

Research Report

A Description of the Ceremony of Kurova Guva

ESCORTING THE SPIRIT FROM THE GRAVE TO THE HOME

INTRODUCTION

When a Shona married man dies, all his kin are concerned with two important duties. First his spirit (*mudzimu*; pl. *vadzimu*) must be properly settled and secondly they must take part in the ritual distribution of his possessions (*nhaka*) which include his wife or wives, sons and daughters, cattle, other domestic stock and his personal belongings.

To settle the spirit various procedures must take place. First is the burial of the corpse close to its former home. A number of customs have to be observed when the burial takes place. For instance, the corpse must never be wrapped in a red cloth. The arms and legs must be flexed and the head face the village. After the burial it is essential for the deceased's surviving brothers, his father (if he is alive), his older sons and his nephew (*muzukuru*; pl. *vazukuru*) to carry out what is called *gata*: a visit to a distant diviner of high repute, who will tell them the cause of the death, so that the family may perform the necessary rites to propitiate the spirit that was upset and responsible for the death, lest further illness or tragedy befall other members of the family.

When all this has been done it is necessary to hold the ceremony of *kurova guva*, as it is called amongst the Zezuru or *chenura* amongst the Manyika. This is usually held about a year after the burial, but it may take place earlier or

even later as was the case with the ceremony about to be described. The purpose of *kurova guva* is to bring back the spirit of the deceased from the grave to his hut to be in the midst of his descendants. At the end of the ceremony when the spirit is back in his home the *nhaka* ritual takes place.

There are several published references to this ceremony but no adequate or complete description. Speares (1928) describes the ceremony but it is not a first-hand account. That given in greater detail by Wane (1931) refers to the sweeping of the grave, the presence of the ritual friend (*sawhira*) and the daughters-in-law (sing. *nuroora*; pl. *varoora*) kneeling before the grave and the dancing and singing; but says little of the return of the family to the home of the deceased. Gelfand (1956) gives the main details of this ritual among the Zezuru and later (1960) among the Karanga.

By far the most detailed account comes from Holleman (1953) who describes the *bona* ritual whereby the spirit is accommodated or brought home to the village of his next of kin. It is interesting in that in the same district he met with two almost different ritual ceremonies. In the one area pots of beer were taken to a spot in the woods not far from the village to the foot of a *matuwa* tree and some of the beer poured into two holes close to it. After this the libation was

shared. A branch of the tree was then cut and the family returned singing to the village where the twig was attached to the wall of the late father's hut. What is surprising in this account was that there was no apparent visit to the grave. In another ward but in the same district the family approached the grave and a goat was sacrificed nearby by drowning it in a small hole filled with the ritual beer. A portion of its meat was roasted and offered to the spirit. After this the party returned to the village of the deceased, but there is little mention of the ritual ceremony in the hut itself when the mourners return from the grave to the village.

KUROVA GUVA

This present account of the *kurova guva* ceremony for the spirit of Kaseke is one of the few to be recorded. Kaseke, a Zezuru *nganga* who lived in the Chitowa Native Purchase Area, passed away just over three years ago. He was a *nganga* of some standing in the Mubrewa district. He had had four wives, who bore him eighteen children, nine sons and nine daughters. His eldest son Aaron settled in Bulawayo and his second son is a member of the Police Force; the eldest child is a woman, aged about fifty years and she was present at the ceremony. Kaseke was disappointed in his elder sons and so left his land and property to the second youngest son, a boy of sixteen years who was brought up on the farm. He must have decided that he was the only son likely to remain on the land and care for it. The land had been purchased by Kaseke in the Purchase Area and thus belonged to him personally, unlike land in tribal areas. This singling out of one of the youngest sons in his will must have displeased some of the members of the family. There was a great deal of argument and the legalities took many months to settle. At last they were over and the time had come for the ceremony of *kurova guva* to be held. This was arranged to commence on Saturday, 5 September at the village where Kaseke died and was buried; his grave is situated on the side of an anthill about 20 yards from the main hut (*imba*) in which he lived and well within the confines of the village.

By about half-past five that evening quite a number of people had already gathered and drumming and singing could be heard from inside the *imba*. As time passed more relatives and friends arrived, including Mr. D. Madzimbamuto, who was a *nganga* and one of Kaseke's *vazukuru* (a son of Kaseke's eldest sister). He used to

attend regularly the ritual ceremonies which Kaseke held in his village when he was alive; and Madzimbamuto's elder brother, Samuel, was the first *muzukuru*, the one who used to officiate as master of ceremonies as is customary in Shona ritual practice. Drumming and dancing continued throughout the night, until about 5.30 a.m. when the family prepared to go to the grave to bring Kaseke's spirit back to his home and relatives.

Although the sun had not yet risen, the procession started from the *imba* moving slowly to the grave. It was led by the eldest of Kaseke's surviving brothers, a blind man who had to be guided by his wife. Behind him came Kaseke's wife, daughters, sons and grandchildren, his *sawhira* (ritual friend) and *muzukuru*. As he walked at the head of the group of relations the old man played on the *mbira*, the musical instrument beloved by Kaseke, the songs of war usually sung on the way to a grave. The people sang as they gradually covered the twenty-five yards or so to the grave. The song they liked best was 'Yave nyama yekugocha yowerere yowe mhanda mapfumo' (It is now roasted meat, lucky are those who are good with the spear). Another song went, 'Kuenda mbire, kuenda mbire, ndichamutevera, iyewo chete, kuenda mbire' (Advance, advance, I will follow him also, advance).

When the procession came near to the grave, they sat down and the men clapped hands. The eldest brother prayed aloud. 'Oh, all of you, his relatives, who are already dead we have assembled here today so that we may take your child into his home again. From today he will not stay alone in the forest. He is now staying with others in the home. Let him look after his family and all those dear to him and protect them from dangers and troubles.' Dancing and singing then commenced and almost immediately the *sawhira* and *muzukuru* held down a he-goat (*mbocho*) just to the side of the mourners. Its throat was cut; the goat was opened and its stomach (*susu*) removed. Then the *muzukuru* was handed a gourd (*dhende*) filled with *maseke* (the strainings of beer in preparation); and the two men walked up to the end of the grave facing the village. There the *muzukuru* poured the *maseke* from the calabash onto the grave and the *sawhira* smeared the contents of the stomach on it. When this was done the *sawhira* smashed the gourd with an axe and buried the little pieces in a hole he dug next to the grave.

In the meantime beer was brought out by the *varooro* and the *mbira* was being played by



Fig. 1—The procession with the deceased's elder brother playing the *mbira*, on its way to the grave.



Fig. 2—Whilst the eldest brother plays his *mbira*, the *muzukuru* and *sawhira* prepare to slaughter a goat.

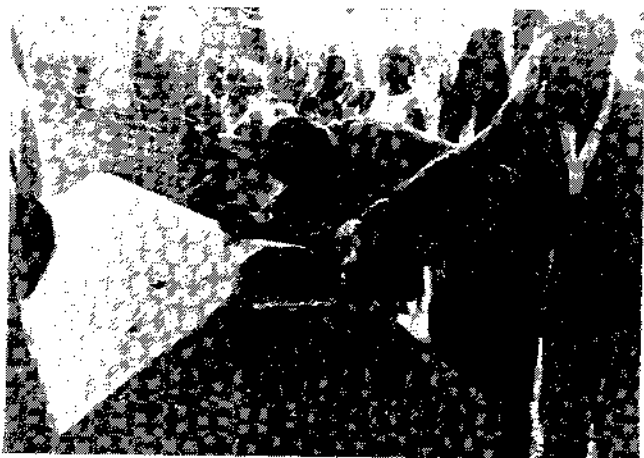


Fig. 3—The *muzukuru* pouring *masese* on the front of the grave.



Fig. 4—A *muroora* affectionately claspng the grave.

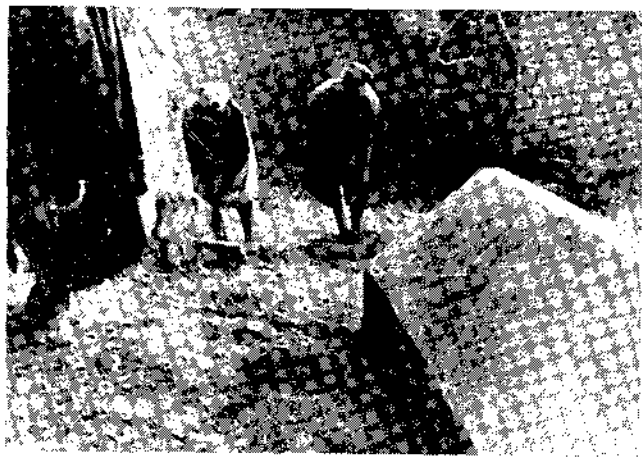


Fig. 5—Two *varoora* sweeping the precincts of the grave.



Fig. 7—The beer pots inside the *rushanga*.



Fig. 6—The *varoora* kneeling before the grave after the sweeping was over.



Fig. 8—With the spirit back the ceremony continued inside the main hut (*imba*). Note the eldest surviving brother with his wife, and the two pots of beer placed before them.

Kaseke's blind brother. Everyone was standing in a little group about three yards from the grave. Daniel Madzimbamuto, the younger brother of the first *muzukuru*, sat down on the ground immediately behind the pot of beer and started to share it out, giving a *mukombe* full to each of the *varoora* until all had had some. Another pot was brought out and given to the men. While some of the *varoora* were receiving their beer, relays of about five at a time, moved up to the grave and began to sweep away (*kutsvaira guva*) with axes and brooms all the loose stones, leaves and litter from its precincts. After working for a minute or two, a few of the women would sing and dance round the grave, whilst their places were taken by other women. After about ten minutes all the ground for about two yards round the grave was cleared and a group of five women, who had taken part in the sweeping, gathered in front of it. They knelt on the ground with their heads almost touching it (*kupfugama*), forming a straight line and waited there silently and motionless until the *muzukuru* had placed some money on the head of the leading *muroora* as an offering of thanks for sweeping the grave. This money was to be shared amongst all the women who had cleared the grave.

About 40 minutes had now elapsed, the sun was shining brightly and the ceremony was nearing the end. The blind man with his *mbira*, led by his wife and followed by a few members of the family, moved away from the grave towards Kaseke's *imba*. On the way back they sang, 'He is now meat for roasting, yo-we-re-re. He is now meat for roasting. Kill-kill. We are going to take him. Ha! ha! He! ye! He was asleep. Haye! haye! yowerere, yowerere.' 'Now comes the fight, Kill-kill.' As they neared the threshold of the hut the blind man said, '*Tapinza mudzimu mumba* (We have put the spirit in the hut).' This was the moment that the spirit of the dead man returned to the household.

Little happened for the next thirty minutes until the next part of the ceremony started, when the beer in honour of the dead man would be produced. On the left of the entrance to the *imba* was a grass shelter called *kuti* or *rushanga*, about eight feet high with an opening about two feet wide. In it, on the ground had been placed several pots of beer. Two of them were very large; one was filled with beer for the spirit (*mumvuri*) of Kaseke. The second, called *nyoro*, was for the *sawhira* as a token of gratitude for his services at the ceremony. These pots of beer

were to be brought into the *imba* and given to the spirit and to the *sawhira*. Most of the people moved into the *imba* where the two drummers and an *mbira* player took up their positions, immediately opposite the doorway. The two big pots of beer were brought in by one of Kaseke's sons and placed in the centre of the hut. The musicians began to play and dancing started.

The words of some of the songs went as follows:

'We are tired, we are tired.
We are going to kill each other. Eha.
We are going to kill each other, Eha.'

'He has left drums beating, O Loyo!
He has left the drums beating.'

'Our method of ploughing has improved,
Ha! iye! ha! iye! wo! (All is fine).
We are going to start ploughing, ploughing.
Plough, plough.
We have grown up.
When are you going to plough.'

'The leg was too heavy for the father of
the child.

It is a man, it is a man, Haye.
The leg was too heavy for the child.
Hukuwe! Hukuwe! Haye!

After a while there was a lull and the *sawhira* came up to Kaseke's pot of beer (*tsotsonono*). He filled a *mukombe* (calabash) of beer and passed it to his father's eldest surviving brother (the blind man). Then he passed one to each of the sons according to his seniority, then to their wives and finally to the rest of the people. This was followed by music and dancing. When the music stopped the *sawhira* was given his pot of beer. He filled the *mukombe* and passed his beer round to anyone he wished. Then another pot was brought in and the author was given the honour of receiving it; it was then passed round to members of Kaseke's and the *muzukuru's* families. The final pot of beer for Kaseke, the dead man, completed the ceremony of *kurova guva*. After an interval of about an hour the ritual distribution of Kaseke's possessions (*nhaka*) was due to begin in the yard about five yards from the *imba*.

CONCLUSION

This ceremony illustrates the close bond which exists between the living and dead in Shona family life. The proximity of the grave to the living quarters and the bringing back of the

spirit to the home continually reminds the family of the dead man. They felt his presence amongst them and since the spirit is endowed with supernatural powers of protection, it is evident how strong a hold he and the other ancestral spirits must have in the daily activities and actions of the family. Nothing is more serious than to forget the *vadzimu* for this will provoke them to anger and retribution must surely follow. As the *vadzimu* keep a watchful eye on their descendants, the latter must be very careful to carry out all that is prescribed.

The reason for the singing of *ngondo* (battle) songs, with words which are strange for a procession to a grave is difficult of explanation. Gelfand (1959) recorded a number in the burial ceremonies of the Zezuru. What is so striking is that they bear no relation to the sadness of the occasion tending to appear ridiculous or laughable by the nature of their contents:

'Hit him in the back and bite him in the buttock'

'The animal is smelling, we want it to smell.'

A plausible explanation is that these *ngondo* songs remind man that all in life amounts to

nought and that man has but a fleeting sojourn on this earth. The grave is but the end of man. Perhaps another reason is that when one parts with life there is no need any longer to be shy and one can say whatever comes to mind.

This ritual of *kurova guva*, with the eldest surviving brother of the deceased leading the procession to the grave and afterwards escorting the spirit back to the hut, also illustrates the concept of brotherhood (*kuzwanana; ukama*) so dear to the Shona. The fact that the eldest surviving brother was blind is of no significance; what matters is the age of the surviving brother and so long as he is alive, whatever his health, he remains the spiritual head of the family unit. Only the head male of the family may approach the *vadzimu* of that agnatic line. Thus when a younger brother needs to contact his *vadzimu*, he cannot do so on his own, but has to ask his eldest brother to pray for him. On the appointed day, he and his close relations come to the hut of his eldest brother who, surrounded by the family circle, addresses the spirit. One can appreciate how this brings home to the agnates the idea that they are a single unit.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Rev. M. Hannon S.J. kindly read the text of this article and made several valuable suggestions.

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