



The Cultural Nature of Mourning In South African Black Families: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: This systematic review investigates the cultural nature of mourning among Black South African families. The study focuses on the unique cultural dimensions that shape grieving processes within diverse South African communities. Given the country's rich tapestry of ethnic groups and religious affiliations, mourning practices vary significantly across regions and social groups. These variations are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where traditional leaders and ancestral customs continue to play a pivotal role in shaping how grief is expressed and managed. To explore these dynamics, the study employed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using three strategic approaches across four major electronic databases—ResearchGate, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, and Scopus—covering empirical, peer-reviewed articles published up to 27 September 2024. The findings reveal a wide range of culturally specific mourning rituals, which are deeply embedded in spiritual and communal values. However, the review also uncovers significant challenges faced by individuals, particularly women, who may be compelled to observe rituals that conflict with their personal or religious convictions. These challenges underscore the need for more flexible, inclusive approaches to mourning that honor cultural heritage while safeguarding individual rights. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how mourning is experienced and regulated in Black South African communities. It advocates for greater respect for cultural diversity in grief expression and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and validating individual mourning practices. Ultimately, it calls for a more compassionate and pluralistic approach to bereavement—one that avoids imposing collective norms and instead acknowledges the personal and cultural complexities of grief.

Keywords: Black South African Families, Mourning Rituals, Cultural Grieving Practices, Traditional Leadership, Ubuntu Philosophy, Funeral Customs, Grief And Bereavement, Systematic Review

1. Introduction

Death, defined as the irreversible cessation of both cardio-circulatory and respiratory functions (Ross, 2018), is an inevitable part of the human experience. Although the biological reality of death is universal, the ways in which individuals and communities respond to it are deeply shaped by cultural, spiritual, and social contexts. Nowhere is this more evident than in South Africa, a country marked by its vast cultural diversity. Among Black South African families, mourning is not simply an emotional reaction to loss but a highly ritualized process embedded in tradition, communal values, and spiritual beliefs (Khosa-Nkatini, 2022; Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014).

In these communities, mourning serves multiple functions: it honors the deceased, fosters connection between the living and ancestral realms, and ensures spiritual continuity. As Mabunda and Ross (2023) explain, bereavement rituals are deeply symbolic acts that help individuals and families navigate grief while maintaining cultural identity. However, the mourning experience is far from uniform. Emotional responses are influenced not only by personal factors but also by cultural expectations and community norms, which can sometimes impose significant psychological burdens, particularly when traditions clash with individual beliefs.

Various subcultures within South Africa—such as the BaPedi, Xhosa, Swati, Ndebele, BaTswana, Tsonga, BaSotho, Vhavenda, and Zulu—uphold distinct mourning customs. A prominent example is the "after tears" ceremony observed in many townships, where community members gather post-funeral to celebrate the life of the deceased through social rituals such as shared meals, music, and dancing (Setsiba, 2012). These practices represent a form of joyful remembrance and community solidarity, transforming grief into collective healing.

Cultural constructions of death also influence how mourning is understood and enacted. In Zulu cosmology, for instance, death signifies a return to the ancestral realm. Rituals are performed to ensure that the deceased is accepted by the ancestors and that their spirit rests peacefully (Ngubane, 2019). Similarly, in Eswatini—a province in Mpumalanga—indigenous healing ceremonies play a crucial role in addre-

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-ssing spiritual imbalances following a death (Makgahlela, 2016). Across many Black South African communities, common mourning practices include washing the body of the deceased, shaving heads or cutting hair, abstaining from certain behaviors, and performing ritual animal sacrifices. These acts are believed to honor the deceased while protecting the living from misfortune or ancestral displeasure.

Among the Tsonga people in Limpopo, failing to perform specific rituals is believed to provoke spiritual unrest, with the deceased's spirit potentially returning to torment the living (Khosa-Nkatini, 2023). This belief underscores the dual function of mourning: to express grief and to restore spiritual order. For the BaPedi, mourning also serves to cleanse misfortune, particularly for widows and widowers, who may undergo spiritual purification a year after the death of a spouse. Abstaining from romantic or sexual relationships during this period is often mandated to avoid attracting spiritual harm or social condemnation (Mabunda & Ross, 2023). As Ekore and Lanre-Abass (2016) and Idang (2018) observe, rituals function as both protective and moral instruments within African cosmologies.

The spiritual and symbolic dimensions of bereavement are further emphasized by Martin, van Wijk, Hans-Arendse, and Makhaba (2013), who describe mourning in Black South African families as a dialectical process involving physical acts (e.g., hair shaving, ritual bathing) and spiritual transitions (e.g., guiding the soul to the ancestral realm). According to Itsweni (2018), mourning is also an obligation of dignity—each family member is expected to perform culturally sanctioned rites that affirm the deceased's new role as an ancestor. Neglecting such customs is believed to invite spiritual misfortune or social exclusion.

Despite the cultural richness of these practices, they are not without controversy. In rural areas, traditional leaders often exercise significant authority over how mourning should be conducted. Nhlapo (2023) notes that chiefs and kings frequently dictate mourning periods, prescribe ritual acts, and penalize families that deviate from customary norms. In some Pedi communities, for example, widows who do not wear black for a full year may face social penalties, including exclusion from public events. These leaders often enforce practices that are rigid, gendered, and difficult to challenge, even when they conflict with the mourner's religious or personal beliefs.

The imposition of such customs may safeguard cultural continuity, but it can also suppress individual agency and complicate the grieving process. Women, in particular, are frequently expected to mourn for longer periods and adhere to stricter ritual protocols than men. In many cases, grieving spouses are expected to seek permission from community elders or chiefs to begin or end their mourning. As van Rooyen (2019) argues, in many traditional South African settings, mourning is less a matter of personal healing and more a collective process governed by ancestral authority and cultural law.

In this context, mourning in Black South African families cannot be understood solely as a psychological response to death. It must be examined as a cultural, spiritual, and political process—one that reflects broader dynamics of tradition, identity, gender, and power. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the diverse mourning practices in Black South African communities and critically examine the intersection between cultural norms, traditional leadership, and individual autonomy in the experience of grief.

2. Problem Statement

Mourning is a deeply personal process, and individuals grieve in diverse ways. It is therefore essential to recognize and respect these variations, especially when shaping cultural, religious, or community expectations. In African societies—and particularly within South Africa—mourning practices are often governed by communal customs that may override individual needs and preferences. As Makobe-Rabothata (2014) notes, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* offers a lens through which African understandings of death can be explored, emphasizing compassion, community, and respect. However, these values are not always reflected in actual practice.

Despite the ideals of *Ubuntu*, many Black South African women—particularly those living in BaPedi communities—face discrimination and social injustice during mourning. Their emotional and psychological needs are frequently overlooked, and they are often forced to comply with cultural rituals that conflict with their personal beliefs (Nhlapo, 2023). For example, women who identify as *bazalwane*—devout Christians who reject traditional mourning rituals—are still expected to follow these customs simply because they live in communities that uphold them. As Ngobeni (2020:6) observes, “Isolation and discrimination inherent to these cultural mourning rituals may burden the widow with psychological wounds.”

The tension between Christian beliefs and cultural expectations creates further complications. Black South Africans who are Christian but still wish to honour their loved ones in culturally meaningful ways are often judged or ostracised by their religious communities. Some of these practices, when done privately, may even disrupt formal rituals, leading to conflict and alienation. Ngobeni (2020) also contends that mainstream assumptions about death and mourning frequently overlook and fail to represent the lived realities and voices of African people.

Widows, in particular, face profound challenges. In Zulu culture, and across many traditional communities globally, widows endure not only grief but also social exclusion, emotional abuse, and humiliation from both family and community members (Cebekhulu, 2015). In some South African contexts, such as funerals involving taxi drivers or individuals associated with gangsterism, control over the ceremony is taken by groups who impose their own practices—such as firing guns, spilling alcohol on caskets, or proposing guardianship of the deceased's children—without regard for the bereaved family's customs, religion, or beliefs (Lukhele, 2016).

These examples illustrate the broader difficulties Black South African families face during bereavement, especially women. Often, they find themselves without adequate support or protection from traditional leaders. The lack of agency in mourning can deepen psychological distress and reinforce systemic inequities. As Christopoulos (2024) states, “Difficulties in mourning contribute to various social problems such as social injustice, wars, and the climate crisis.”

2.1. Research Questions

- What is the significance of ancestors and the afterlife in the mourning process within South African Black families?
- What are the traditional mourning practices followed by Black South African families?
- How do various ethnic groups within Black South African communities (e.g., Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana) differ in their mourning rituals?
- What is the role of the extended family and community in providing emotional and financial support during the mourning period?

3. Review of Literature

The process of mourning is a universal human experience, undertaken by individuals across the world in response to the loss of a loved one. However, the manner in which people grieve varies significantly depending on their cultural, spiritual, and social contexts. According to Gibbons (2024), mourning involves a series of psychological processes that are activated in response to loss, and while suffering can be deeply personal, it often serves to unify communities through shared expressions of grief. In the South African context, mourning is not only a personal journey but also a communal act embedded in cultural rituals. These rituals help families preserve the memory of the deceased and foster collective healing.

For example, among the Pedi subculture, when a woman loses her husband, the extended family gathers to perform cleansing rituals. In some instances, a younger male relative is symbolically assigned to assume the role of the deceased husband, reinforcing the cultural structure of familial continuity. As Cummings (2015) argue, mourning is most effective when it is approached actively and communally, allowing bereaved individuals to meaningfully engage with their loss.

Furthermore, mourning often brings with it complex emotions, such as guilt, anger, or regret, especially when the death was unexpected or traumatic. Feigelman and Cerel (2020) highlight that mourners frequently experience feelings of blameworthiness or self-doubt about what could have been done differently to prevent the death. The duration and intensity of mourning are influenced not only by the mourner's relationship with the deceased but also by the availability of support systems. In many South African communities, support is sought from relatives, religious leaders, and traditional authorities who provide both emotional consolation and guidance through cultural rituals (Cummings, 2015). This underscores the importance of mourning as both an individual and collective experience.

South Africa, as one of the most culturally diverse countries on the African continent, encompasses a rich mosaic of mourning practices. Each culture holds distinct beliefs and customs related to death, reflecting deep-rooted symbolic traditions. These rituals serve both spiritual and social functions, allowing communities to come together in solidarity during a time of loss (Kgatla, 2014). For instance, in the BaPedi community, rituals may include *letswa*—a vengeance ceremony conducted as a symbolic act of justice for the deceased. Women within the BaPedi subculture may wear black clothing for six months, and after the burial, it is customary for family members to shave their hair as a sign of respect and transition.

In addition, the Balobedu subculture, a subgroup within the BaPedi, incorporates Christian religious practices into their mourning process. As noted by Modiba (2023), pastors are often invited to pray and sprinkle holy water on mourners upon their return from the graveyard. Moreover, buckets filled with herbal water are placed outside the household, allowing attendees to symbolically wash away the “dust of the grave,” a gesture believed to prevent misfortune.

In contrast, among the amaXhosa, the significance of a funeral is linked to the societal status of the deceased. When a well-known or elderly individual passes away, the community may organize celebratory events to honor

their legacy, as was the case with the late Nelson Mandela. This suggests that cultural interpretations of mourning can vary not only between ethnic groups but also within them, depending on age, gender, and social standing (Kgadima and Leburu, 2022).

Underlying these rituals is the deeply held belief in ancestral presence and life after death. Mourning is not simply a response to loss, but a spiritual process aimed at establishing a relationship with the deceased in their new role as an ancestor. As Kgadima and Leburu (2022) note, rituals surrounding death “serve to recognize, distort, and reiterate time” in a way that helps manage the psychological and emotional challenges of bereavement. These rituals help preserve a family’s cultural heritage and reinforce the collective memory of the deceased, ensuring that cultural values are passed down to future generations (Cummings, 2015).

Thomas (2021) further emphasizes the importance of rituals performed before and after burial, stating that they enable families to cope with grief and regulate the mourning period. The communal nature of mourning in South African black families is also evident in practices such as household visits, assistance with chores, and participation in ritual events. In the Bapedi subculture, for instance, extended families gather under a tree the night after the funeral, where hair-shaving rituals are carried out by elders in the presence of the community. Additionally, a relative—often a cousin—is chosen to clean the room where the deceased’s body was kept, a task believed to remove the spiritual “shadow” left behind.

As Kgadima and Leburu (2022) caution, the absence or neglect of these rituals can have detrimental effects on the psychological and social functioning of the bereaved. Rituals, therefore, are not only cultural expressions but also essential coping mechanisms that structure mourning in meaningful and protective ways.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two key theoretical perspectives to understand mourning practices among Black South African families: the Kubler-Ross Model of Bereavement and the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu. These frameworks provide both psychological and cultural insights into how grief is processed and expressed in contextually specific ways.

4.1. Kubler-Ross Model of Bereavement

The Kubler-Ross model, also known as the Five Stages of Grief, was employed to contextualize the emotional journey experienced by bereaved individuals. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005), death is inevitable, and the anticipation of this reality often induces anxiety, preparing individuals to confront grief even before it occurs. The model outlines five emotional stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This framework is applied to explore how Black South African families, shaped by unique cultural beliefs, navigate the grieving process (Tyrrell, Harberger, Schoo & Siddiqui, 2023).

4.1.1. Denial

Denial typically occurs when the loss is unexpected or difficult to comprehend, especially when the deceased was perceived as healthy. In this stage, family members may struggle to accept the death, using denial as a coping mechanism to delay emotional pain. In the South African context, some individuals initially attribute the death to witchcraft or spiritual jealousy, rather than accepting it as a natural occurrence. For example, among members of the Tswana subculture, specific rituals such as keeping the youngest child within the household until the funeral is completed reflect the symbolic importance of early mourning practices.

4.1.2. Anger

Wang and Wang (2021) argue that individuals often experience anger either towards others or themselves during mourning. In South African communities, this may manifest in accusations of bewitchment, or self-blame for not preventing the death. These feelings are intensified in contexts where deaths are sudden or lack medical explanation, thus prompting emotional unrest and a search for meaning.

4.1.3. Bargaining

The bargaining stage is marked by internal negotiations and a longing to reverse the loss. In Black South African cultures, this stage often involves consultation with traditional healers or spiritual figures. Bereaved individuals may seek answers, hope for miracles, or attempt to identify those believed to be responsible for the death. This behavior reflects a culturally grounded desire to restore equilibrium, even when logical resolution is unattainable.

4.1.4. Depression

As the reality of the loss sets in, mourners often enter a period of profound sadness and despair. Symptoms may include disrupted sleep, appetite changes, and withdrawal. Among Black South African families, psychological distress is sometimes misattributed to spiritual causes or witchcraft, rather than acknowledged as depression. Even among those aware of mental health issues, cultural stigma may lead them to rely on traditional healing practices

rather than professional psychological support. This is particularly prevalent among subcultures such as the Bapedi and Zulu.

4.1.5. Acceptance

The final stage of the model is characterized by a gradual acknowledgment of the loss and a shift towards healing. In many Black South African families, acceptance is symbolized through ritual acts such as *sitshila*—a cleansing ceremony conducted a year after the death. This ceremony often involves slaughtering a cow, preparing traditional beer, and communing with the deceased's spirit. At this point, the deceased is no longer viewed merely as a lost relative but is honored as an ancestor and spiritual protector.

4.2. Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a foundational African philosophy that emphasizes shared humanity, collective identity, and respect for others. It is described as “a collection of values and practices that Black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings” (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). Within the context of South African mourning practices, *Ubuntu* serves as both a moral compass and a cultural framework. It shapes rituals that promote community cohesion, collective healing, and respectful remembrance of the deceased.

Ubuntu is evident in numerous cultural practices. For instance, in Pedi culture, rituals are performed not only during the funeral but also beforehand, such as preparing the home, cleansing rooms, and organizing gatherings to welcome the deceased's body from the mortuary. These acts are intended to maintain harmony between the living and the ancestral realm. Failure to observe these practices is believed to result in misfortune or ancestral displeasure, affecting both the immediate family and future generations.

However, scholars such as Ewuoso and Hall (2019) have argued that the ideal of Ubuntu is not consistently upheld in practice. In some communities, traditional leaders—including chiefs and kings—impose their own interpretations of mourning rituals, which may contradict the inclusive and respectful principles that Ubuntu advocates (Eliastam, 2015). For example, individuals who do not adhere to prescribed mourning periods may be fined or excluded from community events. In such cases, Ubuntu is not applied as a tool for collective healing but is used to justify control and punishment.

Aromataris and Lockwood (2021) remind us that traditional African leaders were historically expected to rule with the consent of the people. Decisions made without communal consensus were grounds for removal. Yet, in contemporary South African rural contexts, mourners are sometimes coerced into following rituals that disregard individual beliefs, especially among women. This highlights the tension between Ubuntu's philosophical ideals and its implementation in cultural governance.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to guide its research process. PRISMA is a well-established methodological tool designed to enhance the accuracy, transparency, and completeness of systematic reviews by providing a standardized reporting checklist. As highlighted by Sarkis-Onofre, Catalá-López, Aromataris, and Lockwood (2021), PRISMA helps ensure that every step in the review process—from the identification of relevant literature to data synthesis—is reported with clarity. In a similar vein, Siddaway, Wood, and Hedges (2019) emphasize the value of PRISMA in maintaining methodological rigour and enabling replicability in scholarly inquiry.

Following the PRISMA protocol, the current study was structured into two main phases, as outlined by Aromataris and Lockwood (2021), the planning phase and the document selection phase. These phases were designed to ensure both the methodological integrity of the research and the relevance of the selected literature to the study's focus on mourning practices among Black South African families.

In the planning phase, a scientific and targeted search strategy was employed to identify literature across reputable academic databases. Specifically, the search was conducted within ResearchGate, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, and Scopus. These databases were selected due to their high volume of peer-reviewed content and global reach, collectively offering access to over 50 million scholarly documents. The inclusion of these databases ensured comprehensive coverage and increased the likelihood of capturing high-quality studies relevant to the topic.

Subsequently, the document selection phase was initiated. This phase comprised three interrelated stages: an initial database search, the establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the final selection of relevant studies for analysis. During the initial search, a variety of keywords were employed to refine the scope of the literature. These keywords included: *South African Black families, mourning practices in Black South African families, cultural traditions, funeral rituals, South African subcultures and their mourning practices, spirituality and death, role of elders and leaders during mourning, cultural symbolism in mourning, post-burial practices,*

family structures in South African Black families, and *communal grieving*. These terms were carefully chosen to capture the multidimensional and culturally embedded nature of mourning within the South African context.

Following the database search, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected literature. Only scholarly documents published between 2014 and 2024, written in English, and focused on the cultural nature of mourning in African—particularly South African—contexts were included. In contrast, studies published before 2014, written in languages other than English, or focused on non-African or Western mourning practices were excluded from consideration.

Table 1: The inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Articles available online and written between 2014 to 2024.	Scholarly documents written before 2014 but not readily available online.
Scholarly documents written in English.	Scholarly documents not written in English.
African studies that addressed the research questions of this paper.	Non-African studies that addressed the research questions of this paper.
South African studies that addressed the cultural nature of mourning in South African black families.	Global and western studies that addressed the cultural nature of mourning in South African black families.

Source: by the author

The filtering process yielded a total of 203 records, with six additional articles identified through other sources. After the removal of 49 duplicate entries, 160 articles remained. Of these, 87 were excluded during initial screening due to lack of relevance. A total of 120 articles were then reviewed, with 76 proceeding to full-text screening. At this stage, 56 studies were removed for not directly addressing the cultural nature of mourning among South African Black families. Of the 42 remaining articles, eight were excluded for not meeting specific methodological or contextual criteria. An additional 19 articles were disqualified for focusing on Western mourning customs, which were inconsistent with the cultural focus of this study. Ultimately, 11 peer-reviewed journal articles were selected for the final synthesis and thematic analysis.

By employing the PRISMA framework in a systematic and transparent manner, this study ensured the credibility and cultural relevance of the literature reviewed. This methodological approach not only strengthened the validity of the findings but also reinforced the study's contribution to understanding the cultural dimensions of mourning in Black South African families.

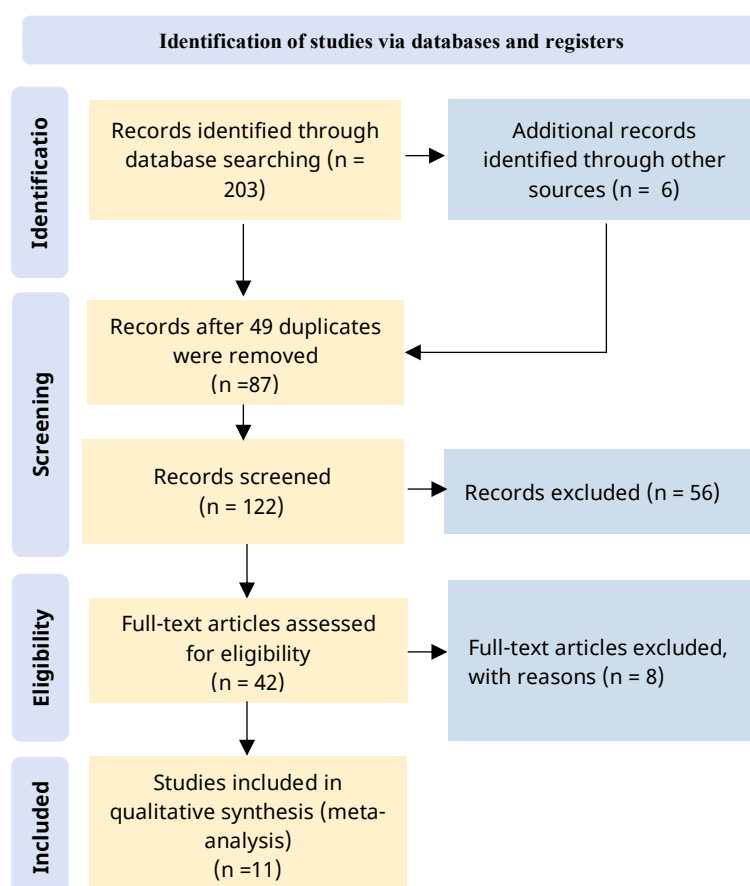


Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart of the selection of studies

The table below depicts the entire search procedure used for this study. The current analysis includes a total of 11 peer-reviewed journal publications that were found utilizing different databases.

Table 2: An overview of the research's journal articles

Author(s)/ year and country of publication	Scholarly document	Methods	Theoretical framework(s)
Gibbons (2024); United Kingdom	Journal article	Statistical analysis	N/A
Alan & Wolfelt (2021); Feigelman & Cerel (2020); United States	Book chapter Journal article	Data analysis Data analysis, survey	N/A N/A
Cummings (2015); South Africa	Book chapter	Data analysis, literature review	Kubler-Ross model
Kgatla (2014); South Africa	Dissertation	Qualitative, in-depth interviews, content analysis	Hallinger & Murphy model, Weber model
Makgahlela, Sodi, Nkoana, & Mokwena (2019); South Africa	Journal article	Qualitative, in-depth interviews, Data analysis	N/A
Modiba (2023); South Africa	Journal article		
Ebewo (2015); Botswana	Journal article	Content analysis, literature review	N/A
Ayling (2015); South Africa	Journal article	Content analysis	N/A
Ademiluka (2009); Nigeria	Journal article	Content analysis,	N/A
Thomas (2021); United States	Journal article	Qualitative methodology, snowball sampling,	Botho/Ubuntu philosophy

Source: by the author

6. Thematic Analysis of Results

The systematic review yielded a range of culturally grounded insights into the mourning practices of Black South African families. Through careful analysis of the included literature, several prominent themes emerged. These themes not only highlight the diversity of mourning rituals across subcultures but also illuminate the complex interplay between spirituality, gender roles, traditional authority, and individual agency. The following thematic analysis presents the core patterns identified in the reviewed studies.

6.1. Cultural Mourning as a Collective and Spiritual Practice

Across all reviewed studies, mourning is conceptualized not merely as a personal or emotional response to death but as a communal and spiritual process. Rituals such as hair shaving, symbolic clothing, ritual cleansing, sacrificial ceremonies, and post-burial gatherings serve to maintain a connection with the deceased and ensure their safe passage to the ancestral realm. Practices such as the “after tears” ceremonies, post-funeral cleansing with herbal mixtures, and year-long mourning attire for widows demonstrate the shared understanding of death as a transition, not an end. This collective orientation affirms the social and cosmological role of the deceased within the family and community (Ngubane, 2019; Mabunda & Ross, 2023).

6.2. Mourning and the Regulation of Gender Roles

A recurring theme throughout the reviewed literature is the gendered nature of mourning rituals. Women, particularly widows, are often subjected to more rigid and prolonged rituals than men. Expectations for widows to wear black or blue clothing for an entire year, abstain from romantic or public engagements, and participate in spiritual cleansing highlight how mourning is shaped by patriarchal structures. In contrast, men often face fewer restrictions and shorter mourning durations. These imbalances underscore how cultural mourning practices serve as a site for reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies (Cebekhulu, 2015; Saguti, 2016).

6.3. The Role of Traditional Leaders in Prescribing Mourning Practices

The involvement of traditional leaders—chiefs, kings, and elders—emerges as a powerful force in determining how mourning is enacted in rural and culturally conservative settings. The reviewed studies reveal that families are often required to consult with or seek permission from traditional authorities regarding the initiation or conclusion of mourning periods. Non-compliance can lead to penalties such as fines, social exclusion, or restrictions from community events. This governance over mourning reflects the entrenchment of cultural norms within local power structures but also presents challenges for those who wish to grieve according to personal or religious convictions (Nhlapo, 2023; van Rooyen, 2019).

6.4. Tensions Between Christianity and Traditional Mourning Rites

Another significant theme is the tension experienced by individuals and families navigating both Christian beliefs

and traditional cultural obligations. Some mourners, particularly those identifying as *bazalwane* (devout Christians), are reluctant to participate in rituals involving ancestral invocation or symbolic cleansing. However, social pressure and community expectations often compel them to comply. This duality produces internal conflict and raises questions about authenticity, faith, and communal belonging. Several reviewed articles highlight that while these individuals may choose to observe mourning rites privately, they often do so without the involvement of the church, thereby maintaining a clear boundary between religious doctrine and cultural obligation (Mokhutso, 2019; Ngobeni, 2020).

6.5. Rituals as Instruments of Healing and Protection

Beyond symbolic meaning, mourning rituals are widely perceived as tools for both emotional healing and spiritual protection. Practices such as cleansing with herbal mixtures, burning mourning cloths, or redistributing the deceased's clothing are believed to prevent misfortune, remove the lingering presence of death, and purify the bereaved household. These practices not only offer psychological closure but are also seen as necessary for maintaining harmony with the ancestral world. The failure to observe these rites is associated with spiritual repercussions, including sickness, bad luck, or social disruption (Khosa-Nkatini, 2023; Kgadima & Leburu, 2022).

6.6. Ritual Conflict and Individual Agency

A final theme that emerged is the growing tension between communal expectations and individual autonomy. Particularly in contemporary South Africa—where democratic values, legal rights, and religious pluralism are increasingly emphasized—some individuals feel restricted by inherited cultural expectations. Women, youth, and Christians are especially vulnerable to social sanctions when resisting traditional mourning rules. This theme points to an evolving societal conversation about how cultural preservation can be balanced with human rights, individual freedom, and the need for more personalized grieving experiences (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019; Palagashvili, 2018).

7. Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that mourning in Black South African families is a deeply entrenched cultural phenomenon, shaped by a combination of spiritual beliefs, communal practices, and ancestral connections. Across various ethnic groups—such as the BaPedi, amaXhosa, Balobedu, and others—mourning is not solely a private experience but is understood as a social obligation that reinforces collective identity and transgenerational continuity. Rituals serve as both spiritual enactments and psychosocial mechanisms through which the bereaved manage their grief, maintain connections with the deceased, and restore balance within the family and community.

A key observation is that mourning practices are both diverse and dynamic across South African subcultures. While certain rituals, such as cleansing ceremonies, hair shaving, and ritual offerings, are widely practiced, the underlying meanings and modes of performance vary. This cultural heterogeneity reflects the multiplicity of worldviews that coexist within Black South African communities. However, it also complicates the assumption of a unified African model of mourning. Rather than a monolithic tradition, mourning emerges as a pluralistic system negotiated through ethnicity, gender, social status, and individual belief.

Another important insight from this study is the intersection between cultural tradition and religious transformation. Even among Black South Africans who identify as Christian and reject ancestral veneration, mourning rituals persist—albeit sometimes in private or modified forms. This suggests that cultural mourning practices are resilient and may coexist with religious doctrines that ostensibly contradict them. However, this duality can generate conflict, especially when individuals feel compelled to choose between adherence to community customs and their personal or religious convictions.

The role of traditional leadership also emerged as a significant influence on how mourning is regulated. In many rural communities, chiefs and kings hold authority over mourning procedures, dictating timeframes, ritual forms, and even behavioral codes for widows and widowers. While such structures can preserve cultural coherence, they may also restrict individual agency—particularly for women, who are often subjected to prescriptive mourning duties without consultation or consent. This reveals a tension between cultural preservation and human rights, a dynamic that is especially evident in the treatment of widows in communities where patriarchal norms are still deeply rooted.

Moreover, mourning practices are not only cultural or emotional responses but are embedded within broader social and political dynamics. Rituals of mourning can reflect social hierarchies, community expectations, and mechanisms of social control. For instance, the imposition of fines or social exclusion for non-compliance with mourning customs indicates the extent to which grief is governed by collective norms. In such contexts, grief becomes not merely an emotional response but a public performance, shaped by power relations within traditional governance systems.

While cultural rituals provide a necessary structure for navigating grief, the study also draws attention to the psychological burden placed on individuals who may not wish to conform to these practices. The pressure to perform prescribed rituals—such as wearing specific clothing for extended periods, abstaining from romantic relationships, or partaking in symbolic acts of cleansing—may exacerbate grief rather than alleviate it, particularly when these acts are not personally meaningful to the mourner. This is further complicated by the cultural stigma around expressing dissent or opting out of ritual observance, which can result in social alienation.

Therefore, the discussion reveals the need for a more inclusive understanding of mourning—one that respects cultural values while also acknowledging individual needs, religious diversity, and evolving social norms. The cultural richness of South African mourning practices must be preserved, but not at the expense of personal autonomy or psychological well-being. There is a critical need for dialogue between cultural custodians, religious leaders, policymakers, and mental health practitioners to create spaces where mourning can be both culturally authentic and personally empowering.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature that situates mourning within a broader socio-cultural and spiritual framework. It also raises important questions about how tradition can be adapted in ways that are respectful yet flexible, ensuring that the mourning process remains meaningful for both individuals and communities in a rapidly changing society.

8. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the cultural nature of mourning in Black South African families, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the systematic review was limited to studies published in English and accessible through selected electronic databases, which may have excluded relevant research published in other languages or in grey literature such as dissertations, community archives, or unpublished ethnographic reports. This may have led to a partial view of mourning practices, particularly those rooted in more localized or orally transmitted traditions.

Second, the study relied exclusively on secondary data, and therefore did not capture first-hand perspectives or lived experiences of mourners currently engaging in these rituals. The lack of primary empirical data limits the ability to understand how mourning practices are evolving in real time, especially in the face of modernization, urbanization, and shifting religious affiliations.

Third, while the inclusion criteria ensured methodological rigor, the relatively small number of eligible studies ($n = 11$) restricts the generalizability of the findings. The reviewed studies were unevenly distributed across cultural groups, with some subcultures (such as the Bapedi and Zulu) more represented than others. This may have introduced a cultural bias, skewing the analysis toward more frequently studied communities.

Lastly, due to the absence of formal quality scoring scales, the appraisal of methodological rigor relied on modified qualitative checklists. Although this approach ensured a baseline of quality, it may lack the precision of standardized grading frameworks, potentially affecting the consistency of assessments across studies.

9. Future Research Directions

Building on the findings and limitations of this review, several areas for future research are proposed. First, there is a clear need for primary qualitative research that documents the lived experiences of individuals navigating grief within their cultural contexts. In-depth interviews, participant observations, and oral histories can provide nuanced accounts of how mourning is experienced, negotiated, or contested within families and communities.

Second, future studies should explore the intersectionality of gender, religion, and modernity in shaping contemporary mourning practices. Particular attention should be paid to how women, youth, and Christian-identifying individuals reconcile or resist traditional expectations. Exploring the voices of these groups can illuminate the psychological and social tensions that arise when cultural norms conflict with personal beliefs or lifestyle changes.

Third, there is scope for comparative cross-cultural studies, both within South Africa and across other African nations or diaspora communities. Such research could help situate South African mourning rituals within a broader continental or global framework, highlighting both unique and shared elements in grief expression.

Additionally, researchers should investigate the impact of legal and policy frameworks—such as the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act—on individual mourning rights. Critical legal studies could reveal how institutional structures support or inhibit cultural autonomy and whether reforms are needed to better protect vulnerable individuals during bereavement.

Finally, as South Africa continues to urbanize and diversify, future research should examine how mourning practices are transforming in urban and multicultural settings. Investigating how migrants, interfaith families, and

mixed-ethnic households navigate grief could yield important insights into the future trajectory of cultural mourning in a pluralistic society.

10. Conclusion

This study concludes that mourning practices among Black South African families are highly diverse and deeply rooted in cultural, spiritual, and communal values. Each subculture—including the Zulu, Pedi, Tshivenda, and others—adheres to its own unique rituals and timelines for grief, which are shaped by traditional beliefs and local customs. For example, in Zulu and Pedi communities, specific clothing is worn during extended mourning periods, while rituals such as hair shaving and post-burial cleansing ceremonies mark symbolic transitions from mourning to healing.

The findings also highlight that mourning is not solely a private emotional response but a communal and spiritual responsibility, reinforcing connections with ancestors and preserving cultural identity. However, tensions arise when traditional leaders impose rigid expectations or personal interpretations of customary law that conflict with individual preferences, especially in rural communities. Such actions can hinder the bereaved from mourning in a way that is personally meaningful or emotionally supportive.

Moreover, the study reveals that although mourning rituals offer emotional and social structure, they must be practiced in a way that respects human rights and individual agency. Cultural traditions, while vital, must remain flexible and inclusive—particularly in contexts where gender roles and religious diversity may challenge normative practices. These insights underscore the importance of aligning cultural preservation with evolving social norms, legal frameworks, and the psychological well-being of individuals and families.

11. Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, several key recommendations are proposed to foster a more inclusive, culturally respectful, and rights-based approach to mourning within Black South African families. It is essential that professional social workers, who often serve as intermediaries between cultural practice and psychosocial support, receive specialized training that addresses the diverse mourning customs found across South Africa. These training programs and workshops should go beyond general counseling techniques to incorporate cultural literacy, with a focus on the emotional, spiritual, and communal dimensions of bereavement. Such preparation would empower practitioners to engage with grieving families more empathetically and competently, particularly in contexts where traditional and modern belief systems intersect or conflict.

Furthermore, there is a need for policy reform within national family frameworks. Specifically, the *Guiding Principles of the Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa* should be amended to include a dedicated subsection that affirms the importance of cultural and religious plurality in mourning practices. This inclusion would serve as a guiding principle for institutions and stakeholders, encouraging greater sensitivity toward differing mourning traditions and beliefs within Black South African communities.

In addition, traditional leaders—many of whom play a central role in directing mourning rituals—would benefit from structured educational programs that focus on trauma, human rights, and the evolving social and legal landscapes surrounding death and bereavement. Such training would enable chiefs and elders to exercise their cultural authority in a way that upholds both ancestral traditions and the individual rights of community members, particularly women, and youth, who are often most vulnerable during times of grief.

Legislative reform is also necessary to support these cultural and institutional shifts. The *Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act* and its 2017 Amendment Bill should be reviewed and revised to incorporate protections for cultural diversity and to prevent the imposition of uniform or rigid mourning protocols across heterogeneous communities. Similarly, the *South African Human Rights Commission Act 40 of 2013* should be updated to explicitly include the right of individuals and families to observe meaningful mourning rituals in accordance with their values, beliefs, and customs.

Finally, it is vital that individual autonomy be respected within the broader framework of communal mourning. While rituals serve an important role in cultural preservation and collective healing, they must not overshadow the personal agency of the bereaved. Individual beliefs, particularly those informed by religion, spirituality, or psychological needs, should be given space alongside traditional practices. Fostering a culture of mutual respect between personal and communal expressions of grief will ensure that mourning remains a process of healing, rather than one of exclusion or coercion.

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