

# Ubuntu and mourning practices in the Tsonga culture: Rite of passage

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The article focusses on *ubuntu* and mourning rituals practised in the Tsonga culture. Tsonga cultures and rituals have been proclaimed as being different from province to province with a few similarities. The rituals referred to in this research do not however encompass the belief systems of all Tsonga people in South Africa. This study discusses *ubuntu* in the Tsonga context and how they partake in the processes of bereavement, grieving, mourning, death rituals, mourning practice and unveiling of the tombstone. This article addresses some challenges and the theme of liturgical inculturation in the Tsonga mourning processes. The study also addresses the necessary liturgical *aggiornamento* needed in the Tsonga mourning processes. It covers the social and religious aspects of the process Ubuntu and mourning practices in the Tsonga culture.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The contextual perspective challenged by this research is the understanding of *ubuntu* and mourning rituals of the Tsonga people in accordance with their culture. This research made use of a literature review based on mourning rituals, which solidifies this research as a study within Practical Theology because it is a liturgical inculturation study.

**Keywords:** Tsonga; Ubuntu; culture; rites; rituals; mourning; practices.

## Introduction

According to Grimes (2014:4), *ubuntu* is a relevant aspect of this study because it is commonly practised at funerals in the Tsonga culture. In essence, the death of a neighbour in the Tsonga culture is deemed as a loss for everyone in the village. In this study, these rituals are classified as not essentially a taboo but as something real for the Tsonga people and respond to it without implying that Western culture is the best solution for Tsonga widows. Wesley and Kurewa (2000:23) argue that it is important for African Christians to express pride and not shame towards their culture. This includes their inherent African religion. Tsonga people are stereotypically known to express themselves loudly and adorn bright colours. In this regard, some Tsonga people will find this funny whilst the latter will feel that it is an offensive and unjust classification. This means that if such minor stereotypes can upset some, different perspectives on the appropriateness of their cultural practices would cause tension. According to Khosa (2009:1), death symbolises transitioning from mortal existence into the spiritual realm. This is perceived as a way for one to become a part of their family's ancestry. Ancestors contribute a fundamental part to the lives of the VaTsonga people. In essence for Tsonga people, when a person passes away, they must perform rituals to ensure that they are welcomed by their ancestors into the ancestral tribe. It is believed that when those rituals are not done, the spirit of the deceased will torment their family members.

This given research will analyse the mourning process in the Tsonga culture and how it affects women the most. It is important to note that when a woman's husband dies she is expected to go through many processes to prove that she is innocent (Kurewa 2000:13). The traditions are instilled by older women who have also gone through the same processes. In this study, the researcher will analyse the practices in comparison to those that are done by men in African communities. This will highlight how women are generally oppressed whilst men are given an easier route. The general perception is that women's sexuality must be guarded whilst men are allowed to explore as much as they please. The women are also regarded as unclean when they become widows and they are barred from most social activities. The research will essentially analyse these cultural rules and how they can be rectified so that they can create a sense of equality within society. Equality is however viewed in African culture as a taboo and can lead to a family experiencing misfortunes. Men use culture as a way to imprison women (Durojaye 2013:180).

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## The role of older women in Tsonga mourning culture

Daber (2003:45) states that culture is essentially directly related to what is expected by the communities. In most regards what is seen as politically correct in African communities has been done over the years. Older women in society are considered as unattractive for men to have sexual intercourse with. This is because they are claimed to partake in witchcraft meaning they constantly communicate with the spiritual realm. This is why they are allocated the role of supporting a widow as well as helping to bathe the dead body. The older women are more likely to instil the mourning practices on the widow as it was once done to them. They advise the widow on how she is expected to conduct herself as well as support her throughout the entire process. If the widow does not partake in these activities she is then considered as being unclean and more likely to cause bad luck as the spirit of her husband will be restless (Chupungco 1992:9).

According to Durojaye (2013:7), older women in the Tsonga society play a significant role in instilling mourning cultures. This is because they have already experienced the same occurrences which make them want the new widows to experience them. The processes that a widower must go through are viewed as a rite of passage. They are assigned to keep the newly widowed woman company whilst she goes through the grieving process. It is also their duty to ensure that all expectations of the mourning culture are followed accordingly. Men instil in women their patriarchal perspectives and the older women ensure that they are adhered to. In African culture when women get older, they are viewed as being unclean and capable of being witches. This is why they are assigned the role of washing the dead bodies of their relatives. They are viewed as being fearless towards the dead as they are essentially perceived to regularly communicate with spirits. Older women are a threat to male chauvinistic behaviour which is why they are silenced by culture (Kgatla 2014:88).

According to Lomba (2014:5), women who have slept with men are perceived as a threat to male dominance as they can possibly behave just like men sexually. This is why society uses culture as a means to ensure that widows go through an extensive mourning period before they can remarry. This period is facilitated by the older women in society. They advise the new widow on how they are expected to behave after their husband's death. The woman is expected to follow all necessary processes to prove that she is innocent and did not kill her husband. The older women are also present when the widow partakes in cleansing rituals after the mourning period. They are essentially there to ensure that the widow experiences all the processes that they went through. Older women are there for an important part towards instilling male dominance (Mwandayi 2011:25).

### Tsonga funerals rites

The author highlights widows in most African cultures are expected to wear black or dark-coloured clothes during the

mourning period. The researcher of Tsonga descendants has also taken note that this is how widows in their culture are expected to behave. If a widow decides not to wear black clothes for a year after her husband's death, her behaviour is regarded as disrespectful towards her late husband, in-laws, as well as the community. In some instances, she will be labelled as promiscuous and capable of having affairs soon after her husband is buried. The wearing of black clothes as part of the mourning process is quite common amongst Africans (Gifford 2008:23). The author of this study is an ordained minister of the word and has observed in her ministry how widows are expected to take the back seat in church. They can also be easily identified because of the black mourning clothes that they will be wearing. If an active member in the church becomes widowed they often choose to withdraw from church activities during the 12 months mourning period. If, for example, they were on the preaching plan, she would withdraw from preaching until her mourning period is over. If they are a member of the church choir, they would withdraw from the choir until the mourning period is over. This is done as a sign of grief and respect for her husband and her in-laws (Barnard 2010:77). Elders in the Tsonga culture argue that these rituals were not designed to harm widows or women, but to protect them. In essence, these practices are common in most African cultures.

According to Lomba (2014:67), this is also prevalent within the Tsonga culture as it is believed that if things are not done right, bad luck will follow the family. Certain rituals are done differently when a person did not die a natural death. If for example, the deceased died in a car accident, the corpse is collected on Friday afternoon from the mortuary (the day before the funeral). It is not brought into the yard to stay in the bedroom like those who died a natural death. The corpse is kept at the gate of the house overnight as it is believed that if he stays in the room or house, the family is inviting death into the family. The assumption is that members close to the deceased will die one after another. It is important to note that such beliefs are not documented but verbally passed on through different generations (Mwandayi 2011:55). A woman's ability to demonstrate her innocence during the mourning phase is frequently the focus of African mourning rites, which are fundamentally similar and linked.

### Missionaries and African practices

According to Kurgat (2009:91), evangelisation efforts should be able to reach out to those who are part of specific social groups. Evangelism should honour those who have a strong connection to a cultural tradition and work within that setting. Individuals cannot be detached from their culture, and as a result, the gospel cannot be delivered to or from people independently of their culture. One of the errors that academics in African studies commit is that they look for solutions for African cultures without first attempting to determine whether there is a problem. For some Africans, this is common because missionaries made the same error when they converted Africans to Christianity. To support this, Wesley and Kurewa (2000:22) note that colonialists and

missionaries believed that Africans were a people without a history or civilisation of their own. They assumed that they lacked a culture or religion of their own when they first arrived in Africa in the 15th century. African missionaries failed to examine and gain a thorough understanding of the traditional religion of the people they worked with (Wesley and Kurewa 2000):

For a long time, we have been made to think and believe that the African religion and anything else related to it, was heathenism or the work of the devil. Consequently, we have vigorously campaigned against our own culture and religion through preaching to the churches. As Christians, we find ourselves completely alienated, not only from our culture but even more so from our people. African Christians, especially those of us in the mainline churches, have placed ourselves in a position where we are cut off from the many sources that would have enabled us to gain knowledge about our own culture, or we have built walls in the name of Christianity that is against our own culture that deprives us of access to the riches of our heritage. Truth is not all we find in culture is good or is everything that we find in culture is bad.

When a man dies, the family of his wife waits for the family of her husband to come and formally inform them that their son-in-law has passed on (Ntuli 2012:90). This means that even if the family already knows of the death, they cannot go and mourn with their daughter until they are formally informed of the death. If they are not formally informed, some families might not even attend the funeral because they might feel the family did not want them there. A group of people is sent with a certain amount of money to go and formally inform the in-laws that their son-in-law has passed away. To affirm this, Khosa (2009:2) states that in a situation where the deceased is the daughter-in-law, her in-laws would identify a group of women to go and formally inform her family of her death. It is important to note that despite the adoption of Christianity in the African society, most people still practise traditional beliefs during the mourning period. In most instances, Christianity is not regarded as enough for the mourning period. Therefore, most African families deviate to culture for the mourning process. When missionaries came to Africa, they generally had the perception that they were saving people who were not civilised. Tasié (2013:35) also states that they viewed African culture as devilish practices; however, Christianity does not fully cater to the mourning process. This has resulted in most African families using a mixture of Christian values and African values.

### The role of men in the Tsonga mourning culture

According to Manala (2015:13), men are not affected by the mourning period as society has ensured that they benefit the most in most cultural practices. In essence, when a loved one dies, men are not expected to be seen crying as this is viewed as being feminine. The women on the other hand are expected to be seen crying loudly whilst being comforted by older women. This is a clear depiction of society's unfair perspective towards the mourning process. The mourning period has more rules towards women whilst men take a lighter route.

The men are not allowed to eat food that is prepared by the widow as it is viewed as being unclean. On the other side, the widow consumes food that was cooked with the water that her husband bathed in. This clearly shows how imbalanced the mourning period is in favour of the husband. The men are not expected to prove their innocence when their wife dies which is why they do not go through an extensive mourning period (Tasié 2013:17).

According to Ntuli (2012:27), the men are also viewed as portals towards ensuring that the widow is viewed as being clean again. This is because the widow is expected to remarry within the family so that she has someone who can fend for her. This means that the widow does not have the liberty to choose who she wants to get married to after her partner dies. The men on the other hand can choose who they want to remarry after their wife's death. Men do not suffer from the cultural limitations of the mourning period. They are allowed to essentially continue with their lives soon after the funeral. They partake in cleansing rituals that are not as gruesome as what the women experience (Maleche 2011:33).

### Important of ritual rites among the Tsonga people

It is common during the Easter holidays for some Africans to visit the graves of their family members (Maleche & Day 2011:8). They visit to clean the graves and put fresh flowers on them, which is common in the Western culture. In some instances, family members visit the graves to perform rituals to thank the ancestors for looking after them as well as asking them to continue doing so. Ancestors are significant and worshipped by the Tsonga people. The important ceremonies require everyone to be present with some family members travelling over 500 km to attend. According to Khosa (2009:18), to appease the ancestors an animal is sacrificed to represent all the wealth of that family. This animal is given the name of one of the ancestors and is used to symbolise the ancestral family. These rituals are performed as a way to notify the ancestors of something new in the family. When you buy a car, it must be taken to the grave and shown to the ancestors. The family members will then ask the ancestors to protect the car when it travels on the road. This is also done to remove curses from jealous people who might bewitch the owner of the car. Tsonga people believe that it is evil and magic and that if certain rituals are not done to ask for protection from the ancestors, your enemies might kill you. According to Khosa (2009:56), in the VaTsonga culture, it is believed that the ancestors must be notified first of anything that is done in a family so that they are part of the occasion and can also bless it.

According to Ntuli (2012:10), when a child is born, the ancestors are informed of the birth of a child into the family. When a child cries endlessly, it is believed that the child is crying for a name. In this case, the '*inyanga*' ritual must be performed. If the parents are not married, and the child is living with its mother when the child cries non-stop, it is

believed that the child is crying to go 'home,' which is the family of its father, as a child is believed to belong to the father's family. When the father's family pays damages for the mother, a ritual follows thereafter to formally introduce the child to its ancestors, and they are given the father's last name. In the Tsonga culture, it is believed that if a child does not carry its father's last name, it might bring bad luck to the child and the child might not succeed in life because the ancestors do not know the child and therefore cannot protect it or open blessings for the child. African culture highlights the importance of partaking in rituals that safeguard individuals. Therefore, it is important for the mourning processes to be followed correctly by all as they are said to cleanse and help the living (Kurewa 2000:27).

### Clean vs. unclean

According to Grimes (2014:78), men in African culture dominate; this is why only women are considered as unclean when their husbands die, whilst men are not. A woman is also considered unclean for 3 months after giving birth to a child. During those 3 months, she is not allowed to have sexual intercourse with her husband, and preferably they should not even share a bed. This is not only common in rural areas as in the researcher's years of ministry, but many women also shared these stories about childbirth. After giving birth, the author also experienced the 3 months exclusion, and this also meant not going out of the house for 3 months, so she was also not allowed to go to church. The same thing applies to a woman who had a miscarriage; she is considered unclean for 3 months and cannot have sex with her husband during that period (Barnard 2010:78). Women who are victims speak negatively about mourning rituals.

They say that it would be good if they only had to mourn and follow all the laws for a year without being beaten and taken to the river for rituals (Durojaye 2013:187). They want the sexual cleansing act least of all. Another widow said that it took her another 3 years to have sexual intercourse with a man since she kept on thinking of that fateful night; she felt unclean for many years. Another custom is eating food that was prepared with water used for bathing her dead husband. All these experiences make widows dislike mourning rituals. At the same time, incredibly old women who are also widows encourage these acts simply because they once did it. They are even paid to come and sit with the widow in the room; hence, they do not mind eating food prepared with water used for bathing. Tsonga culture is male-dominated and oppresses women, more especially widows who are mistreated by their own families, not only by males but by older women who went through the same treatment as well Manala (2015:29). Men dominate women, and families mistreat widows, and older widows mistreat new widows. In essence, women suffer more from the oppressive nature of the mourning process. This is because the widow is viewed as being unclean and a danger to society. Therefore, the cleansing process of women is longer than that of men.

### Ancestral relevance for Tsonga People

According to Maleche and Day (2011:9), the Tsonga culture acknowledges the existence of a supreme being. The power of the ancestors is significant for the Tsonga people. Ancestors have a considerable effect on the lives of their descendants. The ancestors are appeased by prayers and offerings. This differs from family to family, ranging from beer to animals used as sacrifices to the ancestors. Sometimes Sangomas are asked to do the sacrifice on behalf of the public in times of trouble, cases of illness and on extraordinary events. When the ancestors are not pleased, they become restless and can cause trouble for the family. According to the Tsonga people, the relationship between creation [*ntumbuloko*] and a supernatural very strong power is called *tilo*. *Tilo* refers to a vaguely described superior being, and sometimes the term is used to refer to heaven in a different context. Lukken (2005:170) argues that culture does not involve only the rational and the intellectual, but every human practice from the practice of language, through the preparation of food, construction of houses, agricultural practices, the establishment of temples, prayer to divinity or divinities and so forth.

Culture extends beyond what we term the arts. To some Tsonga people, practising *farina* rituals does not make you less of an African, it is part of who you are. Some argue that the word of God says come as you are, and they are Africans, they are Tsonga who practise Tsonga traditions. Lukken (2005:174–175) says that rituals are closely tied up with the community, the place and time from which they arose and in which they function. They are interconnected with certain social-cultural areas. They reflect their era and are even subject to wear as time goes by. Even though they may deal with the same universal events such as birth, marriage, death, greetings and saying farewell, rituals are seldom universal. One cannot simply transport African rituals to Europe, or vice versa.

To affirm this, Lukken (2005) argues the following about culture:

- 'Cultural is not the opposite of nature; one does not have the natural man first and then the cultural man.
- Human beings create culture, but the opposite is also true: human beings are created as humans by culture.
- No one culture has absolute value, and every culture is only relative. Symbols play a decisive role in culture.
- Every culture can be exposed to the danger of becoming manipulative, this danger is related to the question of how power is distributed.'

Lukken (2005:175) argues that because rituals are strongly socio-culturally determined, they are also extremely characteristic of a certain community at a particular time. Some African scholars are of the same argument such as Mkhaka (2014) explains it this way:

When a person dies, a ritual must be conducted to inform his consanguine of the death so that they will not encounter misfortunes. Death is believed to bring about mystical danger to

the consanguine of the deceased. The ritual of informing the relative is meant to protect the consanguine of the deceased. All relatives are usually informed about the death either by word of mouth or by some ritual act. (p. 9)

Shaving off a widow's hair as part of her mourning is quite common among the Tsonga people contexts. It is done so that she is unattractive to other men and to show the seriousness of her grief for her husband. According to Setsiba (2012):

in most *Farina* cultures, these mourning rituals include, among others, cleansing, funeral ceremony, removal of hair, slaughtering of an animal, wearing of black clothes and restriction in social activities for a stipulated time. (p. 3)

This is also done in the Tsonga culture as a sign of mourning for a widow.

The community of the tribe observes these laws and customs, even as they were observed by their ancestors (Ntuli 2012:31). These laws and customs are not new or surprising to Africans, but the roots of these laws and customs are not clear. In the African culture, when an elder tells you to do something, you do not ask any questions. You do as you are told. This could be part of the reason it is difficult to discern the history behind laws and customs in Tsonga culture. To show humility, respect and humanity, widows are not allowed to shout or raise their voices in any way. Folding of hands and looking down is recommended as a sign of humbleness. Pointing a finger shows authority, so widows are not allowed to do that as they are nothing but women. They claim that dying might make a person weak, therefore folding one's hands behind one's back helps one maintain equilibrium (Lomba 2014:16).

According to Chupungco (1992:26), mourners are regarded as unclean, and every time they bathe, they bathe with traditional medicine [*murhi WA rifu*]. They say that the medicine is to make a woman strong as death. Uncleanliness causes bad luck, referred to as [*xinyama*] or [*makhuma*]. This woman cannot cook food for her mother because it is believed that the mother can get sick or even die. This poor woman does not share food with anyone or eat from the same plate with anyone. She must always sit on the traditional mat [*Xitheve*], which is also not shared. Makeup, perfumes and nail polish are said to be for those who are happy, so widows go a year without applying them. They are not allowed to shake someone by the hand as they are 'dirty'. They are not supposed to have any sexual intercourse with anyone – the husband just died so no man can sleep with a widow because he will get *makhuma* or *ndzhaka* [deadly diseases that can only be contracted from widows].

According to Maleche and Day (2011:9), the mourning clothes are black, navy blue or any other dark colour, which symbolise darkness in that family. A widow must be visible in the mourning process. The clothes are used as a mark so that men should not be tempted to have any sexual intercourse with widows because they might get sick and die. Beatings and eating food prepared with *murhi WA rifu*

[traditional medicine] are done as a punishment. She must eat the leaves of wild fruit trees like an animal to see that the man who used to go out and work for her is gone; it is her turn to go out and suffer for the sake of her family. A man cannot just die; it is believed that the wife knows what led to his death (Durojaye 2013:184).

## Ubuntu and mourning

The term *ubuntu* means an act of humanity; this term implies that a community is one big family within small families. According to Broodryk in Matsaneng (2009:20), '*ubuntu* can thus be defined as an all-inclusive African ancient worldview based on values of extreme humanness and related values'. This ensures a happy and qualitative human communal life in the essence of family. According to Durojaye (2013:2), 'cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, widow cleansing, son preferences, and others are not only demeaning to women but also perpetuate gender inequality'. *Ubuntu* has its advantages, according to Daber (2003:10), one of the disadvantages of *Ubuntu* tends to focus on how people can be restored together as a community so that healing can take place as a group healing together. He further states that *ubuntu* implies that one can only be fully human when they are human with other people and not on their own. For Chupungco (1992:8), the ideology of *ubuntu* is not well-rooted in the ethical experiences of modern people that equal moral beings. Meiring is of the view that *ubuntu* as an ethical solution does not hold capacity and context within South Africa.

Ntuli (2012:5) argues that being African is not the same for all people in sub-Saharan Africa. *Ubuntu* as a narrative of return is an effort to revive an outdated mode of being. They are not against the advocacy of Afrocentrism but argue that *ubuntu* is only advanced to serve a certain Africanist agenda when it best suits the elite, and when ordinary citizens employ it, it is nothing more than a soap opera catchphrase with soothing qualities. Meiring (2015:6) makes 'the claim that since the Nguni term *ubuntu* is found in different variations in other language groups around sub-Saharan Africa', Meiring refers to the following examples: *umbundu* in Keni, *ubuntu* in Tanzania, *vanunu* in Mozambique and *bomoto* in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the basic idea of *ubuntu* is shared among many Indigenous people in sub-Saharan Africa. *Ubuntu* is not the same for all African people; it might not even be the same for people within the same ethnic group, thus it is not the same for all Tsonga people. As people grow, they might want to develop their own identity, different from the one passed on to them.

According to Kgatla (2014:85), in some rural areas in South Africa, the whole village is one big family. Children from an early age are taught to share their food with other children of their age and that anyone within the same age group as their parents, they should address elders as they would address their own parents. Thus, *ubuntu* in the African context is not limited to a definition by scholars or philosophers; it is their way of living, it is who they are. When there is a celebration, for example, a wedding, the whole village attends the

wedding and joins in the celebration. Villages consider attendance by invitation only to be taboo, and many take offence to it, as it is believed they are all one big family. When one family is mourning, the whole village mourns with the family; it is a loss not only to the family but to the entire village. Hence the attendance at a funeral in rural areas and some townships is always large compared to Western funerals. To affirm this, Molobi (2006:2) says that in rural Africa, society's communal network assistance in the event of death is a way of support to the family. Molobi (2006) argues:

that burial societies emerged as a response to the social and economic stress of migration and urbanisation. Members of various burial societies come from different churches, and they unilaterally agree on the issue of mutual financial support. It does not matter whether the deceased belonged to a particular church; all members of the village from different churches come in large numbers to support the family, from the day of the burial to the day of the funeral, attending daily services at the house to support the family all week long leading to the day of the burial. Some even take time off work to help the family with preparation for the funeral, some help with cooking, some with cleaning, some help financially; they help wherever they can. (p. 2)

According to Molobi (2006:9), burial societies are managed under the concept of both social and economic support or *ubuntu* as it is known within the African communities in South Africa. For Baloyi (2014:2), in this regard, the extent of one's faith is determined by their attendance at other people's funerals. When one attends other people's funerals, it is then more likely that people will come to help when a member of their own family dies. Baloyi further points out that it is common for people to travel for a funeral from far away, and this is not a choice but an obligation. People drive over 500 kilometres to attend the funeral of a neighbour they grew up next to while still in primary school. Black people will fly thousands of kilometres to attend the funeral of a friend's mother, thus proving how vital attendance at a funeral is in Black cultures (Ntuli 2012:45).

Ubuntu during funerals is affirmed by Molobi (2006:11) when he says that a funeral is a burial procession or place where all types of people meet when someone is buried. Another observation that Molobi (2006:11) makes is that among black people, a funeral is an event that determines the popularity of the deceased and that of their family. This is often not deliberate but coincidental, and people will determine and judge the living standards of other people. If a considerable number of people attend a funeral, people will often say that such a person was *Fifhlegile*: that means they were buried well or sent off well. According to Mugambic in Baloyi (2014:2), the send-off given to the individual, therefore, involves the mourning of the entire community.

In the Tsonga culture, there is a belief that if a person does not attend a funeral of a relative nor participates in a burial ritual, the person will be haunted with trouble sent by the ancestors until he or she fulfils certain ritual requirements.

Unless the ancestors are appeased, it is believed they have the power to cause trouble, misfortune and even death. Mbiti (1991) sees:

[D]eath as one of the most universal and mysterious experiences in human life. Death in the African context can be seen as a stand between the world of human beings and the world of spirits and that the ontological departure of someone requires rituals that are intended to unite the two worlds. (p. 3)

Baloyi (2014) argues that:

[A]mong some traditional African people, particularly in rural villages, people find it strange if the grave is dug with machinery. They prefer that people should dig the grave as a way of showing compassion. (p. 4)

This is the community taking part in the mourning process by also helping physically. The day after the funeral, a goat is slaughtered for those who helped dig the grave, together with some members of the family. In the African culture, the unveiling of the tombstone plays a significant role in the cultural acts, as it is significant in achieving closure by the family. The message on the tombstone is well thought out and approved by members of the family. The size of the tombstone is also determined by the family or what the family can afford. The date of birth, date of death and date of burial must be written on the tombstone. The tombstone and unveiling of it will be discussed later in this article.

## Process of bereavement in the Tsonga culture

In this context, the author will be dealing with bereavement in the Tsonga culture for Christians, as much as bereavement is not the same across all African cultures; it is also not the same for all African families within the same ethnic group. Kanyoro argues that 'they tell African women to be African, meaning to be silent submissive in the face of injustice and oppression' (1997:178). This raises the question, what good does this do to the life of individual women out there within the African cultural environment? The African culture is male-dominated, and it oppresses women, more especially widows who are being mistreated by their own families, not only by males but by older women who went through the same treatment as well.

According to Lomba (2014:56), Tsonga widows are sometimes oppressed in the name of culture, and sometimes church keeps quiet because the church does not want to upset culture or disrespect the culture of its members. Ministry to widows will remain limited for as long as the culture is put before Christ and the suffering of his people. There are lots of myths surrounding widowhood. Some of these rituals people only learn about as soon as they become widows. When a woman asks what would be expected of her if she became a widow, she is immediately suspected of planning her husband's death. The evening before the funeral, which typically takes place on Saturday morning, the corpse is collected from the mortuary; it is collected by members of the family and the church and brought back to the family, where the minister conducts the last evening prayer service (Maleche & Day 2011:8). The corpse spends its last night in its bedroom with

the widow sleeping on the mattress in the same room. Elderly women will also be in the same room to support the widow. On Saturday mornings, the family, friends and fellow church members are invited to see the corpse for the last time. The ministers are usually the first ones to view the corpse, followed by family, church friends, relatives and friends. After the viewing, the minister conducts a short prayer. Family members then carry the coffin to the hearse. The coffin is carried by the relatives and only as the coffin leaves the house for the very last time; it is the family giving their loved one to the church and to the community to say their final goodbyes.

Sabar (2000:3) defines mourning as an old English word meaning 'remembering with care and sorrow'. This definition is suitable for this study. Mourning in the Tsonga context is a way of remembering the dead with care and sorrow, as the dead are no longer among them but have passed on to the other side. Harris (2003:2) identifies four active ways that the church can contribute to the deceased's family:

- 'Congregations help survivors acknowledge their reality of the loss with the funeral and memorial opportunities.
- Being present without judgement allows the bereaved to experience the pain of loss.
- Church services and ceremonies help mourners begin to adjust to an environment with the deceased.
- The work of the church helps survivors begin to withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in others'.

Harris (2003:2) argues that the beginning of ministry is to understand the experience and the pain that comes with such experiences. This should also be true for ministers in the church when the burial takes place at the cemetery, and the guests are invited to the deceased person's house to come and wash their hands. Upon arriving at the house, there will be bowls at different points where guests are expected to wash their hands to wash off bad luck and to enjoy the meal prepared by the family for the guest to enjoy. All these cultural laws are followed without being challenged because they are customs in the Tsonga culture. These are examples of ritual taboos. Widows or any concerned member of the family cannot challenge these as the elders of the family are the ones who have permitted the mourning period to be cultural. Widows in the African context are expected to show great grief for the loss of their husbands, or they might be accused of killing their husbands for their gain, mostly linked to the material things of the deceased. Baloyi (2015:253–254) narrates the story of one of his participants:

'In the morning of the day after the burial, some elderly widows took me out in the forest with a chicken egg, near a river where they performed more brutal rituals. They firstly killed and cooked the chicken. They tried to strangle off my secret hair with their hands and forcefully moved out some painfully. When I cried, they sang louder and louder so that people could not hear my crying voice'. (woman, unemployed, tribe:Tsonga)

## Unveiling of the tombstone

The conclusion of mourning is achieved by means of the cleansing ceremony; in some families, a man is called in to

come and have sex with the widow in the early hours of her cleansing ceremony (Manala 2015:6). This act is traditionally regarded as a way of cleansing her so that she can now have any man in her husband's family or outside. All sexual activities should stop after death in the family. The experience differs depending on the family's background. In some areas, all the children should have sex with either their girlfriends or spouses if they are married, from the youngest to the eldest. They will notify one another until the firstborn; this is done 1 week after the burial to free all the children. In some families, the firstborn must have sex with his spouse. She then must make tea that will be served to the whole family, without bathing first (Daber 2003:56).

Taylor in Setsiba (2012) argues that:

[R]ituals represent a symbolic affirmation of values by means of culturally standardised utterances and actions. The traditional beer (mqomboti) is given to the man who will take care of the family. This is done as a way of choosing the new husband who will take care of the wife of the deceased and his children, as the family do not want to lose the children of the deceased. (p. 3)

Spilling the traditional beer on the floor means the widow has the freedom of going out if she must; it means she does not need anyone in the family to come into her house. Another way of doing it is to give the firstborn son of the deceased the calabash to drink from; this means that he will be the head of the household who will take care of his mother and siblings. It also means that the widow does not need any man in her life. The unveiling of the tombstone is done 12 months after the burial (Gifford 2008:25).

## Rite of passage

According to Van Ommen (2015:2), the term 'pastoral liturgy' refers to liturgy or rituals around major life events, and/or the rites of passage that include, among others, birth, marriage and death. He further argues that pastoral care shares the same sentiments for the people about God; in both actions, the pastor is doing the same thing (Van Ommen 2015:4). Lukken (2005:127) affirms that the rites of passage involve rites that are related to the transition from one phase of life to another: the birth of a child, the beginning of a course of study, first love, engagement, marriage, the novitiate, entering a religious order, ordination, beginning of a major journey, farewell, old age or burial. In the Tsonga culture, it is believed that when one dies, there is a process where the deceased's soul transits from earth to the land of the ancestors; hence, it is important to ensure that transition is done correctly through cultural burial rituals. Additionally, community members take part in rituals to cleanse the mourners' spirits and reintegrate them into society (Setsiba 2012:20). The universal practice of mourning the loss of a loved one is mediated by religious and cultural customs in many communities. Burial is not just a religious ritual but also, as was previously said, a cultural ritual in the Tsonga culture. This encompasses fundamental values, social norms, spiritual practices and specific behavioural obligations that serve as symbols of grieving, claims Maloka (1998). According

to Grimes (2014:13), ritual criticism can be made by the laity, clergy and theologians in addition to the religious. Despite the fact that anthropology has shied away from the evaluation task, one can still find it among social sciences. Because cultures are not static, as Bosch accurately points out, liturgical inculturation between Tsonga culture and religion should always be viewed as a continuous process. This is because the church is still able to unearth unsolved secrets of the faith. There is a creative, dynamic, and surprising relationship between the Christian message and culture.

### **Analysis of the need for liturgical *aggiornamento* in the Tsonga mourning process**

According to Grimes (2014:8), liturgy refers to a formal way that masses of people worship Christianity. In essence, this refers to a set of processes that are seen as Christian to properly connect with God. In this regard, the Tsonga mourning culture is based solely on appeasing African ancestors. This is in a bid to ensure that the family will not suffer any immediate deaths as well as allowing the widow a rite of passage into remarrying again. The processes that communities partake in accordance to their spirituality are supposed to connect them to their high self. African culture is centred on the implementation of a patriarchal society which is why their mourning processes are set to disadvantage women and benefit the men (Manala 2015). This is why the mourning period is longer for the women in comparison to the men.

According to Maleche and Day (2011:6), if the Tsonga mourning culture were to adopt the liturgy associated with Christianity, it would result in the abolition of some practices. This is because they would be classified as ungodly and heathen. It is important to note that the application of Christian Liturgy in any society is a direct result of the community that the people are in. If the community believes in ancestral spirits, they are more likely to practise cultural Tsonga mourning practices. This means that communities that are significantly Christian will then practise Christian Liturgy. The practices that a community adopts is as a direct result of who they identify as.

According to Lomba (2014:19), Christianity in contrast to the patriarchal perspective of African culture emphasises the need for equality in society. This means that some processes that women partake in, according to culture, become invalid. Women in Tsonga culture cut their hair and take part in year-long mourning process. Christianity on the other hand allows women to be able to choose whether or not they want to cut their hair or go through the mourning process. The Tsonga mourning process also specialises in a need for a cleansing process after the mourning process in which the woman is supposed to bathe at a river to clean themselves (Barnard 2010). Christianity however emphasizes the need to use prayer to solve most problems and they view most African mourning processes as demon rituals. This, therefore, means the adoption of the use of Christian mourning methods, results in the abolition of most critical Tsonga rituals.

Christianity in essence disturbs the progression of African perspectives. The abolition of such vital processes is then leads to the occurrence of bad luck within the families. This causes more deaths or general bad luck in whatever the family members pursue (Setsiba 2012).

### **Adoption of a neutral mourning processes**

According to Ntuli (2012:17), it is important to note that the mourning process in most African countries has gone through an adjustment into a more neutral state. This is because of communities adopting Christianity as well as still acknowledging their African culture. The realisation that most of the processes in African culture were funded by a patriarchal society has led women choosing not to take part in some mourning processes. In the Tsonga culture, it was considered normal for the wife to eat food cooked from the water that washed the husband. This was seen as part of the mourning process that is essential in Tsonga Culture. In Christianity, this is viewed as a heathen practice and women are not encouraged to do it. The women can also choose to not practise the mourning process as well as it is viewed as being oppressive (Mwambazambi 2011). Christianity and the modernisation of society have allowed women to have a voice. They can agree or disagree with some cultural rituals that have resulted in mourning processes which are more neutral towards both cultures.

### **Conclusion**

According to Ngobese (2003), in African culture rituals are performed:

[To] restore or maintain the relationship between a person and spiritual powers, for example appeasing angry ancestors, initiating into the community, sending off dying, praying that they should be accepted by the living dead. (p. 36)

This article discussed *ubuntu* in the Tsonga context, and there was a brief discussion on Tsonga traditions and beliefs. Mourning rituals were also discussed. These mourning rituals are believed to be done to maintain a peaceful relationship between the living and the dead because if the dead are angry, the living will suffer. The root of these beliefs is yet to be known. The unveiling of the tombstone is vital in African culture as it symbolises love for the deceased and remembrance. During Easter and festive times, African people visit the tombstones of their relatives to clean the tombstone, and some perform some African rituals to ask for good luck from the dead or to introduce a new marriage in the family, a baby, a new car or a new job. Liturgy should be designed by churches also taking into consideration the findings in this study. Liturgical inculturation goes deeper than merely the so-called cultural aspects such as a liturgical dress (Ntuli 2012:78). An enculturated liturgy that includes eucharistic components and fully connects with an African understanding of the spirit world will empower people who take part in it. The field of liturgical studies makes a clear delineation between the numerous reciprocations between culture and the church's liturgical traditions and culture (cf. Barnard 2010;

Barnard, Cilliers & Wepener 2014; Chupungco 1992; Lutheran World Federation 1996, 1998 as examples).

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