

**THE GENDERED CONSTRUCTION OF MOURNING AND  
CLEANSING RITES OF WIDOWHOOD AMONGST THE ZULU  
SPEAKING PEOPLE OF NDWEDWE COMMUNITY,  
KWAZULU-NATAL.**

**BY**

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**JUNE, 2003.**

**DECLARATION**

I declare that except for the sources used or quoted, which have been acknowledged in the references, this study is my own work and has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any University.

Signature:.....

 08/07/03

## **DEDICATION**

**To my late parents,  
especially my late mother  
who experienced widowhood  
twice in her life time.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My heartfelt gratitude goes to God Almighty who has been my source of strength throughout this study. A special acknowledgement goes to my Director of programmes, Rev. Fr. Maurice Henry (SMA), without whose efforts I would not have been able to undertake this study.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The gendered construction of mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood was studied amongst the Zulu community of Ndwedwe, 70 kilometres north of Durban in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. These cultural rites were investigated through in-depth interviews with six widowers and twelve widows. Respondents were asked about their experiences and perceptions regarding their compliance to the two rites. An analysis of these experiences, which were translated and transcribed into English, was carried out, using studies from other cultures internationally and locally as reference point, for the study. It was revealed that mourning rites, which follow death of a spouse can be stressful for both genders and must be observed strictly by the use of black or any mourning dress. The period of mourning is characterised by isolation and stigmatisation especially for the widows. Cleansing is a symbolic act that purifies all members of the household from defilement by death. This is done for all relatives following burial but a widow remains impure not less than one year of 'successful' mourning in most cases, before she is cleansed and is then absolved into society's normal life. This study has revealed that mourning and cleansing rites have psychological and physical health implications for both genders but with more negative impacts on widows than widowers.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 An overview of the study**

Death is the inevitable end of all mortals and the effects on the bereaved are known to be very stressful. The death of a spouse has profound implications for the surviving partner, who is left to mourn the loss and observe all the rites connected with the death. These implications are heavily embedded in some traditional cultures, usually manifesting in oppressive customary practices and norms, which influence the relationship between the surviving partner and their families (Chen, 2000). Like all other cultures across the globe, the Zulu people of Ndwedwe, who live 70kms North of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, have preserved some of the traditional beliefs, practices and rites linked with death in general and those that relate to the death of a husband or wife in particular; and the behaviour patterns expected of a surviving spouse. Various cultures place particular emphasis on how widows and widowers are expected to live after the demise of the spouse. This study examines some the cultural practices, which include the significance of the mode of dressing during mourning period and how widows and widowers are expected to comply with the rituals of mourning and cleansing. The perceptions of widows and widowers as well as those of family members towards the observance of these rites are some of the issues addressed in the study. It also attempts to explore the gendered nature of the rites of mourning and cleansing following spousal death amongst the Zulu people of

Ndwedwe rural community. Available literature on mourning and cleansing indicates that these rites are gendered with men being immune or exempted from participating in most aspects of the rites. Mourning a husband's death requires a lot of upheavals for the widow because of the restrictions and other inconveniences that are imposed by culture on her as opposed to the widower who is neither restricted nor strictly guarded. The difference in the mourning and cleansing rituals could be ascribed to sex and marital status of women, especially in patriarchal societies. Letuka et al (1994) have observed that the difference between men and women with regards to mourning could be interpreted to mean that the death of a man is more significant than that of a woman. Also, Steward et al. (2001:38) have argued that the difference could be as a result of men's headship position in the family. This, according to Steward et al (2001) seems to have been an interpretation of the fact that women always belong to a family headed by a man. Before marriage, the head of the family will be their father. On marriage, the head of the family will be their husband and upon his death it will be the heir. This situation has been interpreted to mean that a woman is a perpetual minor.

However, individual cultures and at times family or clan members determine what follows after spousal death. Charmaz (1939:114) argues that culture determines the way feelings are expressed as well. "Not only do cultural expectations exist that men "should" show greater control over their feelings, but many men have internalised beliefs about remaining independent, and therefore aloof, from others". She concluded her discussion by saying that "what grief is, and how it is felt, and what is to be done about it are all culturally defined (ibid: 115). Patriarchal institutions and social systems reinforce the low status of widows (Women, 2000) as opposed to widowers in Africa. Ehusani (2002)

posits that widows are not only regarded as candidates for destitution but are classified among the lowest group of the marginalized in universal communities. According to the Women 2000 report, in most African countries, widows' lives are governed by cultural and traditional rules which are sometimes not only discriminatory, but involve degrading and life-threatening mourning and cleansing as well as burial rites.

From my experience and interaction with widows and widowers living in rural communities, especially in Nigeria, I observed that they were more compelled to observe cultural values than their counterparts in the urban areas. These values have been preserved and guarded in rural communities on claims that they give them a sense of identity. Widowhood status is associated with cultural beliefs that are preserved and practiced very much in rural communities, and this is one of the reasons for the setting of this study. Issues relating to death especially are treated with great reverence and there are usually traditional diviners who have special role of dealing with matters of death. Since culture is dynamic and not static, and with urbanization, most communities are grappling to maintain whatever cultural values they cherish. I have therefore, decided to embark on this study as a means of documenting some of these values that could be susceptible to changes and examine the implications of such values among the Ndwedwe rural community of South Africa to contribute to the understanding of some of the cultural rites associated with widowhood. In doing this, questions relating to mourning and cleansing rites are addressed. The processes, significance, family involvement and perceptions of widows and widowers about their compliance with the rites are explored. The experiences of these widows and widowers have been compiled and have formed the basis of analysis. This thesis is a contribution to the body of knowledge about

widowhood practices where there has been a dearth of literature. The thesis has drawn from the body of knowledge of earlier anthropologists and sociologists on Zulu custom, such as Krige (1936), Raum (1973), Msimang (1975) and Ngubane (1977).

The study is qualitative and analytic in design and adopts a qualitative research methodology. The study sample comprises of six widowers and twelve widows. Using in-depth interview procedures, data collected about the experiences of widows and widowers have been coded and analysed according to major themes that emanated from the investigation. The results of these findings and analysis are presented in chapters four and five.

## **1.2 Context of the study**

The idea for this study was conceived as a result of my working experience as a Trainer of widows' empowerment programme with the Non-formal Education programme, a non-governmental organization of the Catholic Archdiocese of Jos, Nigeria. My close association with widows and challenges they face evoked a lot of unanswered questions and in turn, a need to undertake further studies to broaden my perspective on issues relating to the life of widows and widowers in an African context. From my experience, I noticed that widowhood practices like cleansing and mourning rites are shaped by unwritten cultural mores. The process of death, burial, mourning and cleansing rituals are cultural constructs that are observed as part of what every widow or widower has to undergo. For instance, in the case of widow, after undergoing mourning and cleansing

rites in my culture, she has to be inherited by one of the deceased brothers or disinherited of both property and children. This is not the case with widowers.

There is lack of empirical information concerning the practices of mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood among the Zulus, especially of those of Ndwedwe community. It has become necessary for me to investigate and document some of the implications of these rites on the lives of both widows and widowers. Having identified the gap, I have therefore, embarked on this study to explore cultural practices of mourning and cleansing rites associated with widowhood in the Ndwedwe community, located about 70kms outside Durban in KwaZulu-Natal in the Republic of South Africa. The people of Ndwedwe are largely Zulu speakers who still observe major parts of traditional rituals relating to mourning and cleansing. Besides my earlier contact with Ndwedwe as a research assistant in 2002, my training in Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) has given me skills and knowledge to carry out research in rural communities. I have embarked on this study to explore and determine the distinctive nature of mourning and cleansing rites, which have been known in some other cultures to have much impact on the lives of widows and widowers. The outcome of the study will hopefully be used as guideline for planning of gender sensitive policies and church-based community development projects within an African community, and in particular may be used as insight for my job. The study is expected to provide useful information and understanding about the lives of widows and widowers, whose interests have been excluded from community project designs and hardly appear in most government policies in Africa.

### **1.3 Key issues addressed by the study**

Rituals of mourning and cleansing are beliefs associated with widowhood that have remained some of the key components of cultural values that continue to prevail, jealously maintained and guarded by all families irrespective of the gender imbalance it creates. These rites have been much valued that they are passed on from one generation to the next. At death, the gender differentiation is marked by the treatment given to the body of the deceased. For instance, among the kofyar people in Nigeria, which is my culture, women are not allowed to touch a man's dead body, especially if he was a hero during his lifetime. On his death, as was the case with my own father, a male had to be contacted to inform other 'men' to conduct burial rites. This has never happened to a woman's dead body, even if she had been a queen during her lifetime. In the same manner, it is assumed that the experiences of men and women about cleansing and mourning rites have never been the same, not only in my culture, but in Zulu culture as well. This study sets out to address the following issues with the aim of understanding how mourning and cleansing rites are perceived and practiced among the Zulus of Ndwedwe:

- What mourning and cleansing mean for the widow and widower in Zulu culture and why they are expected to observe these rites will be investigated.
- The cultural expectations, interpretations and perceptions of widows and widowers about complying with mourning and cleansing rites will be explored.
- From available literature, mourning and cleansing is gendered. This study will explore if this is the case with Zulu culture and if so, how or if not why.

- Taboos are common features associated with forbidden aspects of cultural norms in most African cultures, and religious practices worldwide. Taboos guide the society about ‘acceptable’ manners for men and women who live in that society. The study will investigate how taboos are applied to widows and widowers.
- Mourning is characterized by modes of dressing and change in bodily appearance in some cultures. The significance of this practice remains the domain of individual cultural interpretation. Why and how would widows and widowers be expected to dress and for how long?
- In most Western and African communities, death brings family members together and it is expected that mourning and cleansing could be a personal as well as community affair. What would be the role of the family and community members in the death of a spouse?

This study will investigate issues relating to mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood in the Zulu culture in Ndwedwe through the narrative experiences of widows and widowers.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Framework for the study**

The disciplines of gender and anthropology provide a broad framework within which this study is located. The approach to the analysis of gender inequality postulated by liberal feminist thinkers is essential to capture the depth, pervasiveness and interconnectedness of the different aspects of women’s subordination. This approach is grounded in feminist research methods, which emphasize that women be given space to make sense of their

lives and experiences the way they understand and communicate it. Also, anthropology emphasizes a naturalistic approach to the study of people in order to discover some information about the different ways in which men and women go about their daily tasks. This method requires participation, involvement and human empathy (Edgerton, 1974). These theoretical approaches that give a vivid analysis of gender, power relations and cultural diversity will guide in the understanding of analysis of mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood in Zulu culture.

### **Liberal Feminist theory**

Some elements of liberal feminist theory (Wollstonecraft, 1787-97, John Stuart Mill, 1869, 1983 in Bryson, 1999) relating to gender relations are laudable and pertinent to this study. In *The vindication of women's Rights* and *The subjection of Women* by Wollstonecraft and John Stuart respectively, they argue that since men and women have the same human qualities, they should have equal rights as well. They believe that all humans will benefit from living in a civilized society that is regulated along the principle of fair justice, if the whole society can draw from each other's talents and abilities. The liberal feminists' stand point in relation to gender equality requires men to be allies with women for a progressive society. It is from this point that the practice of mourning and cleansing rites is approached to determine the inherent inequalities and how justifiable and beneficial the practice is with regards to the regulation of society's principle of humane and fair justice.

The rituals of mourning and cleansing are regarded as some of the cultural practices that are valued and guarded against cultural extinction in patriarchal societies. These practices



are gendered and mostly take men's interest at heart; and the liberal feminist's views echo that gender justice requires "making the game fair" for the advantaged and disadvantaged (Tong, 1989:2). In the words of Bryson, "there is no inevitable problem of men; the only problem is to convince men that sexist behaviour is contrary to their own real interest, and that the feminist cause is theirs as well" (1999:197). The human community has a duty to respect and protect the interest of both genders irrespective of individual differences. The complexity of nature, causes and consequences of inequalities between men and women and their interrelatedness are rooted in sexist attitudes, which are often seen as cultural and unresponsive to change. Liberal feminists' stance in relation to sexist attitudes, which seem to undermine the capabilities of women, is the elimination of structures that continue to block women from unfulfilled potentials. Men in this case are not immune to the appeals of reason and justice, as such oppressive or discriminatory practices can be addressed amicably.

The approach to the understanding of the relationship and attitudes of men and women in society and how to address gender inequalities are important elements of liberal feminist ideologies adopted in this study. The study will examine the significance of mourning and cleansing and the gendered perspective of the rites. It will also unpack some of the beliefs associated with these rites and determine the impact they have on widows and widowers in Zulu culture. The principle of social justice and respect for human dignity as it relates to the gendered construction of mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood have guided the analysis of the experiences related to death rites of widows and widowers.

## **Feminist Anthropological theories**

The framework of this study has drawn from the body of anthropological theories of culture and its influence on men and women. Theorists like Rosaldo (1974) and the famous and earliest anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1935) have carried out extensive studies about different societies and examine the influence of culture on human social development, by separating biological and cultural factors that control human behaviours and personality development. Mead contended that the determination of sex roles, which has to do with women being maternal and submissive while men strong and warlike can only be tested in societies with necessary data (Edgerton, 1974). The data generated from fieldwork is based on an identified problem, which will either disprove or prove the hypothesis. Christine Oppong's (1983) compilation of ethnographic studies reveals the various cultural patterns of separateness and interconnectedness that exist in the diverse cultures of West Africa. Her rich compilation and comprehensive methodological approaches have provided useful guidelines on approaches to the study of communities, which have been applied in this study. Leclerc-Madlala's (2002) article, "Virginity cleansing myth: gendered bodies, AIDS and ethno medicine", examines the significance and myth concerning cleansing rites through sexual intercourse among the Zulus. This study has helped me in understanding Zulu perceptions about the use of women sexuality. It provided a background to why certain communities insist on using women sexuality as a means of cleansing as well as their perceptions about the vagina as being dirty. On the bereavement of a spouse, one of the taboos is restriction about sexual abstinence, which must be observed for some period before it is allowed. In some cultures, sexual cleansing

must be performed before a spouse is allowed to continue normal sexual relationship with any other person or the inheritor.

### **1.5 Structure of the study**

The study consists of six chapters. Chapter One is an overview of this study, which includes my aim and a review of widowhood practices of mourning and cleansing rites. The general introduction covers theoretical framework, which has guided and provided grounding for this study. Theoretical frameworks are drawn from the liberal feminists and anthropological studies on gender and culture, which have offered explanations on the way men and women relate in societies and the complex nature, causes and consequences of inequalities. It has also offered an understanding about the interconnectedness of different aspects of women's subordination, which can be developed to take account of different forms of gender inequalities.

Chapter Two presents an extensive review of literature on available studies on mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood in several countries in and out of Africa. Anthropological and sociological/historical materials on widowhood recorded on Zulu customs by Krige, Raum, Ngubane and others have also been included

In chapter Three, the methodology used in the collection of data is explained. This involved the selection of project area, sample selection method, and in-depth interview procedures as well as data collection methods.

Chapter Four is the discussion and analysis of results and findings about mourning rites. The significance, meaning and reasons for mourning are discussed. The beliefs in

ancestral spirits and their involvement in the activities of the living are some of the reasons for mourning 'properly'. The gendered interpretation and perceptions of the rites as well as the taboos and stigma associated with the rites have been examined. The roles family members and the community play in mourning for the deceased and support for widow and widowers have been explored.

Chapter Five presents an exploration of the way cleansing rites are understood and practiced by widows and widowers. The main actors in need of cleansing happen to be widows, though widowers undergo some minor cleansing as well. This chapter has also traced the procedures and beliefs associated with the practice and provided understanding on why women are expected to undergo cleansing after the loss of their husbands.

Chapter six is an overview; summary and conclusion, and recommendations/strategies for addressing gender inequalities and other inconveniences that these rites cause for both widows and widowers. This is aimed at promoting gender balance in the recognition of basic human dignity for all mankind.

## 1.6 Definitions of some terms

Some of the terms used in this study by respondents and for analytical purposes needs explanation for clarity. For some Zulu terms, the translated version does not convey the proper meaning as it is intended to portray. Most of these terms have appeared in the voices of respondents in the analysis section. A few also appear in the discussion as it was better expressed in the language.

**Culture/ tradition/ beliefs/ traditional culture:** These terms have been used interchangeably in the study to refer to Zulu cultural beliefs concerning mourning and cleansing rites.

**Amakhandlela** Financial assistance to buy candles to be lit following death.

**Isipheko:** Contribution (Gifts) in form of food, money or any form of assistance brought to the deceased's house before and on the day of the funeral.

**Isiqunga:** Medicinal root used for cleansing by those invited to the ceremony

**Sangoma:** Diviner or a fortune teller

**Umfelwa** The term refers to a widower, which was not really used during the study because men are never called by the name as was confirmed by one of the respondents.

**Umfelokazi** This is a name that a woman acquires as soon as her husband dies. She continues to be referred to as such even after she has gone through all the rites. It marginalizes her in some way. She is marked out as the one whose husband died.

**Ukubuyisa:** “bringing home” of the departed or dead person’s spirit

**Ukuzila** The period of sitting down in the room before burial or to remain out of sight before burial.

**Umkhokha:** Bad luck or another death in the family

**Umnyama:** Misfortune

**Ukungena:** To take a brother’s widow as one’s wife, and inherit the brother’s property.

**Umswani:** The digested grass in the stomach of an animal, which is used to mix with gall in a water bowl for cleansing.

**Widow:** A woman whose husband died.

**Widower:** A man whose wife died.

**Zulu people:** This phrase shall be used in this study to refer to the Zulus of Ndwedwe community.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The death of a spouse inevitably results in widowhood in all societies, at least for sometime, as some may remarry. A number of documented literatures have been fundamental to understanding the significance of some of the rituals associated with cultural practices of widowhood. Most of these studies range from ethnographic to anthropological, historical and missionary accounts, whose aims are not necessarily, geared towards an in-depth analysis of a particular rite as such. Some of these studies and their theoretical perspectives were documented before the advent of feminist approaches to research in the social sciences: anthropology and ethnography in particular. Available literature on widowhood, in most African cultures, have revealed that the situation of widows and widowers can best be described as that of loneliness, stigmatisation, depression, economic downward mobility and forced independence among many others. From the Western point of view, Hilz, (1978) argued that, widowhood is best conceptualised as a negatively evaluated social category where the individual loses the central source of identity, financial support, and social relationships. This view is further supported by Charmaz's (1939:309) finding in contemporary American society that, "the major problems of widows is loneliness...which is fostered by both social and structural and psychological conditions". In the same study, she also revealed that, "whereas widows are treated as closely associated with death, widowers tend to be treated much

like divorced men” (ibid: 313). The widower is easily absorbed into the new social circle, whereas the widow will be excluded at least for sometime. This is an illustrative fact that women are systematically discriminated against in the social treatment of both genders. A number of feminists observe this differential treatment as a result of patriarchal set up of some societies. Walby (1990: 4), discussing on the liberal feminist views on patriarchy, concluded that, “women’s disadvantaged position is related to specific details of prejudice against women”. She also believes that attitudes relating to women’s position are always attributed to tradition, which is unresponsive to recent changes in gender relations.

As interacting individuals, we are constantly thinking and exploring as well as questioning how and why traditional beliefs are the way they are and to some extent changes are possible especially where these beliefs have led to negative outcomes. In an extensive report published by Empowering Widows in Development (EWD), Women 2000, widowhood practices in most African cultures are governed by traditional rules which are sometimes not only discriminatory, but also involves degrading practices. A major finding on Nigeria and Ghana has revealed that, cleansing rites involve sexual relationship with designated individuals and scarring or scraping of hair with unhygienic instruments, which have been proved to lead to infections such as HIV/AIDS (EWD, 2001). Of particular concern are the cultural practices of mourning and cleansing rites, which this study sets out to examine within the Zulu context. In this context, belief, perceptions and practices as well as the cultural significance of mourning and cleansing rites among Zulu widows and widowers of Ndwedwe community will be the focus. The taboos of these rites and their implications for the understanding of the gendered



construction are some of the aims of this study. The following literature that documents the beliefs and practices of mourning and cleansing rites is important as a reference point for this research. These include the works of Krige (1936), Longmore (1959), Raum (1973), Ngubane (1977), Brindley (1982) and Msimang (1975). Msimang's study is written in Zulu and is just being translated into English.

## **2.2 The loss of a spouse: A cultural analysis**

Culture determines our ways of life and the way our ideas and values are conceptualised. Charmaz (1939: 315) argues that, "What grief is, and how it is felt, and what to be done about it are all culturally defined". Mourning is associated with grief, an experience, which follows the death of a loved one while cleansing is pre-supposed to rid the widow and widower of the misfortune caused by the dead.

After the death of a spouse, certain cultural practices are imposed on a husband or wife in most societies. It is believed that there exists a special bond between the dead and the living therefore, in practice, whatever is done is for the benefit of both partners. There is a link between the ancestral spirits and the living, which suggests that death is not the end of relationship with the living (Msimang 1975). The special ceremony organised to 'call back' or 'bring home' the deceased spirit indicates the importance of maintaining close links with one's ancestral spirit, as the spirit may either be a source of fortune or misfortune.

Charmaz's (1939: 313) study, carried out in an American society, examines from a gendered perspective, the sociological analysis of feelings and actions that affect people living with loss. She concluded by noting that, "the differences in the treatment of

widows and widowers are likely due to cultural value on gender”. In a study conducted by Raphael (1984), she noted that the experiences that widows and widowers undergo are culturally determined. In most African societies, the cultural rites of mourning and cleansing are gendered, discriminatory and life threatening, especially for women. Culture determines the conduct of widows and widowers from the moment death of a spouse occurs. Among the Zulu, studies documented by Krige, Raum, Ngubane and Longmore revealed that the death of a “Kraal” (head of the family) is followed by series of rituals for the widow, widower and relatives. Mourning rite is observed as a form of respect for the deceased and cleansing for purification of the living, but the ways in which tradition observes them has gender implication. The woman takes as long as one year to mourn for the death of her husband and remains unclean for that same period until she goes through certain rituals, which a man does not do when he loses his wife. This study will investigate some of the implications of the inherent gender inequalities and delve in depth on the beliefs and value systems attached to the rituals.

To understand a people’s culture, according to Edgerton (1974), people’s lives must be understood, as they themselves understand them, not merely as we outsiders understand them. It is my conviction that the commonality of human cultural patterns allows for the understanding of each other. In this study I have made all attempts to solicit experiences and opinions on the two death rituals, and represent them as they were explained to me and understood by respondents.

### **2.3 Mourning Rites of widowhood**

Mourning is that period of grief that follows the death of a loved one. Mourning commences as soon as the announcement is made that a spouse is dead (Korieh, 1986). Announcing the death of a spouse is one of the most frightening experiences anyone can have. The news of the death of a spouse can lead to shock and uncontrollable reaction, which if not properly handled, can lead to another death. Following the announcement, those most closely associated with the deceased especially family members, friends and neighbours make efforts to comfort and support the bereaved. Condolences continue to come in with people offering practical assistance, such as running errands, digging of the grave and all other logistics. While preparations are being made to dispose the body, the widow or widower who is grief-stricken and in a state of “shock, numbness and disbelief” (Raphael, 1984), may not participate in any form of planning for the burial. The period following the death, before burial, prescribed behaviours or rituals, which are culturally determined, must be observed by widows and widowers.

After the burial or cremation, and with the departure of family members and friends, the surviving partner is confronted with the realities of physical experience of absence and loss. The pain of separation becomes hard and this often leads to deep grief, which will continue until the partner is able to come to terms with the stake realities and consequent acceptance of the loss. The problems, which the partners face, are further complicated by anxiety, loneliness, apathy and bewilderment of bereavement (Bowling & Cartwright, 1982). Writing from a psychological point of view, Raphael discusses mourning processes as involving regrets, resentment, ineffable sadness, anger, guilt, and depression at the emptiness of self and world, and perhaps envy of those who have not lost their

spouses. Her study is silent on cleansing rites, most probably because it is either alien to American society, where she is writing or that is not the focus of her study. In Eastern Nigeria, a study conducted by Empowering Widows in Development (EWD) in the year 2001, a non-governmental organisation based in Europe, revealed that, obligatory wearing of black clothing, sleeping with the dead corpse, defilement and one-year mourning period among many others, follow the death of a spouse amongst the Igbos. These practices, according to the report are highly gendered. Women are expected to bear the burden of strict restrictions in and out of their private lives as part of rituals following the loss of their spouses for at least one year. She becomes a public figure because her presence is announced by her appearance. She has also to be seen physically grieving.

What could be the significance and symbolism of insisting that widows observe these rites? Is this the case with all cultures? My study among the Zulus requires adequate grounding for the understanding of how and why mourning rites are gendered, and to what extent this has contributed to their well-being in society. Amongst the Bantu, Longmore (1959:283) observed that, irrespective of the influence of Christianity, all customary observances must be done. She found that, “all relatives of the deceased wear mourning clothes, the women dress in black and the men wear a black band round the left arm of their jackets”. Her findings have left many questions unanswered, especially as to why and what informs the practice. Also, Longmore has classified and made her conclusion about the Bantus irrespective of the differences in the cultures of the tribes that form the Bantus. Krige’s (1936) study also revealed that, the death of a “kraal” (head of household) entails certain mourning restrictions such as, abstinence from sexual intercourse for all relatives for some unspecified period and restricted food intake by the

widows and widowers for the mourning period. But widows are expected to observe these restrictions until they are finally cleansed before they can resume normal life in the community. Raum, (1973) published his monograph on Zulu functions and avoidances in which he described how widows have to sit on bare floor with the corpse of the deceased spouse, covered with blanket throughout the period preceding burial. Food and sour milk or beer is either severely regulated or forbidden. Nobody is allowed to plant or work on the field for the period of mourning. Msimang (1975) has thrown more light on the mourning procedures and the different ways of handling death issues relating to that of the head of a family, the purification ceremonies involved and how death is perceived. Brindley (1982), in her study discovered that, old women are regarded as custodians of these rites especially for widows. They ensure strict compliance. As with most African cultures, old women have certain wisdom that is highly respected and regarded by family lineage. The studies conducted by Krige, Raum, Msimang and Brindley shall only be used as a background for in-depth inquiry about how these rites are gendered and their symbolic interpretations. Due to the dearth in research about widowhood practices in South Africa and among the Zulu in particular, literature on this rite shall be drawn from studies that have been conducted internationally and in other parts of Africa in addition to the few anthropological and sociological studies on the Zulus. This study will unpack socio-cultural implications of the mourning rite, the significance, the perceptions of widows and widowers in complying with this rite and examine the relevance of the gender inequalities attributed to the observance of the rite.

## **2.4 Cleansing rites: Getting rid of misfortune**

Death is believed to bring misfortune (umnyama) to all members of the household. Krige (1936) found out that among the Zulus, the defilement she refers to connotes misfortune and thus the need for the use of herbal preparations for strengthening purposes. After the burial, all members of the household must wash their hands and take medicine to get rid of any misfortune that may result from that. The widow or widower joins in the washing of hands, but that does not end for the widow, because a separate time is set when she is expected to embark on 'proper' rites of cleansing, which is a ceremony organised by her in-laws or her parents for cleansing purpose. This concept of cleansing, as expatiated in Charmaz's study, emanates from the belief that widows carry the stigma of death, and this is part of the visible symbolic reminders of disruption of life and one's inevitable end. Due to a widow's association with death, others may despise her. Cline (cited in Hockey, 2001) established that, historically, widows were regarded as impure and unlucky and all patterns of avoidances were done in order to protect others from being "touched" by death. In Ghana, ritual cleansing by widows may entail sexual intercourse with designated individuals, which could be a stranger met on the road (EWD, 2001). This is done to keep the organs (sexual organs) of the widow and widower from being impaired. The health implication of this practice cannot be overemphasized. One study in East Africa found that other health hazards associated with cleansing rites include transmission of HIV/AIDS and other related diseases. Ntozi et al. (1999) found out in their study that, the performance of sexual cleansing by brothers-in-law, fathers-in-law and the use of unhygienic instruments for face scarring, hair shaving are known to put

women at risk of STDs and HIV/AIDS infection. Other health issues, according to them, include depression, hypertension, stroke, sudden death and suicide.

Ngubane (1977), Raum (1973), Msimang (1975) and Brindley (1982) have indicated that among the Zulu, cleansing is a very essential ritual for the widow. After the one-year mourning period, widows must undertake a purification ceremony. This involves slaughtering of a beast or goat, washing of the body and changing of clothing. Family members come together to pay their respect to the departed and to cleanse the widow of the darkness that she has been carrying along for the past year. Raum also notes that, as part of cleansing, a levirate husband, that is the brother to the late husband who inherits the widow, must slaughter a beast before sleeping with the widow to appease his deceased brother.

This study will contribute to the literature on cleansing rite in Zulu culture. It will provide empirical findings on why women have to embark on the ceremony of cleansing and of what significance this rite is perceived and practiced by widows. The cultural values attached to the rite and the gendered construction shall be my focus in this study.

## **2.5 The gendered construction of mourning and cleansing rites**

There is a dearth of research on the implication of mourning and cleansing rites for widowers. In most cultures, widowhood is associated more with women and so there is hardly any attempt to view men as being affected by rites of widowhood.

I agree with Amina Mama (1996:11) when she states that,

“Although ethnographic work has often been sensitive to gender, early studies were often imbued with patriarchal biases resulting from the male dominance of

discipline, the reliance on male informants and preconceptions that researcher from western societies carried over into analysis”.

There is a strong evidence to support the fact that research on widowhood has been focused on women. Studies conducted by Robert Nuckols (1982), Hilz (1978) Dillenburg (1992), Korieh (1996), Osei-Mensah (1999), United Nations Publication (women, 2000), Amuche (2001), Ehusani (2002), Empowering Widows In Development (EWD, 2001-2002) and Luke (2001) have solely focused on widows. The liberal feminists believe that studies of social mobility should include both men and women. This will enable the exploration of facts and evidences of sexual inequalities. One cannot dismiss the fact that the systemic organization of male supremacy and female subordination, which is a concept central to patriarchy, has dominated research in the area of widowhood.

In Europe however, Davidson (2001) and Lindstrom (1999) have carried out empirical studies on the various gendered perspectives of widowhood, with particular emphasis on late life partnering, the effects of gender roles on coping with bereavement and the effects of spousal loss respectively. Raphael (1984) as well as Hockey et al. (2001) have analysed the processes and key issues involved in bereavement as it affects both men and women; the bond, pain and separation, mourning and influence of family and social group; and coping mechanisms. Their studies focus more on the psychological effects of mourning on both genders. These rituals are patriarchal and seem to take men's interest at heart. It is for this reason that liberal feminists view the gendered constructions of some cultural norms as symptoms of inequalities, which does not augur well for the



society. The understanding of the gendered constructions of mourning and cleansing rites among the Zulus of the Ndwedwe community is essential to this study.

The advent of feminist approaches to human science research, which necessitates the willingness of the researcher to be involved as effective agent in the situation, has since introduced different theoretical perspectives to the understanding of gender relations in society. Listening to women's (and men's) voices, studying their women's writing, and learning from women's experiences have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of our understanding of the world (Personal Narrative Group 1989, in Scorgie 1998). Harding (in Fook, 2000) believes that women's experiences and perspectives can provide an advantaged viewpoint, which will lead to the challenging of women's oppression.

The tools, style and methods used for this research to provide the desired information, shall be discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter deals with the methods and approaches used in the collection of data from respondents on the cultural practices of mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood in the Ndwedwe community.

#### **3.2 Research design**

This study is qualitative in design. This kind of design usually depends on the written, spoken and observed data or behaviour. It also tells a story from the respondents' viewpoint thus providing the rich descriptive data necessary in documenting the two rites under discussion. Qualitative methods are generally used for identification, description and explanation, an approach, which is ideal for this type of research. One of the recommended sampling methods, according to McCall and Simons (in Rubin 1989), is a 'snowball' approach. This study relied on 'snowballing'- the method whereby information from one person or information source leads to another.

The understanding of rites associated with Zulu mourning and cleansing rites were rooted in the principle that the best tool for studying alien culture and coming to understand it is the intellect, sensitivity, and emotion of another human being (Edgerton, 1974:3), and the fact that culture must be seen through the eyes of those who live in it. In its bid to capture the realities of human feelings, the principle of naturalism was a necessary commitment

for this study. Naturalism, according to Edgerton (ibid: 4) “requires that human behaviour be viewed in the context in which it naturally occurs (as part of an ongoing life in a society rather than of an experiment in a laboratory)”. Principles of feminist research methodologies guided the study. In accordance with feminist studies’ methodologies and approaches propounded by Bowles & Klein (eds.) (1983), feminist research is different from patriarchal or male-dominated research and raises the issue of subjectivity versus objectivity by arguing that feminist research cannot be value free. Feminist research must be grounded in female culture and experience. This dissertation uses qualitative method, experiential analysis, that is, oral narratives, textual analysis and other sources, that challenge conventional social science research methods to present the experiences, conceptualisation and perceptions of widows and widowers of their own mourning and cleansing rites. I present data in the manner in which it was communicated to me. To overcome linguistic problems and researcher’s dominance, interview questions and guides were designed in English and Zulu and open-ended to evoke a comprehensive account of respondents’ experiences and perceptions about their compliances to mourning and cleansing rites.

Observations and field notes were made during interview sessions and have been incorporated as part of data for analysis.

### **3.3 Project area**

The study was conducted with widows and widowers of Zulu speaking group of South Africa resident in a rural settlement. From my observation and interactions, the population of Ndwedwe community consists largely of Zulu speakers, whose traditional rites of mourning and cleansing were still very much preserved and observed. Contacts were made through a staff in the Zulu Department, University of Natal, Durban whose mother lives at Ndwedwe and is also a widow. Participants were informed ahead of time and were ready on arrival for the interview. Having been a research assistant in the area myself, it was easy to locate their houses. It was much easier going in the company of a “daughter of the soil”. There was no problem in gaining access to the area, neither was there problems of trust. As already stated, my choice of this community was influenced by my experience of working with rural communities in Nigeria.

Self-reflexivity forms a vital part of this study as I equally record my emotions as well as feelings coupled with reactions of the respondents to the questions posed to them. My subjectivity as a researcher could not be avoided. It did not only play a significant role in the conceptualisation of the study but during the data gathering process. Having worked with widows and with my mother’s experience of having been twice widowed, I related very well to the respondents’ articulated feelings and had a sense that their responses were resonating my own feelings and experiences. Reflexivity in this study meant that I had to acknowledge my knowledge and experiences but equally engage with respondents’ stories. Gavin Sullivan notes that it is necessary for a researcher to

recognise the impact of language, theories and experiences that co-create a phenomenon that is studied. He then urges,

It is important that we continue to be reflexive and subjective in our research in ways that cannot easily be dismissed as biased and anecdotal. Research (needs to) draw, as it must, on our experiences as individuals who live and grow in one part of the global city of language, while recognising that we cannot live as individuals in every suburb (Sullivan, 2002).

### **3.4 Population sample**

The initial sample for this study was ten widows and ten widowers but it was not possible to meet the number due to time constraint and the inaccessibility of widowers. However, six widowers and twelve widows have been included in the sample for analysis. Qualitative inquiry that uses in-depth interview methods according to Patton (1990) is not rigid about the number of participants to be included in the study. What matters is the purpose of the inquiry, the credibility and what can be done within available time and resources. Of the number included in this study, ten widows were interviewed and two were observed because they were mourning at the time of scheduled interviews, and for ethical considerations, could not be interviewed. Five widowers were also interviewed and for the same reason of being sensitive to his state at the time, one had to be observed, as he could not be subjected to an interview. The only criteria used for the selection of respondents were any man or woman who had lost a spouse in a lifetime. This was informed by the fact that in the Ndwedwe community mourning and cleansing rites are mandatory rites most women or men who loose spouses must undergo, irrespective of age and status. All of the widowers interviewed were within the range of 65-78 years old while of the twelve widows that were included in this study; three were still young,

between 30-45 years old. Older widows and widowers preferred to be interviewed in the Zulu language, which did not pose any problem because of the presence of an efficiently trained and competent assistant who was fluent in the language.

### **3.5 Methods of data collection**

The collection of data was done through:

#### **In-depth interviews**

This is a one-on-one method of collecting qualitative data, which is good for gathering in-depth personal narratives of experiences and opinions on specific topics. Interview sessions took one and a half to two hours and were quite rigorous. Questions had to be rehearsed several times with respondents for clarification to enable them respond to the appropriate questions well. Respondents at times had to divert to some other issues during interview sessions. For instance, a widow insisted on telling me what led to her present predicament even when some of the things she said were not quite relevant. Interview sessions lasted between one and a half to two hours and were quite rigorous. The process was slow and at times we had to break up the interview sessions so that the respondent could attend to other family issues before continuing. This however, did not alter the content or quality of data collected. It improved the earlier established good rapport and enabled respondents to discuss freely. This interruption during interviews enabled me to observe respondents in their natural environment, to personally understand the realities and minutiae of life. When one enters the realities of interacting individuals, it makes possible description and understanding of both external observable behaviour and internal state (Denzine, in Patton, 1990). Preliminary arrangements and

commencement of fieldwork for this study started in September 2002. I completed data collection at the end of March 2003. I only went to the village after adequate information about the project had been communicated to the respondents, and fortunately the appointed days and time were kept. As already stated, widows were readily available while widowers were not for the obvious reason that most of the men had remarried and the community does not really regard them with a widowed status. For instance, one of the widows confirmed that it is only a woman who takes on a new name-*umfelokazi* after her husband's death and continues to be referred to as such throughout her life. None of the respondents would refer to a widowed man as *umfelwa*, a corresponding noun for *umfelokazi*. The man often remarries soon and nobody remembers or ever refers to him with such name. Interview questions to guide the interactive discussions were translated into Zulu language and an assistant was trained for two days on how to conduct in-depth interview procedures. My assistant was a Gender Studies Honours Degree student, who is currently on a masters degree programme and is conversant with feminist approaches to research methods. Being a Zulu herself and having had a course in Zulu, translation and interpretation studies, it was easy for her to conduct interviews for this study. She did transcription and translations and another Zulu student helped in crosschecking the data for verification and reliability. I was present at all interview sessions and was able to interact fairly with the respondents even if it meant using signs, as was the case sometimes. The six widowers (males) were interviewed and observed in their homes. Ten of the twelve widows were also interviewed in their homes, while two were in their offices. Questions were aimed at evoking detail accounts of experiences of mourning and cleansing. They were allowed to guide the pace of the interview, because some had to

break up to gather emotions before continuing. Having been satisfied with reasons for my interview, I was allowed into their private life, though not immediately. Discussions became more intimate as I began to identify emotionally with their often-pathetic stories. Using my mother as a reference point, especially with widows eased revelation of information, which otherwise would have been termed confidential.

### **Interactive observation and field notes**

During interviews, I observed participants very closely especially considering the topic in question. Working in the field, face-to-face with real people entails the understanding of how they make sense of their world through multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic: talking with people, listening to them, looking at their physical behaviours, clothing, decorations and space; and reading about them (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). Talking and listening to most of the respondents as they narrated their stories generated a lot of other issues surrounding the problems experienced in widowhood. There were lots of emotional outbursts, crying, hissing, and at times complete silence for two to three minutes. The expression on the faces of most of the respondents registered feelings of pain and helplessness. Where they became bitter and emotionally carried away about the rites or conflict with some family members, they were allowed to air their views and were sometimes comforted with words of encouragement. I found myself grappling with counselling methods that I was incompetent to handle. For instance, one of the widows kept shedding tears as she struggled to complete her pathetic story and I had to divert to some other issues to allow her gather up courage before we could continue. I could read between the lines that our discussion brought back fresh memory of her horrible



experiences with in-laws and having to bring up young children all alone. Not only that, but culture demanded that she had to go through the two rites when she couldn't even feed herself and the children. By consciously sharing their beliefs, values, symbols, rituals and emotions (Frankfort-Nachmais et al, 1992), I was able to understand their experiences and perceptions. I must state that it was not an easy task because at times I had to struggle to put up a bold stand to be able to continue with the interview. I became very much emotionally involved myself.

It was however, noted that most of these emotional reactions came from the widows, while widowers maintained 'manly' attitudes. This to me was a representation of patriarchal attitudes towards sex/gender orientation. A man who expresses himself calmly and displays his emotions is believed to possess 'woman' behaviour, even during the wife's funeral, so it was not surprising that their experiences had no feelings of attached emotions. For example, while a widower was narrating his experiences when he lost the wife, instead of him to show emotion, it was his wife to be who was shedding tears. I observed a widow who was mourning the death of her husband with her head and body covered with blanket while receiving sympathizers. I also observed a widow currently in her black (mourning) clothes as she went about hawking her snacks, which would seem like a contradiction to the beliefs held by the community concerning the limit to which a widow is expected to interact. I believe this is due to Christian influence as well as economic reasons, since she has to make a living. This would have been unheard of in typical traditional setting. The severity in the imposition of these rites also differs with families. Most of the widowers studied were living with either children or grand children and helpers who kept the house clean. Interview conducted in Zulu yielded richer data

than the ones conducted in English. This, I interpreted was due to the fact that they felt at ease with the home language rather than my being a foreign researcher conducting a research in English. Observation of respondents was more effective when I was in the company of an assistant. Then I could focus my attention on respondents more. Although I did not understand the language, gestures played a significant role in relating the message. I could detect when a question was not fully understood by respondents and could capture time, nature of death of spouse and feelings of pain and relaxation. My assistant would break to explain to me about an important point made, which made it easier for me to follow the course of the discussion. Having established a good rapport and learnt a few Zulu sentences to ease my communication with respondents, I was given full cooperation through out the fieldwork or interview sessions.

### **3.6 Method of data analysis**

All interviews and field notes were transcribed and those that were conducted in Zulu were translated into English. The English translated texts of these life experiences, as narrated by the participants, have been subjected to analysis. Taped interviews were transcribed and translated by a research assistant and crossed checked for errors before it was used for final analysis. The content of the data collected was in the form of words, symbols, impressions, gestures, or tones, which is a representation of the real message that was communicated by the respondents during the course of narration of their experiences. The analysis started by reading the material and making open coding, in which the data was broken down, conceptualised and put together. Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined open coding as a form of analytic induction in which free data is inspected

for the presence of dominant themes. It is a technique of making comparisons between individuals' responses and within respondent's narratives or answers to questions. I started with low level coding, that is, by labelling and classifying concepts into categories. I then began to search for the conditions that created or had bearing on these categories. Themes were developed from the respondents' own words, meanings and perceptions and were grouped into these categories according to their interrelated ideas during the analysis. Field notes and observations were included in the study as it enhanced the understanding of respondents' compliance to the rites of mourning and cleansing. All respondents' views were respected and given affirmation to avoid the temptation of guiding them based on theoretical assumptions. This I did by asking respondents to express their feelings concerning the rites. Being sensitive to their views enhanced my understanding of the gendered construction of these rites. Widows' views about widowers and vice versa provided rich data about their perceptions and reactions to the gender inequalities in practicing the rites. For instance, a widower felt observing the rites is a cultural pattern that has been set in place for generations and he sees nothing extra-ordinary about them. Expressing his bitterness about those who defy culture, he said such people will be lost and will pay the consequences when they die.

### **3.7 Research ethics and protocol**

This study maintained the necessary ethical standards. There was a clear agreement with respondents, recognized the necessity of confidentiality and informed consent. They were provided detailed information regarding the nature and purpose of the study and a further clarification made just before interview sessions. They were informed of their right to withdraw from being included in the study at any stage during the interview.

A letter of introduction and permission prepared by Gender Studies Centre to enable me get access to the study participants was most useful, especially for the male respondents, who either felt widowhood issues did not merit an academic research or that the subject was associated with women and doubted the need for incorporating males into such issues. I did not need to show evidence before interviewing women, most probably because widowhood affects them most and were ready to air their views in the hope that some one will get to know of their existence and plight in the society and do something about it. Widows have remained an invisible group in the society. Despite their large population, nobody has bothered to investigate to know what happens to them to give them a sense of belonging. At least, that was what one of the respondents noted. It was quite easy getting women talk about their experiences as opposed to men who had to be sure of the answers they were giving by repeatedly asking if I was clear about the answer to the question being asked. Also, being a woman myself, it was easier for widows to relate to me more closely than widowers. The open-ended nature of questions allowed respondents opportunity to clarify any misconceptions they were having regarding the study. This study will protect the identity of all respondents by the use of fictitious names

in presentation. Time constraint prevented me from revisiting my respondents, though there was no commitment of a return visit.

### **3.8 Limitations of the study**

This study does not claim to represent the modes, perceptions and implications of mourning and cleansing rites among all Zulu speaking communities. Apart from the fact that people differ, there are differences in the way families or clan members decide to impose the rites of mourning and cleansing. As was the case with some widows, family members can dictate how you are expected to observe the one-year period of mourning. It was revealed also, that some family members may relax certain restrictions, while others may insist that the widow must observe every detail of the rites. Also, in cases of terminal ailments, a husband can instruct his wife not to use black clothing to mourn his demise or instructs the wife not to subject herself to all the rites associated with spousal death. Language barrier is one of the major shortcomings of this study. Translated texts often lose a lot of originality in meaning. This does not imply that the data was not valid. My input in the field, in situations where the Zulu language was used, was minimal, as I had to observe without full comprehension. My identity as an international student, coming from a different cultural background, did not alter the content of data as respondents readily participated with full cooperation. The difficulty in getting widowers was not interpreted to mean that men are more susceptible to death than women but because they tend to remarry more quickly than widows after losing their spouse. Oikelome, (2003) posits that the loss of a wife often constitutes a more serious problem for a man than for a woman who loses her husband, the reason being that many men never envisage becoming

widowers. So when they suddenly find themselves in it, they easily get disturbed and ultimately out of place, thus the need for him to remarry.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **MOURNING RITES OF WIDOWHOOD**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Ritual, which derives from rite refer to a society's established form of ceremonial practice or procedure, usually associated with religious beliefs in the non-material world of supernatural beings. Such rites attempt to harmonise the activities of earth and heaven by treating both life and death with respect. Thus, the belief expressed in funeral rites by the living where the dead are accorded a send-off as though they were living. Hicks (2002) states that the general theme of death ritual is the separation of the living survivors, especially the widow and widower from the body and soul of the deceased, so that the survivors can remain on earth, and the separation of the body and soul from each other, to be sent to separate resting places. Rites performed at death symbolically mark a transition from the body, and the soul then goes to join the souls of other ancestors. The dead are served like living, the absent like the present (Mei, 1960). This chapter examines the rites of mourning associated with widowhood as prescribed and practised by the Zulu people of Ndwedwe community, KwaZulu-Natal Province. It attempts to explore the procedures, modes, concept and personal as well as cultural interpretations of mourning behaviours, physical and internal experiences of widows and widowers within the Zulu cultural context. The general experiences of the research respondents and their interpretations are reported in the following pages.

Mourning and grieving have been used here interchangeably to refer to the experiences witnessed during the period of these two rituals. Mourning is the observable behaviours

that follow death (Hockey, Katz & Small, 2001:198). This includes feelings and emotional experiences of survivors after the demise of a loved one. The distinction between what is mourning and grief has been an area of contention for anthropologists and ethnographers. Prominent among these writers are Lofland (1985), Hunting & Metcalf (1979), Du Boulay, (1982) and Rosaldo, (1989). Their debates centre on the interpretations of emotional experiences and the universality of particular modes of feelings: that similar signs cannot correspond to the same underlying sentiments in different cultures. They concluded their argument by agreeing that there is a distinction between observable behaviours, which we call public mourning and the internal feelings we know as private.

The interrelatedness of mourning and grief is contained in the experience of the moment and unfolds across the months that follow death. Outburst of weeping at death affirms the bonds between society members and maintains social solidarity universally but the underlying reasons for variant cultural practices of such rites like mourning are rooted in tribal beliefs. There is an established strong sense of bond that exists between the living and the dead. Therefore, the demise of humans is seen as a transition to the next stage where physical contact is impossible and destination is uncertain. In the absence of an easy, universal language of feelings or shared traditional mode of emotional confessions, the interpretation of mourning rituals among the Zulu aims at providing cultural-specific constructs of the experience.

One of the important aspects of this study is the analysis of the gendered construction of mourning rites. Arber and Ginn (1991) have established that bereavement has a different impact on women than men. They argue that men and women are socialised in



communities differently and upon death women are generally expected by their roles to pay a *higher price* in bereavement behaviour than men, who usually remain in mourning for a brief period. While men sit dejectedly outside the house, women sit inside weeping, fanning the corpse and showing grievously how much the departed member was loved (Bockie, 1993). Family members as well come together to offer mutual emotional support, solidarity and practical assistance, though the role of the widow or widower of being the principal bereaved person remains uncontested. The duration, mode of dressing and social restrictions associated with Zulu mourning rituals of Ndwedwe is discussed in the following pages.

#### **4.2 Rituals at death and burial**

Traditionally, the Zulu people believe in the existence and close presence of ancestral spirits. It is believed that the souls of the dead become spirits, which ultimately found their way to the next world. Berglund (1976) mentions that the Zulu's idea of the world is that it is a flat surface and that the departed exist on the lower side of the earth from where they continue to take special active interest in the fortunes of the living. They also exercise some control over the behaviour of the living. The death of marital partners brings death very close and inevitably demands greater emotional and cultural observances not only by widows and widowers, but also by the immediate community. The death of any community member then becomes a unifying factor for all community members. The Zulu person is never an individual isolated from his or her family, clan, and nation, and this illustrates the intimate relationship between the departed and the living. This bond is also illustrated by the brotherly fellowship that continues even after

death. (Magwaza, 1993:11) writes concerning the bond that, “The descendants cannot survive separated from the existence of the ancestors. The two are closely tied together, making the ancestor of a lineage interdependent”. Death is therefore, not an end of the individual. It is believed that the soul survives after death. Men and women, who play different but complimentary roles, handle death rituals or ceremonies. The men notify relatives about the death, organise for the burial, dig the grave and slaughter the beast while the women remain with the corpse and are also in the kitchen to ensure that food is available for the funeral. In traditional rural areas, the Zulu person who dies must be buried in the ancestral home. There is a strong bond illustrated in the fact that graves for family members must be near each other and at home. However, circumstances could alter that decision. A 77year old widow, Ms. Nomusa Mkhize stated,

My husband was buried in a common cemetery. We could have opted to bury him in the yard but we felt as Christians it will be proper to have him where most of the church people are buried. Otherwise in this area it is not uncommon to find people burying their dead in the yard. In Zulu way of life, that is the proper thing to do.

The advent of Christianity has altered the decision for customary places of burial. The Zulu people of Ndwedwe have also imbibed Christian funeral ceremonies, which are conducted in churches before the burial. A major finding of this study was the influence Christianity had on burial, yet too little on mourning and cleansing rites. The mourning practice of a widow seating down on a mat covered with blanket, the compulsory wearing of black clothing for one year and isolation from public to avoid infestation of death on others are some of the rites that have remained uninfluenced. Also, symbolic slaughtering of animals at burial and cleansing, the belief attached to burial of body at home, the rites

of smearing a widows' body with *umswani* as cleansing agent and 'bringing home' of ancestral spirits have defied Christian influence in Ndwedwe. A widower in Ndwedwe, for example, explained how he had to bury his wife at the cemetery near home. Even in situations where the death occurs far from home, efforts are made to transport the corpse home for burial. Mourning in Ndwedwe commences immediately after death is confirmed, and burial takes place within the mourning period. Burial forms part of the gendered distinction between how men and women are treated in relation to death and subsequent rites. For instance, unlike men, women are not buried with cow or goat's skin wrapped around the coffin. This is only used for the burial of a man, symbolising his importance and status.

An important aspect of Zulu burial in Ndwedwe is the slaughtering of goats and cows. All respondents acknowledged that at death, a goat must first be slaughtered to pave way for the peaceful transition of the deceased to join her or his ancestors.

A full discussion on the use and significance of animal sacrifice is discussed in the next chapter. The worth and status of any man in Ndwedwe community is usually determined by the type of cow or animals that are slaughtered at his death, which does not happen for the women, for which there is no tangible explanation rather than the fact that she is regarded as a minor to a man. In some cases, where family members cannot afford this, a widow must provide it as an honour to the departed. Having internalised her status as inferior to the man, and in a bid to reinstate her status, which was defined through her husband's, she feels compelled to show the society who and what her husband was, even if his relatives were not supportive. Ms. Thabile Ximba illustrates this, when she proudly asserted,

A cow or goat is a 'must have' for anybody who had been in charge of the house.

Widows in Ndwedwe feel obliged to give their husbands a befitting burial and to also clear herself of the blame of being the cause of her husband's death. Thabile explained further that she spent almost R100.000 (One hundred thousand Rand) on his burial and had no regrets because he was worth more than that. Another widower had to slaughter a cow for his late wife's burial because he felt she was worth it, which normally wouldn't be the case. This was confirmed by a widow who acknowledged that this would not be the case with a woman, though she observed that recently, there have been cases where women's death are accompanied by slaughtering of a cow and the only difference being the wrapping of a coffin with the skin. A widower, Mr. Vusi Nkabinde of Ndwedwe explained that according to culture,

Zulu burial takes place immediately after death. The corpse does not have to remain in the mortuary for long as it happens these days with Christian burials. Men dig the grave and it is only men who are buried with cow skin, which is slaughtered on the day of burial. But the ministers of religion took us away from that culture. They say we are backward and wrong because we are worshipping amaZulu.

The influence of Christianity and "modernisation", a term used to refer to the transformation in societies that result from people's adaptation to present times, conditions, needs, and languages to ensure all round progress, on the Zulu culture signals a demise of a traditional value that has been upheld for generations. Mr. Nkabinde maintained that things were not done according to the old good practice and was visibly worried about these changes. For instance, he decried the way people gather in the house

of the bereaved for days waiting and eating until the burial, which might take longer than a week. According to him, it is not part of Zulu culture but a Christian method of delaying burial. It should be noted that modernity, which has been confused with western ideas, ideals and standard of living as well as values of life, have infiltrated many colonised societies, which are not African. Western value systems like mode of dressing, way of worship, expressions and even systems of government, have been adopted by formerly colonised societies, and have had great impact on the life style of individuals within such societies. The effect of these changes are seen in the way people conduct burials, that is by preserving the corpse in the mortuary for a week or more depending on the family's ability to map out plans for burial. This is what Nkabinde says lay heavy financial burden on the bereaved family as they have to keep feeding the multitude of people till the burial day, which was never the case with Zulu burials.

Zulu people in general feel that their dead people need to be treated with reverence. Magwaza (1993:16) states, "It is believed that a person who respects and makes sacrifices to the ancestors according to tribal norms attracts good fortune. Whilst on the other hand omission of ritual obligations chases luck away. As ancestors are believed to have control over the good and the bad fortune, of their descendants, the latter have means of securing benefits". She argues further that even some Zulu people, who claim to be Christians and would have nothing to do with ancestors, soon find themselves performing traditional rituals to the ancestors when confronted with problems they suspect to be as a result of their neglect of their ancestors. Mr. Siyabonga Mkhungo, a widower of Ndwedwe, confirmed that his wife was buried according to Christian rites but he still performs some traditional ceremonies at the graveside every one to two years when he unveils the tomb.

The method of burial accorded to a woman may not be that significant since most ancestral spirits are believed to be men but a wife so cherished during her life time could enjoy a 'manly' burial, in which a cow is slaughtered. It still remains an individual family affair and not a common practice as such. For instance, Mr. Sizwe Ndlela said he had to slaughter a cow for his wife, which will normally not be the case for women. He did it out of the conviction that he felt she was worth it. The decision to honour a wife with a cow depends on her 'ability' to produce male children, her economic support and the way she submits to the authority of her husband and the relatives as well. This was confirmed by Mr. Siyabonga Mkhungo who said his wife had been so supportive, had even taken a funeral insurance before her death, which was so helpful and was always with him in the garden, the bedroom and bathroom, for which he now laments. A woman who is not 'supportive' may not receive much honour at death.

#### **4.3 Procedures, commencement and duration of mourning**

As soon as the death of a person is announced, the women around, especially the widow is told by other elderly citizens around to wail loudly (Amuche, 2002). This attracts neighbours, friends and family members, who rush in to join in the wailing. Men generally move aside and sit silently, unless requested to participate in the burial preparations. Relatives must abandon whatever they are doing to get to the house to express emotional grief about the dead. The practice where relatives retain intense influence over what happens in the family in which they were born is similar to what has been reported amongst the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. In some cases, paternal relatives exercise tyrannical power over the women their brothers married (Korieh, 1986). In

Britain, Firth (2001) observed that Hindus' death, like that of the Zulu, revealed in this study, is followed by the removal of chairs, cushions and beddings from the room of the deceased, where the widow remains to receive visitors. Among the Zulu, the widow is immediately wrapped with a blanket and made to sit on a mat or mattress. Everything in the room is removed except the mat or mattress she sits on. This could be regarded as symbolic of a widow's loss of status and alienation from society. She covers her face, which indicates her alienation from the normal contact with people. The practice was observed during a visit to a bereaved widow, Ms Sibongile Mbatha who had just lost her husband and was observing the mourning rites. The same observation conducted on a bereaved widower, Mr. Sizwe Ndlela showed that a man does not need to sit on the mattress or mat to illustrate grief and does not do anything extra ordinary to symbolise the loss of his wife. Mr. Ndlela was sitting outside the compound chatting with his friend and only came into the room when he wanted to speak to us. Though men are expected to express their grief over a wife's death, these expressions should not be accompanied with visual actions such as open weeping or sitting on the mat. The way widows are expected to behave is illustrated by Ms. Thandi Khuboni's experience.

I sat on the mattress and had to cover my head. They allowed me to use a very light material. It was December, in summer and so, someone made a veil-like lace material to cover my head. I will uncover it and then talk. When it was hot and there were no people in the room, they would allow me to take it off.

The pattern of behaviour expected for widows and widowers in the manifestation of grief differ. While widows can readily express their feelings, widowers are expected to control their distress because tears are visible signs of unmanly behaviour.

Mr. Vusi Nkabinde's comment reiterated the fact that men do not have to mourn the way women do.

According to Zulu tradition, men do not sit near the corpse. They do not mourn the way women do. They sit aside with friends and other male relatives outside the house.

A widow, Ms. Nomusa Mkhize's comment is a held conviction by her fellow women that men are not supposed to do what women should. The way men are supposed to mourn and the duration are often clasps together to emphasise how insignificant mourning is for men.

A man who has been widowed does not need to mourn, but his period is usually far shorter. Men put a black stripe around their arm. It is very rare to find a man wearing it for a year. Never! It is only three months.

Mr. Siyabonga Mkhungo's experience was a typical example of gender role socialisation in societies, where a man expected to be assertive, tough, hard-hearted and never to allow his emotions to 'betray' him.

When she died (his wife), the children were crying and I told them not to cry because we shouldn't disturb her spirit. I myself did not cry. I had to hold myself as a man. I never sat on the mat because men don't do it. Men stay with their friends and fellow men.



The way men behave by sitting outside could be interpreted to the patriarchal role associated with men's behaviour. They spend most of their time and work outside the home, while women are home bound most times. The outward behaviour that widows and widowers have to observe is a cultural way of registering deep grief about the death. Writing on the seclusion and isolation of widows, Korieh (1986) observed that, in most parts of West Africa, among the Jukuns, the Islamised communities and the Igbos, the duration for mourning vary. This could last up to twelve months, five moons and even three years respectively. However, amongst the Igbos, the first 28 days of this period is associated with strict restrictions. A widow is not allowed to the stream, market or entering farmland. A widow can only perform these functions following a ritual that is done at the expiration of the 28 days. Korieh's findings showed that men did not observe these rites. As evident by my finding, amongst the Zulus also, mourning period for the widows could last up to a year or more while widowers may not take up to three months. This finding is quite contrary to what Krige reported that both widows and widowers continue to mourn for a year. Almost all widows interviewed, said they had to go through this ritual for a complete year. Except in a case where finances become problematic for the cleansing rites, which follows mourning period, the acceptable period is a year or twelve months.

From the foregoing discussion, it is significant to note the distinctive difference, which characterizes mourning procedures for men and women. While regression and depression may be natural responses to the loss of a spouse, men try to suppress this for fear of being thought weak as illustrated by the widower above. The period of confinement and the emotional distress experienced by these widows, no doubt, illustrate the nature of

patriarchal set up in sexist society. Gender equality demands that men and women be treated equally and in the liberal's view, (Mill, 1869 in Bryson, 2000) society will relate better if there is fair justice rather than subjecting half of its population to unpleasant situations. The concept of patriarchy becomes meaningful if these systematic and structured natures of the society can be identified in ways that will challenge oppressive systems both at the social and family sphere of human endeavour.

#### **4.4 Bodily appearance and head shaving**

The death of a spouse is said to set off series of adjustment processes, which the surviving spouse has to cope with. There is the emotional distress, which is caused by the loss of a meaningful relationship and the fact that they have to redefine the social reality that reflects their new status as widowed person. They have to adjust their daily routine to reflect their acquired identity as widowed person and must be visibly seen to reflect this new identity. Dress has been used to express an individual's cultural, ethnic or national identity and as a mechanism through which people locate themselves in relation to the social world in which they participate (Magwaza, 2001). Unlike dress being used as symbol of social identity and a signifier of class or occupational status (Giddens, 1991), dress for the widow is associated with stigmatization and defacement, which is not the case for widowers. A widower is not expected to wear anything to distinguish himself from the rest of men that he is widowed. Again, this is symptomatic of the unequal treatment meted to widows by the society. A widow is immediately spotted from the rest of her women folk because of her dress. Across the globe, widowhood has been associated with particular form of dressing, which according to Gorer (cited in Hockey et

al, 2001) is “full panoply of public mourning”. In the nineteenth-century, grief was characterized by separate sphere for women and men. Women were easily identified through the wearing of mourning dresses (Hockey et al, 2001). It was gender-specific. It became a matter of public concern especially during the two world war periods. Bourke (cited in Hockey et al, 2001) notes that, “as the war progressed and black clothes began casting a shadow over all public places, the bereaved were implored to adopt cheaper and more varied mourning apparel”.

Among the Zulu of Ndwedwe, the culture of wearing the mourning dress is very much an integral part of death ritual. Following the death of a spouse, a widow or widower must acknowledge through both emotional expressions and public show by change in clothing and appearance. Appearance becomes central in the projection of a widow’s public identity. Like many other customary patterns of mourning conduct in Africa, a widow is first confined, her hair is scraped and is made to put on black clothing for the next one or more years. This is what Nwadinobi (EWD, 2001) refers to as period of defacement.

Recounting her experience, Ms. Nokwazi Mncwabe had this to say:

Also, as part of mourning, I had to be in black clothes, even my stockings had to be black. One can only show her face, but the rest of the body must be completely covered.

Ms. Thabile Ximba also said:

I had to wear black during the mourning period, which lasted for one year, after which I had to go to my relatives for the cleansing. Throughout the year, my head remained shaved I had to go to the river after burial to wash and have my hair shaved. I then dressed in black and returned home where I found my room smeared with cow dung.

The custom of wearing mourning dresses for men as indicated by this Mr. Jabulani Mathonsi differs with women.

I did not mourn by wearing any particular dress. Apart from church people who wear uniform during such occasions because they belong to different groups in the church, I did not wear any particular cloth during the funeral and burial.

Ms. Thandi Ximba and Ms. Kayise Damane confirmed that men illustrate their grief about the death of their wives by the use of black strip, which is quite insignificant compared to what women have to do to show that they have lost, not just a man, but the very essence of their lives.

Men use a strip of black cloth round their arm wrist. They may go to the barber's shop to shave their hair and this wouldn't be allowed for a woman. I wouldn't even think of a woman doing that. Men put a black strip of cloth around their arm....within three months, they are already telling them to get a wife to look after him. So three months do not even finish. He's off.

Mourning dress has been retained over the years but not without modifications as typical of changing societies. The Ndwedwe case illustrates how the society has gradually accepted these changes, though struggling to maintain its significance. A number of widows interviewed had made some modifications to the colour and dress. Widows preferred to use other colours apart from black. While I was walking through the streets, a number of Zulu speaking widows were seen wearing either brown or blue, not to mention those used in this study. These colours are accepted to be used only in so far as the strict rules of covering the whole body and maintaining the dress for a whole year are publicly adhered to. It was also discovered that, while the old generation of widows still

insist on wearing black dress, the younger ones have not only altered the colour but the style of wearing mourning dress. For instance, Ms Thandi Khuboni said, she had to use clothing that were not bright and a scarf. Others said they decided to change the colour from black to a less ominous but dark colour. The prevalence of sexual and other kinds of violence like robbery was perceived to put women wearing black mourning dress at risk. They become targets for rape, break-ins, since they are no longer attached and lack the presence of a man, which symbolises the loss of ownership and authority. That explains why a young widow, Ms. Londiwe Gumede viewed the wearing of black as non-significant. She stated,

I think the wearing of black clothes is a waste of time. There have been people who don't wear it and nothing has happened to them. But it depends on the husband's family. Like my in-laws expected me to wear black for whole year. For me the wearing of black clothes attract men to come and propose to you. It allows men to take advantage of you because it is now clear that you don't have a husband. But if he dies and you don't wear black, nobody bothers you.

Other reasons advanced for the change could be as a result of instructions by the late husband at death as indicated by Ms. Bongi Cele

My husband had said before he died that he didn't want me to wear black during the mourning period. So I decided to put on a grey-colour cloth for the whole year according to the custom

Ms Kayise Damane confirmed that things have changed with regard to the colour of dress used for mourning.

In our days, it has changed, you can wear black, blue or whatever colour you choose as long as it is plain and single colour. I was wearing my clothes but I used a scarf of different colours throughout the year. I didn't wear a bright colour like blue or a sleeveless dress. I wore short sleeve with a scarf around my neck.

It is evident that whatever one decides to wear, is to signify to the public the loss of a husband or wife. The implication of not wearing mourning clothing is grave. The widow's family members are very particular on this, as it will amount to a disgrace for the entire clan. It is the function of elderly women to coach the newly bereaved widow on what to do and how she is expected to behave during the mourning period. Since it is believed that your husband's spirit is still hovering around you, failure to mourn for him is a sign of disrespect not only for him but also for the culture. When questioned on why a widow had to undergo all these, Ms. Thandi Khuboni responded,

If I don't do the right thing, my husband's spirit is watching and guiding us in doing things.....I had to do it to show respect for my husband and my in-laws. Also, you must respect whatever tradition they have, go by that culture even if you know deep down your mind that these things are not right. You still have to do it.

Women seem to bear the burden of mourning more than men considering the fact that the custom of mourning presses far more heavily on women. As indicated by widowers in this study, men who have lost spouse are not expected to appear any different from the rest of the community. To them, it is simply a cultural thing and nothing more. It was

done by their fore fathers and they grew up to inherit it and are quite comfortable with the way mourning rites are practiced. The view about maintaining continuity of mourning rite was supported by Mr. Nqanawe Hlophe, who stated that without the strict observance of mourning rites, a person loses his/ her identity.

#### **4.5 Social restrictions, taboos and stigmatisation**

The period of mourning is characterized by social restrictions. In Mexico, Arguilar and Wood (1976) found out that, widows and widowers are expected to wear some sign of mourning and to refrain from social activities that may lead to courtship and marriage within six months to a year of a spouse's death. This study revealed that some reasons for the restriction from social activities are to discourage widows from immediate courtship and marriage until when cleansing is done. Cleansing detaches the widow from the husband's spirit and allows her to be fully absorbed into the community. Widows who are seen socialising soon after the husband's death stand the risk of being accused for the cause of the husband's death. The practice of seclusion and isolation of widows is very common in most African cultures. Korieh's (1986) study reveals that, amongst the Igbos, fourteen weeks following burial, a widow is supposed to be secluded in the most restricted manner. Cochrane (cited in Hockey et al, 2001) in his study learnt that, there are patterns of avoidances that widows were expected to observe in order to protect others from being "touched" by death. In Swaziland, women who put on widows' black gowns are not permitted to appear in public for two years and only after they have undergone a 'cleansing' ritual (UN Int. Network, 2003). Also, they have to sit at the back of public transport buses and churches so as not to cast the 'shadow of death' on other

people. They may not leave their homes for a full month after the death of their husbands except to go to the toilet. The same report stated that widowed men are not expected to wear any form of mourning dress and only shave after their wives are buried.

Amongst the Zulu people of Ndwedwe community, all widows interviewed did experience some form of restrictions in movement or associating with others, especially the men. It is only in exceptional cases will a widow go out during the mourning period.

When I was still mourning, I was considered a bad omen to most people except my closest relatives. I could not go anywhere....I was not allowed to attend any social gathering even if I was invited. This ban is for a whole year until you are cleansed.

In some cases there are restrictions on the use of household utensils. This practice emanates from the belief that death is easily transferable through sharing of things.

According to Ms. Xolile Zulu, the experience can be devastating.

Before burial, as part of mourning, I was not allowed to use other people's utensils. I had to use my cup, spoon, plates etc. But you are relieved after burial and then you can use other household utensils. You can't serve anybody as you are unclean and may pass on the death to other people.

These restrictions extend to public facilities like being on the bus and having to attend a clinic for check up. Ms. Bongi Cele's experience of isolation and stigmatisation are common phenomena widows have to go through during the mourning period.

While you are mourning, people won't seat next to you in the bus because you are considered to have a potential of passing on bad luck to other people. You can't sit in the front; you must always sit at the back so that you don't contaminate other people.



Widows who have to struggle due to economic reasons to sustain themselves during the mourning period find it extremely difficult to cope. Ms. Nqobile Khumalo, whose family members could not even turn up for the burial, had to struggle to sustain herself and the three children left behind. She became a victim of this circumstance since it was difficult to secure a job to sustain her family. The shadow of death, which a widow is believed to be carrying, could be cast on anybody, thus the need to widen her space by staying far away from people as much as possible.

I couldn't get a job wearing black and in the vehicle, nobody will agree to sit near me. I was seen as a sign of bad luck.

Ms. Nokwazi Mncwabe's experience clearly explains the stringent condition to which widows are subjected.

During mourning, I was expected to behave in a very respectable manner. I must bow down my head each time I walk and must not look at people in the face. I was not allowed to talk to people outside the family circle. You talk only when you are spoken to. I could not visit other people's houses to avoid bringing death to them.

Other restrictions include complete abstinence from sexual intercourse as illustrated by Ms. Londiwe Gumede's experience. She had to be informed of the need to stay off men and cautioned against 'misconduct' regarding the rite.

I was brought back from the river to the house where I was advised by elders in my husband's family on how to behave during the mourning period. I was told not to have sexual contact with another man and that I should wait until after cleansing before I could find a man.

Raum (1973) also indicated that, no work is done in the fields for the whole year. Widows are made to understand that such rituals were necessary to observe to avoid any misfortune on their side and the family line. A widow narrated how her mother put so many restrictions that made her uncomfortable. This, she knew emanated as a result of fear of community members' criticism about their inability to mourn properly. According to this widow, failure to mourn properly means a lack of respect for both family members and the deceased husband. Raphael (1984) and Korieh (1986) have both argued that, while some of these practices show genuine reaction to the loss of the spouse, others may emanate as a result of the need to "keep up a good front" and "clear the widow (spouse) of any suspicion of killing the husband (spouse) respectively. The outward practice of mourning may end but most widows confessed they were unable to get over it even after the one year. Mourning is a continuous process and it takes a long time before one can actually think back with less bitterness. That explains why most of the participants broke down during the course of the interview sessions. Ms. Thabile Ximba's case told the whole story of what it feels to lose a loved one. She refuted the idea of remarriage on the grounds that no man can ever fill the gap created by her late husband.

After my husband passed away, I felt some kind of loneliness and pain, which cannot be repaired. I felt very, very, very bad, not even your mother's death. Even today I still feel it. I don't think it will be over till I die. It is very painful.

Interestingly, widows and widowers acknowledged the importance and necessity for performing all the rites associated with mourning. This, they believe is not only the acceptable norm, but also a way of paying respect and love to their departed spouses.

#### **4.6 Family and community involvement**

As mentioned before, the Zulu person is never an individual separated from the family, clan, and nation. He or she is part of the whole, intimately tied to the rest (Berglund, 1976). This then implies that the bond experienced while alive is extended to the time of death. As soon as death occurs, relatives must be informed and they have to gather to offer mutual emotional support, solidarity and practical assistance as well as reaffirmation of the family (Raphael, 1984). At times, family support and comfort depends on what preceded the loss or the relationship that existed between the bereaved and his or her family members. Most widows experienced some difficulties with family members when their spouses died as opposed to widowers who had no problems with the late wife's family. As mentioned earlier, the bases for the total involvement of family members depends largely on the sort of relationship that had existed prior to death, and their economic capabilities. As was revealed, family members gather as soon as they are informed of the death. They help in keeping the vigil until burial. Children are seen as the most valuable assets a widow or widower can ever boast of. Almost all the participants who have children acknowledged the great support this meant to them, not only during the death, burial and mourning but has continued to be their source of support economically and otherwise. For Ms. Xolile Zulu and Ms. Nothando Xulu children remain a source of consolation for every widow.

When my husband died, it was my eldest son who was responsible for most things. What was to be done had to be approved by him, as he was considered the head of the family.

While in most cases children lessen the burden of mourning by their availability and support, others may experience heart-breaking situations. Ms. Xolile Zulu, while recounting what her friend went through, said,

I know of a friend whose eldest son kicked her out of the house, the person who was supposed to have been looking after her well being. Before he sent her out, he stripped her of her belongings...She is really suffering. I wish I could speak to her and comfort her right now but she is mourning the death of her grand child

The other dimension to the problems widows and widowers have to cope with is the conflict which sometimes arise from siblings. A widow and widower both confessed having problems with their children/grandchildren following the death of their spouses. These conflicts emanate as a result of either property inheritance or children's rejection to the idea of remarriage as was the case with these two:

Mr. Vusi Nkabinde felt very bitter about his children's lack of understanding towards his intention to remarry.

I very much want to marry but my children are against it. They have even threatened that if I remarry, I should vacate the house...I recommend that a law be enacted to cover widowers, which will give them freedom to continue with their free life after the death of their partners. I believe if there is a law, children must respect it.

The display of excessive wealth by widows or widowers at burial portrays them as insensitive to the plight of the living, and also brings disunity amongst family members. The widow who spent so much on her husband's burial confessed that the sister-in-laws deserted her since then because they felt she had wasted so much money and have not

bothered to help them. They thought their late brother would have willed some of his property to them, which he didn't. On the other hand Ms. Kayise Damane has been falsely accused and deserted by her grand children for inheriting property meant for them following their mother's death. The daughter in-law died shortly after her husband's death, which she explained to have been caused by her brother in-law.

The children accused me of taking money their mother must have left for them before she died. They felt I had robbed them of their inheritance. I pray that one day somebody will believe me.

It was revealed that most of these widows and widowers live lonely and insecure lives. While others may live with other family members, most prefer to live alone despite the high level of insecurity. A widow reported having been burgled and assaulted by armed bandits. For some of those who live alone and can afford the financial burden, there are helpers, cleaners or gardeners who offer assistance while relatives make effort to constantly get in contact. As earlier mentioned most widowers live with either a helper or grand children in the same house. However, widows seemed to be more in control of their lives than widowers. They could still wash their clothes, cook their food, sweep the house and do all the other house chores they had been used to. They acknowledged that their strongest source of support came from their children who live in different parts of the world.

#### **4.7 Implications for health and well-being**

The impact of transition that takes place from being a wife or husband to being a widow or widower is most likely to have adverse effects on health and well-being. Bockie's research revealed that women are generally expected to pay a higher price in bereavement behaviour than men are, because men usually remain in mourning for a very brief period (Bockie, 1993). Women have to exhibit tearfully and grievously how much the departed was loved during his lifetime. The situation that widows and widowers have to handle at this point in time involves a lot of stress. Death, which occurs after a long period of hospital care often places enormous strain on health (Arber & Jay, 1991). While rituals associated with birth and marriages are celebrated with joy, the nature of rituals associated with death continues to be a focus of powerful emotions. Raphael's "Anatomy of Bereavement" is an extensive study on the patterns of feelings experienced by widows and widowers. Outlining some of these powerful feelings to include regression, regret, anger, resentment, sorrow, guilt, helplessness, depression, emptiness of self and world, among many others, she posits that these could lead to serious physical and psychological disorder. Analysing further, she states that, the bond established by the relationship is significant. "The relationship may represent symbolic functions and needs. The husband may represent to the wife security, power, status; and the wife may represent a beautiful possession or safe haven from the world of work" (Raphael, 1984:180). There is intense yearning and longing for the dead spouse and this results in restlessness, sleeplessness and perpetual feeling of deep inner pain. It affects the survivors' mental and physical well-being. Frude (1991) reports that studies conducted by the National academy of science in 1984 to examine the physiological changes produced by death, did show that a

major loss affects the functioning of the nervous system, the respiratory system and the hormonal system as well as producing changes in the cardiovascular and immune system. These are symptoms that may not surface immediately and may gradually lead to other complications. Loneliness and independence are enough burdens to carry as well as other economic needs of children and dependents. In most parts of Africa, mourning practices could threaten the lives of widows in many ways. For instance, the scraping or shaving of hair and scarification of face with knife or using unhygienic instruments, eating from unwashed plates for about 28 days to three months, prohibition from bathing, sleeping on the bare floor, sleeping with dead corpse and drinking water that has been used to wash the dead husband's body (EWD, 2001) are some of the serious health hazards associated with mourning observances.

Krige (1939) and Raum (1973) have both acknowledged that death brings defilement and weakens all members of the household. It is for this reason that all those resident in the house have to eat strengthening medicines and be protected from being drawn after the deceased. All women shave their heads or simply disarrange and leave it uncared for during the whole period of mourning. However, these studies remained silent on the implications of this for the well being of the widows. It was evident from participants that widows must shave their heads and be made to sit on a mat or mattress for the period. The period is characterized by restrictions and stigmatisation, which according to the widows, continue to pose a threat not only to their social life but also to their psychological and physical well-being.

Mr. Siyabonga Mkhungo's experience confirmed some of the ailments associated with mourning:

I felt sick sometimes ago and when I visited the doctor, she diagnosed hypertension (High Blood Pressure). She advised me to get married but I don't want to.

Unlike widowers, most of these widows found it difficult to visit clinics because of the fear of meeting people on the road and be accused of 'contaminating people with misfortune'. It was worst for older widows who experience negligence by hospital staff. They are told to go away, implying they were no longer needed in society. This negligence widows suffer from nurses were perceived as the society's way of not caring for their plight.

Nobody accepts widows especially when they are old. At the hospitals and at pension pay points, they harass us as old people...people feel you are wasting their time. With the stigma of death you are carrying, nobody wants to come near you.

In ancient times, among the Jewish people, mourning consisted of traditional wearing of torn garments but widows were permitted to wash them and take a daily shower for hygiene. Luxurious baths, haircuts, wearing leather shoes and sexual intercourse were avoided. Men do not shave and women do not wear cosmetics (Klug, 1998). Amongst the Zulu, a widow is expected to appear clean only after the ceremonial cleansing. She could then get rid of the mourning clothing and transform herself by wearing new clothes, which are presented to her during the cleansing ceremony. Before then, she must undergo a symbolic bath of cleansing using *umswani*, which is the digested grass in from the stomach of a goat, in the river, after which she can carry on her normal bath. Having to



eat in separate plates and severing food intake are no doubt unhealthy for any woman to experience, especially when she is already grief-stricken. Unlike around the 1930s (Krige, 1939) where widows were supposed to be stripped of their clothes and remain naked with leaves on their private parts, and had sit on a reed, present day widows sit on the mat or mattress but must remain covered with either blanket or piece of cloth. In this way they are able to cover themselves against cold and other infection that might be caused by exposing the body and sitting on the bare floor. Contrary to the belief that women are a weaker sex and are prone to exhibit her emotional feelings at death, this study revealed that widows are able to cope with their daily tasks much better than widowers. While women expressed that they were comfortable with cooking, washing, cleaning, gardening and reluctance to remarry, men had helpers and were staying with either grown up children or grand children whom they claimed were there to care for them. Most of them felt they needed assistance with daily chores and thus the need to remarry. This is in addition to their physical appearances, which readily suggested a need for medical attention. Oikelome, (2003:1) posits that “the loss of a wife often constitutes a more serious problem for the man than a woman who loses her husband, the reason being that many men never envisage becoming widowers....A man needs a woman to help in taking decisions, he needs a companion, he needs a helpmate. He needs emotional succour because women are stronger emotionally than men”. This and other reasons like the lack of sexual restraint are often advanced as reasons for men’s quick idea about remarriage following spousal loss.

The implication of death rituals for well-being, especially as it relates to HIV/AIDS infection and other diseases will be discussed in the next chapter on cleansing rites.

Mourning rites are culturally followed by cleansing, which concludes the circle of rituals associated with spousal death and allows the widowed person normal life in the community.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CLEANSING RITE (S)

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the concept of cleansing in relation to death amongst the Zulus. It will analyse its significance, the symbolic use of animal sacrifice, the *ukubuyisa*, 'bringing home' ceremony and held beliefs as they relate to the gendered construction of the ritual. I have decided to analyse the cleansing rite using a general background of what cleansing is and how it has been practiced across the history of mankind. Biblical evidence (Leviticus 12-15) shows that men and women are endowed with bodily features and activities that are prone to impurity. For instance, childbearing, menstruation and infectious skin diseases were grounds for a woman to become impure and in need of cleansing, while emission of semen, bodily discharge and sexual relationship with a menstruating woman considered rendering the man unclean. However, it took 33 days for a woman to undergo purification rites after she gives birth to a boy, 66 days if a girl. A young lamb and a pigeon were necessary for her atonement and then she will be ceremonially cleaned from her flow of blood. The observance of separate cleansing rites for men and women was a common practice among the Israelites. In Eastern Nigeria, for instance, amongst the Igbos, empirical studies by Korieh's (1996) show that when a woman loses her husband, she is rendered unclean. She is not allowed to touch anything in the house, especially plates and spoons. The old pots and plates so used during mourning period must be discarded as soon as the mourning period is over. All the dirt

collected where she has been secluded is thrown away into the bush after the cleansing rite. She can only join the community and normal life after being purified. The study also noted that men did not need to undergo cleansing rites if their wives died.

In a separate study conducted by Ntozi et al (1999) in East Africa, a widow is expected to perform sexual intercourse with either of the brothers of the late husband or some stranger to appease the husband's ghost. Ntozi also found that in Rwanda, widowers have to undergo sexual cleansing by engaging in sexual intercourse with an *umweza* (a young unmarried woman) as part of the purification. Other instances of sexual cleansing in East Africa as reported by Janet Walsh's testimony on women's property rights violations in Kenya, shows how widows are forced to undergo cleansing, usually involving sex with a social outcast who is paid by the dead husband's family, supposedly to cleanse the woman of her dead husband's evil spirits. In most cases safer sex is seldom practiced and sex is often coerced (Walsh 2002). Widows who are forced into the customary practice of ritual cleansing run a risk of contracting and spreading HIV and widows who refuse to conform to the practice are beaten or ostracised. Walsh explained that brother in-laws pay a 'cleaner' who could be HIV positive person, with a cow, chickens and clothing before inheriting the widow. These practices have come under condemnation not only by widows themselves, but also by women activists and human rights organisations in countries where these practices are prevalent.

Early accounts on the Zulu (Krige, 1936, Vilakazi, 1959 & Raum, 1973) have given a background to the concept of cleansing ritual associated with death. Death is said to defile a whole household and cripples activities for all relatives. The practice that ensues is that close relatives do not only suspend normal duties but must withdraw from society.

The belief is that death renders them weak physically and emotionally, lowers their body resistance to diseases and thus renders them easy victims for sorcerers and their medicines. They become accident-prone; are likely to be assaulted without reason or provocation; their masters at work may take sudden dislike to them and thus dismiss them from their jobs, and anything unpleasant can happen to them (Vilakazi, 1958). It is for this reason therefore, that a message is sent for all relatives to retire to the house of death to be cleansed and fortified before returning to their normal work. The eating of strengthening medicine by all the relatives present is supposed to stop the contagious nature of death from spreading over the kinsmen. While the gathering of relatives might be a visible assertion of family unity, most people are compelled out of fear of the impending doom that may follow. The deceased spirit continues to be present among humans threatening and ready to strike down the next person. So it becomes urgent to neutralize it, its contagion stopped and everybody cleansed of the pollution and thereby strengthened (Vilakazi, 1958). There is a very strong notion that contamination, which extends to the relatives, material objects as well as food, needs medicinal washing and protective rites, which are vested on the diviner who use her/his power to appease the ancestors and the dead man. The particular emphasis placed on widow cleansing rites may not be far from beliefs associated with the woman's body. Madlala's (2002) study on the myth of virgin cleansing amongst the Zulus attests to the myth that women's bodies are suitable places for harbouring dirt and that menstruation blood is considered dirty. These perceptions and the fact that death is viewed as infectious and pollutes the whole household project the woman as a symbol of impurity.

## **5.2 Procedures for ceremonial cleansing**

It was found by this study that, in as much as defilement affects the whole family and therefore in need of cleansing, the widow's cleansing involves some procedures which often take up to a year before she is finally accepted into the society without fear of her contaminating any one. The ritual of the washing of hands and eating of medicine may remove darkness and death from other family members but not for the widow. It was also revealed that cleansing rites for the widow only commence no less than a year after the death of a spouse depending on the economic capability of the family into which she was born and her own family members to organise the ceremony. Prior to that, a widow remains unclean and must not be seen greeting or having contact with most people lest she casts shadow of death on them. When a widow is due for cleansing, she travels back to her late husband's family house (if she has been working in town) preferably on a Friday and a beast is slaughtered to announce her arrival the evening before the day of the occasion. This is another time for the congregation of family members who are expected to participate fully. Unlike the sober mood at death, this is a time for rejoicing and feasting. Ms. Thandi Khuboni's ceremony was held after a whole year of having observed the strict mourning period without 'letting the family down'. Her inability to observe this period brings disgrace and shame on her own parents and the late husband's family as well.

Cleansing is an essential procedure. I had to go back home to my husband's family house in the village for cleansing...It is a ritual that you have to follow to say that we have finished this period (mourning) and entering another period. It means you have done your best for your husband.

There were variations in the involvement of the two families in the cleansing. While others said both families must do it, others prefer to be cleansed by their parents. There is no rigid rule about who does the cleansing but a widow must make sure the cleansing is done before she can participate in society's normal life. It is perceived as a family choice and would be based on the relationship that existed between the widow and her in-laws at the time of death. Ms. Bongi Cele never enjoyed the support of her husband's family members because at the time of her husband's death, her late husband's relatives could not help her to bring up the little children she was left with. Also, Ms. Xolile Zulu happens to fall victim of poverty because there was no finance to enable her organise a cleansing ceremony after the mourning period. When funds are not available, a widow could be forced to continue in her mourning dress for longer period until she or her family members are able to organise a ceremony for her. As long as cleansing is not done, the chances of enjoying a happy life in the society are curtailed. Mrs Cele and Zulu's experiences testify to this. Mrs Cele testified that:

After a year, I had to do the cleansing ceremony, which I did single-handedly. I had to kill a beast as I was expected to for myself...His relatives have never been of help.

While Mrs. Zulu also said:

I had to be in mourning clothes for one and a half years as it was difficult for me to get somebody from my family side to perform a cleansing ceremony for me. A relative of mine had to be given some time to save money so that he could afford to carry out all the necessary expenses of cleansing.

It is understandable to see widows whose children were grown up at the time of their husband's death looking happier and healthier than other widows who don't have children. Their children stood by them and have been very helpful in instances where funds are hard to come by to enable them meet up with some of the financial and other demands of death rituals and its associated ceremonies.

### **5.3 *Ukubuyisa* ceremony (bringing home of the departed man's spirit)**

This is the ceremony that precedes cleansing and can normally be a combined occasion with the cleansing ceremony or it could be organised after cleansing rites. This, according to Vilakazi, is an integration rite, where the deceased is now made to join his ancestral spirits. The brothers of the late husband or some senior members of the family move to the graveside where they perform some rites, usually with a diviner, after which they bring home some leaves that were used at the grave to his room, where songs of praises about the deceased are heard being sung by those involved in the rite. As earlier mentioned, the husband's spirit is believed to have been wondering outside the house since his death, so he needs to be brought home to his room by his brothers or male relatives. Relatives are expected to be in attendance and to fully participate as well. This ceremony marks an important epoch in the life of a widow. The Ndwedwe study found that the twelve widows included in this study have witnessed and participated in the ceremony either before her cleansing or on the day of the cleansing. When the ceremony is combined with cleansing rites, a goat is slaughtered on the eve in the evening and the *umswani*, that is the digested grass in the stomach of the slaughtered goat, is reserved for the widow's cleansing. As early as 4 o'clock in the morning, the widow is led to the river



by an elderly lady to avoid meeting any body on the way, since she is supposed to still be carrying the shadow of death. Water has always been used across the globe for religious and traditional rites of purification. It comes as no surprise that the Zulu widow has to be taken to the river to immerse her body and ‘cleansed’ in the water after being smeared with *umswani*, contents from the stomach of the goat. This practice symbolically washes away the dirt, the contagion of death and the hovering spirit of the husband, and fortifies her against impending death she is believed to have been carrying over the year. Ms. Thandi Khuboni’s experience summarizes the way the rite is conducted for all widows.

They slaughtered a goat to announce that I was there for cleansing...They slaughtered the goat in the evening. They kept the *umswani* for my cleansing. Then I went with an elderly lady, early at about 4a.m to the river where I undressed. She smeared me with this *umswani* and I then rinsed it off in the river. When it is dark, you have to go in the path, walking to the river to do the cleansing.

The ceremony relieves the widow from mourning and she equally have to transform from the mode of dressing, which had become part of her life for the past year. The mourning dress, which could be any plain and single colour, is removed and burnt outside the house and buried, “To avoid untimely future death”, not inside the yard because the held belief is that contamination could still emanate as a result of that.

It is very important to return your husband’s spirit home because it is believed that if you don’t bring the spirit, the man will be left outside and that might annoy him and cause him to be responsible for bad luck in the family.

For some widows, this is the time when friends and family members shower them with gifts. Since she needs to change her clothes, gifts of clothing and beddings are brought to

her. This has been interpreted to mean a form of affirmation and appreciation from friends and relatives for having successfully completed the mourning period without bringing disgrace to the family. As explained by Ms. Thandi Khuboni, this form of appreciation may not be the case for all widows.

I did not wear black but my friends and relatives still gave me a lot of gifts. They even brought duvets, pillows and had to change my beddings completely as well as change my clothing. I was made to wear new clothes and stockings and walked in the yard for everybody to see me. I had to sit in the room where gifts were offered to me to thank me for having mourned for one year. There are women who can't mourn for one year because before the year runs out they have started having boyfriends. They take off the black clothes before the end of the time.

The most interesting observation about this ritual is that it is highly gendered. While old women to a large extent control the behaviour and ensure proper cleansing is done, other men who may not necessarily be widowers but relatives who present at the occasion are expected to participate fully and be sure it is conducted according to custom. Since this ceremony is marked with festivity, relatives make all efforts to be present. Widowers do not have to undergo a cleansing ceremony as it is only done for the widows. This study found that apart from the washing of hands, which involves all other members of the household and other people who come to the bereaved family for the funeral following burial, men do not need to cleanse or organise a special time for cleansing. The organisation of this rite creates economic problems for the widows, especially where there are no children or financially viable relatives to support a widow in organising the ceremony.

In my opinion, the lack of support could become a source of her misery and consequently lead to ill health and death. The continuation of this practice not only places widows in a negative and powerless position but encourages widows to go into prostitution in their bid to seek for finances to enable them cleanse and be reabsorbed into the society. It exemplifies the notion that male is powerful and significant. Patriarchy seem to have silenced widows in this aspect because, as it is revealed by the Ndwedwe study, most widows feel complete compliance to the rites of mourning and cleansing means respect for the in-laws and even the late husband. Ms. Nothando Xulu is surprised when asked about the participation of widowers in the cleansing rites. Her reply is obvious.

How do you expect a man to cleanse? They are not supposed to. It is only women that need to undergo cleansing rite.

When she is questioned further on why she feels a widower shouldn't be cleansed, she simply replies,

This is because they are men.

Writing on Feminism and African tradition, Lee Habasonda (2002) argues that, in African society, women do things men approve of. According to Lee, men should be the first targets to start an approach on attitudes shift towards women to enable a change in the social structure. While it may be right that this approach is acceptable in the context within which she is writing, the rites experienced by widows following spousal loss demand equitable and respect for the dignity of the woman. It is a human right violation and various attempts by women activists and feminist thinkers have encountered resistance to their demand for equality with men. Liberal feminism does not deny the

existence of difference between men and women, but that irrespective of this difference, women are equal. "Inequality is a natural outcome of individual difference within meritocracy. It is only when inequalities become extreme that intervention becomes necessary" (Nes & Iadicola cited in Saulnier, 2000). The liberal feminist approach to gender equality, within which the framework for this study is set, argues that women are systematically disadvantaged by customary constraints, which portrays the women as less intellectually and generally incapable of performing successfully in life than men in the public and private domains. Biological determination of sex roles between men and women does not automatically portray women as the lesser sex, thus excluded from opportunities in society that would uplift their standard of living. Both Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill argue that education and individual freedom of choice would enable most women to perform their traditional roles better, and that the exclusion of women from public functions and confinement to the private sphere limit and denies them access to personal fulfillment. Mill for instance, saw any form of discrimination against women as wrong and must be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side nor disability on the other (Bryson, 1992:54). Widows are perpetually confined to home, especially during the mourning period, and this limits them from participating in any activity in the public sphere. Education plays a vital role in empowering women because most of the widows interviewed who have had some form of formal training, are gainfully employed and are able to cater for their children even after the demise of the husband. They are also able to assist relatives of the late husband with burial and post burial expenses.

Feminists anthropologists like Quinn (cited in Purdy, 1977) have argued that while it is an undisputable fact that men have greater physical strength than women, it is not agreeable that the differences in behaviour is attributed to the physiological difference. It is this physiological difference that has been construed by many people as reason for male dominance over women. However, gender justice should raise above all these arguments and practically ensure that irrespective of the differences that exist between men and women, we are all humans, whose rights and dignity must be respected. The problems widows face as a result of some of these cultural rites imposed on them as a prerequisite for their re-absorption into normal community life should be carefully studied by custodians of traditional practices to device means of making widows more comfortable.

#### **5.4 The beliefs associated with cleansing rites**

In most traditional societies today, the ancestral spirits form a crucial part of their belief. Rituals and medical beliefs associated with ancestral spirits are practiced. Amongst the Zulu people, there is a strong belief that the death of a man does not automatically alienate him from partaking in the activities of his kinsmen. He is believed to be away physically but very much present especially to his close family. That explains why at death, the living can talk directly to him or his spirit and elders have to beg him to be kind and considerate, to protect his kinsmen, especially his immediate family and in general, to behave with responsibility (Vilakazi, 1958). This belief featured during the interviews. Widows are made to believe that the spirit of their late husband is watching over their mode of behaviours, as such any attempt to deviate meant taking responsibility

for the consequences. To further institutionalise the practice, widows can only be accepted into the communion of the society after they have properly been cleansed. Ms. Kayise Damane and Ms. Nokwazi Mncwabe testify that their acceptance into community life was possible only after the rites had been done.

I had to smear my body with *umswani* and then wash it away to symbolize the end of mourning. I then took off my black clothes and these were burnt....I could then wear new clothes to allow me normal life in society again....without stigma. A widow, who cannot cleanse after the mourning period, remains unclean and can bring bad luck to other people in the family. She is going about with darkness and the husband's spirit is still hovering around you. People will develop negative attitudes towards you and you cannot function well in the society.

However, due to influence of Christianity, these beliefs have either been abandoned or contested. Contact with Christianity and other religions might be regarded as a strong influence on attitudes towards death, but these have little effect. It has almost no direct influence on ceremonies and beliefs associated with death. The lighting of candles and church services preceding burial are some of the major areas of Christian values imbibed. As soon as death occurs, candles are lighted and placed in the room where the bereaved widow sits beside the mattress, (as was observed) and contributions in monetary form is called *Amakhandlela*, which is, a help to keep lighting the candles. It was attested that prayers are organised a day before the cleansing ceremony, as was the case for Thandi Khuboni. A number of widows and widowers interviewed acknowledged that their being Christians lessened some of the ritual procedures and influenced their attitudes towards

complying with the traditional beliefs associated with it. However, these rites are necessary for conformity.

One reason for doing this is that within that one year your husband's spirit is still around you and I do anything wrong, I will get bad luck...So people who don't do it are sort of putting themselves into a risk of having bad luck...We don't know what happens to people who don't cleanse but when people go to see the *sangomas*, they tell you it is because you have not cleansed that is why your children, for example are worrying you...I am a Christian. I don't believe in whatever bad luck that is posed to me by the spirit. But then certain things you have to do because you don't know how far they can go.

When asked to express her views on the cleansing rites, this same widow commented:

I am not against it because with each culture, there is a purpose for behaving. You get people into a culture and the purpose is to have them respect just that period after the death of a husband. So, I did it for sheer respect for my in-laws and also respect for my husband....Obviously, men will expect you to show respect.

The rite is therefore associated with fear: fear of the unknown, fear of being ostracised by the society and fear of repercussion as a result of non-compliance by the widow. The husband may feel slighted and send catastrophe on the family, which might lead to her death or of a close relative. A widow must take into consideration the fate of her children; family members and the deceased to enable her accept to undergo all the rituals associated with the death of her husband.

For Mr. Sthembiso Ntshangase, maintaining these cultural rites is basic to one's sense of belonging and identity. Each culture has a specific way of carrying on their practices

from one generation to the next, so for him, the rites of cleansing is just one of such practices that distinguishes the Zulu person from others.

Our fore fathers have lived like that, if we continue to ignore or turn our back on our cultural things we won't know who we are and that will lead to the danger of other people imposing their culture on us and we will loose our identity.

He explained further that, besides other people imposing their cultures on them, there is a held belief that if you don't comply with your culture, you will loose your conscience and some people may go mad and others would be regarded as outcasts.

Another widower, Mr. Nqanawe Hlophe compared the observance of mourning and cleansing rites to the Christian seasonal practices.

It is a good thing. Just like the Christians in the time of lent, where they discipline themselves and sacrifice some things that they might want to indulge in, these are the things that we are taught to observe by our grandparents.

It is in the light of these beliefs that one can understand the reason why most of the rituals centred on death are strictly adhered to. It was also interesting to note that the question as to why men don't cleanse was dismissed, diverted or defended by the information that they do cleanse after the burial. After the burial, every member of the family is expected to wash their hands in a mixture of medicinal concoction administered by a diviner to purge all of pollution by death. This is the time when widowers undergo cleansing, but widows will only be finally cleansed after a year of successfully mourning for the death of the husband. When a widow does not break any of the rules governing her life during



the period of mourning, she is regarded as having successfully completed observing the period.

### **5.5 The symbol of animal sacrifice**

The Zulu society, according to Laband (1977), was essentially pastoral, living in a land of mixed grazing ideally suited for raising livestock. Cattle were especially prized as the prime indicator of wealth and also for their ritual importance in communicating with the ancestors. Laband explained further that, before any Zulu goes to war, it was vital that the army satisfy the ancestors with a generous sacrifice from the herds of cattle. This induced the spirit to accompany the warriors against their enemies.

This study revealed that there is a special attachment to the idea of animal sacrifice to the ancestral spirits in terms of death. A cow is slaughtered during the burial and other occasions associated with death, such as the *ukubuyisa* and cleansing ceremonies. Before a cow is slaughtered, a goat is first slaughtered because it is believed that the goat ushers the deceased to join his or her ancestors. The goat is considered to be the animal of the ancestors. Its 'cry' is believed to evoke the spirits to listen to the pleas relayed. A cow may not be necessarily slaughtered during a woman's death. A goat is considered enough honour for a woman's death. Also, men were buried with cow skin wrapped round their bodies, though with the introduction of coffins, the skin could be placed on the box. On the other hand, women are not buried with skin, even before coffins were used for burials. The reason for this being that, women by culture are not supposed to be buried

like that. A cow signifies status while a goat is a medium for peaceful transition to the ancestors. A widow simply explained that men have to be given that reverence.

The goat is slaughtered for the widow to take off her mourning clothes and the *umswani* from the goat's stomach is mixed with water to cleanse the widow. Again, the goat plays a very significant role in Zulu death rituals because of its connection with the ancestral spirits. It is only right that the goat should be so used considering the way ancestors are believed to interfere in the activities of the living.

### **5.6 Cleansing and its health implications**

There is data to support the claim that ritual cleansing of widowhood has a lot of implication for the well being of people who have to comply with this culture, especially in Africa. Junod's (cited in Gluckmann, 1935) studies amongst the South Eastern Bantu revealed that, widows do not participate in the ordinary sexual cleansing; rather they have to seduce a stranger into intercourse to break off the act *ante semen immisum*. The man will then die. Since the woman's intimate relation with the husband was through sex, she has to ritually pass on the contamination of death to a stranger in intercourse. In Ghana, ritual cleansing for the widow involves sexual intercourse with designated individuals or stranger met on the road (EWD, 2001 report). Also studies in East Africa, Kenya and Rwanda specifically, (to be completed). A study conducted by Rosemary Amuche (2000:3) in Nigeria revealed that in a "community in the east, the widow would have to go to bed with ten men as part of cleansing ceremony. All these is believed to cleanse the widow from the dead man's spirit and it's also believed that if the ceremony was not

carried out, the man that would marry her will die. Refusal to perform these rites by the widow is seen as an abomination and she would then be ostracized”.

These customs have since been dismissed not only as being inhuman but also for the risk of HIV/AIDS infection. Among the Zulu of Ndwedwe, it was revealed that for widows to officially end the cleansing procedures, they must do sexual cleansing. After the one year of mourning and following the *ukubuyisa* ceremony, a widow can decide to get a man whom she does not really love to remit the dirt to him through sexual intercourse. After that, she can then continue her normal life in society or be inherited by any of her husband’s brothers if she so wishes. This practice is rarely practiced these days. The involvement of men in sexual cleansing is not so pronounced because polygynous men have other wives as sexual partners and are therefore not considered so much as widowers, unlike women who automatically become widows on the death of their husbands. The man may abstain from sex for a short time to honour his wife’s death but not for long.

In this era of HIV/AIDS pandemic, the danger of this practice cannot be overemphasized. The spread of this disease should equally be of concern for men, thus the need for a proper solution to discourage this gross inequality in the treatment of widows as opposed to widowers. It is the context of this dreaded disease, Sleaf (2001) reported that sexual cleansing by widows is being discouraged by Luo elders in Kenya, but would rather rename it as “symbolic inheritance”. She also reported its official condemnation in Zambia. Liberal feminists see the idea of widows having to go through sexual cleansing to the detriment of their health, as violation of the rights of women and unjustifiable for a society where all humans are supposed to be comfortable and treated equally.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF MOURNING AND CLEANSING RITES**

#### **6.1 Review**

This study aimed at producing findings from raw data, drawing inferences about the relationships among the themes and developing conclusions and implications without quantification or statistics. Set in a naturalistic environment; Ndwedwe community, KwaZulu-Natal, I have therefore, presented and interpreted experiences of widows and widowers regarding the rituals of mourning and cleansing rites of spousal death as prescribed and practiced by Ndwedwe community members. The summary and conclusion of this study is based on the experience of widows and widowers resident at Ndwedwe. Also, the information provided by this study span from September 2002 to February 2003. This information is by no means a representation of all the Zulu widows and widowers across KwaZulu-Natal.

The study was qualitative in design and used in-depth interview method; interactive field observations and notes to collect data, which were audio-taped, transcribed, translated and subjected to open-coding for analysis. Guided by liberal feminist theory of gender equality for all men and women, which emphasises individual fulfilment free from structures of highly defined sex roles, the study conducted in-depth interviews to unravel those areas of mourning and cleansing rites that limit the two genders from experiencing full fulfilment of potentials. Gender inequality, according to liberal feminists leads to

societal injustice and liberal feminism propounded by Wollstonecraft's "A vindication of the rights of woman" and John Stuart Mill's "The subjection of women" (Tong, 1989:2) holds that the whole society can only excel when both sexes come together to address and support each other towards the eradication of causes of inequalities in the private and public spheres of life.

A number of research findings globally and particularly in Africa consulted, have illustrated that widowhood is associated with many cultural practices amongst which are mourning and cleansing rites. For instance, in Nigeria, Kenya, Lesotho and Swaziland, there are prescribed mandatory mourning rites following spousal death, which is characterised by seclusion, restrictions and discriminatory attitudes by family and community members. These practices have been found to be rigid and discriminatory on women as men often have very few changes in their outward appearance. Also, Empowering Widows in Development (EWD), an organisation that has championed the plight of widows, has a rich collection of studies on widowhood aimed at highlighting some of the negative cultural practices affecting the lives of widows for the attention of various government interventions, especially in Africa. This study revealed that the cultural practices of mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood amongst the Zulu people of Ndwedwe are gendered, having less impact on the lives of widowers than widows. The status of widowhood starts on the day of death of spouse. The death of a spouse is linked to the belief that death is a transition from this world to the next where the deceased joins his or her ancestors and while there, continue to take special interest in the activities of the living. This accounts for the belief that one's fortune or misfortune could be attributed to the manner in which a person's treats his or her ancestors. A person becomes an

ancestor after the “bringing home” ceremony, which makes him the *idlozi elihle*, an ancestral spirit of good fortune. Special reverence is accorded the corpse and burial is preferably done in the homestead, close to where the departed ancestors are laid.

Death rituals and ceremonies are combined responsibilities of both men and women but major decisions concerning where, how and when burial takes place is done by men. Women are expected to ensure that food is prepared for the guests that will attend the funeral rites. The traditional slaughtering of beast differs between men and women. A goat is first slaughtered to lead a man home to join his ancestors, followed by a cow, which for the woman, a goat is often enough. A cow is rarely slaughtered for a woman’s burial because the goat is considered of most importance for ancestral purposes while the cow may just be slaughtered if the family so wish to. Mourning for a husband’s death differs from that of a wife. Mourning a husband’s death starts with the widow stripping the room of all beddings, sitting on a mat or mattress covered with blanket, restrictions from movement or contact with other people outside the house and must be visibly seen to be in deep grief and completely shattered by the loss. Also, she must make arrangements to change dress; black or whichever plain colour she decides to use and shave her hair. This continues to be her mode of dressing and appearance for one or more years depending on how fast her relatives can raise money to enable her cleanse. The period of mourning have been assessed by ten out of the twelve widows included in this study to be quite oppressive because of the restrictions, stigmatisation and risk of being raped. Since it has been in practise for generations, women have learnt to cope with the inconveniences and would rather see it as showing respect for the departed husband, whom they had loved so much, as exemplified by the experiences of Ms. Kayise

Damane, who had three children to cater for with little or no support from the late husband's family but felt she was duty bound to use all resources within her means to observe the rites and to show the community the degree of love she had for her departed husband. More so, women who do not perform such rites stand the risk of being accused to have caused the death of their husbands as was observed by Ms. Thandi Khuboni whose mother insisted on her strict observance of the rites.

Mourning for the death of a wife by a widower differs with the way a widow mourns for her late husband. Widowers interviewed in this study and from the information gathered from widows interviewed, revealed that men too do mourn but with less restrictions and for a short period. A widower often has few changes in his appearance. A man is expected to mourn but the community does not expect him to show his emotions on the news of his wife's death. He is expected to control himself and appear to be strong, in control and does not sit in the room on a mattress or mat as a woman does. He should show some evidence of grief but his mourning period should not exceed three months, as he is believed to be incapable of handling his life alone. This explains why my female respondents remarked that widowers are persuaded by friends and relatives to remarry soon before it becomes too late, in the words of Ms. Xolile Zulu, "People say to them, 'You must quickly look around before you run out of colour like cloth. You must not get stale'. There are fewer restrictions that the culture imposes on men and it is not mandatory that they adhere to them. If it becomes necessary for a man to shave his hair to show that he has lost a wife, then he has to visit a barbershop to have it done properly. It is an abomination for a woman to do this because she is not expected to look beautiful in any way as was observed by Ms. Zulu. A man does not wear mourning dress as such but

if he chooses, he may use a black strip, which he wraps round his arm for a short period. He is not stigmatised or accused of casting the shadow of death on other people while a woman is often avoided on the grounds that she is carrying the shadow of death that could affect other people.

The gendered differences emanate as a result of culture, as asserted by the views of widowers interviewed in this study. These differences could be linked to the patriarchal nature of the way society is organised. Men head the family, where women and children are regarded as minors. Major decisions in the family are the prerogative of the husband, who represents a symbol of authority, so on his death a wife is expected to observe strict rites not only as a sign of respect for him (in absentia though), but such an expectation is due to an obligation that is an adjunct of her subordinate status.

Amongst the Zulus of Ndwedwe, the death of a person is a time when family members come together to reaffirm the bond of all members. They come together, offer emotional and financial support at burial and participate in mourning rite practices that are performed at least before the burial, though they soon disperse a few days after the burial. Grown up children for instance, remain a major source of support especially for the widow during and after the death of a spouse. This will not be the case with widows who are left to cater single-handedly for children of school age or even younger. For widows in this category, the burden of bringing up those little children is an added ordeal as was the case with Ms. Bongi Cele. Widowers, who are living alone, have children or grandchildren who help with housework. However, Ms. Momusa Mkhize, a 77year old widow related how a fellow widow was “kicked out of the house and stripped of her belongings by her eldest son and rented out the house. Also, Mr.Vusi Nkabinde’s wish to



remarry has been vehemently rejected by his children and this has left him an unhappy man. Some of these instances have been proved to be symptomatic of high blood pressure, a common problem found with the widows and widowers interviewed.

The study also revealed that death defiles and weakens all members of a household, thus the need to take herbal medicine to strengthen inmates. As soon as burial takes place, Mr. Sthembiso Ntshangase, a 70 year old widower, said family members and those who have taken part in the burial must all wash their hands with *unswani*, which is the digested grass from the goat's stomach is mixed with other herbal roots "to remove bad luck and misfortune as is commonly believed by Zulu culture". The widow is not in anyway totally cleansed by this ritual with the rest of the people who have to mourn the death/ household members. While a man who loses his wife becomes cleansed soon after the burial, a widow must observe the minimum of one year or more period of mourning before a ceremony is performed to cleanse her officially. During the year, she is impure and must abstain from social contact and sexual intercourse to avoid contamination of other people and based on the belief that a widow may have caused the death of her husband; she must remain secluded until all rites are completed. Friends and relatives gather to appreciate and witness her successful completion of a year mourning period for her husband. It is at this time that the deceased male relatives usher home the spirit of the late husband, who is believed to have been wondering about. The involvement of widows and widowers in the rite of sexual cleansing was not explicit. Some key informants believed it is practised, though not confirmed by this study, but it depends on the family as well as the part of Zulu area one comes from. Cleansing generally concludes the rites of widowhood for the widow and she is now free to join the rest of her fellow women in

society but not without the name, *umfelokazi*, which literally means a woman who is bereaved of which Ms. Nomusa Mkhize believes the word does not have an equivalent for widowers (men). Widowers are never referred to as men who have lost their wives.

The implications of the gendered nature of mourning and cleansing rites are grave. Widows stand the risks of emotional and psychological complexities arising from isolation, stigmatisation and loneliness. Also, the rite of sexual cleansing is not only dehumanising for the widow but puts her at risk of STDs and HIV/AIDS infection. It is in the light of these areas of unequal treatment meted to women that liberal feminists question the rationale for sex differentiation and believes that male dominance is rooted in irrational prejudice. Liberal feminists seek to improve the status of women within the private and public spheres through the reformation of all sets of customary and legal constraints, which are based on false beliefs about women's capabilities, that continue to relegate women more to a subordinated status. Women's rights can be guarded through government commitment to their welfare needs, health services, education, shelter and social needs. The whole concept of widowhood is shrouded in silence probably because men are hardly affected by the problems that arise as a result of losing a wife. Widows in this study express joy at the idea of letting their experiences or stories known because of the feeling that nobody has ever found it necessary to find out what happens to them. Their experiences, which form the major bulk of this study, revealed that women have found some of these cultural values attached to mourning and cleansing to be not only inconvenient but also repressive. Some have to observe these rites not because they believe in them but because family members, who do it as an extension of culture, insist on them. According to widows interviewed, the rituals of mourning and cleansing do not

terminate the pain of separation that is associated with the loss of a spouse. After undergoing all the observable prescribed rites, a widow can join the rest of her women folk in the community but that does not really take away the fact that she is widowed and has lost her marital status.

## **6.2 Conclusion and recommendation**

From the study, it is clear that mourning and cleansing rites observed by widows and widowers of Ndwedwe community are not too distinct from those practised in other parts of Africa cited in this study. While a widow must observe a one-year period of mourning with strict seclusion, wearing of mourning dress and stigmatisation, a widower observes less mourning period and is never stigmatised. Also, while cleansing rites, which takes place after a year for the widow as a result of defilement by death, the widower is cleansed by the general washing of the hands following burial. Where then is the way forward? Abolish or redefine these rites? A number of researchers on widowhood customary rites have emphasised the need for a reassessment or abolishing some of these rites that are unhealthy and are sources of human rights violation. For instance, Sleaf (2001:5) reports that sexual cleansing has particularly come under scrutiny due to the effect of HIV/AIDS. Luo elders in Kenya, according to her, wish to do away with the sexual cleansing practice but to rename it 'symbolic inheritance' for fear of women abandoning inheritance culture. Also, Zambia has officially condemned sexual cleansing. However, Sleaf is quick to observe that, "whilst on the one hand there is a call for them to be abandoned, there is also a belief that the best approach is not to abolish but make them safe, by removing the sexual element. However, either as reformers or custodians of

traditional culture, it has been men who have been taking the decisions, in their own interest, with little involvement of the women themselves". Custodians of culture are mainly the prerogatives of men and old women as well, though the old women's views may not be taken into consideration for change. Ehusani's (2002:4) views on the traditional imposition of mourning rites on widows sum it all. He posits that, "the bottom line to all these practices (mourning and cleansing rites) is lack of acknowledgement of the equal dignity of men and women". He calls for the dismantling of the "superstructures of imprisonment" imposed on widows and concluded that "we must begin to promote the notion of complementarity in the talents and geniuses of the male and female species....God has given each gender certain unique traits and talents, not to be subservient but to be complementary to one another". Widows have resigned to their fate, by not complaining about their situation and submit to the rites. In as much as it is oppressive, they refer to the rites as a sign of showing respect to the late husband and his immediate surviving relatives. They live with the pain, isolation, stigmatisation and loneliness that characterise this period of mourning up to the cleansing time. It is very important to educate the population and family members about the unfair and discriminatory attitudes towards widows and widowers to enable them live well in the society. Family members should be encouraged and strengthened to play a vital role in assisting or supporting widows and widowers to come to terms with their situations.

There is a need to educate not only women about their rights to full interaction and normal life following the loss of their husbands, but men and community elders who are the custodians and interpreters of these customary practices. The inclusion of community health workers to promote awareness on the health implications of these rites is

necessary. NGOs, community development organisations, and church-based community projects are encouraged to conduct research on mourning and cleansing rites of widowhood as well as other socio-economic, cultural, political and psychological problems of widows and widowers with the aim of developing innovative interventions to solve the problems. Government and non-governmental organisations should set up structures with the function of finding strategies for solving widowhood problems. There is a need to shift from advocacy to practical action by domesticating all international conventions on women's rights. All customary practices associated with these rites that violate human rights, especially of women must be addressed to create a society where justice flourish and human life is fulfilled.

Finally, in the course of this study, some major thematic issues relating to widowhood emerged, which would necessitate further research. For instance, the issue of widows inheritance (levirate), especially in relation to HIV/AIDS pandemic, property grabbing by in-laws, widows' association with witchcraft, coping strategies for bereaved spouses and the vulnerability of widows at old age. Researchers should conduct intense studies on widows and widowers to clearly understand their plight. There should be proper investigation about the cultural, social and psychological trauma widowers, and most especially widows are saddled with.

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