CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, I explain the rationale for this study and give an overview of the thesis. Starting with the background to the study, I outline the significance and objectives of the study, and discuss the theoretical framework in which it was undertaken. For clarity, the concepts 'traditional African' and 'African Christian' are defined as they apply to this study. Finally, I provide an outline of the organisation of the whole thesis.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Although it is an expected and irreversible part of life, death is one of the aspects that appear to have a negative impact on the lives of family members and close relatives. The death of a loved one can activate a complexity of emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and changes like no other experience in life. After the death of a loved one, people grieve their loss, try to make sense of it, and find it necessary to reorder their private worlds and their meanings in a completely new way (Richards, 2001). Like any other stressful life event, the death of a family member requires different coping mechanisms for those who remain. Individuals from different religious and cultural backgrounds all experience the impact of death in the family in one way or another. However, members of different religious groups deal with this event in various ways. Such ways of dealing with the impact of death are socially constructed and cannot be regarded as universal.

Among the mechanisms for dealing with the traumatic event of the death of a husband is the performance of bereavement rituals. Traditional African people, particularly within the Tshivenda speaking community, have prescribed cultural ways of performing these rituals. Typically the performance of bereavement rituals was not supposed to be negotiated. It was understood that they were part of mourning and that all people would

follow the prescriptions imposed by their culture. This seems to have changed since Christianity came into existence in Africa (see section 3.2.2.2).

Present-day Tshivenda-speaking people subscribe to different religious beliefs. In the same community, there are people who adhere to various traditional African practices as well as those who have adopted Christian practices in relation to death and bereavement. In some of the traditional African cultures, the belief in ancestral spirits forms the core of their religion. It is believed that there is a connection between the living and the dead (Ngubane, 2004). The relationship between the dead and the living is still maintained and the ancestors are believed to take away the dead. Even though that person has died, it is believed that he or she will always visit those who are still alive and communicate with them (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). There is a belief that the completeness of life for the individual is not attained in isolation and apart from the others, but is something communal and possible only in a network of mutual interdependence. However, in Christian beliefs, the link between the dead and the living is constructed differently; the dead cannot be contacted directly; the living are linked through God or Jesus Christ and will be reunited with the dead at the resurrection still to come (Pang & Lam, 2002). Zulu people who confess to be Christian are known to have a dual affiliation that includes belief in the influence the ancestors on the living and in the trinity (Ngubane, 2004). As a result, Christianity did not necessarily end traditional practices for Zulu widows. Those who do not observe traditional cultural practices are from churches or doctrines that strongly prohibit them (ritual practices) (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007).

There is no literature from a psychological perspective that exists on the subject of bereavement rituals concerning Tshivenda speaking women. Lack of information could lead to misunderstanding of the meaning as it relates to death and bereavement rituals that particular people construct within their culture. Current literature on the topic of bereavement mainly deals with other African cultures (e.g. Guzana, 2000; Ngubane, 2004; Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007) and Western ways of coping with death (e.g. Chan et al., 2005; Corr et al., 1997; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). The available literature

concerning this area of study may leave people with the assumption that Tshivenda speaking women construct the meaning of death and bereavement rituals in the same way as other cultures.

Furthermore, Western therapeutic strategies deal mainly with the affected individuals but not with how the relationship with a deceased person might influence their coping mechanisms. As an academic from the Tshivenda-speaking community, I see this study as necessary to identify discourses and explore how meaning is constructed within the context of death and bereavement rituals when a woman has lost her husband. In this regard, I consider it significant to look at the ways in which the religious-cultural discourse informs African Christian and traditional African women's perceptions of bereavement rituals and the way in which they construct realities after the death of a spouse (See section 1.4 for contextualisation and definition of the concepts 'African Christian' and 'traditional African' as they apply to this study). I have chosen religion and culture as discourse markers because they, in particular, inform daily practices and meaning-making, including performance of bereavement rituals in a local context.

Death appears to be one of the most certain methods by which the ancestral spirits reveal themselves to the living among most African people (Gumede, 1990). Soon after a family member has died, Africans start performing various bereavement rituals as a way of dealing with the grief and at the same time honouring their ancestors. There are rituals that have to be performed before a burial and others that are performed afterwards (Vold, 2000). With the entrance of Western ideologies and the European Christian missionaries, some of these rituals are no longer performed in the same way that they used to be practised in the olden days. Honour and respect of the dead is disturbed by urbanisation and adoption of burial administration in which, instead of paying last respects for the dead at home, family members have to go to burial firms for that purpose (Ngubane, 2004).

Considering that Christian and African traditional beliefs are different, the present study aims to explore the discourses on bereavement rituals in these two religious groups.

The focus is on identifying discourses that inform how widows construct meaning after losing a husband and perform bereavement rituals prescribed by their family and cultural heritage. Although the two groups (African Christian and traditional African within the Tshivenda culture) might construct their experiences differently, both have a common aspect to deal with, namely, the death of a spouse. Because Christian beliefs appear to be Western-based, their ways of coping with bereavement will be influenced by the Western culture whereas traditional Africans will be influenced by their own culture (Chavanduka, 1999). The widows may even have dual membership of these two religious-cultural groups, accepting both African traditional and Christian religious practices. This is particularly relevant when a Christian woman chooses to return to her African traditional practices when dealing with bereavement, and is thus seen to be violating some of her Christian practices.

It is hoped that this project may contribute to a re-construction of self-identity for the community (women) in which it is embedded. Such an exercise may lead to a reassessment of Tshivenda culture or norms, and an examination of areas of life that were considered evil soon after the arrival of missionaries in Africa. Hopefully, such a reassessment may reinstate those cultural values and beliefs for the benefit of those who still perceive them positively, without judgement for those who perceive them negatively. That is because in the same community there may be women who perceive the cultural values negatively and those who perceive them positively.

This is part of the rationale for conducting a study of this nature. In exploring the social construction of bereavement rituals, the historical and cultural values that underlie the psychology of bereavement in a Tshivenda-speaking community may also be examined.

The position of psychology in Africa is "predominantly a Euro-Americocentric science" (Viljoen, 2002, p. 529) and there appears to be a marginalisation and under-representation of African indigenous psychology. To counter this under-representation and marginalisation, studies that reflect the position of African indigenous knowledge

are important. This study may add to the body of knowledge representing African indigenous psychology and how culture and religion intersect, especially with regard to the position of women in a culture dominated by patriarchal discourses. Since women have "historically used conversation with other women as a way to deal with their oppression" (Madriz, 2002, p. 839), a study of this nature will allow the participants (women) to group together and share their constructions of the performance of bereavement rituals, as informed by their belief systems and culture.

The focus of this study is on women only because they are often labelled as emotionally weak in relation to bereavement. They are also seen to use passive ways of coping, whilst men are labelled active in dealing with death (Littlewood, 1992). Men are considered to respond to death in an active way that involves responding positively and constructively (Thompson, 1997). Among the Tshivenda-speaking community, women are not only considered emotional, but they are also expected to perform bereavement rituals, which is not the case with men. When a husband loses a wife, he talks, gives instructions to others and is visible with no difference in attire (Guzana, 2000). This discrimination might be because women are constructed according to the discourses that regard them as either weak or passive. Bereaved women and their caregivers might internalise such discourses and provide support based on these. Also, other community members may determine the type of support they offer based on these discourses (Rando, 1993).

As religious-cultural heritage prescribes performance of these rituals, I consider it imperative to explore how women construct performance of these rituals. This is because the way bereaved women are constructed according to particular discourses plays a role in the way they construct themselves and their situation. In my reliance on the narratives of the participants, the study is based on the assumptions in the next section.

1.3 ASSUMPTIONS AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The theoretical framework that informs this study assumes that the performance of bereavement rituals is a social action, and that social processes emerge as a function of culture and social history as people construct meaning from their experiences (Burr, 2003). Therefore, Tshivenda-speaking women's perceptions of bereavement rituals are likely influenced by their culture and their religion. I assume, therefore, that a cultural-religious discourse informs the way in which they perceive the beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours, artefacts, and symbols related to the death of a spouse and the performance of the relevant rituals. Furthermore, I assume that the situated meanings are socially constructed within the context of everyday life. For African Christian and African traditional women, mourning the death of a spouse and the construction of their realities concerning the bereavement rituals are intermingled with their submissiveness to the dominant patriarchal and oppressive norms that prevail in this culture.

Although authors like Parkes, Laungani and Young (1997) challenge the use of rituals by psychologists to support survivors in times of crisis and loss, I also assume that the research might reveal some valuable information and understanding of bereavement rituals and how these assist bereaved people in a particular African community. I assume that the findings will inform different people – religious leaders, counsellors, social workers and others – of the immense therapeutic value that bereavement rituals have for bereaved African people who believe in the significance of the rituals in their lives. In so doing, they may assist in facilitating rituals that promote the healing process and not minimise cultural beliefs. Assisting people from an African background using only Western therapy strategies might not be sufficient or effective for people who believe that when one individual is psychologically affected, then the whole family is also affected (Viljoen, 2002).

This investigation will hopefully enable people to view rituals in a different manner and appreciate their value in the healing of the individual and the community who believe in their role after the death of a husband.

The present study, therefore, focuses on the particular ways in which African Christian and African traditional women construct their perceptions of the performance of bereavement rituals. Tshivenda-speaking women who accept either the Christian or the African traditional belief system, and who have buried a husband, were considered for participation in this study. I believe that these widows can offer some insight into the perceptions of and the role that can be accorded African bereavement rituals. The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the discourses pertaining to the way Tshivenda-speaking women construct performance of bereavement rituals.

In order to explore the perceptions and constructions of bereavement rituals, I will be searching for a greater understanding of and answers to the following research questions:

- How do Tshivenda women, who have lost a husband through death, construct their experiences of grief, given their respective religious-cultural backgrounds?
- How do bereaved Tshivenda women construct their experiences of bereavement rituals implied by their cultural affiliation?
- What are the functions and meanings that traditional African and African Christian women mourning the death of a spouse attach to bereavement rituals prescribed by their cultural affiliation?
- What situated meanings are attached to places, bodies and institutions related to bereavement rituals as constructed by Tshivenda women adhering to the traditional and/or Christian belief systems?
- What subject positions did the bereaved Tshivenda women enact when grieving for a deceased husband?
- What contradictions emerge in the constructions of bereaved Tshivenda women in their respective traditional and Christian backgrounds?

1.4 'TRADITIONAL AFRICAN' AND 'AFRICAN CHRISTIAN' GROUPS

I highlight these groups because I want to contextualise them as they relate to this study, considering that they might hold a different meaning for people who are not familiar with Tshivenda culture. People from different cultural and historical backgrounds may understand them differently. I cannot ignore that, because of diversity of knowledge even among the Tshivenda-speaking people, there might be people who understand these groups differently. In addition, the meaning of these concepts might change. I have specifically defined the group of participants in terms of their home language by using the term 'Tshivenda-speaking'; and I have avoided using the term 'black' that might lead the focus of the study in a different direction and involve various additional cultural and political elements (Ndletyana, 2006).

The Tshivenda-speaking community subscribes to different religions, chiefly, traditional African religion and African Christian religion. These are the major religions that inform the way Tshivenda-speaking people attach value to their culture, religion and its practices, particularly those related to bereavement.

These two groups – followers of traditional African religion and African Christians – were decided upon for the purpose of this study only and they are subject to re-construction. These concepts may be considered or constructed in different ways. I decided to use this distinction to categorise the participants for the study. 'Traditional African women' in this study refers to a group of selected women who follow traditional African religion and practices in the Tshivenda culture. This is a religion that adopts African religious-cultural practices. 'African Christian women' refers to women who have adopted Christianity, but are also living within the African culture of the Tshivenda-speaking community.

The way we perceive reality is a result of the construction of such reality through interaction between people, through language. The perceptions that the two groups have regarding death, dying and bereavement rituals are influenced by religion and culture, hence the religious-cultural context adopted in this study. Thus, what people

believe to be real in their daily interaction and practices appears to be the result of religion and culture. For example, both groups that the present study is interested in, believe that there is life after death, albeit in different forms. Such belief in life after death gives people hope for the future.

In situations where cultural norms are dominant, individuals who have different religious backgrounds live in conflict because of clashing norms, which may exist between the cultural demands and their religious expectations. For example, within the Tshivenda-speaking community, where people are either traditional Africans or African Christians, culture demands that individuals perform rituals that may, in some cases, conflict with their Christian practices and expectations. One such conflict exists in the performance of the bereavement rituals as prescribed in traditional African culture. These rituals, when performed by widows, subject them to positions they either accept or reject. Despite this, traditional African widows may perform such rituals because they are prescribed and the widows believe that failure to perform them might bring misfortune (Ray, 1976). Failure to perform the rituals is just another way of deviant behaviour towards grieving. Rosenblatt (2001) regards such behaviour a cause of ill-health, insanity, misfortune, supposedly caused by the gods, or the deceased coming back to take the life of someone in the community.

However, it is also important to consider that although conflicts exist between the beliefs of the two religions, they are not necessarily considered as two discrete or polarised positions. This study rather considers how the two religions inform people's talk and interactions.

1.5 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

The thesis consists of eight chapters. The current chapter introduces the reader to the process followed in the study. Here I discuss the background and the rationale of the study, the assumptions and purpose of the study, and the questions that focus my search for alternative understandings of women's constructions of bereavement rituals.

Chapter two addresses an overview of the theoretical framework that will guide my interpretations. This theoretical framework is social constructionism; and it allows for the use of a discourse analysis methodology when analysing the participants' talk. The discourses identified from literature (chapters two and three) are also highlighted.

In chapter three, I examine the religious-cultural worldviews informing perceptions about the concepts of death and dying, particularly how these operate in traditional African context. I also discuss the way culture and religion are constructed. Within religion, in the Tshivenda-speaking community, I discuss the beliefs, religious practices, religious objects and places, values and morals and religious officials and leaders as they play a role in how people construct reality. The chapter also addresses the way Christianity was introduced to the Tshivenda-speaking community, and its effect on the way people perceive and construct death and bereavement rituals. The religious belief that death is a continuation of life is also discussed. I first focus on the construction of death as the end of a particular form of life and as a rebirth. The chapter furthermore addresses the definition of the two groups that were considered for this study, namely, "traditional African" and "African Christian". I also conceptualise the religious-cultural discourse, and its social construction. In addition, I define a model presented in the form of a diagram, indicating the different probable discourses as they tie in with the religious-cultural discourse. The ways in which people construct death as 'good', 'wild' and 'caused' are discussed.

Chapter four concerns bereavement and bereavement rituals. In this chapter I consider the social construction of bereavement and grief as they contribute towards the performance of bereavement rituals. Some of the discourses regarding bereavement and mourning are explored. I also report on the bereavement rituals in the Tshivenda-speaking community, their meanings and the functions rituals have in people's lives. Issues of gender and bereavement as embedded in culture are also discussed.

In chapter five, I address the research approach and method that I employed in this study. The chapter focuses on the definitions of 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis'. It

also explains the way credibility can be ensured in a study of this nature. I discuss the procedures for collecting data, and highlight the way in which the discourses were identified. This includes the procedures followed in selecting participants, data gathering and the process of discourse analysis. Issues concerning reflexivity and advantages of the research approach adopted for this study are also discussed.

Chapter six addresses my interpretations of the texts provided by the Tshivenda-speaking women in their co-construction of their experiences of bereavement and bereavement rituals. In this chapter I interpret and analyse the way traditional African and African Christian belief systems in the Tshivenda culture inform the constructions of bereavement and the performance of bereavement rituals in the context of multiple realities. I also give an interpretation of the contradictions that emerge in the constructions of the bereaved Tshivenda women, and the subject positions that they enact when grieving for a deceased husband.

In chapter seven I present an analysis of the discourses obtained from the participants. It is in this chapter that I interpret the discourses on bereavement rituals as the main focus of the study. Gee's (1999) six building tasks that guide discourse analysis are considered for the purpose of analysis. The participants' discourses are then analysed in terms of Parker's (1990) criteria of identifying discourses in a text.

As the final chapter, chapter eight presents a reflection of the whole process and the shortcomings encountered in the course of the project. I also offer a conclusion based on my analysis of the discourses and present recommendations for further exploration.

1.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter highlighted the background of the present study and provided the justification for undertaking such an exploration. A more in-depth focus on the theoretical framework adopted in this study follows in chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to analyse the discourses pertaining to the way Tshivenda-speaking women construct performance of bereavement rituals. Therefore, a theoretical framework that considers performance of bereavement rituals as a social action is needed. This framework adheres to postmodern paradigms that regard the nature of reality as being socially constructed. For the purpose of this study, I have adopted a theoretical framework that emerged from a postmodern stance, namely, social constructionism, which assumes that performance of bereavement rituals is a socially constructed reality. Therefore, I cannot deny that multiple realities of performance of bereavement rituals could also exist. In this chapter, I first focus on where social constructionism originated and then address its nature as it is relevant to this study. The discourses that were identified from the literature chapters are also discussed in this chapter.

2.2 THE ORIGINS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Like many theories, social constructionism originated from various sources and disciplines. Literature reports a gradual emergence of alternative approaches to the study of human beings in Britain and North America a few decades ago. These approaches arose in critical psychology, discursive psychology, discourse analysis, deconstruction and poststructuralism. What appeared to be common to these approaches is now referred to as social constructionism. Social constructionism is a theoretical orientation that underpins the approaches currently offering radical and critical alternatives in psychology and social psychology, as well as other disciplines in the social and human sciences (Burr, 2003).

In light of the origins of social constructionism, the factors influencing its emergence deserve attention. It is important to consider that these influences, and the history of social constructionism, are just one of many possible constructions of what was happening at the time.

Literature shows that sociology fundamentally influenced the development of social constructionism (Burr, 2003). Sociology emphasises the thinking that, through social interaction with others, people construct their own and others' identities and inner voices (Hoffman, 1993). The influence of sociology on social constructionism may be traced back to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) book entitled *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Liebrucks, 2001). These authors' account of social life argues that it is through social interaction and practices that human beings create and sustain all social phenomena. This occurs through externalisation, objectivation and internalisation.

In "*Introduction to social constructionism*", Burr (1995) argues that when people externalise, they get involved in some activity; they create some artefact or practice. For example, they may have an idea about a phenomenon like death, and externalise it by telling a story about such a phenomenon. As people listen to the story and retell it, the story takes a certain form. This is where its idea "becomes an object of consciousness for people in that society" (Burr, 1995, p. 10). This makes it appear to be something out there waiting to be known rather than something consisting of the constructions of people through their interaction. As a result, future generations end up internalising the idea that they found already in existence, and consciously understand it as part of their world. Keeney (1983) argues that one's knowledge is recycled in the (re)construction of the world. This involves how the social practices of people can socially construct the world. At the same time, the social world can be experienced by people as something that was there. Burr (2003) maintains, therefore, that social constructionism carries the status of an object.

Burr (2003) reports that social psychology emerged during the Second World War, at a time when psychologists wanted to provide the governments of the United States of America and Britain with knowledge that could be used for propaganda and to manipulate people. This occurred in a period when psychology was adopting the positivist methods of the natural sciences, that could not answer the *how* questions.

In the 1960s and 1970s, social psychologists were worried about the way psychology was serving the dominant groups and ignoring the voices of the ordinary people. To create a balance between the marginal and the dominant groups, a number of books that proposed alternatives to positivist science were published (Hibberd, 2005). These books focussed on the accounts of ordinary people and challenged the oppressive ideological uses of psychology (Burr, 2003). These concerns are apparent in social constructionism.

In psychology, social constructionism's emergence dates back to Gergen's (1973) paper "*Social psychology as history".* In support of Gergen, Burr (2003) argues that all knowledge is historically and culturally specific. As a result, people have to extend their "enquiries into social, political and economic realms" so that they can understand the evolution of current psychology and social life (Burr, 2003, p. 13). Gergen's (1973) paper also argues that there is no final description of people in a society because social life is not static, but always changing. That is also because meaning making is not static and fixed, but is fluid, provisional and context-dependent (Coyle, 2007).

The ideology that gives shape to social constructionism is postmodernism. Postmodernism arose as a rejection of the fundamental assumptions of the modernist movement that preceded postmodernism and that continues to exist parallel to it. The main tenet of modernism is to search for "the true nature of reality through application of reasons and rationality" (Burr, 2003, p. 10). This implies that there are underlying rules that inform our functioning in the world.

Postmodernism opposes the theories that consider the nature of life to be based on underlying structures (for example, Freudian psychoanalysis). Rather, it embraces the understanding that the social world is always changing, and that such changes depend on social relations. As in architecture, postmodernism's argument is that there is no good designer because it depends on people's interpretation of what they observe (Burr, 2003). One can argue that the way people construct their world cannot be judged according to how the previous generation judged it. Equally, today's standards cannot be used to judge the next generation. That is because grief and bereavement vary across places, times, and groups in terms of how and when, or even whether emotions are expressed (Rosenblatt, 2001).

Postmodernism also opposes the idea that social change is about discovering and altering the underlying structures of social life through the application of a theory or meta-narrative. Social constructionism shares this stance, and points out that the word 'discover' implies something that existed before (Burr, 2003).

The above section showed how social constructionism originated from several sources. Burr (2003) adds that social constructionism was influenced by the works of French intellectuals like Foucault and Derrida within the cultural backdrop of postmodernism, with its intellectual roots in earlier sociology and in the concerns of the crisis in social psychology.

2.3 THE NATURE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism accepts that there is not one truth or reality for any situation. Instead there are multiple descriptions or realities constructed in the interaction between people (Gergen, 1999; Rosenblatt, 2001; Willig, 2001). Rosenblatt supports authors like Gergen (1999) and Liebrucks (2001) who argue that the way people construct reality depends on the influences received from societal gatherings, history and interaction with others. In social constructionism, people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences are the products of systems of meanings that exist at a social rather than an individual level

(Terre Blanche, Kelly & Durrheim, 2006). As people interact with each other, they construct a particular reality about their world and attach meaning to it. Furthermore, social constructionism questions the value claims of what is real and what is perceived. It views knowledge as historically and culturally specific and sustained by social processes such as those in the Tshivenda practice of bereavement rituals. The performance of bereavement rituals is therefore assumed to be a social action and social processes emerge as a function of culture and social history as people construct meaning from their experiences.

Social constructionism gives voice to ordinary people who are usually excluded from mainstream research practices. In particular, women whose evidence was long being there that they were undervalued and anything associated with them seemed to be perceived negatively (De la Rey, 1992). Thus, similar to feminism that gives focus to women's lives and activities previously marginalised and subsidiary to men (Bryman, 2008) and promoting equalities between men and women (Ohara & Saft, 2003), social constructionism allows liberation and the practice of human rights that put men and women in the same position (Peltola, Milkie & Presser, 2004) where their voices can be raised and heard. As it is the case in this study, women are understood from their own perspective and context, through their use of language and voices as a form of social action through which they give meaning to their diverse and often anomalous accounts of their perceptions and experiences.

A social constructionist approach advocates that its adherents take a critical position regarding knowledge that is taken for granted (Burr, 2003); that is, knowledge about the world and our selves. This position influences me to be critical in terms of my own and the participants' perceptions of what appears to be real in the context of bereavement rituals and the practices surrounding them. It encourages me to challenge existing ways of viewing and understanding death and bereavement, and makes me question that understanding so that I may arrive at alternative interpretations. For example, why do bereaved women consider death as being painful and themselves as being in need of healing through the performance of the bereavement rituals? It is through questioning

not only the available literature on bereavement, but also the constructions of these bereaved women that an alternative understanding can be obtained and new knowledge added to the literature on bereavement.

More than a decade ago, De la Rey, Duncan, Shefer and van Niekerk (1997) maintained that the theory of social constructionism focuses on knowledge that has been given little attention or no attention at all. Consequently, social constructionism questions the notion of objectivity, an aspect that is emphasised by research perspectives such as positivism, which asserts that there are absolutes in life and focuses attention on the views of dominant groups in society at the expense of others. Social constructionism challenges the conventional idea that knowledge and understanding is based upon objective, unbiased observations of the world, and argues that knowledge is not coherent or logical (Potgieter, 1997). Rather, there are alternative interpretations that may be offered from groups that represent different cultures, religions and social histories.

Gergen (2006) advocates that all forms of knowledge and understanding are culturally and historically specific and relative. This makes the notion of truth problematic (Maze, 2001), and the ways in which participants in this study construct their perceptions of the world could never be considered new. The concepts used were there before, and they depend on the religious-cultural background that informs people's ways of constructing meaning. In this regard, it is likely that the way women talk about their husbands' roles in the family and their grief upon their husbands' deaths is influenced by their historical and cultural heritage. That is because people from different historical and cultural backgrounds might have their own ways of describing the feeling of losing a husband. The way in which I analysed the different discourses was also historically and culturally specific and relative, as the products of that culture and history (Rosenblatt, 2001). Because each woman and I, bring our own interpretations of our religious-cultural background as a frame of reference, we also add a unique element to the interpretation during the conversation.

Social processes are important in the way people co-construct their versions of reality. It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become constructed (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Although they come from the same cultural but different religious backgrounds, the participants may still share certain understandings of bereavement and bereavement rituals. In some instances, participants even contradict themselves or one another in their meaning construction because of their interactions in their different religious-cultural settings. The day-to-day interactions that take place between the participants and the people with whom they share religious and cultural views play a role in how they (the participants) construct reality. In particular cultures, individuals might have a common understanding of reality that is influenced by a culture that discourages discrepancies between individuals and collective ideals through collective culturally constructed voices (Hong, 2004). In particular, cultures that promote psychological interdependence (Neff, 2003), like Tshivenda culture. There are no essences inside people that make them what they are or dictate how they behave (Burr 2003). Therefore, perceptions of bereavement rituals have a distinct religious-cultural base, and are embedded in the social processes that prevail in the settings where these rituals are performed.

Social processes are embedded in social actions; and from the constructionist perspective, language forms an integral part of social action (Potter, 2001). Coyle (2007) argues that language performs an action. This implies that the use of language is more than just conversation; when people talk to each other, the world gets constructed in different ways. Such use of language becomes social action that constructs accounts of what the world is like (Edley, 2001).

Social action is not a static thing, but is continuous, socially constructed, highly contextualised, fluid and variable (Johnson & Meinhof, 1997). The way people construct reality invites different kinds of action and excludes others (Burr, 2003). This implies that the way participants understand the world they live in and the way they talk about their experiences (social action), particularly concerning bereavement rituals, represents their way of making sense of the world and constructing knowledge. White (1995) argues

that the rituals that people create around death and grief are reflections of what people think and meanings produced in language. In support of White, Edley (2001) maintains "reality is the product of discourse" (p. 437). Talking about death gives shape and moulds the experience into what is considered normal or pathological (Hedtke, 2002).

Therefore, in speaking (such as a conversation on the performance of bereavement rituals), women are performing an action. It is an action that is simultaneously informed by the way they talk about the topic and the multiple religious-cultural models that form part of their particular communicative community. These models are situated meanings that provide a backdrop to their talk, and their talk becomes a way of perpetuating and sustaining the religious-cultural values embedded in their perceptions of bereavement rituals. Because each woman brings her own religious-cultural background as a frame of reference to the conversation, she adds a unique element to the conversation. The way the participants construct the topic in their conversational practice also reveals social representations and norms that accompany any particular language and communication, as well as a socio-culturally shared knowledge (Van Dijk, 1997).

In this study, I looked holistically at the perceptions and experiences of bereavement rituals instead of pursuing an essentialist and realist investigation previously accepted in paradigms such as positivism. According to the social constructionist paradigm, I cannot define or discover the essences that make people what they are (Burr, 2003). This would imply categorising people in one way or another as bereaved or not bereaved, knowing and not knowing, and not acknowledging the impact of culture and history upon one's psychology. Rather, social constructionism allows participants to give their views without any limitations based on particular ways of categorising their knowledge. It paves the way for exploring the multiple discourses that could have an impact on how they describe their experiences and construct knowledge.

Within the social constructionist paradigm, "knowledge is derived from looking at the world from some perspective or other, and is in the service of some interests rather than others" (Burr, 2003, p. 6). I decided to follow a constructionist paradigm because it

allowed me to investigate reality from the participants' perspectives, rather than from any predefined rules or categories as is the case in a positivist paradigm. Participants in this study could construct their realities concerning bereavement rituals from their own perspective. As such, I was able to gain a holistic version of participants' worlds. It also allowed the participants and I to co-construct multiple realities instead of absolute truths, and the outcome of this study should be considered in this light. The focus is not on a discovery of truths, but on discovering the multiple meanings of Tshivenda-speaking women regarding the performance of bereavement rituals prescribed by their culture.

Social constructionism is particularly relevant to the perceptions of participants who have lost their husbands through death regarding bereavement rituals. Although essentialists may debate the relevance of social constructionism as a theoretical approach to this study, based on their acceptance that there are absolutes and objectivity in life (De la Rey et al., 1997), I consider it relevant because it allows for and facilitates the exploration of discourses informing the performance of bereavement rituals from the participants' subjective position.

In a social constructionist paradigm, methods such as discourse analysis have become common practice. Discourse analysis enables the constructionist researcher to identify how versions of the social world are produced in discourse (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006), and to describe as best as possible the socially constructed realities that emerge in the day-to-day lives of participants. The focus on discourse assumes that the researcher considers talk and texts as part of social practices. This is also due to the argument that discourse analytic methods have been developed to encompass and address the active use of language (Potter, 2003). Discourse analysis allows the researcher to go beyond what is said (Papa, 2008; Willig, 2008), and also to read not only what the participants have said but also what informs their talk. Many researchers are involved in discourse analysis because it involves studying important and interesting things about human life (Potter, 2003).

For the purpose of analysis, the discourses in the current study were identified and analysed according to the six building blocks suggested by Gee (1999). In this regard, I focussed on semiotic building, world building, activity building, the socio-culturally situated identities and relationships that emerged, political building, and connection building. These building blocks were utilised to establish, firstly, the context of the discourses, and secondly to analyse the specific discourses embedded in the participants' constructions. This is elaborated on in the methodology chapter.

The following section addresses existing discourses in literature, which provide a frame for the context of this study.

2.4 THE RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL DISCOURSE

People's way of understanding and describing the world appear to rely on the beliefs and frame of reference they use to draw distinctions and interpret the world. These frames of reference are informed by culture and a specific time in history (Burr, 2003). In social constructionist terms, people's distinctions and frames of reference are represented in and developed through language (Sims-Schouten, Riley & Willig, 2007). The religious-cultural discourse is considered because it informs people's construction of reality in interaction with one another; it is through this talk and interaction that people create reality (Liebrucks, 2001). Religious-cultural discourses inform African Christian and traditional African women's perceptions and constructions of bereavement rituals.

2.4.1 Conceptualising the religious-cultural discourse

The religious-cultural discourse is employed in this study because there is a relationship between culture and religion in terms of how people construct reality. People cannot talk of religion without talking of the culture in which the religion is practised. This is because religion and culture are responsible for informing our ways of believing in and worshipping a supernatural power or God (Parkes et al., 1997). Religion and culture are also responsible for the way that we use language, and influence our interaction with people in different situations.

When a child is born into a family, religion and culture inform the way people react to the birth (Aborampah, 1999). When people get married, there are expectations regarding appropriate behaviours that are informed by religion and culture. People are expected to celebrate the birth of a child and the marriage of a family member. People celebrate because they believe this occurrence is a beneficial one; and a celebration is, therefore, relevant and appropriate. People are expected to mourn when there is a death in the family. Such behaviours are determined by both religion and culture: neither of these factors can be omitted. If people fail to comply with the religious-cultural prescriptions that should be followed in different situations, this might be construed as disrespecting one's culture.

Traditional Africans have particular religious-cultural practices and rituals of communicating with ancestors and paying respect to the dead, based on their belief that the dead can influence the present reality, and the lives of those who remain behind. These practices are believed to assist the deceased to join the ancestors, relatives and old friends who have passed away (Ngubane, 2004); to gain the deceased's goodwill; and to ensure that he or she will influence the lives of survivors positively (Opoku, 1989). Bereavement rituals are but one way in which traditional Africans honour the deceased. Christian bereavement rituals, however, are chiefly designed to comfort the mourners (Levine, 1997).

2.4.2 Social constructions informing the religious-cultural discourse

Mehta (1999) agrees that religion and culture play a role in the way people perceive death. Given the cues and clues that Gee (2005) suggests to recognise the situated meanings during discourse analysis, one can argue that our religion and culture guide us to attach meaning to death. A culture that believes in the influence of the deceased on the lives of the living will perceive death as a passage to another life, whereas a culture that does not perceive such an influence, or make any link between the dead and the living, will have different perceptions. The latter might perceive death as the end of life and not a continuation of life that involves ancestors and possibly, God.

The Tshivenda-speaking traditional community is an example of a community that believes in the power that a deceased has after death. This community believes that the deceased has to fulfil certain roles in relation to the living. Such belief is informed by religion and culture. African culture maintains that death is not the end, but is a continuation of life (Opoku, 1989). Therefore, the way people attach meaning to death depends on the culture and religion that are in turn socially constructed.

2.4.3 The model defined

The model adopted in this study is represented below in a diagram that reflects existing discourses in the context of this study and how they tie in with the religious-cultural discourse.
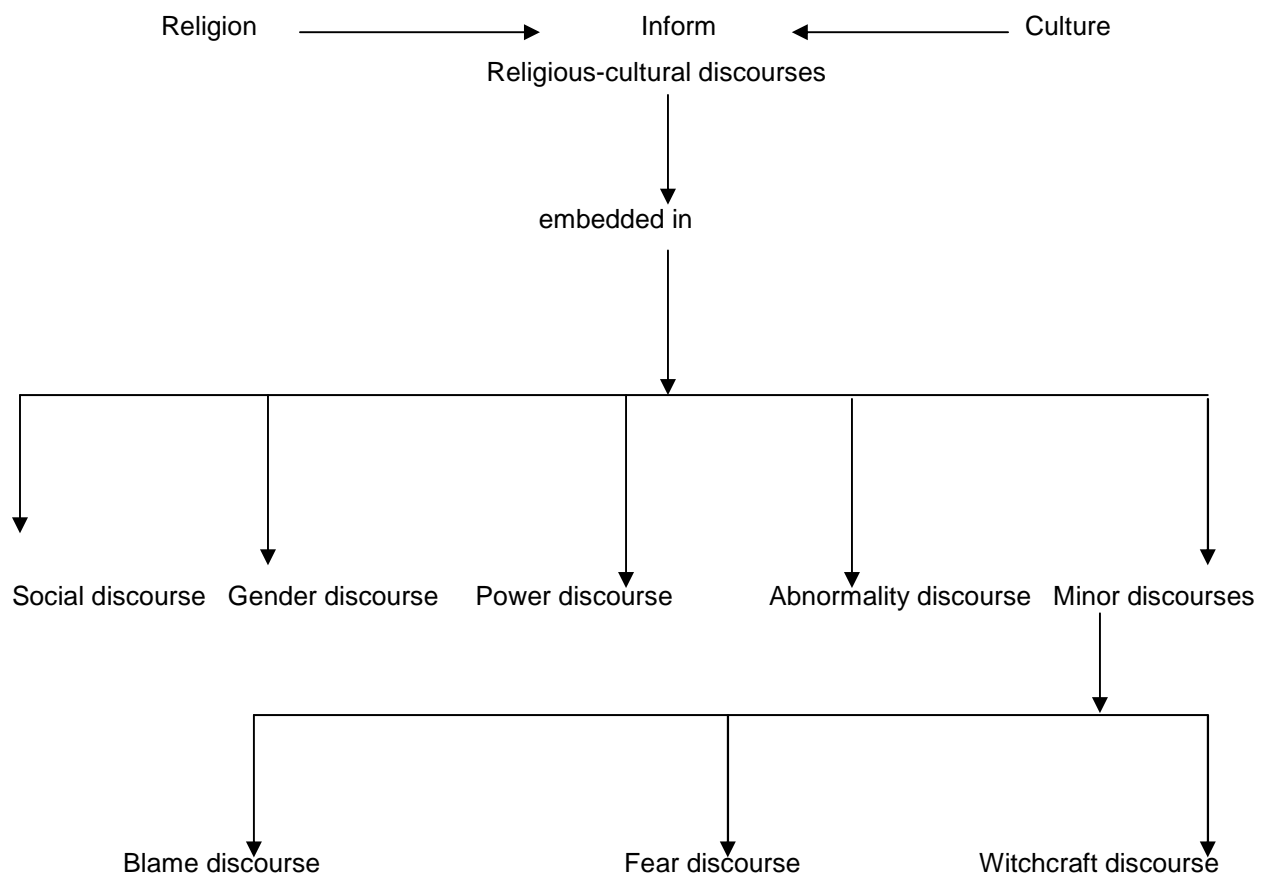
Religion ⟶ Inform ⟵ Culture
Religious-cultural discourses

embedded in

Social discourse   Gender discourse   Power discourse   Abnormality discourse   Minor discourses

Blame discourse   Fear discourse   Witchcraft discourse

Figure 1. A model of religious-cultural discourses

23

For the purpose of this study, the model presented above maintains that religion and culture inform religious-cultural discourses pertaining to the death and bereavement rituals. The religious-cultural discourses appear to play a role in the way we believe, act and interact in our day-to-day life. This also includes the performance of bereavement rituals. The model implies that religion and culture, as they inform religious-cultural discourses, are embedded in social, power, gender, abnormality and minor discourses that are found within other discourses - blame discourses, fear discourses and witchcraft discourse. Thus, whether or not one will perform the bereavement rituals or not depends on one's interaction with others in relationships about culture and religion. The sections below (2.4.3.1-2.4.3.5) describe the various elements of the model.

2.4.3.1 Social discourse

Language is used to construct culture and religion, which involves people's behaviour in action and interaction with other people. As such, people cannot construct culture and religion without talking about the groups that are bound together in that particular religious-cultural setting. Such people can be the bereaved, community members, nurses and doctors in hospitals in the context of death (either wild or good, as described in chapter 3). They are found in homes, communities and hospitals. This implies that culture and religion are embedded in a social discourse that informs the way people act and interact in a particular way, in a particular situation.

Community leaders and elders often lead discourses on death, as they understand them in terms of their culture. Should death be constructed in a way that does not require social networks, people could possibly perceive it differently, i.e. in a way that does not stress the bereaved or the dying person even when there are no family members involved.

2.4.3.2 Power discourse

This discourse is embedded in the relationship between the bereaved and other people, such as a widow and her in-laws or relatives. The language used in some

definitions of culture constructs culture as prescriptive of how people should think and behave; and implies that people are powerless within the context of such culture and within certain situations. People allow culture to prescribe appropriate ways of interacting with one another. When behaviour is prescribed it implies that people have no choice to decide on a different way of behaviour, possibly because they might be blamed for not complying with the prescriptions, or because they might lose support from other people with whom they should interact and bond, given the context of such behaviour.

This way of talking about culture as having power possibly comes from cultures that are dominated by values that determine what is wrong and right, good and evil, and what constitutes respect, praise and blame (Mbiti, 1975) and cultures that discourage discrepancies (Hong, 2004) and encourage interdependencies (Neff, 2003). When living in such a culture, one is expected to do things in the so-called 'right and good way', and one should respect the cultural prescriptions to avoid blame and misfortune.

Constructing culture as having power tends to oppress those who might be interested in different ways of behaviour from those legitimised culturally. In order to gain favour and support from other people, they cannot use their own powers because these are suppressed by their culture.

Talking about religion as involving worshipping God and ancestors implies that there are some beings that have more power than others, and that those who do not have power should worship the ones who have power. In turn, the ones who are worshipped bestow certain favours on the worshipper. The one who has power becomes the authority figure in a person's life.

Religious leaders and officials are given power over other people, as they provide services, such as purification rituals. In the context of death should they not do so,

people would remain 'unclean'. Therefore, the religious officials and leaders have some kind of authority over the bereaved people.

Power is also given to the ancestors who are ascribed the role of blessing the ones who perform the rituals and punishing those who do not. People also accord the ancestors positions of authority and believe that, if they do not honour them, the ancestors have the power to punish them; conversely, if they are honoured they also have the power to bless. Thus, in a hierarchical order of existence, ancestors appear to occupy higher positions (authority position).

In terms of these religious and cultural discourses, bereaved women have a lower position in the hierarchical structure. They are expected to perform the rituals without any voice of consent or power. Only those who are in higher positions in the hierarchy have a voice and power. A positioning that implicates the bereaved as powerless may derive from a culture and religion that gives higher privileges to others (such as sangomas and faith healers). Culture and religion, as institutions that have prescriptive powers, are not easily opposed. The position of the bereaved would be different if they held a position equal to the dominant group. In this case, the dominant group is 'those who know better'.

2.4.3.3 Gender discourse

The word gender refers to "the social and cultural patterns associated with women and men" (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009, p. 136). This may imply that gender is not a biological category, but a socially constructed one. Thus, the way language is used to construct gender in relation to bereavement rituals implicates women and men as different (Ngcongo, 1993). Men are seen as stronger and superior, and women as weaker and inferior (Rakoczy, 2004). The position that women occupy implicates them as the ones who need rituals more than those who are stronger (men) and, therefore, do not need rituals as much. Women are positioned as subordinate not only because of cultural influences, but also because of the discourse that women are weaker. Such women, particularly from Tshivenda culture, explicitly position

themselves in relation to a stated position. The moment they take up a particular subject position in discourse, they have a particular limited set of concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking and narratives they can take on as theirs (Murakami, 2003). As they occupy this subject position they appear of less value and are deprived of human rights as per the Bill of Rights (1996). That is because our sense of who we are comes from our occupation of subject positions within discourse (Burr, 2003).

The language used to construct women as weak and in need of rituals may derive from cultural discourses that position women as taking a subordinate role in society in relation to men. Because of their position, women are also expected to express their emotions openly, for example, through crying (Rosenblatt, 1997). On the contrary, men are expected to control themselves, and never cry aloud or express their emotions (Maritz, Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2008).

2.4.3.4 Abnormality discourse

The way language is used in constructing death as being painful suggests that those who experience the pain of death are not in a normal state. They are represented as ill and devastated and in need of something that will help them return to their normal state. Hedtke (2002) argues that even when people give their condolences to the bereaved, they use language that represents the bereaved as ill and in need of healing. The bereaved widows also behave in a way that positions them as such by the way they dress (Carton, 2003). For example, in Tshivenda culture, widows dress in black for a period of twelve months. The construction of death as implying abnormality or an illness further legitimises the performance of bereavement rituals.

Also, the language used to construct death as good may signal that the good death can help people to stay normal even after the death of a family member because they will be able to perform the necessary rituals (Gielen, 1997). A good death is given a therapeutic role that can heal the bereaved from the illness caused by

death. On the other hand, the language used to construct a wild death signals this kind of death as unhealthy; and positions the bereaved in an abnormal state through being denied an opportunity to perform certain rituals.

The discourse on death that legitimises abnormality in bereaved people may derive from a religion and culture that consider death to be good only if it occurs in one's home, surrounded by people who share the same religion and culture as the dying person. Different authors (Van der Hart, 1983; Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991) construct bereavement rituals through language that implicates the people who perform the rituals as not normal and possibly in need of therapy. People are constructed as polluted or contaminated, and bereavement rituals are personified as something that can provide therapy or healing through cleansing (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). They are seen as serving the dead to avoid guilty feelings and misfortunes caused by disciplinary action from the ancestors (Ngubane, 2004). Religious leaders, sometimes also known as faith healers, are the ones responsible for the purification of the homestead. This procedure implies that the bereaved are dirty or ill, and that they need cleansing or therapy to help them return to their previous normal state.

The language used to construct bereavement rituals may furthermore come from religious and cultural institutions that prescribe the performance of bereavement rituals. These institutions consider the rituals to be important for both the deceased and the bereaved because they supposedly make people feel better or return to their previous normal state (through cleansing). Religion and culture appear to be institutions that highly esteem religious leaders and officials and their roles in the spiritual well-being of a community.

The language used to talk about bereavement rituals seems to imply that all practices related to bereavement rituals are meant to cure some form of abnormality in those who participate. This is because bereavement rituals are believed to help in chasing misfortunes away, providing therapy or healing and justifying emotional display. Bereavement rituals could be constructed in a way that does not subject

people to a state of being abnormal. It is possible to consider that the people who perform rituals are not polluted or somehow ill, and in need of cleansing and therapy. It seems that people may construct bereavement rituals as something that associates the bereaved with their culture and religion.

2.4.3.5 Blame discourse

The death of a loved one forces many grieving people to face head on the sadness, guilt, anger, or fear that follows a loss (Frantz, Farrell & Trolley, 2001). When death is constructed as unnatural and caused by some external agent, the implication is that there are people who can be blamed for the death, as well as people who do the blaming. The bereaved are the ones who must blame someone for the death. They might consult with the sangoma who has more insight into who should be blamed. The sangoma's role in this respect constructs him or her in a higher position in relation to the bereaved.

Constructing death in a way that gives a sangoma greater power may derive from a culture dominated by a discourse that regards death as unnatural. If death were considered natural, it is possible that there would be no social language that blames death on people. As a way of avoiding such sense of blame on either self or others, traditional Chinese, for example, believe that death is beyond human control (Chan et al., 2005).

2.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter discussed the importance of adopting a relevant theoretical framework (social constructionism) in the study of bereavement rituals, which are social actions. This theoretical framework was linked to a methodology (discourse analysis) that was chosen as it allows for discourses to be identified. The religious-cultural discourses discussed in this chapter were identified in the literature. This literature is examined in greater depth in the two chapters that follow.

CHAPTER 3
RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL WORLDVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As the focus of this study includes two religious world views with which the Tshivenda-speaking community is affiliated, the chapter unpacks the meaning of religion and culture as they relate to the discourses that inform the construction of death in relation to bereavement rituals. It is assumed that culture and religion play a role in how people talk about death and dying, as these are the institutions that call for the performance of bereavement rituals among most of the African cultures, particularly the Tshivenda-speaking people.

This chapter addresses the religious-cultural worldviews informing the ways people perceive and talk about death and dying. In order to address these worldviews, I first consider the way culture and religion are socially constructed and the role they play in informing people's everyday life, behaviour and interaction. Religions in the Tshivenda-speaking community, the introduction of Christianity among the Tshivenda-speaking people and the construction of death as the continuation of life are also highlighted. The chapter also addresses the meaning of the two groups (African Christian and traditional African) as they are constructed in this study. The way people construct death and dying is also discussed.

3.2 CULTURE AND RELIGION

This section addresses these concepts as they appear to play a major role in the way people talk about death and bereavement rituals. Culture and religion inform not only people's talk, but also the behaviour that is acceptable in different situations in their communities (Moyo, 2004). These two concepts also assist in recognising discourses that inform people's perceptions and constructions of reality.

3.2.1 Culture

Cohen and Swerdlik (1999, p. 5) construct culture as "the socially transmitted behaviour patterns, beliefs, and products of work of a particular population, community, or group of people". Parkes et al. (1997, p. 10) construct culture as "ways of thinking and behaviour which distinguish one group of people from another and which tend to be passed down from generation to generation". Culture appears to be networks of knowledge, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world (Barth, 2002). Culture is seen as involving certain people (community members) in a particular institution (community or society). The way culture is constructed implies that there are people who have a common way of thinking and behaving that identifies them as belonging to a particular culture. What makes it unique, possibly, is that it is shared among a collection of interconnected individuals, who are often demarcated by race, ethnicity, or nationality; externalised by rich symbols, artefacts, social constructions, and social institutions used to form the common ground for communication among members (Hong, 2009). However, culture may undergo continuous modifications as aspects of the knowledge tradition may be falsified or deemed not applicable by a newer social order and reality (Hong, 2009).

The culture of a particular community, therefore, prescribes the members' way of behaviour and thinking, which makes it possible for them to act and interact in a particular way in different situations. Those who behave differently from those culturally prescribed patterns come to be considered abnormal (Hedtke, 2002). This may imply that those who behave as prescribed for a particular situation will be considered normal. When people who belong to Tshivenda culture behave in an unacceptable way within their culture, they may be judged and possibly considered abnormal.

When people who belong to a particular group and culture are exposed to other and different cultures that can make them acquire the shared knowledge of those cultures, they are likely to behave in an abnormal way in relation to their own culture. Their behaviour might be influenced by knowledge that can be activated by certain contextual

cues that will subsequently affect the way they think and behave (Hong, 2009). However, it is through people's actions and interactions that they show to which culture they belong. As such, culture becomes the way things are done and the means with which such things are done (Ngubane, 2004) for that particular group of people.

The way people think about bereavement and bereavement rituals in a particular culture may be discerned in the way they act and interact, and how they use language in the context of death. That is because people's constructions of death are symbolised in their actions and interactions (Rosenblatt, 2001).

In cultures with an emphasis on embeddedness, people are viewed as entities embedded in the collective. Meaning in life is expected to come largely through social relations, through identifying with the group, participating in its shared way of life, and striving towards its shared goals. Embedded cultures emphasise maintaining the status quo and restraining actions that might disrupt in-group solidarity or the traditional order. Important values in such cultures are social order, respect for tradition, security, obedience, and wisdom (Schwartz, 2009).

Such shared knowledge, that influences the way things are done, constantly emerges and evolves as a result of socio-political and other changes in the society (Hong, 2009). Therefore, construction of culture may depend on the socio-political context. This may imply that culture is not static but may change as a result of socio-political changes and that it will always be relevant to the people in the present context. There are, however, authors like Ngubane (2004) who argue that it is only when so-called enlightened Africans want to compromise their authentic self and African values that culture will be referred to as dynamic. Ngubane's argument may imply that there is one particular African culture, which, because of civilization, modernity, progress and development discourses, results in its people being alienated from their socio-cultural background. Without taking a complete opposite stance from Ngubane, I can argue that there are multiple cultures in Africa that constitute an African identity. South Africa in particular is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country in which each tribe respects its own culture and

subjective identity. For example, Shangaans, Zulu and Vendas have their acceptable ways of expressing grief.

In a social constructionist paradigm "our subjective experience is provided by the discourses in which we are culturally embedded" (Burr, 2003, p. 59). This implies that the way we experience the world is possibly the result of how a particular culture defines such an experience. Culture provides people with language that they use to describe and construct their subjective experiences. Consequently, people from different cultures are likely to construct death differently (Rosenblatt, 2001). That is, even though grief can be considered universal, ways of reacting to the experience are shaped by one's own culture through various prescribed rituals, beliefs, and family rules (Chan et al., 2005). For example, cultures may differ in whether people are expected to cry or show grief openly upon the death of a family member. Shangaans will cry heavily to show that they are mourning and the pain associated with the death of a family member is unbearable, whereas Zulus are not allowed to mourn death caused by an accident (Ngubane, 2004), possibly because such death is considered a wild death (Opoku, 1989).

Therefore, culture appears to be a container for many other abstractions that are based on inevitably selective observations made by certain people at certain times. Even if people can grant some sort of reality to a culture, a culture is inhomogeneous and complex, filled with contradictions and ambiguities, and is forever in process (Rosenblatt, 2001). It is not easy to hold onto a particular way to construct culture, but depends on people in a particular time and environment.

When we talk of culture as it distinguishes groups of people, we also need to talk about that which binds such people together, for example, religion. Religion merits discussion as it is one of the ways of giving meaning to living for people in their respective cultures.

3.2.2 Religion

Van Beek and Blakely (1994) construct religion as "a human interaction with culturally postulated reality" (p. 2) while Parkes et al. (1997) talk of religion as "that body of ideas which binds a society together" (p. 10). The way these authors talk of religion suggests that religion binds people in particular institutions (society) and people interact with what that particular culture assumes to be a reality. Pang and Lam (2002) argue that the variance in cultures and cultural practices reflect underlying differences in their belief systems. This may imply that people in each and every culture act and interact in a way that reflects what they believe in. Those cultural practices become an integral part of the practice of people's faith as they define the moral standards that underpin that faith, belief or spirituality (Gcabashe, 1995).

The Collins Gem English Dictionary (2003, p. 486) defines religion as "a system of belief in and worship of a supernatural power or God". This definition seems to imply that religion is relevant to those who believe in a God (for example, Christians) and those who believe in ancestral powers (traditional Africans). In the context of this study, I will discuss religion as it applies to these two groups. A detailed exploration of the meaning of these two religious groups as they apply in this study is addressed later in the chapter.

According to the above definitions, practising a religion appears to necessitate actions that need to be performed by actors (people). Such actions include the rituals involved in the worship of a supernatural power or God. There are actors who should perform particular actions (worship). Talking of religion in a way that involves worshipping God appears to imply recognition of some higher power that has control and that deserves obedience from people. It also implies that those who worship accept the position of being powerless and possibly in need of favours from this higher power. Religion appears to be the way by which people express their spirituality (De Veber, 1995).

There are two main religions that inform people's construction of reality amongst the traditional African people in the Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Tshivenda-speaking

34

people, namely the traditional African religion and Christianity (Moyo, 2004). In the next sections I briefly highlight these two religions together with the bereavement rituals that are performed in each religion. I also give a brief background of the introduction of Christianity among the Tshivenda-speaking community because both traditional beliefs and Christianity play a role in how people construct reality about bereavement and bereavement rituals.

3.2.2.1 Religions in the Tshivenda-speaking community

Both Christians and traditional Africans engage in particular practices to satisfy their spiritual needs. There is a religious-cultural discourse that governs people's behaviour. Thus, although culture prescribes the way of living within a particular group of people, religion restricts their behaviour, in part because there are certain religions that undermine some cultural practices (Chavanduka, 1999).

This study is concerned with how Christian and traditional beliefs inform people's perceptions of bereavement rituals. Whereas in most of traditional African religions, people believe that the dead have a significant and long-lasting influence on the lives and behaviour of those that remain behind, Christians believe that only God can influence their lives and behaviour, and that the dead have no way of influencing the lives of the living. The core of the Christian faith is that there is life after death; that such a life is lived in heaven where people go after death, and life there is led by Christ (Ter Blanche & Parkes, 1997). Traditional Africans believe in life after death and the presence of ancestors who interact with the living (Ngubane, 2004; Opoku, 1989). The perceptions of these religious beliefs construct how people view death and dying.

Many traditional Africans believe that if the ancestors are not given their due respect through the performance of rituals, they might strike the family. However, this is a religious-cultural belief and is not universal. Thus, it is not everybody who believes that the ancestors can bring misfortunes as a consequence of not performing the rituals. For example, while knowledge about misfortunes that accompany the failure

to perform death rituals usually influences the behaviour of most traditional Africans, Christians' talk and behaviour are not influenced by this same fear of misfortunes. Possibly, their talk is influenced by their belief in Christ that brings about knowledge of life in heaven after death (Ter Blanche & Parkes, 1997) where they will reunite with the deceased during resurrection (Pang & Lam, 2002). Rather, their talk is influenced by their belief in Christ and the accompanying biblical promise of life in heaven after death (Ter Blanche & Parkes, 1997).

The nature of religion can be inferred from the following four aspects, as elucidated by Mbiti (1975): beliefs, practices, religious objects and places, and religious officials or leaders. No aspect on its own constitutes the entire meaning of religion, but all these parts must be seen as working together to give us possibly some sense of a complete picture of religion. Different people construct the meanings of these aspects as they interact with one another, as well as through their social language, which is underpinned by a religious-cultural heritage.

1. Beliefs

Beliefs are an essential part of any religion. They show the way people think about the universe and their attitude towards life and death. Religious beliefs are concerned with topics such as God, spirits, human life, magic, the hereafter, and so on. For example, a traditional African belief in many cultures is that death is not the termination of life, but a continuation of life in a different form in another world (Ngubane, 2004; Opoku, 1989). Such continuation of life invokes a certain type of relationship between the dead and the living. As stated by Ray (1976), after death, the soul of the deceased continues to remain in contact with the family left behind. Because of this belief, the performance of certain rituals is prescribed to ensure that the deceased does not become angry with the living.

The relationship between the living and the dead has powerful moral and psychological implications and plays a vital role in the everyday life of many Tshivenda-speaking people, and many other African societies. This is because

failure to honour the deceased might bring misfortune to the family. What is important here is not only the afterlife, but the way the deceased continues to be involved with the living (Rosenblatt, 2000). When the deceased is not honoured, for example, through failure to perform the rituals, this relationship may be disturbed.

2. Religious practices

Religious practices appear essential to any religion. Religious practices show how people express their beliefs in practical terms. They include praying or worshipping, making sacrifices and offerings, performing ceremonies and rituals, observing various customs, and so on (Mbiti, 1975). Prayers are regarded as ways of communicating with God who watches over people and consoles them when things are difficult and painful (Chong, 2006). The consideration of prayer appears to symbolise acceptance that a person is not well and needs divine intervention for his or her wellbeing. Religious practices found in Africa also include the performance of bereavement rituals when a member of the community dies. Such rituals include purification, since interaction with a deceased 'contaminates' a person and he or she needs to be cleansed with rituals that symbolise honouring the deceased, rituals that symbolise a change in status, and so on.

When religious practices are constructed as symbolising people's expression of their beliefs, then people are more likely to value and participate in such practices. In this way, religious practices often add value and a sense of fulfilment to people's lives.

3. Religious objects and places

Religious objects and places that people set apart as being holy or sacred are not used for common everyday activities, and have a particular religious purpose. There are many such religious objects and places. Some are constructed by people, but others are taken in their natural form and set apart for religious purposes. Some belong to private individuals and families, while others belong to the whole community. They include places like shrines, groves, sacred hills or

mountains and objects like amulets, charms, masks and many others (Mbiti, 1975). In the Tshivenda-speaking culture there are, for example, places called 'zwiendeulu' where only royal people are buried, irrespective of their religious affiliation, and where those who are not from the royal family are not even allowed to enter.

The importance attached to such objects and places in religious terms is derived from social interactions and history. As people interact, they decide to accept certain places or objects as important within the context of their religion. For example, a burial place is accepted for that particular purpose only. When people go there they are expected to engage in actions associated with death, such as performing the relevant burial rituals.

4. Religious officials and leaders

According to Mbiti (1975), religious officials or leaders are the people who conduct and facilitate religious matters such as ceremonies, sacrifices, formal prayers and divinations. In many cases they are trained men and women. They are deemed to know more about religious affairs than other people, and are respected by their community. Such people hold offices as priests, rain-makers, ritual elders, diviners, medicine men and women, and even kings and rulers. These officials may or may not be paid for their duties, but in most cases people give them gifts to show their gratitude. These people are an essential part of a religion and without them, religious-cultural activities would neither survive nor function properly; much of the religious wisdom of the people would be forgotten, and people would not benefit from it in practical terms (Mbiti, 1975).

These religious officials play certain roles in the community that other people relate to and identify with, depending on the situation. In the context of death and dying, elders and diviners are considered to have the power to facilitate certain rituals. The bereaved perform the rituals as they conform to the wisdom of their religious-cultural officials and leaders. Culture has given such officials and leaders power and

specialised knowledge and their prescriptions have to be followed to ensure goodwill both for the deceased and the community.

Both Christian ministers and traditional healers are seen as playing major roles in determining how people address the issues around death. For the purposes of this study, ministers are seen as representing Christian religious leadership and traditional healers as representing cultural leadership within the African religions as it relates to Tshivenda speaking people. These officials are seen as the authority in prescribing religious-cultural practices pertaining to death and bereavement. For example, Christian ministers facilitate the necessary prayers and traditional healers facilitate traditional African rituals.

In situations where a deceased was a member of the African Indigenous Church (AIC), a faith healer will come and sprinkle 'holy water' (tshiwasho) all over the homestead and kraals (cattle enclosures) (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). The sprinkling of holy water implies that the place is dirty and needs to be cleansed through the use of holy water. The water is given a role of returning the homestead and kraals back to the previous clean state that was interrupted by the occurrence of death.

In the event of the death of a spouse, it becomes necessary to purify the surviving spouse (widow) with holy water. The principal mourner is expected to wear funeral clothes for a period of 12 months (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). These clothes symbolise the acceptance of one's status (widowhood) that is occasioned by the death of a spouse. During this period, it is taboo to marry or have sex with another man because the widow is believed to be still mourning and in the process of purification. Purification, wearing of funeral clothes and avoidance of sex or marriage within twelve months are all symbols and cultural prescriptions that should be followed in the particular Tshivenda traditional African religion. These practices imply that a widow is ill or dirty and in need of therapy or cleansing.

During the death of my family member a ritual that concerns bringing the spirit of the deceased home was also performed. In this ritual, the traditional healer, together with the senior members of the family, killed a goat by drowning. This is done to show that the deceased's blood was never shed during his or her death. The goat is eaten by everyone (family members, relatives and the neighbours) symbolising the communal nature of the performance of the bereavement rituals. Furthermore, the whole goat is eaten on the same day as tradition prescribes and all the bones collected for burial in a corner of the yard. This small grave of bones symbolises the continual presence of the deceased in the family.

In the life of traditional African people, the deceased becomes another religious official who is always given high esteem as he or she intervenes in people's lives. The ancestors act as the official guardians of the social and moral order (Ray, 1976). The ancestors control social relationships pertaining to certain spheres, such as domestic productivity in the form of luck, wealth, and fertility (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). The ancestors do not only give blessings to the living, but they also send misfortunes that are seen as punishment for a community's or family's failure to perform the necessary rituals (Ray, 1976).

Another unique characteristic of the Tshivenda-speaking culture is what Stayt (1968) calls the pivotal role played by diviners in the performance of death rituals. The diviner chooses the site of the grave and also indicates who among the survivors should be the first to dig the grave and touch the corpse. Religious leaders and officials are more highly esteemed than the bereaved. Respect for these officials derives from the religious-cultural heritage that expects people to rely on religious leaders and officials when the performance of rituals is necessary, for example, during bereavement.

When a family member dies in the Tshivenda-speaking community, after the burial, the bereaved visit the sangoma (religious official) to find out exactly what or who killed the deceased. This is done because it is believed that death is caused by

somebody who must be known to the family. Normally the sangoma will not give the name of the person who caused the death, but will give references that will identify either a member of the community or a close relative who the mourners will begin to suspect. It is believed that the person who is responsible for a person's death can never be a stranger, but is a close relative who understands the family background, and includes people who are usually close to the deceased. This behaviour in which someone is blamed for causing the death places the bereaved and those who have come to support him or her in a difficult position.

3.2.2.2 Introduction of Christianity to the Tshivenda-speaking people

European missionaries introduced Christianity to the Tshivenda-speaking people in the northern parts of South Africa in 1814. It nearly destroyed the indigenous religious-cultural practices of the Tshivenda-speaking people. Most Tshivenda traditional religious rituals, including those associated with bereavement, were regarded as evil and against the Christian faith. It was also believed that these rituals promoted and encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of worshipping God. Tshivenda-speaking people who became Christians were thus discouraged by the church from participating in African traditional rituals (Chavanduka, 1999). Other groups in South Africa resisted such attempts, for example, even though some Zulu people adopted Christianity their widows may still participate in their own traditional practices (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007).

Currently, many African Christians are members of a church and still participate in their African religious practices. The African Independent Churches (AIC) emerged as a result of this dual allegiance and allowed its members to participate in both Christian and African religious practices. For example, an AIC faith healer integrates Christian ritual with traditional African rituals (Selepe & Richards, 2008). Integration of the two religious practices suggests that its followers respect both religions and might feel guilty for not adopting both religious practices. For example, if people believe in the performance of bereavement rituals and they do not perform them, they may feel guilty and fear that they might be punished for not complying with the

cultural prescriptions. At the same time, they may also feel guilty for not praying to God in the moment of bereavement for He has power over human life and people should obey Him (Parkes et al., 1997).

Christians from the 'Born Again' churches (u bebwa hafhu) in the Tshivenda-speaking communities no longer consider it important to perform the culturally prescribed bereavement rituals since they are believed to contradict church doctrines. Their ministers, who participate in and lead the funeral services, continue to discourage these practices, particularly those prescribed by culture. This is due to the Christian belief that when a person dies, his or her spirit leaves the world of the living to go where God has 'called' him; for his or her death is believed to be God's will (Vold, 2000). Christians do not acknowledge any link between the dead and the living nor do they believe the dead has influence over the life of the living. They do not believe in a continued interdependence and communication with the ancestors as a way of gaining goodwill from those who are dead, unlike traditional African people. As a result, followers of 'Born Again' churches consider it primitive to perform traditional African bereavement rituals, which amongst the Tshivenda-speaking community are regarded as the best entry point for facilitating healing, should one lose a family member to death (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). One implication of the differences in beliefs is that Africans who follow traditional rituals are considered to be sick, weak, unclean and powerless in the context of bereavement, while Christians regard themselves as still clean, healthy and strong, even when a family member has died.

Aiken (2001) reports that the final ritual for Christians takes place either at a church, funeral home or cemetery. The coffin is often brought into the church or the funeral home for family and community members to pay their last respects. Christians regard this ritual as a way of saying goodbye, and it seems that people's relationship with the deceased ends with the burial because they do not expect the dead to fulfil any roles after death. The practice of paying last respects at the funeral home or church seems to compromise the traditional way of showing last respects

at the deceased's home (Ngubane, 2004), particularly in the hut he or she used to sleep in when he or she was still alive.

Christian mourning rituals can be divided into Catholic or Protestant practices. In the Catholic Church, mourning rituals involve candle lighting, incense burning, and the sprinkling of holy water, and in many parishes the priest encourages the family members to participate in the burial ritual as speakers and singers. This is followed by the committal service at the graveyard, where the priest blesses the grave and leads the mourners in prayer for the peaceful repose of the soul and the comfort of the survivors (Marrone, 1997). For Protestants, family and friends gather at the church or funeral home to console one another and pay their final respects to the deceased. The actual funeral service usually takes place on the next day when the minister conducts the service at the church or mortuary. The service includes hymns, prayers and readings from the Bible (Marrone, 1997). Those who are participating in funeral customs walk in a funeral procession wearing black clothing and assist in raising a mound over the grave (Fulton, 1992). In addition, prayers and hymns will also be sung at the graveyard before people finally take leave of the deceased. Black clothes in this context symbolise mourning and a call for sympathy from other people, and also provide justification for grieving the death of a close family member.

The section that follows accounts for the way people construct death as a continuation of life in a different form.

3.2.2.3 Construction of death as continuation of life

In this section, I will first discuss death as the end of one form of life and then focus on death as rebirth in the spiritual world. This discussion is relevant to the assumption that the end of life implies the end of a particular form of bonding and interaction between the dead and the living, whilst at the same time calling for a particular, though different, form of interaction and bonding.

1. **Death as the end of life**

   The way people talk about religion as involving people's interaction and bonding implies that such an interaction is made possible in the presence of life. This means that when people are alive, they are able to interact and bond with one another. The absence of life (death) is defined as the absence of respiration, pulse, and heart beat, as well as the failure to respond to stimuli such as light, movement, and pain. A dead person can no longer engage in physical interaction and bonding with other people (Kastenbaum, 1998). Among the Tshivenda-speaking community, when someone no longer interacts with others or is in hospital and unable to speak that person is considered dead even before any medical declaration.

   Constructing death as the absence of interaction and bonding with other people derives from a culture that seems to associate life with people in interaction, and from a religion that focuses on the connections between people. Therefore, the end of life in this culture is associated with silence, unresponsiveness, or the inability to interact and bond with others.

   In order to continue bonding with the deceased, people tend to sense the presence of the deceased, communicate with the deceased, mentally relive the relationship, and dream of the deceased (Epstein, Kalus & Berger, 2006). Such ways of creating bonds with the deceased seem to play a role in comforting the bereaved.

2. **Death as rebirth in the spirit world**

   The concept of rebirth seems to inform the way in which people perceive death from a religious perspective. Birth is associated with something new in our existence. When a child is born, people are excited about the arrival of a new family member. In some religions that accept life after death, the concept of rebirth seems to provide a context in which death is perceived as the continuation of life (Gielen, 1997). Although the deceased will never be seen in the same physical state as he or she was known during his or her lifetime, that person continues to exist in a new and different spiritual form. When the deceased continues to exist amongst the living in

a spiritual form, the significance of the deceased's life also continues to exist even when the person is not around (Hedtke, 2002). The family continues to refer to his or her life in connection with what they can see or remember.

For Christians, a deceased person who lived a good life goes to heaven. For Buddhists, the deceased are believed to continue the cycle of rebirth until they attain enlightenment (Chan et al., 2005). The construction of death as rebirth appears to justify the acts of worship that people perform in accordance with religious norms. Thus, people worship the ancestors for they know they still exist as a part of their lives, though in a spiritual form. This construction also justifies the performance of rituals that involve allowing the deceased to join the ancestral or spiritual world so that they can fulfil the ancestral roles for the benefit of the living.

From a religious point of view, death is constructed as a transition from one form of life to another (Backer, Hannon & Russel, 1994). Some religions (such as Hinduism and Buddhism) believe in reincarnation, in which the embodied self passes through childhood, youth, and old age, and assumes another body after death. The particular form in which the deceased is reincarnated depends upon their 'karma' or behaviour in their previous life (Backer et al., 1994). For the traditional African, death appears to represent a transformation from the 'flesh' world to the ancestral spiritual world. Religious-cultural discourse informs people's construction of ancestral life after death, and guides the way people perceive death as either a rebirth or continuation of life.

The following section explores social constructions of death and dying.

3.3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF DEATH AND DYING

This section focuses on the way people construct death and dying as a social phenomenon informed by culture and religion. Given the above discussions on culture and religion, one can assume that people's religious-cultural background plays a role in

their day-to-day perceptions. In this section, the literature reviewed informed the way that I identified constructions of death and dying.

3.3.1 Socially constructed perceptions of death and dying

As I have already argued, people perceive death in different ways depending on their religious affiliation and culture. The same applies to people from the same family who may perceive death, its impact and its meaning differently (Beck, 1999). The primary focus of this section is to show how perceptions of death and dying are socially constructed. The way that people socially construct their perceptions of death and dying plays a role in the performance of bereavement rituals. Such perceptions of death and dying are based on death as 'good' and also as 'wild'.

3.3.1.1 Good death

The way people talk about death is neither uniform nor universal; rather, it is based on history and culture. It is also dependent on one's religious affiliation. What is considered to be a good death in one culture might be different in another culture. The definition of a 'good death' might also differ in the same culture, depending on the time and context. Thus, history and culture mediate the social language that is used when constructing reality in different contexts.

Death is constructed as painful and fearful, irrespective of religion and culture. Constructions that consider death to be good may elicit surprise. When things are seen to be good, it suggests that such a thing is appealing to the people who experience it. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006) refer to this as the binary opposition that informs the discourses and the metaphor people express in their talk. People can refer to something as 'good' not because it brings happiness, but because it meets their expectations in that particular culture.

The perception of death as good seems to have two meanings. According to Howarth and Leaman (2001), these meanings are derived from two divergent Greek etymological sources. The first is 'to die well'. This is linked to the debate on the

medical quality of the physical end of life, namely euthanatos. The second meaning is 'to die nobly', which means being prepared to meet one's death, in the social sense of being prepared to die. In addition, Opoku (1989) refers to a good death as death that comes after a person has "attained a ripe old age" (p. 19). Opoku's construction of good death concerns age. As long as a person is old, his or her death can be perceived as good. Opoku possibly also implies that the person's relatives or community expect that person's death.

A good death is also one that facilitates the ways in which the bereaved cope with the death of a family member. This kind of death can be simply described as an appropriate death, a correct death, a healthy death, a peaceful death, or even a happy death (Clinton, 1999). Hart, Sainsbury and Short (1998) talk about a good death as the kind of death that takes place as a public event, for example, in a dying person's home and where family members, friends, co-workers and even some members of the community have an opportunity to surround and support the dying person. With such deaths, family members also get an opportunity to perform necessary rituals that assist the dying person to make the transition to the next life happily and peacefully (Gielen, 1997). Naturally, in such situations the family members believe in the blessings and punishments associated with rituals. People who have a different construction of a good death may perceive it differently, and not in relation to the dying person's transition to the spiritual world.

In a good death, communal or social support appears to be very important to both the dying person, and those who will remain after his or her death. The person's social network, mostly family members, friends, co-workers and neighbours usually render such communal or social support. Among the Chinese, such social support is so important that if the son is not there during the father's death, such a death is considered a curse (Chan et al., 2005). Celentano and Sonnega (1992) refer to the categories of support as providing instrumental aid (assisting with the normal daily functions of life), socio-emotional aid (sympathy, affection and affiliation) or informational aid (giving advice, opinions and facts). Obviously there is a need for

all the above categories of support for a dying person, because an isolated person has a greater chance of dying a wild death (see 3.3.1.2 below), hence increasing the guilt feelings of the bereaved.

Weisman (1980) states that "it is reasonable to assume that … the dying wants to be as autonomous as possible for as long as possible and then to be cared for in ways that do not corrupt or degrade their individuality" (p. 64). It seems important to involve the dying person in making decisions about their treatment and care because this reduces their feeling of helplessness. When a dying person's integrity is recognised, this reduces depression and may promote a healthy psychological state, not only for the dying person, but also for the family members who are more likely to feel that they have done everything necessary to prepare themselves and their relative for the latter's demise.

A quick and painless death, ideally in one's sleep, is often touted as the ideal way to die. However, many traditional Africans prefer a natural prolongation of the dying process (without the aid of machines) so that they can make peace with their death, say farewell to friends and relatives, and give final instructions to immediate relatives. Celentano and Sonnega (1992) call this process a 'good death'. Though it rarely occurs in modern cities where hospitals provide advanced care, death seems preferable when it occurs at home, where the family can provide comfort and an opportunity for the dying person's spiritual needs to be met through the performance of the necessary rituals. Among the Tshivenda-speaking people, a good death occurs when a person dies at home in the presence of relatives and with the availability of necessary rituals that are seen to assist in the separation of the body and the soul, and which allow the individual to die peacefully.

In a good death, the dying person tends to act as manager of the ceremonies, presiding over his or her last days of life by conducting farewells, giving blessings and accepting pardons, and awaiting the end of life (Hart et al., 1998). The dying person tends to feel in control and is given respect, in accordance with African

culture that dictates respect for the dying and the dead. When such respect is offered to the dying, the relatives will then talk about such a death as a good death because they have also participated in the necessary rituals.

When death is constructed in terms of being good, both the dying person and those who remain, such as family members, fulfil certain roles. The family members do not only give support and care, but they also perform the necessary culturally prescribed rituals meant for the dying person. Such rituals do not only help the dying person to get to the spiritual world peacefully, but they also console the family members through the knowledge that they have completed the culturally expected tasks related to the dying process.

A good death seems to be more conducive to coping with death. Nowadays, however, instead of dying at home next to family members (as stated above), people very often die in hospitals (Backer et al., 1994) away from family members who should assist them during their last days. The good death, which seems natural, has changed and often little assistance is provided to relatives when their family member is dying.

The consequences of a good death appear beneficial not only for the dying person, but also for family members who will remain after his or her death. The family members need an opportunity to give support to their dying family member and to receive support from the community. As stated above, they also need to perform the necessary rituals that show care for the dying person. These opportunities are denied family members when a person dies a wild or a bad death (see the following section).

3.3.1.2 Wild death

The concept of a 'wild death' is associated with the forest or bush, or being separated from familiar surroundings and being unable to access something or somebody. A wild death is one in which a person dies away from family members,

and is associated with people who are inaccessible to other family members and relatives. For people in African cultures, a wild death is unnatural and traumatic.

A wild death occurs when an individual dies in hospital surrounded by machines and doctors instead of family members (O'Gorman, 1998). Such a death denies traditional African people the chance to offer rituals to dying family members who are surrounded by nurses and doctors, who may not be familiar with the dying person's culture. The doctors' role is placed at the centre stage of the life of a dying person, rather than the person himself or herself. A wild death occurs in isolation or in an alien institution where the individual waits to die (O'Gorman, 1998). When people talk about the death, they focus on where it occurred and who was present. People perceive death as being wild when family members are absent and the person dies away from the natural home setting that would have allowed for the performance of necessary rituals.

African culture emphasises the need for communal support when a person is dying. Dying in an institution does not allow for social support, and the dying person's process of socialisation is prematurely terminated. This causes stress, fears and anxieties not only for the dying person, but also for family members who remain at home while their family member is hospitalised, waiting for his or her death. Furthermore, this kind of death denies the bereaved an opportunity to perform the necessary funeral rituals, resulting in feelings of guilt. For these reasons, O'Gorman (1998) refers to this way of dying as a wild and unhealthy death, which among the Chinese, is associated with a curse (Chan et al., 2005).

From a traditional African perspective, a wild death is similar to a bad death that includes death by violent accidents, unclean diseases and suicide (Opoku, 1989). According to Opoku (1989), people who are believed to have died a bad death are capable of coming back and repeating what they have done (e.g. suicide) through someone else in the family. This is because in some African cultures it is believed that the spirit of the deceased is capable of coming back to the family and living in

another person or a newborn baby. The perception of death as wild is accompanied by fear associated with the absence of the necessary rituals that are needed to prevent misfortune (Ray, 1976) for the survivors.

In some of traditional African cultures (e.g., Tshivenda culture), whether a death is considered good or wild, it is believed that it is caused by someone. The following section focuses on the construction of death as caused by hostile people or elements.

3.3.1.3 Causes of death

A traditional African belief is that death is never natural. Instead, there is always something or someone who is to blame. It is believed that death came into the world at a very early date in the history of humankind and that every time a person dies this death is caused by something or somebody (Sossou, 2002). Such a belief qualifies traditional Africans to perform different rituals as a way of acknowledging the value of a deceased and identifying themselves with their cultural practices. The rituals associated with finding the cause of death were also developed to help the bereaved cope well with the death of a family member. It is through identifying these causes of death that one's experiences, reactions and coping with death are informed. Belief in such causes of death also informs the particular rituals that the family and community will perform.

In some African cultures, death is believed to have both physical and non-physical causes (Opoku, 1989). The physical causes include old age, diseases, accidents, or injuries. From an African perspective, however, physical causes alone do not adequately and exhaustively explain the phenomenon of death. The non-physical causes provide a more comprehensive explanation of death. Non-physical causes include sorcery, curses, witchcraft and other mysterious forces as well as summons from ancestors which occur as a punishment for not abiding by cultural practices. Africans believe that even if death is caused by illness, there is always something that facilitated that illness (Mbiti, 1975). That belief informs the role of sangomas,

who use their supernatural powers to identify and provide an explanation of who caused the person's death.

The way people talk about death as caused by both physical and non-physical forces assumes that there is one person who is more powerful than others. Those who appear powerful are able to make others feel responsible for someone's death. Such people who appear powerful and in higher positions that qualify them to blame others are sangomas and the bereaved members of the family. It appears to be in the nature of human beings that when they are hurt by the reality of life, they need an explanation that will ease the pain they are experiencing.

In contradiction to the belief that death is caused by someone, that leads to blame for others, Chinese people seem to avoid such blame by attributing the cause of death to pre-destined rules, sickness or evil spirits (Chan, et al., 2005). Chinese beliefs appear to imply that death is beyond human power and it cannot be blamed on human beings. Possibly, they understand that human beings are mortal and cannot survive forever.

3.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The chapter addressed the two dominant religions in the Tshivenda-speaking community in terms of their religious-cultural worldviews on death and dying. It was proposed that culture and religion play an important role in prescribing ways in which people should behave and interact with one another in different contexts. Culturally 'good and acceptable' ways of behaviour were explored, especially in terms of the performance of bereavement rituals. These rituals form the focus of the following chapter.