

# An Investigation of the Batsotso Mourning Rituals in Kakamega County, Kenya

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**Abstract:** Every community in the world responds to death and loss in unique ways. Funeral customs and ceremonies vary across different cultures worldwide. The study focused on establishing and understanding the effects of the Batsotso mourning rituals and ascertaining their applicability in grief and bereavement counseling. The research narrowed down to the different rituals performed during the mourning period among the Batsotso people with the aim of generalizing the results to other Kenyan communities. Batsotso is one of the Luhya dialects, a tribe that inhabits Kakamega County in Kenya. The study used descriptive research design. The data was collected by the use of questionnaires, interview and observation. The target population for this study was 400 families from Butsotso who had experienced death in the last three years. The sample size of 80 participants was selected through simple random sampling. The questionnaires were given to adults and children while the interview guide was administered on adults who had attained at least fifty years of age. Results from the study were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative techniques and interpretation presented in form of charts and tables. The research was guided by three theories. The theories include Bowlby's theory of attachment, Kubler Ross grief theory and Rondo's theory on grief process. The study concluded that there is relationship between the Batsotso mourning rituals and the psychological well being of the mourners. The study recommends that Batsotso people should practice mourning rituals which have therapeutic and psychological purpose as they help them to cope with death.

**Keywords:** Batsotso, grief, mourning rituals, knowledge, Kakamega

## 1. Introduction

Death and non death related losses are pervasive experiences that lead to considerable stress and may serve as catalysts for psychiatric illnesses even though grief is not an abnormality (Roos, 2002). Lynne (2012) defines mourning as a culturally appropriate process that helps people to pass through grief. She looks at this process as a multi-faceted response to loss, particularly the loss of someone or property to which a bond had been established.

Over a long period of time, different people from different cultures have gone over the mourning process by use of different strategies. Different communities worldwide have unique ways of meeting the emotional needs of the bereaved. For instance, in the Jewish culture people could take several days after burial, at the burial site. In this culture the dead bodies were wrapped in clothes before burial as documented in the Holy Bible (John 11:39). It is also clear that burying the dead was an important part of mourning rituals. In the Far East specifically in India, unique rituals include cremation where the body of the dead is burnt to ashes. The Indians do this to separate the spirit and the bodies of the dead, to allow the spirit go to the spirit world (Clark, 2000). Silverman & Prigerson (2001) discusses how different cultures in Europe conducted funerals. For instance in Poland a door and windows of the house where someone died were left opened to allow the soul of the deceased to leave. Mirrors were covered with some cloth. Clocks were stopped.

African communities too had their own mourning styles. Cottle (2006) examines how the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe mourn their people. He found out that when a person is so close to dying the family makes effort to revive the person by pouring cold water on him or making him

inhale smoke from certain herbs. Roos & Toit (2002) examine the rituals used in Ethiopia.

In his analysis Were (1967) observes that the Batsotso are made up of twenty clans: Abakobero, Abangonya, Abamweche, Abamwende, Abashisiru, Abashiibo, Abamatioli, Abamamu, Abatamanyini, Abashibuli, Abangusi, Abashibimbi, Abashialo, Abamucherera, Abashinda, Abashimukoko, Abakhobole, Abamani, Abanyulia and Abashirima. Barret (1987) in looking at death among the Turkana says that death in Africa helps people to join the ancestors and become one of them. He quotes a Turkana prayer during burial of an elder:

*Our father leave us, here is your tobacco, chew it, this is your milk drink it, this is your meat, eat it. Father, help us now and give us life, make us rich and give us food. (p.40)*

The Administrative units in Butsotso are locations, sub locations and areas. The two locations inhabited by the Batsotso are Butsotso South and Butsotso North. They are further subdivided into several sub locations with each being dominated by a specific clan. The sub locations are further broken down into areas which are headed by a village elder. The village elders administrate on minor disputes in their areas and must be well conversant with the customary law of the clan in that area. The main economic activity in Butsotso is Sugarcane farming. The community still holds on various traditional customs. Funeral rituals are among the most preserved cultures of this community.

Due to the inevitability of death, the mourning process remains a process that many people have to continue going through as long as they live. In the African culture including the Batsotso people, there is much superstition and cultural beliefs that accompany mourning due to death of a loved

one. This study tests whether the Batsotso people understand meaning of their mourning rituals.

## 2. Methodology

Research design is the plan that is used to generate answers to the research problem (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The study adopted descriptive research design in order to provide a framework to examine current conditions, trends and status of the study phenomenon.

This study targeted 400 families from Butso. This is the number of estimated number of families that had experienced death in Butso in the past three years (Butso South and North locations burial records, 2013). A sample size of 80 Participants was targeted. This represents 20% of the target population. This percentage was chosen due to the researchers' limited resources. The participants were selected from five Batsotso clans. This is 25% of the total number of Batsotso clans and is therefore assumed to be a representative of the twenty targeted clans.

The researcher obtained the sample by use of burial records at the office of the assistant chiefs. These records helped the researcher identify the location of the various targeted participants by simple random sampling. Questionnaires were used.

### 2.1 Data Analysis

The researcher used quantitative methods of data analysis. Secondary data was used to support the findings of this study. Graphs, pie charts and tables were used.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The study established that majority of the participants are males 52.72%, while women were 47.27% of the respondents.

### 3.1 Meaning of Various Mourning Rituals

#### 3.1.1 Lichienga

Thus is a big fire which is lit in the compound and keep burning continuously pro and after burial. The participants indicated that bonfire is performed so as to unite those who remain behind; to show that they are in good standing with the deceased; to keep the bereaved intact, to keep mourners warm, and to hold funeral discussions around the fire. It can only be lit when the body of the deceased is in the compound of his or her home.

#### 3.1.2 Washing the corpse

The body is taken behind the house, away from the public and a piece of cloth is used to wipe the body, and then the body is anointed and dressed. Washing of corpse is done to remove any dirt so as to send deceased off when he or she is clean; to confirm that the body was in good condition; to honor the dead, to prove to him or her that though dead, you still value him.

#### 3.1.3 Burial at night

It is a normal burial done at night and it done when one is murdered or when the death is not natural so as to curse the killers; it is done to send the spirit of murder away.

#### 3.1.4 Oluveko (shaving)

All the close relatives of the departed gather a day or two after burial. The shaving it is not done by a special person but each person shaves another. Hair is part of one's body that you can remove to represent personal loss. It is done as an identity for the bereaved members; for warriors it is done to separate the dead and his brevity; to show others that the mourners had a funeral and to separate the dead from the living.

#### 3.1.5 Burial outside compound

It is burying the dead outside the home compound mainly behind the house for those people who have divorced or unwed women. It is done to send the spirit of being unmarried away.

#### 3.1.6 Obukoko

After the burial the girls of the clan of the dead but are married agree on a day they come for this event. Abakoko are part of the family who stay away from home. It is kind of reunion and animal is slaughtered. It is done to review what was done in the funeral, pay debts and share property of the deceased.

#### 3.1.7 Lisabo

The close relatives come back to meet at home of the deceased and animal is slaughtered. It is done to close the chapter with the deceased; it is the final celebration to remember the dead. It is usually done one year after burial.

#### 3.1.8 Shinini

This is a small group of relatives who come three to four days after burial. It is an overnight event. It is done to bring the spirits of a person who died away from home back home. It involves visiting the actual place where the person died.

#### 3.1.9 Beating the Corpse

It is beating of dead body of a person who has committed suicide; they are beaten to drive the spirit of suicide away. This is done before the body is removed from the spot where the person died.

#### 3.1.10 Remarrying ceremony

Relatives' gather and the widow chooses from among the brothers of her late husband. It is done so as to get comfort from the new partner.

#### 3.1.11 Speaking to the corpse

This is usually done to someone who is believed to have been killed so that he or she can revenge. Also it is done if someone who dies away from home and complicates his journey back home. Done to ask the dead person when dressing to tell him or her to flex the joints; it is done also to mourn the dead; to curse the people who killed the dead person; to ask for forgiveness from one who was enemy.

### 3.1.12 Piercing the Corpse

A man who die at an advanced age but has never married could be pierced at back or at his manhood with thorn. It is done to encourage men to get married.

### 3.1.13 Wailing (Okhwikhula)

People cry aloud immediately after death and continue in the entire funeral. It is done to announce the death; to show that one was not responsible for the death; to say good bye to the dead and also to release emotions.

### 3.1.14 Obuloli

Tributes said to acknowledge the good done by the departed. It is done to pay tribute, to show gratitude and to remember his good deeds.

### 3.1.15 Burial of Banana Stem

It is doing a funeral; service of a person who died and his body cannot be traced. It is done to end searching of the dead and bring the searching to a conclusion.

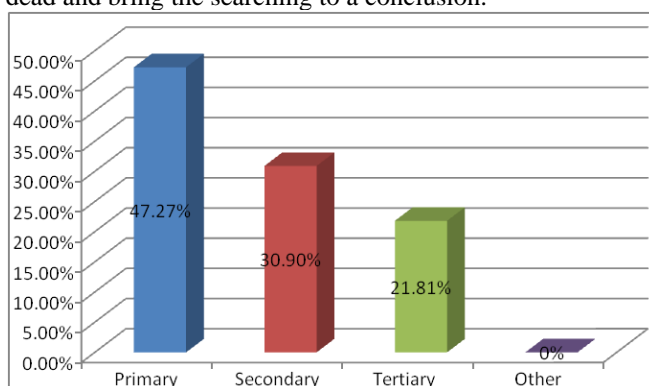


Figure 1: Education

Majority of respondents were not educated. More than half had completed primary and secondary school only. Very few had acquired post secondary skills from tertiary institutions and universities (Figure 1).

Table 1: Understanding of meaning of the mourning rituals

| Ritual                  | Yes/Frequency | %     | No/Frequency | %     |
|-------------------------|---------------|-------|--------------|-------|
| Born fire (Lichienga)   | 49            | 89.09 | 6            | 10.90 |
| Washing the dead        | 51            | 92.72 | 4            | 7.27  |
| Burial at night         | 45            | 81.81 | 10           | 18.18 |
| Shaving your hair       | 28            | 50.90 | 27           | 49.09 |
| Burial outside compound | 17            | 30.90 | 38           | 69.09 |
| Burial of banana stem   | 47            | 85.45 | 8            | 14.54 |
| Obukoko                 | 44            | 80    | 11           | 20    |
| Lisabo                  | 31            | 56.36 | 24           | 43.63 |
| Shinini                 | 24            | 43.63 | 31           | 56.36 |
| Beating the corpse      | 40            | 72.72 | 15           | 27.27 |
| Remarrying              | 53            | 96.36 | 2            | 3.63  |
| Speaking to the corpse  | 47            | 85.45 | 8            | 14.54 |
| Wailing (Okhwikhula)    | 41            | 74.54 | 14           | 25.45 |
| Piercing the corpse     | 38            | 69.09 | 17           | 30.90 |
| Obuloli (Testimony)     | 36            | 65.45 | 19           | 34.54 |

More than 50% of the participants indicated that they understood the meaning of Born fire (Lichienga), Washing the dead, Burial at night Shaving your hair, Burial of banana stem, Obukoko, Lisabo, Beating the corpse, Remarrying, Speaking to the corpse, Wailing (Okhwikhula), Piercing the corpse, and Obuloli (Testimony). Less than 50% of the

participants indicated that they understood the meaning of burial outside the compound and Shinini. The study results indicated that majority of the Batsotso people understand the meaning of performing their mourning rituals

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study therefore concludes that most of the Batsotso people understand the meaning of their mourning. This is because more than 50% of the participants indicated that they understood the meaning of the mourning rituals: Born fire (Lichienga), Washing the dead, Burial at night Shaving your hair, Burial of banana stem, Obukoko, Lisabo, Beating the corpse, Remarrying, Speaking to the corpse, Wailing (Okhwikhula), Piercing the corpse, and Obuloli (Testimony). The study recommends that Batsotso people should practice mourning rituals which have therapeutic and psychological purpose as they help them to cope with death.

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## Author Profile



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