

## **Mats, blankets, songs and flags: ethnography of the politics of funerals in contemporary South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

In our ethnographies, the refusal of our hosts to accept previous theoretical frameworks leads us to transform and expand the anthropological concepts to which we were attached.

In contemporary South Africa, demands for land constitute an issue involving both the beneficiaries and agents of the State. In order to explore such an issue in the present paper, we address a seemingly unusual place-event: mortuary rituals.

The profusion of funerals in South Africa provides the people who participate in these functions with meanings to their engagements in the public policy of land restitution. The groups involved give meaning to the events through intangible sources. Such a relationship confronts our common explanations concerning the control of life as a State *affair*, i.e., as an exclusive temporal matter. Here, we face the challenge of thinking about a State that rules and, at times, is also ruled by the dead. This approach stands back from theories concerning (i) the inexistence of the State in such places or (ii) the political performance of the groups involved as a reshaped form of other socialities – such as kinship, magic or religion.

The lesson – learned from those who receive us in our research investigations – is a starting point for a reflection on the relationship between fieldwork, comparisons and the production of ethnographic knowledge regarding the notions of political life and the public sphere.

It is with pleasure that I bring to you some of the first observations regarding my fieldwork in South Africa. These are preliminary observations on a subject that concerns absolutely all the people that I met: funerals. I shall divide my presentation into two parts.

The first will be a textual exploration of the three funerals I experienced during our fieldwork. The second will be dedicated to a brief reflection regarding the State, comparing the theme of this encounter – the notion of the public sphere in relation to ethnographic work and the theories of my hosts in South Africa, express during these funerals, where are understood here as place-events (Daniel, 1996).

Although I do not believe it is necessary – after all, we are at an encounter that celebrates ethnography –, I would like to outline the manner in which I write with regard to that which you are about to hear. The manner of writing that I have adopted is not an “exploration of empirical evidence” or a “description of facts”: that which appears to incautious eyes as “mere description” is a form of theoretical reflection. Ethnography is understood here as a form of knowledge and not only a research method or narrative technique.

I now shall go on to the first part of my presentation.

We were in the dining room in the home of Ms. Mbatha (about 70 years of age). We had just interviewed the lawyer from the legal aid office regarding land restitution cases. He explained that a considerable number of cases involve former residents of rural areas who were compulsorily banished to urban locations in the 1960s. Sibongile Mbatha was one of these people. She had lived a short time in Madadeni. She had recently moved to the centre of Newcastle after his daughter, who had become a judge, had bought a comfortable house for her in a middle-class neighbourhood.

Mangaliso thought about Sibongile when I asked him for help: I wanted to get to know the urban peripheries in South Africa. He was the leader of the Landless People’s Movement (LPM), had lived in Madadeni and had worked as a taxi driver. His return to the mud houses where he was born, to the Kraal of Ingogo, had occurred about the time his involvement in the LPM struggle was intensifying (as the research of Marcelo Rosa indicates). Despite the personal distancing of life in the city, Mangaliso had maintained ties with family and old friends. In his opinion, Ms. Sibongile would be the ideal person to direct me toward life in Madadeni.

She was extremely kind. She invited us to her home. While we ate sandwiches at lunchtime, she and Mangaliso spoke about past deaths and funerals. The subject had come up not only because the colonial-anthropological literature dictates it through “the worshipping of ancestors”, but especially through the particular involvement that each had throughout a life that was intensely marked by death.

Sibongile Mbatha headed a group of restitution claimants who were waiting for the day that the government would give them back their farms, which were taken from them following the Group Area Act in the late 1960s. Among the members of this group was a man who, at the end of the apartheid era, had been forbidden to place tombstones on the graves of his parents. The landowner, who had once accepted burials, no longer allowed him and his family access to the area to perform funerals or even ceremonies to worship ancestors. He had kicked them off the land by setting up an ambush and torturing them cruelly. The landowner, like many others,

stopped any attempts on the part of the Black population to establish roots on his land. His fear was justified in the following manner: the burial sites were active documents capable of determining the course of a land restitution case (Peirano, 2006). At the back part of the backyard of Mr. Mabaso's home – located in a township called Osizweni, to where they were moved over forty years earlier – the headstones withstood the passing of time better than the old man himself.

Mangaliso recalled events of death and burials because he found himself involved in a very delicate ritual. In 1995, his beloved wife was killed in a taxi accident. Since then, he went through a number of changes to break from the life he had led with his wife: he quit working in urban jobs (he himself had driven taxis), moved away from the location (another name given to the townships), taking his daughters with him to Ingogo, a rural area where his father had lived. He recalled the malaise he had felt the day his wife died: they were to go to Johannesburg together, but he was running late. His anguish grew without his understanding the reason for it. It was only after he had received the telephone call telling him the terrible news that he was able to give a name to the feeling that was torturing him.

The funeral services followed the same process that currently occurs throughout the country, in which the body normally waits for a week (in specialised funeral homes) until the Friday following the death, when the wake officially begins: the all-night vigil followed by the burial on Saturday.

At the end of last year (2006), one of Mangaliso's neighbours told him of the dreams he was having in which Mangaliso's wife visited him. She told him that the waiting time and burial procedure were insufficient to conduct her from her place of death to the grave. Although her body was with the ancestors – despite all the retaliations of the farmers that owned the land where their homes and kraal were –, her soul or spirit was wandering in such a way that – with ten years gone – she remained restless. Mangaliso therefore needed to re-conduct his wife by means of a precise ritual to the place that was rightfully hers.

Sibongile joyfully remembered her childhood on her father's farm when a specific ringing of the bell announced the death of one of the village residents. Everyone would get off from working in the fields and the children didn't have to go to school. A village carpenter would build a rustic coffin. The neighbours would prepare food for the mourning family, who, in turn, would repay the kindness by offering tea to the condolences of family and friends.

The two said the funerals nowadays had become a capitalist business in South Africa. One can feel the strong presence of death in local life. The newspapers were filled with classified advertisements offering to sell or rent tents and all the other equipment necessary for

the weekend ceremonies or the numerous offers of funeral insurance that appeal – at times morbidly, at times amusingly – for people to be prepared and not get “caught by surprise”.

The common justification these days for waiting a week to watch over and bury a corpse concerns the importance of the presence of friends and family members at the funeral. It is believed that all who die become ancestors. Just as an ancestor can have a beneficial role in the lives of the living, the opposite can also occur. The living who attend the funeral – bringing presents, such as blankets and mats for the family or contributing with money for the funeral expenses – can also help in the post-mortem path of the deceased. In other cases, the lack of proper procedure on the part of the living – whether through negligence or deliberate decision – can result in a degenerative process that affects the living and dead, family members and ancestors alike. Faced with such delicate tricks of fate, everyone prefers not to take chances and waits all the time necessary for the greatest number of people to attend the funeral.

The internal dispersion that took place during the apartheid period put an end to the idyllic world that Sibongile remembered. Relatives and neighbours no longer live in the same village. It is no longer possible to build a coffin with one’s own hands. They are no longer permitted to bury their relatives in the ground on which they once lived. For Sibongile, however, the worst of it all is that throughout all the waiting – for the arrival of relatives, for resources to pay the funeral expenses, for the authorisation of the landowner to allow the body to be deposited in the same site where the ancestors were laid to rest –, the tears dry up.

After the apartheid period had ended, burial sites were transformed into documents, evidence of the ancestral past of the families in the farm regions from where they were expelled, which most often also indicated ownership of a parcel of land that was usurped from them. The tacit agreement between Whites and Blacks, which had once allowed the funeral ceremonies to take place, had begun to collapse. The White landowners no longer want to permit burials or any other type of ceremony.

As a result of this refusal, a series of events marked the actions of social movements, such as the one led by Mangaliso – the Landless People’s Movement. Mangaliso dedicated himself to the movement with zeal following his wife’s death. However, despite all his involvement and heroic deeds, he did not feel satisfied. There were problems in his life that tormented him – coming, above all, in the form of envy. In those days, upon discovering one source of his uneasiness in the lack of quietude his wife’s spirit was experiencing, Mangaliso appeared more hopeful: if she could rest in peace, perhaps he too could partially be relieved of his afflictions. Therefore, he gathered all possible resources for the ritual: he borrowed a car

from a prosperous cousin in order to go to the place of burial; slaughtered a goat; fulfilled his obligations.

One of the actions that had a great repercussion in the South African media had occurred a few years earlier. Members of the movement helped to bring the body of a young woman to the burial site of her ancestors. The exhumation of the corpse of Gertrude Zondi from the cemetery in the Township and its re-conduction to the traditional gravesites was a victory of the movement over the landowner's refusal.

The politics of funerals is of extreme importance in the context of South African land affairs. Elements from distinct social spaces converge during these events (e.g. witchcraft in the broad sense of the word, HIV/AIDS, the dispersion of families, ancestral worship etc.), the unprecedented combination of which configures profound situations of diverse emotions, desires and political performances.

I would like to emphasise parenthetically that we went to funerals on practically every Saturday throughout the length of our fieldwork.

Obviously, not all the funerals that take place on Saturdays are transformed into stages for political demonstrations. Therefore, I shall briefly describe three distinct cases that we witnessed: the funerals of Mr. Khubeka, young Doris and young Nomusa.

### **The burial of Khubeka**

Khubeka was one of Mangaliso's cousins and the two shared the same age of about fifty. They lived near one another in the rural town of Ingogo. Unlike Mangaliso, his cousin had remained in the taxi business, and unlike those who awaited the progress of land restitution cases, Khubeka had managed to buy lands that had once belonged to his family from a White landowner. His first wife lived on the farm. It was there that he raised his cattle, which we saw being guided about during his funeral.

This was certainly the most luxurious burial that we witnessed. The family had hired a specialised company, called Doves. There were two tents set up. One had room for 100 people and was where the previous night vigil had taken place. The other had the capacity for over 1000 people and was where homage to the body was paid. People from all over were present. The spectrum of types that offered condolences was evidence of the broad scope of Khubeka's relationships in life: friends from the taxi cooperative, the White farm owner who had sold him the land and later had come to ask him for a loan in order to avoid bankruptcy, relatives from the rural area, his wife from the rural area, his younger wives from the city, modern luxury cars, rusty old bicycles and worn shoes covered in dust from the rural roads. As usual, the

speeches praised the qualities of the man who had gone so suddenly – after suffering a heart attack. The official speeches from the authorities of the (Anglican) church who were present offered the same content.

Mangaliso worked incessantly as the master of ceremonies. He, who is generally assisted by other companions in logistical tasks, was occupied on this day with all types of prosaic details and problems: everything from the chairs and correct seating arrangement to accommodating the arrivals to what they would eat after the burial.

Repeating and thinking about Ms. Sibongile's theory, all that pomp did not ensure that a single tear would be shed – except from Mangaliso. In his farewell speech to the deceased, he repeated the same emotional scene that would take over during burial services promoted with the political intervention of the LPM. His tears, which until then we had assumed were political, now had taken on a different meaning.

### **The burial of Doris**

Doris Dlamini was a young woman about thirty years old – a single mother with one child. She had worked on a chicken ranch up until the moment she succumbed to “the illness” (Kulick). Although some people suggested the possibility that “the illness” stemmed from HIV/Aids, no one dared to publicly declare such an opinion.

Doris's case mobilised the collective feeling for another cause: the farm owner of the lands on which she had lived with her parents had forbidden her burial. Although Doris's parents still worked for the farm owner, he had declared that he was opposed to the funeral on his property.

The case occurred in Lions River, a place near the city in which the LPM has its main base of operations as well as its central office. Doris's burial was quickly transformed into a banner. Supporters of the movement headed a political discussion, with debates on local radio against the Department of Land Affairs. The newspapers printed daily reports on the progress of the negotiations. The situation was quite tense and, after an agreement signed on less-than-solid bases with the local government, Doris's burial was ensured. Distrustful, LPM members decided to ask their militants to attend the funeral. It was said that the burial would take place even if by force.

On the day of the burial, a Saturday, the atmosphere was one of euphoria and tension. The cars had to pass in front of the main building of the farm, cross a bridge and travel a road in terrible condition in order to arrive at the homestead of the Dlamini family. In front of the mud houses, the many police cars indicated the spirit of negotiation that had gone on up to that

point. Other vehicles from official government agencies also suggested the “political” dimension that Doris’s death had taken on.

A tent – with room for 100 people – was set up beside the clay homes. The men were digging the grave near the entrance. The women’s singing could be heard from within the round hut, where they watched over Doris’s body. I joined these women, while Marcelo observed the movement of those outside, who, for the most part, were LPM members. Inside the hut, the sound from the megaphone, with political chants from the times of “struggle” – the days of demonstrations against apartheid - made the situation all the more poignant.

After all the religious leaders had entered the round hut, the final sacred words were read. The casket was taken from the round hut to the house where Doris had lived: it was her farewell. Doris was then placed inside the large tent. The table behind the coffin offered places for the authorities. The Regional Minister of Land Affairs was present, indicating the capital importance of the event. Flags from the LPM and MST (of Brazil) were displayed behind the political and religious authorities. Statements praising the deceased were interlaced with religious songs, sung mostly by the women of the sisterhoods that were present. The political leaders began to give their speeches. The difference in tone between one speech and another was notable, between the familiar statements of those who knew Doris and those who had transformed the young dead woman into a symbol of the contemporary political struggle in South Africa.

When the confrontations had come to a close, Doris’s body was carried in procession to her burial site. At the graveside, voices of protest once again mixed with the sometimes kind, sometimes effusive words of the religious leaders who were interested in conducting Doris to a place beside her ancestors.

When the gravesite was covered, the lunch service began. Some ate the food prepared by the women for the general public. Others, mostly family men, were graced with pieces of roasted beef – meat from the sacrifice that was required for the occasion.

The political backlash from the burial emerged a week later. One of the journalists who had attended the funeral published a story stating that the LPM demonstrators shouted to the crowd with belligerent cries of “Long Live Mugabe!!!”, “death to the farm owner”, “farm owners are dogs”. The NGO that guides the actions of the movement and administers a considerable sum of financial resources became apprehensive with the news, publishing an item of clarification in the press. The Black comrades who shouted the war chants were duly punished for their actions, which were against the spirit of reconciliation that they have been forcefully trying to construct in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **The burial of Nomusa**

Although Doris's funeral had reanimated the spirit of the political struggles in the LPM, the negative repercussion of the belligerence of the activists generated a kind of schism in the group.

Nomusa died during this period. She was also young and a single mother with a girl about 10 years of age. Nomusa worked as a community health agent and left her job when "the illness" robbed her of her strength. The young woman worked in a sugarcane plantation region, known for the abuses local landowners practiced against the Black labourers. She had lived with her parents on one of these plantations. All the members of her family worked as labourers in the sugarcane fields, except for her. For this reason, the plantation owner did not allow Nomusa's body to be buried on his land.

The case was very similar to Doris's. However, without the active involvement of the NGO employees (who mobilized the press and generated debates with government leaders), the militants of the movement were left to their own devices.

Vela, our friend, resident of the region and young leader of the movement (from Marcelo Rosa's argument, a young leader over the age of 35), was boycotted. All his requests for help were denied. There were no resources for the funeral. Not even the red t-shirts kept at the headquarters of the NGO were donated for the people to wear during the funeral.

Vela refused to be discouraged by the setbacks that emerged from all sides. He managed to gather the money needed to rent a van that would transport some comrades who were coming from far away. The family took charge of renting the tent and arranging the food for everyone – on the day of the vigil as well as the day of the burial. After a meeting with an official from the Department of Land Affairs Vela ensured the right to bury Nomusa despite threats made by the plantation owner.

Even with everything arranged, Vela was apprehensive: what was the point of so much mobilizing if the funeral was not going to have any repercussions, if the funeral was not going to be transformed into another banner in the struggle of the LPM? For Vela, the opportunity to obtain the sympathy and involvement of his community was being wasted. The residents of the region had long distrusted the actions of the movement, asking, "What is so special about you people in the LPM, who go to so many funerals, who travel everywhere and never bring any benefits to our region?"

When we arrived, we saw no signs that a funeral would take place there. Even Mangaliso was dismayed with the situation. Vela was in the middle of the bush with the other



men, digging the grave where Nomusa would be buried. The plantation owner made passes in his 4X4 in an attempt to frighten them. Half a dozen women were with Nomusa's mother in mourning under the tiny tent alongside the casket. Vela had extended an LPM flag on the canvas of the tent near the coffin.

Thandi, the master of ceremonies, was waiting for us when we arrived. Dressed in her work clothes from the field, she would soon go through a transformation in her attire and in her voice: singing hymns and inviting those present, whose numbers were growing throughout the day, to bid farewell to Nomusa with kind words.

Mangaliso asked me what he should do with the flags from the movement that he had brought. He felt embarrassed. I suggested that he extend them on the clothes line: a flag from the MST and another from the Mozambique Peasants' Movement were added to that of the LPM.

Little by little, perhaps over a hundred people had shown up. Among them, the flags acquired an impressive strength, held up by the young people along the sugarcane plantation on route to the bush when Nomusa would be laid to rest next to her ancestors.

Upon our return, we were offered lunch. For the first time, we were served the sacrificial meat, traditional bread, a normal meal (different chopped vegetables, minced meat with a spice resembling curry, salad with mayonnaise and rice coloured with curcuma – all chopped), with dessert and even beer.

Vela was radiant and Mangaliso was surprised. For both of them, and especially for Mangaliso, who had seen everything this life had to offer, the struggle had transformed into a sequence of grandiose events interlaced with ordinary moments to which such importance was no longer given.

When we got back to Brazil, we received an e-mail from him saying that the community had become inspired with what had occurred – contrary to what we had all supposed, even without the media and without the t-shirts, the funeral had its repercussions. When we were leaving the services, Thandi told us that the police had been there with the intention of stopping them under orders from the plantation owner. When the officers heard that the LPM was there, they sounded a retreat, saying, "We don't want to get mixed up with those guys". The LPM was more than the two leaders present at the burial; the LPM was in the minds of many people – including the police officers. We all rediscovered the importance of the dead in our lives.

Conclusion

With the unexpected turn of events at Nomusa's funeral, we learned that the term calculation reveals very little or almost nothing about the dynamics of the public sphere in contemporary South Africa. Some, like Norbert Elias, say that we do not calculate because we are all in the whirlpool of Edgar Allan Poe, with no prospects for free ourselves from the urgency of the present and are about to succumb to the current. I do not believe that is so. In this case, we would be in the field of anthropology that is only so – science, for instance – because it distances itself; because it is objective. In my view, this is a conservative and rather pessimistic standpoint.

The heuristic path we should choose is not that of an unmasking of the social contract or revealing what is beyond common language in an attempt to detect what is "out of order". Besides the explicit ethnocentric bias of such an undertaking, there is something more perverse in such a perspective: we guarantee that we would never be caught by the unpredictable, since we avoid such events by classifying them as "out of order". Events are not mere "forms of the social" and they are not entirely the reverse of the social (Das). Events do not unfold as epiphenomena. In the example of ethnography – understood by me as a theoretical form –, events are also manifestations of the theories of those who receive us. The itineraries we undertake during our fieldwork are mostly theoretical and are constructed by our hosts.

The burial sites where the families of Black labourers bury their dead on farms (that no longer belong to them) are symbols of both their living relationships (historical, we could say) and their relationships with their ancestors. With the possibility of serving as documents in restitution cases, the graves simultaneously permeate the order of bureaucratic discourse in contemporary South Africa as well as the universe some anthropologists called the "occult". Would it therefore be desirable for us to continue separating these phenomena, describing these place-events in spheres?

Mangaliso's tears prove to us that the interest in the "occult" does not imply de-politicisation or contempt for mundane collective ties. Our understanding at this time suggests that the State, in the South African case, both administrates and is administrated by the living and dead alike. Through the burial sites, we can see the multiple causalities (S. F. Moore; S. Tambiah) that are in play congregating subjects and objects, blurring the frontiers of that which – at least for me – used to be seen as a privileged source of anthropological dialogues: living men – at times women – and the relations of cause and effect that are so common in our discussions on reason (in this case, political reason).

Today I think that perhaps by taking our *a priori* definition of a laic State too seriously, we have become incapable of seeing the spirits at work, acting upon people and the State – and,

if we pay closer attention, not only in South Africa (cf. Herzfeld). What the future holds in store for us regarding the importance of these new place-events and peoples whom we are not always able to perceive, only new ethnographies will tell.

Inspired by the theme of this edition of *Ethnografeast*, I wonder if the funerals witnessed here could be thought of as public spheres, and if this might be a suitable theoretical formula for us to understand them.

In his classic book *Death, Property and Ancestors*, Jack Goody suggests that “the mortuary institutions are not to be considered merely as ‘religious’ phenomena, in the sense of ways of acting associated with the ‘supernatural’ world” (:29). When a social phenomenon really matters, it should be considered “more than religious” – that is, preferentially economic or political. I wonder if it would not be better for us to invert the formulation and begin to think of politics – and the public sphere is certainly a concept that makes up part of what we understand as politics – as religious (at least in the South African case).

It is Mangaliso that makes me think about this, due to his selfsame emotion at the funerals of his dear cousin and neighbour of his same age (Mr. Khubeka) and two unknown women (Doris and Nomusa), at whose funerals he took part as leader of the LPM.

Mangaliso’s emotion was a genuine expression of his understanding with regard to these funerals. It was not possible for him to separate feeling from reason – even if today this is what we are tempted to do in anthropology. If Mangaliso’s tears do not dry up, I believe, for now, that this is due in large part to the fact that he perceives the agency of the dead in the existence of the living. With his tears, Mangaliso warns us that “we should not reduce the struggles of Doris and Nomusa’s families to the struggle for land in terms of a struggle written by public benefits”. We should not repeat the argument hallowed by the critical sociology of clientelism.

The best path now, let us consider, would be to rethink the struggles for public benefits or rights in general in other terms. If we did so, perhaps one day we can recognize that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our [political] philosophy.