

Shona Religion and Beliefs

Even though the majority of Shona people believe in God, virtually all of them still believe their ancestral spirits are their supernatural protectors. It is this belief that brings has perpetuated an intriguing religion and culture, supported by a set procedures, protocol and customs. Until recently these customs, like mbira music have all been passed down the generations orally.

Death and Dying in Shona Culture

When a grown person dies in the Shona culture, it is believed that his spirit wanders about. It is a homeless spirit. Only until the surviving relatives of the deceased "welcome back" his or her spirit does it become a legitimate ancestral or family spirit.

At the burial of a grown person, one who has left a wife or husband and children, special arrangements are made to enable the living to welcome back the spirit of the deceased. The deceased is believed to have two (2) shadows - a black shadow representing his flesh and a white shadow representing his soul or spirit. During the burial, a long stick, the height of the grave is rested against the body of the deceased. Its top end will be visible on the edge of the grave after burial. After the soil around the grave has settled, the stick is removed leaving a thin hole down into the grave. The stick is normally removed after several months. It is believed that the spirit will come out through the hole and manifest itself as a worm or caterpillar which will turn into the deceased's spirit and wander about. As soon as the stick is removed, one of the surviving relatives periodically visits the grave to see if they can find the caterpillar or gonye. When the spirit caterpillar comes out, it will soon turn into the deceased's spirit. As soon as the caterpillar is found, word is passed among family members that the spirit has come out and is therefore wandering about without a home.

Kurova Guva or Bira

The family will wait approximately a year after the deceased's death to hold a special ceremony to accept and welcome his or her wandering spirit (or Mudzimu) back to the family. This ceremony is called kurova guva. In other parts of Zimbabwe is called bira. By the time this ceremony occurs, a descendant of the deceased will have been chosen as the Svikiro or spirit medium. In some families the oldest son is normally the spirit medium. However in other situations the spirit may choose its own spirit medium. The spirit chooses its own medium by causing an incurable illness to the medium-to-be which can only be diagnosed and treated by an African doctor or n'anga. The n'anga simply tells the family to complete a ceremony that designate the sick as the spirit medium of the deceased, and he or she will no longer be ill.

Before the bira ceremony is conducted, beer is brewed from rapoko or kiffir corn. The family gathers and a beast is slaughtered in honor of the incoming spirit. On the day of the ceremony, very early in the morning, the family prepares **Sadza neNyama**, the Shona staple food made of ground corn and meat. They travel to the grave with a pot of beer, a wooden plate of snuff (ground tobacco) and sadza nenyama. At the grave site, they will pour the beer over the grave and place the other items on it. An elder person, maybe the deceased's son will kneel and say a prayer of welcome to the deceased name, "We are calling you back home to be with us. Please guide and protect your family. If there is anything you need please let us know. Be kind to us". These words mark the incorporation of the wandering spirit back into the family circle.

The family leaves the grave site and heads back to their home where festivities continue into the middle of the night. It is during this time that the mbira is played to please and welcome the spirit home. It is during this ceremony that the deceased's spirit will actually possess its spirit medium.

On the next morning, the relatives take several small pots of beer to the cattle kraal. They pour the beer on a bull's head. If the bull shakes its head, then it is believed the spirits are happy otherwise the next person pours their pot of

beer until the bull shakes its head. As soon as the bull shakes its head, the family will celebrate and women in attendance will ululate (Kupururudza) to signal the grand finale of the ceremony. The family now has a new ancestral spirit.

Ndebele Customs & Traditions



Ndebele Art Panels

The Masanabo sisters at one of their Ndebele art panels at the High Commission (© Visual News Associates, Islamabad)

Ndebele people treat death and life after death in an amazingly similar manner to the Shona people. Like their sister tribe, the Shonas, Ndebeles believe death is passage from one form of being to another. A grown person who dies will have a role as an ancestral spirit, *idlozi*, after that spirit has been accepted back by the family to assume family responsibilities. Wolfgang Laade, in the [Music of Man Archive: The Ndebele People](#), page 40 describes death, dying and ancestral spirits among the Ndebele people as follows:

"The nature and role of the ancestral spirits (*amadlozi*) in the Nguni and Ndebele societies was explained. Here we shall be concerned with an important ritual, the *umbiyiso*. Death alone does not confer ancestor hood. This ritual is necessary to 'bring back home' the spirit, re-establishing the dead man into family life. Bozongwana describes everything connected with death and burial, and describes also the *umbiyiso*, or 'Calling home the Dead Father'. This ritual is held a year after the burial, that is after the decomposition of the dead man's body.

He is 'called back home' that he should 'look after his children'. The purpose of this rite is to facilitate the dead man's transition into the realm of the *amadlozi*. All relatives and friends should be called to this ceremony. Beer is offered at the grave of the dead man to induce him to come. Then the people walk back to the house singing 'Woz ekhaya...', 'Come come..'. In the afternoon an ox is killed and its meat cooked. The family sits together through the night. They eat and drink beer and snuff in a communion service in which each member can say what he or she wants from the ancestral. The rest of the food and drink is left in front of the hut for the spirit to consume. In the morning they sing and dance 'ubaba makeze ekhaya', 'Father should come home', and the ox meat is eaten and beer served. This communion service implies the re-admission of the dead man into the home in another form and capacity. Like on all ritual occasions, from birth and puberty to marriage and death, the sharing of sacrificial meat secures the establishment of the communion between the living and the dead. If the spirits come and eat the food and drink the beer offered to them they will in return look after the well-being of the family. The 'living dead' must be given meat and beer at least once a year in order to maintain and renew the fellowship which is so vital to both. To facilitate communion, the *idlozi* spirit is given an animal as its host, preferably a black ox, the 'ox of the ancestor', *inkomo yamadlozi*, the care of which is the special task of the main heir. Important matters concerning the family should be announced to this animal. Sometimes beer is brewed and a small amount of it poured over it as an offering. If such an animal has not been set aside, earlier, it is installed on the day of *umbuyiso*"