Survival Knows no Bounds:
A Study of the Participation of Blacks
in the Death Industry in Harare[1]

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Introduction

Studies in African Traditional Religions, by African scholars based in Departments of Religious Studies and Theology, have come under increasing scrutiny. Two major criticisms have been levelled. Firstly, it is maintained that most African scholars in Religious Studies are committed Christians. According to David Westerlund, this has led to the "Christianisation" of African religions in certain respects (Westerlund 1991: 19). Secondly, African scholars are accused of adopting a rigid "religionist" stance. This is the insistence that religion is irreducible, unique, and can never be adequately studied from the outside. African scholars are accused of engendering a parochial view of religion. Writing on this issue, Ivan Strenski charges that "what we eventually get is nothing short of academic incest" (Strenski 1993: 2).

This study endeavours to engage in dialogue with the methodological issues raised above by focussing on the participation of some blacks in the death industry in Greater Harare. It seeks to approach religion in an African urban context as a response to a number of forces: as a phenomenon "in relation" (Strenski 1993: 1). By examining the Shona people's traditional attitudes to death and how urban pressures have impacted upon them, the study attempts to illustrate the fact that religious beliefs and practices are dynamic. This point has been emphasised by the phenomenologist of religion, C. J. Bleeker, who argues that religion is not a static phenomenon (Bleeker 1963: 14). Cognisant of the fact that Shona beliefs pertaining to death are shaped by, and respond to, the prevailing context, this paper examines how the high death-rate and economic considerations have prompted some indigenous business persons to enter into the death industry. However, for us to grasp the significance of such a move, we need to appreciate the traditional worldview concerning death.

Shona beliefs and practices associated with death

In most societies, even the most secularised, significant moments in an individual's life are marked by rites of passage. Birth, puberty, marriage and death are usually events where religion features prominently. Among the Shona people (an umbrella term for closely related ethnic groups in Zimbabwe), death has always had a spiritual interpretation. There are myths and stories that try to account for how death came into being, although these shall not detain us here (Aschwanden 1989: 49-68). What should be noted is the fact that among the Shona people death was regarded as an intrusion threatening the well-being of society. Out of courtesy and respect, people would not bluntly refer to the fact of death. Instead of saying "X *wafa* (is dead)", people would use euphemisms such as *washaya* (is no more), *waenda* (is gone), *wavata* (has fallen asleep) and others. Since "language itself is a living expression of culture" (Sanneh 1989: 200), these Shona expressions concerning death merit attention. The respectful language reflects the attitude towards this profound experience. Some of the casual references being employed by people in the death industry today illustrate how language is indicative of changes in feelings.

In the traditional context great sensitivity accompanied death. What John S. Mbiti observes regarding African societies in general is applicable to the Shona.

> "Death marks a physical separation of the individual from the other human beings. This is a radical change, and the ceremonies are intended to draw attention to that permanent separation. Meticulous care is taken to fulfil the funeral rites, and to avoid causing any offence to the departed."
> (Mbiti 1991: 119)

Among the Shona, death was an event when close relatives and the extended family came together. Washing the body, clothing it and flexing the arms and legs would be performed by the *mukwasha* (son-in-law) among Manyika (Gelfand 1982: 41). Amongst the different ethnic groups, it was the prerogative of *hama yeropa* (blood relative) to oversee issues pertaining to the body. The *sahwira* (ritual friend), since he had been absorbed into the family through *kucheka usahwira* (a ceremony establishing ritual friendship), was allowed to officiate in some instances. Indeed, close relatives were expected to be by the deathbed. Gelfand accurately notes the following:

> When a man is seriously ill and on the point of death, the relatives are summoned- his father, mother, elder brothers and sisters, the paternal aunt (his sister or aunt, the vatete) and his son-in-law.

The bereaved relatives were bound to be careful in their handling of the body due to the fear of *kupfuka* (vengeance by the deceased). The spiritual beliefs of the Shona uphold that if the body is not treated with respect, the deceased will wreak havoc on the culprits. In order to avoid complications, elderly relatives such as grandparents and other experienced practitioners were in charge of burial procedures. Where the body lay in state, relatives would spend the night singing and protecting the body against witches.

Proper ritual behaviour had to be observed to ensure a smooth burial. The grave was carefully selected, usually at a site close to the ancestral home. Sometimes the family bull (*bhuru remusha*), dedicated to one of the ancestors, was expected to display awkward behaviour in the event that customary practices had been violated. The services of a diviner would be sought to clarify issues. In addition, belief in the transformation of the deceased into an ancestral spirit was at the heart of Shona attitudes to death. According to J. L. Cox, "special attention must be given to avoid offending the recently deceased through carefully constructed burial practices anticipating his return to the homestead as an ancestor" (Cox 1995: 347). Close relatives were expected to play prominent roles during burial.

Shona beliefs and practices associated with death reflected a deep spiritual orientation. The axis around which they evolved was that the deceased had passed over into another realm, the unseen. Of central concern was the deceased's transition into the fold of the ancestors. This point is emphasised by the South African black theologian, Simon S. Maimela. According to him, "death is accepted as both natural and inevitable, it is an ecstatic experience of fulfilment that reunites an individual with the ancestral spirits, who have gone home to live forever" (Maimela 1985: 74).

From the preceding discussion, a number of issues may be isolated concerning the Shona attitudes to death as they have been handed down in the "cumulative tradition" (Smith 1962: 144). Death provided an opportunity for close relatives to express their solidarity with the deceased. The sons and daughters-in-law were significant players in slaughtering the *nhevedzo* (sacrificial beast) and preparing the way to the grave respectively. The *muzukuru* (nephew) could also conduct funerary rites. Bourdillon's observation is an accurate one: "Kinship relations feature prominently at all the rituals associated with death" (Bourdillon 1987: 217). Strangers had a minimal role in death rituals, allowing relatives to bid farewell to the recently departed and anticipate that he or she would become their guardian. The stranger feared handling the corpse since it potentially spelt danger. Crucially for this presentation, *chitunha* (corpse), whether of a relative or a stranger, was believed to have a polluting effect. Those handling a corpse or participating in the burial of an adult had to wash their hands in water medicated with the *muzeza* herb. A cleansing effect was anticipated. In other instances, "some of those who had close contact with the corpse may have

to wash themselves completely and take prophylactic medicines as well" (Bourdillon 1987: 204). In the Shona traditional beliefs, contact with the dead had to be minimal, since it was both dangerous and polluting.

Another salient point worth noting is that there were no economic or commercial interests arising from death in the community. Although tokens could be demanded before the body was taken out for burial, this was mainly meant to fulfil *zvirango* (protocol). Those who would have dug the grave would be given beer and food. The in-laws would render free services, while neighbours, relations and friends would bring fowls, goats or *upfu* (maize meal) as presents of sorrow (*chema*) (Gelfand 1982: 14). Without romanticising the African past, it should be acknowledged that in the event of death, the whole community came together. A number of African scholars have celebrated this idea of communal solidarity.

The Zimbabwean Biblical Studies scholar, Temba J. Mafico, argues that "the traditional African philosophy of life is based on the community" (Gelfand 14). A Ghanaian traditionalist, Kofi Asare Opoku also maintains that one's full personality in an African society can only be attained in relation to others (Opoku 1993: 76). Among the Shona, death meant that every one in the vicinity and relatives far away had to participate in the burial. Co-operation and voluntary services characterised funeral proceedings. In contemporary Harare, a number of these traditional aspects have been challenged. We turn to a discussion of such developments below.

Modernity and the black participation in the death industry

The coming of colonialism and the subsequent urbanisation of sections of African space had a marked impact on African religio-cultural practices. The Zimbabwean philosopher, David Kaulemu, observes that: "In Southern Africa, the general modernising tendencies have helped to create an enhanced consciousness of the self. With the reorganisation of space and time, the old face of the spiritual is challenged" (Kaulemu 1997: 3). This is clearly shown in the participation of blacks in the death industry in Harare.

In Zimbabwe, the interface between "modernity" and "pre-modernity" produced and continues to produce interesting paradigms of contestation and reaction. The arena where this encounter radiates tension is the absorption of the Shona worldview into the global money market. Although the Shona had a long history of trade with the Arabs, Indians and Chinese on the basis of their possession of gold, the barter trade had not prepared them for the alienating impact of money (Ransford 1968: 20). As we have seen, communalism was at the heart of traditional society. Once "modernity", mediated by colonialism and urbanisation, had reached African shores, considerable re-orientation was inevitable. The following observation is an accurate one:

"With the advent of a money economy anything can be
exchanged for anything else via the medium of money.
Moreover transactions can take place between people who
may be a great distance from each other. Money therefore
is the crucial disembedding mechanism whereby people al-
ienated from the value of goods. Money must be trusted."
(Balcomb 1996: 14)

It is in the attitudes towards death among blacks from a Shona background that
the centrality of money and its challenge to spirituality can be discerned. As
colonialism asserted itself, the in-coming whites ensured their continued pros-
perity by monopolising strategic industries. An economic history of Zimbabwe
shows that from the 1930s the whites systematically marginalised blacks (Wild
1992). Industry and commerce and the entire economy were serving white
interests. In the funeral services sector, white-owned companies such as Doves-
Crocker Morgan, Mashfords and a few others dominated the market. At any
rate, they rendered their services to a predominantly white clientele until the
1960s, when a number of well-to-do blacks started accessing their services.

During the colonial period most blacks continued to rely on the extended
family support system in times of bereavement. As was illustrated in the preced-
ing section, communal bonding as well as a vibrant kinship structure facilitated
coping with death. In cosmopolitan settings like Harare, and uprooted from the
familiar context of the village, no such support could be taken for granted. The
impact of such a new ordering of experience is outlined by Kaulemu, who ob-
serves that, "the uprooting of individuals from their ancestral locales challenges
their identities as members of their families or of particular clans" (Kaulemu
1997: 5). In order to resolve the issue of uncertainty in the event of death in
such alien settings, burial societies were formed. These provided "havens of
belonging" for many migrant workers in Harare. While a detailed study of such
societies lies outside the purview of this presentation, it is important to ac-
knowledge their significance in the evolution of attitudes towards death.

An informative discussion of burial societies in Southern Rhodesia (now
Zimbabwe) is found in Masuko (Masuko 1995). He highlights their social as-
pect, as well as their role in influencing the trade union movement in the 1930s
and 1940s. Beginning with the registration, in 1908, of a burial society under
the Friendly Societies Act, number 7 of 1882, these societies have become an
integral part of urban life in Zimbabwe. Many black townships (now called high
density suburbs), became home to a number of burial societies. The most impor-
tant role of the society is to cushion a family against financial difficulties in the
event of death. M.F.C. Bourdillon outlines their activities:

> Another common financial type of club are burial socie-
> ties, which, for a small regular subscription provide dona-
> tions and support immediately after a death in a family,
> and guarantee funds for a good burial, often including trans-
> port of the corpse to the rural home; burial societies also
> provide various other benefits, including social activities
> for their members, who gather from time to time for music,
> feasting and dancing (Bourdillon 1987: 322).

The *bheriya* (a corruption of "burial") has become part of the vocabulary of the
high density areas, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds. Signifi-
cantly, they ushered in the possibility of complete strangers having a role in the
death of a Shona person. Writing from the South African context, the missiologist,
Gerhadus C. Oosthuizen, celebrates the diversity found in burial societies. He
argues that they present a realistic and pragmatic expression of ecumenism,
serving, as they do, people from different religious and cultural backgrounds
(Oosthuizen 1990). In Harare, burial societies in areas such as Mbare and
Mufakose claim the membership of people who are originally from Malawi,
Zambia, South Africa and others. The construction of railway lines, as well as
the search for employment opportunities has facilitated cultural exchange in
the Southern African region. A good example is how "Islam was brought to
Zimbabwe for the most part from the north, by Malawians who came to work
and to settle in this country from 1900 onwards" (Mandivenga 1991: 76). It was
due to such developments that Shona attitudes to death have gradually evolved,
allowing the pronounced participation of blacks in Harare's death industry.

Areas of participation by blacks in the death industry in Harare

a) The context
Two dominant reasons account for the Shona people's dialogue with tradition,
seen in their increased participation in the funeral services sector. As has been
noted, culturally, only the close relatives played an active part in the event of
death and burial. Financial rewards were not a prime consideration since death
had a heavy spiritual explanation. It is significant to note that the marked
increase in the number of blacks in Harare's death industry coincides with the
opening up of the national economy in the 1990s and the increased death rate
in the same period due to HIV/ AIDS. These two factors largely explain the
participation of Shona people in the funeral services sector. With around seven
hundred people dying every day due to AIDS-related diseases (*The Sunday Mail
Harare*, 15 July 1998), death has become a common feature.

The high incidence of death in the densely-populated residential areas of
Harare has largely demystified the phenomenon. Although the sting of death

remains, its mystique has been eroded considerably. Whereas in the past chil-
dren were screened from the reality of death, today many even participate in
the body viewing. For some Shona people who have moved up the social ladder,
all the funeral proceedings are captured on video. Such developments mark
changing attitudes towards death.

b) Provision of funeral services

The high death rate has meant that there is a ready market for products related
with death. It is this availability of a market that has inspired many people to
venture into this hitherto unthinkable area. In Chitungwiza, virtually every
residential section has a firm offering funeral services. This presence of service
providers and consumers justifies our reference to the death industry in this
study. It is also prudent to acknowledge that poverty in Zimbabwe has increased
during the period spanning 1990 to the present (Kaliati 1998: 1). Unemploy-
ment has meant that for many young urban dwellers, life has become an unbear-
able burden. In this quest for survival, many black Zimbabweans have entered
the death industry.

From the 1990s, black-owned companies such as Kuwadzana Funeral Serv-
ices, Moonlight Funeral Assurance and Services, Homage Assurance and others
have entered the Harare market. While blacks have always been employed in
the white-dominated companies, owning a parlour was considered a taboo.
However, these new black firms offer embalming facilities and from a Shona
cultural perspective, they are breaking with tradition. These companies also
provide transport to other countries such as Malawi and Mozambique to cater
for those who might want to be buried in their country of origin.

While it is the established indigenous companies that have proceeded to
build parlours, numerous small players have contributed to the black presence
in the death industry. At Parirenyatwa, Harare and Chitungwiza General Hospi-
tals, many bereaved relatives have been accosted by "documentation and trans-
port" businessmen. They offer to process all the papers associated with death, as
well as to transport the corpse to the rural home. Some claim to be connected
to pathologists, promising a smooth and expedited post-mortem. Since the mar-
ket has become highly competitive, an aggressive business approach has been
adopted and canvassing for clients is pronounced. Commuter omnibus drivers
are also sometimes hired to carry mourners. In their parlance, *funezhi* (a corrup-
tion of 'funeral') is good business since they can get an assured figure. As can be
noted, such commercialisation of death is not consistent with traditional Shona
attitudes.

c) Selling of coffins

Another area of participation by blacks in the death industry in Harare includes
the now over-subscribed coffin-making business. In the densely populated sub-

urbs of Harare and Chitungwiza, 'Coffins for Sale' signs abound. The prices are highly negotiable and a lot of bargaining is employed when buying the coffins. Whereas in the past, coffins would only be encountered at death, today they are alluringly displayed. The net effect has been to familiarise people with death. However, advertising coffins represents a break with tradition since death was not meant to be an opportunity for financial gain. It should be conceded that the entrepreneurs maintain that they are providing a service that is cheap and readily available.

d) Selling of flowers and materials
While flowers have been an integral part of European culture, their role among the Shona people has been negligible. However, due to cross-cultural borrowing, flowers now feature considerably at some indigenous funerals. At Africa Unity Square and next to the entrance at Warren Hills cemetery, a number of blacks are making a living by selling flowers to bereaved families. Others have set up workshops for making materials for dressing corpses, such as gowns and pillows. These products are advertised, calling upon the potential client to demonstrate affection towards the deceased by ensuring a decent burial. The incorporation of flowers and the marketing of materials for the corpse may be seen as illustrating the evolving attitudes to death.

e) Marketing of tombstones
The 1990s have witnessed a marked increase in the number of co-operatives and individuals specialising in tombstones in Harare. Some of these can be found next to the VID premises in Eastlea, opposite the ZUPCO depot in the Kopje area and in the fenced area at Malvern Shopping Center. Just before entering Chitungwiza along Seke Road, one also observes impressive tombstones. Here too, the prices are highly negotiable, ranging from Z$900 to as much as $60 000. The quality of the stone, the size, design and the number of words to be engraved all have a bearing on the cost. The need to keep the memory of the deceased alive has ensured that the tombstone business in Harare thrives. Some clients buy the tombstones for graves located in Harare, while others transport them to the rural areas.

f) Marketing of Other Funeral Products
The prevalence of death in Zimbabwe – an open invitation to desperate and enterprising persons – is crystalised in the increased time reserved for funeral messages on local radio stations. Newspaper advertisements in memorium highlight the national preoccupation with death (Paris 1995: 173 n6). Opportunistic musicians have capitalised on this by becoming "death merchants". Funeral hymns and choruses from the main-line, evangelical and independent churches have been recorded and released on to the market. Popular tracks like *Masodzi*

(Tears) by a band called Youth in Action, and *Tumai Mweya* (Send Your Spirit) by another, Mr Bulk and the Angel Spirits, get their mileage from being associated with funerals. Even non-religious songs like *Window* by top-selling artist Simon Chimbetu, harness the theme of death.

The audio tapes are used in the long journeys by mourners, and in keeping alive the memory of loved ones who have departed. If this is added to the other areas of participation noted above, it is clear that many Shona people have entered the death industry. Unemployment, soaring prices, urban poverty and creativity have forced many black people to participate in the marketing of products associated with death. As illustrated in the preceding section, this represents a marked break with tradition.

Cultural change and continuity

The increased participation in the death industry in Harare by people with a Shona cultural background highlights the extent to which culture changes. In an informative study, M. F. C. Bourdillon examines the tensions between traditional and new ways in Zimbabwe. He reaches one conclusion: "culture changes" (Bourdillon 1993: 71). In this study we have seen how "modernity", mediated by the cosmopolitan setting of Harare, has led to a departure from the way of the elders. Financial considerations have tended to be held in tension with cultural concerns in an economically hostile environment. The fact of existential issues taking precedence over cultural expectations is poignantly expressed in reports that more than one thousand unclaimed bodies are given pauper funerals by the State each month. Many families have not been able to organise their relatives' burials due to economic hardships (The Herald Harare, 7 December, 1998). Given the importance of burial for the Shona people, that we have highlighted in this study, this represents a profound cultural change. When this is viewed alongside the numerous areas of participation in the death industry, it becomes clear that the quest for survival strains cultural expectations.

There is, however, a need to guard against the impression that Shona attitudes towards death have been completely transformed by economic factors and its marked frequency. While it is clear that to some extent death has been commercialised, certain continuities may be noted. Although many people from a Shona cultural background have entered the death industry in Harare in an endeavour to find a means of livelihood, the bodies of strangers continue to be treated with respect. Their relationship to corpses continues to be governed by indigenous cultural beliefs. A good example can be found in the careful handling of the body. The traditional notion of vengeance if the deceased is not treated with respect persists.

The flourishing of the death industry in Harare is also galvanised by the deep-seated cultural opposition to cremation. Burial remains deeply entrenched

as the way for disposing of the dead. The Harare City Council has failed to persuade black people to accept cremation despite a high death rate and a decrease in the land available for burial. This resistance to cremation has seen African Christians and traditionalists in basic agreement. Since burial has a special place in the Shona people's collective memory, it has persisted in the "modern" period. The tenacity of culture is vividly manifested in this instance (Chitando 1999). It has to be acknowledged that in the urban context, strangers dig the grave and tight time schedules have to followed. Continuity is detected in the role of relatives in covering the grave and properly marking it.

The participation of blacks in the death industry has not completely eclipsed the notion of pollution. The stigma associated with handling the dead persists in most instances. An example of this can be seen in the insistence by some undertakers in black and white owned firms that they work at the "Head Office". Also, transport operators who carry corpses to rural homes strive to observe decent speeds, as well as culturally prescribed times of departure. In addition, the decision by many people to be buried at the rural homestead despite the high costs involved, illustrates the continued relevance of the traditional home (*kumusha*) as a form of sacred space. Even though the urban context has led to some variations, P. Isaak's observation that "a funeral is a complex and centrally important series of events in the ritual life of many African peoples," remains accurate (Isaak 1998: 65).

It is therefore important to note that in Africa's encounter with "modernity", the old has been held in creative tension with the new. Although the search for promising economic returns has led some blacks to commercialise death, African culture has proved to be the "enduring heritage" that Opoku (1993) celebrates. Anthony Balcomb's incisive observation is also instructive in this regard. He argues: "On the whole, however, Africans have not allowed the full force of modernity to penetrate the African habitus in a profoundly ideological way" (Balcomb 1996: 16). To say this, however, is not to overlook the impact of the urban context on the Shona attitudes to death. It has been shown that existential considerations have had a decisive bearing in shaping the changing patterns of behaviour. These observations have a bearing on the study on how the study of religion is executed and we turn to this issue below.

Methodological implications: A brief analysis

This study began by noting the debates surrounding the contributions of African scholars based in Departments of Religious Studies and Theology to the academic study of religion in Africa. It was observed that such scholars have been accused of allowing their Christian commitment to colour their picture of the indigenous traditions. Adopting a limited interpretive framework has also been raised as a limitation in their writings. The investigation into some of the

Shona people's participation in the death industry in Harare allows us to draw specific conclusions pertaining to methodological issues in the academic study of religion. We shall tackle the second criticism first, since the one regarding the special role accorded to Christianity does not feature prominently in this discussion.

An anthropological approach has been pronounced in the academic study of indigenous religions in Africa. Indeed, anthropology has been influential in the field, with one scholar maintaining that "an anthropological view of religion becomes the only scientific approach" (Meslin 1985: 47). However, from the preceding paragraphs, it is clear that the history of religions provides valuable insights. It is through an examination of religious phenomena as they have evolved over a period of time, noting mutation and continuities, that a more informed view of religio-cultural issues may be attained. The history of religions allows African religions to be viewed as being part and parcel of humanity's religious history. By investigating the Shona people's traditional ideas pertaining to death and how they have been shaped by the urban context, this study illustrates the dynamism of religious phenomena. This highlights the fact that religious beliefs and practices are susceptible to change.

The need for African religious studies to adopt a wider interpretive framework also ensues from this discussion. The tendency to isolate religious phenomena and decontextualise them has often resulted in a limited appreciation of religion. Our discussion shows that economic considerations and the AIDS pandemic have left an indelible impression on the Shona perception of death. The realisation that religion does not occur in a social vacuum is an important one for African religious studies. The relational nature of Shona attitudes towards death raises "questions about our tendency to isolate religious institutions from other aspects of society such as economics, politics and social structure" (Brown 1991: 147). A holistic approach shall be attained in the study of religion in Africa when more "conversation partners" are identified (Smart 1985). It is hoped that in this way the academic incest noted in the introduction will be avoided.

The issue of the role of African Christian scholars in clarifying the interaction between Christianity and African culture is an involving one and goes outside the scope of this presentation. However, it is clear from this study that they do have a role in interpreting how, for example, African cultural beliefs regarding death persist among those who have converted to Christianity. Given that indigenous beliefs and practices associated with death have an impact on widows and orphans (Drew 1996), Christian theologians may pursue how their religion may offer positive insights in such situations. Given the fact that Christianity has become an integral part of African identity, at least in the context of Southern Africa, African Christian scholars will continue to be relevant. The only proviso should be that they must acknowledge the integrity of indigenous

beliefs and practices. They should not view these only from the perspective of how they may be utilised in Christianity. In this way, they would allow the phenomena of indigenous religions to be understood on their own terms. We have endeavoured to be faithful to the Shona people's changing perceptions towards death without injecting heavy doses of Christian theological formulations. It is hoped that African religious studies can indeed become multi-disciplinary in outlook, by harnessing insights from the diverse approaches available in the academic study of religion.

The study of African traditional religions has also tended to dwell on an ideological, pristine, indigenous religious system, oblivious to all external influences. Our own study has highlighted the extent to which change is inevitable. Although limited to the urban context, it can be surmised that even in the communal areas, the high death rate and commercialisation have affected beliefs and practices associated with death. It is hoped that other researchers will pursue the issue of how the rural areas, the seat of indigenous religions, have become an arena defined by change. It would be particularly rewarding to investigate the impact of the high incidence of death on witchcraft beliefs and the observation of days of rest in memory of the deceased (*mahakurimwi*) and other issues. These, however, remain as areas for further research.

Conclusion

In this study, I have outlined the increased participation in the death industry in Harare by people from a Shona cultural background. Having examined the attitudes towards death in the traditional setting, it has become clear that the marked participation by blacks in the death industry represents an apparent break with cultural trends. In the past, handling corpses was associated with pollution, and no financial rewards were anticipated in the event of death. Today, some black people in Harare have entered the lucrative funeral services sector. The high death rate prevailing in the country ensures that there is a high demand for funeral products, while the harsh economic environment and urban poverty have meant that individuals pursue new strategies for survival. However, the study also notes that the encounter with modernity has not precipitated a wholesale abandonment of the traditional attitudes to death since one can identify patterns of continuity amidst the changing perceptions.

The participation in the death industry by people from a Shona background raises methodological issues in the academic study of religion. The study briefly examined this matter, paying particular attention to the need for scholars to be sensitive to the reality of cultural change. In addition, the fact that religious phenomena are always warped within specific socio-economic contexts is emphasised. It is maintained that sensitivity to this issue facilitated an appreciation of the dynamics impacting on the Shona cultural metamorphosis. The con-

tested status of African Christian scholars in the study of indigenous religions was also briefly explored. The study advocates a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of religion. It is hoped that by investigating the participation of blacks in the death industry in Harare through the utilisation of varied heuristic devices, this study has illustrated an enduring historical truth: *Survival Knows no Bounds*.

Notes

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