

Khululeka

grief support for children and youth

A letter from a Xhosa Grandmother to her grandchild
(and all others that are interested)
explaining some of the Xhosa traditions and beliefs.

To my dear umzukulwana from your uMakhulu,

We do not like to speak about death to our children. We do not like to burden them with such things. But it has become necessary to speak of death to you and how we bury our dead. So you can feel at home in our traditions and rituals and so they can be a container for your grief and sadness too. So that you do not feel this is foreign to you or that it makes no sense.

By the time you read this letter you will have witnessed many funerals. Many times you will have been there when we slaughtered the cow and made beer for the ancestors. Many times you will have heard us weep and sing.

And we have forgotten to tell you why we do the things we do. Maybe we were too upset to tell you everything and have forgotten that you are grieving too. Maybe we never told you because we wanted you to be happy and not know about such painful things. Maybe we never told you because we were hoping that you do not feel this deep pain, because we were hoping that you were young enough to forget. Hoping that in forgetting there would be your healing.

But we are learning that there is deep pain in your hearts too. There is sadness that needs to be seen and spoken about openly, so that we can heal together.

So today I want to tell you about how we bury the dead and why we do this.

You will have seen us empty the house and make space for all the family that comes from all over. We have to feed them, and they sit with us bezila nathi (they mourn with us).

As you know most of the time the funeral is on the second Saturday after the death and the body will be brought to the house just before the funeral. Everybody must come to the day of the funeral and many people give speeches.

On the day of the funeral or some time soon afterwards you have seen our elders go out and buy a cow and slaughter it very early in the morning. The men cook the cow in big pots full of boiling water and they do not add any spice. Then we all eat the meat, outside of the house. All the meat must be eaten before any other food is served.

Our elders speak to the ancestors and we are all serious during this time. This is when we tell you to keep quiet too. The dead person carries our messages to the ancestors so that they remember us and do not forget to forgive us. In this way we send the dead person to their new home, so that they can become a true ancestor. Our prayers help them find the way. This we call, as you know, „UMKAPHO“.

Maybe you have wondered why we do this mainly for the men and not for the women. Well, the women know the way, so they do not need help.

We put beer and meat and flowers and a white candle in the corner of the house. The beer and the meat are for the ancestors to taste. The burning candle keeps the bad spirits away that like to come to funerals. That is also why we burn imphepho.

(Some of us don't like children to come to the funerals, because of the bad spirits, because children can see more than the adults can, and they do not want you to be disturbed by what you see. But I think if we speak openly to one another about these things children can deal with them quite well.)

We must never burn our dead. We must always bring them back to the place they belong to, so that they can be reunited with all the ancestors and sleep in the ground they were taken from.

There we put them into the grave. We also put food for them and their walking stick and other things into the grave that they might need.

On the day after the funeral we like to sprinkle you and the adults as well with water and herbs to cleanse you from any shadows you may have picked up.

The clan decides together how long ukuzila should be: Sometimes 6 months, sometimes 9 months, sometimes a year. The women have to wear black during that time and stay at home. The men usually wear a black button or scarf.

At the end of ukuzila we women gather round the widow and bring her new clothes. We take her old, black clothes off and burn them. Then we put the new colourful clothes on her. We call this „KHULULA IZILA“ (which means take off from mourning.) This is why we only ever wear cheap black clothes during ukuzila, because at the end of ukuzila they get burned.

The men do not have this ritual.

After about a year or longer we hold as you know “UMBUYISO“. This is when we celebrate, that the person who died has now become a real ancestor and has come back to us to help and protect us.

We welcome him home. So we slaughter another cow. This time the women prepare the meat with spices in the way the person would have liked. And we eat the meat inside the house and celebrate together that they have come back to us.

Sometimes “UMBUYISO” and the unveiling of the tombstone happen at the same time.

“UMBUYISO“, we celebrate again and again. Whenever we have a dream about the person, and they ask us for food or drink, we celebrate it, in their honours. It says “welcome home” to the ancestors.

My dear umzukulwana, I have written a little today about how we bury our dead.

The important thing to remember is that they are just in hiding (this is what the Xhosa word for funeral means) they cannot be seen, but they watch over us.

Sala kakhule

uMakhulu wakho
(your grandmother)

More information on www.Khululeka.org

