

**DORO REKUFA AND TSVITSA: BEER, ANIMALS AND
DEATH RITUALS AMONG THE NDAU OF SOUTH
EASTERN ZIMBABWE**

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Abstract

Despite Westernization and particularly the advent of Christianity and its widespread entrenchment on the African continent, traditional indigenous rituals continue to constitute an integral part of African religious belief systems and practices. This article presents the results of an ethno-archaeological study of two death rituals that are conducted by the Ndau people of south eastern Zimbabwe. The rituals are a demonstration of attitudes towards death and beliefs about the role of the dead among the living. The Ndau do not believe that death signals and represents the end of life. In the same vein and perhaps more importantly, the Ndau do not believe that death just happens. It is caused by human agency out of jealousies, hatred and conflict among the living. These beliefs are central to the two rituals presented and discussed here: the first ritual is conducted to ascertain cause of death and the second to bring back the spirit of the deceased from a temporary state of limbo immediately after death. Meat and beer are central to these rituals, firstly as offerings to the deceased and secondly as an important part of the living celebration of the rituals. The paper then explores some interpretive implications of the rituals from an archaeological perspective.

Key words: animal sacrifice, death rituals, ethno-archaeology, funerary rites, Ndau, south eastern Zimbabwe

Introduction and background

From time immemorial, death has always provoked very deep emotions and entrenched attitudes among the living. Thus treatment of the dead, their disposal, as well as practices immediately and sometimes long after burial, have been surrounded by specific ritual practices. In many cultures,

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these rituals are conducted against a background that death is not an end in itself, but a highly ritualized multi-staged transformation from one form of being into another (see Oestigaard 2004). In such cultures, the dead therefore continue to play a role among the living. The departed look after the living and the living themselves should also look after the deceased. It is against this background that at different stages, death is highly ritualized among different cultures.

This paper presents two death rituals that are conducted by the Ndaou people of south eastern Zimbabwe. The analysis of these practices featured in an ethno-archaeological research project in the region, which was partly aimed at investigating the ritual use and significance of animals in human-animal relations beyond subsistence practices (Shenjere-Nyabezi 2016).

The Ndaou people

The Ndaou are a Shona speaking people found in east-central Zimbabwe in Chipinge and parts of Chimanimani and Chiredzi Districts, as well as south-central Mozambique (Figure 1). Ndaou family and political units are located on both sides of the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border and people continue to interact across it. Historically, they are regarded as the indigenes of the area: and Ndaou was the name that the Nguni, who invaded the area during the *Mfecane* upheavals in the early nineteenth century, gave to the people living in the region between the Save and Buzi Rivers (Rennie 1973). The name connotes the way in which the Ndaou people greeted a chief or an important foreigner, i.e. by kneeling, clapping their hands and repeatedly and rhythmically shouting *ndauiiui, ndauiiui*. The term thus signified subservience and submission to their new Nguni lords (Patrício 2012). Ndaou origins and history emerge from the fragmentation of the Mutapa state and the Mbire kingdom, and to the expansionary cycles of the Rozvi, a Shona-Karanga lineage group who moved from the Zimbabwe hinterland highlands around the fifteenth century, and successively occupied the central strip between the Buzi and Save Rivers (Rennie 1973; Bannerman 1981; Wolmer 2007; Patrício 2012: 10). It is recorded that the Ndaou dominated the Tonga populations who had previously lived there, creating small political units (chieftaincies) relatively autonomous from each other but related by kinship.

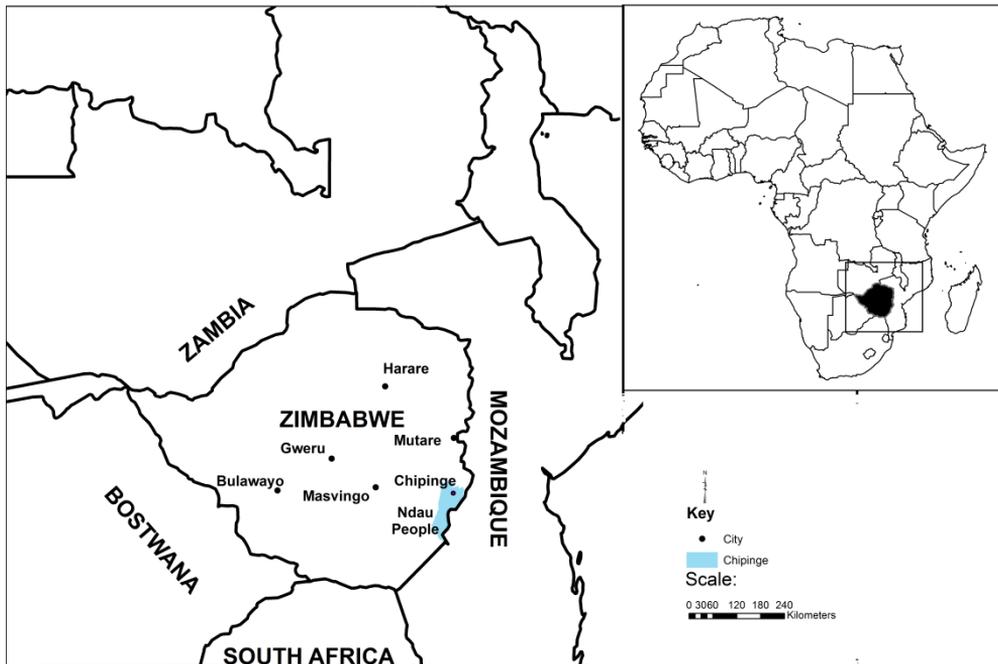


Fig 1: Location of the Ndau of south eastern Zimbabwe

The archaeological study of death

Death has always been a very central part of the human experience, perhaps as important as living itself, hence it is accompanied by many funerary rites, ceremonies and rituals. Although death is universal, mortuary rites have tended to appear to be culture-specific, reflecting the different ways in which people deal with death and the dead (Oestigaard 2004). It is this background of the centrality of death and the observed diversity of reactions to it that has made the subject of death a major area of academic inquiry among scholars in different disciplines, including anthropology and archaeology. In archaeology, the traditional use of mortuary data has been to reconstruct past social organization, particularly in the context of identifying and understanding the development of socio-economic and political complexity of the ancient past. However, although there has been a long standing concern with mortuary behaviour among archaeologists, it is only as a relatively recent development that more explicit theoretical positions and stand points have been explored in detail.

This includes the explicit position of Tainter (1978: 106), who has argued that:

Of all classes of archaeological data available to the archaeologist, no other can be as informative on prehistoric social organization as that derived from the study of mortuary practices.

Tainter's outlook that has received very strong support from other scholars on the archaeology of death, as elaborated by O'Shea who has further stated that:

Mortuary evidence is an extremely valuable archaeological resource, since it represents the direct and purposeful culmination of conscious behaviour, rather than incidental residue.
O'Shea (1981: 53)

Over the last four decades, however, archaeological interest and attention has shifted substantially from a focus on reconstructing ancient social structures. It now includes investigation of cultural meanings of the material correlates of mortuary practices, and equally important, the search for the non-material attitudes and belief systems underlying such practices. Part of this has been in response to calls for archaeology to move towards a contextual approach, as opposed to what is now seen as a somewhat ambiguous and misguided goal of discovering scientifically universal laws of human behaviour, which once lay at the heart of the 'New Archaeology' (Binford 1962, 1972).

Accompanying this new research direction, now generally subsumed under cognitive archaeology, are the developments in ethno-archaeology where the exploration of living contexts for interpretation of the archaeological material record has been a driving goal (e.g. papers in David and Kramer eds.2001). In more recent years, further cognitive theoretical efforts to unravel the causative phenomena underlying human behaviour in the deep past have included agency theory (Dobres and Robb eds. 2000) and, even more recently, assemblage theory (Hamilakis and Jones 2017). These theoretical constructs will be explored further in the discussion of the ethno-archaeological case studies that are the subject of this paper.

Background to the rituals: Death and the living among the Ndaus

In common with many other cultures in southern Africa, the Ndaus do not believe that death signals or represents the end of life. In the same vein and equally important to the Ndaus, they do not believe that death 'just happens'. It is caused by human agency and is usually the result of hatred, jealousies, and conflicts among and between kith and kin. Death from 'natural causes' or occurring by 'accident' – even murder – is always caused by a third force that allows the death to occur. This belief is so prevalent, to the extent that today, among the Ndaus and perhaps other related groups, deaths resulting from viral infections (such as the purported HIV/AIDS pathogen) are seen in light of this unseen causative agency: it is believed that the very fact and process of contracting a fatal virus is caused in turn by forces and factors beyond the agency of the individual affected (Maoneke, personal communication).

In keeping with this strong, deep-seated conviction, the Ndaus always carry out a traditional, probing inquiry into the cause of an individual's death. This is a highly ritualized undertaking which normally takes place three months after the burial. The ritual and inquiry are conducted for every individual, including infants who have died after cutting their teeth. It is believed that infants who die before they reach the teething stage would not have become full members of society, and so had never meant nor had never been meant, to attain full personhood. As a result, the death of an infant prior to four or six months old is not recognized as a social loss in the conventional sense; correlatively it is not mourned as such. Instead, they are placed in large clay pots and are buried along river banks. This is a mortuary practice that has been noted among Shona groups in Zimbabwe other than the Ndaus. Burial of young infants along water courses is widely believed to keep the mother of the infant wet (a metaphor for fertility), besides keeping the deceased infant cool (Taggart 1988, Pwiti and Mahachi 1991): burial in dry ground dries up the mother's fertility and keeps the deceased infant angry!

Another ritual associated with burial practice relates to the relationship between the dead and the living. As noted above, the Ndaus share the

commonly held cultural belief that death is not an end to life. The dead go to join their family ancestors and continue to live in a spiritual state or form in everyday affairs of the community. They become part of the family ancestry which is to say they do not vacate the family wholesale. Ancestors have a very important obligation and responsibility to look after those that they have left behind. However, it is also believed that directly following the event of death, the spirit of an individual will be wandering and in a state of limbo. It does not immediately join the ancestors properly until the relevant ritual has been carried out. Similarly, because it will be wandering and disoriented, such a spirit is unable to play their expected and proper role among the living members of the family. The spirit has to be brought home and inducted into their new role as a proper ancestor. To this end, about a year after burial, the Ndaus conduct the *Tsvitsa* ceremony which in essence achieves two objectives. The dead individual's spirit joins the rest of the family's ancestors; while at the same time, the spirit is brought back home and may therefore stop wandering.

***Doro Rekufa* ritual ceremony**

This ritual ceremony of bringing home the dead, known as *Doro Rekufa* involves family members consulting a traditional diviner/healer (*N'anga*) who is able to discern the cause of death, including the person or persons responsible and how they were involved. This is a very important part of death rites among the Ndaus.

The specific ceremonial event which constitutes the basis of this paper was held eight months following the death and burial of Mr Josani Mawoneke, a resident of the Manzvire Village in the Chipinge district in south eastern Zimbabwe (Figure 1). The preparatory work started with the family consultation with, and seeking the permission of, the traditional community leader, whose title is *Mutape*. As the traditional leader of the community, the *Mutape* is a central figure in all important affairs and the ceremony cannot take place without his permission.

Once the permission has been granted, the family then starts making preparations, chief of which is to start brewing traditional beer, almost always an integral part of traditional ceremonies among the Shona and

other Bantu speaking people across much of southern Africa. Traditional beer brewing is initiated seven days before the actual day of the ceremony. Although the family of the deceased will brew most of the beer, other members of the community also take part and contribute (Figure 2). Among the Ndau, traditional beer is made by women from sorghum and maize and it takes seven days to mature. It is a very demanding task, going through a number of defined processes and stages.



Fig 2: Members of the community brewing traditional beer for the ceremony.

The ceremony of *Doro Rekufa* is not a closed family affair; it involves the whole community. A few days before the ceremony, young sons and nephews of the deceased are sent around to every homestead in the community to notify people of the forthcoming event and to remind them of their cultural community obligation to make a contribution. This reminder is not stated directly. The boys simply politely say the words “*Hukudzeduwo*,” (“Our chickens,”) and the message is immediately understood and acknowledged. This is all in keeping with the traditional African community spirit of sharing both in times of need and times of plenty. Traditionally, a substantial contribution would be made, such as an

actual chicken, by each household in the community. Today, however, not everyone can afford this. For the particular ceremony that was documented on this occasion, only one small chicken was contributed by the community. The rest of the contributions were in the form of small amounts of cash and agricultural produce such as maize. These offerings go towards settling the diviner's bill and feeding the people on the actual day of the ceremony.

On the evening of the day before the consultation with the traditional diviner, community members gather at the homestead where the ceremony is to take place, in this case, the Maoneke homestead (Figure 3). This marked the beginning of the *Doro Rekufa* ceremony. Guests are fed and there is modest consumption of the beer which has by then matured.



Fig 3: Community gathered at the Maoneke homestead before the traditional healer consultation.

Early the next day, the actual ceremony began. On this day, a total of eight goats and ten chickens were slaughtered. Traditionally, a whole beast would have been slaughtered – in this case a bull since the deceased was male; (if the deceased had been a female, it would have been a cow). On this particular occasion, however, it was not possible for the Maoneke

family to manage the cost of slaughtering a bull because of the constraints that they were facing. Thus, the more easily affordable goats and chickens were used.

At this point, the community gathering is informed that family members would now be setting off to go and consult with the traditional diviner. Only family members comprise this delegation. Everyone else stays behind. On arrival at the diviner's homestead, only the very closest family members are allowed into the diviner's consulting house, as this is a very private affair.

After the consultation, the family members return home where the community would still be gathered awaiting the outcome of the consultation. This is when cause of death and the identity of the culprit or culprits are revealed publicly to the whole community. This is a very long winded affair which keeps people in a state of suspense. One by one, a representative of each category of relative, including nephews, uncles, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law, take turns to address the gathering. Each representative announces that, according to the findings of the traditional diviner, as nephews or uncles (for example) they have been absolved of complicity or involvement in the death. They each declare that they did not 'eat' the deceased. This is symbolized by their shaking off the maize flour that would have been placed in their hair (Figures 4a and 4b).



Fig 4a left: An aunt of the Maoneke family shaking off the maize flour from her hair.



4b right: An uncle of the Maoneke family shaking off the maize flour from his hair.

The guilty party will symbolically admit their involvement by keeping this flour in their hair. Traditionally, this is not regarded as a matter of public humiliation. After all these proceedings, the village community leader, the *Mutape*, then addresses the whole gathering, imploring the family to live in peace and harmony, despite the outcome and findings of the diviner about the cause of death.

Following this, beer drinking and feasting which would have started the previous night, continues while close family members withdraw to further consult on what course of action to take in regard to those who had been found guilty. Typically it is assumed that the guilty party (usually a family member) would have been driven to such an act because of problems in the family. Such problems may go beyond the individual's immediate fault and are regarded as indicating that more generally matters were not right in the family. This being the case, it takes members of the family to resolve the troubling issues amicably. This may involve the guilty party having had outstanding issues and problems with kith and kin, or with the ancestors. The individual may then be asked to appease the unhappy ancestry with a beast as well as offerings of beer, and if the ancestor(s) accepted the offerings, then peace, good will and good relations are restored. The *Doro rekufa* ritual ceremony thus continues to be a very important part of death rites, family counselling, and social stability among the Ndaus today.

It is of particular interest here to take note that although the meat of the slaughtered animals serves to feed the multitude of people gathered for this ceremony, the actions of slaughter, of sharing and of distribution are highly ritualized and informed by a number of socio-cultural norms and political considerations. Thus, the death of these animals plays a crucial role in the ceremony, its meaning and function in the community. Thereby through the complexity of ritual the slaughtered and prepared animals are no longer simply meat. This fits into an overall landscape of attitudes toward animals and their cultural roles. Ethnographic data from among the Ndaus (Shenjere-Nyabezi 2016) indicate that people do not slaughter animals just for meat. Ndaus, and indeed many other Shona groups, would not slaughter a cow or bull simply for food. Usually, these valued

animals are slaughtered only for ceremonial purposes such as funerals and other important cultural practices such as offerings to the ancestors as appeasement concerning a specific issue.

The choice, timing and butchering process are always informed by the needs of different cultural ceremonies and ritual activities. During the ceremonial occasion under discussion, specific animals and parts of animals were distributed and shared in strict accord with Ndaus cultural rules. For example, as the community leader, the *Mutape* was presented with a live chicken, in recognition of his status. The chicken was then slaughtered and cooked for the *Mutape* by one of the deceased's nieces. The chicken's gizzard is regarded as a special organ and as such it is roasted separately for the *Mutape*. The *Mutape* then shared the rest of the chicken with close associates. Similarly, different parts of the other animals involved in the ceremonial cooking were also shared according to the Ndaus cultural norms.

***Doro ReTsvitsa* ritual ceremony**

The *Doro Rekufa* ceremony is followed by the *Doro ReTsvitsa*, which is the finale of death rites among the Ndaus people, and is normally held one year after the death and burial. As noted above, during the interim period following the burial and up to the time when the successive ceremony is held, the Ndaus people believe that the spirit of the deceased will be wandering. As long as this is the case, the deceased will be in a state of limbo and restlessness. Referred to literally as *kudzora mufi mumusha*, this subsequent ceremony is held to bring the spirit back into the home, and to enable the deceased to relate with the living properly.

The main and most important part of the *Doro ReTsvitsa* ceremony takes place inside the house of the deceased. Traditional beer and animals are again an integral part of the ceremony. If the deceased was male, ideally a bull would be slaughtered. On this occasion, again because of the reduced circumstances of the Maoneke family, five goats were slaughtered instead. The brisket from one of the goat carcasses was offered to the deceased, a presentation which symbolizes the establishment and recognition of his new role and position in the family. The rest of the different parts of the

cooked carcass are shared according to the manner in which the living were related to the deceased, as well as their status in the community. A special pot of beer is presented to the deceased. As this is happening, the elder surviving close relatives appeal to the deceased that with these offerings of beer and meat, the spirit should now stop wandering and come back home and join the family. The elders also appeal to the deceased to accept the offerings and their new responsibility, which is now to join the long-gone ancestors in looking after the living. Although the meat and beer are offered symbolically as meant for the deceased's consumption, they are in the end actually consumed by close living relatives. Meanwhile, all female relatives who fall under the category of daughters-in-law are gathered at the entrance to the house where the ceremony will be taking place. Here, they sing and dance and plead for their portion of the meat being shared inside (Figure 5).



Fig 5: Daughters-in-law sing and dance as they plead for their share of the ritual meat.

The formal and highly ritualized beer and meat offerings and consumption episodes are then followed by general and more relaxed beer drinking and feasting inside the house. After the private proceedings inside the house, the ceremony proceeds with eating, drinking, singing and dancing for the

rest of the community. All this is in celebration of the return of the spirit back home and symbolically emphasizes the very central belief that the dead do not disappear. They join other departed ancestors and continue living in a different state. By bringing them back home through the *Tsvitsa* ceremony, they become part of the living and continue to play an active part in the well-being of the family and by extension of the whole community. The ceremony lasts until the early evening, following which those of a more sober disposition will make their way to their respective homes. Those who are highly inebriated continue with the celebrations as long as the beer is still flowing.

Animals as ritual and animals as meat

The death rites and rituals presented above draw attention to a number of issues that relate to the archaeological study of death, and equally to the archaeological understanding and interpretation of animal bone assemblages. In the first instance, as an ethno-archaeological research undertaking, the study provides glimpses through an episodic window into a specific living cultural context of death. Thus these observations provide an avenue for an archaeological appreciation of the complex belief systems that surround it. This underlines more generally the importance of ethno-archaeological studies in this direction. Astute observation of ritual proceedings provides data that can reveal correctives to researchers' and theorists' assumptions about the normative and metaphysical implications of people's patterned behaviour. Obviously these observations do not provide indubitable or direct archaeological decoding of belief systems associated with death and dying, nor is anyone to one correspondence proposed between elements of ritual behaviour and attitudes towards death and treatment of the dead, and the significance of animals in these rituals. Nevertheless the value of this ethno-archaeological data may lie in the opportunities it provides for recognising mortuary remains as representing the culmination of whole sets of complex practices and the motivating collective beliefs that underlie the accompanying rituals.

Of equal importance, the ethno-archaeological case studies presented in this paper have implications for the current archaeological concern to read

archaeological assemblages beyond attributing functionalist goals. As noted at the outset, an important goal of the ethno-archaeological study was to investigate the role of animals beyond subsistence in order to gain insights into the possible cultural practices and processes that produce the archaeological bone assemblages in evidence. The data show that such assemblages accumulate from processes and practices that are not directly related to subsistence, but are tied to belief systems and ritual reflecting norms and a well developed philosophical praxis about the value of the continuity of life, intergenerational and intra-familial relations, family therapy, intra-community cohesion, reinforcement of political relations, retribution, reconciliation and restoration of balances with nature that signify the sophistication of cultural practices in evidence to this day, despite the ravages of modernity.

This suggests that bone assemblages, and indeed other types of archaeological assemblages, are fluid and vibrant in nature (Crellin 2017). The bone assemblages that archaeologists recover and commonly interpret as remains of meals from prehistoric dinner tables may – in fact, they are – loaded with many other cultural meanings and significances beyond subsistence. These meanings are not immediately manifest, and not directly readable, but important to bear in mind. Also of importance in this regard is the consideration that should be given to the agency behind the assemblage. Here it is observable and notable that a part of the agency behind the slaughter of food animals is not so much subsistence as it is the important cultural belief systems associated with different life situations, including death. The assemblages therefore more likely reflect dynamic trajectories where animals are reared as domestic food produce but also, on occasion, are transformed into symbolic forms of life force that are ritually slaughtered, ritually consumed and their bones discarded to become a ritual assemblage, the traces of a culture that embodies a profound understanding of the human condition.

Conclusion

Despite Westernisation and particularly the advent of Christianity and its widespread, habitual entrenchment among people on the African continent, the two ceremonies under study here continue to be central to Ndaubelief

systems and practices. Admittedly, some aspects have been affected and have had to be adapted in keeping with socio-cultural and economic changes that have been taking place since the colonization of Zimbabwe last century. These adjustments include the occasional substitution of goats for cattle, and community member contributions in cash and other items rather than actual chickens for the *Doro ReKufa* ceremony. However, what remains central to these cultural practices, and what is evident in the minutiae of observable ritual behaviour, are the belief systems that feature the significance of animals in varied contexts, beyond their sheer caloric value.

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