

The Way Back Home

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WHERE THERE'S NO WILL, THERE'S NO WAY to reconcile the dead and the living. All across this Mzansi of ours I have attended funerals of people who died without leaving any inkling of where they wished to be buried, or how they wanted their assets distributed; preparing for death is not a priority among my kind, regardless of poverty or wealth. For a lucky few, this has not been a problem, but I've witnessed many, many instances in which a lack of clarity has led to brutal family squabbles over the control of a deceased person's afterlife – including, very recently, in my immediate family.

On the morning of 18 August 2012, we were preparing to bury my cousin, Hasani, at a cemetery in Thembisa, a township east of Johannesburg. He had died a week before, at the age of 57, in a horrific car accident while on his way back from his rural home in Giyani, where his mother, my aunt Norah, lives. Hasani's funeral did not happen as planned; in fact, it took two court interdicts and nearly two months for him to be buried, finally, on 14 October. The delay in despatching Hasani to his final destination was due to differences in opinion between his wife's family and his family as to where his physical destination should be. The relationship between the families proceeded to completely break down and the prospect of them ever mending fences is very slim.

Some people on Hasani's side of the family wanted him to be buried in Giyani, in the heart of Limpopo. They saw no reason why he should be separated from his family and assumed that his spirit would be at peace next to the graves of his father and ancestors. They argued that Hasani was their son, that he was named for an ancestor of theirs and, therefore, that his spirit resided in Giyani, in the sacred place of the Mabasas. They dismissed Johannesburg – where my cousin and his immediate family had lived for two decades – as a foreign place. In their minds, there was no question: Hasani had to undergo Vatsonga rituals in his ancestral home for his journey to be complete.

Accordingly, the path would be paved by a medicine man on behalf of the Mabasa family, and it would involve many individual rites and sacrifices. Aunt Norah and Hasani's wife, Wendy, would have to be bathed with traditional Tsonga medicine. Then, they would both have to wear strings made out of a nala plant plucked from ancestral land, as well as black clothes to symbolise their mourning. Furthermore, both women would have to undergo a few incisions, which the Vatsonga medicine man would make, and into which he would place some muti in order to dispel bad luck and to prevent a tragedy like this from happening again. Oh yes, and Wendy would have to undergo a mourning period of six months, during which she could not become sexually involved with another man unless she wanted him to fall ill and die.

The Mabasas, like other Vatsongas, indeed like most people of African descent in South Africa, believe that ancestors have more power over the living than living people themselves. They needed all this to happen to appease their ancestors, and they needed it to happen in Giyani.

This version of a despatch did not go down well with Wendy and her family. Wendy is Zulu; she and my cousin had been married for about 19 years, had had four children together and lived in Thembisa. She was not against Hasani being buried under Vatsonga tradition, but she wanted him to be buried in a place that she and her children would have easy access to whenever they wanted to condole by his grave. She knew that most of my cousin's friends lived around Johannesburg; he had left Giyani more than 30 years before, after finishing high school, and had spent most of his adult life in Daveyton – a township to the east of Johannesburg, where his father still owned a house – and then in Thembisa. There were few people left in Giyani who knew him; even among close relatives and old classmates from school, most had died, or, like him, had moved elsewhere. To his wife and her family, it made perfect sense that Hasani be buried where he was most known. By settling in Thembisa, Wendy believed that my cousin had voluntarily cut the umbilical cord that connected him to Giyani. As his widow, she also believed she was entitled to have the final say.

Hasani and Wendy had taken out retirement policies at Transnet, where he worked, as well as a comprehensive funeral policy that would cover the cost of his burial. Resentful about being left out of his financial legacy, Hasani's family began spreading rumours that Wendy had bewitched him in order to cash in. When Wendy began making formal arrangements for the funeral in Thembisa, my cousin's family was enraged. They saw it as disrespect. Defiantly, they began making their own arrangements for a funeral in Giyani, to take place on the same date. Friends and relatives saw their loyalties torn, and neither faction was willing to compromise. Wendy's family and their friends went to Thembisa for her vigil, while members of my cousin's family went to Giyani and Daveyton. Luckily for Wendy, she was in possession of Hasani's death certificate, and this helped her to ensure that his body was not handed over to the Limpopo side of the family.

At four in the afternoon, on the day before his scheduled funeral in Thembisa, my cousin's body was delivered to his home there. But a curious thing happened: the casket would not fit through the doorway; it got stuck. Some of the people present, mostly Wendy's friends and family, interpreted this to mean that my cousin's body, his spirit and his ancestors were all crying out against him being buried in a foreign land – that this was their way of saying he should be buried in Giyani. Some women began to scream, others fainted and many believed that Wendy had been cursed by evil spirits because of her stubbornness.

Rumours began to spread. People said that anyone who attended the funeral at her house would either fall ill or die, as the real funeral was the one happening in Giyani. To this day, I do not know if and how Hasani's family orchestrated any of this, but three women vomited and collapsed that day in Thembisa, most sympathisers who had arrived to bid him goodbye left hurriedly, and when the time came for a vigil, later that night, there was almost no one left.

As it turned out, the casket was wider than the door frame, but after the handles were removed, it went through fine. Regardless, and even before news of the cursed casket reached them, the family in Giyani applied for a court interdict to prevent Hasani's funeral from taking place in Thembisa. They were granted a temporary stay, and the funeral did not take place the next day. In fact, it did not take place for the next two months, until Wendy's family won a counter court order to have Hasani buried in Thembisa. Notwithstanding, most relatives on the Giyani side of the family did not attend.

I wonder, to this day, if Hasani ever reached his final resting place; if the two families will ever reconcile; would the problem have arisen if my cousin had left a will stating exactly where he wished to be buried; and will we see more disaster in the family? Indeed, Vatsonga culture decrees that when a person dies all members of the family of the deceased must shave their heads. An unshaven head signifies bad luck, yet many of my family members did not observe this tradition.

For most of us, the city is not a home, but merely a place of work. It doesn't matter that you spend 99 per cent of your life in the city, you belong to the village you come from. No matter that you have permanently settled in the city, every festive season you have to go home to reconnect with your ancestors. Apartheid made sure that our grandparents and parents came to the city as migrant labourers, never as permanent residents. We've come a long way since then, but sometimes I wonder how far? A change in the law doesn't necessarily or immediately result in a change of mind.