



Culture

and control in South Africa: Funerals in a time of Covid-19

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal'
<https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

The twin priorities of preserving health and protecting the economy have rightfully taken centre stage in the popular discourse in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, presented as an apparent dichotomy or even a zero-sum game. The debate is wide-ranging and polarised between those arguing for hard lockdowns to save lives irrespective of the associated risks of bringing the economy to a halt, and others arguing for the economy to get going again notwithstanding the health and death consequences. The latter position for example argues that the lockdown cure might be worse than the disease itself leading to even greater hardships, especially for the poor and unemployed.

Following this line of argument, a recent report by actuaries warns that the current strict lockdowns may cause 29 times more deaths than they are designed to prevent. At the heart of the report is the notion that, "Viruses kill. But the economy sustains lives, and poverty kills too." (See: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-05-05-actuaries-warn-ramaphosa-of-a-humanitarian-disaster-to-dwarf-covid-19-if-restrictive-lockdown-is-not-lifted/>).

Between these two extremes there is a wide variety of positions on how to balance the exigencies of the economy with the priority of health, or as President Cyril Ramaphosa indicates, "between lives and livelihoods". Yet, a fuller appreciation of the impact of COVID-19 must also consider its cultural consequences and in this piece I highlight some of the dilemmas in relation to funeral rites.

It is well-known that funerals have been a principal source of the spread of the coronavirus in the Eastern Cape, but beyond merely pointing out the hotspots in order to respond with practical measures to curb the spread, there needs to be a deeper reflection on the long term consequences of the lockdown regulations on such local cultural practices. The very abrupt change to people's lives opens up possibilities for considering new ways of doing things. We start from the premise that culture is not an immutable entity chained to particular traditions. Instead it is dynamic, responding to changing circumstances, especially under conditions

of crisis which may offer transformative prospects. The COVID-19 pandemic has elicited the sort of reactions amounting to a national and even global crisis. This article does not engage in the debate about the veracity of these responses. It does not pretend to provide answers on whether the lockdowns were necessary or even advisable; it merely seeks to raise questions about past practices in the hope that the social disruption of the lockdowns may lead to some reflection on our value systems and how they inform our behaviour.

There is no doubt that the very strict regulations around funerals have battered previously held rituals and traditions. Night vigils are prohibited as well as hugging and kissing, with an insistence on social (physical?) distancing, only fifty people are permitted to attend and only close relatives are allowed to travel to funerals. Health Minister Mkhize for example, in an article entitled, 'Funerals cannot be the same again' says quite unequivocally that "So we would like to ask our people now to change the approach as they deal with the issues of funerals, It is important for us to say that social distancing still remains a very important issue to curb this pandemic. Unfortunately, we've observed that quite often during funerals, as people are giving each other comfort and hugging, they'll be holding each other very closely, and some are crying, maybe some are coughing, and so on". (See: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-19-funerals-cannot-be-the-same-again-zweli-mkhize/>)

In addition to regulations concerning funerals in general, more restrictive rules apply to the funerals of people who die of COVID-19. The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), strongly recommends that these people should be cremated. However, if cremation is not possible, very strict measures have to accompany a burial: the body must be placed in a triple body bag, labelled with a biohazard warning tag "hazard Group 4 Pathogens" then buried in a



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nontransparent coffin (See: **The Covid-19 burial problem for South Africa. Sarah Smit**). 14 Apr 2020 <https://mg.co.za/article/2020-04-14-the-covid-19-burial-problem-for-south-africa/>).

While these changes have dramatically shifted the very essence of funeral rites, the regulations have also had the unintended consequence of relieving many people of the intense pressure to hold large funerals. A family's honour is at stake on account of how many cattle, sheep and chickens they've slaughtered, how much money they spent on the coffin or casket and generally how grand the preparations are for the funeral. Everyone is welcome to pay respects to the departed and to comfort the grieving relatives, often in very close proximity to each other as a collective effort to share the grief. However, there is a very thin line between the laudable community response of care and solidarity in the offering of condolences and the crass commercialism and overt consumerism which have become the norm for funerals for very many communities across the country. While the latter has clearly been a major burden on family finances for the majority, the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to rethink how these things are done.

The lockdown regulations around funerals have had multiple responses which are evolving. While during the initial stages of the pandemic many simply ignored the regulations more recently, people are willing to reconsider the ways in which they've done things before. For example, in a recent article Lethu Nxumalo highlights the huge savings because of the highly restrictive conditions imposed by the lockdown. She cites one mourning relative, "When my sister passed away recently, we saved so much. We had no cow, no tents, no buses, no after tears, no distant relatives over a long period of time. We

honestly spend unnecessary money on our funerals." (See: <https://www.iol.co.za/sunday-tribune/news/families-save-thousands-on-funeral-costs-during-covid-19-lockdown-47246077>)

In this respect also, the king of the Amampondomise, Zwelozuko Matiwane has issued a ban on funeral services in order to re-introduce the practice of *ukuqhusheka*, or secret burials, changing the nature of funerals from huge affairs involving the entire community, to private family observances with the deceased buried on the same day without a prolonged and expensive fanfare. Nosebenzile Ntlantsana a local leader follows this logic by supporting a recovery of this ancient, but lost tradition of secret burials when he says, "Families get into huge debt in order to pay for funerals nowadays. As traditional leaders we often need to intervene in settling disputes between families and service providers when the families cannot pay. It is heart-breaking to see how much pressure there is to have big funerals these days - maybe this practice will help families especially in our communities." (See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52571862>).

Harking back to an ancient tradition like this could serve to legitimate a new way of dealing with fundamental questions of how we respect the dead without bankrupting families and how we may encourage a spirit of togetherness during a bereavement without compromising peoples' health.

At the same time we have to take account of deeply ingrained cultural mores. For example, Professor Jabulani Maphalala says, "According to Zulu culture, the body of a deceased person must spend the night at home before being taken to a cemetery the following day. When you fetch the deceased person from the mortuary you must communicate to him or her and say

that you are taking them home. If you don't say the right things that are acceptable to the ancestors, the soul of the deceased will be left behind at the mortuary from where it will start wandering. This can cause a lot of suffering to the deceased person's children later in life," (See: **Coronavirus hits burial rites in South Africa. <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/covid-19-hits-burial-rites-20200311>**).

Yet in reality, it is now accepted practice to bury the body prior to holding the funeral service which according to Brian Haynes, Director of CODESA Funeral Services in Umngazana, near Port St Johns in the Eastern Cape, represents a change in perspective of deeply held ideas on the relation between ancestors and the living. It remains to be seen whether these changes are irrevocable, but Haynes is convinced that it is highly unlikely that people will return to the old ways of preparing the body to meet the ancestors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has planted the seeds of change and people are already responding in ways unimaginable just two months ago. At the very least the pandemic has thrown into sharp relief that there is a multiplicity of cultural practices around funerals and an acceptance of this diversity is vital for the battle against intolerance. In some cases the pandemic has inspired ingenious adaptations as people seek to establish their equilibrium in a time deep social disruption. But we must look beyond the current crisis at the kinds of post-pandemic behaviour which opens up possibilities for progressive outcomes for the majority. We have to be very wary of blithely hankering after a normality of extreme inequality and as far as the future of funerals is concerned, let's use the disruption occasioned by COVID-19 to re-examine the values which underpin our respect for the departed with the kind of lightness suggested by Roy. ☀