The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:  
http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/

Available through a partnership with

Scroll down to read the article.
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 (nzukuru; pl. nzwukuru) 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. muroora; pl. varora) 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 sacri-
ficed 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 Gweva**

This present account of the *kurova gweva* ceremony for the spirit of Kaseke is one of the few to be recorded. Kaseke, a Zezuru nganga who lived in the Chihowa Native Purchase Area, passed away just over three years ago. He was a nganga of some standing in the Muhrewa 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

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 pro-
cession 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 instru-
ment 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 yekegocha 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, ndi-
chamutevera, iyewo chete, kuenda mbire’ (Ad-
vance, 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 assem-
bled 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 (*mbocha*)
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 masese (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 masese onto the
granite 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
*varoora* and the *mbira* was being played by
Fig. 1—The procession with the deceased's elder brother playing the mhiru, on its way to the grave.

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

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

Fig. 4—A nunurura affectionately clasping the grave.
Fig. 5—Two varoora sweeping the precincts of the grave.

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

Fig. 7—The beer pots inside the rashanga.

Fig. 8—With the spirit back the ceremony continued inside the main hut (timba). 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 hearing 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, yowere-re. He is now meat for roasting, Kill-kill. We are going to take him. Ha! ha! ha! ha! It is a man. It is a man, Haye. The leg was too heavy for the child. Haye! Haye! Hukuwe! Hukuwe! Haye!'

About a while there was a lull and the sawhira came up to Kaseke's pot of beer (tsotsontono). 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.

University of Rhodesia

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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

REFERENCES

SPEARES, J. 1928 The Burial and Succession Rites of a Mushona Chief. NADA, 6, 89.
WANE, F. J. 1931 The Ceremony of Kuroba Guba or Kadibura Guba. NADA, 9, 100.