

# AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE MANAGEMENT OF LIFE AND DEATH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION BUILDING AND RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA



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## Vision

To be a leading national and international icon of humility and freedom

## Mission

To provide a pioneering and empowering heritage destination that challenges visitors to reflect upon our past, improve our present, and build on our future as a united nation

## Preface

This paper was first written by the Senior Researcher Professor Harriet Ngubane at the Freedom Park Trust. General Masondo also contributed to its development while the Heritage Manager Professor Y. Seleti also added inputs.

This paper has benefited tremendously from contributions by various stakeholders. Special mention need to be made of the national structures of traditional healers, the Eastern Cape traditional leaders and finally the faith-based organizations which contributed much in the understanding of the diverse levels of spirituality.

What has been said in this paper is a contraction of what could otherwise constitute a large volume if details were given. The emphasis has been on the portrayal of the common features- the running thread of understanding that traverse the various indigenous groupings, speaking different languages and living in distinct environments.

What is written here is only a start of a debate to consider who we are and where we come from as well as what our future promises us. This booklet is meant to all social levels of society. It is hoped that the younger generation on reading it might ask their parents a number of critical questions.

## Section I: The Conceptual Foundations of Cleansing and Healing

The concept of one Supreme Being as a Creator was known in African societies well before the arrival of western religious doctrines.

The African conceptualization is that the Creator's special sphere is up above, from whence the welfare of the whole society emanates, while the spirits of the ancestors reside down below, where they bring forth blessings and protection over their respective descendants.

There is a reciprocal relationship between the ancestral spirits and their descendants. The latter have a duty to perform acts, which promote the acquisition of ancestral status of the spirit of the newly departed, which on attaining the right position in the ancestral realm is able, in conjunction with the rest of ancestral spirits; to protect and bless the descendants.

Closely associated with this reciprocal relationship is the notion of cleansing and healing. The spirit of the newly deceased is not enabled to reach the realm of ancestral spirits directly soon after death. The duration of time is measured in accordance with the responsibilities that the deceased undertook while alive. As a married person, for instance, he/she would have had a heavier load of social and religious responsibilities compared to that of a child or an infant. With high level of responsibility, there is also an equal chance of making many mistakes. As a result, those who had reached adulthood with its many duties are more likely to be more tarnished than the young; hence, the spirits of the deceased adults spend a longer time before integration with the body of ancestral spirits than the spirits of the junior members of society.

During the period preceding integration into the body of ancestral spirits, the spirit of the newly deceased person is going through a process of cleansing to get rid of all impurities that might have tarnished it in social human life. While traveling along this purification journey, it is alone in the dark and in the wilderness. It is assisted by the support of the living kin who through their mourning observances share the sense of loneliness and withdrawal from the normal pleasantries of life. The companionship is expressed especially through the chief mourner

whose behaviour patterns focus her/his mind and body on enabling the departed spirits to reach the destination.

Both the departed spirit and the kinship group would have gone through two traumatic experiences with the occasion of death. For the departed spirit, the trauma is not only the wrenching of the spirit from the human body but also its separation from visible society. Equally for the close kin, death means they have lost one of their important members, they must learn to accept and adjust to that loss. For both the living and the spirit of the recently deceased, life after death and bereavement, means a period of uncertainty, of adjustment and of contemplation. It is also a dangerous period in that if the living kin abandon the spirit on its purification journey, it might never reach the desired ancestral realm. It would continue wondering in the valley of spiritual wilderness without end.

Thus, there are two sets of rituals which are performed by the living in order to help the spirit of the deceased to reach a full cycle of the spiritual life. First, after an appropriate duration of time after death, there are rituals performed to separate the chief mourner from the close connection with the spirit of the deceased, thereby integrating her back into society. Meanwhile the same rituals complete the purification of the spirit of the deceased thus enabling it to be integrated with the body of ancestors.

Secondly, after a period of time has elapsed, following the integration rites, another set of rituals are performed to invite the spirit of the newly deceased person and to show it the way back to the home of the living kin people. Thus, the spirit of the recently deceased person comes home for the first time accompanied by the rest of ancestors. This occasion is also marked by celebrating the complete cycle of life as well as the union of the living and the dead. An expression of healing and contentment is expressed by this last set of rituals

## Section II: Management of Unnatural Death

The first part of this paper emphasized the management of death of those who died a natural death. This section focuses on the management of unnatural death such as death in an accident, being struck by lightning, murder and people who die in the battlefields.

Unnatural death is seen as catastrophic death which has a special degree of negative spiritual intensity that can be considered to be a 'pollution' that clings to the bereaved in such a manner as to cause further disaster and calamities. Disasters are conceived as 'opening up a passage for the flow of catastrophe that continues to afflict the living - expressed in some Nguni languages as *Umkhokha*. Those bereaved because of such disasters must take precautions to ward off not only the defilement that normally arises from natural death (*Umnyama*) but also the especial

Kind of defilement called *Umkhokha*. As a precautionary measure against *umkhokha* people who die as a result of catastrophes are usually never brought home to lie in state at the vigil kept on the last night before their burial. In the olden days they were buried where they fell.

The deceased coffin on the day of the funeral is often brought home but stops at the gate and from there is led to the graveyard. The bereaved are often not expected to express their emotions through wailing publicly. They are supposed to be conduct themselves solemnly and not to openly talk about the cause of the death. However, very often this behaviour is circumvented if the necessary rituals are performed. For instance in the case of a car accident, the spot where the accident occurred is visited by the specialist who know how to conduct the ritual of transporting the spirit from the area of the accident to show it the way via home (at the gate) and the way to the graveyard. At the same time the spot where the accident occurred is also cleansed by the necessary rituals.

Participating in warfare in the past produced a special type of defilement for two categories of people, firstly those who die while fighting and secondly, those who survived the war and returned home. The contradiction which the African conceptualization produced was that the Creator as a supreme Divine power is responsible for the welfare of every member of society and thus killing another human being is not permissible. Yet on the other hand there are situations in social life where societal formations have to defend their rights in warfare. In the past such wars were fought at the instigation of kings. It was the responsibility of kings to strengthen and protect the warriors who went to battle. Those who died in the battlefields were buried by their generals following the concept of *Umkhokha* that required that they are buried away from home.

Those who returned from war were cleansed at the national level before being reintegrated in society. In so doing the land was also cleansed from the blemish of catastrophic death, a process called *Ihlambo* in many African languages. The individual warrior on returning home was also cleansed. This was done to take away the propensity towards blood lust which is called *Inqungo* in African languages.

### Section III: The place of Freedom Park in the management of the spirits of those who fell during the armed struggles

The Freedom Park in its efforts to identify and bring back the spirits of those who died in action outside the country is performing the duties of nation in the modern world. Freedom Park as an arm of government that seeks among other things, reconciliation, which is a prerequisite to nationhood, pays close attention to healing the wounds of those families and friends who lost their loved ones during the struggles to liberate South Africa from the tyranny of Apartheid. The nature of the liberation was such that the bulk of the liberation armies were hosted by friendly countries including those that shared boundaries with South Africa. A number of combatants fell during these hostile engagements. Some of them were not easy to identify while others died in the company of civilian people of a given country that had proffered hospitality.

One of the important tasks of Freedom Park is to provide a resting place for the spirits of those who died away from home during these conflicts. In pursuit of that goal, the indigenous concepts of management of death provide a paradigm. Thus, it is necessary for both South Africa government (represented by its military formation, which thus represents the military identity of the fallen soldiers) and the surviving family members of the deceased to visit the hosting country in order to carry out not only the necessary rituals but also the diplomatic aspects of the exercise. It also enables the families of the deceased to meet with the families of the civilian members of the host country. The imperative of this is underlined by the need for the two sets of the bereaved to re-live the pain and perform rituals together.

In so doing they share the pain of the past in order to shed it or minimize it so as to move forward and adjust themselves to their loss. As indicated in the first part of this paper, such a behaviour also assists the spirits of the deceased combatants which may still be in the spiritual wilderness to be focused and realize the efforts of their living kin and friends to help them to move along

In other words, such interfaced contacts and ritual behaviour contribute to cleansing and minimizing the pangs of pain.

In addition, it also fulfils the demands of diplomatic behaviour so that at all levels the people of the host country become aware that there is appreciation of their behaviour when South Africa went through difficult times. Going through cleansing and healing together underlines the bonds of friendship for which some people paid a high price of sacrificing their lives.

The facts that the rituals followed in the host country are determined by the preferences of those countries, people; is another indication of respect and honour for the host country. After sharing cleansing and healing rituals, there are two more sets of rituals that need to be performed. The first set consists of those rituals which the host country has to perform in order to release the spirits from their country. The second set consists of rituals which the South Africans perform to receive the spirits and transport them to "Isivivane" in the Freedom Park. To summarize, the need for the South Africans to be part of the rituals in host countries arises from the following imperatives:

- a) To re-live the events and pain of conflict together so that we forgive together.
- b) To enable the people of the host country to forgive the people of South Africa for partly causing such pain to be inflicted on them.
- c) To give the opportunity to the people of the host country to release the spirits with a ritual this is according to their traditions and culture.
- d) To enable the South Africans to receive these spirits from the country where the death taken place.

All these imperatives on the South African side are guided by the conceptual management of death as found in the indigenous structural frame of the management of death discussed in part one

By bringing back, the spirits of those who fell in combat, Freedom Park opens up space to enable all those who may wish to do so to visit their departed spirits. In addition, in the future, all those who might want to show their departed spirits the way to their homes might take advantage of their presence at Freedom Park. Thus, Freedom Park in opening up this spiritual space; also enables people of various faiths to relate to their own departed spirit in the way that their faith dictates.

### Implications of the above on nation building reconciliation and spirituality

When we examine the place of the past in our present it is important that we consider the values that are shaping the present thinking in our country. The thrust of what we have discussed above is about restorative rather than retributive justice which should shape the principles of reconciliation and nation building. The present and the future that we are promoting are based on the historical and ancient African wisdom that affirms the humanity of all its citizens. Freedom Park elaborates further on the principles and processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which rejected the structures in the past that served to divide the nation. The commemoration of December 16 as a day of reconciliation institutes in society an acknowledgement of a divisive past and an aspiration to building a new nation, united in its diversity. The values that frame the building of this new nation are based on tolerance, negotiation, accommodation of difference and celebration of plurality of identities.

Consciously or unconsciously, South Africa has re-enacted African methods of conflict resolution and peace building in society that rest on the restoration of human dignity to all notwithstanding their errors as long as they acknowledge them and are prepared to be exorcised of the demons of the past.

Within African wisdom it is not enough to acknowledge the wrongs of the past; a transformation of behaviour is a requirement. For most people of Africa peace cannot be separated from justice, freedom, human dignity, equality of rights, well-being and development.

It is only fitting that during the commemoration of December 16 as a national day of reconciliation, the Freedom Park indeed projects the peace building strategies found in African society such as those of heightening reflective and contemplative spirituality as illustrated in the Cleansing and Healing rituals described earlier. Mediation, negotiation and arbitration are meant to achieve this restorative reconciliation.

While the conversation with the past allows us to avoid the errors of the past that culminated in wars throughout our land, it is important that the present be sculptured with the positive non-violent methods of conflict resolution rooted in our cultures. The annual commemoration of the day of reconciliation provides a forum at which the Freedom Park representing the state articulates the humanist values of peace and justice for all. The opportunity cost of not doing so will be at the expense of our culture, heritage and history.

Thus the yearly national day of reconciliation affords South Africans an opportunity to remember the demons of racism, sexism, oppression and prejudice and to symbolically exorcise these from the nation. The symbolic healing and cleansing as practiced and popularized by the Freedom Park projects the commitment to renewal and restoration for this nation. The week of prayer is an expression of our aspiration to live peaceably with one another in the present and the future.

In this paper we have drawn on the African philosophy on the management of life and death, traditions of conflict resolution and reflected on their implications for nation building and reconciliation taking cognizance of the current global environment in which we live. It is aimed at providing access to sound knowledge underpinning the Freedom Park Trust principles and practices.