

# **Power Politics During and After Funerals Amidst the Shona of Zimbabwe**

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## **Abstract**

This article is about power politics during and after funerals among the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The paper is deliberately provocative, aimed at identifying issues related to the power politics during and after funerals amidst the Shona people in order to identify areas for further research. This work relied on documentary research and observations for its methodology, and the writings of Claude G. Mararike (University of Zimbabwe, Department of Sociology), Ezra Chitando (Department of Religious Studies, University of Zimbabwe), and Praise Mapuranga (Senior Lecturer, University of Zimbabwe). The major findings of this study are that the socio-economic status of the deceased and the bereaved is critical in determining power politics during and after funerals amongst the Shona.

## **Introduction**

Funerals stand out as major community gatherings, and one could be struck by the energy and enthusiasm of the participants as they dance, talk and sing. Furthermore, the significance of such events lie not in the fundamental relationships to the ancestors, but in funerals focused on relationships among the living as observed by Isaak (1998: 59). The main event of the funeral usually provide occasion for family reunions, therapeutic expression, and the healing of strained relationships, but in some instances, it is not the case. Blakely (1994: 407) confirms that funerals also provide historical commentary and the transmission and creation of knowledge as well as the performance of verbal and general art, such as drama, music and dance.

The thrust of this study is to examine power politics during and after the funerals among the Shona people (an umbrella term for closely related ethnic groups in Zimbabwe) as submitted by Chitando (1996: 66), and to illustrate how different categories of power are influenced by death and politics. The study will in general focus on the Shona funeral setting (urban and rural) as there are variations from region to region, as such, all forms of power politics during and after funerals cannot be exhausted; only most commonly witnessed in today's funerals.

## **Definition of Power Politics**

Many people may be aware that political issues can generate the strongest emotions,

attachments, and actions. Several people have a general understanding of what politics is all about. Some say it means government or power. Jackson (1993:4) defines politics as art of compromise or manipulation. Shively (1947) in his book *Power and Choice* depicts politics as making common decisions for a group or groups of people. He further asserts that some individuals in the group exercise power (ranging from influence to coercion).

Another widely accepted definition of politics is put forward by Harold Lasswell (1936), he points out that politics is always concerned with "who gets, what, when and how". As for power, no one can hold it, touch or even see it, yet almost everyone wants it. It is present whenever there is politics. Jackson (1993) observes that power permeates politics. Mokken and Stockmann (1976) view power and influence as interwoven. For Mokken, power is influence (ability to persuade or convince others to accept certain objectives or behaviour in a certain way), and influence can be a form of power. For Maclver (1964), influence needs authority (power to make binding decisions and issue obligatory commands). According to Max Weber (1947), authority (and therefore legitimacy) may be said to stem from three main sources; traditional authority which is derived from custom and history gained through inheritance; charismatic authority which is based on popular administration of personal "heroic" qualities of an individual of whom it is invested in, and rational-legal or bureaucratic, authority which is invested in offices held by individuals.

Having looked at some definitions of power and politics, it is worth looking into a Shona funeral to appreciate where power and politics come into play.

## **Shona Funerals**

A funeral is a complex and centrally important series of events in the ritual life of many African people. Funeral includes burial, mourning and all ritual procedures. When discussing funeral rituals among the Shona, it is worth noting that there is no uniformity in the practices. Bourdillon (1987: 99) adds that they vary from area to area. However, a general structure is discernible among most of the Shona, subscribes Bourdillon.

He contends that in all Shona areas, funerals and post-burial ceremonies have a common pattern and function. Isaak (1997: 38), also contends that though funerals differ in size and complexity depending on the circumstances of death, age, gender, social/ economic/ political status and religious affiliation or commitment of the deceased, they are all regarded as the last ritual in one's life, often involving the entire community, and sometimes even the whole country in cases of one declared liberation or national hero or heroine. In some cases as perceived by Lewis Rambo (1993: 8), the social mechanisms of group control may be so powerful and effective that they are able to overpower considerations of culture, person, and religion. And in other situations, it may be that religious fear is the dominant force, overshadowing others.

Funerals are intended to honour the dead, and to be a healing process for the living descendants, and other relatives, as well as for friends and associates. In other words, funerals sometimes bring quietude and tranquility to everyone involved, for the living, and even for the dead as eluded by Mbiti (1969: 85). Death, whether of the rich or the poor, brings about a great deal of community interaction, which enables people of various opinions to be present at the funeral, either relational or non-relational. Hence, it is at the community level, where funeral power politics commences.

The function of funeral politics is to direct people towards constructive mourning in which each individual is expected to participate in group activity. The church also has the obligation to be involved wholeheartedly, and in case a church member dies, congregants' acts, feelings and beliefs are concerned with doing one's duty to God. The family, as observed by Parratt (1995: 147), has to reset itself and gear up for the occasion. Thus, funerals and post-death ceremonies are supposed to unite in a down-to-earth practical way. However, in most cases, it is not like that, a lot of politics take centre stage, thus, it is important at this stage, to look at categories of power and politics, during death of a family member.

## **Categories of Power**

Funeral and post-funeral ceremonies have to be administered by steps or by stages, where a number of different organisations and people are involved. Bujo (1992: 114) notes that during funerals, neighbours collaborate and bring along whatever they can afford, to help in the feeding of mourners present. Thus, relatives and close friends also assist during the funeral. The community is the core of African spirituality, hence, by community one will be referring to the living and the dead, the power of the living, and power of the dead. It is evident that there is community power, family power, traditional and cultural power, bereaved power, religious power, gender power, and many other powers during and after burial.

From the above mentioned powers, several questions can be asked such as to where power lies, that is, the location and centrality of power? Does power during and after burial lie in a group or individual, or some persons behind the scenes? What and who influences the person to have more power? Who gives duties and responsibilities during death notification, and who can refuse assignments? Due to unique gender relations in culture, can women take over funeral administration? Who is who, during and after a funeral in terms of power dynamics among the Shona people? To respond to some of the above questions, some of the categories of power will be analyzed.

## **Traditional Power**

According to Mararike (2011), certain standards and procedures have to be followed when death occur traditionally. Traditional power dictates that certain customs are to be followed, in case of death of a child, or a pregnant woman or people killed in an accident. A child below six months may be interred by old women, in the wetlands (*Matoro or Mubani*).

The mentality of ethnic traditional societies differs from the scientific mentality of modern societies. Shorter (1998), sees the traditions of human societies as originating from specific environments, where they are free to accept or reject what the environment offers. Human society creates its own socio-cultural tradition with modifications and adaptations as expressed by Shorter (1998). The tradition is influenced by historical events and personalities where unsung heroes and heroines have influence.

Traditionally, for one to become an ancestor, one ought to receive proper burial rites, which is the duty of the community (community power) to see to it that all has been done as culture and tradition demand. According to Jerome Skhakhane (2000), what is important in these rites is that the “whole” person ought to be given a proper send-off. By “whole person” I am not referring to the person as we knew that person before death. I mean the person remains a person withstanding the fact of being separated from the body. By way of illustration, if a person dies in unnatural causes such as road accidents, the corpse is later collected from the morgue. The person may be interred, but the burial process is incomplete until the person can be “fetched” from the site of the accident so all different steps or stages for proper burial rituals can be followed.

The living are conscious of this need, and do all they can to satisfy it. If the departed are not properly remembered, the living would feel uncomfortable. Nelson Mandela speaking of his childhood in his book: *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995):

I also learned that to neglect one's ancestor would bring ill-fortune and failure in life. If you dishonored ancestors in some way, the only way, to atone for that lapse was to consult a traditional healer or tribal elder, who communicated with them and conveyed profound apologies. All these beliefs were perfectly natural to me.

From Mandela's observation, one can see the effect of traditional and cultural powers. To sum it up, as far as traditional and cultural powers are concerned, one would confirm that proper rites are a gateway to ancestor-ship, who are believed to be alluded by Maimela (1985: 19):

In order to save people from anxiety that are experienced from bad luck and malevolent spirits, tradition has designed various protective rites and rituals whose function is to immunise potential victims against evil spirits.

Culture is a complex reality, but an integrated, interacting, and integrating dynamic whole as subscribed by Majawa (2005: 401). In short, Majawa maintains that cultures are both human made and human-conditioning, with constitutive elements, such as common world vision, views of life and outlooks on life. Culture dictates, that the dead person has power, thus culture has its own syllabus as to how a funeral should be conducted. And some cultures and traditions dictate that power during and after burial is a solely male-dominated event with little or no women participation. Tradition has clear roles as to who does what, during and after funerals. According to Mararike (2009: 23), soon after burial of the deceased, precautionary rituals are usually performed to purify those concerned with the funeral, and prevent the spirit from returning from the grave to trouble those left behind. One elder described the importance of the dead and the *kurova guva* ceremony (bringing home the spirit of the deceased) as: "The dead are dead, but are alive; they do not see, but they see", one can also see the power associated with the dead. In few cases, mothers of the deceased play powerful roles during and after funeral, although it is mainly taken from behind. Such an influence from behind can be more powerful than one in front. The patriarchy should therefore, not be taken as an absolute domination by the father of the family.

Power and responsibility depend on the "family board meeting" which sorts the program, arrange that proper burial rituals are done, select the burial place and all logistical issues, protocol included. In most cases, the kitchen or the house is a venue in rural areas where the dead will lie in state. The house has "power" for it is also a public relations centre, feeding point and the housing of corpses. Not all corpses, which lie in the house are placed at the *Chikuva/huva* (kitchen bench), but only that of the father and the mother of the house; children and others are housed there, but not at the *Chikuva*. A case in point, if a husband, a father or a brother dies, the female relatives may not fully participate in some core-funeral and post-burial decisions, in some cases, funeral mourners become guests at their beloved husbands or fathers' funerals.

The patriarchal African lifestyle extends from the family unit through the extended family to the community. Thus, the funeral administrators (usually elderly men relatives) may arrange funerals with cultural and traditional powers' dictation. Normally, female mourners will be briefed on what male funeral administrators have deliberated on.

Jafta (1998: 35) reveals that it is also important to note that burial times are dictated by tradition-afternoon – when the sun has gone down, not during mid-day. The power of the dead person is also recognised. One hears, “*Munhune chivanhu chake*” (that the deceased should receive rites as his/her culture stipulates). Thus, it is normal for a deceased body to be taken from town to the rural area, and rarely have the bodies been seen leaving from the rural areas to the town, unless it is categorically willed by the deceased and the relatives concur, which may not be the case. Following is family power, which may not necessarily go along with cultural and traditional dictates.

## **Family Power**

The Shona culture is family centric. It treasures the extended family. To exist in Africa, is to belong to a family. Until recently, death, funerals, and post death rituals used to be an affair that affected all inhabitants. Work had to stop. People came together for condolences, and thereafter formed bereavement groups to console the bereaved. But today a lot has changed due to modernity, where next of kin want things their own ways, thereby maximising resources and time. In a country experiencing rapid social changes, like Zimbabwe, funeral and after funeral ceremonies are strictly family activities, thus family power which is sometimes facilitated by an affiliation with funeral insurance policies.

Funeral politics make some family members manipulative, without some sense of remorse or confession that they may not only benefit, but consciously support and participate in a system designed to destroy others, especially the immediate family of the deceased (the actual bereaved), perceived as rich and proud. In most families, funerals, burials and after are administered by the male family members, as seen in traditional and cultural setups. If the male family members, who come from the other side of the world, those from the rural areas sometimes called SRBs that is, strongly rural based, may come with dictatorial tendencies as culture and tradition demands, where exclusivism will be the tone of the day, and family members viewed as anti-tradition may be sidelined, with some family pressure groups lobbying for systematic and sometimes erratic boycotts with people, the bereaved refusing to join their line of thinking.

However, it is important to separate family input and the bereaved in case a husband or wife dies. The husband's family likewise, the wife's family have a tendency to dominate at the expense of the husband and children or vice versa, the deceased wife's family may want to run the funeral claiming that she belongs to them in case of the *vaBudy*, popularly known as *Matoko*, their daughters are not buried where they are in most cases, instead they go back to their families, thus not being sensitive to the needs of the bereaved (husband and children). There is now a popular saying: there is no place without graves (*hapana kusina guva*).

Shona society is patriarchal, meaning that the Shona are dominated by the rule of men. This may be over simplifying the point not to look at the role of women. In some cases, women's power comes from behind the scenes. In some cases, bedroom board meetings tend to be influential giving an impression that men are dominating, but only to find out that in some cases, women would have decided on the issue at hand, and men would be only spokespersons of bedroom board meeting deliberations.

It is important to cautiously separate family power from bereaved power. Bereavement is actually a process not an event. If the bereaved are given participatory and decisive roles as to how they would prefer the funeral to be conducted, such as the choice for the burial place of their beloved, and above all, the honour to choose the coffin or casket of their choice. It is sometimes difficult for some family members to stand female administered funerals, since they think it makes them useless, however, their presence would not be felt, even though they would have contributed nothing. They would be at a place to see the funeral run their way, even not knowing where resources would be coming from. On that note, gender power needs re-visiting.

## **Gender Power**

The status of women with regards to funerals, burials and post-death ceremonies in an African setting is a breeding ground for abuse. Patriarchal attitudes towards women during bereavement should change. According to Praise Mapuranga (2011: 20), from a tender age, girls are taught to be obedient and submissive to men and not to assert themselves. During the initiation ceremonies that mark their (girls) growth from childhood to adulthood where gender roles are usually taught, girls are instructed on what the culture expects from them as women.

Women are dictated as to how funerals and post funerals should be run. There are sometimes no minimal consultations to what would take place. Women are groomed to be passive and takenotes and instructions from male funeral administrators, without questioning. This has led to one leading African woman theologians – Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2002) to say:

Patriarchal mentality has brought about cultural limitations which clip the hands of women. Women have to respect all patriarchal decisions without questioning.

In as much as women are “forbidden” to participate during and after their husband’s burial, a lot has changed to date. With gender advocacy, a number of women have given themselves power, and have become so influential in some burial of their loved ones. Women have challenged all customary law, and thus, they have clashed with civil laws. They now know that women have legal power to speak for themselves. Women have given themselves authority and a mandate, to do as they perceive reasonably fit. *Varoora* (daughters in law) are assigned by tradition, to carry water to the grave, to tie people with small white material (*kusunga machira*) for easy identification for the bereaved, *kuvhara musuwo* (to block the entrance) for the copse not to enter or come out of the house until a certain amount is paid to them. *Vakuwasha’s* (sons-in-law) role is cooking food for the mourners in some areas, and for digging up the grave.

Transformation means going back to the drawing board, by all parties concerned (the next of kin, the bereaved family members, the community and others) to jointly determine the rules and agree with the parameters on how death, funeral and post death ceremonies should be held, involve power politics. The stakeholders (women included) should meet as equals and with mutual respect. This would mean that in some cases such as, choice of coffin, or clothes to be worn by the deceased, and any other funeral arrangements, would be agreed upon with wider consultation, bearing in mind that consultation also is not a decision, and at the end of it all, a decent burial takes place, by involving all the concerned parties.

“Some oppressive cultural and traditional” procedures should be condemned, and make a deliberate choice to fix the widower or widow or the deceased’s immediate family over power politics when it is checked. This of course would cause uproar, especially if the deceased was not culturally or traditionally inclined. The motive behind this deliberate power exercise would be to redress the imbalances of the past. If in some cases, the patriarchal “funeral committees” were sensitive to the pain to which their fellow members (especially women) were exposed, they would exercise caution when they would abuse the bereaved (who are mostly innocent victims). Thus, some women resorted to religion, for they thought it would provide a sense of security and assurance. There are some cases where some women, instill pain to fellow women during burials at the expense of the culture forcing their counterparts to be systematically excluded from some burial proceedings. And the acceptance of an ethical and moral injunction by a religious group would undoubtedly affect his/ her behaviour as endorsed by Scobie (1975: 12).

The fact that gender roles and relations, are worked out differently is a motivating factor in leading women to question the roles and status, ascribed to them in traditional culture, and to envision new ways of behaving as alluded by Cartledge and Cheetham (2011:75). Power dynamics suggests that the solution is not to overthrow tradition, but to work with it, and through it, to bring about a transformation of attitudes and reconciliation between the genders. Kim (2011: 75), submits that while gender is universal, it is always culturally expressed; where women and men are differentiated by sex at birth in the categories of male and female, although universally recognized, gender is perceived differently across cultures.

## Religious Power

In this area of study, not only is the contents of beliefs important, but also the manner in which it is held, and the consequent effort on behaviour, since items of belief in themselves would have little significance, if they do not influence the individual to respond in a particular way. In other words, religious beliefs empower religious attitudes, which imply behavioural elements as asserted by Scobie (1975: 9).

The church has religious power upon notification of death of a member. The church honours the dead with funeral rites, give much needed comfort to the bereaved, and to the entire community. Pastoral prudence has to consider various possibilities during and after burial. Sometimes religious law coincides with legal law, but this does not mean that the church can take over. Some indigenous churches may not participate in burial rites of their deceased member, if they are not given full responsibility and authority to do so as their dogmas and doctrine allow. Muchemwa (2002: 36) writes that culturally, a beast is slaughtered as funeral relish, but some apostolic sects (Johanne Marange for example) may not continue with burial rites, if the beast is slaughtered or before the funeral. According to Johanne Marange Apostolic Church's canons, slaughtering should only take place after burial, and upon their giving a go ahead of such ritual to commence.

Practically speaking, a lot of mourners leave immediately after burial, and one wonders then who would eat the slaughtered beast. Again, one may affirm how religious power can influence the funeral. Muchemwa (2002: 36) submits that there is a general belief that traditional slaughtering of the animal has ritual attachments to the beast. The animal is normally "dedicated" to the deceased, *Muriwo wako uyo* (here is your relish). Here, one could see clashes between traditional and religious law.

In the case of the African Initiated Church (AIC), instead of slaughtering an animal, cabbage, beans, dried fish and *chunks* (soya mince) are consumed until burial day, since shedding blood is unacceptable during funerals. And also, the church sometimes has uncontrolled power, and influence at the expense of the family, and the community (especially given the ecumenical flair).

Some denominations may want to run the funeral solo, forgetting that some of family members belong to other churches. Clash of doctrines is sometimes witnessed, such that some Apostolic churches would not entertain drums and other musical instruments deemed unholy to their doctrine. A good number of Pentecostal assemblies (Apostolic Faith Mission and many others) do not allow any cultural practices during funerals. In most case there is conflict between some churches' expectations for the family and local culture. Most Pentecostal assemblies adopt a confrontational attitude towards traditional customs such as *chiroora*, *chisahwira*, were daughters in law and jocular friends imitate the deceased, and sometimes are given tokens, whilst others such as Catholics are more flexible and accommodating in their approach.

Churches should listen to relatives, not condemning things of others. Is there a culture better than the other? What is good in one culture may be bad in the other. Culture changes, socio-political adjustment to the environment is necessary especially in this power game. So it is important to have diagnostic procedures to reach agreeable standards, not to use inappropriate forum.

Some religious adherences monopolize the liturgy during a funeral (one cannot miss the religious ethos behind words), not tolerating other religious hymns besides theirs, like the Adventists. Some funerals on the other hand, are not overtly religious as some. Religion should protect and promote well organised funerals by upholding basic human rights, thus religious superiority needs to be on guard (also of note, social classes also help in the distribution of other powers during burial, and after).

According to Kurewa (2007: 165), churches in Zimbabwe condemn Shona rituals and adopt western rituals as Christians. Unfortunately, the so called Christian rituals are irrelevant rites to the Shona people, thus, they have no meaning to them. That also means that there is no way people can hear the good news of Jesus Christ, because there is no point of contact with the person emotionally disturbed by the death of a beloved one. With the burial itself, the Shona have always believed that the spirit of the deceased does not die. They also believe that the spirit of the deceased can be evil to those left behind, thus, the rituals related to burial are important to be observed. Thus, church in Zimbabwe needs to develop rituals that appeal to the mind, and also to the heart and soul, and emotions of the people of Zimbabwe.

## **Other Powers**

Status is boosted or sometimes power comes by mere chance. In rural areas (rarely in urban), witchcraft beliefs can cause people to be fearful and thus make the practice of witchcraft powerful in the view of vulnerable groups, although some of non-vulnerable also claim to be equally powerful. Academics, even those who take illicit beers (*zed*, *kiranko*, *musombodhiya* – 100% alcohol content) have their share in the distribution of power, since some use physical power such as rank marshals (*mandimbandimba*), strong and physically fit giants (*mamonya*) are also forces to reckon with during and after burial. Drug addicts and beer drinkers show their power by digging of the grave, in case it is a rural setting, and failing to meet their beer needs would result in sabotage, thus delaying the burial because they would make sure the grave is not ready for burial. Again, another form of power is imposed power. *Varoora* and *anambuya* (daughters in law and aunts) may delay funeral proceedings, if their accounts are not settled, such as blocking the entrance for the deceased to enter or come out of the homestead. In most cases, a food catering group may delay food for the grave diggers, thus exercising power during and after burial. Hence, there are several powers during the funeral; some are powerful behind the scenes, while others are open for all to see, and in some cases, power is confused with abuse, which is rarely monitored.

## Monitoring and Protesting the Abuse of Power

Having looked at the above categories and structures of power, one can argue that power sometimes corrupts. Absolute power corrupts, absolutely, especially when it is determined by status (position one holds in society). According to Jafta (1998: 38), history is replete with abuses of power from all classes of society. Once tested, people want to cling to power by all means, and this, power hunger cuts across racial, sexual and cultural boundaries. And thus, some funerals may not take place, if some well-to-do relatives are not present.

How can abuse of power be prevented from happening, and what signs should one look for when there is suspicion of an abuse of power? The answer is in monitoring the use of power during and after the funeral, and knowing that protesting against abuse of power is the responsibility of the family, and later on the entire mourning community. And what is required among the Shona people of Zimbabwe is a complete overhaul of all structures. First, gender power needs not to be too extreme. Next, traditional and cultural powers and not politicking should also move up with time, not drowning in archaic and abusive rules and regulations. The family of the deceased, thus the called next of "skin" and next of kin should be given the floor to participate in decision making, pertaining to the funeral of their beloved ones.

Sometimes sayings such as "*ane mari ndiye mukuru*" (one who has financial muscle is the boss or the elder), although money is not all, one needs to blend with others. Some people are rich, but do not have power. Some are poor, for example, soldiers or low ranked members of the forces are poor, but sometimes they have power. It is also fair to attest that some people are powerful by status, while others are associated to powerful people, or to political heavyweights who can do anything during and after burial. Some use intellectual power which makes their personal views taken seriously at the consultancy level by virtue of learning, for instance, a professor or doctor may be listened to during and after a funeral. Some people are declared liberation or national heroes or heroines in appreciation of their unwavering service to the nation. In this case, the state has power-over the proceedings, but works in collaboration with the family of the declared persons, who may not have much influence in the state run funeral. One has to recollect the idea of different powers, related to each other, in a model of independency and interdependency that give everyone freedom to develop, but at the same time, a unit in diversity is warranted.

## Conclusion

This study examined some categories of power politics at different levels. Power issues are inevitable during and after funerals, to the extent that some death and burial ceremonies are stressful, where clashes among traditional, gender, religious and sometimes family powers are unavoidable. It is clear that the centrality of power during and after burial lies in some situation within economic or social status.

However, power politics during and after funerals can change or has changed with time. In some instances power is determined by geographical location. Funeral politics is often determined by the culture of a community/family. Cultural norms and taboos have continued to restrain, free and open participation at funerals. Thus, statements such as *chivanhu chivanhu ngachitevedzerwe*, that is, local traditions and customs should be adhered to should be considered. Nevertheless, the challenges brought forward by several factors have necessitated a gradual breaking away from the yoke of tradition and have denounced taboos, therefore, pushing funeral administration in the hands of competent people despite their gender or class.

Religious motivated funerals are not satisfied with secondary sources of problems; they normally trace and attack primary sources of problems, which sometimes lead to confrontations. In some instances, religious and cultural power clashes are witnessed. Therefore, dialogue with adherents of Shona traditional religion should be understood in the sense of encounter, mutual understanding, respect and a mutual searching for the good will of both. Finally, it should be learnt that funerals should not amount to torturing anybody, forcing external paraphernalia of difficult postures that embarrass mourners or the bereaved that are not used such activity.

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