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Virtual Burial Societies and the Negotiation of Social Support Among Migrants From African Countries in Cape Town

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Abstract

This study examines the emergence and functions of virtual burial societies among migrants from African countries in Cape Town, South Africa. Against legal precarity and exclusion from formal welfare structures, migrants utilise Information and Communication Technologies, particularly WhatsApp and remittance platforms such as Mukuru, to fulfil social, cultural and financial obligations. Drawing on ethnographic data, the study demonstrates how these digitally mediated networks facilitate funeral coordination, emotional solidarity and timely financial contributions, ensuring ritual continuity. Virtual burial societies thus illuminate evolving modalities of informal social protection, resilience and digitally mediated collective care in African urban migration contexts.

Keywords

Virtual burial societies, African migrants, Cape Town, Information and Communication Technologies, WhatsApp, informal social protection

Introduction

Despite persistent xenophobia and sporadic violence, South Africa remains a significant site of migration within the African continent, attracting migrants seeking refuge and economic opportunities in urban centres (Chekero, 2025; Morreira, 2016; Vanyoro, 2024). In Cape Town, many migrants navigate urban life marked by marginalisation, economic precarity and limited access to essential services such as healthcare and education (Chekero, 2023; Sichone, 2020). The uncertain and often insecure legal status of many migrants further situates them at the margins of formal, social and economic systems, thereby exacerbating their vulnerabilities and constraining their access to resources.

In response to these structural and social challenges, migrants develop adaptive strategies to sustain everyday survival and community cohesion. Central among these strategies is the mobilisation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly WhatsApp and

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remittance platforms such as Mukuru, which facilitate social connection, financial exchange and mutual support across translocal networks (Nyamnjoh and Brudvig, 2014). WhatsApp groups operate as dynamic social fields where migrants exchange vital information, foster mutual aid and collectively negotiate the constraints of displacement and marginalisation, illustrating the centrality of digital platforms in contemporary migrant sociality.

A particularly salient innovation within these digital networks is what I term 'virtual burial societies', reflecting digitally mediated adaptations of traditional burial society functions. These include live-streaming funerals, creating online memorial spaces and coordinating virtual gatherings for mourners who are unable to attend in person, illustrating how ICTs facilitate both social and ritual obligations (MacNeil et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2024). Virtual burial societies constitute a negotiation of communal burial practices, in which rituals traditionally performed according to cultural and cosmological norms are reconfigured through digital mediation. Such platforms enable migrants to uphold kinship obligations, sustain care across distances and maintain cultural continuity, reinforcing what Chekero and Morreira (2020) describe as 'reciprocal friendships that are a little like kin' (p. 33), and highlighting their role in sustaining relational bonds, mutual aid and community cohesion.

These virtual networks also intersect with broader financial ecologies, highlighting how social and economic practices are intertwined. Platforms such as Mukuru provide secure and timely channels for contributions, linking social, cultural and financial obligations in ways that are attuned to migrants' mobility and socio-economic realities (Cirolia et al., 2022; James, 2014; Rodima-Taylor, 2023). By facilitating participation in mutual aid networks and supporting ritual continuity, these platforms demonstrate that financial technologies are not merely transactional tools but constitutive infrastructures of sociality, care and solidarity.

This paper, therefore, examines the role of ICTs in virtual burial societies among African migrants in Cape Town, exploring how these digitally mediated networks sustain social, cultural and financial obligations across distance. It addresses a gap in the literature on translocal migrant sociality, digitally mediated mutual aid and the transformation of communal practices in migration contexts (Brudvig, 2019; Nyamnjoh and Brudvig, 2014). By examining the social and financial dimensions of virtual burial societies, the study contributes to an understanding of how digital technologies are reshaping collective care, resilience and social protection in African urban migration contexts.

Conceptualising burial societies in Africa

In African social life, burial societies stand as enduring embodiments of relational ethics – locally rooted infrastructures of care that respond to death, displacement and exclusion through collective responsibility. They operate not merely as financial instruments but as expressions of a cosmology where life, death and social bonds are intimately interwoven. Historically, these mutual aid institutions emerged as vernacular responses to the disruptions of colonial labour migration, particularly the fragmentation of kinship networks. By 1919, Mozambican migrants in Zimbabwe had formed the Sena and Gazaland burial societies (Hall, 1987), which offered financial protection and a symbolic reconstitution of home in unfamiliar urban spaces. Cormack (1983) aptly describes them as 'homeboy networks', whose strength lay in their capacity to sustain rural-urban continuity through ritual, memory and shared origin.

Over time, burial societies have expanded beyond their original focus on covering funeral expenses to provide informal insurance against illness, job loss and other life challenges (Cormack, 1983; Ngwenya, 2000). These societies take various organisational forms, all of which are grounded in principles of democratic accountability, mutual trust and collective responsibility. By explaining

the key elements of burial societies – such as member contributions, shared decision-making and support during crises – this discussion sets the stage for introducing virtual burial societies as an innovative adaptation by migrant communities. Variations across contexts reflect local ecologies of belonging: Ethiopia's Iddirs and neighbourhood-based groups in Botswana and Zimbabwe rely on face-to-face familiarity (Dercon et al., 2006), while workplace societies adapt to weak ties (Chekero, 2025). Ethnic and religious configurations offer internal cohesion but can also reproduce patterns of social exclusion (Ghatak, 1999). Gendered formations, particularly those led by women, play central roles in caregiving and performing ritual responsibilities (Teshome et al., 2014). Among diasporic Zimbabweans in South Africa, burial societies serve not only to facilitate repatriation but also to secure ancestral legitimacy, allowing rituals of return and continuity (Dafuleya, 2013).

To fully grasp the significance of these institutions, one must situate them within African ontologies of death, where dying is viewed as a passage rather than an end. In their study of Shona migrants, Chekero and Morreira (2020) remind us that the ethical Shona person is constructed in connection to the social world and is composed of living persons and ancestors (as is the case across Southern Africa). Thus, death demands communal witnessing, ritual mediation and ancestral incorporation (Dafuleya, 2013). Within this framework, burial societies become custodians of moral and spiritual order. Their function extends beyond logistics to encompass the restoration of cosmic balance, ensuring that no one dies or is buried in anonymity (Hall, 1987). Failure to provide a proper burial is not merely a personal loss, but a rupture in the community's moral economy.

Despite critiques that question the resilience of informal systems in contexts of protracted instability (Moser, 1998), burial societies have demonstrated remarkable durability. In settings like Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, they have not only persisted but also adapted (Dafuleya, 2013), primarily due to their integration into everyday life. Their informality enables flexibility, emotional responsiveness and localised forms of credit and risk-sharing, particularly for those excluded from formal finance (Coetzee and Cross, 2001). In South Africa, where institutional failure is widespread, over six million people rely on these collectives as trusted mechanisms of social protection (DGRV SA, 2003, cited in Kibuuka, 2006).

In recent years, the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has facilitated the emergence of virtual burial societies, digitally mediated networks that extend the social and moral economies of care among African migrants. Predominantly hosted on platforms such as WhatsApp, these societies allow transnational solidarity to persist despite geographic dispersion, systemic exclusion and bureaucratic marginalisation (MacNeil et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2024). They operate as informal organisations, grounded not in formal institutional hierarchies but in relational accountability, trust and shared norms, reflecting the adaptive capacities of migrant communities as they navigate precarious urban and transnational contexts.

Drawing on cultural idioms such as *hushamwari*, a Zimbabwean ethos of friendship and *kuhanyisana*, a South African Tsonga concept of mutual care, these digital networks adapt and reanimate long-standing traditions of collective support (Chekero, 2025). Members mobilise these platforms to pool financial and material resources, coordinate funerary obligations, circulate condolence messages and transmit ritual knowledge across physical and symbolic boundaries. In doing so, virtual burial societies function as sites where cultural obligations are enacted, affective ties are reaffirmed and belonging is continually negotiated and performed, even under conditions of xenophobia, legal precarity and social marginalisation.

Crucially, these ICT-mediated burial societies do not replace traditional burial practices; instead, they operate as adaptive extensions that renew and transform these cultural institutions in response to the exigencies of contemporary migrant lifeworlds. By facilitating both material and moral support, virtual burial societies illustrate the inventive strategies through which African migrants

reconstruct fragmented social worlds, creating resilient yet improvisational networks of care. Situated within broader financial ecologies that include remittances, mobile money, informal savings groups and formal banking systems, these societies exemplify how digitally mediated, informal organisations can sustain enduring solidarity while negotiating economic precarity. In doing so, they reinforce cultural continuity, generate new norms of trust and reciprocity, and demonstrate adaptive innovation in contexts marked by structural constraints and social marginalisation.

Conceptual framework: incompleteness, conviviality and relational ethics in migrant lives

This study draws on Nyamnjoh's (2017, 2023) theorisation of incompleteness to unpack the affective and relational dimensions of African migrants' experiences in Cape Town, particularly in moments of illness, bereavement and death. Incompleteness, as Nyamnjoh (2023) posits, is not a flaw to be corrected but an ontological condition of being human, one that invites open-endedness, interconnections, fluidities and conviviality in the face of uncertainty. In this framing, migrants do not strive for self-contained autonomy or completeness; instead, they embrace their limitations as an enabling force that sustains conviviality, interconnections and interdependencies. Conviviality, in this context, extends beyond the liberal ideal of peaceful coexistence (Gilroy, 2015) to denote a deeper, ethically stimulating orientation to others, one grounded in debt and indebtedness (Hay, 2014).

To further ground this analysis in context-specific ontologies, the study engages with the Shona concept of *hushamwari*, often translated as 'friendship', but far richer than the English language can convey. As Chekero and Morreira (2020) argue, *hushamwari* refers not merely to affective ties but to an ethic of being-with that sustains people through life's difficulties, including death and bereavement, in this study. It is friendship infused with obligation, reciprocity and care. In parallel, the South African xiTsonga notion of *kuhanyisana*, loosely meaning 'helping each other to live', encapsulates the idea of interdependence as a lived, moral and affective imperative. These indigenous relational logics offer a lens through which to theorise conviviality not as a fixed state, but as a practice that emerges and endures through everyday negotiations of care, solidarity and obligation (Owen et al., 2024).

These vernacular concepts resonate closely with *Ubuntu*, the widely known Southern African ethic that emphasises relational personhood, 'I am because we are'. Taken together, *hushamwari, kuhanyisana* and *Ubuntu* enable a theorisation of conviviality grounded in African epistemologies, challenging Eurocentric notions of sociality by foregrounding the centrality of interdependence in making meaningful life. As migrants navigate illness, bereavement and death, events that acutely reveal their incompleteness in the face of hostile bureaucracies, medical xenophobia and transnational constraints, they lean into these relational moral economies for survival and continuity.

As I show in this study, WhatsApp has become a key medium for enacting these affective and moral economies. It is not merely a communication tool, but a space where digital conviviality unfolds: death announcements are circulated, funeral arrangements are coordinated and collective grieving rituals, known in Zimbabwe as *kubata maoko* (offering condolences), are enacted. These virtual burial societies become platforms for performing *kuhanyisana* and extending *hushamwari* across borders and beyond kinship. Migrants contribute emotionally, financially and symbolically. This is not done out of obligation to the state or market, but to uphold relational ethics that endure even in virtual space. Here, digital technologies do not merely replicate offline relations; they (re) shape them, enabling nimble-footed solidarities (Nyamnjoh, 2023) responsive to precarity and mobility.

Moreover, repatriating a body is not reducible to a logistical challenge. It is a deeply affective and collective project, animated by relational labour, the mobilisation of networks and the affirmation of a shared moral universe. Migrants mobilise their incompleteness as a resource, an awareness that no one survives in a social vacuum (Chekero, 2025), and turn to others in practices of *kuhanyisana*, reaffirming communal ties amid marginalisation. This becomes especially important in contexts where the state fails to provide and where migrants must make do through relational ingenuity.

Ultimately, this study reveals how migrants transform their vulnerabilities into sources of social creativity. While not eliminating structural violence, they engage in practices that allow them to coexist with and through others (Mushonga and Makwara, 2025; Owen et al., 2024; Ross, 2015). Conviviality, grounded in *hushamwari, kuhanyisana* and *Ubuntu*, offers an alternative ontology of being and becoming in the city. It shows that incompleteness is not only a condition to be navigated, but a generative force that underwrites the making of more liveable, relational and compassionate futures on the margins of urban life.

Harvesting data in virtual and physical spaces

The findings presented in this study are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2023. This work formed part of a broader anthropological engagement that examined how migrants navigate, reconfigure, and inhabit the social and spatial terrains of mobility and conviviality in Cape Town. Employing a multi-sited ethnographic approach, I combined in-depth interviews and group discussions with digital ethnography to trace the everyday strategies employed by African migrants as they navigate precarious urban lives.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, participant observation took place in both physical community spaces and online environments among migrants. The COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 brought new urgency to digital spaces. As physical movement was restricted, WhatsApp groups, which were already integral to many migrants' everyday lives, took on greater importance. They became both tools for communication and vital spaces for migrants' engagement and my ethnographic immersion. In these digital gatherings, migrants shared stories, mourned losses, coordinated support and sustained social ties. As a researcher, I found these spaces to be rich sites for observing how care, solidarity and survival were negotiated in the face of uncertainty. I conducted digital participant observation before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in three primary WhatsApp groups: Dzoro One Big Family, Bota Funeral Group and Our Township Stories. Over time, these groups transformed into virtual burial societies. Through long-term engagement, I observed how they shifted from informal conversation spaces to structured forms of mutual aid. This allowed me to observe how migrants perform everyday rituals closely, offer care and sustain community ties across borders. These groups became key sites for witnessing how solidarity and belonging are nurtured in digital and transnational spaces.

Central to my methodological approach was the mobilisation of *hushamwari.* This concept anchored my recruitment strategy and facilitated access to digital and physical spaces where migrants congregated. Drawing on long-standing personal relationships and networks established over years of fieldwork, I was invited to join multiple WhatsApp groups where key social interactions took place. These relationships of trust enabled me to observe, participate in and document real-time conversations surrounding illness, death and financial hardship. Participant consent was obtained and continually negotiated daily throughout the research process.

Smartphones emerged as essential ethnographic tools. Their widespread use enabled participants to share photo stories, voice notes and videos, effectively offering visual and auditory ethnographic diaries of their everyday lives. WhatsApp groups provided more than communication; they

became digital lifelines. They facilitated the circulation of urgent information (e.g. health crises, deaths), coordinated care and acted as repositories of memory and mourning. Mobile phones were also used for remittances and emergency support, reinforcing the function of these digital networks as vehicles of social and financial solidarity.

I conducted 55 interviews with migrant participants within and beyond the digital realm. These conversations consistently underscored the importance of virtual burial societies in addressing the financial and emotional burdens of illness and death. Mobile technologies enabled not only the transfer of funds but also the maintenance of affective ties across borders. Furthermore, the pandemic also reshaped the modalities of communal engagement. Migrants adapted by initiating virtual 'happy hours', online prayer meetings and video calls, substituting in-person funeral gatherings. These virtual practices demonstrated the resilience of social ties and the creative reconstitution of fellowship in times of isolation. As Pink (2015) argues, digital ethnography is not confined to physical proximity but allows for immersive engagement through mediated co-presence. The ubiquity of smartphones and familiarity with digital tools among participants further enhanced the fluidity of data collection.

In this study of virtual burial societies among migrants, I avoid defining participants strictly by state-based categories, such as nationality. Following Chekero (2025), I resist the 'state trap' – the tendency to reproduce official labels categorising people as insiders or outsiders. While I still refer to them as migrants, I do so critically, aware that this term is both necessary and limiting. I do not frame my research around a single national group; instead, I explore how diverse people connect across borders and locations. WhatsApp groups often include members from various African countries, making rigid national labels inadequate. I focus on the translocal and transnational networks shaping care, solidarity and survival in Cape Town. These digital spaces reflect shared struggles, not shared passports. By emphasising lived connections over administrative classifications, I capture the flexible, relational ways migrants create a sense of belonging.

Ultimately, the integration of *hushamwari* into digital ethnographic practice enabled me to move seamlessly between online and offline spaces, as well as between formal interviews and spontaneous digital interactions. This methodological nimbleness enriched the empirical base of the study and captured the dynamic ways migrants mobilise technology, community and cultural idioms to endure and thrive under conditions of uncertainty.

The role of ICTs in migrant connectivity

ICTs, particularly WhatsApp, have become vital infrastructures through which African migrants in South Africa sustain social networks, coordinate care and reproduce culturally embedded practices across distance. These platforms are actively repurposed to orchestrate ritual obligations and reinforce communal solidarity, especially under conditions of xenophobia, legal precarity and limited access to formal social protection (MacNeil et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2024). Comparative evidence highlights the broader significance of such digitally mediated practices: diasporic communities in Canada and the United Kingdom employed virtual funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain mourning rituals and affective ties despite geographic separation (Wilson et al., 2024), while studies from Taiwan and Japan demonstrate how digital memorialisation mediates grief, preserves collective memory and sustains ritual continuity (Uriu et al., 2019). These examples highlight cross-cultural patterns in the creative use of ICTs to sustain social and moral economies in contexts of constraint, demonstrating how digital platforms can expand the relational and ethical dimensions of care beyond physical boundaries.

Within the South African context, migrants have adapted these technologies to create virtual burial societies that are digitally mediated. These informal organisations extend the ethos

and functions of traditional burial associations into online spaces (Chekero, 2025). Such societies coordinate funeral contributions, circulate condolence messages and transmit ritual knowledge, effectively embedding cultural obligations within technological infrastructures. They operate as affective and moral arenas where belonging is reaffirmed, solidarity enacted and relational obligations maintained, demonstrating the capacity of migrants to transform fragmented social worlds into resilient, if improvised, communities of care.

ICTs further facilitate economic resilience by enabling collective financial strategies. Migrants leverage mobile platforms to pool resources, distribute aid within networks and respond to emergent shocks, reflecting broader patterns identified in studies of digital remittances and community-based financial practices across Africa (Alakbarova and Gurbanova, 2025; MacNeil et al., 2023). In doing so, WhatsApp-mediated practices illustrate how digital tools are simultaneously social, cultural and economic assets, embedded in everyday life and central to migrant strategies of survival and adaptation. By situating South African migrants' ICT practices within these transnational and comparative literatures, this study highlights the inventive continuity of traditional care practices, revealing how virtual burial societies are both locally grounded and globally resonant forms of digitally mediated sociality.

WhatsApp: a nexus of communication and community

African migrants in South Africa have appropriated WhatsApp as a communication tool and a vital social infrastructure. It enables them to maintain translocal ties, coordinate obligations and mobilise care across distance. WhatsApp groups serve as dynamic platforms for mutual aid, emotional support and communal solidarity, particularly during illnesses, bereavements and crises. Within these platforms, migrants have created virtual burial societies – digitally mediated networks that reproduce traditional practices of care and mourning while adapting to the constraints of urban precarity and limited formal social protection. These groups facilitate resource pooling, information verification and the ritualised enactment of solidarity, sustaining cultural obligations and relational ethics across dispersed communities.

Ethnographic engagement with group administrators reveals the governance and moral economies that sustain these networks. Unlike broader, often impersonal digital collectives, the societies studied here are anchored in existing friendships, prior participation and proximity to founding members. Solidarity within these groups carries moral and social weight: inclusion depends on adherence to community norms, and contributions signify ethical commitment. One such group, Our Township Stories, originated as a space for sharing updates and nostalgic reflections from members' hometowns, but gradually evolved into a site of solidarity, emotional support and financial cooperation. Conversations with administrators Daison and Purazi revealed how the group mobilised during illness and death to coordinate contributions, circulate verified information and enforce group discipline. Through their digital authority, admins regulate narrative flow, limit irrelevant content and safeguard the integrity of mutual aid. In this way, these platforms support logistical coordination and the ritualised enactment of communal care, fostering a sense of home and away from home. During one of our frequent dialogues, Daison expressed that

> The group started with just a few family members and friends living in different cities in South Africa. We made it to keep in touch and share news from home. However, it has grown significantly, and we now have around 250 people. Not everyone remains close with their family, but we firmly believe that friendship is important. We only add people we know or who have been referred by someone already in the group.

In addition to the above, another admin, Purazi, said:

> We share news when someone is sick or has passed away. Then we ask everyone to contribute, because funerals can be very expensive. Usually, we give the money to the deceased's family. If they already have money for repatriation, they can use it to buy food. If not, they use it to send the body back home. It is our way of showing support during a difficult time and paying respect to the person who has passed away.

The narratives of WhatsApp administrators like Daison and Purazi show how digital technologies are locally reappropriated to reproduce and renegotiate long-standing African values of solidarity and mutual aid. During fieldwork, it became clear that these groups function far beyond mere platforms for communication; they are central infrastructures for managing illness, bereavement and communal grief within migrant communities. When members fall ill or pass away, these digital communities rapidly mobilise to share health updates, verify deaths, coordinate support and pool resources for dignified funerals. This pooling of financial contributions through WhatsApp echoes the ethos of *kuhanyisana* and *Ubuntu*, emphasising relational personhood and shared humanity (Chimuka, 2001).

In WhatsApp groups, the admins play a crucial role in curating membership and regulating the moral and informational dynamics of the group. Their actions reflect a digital governance grounded in convivial ethics (Nyamnjoh, 2017), embodying care, trust and the concept of living together in harmony, as discussed by Mushonga and Makwara (2025) and Owen et al. (2024). In this context, WhatsApp is not merely a technological tool, but a social infrastructure that enables African migrants to practise reciprocal responsibility across distance and precarious borders.

The convergence of *conviviality* (Gilroy, 2015) and *Ubuntu* (Chimuka, 2001) within WhatsApp groups illustrates how migrants adapt and re-embed traditional values into digital lifeworlds. WhatsApp groups are central for mobilising support during illness, bereavement and crisis. One member, Rebecca, whose husband passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic, shared the following reflection:

> When my husband died, I did not know how I was going to cope or manage to send his body back home. We believe that burying someone in their ancestral land is not just a tradition, but a spiritual and cultural duty. The WhatsApp group Bota Funeral helped me immensely – they held prayer sessions, sent money to assist with repatriation, and shared messages of comfort and condolence. Some of the people who helped me, I have never even met in person. However, their support made me feel less alone, and I am now a proud member of the burial society.

Rebecca's reflection highlights how virtual burial societies offer emotional, financial and spiritual support, sustaining cultural obligations and social bonds across distances. Ritualised sharing of grief enables users to maintain *hushamwari*, reflecting ICTs' capacity for 'compressed co-presence' where social closeness persists despite geographic separation (De Bruijn and Nyamnjoh, 2009). Such digital co-presence is vital for managing crises and sustaining emotional intimacy among mobile populations. Group interactions often follow moral codes shaped by the broader cultural expectations of respect, humility and responsibility – values central to *kuhanyisana*, and traditional burial societies. Importantly, these virtual spaces are not only reactive but also preventive and educative, serving as sites where health information, community warnings and guidance on remitting funds are shared. This is confirmed by Daison, who said:

> These virtual groups respond to problems and help prevent them by sharing important health tips and warnings about issues such as disease outbreaks. They alert us about police raids and where it is safe to go for healthcare, especially now when some community groups are turning migrants away from public hospitals. This helps keep everyone informed and safer.

In doing so, virtual burial societies reflect how digital networks become extensions of the moral economy, adapting African ethics of care to global and urbanised contexts (Hay, 2014). Rather than signalling the erosion of tradition, WhatsApp-based burial societies illustrate the continuity and transformation of African social forms within diasporic life.

These practices show how WhatsApp mediates collective life, sustaining kinship ties and communal obligations across distance. Digital *Ubuntu* demonstrates flexibility, enabling migrants from diverse backgrounds to construct shared moral worlds that transcend kinship or nationality. This resonates with Chekero's (2025) conception of *hushamwari* as a strategic and affective mode of belonging, enabling migrants to forge bonds of friendship and support in unfamiliar urban terrains. While these digital burial societies are contemporary in form, they are deeply historical in function, echoing older mutual aid networks and burial societies that offered communal insurance against death and misfortune. In today's context of economic insecurity, border regimes and bureaucratic exclusion, WhatsApp becomes a critical site of resilience, allowing migrants to enact belonging, offer dignity to the dead and reaffirm their humanity in conditions that often deny it.

Virtual burial societies as sites of social cohesion and moral reciprocity

Traditionally, African burial societies have served as vital mechanisms for pooling resources during bereavement, fostering social cohesion, and promoting solidarity within communities (Dercon et al., 2008). In contemporary contexts, digital technologies increasingly mediate these roles as migrants navigate urban precarity and formal exclusion from social protection systems. WhatsApp-based virtual burial societies have emerged as essential infrastructures that sustain relational networks across distances, enabling trust, mutual care and communal obligation. These platforms preserve the ethical foundations of traditional societies while accommodating the logistical demands of geographically dispersed communities.

Ethnographic engagement with group administrators illustrates the dynamics and moral economies embedded within these networks. Edmund, known as ED, administrator of Dzoro One Big Family, explained how WhatsApp became a lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic when social distancing prevented physical gatherings. The platform enabled the continuation of rituals, reinforced existing ties and facilitated new connections, providing emotional and practical support. Edmund described the group's evolution:

> Our story started when we made a WhatsApp group to help send a friend's body back home after they died. We began sharing money, ideas and support. Then we had a big idea: why not make this group a virtual funeral society that helps many people, not just one? Initially, the group consisted only of family and close friends. However, over time, more and more people joined in. Even now, after COVID-19 is over, the WhatsApp group is still essential. It spreads news quickly, comforts those in need, and connects those who want to give money or help in other ways. Dzoro One Big Family is like a big family, where people come together to support and stand by one another.

Edmund's account demonstrates how practices of *hushamwari* and *kuhanyisana* are actively reimagined through digital mediation. In these virtual spaces, migrants perform everyday acts of giving, comforting and organising, sustaining collective responsibility despite isolation. Drawing on Nyamnjoh's (2017, 2023) concept of incompleteness, these practices are not attempts to restore wholeness but strategies for living with uncertainty, interdependence and fluid sociality. Conviviality here is enacted through ethical entanglements grounded in mutual obligation, rather than merely symbolic coexistence.

Morgan, another administrator, described the origins and growth of Bota Funeral Group. Initially formed to raise funds for a cousin's repatriation during the economic strain of the COVID-19 pandemic, the group expanded rapidly into a network of over 600 members. Membership remains by invitation, reflecting trust, accountability and shared moral responsibility. Morgan stated,

> At first, we just wanted to help my cousin's body go back home. It was challenging because many people lost their jobs during the pandemic. We made a small group with family to ask for money and help. Then more people joined, and it grew fast. Now, the Bota Funeral Group has over 300 members who support one another.

These accounts exemplify how digital burial societies maintain continuity with traditional practices – pooling resources, coordinating funerals and sustaining solidarity – while enabling novel capacities. WhatsApp facilitates cross-border inclusion, rapid information flow and large-scale participation, illustrating how digital tools extend rather than replace existing social and economic networks.

This ethnographic evidence aligns with anthropological insights on the centrality of moral obligation in migrant networks (Mushonga and Makwara, 2025). Migrants rely on social systems grounded in ethical principles, where care and solidarity are essential for survival. Networks such as Dzoro One Big Family, Bota Funeral Group and Our Township Stories operationalise *Ubuntu* by emphasising interdependence, mutual responsibility and the cultivation of enduring social bonds. These practices resonate with Mauss' (1990) gift paradigm, where giving generates reciprocal obligations that sustain community cohesion. In marginalised urban contexts, such gifting functions as a survival strategy and a moral economy.

Nyamnjoh's (2017) notion of conviviality emphasises the ethical and relational aspects of these interactions, fostering everyday solidarity. Complementing this, Nyamnjoh's (2023) concept of incompleteness illuminates how migrants embrace interdependence and relational limits, fostering fluidity and openness in social networks. *Ubuntu, hushamwari, kuhanyisana* and conviviality collectively animate digital support systems where care is both culturally embedded and existentially necessary. As Desmond Tutu (2004) observed,

> A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, walk, speak, or behave as human beings unless other human beings taught us. We need other human beings to be human. (p. 25)

As elaborated by Poovan et al. (2006: 23–25), *Ubuntu*'s ethical and relational dimensions offer an analytical lens for understanding how migrants creatively respond to exclusion and vulnerability. In the absence of accessible public healthcare, especially for undocumented migrants, these networks operate as alternative infrastructures of care. As Hall (1987) observed, burial societies historically offered more than economic relief – they constituted crucial nodes of belonging, obligation and continuity with one's home community.

The transition from physical to digital burial societies during COVID-19 illustrates adaptation rather than rupture. Migrants, often constrained by lockdowns or financial precarity, used WhatsApp to sustain their networks, mobilise contributions and circulate critical information. Virtual burial societies function simultaneously as practical and emotional infrastructures, preserving *Ubuntu*'s ethical principles while navigating the affordances and limits of digital platforms.

Drawing on Mauss' (1990) theory of the gift, migrants' contributions to funerals serve not merely as the redistribution of resources, but also as mechanisms for generating enduring social

ties grounded in reciprocal obligation. These acts of giving produce networks of relationality that extend beyond immediate material exchange, instantiating a form of conviviality that Hay (2014) characterises as a politics of presence, shared vulnerability and attentive engagement in everyday life. Such interactions cultivate relational depth, where co-presence and ethical responsiveness shape social bonds more than transactional utility. Gilroy's (2015) ethical framing underscores that these engagements are practices of attentiveness to the well-being of others, revealing the moral stakes inherent in sustaining interdependence. Empirical research by Mushonga and Makwara (2025) and Owen et al. (2024) demonstrates that these migrant networks actively reproduce social support under conditions of structural constraint, showing that care is both performed and institutionalised through everyday practices of obligation and solidarity. Collectively, these perspectives illuminate conviviality as a lens for understanding how migrants convert acts of giving into ethical and social commitments that structure community life.

In keeping up with Nyamnjoh's (2023) notion of incompleteness, migrants navigate relational limits by maintaining flexible and adaptive bonds that sustain collective resilience in the face of uncertainty. Ethnographic evidence is captured in the Shona proverb, '*kutsva kwendebvu varume vanodzimurana*' (when beards burn, men douse each other out), which encapsulates the centrality of interdependence in moments of vulnerability. This proverb illustrates how solidarity emerges not only from formal obligation but also through the recognition of shared risk and mutual reliance. Conviviality, in this sense, is enacted through continuous negotiation of obligations, where care is both iterative and responsive to evolving circumstances.

Through these digital spaces, migrants negotiate traditional support systems, striking a balance between continuity and innovative capacities that enable speed, scale and cross-border coordination. WhatsApp-based burial societies are not only tools of crisis response but platforms for sustaining everyday relational life, collective ethics and affective solidarity. In doing so, they exemplify how African social forms adapt and endure in diasporic, urban and digitally mediated contexts, revealing resilience, moral imagination and the lived practice of *Ubuntu* in the face of uncertainty.

Digital burial societies and the financial ecologies of migrant life

While digital burial societies are often celebrated for sustaining solidarity and enacting *Ubuntu* among migrant communities, their significance must be understood within the broader financial ecologies that migrants navigate. Migrant financial practices are multi-scalar and relational, spanning formal institutions such as banks and microfinance institutions, as well as informal mechanisms including savings groups and burial societies (Cirolia et al., 2022; James, 2014). These practices are not merely economic; they are deeply entangled with moral obligations, social ties and resilience strategies in contexts of precarity. Digital platforms, while facilitating translocal connectivity, negotiate these obligations in ways that can simultaneously enable and constrain migrants' financial and social lives. As Rodima-Taylor (2023) notes, digital mutuality can amplify solidarity and vulnerability, reshaping the ethics and politics of financial interdependence.

Mukuru, a digital remittance platform, exemplifies how technology mediates social and financial practices among migrants. Purazi explained, 'With Mukuru, I can send money to the deceased's family without worrying about papers or where I am; it just works across borders'. By circumventing the bureaucratic and often exclusionary requirements of formal banking – including proof of residence, employment, and identity documentation – Mukuru provides a flexible and accessible infrastructure attuned to the mobility and socio-economic realities of migrants. Beyond facilitating remittances, it is a key mechanism for sustaining obligations within informal networks, including

WhatsApp-based virtual burial societies. It enables members to contribute to funerals, support grieving families and uphold cultural and moral obligations across transnational spaces.

Within virtual burial societies, timely financial contributions are critical for addressing illness and death. As Daison explained, 'If we do not send our contribution on time, the family suffers; Mukuru makes sure the money reaches them immediately, wherever they are'. Similarly, Sophia noted, 'It is safer and faster than carrying cash, and everyone knows the contributions are tracked'. Mukuru enables instant and secure transfers, allowing groups like Dzoro One Big Family to coordinate mandatory contributions of R100 per event, with optional additional amounts. At the same time, the treasurer manages disbursements through the platform. Participants emphasised that Mukuru enhances safety and accountability: digital transfers mitigate the risks of carrying cash in high-crime urban environments, and administrators can enforce contributions, with unpaid amounts accruing as credit and potentially triggering fines or temporary exclusion.

These financial practices are inseparable from the relational and moral economies that underpin the societies, shaped by intimate knowledge of household capacities, seasonal needs and social obligations (Cirolia et al., 2022; James, 2014). In this way, Mukuru does more than facilitate remittances – it functions as a critical infrastructure that intertwines technology, sociality and ethics, sustaining communal solidarity and cultural obligations within digitally mediated networks.

Mukuru thus illustrates the convergence of digital technology and sociality, enabling migrants to sustain kinship obligations and cultural continuity across translocal spaces. While these platforms reinforce solidarity and conviviality, they also mediate financial risks: digital indebtedness may generate unsustainable obligations or reproduce inequalities among members (Rodima-Taylor, 2023). Situating virtual burial societies within these broader financial ecologies highlights their dual character: they serve as sites of mutual aid and cultural reproduction, yet they are also arenas where economic vulnerability, social accountability and moral obligation intersect.

Through the integration of Mukuru into digital burial societies, migrants exercise agency over both financial and social obligations, navigating precarity while maintaining communal responsibility. This case highlights the transformative potential of mobile technologies in reshaping traditional forms of mutual aid, demonstrating that digital platforms are not merely tools for remittance but also vital infrastructures through which translocal migrant communities negotiate culture, solidarity and economic survival.

Negotiating absence and presence: temporalities of waiting, loss and remembrance

ICTs, particularly mobile phones and platforms like WhatsApp, serve as critical relational infrastructures for African migrants in Cape Town. These technologies are spaces where care, obligation and presence are actively negotiated, particularly in contexts of illness, bereavement and death. Nyamnjoh's (2017, 2023) concept of incompleteness offers a lens through which to understand migrant life as inherently relational and porous, rather than confined by notions of individual autonomy or self-sufficiency. Incompleteness is not a deficit but a mode of being that embraces openness, fluid social connections and ongoing negotiation, allowing migrants to inhabit vulnerability while sustaining networks of improvisational support amid structural uncertainty.

Within these digital spaces, WhatsApp facilitates what Nyamnjoh (2017) terms a politics of presence and mutual recognition, extending beyond mere convivial coexistence (Gilroy, 2015; Hay, 2014). Migrants coordinate funeral arrangements, circulate death notices and engage in collective mourning in real time. These activities are informed by vernacular ethics, including *hushamwari, kuhanyisana* and relational moral economies that valorise solidarity and mutual endurance

(Chekero and Morreira, 2020). Virtual burial societies, such as Dzoro One Big Family, Bota Funeral Group and Our Township Stories, exemplify these dynamics. Emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic, these networks have persisted, mobilising hundreds of participants through trust, social pressure and reciprocal obligation.

While these practices illustrate relational ingenuity and collective resilience, it is crucial to temper normative interpretations of *Ubuntu*, conviviality and Maussian gift frameworks. *Ubuntu* and related ethical paradigms can be mobilised in essentialising ways, masking tensions, exclusion and coercion within networks. Contributions in virtual burial societies – whether financial, practical or emotional – do not operate in a vacuum; they are embedded in moral hierarchies and social pressures that may disadvantage those unable to participate fully. As one participant noted, failing to contribute can result in temporary exclusion or social censure, underscoring the fragile, negotiated and often uneven nature of solidarity. In this sense, Mauss' (1990) gift paradigm highlights the ethical entanglement and the latent power asymmetries inherent in reciprocal exchanges.

Mobile phones thus function as conduits for relationality and ethical performance, enabling migrants to enact *kuhanyisana* and *hushamwari* across spatial and temporal distances. These digital practices also instantiate Nyamnjoh's (2023) concept of nimble-footedness, as migrants creatively navigate shifting social, economic and bureaucratic borders. The delicate management of presence and absence in these spaces resonates with Schopenhauer's (2015 [1851]) porcupine allegory: migrants balance intimacy and separation, care and self-preservation, connection and constraint, revealing both the possibilities and limitations of digital conviviality. By situating these networks within conditions of scarcity, inequality and moral negotiation, this analysis moves beyond idealised representations of *Ubuntu* and conviviality, foregrounding the contested, ambivalent and ethically complex realities of migrant social life in digitally mediated spaces.

Reluctant solidarity and tensions in virtual burial societies

While virtual burial societies among African migrants in South Africa are often celebrated for fostering mutual care, resilience and community, ethnographic evidence reveals the ambivalences and tensions underlying these digitally mediated solidarities. Drawing on Bähre's (2007) concept of 'reluctant solidarity', it becomes apparent that assistance, even in moments of crisis such as death, is rarely uncomplicated or universally accessible. Bähre's (2007) fieldwork in a Cape Town township illustrated how mutual aid is embedded in contestation: he recounts the case of Noparuru, 'despite being marginalised, she became central to a dispute over funeral arrangements after her death from AIDS' (p. 45), revealing that solidarity can simultaneously affirm and unsettle community bonds. In virtual burial societies, similar dynamics emerge: group members negotiate obligations, contributions, and recognition through WhatsApp and other mobile platforms, yet these negotiations are often fraught with inequality, competition, and moral tension.

Economic precarity and uneven participation exacerbate tensions within these societies. African migrants with irregular income or undocumented status frequently face moral scrutiny when unable to meet contribution expectations. Sophia, a group member, reflected on one case she witnessed:

> When someone in our Dzoro One Big Family group died, I did not give any money for their funeral. I remembered that this person hardly ever gave money to help others in the group. He never attended other people's funerals or offered help when someone needed support. Giving money felt strange and unfair, especially since he had never helped anyone else. I thought that giving would not be right because it should be fair for everyone to help each other.

Sophia's sentiments exemplify how reciprocity is morally enforced in virtual networks, echoing Heil's (2014) argument that conviviality is maintained through negotiated ethical consensus, which can falter under conditions of scarcity. Similarly, Stanford described the psychological and social pressures associated with contribution expectations:

> Even if I wanted to help, I had no money that month. I was worried they would think I do not care. If I gave only a little, I would feel ashamed. I was scared they would remove me from the group, and they did. They let me return only after I paid a fine, but I still feel sad and disappointed.

Stanford's reflection illustrates how reluctant solidarity operates. Migrants provide mutual aid even under economic and social duress. Yet scarcity and moral expectations produce ambivalence, anxiety and resentment. Judgmental norms enforce participation, while exclusionary practices reinforce group hierarchies. Membership often depends on nationality, kinship or prior contributions to the organisation. As Lapiņa (2016) notes, conviviality can coexist with boundaries that limit inclusivity. These dynamics show that solidarity is neither automatic nor unconditional. Elad described a similar tension, where participation was contested based on prior engagement, further revealing the fragile and negotiated nature of care within these digital networks. Elad explained one such case:

> Some people from outside the region attempted to join the group for the funeral, but others stated they could not participate because they had never contributed to the group before. It created tension, which made other people leave the group and form their own. It was so disappointing that even in mourning, people argued.

Here, digital conviviality in virtual burial societies simultaneously produces inclusion and exclusion. It strengthens intra-group bonds while foregrounding moral hierarchies and conditional membership. As Bähre (2007) observes, solidarity is rarely egalitarian; even acts of care carry implicit judgements about worthiness and contribution. Sophia, for instance, reflected, 'Some people expect me to contribute every month, but I cannot always afford it. I worry they will think I do not care'. Such accounts reveal the everyday moral calculations that underpin virtual forms of support. Similarly, Stanford recounted being removed from a group for delayed contributions, only rejoining after paying a fine: 'I still feel sad and disappointed', he explained. Elad described conflicts over participation when prior engagement dictated inclusion: 'Those who never helped before were told they could not contribute now'.

Despite these tensions, these digital formations exemplify Ross' (2015) notion of 'relational ingenuity'. Migrants improvise care and maintain connections across geographic, economic and bureaucratic barriers. WhatsApp becomes a site of affective labour and moral performance, where the absent can be symbolically present, obligations fulfilled and relationships sustained. These ethnographic moments illustrate Nyamnjoh's (2023) concepts of incompleteness and relationality: solidarity is enacted within constraints, requiring improvisation, negotiation and ethical labour that extends beyond strict reciprocity.

Yet fragility remains central. Contributions, recognition and presence are conditional; moral and structural inequalities shape who can participate and how they participate. The ambivalence evident in Sophia, Stanford and Elad's experiences confirms Bähre's (2007) argument: solidarity is necessary but contingent, enabling survival while producing tension, judgement and stress. Virtual burial societies present a paradox: they enable migrants to extend their ethical and social responsibilities across space and time, yet these networks are constrained by structural, economic and social limitations that prevent them from achieving universality or egalitarianism.

In sum, African migrants' engagement in these digital networks illuminates the ambivalent potential of ICT-mediated conviviality. In contrast, such societies sustain relational life, moral responsibility and communal presence, but they also reproduce hierarchies, exclusion and conditional judgement. As Nyamnjoh (2023) emphasises, incompleteness and interdependence constitute migrant life: solidarity is never absolute but continuously negotiated through practical, economic and moral labour. These findings advance anthropological understandings of digitality, care and the moral economy, revealing the complex and tension-laden dynamics of relational solidarity among migrants as they navigate death, poverty and the pursuit of belonging.

Questions emerge regarding how the virtual burial societies examined here differ from broader digital savings or lending groups, particularly those in which members may be anonymous and lack prior social ties (Bähre, 2007; Beaunoyer et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024).Unlike these wider, often impersonal formations, the societies in this study are informal, embedded within pre-existing friendship networks, histories of participation and relational proximity to founding members. Solidarity in these contexts is not contractual but morally and socially enforced: membership is conditional, and contributions carry ethical weight that is inseparable from ongoing relational obligations (Chekero, 2025).

Conflicts and exclusion arise when members fail to meet expectations, illustrating the fragility of digital conviviality. Sophia reflected, 'If you do not send money regularly, people start to doubt your care, and sometimes they remove you from the group', Stanford recounted temporary expulsion for non-payment and the shame that persisted even after settling his fine. These narratives demonstrate that non-contribution is not merely an economic lapse but a breach of relational and moral norms, producing social consequences, judgement and sometimes long-term estrangement.

Such dynamics reveal that solidarity in friendship-based digital networks is contingent, negotiated and deeply relational. While these societies enable care, reciprocity and relational ingenuity, they reproduce hierarchies, exclusion and affective stress. They underscore how digitally mediated sociality among migrants is simultaneously enabling and constraining, highlighting the interplay of moral economy, relational ethics and the contingent nature of digital conviviality in sustaining community obligations (Bähre, 2007; Beaunoyer et al., 2024; Chekero, 2025; Wilson et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This paper examines how African migrants in South Africa utilise ICTs, particularly cellphones, WhatsApp and digital remittance platforms such as Mukuru, as conduits for financial assistance, emotional support and everyday sociality, reanimating communal ethics across dispersed geographies. These platforms are not merely technological tools but extensions of African philosophies of relationality, including *Ubuntu, hushamwari* and the ethic of sustaining one another under conditions of uncertainty. Through WhatsApp-based virtual burial societies and mutual aid networks, migrants enact forms of relational care that challenge assumptions that physical co-presence is a prerequisite for meaningful social cohesion. In these digitally mediated spaces, *Ubuntu* is not diluted but negotiated, giving rise to what may be termed digital *Ubuntu*, in which reciprocity and moral obligation continue to flourish despite spatial and legal dislocation (Chekero and Morreira, 2020). Contributions during illness, mourning or financial strain echo the gift paradigm (Mauss, 1990), not as transactional obligations but as embodied commitments to a translocal collective.

These practices illustrate how digital technologies become embedded in the moral and financial ecologies of migrant life, functioning as affective infrastructures that sustain community without formal support. Cellphones and platforms such as Mukuru enable migrants to navigate structural violence, state exclusion and social marginalisation (Cirolia et al., 2022; James, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2017). Mukuru exemplifies the intersection of technology, sociality and ethics, as it circumvents

the bureaucratic and exclusionary requirements of formal banking. This facilitates timely financial contributions to virtual burial societies, allowing members to support grieving families, uphold kinship obligations and sustain cultural continuity across borders. Participants emphasised that the platform enhances both safety and accountability: digital transfers mitigate the risks associated with carrying cash, ensure contributions are tracked and enable administrators to enforce participation, while also mitigating potential inequalities and financial strain (Rodima-Taylor, 2023).

Through the integration of Mukuru into digitally mediated burial societies, migrants exercise agency over both financial and social obligations, navigating precarity while maintaining communal responsibility. These virtual networks, which simultaneously serve as sites of mutual aid, cultural reproduction and financial negotiation, demonstrate how mobile technologies transform traditional practices, embedding ethics, solidarity and resilience into the digital infrastructures that sustain translocal migrant communities.

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This research was conducted during my doctoral studies at the University of Cape Town. I am currently affiliated with the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship at the University of Pretoria.

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Ethical considerations

This study received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of Cape Town, under Application Number: EARC2018-30. The research was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines for studies involving human participants.

Consent to participate

All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study. Verbal and written consent were obtained before data collection, as appropriate to the context and in accordance with the ethical approval.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. This manuscript does not include any individual-level data, images or videos requiring specific consent for publication.

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Data availability statement

Due to the ethnographic and sensitive nature of this research, data supporting the findings are not publicly available. Anonymised excerpts may be shared upon reasonable request and following ethical guidelines.

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