

# Perceptions of cremation as an alternative burial system among the Zulu People living in KwaZulu-Natal

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## Abstract

*Africa is going through a tremendous and rapid change in every respect of human life; some of these changes being circumstantial than otherwise. People are becoming increasingly detached from the corpus of their tribal traditional beliefs and practices. One of the changes pertains to cremation, an act of disposing of a deceased person's body by burning its remains. Zulu people, a major population group in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and a progeny of King Shaka Zulu are known to unwaveringly hold onto their cultural beliefs especially those that touch on the 'idlozi', living dead. HIV and AIDS pandemic in particular, have resulted in several deaths in the province calling for unconventional ways of disposing of dead bodies. A current debate on cremation as an alternative burial system at a time when municipal burial sites are increasingly becoming a scarcity thus becomes valid and critical. Municipalities are encouraging people to seriously consider cremation as an option to burial systems (Madlala, 2010:1). In light of the circumstances highlighted above, we recently undertook a study whose aim was to explore the societal views on cremation amongst people of African descent in general and with special reference to the Zulu people living in KwaZulu-Natal and who was represented by Durban's largely populated areas (Zwane, 2011). This study was conducted in two areas; a semi-urban area represented by uMlazi and a rural area exemplified by Zwelibomvu. The researchers believed that this study was necessary as it would contribute in influencing society to review cremation for future decisions without feelings of coercion. Even though Umlazi residents are the most directly affected by burial land shortage, we thought including a rural area would also enhance the study so as to arrive at a balanced conclusion. This article, therefore reports on the findings of the study with reference to cremation as an alternative burial system amongst Zulu people.*

## Key Words

Perceptions, cremation, traditional beliefs, Zulu people, alternative burial system

## **Introduction**

Most of the available literature on Zulu burial forms has concentrated on the conventional practice of burial; that of burying the dead in the grave, as it is the only practice recognized by the Zulu culture. There is limited information available about cremation in Africa. Owing to this fact a better understanding of cremation is needed within the context of diseases in the world. With South Africa currently going through a difficult time where HIV and AIDS pandemic has resulted in countless deaths, this has had a major impact on municipal burial sites amongst other things, as plots are limited. In comparison to other provinces, KwaZulu-Natal has the highest incidence of HIV and AIDS (Statistics South Africa, 2005 and UNAIDS, 2006). It has been declared, for example, that in some of the municipal graveyards in KwaZulu-Natal there is no more burial space. As such eThekweni municipality has been engaging on *indaba* gatherings with an aim of eliciting a debate on cremation as an alternative burial system under the circumstances. The article focuses on the views of the Zulu society regarding their cultural perceptions of cremation as an alternative burial method to traditional burial system. The research was limited to Zulu people living in the eThekweni region of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa which, as a large metropolis, was felt to be representative enough of the province. The chosen sample; semi-urban and rural were felt to be representative of Zulu people living in the eThekweni region of KwaZulu-Natal. Most of the participants in this study had experienced death of a loved one within the past five years and were, therefore, believed to be the right people who would provide objective responses to the much needed information to help people make informed decisions around the topic.

## **Background and outline of research problem**

Steinberg (2004:15) states that problem identification is about the search for general area of interest that has a professional meaning. Vithal and Jansen (2006:13) argue that the importance of any study is its contribution towards improving practice, informing policy and/or enriching the knowledge base of the topic under investigation. Cremation, a widely unpopular practice throughout African culture, especially among the Zulu people, has until recently been a foreign concept amongst Zulu people. Recently the topic of cremation has featured in the national newspapers in keeping

with efforts on the part of the Government to familiarize people within eThekweni municipality (Madlala, 2010). The problem is not restricted to KwaZulu-Natal problem as studies from elsewhere also address this plight (Jackson, 1998 and Nawa, 2010). The eThekweni Municipality became aware of the problem of grave shortages within its zone and so took it upon itself to initiate discussions with the local populace that would serve to introduce cremation as an alternative burial method. Following are facts pertaining to the challenges facing the Department of Parks, Recreation, Culture and Cemeteries. These have to do with eThekweni population, land, graveyard infrastructure and tariffs.

eThekweni's municipal population is about 3.5 million and comprises approximately 32% of the province of KwaZulu-Natal's 10.6 million. The projected population by 2020 is 4.07 million, which is an increase of about 500, 000 people. The current growth rate is 1.4%. It is projected that the population will reach 7 million by 2060 (Census, 2001 and Statistics South Africa, 2005,). Migration to eThekweni from rural areas and countries outside of South Africa is also on the increase. Poverty and degradation that exists in most areas of KwaZulu-Natal are the main reason for urbanisation in search of job opportunities for improving lives. This migration has led to serious overcrowding in urban areas. In August 2011 a workshop organised by the Department of Parks, Recreation, Culture and Cemeteries indicated that there was a growing demand for more land to be made for housing and infrastructure required to support the living. This means that there is greater competition for land, since land is also needed for the development of cemeteries, business, recreation, agriculture and other requirements.

The land required for traditional burial sites is scarce. According to the Department of Cemetery and Crematoria, the current layout model requires 10, 000 square meters (or one hectare which is the size of a soccer field) for a burial site to be established. Approximately 20 hectares (20 soccer fields) are required per year to meet the current demand for gravesites. It is assumed that over the next 50 years the requirement will be in excess of 1,000 hectares (1,000 soccer fields). In an interview with Mr. Dass, Head of the Department of Cemetery and Crematoria he pointed out

that there are currently 62 cemeteries in KZN that are available for re-use. In other words there are approximately 500, 000 graves that can be re-used to bury people on top of one another. This number includes land acquired for the establishment of a cemetery in the western part of the municipality as well as cemeteries that were recently acquired in Umkomaas. Dass said that the department is currently exploring the possibility of acquiring additional land. It also wants to buy two crematoria with three cremators. It is clear from the above information and from the other presentations made by the Department of Parks, Recreation, Culture and Cemeteries that land is a scarce resource. Out of the 22 cemeteries within the eThekweni Municipality, 19 are full, which means that only 3 still have gravesites available (eThekweni Municipality, 2010). The Department of Cemeteries and Crematoria therefore has to achieve new levels of efficiency if it is to cope with its current resources. It will have to adapt to the challenges and explore all feasible options in order to address grave yard shortages.

The department of Cemeteries and Crematoria also pointed out that there is a backlog in terms of the waiting list for our cemeteries. The total number of cemeteries is 62, the total number of crematoria is 2, and the number of cemeteries without any infrastructure but only land is 10. Furthermore a significant percentage of the cemeteries have inadequate infrastructure. (National Conference, August 2011). Mr. Sandile Khawula of the Department of Parks Recreation and Culture pointed out that the total value of the Municipality's cemeteries and crematoria infrastructure is R154 million, and that proper maintenance for existing infrastructure can cost at least R2.3 million annually. The total estimate for a new cemetery is R56 million (R56m). In terms acquiring new land, the current rate per hectare is R1m; there are also high price tags for the other related costs such as offices, ablutions, storage, fences, consulting fees for surveying plan and geological investigations, environmental impact assessment and internal roads and pathways.

It is against this backdrop that Zulu people's perceptions on cremation as an alternative burial form was sought. Prior to the above information for Zulu people cremation was perceived as a curse and as something that contradicts culture. In the

Zulu culture there is a belief that death is not the end: a person who dies enters into the afterlife and becomes a provider for the family. Such a person is referred to as an *idlozi*, ancestor. The study sought to investigate people's perceptions given the above scenario. The study asked a question whether or not people's perceptions on cremation have changed at all in light of burial space shortage (amongst other concerns) as pointed out by the eThekweni Municipality.

The voice of reason behind the cremation was the Municipality pointing out the reality of diminishing burial spaces. This study, however, deliberately also involved a population from rural a rural area, not subject to municipal by-laws, in order to gain broader views and thus arrive at a sensible conclusion. Prior to our study, research on cremation had mainly been conducted as part of efforts to explain the different types of burial methods. Past research indicates that many Africans are opposed to the practice of cremation simply because it is felt to be disrespectful to their deceased, who need their bodies to be intact when entering into the 'afterlife' (Roos, 2003:4). Those who hold this notion, therefore, have concerns about what will happen during resurrection when the dead person has been cremated. Furthermore, most Christians favour burial rather than cremation because they believe that the dead will be resurrected when Christ returns. Nonetheless, there are also Christians who have nothing against cremation because they believe that the soul is more important than one's bodily remains (Jackson, 1998: 9).

## **Research questions**

According to Breakwell, Hammond and Fife-Schaw (1995), a research question is formulated in order to explicitly state the coherent goal of one's research. Furthermore, in framing a research question, the relevant context needs to be stipulated. This study examined the following questions:

- What views do various cultures maintain about cremation?
- Where, when and how was cremation introduced to African people?
- What was the situation in Africa prior to the introduction of cremation?

- What impact does or can Zulu belief system have on one's ideas of cremation?
- Why would people choose cremation instead of the traditional burial methods?
- Are there any contradictions between religion/culture and cremation?

### **Theoretical framework underpinning the study**

The study was located within the interpretive paradigm which involves direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understanding and interpretation of how people create and maintain their social worlds (Neuman, 2006:68). The study adopted cognitive and cultural theories which were deemed useful in interpreting the study's findings. They were not randomly selected but were carefully chosen as they were found feasible when simultaneously used in a study like ours; where perceptions on cremation needed to be defined in terms of the context of the people's broader surroundings. Briefly, then cognitive theorists maintain that humans perceive the world through cultural perceptions (McGee et al., 2004:395). By extension cultural theory explores the totality of a society's distinctive ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge; that is the way humans interpret their environment (Sedgewick, 2005). Seen as taboo and something that contradicts their culture, the study explored and analysed what Zulu people think of cremation as an alternative to traditional burial practices.

### **Methodology and data collection**

Qualitative research provides researchers with social reality and they can therefore gain an in-depth understanding of localities, activities, and constraints as experienced in individuals' unique daily lives (Nueman, 2006:73). By extension quantitative research tends to be objective, precise and more accurate than that obtained through other methods (Polit & Beck, 2008). In a study which sought to examine cremation as a social issue and looked at how it was perceived by Zulu people, both qualitative and quantitative methods were found appropriate. The qualitative method helped unravel the understanding of cremation and address the importance of the population groups in question for choosing cremation as an alternative to burial or sticking to conventional ways of burying the dead. Qualitative

methods also allowed us access to meaning and context; and also facilitated in-depth exploration, whilst the quantitative method quantified people according to their knowledge or lack thereof with regards cremation. This, we argue, would then guide us to come up with meaningful recommendations in favour of or against developing or changing people's attitudes. Babbie & Mouton (2001, 2004) contend that by combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, the strength of both methods are harnessed so as to ensure high quality concerning the research question under investigation; in our case perceptions of people on cremation and effects that Zulu culture has on these perceptions.

Data collection commenced immediately after all ethical considerations had been adhered to. These included consents from participants, headman of Zwelibomvu and the uMlazi Councillor. Other relevant stake holders such as the Head of Parks and Recreation, Leisure and Cemeteries, and relevant religious leaders were also consulted. All participants had been prepared about the general nature of the topic in question. For data collection processes this study employed triangulation method. According to this approach one attempts to find different ways and channels of gaining information in order to find answers to the central question defining one's research (Mayring,1996: 121). However, the aim is not to gain total corresponding conformity, but rather to compare the differences discovered in the obtained data in order to reveal strengths and weaknesses of the respective methods. The results may be more meaningful than relying on only one single method of data collection because the method provides different steps of analysis and allows the researcher to validate his or her findings. In a study that seeks to understand debates around cremation, focus groups and face-to-face interviews were research tools employed. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001:292) focus groups interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to observe a vast amount of interaction on a topic within a limited period. A focus group interview can tap into human tendencies where attitudes and perceptions are developed through one's interaction with other people. During focus group discussion, individuals' ideas and attitudes may shift due to the influence of other comments. The purpose of the group discussion is to obtain information of a qualitative nature; from a predetermined and limited number of people. In addition, face to face interviews are useful if one is interested in complex

or controversial issues; whether personal or general (Greef, 2002:302). During face to face interviews we asked participants to share their personal feelings and experiences of death, burial and or cremation. In this sense these interviews authenticated opinions discovered during focus group discussions on whether Zulu people's perceptions on cremation as an alternative burial system would be acceptable or not; given the concerns of eThekweni municipality.

## **RESPONDENTS' VIEWS ABOUT CREMATION**

In all instances the research was conducted in IsiZulu, the local language of the people. Descriptive translation theorists maintain that translations can never be exact equivalents of their originals because every translation involves a certain amount of manipulation for a certain purpose (Hermans, 1985). Taking the point forward, Lefevere (1992) and Bassnett-McGurie (2002) maintain that socio-cultural context in which translations take place should be considered at all times when translating. These scholars argue that translations are never produced in a vacuum but that they are part of a larger system and should therefore be described in terms of the target system. While for brevity we only present the English version of the verbatim responses of the face-to-face interviews that were conducted with participants from both semi-urban uMlazi and rural Zwelibomvu, we have strived to take into account the views of the descriptive translation theorists.

The respondents were part of the focus groups which comprised ordinary people and those with strong religious backgrounds. They were also diverse in terms of their financial status as well as educational levels. However, such factors as cultural, religious, literacy and financial did not seem to have an impact on the opinions raised. In most instances the majority of respondents were opposed to cremation as an alternative burial method. An overriding question asked was:

**Have you heard that eThekweni municipal authorities are encouraging people to opt for cremation in order to alleviate the grave sites challenge? If yes, what is your view on this matter? If no, how would you respond if consulted?**

Most of the respondents were aware of the proposal. A few that had not heard were from rural areas; even though a substantial number from these areas were also aware of it. What was crucial here was a response to the second part of the question. When face to face interviews were conducted the questions underwent various adaptations in order to accommodate cultural, religious, literacy and financial factors that had emerged during group discussion. The following analysis takes into account all those factors. From the initial sample of 80 respondents that had formed the sample of our entire study, fifty took part in the face to face interviews (25 from the semi-urban area of Umlazi and 25 from the rural area of Zwelibomvu). Only ten were in favour of the municipal authorities' intervention. Even then, not all indicated the option as strongly as those who were against it; that is, those who wholeheartedly expressed their conviction against cremation. Regardless of whether the respondents were from urban or rural areas, a high percentage was unequivocally opposed to cremation. For example, respondents who seemed to express strong religious inclinations were still caught up in the belief that people need to be buried rather than cremated.

Similarly, on the question of whether cremation would appeal more to educated than to uneducated people there did not seem to be a correlation. It was evident that poor families did not necessarily think that cremation, due to its cost effectiveness, would be an easier route to take. The overall responses revealed that where the issue of cremation was concerned, cultural factors seemed to overshadow all other aspects. Inherent in the following examples of verbatim responses, albeit for brevity translated and presented in English only, are the observations made above. To illustrate the sentiments expressed, we have randomly selected responses by skipping two and picking the third from the total of fifty respondents:

“I have heard about the municipality’s interventions but I do not agree with that, what will the ancestors say if they see me as ashes?”

“As a Zulu man, I totally disagree with that. We grew up knowing that a dead person becomes an *idlozi* who may be consulted in times of need. How then, can that happen when one has been turned into ashes?”

“I am a Christians and I believe in the resurrection. I believe that when a person dies he/she goes to heaven to be with the Lord, it does not really matter whether a person is cremated or buried.”

“Since when have Zulu people started to put price to their loved ones? Even the poor of the poorest have afforded to bury their loved ones because death is also a communal ritual. In the spirit of Ubuntu neighbours are not going to sit back and watch as the family next door struggles about burying their loved one.”

“I may have the best education but the very act of cremating my deceased relative would be viewed as despicable.”

“When a person is cremated, you only get so little of ashes, what are you going do with it? No, no, no! This is against our cultural belief.”

“I never imagined a time when cremation would be an option, but given the circumstances, what do we expect municipalities to do? It is time families engaged in this topic even before they are faced with death.”

“Why is the municipality not encouraging burying family members one on top of another? That way the question of cremation would be out of equation.”

“I support the idea of cremation. I believe that the spirit is more important than the body.”

“We know that when the person dies, he or she goes to meet with his/her ancestors and now if he is cremated, how are the ancestors going to identify him?”

“I live in Zwelibomvu. Even though I have heard that there are regular *izimbizo*, meetings to discuss this issue, I have never really thought about it because it does not affect me directly. I will be buried in my father’s homestead, where my ancestors rest. I also do not think that any of the people living in urban areas have no rural background. It is time they traced their origins instead of adapting to other cultures’ way of life.”

“We as the Zulu people believe that when a person is dead he becomes an *idlozi* and plays a main role of mediating between the living and the dead. He is the one that is tasked with interceding for his or her family to God, *Umvelinqangi* on behalf of the living. When cremated he will become a bad spirit and bring bad omen to the family for having abandoned him. His family will experience hardships till a sacrifice is offered. So why complicate things? That is why I believe we must not practice cremation.”

“In my family we have discussed cremation as an alternative burial form because we have experienced shortage of burial ground before. We have not cremated any family member yet, but we do think it will be necessary to give it a thought”.

“For me it is irrelevant where a person comes from. I am from a semi-urban area but I am still a Zulu person and as such we have nothing to do with customs that belong to other societies. Have you ever seen or heard of Hindus burying their loved ones in the grave? No, they don’t. Then why must we embrace their way in disposing of our loved ones?”

“Come on people. What is this world coming to? Our generation has to pass on the correct ways of doing things to future generations. Now this cremation! I am totally against it”.

“As a Pastor, having listened to challenges faced by municipal authorities, I would advise members of my church to practice cremation, but it would be up to the preferences of individual families. As I have said, we believe that the spirit and not the body is important. Whether one is cremated or not, the spirit belongs to God, not the body.”

“Cremation is a taboo: the body of the deceased should be respected so that he or she will arrive in one piece to the ancestors.”

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Having presented an overview of peoples' perceptions on cremation we contend that despite the direction the responses took, cremation is a subject that should not be ignored in South Africa given the death rates due to the scourge of HIV and AIDS, amongst other things. More campaigns need to be done to enable people to understand cremation as well as the Municipality's predicament in this matter. The findings of the study are exploratory in nature and many of the conclusions are tentative, it is therefore recommended that further research into other alternatives to burial should be done in order to help the Zulu people make informed decisions on the matter. Such research would also help solve the challenges being faced by the Municipality with regard to the graveyard crisis. The study has shown that Zulu people, in consequence of their culture, have a negative attitude towards adopting or choosing cremation as an alternative to burial. Many Zulu people have little or no knowledge about other burial methods, particularly cremation. The researchers thus recommend that further studies be conducted into alternatives methods of interment in order to better educate this society so that in the future they will be able to make more informed decisions about what to do with the bodies of their deceased loved ones. The Government and municipal authorities need to put programmes in place that will ensure adequate information is disseminated. It is only in this way that Zulu people's negative attitude towards cremation might ultimately be modified and when that happens cremation might not be as stigmatized as it currently is..

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