

## A general Comparison of the Shona and Chinese funeral rituals

Musona Muchinei  
Hebei University China

### Introduction

Funeral is probably one of the the most undesirable sacred phenomenon in the history of mankind, hence funeral rituals are an important part of life etiquette and social life. Many cultures observe strict rituals during the the process of paying last respect to the deceased. Many of the rites are very sacred and must be strictly followed. In the present paper we utilized the phenomenological approach to provide a descriptive narrative of the fundamental differences between Chinese and Shona funeral rites confined to events before burial. During the research process we found that Chinese and Shona funeral procedures are very much akin in terms of the rituals and beliefs.

### Background

The Shona and Chinese have long history tracing back to the early existence of human beings. Since the existence of the earliest men, human beings had the biological ability to multiply its species. However, all human beings were also predestined to die. So death is as old as the existence of the first men and so are the funeral rituals.

People in various regions occupying various parts of the world are separated by geographical distance on large medium and small scale. These geographical separations created cultural chasm among societies as people in the leaving in different regions tend to differ in their social life experiences environment and ideologies. However, because people occupying different parts of the world may share certain experiences and similar environment and ideologies, they are therefore also bound to share the same culture and believes. In this regard, Shona and Chinese societies may have various differences and similarities in funeral rituals since the early primitive societies.

These rites also differ even at local level in both societies. From the early primitive societies to the contemporary world, both societies have experienced some dynamics which have a bearing on the way they funeral rituals are done. For instances, with the advent of Christianity, Shona traditional funeral rituals have been either diluted or even totally replaced by Christian rituals. For instance, a year after burial people the bereaved families used to call for a ceremony called "*chenura*" where people would brew traditional beer, slaughter a cow and a goat, feast and perform many detailed rituals as a way of remembering and honoring the deceased. This has now been replaced by a Christian ritual known as "*nyaradzo*" (*memorial service*) in which a church service is held and no traditional rituals are performed they are banned and have been shunned. This has become the common norm particularly in urban areas, whereas the *chenura* tradition in now only confined among conservatives indigenous communities remote rural dwellers.

In both societies funeral rituals differ across the social structure, depending on age; social

status; gender; marital status of the deceased and other factors. But these differences are may or may not be treated the same in two societies under study. As such it can be safely claimed that, a comprehensive comparison of the funeral rituals between the two societies may not be very successfully. This is because there are several overlaps between the societies and through out history. Hence this paper is a general comparison of funeral rituals at ordinary funerals.

### **Literature review**

Detailed accounts of Shona funeral procedures and rituals are mostly found in novels. In this research we depended on the following novel to obtain knowledge about Shona funeral rituals: *Tsika Dzavashona* by Gombe (1986); *Karikoga Gumi Remiseve* by Chakaipa (1958) and Akanyangira Yaona some few basic rituals are also discussed in some teaching and learning materials. Details about Shona funeral rituals and procedures are also found in school textbooks such as *Shona registers volume 1* by Hodza (1981) . Some other information on Shona rituals is included in research papers that discuss various social matters of the Shona people, such as Moyo.J (2013) in *The Interface of Verbal and Non-verbal communication at Shona funeral milieu: Sociolinguistic implications*.

So many published researches about social life are found on the internet, usually on the academic website called the ncki.net. We obtained more knowledge about Chinese funeral rites from research papers that compare Chinese and Western funeral rituals, such as *Chinese and Western Culture in Funeral* by Po WenYi (2008) and Wang XiaoFan (2009) who explored the weeping phenomenon in Chinese Traditional Funeral, and also on the cultural differences Reflected by the crying in the traditional Chinese and Western funeral and She XiaoXuan (2013) Seeing the Difference in Etiquette between Chinese and Western cultures From “*Four Weddings and a Funeral*”. Similar information on Chinese funeral procedures and rituals is repeated and widely posted on the internet by several unpublished scholars. We also reference to such posts to support replenish what we obtained from published works. From all these reference sources we selected funeral procedures and rituals that are significantly different from those of the Shona society.

**Announcements:** In the Chinese society the announcements of the funeral are sent in the form of invitations. For most Chinese funerals, the invitations are white. If the person was age 80 or older, then the invitations are pink. Living until 80 or beyond is considered a feat worth celebrating and mourners should celebrate the person’s longevity rather than mourn. The invitation includes information about the funeral’s date, time, and location, as well as a small obituary that includes information about the deceased that may include his or her birth date, date of death, age, family members that survived them and sometimes how the person died. The invitation may also include a family tree. A phone call or in-person invite may precede the paper invitation. Either way, an RSVP is expected. If a guest cannot attend the funeral, flowers and a white envelope with money is traditionally sent.

In comparison in the Zimbabwean society there are no formal invitations sent out to relatives and word about the funeral is just spread among relatives using different modes of communication and there’s no need to RSVP. According to Moyo (2013:8) “When death occurs, there are two typical means of announcement: a wailing tone from female members of the deceased’s family, then the singing and drum beat to herald to all and sundry that a member of the community or neighborhood has died. The wailing stands out as a synonymous feature of both traditional funeral rituals and contemporary Shona funeral rites”. Gombe (1886) in *Tsika DzavaShona* indicates that people would sent a messenger to the relatives. To

the village headman and the Chief, the message has to be accompanied by a token in form of a Chicken. He indicates that, these days the token is mostly in form of a small amount of money.

**Funeral attire:** Guests at a Chinese funeral wear somber colors like black. Bright and colorful clothing, especially red must be avoided as these colors are associated with happiness. White is acceptable and, if the deceased was 80 or above, white with pink or red is acceptable as the event is cause for celebration. The deceased person wears a white robe and white envelopes with paper money are tucked inside. All other clothes that the deceased used to wear when he/she was alive are burned

In the Zimbabwean context people attending the funerals without any color restrictions. Black color is also associated with mourning, so people who are willing to pay attention to colors may wear black colors. However unlike in Chinese funeral the relative of the deceased do not wear special robes. In Shona society at a funeral one cannot tell who are and who are not relatives or not by attire or color of the attire.

**Funeral preparation:** The job of coordinating and preparing Chinese funerals falls on children or younger family members. It is part of the Confucian principle of filial piety and devotion to one's parents. When someone in the family dies all statues of Chinese gods in the home are covered with red paper. A piece of white cloth is put over a doorway. If the deceased is a man people put a gong to the left of the entrance. And if the deceased is a woman a gong is put on the right side.

Comparatively, Zimbabwean funeral preparations and procedures are coordinated by adults young adults can assist senior adults when requested but everything goes through senior family members. Adult organizers are usually close family friends known as *masahwira* and the also the son-in-laws (*vakwasha*) and daughter-in laws (*varoora*). When an adult person dies, in Shona culture a cow is killed usually by the son in-laws. This cow is given a special term, as *mombe yenhewedzo*. Rituals are performed on cow as special way of announcing the death to the ancestors of the deceased.

**The wake:** There is often a wake preceding the funeral that may last several days. Family members are expected to keep an overnight vigil for at least one night in which the person's picture, flowers, and candles are placed on the body and the family sits in wait. According to (Gao & Quan, 2012) It is customary for relatives to hold vigils over the dying, in order to accompany them till the very last moment before entering the afterlife. This process, called *shou ling*, is a way for loved ones to show filial piety and loyalty to the deceased. Family members thus take shifts to watch over a relative on their deathbed.

In Shona culture a female relative sits closest to the deceased just behind the door during the vigils, with many other relatives and neighbors in the room, which is usually a round hut in a rural setting. The body lies in state in the round hut just behind the door, female relations positioned closest to the body. Women sleep in the round hut singing and beating drums. Due to the influence of Christianity, the songs are a mixture of Christian and traditional hymns

### **The consolation**

In Shona society, during the night vigil men stay outside sitting around bonfire chatting, and discussing various general topics, mostly unrelated to the funeral. Some dance and sing beating drums. They also exchange jokes, laugh freely as if nothing happened. This culture is

there to lighten the sorrowful mood of the bereaved relatives. The family friends specially known by the name *masahwira* and daughters in-law (*varooro*), play a very significant role at a funeral. They play all sorts of teasing and jokes my mocking and creating jokes about the deceased and the close relatives. This is done order to lightened the grief at a funeral by making the close relatives laughs and not always cry (Chikore, 2017:54).

At a Chinese funeral the concepts of *Chisahwira* is not regarded. The funeral atmosphere is usually very sorrowful and it is not proper to mock and play jokes and tease with negative comments about the deceased as in Shona culture. The deceased is strictly respected and relatives cannot be console by way of making jokes and teasing them or about their beloved whom they have lost.

### **Eulogies**

Speeches, usually known in local language as "*kupa umboowo*" (giving testimonies). It starts with the deceased's closest relatives right up to friends and neighbors and/or workmates. As per custom, people usually testify good things about the deceased, even if he was had bad social morals. "Typical of the Shona funeral speeches is the philosophy: 'Wafa wanaka' 'Once dead, one's past faults are forgotten'." (Moyo, 2013:9). At a Chinese funeral, it is said that eulogies may be given but do not seem to be strictly tradition as is in Shona culture.

### **Condolences**

During the wake, in Chinese culture family and friends bring flowers, which are elaborate wreaths that include banners with couplets written on them, and envelopes filled with cash. On the day of the funeral, all the guests are expected to give money in white envelopes (white is the color of mourning in Chinese culture) to the family members of the deceased. This can be directly handed over to one of the family members. The minimum expected amount is 101 yuan (about \$16), but there is no upper limit for the same.

In Shona societies funeral contribution are known by the special name "*chema*". Mourners make contributions, usually in the form of basic groceries such as mealie-meala and vegetables. Important contributions also come in form of money and fire wood. Money is usually used to buy other basics such as cooking oil; bread; milk extra vegetables; meat and other needs which may not have been provided as free contributions or to replenish shortages. Women who are not relatives of the deceased move from homestead to homestead collecting *chema* usually in the form of mealie-meal, writing down family names of those who would have contributed, the nature and amount of contribution. In indigenous communities, a contribution of mealie-meal is usually mandatory especially from relatives and people from neighborhood. Flowers are usually bought by closest relative(s) and not anyone should bring his or her own flowers.

In Shona culture there are no organized mourners, or mourners for hire. The members of the society identify their own abilities and voluntarily participate in the tasks they are good at. Those with such talents as singing; drum playing and others voluntarily play a leading role in the respective areas, joined by any other willing members of the society.

### **After funeral**

According to Chinese funeral rites, after the funeral a hired band leads the procession playing loud music marching to the cemetery. Behind it is the family member wearing mourning clothes, followed by hearse or sedan containing the coffin, then friends and associates complete the procession.

In Shona culture there are no professional mourners paid to wail and cry as they lead the procession. The members of the communities sing together as they lead to the cemetery. If the deceased was a Christian, the church members would lead most of the songs and the rest of the crowd can join in.

### **Food and beverages**

In Shona culture most men will go to the cemetery to dig and prepare the grave pit. As per custom, their meal is delivered to the cemetery. Among the meals will be a chicken specifically prepared for the grave diggers only. In most communities men drink alcohol, hence beer becomes an important beverage during the preparation of the grave pit. This is done to create a bustling atmosphere which makes them do their task excitedly with lightened fright of being in a sacred yard. Everyone has to eat something at the funeral, no one should refuse to eat (except for special cases such as health and religious reasons). This is a sign of unity and togetherness. Even if one does not feel like eating, he or she has to accept and have a little of it. At a funeral people are expected to unite and put aside their differences. In contrast, the Chinese would go back home for breakfast after digging the grave pit, take a rest in the and take the body for burial in the afternoon.

### **Beliefs and taboos**

At a Chinese funeral all mirrors should be removed from anywhere near the deceased. It is done according to the belief that if some person sees a reflection of a coffin in the mirror yet another death would happen in the family very soon. During the wake Chinese people burn joss paper or prayer money. This is because they believe that the deceased should have some kind of income during their afterlife. Everyone present at the wake burns an incense and bows as a sign of respect for the deceased. Fake paper money and miniature items like cars, houses, and televisions are burned. These items are sometimes associated with the loved one's interests and are believed to follow them into the afterlife.

The number three is significant at a Chinese funeral. There will be many customary gestures being carried out three times. The Chinese name for the number 3 is “*san*”. It has the same sound as the words for “disperse, separate”. The Chinese think separation undesirable, and associate it with death. The values of the money contributions at the funeral must be in odd numbers.

A hired band that leads the procession to the cemetery plays loud music which is believed to frighten spirits and ghosts.

A special red plaque with some inscription on it is put outside the house. People in China believe that 7 days after death the soul of the deceased will return to his/her home. And for the soul not to get lost this plaque is put on the seventh day, everyone in the family will stay in their rooms. The floor of the entrance hall is sprinkled with a little bit of flour or talcum powder. This should show if the soul of the deceased has visited the house or not. The wagon with coffin is adorned with a large portrait of the deceased hanging on the windshield. In Shona culture no pictures of the deceased can be displayed anywhere at the funeral.

### **Colors**

The Chinese generally seem to pay more attention to color than the Shona culture does. White is the color reserved for death in Chinese culture and black symbolises deep sadness. During the wake, family and friends bring white flowers, couplets written on them, and white envelopes with money inside. Traditional Chinese funeral flowers are white. After the funeral,

sons and daughters wear black and white mourning clothes and walk in the front row of the procession. Daughters-in-law come next and also wear black and white clothes. Grandsons and granddaughters wear blue mourning clothes.

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