

# Death and culture: digging through the archives of Tamar to compare the widow scripts inscribed by the Nguni culture on the African widows<sup>1</sup>

Slindile Thabede

University of the Free State, South Africa  
ThabedeS@ufs.ac.za

## Abstract

In a multitude of African cultures, profound beliefs and customs revolve around death and mourning, highlighting the differing significance attached to the death of a husband versus that of a wife. Across many African societies, the passing of a husband holds great importance, marked by intricate rituals, communal solidarity, and adherence to cultural practices. Additionally, the mourning period for the husband may extend for up to one year or two, whilst for the wife, it typically lasts up to three months. These mourning practices mirror the esteemed role held by the deceased within their social and familial circles. Often, widows face barriers to expressing the injustices they endure within marital settings. Thus, this research aims to uncover the inherent oppression widows experience in African traditional families while also illustrating how the body serves as the embodiment of cultural narratives within such marital and bereavement frameworks. Utilising the biblical narrative of Tamar, this study will reexamine the challenges widows face within the African cultural context of marriage and death.

## Keywords

*death rituals; mourning; levirate; patriarchy; gender; African marriage*

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1 This paper was presented at the conference CDAS Conference 2024: Death and Community. 5-7 June 2024, Bath University. This paper is looking at the mourning of women within the black African cultures, specifically the Nguni cultures. Nguni consists of Zulu, Xhosa and Swazi; however, as a hybrid, I belong to the Zulu and Swazi cultures. Nonetheless, this experience described by the paper is not unique to the Nguni tribes alone, and it is not specified to a certain context in South Africa; it is found both in urban and rural areas. It is an experience undergone by many black widows in most black African tribes and clans in South Africa and across the borders of the South. I have made mention of other cultures as I build my argument, demonstrating that it is indeed an experience found in black cultures globally, not situated to a specific geographical or historical context.

## **Introduction**

Death is a universal phenomenon that is emotionally shattering for families, clans and communities worldwide. According to Moyo (2009:102), death in African cultures is regarded as a terrifying event that people prefer to confront together. This fear stems from its perceived association with evil spirits or sorcery. Saguti (2017:36) further explains that death is seen as a bad omen and an experience that no one wishes to undergo.

In explaining the concept of death from an African perspective, Saguti (2017:36-37) asserts that upon death, a person's spirit is believed to leave the body and become restless. Many Africans refer to this spirit as a shade or shadow. It is believed that as soon as the person dies, their spirit begins to wander. A wandering spirit is considered dangerous, as it can harm people, particularly the relatives of the deceased and the public, depending on the nature of the person's death. Therefore, proper funeral rites and rituals are necessary to allow the wandering spirit to rest peacefully among the dead. The rituals performed during and after the funeral are aimed at calming the spirit of the deceased (Oduyoye 1992:13).

In African cultures, death is not seen as the end of life but as a transition from one state of existence to another, moving from being a living person to becoming a living dead or spirit. Lugira (2009:50) explains that upon death, a person's soul is believed to separate from the body, transforming from a soul into a spirit. In African religion, this transformation is viewed as a social elevation, granting the deceased immortality and superhuman status. Oduyoye (1992:14) notes, "As departed spirits, men and women are equally powerful, and an improper funeral for either might invite significant trouble for the living." Explaining this dynamic, Saguti (2017:37) asserts that while a proper sendoff is important, the method of ritual remembrance is even more crucial, as it influences whether the deceased will bless or harm the living.

However, the problem regarding death in African societies is that the mourning rituals appear to exhibit gender biases. In numerous African societies, "widowhood encompasses prolonged mourning rituals, coerced remarriages, persecution, abandonment, solitude, destitution, diminished social standing, apprehension about the future, and mental distress" may

subject widows to silent victimhood (Sossou 2002:201–209). However, the same cannot be said for widowers. According to Kotzé and Masilo (2012:22), African widowers resume their normal activities and work as soon as 28 days; whereas the widows are prohibited from working until the cleansing rituals have been performed. Defending this cultural ideology, Saguti (2017:37) asserts that in a patriarchal system, men are usually the breadwinners, while women are seen as housewives. When a wife dies, a man typically mourns for a short period before resuming work to support his family. In contrast, a widow might mourn for up to a year, as she would be financially supported by whoever inherited her through levirate marriage. Saguti's explanation does shed light on the gender-biased mourning rituals, but it also highlights how these practices have been abusive towards African widows by favouring widowers. However, capitalism and globalism have changed family dynamics by turning women into breadwinners alongside men, shouldn't cultural practices be evolving to accommodate these changes?

In patriarchal societies, the female body is frequently a target for the perpetuation of violence and subjugation. Manala (2015:1) is convinced that the challenges experienced by widows, such as social exclusion, economic hardship, and even abuse, are not adequately addressed or understood. This, he argues, highlights a significant gap in research and advocacy concerning the well-being and rights of widows in the African communities. However, African researches both male and female have taken the task to contribute to the silencing of the widow's voices, a significant number of scholars like, Masuku (2023) Bashir (2023), Khosa-Nkatini (2022), Zulu (2020), Gumede and Mathonsi (2019), Siwila (2011), Saguti (2017), Manala (2016) Thabede (2017), Akujobi (2009), Chipolombwe (et al 2004) the list is endless of the number of African feminists and men alike who have taken the task of bringing widows to the centre, the number seems to be growing even though much work still needs to be done because African cultures have not yet transformed to accommodate the modern realities. Contrariwise, Oduyoye (1992:14–15) rather asserts that it is the widower's mourning rites that are found to be missing in research. Indeed, there is more literature written regarding the plight of widowhood than of widowers. Many African scholars involved in advocating for the widows argue against the dismissive attitude towards cultural practices; they

inadvertently endorse certain oppressive practices against widowhood. Their profound arguments caution Africans against becoming adversaries of their own culture, but avoid bringing alternative solutions for combating the oppressive patriarchal dominance that affects widows. For instance, they could advocate for shorter mourning periods or equal time spans for both men and women.

Since this paper seeks to prove the gender biases in the mourning rites, my perspective will focus on the female experience; the male experience will only be narrated to show the existing differences. The researcher will be making use of the story of Tamar in Genesis 38,<sup>2</sup> to highlight the situation of the widows as invisible victims who suffer dehumanisation during mourning rituals for their deceased husbands. Khosa-Nkatini (2022:1) makes a profound observation by highlighting, “it is interesting that in western weddings the vows taken assert ‘until death do us part’, however, for the African couple the mourning rituals are the only symbols valid to separate a man or woman from their deceased partner.” Khosa-Nkatini’s observation is true, this is because the implications of this rationality are layered within the marital rituals which will be explained below. Nonetheless, “looking at the widowhood practice in most African societies, one cannot really say they have much choice, acceptance is their best option if they are to live in peace with their societies without being tagged rebels” (Akujobi 2009).

## Bosadi theoretical framework

The *bosadi* framework is a methodology developed by Madipoane Masenya (1998). It represents a deliberate effort to establish “Africa” as a

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2 Stories of widows and widowers in the Old Testament exist beyond Tamar’s experience. For example, Ruth, Orpah and Naomi (Ruth1:1-5), Bathsheba (1 Sam 11:26-27); the wise woman of Tekoa who pretended to be a mourner (2 Sam 14:2), and Abigail’s failure to mourn (1 Sam 25:37-42). Abraham’s failure to mourn Sarah (Gen 23:2). Third/Fourth Isaiah of the proclamation of an end to Zion’s mourning (51:11; 57:18; 60:20; 61:2, 3; 66:10). As reiterated above, my investigation will focus on the widowhood regarding Tamar’s specific experience, contrary the widowers experience will be made mention of according to how it differs or problematises the female experience, it will not be the author’s focus. The above-mentioned widows and widowers experience comes with their own socio-historical and geographical settings which may require an exegetical inquiry regarding to their variant nature and practice of mourning.

hermeneutical lens for biblical interpretation. The word *mosadi* (woman) is not confined to Northern Sotho alone but resonates across many South African languages, *wansati* (Xitsonga), *umfazi* (isiZulu), *musadzi* (Tshivenda), *mosadi* (Sesotho and Setswana) and extends beyond South Africa into broader African linguistic traditions. This linguistic spread underscores a deeply rooted African conceptualisation of womanhood that Masenya draws upon in shaping her interpretive framework (Masenya 1998).

Her *bosadi* approach asserts Africa's legitimacy within South African biblical hermeneutics, grounding interpretation in the lived realities of African women. Rather than merely juxtaposing biblical texts with African cultural practices, the *bosadi lens* critiques both spheres, interrogating not only gender but also class hierarchies, the marginalisation of women as "strangers," and the alienation of Africans within their own socio-cultural spaces. Contrary to accusations of cultural romanticism, the *bosadi* methodology does not idealise African traditions but seeks to retrieve and reimagine them critically (Masenya 2005:746).

This framework has been regarded as parallel to liberation theologies, where the interpretive starting point lies not in the ancient biblical world but in the lived experiences of marginalised communities, in this case, African-South African women. The framework simultaneously critiques, reconstructs, and affirms, positioning itself as an authentically African biblical hermeneutic that redefines womanhood in liberative and contextually relevant ways (Masenya 2005:746)

Therefore, since the socio-historical context of the story of Tamar is deeply rooted in a patri-local setting, as evidenced by the themes it explores, such as lineage, procreation, widowhood, Levirate marriage, and prostitution, all of which are established systems that predominantly favour males within an African society. Levirate marriage dictates that the surviving brother must marry his widowed sister-in-law to further the lineage of the deceased brother. As a result, the offspring of this union, particularly a son, would be recognised as the heir of the deceased brother, which then guarantees the widowed wife with shelter; otherwise, failure to comply means she would face social abandonment (Brenner 2012:279). Moreover, the presence of prostitution in the story highlights the prioritisation of

male sexual gratification; however, it also serves as a means of economic sustenance for women, particularly widows who were marginalised from mainstream society and left in dire financial constraints<sup>3</sup> by their deceased husbands (Walton 2009:193).

Whilst the story of Tamar foregrounds many problematic themes, one can tackle regarding the injustices undergone by women in a patri-local setting.<sup>4</sup> My specific focus will be on widowhood; I will therefore silence the other themes and shine the light on her widowhood status and experience. Her story becomes a good reflective space to understand some of the dynamics of what married widows face in the African cultures during mourning.

In the rest of the article, I will show how elements of the patriarchal realities found in Genesis 38 are brought into sharper focus when read from the *bosadi* perspective that brings elements of African cultures into conversation with the biblical text. However, we will also show that even though the effects of patriarchy are brutal on its women as in the case of Tamar, it is possible, like Tamar to rise above the circumstances which can be described as life-denying in nature. However, this paper becomes a reflective space to test if the same modes of resistance can be adopted by African widows.

### The story of Tamar: Genesis 38<sup>5</sup>

Tamar was a Canaanite woman who married Er, Judah's firstborn son. However, Er died before they could conceive a son, and his death left Tamar with an uncertain future. Judah then instructed his second son, Onan to marry Tamar to provide an offspring for his dead brother, through levirate marriage. However, during coitus, Onan purposefully withdrew his seed

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3 I will also purposefully touch on the sexual intercourse as part of the cleansing rite, not because it is the only form of cleansing rite the Zulus use, but because the story we are dealing with manoeuvres such a rite for this woman's redemption. Even some widowers in other parts of African culture make use of sexuality as a cleansing ritual.

4 These highlighted themes have been discussed extensively in Thabede (2017, p. 50).

5 This article is adapted from Chapter 3 of the Unpublished Master's thesis, Thabede "Tamar as Victim of Levirate Marriage? Reading Genesis 38 within a Zulu Cultural Context of Marriage". Stellenbosch University. 2017, p. 50. Much of the exegesis is conducted in this work, I have extracted what works in conjunction to the argument around black African widows

from Tamar to prevent conception. According to the narrator, the action displeased God, and he killed Onan for the injustice perpetrated against Tamar.

Judah was concerned that Tamar could be the cause of the death of his two sons and decided to withhold his third son, Shelah, from Tamar. Judah then sent Tamar back to her father's house to wait until Shelah was old enough to marry her. Although Judah's decision made allowance for the future marriage between Tamar and Shelah, his actions in the meantime isolated Tamar from his family, as she had to wait until the youngest son was old enough to marry. As time passed, it became evident that Judah did not intend to give his third son to Tamar at all! This left Tamar with few options. When she heard of the death of Judah's wife, Tamar seized the opportunity to devise a plan that would change her social status, which had denied her access to a proper life. She dressed as a prostitute, positioned herself by the side of the road and waited for Judah to pass by to make advances at her. Indeed, when he saw her, Judah was attracted to her under the impression that she was a prostitute, and he then approached her for sex. In the end, Tamar received an heir that protected her status as a bride in Judah's family and the continuator of Er's household.

### **Tamar sentenced to seclusion**

Following the death of Er in the story, conflicts arose within the family. Verse 7 briefly states that Er's demise was a result of his wicked behaviour; thus, it is perceived as a form of punishment, although only God knows the specific transgression. According to ancient societies, it was common to attribute deaths to divine intervention, particularly when the cause of death was unclear (Westermann 1986:51). Whilst for Africans, due to the involvement of ancestors in the everyday lives of the living means that they can also be perceived to be involved in the cause of death of their family members, according to Saguti (2017:38) "when the ancestors are not happy about the attitude of their descendants, they make them know through employing painful means like sickness, misfortunes, or death, especially to

those who have misbehaved.”<sup>6</sup> In this regard, due to their involvement in the rituals used in the binding of the married couple, their involvement is intertwined with every development of the marital stages, including death.

Tamar was widowed and childless; therefore, it became Judah’s responsibility, as well as a social and religious obligation, to provide her as a wife to his second son, Onan. Through this union, Tamar was expected to ensure the continuation of Er’s family lineage by means of reproduction. According to Levirate laws, outlined in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, the surviving brother is obligated to perpetuate the name of his deceased brother by marrying his sister-in-law. The firstborn child from this union is considered the offspring of the deceased brother and would inherit his estate (Walton 2009:193). Therefore, in Onan spilling his semen on the ground may be explained by Africans as the cause for infuriating the ancestors due to reasons that the bride (Tamar) is available, and she is the worthy vehicle of entry for ancestors, but the seed from Onan is missing.<sup>7</sup> In this case, God is angered by the actions of Onan, causing his demise because of disrespecting Tamar.

Tamar is already caught in the double margins of culture due to her childlessness in a male-dominated society, and secondly, being a widow, such an experience heightened challenges for a childless widow. However, Oduyoye (1992:14) explains that the bride is expected to become the channel for the husband’s ancestors to return through her offspring. Tamar is then found to be failing cultural and clan expectations by not having children during both marriages. However, little acknowledgement is given to the reality that it is rather the men in her life who are putting her under this predicament; her womb has not been put to the test and failed yet.

It has been echoed by many African scholars that failure to produce an heir for a woman causes shame, disgrace and objectification. This reiteration is captured by Oduyoye’s assertion that the bride’s failure not only affects the husband’s immortality but also the clans as well as the ancestors of her in-

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6 Magesa (1997:48) states that ancestors serve as both the protectors of society and its most feared critics and source of punishment

7 According to Saguti (2017:39) “the ancestors, are the direct watchdogs of the moral behaviour of the individual, the family, the clan and the entire society with which they are associated. No serious misbehaviour or anti-life attitude among their descendants, in thought, word and deed, escapes their gaze”.

laws. This painful reality illuminates Judah's harsh actions, who, in Genesis 38, discards his daughter-in-law and strips her of the economic privileges that should have protected her. However, it also does trickle into the mental psyche of Judah, who holds the false belief that Tamar's union with his sons led to their demise, and he further complicated matters by trying to resolve an ongoing conflict with hypocrisy (Kruttschwitz 2012:393). Subsequently, Judah directs Tamar to return to her father's household to remain a widow, deceitfully promising her that he would later marry her off to Shelah, his youngest son, when Shelah was grown enough to wed. Interestingly, Judah's actions can be seen as a method of secluding herself for the aura she carries, having lost two husbands. Notably, according to Saguti (2017:37), "when the death of a spouse occurs, it cuts and destroys the harmony and the relationship that has existed between the two clans and the community of the ancestors". This is evident in Tamar's experience as her father-in-law destroys their relationship by sending her back home. In the traditional African setting, a woman once given over to the in-laws for marriage is not allowed to return to her family. Therefore, what Judah is doing is rather a disrespect and humiliation towards another patriarch. In cases like these, sororate unions are forged to continue the alliance of clan relations because a dowry given to a woman can never be returned. However, Tamar does not seem to have a sister who could save her. Judah is afraid that Tamar is walking around with the shadow of two dead husbands; therefore, he fears that she will introduce him to death or misfortune, too. Interestingly, Judah can also be said to be walking around with his wife's shadow because he also lost his wife when Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute. This highlights the very issues the paper is trying to expose regarding what is communally allowed for the widower versus the widow. In this case, both Tamar and Judah are grieving their spouses; however, one party acts more righteous than the other. Nonetheless, Judah's actions did leave Tamar in a highly vulnerable position. While he subjected her to enforced childlessness and isolation by sending her to her father's home, Judah exposed his own family to potential misfortune. Who was now going to reproduce the next heir with no bride at home? Unfortunately, Judah's action demonstrates that his concern is not about the offspring but rather the two shadows that Tamar carries of Er and Onan.

## **Forging mourning rites through deception**

The story reaches a climax when Tamar is found pregnant. Judah ordered that she be burnt because she had played the harlot. This crime was considered an insult to the memory of Tamar's dead husbands, to the father in-law and she was therefore found guilty of adultery, not only as Er and Onan's widow but also as Shelah's wife-to-be (Westermann 1986:54). However, Daber (2003:49) elaborates on the psychological state of the widow by explicating that there is an emotional distress which is caused by the loss of a meaningful relationship and the fact that widows must redefine the social reality that reflects their new status as widowed persons.

Thatcher (2011:26) raises a critical query by asking: "If power influences our thinking, how can we oppose it, given that the means available to us for resistance are also shaped by power? If resistance itself is a form of power, how do we attain it?" Thatcher's inquiry delves into the complexity inherent in challenging and reclaiming power. In Tamar's situation, her method of resistance was deception, which, paradoxically, is a tool that can corrupt. Vice versa, this provided her with the autonomy she sought, making deception her instrument of empowerment.

However, is the narrator who complicates the matter of widowhood by depicting Tamar removing her widow's attire. This act suggests that Tamar had been compelled to mourn for a longer duration than necessary, indicating the need for her to be cleansed from her attachment to her deceased husbands. Tamar could not seek a new life for herself; only Judah had the power to assist her, and he chose to keep her bound to the dead husbands. In doing so, he was also deciphering how long the period of her mourning would last. According to Saguti (2017:38), during the period of mourning, the widow is considered unclean and has to go through a series of rituals to be considered worthy for mingling with the community. Therefore, by opting to disguise herself as a prostitute to engage in sexual relations with her father-in-law, Tamar adeptly circumvented the system that denied her agency.

Bosworth (2008:53) argues that the narrative complexities are compounded by the victim's dual role, where her attempted resolution also constitutes a transgression. Deception emerges as the subsequent step, wherein the victim,

driven by desperation, seizes control through deceit, her sole instrument of empowerment (Thatcher 2011:28). Tamar finds herself abandoned and likely stigmatised as a perilous figure, presently unmarried, childless widow living in her father's home. Arnold (2003:327) concurs that within the Semitic society, widowhood represented the utmost vulnerability for a woman. However, Genesis 38 remarkably illustrates Tamar's ability to transcend patriarchal constraints by seizing control of her destiny. Within the patriarchal framework described above, Tamar orchestrates a bold yet perilous scheme: she sheds her mourning attire, disguises her identity with a veil, and stations herself where Judah would encounter her on his way to 'the entrance of Enaim' to shear his sheep (Westermann 1986:269).

Interestingly, Judah was also himself widowed; however, because he is male, a widower is not expected to wear anything to distinguish himself from the rest of the men (Daber 2003:49). His experience is like that of Abraham after losing Sarah; life continued (Gen 23:2), he even acquires a new wife in Genesis 25. Unlike women who must wear, carry and expose their trauma to the public, even though Ruth, Orpah and Naomi did not have to follow the same experience, even Bathsheba after losing her husband Uriah (1 Sam 25:37–42). Whilst it's strictly emphasised that failure to mourn a man by a woman is a sign of disrespect for him but also for the culture, interestingly, men do not have to carry this burden. Nonetheless, this does sound like a heavy yoke for women since their new identities as wives are hedged in the man during the wedding, but men do not get to die and be born afresh during the wedding or during the spousal death.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequently, Tamar's act of seducing Judah can be interpreted within the context of the purification rituals. Unfortunately, the Israelite culture does not offer specific guidelines for the purification rituals of widows. For example, in the story of Ruth, Orpah, Ruth, and Naomi, these women all lose their husbands without any mention of a purification ritual; rather, the narrative focuses on the quest to find a levir in Bethlehem of Judah. Malungo (2001:327) observes that in certain Zambian communities, a levirate marriage is viewed as a type of ritual cleansing through sexual intercourse for the widow who is to be inherited or wed. Furthermore, the

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8 Ntshangase 2018.

intimate bond between the deceased and the widow was formed through sexual intercourse; this connection can only be dissolved through the ritual of sexual cleansing (Munala 2022).

It is worth noting that the individual who seduced Judah was not a stranger to him, but his determined daughter-in-law, Tamar. To her, the man she engaged with would bear the burden of misfortune that had loomed over her for years while she was dressed in the mourning attire. Due to the breakdown in relations after the passing of her husband, one wonders if Tamar selected Judah for her purification ritual due to the injustices he had inflicted upon her in the past. Alternatively, it could be that Tamar chose Judah because it was his obligation to fulfil the role of a levir. He should have conducted a cleansing ritual to release her for marriage to another man. Nonetheless, Tamar found herself ensnared in the mourning garments that constrained her life and restricted her from public interaction and communal involvement. According to Daber, widow garments are associated with stigmatisation and defacement (2003:49). Indeed, Tamar understood this dynamic because she was living within it.

## **Challenging the patriarchal widowhood oppression**

Through abandoning her role as a mere victim, Tamar resorted to deception to settle the score with Judah. By choosing to seduce Judah rather than another man, it becomes evident that she had concluded that the only means to revive her deceased husband was through Judah's offspring. She then orchestrated three key actions: firstly, she orchestrated a ritual purification to break free from mourning and the associated victimisation of widowhood. Secondly, she utilised the ritual to reject her identity as a barren woman by becoming the mother of twin boys. And thirdly, she employed the ritual to undermine Judah and challenge his patriarchal authority.

Upon Judah discovering that Tamar is eventually pregnant as a widow living in her father's house, his decision is swift and cruel; "... she is to be burnt ... bring her out ..." (Newsom & Ringe 1998:43). This death penalty was to be carried out outside the town, where everyone could participate in the execution. Moreover, since the law insinuated that the female body was

under the control of a man, whether her father or her husband (Anderson 2009:33), it was easy for Judah to exploit and control Tamar for his own agenda. However, it is striking that not even Tamar's father could save her or speak on her behalf after Judah humiliated her by sending her back to her parents. Notably, the strategy of deception that Tamar employed later in the story transformed her from a victim to a victor.

Considering the above discussion, Tamar may indeed be described as a “depatriarchalizing” figure in the narrative because she resisted the role of the victim that pushed her outside of the social boundary. Tamar took matters into her own hands to end the patriarchal control over her life. She used the same tool of patriarchy, that is, the control of sexuality, to get even with the man who forced her into the position of marginalisation and exclusion from family and society.

## **Widowhood from the African cultural perspective**

To understand widowhood as a framework for explaining women's roles and positions in many African societies, it is necessary to explore the historical roots of African knowledge systems (Akujobi 2009:2459). Such an inquiry into the past enables us to make sense of the present and guides the shaping of the future. Interestingly, the African setting has its own cultural script for every stage of life. Drawing us into the multifacetedness of the widow oppression Saguti (2017:38) explains, “the death of a partner in marriage does not mark only the separation between the two people, but the two clans and the two communities coming apart. This is because marriage involves the ancestors who were involved in the making of the marriage”. Therefore, the context of the plight lies in understanding the dynamic of the African wedding and the expectations that come with such a structure.

According to Oduyoye (1992:13), during an African wedding, rituals performed to bond the man and a woman emphasise a deep binding because blood and the ancestors are evoked. Such rituals include the transfer of the woman from the spiritual power of the father to that of the husband. For example, in the Yoruba culture, a ritual of crossing over with a washing of feet at the threshold of the husband's family home (Oduyoye

1992:13). In the Zulu culture, a goat bile is poured over the bride's head by her father or male elder in the cow kraal on the morning of her wedding day. There is also a bathing at the threshold of the husband's house before the wedding ceremony begins, which, like the Yoruba culture, signifies a crossing over for the bride. This ritual indicates that the bride's old self is ending her life with her familial ancestors to be born again in a new family; her old self is buried during the marital ceremony, and she begins a new life in the husband's house. This time around, her new identity is hedged in her husband. Therefore, from a female experience, the death of a marriage partner not only marks the separation from the better half, but also a loss for the two clans and the family that might be gaining financial assistance through the spouse. It also involves the ancestors who were summoned in the making of this marriage (Saguti 2017:37). This then suggests that mourning is a multilayered experience because of the processes and the parties involved.

Moreover, according to ancient oral evidence, when Africans married, there was usually no room for divorce hence there were other marital unions in place for when a woman lost a husband or during barrenness, because returning home was never an option. Rather the only procedure was that the husband's family would be responsible for finding the bride a new husband within the homestead to preserve the wealth of the family and continue the relations with the woman's clan than returning lobola cows, levirate marriage (marrying the brother of the dead husband) and sororate unions for men (marrying the sister of the dead or barren wife) were in place.

However, the Western culture, through colonisation, capitalism and globalisation, has disrupted many of those African cultural norms, which are now being disregarded by the African youth who choose to identify with the new Western culture when it comes to these cultural realities.<sup>9</sup> Masuku (2023) provides evidence of the repercussions faced by those who dismiss the cultural mourning rituals. In her response to the book written

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9 "Umshado" is an African language novel written in isiZulu and published in 2011. The author of the novel is Nelisiwe Zulu. Zulu wrote a Zulu play in 2020 titled 'Isiko Nelungelo' (Culture and Rights), which challenges the tradition of ukuganiselwa (levirate marriage). This is a cultural practice where the male figure in the family inherits his late brother's wife (Masuku 2023).

by Zulu (2020), where a widow expected to undergo levirate marriage, but rather escapes her in-laws to find love on her own terms. The man she falls in love with, being from the Zulu culture, wishes to marry her sooner, out of desperation to please the spirit of his dead nagging father, who appears in his dreams often. He also dismisses the mourning rituals that his lover is yet to undergo before they can wed, and rather prepares for a wedding regardless of the mourning procedures. Consequently, bad luck struck both him and the woman for refusing to respect cultural laws, and consequently, they are separated indefinitely. Masuku brings valuable insights and arguments regarding the dangers of lurking shadows of the deceased, whilst also subverting the patriarchal subjugation towards widowhood.

### **Widowhood: A social reality of seclusion**

The practice of seclusion and isolation of widows is very common in most African cultures (Daber 2003:56). Notably, widows are expected to observe patterns of avoidance to protect the public from being touched by death (Hockey et al 2001). Isolation and stigmatisation become their new reality. Daber found that this practice is also like the Mexican culture where widows and widowers are also expected to refrain from public engagement for six months to a year (2003:55). According to Siwila who speaks for the Zambian context, the death of spouse in many African communities marks a new stage of life for the partner left behind that demands separating rites aimed at terminating the coitus rites with the deceased (2011:55). It is assumed that a husband's soul will not rest until the widow has completed elaborate mourning rites and has been purified, only then can she safely remarry or continue with life (Oduyoye 1992:14). On the other hand, the widower is interestingly told to hurry in finding himself a sexual partner to rid himself of the deceased spouse's shadow. This can also be seen in Genesis 25 when Abraham found himself a new wife in Keturah. Even Judah is seen sleeping with a prostitute months after his wife had passed. Men illustrate the death of their spouse by wearing a black strip on the arm for three months; even then, there is no social exclusion or isolation compared to widows' experience (Daber 2003:55).

Bodily appearance and head shaving are amongst the new realities of assuming a widow and widower status in the African setting. According to Daber (2003:49), widows must adjust their daily routine to reflect their acquired identity as widowed persons and must be visibly seen to reflect this new identity. Visibly seen does not mean mingling with the public, it signifies the widow's appearance must alert the public that one is surrounded by the dark shadow of death, since the spouse is deceased.

Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014:236) outline the restrictions imposed on widows from the Bapedi tribe in South Africa's Limpopo province after their husbands' demise, including curbs on returning home after sunset, visiting neighbours, and participating in communal activities. According to Manala (2015:3), these limitations aim to shield widows from accusations of witchcraft. However, regardless of what widows do, they are seen as bad omens. Widowhood is mostly associated with bad luck and death; the belief in many African cultures is that the widow needs to be kept at a distance as much as possible (Daber 2003:70).

Akujobi (2009:2462) highlights that in certain societies, strict traditions impose harsh restrictions upon widows. These restrictions include the denial of ornaments, perfumes, flowers, and fine clothing, as well as the prohibition of hair styling. Additionally, it is common for widows to shave their heads as a sign of reverence for their deceased husbands, while being deprived of other aspects of feminine beauty and enjoyment. Furthermore, in some societies, widows face even more severe hardships, such as being deprived of regular meals, forced to sleep on bare floors, and obligated to observe celibacy, along with other undisclosed challenges. Akujobi (2009:2462) finds this treatment sharing similarities with the Indian widows in India, the oppression faced by widows often marginalises and subjects them to inferior versions of womanhood. This plight is mirrored in African societies, where the multifaceted experiences of loss, deprivation, helplessness, and hopelessness are intricately woven into the fabric of widows' lives. Addressing these injustices requires challenging the entrenched beliefs and advocating for the rights and empowerment of widows within their communities.

## **Widow cleansing rituals**

In many black African communities, various cleansing rites are used to cleanse the woman out of the mourning period and black attire. These rituals vary according to clan and tribe. Masuku explicates, “an important meaning that has been associated with the practice of the rituals of the widow or widower cleansing is the reintegration of the widowed person into the community” (2023:12). It is usually after this cleansing process that a widow or widower can return to living a normal life and the marginalisation treatment from family and the society comes to an end.

Oduyoye (1992:15-16) asserts that the separation rituals to free the widows from the deceased husband’s shadow are marked by her purification rites that may involve acts like carrying hot coals to the stream for a pre-dawn ritual bath. For some women, it involves shaving the widow’s hair, whilst for others it will require burning of all the clothes she wore during the mourning period.

There is yet another specific ritual for “cleansing” a woman who has lost her husband. In some contexts, this practice has been discouraged or dismissed for its negative effects on the health of the community. To officially end the cleansing procedures for widows, they are to engage in a sexual cleansing rite (Daber 2003:83). The ritual entails that after a one-year mourning period, a widow is given to a relative of her late husband’s brother who would have sexual intercourse with her. In some cases, the man could be a total stranger, and the aim is to ensure a spiritual separation between the widow and the deceased (Adefemi 2015:26). Junod’s studies amongst the Southeastern Bantu shows that to nullify the apparent bad luck that clung to the widow, she would have to seduce the stranger into having intercourse with her (Daber 2003:82). The man would carry the bad luck with him while the woman becomes purified. This practice has been condemned as it is considered detrimental to the health of both the woman and the man or stranger due to the possibility of contracting various sexually transmitted diseases. Be that as it may, the widow’s redemption in the family and the community is tied to this practice. Contrastingly, Oduyoye (1992:14) asserts, oral evidence maintains “a widower is encouraged to obtain a sexual partner as soon as possible to disgust the spirit of the deceased wife, who will never again visit him”. Interestingly, a widower can dismiss his or

cut the coital ties with his deceased wife as soon as he pleases, the widow must wait for a year to do so.

Interestingly, Tasie (2013:60) believes that the widowhood rites were not meant to dehumanise women as much as they have proven to be. Tasie, being male and positioned on the side of privilege when it comes to such an experience, is not questioning the oppressive structures but rather coercing women to accept the widowhood fate. Tasie (2013:60) sums up the purpose of the Isiokpo tribe's widowhood rites in two main categories, namely: 1) First, to sever the ties between a dead husband and his living wife. The Isiokpo culture believes that during the immediate aftermath of death, the ghost spirit lurks (sic) around the homestead to haunt the living and to continue to perform his duties to his living relations. Second, some aspects of the rites are aimed at equipping the widow with the necessary courage and bravery to cope with the life of self-reliance, which the death of the breadwinner has exposed her to. If such claims were true, why is it that men face a short period of mourning when their spouses are deceased? Does this mean the spirit of the deceased man is more stubborn in detaching itself from the female body than a deceased wives spirit on male bodies? Does the spirit of the deceased husband really require 12months to be cleansed from the surviving wife? Oduyoye (1992:14) has already revealed that both male and female spirits are equally beyond the grave; therefore, why does this culture make it seem like men become more powerful than women after the grave? The bosadi's point of contention argues that the family in-law, society and culture eventually grant women the same time frame as men and not prolong the period of marginalisation for women unnecessarily.

### **The implications of the mourning clothes**

Daber's (2003:55–56) study investigates the experiences of widows and their shared challenges during widowhood. Many widows recounted distressing incidents related to their visible mourning attire in public. One widow expressed feeling marginalised in public spaces, where fellow commuters on buses refused to sit with her. Khosi-Nkatini (2022) also observed that in a modern church in Pretoria, widows were segregated into their own pews, symbolising their marginalised status and separation from other church

members. Moreover, some widows reported that wearing mourning attire increased their vulnerability to sexual violence and robbery, as they no longer had protection (Daber 2003:55). Additionally, certain widows noted that their mourning clothes attracted unwanted male attention, resulting in harassment and unwelcome romantic advances, contrasting with less conspicuous attire (2003:54-55).

Mourning attire was not exclusive to African cultures, as Daber's research demonstrates; it is rather global and prevalent in Western cultures, and it was also distinctly gender specific. She emphasises, "In the nineteenth century, mourning was marked by separate spheres for women and men, with women easily identified by their mourning dresses" (Hockey et al., 2001). This practice gained significant public attention, particularly during the two World Wars. Bourke (cited in Hockey et al., 2001) observes that "as the wars progressed and black clothing dominated public spaces, the bereaved were encouraged to adopt more affordable and diverse mourning attire," reflecting a broader societal concern.

This connects very well with Daber's conclusion concluded above that widow garments are associated with stigmatization and defacement (2003:49). This connects very well with Daber's conclusion concluded above that widow garments are associated with stigmatization and defacement (2003:49). Hence, Akujobi (2009:2466) proposes that widows should reject the practice of remaining silent and rather express their emotions openly in any way possible. They should dismantle the stereotypes surrounding them and reveal their authentic selves. In doing so, widows can assert their own space and ensure that their stories are told from their own perspective rather than by others. She advocates for widows to speak up and, if feasible, to write themselves into existence.

Interestingly, despite the risks associated with wearing mourning attire, African widows are reshaping how they express their grief in contemporary times. Many widows now have the autonomy to choose the colours of their mourning attire that best symbolise their loss. This approach serves as a form of resistance among South African black widows for adapting traditional practices to align with modern realities and safeguarding themselves from marginalisation, robbery, and sexual violence. Whilst not universally applicable due to cultural norms within the marriages they entered, this

represents a form of defiance by modern African widows challenging patriarchal norms that undermine their dignity and livelihoods.

## Conclusion

Reading Tamar's story in Genesis 38 through the *bosadi* framework deepens the African widowhood discourse already present in black African women's readings of the text. Tamar's predicament as a widow, denied dignity within a patriarchal system, mirrors the contradictions that African widows continue to face in their African cultural contexts. Since the *bosadi* approach insists that biblical interpretation must emerge from the lived experience of African women, where widows often encounter marginalisation, dispossession, and silencing within both cultural and religious spaces. Thus, Tamar's act of resistance becomes an assertion of one's identity that resonates with the struggles of African widows who must navigate oppressive cultural traditions while seeking to reclaim their human dignity.

Through Masenya's *bosadi* framework, this paper managed to critique both the biblical text and African cultural practices without romanticising either. This hermeneutic allowed Tamar to be read not as a victim alone but as a depatriarchalizing figure whose actions exposed the fragility of oppressive systems and opened spaces of possibility for all black African widows in the Nguni and other tribal cultures. According to Adebayo, the African widow must begin by recognising the strength she holds within herself and acknowledge that she was created equal to her male counterpart. She therefore needs to view herself as a subject rather than an object, embracing her self-worth. This involves breaking away from invisibility, illusion, complicity, and duplicity (Adebayo, 1996:23–25)

Alternatively, Nguni women and other black African women can emulate Tamar by inventing creative and subversive strategies of survival and being widows in their contexts. Just as Tamar exposed Judah's hypocrisy, black African widows are called to name their oppression and dismantle destructive images imposed upon them by breaking the silence and narrating their own stories. In this sense, Tamar embodied the *bosadi* principle of making African widows' lived experiences central to

interpretation, highlighting not only suffering but also sources of power and resilience, and offering strategies of resistance.

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