MICHIGAN STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y

Self-Reliance in Practice: A Study of Burial Societies in Harare, Zimbabwe.

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ABSTRACT

Burial societies are local indigenous organisations which provide mutual help and assistance to members in the event of death and illness, and are an established feature of urban life in Zimbabwe. As such they are examples of self-reliance in practice, but despite this there has been very little in the way of concrete research in this area. This paper sets out to investigate the role that burial societies play in the lives of their members and is therefore concerned with the various functions that the societies' perform, the services that they offer, as well as establishing members' motivations for joining. The assumption is made that there are both 'manifest' and 'latent' needs on the part of the membership for which the societies cater. In addition to considering the relationship between society and member, the study also examines the preponderance and extent of use of the societies in the high density suburbs of Zimbabwe's capital city, Harare. Consideration is given to some of the organisational and structural aspects of the societies. Previous research into the societies is noted to provide background to this study and there is some speculation on the role the societies could perform in the future.

Introduction

Burial societies present as a fairly well established and significant feature in many of Zimbabwe's high density suburbs. They are generally seen to offer a measure of financial security in the event of bereavement and also cater for some of the other social needs of their members. As Cormack (1983) has noted, burial societies can be seen as a product of urban living and appear to have evolved to aid the migrant from the rural areas who finds himself facing problems in a strange and hostile environment. They have therefore been seen

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to function as self-supporting networks that ease some of the trauma associated with urbanisation and help maintain some of the traditions and cultural values of their members. This is perhaps particularly so with those burial societies that base their membership on foreign migrant workers, although other burial societies are made up of Zimbabwean and church based groups. Burial societies therefore present as organisations that would seem to fulfull some real 'need' on the part of their members and that have a definite functional quality. The number of burial societies and their continuity over long periods of time shows their appeal and popularity and again gives the impression that they are indeed relatively successful in their activity.

This paper examines the service provided by burial societies to the community at the present time but also looks tentatively at the possible role these societies might offer in the future. Post-independent Zimbabwe has stressed the values of self-reliance and self-help as part of the 'new' socio-economic order. Burial societies have been seen as fulfilling a wide range of social and economic functions – from maintaining 'home boy' ties[1] (particularly those ties maintaining a link with a person's rural home or maintaining links between those from the rural home in the urban context – ie. both extra-town and intra-town ties), to providing some measure of financial security for members with some apparent degree of success. However, our knowledge of these organisations is limited as there is little in the way of concrete research and documentation, although some small scale studies have been carried out.

Burial societies appear to have established organisational structures which are geared to a self-help philosophy. Their apparent success might prove of interest when considering new groups being set up to achieve other aims of a more developmental nature in Zimbabwe today. Many such groups, for example some co-operatives, have ended in failure, sometimes due to the inexperience and lack of group cohesion of the members. Whether the functions of burial societies could be looked at in terms of co-operative development or similar ventures – either on the part of the societies themselves or other organisations – is considered in this paper.

History and previous research on burial societies

Records from the National Archives of Zimbabwe show that as early as 1919 burial societies had already been formed – namely the Sena Burial Society and the Gazaland Burial Society – which based their membership on migrant labourers from Mozambique. The Sena Burial Society split into two factions

around 1923[2] following in-fighting over financial mismanagement and this led to the formation of the Sena Burial Society of the North and one of the South. Stopforth (1971) in his survey of Highfield township mentions that the Sena Burial Society was still operational and this is confirmed by this present research. There is little information on the formation of burial societies until the late 1960's when Ndubiwa (1974) reported that during this time there was a keen interest in the formation of such societies in the African townships of Bulawayo. He noted that by 1973, 248 burial societies had registered their constitutions and were approved by the Bulawayo District Commissioner. He also speculated that perhaps an equal number operated without approved constitutions or with no constitutions at all. Cormack (1970) suggests that the number of societies in Harare may be less than Bulawayo and compares these high numbers to a study of Highfield township[3] which identified only 18 societies. The result of this present survey indicated a total of 30 burial societies in Highfield and this may not have been exhaustive. The total number of 134 societies identified in the course of this study is likely to be an underestimate and a definite count may have to wait until registration of societies is compulsory.

Ndubiwa (1974) noted that membership of societies generally ranged from 10 to 50 and in some cases could exceed 100. He noted that although membership was supposed to be open to all, in practice the pattern was that it was confined to those who came from the same regional and ethnic groupings. This finding was supported by research carried out by Moller (1975) in a study of Mbare, Mufakose and Kambuzuma, three high density suburbs in Harare. Moller observed that most burial societies were organised along tribal, regional and ethnic lines and the motivation for joining stemmed from the need of the members to maintain traditional and cultural ties with their rural homes. While maintenance of ethnic and tribal ties might provide a key motivation for the formation of burial societies, other more practical objectives have been documented. Cormack lists the following:

a) to advise members when a death occurs;
b) to consult the bereaved family;
c) to meet the cost of burial (coffin, providing food and transport for mourners);
d) to assist financially the bereaved family;
e) to visit members taken ill;
f) to pay hospital fees;
g) to assist the unemployed;
h) to organise social gatherings for members.

Cormack also notes that in addition to their stated objectives, burial societies also meet a number of latent needs on the part of their members. For example they may ease the trauma experienced by the migrant to the urban area by introducing him to town and enabling him to enjoy a 'psychological sense of security'. This may help mitigate the loss of the mutual support and close kinship association previously provided by traditional ties. The migrant's adaptation to urban life will therefore be eased as many of his traditional values and cultural ways will be shared with the other members, and he may be able to participate in some traditional activities such as dancing. Cormack notes that there is little evidence of co-ordination between societies in a township and in only a few cases does society membership extend beyond the limits of a single township. He also suggests that societies favour the approval or registration of a constitution as this gives them a stamp of respectability. Moller has also observed that due to burial societies' economic and self-help aspect they also fulfilled a social function. Members enjoyed regular drinking sessions and also the major annual Christmas party. Moller noted that burial societies could give loans to their members in time of difficulty as well as assisting with burial costs.

Purpose of this research

The study aimed to investigate the role and function of burial societies in Harare with a particular concern to establish their preponderance and use, particularly how they are organised and the services/benefits they provide; to determine some of their 'manifest' and 'latent' functions, ie, the needs they cater for; to establish their popularity and members' motivations for joining; to explore briefly the apparent success of burial societies in terms of their continuity and self-help philosophy in relation to any wider role in terms of 'development' or co-operative initiatives for these or other groups.

More specifically, the study was aimed at establishing the population of burial societies within the high density suburbs of Harare (excluding Chitungwiza) and collecting data on such matters as membership, committee structure, contributions payable and benefits received. One area of interest regarding membership involved the background of members as far as 'urban permanency' was concerned – questions here aimed at determining the level of contact members still had with the rural areas. The relevance of this was to determine whether a primary motivation for joining a burial society had to do with maintaining links with the rural areas. The research therefore aimed to identify what needs are catered for by the societies and attempted to establish the attitudes and opinions that members held towards the organisation and function of their societies and discover if they felt satisfied with these.

Hypotheses

This research was primarily exploratory and there was little factual data or set of theories to guide any definite hypotheses. However, a basic assumption was that burial societies appear to have had some success with an established organisation and membership and that this may be due to some of the following factors:

a) they are voluntary organisations where membership is not imposed but is considered a privilege;
b) the desire for membership arises out of one of the most basic needs of all – ie the wish for a decent, respectable burial (manifest function). In this regard there are sound financial incentives for maintaining membership and legitimate benefits which derive from this;
c) the societies offer and extension of the primary group in a secondary setting – ie 'home-boy' ties and close friendships (latent function);
d) a final and very tentative hypothesis concerned the apparent popularity and success of these societies and the postulation that an increased knowledge of their organisation and motivation could be of benefit to other groups, as well as to the societies themselves.

Methodology

As a first step basic information collection was a priority and this concerned building up an index of the names, addresses and relevant contact persons for as many burial societies as could be discovered. Two students assisted with data collection over a two month period, although further follow-up continued for several months (Jan – June 1985).

Information was collected from a wide variety of sources, including the National Archives, Government libraries, funeral parlours and the Deeds Office at the Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs which holds constitutions of burial societies. In order to update this information, gain further contacts and discover which burial societies were currently active in the high density suburbs, contact was made with Community Services Departments and caretakers of community halls in a number of townships in Harare.

At the end of this information collection exercise a total of 134 burial societies had been located. However, on further analysis this figure reduced to 97 as no information could be obtained on the remaining 37 societies

regarding either their whereabouts or whether in fact they were still in existence. This figure was then used as the population of interest for the purpose of the sampling frame. Although a sample of approximately 30% of societies had been initially aimed for, in the end this figure was reduced to approximately 23% – a total of 22 burial societies. The burial societies were also selected on the basis of their origin as this appeared to be of significance in their style and method of operation. Consequently an equal proportion of indigenous and 'disparate' societies (formed by Malawian or Zambian Nationals) were selected for the study.

Interview schedules

Interview schedules were prepared for administration to two different sets of respondents. The first schedule was aimed at burial society office holders (ie committee members) in each of the 22 burial societies and the second schedule was intended for completion by burial society members of which 48 members responded. The interview schedules aimed to collect factual data on the structure and organisation of burial societies and secondly to consider the attitudes and opinions held by respondents regarding their societies. Some of the questions in the respective schedules were 'overlapping' in order to compare the response from the office holders with that of the general membership.

Background data

The main respondents to the survey were the Presidents of the burial societies. In most cases interviews with other respondents were only carried out in the absence of the President who usually commanded great respect. In some cases interviews had to be re-arranged as committee members were unwilling to co-operate without the sanction and presence of the President. Due to the 'snowball' type of sampling, surveys were limited to five of the high-density suburbs in Harare. The 22 burial societies were located, proportionately, in the following suburbs: Mbare (36%), Mabvuku-Tafara (36%), Highfiedl (23%) and Msasa (5%). It is worth noting that three of these societies had branches in at least two other suburbs and one society (Manica) had branches in as many as six of the high-density suburbs. These additional branches were excluded from the survey in order to avoid duplication of responses.

The majority of burial societies were founded between 1971 and 1980, representing 41% of the sample (nine societies). Only 25% of the sample (five

societies) had been formed after 1981. However over a third of the sample (eight societies) were founded prior to 1971 and one society was founded prior to 1930 (Malawi No 7 – 1919). Of the earlier societies (ie pre-1971), six of the eight were non-Zimbabwean (ie Malawian or Zambian) in origin, indicating the earlier roots of the 'disparate' group. It was clear that many societies were initially formed by foreign migrant workers to Zimbabwe. For purposes of comparison, the sample of burial societies was divided equally into those whose origin could be traced to Malawi (41%) and Zambia (9%), while Zimbabwe accounted for the remaining 50%. Although those burial societies with roots outside this country retained a 'disparate' identity, approximately half of these had accepted a Zimbabwean membership in addition to the membership of their own nationality. In addition 27% of the sample indicated that membership was 'equally mixed' and would not identify any majority ethnic membership or membership of a specific nationality. It is worth bearing in mind that many of the disparate societies have now been in existence for two or even three generations and that the initial 'migrant' status of much of the membership has now given way to a more settled and indeed permanently 'Zimbabwean' grouping.

Membership

Numbers, interest groupings and criteria

The Zimbabwean burial societies generally seemed to have a smaller membership than the disparate group, with 91% of the former having a membership of under 100. In contrast only 45% of the disparate group had a membership of under 100, while 54% were over 100 (compared to only 9% of the Zimbabwean societies) This factor may be partly due to the longer existence of the disparate group. However this finding may also indicate that those societies founded initially by migrant workers have become nodal points for those seeking contact with fellow-nationals or 'home-boys', and hence have attracted a larger membership. This was corroborated by responses to a further question that aimed to discover the main 'interest group' of each burial society. The responses indicated that while the nationality and tribal affiliation of the members proved a significant factor as a motivation for joining a society with the Malawian/Zambian grouping (ie 45% of that sample), the Zimbabwean societies were identified primarily on the bases of region (eg Manicaland) and district affiliation (8 societies or 73% of the Zimbabwean sample). In practice this distinction may not be as clear-cut as presented as there is evidence to suggest that the disparate grouping may also base their membership on

regional and district links within their home countries. First priority, however, with many disparate societies would be to grant fellow nationals membership. However, 41% of the overall sample indicated that membership was open to all irrespective of interest groupings. Even if this is the case many societies with ostensibly open membership do impose some restrictions, such as identifying who can take on leadership positions.

A further question attempted to elicit whether burial societies maintained a certain identity and type of membership by imposing restrictions on who could qualify for membership. The responses revealed that nearly half (41%) ostensibly had no restrictions on membership and a further 18%, although having no restrictions on membership, did reserve the 'leadership' positions to those of a certain nationality (eg Malawian), or gave 'preference' to those from a certain area (eg Wedza). Nine societies (41%) indicated that they did have restrictions on membership and these varied from district groupings (eg Gutu District) to tribal groupings (eg Karanga) to national groupings (eg only Malawians).

Age, sex and marital status

The majority of members were male (79% of total sample) and aged between 30-59 years (comprising 91% of men). Only five members were aged between 20-29 years (10% of total sample) and only four members were over 60 years of age (8% of total sample). Women accounted for 21% of the total sample and those aged between 30-59 years accounted for 80% of that number. With regard to the distribution of men and women within the societies, some societies (mainly Zimbabwean, 36% of the total sample) would only accept men as members, while others (notably the disparate group, 23% of the total sample) accepted both men and women on an equal footing. A further four societies in the disparate group (18% of the total sample) did have both male and female membership, but each group met separately, although they were linked through the one committee structure.

Where men only were entitled to membership, the wives and children of the members were covered in terms of the normal benefits provided by the society; however, they were not entitled to membership in their own right. Those societies which admitted both men and women as subscription-paying members, permitted women to join if they were the 'breadwinners' of the family and they then became entitled to benefits in the same way as their male counterparts. Where the membership is mixed, it is usual for men and women to be seated separately on either side of the room, although as mentioned above, some societies prefer separate meetings for each group.

Almost all members of the burial societies were married (43 members, representing 90% of the sample). Only two members were single (4% of sample) while the remaining three members (6% of sample) were either divorced or widowed.

Educational and occupational status

Most members' education had not progressed beyond the primary school level (37 members or 77% of sample), while ten members (21% of sample) had attended secondary school at some stage. Only one member had received tertiary education. This educational level ties in to some extent with the occupational 'life chances' of the membership, which on the whole is of the less privileged socio-economic strata.

The majority of members consisted of unskilled manual workers (27% of the sample), while this figure rose to 42% with the inclusion of the 'skilled manual' grouping (representing 20 members). Nine members (19% of sample) were unemployed. The remainder were divided between 'professional' (6%), 'clerical' (19%) and 'other' (15%). The 'other' category included two housewives, two self-employed, one security guard and two pensioners.

Length of membership

The majority of members had belonged to a burial society for five or more years (25 members or 52% of sample) and 15 of these (31%) had membership totalling over ten years. The remaining 23 members (48%) had a membership of less than five years. The general indication was of a well-established membership with a relatively long period of service as members. The 48 members sampled had served between themselves a total of 434 years as members.

Reasons for joining

Members were asked to indicate by ranking in order of priority, four reasons which they may have had for joining a burial society. Although an 'other reason' column was added, all members decided to use the categories specified. These were:

(a) financial security;
(b) maintenance of tribal/regional links;

(c) entertainment and social activities;
(d) a sense of 'group' belonging.

The majority of members (83%) gave 'financial security' as their first priority as a motive for joining a burial society. 'Maintenance of tribal/regional links' received second priority; 'Entertainment and social activities' third priority, and 'A sense of group belonging' fourth priority, The indication therefore is that financial security is the dominant motive for joining a society, but that maintenance of tribal or regional identity, closely tied to a sense of group belonging, which admittedly is a similar area, is also important.

Number of dependents

The members were asked to state the number of their dependents. Dependents were classified as a spouse, children under 18 and relatives who were financially dependent to some extent on the member. The question intended to discover the extent of commitments of a member and hence perhaps the necessity of insurance in the event of misfortune. The results indicated that most members had dependents of one form or another. The majority of members had a relatively high commitment of between five and nine dependents (22 members, or 46% of sample), while eight members (17% of sample) had over ten dependent members; 14 members (29% of sample) had between one and four dependents, while only four members (8% of sample) had no dependents at all.

Urban Permanency

This concept was based on a variety of criteria and sought to establish the degree of urban commitment of members, with its implications for the need for members to maintain 'home boy' contacts in the urban setting and hence the likelihood of them joining organisations such as burial societies. The majority of members (35 or 73%) appeared to have a strong urban commitment. This was indicated by such factors as the length of time members had lived in Harare, the members' family situation, ownership of a house, land and livestock in rural areas and how often members might wish to visit their rural homes and for what particular reasons. The majority of members appeared to have very little or no tie to the rural areas and their degree of 'urbanisation' appeared high.

This preponderance in favour of urban permanency proved to be weighted on the side of the disparate society members who obviously have less contact with their rural homelands. Most members of disparate societies reported a complete severance of ties with their areas of origin – presumably due to the distance involved, low income and the length of time many had spent away from 'home'. Of the disparate sample, 91% were classified as more or less permanently urban, while only 23% of the Zimbabwean sample fell into the same category, the remainder having close ties with the rural areas.

Functioning of committee

Office-holders were asked whether they considered that their executive committee functioned well. The response to this question was an overwhelming concurrence that the committee does indeed function well (21 of the 22 societies). Reasons given ranged from the fact that members of the committee knew each other well and were familiar with procedure, to efficient communication and control being exercised by the committee members. This response is suspect, however, in view of the relatively high negative response regarding the issue of maladministration of funds and the problems involved in giving a critical response in a group situation. The one negative response listed 'absenteeism' as the main problem facing the committee.

Office-holders were asked whether they considered that the committee members needed any training to help them manage the society more efficiently. Opinion on the issue of training for members of the committee was roughly the same for both groups. Overall 15 societies (68%) indicated that some kind of training would be useful, while seven (32%) did not feel this was needed. Those that responded in favour of training generally listed accounting and bookkeeping as the most needed skills, although two felt that all office-holders (ie not only the treasurer) needed training. One society listed agriculture as a possible area – presumably as an income-generating venture for the society. Another respondent, although feeling that training was required, indicated concern that this would involve using much of the society's funds. Training was therefore generally seen as potentially useful by most office-holders, although the question of who should receive training and the sponsoring of this appeared uncertain.

Contributions and Benefits

Contributions

All burial societies charge a joining fee, followed by monthly subscriptions. Usually the male member of a family will join and this will entitle him to various benefits in the event of sickness or death for himself and the family members. Where women are the heads of households and subscription-paying members in their own right, they are usually charged a reduced fee for membership. The charges are the following:

(a) *Joining fee* – Joining fees for the disparate group ranged from $3 to $15. The average payment was $10. In contrast the Zimbabwean group charged higher joining fees ranging from $15 to $50. The average payment was $25. The reason for this anomaly is uncertain but may have to do with the more recent formation of the Zimbabwean societies and hence higher 'inflation' payments, or may have to do with a possibly higher economic bracket of Zimbabwean members. The joining fee generally appeared to be the same for both men and women, although one society indicated a lower fee for female members.

(b) *Monthly subscriptions*– Monthly subscriptions for the disparate group ranged from $1.50 – $3.30 with an average payment of $2.20 (for men). The Zimbabwean group ranged from payments varying from $2,00 – $3,00 with a slightly higher average payment of $2,70 per month (for men). Women were charged lower subscription payments (usually of 50c or $1), reducing in two cases for the disparate group to 50c per month. Most societies also charge additional contributions for the annual Christmas party, usually ranging from $2–$5.

(c) *Withdrawal of contributions* – In the event of termination of membership some societies will allow a withdrawal of the contributions. None of the societies offered a full refund of contributions, but 14 societies (64%) did offer a partial refund. Eight societies (36%), indicated that no refund was available under any circumstances and two of these stressed that it was very rare for people to terminate membership.

Experience of Financial Difficulties

This question asked office-holders whether their society had experienced any financial difficulties in the past. In response to this question nine societies (41%) indicated that they had experienced some difficulties in the past, while 13 (59%) had not. The disparate group appeared to have had more difficulty

with 55% (six societies) of that sample, while the local group presented as 27% (three societies) of that sample. Difficulties that were specified included:

(a) insufficient funds – the problem mentioned here was that some members failed to pay their monthly subscriptions (two societies, disparate group);
(b) maladministration of funds – the problems indicated here varied from fraud to poor administration by the treasurers. This problem presented as a current difficulty, with two societies indicating that this had now been resolved.

Direct benefits

There was no significant difference between the two sample groups regarding the amount of benefit payable in the event of death. All groups provided similar benefits in the event of death of a member or of his wife. These benefits consisted of a lump-sum cash payment in addition to the provision of other benefits relating to the funeral and mourning process generally. This cash payment ranged with all societies from $300 – $600 with an average payment of $400. With regard to the death of a member's child, the cash payment ranged from $200 – $450, with an average payment of $300. Most societies limited their payments to the immediate family, but five societies indicated that they also gave a small sum of $4 in the event of a parent's death, with some societies also providing a coffin.

In the event of funerals, all societies provided transport to enable mourners to attend the ceremony. This would be in the form of hired buses with the addition of the provision of a funeral director's hearse to transport the coffin. Some criticism was expressed at the level of hiring charges of both buses and hearse. All societies catered for the major expenses associated with the funeral arrangements. This consisted of provision of a coffin, food for the mourners and fuelwood to enable cooking to take place. Provision of groceries, drink and other necessary items were also provided. The grave site itself would already have been purchased by the society and arrangements undertaken to ensure a respectable and decent burial.

These arrangements are undertaken in respect of persons buried within an urban context. With regard to members who wish to be buried in the communal lands, the usual practice is to provide the 'equivalent' of an urban burial. This means that the society usually purchases the coffin and then gives an equivalent cash sum to the family to enable them to make their own

arrangements for the burial. This would be expected to cover the costs of transport, food and fuel and the sum of $50 was mentioned by one society.

Two societies differed from this general practice – one of the disparate group stated that it was a condition that the person be buried in town, while one of the local group stated that it was conditional on membership that the person be buried in the communal lands.

'Secondary' benefits

In addition to the primary benefits associated with death and burial, the societies indicated that they offer further benefits of membership. The following activities and services were mentioned: regular drinking sessions, singing in choirs, Christmas party, traditional dancing, payment of hospital fees in the event of sickness, costs of visiting hospital and support of family, provision of a bag of mealie-meal to deceased member's family, repatriation expenses to Malawi or Zambia, holding of 'braais'.

Members were asked whether in the event of an illness or death in their family, they had received 'comfort and emotional support' from the burial society. The responses indicated that the majority had received such support from their societies and mainly identified help of a practical nature, such as cleaning the house or taking over responsibility for chores to allow them time to deal with their problems. In certain cases following a bereavement, another society member would stay with the family concerned to offer practical and emotional support. Women are mostly involved in this 'comforting' and the practical duties are intended to take some of the strain from the family and help 'cheer' them up.

Assistance to Non-Members

In response to the question whether the societies assisted anyone who was not a member, all societies responded in the negative. One society office-holder summed up the prevalent view on this matter, pointing out that "we are accountable to those who sponsor us through subscription".

Community role

Self-reliant nature of burial societies

The societies' office-holders were asked whether they felt that burial societies supported the idea of self-reliance. Nineteen societies (86%) responded affirmatively, many stressing that the self-reliant nature of their organisations stemmed from the fact that they were 'united' and independent'. The fact that the organisations developed from the initiative of their members was given as further evidence of self-reliance. Several office-holders added that although they considered that their societies were self-reliant, they would prefer more resources to enable them to venture into other areas. The three societies which responded negatively were from the disparate group, but gave no reasons for this view.

Extension of role of burial society

Office-holders were asked whether they felt that the role of burial societies should be extended in terms of social or community development (projects). Examples provided in the question were of co-operatives, education for members and employment prospects. In response to this question, 18 office-holders (82%), responded affirmatively. The four office-holders who responded negatively were from the disparate group.

Those in favour mainly mentioned co-operatives as a possible area for extension and indicated that this would provide a source of employment and income-generation for members. Five societies stressed that they would need technical back-up, resources and advice to succeed, but felt if these were available then burial societies could venture into this area. One society suggested the development of an agricultural co-operative which would provide employment opportunities, while another suggested developing income-generating projects, although the actual type was not specified. Several pointed out that burial societies were ideally suited for co-operativisation as they had developed a unity of purpose and had the necessary structure and organisation. The reactions in favour of developing new ventures were therefore generally enthusiastic, although many did recognise the need for advice, support and resources if they were to extend their service in this way.

Ordinary members of the societies were less definite in their response to this issue. Opinion was divided with 27 members (56%) indicating a positive response and 21 members (44%) indicating a negative response. Those who

felt the societies should become involved in new areas mainly suggested the formation of co-operatives, although other areas mentioned were income-generating employment projects, projects to benefit the 'community' (unspecified) and helping members with educational fees. One member noted that "most of our members are unemployed, so there could be scope for employment and self-reliance". Several felt that 'dynamic' and 'self-help' goals should be encouraged and that societies are experienced in 'collaboration' and working together in a spirit of enterprise.

Some members took a more cautious view, one indicating that he would only be in favour if "we are given the right opportunities", while another suggested that if the society wished to extend its role, there should be a *separate* subscription for this purpose. Others felt that the societies should not become involved in non-burial matters as this was not their purpose or function. The society office-holders who were against this idea indicated that burial societies were set up for the particular purpose of assisting members with burials and not for any other. The anxiety was also expressed that co-operatives would tie up the societies' money and they would then be unable to fulfill burial needs. One society expressed the fear that some members would embezzle funds if their operations were extended.

Government assistance with burials

This question asked office-holders whether they considered that the Government should help people more with problems relating to burial and death. Examples given in the question included national insurance policies and more financial aid to burial societies. There were mixed responses to this issue. Generally the disparate societies felt that Government should be doing more (eight societies or 73% of disparate sample), while the Zimbabwean societies responded the other way with an equivalent proportion. The responses in favour stressed the idea that the Government is the responsible authority and should do more, particularly in the area of ensuring decent burials for paupers and destitutes. The question was generally interpreted here as Government doing more for those who do *not* belong to burial societies.

The group that felt Government should not assist more emphasised that the Government has many urgent problems to deal with and that individuals should help themselves by forming burial societies. Other comments stressed the self-help philosophy and the importance of initiative.

Members generally felt that the Government should help more in this area (28 members or 61% of sample). Again many responses suggested that the Government should only help the destitute and that others should be encouraged to join burial societies so as to remove a burden from the Government. While these responses stressed the value of self-reliance, other members felt that some financial aid should be given to the societies as well as this would enable them to further extend their services into the community. One member suggested that the Government should help old people who are not working and who are unable to afford burial society subscriptions, by paying these subscriptions for them. Another response, while recommending that the Government should help more, suggested that it was premature at the moment for Government to take on responsibilities in this area.

Government guidelines for burial societies

This question asked office-holders whether they considered that the government should produce an overall policy or guidelines to regulate the activities of burial societies. The overwhelming majority of office-holders from the disparate societies (ten societies or 91% of that sample) indicated a preference for an overall policy to regulate and guide societies, while four societies (36% of the sample) also indicated this preference. Overall 14 societies (64% of the total sample) felt there should be an overall policy. The main reason given for developing such a policy was that control and co-ordination of activities would give burial societies protection as a group and particularly protection against 'unscrupulous leaders'. Other reasons given were that this would enable regulation of activities such as control of hire charges (of community halls, buses etc) and costs charged by funeral parlours. It was felt that burial societies would develop more 'muscle' as a group and they would be in a better negotiating position. This would also help to avoid confusion and disparities and ensure 'clean operations'.

The majority response of the members was in favour of regulation by government (33 members or 69% of sample). The main reason advanced for this stressed the need to protect the societies from exploitation from unscrupulous funeral parlours and undertakers. Linked to this was the issue of high transport costs which members felt unfairly discriminated against them. On the other hand 14 members (30%) were not in favour of such regulation. Many of these felt that government regulation was tantamount to interference in their affairs. One member felt that if guidelines were set, then some burial societies would not be able to meet them and this would obviously create difficulties for them. Another felt that it was still too early to be considering

this, while yet another view was expressed as "we feel we are doing alright".

Formation of a national steering body

Office-holders were asked their opinion on the formation of a national steering body on the part of all burial societies, which could ensure regulation and monitoring of their activities on the one hand, but also co-ordination and representation of their interests on the other. The majority of societies from both sample groups indicated that they felt either 'positive' or 'very positive' on the suggestion of a national steering body (12 societies or 55% of the total sample). Six societies (27%) indicated ambivalence and four societies (18%) gave a negative response. The majority of members indicated a 'positive' or 'very positive' response to this question (25 members or 53% of sample), while nine (19%) indicated a 'negative' or 'very negative' response. The remainder expressed uncertainty over the issue. There was therefore generally a response in favour of establishing a body which could look after the interests of societies and provide a forum to negotiate with government and other agencies. Many of the reasons given either in support or against this idea were similar to those expressed in the previous question.

Co-operation between burial societies

Office-holders were asked whether their societies co-operated with other societies in their area and in what particular ways. The responses were roughly equal, with ten societies (45%) responding that there was co-operation and twelve (55%) replying in the negative. In all cases where the answer was positive, the office-holders indicated that assistance is rendered (and received) at times of funerals when societies will either actively join in mourning at the funeral itself or will offer financial help – which presumably would be reciprocated at a later date. Other areas of co-operation included that of 'entertainment' when other society members would be invited to some event, and generally 'in cases or problems'.

Conclusion

General

In establishing the preponderance and extent of the use of burial societies in Harare, a total of 134 societies were identified in the high density suburbs (excluding Chitungwiza), of which 97 are likely to be operating at the present time. This figure should only be considered as tentative and it is likely that an even higher figure could be assured given a more rigorous search through the suburbs. This wide membership, the number of societies in the high density areas, the continuity of the societies over a long period of time and their seeming popularity all point to the likelihood that they do indeed serve a very real need for many thousands of their members. The importance of burial in African society should not be underestimated, particularly with the need to appease ancestral spirits and to carry out the procedural aspects of burial in a correct and dignified way. The number of mourners at a funeral, the provision of cooked food, organisation of transport and funeral director's cars are seen as important in maintaining the status of both the family and the deceased. In this respect the purposive role of burial societies in offering not only a practical and functional service, but a service which caters also for the psychological, social and even spiritual needs of members is acknowledged. A further example of this is the service the societies offer to members in terms of maintaining their contact with those of a 'home boy' network in both the urban and rural context, assuring a degree of continuity in a rapidly changing world.

The satisfaction of needs can therefore be seen in terms of those that are 'manifest' or direct and practical, such as the financial security and practical arrangments which insure against death and illness, and the 'latent' or indirect and personal, such as the sense of 'belonging' and social identity afforded by membership. The fact that burial societies are able to deal with both these areas of human need is perhaps one major reason for their apparent success.

Other factors which may be responsible for the success of the societies include the relative homogeneity of membership, the fact that there are recognised and acknowledged leaders who are deeply respected, while at the same time a relatively wide participation in the committee structures, ensuring a measure of 'democratic' input. The fact that members are expected to contribute regular subscriptions, are themselves involved in the activities and operations of the societies and valued for the dignity and respect their presence at funerals confers on both deceased and family, may all be additional factors ensuring commitment to the societies. Sanctions also appear to operate as motivational forces as strong group pressure on members and financial

penalties in the event of termination of membership are likely to act as incentives towards ensuring continuity of membership. It may therefore be of interest to consider factors similar to these when considering the relative success or failure of other new groups being formed for self-help or developmental purposes.

Specific

The disparate group indicated the importance of maintaining tribal and national contacts, albeit from particular regions within those countries. In some cases the leadership positions were reserved for those of a particular nationality. This group presented as far more committed to an urban way of life, due probably to their distance from 'home', their length of residence away and the fact that they had little or no contact with their countries of origin. Although in many cases the membership of these societies consisted of fellow nationals, several stated that they had no objections to local Zimbabwean membership and indeed a degree of 'acculturation' had taken place. The Zimbabwean sample presented primarily on the basis of maintenance of contacts on a regional and district level and the vast majority of members appeared very committed to their rural homes. Maintenance of the 'home boy' ties of both groupings presented as an important factor – with the disparate sample this social network appeared mainly of the urban 'home boy' variety while the Zimbabwean sample presented more as a rural 'home boy' network.

The disparate groups had generally been in existence for a longer period than the local groups and perhaps consequently had a much larger membership in each society (generally over 100) whereas the local groups tended to have a membership of under 100. While no data was collected on the assets of the societies, it can be assumed that, in some cases, this may be quite extensive and certainly there are many societies with branches in several of the high density suburbs. The Zimbabwean societies appear to charge more for membership than those of disparate origin, but generally the benefits of both groups are similar and are of a fairly substantial nature for their members.

While the main benefit derived from membership of a society appears to be financial and is a form of insurance, there are other benefits which are regarded as significant by the members. As previously mentioned, maintenance of the 'home boy' network – whether of an urban or rural nature – is seen as important, although with most members this was a secondary motivation for joining the society. Similarly, the sense of 'group belonging' resulting from membership is seen as an advantage. The entertainment and social activities

provided by the societies is also seen as important, although less so than the other motivating factors.

Burial societies are seen by their members to be very supportive in the event of illness and death and practical assistance is usually provided to the bereaved to help them through the trauma. As the majority of members do have family responsibilities, this help is obviously very useful. Burial societies do generally appear successful in maintaining their membership over time and receive a high level of commitment from members. While some of the reasons for this have already been mentioned, sanctions may also have their part to play in terms of the financial penalties levied in the event of termination of membership as well as group pressure to continue with membership.

Many burial societies do appear to have experienced financial difficulties due to insufficent funds and maladministration of funds. As a result some of those surveyed expressed caution at the idea of their societies becoming involved in developmental areas such as co-operatives. In spite of this drawback, the overwhelming majority of office-holders expressed the view that the societies should perhaps extend their role to include co-operatives or income generating projects. Members generally held a more cautious view, although a majority still felt their societies should become engaged in such projects.

Most burial societies elected executive committee members annually, while others held less frequent elections or only 'when the need arises'. While members expressed satisfaction with the management of their societies, the office-holders proved more circumspect with a majority indicating that some form of training for office-holders would be desirable. This mainly concerned financial administration of the societies such as accounting and book-keeping skills.

Members and office-holders of the burial societies were mainly in favour of the government producing an overall policy or guidelines regulating the activity of the societies. This it was felt would provide the control and co-ordination which could protect societies against those who wished to exploit them – both from within (eg leaders) and without (eg unscrupulous undertakers). Proper regulation could increase the public's confidence in the societies and hence lead to an increase in membership. While formal regulation might provide these benefits there was some concern that this could make the societies vulnerable to political or economic manipulation. Responses were mixed regarding increased government assistance in the area of death and burial. Generally those in favour of the government taking more initiative felt

this should be restricted to the destitute and paupers and that people should be encouraged to join burial societies as a form of self-reliance. While it was therefore recognised that help was needed – particularly for those unable to afford burial society subscriptions – the society members and office-holders demonstrated a strong streak of individualism, a desire for self-help and a wish to avoid interference in their affairs.

Attitudes to the formation of a national steering body set up and run by the societies themselves where positive. It was considered that a body of this nature could be responsible for the interests of burial societies and provide a forum to negotiate with Government and other agencies. The advantages and disadvantages of such a body were seen in a similar light to the question of government regulation of the societies – ie either as protection of, or interference in, their affairs. Responses to the schedule indicated that approximately half of societies already did co-operate in some way with other societies including the lending of 'mourners' to funeral and financial assistance at times.

Several areas of concern to both members and office-holders were identified in the course of this study. In particular the charges made by undertakers, the City Council and local transporters were criticised to being too high. The societies felt that they should receive discounts and preferential treatment due to the volume of their 'trade' with these organisations, but insisted that they felt helpless and exploited by them. Employers were also criticised for failing to recognise that burial society members needed time off work to attend funerals and it was suggested that the Government should step in with regulations to ensure that this is possible.

Others felt that burial societies should be given more publicity and their role should be sanctioned and recognised as worthwhile. Encouragement could then be given to enable people to join societies and become self-reliant. Facilities could also be provided (such as 'sheds' in order to hold meetings) which would assist the societies and remove some of the burdensome charges from them.

Recommendations

1. It would seem that burial society office-holders – in particular the treasurers of the societies – could benefit from a period of training in accounting and bookkeeping skills and indeed most said they would welcome such training. This would hopefully reduce inefficiency and maladministration of funds and

increase competence in this area. It is unclear where such training would come from, but perhaps sponsorship of some form could be arranged through Government, an NGO or private voluntary organisation to enable interested committee members to attend sessions.

2. Many office-holders and members expressed an interest in developing co-operative ventures or income-generating projects, although this idea was initiated by the interview schedules. The hierarchical structures of burial societies might create problems as far as some co-operative ventures are concerned, yet, as noted in the conclusion, some of the organisational aspects of the societies could facilitate this development. Their fulfilment of valid and felt needs, their homogeneity and continuity of membership, the recognition and respect given to acknowledged leaders while at the same time ensuring a participatory approach to members, are all factors which seem to contribute to their success as organisations. As mentioned previously, other groups with self-help and mutual aid ambitions could learn from the relative success of burial societies. It is worth noting that some burial societies in Bulawayo have taken the initiative in the direction of self-reliance by developing a co-operative funeral parlour service, which offers a co-operative transport and undertaking service to members. This would seem the logical step forward for burial societies, particularly as they would be involved in an area familiar to them and of immediate service to their members. This could also deal with the problem of exploitation and excessive charges levied by bus operators and undertaking companies. Advice, assistance and training in the management, administration and running of such an enterprise could perhaps be available through the Department of Co-operatives. Alternatively, if the co-operative model was not considered appropriate, training courses through SEDCO(Small Enterprise Development Corporation) might be a possibility.

The development of other co-operative enterprises or income-generating projects (ie other than those relating directly to servicing burials) could be considered, but at this stage may be premature. In order to retain the confidence of members it may be more appropriate for societies which wish to expand their activities to adopt a more cautious approach and perhaps attempt to deal with the particular difficulties faced by the increasing expense of burial itself first. Any moves to expand their role would in any case have to be carefully considered due to the mixed feelings of the membership towards such ventures.

3. An organisation composed of burial societies (ie a national steering body) was a popular idea and this could be initiated by interested societies to safeguard their interests. As a first step it would seem sensible to attempt to

document and register burial societies, perhaps initially in Harare or Bulawayo, and then extend this to cover other cities and towns in the country. This documentation would seem a necessary preliminary step to the formation of a national steering body. Presumably a working party or committe composed of active and influential burial society office-holders would be needed to undertake the spade-work involved. The advantages of such a steering body appear to have been recognised by a majority of the membership surveyed and this would seem an important step in developing a negotiating forum for the societies. There is no legal requirement for the societies to register their constitutions, or be approved at the present time, so the function of such a body would be on the level of a voluntary 'umbrella' association. The association would presumably act as a co-ordinator for the interests of the societies and represent these to Government and other involved parties.

Footnotes

1. The importance of the concept of 'home-boy' is well documented by P. Harries-Jones in Mitchell, J.C. (1969). He criticises previous research which indicated a schizoid picture of the urban migrant's social personality, with a rigid dichotomy between the urban and rural 'social fields'. He suggests, that the ties the migrant maintains with those people from his home village (ie extra-town ties) may interact and partially overlap with ties which are developed in town (ie within-town ties). A similarity may be seen here in the function played by burial societies in the urban context of Harare. Firstly it appears that both the 'urban' and 'rural' home-boy network is maintained by many burial societies and that these ties are seen as very important to the identity of the societies. The urban or 'within-town' ties are particularly important to those societies whose origin can be traced outside this country and where there is a consequent need to maintain ethnic and district ties in the urban setting. Indeed the cohesion, longevity and stable committee structures of these societies point to the success they have had in terms of the continuity of these relationships. As far as the indigenous Zimbabwean societies are concerned, there is evidence to show that the 'rural' or 'extra-town' ties are of more significance generally where members have a series of rights and obligations in their rural homes and are less permanently urbanised. Membership of societies in these circumstances is likely to be based on district (rural) home-boy ties.

2. British South Africa Government Minute No. S1/127/23 from the Office of the Superintendent of Natives (18/2/23), National Archives of Zimbabwe.

3. Ministry of Local Government and Housing, Salisbury, 'Analysis of Organisations: Highfield' (1970) p.89.

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