



A place for traditional and customary practices in funerals during and post COVID-19: Insights from South Africa

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.104.316>

Abstract

President Cyril Ramaphosa and his government declared a National State of Disaster, and banned large gatherings to help contain the spread of coronavirus on March 21, 2020. Less than a week after he banned large gatherings to help contain the spread of coronavirus. Families were also encouraged to bury their deceased loved ones as soon as possible after they leave the mortuary. This left families with little to no time to grieve and execute certain expected customary rituals, some of which are performed on the deceased. Families were prohibited from handling the remains of their loved ones and assigned people by the government assumed that role. The bodies of deceased COVID-19 patients were carefully transported and covered in body bags, but in terms of custom, they should be wrapped in a cow skin or blanket according to customary rules. According to African customary law, close family members should be present in the same room as the deceased and perform rituals to ward off evil deeds performed by those who encounter the body. The worldviews of South African people towards conducting burials was thus disrupted by the COVID-19 regulations. Embalming was also discouraged to minimize interaction with the remains. This paper relied on secondary data from the relevant literature, such as official documentation, scholarly articles and news articles. The paper asserts that the COVID-19 regulations have altered the way people in South Africa perform their traditional funerals. It also describes the difficulties people faced while burying their loved ones according to the strict COVID-19 guidelines which compromised most of the traditional and customary practices. The paper further looks at the funeral processes post COVID-19 and emphasises that people have been led by the spirit of Ubuntu to continue with their traditional ways of conducting funerals that are centred in African spirituality.

Keywords: African spirituality, customary practices, COVID-19; culture, funerals, tradition.



Introduction

Africa's genetic make-up is very diverse, filled with a several cultures and customary practices and that is what makes it Africa, the differences and cultural diversity that exist. The cultures have been deeply rooted in African traditions such that they gave birth to customary practices. Customary practices are referred to as significant practices passed on or inherited from one generation to the next, furthermore, these practices are accepted and respected by the members of a community in that culture (Hinz, 2008; Ndulo, 2011). This therefore signifies the importance of these practices such that community individuals come to a consensus about their importance, how they ought to be practiced and during which cultural event ceremony they are expected to take place (Tebbe, 2008).

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the COVID-19 outbreak, which was caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), to be a pandemic situation. It is predicted that 80% of infected individuals would develop a mild to moderate form of the infection, while 20% would develop a serious type of the infection. The most serious type, which can quickly progress to severe acute respiratory syndrome and other problems that can lead to death, affects 5% of people (Cardoso et al., 2020).

Furthermore, according to Cardoso et al. (2020), there was widespread concern about the novel coronavirus's high rate of transmissibility, which has had a variety of devastating effects, forcing local governments to create, in addition to health emergencies and states of calamity, extraordinary administrative measures for funeral services. Western ceremonies to remember the dead and console mourners had to be shortened or even disrupted as a result of the crisis. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many elements of death and its rites have had to be reformulated.

Like any other culture or in a normality of a life cycle, African customary practices were heavily impacted during the COVID-19, some practices had to be put on hold whilst others which did not pose a great threat of transmission were still allowed to be executed under strict laws and/or regulations. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the government prohibited the movement of bodies between funerals and offered instructions on how to hold funerals. There have been complaints of funeral attendees going over the permitted limit of 30, as well as a lack of social isolation and adequate sanitization plans for mourners (Dzinamarira & Musuka, 2021). Similarly, according to Shongwe (2020), the government of Swaziland (also known as Eswatini) has modified the COVID-19 regulations and given instructions on how to handle the body of someone who has passed away from an "acute respiratory illness." The new regulations have significantly changed how such a deceased person's body is traditionally treated, who is allowed to handle and transport the body, and how the home and burial site are run.

Jindra, and Noret, (2011) agree that during funerals, one of the most secret African processes of death in a family and a funeral takes place. Important customary and cultural practices are supposed to occur such as sitting on a mattress as part of the grieving process, having to wash the corpse of the dead and 'collecting the spirit' of the dead at the scene where the person took their last breath. In essence, the prohibition of these customary practices has posed a serious threat to the African worldview, which includes religion and spirituality. History has taught Africa that neglecting cultural practices may result in them disappearing or being replaced by Western methods (Schicho, 1992; Meko, 2012). As much as COVID-19 has had a traumatic impact on the social and mental aspect of the society (Elmer et al, 2020), clearly even the customary processes are a victim to being side-lined and overlooked.

Under the pandemic the richness Africa's characteristics of customary practices has become a factor that would determine where the fight against COVID-19 is headed (Bruns et al., 2020). In addition, unfortunately, all these were exercised as a means to curb the spread of the virus and it was done so in the expense of the African customary practices being prohibited. Based on the challenges that were faced by South Africans in preparation and during funerals, this



study gives details on how the COVID-19 pandemic has disturbed traditional and customary practices that are linked to funerals. The study's argument focuses on things during and post COVID-19 period in South Africa.

Traditional cultural practises in Africa

Culture, as it is commonly known, refers to a set of characteristics and values that distinguish a group of people from other groups or societies. Language, clothing, music, work, arts, religion, dancing, and so on are all examples of these unusual characteristics. It also includes social norms, taboos, and beliefs of a group of people. Here, values are described as beliefs about what is right and wrong, as well as what is important in life (Idang, 2015).

According to Ezedike (2009: 455), African culture:

...refers to the sum total of shared attitudinal inclinations and capabilities, art, beliefs, moral codes and practices that characterize Africans. It can be conceived as a continuous, cumulative reservoir containing both material and non-material elements that are socially transmitted from one generation to another. African culture, therefore, refers to the whole lot of African heritage.

Culture is a dynamic whole that represents the totality of the African in a society, and that it is a lifelong phase that outlasts birth and death. Knowledge, belief, art, values, rules, and customs are all part of African culture (Falola, 2016; Amponsah et al., 2018). Traditional cultural practices represent a community's values and beliefs over a long period, often generations. Every social class in the world has its own set of traditional cultural traditions and values, some of which benefit all members and others of which have become detrimental to a particular community (Maluleke, 2012).

African worldviews

The way a person appears to understand his or her connection with social structures, natural things, other people, and spirituality is described by Barker (1999) as a worldview. Therefore an African centred worldview is also known as an Afrocentric worldview which focuses on African cultural beliefs, practices and values. Asante (1987) added that an African-centric or Afrocentric worldview is one that is founded on African cultural traditions, practices, and values. Barker (1999:114) defines culture as "the customs, habits, skills, arts, values, ideology and religious behaviour of a group of people". Graham and Al-Krenawi (2003:9-10) define culture as "the totality of ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge, and a way of life of a group of people who share a certain historical, religious, racial, linguistic, ethnic or social background".

African culture encompasses African people's traditions, beliefs, principles, knowledge, skills, arts, values, and way of life. A worldview influenced by African culture is referred to as an African worldview (Barker, 1999; Graham & Al-Krenawi, 2003). Several scholars, including Van der Walt (1997; 2019), Kamalu (1990), and Gyekye (1995), support the idea that the African and Western worldviews exist and are distinct. People do not see things in the same way, according to Torrey (1986), and how they see things is influenced by their cultural values. Ideas, beliefs, time perceptions, and the idea of cause and effect are all taught culturally. In different places, the universe is defined differently.

African spirituality is closely intertwined with African worldview in the sense that African people's beliefs form their worldviews. Deeper human values, behaviours, beliefs, and rituals are all part of indigenous African spirituality, which is focused on a variety of African worldviews (Gumo, 2017). These are based on African people's experiences south of the Sahara, articulated and lived in the African sense, influenced by African issues, needs, and ambitions, expressed using symbols derived from the immediate African climate, and passed down by African forefathers before colonialism. African spirituality is practiced in different ways



in different communities, which explains why African worldview is articulated in plural terms (Gumo et al., 2012).

Customary laws and funerals in Africa

Death-related beliefs and behaviours cut to the heart of one's vital sense of human destiny and meaning. They go even further in Africa, where they are deeply interested in social structure, community identity, and even politics. In funerals, religious practices, kin groups, and social relationships in general play a larger role than in the West, in which these events are handled in smaller, more personal circles. Maboea (2002:109) cites Makhubu (1988) to argue that the idea of "death" is limited to animals and plants for Africans, not humans. When it comes to human beings, death is viewed as a very negative concept; instead, Africans tend to use phrases like "he or she departed from us" or "he or she is no longer," (Baloyi, 2014).

According to Rahner (2011:112), the well-known concept of death as the separation of soul and body fails to indicate "the explicitly human aspect of human death." Some theorists characterize death as the termination of the human organism's integrated functioning. Schmidt (2006:40) uses the metaphor of "the passage to the spiritual realm, which is represented as crossing a river" to explain death. Mbiti (1991) considers death to be one of life's most universal and enigmatic events. Adeyemo (1979) claims that death is a barrier between the realms of humans and spirits, and that the ontological departure of an individual necessitates rituals aimed at bridging the two worlds.

Tjibeba (1997) believes that death is a mystery to all Africans; he goes on to claim that religious rites help to justify the deceased's passage to another state of existence. It should be noted that this statement demonstrates that Africans believe in the continuation of life after death, which is why they aspire to maintain a good relationship with their ancestors (Baloyi, 2014). Many African scholars recognize and emphasize, according to Mugambi (1989), that death is not the end of people's existence: the "dead" will become ancestors who will continue to affect the lives of their surviving descendants.

It is believed that if someone does not attend a funeral and engage in its rites, they will be plagued by the ancestors' wrath before they meet those ritual specifications. According to Walter (1999), Paul Rosenblatt, an authority on grief across cultures, claims that he is unaware of any society where bereavement emotions are not influenced and regulated, and where rituals are not present to accompany and regulate them. This is also valid for Africans, since only a few people would like to be excused from the ceremonies, while the majority would prefer to participate where possible.

Death rituals often play an important role in bringing people together, especially distant relatives. There are many taboos in place to ensure that those who attend the funeral feel more protected than those who do not. Baloyi et al., (2014) who cited Dipone (2012), stated that the latter briefly discusses in her article 'Pot dance fights bad luck', how the Batswana people, especially the *Barolong* and *Batlhaping*, support the ritual of dancing around a pot of meat, raising their skirts and revealing their underwear as a death ritual., .

According to one family member, if they do not perform the *manpsala* (a traditional ritual) rite, the deceased's family members would become unlucky and suffer from *vutha* (a flame curse) or lose their employment (Baloyi et al, 2014). Another traditional practice in most African nations appears to be hand washing. Qwazi (2012) described Jimmy Matyu, a late well-known journalist, as to have been conducting this practice while paying his respects at the funeral of a close friend. Gerber (2012) discussed this traditional practice, stating that mourners are supposed to clean the graveyard dust from their feet and wash their hands in the water placed at the home's gate for the purpose of eliminating any terrible misfortune from befalling them.



Research Methodology

This paper uses a literature review approach that includes relevant news articles and academic articles to investigate how COVID-19's disruption of traditional burial customs has impacted cultural processes during local funerals. The main literature that the study sourced focuses on African spirituality, lockdown regulations, funeral rituals, the role of the community and aspects relating to a mourning family.

Funeral processes during COVID-19

Similarly, funerals are matched with unique procedures within African culture; typically, the corpse within the casket is anticipated to arrive at the house on Friday and stay the night. It varies by country, but multiple candles are typically set around or surrounding the casket and kept lighted throughout the night (Setsiba, 2012; De Smet and Breyne, 2017). Also, it is expected that there will be a mattress in the same room where the casket is placed to allow ladies to sit on the mattress to grieve the departed, but due to the hastened processes of the COVID-19 to avoid viral spread or contamination, this does not occur. The family is not permitted to view or observe the body before to the funeral, which implies that the process of bathing and dressing the corpse will not take place.

There was no time to say goodbye during COVID-19, because the burial process was rushed and customary practices were incomplete and some skipped the needful; aspects because of time. Therefore, aside from dealing with a devastating loss, the family was unable to hold a proper funeral due to the significant danger of infection with the novel coronavirus (Cardoso et al., 2020). Furthermore, the process of mourning and sitting in the mattress was hampered since, when the epidemic initially began, families were required to bury their loved ones within 72 hours of death due to a huge volume of deceased individuals and bodies piling up at the morgue. The deceased's bereavement and the gathering of family and friends for sympathy and unity were thus all abruptly halted (SAnews.gov.za, 2020).

Such things as discussed by Motsoeneng and Modise (2020) make allowing the processes of African spirituality and traditions to be difficult to perform even though they were regulation placed, they cannot be properly articulated just as the people cannot go to the hospital to 'collect the spirit' of their family member. It is due to such regulations and that an important aspect of African culture was interrupted. With the rise in cases and rapid spread of the pandemic, a horrific humanitarian disaster has been added to a sanitary and funeral emergency. Another "dehumanization" aspect that mischaracterizes the funeral tradition is the need for post-death treatment to avoid virus contagion, which includes burial staff wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), shorter funerals, a smaller number of people attending the service, and a secured coffin (Cardoso et al., 2020).

The pandemic threat affected each person differently, depending on their prior experiences, individual functioning dimensions, life contexts, protective resources, and postural instability. A popular trend, especially among the younger generation, is to dismiss the possibility of infection by the novel coronavirus said (Jaja et al., 2020). The use of a protective resource to lessen the impact of the health emergency and the sensation of being "immune" to COVID-19 can be viewed as a way to cope with the distress caused by a pandemic that affects all indistinctly.

However, when someone close became ill, the illusion of omnipotent power over life faded, and the idea of perceived invulnerability crumbled. In addition to coping with a traumatic loss, families were discouraged from gradually preparing themselves emotionally because the loss occurs in the sense of acute illness, and there was a high risk of infection, which makes it difficult for individuals to conduct a dignified burial. According to Muturi et al (2021), the convention of the South African government limited the number of people allowed to attend a funeral to 100 or fewer, with a distance of approximately one and a half meters between them if the venue was too small to accommodate the required number of people. Furthermore, no



more than 50% of the venue's capacity was permitted to be used, and all health regulations had to be strictly followed. Night vigils or other events before or after funerals were also prohibited under the then new regulations (Jaja et al., 2020).

Dzinamarira and Musuka (2021) stated that the coffins could not be opened, preventing a rite that is an important part of traditional beliefs. As a result, in addition to the devastating loss of a loved one, people are unable to participate in the final rites, which include opportunities for communion, complicity, and association with the sacred, as well as to begin the required process of separation. Giving one's last respects to a loved one is a mental health act that encourages people to make amends and move on with their lives. Normal funerals which were attended by a mass of people were abolished and necessary restrictions on burials were enforced in the extraordinary regime imposed by the pandemic, causing more disruption than comfort (Dzobo et al., 2020).

COVID-19 protocols during funerals

Although the lockdown restrictions allowed for a limit of 50 attendees during a funeral, some families ignored this rule, resulting in a flood of new COVID-19 cases in many South Africa provinces with the Eastern Cape as one of the leading provinces. Social separation is not always observed at funerals. Food and water are shared, for example, and people sit close to each other, exchanging pleasantries. Furthermore, Rwafa-Ponela et al. (2022) stated that cultural practices such as washing hands in a single basin after a burial provide a possibility for guests to get the infection. Also, the use of a mask to cover the mouth has not been effectively enforced, thus singing at funerals was another opportunity for the infection to spread (Kgadiman & Leburu, 2022).

Several people continued to hold church events, and during church services, congregants sang and worshipped loudly, sat close together, and frequently made contact with contaminated surfaces. COVID-19 has been shown to be extremely contagious, spreading primarily by droplets or close contact with asymptomatic carriers and infected individuals. As a result, specialists have warned that utmost caution should be exercised when dealing with an infected person (Jaja et al., 2020).

Bank and Sharpley (2020) conducted a study on COVID-19 in rural South Africa, saying that the rural Transkei was part of a national police campaign, sending the message from the government that lockdown measures were not optional. According to one traditional leader, "there was a funeral in a neighbour's house, when more than 100 people came." Authorities took offense and stormed the location while the traditional healer was still in contact with the deceased.

The traditional leader went on to say that the unannounced police raid jeopardized the process of speaking with the departed, threatening the funeral's authenticity. Nonetheless, it was evident that the police wanted rural populations to understand that the laws were mandatory, and they appeared to be keen on sowing terror. The warning was that individuals who did not follow the new guidelines would soon be imprisoned (Bank & Sharpley, 2020, Khosa-Nkatini & White, 2021).

All funerals had to be notified to the local police station, and police had to be present to check that the rules and regulations were followed as required. It's easy to image the chaos and confusion that ensued when relatives and mourners were forced to confront regulations that made no sense to them in terms of their understanding of customary standards. Kgadima and Leburu (2022) argued that most Africans who understand and practice African religion believed the authorities disrupted their ritual and the spirit of the deceased. They preferred jail time/fines to spirits who would later haunt them for failing to execute correct burial procedures.

In a situation where the size of local funerals has expanded over time, limiting attendance to 50 persons meant that many people who wished to attend were turned down. It was difficult



to send out invitations because funerals were typically open occasions that anyone in the hamlet might attend if they wanted to pay their respects (Graham, 2022). Individuals would end up inviting themselves, which increased the number of attendees. In such cases, the police would appear and order everyone who wasn't on the invitee list to leave; if they refused, the police would take punitive measures (Van Overmeire & Bilsen, 2020).

The impact on cultural socializations

The study argues that cultural socialization was hindered by negligence, so that cultural practices can no longer have a smooth transition, and the culture from one generation to the next is now difficult to archive. Juang and Syed (2010) refers to cultural socialization as a significant aspect to ensure a growth and continuation of a particular culture or customary practices from one generation to the next. So, in instances where culture has not been properly socialised the history and practices of this culture becomes vague and/ or in certain instances it completely disappears.

The prohibition of these customary practices did not only change the way socialization takes place, but it will also have an effect in the practices themselves. South Africans being the community of unity and cooperation this has also become a customary practice particularly during funerals or ceremonial events. Walters et al (2021) claimed that South African have been prohibited from having a family gathering in large numbers and this was essentially to help stop the spread of the virus and this has had an impact on the custom, thus the disturbance of the way of life in supporting one another during these ceremonies.

Africa without its culture and customary practices is incomplete. For example, death is seen as important part of African spirituality. When a person has died they ascend to be higher beings (ancestors) in which they will be watching over by those left behind, such as family members (Middleton, 1999). Henceforth, it is significant that the send-off of these individuals must be handled with importance and carefulness, and this includes the practice or using of traditional medicine or *muthi* to bathe the corpse and to speak a few words to the dead. As such these teachings of how to perform these rituals were lost under COVID-19 as the processes of the funerals was hindered so the traditional practices could not be passed down.

Funerals post COVID-19 in South Africa

The National State of Disaster has been lifted as of April 5, 2022. This meant that individuals were free to return to their ancient burial rituals. For some South Africans who believe in African practices, the repeal of the COVID-19 restrictions is the work of ancestors who observed how long-standing traditions like as burial ceremonies were jeopardized. Ancestors must be 'kept happy' at all times for Africans so that they might bless those who are still alive. It is believed that they are still a part of the family's everyday routine (Adedibu, 2020). Additionally, ancestors are considered stewards and are thought to know more than the living. When they are delighted or furious, they can bring both good and bad luck (Edwards et al., 2009).

For most people, returning to normalcy involves providing time for grief, comfort, and support, as opposed to the COVID-19 period, when such processes were omitted due to time constraints. Returning to normalcy entails allowing the entire village to participate in the burial process. In the African culture, a village/community is considered a family. According to the African setting, family is more than only biological relations. It is not limited to the immediate or extended family. As per Jaja et al (2020), family is family, and terminology like "cousin" are considered Western ideas. Your cousin is your sibling in the African culture. There are no 'nieces' or 'nephews'; your siblings' children are considered your children. At the time of the funeral, the local church, the burial society, or just a passer-by who hears about the bereavement and comes to assist the family are all considered family members.

Jaja et al (2020) further stated that, everyone that is present on the day and at the funeral place is there to mourn alongside the deceased's family and to pay their last respects. Africans



will often travel more than 500 kilometres to attend the funeral of their grandparents' neighbours. According to Baloyi (2014), attending other people's funerals demonstrates your faithfulness, which raises the possibility that mourners will support you if a member of your own family passes away. For Africans, attending a burial in vast numbers of people who have travelled great distances is not only customary, but also required. People travel great distances to attend a neighbour's funeral who they knew since elementary school.

South Africans were given the opportunity to practice Ubuntu and help those in grief following COVID-19. Chigangaidze et al (2022) states that Ubuntu in the African context is not restricted to a description by scholars or philosophers. It's a way of life for them. When there is a celebration, such as a wedding, the entire village attends and participates in the festivities. Attendance by 'invitation only' is frowned upon in villages, and many people take offense because they believe they are all family. As one family mourns, the entire town mourns with them. As a result, funerals in rural areas and some townships are always well attended (Van Hout & Wessels, 2021; Khosa-Nkatini & White, 2021).

This paper makes the case that there is also a chance for African spirituality to flourish after COVID-19, guided by the spirit of Ubuntu and African worldviews. Ubuntu is an African philosophy that connects communities by showing humanity towards one another. Therefore in this case, applying Ubuntu during funeral processes shows the interconnectedness of the community and the good relationship they have which enables them to show compassion and humanity to the mourners (Bhuda & Marumo, 2022). The funeral rites serve to reunite the family and the community through rituals. The African spirituality's rituals help ensure that the entire funeral procedure is carried out successfully (Bank & Sharpley, 2020). In order to make the ancestors happy and ensure that the deceased's spirit is welcomed into the spiritual world, rituals done during burials allow individuals the chance to share spiritual knowledge and rely on one another. Each community has a responsibility to safeguard its indigenous knowledge while maintaining its unity and assisting one another in performing the ceremonies properly (Kgatle & Segalo, 2021).

Conclusion

Many aspects of customary practices associated with dying, death and funerals have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Visits to the dying person and funerals have been restricted due to concerns about disease transmission. This has thrown off the rituals and rites that take place before and during the funeral. African belief and worldviews about death and funerals seemed to clash with government regulations on how funerals should be handled during COVID-19. The study has argued that the COVID-19 regulations did not even allow family members to mourn and process the death of their loved ones in peace because of the timelines set for burial by the government and the changes on the funeral processes. The "new standard" that was introduced during COVID-19 period has altered how South Africans view funerals and such disruptions continued until the virus was eradicated. The study further stated that although rituals may vary from community to community, they all contain the element of social interaction. Funeral rites offer a chance for mourners to get together to remember and honour the deceased while also acting as a staging area. Now that South Africa is past COVID-19, people are permitted to follow their customary protocols and mourning their loved ones according to their worldviews which are long standing culture.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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