

## Rituals and Taboos Related To Death As Repositories of Traditional African Philosophical Ideas: Evidence From The Karanga of Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examined the Karanga death rituals and taboos with a view to discovering their underlying philosophy. The qualitative research design was adopted in this study. Data collection techniques included the interview, observation and documentary analysis. Sampling methods used in this study include purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Data were presented in narrative form and analyzed thematically. The study established that Karanga death rituals and taboos are important repositories of philosophical concepts which can be tapped into for purposes of philosophical discourse. Rituals and taboos are a Karanga mode of philosophical expression. The study concluded that rituals and taboos related to death are instrumental in understanding the Karanga world view. The study recommended that similar studies be conducted with other traditional African ethnic groups. It also recommended that some metaphysical concepts associated with Karanga death rituals and taboos be investigated empirically. It also further recommended that curricula at various levels of our education system should include cultural taboos and rituals to enhance the learners' understanding of traditional African philosophical concepts.*

**Keywords:** Rituals, taboos, philosophical Ideas

### INTRODUCTION

It has been observed by African scholars that over the centuries, traditional African philosophy has been expressed through culture (Gyekye 1987, Mbiti 1969). In traditional African society, religion permeates all aspects of life (Mbiti 1969). Thus in the African world, the religious is inextricably intertwined with culture. The African worldview is therefore basically religious. This religious worldview is the basis of the African interpretation of the world around him. It is not therefore surprising that African traditional religion has been observed to be expressive of African philosophical thought (Gyekye 1987 Idowu 1973, Mbiti 1969, Parrinder 1976). Rituals and taboos constitute an important dimension of African religion. It is therefore my contention in this paper that Karanga philosophical ideas are embedded in their death rituals and taboos. This paper supports the view that lack of a doxographic tradition among the traditional Africans does not by any means imply the absence of philosophical thinking or philosophical ideas (Gyekye 1987). This study attempts to analyze the Karanga rituals and taboos with a view to discovering their philosophical import. This is important in the study of Karanga philosophical thinking because probing the Karanga on their spiritual beliefs does not yield much in terms of why a particular ritual or taboo is observed. The response one often gets is that a religious practice is held because it is part of tradition. There is therefore a need on the part of philosophers to analyze and synthesize disconnected ideas which emerge as the informants describe how the rituals are conducted. The study sought to answer the following research question: What philosophical concepts are embedded in Karanga death rituals and taboos? The question was broken into the following sub questions:

- a. What do death rituals and taboos mean to the Karanga?
- b. Can death rituals and taboos assist in the understanding of Karanga philosophical ideas?

A study of this nature is significant because as Mbiti (1969:1) wrote:

*Religion is the strongest element in traditional African background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned.*

## **METHODOLOGY AND DELINEATION OF THE STUDY**

The design of this study is qualitative and is informed by the phenomenological epistemology. This approach was adopted because:

1. The phenomenological epistemology accepts that reality is in essence subjective and that therefore human beings are capable of giving meaning to their own existence. The approach was therefore appropriate in this study because the aim was to discover the meanings of taboos and rituals as they occur in a Karanga setting
2. The approach enabled the researcher to employ the phenomenological principles of epoche and eideic intuition. Through the principle of epoche I was able to suspend or “bracket” my value judgments or biases in order to study phenomena without any preconceived ideas. Through the second principle of the phenomenological method, eidetic intuition; I was able to see the essential ideas in Karanga death rituals and taboos. The method therefore allowed me to identify philosophical concepts as they exist among the Karanga.

Sampling was determined by the qualitative nature of the research design. Purposive sampling was used to choose informants who were knowledgeable about different aspects of rituals and taboos. Through snowballing sampling, participants were asked to suggest others whom they thought could supply information on specific rituals and taboos. The study was conducted among the Karanga of Gutu, Bikita and Ndanga districts of Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. The study focused on the above geographical area for two reasons. Firstly, a study of a similar nature has not been conducted among the Karanga. The chosen geographical area is inhabited largely by the Karanga. Secondly, I have close relatives and friends in all the three districts and hence I had little difficulty in identifying and accessing key informants. It was also easy to undertake participant observation during death rituals. I interviewed over twenty Karanga adults of the age range 50 to 60 years and all of them had participated in various death rituals. I attended six burial ceremonies and two *kurova guva* rituals.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Philosophy is made up of a number of components, namely metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, logic and semantics (Akinpelu 1987, Atkinson 1999, Wanjohi 1997). The popular conception of philosophy refers to a people’s worldview (Akinpelu 1987). The traditional African worldview has been viewed as African philosophy because of its religious basis. As Gyekye (1987) Noted.

*The reflective impulse is also manifested in African religious thought. It is generally accepted that Africans are religious people, in the sense that they possess elaborate systems of religious beliefs and practices that they deal with such fundamental questions as the meaning of life, the origin of all things, death and related questions. In religions we seek answers to questions as the meaning of life, the origin of all things, death and*

*related questions. In religion we seek answers to questions of ultimate existence; philosophy also is concerned with similar questions of ultimate existence.*

In this paper, an attempt is made to unravel the philosophical ideas found in the Karanga death rituals and taboos. The paper shows how traditional Karanga thought is related to the branches of philosophy.

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy which studies questions which science cannot answer. It is a study of being (ontology). In different aspects and how they are related (Wanjohi 1997). There are many themes in African religion which show evidence of metaphysical thoughts among Africans (Mbiti 1969, Wanjohi 1997, Gyekye 1987). These include God, the soul, death, causality and human destiny. The paper discusses the metaphysical concepts embedded in Karanga death rituals and taboos.

Epistemology investigates the origin and nature of human knowledge. It is the theory of human knowledge. As Akinpelu (1987) explains.

*Epistemology digs into the roots of knowledge. It asks such questions as: what do we mean by knowledge itself, and what is it to know something? How do we establish that we know when we claim to know something? How do we claim that we know something.... What are types of knowledge that are possible?*

Thus the aim of the epistemologist is to question knowledge so as to establish its truth or falsity. The epistemologist is concerned with types of knowledge. These include revealed knowledge (knowledge revealed to men by a supernatural being); intuitive knowledge (knowledge coming from within man); rational knowledge (knowledge obtained through reasoning); empirical knowledge (knowledge we get through the senses) and authoritative knowledge (knowledge from authorities in a given field). (Kneller 1964). In this paper, types of knowledge associated with death rituals and taboos are explored.

The third branch of philosophy which is important to the philosopher is axiology or the study of values. Axiology answers three main questions: whether values are subjective or objective; whether values are changing or constant and whether there is a hierarchy of values (Kneller 1964). A study of axiology therefore leads to the understanding of the values of a given society and enables someone to judge the worth of these values. Axiology deals with three areas (Atkinson 1991). Firstly, one area of axiology is known as ethics. Ethics studies what is usually good or preferable in both character and conduct. The second aspect of axiology is aesthetics which explores questions related to the beautiful. The third aspect of axiology is political theory which is the study of social organization. This paper examines Karanga values enshrined in the death rituals and taboos.

The fourth branch of philosophy is semantics (Atkinson 1991). Semantics is the study of meaning in language. Words and concepts are not identical since the same word may be used for different concepts on different occasions (Kneller 1964). A given word or statement therefore can mean different things to different people. As Cox (1983) observed.

*All forms of understanding evolve their own terminology and symbology and religion is no exception. Each religion has its own set of technical terms which have been worked out by its scholars and thinkers and which they use with precise meanings- terms such as salvation, Karma, Messiah, Nivana, sin and forgiveness.*

Semantics is therefore important in understanding the underlying meanings of certain words associated with Karanga death rituals and taboos. Thus in death rituals and taboos, we find religious language which can be comprehended through grasping Karanga semantics.

The fifth branch of philosophy is logic (Atkinson 1991). Logic investigates whether an argument is reasonable or not. It is a systematic attempt to distinguish valid arguments from invalid arguments (Newton-Smith 1985). Through logic philosophers determine whether the reasons given are good ones and whether they lead logically to the conclusion. The two kinds of philosophic logic used by philosophers are deductive logic and inductive logic. Deductive logic involves arguing from a universal truth to a particular application while induction is a way of arguing which moves from the truth of a particular statement to the probable truth of more general statements (Atkinson 1991). This study examines forms of reasoning behind Karanga death rituals and taboos.

### **Rituals**

A ritual or a rite is a prescribed way of conducting a religious action or ceremony (Mbiti 1975). Through word, symbol and action, ritual communicates a religious language. Arnold Van Gennep (1965) referred to rituals or rites of passage which he said are designed to enable a person to move successfully through the various stages of life. The rites center primarily on birth, puberty, marriage and death. According to Gennep, protective and purification rituals are characteristics of these stages. He subdivided the rites of passage into rite of separation, rites of transition and rites of incorporation. However, these different types of rites cannot be neatly separated from each other and often occur simultaneously within one particular stage of life such as death. Mbiti (1975) identifies different traditional African rituals which he categorized as personal rituals, agricultural rituals, health rituals, homestead rituals, professional rituals and festivals. According to Ray (1976), the main purpose of rituals of passage is to create fixed and meaningful transformations in the life of cycle (birth, puberty, marriages, death), in the ecological and temporal cycle (planting, harvest, seasonal changes, New Year). Rituals have a sacred dimension. According to Adler cited in Schmidt (1980).

*Ritual is the language of religion. It brings into our daily life the invisible world of this spirit and the unseen of God.*

Rituals (death rituals included) are therefore important in understanding a people's religious and philosophical outlook.

### **Taboos**

The Polynesian word taboo means that a particular person, object, word or action is to be avoided (Hastings 1954). Scholars' such as Smith (1898); Durkheim (1915) and Radcliffe-Brown (1939) have observed that an important quality of taboo is its association with the sacred. According to this theory, anything taboo is sacred and dangerous and is therefore to be avoided. Precisely, what is sacred, dangerous and forbidden is unregulated contact between the sacred and the secular (Parry 1985). Gyekye (1987) has observed that taboos among the Akan of Ghana are associated with supernatural beings. Gelfand (1979) also observed a link between taboos and religion among the traditional Shona. Taboos are therefore associated with a people's metaphysical ideas. Steiner (1956) sees taboos as an element of all those situations in which attitude to values are expressed in terms of danger behaviors. Steiner sees taboos as playing an important function of protecting societal values. This implies that in taboos are enshrined values. Taboos are associated with impurity and contagion (Smith 1898). Any person who comes into contact with something tabooed becomes taboo himself and is therefore expected to go through prescribed ritual purification. Taboo behavior expresses and reinforces the values and sentiments important to the maintenance of society (Radcliffe- Brown 1939, Mary Douglas 1966). Aschwanden (1982) and Radcliffe-Brown (1939) have realized the symbolical nature of taboos. Taboos are a

symbolical way of pointing a warning finger at the contrast to the ideals which are held by the individual and the group. In other words, in taboos are embedded a people's philosophy.

## **DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Metaphysical Content of Death Rituals and Taboos**

An analysis of death rituals and taboos provides an opportunity to explore the metaphysical aspect of life. It is a study of being (ontology) in different aspects to reflect the ultimate meaning of human life. Rituals and taboos are a repository of traditional Karanga metaphysics. There is evidence of metaphysical themes in Karanga death rituals and taboos. We examine some of the themes below:

#### **The Concept of Death**

##### ***Death and Birth Are Similar Processes***

It is strictly prohibited by the Karanga to bury the deceased during midday (*masikati*). According to the Karanga, no one should be buried during midday as people are not normally born and do not die during midday. My informants saw a link between birth and death and even explained that a person dies the time when he /she was born. They told me that if someone knew the time of the day when he or she was born, then he or she would know the time when he was going to die. The general view seems to be that people are born and die when it is cool. According to my informant, during midday, it is normally hot and spirits will be resting and therefore it is also a bad time for the deceased's spirit to start on a journey. The Karanga said people who died during midday died because of spirits such as *ngozi* (the avenging spirit) otherwise people normally die before or after midday. A small scale survey conducted by the researcher indicated that the majority of people interviewed confirmed that their children were not born during midday and also that their relatives had died before or after midday. It is important to note that the burial taboo related to death is still being strictly observed even by the modern day Karanga. Even in urban areas burials do not normally take place between 1 and 2 in the afternoon. The following sub-theme further illustrates the Karanga philosophical thinking that death and birth are similar processes.

##### ***The Act of Dying Can Be Delayed***

According to Karanga belief, it is taboo to deny a critically ill person whatever he or she wants for he or she will take long to die. The Karanga believe that someone might not die until someone close to his heart and is far away comes to see him. In most cases the dying person would be willing to say his last words to one or all of his relatives. I was informed of one instance when a dying person asked for his son-in-law to be sent for. Apparently the son-in-law was close to his heart but was geographically far away. It took almost a whole day for the in-law to arrive. As soon as he arrived, the dying father-in-law requested that everybody except the son-in-law leave the room. He spent a few minutes with the son-in-law and then peacefully died. In another instance, a critically ill patient at a hospital in Masvingo town asked his close relatives in rural areas to come and see him. The relatives arrived after about three hours. He spent ten minutes with them and died. There were many stories I was told by the Karanga about people who delayed dying until their wish was fulfilled. Bullock (1927) observed this Shona belief in death as an entity which can be controlled:

*Relatives come from far and near to the sick man; and when death is imminent they will beseech him not to die before sunset.....*

The Karanga have a strong belief that an ill person reaches a stage when he knows he will not recover but will certainly die. It is said during that stage the ill person will be close to the

world of spirits and will avoid looking directly into the eyes of the living. It is believed some ill people at his stage even speak words or even behave in a manner which suggests that they are going to die. This Shona belief is also noted by Bullock (1927) who wrote:

*There is a belief that, when a man is dying he sees in a vision of the spirits of his dead relatives. Some of them take him by hand, and try to lead him away from life. Others strive with these, and his death or recovery is dependent on the result of the struggle.*

Thus according to this Shona philosophical thought, death can be delayed by the spirit world.

The Karanga also believe that magic can cause an ill person to delay dying. Some people are said to use magic which can make them live longer and this type of magic has the negative effect of prolonging the dying process. It is said some people eat the heart of a tortoise or use the fat of a python to strengthen themselves (*kuzvisimbisa*). People who use such magic die a slow and painful death. The heart of the tortoise or python is said to take long to stop beating after the creature has been killed. Similarly, a person who used magic from these creatures will have his heart continue to beat when the rest of the body is incapacitated. As one informant said: *munhu anosvika pakunhuwa mwoyo achingotakwaira. (The person will produce a bad smell but the heart will continue to beat)*. In such situations, the Karanga would perform a ritual to expedite the death process. They would burn the fat of the tortoise or the fat and skin of a python so that he could die. (*Vaipisa mafuta ekamba kana mafuta neganda zveshato kuti murwere aende.*). Thus traditionally, the Karanga practiced euthanasia.

It is interesting to note that the metaphysical belief that death can be delayed is similar to the Karanga belief that the birth process can be delayed. A pregnant woman must not be denied food she enjoys eating most as she will experience difficulty during pregnancy as the baby delays to come out of the womb. She is prohibited from bidding farewell to someone close to her heart if the person is going away as the baby will delay to come out or might not come out until the person close to her heart returns. (*Haafanire kuonekana nemunhu waanofarira chaizvo kana munhu wacho achienda kure nokuti anozonetseka pakuzvara kana kuti haazvari kusvika munhu wacho adzoka*). There are many more pregnancy taboos which seem to have been meant to avoid the delaying of the delivery process.

The two processes, birth and death are associated with entering into other worlds: birth leads into the world of the visible while death leads into the world of the invisible. They are both associated with death and rebirth. Wanjohi (1997) commented on this traditional African belief thus:

*Being born must therefore be thought of in terms of the category of passage. To come here is to leave the beyond, it is to be in transit, to change one's state. Being born here means dying up there and at the end of life, the opposite is true: to die here is to be born up there.*

In other words, African (the Karanga included) metaphysics sees birth and death as closely related processes. It is important to note that the Karanga see a close link between an unborn baby and newly born baby with the world of spirits. Similarly, the Karanga revered old people as being closer to the world of spirits by virtue of their age. An unborn baby and a newly born baby are believed to discover hidden knowledge and reveal it in the same way as spirits assist diviners to discover hidden knowledge. Thus baby hood and old age are associated by the traditional Karanga to closeness to the world of spirits. As Wanjohi explains:

*Childhood, like old age, constitutes an intermediary or transitory stage, a period of progress. While the child tries to free himself from the control of the other world, the old man prepares himself to return there...*

Thus the newly born baby and old people have something in common: they are both about to enter into new worlds. The exit door from one world is the entry door into another world.

### ***Death as a Mystical Danger***

When a person dies, a ritual must be conducted to inform his consanguine of the death so that they will not encounter misfortunes (*kana munhu afa, hama dzinofanira kuti dziziviswe kuitira kuti dzisasangana namashura*). Death is believed to bring about mystical danger to the consanguine of the deceased. The ritual of informing the relatives is meant to protect the consanguine of the deceased against mystical danger. All relatives are ritually informed about the death either by word of mouth or by some ritual act. One such ritual act involves throwing millet seeds into the fire while names of the deceased's relatives who are far away are being mentioned and the death message put across. It is believed by the Karanga that relatives of the deceased who have not yet received the bad news of the death will encounter bad omens or some misfortunes which will be a sign that something is wrong in the family. This might be in the form of an attack (verbal or physical). for no apparent reason; seeing a green branch falling off a tree or a plate breaking while you hold it.

### ***Death as a Concrete Reality***

It can be inferred from the Karanga taboos that the Karanga seem to see death as a concrete entity. They appear to view it as something which actually exists and can be invited by human actions. It is strictly prohibited to sit while holding one's cheek as this symbolizes someone in mourning and is likely to bring about death. When someone is seriously ill relatives should not cry as this is likely to cause his death. It is forbidden to carry two stones or logs to be used for burial as this is believed to cause more deaths. According to my informants, the Karanga say you have planted death in the family. (*Unonzi wadzvara rufu*). Next time when death strikes, people will die in twos or more. One Shona informant added: "*Munenge muchishura rumwe rufu*." (Your behavior of carrying objects in twos is likely to result in another death.). Any action associated with a funeral is discouraged during normal times. To the Karanga, death exists and is to be feared in the same way bacteria and viruses exist and are feared in a scientific world. That death is an entity which exists is shown by the following Karanga proverbs *Rufu runoita wegondo, rinотора nhiyo ruchisiya mai vachichema* (death is like an eagle which takes a chick leaving the mother hen mourning).

*Rufu haruna ndanatsa* (death does not care you are a good man).

*Rufu runodana* (death calls).

*Rufu haruna ishe* (Death knows no chief).

Further evidence that the Karanga viewed death as concrete was obtained from some informants who said: *Chitunha hachibudiswi nepamukova asi nepaburi rinenge ragadzirwa kuitira kuti rufu rusapinda mumba*. (The body of the deceased is carried out of the hut not through the door but an opening made in the wall for the purpose of taking out the body. This is done to prevent death from striking again.). This old burial practice is no longer being observed by the Karanga due to westernization.

### ***Belief in a Shadow (Mumvuri)***

If a shadow is seen in the hut where the deceased is lying in state, burial of the deceased should not take place until the shadow disappears lest the deceased's spirit comes back to

trouble the living. This taboo points to the Karanga belief in a soul which can manifest itself in the form of a shadow (*mvuri*). My Karanga informants differed on the concept of *mvuri*. Some insisted the shadow is black and that when a person dies the shadow disappears. In other words, so they argued, a corpse has no shadow. Some even argued that a coffin with a deceased person does not cast any shadow. Other informants however argued that a corpse has a shadow but the deceased may show his displeasure by projecting his shadow in the wrong place. They said such a shadow might be seen on the wall of the hut or room where the deceased is lying in state. Still some of my Karanga informants said that a person has two shadows- a white shadow and a black shadow. The black shadow is the one which is the one which is seen every day; the white shadow is not normally visible and is the one which becomes an ancestral spirit (*mudzimu*). The white shadow is supposed to disappear soon after someone's death. If the white shadow does not disappear and instead appears on the wall of the hut where the deceased is lying in state, it will be a sign that the deceased is restless and wants something done. It is important to note however that all Karanga do believe in a shadow (*mvuri*) which can appear if the deceased is unhappy with something. It seems the *mvuri*, represents the Karanga concepts of a soul. This seems to indicate that the Karanga believe that a person consists of two separable entities, a soul and a body.

#### *The Spirit of The Deceased is Powerful and has Human Feelings*

According to Karanga belief, the deceased's spirit continues to have humanlike emotions such as anger and thirst. The Karanga believe the restlessness and anger of the spirit can cause misfortune among the living. Taboos meant to show respect of the deceased's body show evidence of Karanga belief in the anger of the spirit.

It is not allowed to leave a human being to die with his eyes and mouth open like an animal, the deceased spirit will grow angry and restless and come back to trouble his consanguine. (*Munhu haafaniri kufa maziso, nemuromo zvavhurika semhuka, anozoita shungu akadzoka kuzotambudza vapenyu. Anenge achiti sei musina kundigadzira musi wandafa?*). It is taboo to spit even if the body is giving a bad smell. Spitting because of the deceased bad smell is seen as a sign of contempt, hatred and dislike for the deceased and this action is believed to invite the wrath of the deceased spirit. In addition, it is forbidden to refuse to eat the food prepared at a funeral, no matter how badly cooked it is as this will make the spirit of the deceased unhappy and restless. The Karanga say, " *zvinodyiwa parufu hazvirambwi nokuti unenge wadadira rufu*". (Refusal to eat food prepared at a funeral is interpreted by the Karanga to be a sign of arrogance during the funeral). The Karanga believe the spirit of the deceased is restless, angry and dangerous. Thus they try as much as possible through ritual and taboo to cool the deceased's spirit.

Bourdillon's (1976: 204-205) analysis of the concept of cooling the spirit among the Shona equally applies among the Karanga.

*"At death, a new spirit with its appropriate superior powers enters the conceptual world of the community. Nobody knows quite how the spirit will react to its new environment nor what secret, grudge the deceased might have harbored before his death, which explains the necessity of keeping the spirit "cool" and of discouraging it from returning to the homestead. In the Shona idiom, as in English, the concept of 'coolness' carries overtones of calm, placid peacefulness; the opposite of "cool" "is hot, much as the concept is used in the English expression, 'hot tempered.....".*

They believe the *shungu* (anger). of the deceased's spirit soon after death can be calmed through ritual. To discourage the deceased from 'stabbing' or harming the living two seeds called *masoso* are placed in the grave one above the head and one below the feet of the



deceased's body. Grass from watery places as well as the water-lily is placed in the grave to cool the spirit. Soon after burial, the new grave is sprinkled with water as a way of cooling off the spirit. To calm the deceased's anger, the consanguine must sacrifice a goat known as *mbudzi yeshungu* (the goat of anger). The meat of the goat of anger is not allowed to be boiled as it is believed the deceased's anger will increase as the heat in boiling water increases. Instead, the goat's meat is supposed to be roasted. To ensure that the deceased's anger is completely done away with, all the meat of the goat of anger must be consumed on the same day and all the bones burnt so that nothing remains.

The Karanga believe that soon after death, the deceased spirit inhabits a dry land and is therefore bound to feel thirsty. Thus the ritual beer to quench his thirst is called *doro renyota* (beer of the thirst) or *doro remvura* (beer of water). The ritual of the *doro renyota* is conducted before the deceased spirit is accommodated in the family through the *kugadzira* or home bringing of the deceased ceremony. It seems therefore the ritual *doro renyota* is meant to symbolically cool off the spirit which is lonely and restless.

In addition, the Karanga fear the deceased's spirit because they believe it has acquired extra powers which it can use to influence the living, at times causing misfortunes. My Karanga informants told me that the deceased can cause unusual and mysterious happenings such as causing bees to sting people at a funeral, giving a bad smell, increasing the weight of the body in the coffin such that no one can lift it and at times making the body expand such that it cannot fit through the door. If the deceased had indicated his wish of where to be buried, it becomes taboo to bury him at any other place other than the one he has chosen. According to Karanga belief, if the wish of the deceased is not considered, the deceased will make it difficult to transport his body or to dig his grave. If the deceased had indicated his wish to be buried in the rural areas and not in town, ignoring his wish might result in the car meant to ferry him from the mortuary to a town cemetery refusing to start. Ignoring the site of the grave chosen by the deceased is believed to result in grave diggers encountering problems such as rocks, roots or water seeping into the grave. Thus death is believed to empower the deceased who becomes more powerful than the living.

### ***The Deceased's Spirit goes on a Journey***

The Karanga people believe that soon after death, the deceased's spirit goes on a journey. The Shona say: "*Kana munhu achangofa, vanhu havabvumirwi kuchema zvakanyanya kana kuridza mhere, zvinonetsa mufi parwendo akadzoka, anocheuka mwoyo wake ukarwadza akadzoka.*" (Soon after the person has died, people are not allowed to weep loudly and for too long as this might stop the deceased's spirit from smoothly proceeding on its journey. According to the Karanga, the deceased's spirit will be perturbed by the loud crying and turn back). The deceased's corpse must be ritually washed; just like ordinary life anyone who plans to start on a journey washes his body. On the way to the grave, the deceased must be allowed to rest just like someone on a long journey needs to rest. The spirit of the deceased, according to the Karanga, must be free to undertake its journey hence the deceased's body must be undressed of anything which had been tied around it. This includes belts and bandages.

### ***There is life beyond the grave***

The Karanga believe in life after death. As we have seen above, taboos and rituals show that the Karanga believe that the soul of the deceased embarks on a journey soon after death. Preparation of the body before and items put in the grave show the Karanga belief in life after death. Banana's (1991: 27) analysis of the Shona concept of death in general equally applies to the Karanga in particular.

*Life is an endless enterprise, Death is not death; it is a vehicle from the ontology of visible beings to the ontology of invisible beings. Death is part of life, it is a gateway to eternity, it's a gateway to life in the hereafter.*

To the Karanga therefore, death is regarded as part of the natural rhythm of life but it seems it is dreaded because of its disrupting effect. This conception of life following death is further illustrated by the terms used by the Karanga to describe death. When someone has died, the Karanga use the following terms:

*Watisiya (he has left us).*

*Watsakatika (he has disappeared).*

*Watumamira (he has gone ahead of us).*

*Waenda (he has gone).*

*Wazorora (he has rested).*

The underlying philosophical idea in these Karanga terms is that life continues after death. Death is viewed as a departure, not an end of life. This explains why the Karanga conduct the *kurova guva* or the bringing home of the deceased's spirit ritual. Taboos and rituals also show that the spirit of the deceased is believed to continue to have sensory experience; it can see, hear, and has emotions and desires.

#### ***Aging as a drying out process***

The Karanga have taboos and rituals which show that the burial ritual of the deceased is determined by age, condition and status. According to my informants, " *Rusvava kana mwana asati ava nemeno haafanirwi kuvigwa pasina kunyorova. Anofanira kuvigwa mubani, mumahombekombe erukova kana jecha. Akavigwa pakaoma mai vake vanozokona kuenda kumakore vobva vakona kuita vamwe vana. Kuvigwa korusvava pakaoma kunokonzera kuti mvura isanaya.* "(A baby who dies before teething is not to be buried on dry ground but in wet places such as veils, river banks or in the sand of the river bed. Burying such babies on dry ground would lead to the mother of the baby failing to menstruate and hence becoming sterile. Furthermore, burial of such babies on dry ground is believed by the Karanga to lead to drought). It was therefore common practice among some Karanga that when drought threatened in a particular geographical area, people would break a gourd full of water on the grave of the infant in the area. One of my informants said: " *Mukadzi afa nenhumbu kana achizvarwa anovigwa panyoro nokuti anonzi munyoro* " (A woman who died in her pregnancy or during child birth is buried in a wet area because she is regarded as wet.). Thus the condition of premature or aborted children; those babies who died before teething, women who died in advanced stages of pregnancy or in childbirth were regarded as wet (*vanyoro*). and were to be buried in wet places (*nzvimbo nyoro*). While premature or aborted children were buried in the river sand where there was plenty of water, bigger children were buried on slightly drier ground. Adults were buried on higher and drier ground than the ground on which aborted and young children were buried. It appears that one of the underlying concepts of these death rituals and taboos is that the process of growing up is the process of drying out. Babies are wet and are buried on wet ground while adults are dry and are buried on dry ground. Babies in the womb and those being born make their mother wet. The concept of aging as a drying out process is clearly demonstrated by the vaDuma burial practice of chiefs. The vaDuma are sub dialect group of the Karanga. According to the vaDuma informants, when a Duma chief dies, he is not buried immediately but his body is mummified. It seems mummification was done by the vaDuma people as a way of ensuring that the deceased chief was only buried among the other deceased chiefs (who were already dry). In a cave of a

mountain or hill, when all the wetness of life has been drained out of him. Aging as drying out process seems to be an important metaphysical concept among the Karanga. Those who are older are believed by the Karanga to be drier and to be closer to the ancestors. The Karanga sometimes address their living grandfathers and parents as *mudzimu* (ancestral spirits). These people are in an advanced state of aging and drying and therefore are closer to the ancestors. According to Karanga belief, aging is a drying process which raises the status of the spirit. The maturity of the spirit is believed by the Karanga to depend on the maturity and social status of the living persons. In particular, parenthood and age are important for the spirit to acquire the full status of an ancestral spirit after death. This explains why the Karanga do not conduct the *kurova guva* ritual for children and unmarried people. Bourdillon's (1987:220) analysis on the Shona concepts of the spiritual aspect of man applies to the Karanga.

*The spirit of a person who dies without children can never be fully mature. On the other hand, as a person becomes aged he is thought to grow closer to the spirits. Old people are believed to be very influential with spiritual powers and are regarded with a certain amount of fear and sometimes even suspicion.....thus there is a correlation between the maturity of a living person and the believed maturity of his spirit.*

Among the Karanga, the spirit of a chief has a higher status than that of his subject. Similarly, the Karanga regard the spirit of the deceased grandfather to be more powerful than the spirit of the deceased father. Thus among the Karanga, spirits fall in a hierarchy which result from age, maturity and social status.

#### ***The concept of impurity and contagion***

Death rituals and taboos suggest that the Karanga believe that death has aspects of impurity and contagion. The hut where the deceased lay in state before burial must be swept and the dirt as well as the water used to wash the body of the deceased must be thrown into the grave as they are associated with death. Those who come in contact with the deceased as well as the soil from the grave should cleanse themselves with water mixed with an herb called *zumbani* in order to prevent death. Those who dig the grave and bury the deceased must wash their faces, hands and feet by the grave side to ensure that all the dust and soil from the grave are not carried home as this would be the same as inviting death. It is also strictly forbidden for relatives of the deceased to come into contact with the deceased's property without first deeping hands in medicated water. If a consanguine of the deceased comes in contact with the deceased's property before the ritual, he or she will suffer from leprosy. It appears according to Karanga belief; the mystical danger associated with the corpse is contagious. Death is a pollutant which makes people ritually unclean or exposes them to danger.

#### ***The concept of sacred time***

Death rituals and taboos indicate that the Karanga have a concept of sacred time. The period of mourning is regarded as sacred time. Agricultural activities are suspended before the burial of the deceased (*mahakurimwi*). It is taboo to conduct the *kurova guva* ritual during the month of November because the spirits will be resting (*Zvinoera kurova guva mumwedzi waMbudzi nokuti midzimu inenge yakazorora*). According to my informants, important rituals such as marriage, *kurova guva* and rain rituals should not be done during the month of November as spirits would have temporarily withdrawn from human activities in order to take a rest in the spirit world.

#### ***The concept of causality***

It appears the Karanga attribute human suffering to man's failure to observe traditional rituals and taboos. The unseen world simply responds to man's irresponsible behavior.

### **The Epistemological Content of Death Rituals and Taboos**

Taboos and rituals suggest that there are many alternative ways of acquiring knowledge. We learn that knowledge can be accessed through revelation. The service of a *n'anga* (diviner) is sought after the death of a family member (*gata*). This important ritual among the Karanga is meant to find out the cause of their relative's death. The ritual is conducted even if the family member died of an accident or incurable diseases such as HIV/AIDS. The Karanga, because of their metaphysical outlook, find scientific or naturalistic explanations for death inadequate. In their primarily spiritual universe, they look for the cause of death in the spiritual realm. In African metaphysics, diseases and accidents are viewed as secondary causes of death. The primary cause of the death is believed to be found from the supernatural world. This explains why the Karanga consult the diviner in order to establish the cause of death. Divination is therefore an important source of knowledge.

It has also emerged in the above discussion that the deceased can communicate his or her displeasure to the living through various ways.

Omens are an important source of knowledge of the bad news about death. The Karanga interpret certain unusual events as denoting the coming of death news. The concept of *mashura* shows that the Karanga can be forewarned about the coming bad news through certain occurrences. This source of knowledge was regarded as true especially at a time when the Karanga had poor communication technology. This must have saved an important purpose of preparing people psychologically for bad news.

Taboos and rituals are trusted as a source of knowledge by the Karanga. They are regarded by the Karanga as constituting the accumulated wisdom of the generations of their forebears (*vakuru vekare*). They are not to be interrogated as is the case with scientific knowledge. This explains why the response one invariably gets from the Karanga when one seeks the underlying meaning of the ritual is: Our forefathers have always done it that way.

Taboos and rituals seem to suggest that empiricism is one way of accessing knowledge. Through their experience and observation, the Karanga can have knowledge about certain events related to death. It is probable that certain taboos and rites were introduced after observations of certain patterns of cause and effect. When the Karanga observe a particular shadow (*mumvuri*) in the hut or room where the deceased is lying in state, they immediately conclude that the deceased is expressing his or her displeasure.

### **The Axiological Content of Death Rituals and Taboos**

Taboos and rituals are an important aspect of Karanga axiology. They are an important source of material for philosophical discourse on axiological issues. The taboos and rituals serve to reinforce what are considered by the Karanga to be essential values of the community. These values include, respect, responsibility, family-hood and social stability.

Family-hood is an important value among the Karanga. Kinship (*ukama*), is something which mystically links the consanguines. Death creates a state of mystical danger to the consanguines of the group who are mystically linked through blood and spiritually. This concept of kinship is shown by the following Karanga proverbs:

*Ukama hunonhuwa (relationship is scented).*

*Hama haitengwi ( a relative can never be bought).*

*Ukama hausukwi nemvura hukabva* (kinship cannot be washed away with water and be removed).

*Ukama urimbo kudambura haubvi* (relationship is like bird lime; even after breaking it does not vanish.). Once kin you are always kin. Nothing can be done to destroy kinship as it is a mystical relationship.

THE Karanga believe that all relatives of the deceased should be informed of the death so as to protect the consanguine of the deceased against mystical danger. All relatives are informed about the death either by word of mouth or by some ritual act. The deceased's consanguine are expected to attend the funeral. Failure to do so is believed to invoke the wrath of the deceased. Those consanguine who come after burial should do a ritual whereby they place a small stone on the deceased's grave as they identify themselves and explain to the deceased that they have come to mourn the deceased. It is important to note that the traditional kinship system includes the deceased. The deceased's spirit is therefore still closely linked to the living consanguine. The consanguine should choose and mark the site of the grave (*kutara rukarwa*). If a non-consanguine does that, the spirit of the deceased will be angered and trouble the living. Even a deceased married woman's spirit is believed to be interested in its own consanguine. Her consanguine should dig her grave first and lead during the burial ceremony and subsequent rituals. The *kurova guva* ritual is meant to bring the spirit of the deceased back into the family fold.

Death ritual and taboos promoted a sense of social solidarity. It enhanced the "we" feeling among the members of the community affected by death. Death is therefore a unifying factor which brings together kin and non-kin. When there is death in the village, people are not allowed to work in the fields (*mahakurimwi*). The *mahakurimwi* for a deceased chief covers a longer period than that of a commoner. The *mahakurimwi* is meant to ensure that members of the community give moral and material support to the bereaved family.

The taboos and rituals of death also show that the Karanga value marriage. Young males and females of marriageable age who die unmarried are buried with a rat, which is put on the sexual organs—a male rat for female and a female rat for a male. The rat is placed on the deceased's genital organs as the following words are uttered: "you so and so, here is your wife/husband do not come back to trouble us."

We can infer from the taboos and rituals that the Karanga were essentialists in the sense that they believe values are permanent or objective. The values enshrined in the taboos and rituals are not to be questioned but to be accepted as they are.

Our analysis of taboos and rituals seem to indicate that the Karanga have a hierarchy of values. They appear to support Tempel's (1969) argument that there exists a hierarchy of forces and primogeniture among the Bantu (the Karanga included). It seems the value accorded to a being by the Karanga is dependant on the force of the being. For example it has emerged from the analysis that age and status increase a person's force and respect in Karanga society. Those who die unmarried are of lesser importance than those who die married. The fact that the days of mourning for a chief (*mahakurimwi*) are more than those of a commoner indicates that the chief is valued more than the commoner.

It also emerged from the analysis of rituals and taboos that the Karanga moral system allowed for the segregation of certain categories of people in society. Thus the *kurova guva* ritual was not to be conducted for people of bad character and for those who died of incurable diseases such as *maperembudzi* (leprosy), *rukosoro* (tuberculosis), *zvipusha* (epilepsy) and *nhukusa* (cancer).

It also appears that the Karanga at times find it necessary to practice euthanasia. As the above discussion has shown, there are times the Karanga quicken the dying process through the ritual act of burning the fat and skin of a python close to the ill person. As one informant

explained: “*Vanopfungaidza chiutsi chemafuta neganda reshato kuti murwere asaenda achidzoka asi kuti aende zvachose.*” (The Karanga burn the fat and skin of a python close to the terminally and critically ill person so as to quicken the dying process)..

### **Semantics in Death Rituals and Taboos**

Karanga death rituals and taboos are important in studying Karanga semantics. The rituals and taboos have underlying meanings which can only be grasped by the philosophy of the Karanga people. We have come across words and terms associated with rituals and taboos which might be understood differently or which might have more than one meaning. For example, the Karanga term *kurova guva* is used by the Karanga to refer to a ritual to bring home the spirit of the deceased and not to mean the physical beating of the grave. Thus some terms associated with death rituals and taboos have social meanings among the Karanga.

### **Logic in Death Rituals and Taboos**

Rituals and taboos do suggest evidence of systematic reasoning among the Karanga. The origin or basis of these rituals and taboos seem to be deductive logic or inductive logic. It appears some rituals and taboos originated from Karanga experience and observations over a long period hence the rituals and taboos might be evidence of deductive and inductive reasoning among the Karanga. Occurrences after the death of a loved one or a member of the community might have led to certain logical conclusions which resulted in rituals and taboos.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Our analysis of death rituals and taboos has yielded a number of Karanga philosophical concepts. The study has indicated that in rituals and taboos are preserved metaphysical concepts such as nature of man, *mumvuri* (soul); death, causality, time, purity and pollution, heat. Our study of rituals and taboos has also indicated that the Karanga have an axiological system which is of significance in understanding Karanga philosophy. In rituals and taboos are treasured Karanga fundamental values such as family-hood, respect, responsibility and social stability. Death rituals and taboos are of importance in the understanding of Karanga epistemology. According to our discussion, knowledge can be accessed through empirical means, precognition and authority. Death rituals and taboos can therefore function as an alternative source of African philosophy.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Rituals and taboos should be incorporated into the curricula of the various levels of our education system to enable learners to understand Karanga philosophical thought.
2. Since rituals and taboos exist mostly in oral form, philosophers must start a programme to collect and analyze the rituals and taboos with a view to discovering Karanga philosophical ideas.
3. Replication of our work with other African ethnic groups to see if the same pattern emerges.
4. Empirical investigations of Karanga philosophical concepts such as the act of dying and the soul.

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