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# Death-Cleansing Rituals (Go Ntsha Khetshila) as a Coping Strategy for Grief-Stricken Widows in Bellevue Village:

## A Cultural Perspective

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### Abstract

**Background:** The loss of a spouse is a distressing experience, often leading to emotional turmoil and social isolation. Widows face challenges like financial dependence and comforting children. In Balobedu culture, death cleansing rituals (Go ntsha khetshila) provide essential support, promoting solidarity and coping mechanisms for the community.

**Aim:** This study aims to investigate the death-cleansing rituals as coping strategies for grief-stricken widows in Bellevue Village. It seeks to elucidate the cultural significance of these rituals as a communal response to bereavement within the Balobedu culture, with a particular focus on the experiences of widows.

**Materials and Methods:** A qualitative research methodology was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gather in-depth narratives from twelve Balobedu widows residing in Bellevue Village. The collected data was analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and insights.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that the death cleansing rituals transcend mere symbols and herbs; they serve as a pivotal communal activity that unites the community in support of the bereaved family. This solidarity not only aids in the emotional healing of widows but also reinforces the cultural fabric of the society.

**Conclusion:** Death cleansing rituals are vital for supporting widows in Bellevue Village during their grief. They offer emotional and social support by fostering community involvement and preserving cultural traditions. Integrating these practices into bereavement support enhances the well-being of grieving individuals within the Balobedu culture.

### Keywords

Bereavement, Widows, Death cleansing rituals, Balobedu culture, Coping strategies, Support

### INTRODUCTION

The loss of a loved one is universally acknowledged as one of life's most devastating experiences, often accompanied by profound sorrow, uncertainty, and confusion. This emotional turmoil can be particularly intense for women who are

navigating the loss of a spouse. Research indicates that widows frequently encounter a multitude of social and emotional challenges during this difficult period, which may include making funeral arrangements, providing comfort to bereaved children, and managing complex relationships with their deceased husband's relatives (Itsweni, 2018; Makgahlela, Nkoana & Mokwena et al., 2019; Sekgobela & van der Wath, 2019).

In numerous cultures, especially African societies, rituals play a pivotal role in grieving. These rituals provide essential support and comfort to mourners and facilitate community bonding and collective healing (Molano, 2024). For example, in the Balobedu culture, specific death-cleansing rituals known as Go Ntsha Khetshila can offer individuals a structured and culturally sanctioned pathway to navigate their grief. Such rituals encourage communal expression of sorrow, fostering a strong sense of collective well-being and reconnection with the community (Milroy, Dudgeon, 2014).

Moreover, African traditions encompass a variety of customs that emphasize the importance of collective support in times of mourning (Mamosadi, 2023). In communities like Balobedu, residents actively support each other by assisting with household responsibilities, providing emotional and financial assistance, and facilitating the grieving process (Walsh, 2007). The integration of death-cleansing rituals into this communal support system not only offers individuals a framework to process their bereavement but also solidifies community ties and enhances social support networks.

Numerous cultures around the world have developed distinct traditions to address bereavement, reflecting the universal need for rituals that guide the bereaved and educate society on how to provide compassionate support (Itsweni, 2018; Howarth, 2007; Samuel, 2013; Stewart, 2019; Khapaeva, 2017; Ngubane & Makua, 2022; Sodi & Bojuwoye, 2011; Blumenkrantz & Goldstein, 2010). These traditions enable mourners to express their grief openly and assist communities in understanding their role in offering support during these challenging times (Setsiba, 2012; Dlukulu, 2010; Kgatla, 2014).

This study aims to explore the significance of death cleansing rituals and their impact on widows' experiences of grief and support systems. Examining these rituals' role in providing agency and promoting cognitive stability amidst sorrow, this research highlights the importance of cultural practices in navigating loss. Understanding these dynamics is vital for fostering better support mechanisms within communities and enhancing the well-being of the bereaved, particularly widows, as they adjust to their new realities. The insights derived from this study will contribute to a deeper comprehension of the intersection between cultural practices, emotional health, and community solidarity in the context of bereavement.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The experience of widowhood in rural South Africa presents unique emotional and psychological challenges for women, particularly among the Balobedu community in Bellevue Village. Despite the reliance on traditional death-cleansing rituals aimed at assisting widows during their mourning process, the specific mechanisms through which these rituals aid in coping are not well understood. There is a lack of empirical research that explores the cultural significance and psychological impact of these rituals on the mental and emotional well-being of widows. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of death-cleansing rituals as a coping strategy for Balobedu widows, focusing on the following critical questions: How do death-cleansing rituals aid widows in their mourning process? What cultural values are embedded within these rituals that promote emotional health? What is the overall cultural importance of these rituals in the context of grief? This research aims to fill the gap in understanding the role of cultural practices in supporting the psychological health of grieving individuals.

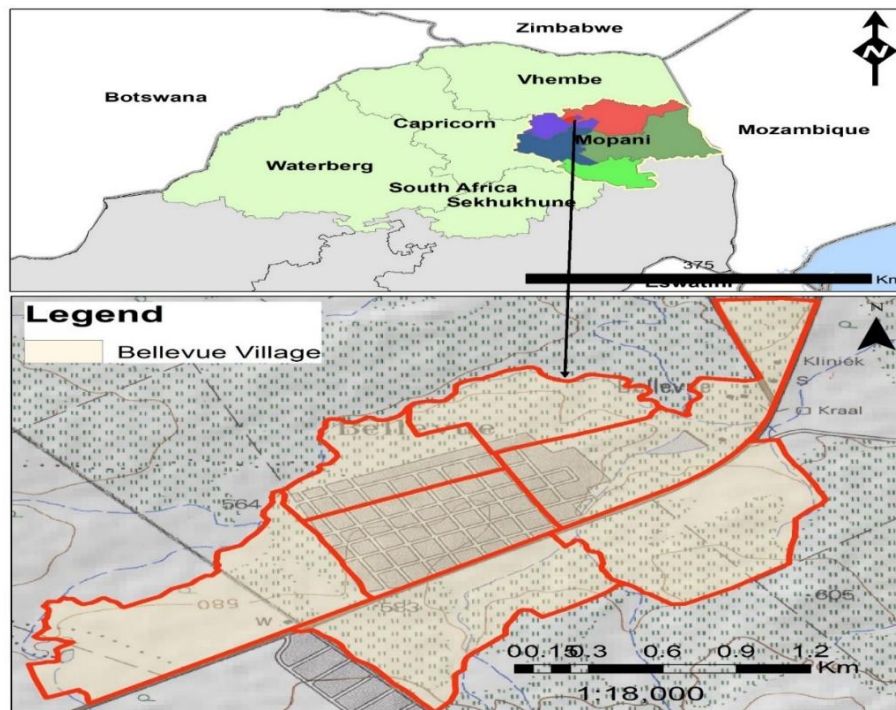
## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study Design**

This study investigates the significance of death-cleansing rituals as a coping mechanism for Balobedu widows in Bellevue Village. Employing an exploratory qualitative research methodology (Mogaji et al., 2024), the study aims to provide a detailed understanding of the lived experiences of the respondents. Qualitative research is particularly valued for its capacity to explore participants' experiences in-depth, yielding insights into individual attitudes, opinions, and behaviours rather than relying on broad generalizations (De Vos et al., 2013; Bryman, 2010). This methodology emphasizes quality over quantity, enabling researchers to examine situations within their natural contexts and uncover the motivations and meanings behind individuals' actions. As such, it was well-suited for this investigation. Characterized as exploratory, the research sought to illuminate the traditional death-cleansing rituals of the Balobedu community from the perspective of its members. While exploratory research in social sciences is variably defined, its primary goal is to uncover new insights. Swedberg (2020) notes that assessing a study's novelty can be challenging until the researcher immerses themselves in the process. Despite this, this study successfully revealed the practices linked to death-cleansing rituals and the authentic emotions experienced by Balobedu widows. This topic has been inadequately documented in existing literature.

### **Study Setting**

This study was conducted in Bellevue village, located in the Mopani district of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Limpopo Province is situated in the far north of the country. Bellevue is one of the largest villages in Balobedu and lies between the Mooketsi complex and Giyani town along the R81 road. The village has three sections: Sefofotse, New Stands, and Belevia.



**Fig. 1** The Bellevue Village of Mopani District, Bolobedu area in Limpopo Province.

### Population and Sampling

In this study, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify 14 participants who had experienced death-cleansing rituals and were widowed in Bellevue Village, situated within the Mopani district of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Notably, widows do not consistently wear distinctive mourning attire, which complicates their community identification. Consequently, the snowball sampling method facilitated referrals from community members and fellow widows, enhancing the researchers' ability to reach a broader population of individuals relevant to the study.

### Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from each widow prior to the commencement of the interviews. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were prioritized. These included ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, conducting interviews in secure and private locations selected by the participants, and offering emotional support to individuals who experienced distress during the interview sessions. Before initiating the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee, which granted formal permission to conduct the research. The clearance reference number assigned to this approval is FHSSE/22/ASS/05/2410. Additionally, the leaders of Bellevue Village granted permission to conduct the study.

### Data Collection

To gather data for this study, a semi-structured interview guide was meticulously designed to facilitate in-depth interviews with 14 widows who had experienced the death cleansing ritual process. This flexible format allowed the researchers to modify their questions according to participants' responses, which promotes a more tailored and enriching dialogue (Nathan et al., 2019). The interviews commenced with efforts to establish rapport and gain participants' trust, followed by exploring their experiences during various stages of bereavement. This was then complemented by a focused examination of how the death-cleansing rituals played a significant role in their coping and healing processes. Through this approach, the study aimed to capture a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and the impact of the rituals on their emotional well-being.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a rigorous thematic content analysis framework. The first step involved reading and re-reading the collected data to understand its content comprehensively. Following this, the data was systematically coded into meaningful categories that encapsulated the essence of the information. These codes were then organized into broader themes and sub-themes, enabling a structured and in-depth examination of the data. This iterative process involved continuous refinement of the categories to ensure an accurate representation of the underlying patterns and insights. By utilizing this methodological approach, the researchers could identify significant trends and relationships within the data, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This thorough analysis underscores critical aspects of the data and lays a solid foundation for subsequent interpretations and conclusions, facilitating a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

## MEASURES ENSURING TRUSTWORTHINESS

To enhance the measure of trustworthiness in qualitative research, it is essential to implement a structured approach that addresses its core components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- **Credibility**

Establish trust in the data collection and analysis processes. This can be achieved through member checking, where participants validate the findings, and triangulation, involving multiple data sources or researchers to corroborate results. Conducting prolonged engagement with participants can also deepen understanding and capture the nuances of the studied phenomena.

- **Transferability**

To facilitate the application of findings to other contexts, provide rich, thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and processes. This contextual information assists other researchers in determining how well the findings may fit their settings.

- **Dependability**

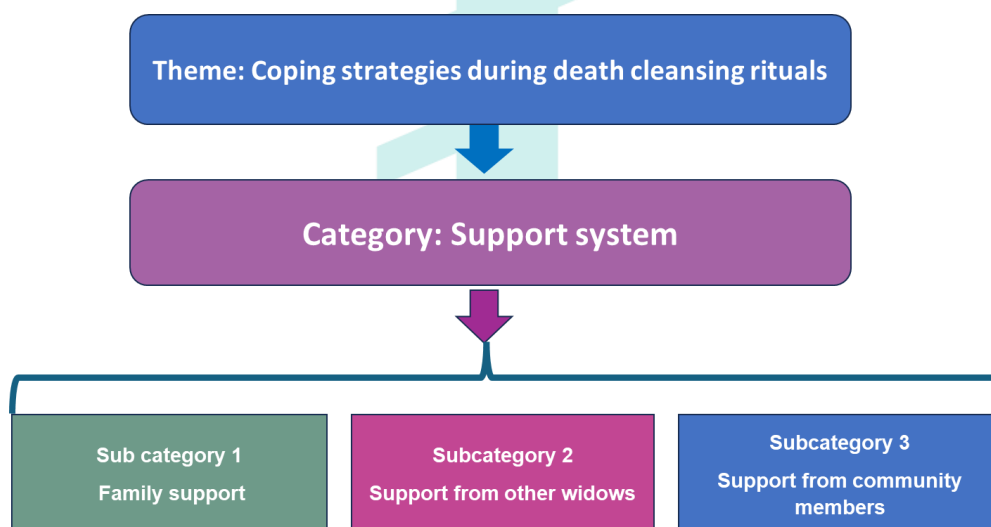
Employ an audit trail to document all stages of the research process, including data collection and analysis techniques. This enables external audits by other scholars to evaluate the consistency and reliability of the study's findings. Peer debriefing can also be a vital practice, providing external perspectives that help identify any biases and reinforce the study's rigour.

- **Confirmability**

Ensure objectivity by minimizing researcher bias through reflexivity, where researchers critically reflect on their influences on the research. Keeping a research diary or journal can also aid in tracking personal biases and decisions made throughout the research process.

Incorporating these strategies into qualitative research strengthens its trustworthiness and aligns with scholarly rigour, ensuring that findings are robust, reliable, and impactful in contributing to the field of study.

## RESULTS



**Fig. 2** Themes and sub-themes of the results

### THEME 1: Coping strategies during death cleansing rituals

The participants from the study revealed how participation in death-cleansing rituals served as their coping mechanism. First, they mentioned that the rituals helped them connect with their deceased husbands. Second, they indicated that they were given an elderly relative widow who is tasked to take care of the new widow's needs:

*“I was assigned someone to take care of me. In this case, it was my aunt. She was tasked to give me food, water and anything I needed. It felt so good and comforting; she explained the death rituals which I would go through and told me what to expect because she went through the same thing, and the rituals helped her to cope. She made sure my kids were fed and cleaned up, spoke to me when I was down, prepared water for me to bathe, and removed the water after I was done because people are not supposed to see me until the burial day or during the prayer services. When you are a new widow, you are treated like a queen; they can even wash your body if you are weak. My aunt also dished up for me and brought food to my mattresses; after I ate, she took out the dishes; although I was in pain, I felt very special”*  
(Participant 5).



This theme includes one subtheme and three categories, which are presented as follows:

### **Sub-theme 1.1 Family support**

The participants in this study indicated that their families were their best support system during the mourning process. Families come together during this time and make collective decisions for a successful burial of the deceased and the survival of the widow and children. Older women (especially widows) from both the immediate and extended families leave their houses upon hearing about the death and live with the widow in her house until a few days after the burial. Following are the direct narratives from the participants:

*“Remember, I am still not allowed to be seen by people. All the chores are done by elders who are widows and aunts from the husband’s family.... My family support was the greatest, and I am grateful that they supported me throughout. Other family members brought food parcels, cows, money, and offered their cars so that the burial process can be a success” (Participant 1)*

*“The family assigned someone to take care of me. In this case, it was my aunt. She was tasked to give me food, water and anything I needed; the rest of the elderly women cared for my children and everyone in the family while I was relaxing on the mattress. Some members also offered some services like decorating for prayer services” (Participant 10)*

### **Sub-theme 2: Support from other widows**

Here are some narratives from the participants in this study:

*“My husband left home (died) exactly at 07:00 AM. Already I was allocated a person who also lost her husband to come and stay with me to help me throughout the process of widowhood” (Participant 7)*

*The first day my husband died, I was with his family because he was sick, so he died when everyone was there so immediately when my husband died, they took down the bed and asked me to sit on the mattress. They immediately allocated an old lady who lost a husband a while ago. Specifically, it has to be someone from my husband’s relative; that old lady was so compassionate; she did not care about my age; she took care of me with her whole heart; she brought water for me to bath daily, after bathing she took out the water and mopped the floor, other women cooked, she went to dish up for me three times a day and when I am done eating, she took back the dishes for the other women to wash them, she spoke and comforted me; the family conducted the whole funeral arrangements while I was indoors and they also took care of my children” (Participant 6)*

*“I called my pastor at church, and they allocated an old woman for me who was also a widow to come to my house; the woman told me to buy different types of tea, and they asked me to go collect seven stones so that we can do rituals the church way, she guided me in every step of the way” (Participant 8)*

### **Sub-theme 3: Support from community members**

The participants indicated that their community has collective funeral funding for each household that participates; whenever there is a funeral, the community leaders gather each household and collect the contributions. The participants further indicated that the community treats the bereaved families with empathy, sympathy, and compassion; the community extends its hand to assist with home chores every day until the bereaved’s home is cleared of guests. Participants also mentioned that the community comforted them by participating in the daily prayer services during the week to console them.

*“The community’s role during the mourning is to offer moral, physical and financial support such as doing home chores, digging the grave, killing the cow and goat if any, chopping of veggies, cooking and serving, as well as daily prayer services, once the funeral is done, the community carries on with their lives” (Traditional Healer 2)*

## **DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to explore the death-cleansing rituals as a coping strategy for widows experiencing grief in Bellevue Village. The Balobedu people have established a collective coping approach rooted in their cultural norms and traditions. Participants included widows, traditional healers, and older women who are guardians of cultural knowledge. They emphasized that these coping mechanisms apply to all Balobedu widows with similar cultural backgrounds, suggesting that they have the shared capacity to heal and cope with death. Community and family support was recognized as vital for helping widows during this challenging time. According to Amoo et al. (2022), widows in African communities struggle significantly without support from their families and communities.

It is widely acknowledged that death brings deep emotional pain, a sentiment consistently echoed by the participants. As a result, African communities often rely on traditional death rituals and familial support to navigate their grief (Sundermeier, 1998). During these rituals, the collaborative efforts of family members, experienced widows, and community members become apparent as they unite to provide emotional, physical, and financial support to the widow and her children (Scannell-Desch, 2003).

Participants described how families assign an older widow, often a relative, to provide comfort in mourning spaces and offer various forms of assistance. They noted that their families played crucial roles in organizing funerals and caring for children. Some family members covered specific funeral expenses, such as purchasing a cow, while others contributed essential services like decorating for prayer gatherings. This support network significantly eases widows' administrative and financial burdens, allowing them to focus on healing. Consequently, widows could remain indoors without worrying about feeding the community members who gathered to support the burial arrangements, as the family managed this responsibility (Bowling & Cartwright, 2024). This allowed participants valuable time for reflection and planning for their futures as single parents.

Traditional collective coping mechanisms are crucial in Balobedu society. While most participants identify as Christians, nearly all have actively engaged in traditional death rituals. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between participants' religious affiliations and their involvement in these rituals.

Participants raised concerns about the negative consequences of not undergoing cleansing rituals after losing a spouse. Among these consequences are Makhuma (defilement sickness) and even death. They highlighted a pressing issue: many rural widows cannot afford psychological support to cope with their loss, and they believe that death is not merely a medical condition but a spiritual one that requires resolution through cleansing rituals.

## CONCLUSION

This study examines the importance of death-cleansing rituals as a coping mechanism for Balobedu widows. The findings indicate that these rituals are not merely composed of herbs and cultural symbols; they serve to unify the community in support of the grieving family. Such communal involvement fosters closer relationships between the community and widows, leading to compassionate treatment. In their absence, widows face limited financial aid and assistance with household chores, as community members tend to maintain distance. The study also reveals a concerning attitude among the youth towards these rituals. Participants expressed fear that ignoring such traditions could result in illness or death in future generations. When a widow neglects the cleansing rituals, the community often ostracizes her due to fears of contamination, further diminishing her support network. Despite certain criticisms of these customs, including arguments that they violate human rights, as noted by scholars like Dube (2016), many participants defended the rituals. They emphasized the ubuntu principles of mutual respect and care, although some expressed that such principles are not always enacted in the treatment of widows. Additionally, participants confirmed that participation in social activities is typically prohibited until after the cleansing ceremony, yet they acknowledged that they are not forced into seclusion; rather, they are offered respect and autonomy in deciding their involvement. Out of the participants, 15 asserted that the rituals do not infringe upon their rights, while one expressed specific concern. None advocated for the complete elimination of these practices, noting that failing to perform the rituals could bring harm to both them and the larger community. This situation underscores the necessity for better cultural education among the youth and researchers to dispel misunderstandings and foster a more nuanced view of death-cleansing rituals.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data collected for this study can be obtained upon request from the corresponding author, PM. The data are not available to the public due to ethical restrictions. The conditions of ethical approval instructed that only the researchers have access to the raw data to protect the research participants' privacy.

## CONSENT

The authors confirm that participants in this study signed an informed consent form to participate in the research, and no identifiable information will be shared with the public, as only participant numbers will be provided. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants in this study.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any financial or personal relations that may have negatively influenced them in writing this article. All the authors confirm that there are no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

“Conceptualisation, Mphephu P; methodology, Mphephu P and Matshidze P; formal analysis, Mphephu P; investigation, Mphephu P; writing—original draft preparation, Mphephu P; writing—review and editing Mphephu P, Tshifhumulo R and Makhado L; supervision, Tshifhumulo R and Matshidze P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.”

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