

## **RAT RACE PRODUCTIONS: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF "COST OF DEATH"**

**by Theresa Hayward**

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The documentary "*Cost of Death*" is a ten-minute investigative journalistic piece. The concept for the documentary was targeted towards audiences of *Special Assignment* or *Carte Blanche*, the argument for this been that these two programs air investigative documentaries. The target audience that this documentary was created for are generally working class citizens, in the medium to high income bracket, note that there is a jump from SABC audience to MNET audience as MNET is a paid for channel and therefore its audience is generally falls into the higher income bracket. We felt this story would appeal to both audiences as if it did not affect them personally we were sure that they would have come across this issue when dealing with employees. Therefore we felt the need to answer the question "why" are people spending so much money on funerals when they can not afford it – "is it a cultural thing?".

It is a newsworthy topic to cover mainly because of the impact on South African society – it is a known fact that Xhosa people have expensive, "executive" funerals in South Africa, yet it is hard for other cultures to understand why people go to these huge expenses when it is beyond their means, and this is one of the questions we attempted to answer in this documentary. It is also newsworthy due to its currency and proximity to the audience. The personal account of Sindiswa which runs throughout the piece gave the documentary a human interest feel and put a face to people that are experiencing this problem.

Originally we had set out to focus on families that had lost their breadwinners and were struggling to make ends meet with the loss of income coupled with the funeral debt. However on investigation we found that many people were struggling even if it was not the breadwinner of the family. Our original case study had lost her brother and although he was not employed at the time of his death he was still able to provide for his own two children and he was expecting to get a job soon which would have taken pressure off his sister who was providing for the whole family (her parents, her own children and extended family). In our investigation we never came across a family who had recently lost their breadwinner. Therefore we moved our focus off the breadwinner and onto families in general who had recently lost a loved one. The funeral which were permitted to film was a woman who had died suddenly after a long struggle with cancer. Around four hundred people attended her funeral and her husband was the perfect host. This struck me as in my culture it is very different, people would be running around the grieving family, rather than in the Xhosa culture where the grieving family are running around the mourners to ensure they are comfortable. It was necessary to show this difference in cultures to our audience in order for them to understand the difference in expenses, and I think this was achieved when Bulelwa and Dr Mpalo discuss the food situation at modern Xhosa funerals compared to traditional Xhosa funerals.

The voices that were included in the documentary range quite a bit. Dr Mpalo, Professor Kaschula, and lecturer, Bulelwa Nosilela, were our expert voices on Xhosa values and tradition. With Professor Kaschula it is a bit uncommon to have a white person talking about a culture which he was not born into yet has adopted. Due to this

we had to restructure him on the timeline to always be talking as a secondary source, reinforcing what the first expert had just said, rather than allowing him to be an expert all by himself. All the sources used in the documentary are Xhosa (or in Professor Kaschula's case has an affiliation with Xhosa culture) except for Ronel Mostert, *Siyakubonga funeral home* owner. This resulted in a slight break in continuity, whereas everyone else refers to "we" as in "Xhosa society", Ronel refers to "them". Therefore there is a slight case of "otherness" in the piece which we had originally intended to avoid altogether. This is evident in the fact that we decided not to use any of Erika Botha's (Hospice assistant director) interview as she had constantly used a "them" vs "us" discourse which we felt was inappropriate for the piece. We also decided not to use any of Luyanda Matiswele's (Eluxolweni representative) interview as he had spoken in English, his second language, coupled with his nervousness to be on camera it resulted in very disjointed sound bites which did not work. In hindsight had we asked him to speak in Xhosa we would probably have been able to use his sound bites.

We had hours of footage from the funeral and the funeral parlours which we could have used but chose not too. For example we have some rare footage of inside a morgue however it is quite disturbing and we did not feel it necessary to include in the piece. Had the documentary taken a different angle we may have used it in the final product, but then there are also issues of ethics to be dealt with – "is it ethical to film someone who had no say in the matter, even if they were dead?" - My feeling is no, it is not ethical, unless you have permission from the deceased's family but there is still a fine line.

The idea of "otherness" which has been touched on above also revealed itself when we were on the shoots in the township. An all white crew in a relatively new car we felt like we were in a way exploiting the township for our story especially when one compares what the people there have to what we as middle class Rhodes students have. This idea also came out when our first case study decided to back out, she felt like we were going to exploit her for her story and she was going to get nothing out. We attempted to explain to her that if the documentary was ever aired her story would perhaps be a comfort to many South African's who find themselves in the same situation as they would realise that it was not only them who were suffering. As she was a social worker she has seen this issue of funeral debt affect many people in her community and therefore agreed to be interviewed as a social worker. However she pulled out again as she said she did not want to get on the bad side of certain funeral parlour owners as she did not want to be isolated as someone who had spoken out against them. At this stage we were approaching the end of our shooting schedule and therefore decided to move onto a different case study. Sindiswa was earmarked as our backup case study however she posed a new problem in that she refused to allow us to film anything apart from the actual interview and because she works two jobs was only available at 17h00 on Wednesday's.

Finding people who were willing to speak was generally a struggle, initially the funeral parlour owners were very sceptical to speak to us as they feared an exposé on their businesses. Even the Department of Social Welfare was sceptical of allowing us in and we had to arrange a meeting with the area director to obtain permission and reassure him that we would not imply any "dirty dealings" where there were none – however if there were, we would be obligated to do so.

Another ethical decision we were forced to make came about with the filming of the funeral. we were concerned with the idea of exploiting a private moment for the gain of our documentary. In order to overcome this we attempted to contact the family who were holding the funeral. in order to get permission to film certain rituals and ask them what they did not want us to film, what they suggested was appropriate to wear and what they thought we could do in order for us not to draw any of the focus from the funeral in progress. On contacting a spokesperson for the family they said that they were happy for us to film every moment and were excited to have us coming.

Through the process of investigating our hypothesis we were forced to look into the stereotyping of a Black "executive" funeral and attempt to deconstruct this stereotype and understand the cultural values implicit in it. It was only through doing this that the piece could become an eye opener to other cultures in order for them to understand why Xhosa people go to such expenses over burying their dead. In terms of this I feel we only half answered the question. The sound bites we had were too long and disjointed to edit together so that our audience would understand the "embarrassment" in Xhosa culture of not been able to give one's deceased an expensive funeral. We only realised the sound bites wouldn't work together in the edit a few days before the deadline and our source did not have the time to be re-interview, therefore this element was not fully explored in our final documentary.

This said however, in the final edit the narrative is very strong and conceptually the final product works well and opens up debate for further discussion around the issue by the audience. The final product has a clear beginning, middle and end. In the beginning the idea of an executive funeral is introduced and after the title it progresses with the introduction of a personal story which runs throughout the piece. Towards the end we introduce solutions to the problem, these are namely having a funeral policy in place before one loses a family member or getting help from the social welfare department once one is in the situation. However the solution to the problem is dependent on circumstance and we make this clear in the voiceover when we mention "one can not always plan for death. Especially when someone young dies".

On a technical level the piece is strong, the footage used is good and the sound on shoot, for the most part is excellent, except for Russell's interview where there was drilling going on intermittently, unfortunately the sound was not perfected in the edit which brought the technical side down. However the lighting was generally good, especially on the interviews where we took great care to light our subjects correctly. Unfortunately despite three-point lighting on Joe's interview the fact that it is a dark complexion against a light background meant that we did not portray her as we would have liked. The natural lighting used for Sindiswa's interview worked really well due to the fact that the sun was low as it was late in the afternoon.

Overall the piece explores the hypothesis which it started out with and through the narrative of the documentary the audience is able to recognise and engage with it as it holds the viewers attention.