



January 2020

This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection

John C. Lyden

Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, johnclyden@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2020) "This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss1/4>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection

Abstract

This is a film review of *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* (2019), directed by Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese.

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection (2019), dir. Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese

This is the first film from the nation of Lesotho to be selected for the World Cinema Dramatic Competition at the Sundance Film Festival. It offers an elegy for a community that is to be relocated, as their village will be flooded to make way for a dam. The people do not own the land, so the government has the legal right, and there is nothing that the people can do to stop it. But one woman, Mantoa (played by 80 year old actress Mary Twala Mhlongo, pictured above), will not accept this. Her husband, daughter, grandchild, and now her son have all died, and she herself does not want to live any longer. But her family is buried there, as their ancestors have been for centuries, and she will not stand for their graves being flooded and forgotten. They have even buried their placentas and umbilical cords there, as she reminds the villagers. There is no way they can move all this and relocate all the dead, so she refuses to leave.

The villagers are Christian, having been missionized and converted a century earlier. The story is recounted of how the church there was built, and the church bell made out of the spears and old gods of the villagers. They literally melted the old gods to make a home for the new One;

now, the leaders muse how a new god is coming once again. But this is a god of progress and capitalism, destroying the old ways without any concern or compassion: no one has any love for this god, even though its coming is inevitable. In the face of this, the Christian minister offers the comfort of his faith, and speaks of the redemptive value of sacrifice and suffering. He counsels passive acceptance as they are moved to the city. The villagers also seem initially resigned to their deportation, but Mantoa is not buying it. She is as angry at the Christian God as she is at the new God of Progress, finding no meaning in the deaths of her loved ones and no comfort in the words of the minister. Her protest creates a response in the villagers, who are galvanized to resist their relocation.

Although she attacks the response of passive acceptance counseled by the Christian minister, there is something very biblical about Mantoa's lamentations, expressed in her cries of grief and anger launched at God. Biblical allusions and quotations fill this film, often through the words of the narrator (Jerry Mofokeng Wa Makhetha) who comments lyrically on the story, accompanied by his own mournful and other worldly playing on a *lesiba*. But do not expect a *deus ex machina* to appear in this film to answer the cries of the oppressed: while the minister speaks of the day when "all tears will be wiped away, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelations 21:4), that day does not come in the form of any successful protest against the building of the dam. Instead, violence appears in the community as Mantoa's house is burned to the ground and a man is shot dead. Mantoa digs a grave for herself to be ready for the death she longs for. And yet in reference to the film's title, by the end the narrator can clarify that for those that have eyes to see, there *can* be resurrection here, and not only death: not in any literal sense, but in Mantoa's protest itself, which she expresses in a final defiant act.

Director Mosese admitted at the screening that this story is personal, as *Mantoba* is modeled on his own grandmother who fought against the forced relocation of their village in the face of a government dam project. His films express his own ambivalence about Christianity and its dual relationship to Africa, as it has provided symbols of hope and rebirth even while it has accompanied the very colonialism which has taken away land and life from the people. In a recent interview, he remarked that he would like to be hopeful for Africa, that it will be reborn:

I would like to think that as an African continent we are in the process of becoming. Africa is God in diapers. Our own trials and tribulations, whether inflicted by others or by us, will lead us to something beautiful. I would like to believe that. We are constantly living in a state of becoming. New faces and new pairs of eyes are slowly being forged in the dark. Or maybe it's all bulls**t, the suffering will keep on going, we were meant to be eaten by others, the "Africa rising" myth is a lie, and there is nothing at the other end. But it's very hard to embrace nothingness; I would like to believe in something. I would like to believe we are becoming.¹

His ambivalence about the future, well expressed in these remarks, shows through in this film as it wrestles with those same questions. Rather than embrace nothingness, one needs to look towards hope. The film provides a vision of that hope, found in one angry old woman who refuses to surrender to the powers.

¹ Interview by Christopher Vourlias, "Director Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese: Africa Is 'In the Process of Becoming'," *Variety*, December 2, 2019.