

Distance no impediment for funerals: Death as a uniting ritual for African people – A pastoral study

Author:
Magezi E. Baloyi¹

Affiliation:
¹Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, University of South Africa, South Africa

Correspondence to:
Elijah Baloyi

Email:
baloye@unisa.ac.za

Postal address:
PO Box 392, University of South Africa 0003, South Africa

Dates:
Received: 30 Aug. 2013
Accepted: 20 Feb. 2014
Published: 09 July 2014

How to cite this article:
Baloyi, M.E., 2014, 'Distance no impediment for funerals: Death as a uniting ritual for African people – A pastoral study', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35(1), Art. #1248, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i1.1248>

Copyright:
© 2014. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

An African funeral is a very social event for the entire community in which the deceased lived. Regardless of whether the deceased was a Christian or not, death has always been a reunion for long-separated relatives, believers and non-believers. Nowadays, tents, cars and the gathering of multitudes of people demonstrate how death can bring people together, irrespective of distance and relationships. Of course, this is not to deny the fact that death can be a cause of division between relatives and friends. Nonetheless, the funeral itself is also a uniting factor; many people come together, regardless of distance, to pay their last tributes to the deceased and to provide the bereaved family with emotional support. In this article, I argue that death, amongst other things, is a uniting factor that is able to bring people, who are separated by distance and other factors, together. The aim of this article is to discuss how death invites people into a family, regardless of bad blood, flawed relationships and separation.

Introduction

The death of the Mozambican citizen, Mido Macia, at the hands of the South African Police Service (SAPS) in Daveyton, Johannesburg, in February 2013 did not only stunned people, but also brought doubts and mixed feelings about the SAPS to the surface. Remarkably, many people attended his funeral, and even travelled to the Matola village outside Maputo where Macia was buried by his loved ones. The street resembled a taxi rank – traffic police had cordoned off the road and a hearse was at the head of the queue. It was dark when the procession of about 30 vehicles started their journey to Matola. In the taxis and cars mourners sang, this was what Macia would have wanted for his funeral (Mapumulo 2013:5). The fact that many people went as far as Matola to pay their last respect to Macia is a typical sign that, for African people, distance is no impediment as far as funerals are concerned.

At the recent loss of the South African national soccer team's assistant coach, 'people from all over South Africa flocked to Driekop in Burgersfort to pay their last respects to the Bafana Bafana assistant coach' (Thamagie 2012:2). In another incident, not only had the food been prepared for multitudes, but the house, tent and surroundings were packed with people, some who had travelled a great distance, when the first two wives asked the court to stop the funeral of Mr Phineas Mudzunga (at Tshitomboni village, outside Thohoyandou). The reporter said:

She started with preparations for the funeral and everything went well. She said even the colleagues of the deceased who came all the way from as far as Tzaneen, where Phineas Mudzunga worked, left very disappointed after the funeral was stopped. (Tshikhudo 2012:1)

The focus of this study is not the problem of stopping the funeral, but the fact that people came in numbers from 200 km away to say their last farewell to the deceased – it is typical of African people to mourn collectively.

In the article 'Nobody to bury', Jeranji (2012:6) reports that the mourners of 13-year-old Unathi, who died in a shack fire in Nyanga (Cape Town) came from as far away as Kraaifontein, Franschoek, Worcester and the Eastern Cape Province. This is not the first time that we hear of people travelling long distances to attend a funeral. Walter (1999:187) is correct when articulating the fact that, given the circumstances of death, relatives feel they have more in common with each other. Even though relatives may not have visited the family for a long time prior to the funeral, when one of them passes on they do their utmost to attend the funeral. This is testament to the fact that, as far as death is concerned, distance is no impediment for African people. Even if they failed to visit the person in his or her lifetime, when death comes they travel long distances to pay their last respects to the deceased and to show compassion and support to the bereaved family. The practice of coming together as one family during trying times (and a funeral obviously is such a time) is also supported by Rhodes (2012:n.p.), when he says: 'Everybody in the community was treated as kin. Even those that did not demonstrate the helping tradition could expect to receive help, especially in times of emergency.'

Burying one of my aunts in a rural village turned out to be a particularly painful experience when few people came to help dig the grave (this is a way of caring for the family). After an enquiry by the local *induna*, it was found that people belonging to the family had not previously helped dig graves for other villagers, because there were no men in the family to do so. As a result, the lack of help was apparently a form of payback by the village (i.e. because the family had not cooperated at other people's funerals). The more faithful your attendance at other people's funerals, the more likely it is that people will come to help you when a member of your own family dies. This supports the popular Tsonga saying *Vuxakamunhu o tiendlela*, which means that you should create your own relatives. Very few family members and relatives attended that funeral because the family lacked someone who would have created friends and relatives by attending the funerals and events of other people in the community.

A similar practice of abandoning one another as a way of revenge is very common, especially amongst villagers of the black Africans of South Africa. In an African context, death is not only feared and considered to be a person's biggest enemy, but is also a terrible blow for those who remain behind. Maboea (2002:108) shares the same understanding when he indicates that, whilst the immediate family members of the deceased are regarded as having no strength to do anything, other members of the community, neighbours, distant family members, friends and relatives must help make the necessary arrangements for the burial. I have also personally observed that, on Fridays, one of the busiest roads in South Africa, the N1 between Gauteng and Limpopo, is crowded with buses, taxis and other vehicles that have been hired to ferry people from their workplace and homes to the funerals of their beloved relatives and friends. For most of these people, it does not matter that they have not visited each other for many years – when death comes they have no choice but to attend the funeral.

It is also true that there are cases where death becomes a dividing force in families. For example, Fanny (fictitious name), who lost her husband, was blamed every time a villager died, hence she was hunted down (LaFraniere 2005:1). Indeed, the fact that she was hunted down means she already left the home and this was a division of the family on its own. I acknowledge that, in certain cases, death separates people and destroys relationships (a topic for a future study). However, the intention of this study is to focus on how death in the African context is a uniting factor between relatives and friends. My intention in this article is to argue that death is not only feared and respected amongst Africans, but is also a driving force that can bring people together – regardless of geographical distances or relationships.

The relevance of the study to practical theology

Death must be understood as another form of suffering that those who are left behind have to undergo. Apart from the fact that suffering is a complex, multifaceted issue, Dreyer

and Van der Ven (2002:45) argue that it is very important to realise that suffering is also a theological issue that creates both certain tensions and solidarity. Pastoral caregivers are faced with the challenges of praxis regarding the existential and active aspects of Christian life, which include charity of the gift of yourself to others, spirituality, anthropological aspects, social life of the church and signs of the time (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:88). In Cone's (1986:9) liberation theology, God comes to set the captives free. I agree with Manyama (2010:70) who argues that, because spirituality is part of our being, liberation theology and human spiritual life cannot be separated. This means that liberation theology has a clear relationship with liberation because the person who needs liberation is also a spiritual being. On the other hand, it is important to note that religion is an anthropological constant in which every liberation theology would be incomplete without human beings' anthropological being (Malan 1993:254). In this context, the 'captives' are those faced with the calamity of death. Note that large-scale funerals are often criticised and even labelled as another way of squandering finances.

It is from this short explanation that the study about how the people of God come together to grieve in a funeral situation becomes a pastoral theological study. I also agree with Phaswana (2008), when he makes the point that pastoral care in the African context must be performed in communion with family members as well as extended family members. It is a challenge for pastoral caregivers to ensure that pastoral care, the concept of which initially came from the developed world, and which is characterised by individualistic concerns, is contextualised to fit into the African situation – where things are always done and decided in consultation.

African pastoral concept

As I have said, the practice of large numbers of people coming together for a funeral, even from far away, is not only normal for Africans, but also an obligation. Mbiti (1991:120) articulates it clearly by arguing: 'The corpse is kept frozen in the hospital or mortuary for several days, while funeral preparations are being made and relatives living far away are awaited.' I have recently learnt that when funeral preparations require a lot of effort, time and people, local chiefs in rural areas suspend all normal activities in their homesteads as a way to ensure that all people are involved in the funeral. This reminds me of the time when a local chief arrived to stop our church youth conference one Friday evening. He argued that the conference could only resume after a burial that was scheduled to take place, the reason being that all people must first attend the funeral before they attended to other matters. According to African cultural heritage, the death of an individual is not only a rite of passage, but also a cause for concern for the community in which he or she lived. The 'send-off' given to the individual therefore involves the mourning of the entire community (Mugambi 1989:99–100). Poor and Poirner (2001) say:

For thousands of years, grief, particularly the death bereavement had been recognized as part of life and the extended families

accompanied by neighborhoods helped the members cope with the loss and grief. They shared in the realization of death and bereavement, and provided a sense of community and immediate as well as lasting support. Individuals and families turned to one another and to their religious leaders and institutions. (p. 39)

Poor and Poirner (2001) argue:

There are then two basic conditions under which man [*sic*] may live. One is described by the words community, belonging and fellowship, the other is described by isolation, estrangement and aloneness. (p. 12)

Of these options, the African people choose community. The idiom, 'I am because we are' applies not only when people are enjoying the beauty and benefits of life, but remains relevant even when people are faced with difficulties in their lives, death included. I am in full agreement with Setiloane (1989) when he articulates:

Every person is related to one another. These relationships, by blood, by marriage or by mere association, are emotionally seated and cherished dearly. This becomes evident where a need arises, like some tragedy (a death) or occasion for rejoicing. (p. 9)

On these occasions, death is not only an uninvited guest, but also manages to bring many people together irrespective of their previous bad or good relationships. In contrast to much of the developed world's 'rugged individualism', which is foreign to the innate nature of human beings, community life and group support are basic human characteristics, and this is particularly true for African people (Msomi 2008:219).

Many different people will offer help and tributes to the family when the family prepares for a funeral. Death truly does not choose – it is always the 'bride' of every family. The similarities between people are more pronounced in times of death, which is why people like to participate in preparing for the funeral. Whilst some people offer condolences and contributions, others help to clean the house, pitch the tent(s) and search for the animals that will be slaughtered. It is this power of death that is able to unite different people – including people with very different opinions – into one big family. For Africans, there is nothing like death to encourage the community to constantly be on guard and to stand together to face death (Maboea 2002:110).

Even if people have failed to visit the sick person either at home or in hospital, when that person dies, it is very important for those same people to be present at the funeral. The solidarity of African people can be seen when one of their relatives who lives far away, dies. One Friday, as I was driving on the N1 to Limpopo, I came across a group of three cars on the side of the road. As I knew the owners of these cars, I stopped to check if something was wrong. They greeted me with a smile and when I asked what was happening, they answered: 'We are just taking a break because we still have a long way to drive.' They indicated that they were going to a funeral back home. I share the common conviction that relatives and friends meet each other after death (Schmidt 2006).

The concept of death in an African context

Maboea (2002:109) quotes Makhubu when arguing that, for Africans, the concept of 'death' is only applied to animals and plants, not human beings. Death is considered a very negative concept when applied to human beings – Africans prefer to use concepts such as *u hi siyile, anga ha rikona or u lovile* (from Tsonga, meaning: [he or she departed from us or he or she is no more]). The well-known definition of death as the separation of soul and body fails to indicate, says Karl Rahner (2011:112), 'the specifically human element of human death'. Other philosophers define death as the cessation of the integrated functioning of the human organism. When referring to death, Schmidt (2006:40) uses the metaphor of 'the passage to the spiritual world which is described as crossing a river'.

Whilst Mbiti (1991:116) sees death as one of the most universal and mysterious experiences in human life, Adeyemo (1979:63) argues that death is a thing standing between the world of human beings and the world of spirits and that the ontological departure of someone requires rituals that are intended at uniting the two worlds. Tjibeba's (1997:19) understanding of death for Africans is that it is a mystery to all; he goes on to say that religious rituals serve to explain the transition of the deceased to another state of life. It should be noted that this is an articulation which testifies that Africans believe in the continuity of life after death, which is why Africans strive to maintain a healthy relationship with their ancestors. Like many other African scholars, for Mugambi (1989:102), many African tribes realise and emphasise that death is not the end of people's existence: the 'dead' will become ancestors who will continue to influence the lives of their living relatives.

It is believed that although death is a loss to both the church and the community, what about the family? This is why, when Tsonga-speaking people refer to the grave, they call it *yindluyohetelela*, meaning the final resting place, whilst the dead are called *lava tietleleleke*, literally meaning those who are asleep. Referring to dead people as being asleep receives its theological relevance from Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. Amongst the Kamba people *kikwu*, meaning death, is regarded as a very dangerous thing which must and can be removed.

Common causes of death in an African context

Despite the above, there are problems faced during death. The conception concerning the causes of death varies from one tribe to another, but I shall just select a few which I feel are relevant to this study.

Sorcery and witchcraft

Amongst African people, witchcraft is considered to be one of the major causes of death. People who are suspected of witchcraft are beaten or killed and some are banished from their communities as a result (Mbiti 1991:117). In most cases

where witchcraft is suspected to have been the cause of death, the dead are buried along with their arrows, spears and other weapons because it is believed that they will continue fighting against their enemies. African people have a strong belief in witchcraft and sorcery. Schmidt (2006) is correct when he says:

Evil spirits or witches may also cause death against God's intentions. Especially people who die at a young age or under strange circumstances are considered to be killed by evil forces. (p. 41)

This type of thinking not only inflicts fear and doubt between people, but also undermines the power of God and his message, which declares that the devil and his evil forces have been overcome and conquered by the death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ. My argument is not that sorcery and witchcraft do not exist; I simply want to point out that they are often overemphasised and feared more than should be the case. My point is that people should fear God and should find assurance in the message of the Gospel.

Natural death

In the African traditional context, it is very difficult for many people to accept death as something that occurs naturally. When someone dies, it is often suspected that someone else has directly or indirectly tampered with his or her life. Some Christian church leaders, particularly those within the tradition of African Independent and Pentecostal churches, emphasise this by arguing that there are evil spirits that kill people. A case in point is Olukoya (2004), who argues:

The spirit of death is one of the strongmen identified in the book of Revelation. This spirit sponsors death, killer diseases, incurable diseases, terminal sickness and other horrible causes of death. (p. 121)

Without being judgemental, it seems that this view not only dismisses any possibility of natural death, but also claims that, whenever death occurs, someone is to blame. For the sake of space, I shall not focus on natural death in this article. However, I do maintain that, even though other causes of death are possible, the issue of natural death must also be accommodated in the African mind, simply because this form of death is a reality. From early times, African people believed that elderly people who had finished their roles in this life would die. I agree with Mbiti (1991:118), who makes the point that God may call people to leave this life. I assume that the reader understands the concept of ancestorship; however, not all who die become ancestors – only those who have lived exemplary lives.

Taken by ancestors

Mbiti (1991:128) says that African people believe that death is not the end of human life, but that a person continues to exist in the hereafter. The widespread belief of pleasing the departed and showing them respect is currently experiencing revival, as can be seen when one attends an African funeral. For instance, some chiefs take strong measures against men who appear at the graveside without jackets and women are

obliged to cover their heads as a sign of respect to the dead or ancestors. Apart from the belief that the way people live indicates the type of an ancestor they will become when they pass on, there is still a belief that ancestors have a strong influence on the living.

Indeed, unless the ancestors are appeased, it is believed they have the power to cause trouble, misfortune and even death. The whole notion of the ancestors and the influence of the ancestors is an important concept in African traditional belief systems. You can enjoy life and prosperity (Maboea 2002:63) if the ancestors are happy with you, but if you anger them their wrath may cause your death. As the deceased is believed to have been taken by the ancestors, it is therefore a good time for the community to bid farewell to the departed – this is the topic of the discussion below.

Reasons for coming together at an African funeral

Offering assistance to the family

Many people are needed to slaughter animals, to do the cooking and to dig and prepare the grave. According to Maboea (2002:119), why many prefer to slaughter an animal, especially if a mother or father has died. Whenever the collective decision is reached to slaughter an animal, the meeting appoints a delegation of people who will carry out this decision. The reader needs to bear in mind that this meat is provided for those who come from far away. It is also important to note that in olden days, the cow was slaughtered in order to provide the skin for burial.

Some traditional African people, particularly in rural villages, find it strange if the burial grave is dug with machinery. They prefer that people, traditionally called *timhisi* (literally [hyenas]), should dig the grave as a way of showing compassion. The reason the gravediggers are named hyenas is because *kuvamhisi* also means [to be a hard and fearless worker] (Ntsan'wisi 1985:96), implying that gravediggers are hard workers. It is also believed that the immediate family members of the deceased are not able to perform cooking and other daily duties, but that neighbours, relatives and other people who attend the funeral should perform these duties for them. The author is not alone in this view – Letsosa and Semenya (2011) indicate that during the week, the women of the community should prepare traditional beer for the men who come to mourn and for those preparing the grave, as well as food for the family.

To participate in death rituals

Let me start this argument by quoting one of the people interviewed by Msomi (2008):

My mother became ill and died when I was in Johannesburg and I did not come to bury her and fulfil the Zulu customs (*angibuyangaukuzogcinaamasikoeszulu*). Now I have these troubles. (p. 101)

It is a belief that if you do not attend a funeral and participate in its rituals, you will be haunted with trouble – sent by the ancestors – until you fulfil certain ritual requirements.

According to Walter (1999:119), Paul Rosenblatt, who is an expert on grief across cultures, argues that he knows of no society in which the emotions of bereavement are not shaped and controlled, and they are accompanied and regulated by rituals. This is also true for African people. In most cases, only a few people would like to be excused from the rituals – most people would like to be part of them. Although these rituals vary from tribe to tribe, the main focus of this study indicates that death rituals also play a pivotal role in bringing people, particularly relatives from different places, together. Many taboos are in place to ensure that the people who attend the funeral are made to feel more secure than those who did not attend.

In her article, 'Pot dance fights bad luck', Dipone (2012) briefly discusses how the Batswana people, particularly the Barolong and Batlhaping, defend the ritual of dancing around a pot of meat, lifting up their skirts and showing their underwear as a death ritual. One family member claims that if they do not practice this *manpsala* ritual, the family members of the deceased will become unlucky and experience things such as *vhutha* or lose their jobs. Another ritual, the hand wash, also seems to be very common in most African tribes. Qwazi (2012:5) mentions the late, well-known journalist, Jimmy Matyu, performing this ritual when paying his last respects at a close friend's funeral. This common practice is discussed by Gerber (2012), who says that the mourners are expected to wipe the graveyard dust from their feet and to wash their hands in the water placed at the gate of the home for the specific purpose of removing bad luck. I differ with the above concept of washing hands for ritual's sake. If the practice is performed to wash the dirt from the mourners' hands after the long walk and working in the graveyard, then there is nothing wrong with it. However, if it is for the purpose of purifying people and removing bad luck, then I do not agree with the ritual – those who came to wash first will 'transmit' their bad luck to those who come to wash later. My logic is that, if you leave the bad luck in the water, it means that those who wash in the same water are at risk of taking the bad luck with them. It is obvious that the rituals mentioned above would make those who did not attend the funeral feel that their absence was inviting bad luck. In this case, the rituals may be used to compel people to attend the funeral. Schmidt's (2006) opinion is that the proper burial rites are absolutely necessary so that a person can become an ancestor and live in peace. Wrong burials cause the spirit to return and haunt the community. Of course, this only applies to those who believe in ancestral worship.

Averting death, avoiding misfortune and sickness

Many African people view death as something that can 'take away' the whole family if something is not done (rituals performed) when the first few deaths start occurring in a family. It is argued that, whilst death may attack a whole family, a certain ritual, named *ukwuu* in the Kamba language (Tanzania), needs to be performed to stop and confine it. Usually this ritual is performed when a number of men in the family die. Death is seen as a misfortune caused by the power

of the ancestors (Makhubu 1988:61). It is also believed that death may bring misfortune to people who did not attend the funeral or did not participate in funeral rituals. In some African tribes, it is believed that ancestors will forgive you for not attending a party or a wedding, but it is difficult for them to understand and forgive you for failing to attend the funeral of someone you know, particularly a relative. Msomi (2008:101) mentions a case study of a man who did not attend his mother's funeral because he was working far from home. When he was visited by a pastor in the hospital after he fell ill, the man said:

I cannot be helped here in the hospital. I know why I became ill. My mother became ill and died when I was in Johannesburg. I did not come to bury her and fulfil the Zulu customs (*angibuyangaukuzogcinaamasikoesizulu*). Now I have this trouble. I have been asking the doctor for permission, trying to explain to him that I just need to go home and attend to this matter. I would then come back and continue this treatment which they are giving me here. If I do not do this, I do not see how I can get better. I must do something concerning my mother. (Msomi 2008:61)

The argument of the sick man in this case gives an indication that there is still a belief that a failure to attend the funeral of a relative may cause bad things to happen or may even lead to sickness. This belief is the reason why many African people attend a person's funeral, even though they did not care for that person when he or she was alive. This is the reason why most Saturdays and Sundays (and often holidays) are preferred days for funerals; it gives those at work an opportunity to attend the funeral (Maboea 2002:111). This suggests clearly that, although in some cases the cleansing will be performed after few months or even a year, an immediate cleansing is performed for the people who attended a funeral, a way of wiping the death away from people who were contaminated by coming to the funeral. This clearly connects the funeral attendants with the fact that they should be present when the cleansing rituals are performed. This is supported by Schmidt (2006:41) when he says: 'All those present at the funeral must be ceremonially cleansed.'

Identification with the mourners

It is very common during pastoral counselling to ensure the counsellee that 'we are together in this'. This is exactly what African people are saying when they come together at a funeral – they have solidarity with the bereaved family. Supporting the grieving family takes priority over all other events. When a death occurs, relatives may not have a party or wedding, even if it was planned beforehand. Death, in other words, cancels every other occasion of celebration so that everyone can come together and mourn (Pauw 1975:122).

Currently, in many villages in Limpopo where local chiefs and headmen are in charge, parties and even church prayer meetings are stopped for the week of mourning and these gatherings only resume after the burial. I experienced this practice in the village from which I come. On one occasion,

we were just commencing an all-night prayer vigil in the church building when a headman approached us. He told us to cancel the vigil because there was a funeral somewhere in the village. If we did not, we would be called to account before the local chief. Maboea (2002:119) is correct in saying that attending a funeral conveys an important message to the bereaved family. By the same token, a failure to share the suffering and pain caused by death (i.e. by not attending) conveys a very negative message to the family.

Even if under normal circumstances people do not go to their ancestral home (emigrant workers), they will be forced to go home when there is a funeral. Contributions to the burial are also very important, particularly from family members. The local tribal authorities in the village have a stipulated amount of money set aside for funerals for each household, thus extending solidarity with the deceased to include the whole village (or section of the township).

Even if you do not cry when hearing of the death, the moment you enter the gates of the funeral home, the crying and mourning begins. The philosophy is that if someone dies today and I attend the funeral, if I die tomorrow these people will come and pay their last respects to me (i.e. by burying me). Many residents feel that it is their duty to go to the home of the deceased to give the bereaved family moral support, particularly when the body is about to arrive (Maboea 2002:120).

An opportunity to bring children born out of wedlock into the family

For some people, death, particularly of the husband, is also used as an opportunity to receive children who were born out of the wedlock into the family. One widow, Reneilwe, who still mourned her husband, said: 'The family even produced two kids they say belonged to Magezi who should share the money' (Nkhwashu 2012:2). Even though the issue involves money here, the fact that death provided the family members an opportunity to present the children born out of wedlock remains an important part of the discussion also. The tendency to acknowledge the unknown children of the deceased man during or immediately after the funeral is also becoming a common phenomenon. Whilst in some cases it is to let the family know of the existence of these children, in others it is used to claim some of the money left by the deceased. My articulation is that children born out of wedlock are not supposed to wait for their father to die to unite with the family. Instead, they are supposed to be united with the family when the man is still alive. Besides using the opportunity to bring children who were born out of wedlock into the family, the funeral is also an opportunity to pay the deceased the community's last respects. This is the topic of our next discussion.

Last respects

From the story discussed briefly in the opening sentence of the introduction to this article, it was also said later that the coffin which held Macia's body was opened whilst people

lined up to see the face of this young man for the last time before he was buried in Matola (Mapumulo 2013:5). Although the practice of viewing the dead for the last time is not unique to Africans, for the sake of this study this practice is mentioned to strengthen the argument of the coming together of African people for a funeral (regardless of distance), which is not common to other nations and other people. Opening the coffin is a very common practice amongst many African people and sometimes even very young children are carried to take part in this practice. It also happens that if someone close to the family arrives after the coffin is closed, the family may be forced to reopen the coffin to allow that person to see the dead person, particularly if they have not yet gone to the graveside. This is one of the many practices in which people want to participate. Space constraints do not allow me to discuss this practice in any more detail.

Another important part of paying the last respects is the practice of throwing soil into the grave by hand. Today, wealthy people may decide to buy flowers instead. However, the initial tradition is to throw soil in as a way to bid a last farewell. One of the arguments for throwing soil is that women who cannot use shovels to close the grave must 'show their support' by throwing the soil by hand. It is not clear why men do the same (even though they can wield shovels).

Pastoral interventions: The way forward

The coming together of people at a funeral emotionally strengthens and helps the family not to feel that they are alone during their time of loss. African people share both the joys and sorrows of this life; in their togetherness, they therefore help the bereaved family in times of need. Communalism helps to cover those who are not well off; this means that even poor people can still have a decent burial for their loved ones since community support is always there for them. In Tsonga there is a saying, *Xandlafamba-xandlavuya*, which simply means that if you help others you will also receive other people's help in times of your need. I agree with Magezi (2006:510) that tensions can result from neglecting to involve the elders and the community in your affairs (funeral included) and thus I value the importance of holding the *umntungumtungabantu* spirit in high esteem.

Apart from the good practice of coming to mourn together, it is expensive for some families to keep the body of the deceased in a mortuary for an extended period whilst waiting for everyone to come home. Nor is it fair to expect the person who paid a lot of money to travel to make more financial contributions towards the funeral arrangements? However, such a practice of coming together must not leave the bereaved family without resources afterwards. Without disregarding the need to work together for burial, I am also of the opinion that if, for some reason, you cannot or do not attend the funeral, but at least manage to contribute something in a form of money towards the preparations, this should be acknowledged. A pastor journeying with the bereaved family builds a relationship of trust and can give the

family advice. But, when helping the family, the pastor must also be willing to accommodate external family members as well as friends and relatives.

In my pastoral experience, I have seen some people trying to ensure that, although they had issues with the deceased when he or she was still alive, they can make peace with whatever happened between them simply by attending the funeral. Without going into any detailed argument about the merits and demerits of this view, I think pastoral caregivers should teach that the issue of forgiveness must be prioritised when everybody is still alive. However, I still believe that reconciliation, or a lack of reconciliation, whilst the person was still alive must not be used as an excuse not to attend a funeral. It is also important for pastoral caregivers not to identify with those people (particularly in some villages) who make it a rule that, if you do not come to the funeral, you are liable for certain 'measures'; I say this because attending a funeral must come from one's own will – no form of coercion should ever be involved.

Conclusion

In most African tribes, death is used as an instrument to unite people (although, in some cases, it can be used as a dividing factor). The issue of communalism plays a pivotal role because the community needs to be together 'through thick and thin'. Even if families are enemies, when the common enemy – death – comes, people become united against it. The article indicates that, in traditional African society, you do not have to be a relative by blood or marriage to become part of a community, and that this is particularly true in times of bereavement. You only need *ubuntu* and to participate in the community's activities in order to become part of that community.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

Adeyemo, T., 1979, *Salvation in African tradition*, Evangel Publishing House, Nairobi.

- Cone, J.H., 1986, *Speaking the truth*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Dipone, E., 2012, 'Pot dance fights bad luck', *Daily Sun*, 01 October, p. 4.
- Dreyer, J.S. & Van der Ven, J.A. (eds.), 2002, *Divine justice – Human justice*, Institute for Theology and Religion, Unisa, Pretoria.
- Gerber, C., 2012, *Death rituals in Africa*, viewed 03 October 2012, from http://dying.lovotoknow.com/Death_Rituals_in_Africa
- Hesselgrave, D.J. & Rommen, E., 1989, *Contextualisation, meanings, methods and models*, Baker, Grand Rapids.
- Jeranji, T., 2012, 'Nobody to bury. Undertaker did not arrive at the funeral', *Daily Sun*, 17 September, p. 6.
- LaFraniere, S., 2005, *AIDS now compels Africa to challenge widows cleansing*, viewed 06 September 2012, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/11/international/africa/11malawi.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>
- Letsoa, R. & Semanya, D.K., 2011, 'A pastoral investigation of the phrase "go tlosasetshila" (traditional purification as the last phase in the process of bereavement mourning amongst the Basotho)', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32(1), 1–7.
- Maboea, S.I., 2002, *The influence of life-giving power in the African traditional religion and the Zionist churches in Soweto – A comparative study*, CB Powell Bible Centre, Unisa, Pretoria.
- Magezi, V., 2006, 'Community healing and the role of pastoral care of the ill and suffering in Africa', *In die Skriflig* 40(3), 505–521. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v40i3.356>
- Makhubu, P., 1988, *Who are the independent churches?*, Skotaville, Johannesburg.
- Malan, D.J., 1993, 'The implications of E Schillebeeckx's theology of liberation for anthropology and creation', *Skrif and Kerk* 14(2), 249–262.
- Manyama, A., 2010, *Emmanuel Levinna's conceptual affinities with liberation theology*, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York.
- Mapumulo, Z., 2013, 'Mido Macia goes home', *City Press*, 10 March, p. 5.
- Mbiti, J.S., 1991, *Introduction to African religion*, Heinemann, Johannesburg.
- Mugambi, J.N.K., 1989, *African heritage and contemporary Christianity*, Longman, Nairobi.
- Msomu, V.V., 2008, *Ubuntu contextual African pastoral care and counselling*, CB Powell Bible Centre, Unisa, Pretoria.
- Nkhwashi, G., 2012, 'Culture shock for rich widow', *Daily Sun*, 25 July, pp. 1–2.
- Ntsan'wisi, H.W.E., 1985, *Tsonga idioms – A descriptive study*, Sasavona, Braamfontein.
- Olukoya, D.K., 2004, *Prayer warfare*, Battle Cry Christian Ministries, Ikeja.
- Pauw, B.A., 1975, *Christianity and Xhosa tradition*, Oxford, Cape Town.
- Phaswana, D.R., 2008, 'Communal pastoral counselling: Culturally gifted care-giving in times of family pain – A Vhavenda perspective', PhD thesis, Department of Practical Theology, University of South Africa.
- Poor, B. & Poirner, G.P., 2001, *End of life nursing care*, Jones and Bartlett, Toronto.
- Qwazi, C., 2012, 'He wrote about his own death', *Daily Sun*, 26 September, p. 5.
- Rahner, K., 2011, *A contemporary theology of death*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Burlington.
- Rhodes, H.A., 2012, *The African-American family in crisis*, viewed 13 September 2012, from www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1990/4/90.04.06.x.html
- Schmidt, M.C.C.J., 2006, *Evil and salvation in African religion and Christianity*, Maryknoll Institute of African Studies of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota USA and Tangaza College, Nairobi.
- Setiloane, G.M., 1989, *African theology: An introduction*, Skotaville, Johannesburg.
- Thamage, T., 2012, 'Tears for Tommy', *Daily Sun*, 29 October, p. 2.
- Tjibeba, H.R., 1997, 'A study of burial rituals, grieving and bereavement among the Nema of Namibia', A pastoral response MTh dissertation, University of Natal, Durban.
- Tshikhudo, E., 2012, 'Wives fight over husband's body', *Limpopo Mirror*, 02 November, pp. 1–2.
- Walter, T., 1999, *On bereavement – The culture of grief*, Open University Press, Buckingham.