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A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

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Title: Death in the City: Burial Societies in Soweto

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DEATH IN THE CITY = BURIAL SOCIETIES IN SOWETO[1] by J Y KRAMER.

Burial societies are perhaps the most widespread of mutual aid societies in Soweto. They are associations whose purpose is to provide their members with financial assistance when a death occurs in their family. They arise out of peoples' desire to ensure that they will be buried properly or that they will be in a position to provide a proper burial for a family member. Thus, in order to fully understand the role which societies of this type play in Soweto, it is essential that we appreciate the reasons which underlie this desire to be buried properly.

Dr Anthony Barker, speaking of the Zulu with whom he has worked in the Nqutu district of Zululand, has commented on their beliefs and attittudes towards death, and, because his observations apply equally well to the situation which I found in Soweto, I quote him at some length:

> 'It is important to realise, first, that in Zulu as in much African thinking, the boundaries between the living and the dead are less hard-drawn, less impenetrable than they are in white thinking. Perhaps this is surprising? The Christian faith has taught of the life after death for the twenty centuries of its course, yet, in his concern for the respectful attitudes due to the dead elders of his family, the Zulu son shows an awareness of his duty far deeper than the conventiona black-bordered paraphanalia of Western death. It is not of course all mere politeness, this careful observance of fitting behaviour. Our people accept that the living are in large measure under the influence of their dead, who can bring down upon the house both blessing and cursing. And the difference between a bright, peaceful future in the home and a decade of trouble may lie in the correctness of the ceremonies of burial or of the return, one year after death, of the wandering soul of him who died.'[2]

Although Barker is speaking about Zulus, I found that his remarks, in the main, were applicable to members of all the ethnic groups living in Soweto as well as to people drawn from a wide range of occupational and educational categories. In addition, membership in a Christian church

does not appear to prevent people from carrying out the rituals pertaining to death and burial which derive from a belief in , and acceptance of, the power of the ancestral spirits.[3] Furthermore, there are other beliefs and practices associated with death which are not mentioned by Barker, but which play an important part in influencing the behaviour of the family of a deceased person. These are the rituals and associated beliefs concerned with combating the effects of the pollution resulting from the death of one who has 'the same blood' as yourself. (This includes spouses, because on marrying, a woman is regarded as becoming a member of her husband's family)

Thus, when a person dies the following steps are taken. On the night preceding the funeral an all night vigil is held at the home of the deceased. The corpse is brought from the undertaker where it has been kept and is placed in the room where the deceased normally slept. This is to ensure that the deceased will 'rest in peace'. A white sheet is hung from the ceiling, separating the coffin from the rest of the room, and a candle or candles are placed near the coffin. From the time that the corpse is brought home, until it is removed to the cemetry the following day, a close family member must remain with it. The corpse is brought home in the late afternoon, and as soon as this is done, an animal should be slaughtered. Ideally this should be a cow or ox, but, if for financial reasons, the family cannot afford to buy a beast, a sheep or goat may be slaughtered. Often, four of five sheep or goats are slaughtered in lieu of a beast. This, is done, people say, because the deceased will not rest in peace unless 'blood is spilled'. In addition, it is said that this slaughter is to 'accompany the deceased half way' to the ancestors. The meat obtained from this slaughter is used the following day to provide food for the mourners who return to the house of the deceased after the funeral .

Although the slaughtering is essentially an affair between the family and the deceased, friends and relatives come and remain for the whole night with the family, to console them. Besides, people say, the family cannot remain alone in the house while the corpse is there. During the vigil, hymns are sung, prayers are said, sermeons are preached and eulogies are given, and thus the funeral becomes something of a community affair.

All this time the close members of the family should act in a subdued manner. They should not speak unnecessarily, and when they do talk, it should be in low tones. They should in fact refrain from taking an active part in social affairs. This is because they are believed to be covered by a 'black cloud' which 'envelops' them as a result of the death of a close relative, 'one who is of the same blood'. They are in fact, regarded as being

in a state of pollution which lasts from the time of death until they remove their mourning clothing and are purified in a special ceremony. The term for this 'darkness' or 'blackness' is in Sotho sefifi, and in Zulu, isinyama. I am most familiar with the Sotho term, sefifi, and , because no English word adequately conveys the full meaning of this concept, I will use the term sefifi whenever I refer to it.

People who are under the influence of this sefifi, should not mix freely with other people. They should not frequent shebeens and they should not consort with members of the opposite sex. If they do these things, it is said that they will suffer serious misfortune. People will not like them and they will continuously be involved in quarrels. They are likely to be assaulted or stabbed or they might be involved in a motor accident. It is also said that if a man passes away and his wife 'misbehaves' with another man before she is purified, then she will break out in sores and her body will become rotten. Thus, the close family members of the deceased, those who put on mourning clothing - a black patch or arm band for a husband, a complete outfit in black for a widow, and a ribbon of black material worn around the neck for children - are in a social limbo for the duration of their mourning period. This period lasts for four to six months in the case of the children of the deceased and for a year for a spouse.

After that time, a ceremony is held at which a sheep or a goat is slaughtered and the gall, contents of the stomach, and some blood are mixed with water and used to wash the mourners, thereby removing the sefifi and thus purifying the people. (Some people have said that in addition to those parts of the animal detailed above, certain medecines must be obtained from an inyanga and should be added to the cleansing mixture) The black clothing is removed and is burned, usually by an old woman. Traditionally, this mourning clothing should be throwm into a river, but, as an informant pointed out, there are no rivers in Soweto.

This ceremony - of washing off the sefifi - was regarded by all the people to whom I spoke as being of the utmost importance. If this ritual was not carried out, a person would always suffer misfortune. The suggestion that the mourning clothing could be removed without the person involved slaughtering or carrying out the rituals of purification was greeted with shock. This ritual, is, to use the words of an informant, ' a matter of must.'

In addition to these rites, especially amongst the Nguni speaking peoples, an additional ceremony should be carried out. some time after the removal of the mourning clothing. This is the ceremony of recalling the spirit of

the deceased to his home (ukubuyisa idlozi). The senior members of the family visit the grave of the deceased and on the following day a beast or goat is slaughtered. The gall bladder is removed and the gall is sprinkled around the house. By virtue of this ceremony, at which the spirit of the deceased is asked to return home to look after his children, the family are now in a position to petition the ancestors through him. However, due to lack of money, this ceremony is often postponed for a considerable length of time, and is only performed when, as a result of misfortune, the family wish to communicate with the ancestors. This they can only do through the spirit of the most recently deceased household head, and unless his spirit has been brought home, they cannot communicate through him. Sotho speaking people have a similar ceremony as well, but, in Soweto, for financial reasons, it is usually combined with the rites for the washing away of the sefifi.

I have given this brief and rather superficial account of the major beliefs and practices which are associated with death in Soweto in order to indicate the wider significance which the death of a family member has for that family. In addition to having to cope with the grief and sense of loss occassioned by the death of a loved one, the family of the deceased also have a number of obligations, in relation to the spirit world which they have to discharge. The deceased must be buried properly and decently and with all the respect occassioned by his new status. As one informant put it: 'We must do all these things. It is the last thing that we will be able to do for him.' However, all 'these things' which have to be done cost money, and so, in addition to having to worry about their spiritual well being, the family of the deceased are burdened with heavy financial worries as well, especially if noe financial precautions were taken while the deceased was still alive.

What, in fact, are the expenses involved in a proper burial? The largest amount of money goes to the undertaker, whose services in the urban areas are indispensible. In the first place, few if any funerals in Soweto are held immediately after a death. Usually the funeral takes place on a Saturday or Sunday about a week or ten days after the death. This is done so that all those people who wish to attend the funeral will be able to do so. If it were to be held on a week day, no one would be able to attend as they would not be able to get time off from work to do so. Furthermore, at least a week is allowed to elapse between the death and the burial in order that any members of the deceased's family, as well as any other interested parties, who happened to live in the homelands and other distant parts, can be informed of the death and can be in a position to come to the funeral.

Also, the period between the death and the funeral gives the family an opportunity to make all the necessary arrangements for the funeral and it gives them time to gather together part or all of the money required for The body therefore has to be kept under refrigeration all that time, and this is done by the undertaker. He also is the one who arranges to fetch the body from the place of death and prepares it for burial, and he provides the coffin as well as the use of a hearse and family car for the funeral. Most undertakers provide a package deal which includes all these services, the price of the package depending on the price of the coffin chosen by the family, and from what I can gather, the least that an undertaker would charge would be about sixty rand. One white owned firm of undertakers in Johannesburg, however, stated that although their cheapest was R64, most of their African clients (about 60%), chose a coffin which brought up the cost to R80.

In addition to having to pay the undertaker, those responsible for the funeral also have to provide transport to and from the cemetry for all those who wish to go to the funeral. As very few people in Soweto own their own motor cars, the family has to hire one or more busses for this purpose, and each bus costs fifteen rand. Furthermore, because the houses in Soweto are so small, the family must hire a tent or marquee to provide shelter for those people who come to the wake on the night before the burial, and for those who return to the home of the deceased after the funeral for a full scale meal, provided by the family. The meat for this meal, as I have pointed out earlier, comes from the animals which the fammily have slaughtered, and these are also quite expensive. A sheep or goat costs about fifteen rand while an ox would cost four or five times that amount. Thus, if the family provided the minimum requirements for a proper burial, it would cost them over a hundred rand.* In many cases, however, the family feels obliged to lay out more than that, because in addition to not wishing to offend the ancestral spirits, they are also concerned about the image which they project in the community. It must not be said that they do not know how to honour their dead, and the quality of the coffin, the adequacy of transport, the number and type of animal which is slaughtered as well as the variety of food provided are the criteria in terms of which they are

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* Minimum undertakers fee R60
Cost of one bus R15
cost of one sheep/goat R15
R90
Plus the cost of a tent, vegetables and other foodstuffs required to feed the mourners.

judged by the assembled mourners. In fact, if an elaborate coffin is bought, if more than one bus is hired and if a beast or several sheep are slaughtered, the funeral can cost the family a good deal more than two hundred rand. However, whether the family contents themselves with the bare essentials, or whether they go in for something more elaborate, the money which they have to lay out is bound to place them in financial difficulties, considering the extremely low wages earned by the majority of the inhabitants of Soweto. If a family cannot afford to bury its dead, a paupers funeral is provided by the state, but this is regarded as the ultimate humiliation, both for the deceased as well as for his family.

There are, however, a number of sources from which additional money can be obtained, the most important of which are burial societies and burial insurance policies. But before discussing these, I would like to mention some other ways in which money is obtained. It is customary for all those who attend the funeral and wake, or who come and condole with the family during the time between the death and the burial, to make some contribution to the family. These donations vary widely, ranging from ten or twenty cents to several rand. All these contributions are recorded in a book which is given to the family together with the money. Usually the person in charge of collecting this money is someone connected with the family but not directly related to the deceased, often an affinal relative, and apparently the contributions are all recorded so as to ensure that the family receives all the money collected and that some of it does not find its way into the pockets of the collector. Governing these contributions is a principle of generalised reciprocity. As one informant put it, 'If I do not go to peoples' funerals, they will not come to mine. So I must go.'

If one is a regular patron of a particular shebeen, then there is another similar source of funds available to him. If such a 'regular' dies or a close family member passes away, then the other patrons, as well as the shebeen king or queen, make some donation which is passed on to the family of the deceased.

Finally, if a person happens to be a member of a rotating credit association (stokfel) or some other type of society , the members of that association also make a contribution to the family of the deceased. In fact, in some of these associations, it is laid down that the members must all donate a set sum of money on such occassions. An interesting variation of this practice is to be found in the various associations of taxi-owners in Soweto. Written into the constitutions of these associations is that in the event of a death occuring in the family of a member, the other members are bound, in addition to having to contribute a set sum, to make their taxis available to the family of the deceased for the transportation of mourners to and from

the cemetry. People in Soweto say that they always know when a taxi-owner is to be buried because it is impossible to get hold of a taxi on that day.

Let us now turn to associations which are specifically concerned with the provision of financial assistance to members who suffer a death in their family. If a person wishes to ensure that he or his family will have the money needed to provide a proper funeral, there are two course of action which are open to him. He may either join a burial insurance scheme, or may become a member of a burial society. Many people, in fact, belong to both. The burial insurance schemes are usually run by undertakers, and from their point of view, it can be seen as a means of increasing their custom. Such schemes are organised by Black owned firms in Soweto and White owned ones in Johannesburg . Normally on joining such a scheme, a person pays an enrolment fee and then has to pay a 'monthly 'premium'which is collected by an agent from the firm. The advantages of this type of scheme are that for a fairly small sum of money each month, the actual amount depending on the age and number of dependants of the subscriber, a person can ensure that if he or any other member of his family dies, all the undertakers expenses will be met.

The one drawback of this type of scheme is that sometimes the agents pocket the money they collect, instead of handing it over to the company. There is a safeguard against this type of practice in that each subscriber is given a book into which he must paste a receipt which the agent is supposed to give him everytime he pays his subscription. However, there do seem to be ways in which the agents manage to collect money without issueing receipts. Also, there is the possibility that one might be dealing with a bogus agent. One informant told me the rather sad story of how he had enrolled in one of these schemes and had payed his subscriptions diligently for over two years. However, when a member of his family died, and he presented his book, which had the required number of receipts pasted in it, to the company, he dismovered that it was not valid as he had been paying his money to a bogus agent who had stolen a number of books and a batch of receipts from the company.

Burial societies, on the other hand, are more like clubs. Although they vary in size from small associations consisting of a few kinsmen to Soweto-wide associations with memberships of more than a hundred, a great deal of face-to-face interaction takes place between their members, all of whom have an equal say in the running of the association. In addition, in theory all the members also have an equal chance of becoming an office bearer in the society, and usually there are quite a number of offices to be filled. The usual line-up is Chairman; Vice-Chairman; Secretary; Vice-Secretary; Treasurer; and Vice-Treasurer, while in some societies there might also be a President and several committee members. In practice, however, it often seemedto be the case that the founders of the association entrenched themselves in office and only stood down when they had had enough or when they died. This probably also explains why , in a number of societies, only a few of the office bearers seemed to perform the duties associated with their office, while the others seemed to occupy positions of honour rather than of authority. Such a state of affairs could lead to dissension, and I know of at least two societies where a group of frustrated aspirant office bearers broke away from the parent society and set themselves up in positions of authority in new associations.

All of these societies provide a similar range of services and they also obtain their funds in a similar fashion. Usually, when a person joins a burial society, he has to pay a joining fee, which can be anything from R1,00 to R10,00. Thereafter, he is obliged to pay an agreed upon sum of money to the society when a member or one of his dependants passes away. This amount usually varies between one and five rand; and the total amount collected is handed over to the family of the deceased. However, in some societies, the members do not 'pop out money' (to use a Soweto colloquiallism) whenever any one dies. Instead, they all pay a sum of money - a rand or two - into the clubs coffers every time that the society meets - which is usually monthly. The money so collected is banked, and whenever a person dies, an agreed upon amount is drawn out and given to the family. In societies where this is done, the amount given to the family is usually in the region of eighty to a hundred rand. Some societies, too, do not give the money to the deceased's family, but instead pay the undertaker directly for his services. In such cases, the burial societies have an agreement with the undertaker in terms of which they recieve a discount.

Although the main purpose of these societies is to provide their members with financial assistance at times of death, there are also certain other benefits which a person might derive from belonging to such an association. In the smaller associations, especially those that have an exclusively or predomi-

nantly female membership, the members are expected to provide the family of the deceased with help in the preparing and serving of the food at the funeral. Often such societies own a number of large posts and other cooking utensils, and on the night of the wake, which like the funeral all the members must attend, the members peel vegetables and otherwise prepare the food which is to be cooked the following day.. Also, especially if the deceased belonged to a large society, one of the office bearers will make a speech at the grave side during the funeral. I also have heard of one society in which the president also participates in the washing off of the sefifi when the purification rituals are performed.

In addition to this, the regular meetings of the society are pleasant social diversions. Usually the meetings are held at the homes of the different members in turn, and the hostess, if it is a women's society, usually provides tea and cake for the other members. Needless to say, there is a certain amount of competition between the ladies as they try and outdo each other in terms of the refreshments which are provided. If it is a society of men, the occasion is also used as an opportunity to relax and discuss matters of general interest over a beer or two after the business of the society has been transacted. Such meetings are of particular importance in societies composed of migrants who come from the same area in the homelands. Since people are continually moving backwards and forwards between Soweto and the homelands, this is one of the places that news from home can be exchanged and greetings and parcels can be handed over for delivery to a man's family, to some one who might be going 'home' for a visit.

As is clear from the above statements, there are associations in Soweto which have a membership comprising people from a particular ethnic group only. Such burial societies, it would seem, however, are organised, not on the basis of ethnic exclusiveness, but rather in terms of a common place of residence in the homelands. Thus, they are associations of 'homeboys' rather than associations of 'ethnics'. This perhaps explains why societies of this kind are found almost exclusively amongst migrants, and why certain societies, which started out with an ethnically exclusive membership became multi-ethnic. I know of a number of associations like this, where, as the dominant ties of the majority of the members switched from the rural areas to Soweto, so neighbours and friends of different ethnic groupd were recruited as members. Thus, it would seem that locality, more than anything else, is a prime factor in the recruitment of members for burial societies. This is furhter borme out by the fact that a large number of burial societies are known as 'neighbourhood societies' - lekhotla la motsi in Sotho, and ibandla lomzi in Zulu. However, in the light of the discussion of burial

practices, this should hardly be surprising, as it would seem to be a formalisation of the participation of friends and neighbours in what is probably the most difficult crisis which a family will have to undergo. In other words, societies of this type can be seen as an attempt to ensure a certain amount of stability and continuity in a world which is all too unstable and insecure.