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Changing Dynamics in the Burial and Mourning Traditions in Africa: Lessons from Zimbabwe and Lesotho

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Abstract

Burial and mourning practices in Africa have long been embedded in deeply rooted cultural, spiritual and communal value systems. However, these traditions are undergoing significant transformation through modernisation, urbanisation, migration, religious change and economic pressure. This study examines the changing dynamics of burial and mourning practices in Southern Africa, with particular attention to Zimbabwe and Lesotho. Drawing on qualitative insights from existing scholarship, cultural analysis and the researchers' contextual observations, the paper explores how mourning periods, communal participation, ritual ceremonies, ancestral relations and attachment to burial land are being reconfigured rather than simply abandoned. In both countries, prominent shifts include the professionalisation and commercialisation of funerals, the influence of Pentecostal Christianity, the growing role of funeral assurance schemes and the disruption of expected rites by COVID-19. Using functionalist, symbolic interactionist and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) perspectives, the paper identifies a continuing tension between cultural identity and contemporary practical realities. It argues that some indigenous practices have weakened, while others have been adapted or hybridised into new cultural forms. The comparison contributes to debates on cultural continuity, genealogy, identity and social change by showing how communities preserve the social and spiritual functions of mourning even when its outward forms change. The paper is positioned primarily within cultural studies, specifically the interdisciplinary study of religion, ritual and social change. Among the factors considered, Pentecostal reinterpretation and ritual substitution, the professionalisation and commodification of funerals, and migration, together with pressure on burial land, appear most influential. COVID-19 is retained as a historically bounded accelerator rather than the dominant continuing force.

Keywords: burial and mourning traditions; cultural change; genealogy; identity; Lesotho; Zimbabwe

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1. Introduction

African burial practices are repositories of genealogy. They locate the deceased within a lineage, return the person to a socially meaningful place and reaffirm obligations between generations. Historical work on Basotho migrant communities shows that death away from home intensified rather than dissolved the importance of kinship, repatriation and collective mourning (Maloka 1998). Similarly, studies of Basotho ritual life describe burial as a religious and moral process through which relations among family, community, land and

the spiritual world are reordered (Opong 2004). These perspectives are central to recovering forms of African knowledge that colonial and Western-centred accounts frequently treated as marginal or irrational (Akena 2012).

Death is universal, but the ways in which people understand death, care for the bereaved, prepare the deceased and remember those who have died are culturally situated. Burial and mourning traditions are therefore more than ceremonial responses to the end of life. They communicate what a society believes about personhood, family, spirituality, belonging and the relationship between the living and the dead. They also provide a social language through which grief may be expressed, contained and witnessed. From this perspective, mourning does not occur exclusively within an individual. It unfolds within families, religious communities, neighbourhoods and wider cultural systems that determine what should happen after a death, who should participate and how the bereaved should conduct themselves (Silverman et al. 2021).

In many African societies, funerals are understood as communal rather than exclusively private events. Because personhood is relational, the death of an individual disrupts a wider network of familial, spiritual and community relationships. Mourning therefore involves more than attending to the emotional experiences of close relatives; it also entails supporting the deceased's transition to the ancestral or spiritual realm, reorganising family and community roles, and restoring social cohesion. Extended family members, neighbours, religious leaders and other community members participate in funeral arrangements, prayer, ritual observances and practical activities such as preparing food and digging the grave. Their involvement communicates that the bereaved family does not carry the burden of death alone. Communal labour, material contributions, singing, prayer and ritual participation consequently function as practical expressions of solidarity, shared responsibility and Ubuntu (Shakwane and Vilakati 2024). Research from Southern African settings similarly demonstrates that bereavement rituals can perform psychosocial functions by organising grief, affirming relationships, providing social support and assisting communities in making meaning of death (Makgahlela et al. 2021; Thomas 2021).

Despite their important social and spiritual functions, African experiences of death and mourning have often been interpreted through theoretical and clinical traditions developed outside the continent. Dominant psychological approaches tend to conceptualise grief as an internal and individual process, sometimes overlooking collective identity, spirituality, material obligations and continuing relationships between the living and the dead. This does not make externally developed theories irrelevant; rather, their applicability should be examined within the cultural contexts in which grief is understood and practised. Decolonising death studies therefore requires recognition of multiple understandings of bereavement rather than assuming that Euro-American models are universally applicable (Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al. 2025). African people do not grieve outside culture, even when they use hospitals, counselling services, funeral parlours, insurance products and Christian liturgies (Shakwane and Vilakati 2024).

A culturally grounded analysis must avoid treating indigenous traditions either as irrational remnants of the past or as inherently beneficial simply because they are cultural. Such traditions may provide dignity, belonging, spiritual continuity and communal support, but they may also impose financial pressures and unequal obligations shaped by gender, age and social position (Khosa-Nkatini 2022). Culture is not fixed; funeral practices are continually negotiated in response to religious change, migration, urbanisation, commercialisation, public-health crises and economic uncertainty (Dhobha et al. 2025).

The changing form of a ritual should not therefore be confused with the disappearance of its meaning. Comparative scholarship suggests that funerals remain important sites of social support, identity and continuing bonds, even as professional death-care services and

new religious repertoires alter who performs particular tasks (Shimane 2018; Silverman et al. 2021). In this sense, transformation can involve the transfer, compression or reinterpretation of ritual functions rather than a linear movement from 'tradition' to 'modernity'.

This paper asks how burial traditions in Zimbabwe and Lesotho are being reconfigured through interactions among indigenous religion, Christianity, commercialisation, migration and modernity. Although the two countries have distinct histories and cultural systems, both illustrate how burial practices are preserved, modified and contested. The analysis focuses not only on changing outward practices but also on the social and spiritual functions communities seek to retain. Shorter mourning periods, funeral-parlour involvement and Christian services do not necessarily diminish respect for the deceased or eliminate indigenous understandings of ancestry, land and belonging (Shakwane and Vilakati 2024).

Guided by functionalism, symbolic interactionism and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the paper treats burial traditions as living cultural practices. In Zimbabwe, migration, funeral insurance and costly repatriation demonstrate the continuing importance of ancestral land and burial among one's kin (Mwandayi 2024), while transnational families have adapted funeral participation through virtual rituals without entirely abandoning cultural expectations (Maviza and Thebe 2025). In Lesotho, burial similarly remains connected to family identity, communal obligation and increasingly contested land use (Likiki 2023). The paper therefore argues that burial traditions have not disappeared under modernity but are continually reconfigured through religious hybridity, economic change, migration and shifting social identities.

The article contributes to the recovery of muted African knowledge while recognising culture as dynamic and open to ethical revision. It examines whether changing rituals continue to support the bereaved and preserve genealogy, belonging and relationships among the living, the dead and the land. Recent Lesotho evidence concerning pandemic-era funerals confirms that even when customary practices are restricted, families actively seek culturally intelligible ways to conserve dignity and relational continuity (Chakawa and Molale 2024). Disciplinarily, this study falls primarily within cultural studies, specifically the interdisciplinary study of religion, ritual and social change. Sociology, psychology, theology and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems support the analysis, but the paper is not principally a doctrinal theological study, a philosophical argument about death or a clinical psychological account of grief. Within this frame, the analysis gives greatest weight to religious reinterpretation, particularly Pentecostal ritual substitution. Followed by professionalisation and commodification, and by migration and pressure on burial land. Gender and economic inequality cut across these processes and shape how their effects are experienced.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative comparative study combines a focused interpretive review of scholarship with cultural analysis and the researchers' contextual observations in Lesotho and Zimbabwe. The documentary material includes peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books and chapters, graduate research, policy material and legislation dealing with death, burial, mourning, funeral economies, Christianity, indigenous religion, migration, gender and COVID-19. Sources were selected purposively for their direct relevance to the two national cases and to the themes named in the accepted abstract. The study is interpretive rather than a systematic review; it does not claim exhaustive database coverage or calculate effect estimates.

The observational component draws on the authors' situated knowledge as researchers and members of Southern African cultural and academic communities. It is used to identify contextual patterns and to interpret the changing visibility, organisation and meaning

of funeral practices. The paper does not report interviews, quotations from participants or identifiable personal information. Observations are presented at the level of general cultural patterns and are triangulated against published scholarship. This change from the initially proposed interview language avoids implying a primary interview dataset that was not used in the final study.

Analysis proceeded through iterative comparison. Material was organised around six cross-cutting themes: communal participation and ritual sequence; Christianity and religious hybridity; professionalisation and commercialisation; funeral assurance and burial societies; migration, burial land and genealogy; and crisis-driven change, particularly during COVID-19. The three theoretical lenses were then used to ask, respectively, what social functions practices perform, how ritual meanings are negotiated in interaction and how African cosmologies and locally grounded knowledge shape understandings of death. Reflexive comparison was maintained by treating 'African' neither as culturally uniform nor as a synonym for practices that are automatically beneficial.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis combines functionalism, symbolic interactionism and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS). Functionalism directs attention to how funeral practices restore social order, redistribute responsibilities and sustain solidarity after death (Durkheim 1912). Symbolic interactionism explains how meanings attached to the corpse, mourning clothes, the grave, communal meals and Christian liturgies are produced and revised through social interaction (Blumer 1969). AIKS centres knowledge formed and transmitted within African communities and insists that death be interpreted within its social, spiritual, political and material context rather than through imported assumptions alone (Breidlid 2009; Akena 2012; Chilisa 2012).

Both Max Weber and George Herbert Mead place meaning at the centre of human action, but they do so at different analytical levels. Weber's interpretive sociology seeks to understand the subjective meaning actors attach to social action and relates that action to institutions, authority and historical conditions (Weber 1978). Mead's social psychology explains how the self and shared meanings emerge through communication, role-taking and the internalisation of the attitudes of others (Mead 1934). Blumer (1969) subsequently developed symbolic interactionism from this tradition, emphasising that people act towards objects, persons and rituals on the basis of meanings produced and modified through interaction. Applied to funerals, Weber helps explain meaningful action within churches, funeral businesses and family institutions, whereas Mead and Blumer illuminate how mourners negotiate the meanings of graves, garments, vigils and prayers.

For this article, the functionalist theory explains why funeral rituals remain socially indispensable despite rapid social transformation. African Indigenous Knowledge Systems illuminate the cosmological assumptions underpinning indigenous understandings of death, while Symbolic Interactionism explains how these meanings are continually renegotiated through everyday religious practice. Together, the three perspectives reveal that contemporary burial traditions represent neither cultural persistence nor cultural loss but ongoing processes of adaptation. Of these approaches, AIKS provides the indispensable interpretive anchor because it identifies the locally grounded meanings of ancestry, relational personhood, genealogy and land. Symbolic Interactionism is the strongest explanatory companion because it shows how those meanings are negotiated and reinterpreted, while functionalism is valuable but more limited because an emphasis on cohesion can obscure conflict, coercion and unequal gendered burdens.

4. Changing Dynamics of Burial and Mourning Traditions in Lesotho

4.1. Moetlo oa Lefu as a Social and Cultural Process

Basotho experiences of death have long been shaped by mobility, kinship and the obligation to return the dead to a meaningful social world. Maloka (1998) demonstrates that migration reorganised mourning across distance, but it did not erase the claims of home, family and communal responsibility. These genealogical ties remain an important background to contemporary *moetlo oa lefu*. Among the Basotho, death traditionally initiates a sequence of responsibilities that may collectively be described as *moetlo oa lefu*, or the customs and rituals associated with death. It is important not to reduce *moetlo oa lefu* to the funeral service itself. It is a broader process extending from the announcement of death and the gathering of relatives to burial, cleansing, mourning and the eventual reintegration of bereaved family members into ordinary social life.

Maduna (2022) identifies pre-burial, burial and post-burial phases of *moetlo oa lefu*. Practices within these phases include *pihi*, through which death is formally announced or reported; *matšeliso*, involving the gathering and comforting of the bereaved; *tebelo*, the vigil; the preparation and burial of the body; washing the hands after returning from the cemetery; the communal meal; the wearing of *thapo* or designated mourning attire; and later processes associated with removing mourning cloth and concluding the formal mourning period. These practices should not be read merely as separate activities. Together, they mark the movement of the family from the shock and disruption of death towards public acknowledgement, burial, mourning and gradual social re-entry.

Opong (2004) similarly illustrates the religious and moral dimensions of Basotho funeral rituals. Burial practices were found to express beliefs about ancestors, social responsibility and the maintenance of order between the material and spiritual worlds. Although contemporary Basotho families vary considerably in how they interpret such beliefs, the continued importance of ritual sequencing suggests that death is not ordinarily regarded as a matter to be managed only by medical personnel or the nuclear family. It remains an event that requires social recognition and culturally appropriate accompaniment.

Rakotsoane (2009) provides a deeper cosmological foundation for this understanding. In ancient Basotho religion, rites and rituals communicated matters of religious significance through words, actions and symbols. They also sustained contact between the living and the dead and transmitted religious knowledge from one generation to another. From this perspective, burial does more than dispose of the body; it places death within an intergenerational spiritual order and preserves the deceased's relationship with the family and community.

The formal announcement of death illustrates this relational character. A death affects more than the household in which it occurs. It must be communicated to relatives, neighbours, chiefs, church communities, colleagues and other social networks. The announcement begins a process of mobilisation. People visit the home, provide comfort, contribute money or food, assist with practical arrangements and negotiate the burial programme. Although telephones and digital platforms have accelerated communication, the cultural significance of announcing death remains. Information is not transmitted simply to report that a person has died; it calls a network of relationships into responsibility.

Similarly, *matšeliso* is not adequately translated as the expression of condolences alone. Its meaning is visible in presence: sitting with the bereaved, praying, listening, bringing resources and helping the family endure the days before burial. From a psychological viewpoint, such practices can reduce the isolation that frequently accompanies loss. They give grief witnesses and allow the bereaved to recount the circumstances of the death within a supportive environment. Nevertheless, the quality of the support matters. A crowded household does not automatically guarantee that the bereaved feel emotionally

understood, particularly when attention is concentrated on funeral arrangements while their psychological needs remain unspoken.

The sequence therefore provides both a social map and a temporal structure for grief. It publicly confirms the death, identifies who belongs to the network of obligation and creates recognised stages through which mourners move. Yet the same structure may become burdensome when participation is coerced or when the emotional needs of the closest bereaved relatives are subordinated to public performance (Maduna 2022).

4.2. From Communal Obligation to a Professionalised Funeral Economy

One of the most visible changes in Lesotho is the growing professionalisation and commercialisation of funerals. Funeral undertakers increasingly perform responsibilities previously managed by relatives and communities, including collecting and preserving the body, supplying coffins, transporting the deceased and coordinating funeral arrangements. Funeral insurance and burial societies have consequently become important mechanisms through which households prepare for the considerable costs associated with death (Maduna 2022; Dhobha et al. 2025).

This development should not be understood simply as the replacement of culture by commerce. Funeral assurance responds to genuine financial vulnerability because death may occur unexpectedly while burial expenses such as transport, food, coffins, graves, clothing and accommodation must be met within a short period. Burial societies and funeral policies distribute these costs over time, helping families fulfil social and cultural obligations without carrying the entire financial burden at once (Case et al. 2013; Dhobha et al. 2025). Lesotho's financial-inclusion documentation has consequently identified both formal and informal funeral insurance as prominent within the country's financial landscape. Informal burial associations such as *mpate-sheleng* have also historically combined financial contributions with labour, equipment and social support (Jefferis and Manje 2014). Professional services can ease the immediate administrative burden on a grieving family. They may also enable relatives living outside Lesotho to participate in funeral planning and contribute financially. However, professionalisation changes the meaning of responsibility: tasks that previously demonstrated kinship and communal obligation may increasingly be outsourced. The question is therefore whether paid services supplement communal participation or gradually displace it (Maduna 2022; Dhobha et al. 2025).

Maduna (2022) further demonstrates that commercialisation introduces visible differences in funeral expenditure. Coffins, tombstones, vehicles, catering and decorations may communicate honour and dignity while simultaneously functioning as public indicators of family status. The desire to bury a loved one "properly" may consequently pressure families to purchase goods and services beyond their means. Maduna's participants reported expenses associated with food, animals, transport, funeral clothing, coffins, tombstones and preparing the bereaved household. Practices intended to honour the deceased may therefore become sources of debt and prolonged financial strain for the living. Comparable research in Southern Africa shows that socially expected funeral expenditure can substantially reduce household resources and threaten longer-term financial security (Case et al. 2013).

This is one of the central tensions within contemporary Basotho funeral culture. A funeral is expected to uphold the dignity of the deceased, yet dignity is increasingly vulnerable to being measured through consumption. The size of the gathering, quality of the coffin, quantity of food and appearance of the grave may become socially visible measures of care. Families with limited resources may therefore experience grief alongside fear of social judgement. The question is not whether families should spend money on funerals, but whether respect for the deceased has become too closely associated with the

purchasing power of the bereaved (Maduna 2022; Dhobha et al. 2025). The communal meal provides a helpful illustration of this shift. Traditionally, feeding mourners acknowledges their presence and contribution, expresses gratitude and restores fellowship following the burial. Maduna (2022) observes that leshele-shele historically consisted of relatively simple food, whereas contemporary funeral meals may be more elaborate and feast-like. Although the cultural function of feeding the community remains, expectations regarding adequate food have expanded. Hospitality may consequently become a costly performance, particularly when families anticipate large numbers of mourners whose attendance cannot easily be predicted. These developments reveal adaptation rather than a simple market takeover. Assurance schemes can protect families against sudden costs, while undertakers can facilitate transportation and relieve immediate practical burdens. At the same time, market choices may transform culturally expected dignity into visible consumption. The relevant question is therefore whether professional services remain accountable to family agency and communal meaning—not whether every commercial service is necessarily culturally inauthentic (Case et al. 2013; Dhobha et al. 2025).

4.3. Christianity and the Hybridisation of Funeral Practices

Christianity has profoundly influenced burial and mourning practices in Lesotho. Church leaders provide pastoral support, conduct prayer services, preach at funerals and preside over burials. Hymns, scripture readings and Christian teachings concerning resurrection and eternal life offer meaning and hope to bereaved families. Religious communities may also remain sources of support after the intense communal presence surrounding the funeral has diminished (Letsosa and Semenya 2011).

Nevertheless, the relationship between Christianity and Basotho cultural practices cannot be adequately described as the simple replacement of indigenous religion. Families frequently negotiate among Christian teachings, family customs and inherited understandings of the dead. A funeral may be publicly and liturgically Christian while retaining culturally significant practices concerning the announcement of death, consultation among relatives, burial location, mourning clothes, purification and the responsibilities of the extended family. Research on African Christian funerals similarly demonstrates that Christian and indigenous practices frequently coexist, although tensions may arise concerning ancestral beliefs, cleansing rituals and the theological interpretation of death (Mzondi and Modiba 2024; Makamu et al. 2026).

The changing religious landscape has made some of these negotiations more visible. Pentecostal and other revivalist Christian movements may challenge practices interpreted as ancestral veneration, ritual impurity or communication with the dead. For some believers, abandoning particular rituals represents spiritual freedom and fidelity to Christian teaching. For others, the rejection of these practices can be experienced as the loss of cultural identity or as a failure to honour family obligations. Comparative research from South Africa shows that Christianity has simultaneously challenged, absorbed and reorganised African burial traditions rather than producing one uniform response across communities (Opong 2004). Recent Pentecostal research in Southern Africa similarly shows believers evaluating mourning practices through biblical categories while retaining selected communal and memorial functions (Mzondi and Modiba 2024).

The resulting funeral is often hybrid. Christian prayer may accompany a culturally determined burial process. Family elders may retain authority over some decisions while clergy determine the structure of the service. A family may reject explicit language about ancestors but continue to insist that the deceased be returned to the family's place of origin. This suggests that the spiritual meanings of burial can remain active even when the vocabulary used to explain them changes.

Traditional purification practices demonstrate the complexity of this relationship. Letsosa and Semenya (2011) found that bereaved Basotho who had not undergone purification could experience restrictions on their participation in church and community activities. Purification therefore marked more than bodily cleansing; it regulated social status and the transition from mourning back into ordinary life. Contemporary Christian families may reinterpret, shorten or decline such practices, but the underlying need to mark the end of an exceptional mourning period remains. Churches may fulfil a comparable function through memorial services, prayers, anniversaries or ceremonies recognising the bereaved person's return to ordinary congregational life.

This negotiation is visible at different points in the ritual sequence. Prayer and preaching may be explicitly Christian. While the timing of burial, authority of elders, mourning garments and the significance of purification retain Basotho meanings. Research on traditional purification shows both its reintegrative value and the restrictions placed on people considered not yet cleansed (Letsosa and Semenya 2011). Hybridisation is therefore neither theological confusion nor uncomplicated harmony; it is the practical work by which families reconcile overlapping sources of authority.

4.4. Migration, Urbanisation and the Meaning of Burial Land

Burial in Lesotho is closely connected to land, genealogy and belonging. The place of burial communicates where a person belongs and with whom they remain connected after death. For families with established rural homes, burial on family land places the deceased within a visible genealogy and maintains continuity between generations. The grave becomes part of a family landscape rather than an isolated site for disposing of the body. This attachment is also grounded in beliefs about ancestorhood. Rakotsoane (2009) explains that ancestral graveyards give land spiritual value because they sustain relationships between the living and the ancestors. Displacement from ancestral territory may therefore threaten more than access to land; it can disrupt the spiritual and genealogical relationships through which both the living and the dead are socially located.

Migration and urbanisation have complicated this relationship. Many Basotho live, work or study away from their places of origin, particularly in South Africa, while maintaining cultural and emotional ties to rural communities. Death can consequently generate disagreement about where burial should occur. A spouse and children may associate home with the deceased's most recent place of residence, while the extended family may define it through ancestry, clan and paternal land. Maloka's (1998) historical study of Basotho mineworkers demonstrates that labour migration has long complicated experiences of death, mourning and burial away from home. The repatriation of remains further demonstrates the continuing significance of returning the deceased to their place of origin. Although writing about Zimbabwe, Mwandayi (2024) similarly shows that families may incur substantial expenses repatriating deceased relatives because burial on ancestral land affirms membership in a kin group and restores connections with family history and the ancestors. The return is therefore not merely logistical: it is an act of belonging and completion. Nevertheless, the financial and administrative demands of repatriation may delay burial and intensify the burden experienced by close relatives.

Urban cemeteries and changing land arrangements are also altering the material form of remembrance. Burial in a public cemetery may provide accessibility for relatives living in town, but it differs from burial within a family landscape where graves are incorporated into everyday life and intergenerational memory. These changes do not necessarily weaken attachment to the dead, but they may transform how graves are visited, maintained and incorporated into family narratives. Migration also affects participation before and after burial. Formal employment, limited leave, transportation costs and geographical distance

can make prolonged physical presence difficult. Family members may contribute financially while being unable to provide labour or daily companionship. Maloka (1998) shows that Basotho migrant workers developed collective responses to death under the constraints of distance and mine-compound life. More recent research on Zimbabwean transnational families similarly demonstrates how virtual attendance and financial contributions can maintain participation across borders, although these alternatives may not fully satisfy families' cultural, emotional and psychological needs (Maviza and Thebe 2025).

Burial location consequently functions as a genealogical statement. It connects the deceased to a lineage and provides descendants with a material site through which belonging can be remembered. Contemporary mobility makes this statement more costly and contested, but repatriation and extended-family consultation indicate that attachment to place remains active rather than merely symbolic (Maloka 1998; Mwandayi 2024). These attachments nevertheless exist within a country whose limited land must also support housing, agriculture, infrastructure and other socioeconomic needs. Likiki (2023) calls for serious consideration of the relationship between Basotho burial culture, land preservation and socioeconomic rights. Comparable research in Zimbabwe identifies land scarcity as an important factor in debates about cremation and alternative forms of bodily disposal (Gwisai and Masona 2023). The issue is therefore not simply whether alternatives are technically available, but whether they can acquire cultural and religious legitimacy while preserving genealogy, remembrance and relationships with the dead.

4.5. COVID-19 and the Disruption of Expected Mourning

The COVID-19 pandemic made the importance of funeral traditions particularly visible by restricting them. Public health regulations limited attendance, travel, contact with bodies and the duration or form of funeral gatherings. Practices, ordinarily regarded as essential, could no longer be carried out in familiar ways. Families had to bury loved ones with fewer people present, altered vigils and restricted opportunities to view or accompany the body. Inadequate communication and perceived interference with culturally meaningful practices left some affected families feeling guilty, confused, distraught and traumatised. Their findings show that public-health interventions do not operate in a cultural vacuum. When families cannot perform actions, they regard as necessary for dignified burial, the distress may extend beyond sadness about the death itself. It can include fear that the deceased was not adequately honoured, accompanied or returned to the community (Chakawa and Molale 2024).

The pandemic did not create all the changes evident in contemporary funeral practices, but it accelerated existing negotiations about funeral size, duration and cost. It demonstrated that some practices could be modified rapidly when circumstances required it. Smaller funerals reduced expenditure for certain families and challenged assumptions that large gatherings were always necessary. At the same time, restrictions revealed that attendance is not simply a matter of numbers. Physical presence carries relational meaning. The inability to visit, embrace, sing, pray or travel with the body deprived some families of culturally recognised ways of giving and receiving support. Southern African psycho-theological research similarly found that restrictions on travel, body viewing and communal gathering disrupted established mechanisms of grieving (Chakawa and Molale 2024).

The lessons of the pandemic should not be reduced either to an argument for restoring every former practice or to a case for permanently maintaining restricted funerals. Instead, the experience raises a more careful question: which elements of burial and mourning are psychologically, spiritually and socially indispensable, and which expectations can be simplified without undermining dignity? Funeral rituals can facilitate social support, meaningful farewell, continuing bonds and adjustment to loss, but their value depends more

on their cultural and personal significance than on the performance of every customary element (Burrell and Selman 2022). This distinction is particularly important where families must balance cultural obligations against financial pressures, migration and changing living arrangements. Research among Zimbabwean migrants found that exclusion from funeral rites during the pandemic produced continuing spiritual distress, demonstrating that physical presence and ritual participation cannot always be replaced without consequence (Musoni 2023). At the same time, transnational families adopted virtual funerals and memorials that preserved a degree of togetherness, even though these alternatives did not fully satisfy their social, psychological and cultural needs (Maviza and Thebe 2025).

4.6. Gendered Expectations and Cultural Continuity

Burial and mourning practices are not experienced in the same way by all members of a family. Women frequently carry a substantial portion of the practical labour surrounding funerals, including receiving visitors, preparing food, caring for children and sustaining the household during prolonged gatherings. Widows may also be subject to visible mourning requirements, restrictions on movement, prescribed clothing and expectations concerning when formal mourning may end.

According to Maduna (2022), Basotho women treat ritual only as an abstract cultural system. Participants acknowledged the supportive and socially organising functions of moetlo oa lefu, including the confirmation of death, the gathering of relatives, communal assistance, cleansing and eventual reintegration. However, they also described financial, occupational and psychological burdens associated with certain practices. The cost of mourning clothes, restrictions affecting employment and agricultural work, and experiences of scrutiny or discrimination could make the mourning period an additional source of distress (Maduna 2022).

Comparable research using a botho/ubuntu framework found that communality during bereavement may contain both support and disharmony. Bereaved spouses received care from family, neighbours, burial societies and churches, yet some also experienced isolation, stigma and unequal restrictions, particularly widows (Thomas 2021). This is an important corrective to interpretations of communal culture that recognise only harmony. Community relationships can comfort and materially support the bereaved, but they can also enforce expectations that silence individual needs. This tension is especially visible in gendered mourning practices, where widows may face longer mourning periods, stricter dress requirements and greater restrictions than widowers (Khosa-Nkatini 2022; Maduna 2022). Contemporary discussions about mourning in Lesotho therefore raise questions of agency and proportionality. Who determines how long a widow should wear mourning clothes? Are the same expectations applied to widowers? Can a bereaved person return to work without being judged as disrespectful? Is a practice still supportive when it threatens employment, education or psychological wellbeing? These questions do not necessarily reject Basotho culture. Instead, they may represent attempts to preserve the dignity and communal meaning of mourning while addressing gendered inequality and avoidable harm (Maduna 2022).

A culturally responsive psychological and pastoral approach should not instruct bereaved people simply to abandon their traditions. It should assist families in identifying which practices provide meaning and support, which have become burdensome, and how modifications can be negotiated respectfully. Bereaved people should participate meaningfully in these decisions rather than being treated merely as objects of family or community rules. This is particularly important where expectations differ across generations, denominations and households. Decolonising bereavement practice requires respect for indigenous knowledge, but it does not require suspending critical examination of power, inequality

or individual wellbeing (Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al. 2025). The changing dynamics of burial and mourning in Lesotho reveal neither the disappearance of tradition nor its unchanged survival. Instead, they demonstrate cultural negotiation. Funeral parlours coexist with family meetings; insurance policies operate alongside burial societies and communal contributions; and Christian services coexist with practices connected to land, kinship and purification. Migrant families use modern transport and communication to return the deceased to places understood as home. Mourning periods may be shortened, yet the need to mark transition, purification and reintegration remains (Letsosa and Semenya 2011; Chakawa and Molale 2024).

Some outward forms are changing because the conditions of Basotho life have changed. Families are geographically dispersed, formal employment regulates available time, urban households have limited space, funeral services have become commercialised and religious identities have diversified. Economic pressures also make it difficult to sustain practices developed within contexts of closer everyday proximity and reciprocal communal labour. Comparable research shows that insurance, migration and commercial funeral services may relieve practical and financial vulnerability while simultaneously reshaping cultural expectations surrounding a dignified burial (Dhobha et al. 2025). Nevertheless, the central concerns underlying burial and mourning remain recognisable. Families continue to seek a dignified farewell, public recognition of the death, support for the bereaved and an appropriate place for the deceased within family memory. Where particular rituals are modified, their functions may reappear in new forms. A funeral policy may assume part of the protective function previously performed through livestock and reciprocal contributions. A memorial service may mark reintegration where an extended purification ritual is no longer observed. Digital communication may mobilise geographically dispersed relatives in a manner previously achieved through face-to-face communication, although virtual participation does not always provide the same emotional and cultural satisfaction as physical presence (Maviza and Thebe 2025).

The challenge is therefore not to choose simplistically between culture and modernity, but to determine whether cultural change remains accountable to the wellbeing of the bereaved and to the values that originally gave the traditions meaning. Practices that sustain belonging, solidarity, remembrance and dignity deserve recognition. Those that produce disproportionate debt, gendered harm, stigma or psychological distress should remain open to communal reflection and modification. This approach neither dismisses Basotho traditions nor freezes them in the past; it treats culture as a living resource through which communities negotiate death, identity and social continuity. Accordingly, the preservation of Basotho knowledge should include critical attention to voice and power. The genealogy of a practice does not place it beyond ethical examination. Cultural continuity is strongest when bereaved people, particularly widows and those carrying the greatest labour and financial burdens, participate meaningfully in decisions concerning mourning duration, dress, expenditure and ritual observance (Maduna 2022). The Lesotho evidence therefore supports a pattern of resilient adaptation: communal and spiritual functions endure, but their forms are negotiated through churches, funeral businesses, insurance, migration and lessons learned during COVID-19 (Chakawa and Molale 2024).

5. Changing Dynamics of Burial and Mourning Traditions in Zimbabwe

The transformation of funeral traditions across Southern Africa is best understood through the concept of continuity within change, whereby indigenous cultural and religious practices are not abandoned but are continually reinterpreted in response to evolving socio-economic, religious and political contexts (Taringa and Chirongoma 2023; Gwisai and Masona 2023). In Zimbabwe, funeral traditions have undergone profound transformation

over the past century, reflecting the dynamic interaction between African Indigenous Religion (AIR) and forces of modernity.

Bourdillon's (1997) Shona ethnography demonstrates the continuing importance of beliefs concerning death, ancestors and transition from the physical to the spiritual world. Mbiti (1969) provides a broader African philosophical account of relational personhood and the living-dead, rather than a detailed ethnography of Zimbabwe. Funeral practices have nevertheless been reshaped by Christianity, urbanisation, labour migration, globalisation, economic pressures, technological innovation, public-health regulation and changing family structures. Tarugarira (2013), more specifically, demonstrates how material display, status and commercial pressure reshape urban Zimbabwean funerals. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated some of these changes through restrictions on gatherings, professional handling of the deceased and virtual participation (Taringa and Chirongoma 2023).

Likewise, Gwisai and Masona (2023) observe that emerging debates surrounding cremation, environmental sustainability and land scarcity illustrate how contemporary Zimbabwean communities are increasingly adapting traditional understandings of death to modern realities without entirely abandoning indigenous worldviews. Consequently, funeral traditions in Zimbabwe have become hybrid cultural and religious practices that integrate African Indigenous Religion with Christian beliefs, contemporary technologies, commercial funeral services and evolving socio-economic realities, illustrating the resilience and adaptability of indigenous traditions rather than their decline.

5.1. Christianity, Pentecostalism and Ritual Negotiation

Christianity has been one of the most significant influences on Zimbabwean burial and mourning traditions. Before colonialism, funerals among the Shona, Ndebele, Ndau, Karanga and other communities centred on preparing the deceased for incorporation into the ancestral world. Elders, ritual specialists and spirit mediums played important roles in burial, purification and post-burial ceremonies. These practices situated death within continuing relationships among the deceased, the living community, ancestral land and the spiritual realm (Mwandayi 2024). Missionary expansion introduced Christian prayers, hymns, biblical readings and church-led funeral services into Zimbabwean funeral programmes. However, Christianity did not simply replace indigenous understandings of death. In many communities, pastors officiate alongside family elders, while Christian liturgies coexist with culturally significant practices concerning burial location, cleansing, ancestorhood and the return of the deceased's spirit to the family. Contemporary funerals should therefore be understood as sites of religious negotiation in which Christian and indigenous meanings are selected, combined and reinterpreted (Taringa and Chirongoma 2023).

Pentecostalism has intensified these negotiations. Pentecostal churches frequently reject practices such as ancestral veneration, consultation with spirit mediums, ritual beer and post-burial ceremonies, interpreting them as incompatible with Christian faith. Nevertheless, Pentecostalism does not operate outside the indigenous religious environment it seeks to replace. Manyonganise (2024) demonstrates that Zimbabwean Prophetic Pentecostal movements incorporate practices resembling indigenous healing, protection, prophecy and the use of spiritually empowered objects while presenting them through biblical language. This reveals the resilience of indigenous religious categories within Christian traditions that publicly claim to have broken with the past.

Scholars therefore increasingly understand Zimbabwean funerals as important sites where Christian theology and African Indigenous Religion (AIR) interact and reinterpret meanings surrounding death, ancestorhood, the afterlife and communal identity. The outcome is neither straightforward religious replacement nor the unchanged survival of precolonial practices. It is a continuing process of negotiation through which Christian

rituals acquire local cultural meanings and indigenous practices are retained, modified or translated into new religious forms (Manyonganise 2024; Mwandayi 2024). Among many Shona and Ndau communities, traditional rituals such as kurova guva (the ritual incorporation or "bringing home" of the spirit of the deceased), purification and cleansing ceremonies, and the continued veneration of ancestors remain central to the mourning process, even where funerals are officiated by Christian clergy (Mbiti 1969; Shoko 2008; Tarugarira 2013).

Recent studies further demonstrate that these rituals have not disappeared but have been reconfigured to accommodate Christian understandings of heaven, resurrection and eternal life, resulting in hybrid funeral practices that simultaneously affirm ancestral continuity and Christian eschatological hope (Taringa and Chirongoma 2023; Gwisai and Masona 2023). This coexistence reflects what Bourdillon (1997) describes as the indigenisation of Christianity in Zimbabwe, whereby Christian beliefs are interpreted through African cultural and religious worldviews rather than replacing them entirely. The following section situates the study in a particular expression of Christianity, Pentecostalism, which has not only transformed the religious arena in Zimbabwe, but has reconfigured and reimagined funeral traditions.

Over the past three decades, Pentecostal–Charismatic churches have experienced remarkable growth across Southern Africa. Scholars attribute this expansion to their ability to address social uncertainty, economic hardship, unemployment, migration, and political instability through messages of prosperity, divine healing, deliverance, and spiritual empowerment. In Zimbabwe, churches such as ZAOGA Forward in Faith, UFIC, Spirit Embassy, Heartfelt International Ministries, and numerous prophetic ministries have become major religious actors that influence everyday religious practices, including funeral rituals. Maxwell (1998) links this expansion in Zimbabwe to changing subjectivities, prosperity teaching and modernity.

Taringa and Chirongoma (2023) argue that Pentecostalism has become a significant agent of social transformation in Southern Africa by reshaping moral values, family life, leadership, and religious practice. Although their discussion focuses particularly on ZAOGA, they show that Pentecostal churches increasingly redefine traditional ritual life through biblical teachings while responding to contemporary social realities.

One of the most significant areas of ritual transformation concerns ancestral veneration. Classical Pentecostal theology generally rejects rituals directed towards ancestors, including kurova guva, spirit appeasement, beer libations, and traditional cleansing ceremonies, viewing them as incompatible with biblical teachings on salvation and divine mediation. This is not only a rejection of particular ceremonies; it is also a reclassification of indigenous knowledge and authority.

Taringa and Chirongoma (2023) demonstrate that contemporary Prophetic Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe does not merely reject African Indigenous Religion but actively engages with it. Pentecostal prophets acknowledge the reality of ancestral spirits, avenging spirits (ngozi), witchcraft, and territorial spirits; however, they reinterpret these phenomena through a Christian demonological framework. Consequently, rituals formerly conducted through traditional healers or spirit mediums are replaced by deliverance sessions, anointing services, fasting, prophetic consultations, and prayer for spiritual liberation. This represents what scholars describe as ritual substitution rather than the disappearance of ritual itself. Indigenous ritual needs remain, but Pentecostal Christianity offers alternative religious performances that fulfil similar social and spiritual functions.

Funerals have become important arenas where Pentecostal Christianity and African Indigenous Religion negotiate authority and meaning. Zimbabwean families frequently include members who adhere to different religious traditions, resulting in contested inter-

pretations of appropriate funeral rituals. Pentecostal churches commonly discourage or prohibit practices such as kurova guva; beer libations; communication with ancestors; ritual sacrifices; and traditional cleansing ceremonies. Instead, they encourage intensive prayer meetings; worship services; biblical preaching; anointing rituals; declarations of victory over death; teachings centred on resurrection and eternal life. However, empirical research indicates that many Pentecostal families continue to participate selectively in indigenous funeral customs because of kinship obligations, family expectations, and cultural identity. Rather than complete rejection, many households negotiate compromises between church teachings and communal traditions.

Recent scholarship suggests that Pentecostalism has generated an alternative ritual system centred on spiritual warfare. Practices such as deliverance, prophetic diagnosis, fasting, exorcism, and anointing increasingly perform functions previously associated with traditional ritual specialists. Taringa and Chirongoma (2023) argue that when Pentecostal believers face persistent illness, infertility, financial hardship, or repeated misfortune, prophetic ministries frequently reinterpret these experiences as evidence of ancestral covenants, generational curses, or spiritual attacks requiring deliverance rather than traditional ritual intervention. In this way, Pentecostalism does not deny African cosmologies entirely but redefines their causes and appropriate ritual responses. Similarly, Maxwell's influential work on Zimbabwean Pentecostalism shows that Pentecostal churches construct new forms of ritual authority centred on prophets and pastors, who increasingly occupy roles once associated with spirit mediums and traditional healers. In this respect, Pentecostalism reinterprets and often replaces indigenous knowledge: it retains questions about spiritual danger, misfortune, protection and reintegration, but relocates explanatory and ritual authority from ancestors, spirit mediums and traditional healers to prophets, pastors and church practices (Maxwell 1998; Mzondi and Modiba 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the reconfiguration of ritual ceremonies throughout Southern Africa. Restrictions on public gatherings disrupted traditional funeral practices that emphasised communal participation, body viewing, ritual cleansing, and extended mourning. Research by Taringa and Chirongoma (2023) shows that Zimbabwean communities in South Africa experienced profound spiritual distress because lockdown regulations prevented participation in culturally significant funeral rituals. Families adapted by embracing virtual mourning, online memorials, livestreamed funerals, and household-based prayer services while seeking to preserve the religious significance of death rituals. Likewise, Mwandayi (2021) demonstrates that Zimbabwean families negotiated compromises between public health regulations and traditional funeral obligations, illustrating the flexibility and resilience of indigenous ritual systems. Its continuing relevance is consequently diagnostic rather than epidemiological: it reveals the durability of changes in digital participation, professional body handling and the negotiation of funeral size, but it is no longer the leading contemporary force shaping burial practice.

Recent scholarship increasingly rejects the notion that Pentecostalism has eliminated African ritual practices. Instead, researchers argue that ritual life has become increasingly hybrid. For example, Kyker's (2009) ethnographic study of kurova guva demonstrates that despite strong Pentecostal opposition, the ceremony continues to evolve through changing musical performances, family negotiations, and local interpretations, illustrating that indigenous rituals remain culturally meaningful even within predominantly Christian communities. Similarly, research on migrant communities in peri-urban Zimbabwe shows that Pentecostal churches and indigenous ritual systems increasingly coexist within plural religious landscapes. Rather than replacing traditions such as Nyau ritual, Pentecostalism creates alternative moral and spiritual spaces that compete with, reinterpret, and sometimes coexist alongside indigenous ceremonial systems. Hybridity therefore describes only part

of the field. In some households, indigenous and Christian practices coexist; in others, indigenous meanings are renamed, subordinated or replaced, even when Pentecostal practices address comparable social and spiritual needs.

5.2. Commercialisation, Assurance and Burial Societies

The commercialisation of funerals is one of the most visible transformations in contemporary Zimbabwe (Mwandayi 2024; Maviza and Thebe 2025). Work previously coordinated mainly by extended families, neighbours and religious communities is now shared with funeral parlours, mortuaries, insurers, caterers, transport providers and memorial-service organisers. Urbanisation, migration and the dispersion of relatives across national borders have increased demand for body preservation, transportation and repatriation services. Professionalisation may therefore be practically necessary, particularly where relatives cannot be physically present. However, it also transfers some authority, responsibility and expenditure from families and communities to specialised commercial institutions. Funeral assurance schemes respond to the substantial and unpredictable costs of coffins, hearses, mortuary care, transportation, food, tents and burial coordination. Regular contributions can protect households from immediate financial shocks and enable culturally expected hospitality and dignified burial. In Zimbabwe, income, salaried employment, access to financial advice and other socioeconomic factors significantly influence whether households obtain funeral insurance (Jonasi et al. 2021). Migration has also encouraged the development of diaspora insurance, crowdfunding and repatriation services through which families finance the return of deceased relatives to Zimbabwe (Mwandayi 2024).

Nevertheless, funeral assurance does not eliminate financial vulnerability. Insecure employment, unstable incomes and changing funeral costs may affect households' ability to maintain premiums or obtain adequate benefits. Funeral insurance should therefore be understood as a form of risk management rather than a complete solution to the financial burden of death. Its effectiveness depends on affordable contributions, transparent policy conditions, sufficient benefits and products that respond to the cultural and economic circumstances of policyholders (Jonasi et al. 2021; Dhobha et al. 2025). Commercialisation additionally creates status pressure. Tarugarira (2013) describes funerals in urban Zimbabwe as arenas in which expensive coffins, catering, coordinated clothing, large tents and memorial programmes may communicate family reputation and socio-economic position. The wish to honour the deceased can consequently become entangled with fear of public criticism. This does not make every elaborate funeral inauthentic, but it shows how dignity can be marketed through tiered services and how bereaved households may incur costs that outlast the funeral.

Community-based burial societies remain an important counterpoint to purely commercial provision. Members pool resources and mobilise labour, food, attendance and emotional support when a death occurs. Hall's (1987) study of burial societies in Harare showed that these associations combine financial protection with trust, reciprocity and mutual responsibility. Their endurance is especially significant for migrant and lower-income communities whose needs are not fully met by formal insurance or state welfare.

Commercialisation therefore does not eliminate communality; it redistributes funeral labour among kin, churches, mutual-aid associations and professional providers. Zimbabwean families often combine assurance benefits, burial-society contributions, church assistance and household resources. This mixed economy preserves some relational dimensions of mourning while responding to modern logistical pressures. It also confirms why funeral change cannot be explained through commodification alone.

5.3. Burial Land, Cremation and Cultural Sovereignty

Cremation is relevant to this study only insofar as it crystallises wider tensions among land scarcity, cost, ancestry and the meaning of a dignified death. It remains legally recognised but culturally contested in Zimbabwe. Shoko (2008) found that many Shona families regarded cremation as alien because conventional burial locates the deceased within ancestral land and supplies a durable grave for memory and ritual. More recent review evidence likewise identifies religious and cultural beliefs as the main barriers to acceptance despite urban land pressure and possible cost savings (Gwisai and Masona 2023). Cremation changes the material grammar of remembrance. Conventional burial preserves an intact body in a known place and allows descendants to identify, visit and narrate a genealogical site. Cremated remains are mobile and can separate memorialisation from ancestral soil. Acceptance therefore depends on whether families can translate four valued functions, namely dignity, genealogical location, continuing relationship and collective participation into alternative practices such as the interment of ashes, memorial walls, named garden sites, church rites or communal ceremonies. These alternatives cannot acquire legitimacy through administrative convenience alone (Hove et al. 2024).

The debate should not be reduced to a contest between rational modernity and irrational tradition. The grave links body, lineage and territory, while post-burial rites may presuppose a known resting place. At the same time, urbanisation and ecological constraints make alternative forms of memorialisation increasingly thinkable. Hove et al. (2024) argue that any consideration of cremation in African contexts requires culturally responsive dialogue rather than administrative imposition. The issue thus illustrates the article's broader claim that changes gain legitimacy when communities can translate valued functions, namely dignity, remembrance, ancestry and participation into a revised ritual form. A cautious comparison with Haiti illuminates the same underlying problem without suggesting that Haitian and Southern African traditions are equivalent. Haitian Vodou and popular Catholic practice also treat bodily integrity, tombs, relations with spirits and continuing obligations to the dead as socially consequential (Métraux 1959; Desmangles 1992; Dayan 1995). In Haiti, as in the Southern African cases considered here, poverty, land pressure, disaster and diaspora may strain established funerary forms, but low acceptance of cremation cannot be explained as an information deficit. The treatment of remains is bound to place, memory, genealogy and relations with the dead; culturally legitimate policy must therefore address those meanings as well as cost and cemetery capacity.

6. Comparative Discussion

The Lesotho and Zimbabwe cases show a shared structure of change without implying cultural sameness. In both settings, burial places the deceased within networks of kinship, land and spiritual continuity. Funerals mobilise reciprocal labour and material assistance, while ritual sequence makes grief publicly recognisable. Functionalism helps explain why these practices endure: they respond to disruption by allocating roles, affirming solidarity and reintegrating mourners. Their persistence is therefore not adequately explained as resistance to modernity.

The cases also share a movement from household- and community-led work towards mixed systems involving undertakers, insurers, churches, municipalities and digital communication. This redistribution may ease burdens and make cross-border participation possible, but it can produce status competition, debt and unequal access to dignified services. Funeral assurance and burial societies mediate this tension. They translate reciprocal obligation into regular contributions, yet often preserve a communal ethic through meetings, labour and mutual support. In both countries, therefore, commodification and solidarity coexist.

Religious change follows a comparable pattern. Christianity has not simply displaced indigenous cosmologies. Mainline, Pentecostal and African-initiated Christian forms selectively reject, rename or substitute ancestral and purification practices while continuing to answer questions previously addressed within indigenous ritual systems. Symbolic interactionism clarifies how a prayer vigil, mourning garment or grave acquires meaning through negotiation among clergy, elders, relatives and the bereaved. AIKS further prevents Christian or commercial forms from being treated as the only authoritative measure of rationality.

Important differences remain. Lesotho's case strongly foregrounds moetlo oa lefu, repatriation, gendered mourning and the continuing pull of rural burial land in a highly mobile society. The Zimbabwe case gives greater prominence to Pentecostal ritual substitution, prolonged economic instability, burial societies and public debate over scarce urban cemetery space. COVID-19 functioned in both contexts as an accelerator: it reduced attendance and bodily contact, expanded professional handling and digital participation, and exposed how central funerals are to collective wellbeing (Mwandayi 2021; Taringa and Chirongoma 2023; Chakawa and Molale 2024).

Taken together, the cases support the concept of continuity within change. What appears to be erosion at the level of outward form may be adaptation at the level of social function and cultural meaning. Conversely, the survival of an old form does not guarantee that it remains supportive, particularly where gendered restrictions or escalating expenditure undermine bereaved people's agency. Cultural recovery and cultural critique must therefore proceed together. Among the multiple interpretations considered, the evidence gives greatest explanatory weight to three linked forces: Pentecostal reinterpretation and ritual substitution; professionalisation and commodification; and migration together with pressure on burial land. Gender and economic inequality shape who benefits from these changes and who bears their burdens. COVID-19 operated across both settings as an accelerator and stress test rather than as the dominant continuing influence.

7. Conclusions

This paper set out to examine how burial and mourning traditions in Lesotho and Zimbabwe are being reconfigured through religious, economic, demographic and public-health change. The comparison shows that these traditions have neither disappeared nor survived unchanged. Their outward forms are increasingly organised through churches, funeral businesses, assurance schemes, burial societies, cross-border transport and digital communication. Nevertheless, the underlying concerns remain recognisable: families seek to dignify the dead, place them within a genealogy and a landscape of belonging, mobilise communal care, negotiate relations with the spiritual world and guide mourners back into social life. Of the factors examined, Pentecostal reinterpretation and replacement appear to have had the greatest impact, followed by professionalisation and commodification and by migration and pressure on burial land. COVID-19 accelerated and exposed these longer-term changes but is no longer their dominant continuing cause.

The study's three theoretical perspectives highlight different parts of this process. Functionalism explains the continuing social value of rituals that restore order and solidarity. Symbolic interactionism shows how communities reinterpret symbols and roles when religious and material conditions change. AIKS centres African cosmologies and prevents local knowledge from being measured only against Western psychological, theological or administrative assumptions. Together, they support the conclusion that hybridity is not evidence of cultural failure; it is often the mechanism through which continuity becomes possible. The approaches did not, however, prove equally valuable. AIKS was most valuable because it located burial within African understandings of ancestry, relational

personhood, genealogy and land. Symbolic interactionism was the strongest explanatory companion because it clarified how meanings are negotiated, renamed and sometimes replaced. Functionalism explained solidarity, ritual sequence and social reintegration, but was least sufficient on its own because its emphasis on cohesion can conceal conflict, coercion and gendered burdens.

The findings also caution against romanticising inherited practice. A culturally grounded funeral can still impose debt, status pressure, gendered labour or restrictions that intensify distress. Equally, professionalisation and shorter rituals can provide genuine relief without necessarily weakening respect for the deceased. The ethically relevant test is whether changes retain culturally valued functions while protecting dignity, proportionality, informed choice and the wellbeing of the bereaved.

For policy and practice, funeral-service providers, insurers, churches, traditional authorities, municipalities and mental-health professionals should consult communities when modifying funeral arrangements. Bereavement support should recognise continuing bonds, spiritual meaning, lineage and land alongside individual emotional needs. Future research should use clearly designed empirical studies to examine generational, gender, class, rural–urban and denominational differences and to document how digital mourning and changing burial spaces affect cultural continuity over time. By foregrounding researchers' observations alongside published evidence, without presenting an unconducted interview study, this article offers a transparent, culturally situated account of African communities actively negotiating how to mourn, remember and belong.

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