the necessity of the body touching the soil when buried. She notes that the federal law in the United States of America insists that the body must be enclosed in a box for public health reasons. Therefore, for Muslims, this raises a cultural conflict of how to bury their loved ones following their religious rituals. Marrall (2006:13) highlights and describes the resolution to this conflict: “They followed the federal laws of burying in urban area using caskets but removing the bottom slats of the coffin upon burial so that the body would touch the soil yet be enclosed by US standards.”

The aforementioned views by Marrall (2006) are a clear indication that when people move to urban areas, their burial rituals are affected. Therefore, by inference, the Bakalanga who bury their loved ones in urban areas may have their burial rituals altered to accommodate city councils’ requirements. Newel (2010) observes that when a *Hosanna* (*Kalanga*, rain dancer) of the Bakalanga in Botswana dies, they are not buried like ordinary people. They are buried in a niche and this is a ritual that cannot be carried out in urban areas, thereby showing that these exceptions may be hindered by council laws affecting the burial of such special people.

Mbiba (2010) observes that burial at home in Zimbabwe is a crucially important concern. Zimbabweans in the diaspora save money through insurance schemes and burial associations to ensure that they will not rest forever in the foreign soil, but be repatriated to their homes. But Mbiba (2010) raises some pertinent questions about

what it means for Zimbabweans when they talk about home, also asking whether they choose to be buried in overcrowded urban cemeteries in Zimbabwe, or want to be buried in rural homes. Mbiba (2010) further argues that the preference for burial at rural homes is an ideal expressed by both Zimbabweans in the diaspora and Harare. The main reason, as pointed out by Mbiba (2010), is that the desire to be buried in a rural area as opposed to an urban centre hinges on the notions of identity and belonging. Above all, he noted that one reason for the desire to be interred at their rural home is the overcrowding and inadequate capacity for urban burials. To underline the importance of being buried at the rural home, Mbiba (2010) has this to say: “Baba Chiendambuya of East London would like to be buried in what he considers home, next to his father’s grave in Gokwe.”

Assuming the above to be the world view of Africans, then it can be argued that the assertion by Mbiba (2010) resonates well with what this chapter aims to demonstrate. When one is buried not at ‘home’ then one would be alienated from one’s ancestors, hence the desire to be buried next to their consanguineous kin. Showing Africans’ preference for rural burials as opposed to urban burial, Mbiba (2010:150) says that “[i]n Harare Zimbabweans from the countryside often considered themselves to be sojourners and often remained anti-urban in outlook, such that urban burial could be stigmatised and associated with failure or with foreigners labelled derogatorily as *mwidzi* or totemless”.

The stigmatisation that comes with urban funerals has seen urbanised African Zimbabweans continuing to ferry their dead loved ones for burial in the rural lands that are their homes. According to Mbiba (2010), even those who die in Britain are repatriated to be buried at home. The idea of repatriating loved ones highlights the effects of urban burials, which Mbiba (2010) argues lack proper rituals. The significance of this lack of rituals, as indicated by Mbiba (2010), is what my research seeks to understand amongst the Bakalanga. Mbiba (2010) highlights the effects of being buried away from home as being akin to “[g]uerrillas who died during the liberation struggle in the bush and buried away from home without proper funeral rituals [and who] were exhumed for proper burials at home”.

Emphasising the importance of home burial amongst the Igbo of Nigeria, Smith (2004) posits that rural burials are opportunities that assure continued identity with the place of origin. This he captures as follows:

The strength of the obligation that relatives of the deceased come home to bury their dead is exceeded not only by the power of the expectation that the dead should be buried at home. For the Igbo who die abroad the journey home involves the literal transportation of the corpse back to the village.

The above quotation forms the basis of this research study as it captures the importance of home for most African ethnic groups and their continued identity if they are buried at home. Therefore, the Bakalanga are not an exception as they also subscribe to the same view. One important issue that Smith (2004) raises is that the journey home for the Igbo also symbolises status and wealth, even flamboyance, that is displayed by those who reside in the cities or abroad. This is the material dignity that Golomski (2015) noticed when dealing with urban burials in Swaziland. He argues that death in the urban spaces of Swaziland has become a subject of material display in the form of tombstones and flamboyance that signifies the funeral as successful (*ukulunga kahle*). Also of interest, Golomski (2015) notes that a ritual of tombstone unveiling has been infused into Swazi burials. This is important for this chapter as it illustrates ritual aspects that Africans have also embraced as a result of their migration, urbanisation and adoption of other aspects of modernity.

Burials of married women

The question that this chapter is also interested in is how the spirit of a married woman is reunited with her ancestors if she is buried outside her ancestral territory or domain. Does it matter where a woman is buried? I am aware that burial at one's ancestral home had always had exceptions for married women, who upon marriage relocate to their husbands' homes. This, therefore, implies that marriage separates a woman from her ancestral land, as her grave will be in her marital home. There is a Setswana saying, "*bitla la mosadi le kwa a nyetsweng teng*", meaning "a woman's grave is at her matrimonial home". Literature from Southern Africa, specifically Botswana, testify to this saying but also points out that the burial rituals are performed by her people according to her father's lineage. For example, Mhaka (2014) posits that a married woman's burial ritual is done according to her father's lineage because the deceased married woman's spirit is interested in its clan and, as such, her people are the ones who dig her grave and lead the burial and subsequent rituals to ensure her spirit is reunited with her family. Jung (2019) observes that amongst the Zulu, when a woman is married, she brings with her a kist or box to her in-laws, which symbolises a coffin. This marks a separation from her family and indicates that upon her demise she will be buried at her husband's place. According to my Kalanga informants, in Botswana, a girl child is separated twice from her mother: at birth when the *mbeleko* (umbilical cord) is cut and upon marriage when a cloth (*mbeleko*) the mother used to strap/carry her in is also cut to symbolise the separation. Furthermore, they pointed out that at death the married woman is buried according to her father's ritual practices. In one of the funerals of a married woman I attended in Natale, a village in the central district of Botswana, I observed that when the coffin was

lowered, there was chanting of a totemic poem by the maternal uncle. The poem is quoted verbatim as follows: “*Ngwena isi nga je ngoabilila tjayo tjozha nge longa. A badzimu bedu ba amutjile nlandankadzi iwoyo*” (translated literally as “You are a crocodile that does not struggle to get food. Your food comes with the flowing water. Let our ancestors receive you”).

It is noted from the above that marriage severs women from their ancestry and, as such, they are not reunited with their clan upon death the way in which men and unmarried women are. That is, they are not buried in the land where they were born, where their umbilical cords were buried, and where the spirits of their forefathers dwell. This goes to show the extent to which marriage is a vital gender contract that ensures gender inequality between men and women. A married woman's subservience to her husband is discursively constructed by her relocation to his village in body and spirit. Masenya (2016) confirms the above by noting that amongst the Sotho there is a proverb which states that “a woman's grave belongs to her husband's home village”. The implication of the proverb is that a woman must stay in her marriage and be buried at her husband's place to show that she belongs to the man. Although efforts are made to mitigate against the loss of a married woman's spirit by having her people perform burial rituals, there are limitations to that as they had ceded control of her upon marriage. Therefore, it is not uncommon for her people not to dig her grave, as they may not live in the same village, while others are caught up in work commitments. Because of the traditional practice of *lobola* (bride price), a family that has received *lobola* for their daughter bequeaths responsibility to the man and his family; hence, her natal family usually works on the fringes upon her death.

However, it needs to be noted that women have grown increasingly aware of their rights and not all married women are buried at their matrimonial homes. Some married women I interviewed pointed out that they had relocated to towns and they wish to be buried there. Others reasoned that they have worked hard and attained a high socio-economic status for themselves and, as such, have bought pieces of land at Phomolong in the Phakalane estates, where they will be buried. These social changes do not only affect married women but also rural people, who are looked upon as the custodians of culture. The development of cemeteries means that the burial spaces for men and women are no longer separated as was the case in the past. Amanze (2002) has pointed out that, in the past, Bakalanga men and women were not buried in the same place, as men were buried in kraals and women in the compound, which has implications for burial rituals.

This chapter has alluded to the fact that when people are buried in urban areas, certain rituals are not performed. This shows that urbanism and other aspects of modernity have affected burial rituals of the African people. This same has been observed by

Mothetho (1999), who points out that most Ikalanga burial rituals in Botswana were affected by Christianity. This chapter confirms this, because Christians in rural area do not perform certain traditional rituals as per the convictions of their faith. However, data and observations made amongst Bakalanga in North-East have shown that there are rituals that have survived the formidable wave of modernity such as urbanism and Christianity. These are rituals such as smearing windows with ashes, the fire at the gate and grave identification when death has occurred are still practised in rural areas despite modernity.

Conclusion

Moyo (2017), when talking about *ukugqiba inkaba* (burying of the umbilical cord), highlights the fact that when people want to know where one comes from, they ask “*ikuphi inkaba yabko?*” (where is your umbilical cord buried?). According to her, the burial of the umbilical cord by the Ngoni of Malawi signifies one’s connection to Mother Earth, the place of one’s roots and belonging. Moyo (2017) draws an important analogy by arguing that as the baby is connected to its mother’s womb through the umbilical cord for sustenance and survival, in a similar fashion when burying the umbilical cord, the baby is connected to Mother Earth for belonging and sustenance for life. In conclusion, when we are young, we sleep on our mother’s bosoms, and after death we find comfort in Mother Earth.

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