

Neighbours Help Out to Pay for Funerals

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Well-wishers offer practical help as well as tears for bereaved Zimbabweans.

A long-forgotten burial custom has been resurrected to help impoverished Zimbabweans, who are losing an average of one family member a month to AIDS and other diseases now classified as "incurable" because of the country's crumbling healthcare system.

In the distant past, when a poor family lost a member, neighbours would bring what little they could afford along to the funeral to help the bereaved feed the mourners. For the most part it was the staple maize meal, or groundnuts which could be boiled in salt water to make a quick meal.

These token contributions were known in Shona as "chema", or "tears", representing a gift to transform the tears of mourners into something more useful.

The rich did not need chema, for they prided themselves in being able to bury their dead in lavish style.

"We are now seeing the re-emergence of the custom of chema for two reasons," a Harare pastor explained to IWPR. "With the AIDS pandemic, families are losing more members than they would otherwise do; and with the collapsed economy, families have become so poor that they are looking increasingly to neighbours for assistance.

"What is interesting is that this was mainly a rural custom where villagers were all basically related. Now the custom has come to the urban areas, where your neighbour more often than not is a complete stranger."

Thanks to the revival in the custom, families in poor suburbs are able to give reasonably decent burials to their relatives, as the AIDS pandemic continues to claim victims with grim regularity.

"Without the assistance being given through chema, many poor families would be giving their dead paupers' burials due to the current harsh economic situation in the country," said the pastor.

These days, ordinary Zimbabweans are barely able to meet their daily needs, let alone raise at short notice the hundreds of thousands of Zimbabwean dollars charged by funeral parlours, and also find the money to feed relatives and people who come to console them in the manner demanded by tradition.

At one reputable funeral parlour, the cheapest coffins cost between 60,000 and 120,000 Zimbabwean dollars (240 to 500 US dollars), while the swisher white coffins favoured in better times now cost anywhere between 160,000 and 195,500 Zimbabwean dollars. A grave plot at Harare's Granville Cemetery, which is mainly for poor urbanites, costs between 20,000 and 38,000 Zimbabwean dollars.

These funeral costs are high for a country where the unemployment rate has risen above 80 per cent and the lowest-paid workers earn less than 15,000 Zimbabwean dollars a month, while economists estimate the average monthly salary at 40,000 Zimbabwean dollars.

Large numbers of breadwinners have died from HIV/AIDS, leaving most Zimbabwean households headed by the elderly and children.

In increasingly harsh times, many town-dwellers can no longer afford the funeral insurance they used to take out to ensure their loved ones were sent on their journey to the next world with some dignity and style.

"I recently attended a funeral of a close friend in Highfield [a poor suburb] and was amazed at the unity displayed by friends, people living in the area, her church pastor and church members," Mary Badza, a Harare shop assistant, told IWPR.

Badza said that when her friend Joyce died, the extended family had spent almost all the money they had left on her medication, and they were so broke that for a time they could not afford to buy bread and other basic foodstuffs.

The head of the family, the late Joyce's brother, is an unskilled labourer for a construction company. Badza said that when he heard the news of his sister's death, he almost collapsed - less because of the bereavement than because he did not know how he would raise cash for the funeral.

But chema came to the rescue. The family received gifts from friends worth more than 100,000 Zimbabwean dollars(over 400 US dollars) for Joyce's burial from friends while the local church provided transport to ferry mourners.

At the graveside, Joyce's the brother was in tears as he thanked God for the friends, neighbours, church and many others in the neighbourhood who had given them chema to buy food and pay for a grave and other funeral costs.

Badza said Joyce was lucky that she died at a time while neighbours can still afford to help each other out.

"A time will come when we will not be able to bury each other, when we will not afford to buy coffins, grave space, pay for other burial costs," she said. "My friend was fortunate that she had so many friends, and people sacrificed the little money they had to assist. The church has also assumed a new importance in these circumstances."

Grace Bhasera is the pseudonym of a journalist based in Harare.

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