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**A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BEREAVEMENT RITUALS IN A TSHIVENDA  
SPEAKING COMMUNITY: AFRICAN CHRISTIAN AND TRADITIONAL AFRICAN  
PERCEPTIONS**

BY

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this project was to identify discourses of traditional African and African Christian women in a Tshivenda speaking community regarding the bereavement rituals performed after the death of a husband. Six focus groups were held with women who had lost their husbands to death. The verbal data were transcribed verbatim and translated from Tshivenda to English. I used a social constructionist paradigm to identify how Tshivenda women construct meaning about the bereavement rituals. The discourses that informed the construction of bereavement rituals were analysed to identify the situated meanings that emerged from the social reality during the performance of the prescribed cultural rituals. Certain discourses were found to be common to most of the women from both Christian and traditional African religions.

The abnormality discourse was prevalent in informing the way that the participants, irrespective of their religious affiliation, constructed their grief experiences and bereavement rituals. They used language that implicated them as not normal and in need of healing (through performance of the rituals) for the injury caused by the death of their husbands. The power/patriarchal discourse informed the way participants used language to describe themselves as subordinate and powerless in relationships, while positioning others as having more power. A gender discourse in their constructions, implied that they performed rituals not only for socio-political reasons, but also because they were women, wives and mothers. Nevertheless, some participants used language that represented them as dominant and responsible for their actions, while others resisted cultural and societal labels of a widow as passive and with no voice about what happens in her life after the husband's death. These participants accepted their gender stereotype, but enacted their freedom of action and interaction. These participants either performed the rituals because they were willing to or believed in their (rituals) role

and significance in their lives or they did not perform the rituals because they were in a position to resist cultural norms and other people's oppression.

A religious-cultural discourse emerged in terms of social relationships and structures of the wider culture. The language they used was informed by their religious affiliation and a collectivist culture. Lastly, minor discourses (fear, blame, religious and witchcraft discourses) informed the participants' description of other aspects of their experiences in ways that legitimised both the rituals and the participants' positions. The discourses should be considered to help sensitise and inform people about the impact of bereavement rituals on the psychological well-being of bereaved women. It is also important for people to understand the positions women are subjected to by themselves, by others and by their religious-cultural heritage. The present study showed that it is important to empower widows who identified themselves as powerless and not responsible for their actions regarding bereavement rituals. They should be encouraged to re-construct their positions and their notions of issues like responsibility, power and womanhood that can assist them to understand the positions that they could accept or deny before and after the death of their husbands.



## KEYWORDS

Traditional African

African Christian

Bereavement rituals

Social Constructionist paradigm

Culture

Religion

Death

Discourse analysis

Perceptions

Women



## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, hereby submitted as requirement for the DPhil (Psychology), is my own original work and has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at this or any other University. All materials have been fully acknowledged.

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Makondelele S. Radzilani

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Date

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