

Perception of Burial Rituals as Psychological Healing among the Indigenous Vhavenda in South Africa

Musehane, N. M.

*M.E.R.Mathivha Centre for African Languages, Arts and Culture
School of Human and Social Sciences, University of Venda, Thohoyandou,
Limpopo Province, South Africa. E-mail: musehanen@univen.ac.za*

ABSTRACT

This study was a survey of the different burial rituals performed by the Vhavenda indigenous community of Limpopo, South Africa. The aim was to establish their meaning in relation to psychological healing. It focused on the rituals performed from the day of death, day of burial and after the burial of a deceased. To accomplish this, the study used the qualitative methodology and participatory observation to gather the data as well as analysed these rituals because this method is suitable for the study as the researcher had the opportunity of interacting with the respondents to gather data for analysis. The findings revealed that When a Venda person dies, the community would performed certain rituals from the day after the death to the day the remains of the deceased is laid to rest. These rituals are performed to pacify the bereaved family. From the day after the death, a few rituals are performed for psychological healing in the community. These rituals are not performed at any other time, but if such rituals are not performed, the perception of the relative of the deceased is that their spirits are not psychologically healed.

Keywords: *Burial Rituals, Vhavenda, death, psychological healing*

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have defined the term 'burial' differently. In this work 'burial' will mean "the act, action, or ceremony of putting a dead body into a grave (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1985). On the other hand, Slater (1992) states that if something is buried, it is hidden under a heap of other things. When a Venda person dies, the community would performed certain rituals from the day after the death to the day the remains of the deceased is laid to rest. These rituals are performed to pacify the bereaved family. The people's perception is that the rituals have healed the community psychologically. Therefore, this study sought to analyze the different rituals and their susceptibilities of the bereaved family in relation to their psychological healing. For instance, when a Muvenda passes on, the first thing his/her family would do is to turn the picture frames of the deceased hanging on the wall back to wall. They then smear the house windows with liquid and ashes then allowed to dry. No radio or television is played during this period. When members of the family speak to each other, they do so softly. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says that in doing so, the living is able to communicate with the family of the deceased. One should not rejoice when there is mourning, they said. The smearing of white ashes to the house, Vho Tshavhungwe of Tshaulu (2011) believes that it is a symbol of stopping something because of hurt feelings and unhappiness.

When a man passed on, his wife is no longer allowed to sleep on their bed. They remake the bed and remove the mattresses. Who Nyamutshagole (2011) believes that the Vhavenda do not sleep on beds if the deceased has a wife who is mourning his death. Who Nyamutshagole (2011) says that the wife should not enjoy sleeping comfortably on that bed while the family is mourning. When a Muvenda person has passed on, in the family there is a way in which death should be reported to the entire community. Before the arrival of the missionaries, community member would be informed according to relative protocol, hence an adage says "*Lufu vha vhidzela tshine*" literally translated, it means people are informed of a death based on how closely they are related. They do not report death to strangers. Before the coming of missionaries, therefore, community members would report death to death by word of mouth.

Later they would choose a burial site in the yard. The next step would be to send children to another village. Death was not announced to children and burial rituals are performed in their absence. However, when they returned, they would be shown the grave and rituals would be performed. If one of the children asked where the deceased was, the parents would inform the children that the person had gone to a faraway place to visit relatives and he/she would not come home soon. In those days there were no mortuaries. Nowadays things are done differently. The study focused on the rituals performed by the Vhavenda Indigenous Community of Limpopo, South Africa. It focuses on the burial rituals that are performed immediately after one passes on and how community communicate the death with relatives the day of death, day of burial and after the burial of the deceased. This study will investigate all the activities performed to pacify the deceased and the bereaved souls. The language of Vhavenda Indigenous Community is the Tshivenda. Tshivenda is one of the twelve languages in South Africa. The languages in South Africa are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, IsiZulu, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu and Sign.

REPORTING: BURIAL RITUALS PERFORMED FROM FIRST DAY OF THE DECEASED TO THE DAY OF BURIAL

When a Muvenda dies, the death should be reported by the one who knows it. The responsible person in the family has to first report the death in the family. It could be the father in the family and the aunt of the family, hence the proverb "*U tshi suma muhulu lufu, u suma u tshi lu divha*", Tshivenda LRC (n.d:89) meaning that you should know about the death before you can report to the elderly because they may want to have the details. This death is then reported to the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) during a special programme for announcing deaths as well as date, place and time of burial. The programme is '*Ro tovhowa*' we have given up/lost' or '*zwa dzimpfu* which means about deaths. When a Muvenda dies, whether he/she is a member of civic association or a church, a Christian pastor will be invited to give the word of God. If he/she was contributing monies to the civic association, the community will make sure that vigil prayers are held as from the Tuesday evening until Friday evening, the week of the burial. Every day members of the family will call a pastor to preach all week long. On the Fridays some families arrange a memorial service. At this service, people talk about the life of the deceased

and what he/she has contributed in the development of community. Some families prefer to go to the mortuary to pay their last respect to the deceased. Some may weep. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says it is believed that the weeping cleanses the hearts of those who knew the deceased. The people are encouraged to weep, they do so because Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) believes that weeping is thus part of psycho-social healing.

Identification of grave site: When a Venda person passes on, certain rituals are performed in his/her community. From the day after the death, there are rituals that are performed for psychological healing in the community. These rituals are not performed at any other time. Early in the morning the adult members of the family will go to identify the burial site. Vho Tshavhungwe of Tshaulu (2011) says that the Vhavenda believe that an adult person should sprinkle snuff at the grave site. The sprinkling snuff, Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) supports Vho Tshavhungwe of Tshaulu (2011) position that it helps to move the hard rocks that could have been there.

The deceased's corpse's arrival at the home: On the Friday or on the day of burial, the hearse arrives at the home with the deceased. The family members take the coffin to the room where the deceased used to sleep. When they get there, the wife of the deceased and other women gather inside the house. The old women are supporting the wife of the deceased. Vho Tshavhungwe (2011) of Tshaulu says that the Vhavenda community believes that the wife of the deceased should not be left alone in the house. She should be kept busy with other persons to prevent her from thinking too much about the deceased.

Lighting of candles: When the coffin is in the house, lit candles are put around the coffin. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says that the Vhavenda community believes that the deceased is in a dark place where he/she needs light to see well. Hence during death one cannot see clearly.

BURIAL OF MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL FAMILY AND COMMONERS

Members of the royal family are buried in the evening. They are buried in a separate grave yard demarcated for the royal family. Once mourners enter the grave yard, they are not allowed to talk. This is done to avoid noise disturbance for the deceased. Women enter the demarcated area or graveyard topless. They do not cover their breasts. When they enter the grave yard there will be a person controlling and announcing every step that should be taken at the grave yard. For instance, he will announce when they are in the grave yard that only limited singing is allowed. When the coffin is lowered into the grave, some members of the family would be ululating. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says that the royal grave site is a sacred place. When they are in the grave yard there is limited singing to avoid noise that those who had long been laid to rest.

A commoner is buried in the morning. On the morning of the burial, funeral attendants bring the corpse early in the morning. People who know the deceased will identify the corpse. This is to ensure that they do not bury a wrong person. Around sunset every day, vigil prayer meetings led by Christian pastor are held. The family will ask a Christian religious man to preside during the burial. Whether the deceased is a Christian or not a pastor will preside over the burial. During the morning service on burial, the pastor will

preach the word of God, then carry the coffin to the grave when the coffin gets out of the house, the relatives of the deceased ask the first-born child of the deceased to crawl under the coffin from one side to the other and back, while the coffin is held up high. If the child of the deceased is not around or if they are afraid to do so, they can use a stick. They throw it under the coffin and return it. Typical South Africans would feel psycho-socially healed if such things are done. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says if it is not done; the perception of the people is that the deceased son or daughter's body will be weak, the relative of the deceased would feel psychologically unfulfilled. When the coffin is driven from the homestead to the cemetery or grave yard, members of the community would ask the driver to stop along the way. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says it is believed that the corpse should rest on the way to the grave yard. The car carrying the corpse cannot be driven at a high speed. If this ritual is not observed, the deceased family members will feel disrespected.

Arrival of commoners' corpse at the graveyard: When commoners enter the grave yard gate demarcated for commoners, men will be manning the gate, checking people entering the grave yard, whether they all have the appropriate attire. No one without jacket or pull-over is allowed to enter the grave yard. If the individual is a female, she is expected to wear a hat or shawl on her head. Some communities do not allow women to wear trousers into the grave yard. Doing this, the community members feel disrespected as well as the believe that the deceased is also disrespected. The pastor would command that the coffin be lowered down to the grave. When the coffin is lowered to the grave, the family may be requested to queue up and sprinkle some soil on the grave. This is done to show that each member participated in the burial of the relative. Before the advent of tombstones, the Vhavenda people used to bury the deceased in the yard in an area demarcated for burial. They would cut 'mutshetshe' the thorny shrub or small tree blinkblaar-wag-, n-bietjie or 'muswoswo' a succulent shrub and put it on the grave. Both shrubs would dry up and nobody would straddle on the grave because the thorns would prick them. The muswoswo would thrive and grow on the grave. No one will stand on the grave because of the stinging milky juice. This equally applies to the ritual of planting plants of the grave.

Pouring of water on the grave: Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says the Vhavenda believes that water should be poured on the grave. That is why the Vhavenda would bury the deceased with a pail of water. However, these days things have changed, with many people using cement mixed with sand. It is imperative that cement should be mixed with the water. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) believes that water cools down the death. It is believed that the deceased is on hot mats. He/she therefore, needs some water to cool him/her down. Without it, the Vhavenda community would not be pacified.

Pouring of seeds on the grave after burial: After they have queued with the soil, the elderly queue with seeds in their hands. They throw mielies or pumpkin seeds on the grave. They pick a handful of seeds and throw them on the grave. The remainder is kept for use during ploughing. The throwing of seeds, Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says resembles the verse in the Bible where they plant the corpse as seeds which would later 'germinate' to resemble the resurrection.

Burial rites during the Tombstone era: Before the tombstone is properly set up, women may carry a winnowing basket of maize seeds and a calabash full of water. They sprinkle the seeds and pour some water on the grave. This is an indication showing that the person will 'germinate' with a new life. The water cools the death. In addition to the seeds, they may break a calabash full of water. When this is performed, mourners will feel that the burial was conducted properly. Water is used to cool the death so that it should not return to the same family. In the case of Christians, they may then unveil (uncover the tombstone) afterwards. This resembles the traditional way when, after death, a stone is removed and life goes on as normal and there is no more weeping. Three young people are selected to perform the ritual. Two of them remove the sheet covering the tombstone, and the other reads what is on the tombstone. The inscription shows when the deceased was born, followed by the date he/she had passed on, and the date of burial. The last words would be "Rest in peace or Go well or we have witnessed your good work while you were still living".

Eating of food after the burial: After the burial, relatives of the deceased are served a meal. When thanking the mourners who attended the burial, a spokesperson for the family invites all mourners to return to the homestead of the deceased. The purpose of this invitation is to cleanse the mourners' hands. Thereafter, they can have a meal or partake in the eating of food. It is in accordance with Venda custom to wash hands before a meal. If the deceased was from a poor family, however, local people are asked not to go to the house of the deceased for a meal. They would go straight home and not to the house of the deceased, to eat food. Only relatives of the deceased go to the deceased's home where they will *thukhukana thoho ya nzie*. Implying that they would share the little that is there. This will be seen by the bereaved family as a goodwill gesture.

Collection of roots found when digging grave: After the burial has been completed, the family of the deceased collects the roots that were dug up from the grave. These would be taken to a traditionalist who will boil them and they would be drunk by the relatives. This is performed to prevent death from returning to the family (Vho Tshavhungwe of Tshaulu, 2011). After the burial, relatives of the deceased shave their heads. Two weeks after the burial the community may not perform any activity in the fields. This is the period of bad omens. If one is found working he or she is fined. However, there is a modification nowadays, a person is buried today and tomorrow they go to work. If you do not go to work nobody will support you.

Putting the deceased's utensils on the grave: After the burial, the family of the deceased will break all the utensils that the deceased used and place them on the grave. Things like dishes, basins, cups are placed there. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says that the breaking of the utensils symbolises the end of the deceased. Secondly she says that the community believes that the deceased should not come back in spirit for the utensils. The deceased should go with his utensils which he/she would use on his/her way. Probably, the grave is viewed as another planet where certain things are done as though it is in real life situation.

Closure of the gate of the deceased's homestead: After the burial is over, members of the family return home. When they arrive at the home of the deceased they close the gate. The original gate would be closed with a branch of a thorny tree. Thereafter another gate will be opened on the other side of the fence. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says that the Vhavenda community believes, in so doing, the deceased will come back home one day. Closing the gate means they do not want the deceased to come back home. If the gate is closed the deceased's spirits will get lost and not find the way home. There is a strong belief that one's spirit will come back home as a ghost to haunt the family.

Bathing of hands after the burial: When people come back from the grave yard, they find water at the gate of the deceased's family. Before entering the gate, they bathe their hands. It is not to say that they want to eat. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says that the bathing of hands means that they are cleansing death. Mourners are believed to carry death with them.

Slaughtering of a goat: After the burial, elderly people slaughter a goat. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says this is done in order to appease the gods, *luvhedza*, so that the deceased should not come back to haunt the family. By that action, the family that is left behind, especially the women, should not be badly affected by the death. It is believed that the goat meat should be eaten without salt and the bones should not be scattered around. Rather, the bones are collected and buried beside the grave.

Name of grave yard: The name graveyard is *tshidza* or *livhida* (grave) in Tshivenda. This has the connotation of a place where things have been disposed. Later, the name changed to *zwirabani* (nursery) or *tshiendeulu* (grave after one's long journey of life). *Zwirabani* indicates a nursery where seeds are planted and later transplanted in required rows. This implies that the body that is buried in a grave will germinate and buried during resurrection. Secondly, the body will rise on the day of resurrection. The grave is called *tshiendeulu*, a place where one rests after having walked a long distance. It connotes that the deceased travelled a long journey of his/her life before meeting his/her death.

Time of burial: The Vhavenda believes that burial should take place at a particular time. A baby is buried before noon. This indicates that its life had barely begun. A grown up person used to be buried in the afternoon. This shows that he/she had reached maturity. However, nowadays there is no difference, a child and an old person can be buried anytime of the day. In the olden days people were not buried at noon. If noon arrived before burial, they would stop the burial and wait for the afternoon. The burial of a member of a royal family differs from that of a commoner; Members of the royal family are buried in the evening when others are asleep. This resembles the hyena and lion that feed on their prey at night. Vho Tshavhungwe of Tshaulu says that it is believed that since they are from the royal family, they do not die, they just disappear. That is why when a chief dies, it is termed '*mativha o xa or u dzama*' meaning that the pools have dried up or the chief has disappeared meaning the death of a chief. This is because no one will see him again.

Position of the deceased's head in the grave: The grave is dug in such a manner that it is from east to west. The head takes the west whereas the feet take the eastern side. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says the Vhavenda believes that the life of an individual is like the sun. It rises on the east and sets on the west. That is why the headboard of the tombstone will be placed at this end. If there is a tombstone, they put a heavy rock to resemble a head on the headboard

Unnatural deaths (murder): If the deceased's cause of death is murder, the coffin is not taken into the yard. Rather, it is kept outside the yard or room until burial. Vho Nyamutshagole (2011) says that the Vhavenda believes that if the coffin is brought into the yard or room, they would be inviting death to the family. However, this ritual is not widely performed.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to analyze the different rituals and their meaning in relation to the rituals or their Psychological effects. The study used the qualitative methodology and participatory observation in analyzing these rituals. This practice is common in many communities, whether they believe in this practice or not. In spite of the changing times, many communities continue with the practice. However, some of the practice are contradictory. The covering of heads by women going to the grave yard of commoners is contradictory to what people do when going to the funeral of the royal people. Women are not allowed inside the grave yard or without something covering their heads or without a shawl to cover their breasts, while women entering a royal grave yard do so with uncovered breasts. Nobody is allowed to put on shoe at a graveyard. However, one can do so at commoners' funerals. Sequel to all these, it is therefore concluded that though some traditional tenets are worth treasuring, yet practitioners of traditional religion should give room for minor or major adjustment in certain practices in order to save the present generation who may not be very knowledgeable on it practices.

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