

FROM ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST: CREMATION AND THE SHONA CONCEPT OF DEATH AND BURIAL IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The increasing death rate in Zimbabwe, caused mainly by HIV/AIDS, has resulted in a shortage of burial space, especially in towns. This, along with the cost of burials, has sparked problems related to notions of death and the hereafter in Zimbabwe. Since 1992, cremation has been put forward as a way of alleviating these spatial and economic problems. However, this option is not very popular with the Shona people, who prefer to observe the conventional burial practices enshrined in their traditional culture. Whilst they are open to new, modern ideas, they are resistant to the notion of cremation, which is regarded as alien and “un-African”. They would rather exhaust all resources to have a traditional funeral. This article explores burial practices among the Shona people of Zimbabwe and their resistance to cremation. It contends that cremation is a viable alternative mode of disposal of the dead, as it is cost-effective and there are theological precedents for this practice.

1 INTRODUCTION

The debate surrounding cremation came to light in 1992, when city officials raised concerns over the scarcity of land to bury the dead in Greater Harare. Official figures show that, of 16 000 people who died in the capital the previous year, fewer than 800 were cremated. Six of Harare’s seven cemeteries are already full and the growing city is short of residential space for the living, let alone resting places for the dead. The shortage of burial space is linked to the AIDS epidemic, which kills approximately 3 000 Zimbabweans a week. About

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2 million people out of Zimbabwe's population of 12 million are infected with HIV, the precursor to AIDS. Official figures indicate that 70 000 Zimbabweans were expected to die of AIDS in 1999. The disease has wrought havoc in Zimbabwe, destroying the traditional extended family and contributing to the collapse of the economy. This has contributed to a lack of adequate food supplies and medical care for the sick. In this light, Mr Zimbwa, the Curator of Cemeteries in Greater Harare, considered various options, such as expanding the cemeteries, but he did not have the necessary funds to do so. In the end he opted for cremation.¹ Along with Myles Zata, the City Amenities Manager, the city fathers recommended to the City Council that the dead be cremated as a way to alleviate the space shortage. After several attempts were rejected, the initiative was finally adopted in 1995. However, cremation of the dead runs against traditional customary burial practices. When a Shona person dies in town, custom dictates that the remains be transported to the deceased's birthplace, where he or she will finally be laid to rest.

This article seeks to explore the phenomenon of cremation and the concept of death and burial practice in the Shona society in Zimbabwe. The article will also analyse cremation in the light of the New Testament. First, it discusses the Shona beliefs and myths about death. Then it examines the Shona views of cremation and discusses the Bible's position. Finally it examines the debates surrounding burial and cremation.

2 BELIEFS ABOUT DEATH

A number of scholars have addressed the issue of Shona beliefs about death and burial.

2.1 Scholars' perspectives

Hubert Ashwanden (1987), a medical doctor at Musiso Hospital in Zaka District in Masvingo Province who studied the Karanga, a sub group of the Shona of Southern Zimbabwe, said, "Death is not the end of life but the beginning of a new existence in which the deceased moves towards the peak of the individual development. It is a transition to another existence. Death is not feared because it is a gateway into the 'world of ancestors'." According to the Karanga,

“God does not cause death, or kill. He lets it happen. People are said to die through God” (*Mwari haaurayi wafa norwaMwari*) (Ashwanden 1987:17). Before a person is buried, he or she is washed. The deceased is talked to as if he or she is still alive. “When you go you leave all the dirt of the world here (*chisiya svina yose yapasi*), the new life is to begin just like the other one when he or she was born” (Ashwanden 1987:229).

Death is also viewed as a meal: it goes through the mouth and then it decomposes; however, the meal is not thrown into the mouth, but enters the body via a special opening. Death is regarded as a danger to the clan, therefore a special opening should be made and closed again so that death no longer finds a way in (Ashwanden 1987:254). So it is common practice among the Karanga that, when a bachelor dies, a roasted maize cob (*guri*) is inserted in his anus in order to close the opening. The same is inserted in the vagina in the case of a spinster. Alternatively, a rat (*gozho*) is buried alongside the bachelor’s body whilst a mortar (*duri*) and pestle (*musi*) are laid beside the body of the spinster. The rationale is that the deceased died in deprivation and so the maize cob, rat or mortar is meant to neutralise potential danger caused by the spirit, which may come back to seek retribution.

Although J. Mbiti (1969) does not write about the Shona society, he raises interesting issues on the causes of death. Mbiti observes that in the African worldview, whatever happens, happens for a specific reason; in other words, it has a specific cause or origin. Death is thought to be the result of external causes, making it both natural and unnatural. The most common cause of death in African society is believed to be magic, sorcery, witchcraft or a curse. The latter is most feared in African society, as many believe that a powerful curse can cause death. The spirits of the living-dead are believed to be another cause of death, as is God. God causes death through natural and unnatural means. Other intermediary agents are also brought into the picture to satisfy the people’s suspicions and provide a scapegoat (Mbiti 1969:151-2).

Michel Bourdillon (1976), an anthropologist, asserts that, after leaving the rural areas for urban life, people’s social networks revolve around companionship through associations. Burial societies are an example

of such associations. Established on subscriptions, they provide support for the deceased's relatives in several ways. Burial societies provide donations and emotional support to the bereaved families and guarantee funds for a good burial, which often includes transport of the remains to the rural homes for burial. They also fulfil a social function by arranging activities that include music, feasting and dancing (Bourdillon 1976:322).

Tabona Shoko (2007), a scholar of indigenous religions in Zimbabwe, observes of the Karanga death rituals:

The Karanga of Mberengwa have an elaborate system of burial rituals. They perform funerary rituals of their deceased relatives in a manner that ensures protection of the well-being of the people. In that respect, the Karanga are extremely afraid of the dead whom they believe to wield more power after death than they did in their lifetime and so have the potential to cause danger in the form of illness, misfortune, and death if the rituals are not properly performed" (Shoko 2007: 86).

As such, "... it is of paramount importance that the burial rituals are performed to the satisfaction of the dead and for the well-being of the descendants" (F Madamombe, interviewed 13/01/90).

Burial rituals may even commence when the person concerned is on the verge of death.

People in the company of a dying person have to see to it that a ritual called *kupeta* (folding) is done ... The eyes of the dying person are closed. The hands and legs are straightened and placed in the right posture for burial. Also, it is important that the body is washed, smeared with oil and clothed, in preparation for the last journey into the unknown world (L Mabikire, interviewed 21/ 01/91).

It is prohibited to bury someone with their eyes open or to fold any parts of the body. The dead will be disappointed if the ritual is performed incorrectly and may return as a vindictive spirit in search of justice. This has dire consequences in that a member of the family may fall seriously ill or a white shadow *bvuri* may appear intermittently in the hut in which

the body lies to signal the displeasure of the dead. As a result, a *n'anga's* is called in to attempt to rectify the problem (L Mabikire, interviewed 21/01/91). Thus, to ensure the well-being of the descendants of the deceased, the *kupeta* ritual is compulsory.

Outstanding respect is accorded the corpse and, accordingly, the proper funerary norms have to be observed or else it is believed that the people involved could be in serious danger. For instance, young people and children are not allowed to see a corpse, as it is believed that the corpse might cause them to become blind (A Nhamo, interviewed 19/10/89). A corpse is thus perceived as dangerous and untouchable. If the correct norms are not observed, it could have serious repercussions on the lives and health of those involved.

In an endeavour to maintain amicable relations with the dead and thus with the spirit world, the Karanga follow a specific ritual when conducting the burial of the dead.

The burial is usually in the morning or evening, a special time when it is cool and the family spirits are active and able to receive the dead amongst their group. No burials occur at mid-day because at that time it is hot and the spirits are at rest, so the dead may fail to be received and end up as a wandering spirit. Such wandering spirits threaten the well-being of the living. This explains why the Karanga are concerned with burial at the appropriate time (Z Gumbo, interviewed 22 /02/91).

The Karanga burial rituals are obligatory and timely in order to please the departed and safeguard the well-being of the living. The dead, so long as they wander or roam about, appear to be in a state of restlessness and have to be calmed by ritual activity performed at the right time and in the right manner. As a result, some water, presumably with a cooling effect, is sprinkled on the grave of the deceased in order to pacify a potentially dangerous spirit (Shoko 2007:86).

The burial norms are described as follows:

When a dead person is taken to the grave, first, he is taken round the hut a number of times so that the spirit of the dead may be confused and find it difficult to come back as a harmful spirit haunting the living ... Also, the corpse is made to rest at various intervals on the road to the grave in order to allow the dead to bid farewell to his home and mourners (Z Gumbo, interviewed 22/ 02/91).

At the grave, the corpse is laid on its right hand side ... the side that represents goodness and power. This automatically overcomes the left, which is the side of evil and weakness. In that way, the spirit of the deceased is expected to be benevolent, guarding the land and well-being of other descendants rather than being malevolent, causing afflictions and chaos to the living ... Before returning home, all those who participated in the burial ritual must wash their hands with water as a sign of cleansing and purification. (R Dhewa, interviewed 1/10/90).

In the Karanga belief, burial ritual practices are important, otherwise the deceased would be disappointed and inflict the family concerned with illnesses, diseases, misfortunes and deaths. Accordingly, the Karanga people fear graves, a symbol of the dead, and often avoid them. They believe that graves have certain powers that linger around them which can be harmful to the living.

Therefore, in the Karanga experience, burial rituals are compulsory. People apply extra care to ensure that they are performed appropriately and efficiently, as it is believed that the deceased can become a danger to the living if the rituals are not performed correctly. He or she has the potential to cause illness, misfortune and death. So the rituals serve the purpose of eliminating danger and enhancing the well-being of both the living and the dead (Shoko 2007:86).

The Karanga also perform rituals of purification as part of their post-burial practices.

A couple of days after the burial of the dead, a ritual called *doro remvura* (literally beer of water) is arranged. At the occasion, all the distant kinsmen, especially those who

might have failed to turn up for the funeral, and the community, are brought together. Besides beer drinking, the invited attendants place stones or soil on the grave in turn, saying, "Sleep well, I am so and so, your relative." Afterwards, the people pile their hands on top of each other. Water is poured from a single container and the people wash their hands simultaneously. So, the ritual purifies or cleanses the participants from defilement or pollution caused by the deceased's corpse and neutralises potential danger stemming from a wandering spirit. In the ritual, water plays a crucial role as a cleansing and neutralising agent (P Masvina, interviewed 3/01/91).

A year after the death of the deceased relative, a ritual called *kugadzira mudzimu* (also known as *kurova guva*) is performed in order to bring the deceased's spirit back home from a period of temporary oblivion and wandering in an unknown environment. By virtue of being brought home, the spirit is then recognised as a fully-fledged member of the Karanga society and can thus be incorporated into the realm of affectionate spiritual beings.

People go to the grave where they begin to sing and dance. Invocation and consecration to family spirits is undertaken ... and the procession finally heads into the home of the deceased ... The deceased's movable and immovable property is distributed and the successor to the wife chosen. By so doing, the spirit of the deceased is legitimately brought home to assume its guardian role. If this ritual is not done, the spirit will strike the family with serious punishment in form of chronic illness and diseases such as leprosy, fits, sterility, mental illness, or misfortune and death (M Chingamo, interviewed 17/07/90).

Such a ritual, in the Karanga belief, is also intended to domesticate the spirit from the dangerous state of wandering entered into soon after death, thereby promoting the health of the descendants.

Some-post death burial rituals include the ritual of honour and appeasement. These are held because there are many ills of life which confront the Karanga people and which necessitate an appeal to

spiritual forces through ritual action. These include illnesses, diseases, dangers, misfortunes, deaths and in fact all matters which threaten the well-being of the living. The spirit of the head of the family may demand honour on a regular basis by causing an affliction. If there is a problem in the family, a diviner is consulted and ultimately the spirit has to be contacted by ritual. Millet beer called *doro reChikaranga* is brewed for the occasion. At the ritual, which normally occurs underneath a *muchakata* tree, snuff is thrown on the ground and simultaneously an address is made by the officiant, who also pours beer on the ground from a *mukombe* (gourd) (Shoko 2007:87).

Karanga rituals to honour the *midzimu* or *shavi* spirits may be performed when the situation is conducive, but especially in response to a crisis, danger, misfortune or perennial and complex illness. The Karanga regard angry spirits as the most formidable phenomenon in their religious experience. Among these are *ngozi* (spirits of vengeance) seeking retribution and justice; provoked, neglected and disappointed *midzimu*, malignant spirits and desperate or disillusioned *shavi* spirits who afflict the living with serious diseases such as epilepsy, convulsions, madness and reproductive problems, among other things. The rationale is that the ritual of appeasement thwarts afflictions and danger caused by the wrath of angry spirits bent on threatening the lives of the Karanga, and so sustains their health (Shoko 2007:88).

2.2 Myths about death

The Shona express their views and understanding of death through myths. According to Shona myth, human beings were originally immortal but were then later subjected to death. In one set of myths the sky and earth were once connected by a rope but because of human "sin", the two became separated. According to some myths, human disobedience resulted in this separation. Yet others attribute the separation to animals, claiming that a mouse bit through the rope and disconnected the sky and earth (C Moyo, interviewed 12/04/06).

One of the myths of death popular among the Karanga is that of the contest between the wasp (*dzingidzi*) and chameleon (*rwaivhi*). The Chief Creator called two of his creatures, a wasp and a chameleon, and gave them messages to deliver to humanity on earth. First the

chameleon was given the message of life: "Men will die but they will return to life." However, the Creator changed his mind and sent the wasp with the message of death, "Men will die and perish for ever." First to leave was the chameleon. The wasp followed and soon overtook the chameleon. The wasp, at brisk speed, delivered the message of death first. When the chameleon arrived, panting with tiredness to deliver the message of life, the people replied, "We have already accepted the first message." So from then on human beings became subject to death (G Matsheza, interviewed 2/03/06). The Karanga are therefore convinced that whilst humanity was created as immortal, the origin of death came about with the passage of time.

Ashwanden (1989) also describes some Karanga mythological beliefs that explain why people observe the practice of *kugadzirwa* (ritual of the dead). Mpofu (1997) provides a precise insight on Ashwanden's myths. The story has it that when God had made man, and the world was peaceful (*pasichigare*), He said, "There will be no death if you do as I tell you. You will always be happy and earth will give what you desire, but none of you, whether man, animal, water or earth, shall ever overstep the boundaries of their power without being punished severely."

One day Man asked Mother Earth, "How did God create you?" Earth replied, "I was made from water, fire and stones." Then man said, "Do you think that I too could create another world?" Earth warned, "Have you forgotten God's rule that you must not overstep the boundaries of your power?" But man said, "If I succeed in building another world I can own my earth." And Man started building a tower (*shongwe*) in order to get away from the earth. God saw that Man was becoming proud. He sent his voice from the Matopos, which cursed Man. It said, "Now you must die, but you have to give me back my breath." Turning to the Earth, the voice said, "You will not, from now on, be allowed to grow what has grown hitherto. Man must be punished for he has become proud. And you, animals, you turn against Man and no longer obey him." Earth objected, "How could you separate me from my friend?" God loved earth and therefore He ordered, "Every Man who dies must return to you. Never let his bones lie about. They must return from whence I took them. But in due course you must give me back my breath. The bones of the animals may lie around on your surface."

When Man heard that he called his children and told them, “Whoever falls asleep (dies) shall be returned to Mother Earth. That is the place Man comes from. But remember to give back God’s breath (*Femo raMwari*) to God himself.” That is why a man is always buried in the ground when he has died. Even if a man has been eaten by a lion, one tries to kill the animal because it has the man inside (Ashwanden 1989:126-7).

Ashwanden provides the following interpretation: The fall of Man is seen as the central cause of death. But death creates a problem for man because of his dual descent, i.e. as a child of earth (his biological descent) and, at the same time, as bearer of God’s breath (his soul). Reunion with the earth takes place when the deceased is placed into the earth’s “uterus”; the return of God’s breath, however, occurs at the bringing home ceremony (*kugadzira*), a symbolical birth. The whole event of the *kugadzira* ceremony (it really begins with death) rests on the idea, that Man continues to exist because of his soul, the “breath of God” (Ashwanden 1989:126-7).

3 SHONA INTERPRETATION OF DEATH

The Shona hold two perspectives of death based on Mbiti’s (1969) model. One is “timely death” and the other “untimely death”. Timely death occurs at the right time and age. It is death that affects the old people (*harabwa*) who are mature and have seen it all. This death is not painful and is expected. Some who adopt Zulu culture could help send off those who are near the end by suffocating them to death. This is done when someone has reached an advanced age and is plastered by dung to support life. This stage is seen as a burden to the living, who then facilitate the death of the person in question. The facilitators are not blamed but are seen as helping the deceased to go to the other world. Untimely death, on the other hand, attacks people in the prime of their lives, when they are still young. Death is seen as tragic, it is painful and the causes are sought by divination. The diviner usually identifies a spiritual cause, either an ancestor seeking honour, a *ngozi* (avenging spirit) or witchcraft (*uroyi*).

From the traditional Shona point of view death is not seen as the end of one’s existence, but as the gateway to another world. This is

expressed in the terms the people use to refer to death. When a Shona person has died, the Shona do not talk about death in direct terms, avoiding words such as *wafa* (died). Nowadays some employ slang equivalents; *atila* (died), *adhiweta* (died), *avhaya* (gone), *akava bhakedhi* (kicked the bucket) (Zindoga, interviewed 5/04/07). Such utterances are considered too direct and impolite. They show no remorse or respect for the dead. Since death is not regarded as the extinction of human life, they prefer metaphorical terms such as the following:

<i>Washaika</i>	-	Lost and hopefully to be found
<i>Watisiya</i>	-	Has left, and the living will catch up
<i>Waenda</i>	-	He/she has gone as if on a journey to be followed by others
<i>Wapfuura</i>	-	He/she has passed/proceeded
<i>Wazorora</i>	-	He/she has rested
<i>Warara</i>	-	He/she is asleep
<i>Hakuchina</i>	-	No longer exists

(T Shoko, class lecture 27/08/97)

Another facet of the Shona view of death is their fear and respect of graves. The grave is regarded as sacred. The Shona believe the grave to be a special place that houses the dead, and is no place for the living. Symbolically a grave takes the shape of a hut, with a special tunnel that represents *chikuva* where the body is laid to rest. The pit entrance symbolises a door, and the earth mound represents the roof. The Shona refer to the grave as an *imba* (hut) in which the deceased is sleeping. It is believed that the deceased has to return for burial to the place he or she was born and where the umbilical cord lies. In Christian burial sermons the pastor says in Karanga, *Wakabva muvhu, uchadzokerazve kuvhu* or *Zezuru, Bukuta kubukuta* (from ashes to ashes, there you return).

At this point we turn to the Shona view of cremation.

4 SHONA VIEWS ON CREMATION

There is a deep-rooted cultural opposition to the idea of cremation among the Shona.

Many people believe that the burial ceremony is an important preparation for the body's journey after death and that destroying the human remains could also destroy the spirit. Although the City Council of Harare tried to promote the idea that cremation was quicker and cheaper than burial and saves space, the Shona were very resistant to this idea. Cultural traditions and spiritual taboos militate against this campaign. Professor Gordon Chavunduka, a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe and Head of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA), explains:

Cremation is totally against cultural traditions. The philosophy of death in Shona African society says it takes about a year for a spirit to leave the body and join the spirits of the ancestors. If the body is cremated, that spirit would be blocked. Although it would remain alive, it would be angered that traditional burial rites had not been followed properly and could return to punish the family and community.²

A spokesman from ZINATHA dismissed the idea of cremation as “un-African”, claiming that the dead would not accept it.

Apart from cultural taboos, the issue of cost also exacerbated Shona resistance to cremation. For instance, a class A grave, under lawn, costs Z\$1 200 (about 30 US dollars) and a Class B grave under bare earth, just Z\$500, while cremation costs Z\$2 000 because of imported gas. However, Mr Zimbwa pointed out that it costs a lot more money to transport a coffin for burial to the rural areas, which is what most people prefer. If they were cremated, their families could just carry a little box of their ashes on the bus.³

4.1 Theologians' views

In an interview with Dr Philemon Mlambo, it was established that Africans do acknowledge the concept of life after death. A grave is referred to as an *imba* (hut) in which a dead person lives even after death. However, the concept of resurrection is not as explicit as in Christianity. The Shona do not agree with cremation because it is a foreign idea – they believe that the body should not be destroyed. In

the Shona understanding, death is spirit, and the body should be looked after as something sacred. In their thinking life is here on earth; the idea of heaven is too remote. God is with the people on earth, not far removed in heaven, and the dead also continue to live with the living (Philemon Mlambo, interviewed 5/07/06).

Corroborating the above position, Mr Patson Mhaka states that cremation is not something that he would opt for. He argues that both in traditional culture and in the Old and New Testaments, the only way of disposing of the dead was through burial. It is theologically clear that when people are raised, they will have transformed bodies. It is as Paul puts it, "Any seed which is planted in the ground is not the same seed which germinates" (1 Cor 15:37).

In the Shona culture, the dead are respected more than the living. They are not feared. Bourdillon concurs that the dead are respected, even the weakest spirit of a child. But he adds that an element of fear accompanies this respect (Bourdillon 1976:205). According to Hastings (1911) mortal remains have to be treated with respect for the bodies had been the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:15; 6:19; 15:22, Rev 7:13).

Whilst some Shona people believe that when burying the dead they should lay the bodies on the left side, Bourdillon argues that they should lie on the right so that they can have the power to fight their enemies (Bourdillon 1976:203).

Bourdillon (1976) states that among the Manyika, a sub-group of the Shona culture, people bury the dead in damp soil. The grave may be lined with wet clay to keep the spirit cool. This is particularly the case with people who die of leprosy, a disease that is caused by the "high god". In such a case it is customary to bury them in swampy grounds in order to cool the body. In some other customs, the practice is to burn the body of the leper and throw his bones and ashes into a pool. Bourdillon maintains this is the only time the Shona people burn their dead because of their fear of the disease.

On the issue of cremation, Menson Beta said that he would not opt for cremation, and would rather be buried without a coffin than be cremated. As far as he was concerned burial is significant from both

the African and Jewish traditions since both have agrarian backgrounds (Menson Beta, interviewed 30/09/06). Mr Edward Sithole, on the other hand, argued that whether one is buried or cremated is immaterial. What is important is one's steadfast faith. It is faith that saves one, not how one is disposed after death. He bases his argument on the Deuteronomy text that says things which are a mystery belong to God but those that are open belong to people. As a result he is looking forward to the resurrection of the body (Mpofu 1997:43).

However, there are some Shona Christians who are open towards cremation. They refer to certain biblical passages that influence their tolerance of cremation and justify it as an acceptable practice for Christians. First, fire symbolised God to Jews and Christians. Norman Geisler and Douglas cite William Phillips, who supports cremation as a Jewish and Christian practice by pointing to symbolic use of fire. "In biblical times fire was often regarded as symbolic of God's presence, so it was appropriate to feature in sacred ceremonies. God was represented by a torch in an encounter with Abraham, and at Mt Sinai he appeared as a "devouring fire" (Ex 24:17).⁴ Since fire represents God, cremation can be a symbol of the believer entering into the presence of God.

Second, in the New Testament Paul emphasises that the sacred is found in the living body. It was the living body that was the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:9) not the dead one. Phillips (Geisler et al 2007) suggests that, just as a temple is constructed for worship and is destroyed when no longer used for worship, the body may be dispensed in a like manner. Paul viewed the body as an earthly tent that could be demolished after use. When Paul wrote about the resurrection of the dead he did not mean the reassembly and reanimation of the corpse. As such Paul's theology is compatible with the practice of cremation. On the contrary those who advocate earth burial because it enhances body resurrection have a weak New Testament foundation on which to stand.⁵

Third, Christian acceptance of cremation is growing. Phillips suggests that the growing Christian tolerance towards cremation is based on their reinterpretation of basic sources that make them realise that the method of corpse disposal in the biblical culture was not clearly

designated. Also, adherents observe that cremation marks a shift away from irreligious materialism. It eliminates the need for expensive caskets and body embalming. It eases the grief process.⁶ Fourth, cremation accelerates the natural process of decomposition. Since the Bible condemns humankind to return to dust (Gen 3:19), cremation facilitates this process in a speedy way. It thus results in an immediate fulfilment of what the Bible forecasts.

5 BIBLE PASSAGES

The Shona Christians base their views of burial and cremation on the Bible. According to BA Robinson (2008), the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) contain a few references to disposal by burning in fire. Some verses describe executions by Philistines or Babylonians. The burning of bodies and objects in ancient Israel was reserved mostly for idols, criminals or enemies. The following verses all make some reference to these practices:

Genesis 38:24: Judah initially ordered his pregnant daughter-in-law to be burned to death because she was guilty of prostitution. This action would have caused the death of the woman and her twin fetuses.

Exodus 32:20: Moses destroyed the golden calf by burning it.

Leviticus 20:14: If a man marries both a woman and her mother, then all three *must be burned in the fire* (NIV). The passage is ambiguous: it is not known whether they would be burned alive, or would be stoned to death first, and their bodies burned.

Leviticus 21:9: If the daughter of a priest becomes a prostitute, then she *must be burned in the fire* (NIV).

Numbers 16:35: God exterminated Korah and 250 Israelite men with fire because they opposed Moses.

Deuteronomy 7:25: God commanded that the idols of pagan gods be destroyed by fire.

Joshua 7:15-25: After Joshua and his army exterminated the men, women and innocent children of Jericho, a few soldiers disobeyed God's command and looted the city. As punishment for the theft, and to pay for Israel's disgrace, God ordered the thieves to be burned. They were stoned to death; their bodies were burned and buried in what was called the *Valley of Achor*.

1 Samuel 31:11-13: Earlier in the chapter, Saul had been wounded and asked for assisted suicide from his armour-bearer. The latter refused, so Saul committed suicide himself. The Philistines impaled Saul's body and those of his sons and left them on public display. The people of Jabesh Gilead retrieved the bodies, burned them and later buried the remaining bones in Gilead. There have been a number of theories raised to account for this unusual treatment of a hero:

- Burning might have been a local custom in Gilead.
- The people of Gilead may have been worried that the Philistines might dig up the bodies and further desecrate them.
- Burning might have been necessary because the bodies may have partly decomposed.
- The Hebrew word translated as *burnt* might actually mean *anointed*, thus, the bodies might not have been burned after all.

2 Kings 10:26: Jehu demolished a temple consecrated to the God Baal and burned its sacred stone.

Jeremiah 29:22: This verse contains a curse which refers to the time that the Babylonians burned Zedekiah and Ahab in fire.

Amos 2:1: God proclaimed a death curse on Moab because he had reduced the bones of the king of Edom to lime through burning.

The Christian Scriptures (New Testament) contain few references to the burning of bodies or objects:

Acts 19:19: Sorcerers who were converted to Christianity brought their scrolls out to be burned.

Revelation 20:15: The fate of those whose names were not written in the **Book of Life** is to be thrown into the lake of fire.⁷

The burial of many important Biblical figures is described in the Bible:

Genesis 25:8-10: Abraham

Genesis 23:1-4: Sarah

Genesis 35:19-20: Rachel

Genesis 35:29: Isaac

Genesis 49:33 and 50:1-13: Jacob

Genesis 50:26: Joseph (The Israelites went to great effort to bury his body in the Promised Land; they retained it for over 300 years in Egypt and after the Exodus during 40 years of wanderings before burying it.)

Deuteronomy 34:6: Moses (God selected a burial site at a secret location in Moab for Moses.)

Joshua 24:29-30: Joshua

Joshua 24:33: Eleazar

1 Samuel 25:1: Samuel

1 Kings 2:10: David

Matthew 14:10-12: John the Baptist

Acts 5:5-10: Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 8:2: Stephen⁸

It was considered a great tragedy and dishonour if someone was not given a proper burial.

1 Kings 13:22: A prophet disobeyed God by eating a meal in a forbidden location. God laid a curse on him: that his body would not be buried in the tomb of his fathers. Shortly after, the prophet was attacked by a lion and his remains left on a road.

Jeremiah 16:6: God laid a horrible curse on the Israelites: that many would die of disease, would not be mourned and would be “like refuse lying on the ground” (NIV). Their bodies would be consumed by animals and birds.

Jeremiah 22:19: God laid a similar curse on Jehoiakim because of his pride and disobedience. Jeremiah said that he would be given the

burial of a donkey: to be dragged away and thrown outside the city gates.

6 CRUCIFIXION

Of the countless number of tombs in Palestine from the era of Roman occupation which have been excavated, only one skeleton has been found which bears the marks of a crucifixion. That is because, after a Roman execution, the body would be typically discarded in an open pit where it would be devoured by wild dogs. To be forbidden a traditional burial added greatly to the horror of this method of execution.⁹

7 DEBATES ON BURIAL AND CREMATION

There has been a lot of discussion and debate about the advantages and disadvantages of burial and cremation. From our study of the Shona people, it appears that there are some people who are in favour of either burial or cremation, and opposed to the other. They proffer various reasons for their preferences:

7.1 Advantages and disadvantages of burial

Some people referred to the Bible to support their views in favour of burial. According to Mrs Dhembeu, God selected burial at Moses' death (Deuteronomy 34:6). Reverend A Moyo, pastor in the Lutheran Church, said most of the references to the burning of a body in the Bible are instances of punishment for criminal acts, punishment for improper behaviour, killings by pagans, or destruction of idols and evil material (Moyo, interviewed 15/04/06). Robinson provides a concise Christian stance:

- St. Paul appears to favour burial. In 1 Corinthians 15:35-44, he discusses how God will raise the decomposed body of a believer. The symbolism used is that of planting a seed and having new life rise from the decaying seed.
- The Christian church has advocated burial since its inception. They reserved burning for witches and other heretics. They exterminated hundreds of thousands of them, mainly during the 15th to 18th centuries.¹⁰ The most conspicuous disadvantage of

burial is that it is more expensive because of the land fees that need to be paid

7.2 Advantages and disadvantages of cremation

According to Mpofu, cremation in Harare started on 26 November 1956. The first person to be created was a white man from the Marandellas. There were 16 cemeteries at that time. Among Africans, about four adult cremations and 35 cremations of stillborn babies take place each year. For whites, the figure is about five to six a day. The average number of cremations a week is 20-25, of this figure 1-2 are stillborn babies (Mpofu 1997:45).

Between 1993 and 1996, statistics of burials and cremations in Harare were as follows:

1993-1994		1994-1995		1995-1996	
Burial	Cremation	Burial	Cremation	Burial	Cremation
5 535	690	6 105	207	4 504	1 200

These figures show a decline in burial and a rising need for cremation.

Mr Lazarus Mandizha believes that cremation can be more economical because a simple box can be used in place of an expensive casket. The average cost of cremation in 2006 was around \$225 000 000 dollars. In comparison the average cost of a funeral that includes embalming, a casket, funeral service and interment in a purchased plot amounted to \$Z100 000 000 dollars. Some people also commented that there is no cost associated with the purchase and perpetual care of a grave site or tombstone if one opts for cremation. Cremation therefore saves land (Lazarus Mandizha, interviewed 10/06/06).

Cremation is also viewed as practical because it allows for the scattering of the remains in a place of significance to the deceased.

This usually takes place at a later date and reduces the stress and strains associated with burial practices. Some Shona people also preferred their bodies to be disposed of quickly by heat rather than decaying in a grave (Angeline Moyo, interviewed 2/04/06).

One of the disadvantages of cremation is that it can help to conceal murder. Once a body has been cremated, it cannot be exhumed and analysed for poisons. From a cultural point of view, the practice can leave survivors with fewer ways to mourn. This is seen as contrary to the dictates of Shona tradition and culture.

8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article explored two sets of beliefs, namely the Shona and the Christian, and tried to discover whether there was any common ground between the two. Ultimately the article sought to establish the reasons why cremation is not an acceptable alternative for disposing of the dead. It has also shown that cremation appeals more to Christians than their traditional counterparts.

The article has outlined debates and spelt out advantages and disadvantages of burial and cremation. The following were put forward as advantages of burial: It is a religious and family tradition; burial offers a place to return to and care for, which gives comfort to the bereaved; a grave is a permanent memorial for the deceased. On the negative side, burial is more expensive because of the land fees that have to be paid.

The article put forward several advantages of cremation: It is usually less expensive; it offers more flexibility for service options; cremation saves land; the remains can be scattered or buried at a later date in a place favoured by the deceased. Resistance to the practice is based mainly on the fact that it is not part of Shona culture. It also leaves survivors with fewer days of ritual mourning.

It can be concluded that burial is preferred and is in conformity with Shona tradition. Cremation is regarded as alien and “un-African” in a culture where this practice does not exist. However, it is also important that cremation be considered as a viable option for

disposal of the dead on the basis that it is cost effective and saves space. There is also some theological support for the practice.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Ferrett, internet <http://wwwnews.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1049421.stm>, 12/12/07.
- 2 Bartlett, internet <http://www.aegis.com/news/afp/1999/AF990835.html>, 12/12/07.
- 4 Bartlett, see note 2.
- 5 Norman et al, internet http://www.inplainsite.org/html/burial_or_cremation_html, 12/12/07.
- 6 Norman et al, see note 5.
- 7 Norman et al, see note 5.
- 9 Robinson online <http://www.religioustolerance.org/crematio.htm>, 10/01/08.
- 10 Robinson, see note 9.
- 11 Robinson, see note 9.
- 12 Robinson, see note 9.