

“MISSING IN ACTION”: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BODIES IN AFRICAN BEREAVEMENT RITUALS

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Abstract.

The authors of this paper offer a turn to embodiment in exploring the role of bodies in “black”, South African bereavement rituals and mourning practices². This paper is born out of the trauma de-briefing program for the crew of a South African Navy vessel after the death of a comrade during an anti-piracy operation off the east coast of southern Africa. Herein we attempt to grapple with the unique complexities of the physical presence of bodies in African mourning rituals in the context of the deceased’s body being “lost at sea”. First we establish the operational context of naval deployment and the loss of the sailor’s body at sea. Second we outline some of the corporeal configurations of black South African bereavement rituals. Here we draw specific attention to bodies in processes of grief and mourning, for the deceased and mourners. Lastly, drawing on testimonies from four South African Navy personnel present during the operational deployment, we highlight the significant role played by bodies in African bereavement rituals. In sum, we suggest

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the South African Military Health Service (SAMHS), South African Navy (SAN), South African National Defense Force (SANDF), South African Department of Defense, or the South African Government.

² The authors reference “race” in this paper as a social construction. In this context “black” represents the apartheid-era racial classification of all indigenous African, South Africans. This demographic system of classification is still employed by the Department of Home Affairs, and the Department of Defense and Military Veterans. “African” in this paper also refers specifically to black South Africans.

the need to re-matter the materiality of bodies in psychological literature on African bereavement rituals.

Keywords: African bereavement rituals, bodies, South African Navy, military grief rituals, lost at sea

INTRODUCTION.

Currently the South African Navy (SAN) serves an integral link in joint operations with other Southern Africa Development Countries (SADEC) in anti-piracy patrols along the coastal borders of the African continent. During operational deployment the personnel who serve aboard SAN vessels face a number of deployment stressors, including, separation from family, extreme environmental conditions, equipment failure, and personal deprivation, which are documented in South African deployment literature (van Dyk, 2009). For the most part SAN vessels return home without significant incident. Recently, however, this was not the case when an SAN vessel, during an anti-piracy patrolling operation off the east coast of southern Africa, lost a member of their crew. The crew member lost was a black African, South African male. The unfortunate accident that befell the SAN member resulted in his body being “lost at sea”. Despite extensive operations to recover the SAN member, his body was not found.

Since 1994 the SAN, an arm of service in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), has undergone substantial transformations in both its organizational structure and culture. The SAN originally developed out of the British Royal Navy (BRN), which left its mark in terms of rank structure, customs, and rituals on the emergent SAN (Bennett & Söderlund, 2008). BRN traditions for memorial services for sailors lost at sea strongly influence current SAN traditions. During such a service the most senior officer present would officiate, assisted by a Naval chaplain. Flags would be flown at half-mast, a wreath would be laid while a company of sailors would perform a last salute, and a fly-past may be included. In line with efforts by the SAN to meet the diverse cultural needs of their sailors, in the days following the loss of the SAN member both the traditional Naval rituals mentioned above as well as specific cultural rituals requested by the deceased’s family were performed, at the site where the Navy man’s body was lost.

In standard response to a traumatic event of this nature, a team of SANDF psychologists are activated and deployed to engage a debriefing programme for the crew members part of the deployment. The genesis of this paper lies in the testimonies encountered by the psychologists involved in the debriefing programme for this SAN crew. Specifically this study is born out of some of the difficulties expressed by some African crew members in mourning the loss of their comrade. In particular for some returning crew members complications to the mourning process were articulated regarding the physical presence, or in this case absence, of the deceased’s body in order for certain bereavement rituals to occur.

At this point it is important to note that the concerns raised by some of the African crew members involved in this deployment varied across self-described religious groups (this includes inter-Christian faiths), ethnic and familial-clan affiliation, gender, Naval rank, and

age. However these concerns were not shared by all the African crew members. These specific concerns were also not explicitly shared by white, Indian, and coloured, members of the crew³.

This unique set of circumstances provided us the opportunity to review the literature on African bereavement rituals. The aim here was to assess the cultural appropriateness of conventional models of trauma debriefing available to psychologists in military and operational environments, and specifically the SAN. Current psychological models of trauma debriefing in military contexts of operational deployment are largely derived on Euro-centric psychological constructs and approaches to understanding the effects of trauma. This is epitomised as a “linear” understanding of bereavement coupled with minimizing post-traumatic stress (disorders) for combat readiness (Pennebaker, 2001; Devilly, Gist & Cotton, 2006). The most dominant body of scholarship in operational or deployment psychology in this regard is derived from the United States military (see Adler, Bliese, & Castro, 2001; Kenndey & Zillmer, 2006; Kennedy & Williams, 2011). Given the diverse cultural affiliation and identification of SAN personnel these models of debriefing are not always appropriate. Redressing these models is necessary for ensuring SANDF psychologists render an effective clinical service to all personnel. Furthermore, given the unique history of political oppression and racism in South Africa, and the role played by military forces in maintaining the apartheid state (Mankayi, 2008), this process of redress bears deep political, historical, and cultural significance.

Consequently a review of the literature on African bereavement rituals revealed two significant trends. First, the research literature on African bereavement rituals for the mourning process for indigenous Africans is scant. Second, and more pointedly, scholarship which specifically addresses the implications of an absent body in bereavement rituals is equally as absent. Therefore this paper proposes to address the aforementioned gap in the African bereavement rituals research literature by discussing the significance of bodies in these rituals. In order to explicate this point we now move on to consider the theoretical and material figuring of bodies in African bereavement rituals and associated scholarship.

EMBODIED ACTS AND ACTS OF EMBODIMENT: BODIES IN AFRICAN BEREAVEMENT AND MOURNING RITUALS

In recent years the social sciences have begun to orientate towards a so-called “turn to embodiment”. Theories of embodiment and, more explicitly, bodies, have however come to the fore in the work of second-wave feminists since the early 1960s (de Beauvoir, 1949/1989), the 1980s new sociology of the body (Turner, 2008), postmodern cultural theory (Featherstone, Hepworth, & Turner, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Crossley, 2001; Shilling, 2007), and the field of critical body studies in the 2000s (Turner et al, 2012). These traditions have jointly pointed to bodies occupying the status of an absent presence in

³ We are mindful of the potential for reading a focus on “black bodies” as a colonial Cartesianesque reinscription of African identity as *of* the body. The implication here is that the unspecified specter of “white bodies” looms large as the rationalized and ephemeral normative. However the emphasis of this paper follows concerns that were explicitly highlighted by some African crew members and not crew members from other race groups.

research literature (Davis, 1997; Shilling, 2007). Psychology has particularly been held culprit for under-theorising the complex torsion of materiality into the processes of identity construction (Chadwick, 2006). In this sense psychological theory has lagged behind in recuperating a Cartesian approach to bodies that still conceives of them as either a biological substrate for psychological life, or cognitive after-effect of constructivist mentalising.

The historical trajectory of body studies has prioritized the bodies of white heterosexual able-bodied males (Hearn, 2012). In this regard Witz registers important corporeal feminist implications in her assertion: “there is a history of bodies in the allegedly disembodied sociological heritage: a history of her excluded body and a history of his abject body” (2000: 2). Craig (2012) suggests that owing to the long history of pathologising black indigenously African corporeality in colonial “race science”, contemporary social sciences have displayed a tepid approach to bodies for fear of a slippage into essentialism or an appeal to determinism. The story of South African bodies is a visceral one, particularly for black South Africans. South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past have a deeply rooted history of churning African identity through embodied constructions of blackness and race, as well as representational and material violence (Morrell, 2001a, 2001b; Rao & Pierce, 2006; Ward, 2006). In tracing the figuring of South African bodies it is increasingly evident for the need to (re-)figure the embodied subjectivity of African corporeality in light of tendencies to: 1) visiblise black bodies as bound within a problematic and colonized flesh; and 2) maintain the un-named and un-marked white (male) body as superior. However the project of refiguring black African bodies in cultural bereavement rituals, taking into account the colonial repercussions and authoritative interpretivism of doing so in English (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000) is particularly complex given the tight but often blurred inter-entwinement of materiality and metaphysical spirituality (Mbiti, 1991; Holdstock, 2000; Nwoye, 2005; Makhaba, Memela, & Magojo, 2009). In response to the culturally unique processes of bereaved clients presenting in therapeutic environments, South African psychologists are also exploring the complex processes involved in African bereavement rituals (van Heerden, 2005; Makhaba et al, 2009; Yawa, 2010).

For the most part theories of bereavement in psychological literature are historically dominated by western contributions (Bowlby, 1961; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Stroebe, Stroebe, & Hansson, 1993; Sutcliffe, Tufnell, & Cornish, 1998; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Lobar, Youngblut, & Brooten, 2006). We acknowledge that extensive bodies of scholarship exist on death, mourning and loss from seminal Freudian theory (Freud [1917], as cited in Rycroft, 1995) and psychoanalytic researches (Kernberg, 2010; Reineman, 2011), to phenomenological-existential perspectives (Sartre, 1958; Yalom, 1980; Bugental, 1981; van Deurzen, 2010), and poststructural scholars (Butler, 2006, 2009). Some of these works bridge insights with African cosmology. Our concern here, however, is the state of bodies in scholarship specifically on African bereavement rituals. Work on African bereavement rituals, for example, Matumba (1994), Maloke (2008), Manyedi, Koen, and Greeff (2004), and Yawa (2010), pays a polite nod to bodies while jettisoning materiality in bereavement rituals in favour of prioritizing disembodied, ephemeral, and psychical mourning constructs. The fate of bodies and the role of materialities in meaning making are, yet again, evacuated in the burial or cremation. The experiences of grief in

bereavement rituals scholarship are consequently focussed on the spiritual status of the soul post-death.

Nonetheless African grief work scholarship has shown there are significant differences in conceptualizing death and bereavement for Africans compared to some westernized patterns of mourning (Nwoye, 2005). African bereavement rituals render “death” a broadly dialectical process of shepherding the deceased’s soul through a series of embodied rituals performed on or involving the bodies of both the deceased and the bereaved, and spiritual rituals which steward the deceased’s soul to an ancestral-spiritual realm (Mbiti, 1991; Holdstock, 2000; Ngubane, 2004; Nwoye, 2005; Makhaba et al, 2009). Both sets of rituals are integral to attaining closure for the deceased and the bereaved. The performance of bereavement rituals through the mourning processes has also been shown to remediate pathological forms of bereavement in both western (Castle & Phillips, 2003) and African (Nwoye, 2005) contexts. Unfortunately psychological bereavement theory which is often characterized by therapeutic progression through various psychologically circumscribed phases of grief falls short in attending to:

- The practical, logistical configurations and inherent symbolic significance in concrete indigenous African rituals which mediate the process of grief itself;
- The psychological potency of these rituals as organically therapeutic within the context of culturally commonplace modes of mourning;
- Traditional (patriarchal) family structures which politically prioritize the role of male elders in directing the mourning rituals;
- The involvement of the deceased’s systemic network, namely, the nuclear and extended families, the geographically located community in which the family lives, the clan to which the deceased was born into, and a spiritual plane of familial elders;
- The complex interactions between the physically present earth-bound mourners and deceased’s body and soul, and a metaphysical-spiritual realm of deceased elders, familial guardians, and significant clan figures; and
- Competing pressures of traditional culturally influenced mourning rituals and religio-Christian burial ceremonies.

The above mentioned factors are subject to a high degree of variability amongst Africans based on familial-clan and ethnic affiliations (Kilonzo & Hogan, 1999), the decisions taken by family elders, social and financial challenges, the extent to which families may have embraced European-style religious belief systems, such as Christianity, or African derived religious doctrine, for example the Zionist Christian Church. More generally, the materiality of the body in bereavement rituals can be roughly theorized in terms of “guidelines” provided in cultural lore on how to deal with death and, more narrowly, the configuration of the bodies of the deceased and bereaved. While these rituals may have evolved, and perhaps changed over time, adherence to strict guidelines is the norm rather than the exception. Listed below are some of the traditional, cultural guidelines for handling the deceased’s body, which largely depend on (a) who has died and (b) how the person died. With respect to *who* the deceased is, the following guidelines apply:

- *Stillborn child*: A child who dies before or at birth is given a name and is then buried as though they had lived. Family elders, usually women, are tasked with the duty of preparing the stillborn body for burial. The body of a stillborn child, though sometimes not fully developed, is viewed as a complete body already imbued with the spirit of the line of ancestry of the family or clan. Cases of families who return to hospitals to demand the foetus that the hospital may have disposed of have been reported. Such families often face difficulties in performing the necessary rituals in the event the body is not found.
- *Child*: The body is washed and prepared for burial by family elders.
- *Adult*: Spouse or family elder is responsible for closing the eyes. The body is washed by elders of the same sex as the deceased.

With respect to *how* the deceased passed, the following general guidelines apply:

- *Death from natural causes / illness*: The body is washed and prepared for burial.
- *Death through accidents*: The body is washed and prepared for burial. The ritual is performed at a designated place outside the homestead. It is generally believed that this practice will prevent a recurrence of misfortune.
- *Death through suicide*: The body is washed and prepared for burial. In view of the act of taking one's own life and bringing harm to one's own body being perceived as unnatural, a specific ritual which symbolically admonishes the person may be performed on the body.

The remains of a person who may have died on foreign land are also treated as though they were the entire body, accorded the respective rituals, and then buried in the culturally assented way. Emphasis should be made of the care that the family employs in handling the body as this is directly related to all the rituals that have to be performed prior to, during, and after burial. In rare situations where the deceased body is not recovered, the family faces numerous challenges as there are no clear guidelines on the appropriate steps to follow.

The comportments, postures, and accoutrements of the deceased's body are only given meaning in interaction with the corporeal configurations of the bereaved. This includes acts of slaughtering cattle, all-night vigils, communal wailing, and washing the deceased's body. Through those embodied acts the bereaved are systemically integrated into the bereavement process. One of the most visible forms of embodied mourning comes in the cultural dress code for the bereaved. For example, the dark-coloured clothing (either black or navy blue) worn by a widow for up to a year after her husband has died. Cavallaro and Warwick (1998) suggest that the processes involved in clothing the body blur the boundaries between the organic dermis of the skin and the synthetic layers of material in clothing: subsuming both in the production of corporeal subjectivity. This, however, has received minimal attention in psychological bereavement literature.

In light of the aforementioned the aim of this paper is to offer an initial foray into the status of bodies in African bereavement rituals. Additionally to explore the significance of an absent body, or in this case a body lost at sea, for the embodied processes of

bereavement for the deceased and bereaved, from the perspective of four SAN personnel and observations from the psychological debriefing process.

SOME NOTES ON METHOD.

This paper draws on extracts of testimony from four African SAN personnel who were part of an operational deployment during which a fellow crew member’s body was lost at sea. During post-deployment debriefing it was evidenced that some African crew members were experiencing difficulties reconciling the loss of their comrade. In particular, concerns were raised by these crew members regarding the absence of the deceased’s body at the time traditional cultural mourning rituals were conducted by the deceased’s family.

Crew members who had reported these specific difficulties were invited to participate in semi-structured individual interviews with two interviewers⁴ to explore the opportunities and challenges for psychological debriefings to cater to the unique and rare circumstances which had specifically emerged on this deployment. The extracts from testimonies detailed here are a selected portion of the interviews conducted. These extracts were selected on the basis that they concisely represented the ambit of concerns raised by participating African crew members in regards to rituals involving the body of the deceased and mourning. The extracts also meet SANDF security constraints. Table 1 provides a brief outline of the self-reported demographics of the sampled participants.

Table 1. Brief profile of research participants.

Participant ⁵	Gender	Age	Rank	Religious denomination	Ethnic/Clan affiliation
Thabo	Male	25	Leading Seaman	Non-denominational Christian	amaXhosa
Bheki	Male	25	Leading Seaman	Anglican	amaXhosa
Vusi	Male	29	Petty Officer	Non-denominational Christian	amaZulu
Nomandla	Female	23	Able Seaman	Nazareth Baptist Church	amaZulu

All the interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded. This did present with minor challenges in capturing the multi-faceted cultural connotations in translating cultural rituals for some of the English-speaking researchers. This difficulty is not uncommon in African bereavement rituals research as many of the terms or phrases referring to end-of-life practices denote a series of acts which often carry simultaneous literal and metaphorical connotations (Makhaba et al, 2009). An example of this can be seen in the phrases, *umolumo* and *ukuhlamba izandla* used by Thabo in describing an amaXhosa mourning ritual. Translated into English these phrases roughly refer to the ritual of

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⁵ Identified under pseudonym.

slaughtering cattle in the presence of extended family to mark the death of a family member. Metaphorically however these phrases also refer to a process of “cleansing” the family of the death in order to prevent *umkhokha*, in other words, the potential for further misfortune to befall the family. The researchers’ found that semi-structured interviews afforded participants the opportunity for further input and explanation of specific cultural rituals. The semi-structured interview was sectioned into two schedules: 1) questions pertaining to rituals conducted on or involving the deceased’s body; and 2) questions regarding the significance of an absent body for bereavement.

Analysis of the transcribed data was conducted using a thematic content analysis, employing Sandelowksi’s (2000), and Lacey and Luff’s (2001) approach to qualitative content analysis. This involved establishing working, pliable thematic categories based on initial hypotheses and reviewed literature. Once the data had been collected the researchers conducted a number of readings and re-readings of the transcribed text as part of familiarization with the data (Lacey & Luff, 2001). Once the researchers were familiar with the data a formal process of coding and thematic induction followed. This served an inductive and generative function so as to revise and rework a coding framework that fits both the theoretical standpoint of the research paper as well as the textual material collected. Quantitative content analysis is typically characterized by counting the number of instances of text that fall into the prescribed content categories. However in qualitative thematic analysis “counting is a means to an end, not the end itself” (Sandelowski, 2000: 338) and extends the interpretative horizons of content analysis. In this paper extracts from the text will be cited in order to illustrate participants’ experiences of their bodies in African bereavement rituals, and to focus the research process on participants’ interpretations of these rituals.

FINDINGS.

1. Bodies in bereavement rituals.

1.1. The roles of bodies in bereavement rituals: Confirming the passing, collective mourning, spiritual movement, and avoiding misfortune.

Throughout the data supplied by the participants, four distinct but inter-linked sub-themes emerged as to the role of bodies in participants’ experiences of African bereavement rituals. First of which concerns the role played by a body specifically identified as dead. This serves as confirmation that death has actually occurred:

Vusi: *“In my culture, you must see the body. The dead body must be seen to let family know they, we can start mourning rituals ... Because, you see, I am alive and my body is alive. I cannot have mourning rituals conducted on my body because it’s alive. But! If my body is dead then the rituals can be done.”*

And:

Thabo: *“I know he is gone; I witnessed ... [circumstances of the deceased’s death]. But, you see, there are still others there [stationed on the SAN vessel] who cannot move on because they have not seen him [the deceased’s body].”*

Of foremost interest in Vusi's assertion: *"I am alive and my body is alive"*, is the bifurcation of his embodied subject. Accordingly both occupy a joint, seemingly interweaved status of "aliveness". In this sense what is made clearer is that both the soul and the body are alive and therefore require distinct rituals signifying the death of the body and the passing of the soul. However in both Vusi and Thabo's statements there is support for the belief that a dead body serves a specific role in notifying family, friends, and the community that mourning rituals can now commence. At first glance Vusi and Thabo's descriptions of bereavement appear to mirror a Kubler-Rossian description of the denial stages of mourning (Kubler-Ross, 1969). However Vusi and Thabo suggest that the presence of the deceased's body does not only affect personal experiences of grief, as echoed by Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005); but also includes the practical and perceived cultural legitimacy for the performance of bereavement rituals.

The sense of connectedness-in-grief also implied by Vusi and Thabo highlights the second sub-theme evidenced by the role of a body in bereavement rituals, that is, to signal the start of communal and collective mourning. The idea that attachment relationships in African families are marked through a collectivized interconnection to the broader community and clan is not new (see Swartz, 1998). Makhaba et al (2009) reiterate that the processes of mourning in one family are also grieved by the wider community. Nwoye (2005) echoes this by asserting the unique role that African communities play in organically and systemically aiding community members in healing during bereavement.

Thirdly, although all of the SAN members who took part in the trauma debriefing process acknowledged and accepted that their fellow shipmate had died, some still voiced ongoing concerns regarding the status of the deceased's spirit. In an exchange between Bheki and JM, mourning rituals conducted on the body act as a facilitator of spiritual movement from an earthly-physical realm to an ancestral-spiritual realm:

Bheki: *"Although my parents are not cultural, more Christian. My grandfather has shared with me if those rituals are not conducted then your, uhm, spirit stays here."*

JM: *"Here?"*

Bheki: *"On the ground. On earth. It does not go on to meet with ancestors."*

Thabo also appears to share Bheki's belief:

Thabo: *"When we cut the hair. This is not only for us who are cutting. It is also for the spirit ... when you remove the hair from the head this is also letting the spirit go forward to the ancestors ... to leave the body."*

At first Thabo does not only reassert that the bereavement ritual being performed has a communal element in assisting mourners through the process of grieving, but he also shares Bheki's belief that rituals inform and assist the deceased's spirit in moving on from the body. Importantly this underscores the multi-plane paradigm that shapes a substantive element of indigenous African life. This multi-plane philosophy holds that life can be found pre and post-death. Holdstock (2000) refers to the ancestral post-death plane of existence as inhabited by "living dead" spirits. In this sense the deceased's body and spirit dynamically occupy a liminal space between earthly and spiritual life and death. Therefore

given the central role of the ancestors in processes of life, dying, and death, as Makhaba et al have illustrated, this implies that “death, like every other event, happens with the ‘consent’ of the ancestors, so that the deceased person may assume their rightful place in the spirit world” (2009: 25).

Lastly, it was noted during the debriefing for the SAN personnel that bereavement not only entailed safeguarding the metaphysical status of the deceased’s spirit with the ancestors, but also the physical safety of the bereaved. Concerns were raised regarding future experiences which could befall the deceased’s family, such as, potential bad luck or difficulties for the family. Generally, this was attributed to mourning rituals not being properly observed, and specifically, the absence of the deceased’s body. Similar concerns by these crew members also concerned future experiences which might transpire aboard the SAN vessel or involve the ship’s company, for example, paranormal activity. This concern was particularly evident in some African crew members having difficulty with night-time duties on board the vessel for fear of encountering the deceased’s spirit. Here bereavement rituals to be conducted on the deceased’s body are positioned as integral to avoiding misfortune:

Vusi: *“You know there is this thing called, erh, what is it, umkhokha, né. This is what in my culture you call a bad fate in the family. If the body is not there and those rituals are not conducted it is like wishing bad luck on the family ... it is like that family will now suffer death and problems.”*

Makhaba et al (2009) point out that *ukuvala umkhokha*, or stopping the track of misfortune, is a belief present in most Nguni cultures. The belief in future misfortune is characterized by the certainty that when a member of the family or community dies in accidental circumstances, such as a motor vehicle accident, other accidental deaths are likely to befall the family or community unless bereavement rituals are conducted and the spirit is heralded through to the ancestral plane. Vusi echoes a version of these concerns:

Vusi: *“But the same problems that happen in that family could also happen to us [referring to personnel onboard the SAN vessel]. Because if there is no body on which to have rituals then those rituals will go unperformed and all of us could be at risk in the future.”*

1.2. The role of the elders and men in guiding bereavement.

It became clear through analysis of the data that the presence of the deceased’s body in mourning rituals not only facilitated the performance of unique cultural rituals, but also served as a conduit through which elders, loosely defined as males over the age of 40 years, would exercise authority over the grieving process:

Thabo: *“When things are not done the way the elders want them to be done there are problems ... [T]hey have been there before, encountered these things, and what to [when] do they happen again.”*

And:

Vusi: “... two years ago my cousin died while herding cattle across the river. Because it was raining season the police couldn’t find his body ... it was decided by my grandfather that the family must travel to [name of the river mouth connecting to the ocean] ... far away from where he had crossed [the river] to collect his spirit.”

The above extract from Vusi demonstrates the authority conferred to a male elder in directing mourning rituals. Interestingly Vusi’s experience also refers to a common bereavement ritual which entails collecting the deceased’s spirit through the use of an *umphafa* branch and transporting it back home. This ritual is especially pertinent if the deceased passed away outside of the homestead.

The patriarchal effects of traditionally structured indigenous African families have been covered in research literature (Tamale, 2011). However, traditional cultural bereavement rituals are not always strictly enacted by men. Bereavement rituals, unlike other rituals, which may be performed in the cultural context, often involve the appointment of a principal mourner. The principal mourner, depending on who the deceased is in the familial structure, can be either a woman or a man. This in turn is highly dependent on the relationships the deceased has with surviving members of the family. That said, in the bereavement rituals conducted by the deceased SAN sailor’s family members, Nomandla, a female crew member, noted the patrifocal orientation of bereavement rituals:

Nomandla: “Three of his [the deceased] family came aboard ... from what I see [sic] it was the father, uncle and another guy; not sure who he is ...”

JM: “So none of the female [family] members were there?”

Nomandla: “It was strange that his mother was not there ... she is also grieving but she is not included. But also, you see, it is usually men who do those things ... I am not sure if I would want that because it would be saying to my mom that she is not important to me like my father. If his [the deceased’s] mother was said no you [are] not coming to [ship’s name] then that is wrong.”

Although Nomandla went on to discuss other factors for why the women may not have attended, for example a lack of space available on the helicopter transport to the vessel, her statement “usually men do those things” underscores the gendered demarcation of bereavement rituals. Nomandla’s sentiments suggest that, at least from her perspective, this differentiation is problematic because it implies a marginalisation of women’s grief.

2. The significance of a body lost at sea.

The data presented here specifically refers to the SAN participants’ experiences of their comrade’s body being lost at sea. This theme appeared to find articulation in the meanings participants’ attached to the absence of a physical or material body, and what this meant for the process of bereavement and closure. The absence of a physical body for the participants in this paper suggested: 1) that the deceased’s spirit would never be able to pass through to the ancestral-spiritual realm, effectively arresting bereavement; and 2) that some members of the crew were somehow disembodied and disenfranchised from embodied aspects of their grief, and therefore not able to achieve closure in mourning.

2.1. A soul set adrift: A spirit never at peace

As mentioned earlier the status of the deceased's spirit post-death is of critical importance in African bereavement rituals. In order for a soul to be perceived by the bereaved that it is "at peace", and for the bereaved and community to gain closure, the soul of the deceased must have been welcomed by the ancestors into the ethereal, spiritual realm. Indigenous African knowledge purports that this occurs broadly under two conditions. First of which is a so-called natural death that is not considered untimely by the family and excludes accidental death, murder, and suicide. Second the timeous performance of bereavement rituals by the bereaved. However the unfortunate circumstances resulting in the death of the SAN sailor, and the loss of his body at sea complicated the customary bereavement process. All the participants in this paper indicated that it was specifically the accidental nature of the deceased's passing, and what this implied for the spiritual status of his soul, which formed a major source of difficulty in their bereavement:

Thabo: *"I am not sure how his family will take this. My feeling on it is that they will have great difficulty because how he dies [sic] is not proper, in our culture."*

Interviewer: *"Not proper?"*

Thabo: *"Yes! It is unnatural you see. Erh [pauses] his body was not there. And for Africans that is not right. Because now they will never know what happened to him."*

Interviewer: *"Do you mean they won't know what happened to his body?"*

Thabo: *"Uhm, erh. Yes. But also his spirit. Because he died off shore there will be problems in trying to conduct all the rituals. We also don't know if there was slaughtering. Which is very important."*

Accidental deaths can be particularly difficult for families to recover from (Makhaba et al, 2009), more so when the deceased's body is missing. This was evident during South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings when the vast number of politically-motivated disappearances was brought to public light. In 2005 the National Prosecuting Authority established a Missing Persons Task Team to investigate the disappearance of anti-apartheid activists reported to the TRC. In a similar effort, project *Bakae*, a SeSotho phrase meaning "where are they?", was undertaken by the June 16 Foundation to locate activists who had disappeared during the fallout of the 1976 riots. A more notable case includes the disappearance of Mbuyisa Makhubo who can be seen carrying Hector Peterson in the iconic June 16 photograph of the riots. The Makhubo family, much like those who testified before the TRC, have gone on to tell of their bereavement difficulties in light of the deceased's absence (Mafisa, 2011).

In similar circumstances, Julia Reineman (2011) provides an insightful examination of the effect of political disappearances under the Argentinian military junta during the country's seven year "dirty war" (1976-1983). Reineman (2011) uses Lacan's model of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, to understand the arrest of grief in "complicated mourning". Reineman's (2011) findings suggest that delayed or inhibited responses to healthy mourning, or what she also refers to as pathological melancholia, are common where a lack of opportunity for the bereaved to mourn their loved one through (in part) embodied acts of bereavement occurs.

Also in the above extract, Thabo points out that the deceased's body being lost at sea violates traditional cultural beliefs because the death is not perceived as natural, moreover it complicates the performance of bereavement rituals in Thabo's eyes. Thabo cites the ritual performance of slaughtering cattle. Mbiti (1991), Van Heerden (2002), Ngubane (2004), and Makhaba et al (2009) reiterate the importance of slaughtering rituals, also called *umkhapho*. The ritual of slaughtering an animal is often done communally with the intent of supplying the deceased's spirit with meat for the ancestors. It is considered an important ritual in solidifying the connection between the deceased's and the ancestors. In a similar vein Vusi's response to Jarred Martin's (JM) prompt about some crew members having expressed concerns about possible paranormal activity given the circumstances of the deceased's death, echoes findings in the research literature:

Vusi: *"This thing that happened here is possible ... in our culture, black culture, we believe that our spirit is not at peace if your rituals have not been done by family."*

JM: *"What happens to your spirit?"*

Vusi: *"I think it wanders. But it does not go beyond that ... like you will find that in such times your spirit is not welcomed by your ancestors."*

Nowatzki and Kalischuk (2009) as well as Keen, Murray and Payne (2012) have found that post-death encounters with the deceased reported by the bereaved are central to the meaning-making processes of life and death for the bereaved. Often reported in the form of visual, auditory, and tactile sensory experiences by the bereaved (Nowatzki & Kalischuk 2009), post-death encounters also affect the physical experiences the bereaved attach to their grieving. Vusi points out that these experiences do not only influence here-and-now bereavement but also the perceived relationships the bereaved and the family have with their ancestors in the after-life. Research findings further suggest that people who perceive the existence of favourable connections between the deceased and their ancestors draw on this as a resilience factor during bereavement (Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009; Chapple, Swift, & Ziebland, 2011; Keen, Murray & Payne, 2012). Thus the circumstances of this sailor's death might be perceived to establish an incongruous relationship with his ancestors and could explain why some crew members feared paranormal consequences that might affect them or the deceased's family.

2.2. Disembodying grief: A case of restrained crying.

In an interview with Nomandla it became apparent that, for her, one of the effects of her comrade's body being lost at sea and not present for bereavement rituals was a sense of alienation from the embodied act of shedding tears for the deceased. The act of crying has been shown to be a key affective-cathartic process in western bereavement literature (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Stroebe, Stroebe, & Hansson, 1993; Castle & Phillips, 2003; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005); and functions as an important process in healing during mourning for indigenous African cultures (Nwoye, 2005; Makhaba et al, 2009). In the following exchange between Nomandla and JM it is suggested that the absence of the deceased's body has a somewhat disembodying affect for Nomandla's grief:

Nomandla: *"It was like, eish, I could not cry for him because he was not there."*

JM: *"What do you mean by that?"*

Nomandla: *"Uhm, erh, I could not cry."*

JM: "Sorry?"

Nomandla: "[laughs] ... No. What I mean is it was like my eyes could not cry for him ... he was not there and I don't know where he is now. So I could not cry for him."

JM: "Do you think if his body was there, at the ceremony, that you would have been able to cry?"

Nomandla: "Yes ... in that situation you see his body then you know the rituals will be conducted and then you can cry with his family, and then you can say he has passed on."

From this extract it is alluded that there are simultaneous processes of embodied subjectivity which co-occur for the deceased and bereaved. These embodied acts co-construct the bereavement context and have implications for the experience of mourning for the bereaved, and the performance of the bereavement rituals. In this context the materiality of the deceased's body and the embodied acts of mourning by the bereaved are active participants in constructing meaning in bereavement rituals. According to Makhaba et al (2009: 5) "[d]epending on when it is done, the wailing ritual is symbolic, and it also has several meanings and functions." These functions also include: notifying the surrounding family and community that a death has occurred; as an act of farewell grieving for the deceased's soul as it moves to the ancestral realm; as an action which attempts to continue the bond between the deceased's soul and the surviving family members; and as a demonstration of genuine sadness at the loss of the deceased and, in cultural terms an exoneration of possible witchcraft or wrongdoing on the part of the mourners. In particular the bereavement ritual of crying, or symbolic wailing, also known as *isililo* in isiZulu, is a loud vocalized crying usually done in groups of mourners (Nwoye, 2005; Makhaba et al, 2009). Of interest is that none of the male participants in this paper shared Nomandla's concern. This could be explained in some of Vusi's responses to the *isililo* rituals:

Vusi: "You need to know that those ones [rituals] are not for us."

JM: "Crying? You mean isililo?"

Vusi: "Yes, 'sililo is only for women in my culture. When there is loss [and/or] death in your family it is known that the women will have great stress put on them. This is why men must be strong. Because if you are seen crying with the women then it disrupts what must happen naturally."

JM: "What do you think must happen naturally?"

Vusi: "Well it is not all the same. Families are different. But I know communities will have a problem with men crying with women. People in the community will gossip about him, and some will even say to that crying-man why he is not being strong for his family."

From this extract Vusi appears to suggest that the ritual of symbolic wailing is also highly gendered. From his perspective it tends to involve women only. This is not necessarily unusual considering that women in some African tribal rituals are prescribed crying as a form of mourning (Aborampah, 1999). What is equally interesting from this extract is Vusi's implication of the greater community in monitoring and policing the performance of culturally circumscribed heteronormative gender roles. Vusi calls on a particular construction of traditional masculinity, namely, emotional stoicism, to maintain the status quo in bereavement rituals. This is not to say that men do not cry when mourning, however, in Vusi's account, crying violates the gendered roles assigned in cultural lore for

bereavement rituals. It is also suggested that this violation may result in sanction or ostracism from the community.

3. A conflict of rituals.

The third theme from the data concerns those extracts of text from participants that suggest a jostling of the bodies in the competing ritual traditions. Specifically two sub-themes were evidenced here: 1) the negotiation of how a body is cared for in mourning when there are both the demands of traditional culturally-linked rituals and religious Christian-linked demands; and 2) reconciling traditional cultural rituals with the performance of the historically British-influenced SAN rituals for when a sailor is lost at sea.

3.1. Cultural rituals and Christian beliefs.

For Nomandla, who is a member of the Shembe Church, or *iBandla lamaNazaretha*, there is a distinct combination of ritual elements from a Christian burial ceremony as well as the traditional slaughtering of cattle in handling bodies during bereavement rituals:

Nomandla: *“In Shembe what you do is there are cultural rituals. But these are put together with what you call a Christian ritual ... not like white person’s Sunday church. There are [animal] skins and there must be slaughtering of cattle and sometimes, what you call that thing in English, Imbuzi [a goat].”*

JM: *“Why must there be slaughtering?”*

Nomandla: *“It’s just natural hey. You must think of it as part of that process. For us when you say goodbye to that person who you love it is important that you do it in that process. That process helps you say goodbye.”*

Nomandla’s concern reflects the doctrine of Shembe, a religious formation established in KwaZulu-Natal in the early twentieth century. Shembe amalgamates cultural traditions from the amaZulu clan and early colonial-era Christianity. Selepe and Edwards’s (2008) study of the African Zion Apostolic Church similarly suggests the selective blending of European Christianity and indigenous African culture. In the extract it is clear that the materiality of bodies as well as religio-cultural and racialised discourses co-construct mourners’ identity positions in regards to bereavement rituals. Interestingly Nomandla’s last statement raises the important effect bereavement rituals have in assisting mourning. Bolton and Camp’s (1986) work on the relationship between participation in funeral rituals and grief work has suggested that post-funeral rituals and symbolic acts do assist adaptive grieving. Bosley and Cook’s (1994) analysis of funeral rites also suggests that bereavement rituals, such as the slaughtering of a goat, can facilitate healthy forms of grief work for the bereaved. Bheki, on the other hand, a self-identified Anglican, stated that in his family traditional African bereavement rituals were not considered a critical part of grieving:

Bheki: *“Because I grew up in a Christian, you know Anglican, family so I’m not going to call it a ritual. We avoid that term. It is a funeral.”*

Bheki went on to reiterate that it was his personal belief in Christianity that had resulted in him not having been as bothered by his comrade’s body being lost at sea. For Bheki it was

enough for a memorial service to secure the deceased's passage to an afterlife. Bheki's belief parallels more orthodox religions which conceptualise life and death as opposite polarities and bereavement rituals serving an important bridge between the two (Das, 1984). However, these beliefs stand at odds with Vusi's earlier discussion on the deceased's wandering soul, and the complex topographical web of life, death, bereavement rituals, materiality, and ethereality, that is African cosmology.

3.2. Cultural rituals and traditional naval rituals.

A review of the literature suggests grief rituals fashioned from the BRN draw from a version of Christian doctrine that holds that bodies are an encasing for the soul (Turner, 2008). The processes of grief play out in a distinctly different manner in military and operational deployment environments. Owing to the operational demands placed on deployed service people military culture emphasises a finite period of grief in a structured form of expression, commemoration of the deceased, and bonding of the bereaved. Military rituals that pay tribute to fallen comrades during deployment serve the purpose of channeling grief in a bounded fashion ensuring military personnel can continue with their operational duties. Historically the SAN is steeped in cultural traditions associated with the BRN (Bennett & Söderlund, 2008). This was evident when the deceased SAN member was paid tribute to through the conventional Naval rituals of having a wreath lowered into the sea and set adrift, and a salute from the ships' company at the site where his body was lost at sea. However, for Vusi, the continued performance of the traditional Naval rituals are potentially inappropriate:

Vusi: *“Even though you do those things [Naval rituals] it does not make me feel better. It also is not relevant for us because we are not British. Even though his family was there ... it still does not feel as if those ceremonies [Naval rituals] match our rituals [African cultural rituals] ... [B]ut what I am also saying is that they [SAN command] must not just be concerned with black people but all of us. Even whites and Indians.”*

Of interest here is that Vusi further asserts that the development of future culturally appropriate grieving rituals for the SAN should not merely be an ethno-centric endeavour concerning black Africans but should strive to cater for all South Africans serving in the SAN, regardless of race, and building on a common South African identity.

CONCLUSION.

Traditional bereavement rituals for indigenous Africans are diverse and varied across cultural and ethnic affiliation. A common thread underlying the performance of bereavement rituals is the role they play in the process of mourning itself. Psychological literature on African bereavement rituals primarily locates the processes of mourning in, arguably, western-dominated psychological constructs. Unfortunately the colonial and Cartesian implication here is that African embodiment remains bifurcated and materiality consistently figured as a problematic.

This paper draws attention to the material significance of bodies in African bereavement rituals for both the deceased and bereaved. This is not done with the intent of burying the complex processes of identification for African bereavement rituals into the flesh. Rather acknowledging that there is a complex dialectic between the materiality of bodies,

psychological processes, and the metaphysical realm. This is evident in the difficulties present in grieving when bodies are not present for traditional cultural bereavement rituals. We found that the presence of the deceased's body has practical significance for the initiation of a sequence of grieving processes drawn from cultural lore. Cultural lore also inter-implicates the deceased's body in bereavement rituals which facilitate the transition of the deceased's spirit to an ethereal realm. Hence the presence of the deceased's body for bereavement rituals has repercussions for grieving and the understanding of future misfortunes.

The findings of this study highlight that bereavement rituals can be differentiated by gender. Firstly, cultural traditions often designate the elderly and men as principal figures in guiding bereavement rituals. Secondly, certain acts of bereavement rituals are constructed and perceived as grief work peculiar to women, such as, wailing and crying. Future research may find it necessary to explore this more intricately by drawing attention to alternative and marginalised constructions of bereavement for African women. Critical body studies might find interesting the shared and contested discourses of women's grief, and whether women continue to be materialised in fleshy, leaky, or subordinated embodiments (Grosz, 1994, 1995).

Furthermore, the set of naval traditions historically dominant in the SAN do not necessarily reflect the current range of cultural beliefs held by sailors concerning death and bereavement. The loss of a black, South African sailor's body at sea highlights the uneven disruptions such an event can have to the complex, interacting matrices of military traditions, indigenous cultural rituals, religious beliefs, and embodiment. At present the literature on military bereavement rituals is sparse and in need of growth.

Lastly, a review of the existing researches on African bereavement rituals operates under the assumption that bodies are present as the substrate through which psychological grieving plays out. The phrase "missing in action" is an equally apt description for the absent presence of bodies in the literature on African bereavement rituals. The tendency to discard the materiality in South African scholarship remains a perplexing phenomenon for critical body scholars. Luyt (2003) and Van Ommen (2009), to varying degrees, have raised concerns about over-discursivised accounts of bodies which fail to adequately theorise the relationship between discourse and materiality. In this regard a postcolonial, material-discursive eye may be necessary in examining how scholars of African bereavement rituals render African bodies, specifically, and materiality, more generally.

Acknowledgements.

The body of this text would not have materialised without the participating SAN members, the support of the Directorate of Psychology in the SAMHS, as well as valuable critique from two anonymous reviewers and the **PINS** editor. For this, we thank them all.

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