




# Tsonga widow's mourning rituals practices in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa: A ritual-liturgical exploration

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This article studies the rituals and ceremonies that are practised by Tsonga widows at a village in Giyani in Limpopo. The research is based on the observation of the exclusion of widows from church attendance and activities in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa (EPCSA). The study was conducted among Tsonga-speaking widows in the Tsonga community. The exclusion of widows is respected and understood by members of the church because they believe in respecting people's cultural and traditional beliefs. This article attempts to study the conflict between Christianity and Tsonga mourning rituals and practices in the EPCSA. This is a qualitative study; however, literature is also included. Mourning rituals are presented and analysed to attempt to find ways in which practical theology can help the Tsonga widows in the EPCSA through liturgical inculturation as they undertake the mourning period. The authors recommend that a study on the effectiveness of mourning rituals for Tsonga widows would be fruitful for the EPCSA.

**Keywords:** Tsonga; widows; rituals; culture; period; mourning; women; husband; death; African; church; Evangelical Presbyterian Church; rites.

## Introduction

The research discussed in this article consists of data on mourning rituals collected from six individual widows and a focus group consisting of seven widows. The collected data were analysed and interpreted to study the conflict between cultural practices regarding death and mourning and Christianity in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa (EPCSA). According to tradition, the rituals designed for Tsonga widows are not meant to harm widows or women but rather to protect them. Mourning ritual practices are common in most African cultures. According to Aransiola and Ige in Akinbi (2015:69), in the Yoruba culture (Nigeria), when a husband passes away, his wife is often suspected as the cause of his death. To prove her innocence and to protect her from the wrath of her husband's spirit, a widow is made to go through various traditional rituals the moment her husband dies, as expected by his family. Some scholars consider these rituals to be evil and inhumane. These widowhood practices vary widely in different countries and among different tribes. The authors have observed that there are similar rituals that are also performed by members of the EPCSA. The EPCSA has not as yet responded in any way to these practices. There is a current liturgical hiatus concerning rituals of mourning for widows by the EPCSA in Tsonga culture.

According to Baloyi (2017:2), most widows who partake in such rituals are compelled to earn the respect of their in-laws and the community and to be accepted by the ancestors of the family. Differing views among scholars continue to contribute to the conflict between Christianity and African ritual practices.

This article will firstly discuss the methodology used in the study, followed by a brief literature review, after which a discussion of the conflict between cultural practices and Christianity will follow. The EPCSA and Tsonga widow mourning rituals will then be discussed by means of a presentation and analysis of collected data.

## Methodology

The research methodology involved both a study of literature and qualitative empirical work in the form of interviews and a focus group that were conducted among Tsonga widows. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994:4), 'qualitative research implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quality, amount, intensity and frequency.' This qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of the reality that Tsonga widows face in their widowhood and rituals that they are exposed to during their 12-month mourning period.

## Data collection method

### Semi-structured interviews and questions

Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allow the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail (Gill, Stewart & Chadwick 2008:291). This method is a one-on-one method of collecting data. Mason (2002:3) suggests that qualitative or semi-structured interviewing has its own character despite extensive variations in style and tradition. The exchange of dialogue and qualitative interviews may involve one-on-one interaction, large group interviews or focus groups.

[T]hese may take place in a face-to-face setting or over the telephone or the internet. For this study the interviews were conducted face to face. Voice recordings of the interviews were done. An interview schedule, which is a list of written and prepared questions with timelines and dates, was used during the process of the interview in order to help the interviewer keep the interactions focused and professional. (Yama 2010:50)

### Individuals interviews

The individual interviews were semi-structured interviews, which allowed the discussion to be open and free. The researcher's follow-up questions were based on the interviewee's responses in line with the research questions and research topic. The interview structure allowed narratives by the widows because they were free to engage openly about what they felt would be helpful to the study with regard to widowhood practices. The written questions served as a guideline to aid participants to where they could start narrating their journeys as widows.

### Focus group (6–10 people)

'Focus groups are used for generating information on collective views and the meanings that lie behind those views' (Williamson & Prosser 2002:293). In this study, the focus group interviews involved open-ended questions based on the research topic. The participants were asked to elaborate and follow-up questions were asked and permitted to be asked. The author used the following participants for the individual interviews: Tinyiko, Sarah, Ntsako, Grace, Rhandzu and Nkateko. The focus group used the following participants: Stella, Cathy, Grace, Kokwana Sithole, Reagan, Thandi and Maria.

## Literature review

According to Cilliers (2013:3), academic disciplines, including practical theology, have been seeing developments that are similar to the developments in the field of rituals and liturgical studies. According to Laing and Frost (2015:1), in premodern times, rituals and events were major elements of everything in life. There was always a reason for events. Whether communities were agricultural or hunter-gatherers, they needed traditional ceremonies to mark the important dates in the seasonal calendar. For Tsonga people, death is a painful reality

which is considered as a rite of passage by many indigenous African people. The community and relatives are expected to play particular roles, the most prominent of which the widow is expected to play: that of the chief mourner.

Mwakabana (2002:16) argues that the foundation of African hope is faith in African Religion (AR). This faith is neither personal nor communal. Offerings, sacrifices and other religious rituals are done. These create an expectation of the spirit world to bring them good. Mpedi (2008:106) argues that various groups in Africa have different rituals; however, they have certain features in common due to the fact that African traditional religion has a strong cultural basis. Mpedi (2008:106) again argues that it is vital to maintain good relations with ancestors and to partake in various ritual offerings. Even though they are not gods, they play an important role in bringing ill fortune. Beyers (2010:6) also sees traditional Africans' beliefs in ancestors as an essential religious practice.

In Nigeria, according to Akinbi (2015:68), a widow is expected to express grief about losing her husband by wearing black clothes, crying and by frequently falling into the arms of other people around her. The same is true of the Tsonga culture. If a widow does not wear black clothes for a year, it might be seen as a sign of disrespect to her late husband, her in-laws and the community. Sometimes she may be labelled as loose and even suspected of having a relationship with someone else, while her husband is barely cold in his grave. The practice of wearing black clothes as part of mourning is very common in the EPCSA; the majority of EPCSA members are Tsonga-speaking people, and there exist many congregations in the rural areas. The widows sit at the back of the church and are easily identified by the clothes they wear. Most widows who are actively serving in church choose to withdraw from church activities during the 12 months' mourning period. This is not any order put upon the widow by the church. For example, if the widow was on the preaching plan (lay preacher) or a member of the church choir, she would withdraw from preaching or participating in the choir until her mourning period is over. This is done as a sign of grief and respect for her late husband and her in-laws. There is no doctrine in the EPCSA that prevents these widows from maintaining their church positions as they mourn; it is often respected as a cultural decision and respected, not only by members of the church but also by ministers in the EPCSA.

According to Akinbi (2015:72) in many African societies, including Nigeria, there is a belief that when a man dies his spirit will not rest and instead will haunt people, sometimes hurting them and destroying things in the community until his wife appeases him by participating in widowhood rites and practices. This is also true in the Tsonga culture, where it is believed that if things are not done correctly, bad luck will follow the family.

## Cultural practices and Christianity

Magesa (1997) argues that:

[D]ialogue between Christianity and African Religion (AR) has never been a real conversation on any level. On the contrary, contact between Christianity and African Religion has historically been predominantly a monologue, characterized by assumptions prejudicial against the latter, with Christianity culturally more vocal and ideologically more aggressive. (p. 5)

Therefore, what has been frequently documented and spread to date are largely Christians' perceptions about African religions, not Africans speaking for themselves.

Widows' mourning rituals are also valid for members belonging to the EPCSA. It appears that the EPCSA has not yet produced a guideline on how these rituals interact with EPCSA liturgical practices. Because of the current liturgical hiatus with regard to liturgical rituals relating to mourning practices for widows within the EPCSA under the Tsonga culture, it is also apparent that there is a need for a thorough practical theological critique on the existing ritual practices. Kurewa (2000:24) argues that it is interesting to observe how other people who have had an interest in writing about African Religion have had difficulties in trying to figure out what to make of African beliefs. In the beginning, the assumption was that Africans did not have any religion at all. This assumption remains a debate among scholars and also among churches.

Kurgat (2009:91) argues that evangelisation is keeping in mind a person's cultural background and tradition as well as their social grouping when you preach the gospel to them. You cannot win them over to the gospel if you disregard where they come from. One of the mistakes of research in African studies is that scholars attempt to find answers for African cultures without an attempt to find out if there really is a problem. This is nothing new for African people, as it is the same mistake that missionaries made when they brought Christianity to Africans. Kurewa (2000:22) argues that when missionaries and colonists arrived in Africa in the 15th century, they believed Africans were a people who did not have their own culture or religion and lacked their own history or civilisation. Missionaries who worked with the African people failed to get close enough to the African people to discover their traditional religion. In this study, when looking at rituals that are performed by Tsonga widows during the mourning period, the authors attempted to look at this ritual not as taboo but as something that is real for the Tsonga people, not offering Western culture as the best solution for Tsonga widows. Kurewa (2000) also argues that maybe the time is already overdue for the African Christian to be proud and to not be ashamed of their culture, including the inherent religion, namely the African religion:

[F]or a long time, we have been made to think and believe that the African religion and anything else related to it was heathenism or work of the devil. Consequently, we have vigorously campaigned against our own culture and religion through preaching to the churches. Ultimately, as Christians,

we find ourselves completely alienated, not only from our culture but even more so from our own people as a whole. It would appear that African Christians, especially those of us in the mainline churches, have placed ourselves in a position where we are cut off from the many sources that would have enabled us to gain knowledge about our own culture. Or we have built walls in the name of Christianity that are against our own culture that deprive us access to the riches of our own heritage. Truth is not all we find in a culture is good, or is everything that we find in a culture is bad. (p. 23)

In African culture, ritual is a very sensitive issue, as it is part of who people are, part of their pride as African people. According to Khosa (2014:1), VaTsonga people esteem ancestors for playing a vital role in their lives. They see death as a way for life here on earth to end and to begin eternal life. This way they join their family tribe as ancestors. To the Tsonga people, when a person's life ends here on earth, it is believed that rituals must be done so the ancestors can welcome a new member to the ancestral tribe. Failure to do so means the spirit of that person will fly around the house and there will be no peace in the family. Widows therefore need to submit to particular rituals and a range of strict prescriptions for the duration of the mourning period.

## The Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa and Tsonga widow mourning rituals

In this context, we will be dealing with bereavement in the Tsonga culture for Christians, with special focus on the EPCSA family. As much as bereavements differ from culture to culture, they also differ from family to family. In the EPCSA, when a member of the church dies, church elders formally inform the minister of the death. In the case of unnatural death, for example a car accident, the family might ask the minister to accompany them to identify the body at the mortuary. The minister, in the company of the church elders, is expected to visit the family to conduct a short prayer and inform the family that the church is aware of the death in the family. From there on, there will be daily evening prayer services at the family's home. The authors have observed that widows are absent from these evening prayers. They are usually in the bedroom, sitting on the mattress covered in blankets as part of the mourning rites. This means they are not part of the evening services and sermons that are meant to comfort the family of the deceased. Manala (2015:1) argues that the challenges experienced by neglected and maltreated widows, who do not receive sufficient attention, is not addressed as contemporary scholarship seems reluctant to reflect on African widowhood rites and their consequences.

Black widows are often oppressed in the name of culture, according to Baloyi (2015:253–254). Women are told to be quiet and obedient in all matters relating to their marriage and womanhood, for that is what it means to be a woman. Baloyi (2017:1) argues that the Tsonga tribe has closely tied widowhood practices to their traditional and cultural beliefs. Baloyi (2017:2) further argues that widowhood practices

have an impact that is oppressive to widows, thus the church should take action.

Hyeman in Ndlovu (2013:95) proposes that in dealing with widowhood, the church must adopt the theology of affirmation because it confirms the eschatology ontology, which sees a human being as a new creation with a new identity and status without stigma. According to Ndlovu (2013:99), in respect of the widowhood conditions, in today's church it is important to demonstrate the power of God through healing and the ministering of hope. Ndlovu (2013:99) further states that healing of the spirit is holistic and requires an in-depth understanding of the concept of the soul, which includes life that is experienced in a network of relationships within a cultural system and in God's presence. Ministry to widows will remain limited for as long as culture is put before Christ and the suffering of his people. There are many beliefs and rituals surrounding widowhood which women only get to know about as soon as they become widows. If a woman were to ask what would be expected of her if she became a widow, she would be immediately suspected of planning her husband's death. There are different rites and rituals conducted before the husband is buried and after he has been buried, leading up to the time of the cleansing ceremony.

In this research the interviewer asked whether there was a way in which Christianity and Africanism could come together and complement each other. One of the respondents responded:

'[I] think the church must give the family their space, because if the church is there, the family will not be free to perform their rituals and some of these rituals are not for public eyes. Even some of the family members will not be aware of it until they are widows themselves – that's how things are done.' (Cathy, age 38, teacher)

Some widows go through these rituals because they are scared of what might happen if they do not, as many taboos are related to the rituals. One of the respondents said:

'[T]here are rules that we are given as widows. These rules are too heavy, some of them we cannot tell you. If a widow fails to do all the rituals, she will suffer a lot in life [...] a lot.' (Kokwana Sithole, 70, housewife)

This belief was true for many of the respondents. These rituals are acceptable to other participants because they believe it is part of who they are as Tsonga women. There is a relationship between the EPCSA and cultural beliefs; it is not a close relationship, but rather a relationship of respect, allowing the church to do its part and the church respecting the family to do their part during the funeral and mourning period. This might be misinterpreted as 'silence' by the church during the time these widows need them the most, especially the widows who do not wish to practise the cultural mourning rituals but are afraid to refuse them, because they have no one to support them in that decision. The mourning for men and women is different in the Tsonga culture; women are expected to cry and mourn for their husbands, while men are expected to be 'man' about it and move on. A general description of

these rituals will be described in the next section. This general description was collected from the interviews and focus group. Wepener (2014:12) argues that liturgical inculturation is both liberation and inculturation, and the concept should be reclaimed as such.

## General description of Tsonga widows 'mourning rituals'

Sarah narrated how she was taken to a nearby river and given an egg by the elders. The elders then instructed her to break the egg using her thighs, meaning that she needed to squeeze her thighs as hard as possible to break the egg placed between her thighs. Had she failed to break or crack the egg between her thighs, the elders would label her as having a hand in, or knowing, how her late husband passed on, regardless of the cause of death. After successfully breaking the egg, she was then instructed to jump over the fire. Had the fire burnt her, it was said that it would be a sign that her late husband's ancestors were angry at her for killing her husband.

For Cathy (age 38, teacher), throughout her 12 months' mourning period, she had to eat and drink from a specific plate and cup. She was not allowed to share a plate with anyone, as it might bring bad luck to the person sharing a plate with her. She was not allowed to use a hand to discipline her children as it might bring bad luck to her children. When she was greeted on the street, she had to kneel and respond slowly with her head faced down regardless of the age of the person greeting her. She was not allowed to shout or scream, as that might be interpreted as excitement about her husband's death.

Thandi (age 60, housewife) was also taken to a nearby river. She was told to put out a burning fire using her urine. After dousing the fire, the elders (women) took a razor and cut her vulva until she started to bleed, blood dripping between her thighs. This was done to get rid of her husband's blood outside her body. Stella, like the rest of the participants, also wore black clothes for a year as a sign of grief. At the end of the mourning period, the traditional healer was brought back to conduct the final cleansing rituals. *Muti* [traditional African medicine or magical charms] was also thrown all over the house and yard again to let the husband's spirit finally rest in peace. She was given *muti* to put in her food to eat and different *muti* to put in her water and bath in it. When Reagan (age 56, housewife) heard of her husband's death, she was not allowed to drink water the whole day, and told that it was taboo, and that if she drank water, she would go deaf. These are just some of the rites and practices that the participants had to undergo by mourning in a traditional way for their husbands.

Nkateko's husband was a traditional healer. He had three wives, including her. Nkateko and the other wives were not allowed to attend church as their late husband had not allowed them to. She only became a church member after her husband's death. Their children were allowed to attend church. After he died, she and the other wives sat on a grass mat. She said a considerable number of people came to support them because her husband had helped a lot of people. She seemed very

surprised that the researcher did not know her husband or had never heard of him because according to her he was a very powerful man and known for helping many with their problems through *muti*. She said a lot of teachers and police officers and women all over Limpopo used his services. She claimed her husband's death was caused by jealousy; other traditional healers used black magic to kill him.

Rhandzu (age 38, HIV counsellor) believes that it is very important for every widow to do the mourning ritual, as it shows respect for your late husband and also for traditions. I asked if there was anything she would not have done or changed with regard to the mourning rituals she underwent or any experience she went through. She said she would not change anything because that is how things should be done, and added that should a woman be working, she can take a year off work and mourn her husband properly. She added as long as there is meat and pap in the house for the widow to eat at her in-laws' home, there are no reasons for her to rush back to work in the city. She argued that work and money were less important compared to mourning your husband; if a woman does not mourn her husband correctly, she will bring bad luck, not only to herself, but to her whole family.

Some of the rules they were given included: they were not allowed to visit anyone, they were not allowed to have any sexual relationships until the mourning period had come to an end. They were not allowed to cook food for other people as it might invite death to those who eat the food. They were not allowed to go to church for the first three months; after the three months if they went to church, they were told to sit right at the back during the church service.

## Data analysis

Research participants were widows between the ages of 25 and 70, who live in a village in Giyani, in Limpopo, and were members of the EPCSA during the time of this study. They belong to the Tsonga tribe either by marriage or birth. The first author conducted qualitative interviews as mentioned in the methodology. The interviews were recorded using a laptop recorder and were then transcribed. Common answers were colour-coded. Charmaz (2012:46) describes coding as the pivotal link between data collection and explaining the meaning of the data. According to Charmaz (2012:46), a code is a descriptive construct designed by the researcher to capture the primary content or essence of the data. Therefore, coding is an interpretation activity and it is possible that two researchers will attribute two different codes to the same data.

## Themes from individual interviews and the focus group

The following themes were found in the transcripts, namely patriarchy, exclusion or inclusion, rites and rituals, clean and unclean, mattress and mourning, and church and culture. These themes were found after looking at the data for both types of interviews: the focus group and the individual interviews, and after a process of thematic coding was followed.

## Patriarchy

Most of the participants shared the rules that they received during their mourning period, which limited not only their movements but also how they expressed themselves or behaved as widows. According to one of the participants, with the pseudonym Pam (age 50, housewife), some of these rituals involves that a widow performs naked in the presence of female elders. Tinyiko (age 42, nurse) narrated how she had to jump over a fire. Ntsako (age 48, sales person) explained some of her duties as a widow, which included jumping over a fire and breaking an egg with her thighs.

These mourning rituals are performed only by widows and it can be argued that they are oppressive to women. Some women choose to do all the mourning rituals because it is expected of them as Tsonga widows. Most of the widows did not experience these rituals as oppressive but simply something that is part of their culture and that they had to do. The researcher however looked at these practices as an outsider and observed that these rituals are oppressive and part of the larger system of patriarchy.

According to Durojaye (2013:2), women across the world have, as a result of religious and cultural practices, continued to encounter gender inequality as a norm. Durojaye (2013:2) further argues that gender inequality is perpetuated by specific cultural practices that are demeaning to women, such as female genital mutilation or cutting, widow cleansing and male children being preferred.

Many women in Africa believe that they should not question culture and tradition but should do as they are told. Women remain silent in the name of respecting culture and their in-laws. When the participants were asked if the men also mourn, these were some the responses:

'[L]et us not lie, let's be honest – they don't mourn. Let me tell you the truth, I once saw a young man who lost his wife. They did a ritual for him immediately after his wife's death so he could move on. They even encouraged him to find another wife after two months, saying it is not good for a man to be alone. That is the reason I sometimes do not understand these mourning things; it's confusing.' (Cathy, age 38, teacher)

'[M]ourning is for women, not men.' (Stella, age 46, housewife)

According to Kurgat (2009:95), the scientific study of the incarnation of the Christian faith community is known as African Christian Theology. The church's European past is confronted by African lifestyles and thought patterns. Kurgat (2009:95) takes note of the fact that widowhood rites are practices that are carried out and enforced by women, as they understand how important these rites are to a widow's well-being. In the Tsonga culture this is true; most of these rituals widows have to undergo are done by other women to widows. Making the fire that widows are expected to jump over, bathing the widows in the river and other ritual practices are all administered by female elders in the community. These women who ensure widows do the rituals the correct way do not see anything wrong with these rituals because it has always been done and has been passed on to

them from generation to generation. It is not seen as any form of abuse or oppression, but as a cultural practice that has never harmed anyone. It is thus also women who participate in upholding forms of patriarchy by means of rituals.

Okin (1998:32) argues that specific human rights related to women need to be identified and acted on to stop clearly gender-related wrongs. Okin (1998:36) further argues that in many countries, a woman's most dangerous environment is the home she lives in. Promoting women's human rights involves making changes in areas of life usually considered to be private. The issue around women's rights and cultural practices remains a debate among ministers in the EPCSA and even among scholars. For Baker (1997:5), a person's nature and their culture cannot be entirely separated from each other. Baker (1997:5) argues that diversity in human groups is not infinite. All human groups have specific universal biological and social characteristics in common. Baker (1997:5) further argues that the construction and internalisation of cultural propositions are often less elaborated to satisfy human emotional needs.

### Exclusion or inclusion

Wearing black clothes while mourning is an African cultural custom that suggests the emotional state of the widow regarding the deceased husband. The widows in the study further highlighted the fact that despite the emotional strain of the mourning process, they still need to do this (Ndlovu 2013:38).

When the researcher asked the participants to explain why a widow must wear black clothes for a year, one of the respondents argued that 'it shows that you are hurt by the death of your husband' (Stella, age 46, housewife).

Manala (2015:2) observed that widows would sit in the back pews in church. The observation was made in three different congregations in Pretoria. The mourning period, which differs according to various cultures, would be for a period of 12 months. This is supported by several of the respondents:

[Y]es, you then wear black clothes for a full twelve months. At the end of the period, a ceremony is done to end the mourning period. Thereafter a widow can wear any clothes of her choice'. (Stella, 46, housewife)

According to research done by Makgahlela and Sodi (2016:542) in Limpopo among the Northern Sotho people, it is believed that if one has sex with a widow, he will suffer from what the Sotho people call *Makgoma*. Makgahlela and Sodi (2016) describe *Makgoma* as:

[S]ymptoms as constipation, bulging stomach, and accumulation of water in the head, swollen lower limbs, feeling cold in the spine and feeling as if one's blood is hot, loss of appetite, losing weight, vomiting and diarrhea. (p. 542)

It is evident that the rituals have been passed on from one generation to the other, and no one has ever questioned these rituals. One of the participants argued that they had a

problem with having to wear black clothes, as it interfered with their way of life and they were discriminated against because some community members held negative views about mourning widows. For example, it makes it difficult for the widow to use public transport.

### Clean and unclean

Widows have to follow a range of prescriptions and prohibitions during their mourning period. According to Douglas (1966:9), this is a system of categories through which the African world can understand the notion of the 'clean and the unclean'. For one participant it meant that when you are told not to do something as a widow, it is for your own protection. According to Douglas (1966:12), the term 'taboo' 'referred to that which does not fit into systems or norms of accepted categories according to society: that which is anomalous, between one category and another, is taboo.'

Throughout the mourning period there were items that were only used by the widows and could not be used by anyone else, and these are discarded afterwards. For example, the cups they used to drink from are either thrown away or burnt. Even the mat they sat on during the mourning period must be burnt because if children were to sit on it, it would bring bad luck to them. Some participants felt it was a disgrace as to how some widows have no 'respect', for example they do not even mourn for 12 months; they do not wear black mourning garments and they wear bright colours. One participant referred to such behaviour as a disgrace.

When asked to explain what *Makhuma* was, one of the participants compared it to being HIV-positive, as many physical symptoms resemble those of AIDS patients. *Makhuma* is what happens to you when you fail to respect the mourning period, or in the case of a man who has sex with a widow before the end of her mourning period, therefore strictly upholding the notion of the widow's uncleanness during her mourning period. *Makhuma* can reportedly only be healed by a skilled traditional healer, which makes it a significant deterrent.

### Ritual space

As mentioned earlier, a relative informs the widow that her husband has passed away and she is then immediately expected to enter the ritual space of sitting on a mattress on the floor.

Turner (1969:94) looks at liminality in terms of rites of passage such as marriage or betrothal. According to Turner (1969):

[D]uring a rite of passage, a person is in a state of transition, in which they are moving from one clearly defined phase of life to another clearly defined one. (p. 94)

Van Gennep (1960) identifies three common features in the varied phenomena that he labels as rites of passage, namely separation, transition (liminality) and incorporation. Following separation, there are changes from the normal routine of daily life; the transition period is a period in

which there will be a great deal of uncertainty and mystery that causes much anxiety. In this study there is a change for a woman from being a woman to being a widow and having to undergo certain ritual practices that require ritual space.

According to Grimes (2014:12), ritual criticism is value-laden but not merely personal, in as much as it is contextualising in its approach and because it sometimes appeals to traditions, principles or theories for its validation. The participants all experienced widowhood and had to go through mourning rituals that were designed for them by their in-laws. Every widow narrated the experience differently. The widows were all Tsonga widows who went through different rituals, although there were some similarities. It can be argued that not all Tsonga widows go through the same cultural rituals. It would be unjust for one to read this study and conclude that all Tsonga widows or African widows are going through the rituals documented in this study. Even some of the older widows performed the rituals simply because it was a custom that had to be followed but did not say what justified the performance of the rituals. The older widows are not pleased with all these changes and feel that restoration of the ritual to the original form is essential but do not discuss the implications of not doing so. According to some participants, mourning rituals are part of the healing process, especially among those who believe in the healing value of the mourning rituals.

## Conclusion

This article studied the rituals and ceremonies that are practised by Tsonga widows in a village in Giyani in Limpopo. The study was conducted among Tsonga-speaking widows. The study found that the exclusion of widows was respected and understood by members of the EPCSA because they believe in respecting people's cultural and traditional beliefs.

Liturgical rituals can be inculcated into the EPCSA in order to assist widows during their mourning period. This liturgy should be designed by the church's liturgy committee, also taking into consideration the findings in this study.

Liturgical inculturation that goes deeper than merely so-called cultural aspects, such as liturgical dress or Eucharistic elements which truly engage with an African world view of the spirit world, will result in an inculcated liturgy that is empowering for those who participate in it.

This was an attempt to study Tsonga widows and their mourning rites and rituals and the silence of the EPCSA during the 12 months' mourning period.

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## Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

## Ethical consideration

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## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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