

THE HISTORY AND POTENTIAL OF BURIAL SOCIETIES IN CREATING BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Burial societies are small and cohesive, comprising members with shared rural and cultural roots. Burial societies are similarly syncretistic, in that they fuse African 'tradition' with elements of Christian modernity. The social values projected by burial societies in South Africa diagnose the core problem in African life which is death. Burial societies adopt a humanist approach to social affliction and they are the people's haven in their own right. This article explores the possible relationship between burial societies and basic Christian communities in South Africa. AICs are used as a model of argument in this paper in providing such a haven of comfort and support in a death afflicted society. Both burial societies and the basic Christian communities are historical and there is a plan for the two to enter into.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article will deal with the historical, sociological and theological perspective of burial societies and the basic Christian communities in South Africa and their impact on black society. Given a history marked by high levels of discrepancies, violence and ill-health, death has always been big business in South Africa. It is now even worse since the AIDS pandemic has taken its toll in the world, and particularly in South Africa. The acute financial stresses suffered by families losing breadwinners go hand in hand with an unprecedented

growth in the funeral business. This growth has created an opportunity for huge profits in the funeral industry. There is also, as a result of this market growth greed, exploitation and illegal business practices. The largest, and newest, market for such entrepreneurs is within African communities, which have historically distanced themselves from the funeral insurance industry, relying rather on mutual aid networks in the form of burial societies.

Many burial societies collapsed in the midst of conflict and fraud, but others survived as models of communal trust, discipline and support. It is with this mixture of experience that we have to seek to understand the historical, sociological and theological context of these societies in South Africa.

1.1 Aim and objective of the article

This article aims to find a model of ministry that we can use in order to bring about a holistic understanding of Christianity among members of burial societies in South Africa. Such an approach will have to bring the spiritual dimension to those societies lacking in this area. In this article, I also want to provoke healthy debate between burial societies and basic Christian communities.

1.2 Methodological approach

The descriptive analytical method will be employed in this article. Most of the information used comes from literature reviews and transcripts. Supplementary methods include other literature reviews and interviews.

2 BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE BURIAL SOCIETIES

African burial societies emerged as a response to the social and economic stress of migration and urbanisation. Verhoef's (2002:1) opinion is that societies adapt to social and economic changes in their environment. In South Africa the social and economic environment of the late nineteenth century revolutionised what were

rural and agricultural societies, forcing them to adapt to emerging mining and industrial society.

Societies constantly adapt to social and economic changes in their environment, because human societies are made from the conflicting interactions between humans organised in and around a given social structure. The change of structures influences the interactive human behaviour in that society as well. In South Africa, as I have just said, the social and economic environment of the late nineteenth century revolutionised what were primarily rural and agricultural societies, forcing them to adapt to emerging mining and industrial society. This applied to African and European communities alike. The disruptions of relatively independent traditional African chiefdom brought about fundamental changes in African societies, almost as fundamental as the changes that occurred in industrialising European societies.

A growing number of Africans became incorporated into the Boer Republics and British colonies until all were included in a single capitalist state under European control. One of the strategies Africans used to survive as autonomous human beings with a culture of their own within this capitalist world was to take up wage labour in either the mines or the emerging industrial sector. Another survival strategy was to engage in a variety of informal activities to secure a livelihood and sustain increasing numbers of dependants in urban areas. In circumstances of change and transformation, societies always retain some link with their past through the integration of practices of culture and systems of values and beliefs that inform their codes of behaviour in the new environment. Such behaviour could be witnessed amongst urbanised Africans throughout the centuries.

In rural African societies, communal networks provided support and assistance in the event of a death. Urban migrants, displaced from home, suffer severe financial hardships as a result of the low wages they are paid. They then join mutual aid networks in 'stokvels' of various types and burial societies. The financial part of these societies was established to ensure a dignified burial for their members and members' dependants. As processes of migration and urbanisation accelerated during the early twentieth century, burial

societies proliferated rapidly. According to Kuper and Kaplan's estimation (1944:185) by 1944 almost two-thirds of households in the Western Native Township (then one of Johannesburg's oldest African residential areas) belonged to burial societies.

The African community is a deeply religious and closely knit community. Their approach to death (Oosthuizen 1990:465) and to its demoralising and disruptive effects upon a family requires a strong emotional response and communal sharing with the bereaved. Burial societies develop either as groups of men or women. They develop as social groups with the burial as their central activity. But it is often difficult to understand burial societies associated with *stokvels*¹ because of the loud music and boisterous celebrations that characterise *stokvels*.

Burial societies are well organised, with properly structured offices of president, chair, secretary and treasurer. Larger groups obviously have more committee members (Molobi 1996:12). Detailed minutes of the meetings held are normally recorded; and these minutes include the group's aspirations, aims and objectives. These groups differ from each other; some have very strict rules – if you resign, you forfeit your contribution. In other groups, membership is not very strict, but cooperation is essential. Some groups allow their members to join other societies as long as they abide by the present society's constitutional requirements. Some research suggests that membership is between 15-30 or more. Societies formed in rural areas may number hundreds, because the entire village is likely to join.

Members of burial societies belong to different occupational groups. It has, however, been discovered that people who belong to the lower occupational groups, such as unskilled workers, outnumber those who belong to the professional occupational groups. The leaders of burial societies are appointed on the basis of their natural qualities of leadership as judged by those who appoint them. Members of burial societies do not usually join their societies on the instructions of their churches. Joining a burial society is very much the decision of the individual. Interestingly enough, members of various churches see

this as a need to cover themselves and their families in the event of death. They therefore flock those societies offering membership.

In the past, burial societies tended to keep a wide berth from the financial insurance industry, which was dominated by whites and perceived to be culturally alien and insensitive to the burial practices of African cultures. How then, in the midst of a newly predatory funeral industry, are burial societies coping? Do they continue to serve a unique and crucial purpose, as vehicles of economic, social, cultural, as much as faith, support?

3 SOCIOLOGICAL VALUE

Burial societies or similar mutual schemes have a particular social value for those leading lives of solitude and for those who are homeless² or destitute. Life is determined by one's interaction with the society one is part of. Gutierrez's book (1984), entitled: *We drink from our own wells* emphasises the 'here and now' of life. The stress today is on the strident world of materialism which governs human survival. The social values projected by burial societies in South Africa diagnose the core problem in African life: death. This relates to *ubuntu* or *botho* which Muller (2005:266-280) views as the vital African value. This has a number of perspectives: financial, moral and communal.

3.1 Financial aspect

We cannot talk about burial societies without referring to their financial aspect as a central core of their business. Finance regulates and addresses people's needs and wants. This is where people strive for survival in their everyday lives. Finance has social and political influence in people's lives and commits them to look for employment to earn money. If you have enough money you can live a better life. Finance is the aspect of economy which is defined as the basis for policy making and the plans that control wealth and community resources. Here we are referring to the distribution of resources among people and how the means of production, such as land, factories and technology, are owned and controlled. The original definition of economy also refers to the laws of 'households'

(Khumalo 2003:10). This definition of the economy is very broad, but emphasises the use of money, land, food, water and housing: those things that enable people to meet their basic needs and live with dignity.

3.2 Morality

Social value has a moral obligation at its core. The African say *Motho ga a latlhwe*, which means, 'a person cannot be thrown away' even when that person is deceased, applies here. Morality relates to issues of empowerment, poverty, community, development and liberation for a better quality of life. The economic factor, on the one hand, cuts across all social concerns, because it relates to the need to acquire the materials needed for a sustainable livelihood. People with consciences are willing to share the gains with others. On the basis of this understanding burial societies are to be viewed as that aspect of economic endeavour that makes life manageable in those families and communities where death has occurred.³

Burial societies are governed by the concept of *botho* or *ubuntu*, as it is known among the African communities in South Africa (Ngwenya 2002:11). The *botho* concept has a unifying worldview or vision. Ngwenya (2002) comes to this conclusion because the concept *botho* permeates social interactions in daily life in that "a person is a person through other persons." Gundani⁴ perceived burial societies' activity to be non-partisan. Their activity cuts across social, political, economic and religious spheres. They are accommodating irrespective of culture or religious status.

Ngwenya (2002:17) maintains that burial societies adopt a humanist approach to social affliction. Humanity in the African context is family and community, with a strong emphasis on religion and its symbolic union with daily practical needs and spiritual entities in the metaphysical world. Burial societies heal social affliction and renew mutual relationships (Ngwenya 2002:18). They can be equated to the newness expressed in the life of Jesus Christ. *Botho* translates social relationships from the despair caused by isolation to caring and solidarity in the face of adversity. Burial societies are the people's haven in their own right.

3.3 Can we relate burial societies to the churches and how?

Some people view churches as social institutions. It could also be argued that burial societies outside the church are in competition with churches, because they render services equal to those of the church or even give a better service than churches. People who are members of burial societies tend to attach a great deal of value to their societies, to the point of perceiving them as their spiritual home. There are number of reasons (Barrett 1970:157) relating to this: the lack of sympathy expressed in some churches, lack of brotherly contact with Africans in churches and complete allegiance to various scriptural practices. If churches are seen to be failing to address these issues, those who are looking for answers to life's challenges will turn to any organisation that does provide answers.

A personal observation here: In trains running between Pretoria Mabopane, Ga-Rankuwa and Belle Ombre stations, there are small groups of Christians working in what are known as train ministries. In the different coaches, a number of passengers formed prayer groups and preach. Each group set itself rules for administering its activities and appoints a leader to guide them. The striking thing here is the way in which these ministries reflect the capability to incorporate the aspect of burial. In their meetings, they give each other mutual help relating to death, buying groceries for the families of the deceased and so on.

Why are these society members leaving their churches to organise themselves in para-churches? People are always searching for ways to solve the problems and social challenges which they face collectively. Burial societies in one way or the other provide part of the solution to their problems. They provide fellowship and comfort which all human beings need and, of course, they make a financial provision to the funeral costs also. It is crucial for the churches to review, not only their sphere of interest, but also to actively investigate the activities their members are engaged in after church services on Sundays.

The burial society meetings are held on Sunday mornings and in the afternoons; some people spend the whole day together, while others belong to more than one club (Kokoali & Hodgson 1985:10). Blacks (Moller 1979:35) experience feelings of helplessness in the face of problems concerning family relationships, marriages, morality, children, finances, housing and unjust laws. They then resort to gatherings such as burial societies and stokvels. Some have joined stokvels to increase their income and thus reduce the financial pressures they are under.

4 THEOLOGICAL MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The division of life and death is important in people's speculations about the hereafter. Human beings are the recipient of God's saving message and grace; their purpose is to conquer the challenges of this world in order to be with God. The gospel focuses on human life in its major stages: childbirth, infancy, youth, marriage, death and burial. Other circumstances are also mentioned: poverty, riches, sickness and restored health. Jesus showed great sympathy towards the hungry, the sick, and the bereaved and the oppressed in general. But he did not refuse invitations to dine with Matthew, Zacchaeus, the Pharisee, Martha, Mary and Lazarus of Bethany, and especially the bridegroom and bride of Cana. Indeed many of his teachings and some major miracles and the institution of the Holy Eucharist took place in the context of conviviality. Fellowship does not end at the table, but leads to eternal life with God in his kingdom.

Burial societies deal with present problems relating to death and help families to deal with death until the actual burial itself. Christian churches claim to know where the soul is going after death. In a way, this agrees with the African traditional view that the dead will end up with their ancestors. Both traditions agree on the continuity of life after death. It is not clear whether burial societies placate ancestors or not, but it is believed that they perform this rite for the affected families. Presently, however, we will focus on fellowship as a result of death.

Fellowship⁵ *koinonia* (sharing), warmth, emotion and mutual caring are the mainstays of most burial societies. *Koinonia* has a theological

thrust of accommodating everybody around the table, a concept which can easily be related to the 'Lord's Supper' as described in the Holy Scriptures. Burial societies, when related to Christian societies may be viewed as more open ended and accommodating without the legal restrictions of many churches.

Burial societies offer a scenario where the act of 'one body' of Christ in South Africa can be anticipated. These societies address destabilisation by encouraging people to share the same faith and earn same joy. This can be related to the Ecclesia Commudade Base (ECB) in Latin America. Here the world is informed by faith in Jesus Christ and not vice versa.

We can also look at the ECB as it developed historically and suggest related approaches in South Africa. The early church's teachings included activities such as comforting, healing, caring and loving. Cardinal Suenens (1979:31) correctly cited from the book of Acts 2:44-45 that "the first Christian community offers us a striking example of this social awareness: the faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed". What lessons do we learn from the book of Acts as explained above? Perhaps (Boff & Pixley 1989:216) explain it better by suggesting that the poor combine the sphere of need with the sphere of freedom. These spheres included the elements of beauty which is portrayed by what the poor are doing to beautify their yards. The poor can love, have a sense of humour, attend festivals, and enjoy times of leisure.

Need and freedom are regarded (Boff & Pixley 1989:218) as the expression of popular religion, *which surpasses most of Christian churches combined for they share in it* (italics mine). This act is obviously not planned, but emanates intuitively as a result of economic pressures. Burial societies have all these qualities in themselves. Although the churches may be aware of the essential issue of seeing themselves as part of the universal church, they still see themselves as denominationally separated from each other.

Burial societies are essential in that they break indiscriminately across racial and denominational barriers. Indeed people have own choice of the kind of aiding scheme they want to serve, but all are built on interdenominational platforms. As far as finance is concerned, their social responsibility cannot be ignored. Among the AICs the whole church becomes responsible for the entire running of the burial occasion. It is the responsibility of the entire congregation to run the programme or the funeral itself. In an interview with a Mrs Khumalo of Atteridgeville (oral interview Mrs Khumalo of Atteridgeville 2 February 1994), Mrs Khumalo explained that the entire church becomes responsible for the whole burial activity. This includes finances. Barrett (1970:156) views this as a concrete expression of brotherly love.

5 PHILADELPHIA OR BROTHERLY LOVE EXPRESSED AMONG THE AICs

Barrett (1970:156) explains the issue well when he states that the root cause common to the independency among the AICs resulted from a cultural clash caused by the following:

A failure in sensitivity, the failure in missions at one small point to demonstrate consistently the fullness of the biblical concept of love as sensitive understanding towards others as equals, the failure to study or to understand African society, religion and psychology in any depth, together with the dawning African perception from the vernacular scriptures of the catastrophic nature of this failure and the urgent necessity to remedy it in order that Christianity might survive on African soil.

This issue should drive the mainline churches to accepting members of the AICs as their brothers and sisters in faith. For *agape* 'love' demands that one does not refrain from offending or shocking one's pagan neighbours, but also endeavours, positively, to do them service (Barrett 1970:157). A healthy dialogue is necessary to expand our understanding of the Kingdom of God even to the

periphery. The Church of Christ must welcome strangers into its initiative to form a strong body of Christ.

Members of the various burial societies come from different churches and they unilaterally agree on the issue of mutual financial support. There is neither Jew nor Gentile here; they all see a common challenge resulting from the occurrence of death. In a way, this is a non-verbal communication, but one with significance, a desired aspect of *theologia naturalis*⁶ reduced insignificantly but with some influence. This suggests that a relevant theology will always view God through the context of people's reality or environment. Brunner sees God's redemptive and creative work as essentially one and inseparable (Lee 1979:123). It is from this perspective that the attempt is made to link burial societies to Ecclesia Communitate Base.

6 AICs AS THE *ECCLESIA COMMUNITATE* BASE (ECB) IN SOUTH AFRICA

The social support of the AIC does not come from a foreign fund or government. Instead, every cent is given, collected and distributed by church members themselves (Barrett 1970:169). In short the movement as a whole has introduced onto the African scene and forcibly drawn attention to a new quality of corporate Christian life and responsibility, a new *koinonia* (sharing of warmth, emotion and mutual caring in the Christian community), together with a new philanthropy.

The AICs have introduced the kind of *philadelphia* and philanthropy widespread in the early church. Barrett (1970:169) discovered that most AICs have parallels in contemporary African independency, and the tenth sign (hospitality and care of the brethren on their travels) is particularly prominent. These new elements in the thinking and the practice of separatist Christianity must at this point be examined in great detail. The burial service is not the responsibility of the AICs. Instead, the whole congregation becomes responsible to its bereft members. The group leader will play the part of the minister; he or

she holds this position owing to his or her ability to preach. Church elders may take up this responsibility if the appointed minister is not present. The entire congregation becomes responsible for all other necessary elements of the funeral itself. This practice encourages members to stay within their own churches (Oral interview with Dean Chauke of the Free Church of God in Africa, 8 March 1994, in Mamelodi West).

Mofokeng (interview 1995) concluded that African Initiated Churches (AICs) are burial societies themselves. However, AICs do not entirely agree with this, since they think this demeans their role in the church of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is easier for a burial society to change into a church than the opposite. As far as churches are concerned, burial societies are financial support mechanisms that they use for a specific purpose. The nature of these societies is such that they can address challenges such as death and poverty.

7 CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

A local theology starts with the needs of the local people and not with the questions raised by Christians of other churches, or those raised within a systematic presentation of faith (Daneel 1999:7). Small Christian communities can be a vehicle of not only faith, but also of liberation. However, concern for identity and stability often causes conflicting notions in the environment, notions that are ignored for the sake of harmony and continuity. The inclusion of social culture in Christianity can easily fall prey to cultural romanticism. Such romanticism will fail to come to grips with Christian views towards the sinful aspects of cultural histories. Sophisticated cultural analysis tends to exclude the most crucial component of the theological process: the community itself.

The idea of bringing burial societies closer to basic Christian communities is well expressed by Daneel's (1999:349-351) picture of the communion celebration held by different AIC members, without worrying about their denominational status. Here, communion is a colourful event of people who sees environmental barrenness as a problem and not each other as problems. Burial societies for instance, do not see their background as a problem, but as a reality

to the challenges of death. Is this not what Rahner calls anonymous Christian acceptance of Christ's lordship beyond the boundaries of the visible church?

7.1 The biblical view burial and the contemporary situation

According to Simfukoe (in Africa Bible Commentary 2006:1462), the African funeral is a social event. A private funeral would be an anomaly in an African setting. In funerals support comes from the neighbours, workmates and church associates, as well as relatives. The bible describes what was done in particular culture and does not prescribe how the dead should be buried. In Old Testament times, decent burials were deemed a blessing and their absence a sign of God's judgement. Burial was a standard way of disposing of the dead. The only exception was when death occurred in a foreign place, in which case burial was preceded by preserving the body. Thus the bodies of Jacob and Joseph were embalmed and transported to Israel for burial (Gen 49:29-50:14; 50:24-26). Decent burial is therefore a historical fact and maintained like that to this day.

Mbigi (Mbigi & Maree 1995:58) refers to collective consciousness as a means of survival *which carries power enough to harness the most powerful oppressive social systems* (italics mine). Basic Christian communities inherit the autonomy which is reflected in burial societies' which express the equality referred to in Romans 3:28-30, that is, that all are justified by faith in Jesus Christ. This may also be interpreted to mean that there is therefore no Anglican, Methodist, Reformed, Catholic nor Pentecostal in matters that influence people's lives unilaterally for all are accountable by their faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, the churches of today become more relevant when they view themselves beyond their individual titles⁷ or self-centeredness. Jesus Christ's ministry should surpass the churches' name tags and selfish standpoints. Death is the same and burials are places where the dead body of a person is finally placed at rest. The process of death is the same whether the body is dressed or not, and therefore it should be clear that death is indeed the rite of passage from this life to the next.

8 THE FUNERAL AS THE FINAL EVENT TO WHICH BOTH BURIAL SOCIETIES AND CHURCHES ADDRESS THEMSELVES

The funeral is the ceremony associated with actual burial. The funeral is the burial procession or place where all types of people meet when someone is buried. The other observation is that, among blacks, the funeral is an event that determines the popularity of the deceased and his or her family. This is often not deliberate but coincidental, and people will determine and judge the living standards of other people. If huge numbers of people attend a funeral, people will often say that such a person *o fitlhegile*, or that he or she was well buried. The credit for this will always be given to the family of the deceased and the burial society that the family belongs to.

Although people have many different views of funerals, Pauw (1964:160) claimed that funerals, in many ways, strengthen the bonds between neighbours, relatives and friends. The obligation to visit the bereaved home, to help with the work that has to be done, and to contribute financially are sources of empowerment. The avoidance of argument at the communal meal also adds to the expression of solidarity between the bereaved (Pauw 1964:160). This occurs across church denominational boundaries.

9 CONCLUSION

Religions, cultures and traditions, including Christianity are developed by people. It will therefore not be impossible for Christianity to reclaim burial societies for its own spiritual purposes. Burial societies are small and cohesive, comprising members with shared rural and cultural roots. Burial societies are similarly syncretistic, in that they fuse African 'tradition' with elements of Christian modernity. The social values projected by burial societies in South Africa diagnose the core problem in African life: the problem of death. The burial societies adopt a humanist approach to social affliction. They are therefore people's haven in their own right. Burial societies have all the qualities that enable them to be regarded as potential churches. No wonder that Mofokeng (interview 1995) concluded that "African Initiated Churches (AICs) are burial

societies". It was because of their significant role that Mofokeng never joined any of these societies. The funeral is the final event to which both burial societies and churches address. This parallel does not dispute, however, the possibility of a dialogue between the two, with burial societies eventually being 'promoted' into becoming basic Christian churches. Such a development will be based on the common practice of Christian outreach.

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Prof Mofokeng, T K. Originally from the Department of Systematic Theology, Unisa. Later appointed as Director of Research at Unisa. Now retired. The interview was held at the University of South Africa, Pretoria on 12 March 1995.

ENDNOTES

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- 1 Stokvels are parties which bring people together as friends and which share or support each other financially or materially. They celebrate in different ways but also share the 'spoils' or the interest from their monthly contributions, particularly at Christmas time, when everyone wants to buy a present or food for the family.
 - 2 'Destitute' refers to the poor, homeless and wanderers.
 - 3 Burial societies (Oosthuizen 1990:463-72) play a significant role in the African community in South Africa. Even in the most deprived circumstances, Africans concern themselves with burials of dear ones worthy of the person and the occasion. The sense of mutual support which has always been foremost in the African community comes to expression within the context of the burial societies. Each burial society is a mutual aid organization. Each member contributes towards this communal assistance. In no other organization associated with the churches are denominational and ecclesiastical barriers of so little concern as in the context of these burial societies. Here many non-Christians receive for the first time the Christian message. A few thousand such burial clubs or societies exist in South Africa, and between them include several million members of South Africa's black community.
 - 4 Gundani is a Professor in the Department of Church History at the University of South Africa, Pretoria.
 - 5 Fellowship is companionship and this word, although used extensively in Christian circles, can be used by others as well. In general, fellowship refers to taking care of each other by communing together. Refer also to Moila (2002:5-10).
 - 6 Brunner allows natural theology ... God reveals himself in creation, but humanity by reason of sin was unable to perceive the revelation (Lee 1979:123). There is something that we can learn even from those who are not Christians or engaged in Christian talk.
 - 7 'Individual title image' refers to Christian churches that perceive the world as divided, but which cannot reconcile themselves into becoming one church of Christ. They do not see themselves as dissolved into one Christian community of Christ sharing one and the same doctrine of Christ (as reflected in the Bible).