

Grandma was my teacher. My final task was to bury her 5,000 miles away

The Sky journalist Shingi Mararike planned his grandmother's funeral in her home village. For someone used to the British stiff upper lip, it was eye-opening.



Shingi Mararike with his grandmother as an infant and earlier this year

On the day my Grandma died, I was filming a story in Whitehaven on the Cumbrian coast for Sky News. It was around 11am and I'd stopped for some food with my colleagues when I saw a flurry of increasingly frantic messages in the family WhatsApp group. Grandma's carer had said she wasn't responding. Mum had gone over to her flat in east London. The emergency services were on their way. Then a message from my mum, simply saying: "Grandma has gone." She'd had a sudden heart attack at home.

The loss was brutal for all of us. My 87-year-old grandma had always been more like a second parent to me. In the days and weeks that followed we grieved. But we also discovered that Grandma had left us a challenge: to lay her to rest in her birthplace in Zimbabwe, a place about 5,000 miles away with no direct flights. This wasn't just a logistical exercise; it would be a last lesson from beyond the grave.

My mum, Rudo Carol, had me when she was 24. Four years later my younger brother, Shumi, came along. As a single parent, she was juggling multiple jobs and the care of two young boys, so my grandma, Grace Nyasha Samaneka, stepped in to help. Grandma had come to the UK in 1965 as a 27-year-old, training to become a nurse and joining the NHS. After I was born, she managed the household in east London, did the school run, helped with our homework and took us to church. She then did the same for her second daughter, Tatenda, helping to raise her children, Ashley and Angel, too.

In our Zimbabwean-British family, she was our bedrock, reminding us that even though we'd been born here, our roots were elsewhere.



Grandma, second from left, with her siblings in Harare, 2024

In her later years, Grandma began to think more about home and went back to Wedza, the part of rural Zimbabwe where she was born. I went with her in 2017, and remember her standing in the shade of a building with a corrugated roof, pointing towards a plot of land where her parents and siblings were buried. “I am happy to have stepped home once again,” she said.

As soon as I heard the news that she had died I drove back to Leeds, where my younger brother and I live, and we raced down to London. It was here, surrounded by family, friends and church members who had come to pay their respects, that we discovered that three days earlier, Grandma had spoken to her brother back in Zimbabwe and told him she wanted to be laid to rest in Wedza, not London. We knew what we had to do.

In 2021 my mum had signed up to UKZ Chema, a community organisation formed to help Zimbabweans in the UK cover funeral expenses. Mum contributed regularly and we were now entitled to £12,000. We topped this up with donations from family and friends, as well as from members of Calvary Charismatic Baptist Church in east London, where she worshipped. I learnt this was part of a Zimbabwean cultural concept known as chema.

Those who are United Kingdom residence and would like to join UKZCHEMA please use this site to join- www.ukzchema.co.uk