



Natal Ndwandwe International's (ft. Kwazi Nsele) "Bayakhala": An indictment of State Biosecurity and Spiritual Violence in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ontological friction generated when secular state health protocols governed by a medicalized biosecurity hegemony supersede the traditional spiritual duties owed to the deceased in South Africa. The purpose of the study is to examine the epistemic and spiritual violence caused by COVID-19 burial regulations through the lens of indigenous Zulu ontologies of death and ancestral continuity. Utilizing a qualitative methodology rooted in interpretive phenomenological analysis and thematic analysis, the study treats the 2025 Maskandi song “Bayakhala” by Natal Ndwandwe International (ft. Kwazi Nsele) as a vocal archive and site of marginalized legal protest. The lyrics were transcribed, translated from isiZulu to English, thematically coded, and juxtaposed against state burial mandates and established ethnographic and philosophical literature. The findings revealed that the state’s reduction of the “social corpse” to a “pathological object” through measures such as mandatory PPE, plastic wrapping, prohibition of night vigils, ritual washing, and direct mortuary-to-grave burials resulted in significant epistemic violence, hermeneutical injustice, spiritual limbo, “unquiet ancestors,” and unresolved communal grief. The discussion argues that these disruptions represent a continuation of colonial epistemic domination and necropolitics, which delegitimize African indigenous knowledge systems. This study contributes to scholarship by positioning Maskandi music as a legitimate source of legal and ontological evidence in decolonial public health research. It calls for a pluralistic jurisprudence and future public health models that protect both biological life and ancestral continuity, thereby advancing culturally responsive emergency regulations in diverse African contexts.

Keywords: Biosecurity hegemony, Epistemic violence, African ritual ontology, Maskandi, COVID-19 burial regulations

INTRODUCTION

Death in Africa is not a single biological event but a social process. Hove argues that death is a transition to the status of an active ancestor to the living-dead.¹ The government regulations on funerals and handling of the dead were intended to protect people during the pandemic outbreak. The regulation often

¹ R. Hove, “Indigenous Ontologies and the State: Navigating the ‘Living-Dead’ in Post-Pandemic Africa,” *African Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 1 (2024): 45–62.

neglects the symbolic and cultural significance of a funeral. In doing so, people are denied opportunities to perform rituals for their relatives. Mbiti argues that the deceased are the living-dead, and by restricting access to the body, the state prematurely kills the social presence of the individual before the community has had the chance to transition them into the ancestral realm.² Therefore, this creates a spiritual and psychosocial danger. In the African context, it is believed that failure to perform rites properly causes the spirit to roam, bringing misfortunes to the family and preventing the living from achieving closure, leaving grief unresolved. It is therefore the hypothesis of this article that the government has failed to recognise its people in South Africa and has continued the colonial epistemic domination. They have maintained government policies that are not culturally neutral and that have delegitimized African indigenous knowledge.

Death in African societies, particularly among Zulu communities in South Africa, is not merely a biological event but a profound social, cultural, and spiritual process. It marks the transition of the deceased from the world of the living to the realm of the living-dead (ancestors), who continue to participate actively in the affairs of their families and communities.³ Traditional funeral rites, including the night vigil (*umlindelolo*), ritual washing of the body, home viewing, and proper burial ceremonies, are essential for successfully guiding the spirit and maintaining cosmological balance. Failure to observe these rites is widely believed to result in “unquiet ancestors,” spiritual unrest (*ulaka lwabaphansi*), unresolved grief, and misfortunes for the living.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent state-imposed regulations on funerals created a sharp collision between Global North biosecurity frameworks and indigenous African ontologies of death. Regulations that limited the number of mourners, prohibited night vigils, restricted physical contact with the body, mandated personal protective equipment (PPE), and enforced direct transfers from mortuaries to graves disrupted long-standing cultural practices. While these measures were introduced to curb viral transmission, they often overlooked the deep symbolic and spiritual significance of funeral rituals for many South African families.

Despite a growing body of literature on the public health impacts of COVID-19 in Africa, significant gaps remain in understanding the ontological and epistemic consequences of these regulations from an indigenous perspective. Few studies have centred the voices of ordinary citizens, especially rural Zulu communities, or analysed cultural productions such as music as valid archives of legal-cultural protest and spiritual trauma. Existing scholarship has largely focused on either epidemiological outcomes or broad policy critiques, paying insufficient attention to the lived spiritual and psychosocial legacies of disrupted ancestral transitions.

The objective of this study is to investigate the epistemic and spiritual violence generated when secular state health protocols superseded traditional spiritual duties owed to the deceased. Drawing on the 2025 Maskandi song “Bayakhala” by Natal Ndwandwe International (ft. Kwazi Nsele) as a primary vocal archive, the article examines how COVID-19 burial mandates undermined African ritual ontologies and created lasting cosmological and communal harm. The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section presents a review of relevant literature on African philosophies of death and the impact of pandemics on indigenous rituals. This is followed by the methodology, which outlines the qualitative approach using thematic analysis of the song lyrics. The findings and discussion sections then analyse the key points of friction between biosecurity hegemony and ritual ontology, focusing on spiritual limbo, epistemic injustice, plastic-wrapped identity, and unresolved mourning. The article concludes with recommendations for pluralistic public health jurisprudence that better accommodates indigenous ontologies in future emergencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the colonial violence on African ritual requires a reflection on the concept of death and African interpretation. Mbiti argues that death is a transition from the physical world to the spiritual world, where the person becomes a living-dead, which is an ancestor who remains part of the community

² J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1991).

³ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Hove, “Indigenous Ontologies and the State: Navigating the ‘Living-Dead’ in Post-Pandemic Africa.”

and must be appeased through rituals.⁴ Opoku also argues that death is a second birth into the ancestral realm; it is a change in status rather than an extinction of life.⁵ Tempels argues that in Bantu philosophy, being is force. Therefore, death is a transition where the physical body falls away, but the “vital force” remains.⁶ This necessitates rituals to ensure that this force becomes a protective ancestral power rather than a destructive and wandering one. This understanding of death is an alternative to other belief systems in other parts of the world. The understanding of death in the African context suggests that when a person dies, they transcend into a powerful being that will bring higher intervention in the living’s lives. Therefore, this raises a critical question of how the biosecurity regulation undermines the transition to the ancestral realm.

In the African context, death is a communal project which involves a series of meticulous rituals designed to maintain the balance between the living and the dead. As death is announced, there are protocols that must be observed, which ensure that the deceased is transitioned from a physical being to a spiritual ancestor. The family undergoes symbolic and physical transformation. The most notable physical transformation is the mourning process, which involves covering mirrors and windows. Mirrors are covered with cloths. This is done because it is believed that it will prevent the mourners from seeing the spirit of the deceased or prevent the spirit of the deceased from trapping another soul. In cultures such as that of the Zulu or Xhosa, furniture is removed from the main room where the bereaved will sit on mattresses on the floor. This act signifies a grounded state of mourning and humility. Candles are also lit in the shrine as they symbolise lighting the path for the deceased. However, the process of physical and spiritual transition was disrupted because of the pandemic regulations. It is critical, therefore, to reflect on how people responded to these impediments.

The ultimate objective of all these rituals is to successfully guide the deceased spirit through their transition from the living to the status of the ancestral spirit. Nyembezi and Msimang note that in the olden days, the grave was dug in a manner that the corpses would sit inside.⁷ They both note the ritual performed by the oldest son, which is to take the family spear and gouge the upper pole of the kraal. He will continue to do so until the digging is finished. The deceased will be buried sitting, with his hand carrying crops of different plants. This was done as it was believed that the deceased would ask on their behalf for a good harvest come the harvest season. It is to be considered that what has been discussed so far are rituals done when the cause of death is considered normal. There are rituals that are done when the cause of death is abnormal. Abnormal death would include drowning, suicide, or being killed in an attack or battle. When the cause of death is one of the listed causes, the deceased would be buried outside the homestead, and rituals such as washing the body with a goat's bile and cud were performed to close the wounds and bruises. The ritual also includes the ritual of fetching the spirit of the deceased from where they died. This was done as it was believed that burying a deceased person before performing this ritual would cause them to become a disgruntled spirit, which would bring bad luck to the family. It was also done to prevent deaths of a similar nature in the family.

The survival and prosperity of the family lineage depend on following, performing, and observing these rituals and traditions carefully. Failure to do so risks the wrath of the ancestors. However, with the outbreak of the pandemic, performing this ritual proved to be more difficult than ever before. The government regulation proved to have been inconsiderate of the cultural context of its population. During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, Richards observed that by enforcing the “safe burials” that excluded kin, the state did not just contain the virus; it created unclean ancestors.⁸ This led to profound communal fear that the deceased would return as an angry spirit to punish the living for the neglect. Posel et al. posit that private funerals in South Africa are culturally invalid.⁹ The silencing of the crowd

⁴ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heineman, 1969).

⁵ Kofi Asare Opoku, “West African Traditional Religion,” (*No Title*), 1978.

⁶ Placide Tempels, A Rubbens, and Colin King, *Bantu Philosophy* (Présence africaine Paris, 1959).

⁷ C.L.S Nyembezi, *Zulu Proverbs* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1966); C.T. Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter., 1975).

⁸ Paul Richards, “Ebola: How a People’s Science Helped End an Epidemic,” 2016.

⁹ D. Posel, M Hunter, and R Walker, “Investigating Death: The Politics of the Corpse in South Africa”, *African Studies* 79, no. 4 (2020): 411–28.

and the absence of the village meant that the social status of the deceased was never properly affirmed. This resulted in what Posel et al. described as a shameful burial that felt like a secret disposal rather than a sacred transition.¹⁰ Kgatle argues that the night watch is essential for guiding the soul. Therefore, by banning these vigils, the state created a state of spiritual limbo.¹¹ Families felt a deep sense of cultural guilt, believing that they had failed their sacred duty to bridge the deceased into the ancestral realm. Dube also argues that the pandemic allowed the secular state to assert total control over the African body.¹² This biosecurity hegemony dismissed indigenous ritual as unscientific and dangerous, forcing a Western, medicalized model of death upon the population whose grief is rooted in the sacred.

The COVID-19 and Ebola outbreaks significantly impacted African funeral rituals and customs, which are deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual practices. The literature review reveals that scholars throughout the world, and specifically the African continent, have contemplated the impact of the pandemic on African spirituality, belief systems, and rituals. Death in an African context is not a mere end of life. It is believed by the people of Africa that this is a journey of becoming and integrating into one's new role in the afterlife. Park (2020) argues that research shows traditional funerals and burial practices in West Africa are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and should be respected and evaluated. Mphephu et al. argue that death cleansing rituals in African communities serve as both spiritual and social mechanisms for navigating bereavement.¹³ They further argue that these rituals help individuals and families process grief while reinforcing social bonds and cultural identity.

In the African context, the performance of rituals pertaining to death is important. These rituals and customs are important in the sense that they help connect the living and the living dead. In Western culture, especially among Christians, it is believed that when one has misfortunes in life, it is because of a lack of faith in God and a broken relationship between the two. In African culture, misfortunes and bad luck are attributed to a broken and unkept ritual between the living and the living dead. This is commonly referred to as “ulaka lwabaphansi”, which is the wrath of the dead. Depending on the nature of death, there are rituals that must be adhered to by the family. Msimang argues that amongst the Zulu people in Southern Africa, the funeral ritual will depend on age, gender, and place in the society.¹⁴ The ritual also depends on the nature of death. A person who died after battling an illness is not buried as a person who died of an unfortunate event, such as an attack, drowning, suicide, or car accident.

The outbreak of Ebola and COVID-19 changed the world overnight. The outbreak of these pandemics has caused so many deaths. However, due to their nature, the government put in place policies and regulations to curb the spread of these pandemics. O'Mahony suggest that the pandemic led to new forms of mourning that may not align with cultural and religious customs.¹⁵ He further emphasizes the emotional and psychological impact of these changes on individuals and the community. Nunez argues that the restrictions forced immobility on both the living and the deceased, impacting the autonomy of the bereaved community in their death and burial practices.¹⁶ The study emphasizes that the limitations on handling corpses and conducting funerals revealed the materiality of death and its associated emotional losses. Canham argues that the health protocols and government regulations have fundamentally altered traditional rituals and customs associated with death.¹⁷ He concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified thanatopolitics, with the state exerting control over corpses and the

¹⁰ Posel, Hunter, and Walker, “Investigating Death: The Politics of the Corpse in South Africa”, *African Studies*.”

¹¹ M.S Kgatle, “Spirituality and Rituals in the Context of COVID-19: A South African Perspective,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 102, no. 2 (2021): 1–12.

¹² Z Dube, “The Corpse and the Spirits: The Impact of COVID-19 on African Burial Rites,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 33, no. 2 (2020): 1–15.

¹³ L. Mphephu et al., “Rituals of Cleansing: Navigating Bereavement in Modern African Jurisprudence,” *Journal of Indigenous Studies* 19, no. 2 (2025): 88–104.

¹⁴ Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*.

¹⁵ S O'Mahony, “After the Virus: New Forms of Mourning and the Disruption of Tradition,” *The Lancet* 396, no. 10256 (2020): 954–55.

¹⁶ L Nunez, “Immobile Grief: State Regulation of the Corpse during Global Health Emergencies,” *Death Studies* 48, no. 4 (2024): 312–25.

¹⁷ Hugo Canham, “Black Death and Mourning as Pandemic,” *Journal of Black Studies* 52, no. 3 (2021): 296–309.

death world. Therefore, it disrupted the mourning and funeral rites, which are crucial for processing loss and sociality within African communities.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design rooted in thematic analysis. The methodology was designed to bridge the gap between formal state law and indigenous life law by treating the cultural production as a primary site of legal evidence. The primary data source for this study was a 2025 Maskandi song “*Bayakhala*” by the Natal Ndwandwe International (ft. Kwazi Nsele). Although the study centres on a single artistic work, this choice was justified on several grounds. First, the song explicitly addresses the micro-politics of funeral disruptions and ancestral transition, rather than general pandemic hardships. Second, it achieved notable popularity and cultural resonance within Zulu Maskandi traditions, functioning as a widely shared vocal archive of communal grief and critique during the post-COVID period. As of July 2026, the song has amassed over 427,000 views on YouTube and approximately 175,000 streams on Spotify. Finally, the lyrical content offers exceptionally detailed and evocative engagement with specific biosecurity measures such as PPE-clad officials, plastic wrapping of bodies, prohibition of overnight vigils, and direct mortuary-to-grave burials, making it a particularly rich text for in-depth analysis.

Maskandi transcends being a musical genre and positions itself as a form of social journalism and a vocal archive. “Maskandi artists often express their experiences of poverty, inequality, migrancy and dispossession through music, hence becoming a form of protest against systemic poverty.” Yende asserts that “Maskandi is characterised by narrative lyricism, metaphor-rich language, and a close relationship between personal experience and communal values.”¹⁸ In this article, the song is used to access the voices of the marginalized and the perspective of those whose ontological crises were excluded from the state’s clinical discourse.

To ensure academic rigour, the lyrics of “*Bayakhala*” were transcribed and translated from isiZulu to English by the researcher, a native isiZulu speaker. The translations were independently cross-checked by an academic peer specialising in African Languages for hermeneutical and cultural accuracy. The study utilised thematic analysis, following the framework of Braun and Clarke.¹⁹ The coding and analysis process was iterative and proceeded through the following phases. 1. The transcript was read multiple times, and initial codes were generated inductively by identifying meaningful segments related to state intervention, ritual disruption, grief, and spiritual consequences (for example, *amadoda egqoke ezimhlophe qwa* “men wearing pure white”). 2. Codes were reviewed, collated, and grouped into broader categories. This phase involved constant comparison between the data, emerging codes, and relevant literature. 3. Themes were refined through several iterative cycles until they were coherent, distinct, and accurately captured the patterns in the lyrics in relation to the research questions. Overlapping or weak themes were merged or discarded. 4. Selected coded excerpts and developing themes were shared with an academic colleague familiar with qualitative research and Zulu cultural contexts for peer checking and feedback. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. 5. The emergent themes were juxtaposed against established African philosophical and ethnographic literature as well as official government health mandates. This final phase involved a critical side-by-side comparison between the lyrical content and state regulations, enabling a clear contrast between Western biosecurity epistemes and indigenous African ontologies of death.

Limitation and Ethical Consideration

This study is limited by its reliance on the analysis of a single Maskandi song. While “*Bayakhala*” offers rich and culturally resonant insights, the findings cannot be statistically generalised to the diverse experiences of all South African communities affected by COVID-19 burial regulations. Because the

¹⁸ Sakhiseni Joseph Yende, “Towards a Theory of Indigenosociomusicology: African Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge, Social Meaning, and Decolonial Music Studies,” *Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2026): 61–71.

¹⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

study focuses exclusively on Maskandi music, it does not explore how people expressed trauma through other artistic forms such as gospel music, reggae, hip-hop, or poetry. Furthermore, the data source is an artistic cultural text interpreted as testimony rather than an empirical dataset drawn from lived accounts of multiple bereaved individuals. Despite these limitations, in-depth qualitative engagement with a single cultural text is a recognised and valuable approach in interdisciplinary humanities and cultural studies research.

As this study involved the analysis of publicly available artistic material (a song released on YouTube and other streaming platforms), formal ethical clearance from an institutional review board was not required. Nevertheless, the researcher approached the data with cultural sensitivity and respect for the artist's voice and intent. All interpretations were grounded in the original isiZulu lyrics and contextualised within Zulu cultural frameworks. Translations were independently verified to ensure fidelity to the source material. No private or confidential information was used.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of *Bayakhala* and the prevailing state burial mandates reveals a systematic dismantling of the African work of death. The findings are categorized into three primary areas of disruption. The primary finding is the state's reclassification of the deceased from a social being to a biological hazard. The Natal Ndwandwe International documents the arrival of the deceased: "*Abantabami bafika bephethwe amadoda egqoke ezimhlophe qwa*" [My children arrived carried by men wearing pure white]. The pure white gear worn by officials is the personal protective equipment that was mandated by the government to be worn when handling the deceased. Richards calls such medicalization a violation of personhood and a biohazard.²⁰ In the African context, a person does not stop living when they die, but they transcend to the spiritual realm. Therefore, they are given respect and rights equivalent to those of a person who is alive. The government's insistence on strict regulation of double bags constitutes a biosecurity hegemony, as alluded to by Dube, which overlooks the ontological requirements of ritual cleansing.²¹

The findings reveal that the criminalization of traditional rituals is an epistemic injustice. The artist laments: "*Bahamba bengalalanga emakhaya okokugcina. Basuka emakhazeni bafakwa emgodini*" [They left without sleeping at home for the last time. They went from the mortuary straight to the pit]. Consequently, there was a Hermeneutical gap created. The government saw the taking of the deceased home as a biohazard, while the community saw it as a vital step for ancestral transition. Therefore, the epistemic injustice was because of the government's failure to recognise the validity of ancestral transition and effectively silencing the population's ability to exercise their moral and spiritual duty. Lastly, findings reveal that the state's attempt to replace rituals with bureaucratic compensation led to deep communal resentment, as revealed in this line: "*Mhlampe esabangcwaba kofanele sibagumbe futhi sibangcwabe futhi*. [Maybe those we buried we must dig them up and re-bury them again.] This reflects a sense of unresolved mourning. Nwoye posit that mourning is "work" that requires physical participation.²² Communities feel that they have failed to complete culturally mandated grief work. This work includes rituals such as cleansing, washing the body, burial, and commemoration. As a result, the transformative process of mourning is frozen, and the deceased becomes a wandering or unclean spirit unable to become a benevolent ancestor.

DISCUSSION

Under the state of emergency, the South African government implemented health interventions framed as neutral, science-based measures to mitigate viral transmission. However, as this discussion argues, these regulations were not culturally vacant; rather, they function as an extension of colonial hegemony

²⁰ Richards, "Ebola: How a People's Science Helped End an Epidemic."

²¹ Dube, "The Corpse and the Spirits: The Impact of COVID-19 on African Burial Rites."

²² A Nwoye, "Memory Healing Processes and Community Intervention in Grief Work in Africa," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 26, no. 3 (2005): 147–54.

and state monism.²³ By prioritizing the Western-centric biosecurity framework, the state effectively ignored the ontological requirement of the African funeral, treating the corpse as a biological hazard rather than a transitional ancestor. This section will present a thematic analysis of Natal Ndwandwe International's *Bayakhala* to serve as a vocal archive of this cultural trauma. The song is not a mere lament; it is an indictment of the state's failure to recognise the spiritual citizenship of its people. The following analysis is organized around four critical points of friction revealed in the lyrics. 1. The Biosecurity state vs ritual ontology. This is the clash between medicalized disposal and sacred preparation. 2. Spiritual limbo and the unquiet ancestors, which is the cosmological consequence of disrupted vigils and burials. 3. Epistemic violence and the plastic-wrapped identity, which speaks to the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems through sterile burial protocols. 4. The relational rapture and unresolved mourning, which is the psychological and social fallout of a failed duty to the deceased.

Spiritual Limbo and the Unquiet Ancestor

The South African government's pandemic regulations disrupted the funeral ceremony and destabilized the spiritual economy of the family. The song documents how the regulations created a spiritual limbo and manufactured a generation of unquiet ancestors.

Hulumeni aliboli icala
Aliboli icala
Uyakhumbula abantabami
Owabagcwaba nge-Corona
Bayakhala kumanje abangeni ekhaya
Angilugcinanga usiko mhla ngigcwaba abantabami
Hulumeni!

Mbiti explains that death is a multi-stage process where the deceased transitions from the Sasa to the Zamani.²⁴ Spiritual limbo occurs when the rituals of transition, such as the washing of the body and the overnight vigils (Umlindelo), are omitted. Kgatle specifically argues that the “Night Watch” acts as a spiritual escort.²⁵ It can be understood that the spiritual limbo evident in the lyrical content “*Bayakhala kumanje abangeni ekhaya*” [They are crying now, they have not entered home] is the consequence of government regulation. As Kgatle notes, during the pandemic, the prohibitions on vigils created a metaphysical traffic jam, where the spirit was blocked from reaching its destination.²⁶

Performing ritual ensures a safe and successful transition to the afterlife. When the dead are in a spiritual limbo, they become unquiet ancestors and disgruntled spirits. The song, as quoted in the lyrics below, documents that government regulation prevented them from keeping their rituals.

“Angilugcinanga usiko mhla ngingcwaba abantabami.”

Mbiti posits that the living-dead require ritual recognition to be peaceful. If they are buried badly, for instance, wrapped in plastic or placed in a mass grave without their family's witness, they do not become protective guardians; instead, they remain restless and unquiet.²⁷ The lyrics:

“Beza kabi bafulathele nezikhukhula ezigugula amaliba neziphepho oThongathi amathongo acasukile”

[They come badly, retreating with floods that wash away graves and winds at uThongathi; the ancestors are disgruntled] suggests that the state's biosecurity measures resulted in a cosmic imbalance. This implies that when the state intervenes in the spiritual economy of death, the consequences are not

²³ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics Public Culture, 15 (1) 11–40,” DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-113> (2003).

²⁴ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

²⁵ Kgatle, “Spirituality and Rituals in the Context of COVID-19: A South African Perspective.”

²⁶ Kgatle, “Spirituality and Rituals in the Context of COVID-19: A South African Perspective.”

²⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

merely psychological, but ecological and ancestral, manifesting as what the community interprets as the “ulaka lwabaphansi”, the wrath of the living-dead.

Therefore, the neglect of these rituals has implications such as misfortunes, unresolved grief and psychological trauma, and a broken bridge. Kgatle argues that communities believe that when ancestors are unquiet, they withdraw their protective presence, leading to family sickness, financial loss, or mysterious death within the lineage.²⁸ Mbiti suggests that rituals are for the living as much as the dead.²⁹ Hence, neglecting them denies the family closure. Therefore, this implication is permanent soul grief, where the living feel they have failed their most sacred duty, leading to long-term psychological distress and a sense of shame.

The Biosecurity State vs Ritual Ontology

The Biosecurity State had catastrophic implications for the social and spiritual fabric of the community. This is because of the neglect of ritual ontology. The lyrical content documents a fundamental tension between two competing systems of safety: the biological survival of the state and the spiritual survival of the family. The lyrics below highlight the dilemma.

*Abantabami bafika bephethwe amadoda
Egqoke ezimhlophe qwa*

The strong regulation of the use of personal protective equipment when handling human remains for the state was a materialistic concern. Dube is vindicated as he argues that the strict regulation of personal protective equipment creates a biosecurity hegemony.³⁰ Scientific authority is used to override all other forms of knowledge, including religion and tradition, in the name of public safety. The imposition of the regulations continues to pose an ontological violation. Dube describes ritual ontology as a worldview where death is not an end, but a mere physical transition.³¹ It is the science of becoming an ancestor. The lyrical content below indicates how this violation took place.

*Abangenanga ngish' ekhaya
Baqonda nabo emangcwabeni abantabami.
Maye maye maye
Bayakhala kumanje abangeni ekhaya*

Heading straight to the cemetery is a representative silencing of ritual ontology. Richards argues that for African communities, rituals like washing the body, guiding the spirit with umhlankosi are not optional decoration but a procedural requirement.³² Transitioning to the afterlife is heavily reliant on the success of these rituals. Just as a doctor follows protocol to save a life, the family, too, must follow a ritual protocol to save a soul. Therefore, this ontology posits that the deceased remains a person with rights and social needs even after they have stopped breathing. Dube argues that neglecting ritual ontology is an act of epistemic violence.³³ It invalidates the belief systems of the citizens and reduces them to superstitions and dangerous “super-spreader” activities. Richards observed that during the Ebola crisis, the fear of an angry spirit left a greater psychological trauma than the virus itself.³⁴ Therefore, the implication of sidelining ritual by the government leaves the communities with permanent spiritual anxiety that has greater implications than the outbreaks.

Epistemic Violence and the Plastic-Wrapped Identity

Plastic wrapping, which is evident in the lyrical content of the song, is the physical manifestation of Hermeneutical injustice. Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as a situation where a group of social

²⁸ Kgatle, “Spirituality and Rituals in the Context of COVID-19: A South African Perspective.”

²⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

³⁰ Dube, “The Corpse and the Spirits: The Impact of COVID-19 on African Burial Rites.”

³¹ Dube, “The Corpse and the Spirits: The Impact of COVID-19 on African Burial Rites.”

³² Richards, “Ebola: How a People’s Science Helped End an Epidemic.”

³³ Dube, “The Corpse and the Spirits: The Impact of COVID-19 on African Burial Rites.”

³⁴ Richards, “Ebola: How a People’s Science Helped End an Epidemic.”

experiences is obscured by the collective understanding because the concepts they use are not recognized by the dominant society.³⁵ The lyrical content below highlights the hermeneutical gap that was created by the government regulation.

*Kunabanye abangasekho phakathi kwethu
Sinethemba lokuthi bafika phakathi kwenu
Ngokuba bahamba kabi
Behamba ngesifo sethathamoya
Bahamba singabagezanga amakhaza
Abanye sabafihla begoqwe ngoshekhasi*

The lyrics above reveal the clash between the concept of biohazard and ancestral transition. The government regulation was justified as scientific, and rituals were invalidated on that basis. This is reflected in concerns expressed in the song over a deceased family relative wandering, not washed, and wrapped in plastic. The government did not recognise the validity of the ancestral transition; it effectively silenced the population's ability to explain why they needed to touch the body. Therefore, by imposing the language of Western epistemics (science and sanitation) on the population, the state committed epistemic injustice. The South African government regulation reflects a sense of dispossession. Mbembe extends the concept of Necropolitics from the state's power to dictate who lives and who dies to the state extending its sovereignty over the corpse.³⁶ Criminalization of the brief of the Department of Health protocols reflects the dispossession of the family's right to the corpse of their deceased family member. Therefore, the plastic wrap did not just contain a virus; it prevented the social grooming of the corpse. By bypassing the home vigil, the state ensured that the deceased's social identity was erased before it could be converted into an ancestral identity.

Lo hulumeni wayeqonde ukuthini mayethi asisabonwa isidumbu somufi?

Ma-Africa vulani amehlo!

Mhlampe inyama yomuntu isazongcwala ama-butcher

Lelizwe libi

The lyrical narration above reflects that the plastic-wrapped identity is a result of the state reducing the human being with a history, lineage, and a soul to biological remains (*isidumbu*). By wrapping the body in plastic and denying the family access to the body, the state physically and symbolically mutes the person's identity. Hence, according to the state, the human remains are not seen as an ancestor in waiting but as a vector of disease. Therefore, this is the ultimate form of Necropolitics, where the state asserts total ownership over the death-world, ensuring that the deceased's transition is dictated by a spreadsheet rather than a shrine. This imposition constitutes both legal and spiritual implications. As the state did not recognise the hermeneutical importance of rituals, mourners were treated as criminals for trying to perform their duties. This neglect results in a legal alienation, where the citizens feel that the law is an enemy to their soul peace. Therefore, as a result, the society suffers a broken lineage where the living are disconnected from the dead.

Relational Rapture and Unresolved Mourning

The South African government, through their regulation, created a silence that prevented the living from achieving closure, leading to what Nwoye defines as a crisis of grief.³⁷ The lyrical content of the song documents this grief. Nwoye describes African mourning as ritualized labor.³⁸ Therefore, grief is not something that is experienced privately, but it is something you "do" through communal vigils, wailing, and physical labor. The lyrical content documents a frozen and unstarted process of grief. This is because of the regulation that has blocked rituals.

Zinyanya zakithi nani mathongo akithi

³⁵ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford university press, 2007).

³⁶ Mbembe, "Necropolitics Public Culture, 15 (1) 11–40."

³⁷ Nwoye, "Memory Healing Processes and Community Intervention in Grief Work in Africa."

³⁸ Nwoye, "Memory Healing Processes and Community Intervention in Grief Work in Africa."

*Sikhala ngesililo sabakwethu abasishiya
Sangakwazi ukubaphelezela
Sasalela emuva nethambo labo
Laziwa uhulumeni ukuthi lalala kanjani*

The line “*sangakwazi ukubaphelezela*” highlights the unresolved grief. “*Ukubaphelezela*” is intended both figuratively and literally. With travel restrictions and capacity caps, relatives were denied opportunities to pay their final respects to the deceased. Figuratively, this means that when a mourner cannot wash the body, see the face, or shovel the soil, the grieving process remains unstated. This forms the crisis of grief, which Nwoye argues is because of the unfinished “work”, as the mind cannot accept the finality of death.³⁹ Harrop et al. and Khosa-Nkatini also state that when rituals are impossible, the transformation process of mourning is frozen.⁴⁰ The following lyrical content shows the implication of abandoning rituals.

*Ngisho bephansi bangofakazi ukuthi
Abakaze belale ngomhlane emakubo phansi
Emseleni esikhundleni sabo
Emakhandleleni sandlala izingubo zabo phansi
Bahamba bengalalanga emakhaya okokugcina
Basuka emakhazeni bafakwa emgodini*

As a consequence of abandoned rituals, the deceased becomes a wandering and unclean spirit, which is unable to transition to a benevolent ancestor, which is the core spiritual danger. The artist uses “*emgodini*” [In a pit], this is a deliberate choice of words, as it reveals the contrast between a respectful funeral that is a transition to the ancestral realm and the discarding of the biohazard human remains. Posel et al emphasize that a bad death brings a shadow over the whole family.⁴¹ This is a sense of social withdrawal. In families where burial rituals were not followed, they feel polluted and cursed, leading to a breakdown in the communal support systems that usually help people survive poverty and hardships. The following lyrics reveal this anxiety:

*Impephi ish' iphelele emabhalukweni
Abafa bafana nabangagcwatshiwe
Abaphezelwanga yithi izihlobo zabo
Nezidumbu zabo zabanjwa yizandla abangazazi
Kwaze kwaba ukuthi bangena phansi
Yingakho kwabona lapho bekhona bengazazi
Mhlampe esabangcwaba kofanele sibagumbe futhi sibangcwabe futhi.*

Harrop et al. associate this anxiety with higher levels of Prolonged Grief Disorder.⁴² The complicated spiritual grief evidenced in the lyrical content is the manifestation of violence and traumatic death. Nwoye argues that death is a communal event; the disruption of ritual prevents the community from collectively coming to terms with the loss, leaving a tear in the social fabric.⁴³ The survivors suffer from communal guilt and moral trauma. They feel they have committed a sin against their loved ones by allowing the state to handle their remains. Therefore, as a result, there is communal dysfunction, which manifests itself in weakened social cohesion and collective identity, risking cycles of misfortune attributed to angry ancestors.

³⁹ Nwoye, “Memory Healing Processes and Community Intervention in Grief Work in Africa.”

⁴⁰ Emily Harrop et al., “Prolonged Grief during and beyond the Pandemic: Factors Associated with Levels of Grief in a Four Time-Point Longitudinal Survey of People Bereaved in the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Frontiers in Public Health* 11 (2023): 1215881; H.P. Khosa-Nkatini, “The Trauma of a Sterilized Burial: COVID-19 and African Funeral Rites,” *Theologia Viatorum*, P 45, no. 1 (2021): 1–7.

⁴¹ Posel, Hunter, and Walker, “Investigating Death: The Politics of the Corpse in South Africa”, *African Studies*.”

⁴² Harrop et al., “Prolonged Grief during and beyond the Pandemic: Factors Associated with Levels of Grief in a Four Time-Point Longitudinal Survey of People Bereaved in the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

⁴³ Nwoye, “Memory Healing Processes and Community Intervention in Grief Work in Africa.”

CONCLUSION

The clash between state biosecurity protocols and African funeral ontologies during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals deep-seated epistemic injustice. In this article, this collision was demonstrated through the vocal archive of Natal Ndwandwe International's (ft. Kwazi Nsele) *Bayakhala*. The clinically and scientifically driven disposal of the dead violated core principles of African spirituality by reducing the deceased from a social and spiritual being to a mere pathological object. Synthesising the perspectives of various scholars, this study concludes that the neglect and silencing of African funeral rites produced devastating spiritual, psychological, and communal consequences. These include spiritual limbo, in which the deceased's transition to the ancestral realm is blocked; epistemic injustice, manifested in the invalidation and othering of African spirituality as "unscientific"; and relational trauma resulting from the denial of families' sacred duty to perform rituals of grief and transition. This leaves a lasting legacy of unresolved mourning and communal guilt. Natal Ndwandwe International's *Bayakhala* should be understood as a powerful protest song and an indictment of a legal system that remains culturally tone-deaf.

This article therefore calls for meaningful legal pluralism in public health policy. Future emergency regulations should not overlook African ontologies but actively accommodate them. Concrete measures include the development of culturally informed public health protocols that integrate indigenous ritual requirements (such as limited family viewing, supervised ritual washing under PPE protocols, or designated safe spaces for brief traditional rites); mandatory consultation with traditional leaders, religious authorities, and cultural specialists during the drafting and implementation of emergency regulations; and the establishment of clear frameworks for balancing epidemiological safety with cultural and spiritual rights, including the creation of joint bio-cultural advisory committees at national and provincial levels. Ultimately, this is a call for the democratic dispensation to move beyond Western-imposed knowledge hegemony. African ontologies and belief systems should be treated as legitimate points of departure in policy formulation, rather than peripheral considerations to be neglected in times of crisis.

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