No Rest for the Dead: Climate Change and Indigenous Burial Practices among the Shona People in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
This study utilizes a cultural destruction conceptual framework to examine the negative impact of climate change on burial practices – graves and their surrounding environments – among the Shona people of Zimbabwe who constitute the majority among Zimbabwe's ethnic groups. Among other practices, the Shona believe that burial is one of the rituals which determines the transition of the deceased's spirit into ancestorship and that the place of burial is a sacred site. Through death, the deceased joins those in the underworld – the ancestors. However, qualitatively, data obtained through participant observations and in-depth interviews which were thematically analyzed, established that the negative effects of climate change observable for example in the scarcity of watery environments for infant burials and the rapture of graves have caused trauma for indigenous communities. Participants who were voluntarily recruited through purposive sampling reported receiving revelations from their deceased relatives ascertaining that the climate-related events incrementally affected burial practices, thus affecting the eternal identity of the deceased. In addition, there is a scarcity of cattle and small grains for memorization rituals which are done at graves. Furthermore, a decreased precipitation resulted in high migration leaving the graves unattended in the rural communities. The study recommends culturally sensitive adaptation strategies used by communities in the Buhera district that protect both the physical integrity of burial environments and graves, and the spiritual meaning of rituals in the face of threats by climate change. The strategies include burying deceased relatives close to homesteads, intensifying a start-up of burial societies which mobilize resources towards the burial of community members and the prioritization of anthill burials. In terms of contribution, this research adds knowledge related to the nexus between climate change and cultural destruction.

Keywords: Ancestors, Buhera, climate change, cultural destruction, *guva*, infant burial, memorization rituals, Shona

Introduction
Across nations, climate change presents one of the biggest threats facing humankind today. The concept 'climate change' is difficult to define. According to the United

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), it is any change in climate over time due to either natural variability or human activity, which in the end alters the composition of the global atmosphere and is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods (Maseno *et al*., 2024, p. 8). Within the context of our study, climate change refers to environmental shifts that, beyond their atmospheric causes, precipitate the destruction or transformation of cultural heritage, ritual practices, and collective memory, thereby destabilizing symbolic orders and social cohesion. Situated in African religious traditions, this study is focused on Shona people who reside in the Buhera district. It should be pointed out right from the onset that 'Shona' is not a single homogeneous group but an umbrella term covering sub-groups such as the Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Korekore, and Ndau (Makaudze and Gudhlanga, 2014). The use of the term 'Shona' in Buhera is deliberately justified on the grounds that there is no single dominant ethnic group in the district. It is a conglomeration of the abovementioned ethnic groups who migrated from neighboring districts. Since each sub-group has its own dialect, it implies that the multiplicity of dialects points to the diversity of cultures within these different ethnic groups in the district (Humbe, 2021). However, because these people stay in the same vicinity, there is a fusion of traditional cultural practices and even language is shared, such that sometimes it is difficult for an outsider to separate the fine thread which ties these indigenous people together. Buhera is thus a cosmopolitan rural district. The identity of the Shona people in Buhera South is multiple and fluid, notably imposed from outside and self-created depending on their circumstances (Humbe, 2021).

The Buhera district provides a particularly relevant setting because it is a predominantly rural area where Shona cultural practices, specifically burial rites remain deeply rooted and actively observed. The Shona who constitute the majority of the indigenous people residing in this district continue to maintain strong ties to ancestral traditions, sacred landscapes, and customary land use. However, the Buhera district has been severely affected by climate change. It is prone to an array of changes characterized by extreme events such as droughts, heatwaves, raging wildfires, heavy rains accompanied by flash floods, cyclones, strong winds, and hailstorms becoming common.

Zimbabwe's Cemeteries Act (Chapter 5:04; ZimLII, 2016) outlines the legal framework for the creation, administration, and regulation of public cemeteries, covering trustee appointments, the interment of the indigent, and the upkeep of memorials. It operates in conjunction with local authority regulations and the Burial and Cremation Act (Chapter 5:03; Zimbabwe, 2016) to manage burial locations. However, in the Buhera district, gravesites and their surrounding environments are experiencing the brunt of climate change. This reality is supported by Dinah Voyles Pulver (2023) who remarks that climate change is un-burying graves, thus making it an expensive, 'traumatic', and confounding problem. In the Buhera district there is an extinction of burial spaces for infants, a non-performance of grave rituals and an un-burying of graves due to the negative effects of climate change. Given the reverence accorded to ancestors and the collective significance of rituals conferred to the dead, the connection between climate change and death rituals is a significant study.

Although this article deals with the situations being experienced by the 'living dead', its rationale is to contribute to the 'living' by helping them to be conscious of the threats posed by climate change to their cultural burial identity, create adaptive strategies that respect burial traditions, and ensure intergenerational continuity in burial practices and belief systems, even in the face of environmental change. The article is structured into various sections: First, it problematizes the impact of climate change in the indigenous Shona people's worldview by indicating that their burial culture has been hit hard by cultural destruction; second, it provides a brief literature review followed by a section which gives an overview of the Shona people's traditional religious worldview on graves. A grave is a central sacred phenomenon which connects the Shona people's spirituality and their identity (Taringa, 2014); the paper ends by proposing strategies like burying the dead near homesteads, prioritizing anthills as burial sites. While these practices are not novel in Buhera, the study suggests scaling up the practice. It also proposes that graves should be fortified against the impact of climate change. The ensuing section conceptualizes the cultural destruction of the grave among the indigenous Shona people.

A Conceptual Understanding of the Cultural Destruction of the Grave among the Indigenous Shona People

Given the centrality of a grave site and its connection to the identity of the Shona people, this study draws on the insights of the cultural destruction concept as lens to understand the negative impact of climate change in the Buhera district. The foundational proponent is Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer who coined both 'genocide' and the specific destruction of culture in 1944 (Novic, 2016). 'Cultural destruction' entered scholarly discussions to denote the annihilation of human-created artifacts, especially following World War 2, becoming more notable alongside debates concerning heritage conservation and human rights (cf. Cultural Destruction, 2026). Over the years, the concept has been expanded by several sociologists, legal scholars, and anthropologists. For example, Ward Churchill, a contemporary scholar and activist has written extensively on 'cultural genocide' regarding the historical policies of forced assimilation, boarding schools, and land dispossession against indigenous peoples in North America (Ryser, Marchand and Parker, 2020). Modern historians and scholars like Parzinger emphasize how intentional iconoclasm and the destruction of cultural heritage during war and colonialism act as mechanisms to erase collective memory and identity (Parzinger, 2022). Basically, the cultural destruction perspective looks into the intentional or accidental elimination of the cultural heritage, encompassing physical artifacts, intangible customs, and traditional knowledge systems. This process directly weakens community identity and resilience, affecting social sustainability. Such actions jeopardize the historical record and weaken the shared memory of impacted communities, thus hindering intergenerational fairness (cf. Cultural Destruction, 2026).

This study regards climate change as a driver of cultural destruction. It therefore defines cultural destruction as climate change's destructive impact on local cultures, encompassing objects and sites as well as other forms of cultural expressions such as traditions, beliefs, and knowledge (Anheier and Juergensmeyer, 2012). Cultural destruction is a poorly acknowledged aspect of climate-related loss and damage but represents one of the most destructive effects of the climate crisis specifically on indigenous cultures. Building on that idea, this research examines how climate change is perceived as a danger to indigenous cultures by investigating burial and ancestral traditions that are associated with the grave among the Shona people's cultural identity. Climate change results in the physical damage of graves due to floods that sweep away burial locations; soil erosion that unveils or moves remains; and drought that compels communities to relocate (World Weather Attribution, 2019). From the viewpoint of a cultural destruction concept, this represents not merely environmental harm but also cultural degradation. When burial environments and graves are ruined, rituals associated with those locations are interrupted, contact with ancestors is thought to be impacted, and the sanctity of the land is undermined.

In indigenous Shona communities, burial grounds are more than just physical places. They are hallowed grounds linking the living with their ancestors, locations where ceremonies uphold spiritual equilibrium and emblems of heritage, identity, and community belonging. John Mbiti (1991) rightly remarks that a grave and its immediate surrounding environment are a sacred religious space and shrine. Being the only space where ancestral rituals are performed, there is a general understanding that the African religious traditions of the Shona regard the gravesite as an important ritual site. As a sacred abode of the ancestors, the grave is comparable to the traditional kitchen hut space called *chikuva* (*raised earthen platform*) which is believed to be the abode of ancestral spirits (Humbe, 2021). It explains why among the Shona people, a grave is known as *imba yemufi* (*house of the deceased*) (Humbe, 2021). It is a sacred space that houses the family's living-dead member. There is ethnographic evidence in Bourdillon's (1987) studies that the deceased remains in constant interaction with the living relatives through dreams and visions. In some of the visions and dreams, spirits of the deceased people whose remains are not properly buried will be demanding for a decent burial (Fontein, 2022). This idea of having the dead coming back to interact with the living relatives makes graves sacred phenomena. Due to the graves' sacredness, taboos such as not to point with a finger at a grave or playing at the grave site must be observed to avoid annoying the deceased. In addition, making noise at a grave is prohibited (Mahohoma, 2020, p. 8). This implies that graves hold strong discursive power as markers of the identity of deceased people in a specific sacred place. Being deeply symbolic, gravesites are places where a family draws its history and identity (Krikler, 2023, p. 1). Thus, the Shona people have a proverb stating, *hakuna musha usina rinda* (*there is no homestead without a grave*) (Humbe, 2021).

This means that a community is known through its ancestors and where they are buried. Taking this perspective, the negative impact of climate change on burial sites is tantamount to cultural destruction where there is an erasure of history, memory, spirituality, and identity of a people. The proceeding paragraphs constitute a review literature related to this study.

A Brief Literature Review

Previous research in Environmental Science, Heritage Studies, and Anthropology, among others, connects the negative effects of climate change to infrastructure and ecosystems, focusing mainly on historic and culturally important places (cf. Mueller and Meindl, 2017, p. 277). Such studies do not cover discussions regarding the impact of climate change on grave sites. From the perspective of aesthetics and culture, death studies and grave studies connect grave decorations, inscriptions, location, and plentitude of gravestones to the community's attitudes and beliefs (Hijiya, 1983, p. 339). Similarly, Joachim Whaley (2012) examines the formal rituals associated with the last rite of passage and the social attitudes towards death and dying.

Perspectives that connect grave sites to collective memory compliment this study. For example, Ruin (2015), as well as Christensen and Sandvik (2016) describe a grave as a site of memory. This indicates that a child's grave is not simply a monument, but a memory site. Most Western scholars regard graves and funerals as symbolic communicative practices that construct and express an individual or collective ethnic and cultural identity (cf. Reimers, 1999). A significant study by Roger Marjavaara and Wingren Carola reports that torrential rainfall resulting in 3,000 landslides inflicted severe damage on cemeteries during 2014 in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Marjavaara and Carola, 2024). In an African context, the deterioration or destruction of ancestral burial sites can carry significant cultural consequences, as these locations are frequently vital to religious traditions and communal identity. The idea of cultural destruction emphasizes how environmental changes can undermine not only physical infrastructures but also the continuity of culture (Kiki, 2025).

This study builds on perspectives that connect gravesites to collective memory. With a focus on the Shona people in the Buhera district, Masimba Mavaza remarks that people who live in the diaspora or urban centers, prefer to be buried upon death in their rural communities (Mavaza, 2022). Most Zimbabweans place significance over being buried next to the graves of their loved ones. Conveniently, while visiting the living relatives, they would also visit the grave, bring flowers, and clean the grave site (Mavaza, 2022; Marjavaara and Carola, 2024; Pulver, 2023).

Archaeological research offers important perspectives on how ancient cultures modified their burial customs due to changes in climate. For example, studies of the Lothagam North Pillar Site close to Lake Turkana in Kenya indicate that prehistoric societies modified their burial practices due to environmental alterations, including changes in rainfall patterns and growing aridity (Hildebrand *et al*., 2018). Muposhi, Chokera, and Mudzimba, writing from the perspective of information and marketing sciences, explore 'green burial' as an environmentally sustainable response to climate pressures in Zimbabwe (Muposhi, Chokera and Mudzimba, 2023). They highlight tensions between cultural beliefs, ecological sustainability, and burial infrastructure. In their recommendations, they suggest legislation and infrastructure development to reconcile climate change with burial practices (Muposhi *et al*., 2023). Results of Hildebrand *et al*.'s (2018) study indicate that the connection between climate and burial customs is not recent but has historically been an evolving element of human adaptation. These historical viewpoints are essential for comprehending current challenges being faced by the Buhera communities, as they illustrate that indigenous communities have traditionally created adaptive approaches to climate change.

Indigenous knowledge systems, commonly known as traditional ecological knowledge, are crucial in shaping burial customs. These systems involve a comprehensive knowledge of terrain, soil characteristics, and seasonal patterns, guiding choices regarding burial timing and site (Berkes, 2012). Burial locations are frequently chosen with consideration for environmental appropriateness and spiritual importance. Nonetheless, climate change is interrupting these knowledge systems by changing environmental patterns and decreasing their reliability. Consequently, methods that were previously dependable might not be practical anymore, prompting communities to adjust or alter customs. Using an eco-theological analysis of the African Initiated Churches (AICs), Molly Manyonganise and Tawanda Matutu established that these churches rely heavily on water for rituals including burial-related rites. They argue that climate change induced water scarcity challenges burial and ritual

practices, requiring theological adaptation (Manyonganise and Matutu, 2024). This upheaval signifies not merely a practical obstacle but also a cultural decline, as wisdom transferred across generations grows increasingly irrelevant in evolving circumstances. Having reviewed some related literature to this study, the ensuing sections bring an overview of the Shona people's traditional religious worldview on graves.

Background of the Shona People's Traditional Religious Worldview on Graves

This section intends to present a tripartite worldview of the Shona people (Shoko, 2007) and it shapes rural communities' burial practices. First, the Shona people believe in the 'spiritual world' or 'world above', the abode of the Supreme Being *Mwari*, ancestral spirits, and alien spirits. Second, they believe in the 'physical world' of human beings, flora, fauna, rocks, rivers, forests, and mountains. For them, the physical world was created by *Mwari,* hence *Mwari* is *Musiki* (*the creator*). *Mwari* is reached through the ancestral intermediaries (the living dead) and is the giver and taker of life. In Shona, ancestral spirits are *vadzimu* (Humbe, 2021). Being involved in the everyday lives of the people, the Shona people believe that ancestral spirits are the custodians of natural resources and they preside over human conduct. Third, the Shona believe in the underworld: This is where graves of deceased people, as well as tree roots, minerals, underground water, and mermaids are found.

The above paragraph has established the three worlds and their relation with each other in Shona cosmology. These three worlds are intertwined (Shoko, 2007). Human beings ensure that the three worlds are in constant interaction through ritual and conciliation. For example, they perform burial rituals to facilitate the transition of the deceased member to the underworld. Ancestral spirits are responsible for watching over the living relatives and warding-off misfortunes (Shoko, 2007). However, ancestral spirits can be angered or offended when rituals or traditions are not observed by the living. In retaliation, the ancestors withdraw protection, thus allowing misfortunes, sickness, and pandemics, as death strikes their progenies.

Building on the above notion of the sacred role of ancestors, it can be stated that ancestral spirits do not operate in isolation. The principal political unit in the indigenous Shona society is the traditional leadership. Traditional leaders possess the sacred duty of custodianship over human affairs and natural resources on behalf of ancestors in the communities (Bourdillon, 1987). The communities are primarily organized around kinship. The location of gravesites is determined by kinship with the approval of traditional leadership. Hence, the Shona have both family and community gravesites or cemeteries. The loved ones need to be memorialized through graving. The grave is a pathway to the ancestors, a space known as *imba yemufi* (*house of the deceased*) where the deceased are laid (*kuradzikwa*) for them to rest (*vazorore*) (Mwandayi, 2011). From the grave, the deceased communicate with the living relatives. Socially, they are the heritage markers of the living (Krikler, 2023) and must be conserved for future generations.

It is imperative to point out that in the past before modernization, graves were built using stones without mortar. The dry construction ensured that the stones were carefully interlocked, creating a stable and long-lasting structure. Today, graves of plain and flat rectangular parallelepipeds are constructed using farm bricks with mortar and plastered with cement (Mawere, 2014). The position of the head is identified by a raised platform carrying an inscription about the deceased's name, date of birth, and date of death. Depending on affordability, some families replace the old grave structures with tombstones (Mawere, 2014). Visiting a grave or performing rituals is a sign of reverence for the dead. Before performing rituals or renovations, family members require permission from traditional leaders. In the next section, the article deals with the methodology of the study.

Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study employs phenomenology of religion as a tool to access an 'experience-near perspective', which forms the descriptive and analytical approach in this study (Traphagan, 2018, p. 163). Fieldwork was carried out in the Buhera district of the Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe, from January 2024 to April 2025. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Ethics, Philosophy, Religion, and Theology, Great Zimbabwe University, and the Certificate Reference Number is EPRTSREC 0022. Voluntary recruitment of 20 indigenous Shona participants who were all above 18 years was done using purposive sampling after verbal consent was obtained. Besides age, the

participants were recruited based on their religious affiliation, occupation, sex, and marital status. All participants possessed first-hand information concerning the negative effects of climate change on Shona burial practices. Information was gathered through in-depth interviews and participant observation from affected graves through transacted walks. Responses from all 20 participants were their personal views which were recorded and subsequently transcribed with their consent. The transcripts were compared with and verified against recordings for precision. All recordings were kept in secure systems protected by passwords or on encrypted drives. Participants' opinions were categorized to ensure their confidentiality. Names of places and participants were kept confidential. A thematic data analysis was used to identify key variables and concepts on challenges caused by climate change to burial practices and graving culture in the Buhera district.

Now that the research design, methods of data collection, and analytical techniques have been detailed, the next section showcases the study's findings, emphasizing how the experiences and viewpoints of participants illustrate the influence of climate change on burial customs and related cultural traditions within the Shona community.

Findings

In the proceeding paragraphs, the study presents findings which are grouped in four broad thematic discussions:

- Dewatering swampy areas.
- Depopulation of communities.
- Rapture of graves due to floods and cyclones.
- Need for ancestor memorialization and adaptation strategies.

Dewatering Swampy Areas in the Buhera District

Several elderly people informed this study that among the Shona people, stillbirths and infants who pass away shortly after birth are placed in a clay pot and buried along the riverbank or at a swamp area. Funerals of stillbirths are still conducted in Buhera. The researchers of this study attended two funerals of stillbirths and established that mourners did not cry and that only elderly women buried the corps. Elderly women who are privy to the burial procedures explained that the little corpses are buried in shallow pits in swampy areas since it is a cultural practice done to ensure that the dead infants continue experiencing the same watery conditions which they had in their mothers' wombs. The spiritual import of this practice as articulated by the elderly women was that burying a stillbirth in a swampy area symbolizes the infant's liminal status. They affirmed that in traditional religious belief systems, the child is not considered fully part of the living community and therefore cannot be integrated into the ancestral realm. The participants therefore argued that a swampy burial returns the child to the primordial source, that is the womb, acknowledging the cycle of life and death. These study findings corroborate Chitakure's study among the Karanga of Masvingo when he opines that swampy burial rituals are religiously observed because most of the Shona peoples believe that the death of either a full-term baby or fetus poses much danger to the family and the community (Chitakure, 2020, p. 144). Chitakure further notes that the burial in a swampy area or near the flowing water is intended to cool their frustration for having died prematurely (Chitakure, 2020, p. 144). In addition, it is believed that burying along the riverside would wash away the evil spirit that causes stillbirth.

Nevertheless, for the participants, climate change, characterized by heightened droughts, diminished precipitation, and the desiccation of wetlands, has resulted in the vanishing of these ecosystems, thereby directly hindering the capacity to conduct the ritual as intended. When climate change eliminates access to these watery environmental settings, the infant burial ritual is jeopardized of its fundamental spiritual meaning. Participants argued that interring an infant in dry soil rather than in a marsh severs the symbolic link to the womb, diminishes convictions regarding spiritual purification and safeguarding, and may induce worries about lingering spiritual ramifications. Consequently, climate change not only changes the processes of burial but also questions their significance.

Confirmation of the above views on the destruction of the cultural burial of infants came from one elderly woman when she narrated, 'Whilst the mourning rite is prohibited during the funerals, the mothers grieve endlessly when their deceased infants are not accorded proper burial rites in swampy areas' (DCR13, 2024). Two elderly women participants remarked that the lack of proper burial rites for

stillbirth corpses affect future conception. Failure in future conception comes as a result of the fact that the spirit of the dead infant is believed to be restless and keeps on coming back to its mother. Women who intend to bear children after having improper burials for their stillbirths are distressed. This illustrates how climate change can cause psychological harm, impacting traditional belief systems, emotional health, and social stability. The improper burial of infants causes their spirits not to rest. In the practice of infant burial in Buhera, where elderly women have a leading role, climate change has impacted their function as cultural guardians. Their capacity to pass on practical knowledge to younger generations has been destroyed. The ecological understanding within infant burial customs becomes increasingly irrelevant, leading to a slow decline of indigenous religious knowledge systems on burial sites and rites. This corresponds with the notion of cultural destruction due to climate change, where customs reliant on certain cultural environments are threatened with extinction. A typical example of climate change's environment impact is migration as indicated below.

Depopulation of the Buheran Communities

Through transect walks, we discovered that villagers in the Buhera district largely rely on rainfall for agricultural activities and livelihood. Adverse impacts of climate change have triggered the emptying of the dry and drought-stricken district through out-migration of middle-aged working-class families to cities like Harare and neighboring countries like South Africa seeking for better livelihood opportunities. We observed abandoned cracking graves at several *matongo* (*abandoned homesteads*). Traditional leaders bemoaned migration as one of the causes of abandonment of graves in the Buhera area. For the traditional leaders, a complete indigenous Shona worldview consists of graves taken care of by the living relatives. Due to climate change, the bond which used to exist between living relatives and the departed ones has been broken. Climate change has negatively influenced the religio-cultural practices of keeping and maintenance of graves. Traphagan (2018, p. 168) echoes similar sentiments stating that these graves become like discarded trash with no one to take care of them. They are just scattered around with no one cleaning the area or making rituals. It is not that people have moved away; rather, no one was left to care for the graves (Traphagan, 2018, p. 168). This migration is not just demographic, but it has cultural consequences too.

Cultural consequences of climate change were evidenced in this study when we were informed that spirits of the deceased whose graves were not being taken care of were communicating about the state of their graves with living relatives living in far-away places. Thus, according to an elderly man who is also a traditional leader, 'a man who had left this village 20 years ago recently came back saying that for quite a long time he has been dreaming of his father telling him to come back and repair his father's house that is his grave which had developed cracks due to intense heat. The deceased father communicated explicitly to his son that the state of his grave was causing his spirit not to rest, and the man narrated that he was feeling guilty for neglecting his father's grave' (DCR5, 2025). The content of the dream shows that climate change has caused a collapse of the Shona religio-cultural framework. In this religio-cultural framework graves are not depicted as lifeless areas, but as the homes of ancestors which should be managed by living relatives. Thus, caring for graves preserves the connection between the living and the deceased.

The above information from DCR5 also serves to indicate that climate change-related displacements have altered issues of honor associated with death rituals (Basure *et al*., 2021, p. 83). This is a growing problem in the sense that when the graves develop cracks with no one to repair them, then the deceased spirits become unhappy and restless. Some participants remarked that when graves are not maintained, the spirits of the deceased come to torment and traumatize the living relatives, reminding them to renovate the graves. That climate change induced migration implies that there is cultural destruction in rural communities. This occurs due to the infrequent execution of rituals related to grave upkeep and a decline in the transfer of knowledge about burial practices across generations. In this vein, climate change does not only impact the physical and social systems, but it also creates spiritual uneasiness and guilt among migrants. Hence, the restlessness of both the deceased's spirits and the living relatives in the Buhera district is a consequence of substantial migration of middle-aged working-class families to urban cities and nearby Southern African countries due to the unfeasibility of rain-fed agricultural livelihoods. It is a form of cultural destruction not by choice but due to circumstances. Graves which were being treated as active cultural sites have become neglected relics which have been described by Traphagan (2018, p. 168) as 'discarded trash'. Another way of perceiving

graves as neglected relics is the omission and/or abandonment of memorization rituals as exhibited below.

Need for Ancestor Memorialization at Graves

Responses from participants indicated that the indigenous Shona people usually perform rituals at graves to honor their dead who are also known as ancestral spirits. Participants used varied terms or descriptions for the ritual, such as *Magadziro, kudzora mufi mumusha*, and *kurova guva*. All of them can be translated with *bringing back ceremonies*. It has become a tradition in Buhera, like anywhere else in Zimbabwe, that in the month of August, families gather to perform bringing back ceremonies at the graves of their deceased relatives and unveiling tombstones. This study finding resonates with Traphagan's (2018, p. 168) submission that adult children are expected to care for the ancestral spirits of their families through a combination of ritual memorialization and caring for the family gravesite. Male elderly participants suggested that traditional beer brewed using small grains is a prerequisite for the successful performance of the rituals. The living relatives offer care through rituals and offerings; in return, the ancestors grant protection, guidance, and blessings. The rituals of memorization are essential because when snuff and traditional beer are poured onto graves, they act as a symbolic 'feeding' of the departed. This represents gestures of remembrance and connection with the departed family members. However, due to climate change induced drought, participants reacted saying there is now a scarcity of grain to brew traditional beer, and cattle which are slaughtered during this crucial ritual of honoring their dead. Thus food insecurity and depletion of cattle herds caused by climate change have put on hold some of the rituals which used to be performed for the deceased at graves. If these rituals are not carried out, the connection with the spiritual realm is interrupted, and the living relatives' duty to care for the departed remains unmet, resulting in a strained or severed bond.

Participants' responses to the issue of the omission of rituals indicated that there were direct implications for the state of the spirits of their deceased relatives. The spirits become restless and unsettled because they feel neglected, forgotten, and uncared for. These spirits remain in a liminal state since they are not yet integrated as ancestors through bringing back ceremonies. The following were the end results of omitting memorialization rituals on living relatives: Mental illnesses, impotence, marriage break ups, or any kind of misfortunes to the immediate family members. Findings of this study confirm Traphagan's (2018, p. 168) sentiments arguing that care of one's ancestors through rituals and offerings made at the family grave site is the most important component of religious practice in Japan. The same view was also echoed by Bourdillon (1987) who wrote about the Shona in Zimbabwe, when he maintained that Shona families perform rituals and offerings at graves to maintain ancestral harmony. If the rituals are not performed, then the spirits of the deceased become sad and lonely because no one is caring for them (Traphagan, 2018, p. 168). The prevenient information is crucial in understanding that climate change has resulted in the abandonment of ancestral memorialization rituals at the graves. A perspective given by participants on the experiences of the villagers in the Buhera communities is first, the deceased are not at peace; second, the deceased are openly showing discontent; and finally, the deceased might be punishing or reminding the living of their responsibilities. The proceeding paragraphs present communication which was done by a deceased woman to her daughter after she became graveless.

The Deceased Became Graveless

A common understanding from participants is that climate change has birthed unpredictable floods and cyclones. They narrated that there was serious destruction of graves due to floods and tropical Cyclone Idai, which hit the eastern region of Zimbabwe on March 15, 2019. They confirmed that some of the graves were washed away, while some fell in, and some raptured exposing human remains to the environment. One participant recounted:

> I dreamt of my mother telling me that she was naked and she wanted us to clothe her. When the cyclone subdued, we went to her grave which is about 500 meters from this home and we found that there was a landslide which had affected our mother's grave. It was so traumatizing to see that our deceased mother had become graveless. We informed traditional leaders and her natal family to organize for a reburial after performance of some rituals to appease her spirit. Her bones and some of her kitchen utensils were scattered all over. The situation was so emotional.

> It was this feeling of establishing an accurate inventory of her remains which made us cry afresh for some days (DCR4, 2025).

Some participants who confirmed the occurrence of the above incident narrated by DCR4 emphasized that there was a conflict which had raged on for so many years between the natal and marital family of DCR4's mother which resulted in the delay of the performance of the bring back ceremony. Participants were convinced that culturally, this incident was very rare, and it meant that the deceased was not resting. In the dream described by the participant, 'nakedness' symbolizes a loss of dignity and safety, indicating that the grave (her 'home') has been destroyed and requesting for a ritual performance. The anguish it brought to DCR4's remaining family members was 'traumatising' (Pulver, 2023). The rapture of the grave was tantamount to the desacralization of the deceased's body remains. This is because among the Shona people, observing human remains on the earth surface is a serious cultural taboo. Relatives with graves which were affected grieved twice – during the funeral and after the rapture of the graves. When graves are not destructed, they function as sacred enclosures, isolating the deceased from the realm of the living. The body in the grave is then treated with honor, shielding, and safeguarding it through rituals.

Among other reasons, the Shona of Buhera treated buried corpses with honor, shielding and safeguarding it through rituals because burial represents a final, sacred placement of the body in the grave as a transition into the ancestral realm. When graves are vandalized by floods and cyclones, it consequently means that the finality of interment is undone. The deceased is disturbingly removed from their grave, once metaphorically regarded as the 'home of resting', which no longer exists. The above account by DCR4 illustrates how climate change can severely disturb both the physical integrity of graves and the spiritual traditions and burial practices in the Shona culture. The effect is both substantial and highly symbolic, carrying significant implications for how the departed are perceived to 'rest'. Drawing from the aforementioned findings, the coming section presents several important lessons about the impact of climate change on indigenous people's burial practices.

Lessons Learnt from the Impact of Climate Change on Indigenous People's Burial Practices

The study exposed the adverse impact of climate change in the Buhera district, highlighting the issues associated with cultural destruction and the impossibility of eternal rest for the deceased (Marjavaara and Carola, 2024, p. 1). In Shona cosmology, life does not cease at death; it evolves into ancestral existence, preserved through appropriate burial, ongoing grave care, and the execution of rituals. In all instances, a common belief arises which is that when burial customs are interrupted, the deceased cannot rest, they experience neglect, exposure, or dishonor, and they express distress through dreams, adversities, or health issues. The outcome is a lack of spiritual equilibrium. This disparity impacts the departed (who stay restless) and the living (who face misfortune, guilt, and worry). Therefore, climate change disrupts not just ecosystems but also the ethical and spiritual framework of the indigenous Shona society. The bond connecting the living, the dead, and the earth is broken, leaving both the living and the departed in a position of disconnection. The dislocation is happening on multiple levels. There is physical dislocation where people migrate away from ancestral land, cultural dislocation which is regarded through a decline of burial rituals and practices, and lastly spiritual dislocation realized by the idea that ancestors are no longer properly integrated or cared for.

Traditionally graves symbolized permanence, a sacred structure, and a stable link to ancestors. Nonetheless, climate change brought about instability (flooding, erosion, and drought) and unpredictability (cyclones and changing seasons). This has changed the burial custom from a reliable cultural foundation into a delicate and unpredictable practice, challenging the concept of a 'final resting place'. It is against this backdrop that the study helps living communities to recognize threats to their cultural identity, develop adaptive strategies that still honor traditional burial practices, and maintain intergenerational continuity despite environmental change as indicated in the section below.

Adapted Indigenous Burial Strategies in the Face of Climate Change

The research acknowledges that climate change is culturally destructing the ways in which indigenous Shona people interact with their deceased relatives and connect with their ancestors. Additionally,

climate change has also negatively affected the Shona people of Buhera's perceptions of identity, belonging, and continuity. In the Shona setting, burial traditions are not secondary but essential to humanity within a moral realm that encompasses both the living and the deceased. When these traditions are interrupted, it is not merely culture that fades away, but also a means of comprehending existence itself. To this end, the study considers the following various culturally sensitive adaptation strategies used by communities in the Buhera district that protect both the physical integrity of burial environments and graves and the spiritual meaning of rituals in the face of threats by climate change.

The communities' adaptation strategies resonate well with the following questions which were raised by Marjavaara and Carola (2024, p. 9): First, how will the knowledge of vulnerable cemeteries affect the process of selecting places of burial for family members and people's possibility to be buried adjacent to a close family member? In addition, how will it affect the feeling of security and wellbeing when buried kin are at risk of disturbance and thereby will lose the permanent rest that was the chosen option? The study established that burying deceased relatives close to homesteads has been understood as an effective response and an adaptation strategy to climate change since proximity of the graves gives the living relatives an obligation to make a continual check on the state of the graves. Thus, if anything happens to the grave, it can be noticed easily and quickly. Maintaining systematic monitoring of graves by the living relatives helps to contribute towards the sustainable development of the concerned communities' cultural property.

Participants explained that they have started burial societies which mobilize resources towards the burial of community members. Through burial societies, communities in Buhera have abandoned using tree logs which have become extinct due to the climate, to cover the wooden coffin or corpse wrapped by a reed mat during the burial process. Instead, the communities have resorted to reinforcing graves with durable materials such as concrete slabs and concrete linings which fortify the strength of the grave. The communities have embarked on planting trees at grave sites to reduce soil erosion. This aids in maintaining the honor and stability of burial locations, even amidst climate change.

Another strategy mentioned by participants was that they now prioritize anthills as burial sites. This is a long held cultural practice which communities now find to be very crucial due to the impact of floods and cyclones on graves. Anthills are on elevated ground and are resistant to floods and erosion, something which guarantees the eternal rest of the deceased. Besides, burying a relative on an anthill restores cultural significance for the participants: When a person wants to make an oath, they say *ndinopika nababa vangu vari pachuru* (*I swear with my father who is buried on an anthill*). Burying the deceased on anthills has some religio-cultural significance, for an anthill is understood to be a connection point between the earth and underworld.

Regarding ritual adaptation and symbolic substitution, certain families in Buhera have opted to conduct memorization rituals individually rather than as a community. This is because of the limited availability of grains, livestock, and water necessary for ceremonial activities. When the community is excluded, the families utilize minor symbolic amounts of beer, snuff, and meat. However, rituals are meant to be collective acts. Without witnesses, the memorization rituals lose their social legitimacy and communal binding force. The research further determined that the Buhera communities no longer possess a designated specific time of year for conducting memorization rituals. Certain individuals are carrying them out in December when resources from family members working in cities and abroad are accessible.

Conclusion

The study connected the Shona people's practices associated with burial to climate change and discovered that a climate crisis poses cultural destruction especially to traditions associated with graving in indigenous communities. Evidence from the study indicated that the acute risks of cultural destruction are causing discomfort for the deceased and their living relatives. The results of this study can be used to generate knowledge for communities to rethink burial practices in ways that remain spiritually meaningful while adapting to environmental realities, for example, identifying alternative sacred spaces, modifying rituals without losing symbolic value, and integrating ecological awareness into tradition.

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