

# ***In Grief, We Remember: A Comparative Interdisciplinary Discourse on Some Mourning Practices and Rituals in the Old Testament and in AmaXhosa Tradition***

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## ***ABSTRACT***

*In this article, I ignite a comparative interdisciplinary discourse on mourning rituals and practices in the Old Testament and amaXhosa tradition. To do this, I apply symbolic interactionism as a theory to unmask how grief becomes a compass guiding social cohesion, consciousness, spiritual continuity and defiance against distortion. Three significant findings emerge. First, mourning rituals and practices serve as the heartbeat of community-based identity, echoing across generations and cementing spiritual bonds. Second, the Old Testament rituals and practices resonate as spiritual instruments of repentance and obedience, while amaXhosa mourning rituals and practices emerge as rhythmic expressions of ancestral reverence and the cyclical connection between life and death. Third, the colonial and insidious assault on amaXhosa mourning rituals is interrogated, with this tradition exemplified as a defiant cornerstone resisting cultural annihilation. This intellectual discourse underscores death rituals as holy stages for cultural revitalisation amidst death.*

**KEYWORDS:** AmaXhosa tradition, Mourning Practices, Old Testament, Rituals, Symbolic Interactionism

## **A CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

Death, a force both immutable and universal, transcends human experience, compelling communities to confront the finality of human existence through rituals and mourning practices. Cultures across time have striven to impose meaning upon this inevitable experience, crafting various ceremonies to bridge the connection between the living, the unborn and the dead. The Old Testament, a foundational scripture of the Abrahamic traditions, offers a wealth of mourning

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practices and rituals, which represent an entrenched theological ethos and communal reverence for the dead.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the amaXhosa, an indigenous South African people, exemplify their philosophy and spiritual understanding through elaborate mourning rituals steeped in ancestral veneration and cosmic harmony. These activities, far from being merely ceremonial, are important expressions of cultural identity, spiritual belief, consciousness and social cohesion. They render death not as an end but as a transition interwoven within a culturally governed understanding of continuity. Therefore, Francis Lukhele's claim that humans are basically walking dead without connection to the spiritual or ancestral kingdom is not surprising.<sup>2</sup> Mamphela Ramphele notes that "we can strengthen our connection to spirit through death rituals."<sup>3</sup> It stands to reason, therefore, that for Africans, the concept of "death" is only applied to animals and plants and not to human beings. This is based on the philosophical reality that death is considered a very negative concept when applied to human beings—some Africans, therefore, prefer to use concepts such as *u hi siyile* (Xitsonga), *o re tlogetše* (Sepedi) or *ulele* (isiXhosa), which means he or she departed from the physical world or he or she is no more.<sup>4</sup> Zodwa Gcingca-Ndolo, in clarifying this assertion, is of the view that:

*Kwisithethe samaXhosa, abantu abakholelwa ekubeni umntu uyafa ngokupheleleyo, kodwa bakholelwa ekubeni umoya wakhe udlulela kwelinye icala lobomi. Oku kuxhomekeke kwimfundiso yokuba umntu akahlali kumzimba kuphela, kodwa unobomi obudibanisa umzimba, umoya, kunye nesithunywa sakhe. Xa umntu eswelekile, amaXhosa akakholelwa ekubeni olanduleleyo uyabalibala abaphilayo; kunoko, uhlala ebukele aze abanike ingqwalasela ekuhambeleni phambili kobomi babo.*

(In amaXhosa tradition, people do not believe that a person completely ceases to exist at death but rather that their spirit transitions to another dominion of life. This belief originates in the understanding that a human being is not merely a physical body but an integrated entity comprising the body, spirit, and a life-giving essence. When a person passes away, amaXhosa do not perceive them as having been forgotten by the living; instead, they are believed to

<sup>1</sup> In some African communities, it is customary not to say that a person has "died." Rather, it is believed that the person is "sleeping" or *balele obaphakade* (sleeping forever). This exemplifies a philosophy that views death not as an end but as a transition or continuation of life in another form, frequently within the spiritual kingdom. See Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan, "Introduction: Themes in the Study of Death and Loss in Africa," *African Studies* 71/2 (2012): 163–173.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Lukhele, "Tears of the Rainbow: Mourning in South African Culture," *Critical Arts* 30/1 (2016): 31–44.

<sup>3</sup> Lukhele, "Tears of the Rainbow," 31–44.

<sup>4</sup> Mamphela Ramphele, "Political Widowhood in South Africa: The Embodiment of Ambiguity," *Daedalus* 125/1 (1996): 99–117.

continue observing and guiding the ongoing life of their family or community.)<sup>5</sup>

It is imperative, then, to observe that in the context of amaXhosa, the disruptive hand of colonialism aimed to delink death practices and rituals from their indigenous foundations. Colonial administrators, blinded by imperial arrogance and ignorance, sidelined the mourning traditions of amaXhosa, regarding them as "barbaric" or "paganistic" and imposing a Western theology that looted their cosmological order.<sup>6</sup> This cultural vandalism, driven by political greed and ecclesiastical hubris, systemically degraded the symbolic power of amaXhosa mourning rituals and practices, which reduced them to a contested site of opposition. It is within this historical scar tissue that this article surfaces, seeking to compare in an interdisciplinary way these two traditional systems, not simply as parallel traditions but as dialogic structures where power, identity and sacred meaning are contested, in the echo of claim and flame, in the tension of word and world and in the rhythm of rite and right. In sharing the same sentiments, Benson Igboin unequivocally reports that "colonial rule disrupted the traditional machinery of moral homogeneity and practice."<sup>7</sup> This implies that the method of moral inculcation was vitiated, which resulted in the abandonment of traditional systems and values through systemic depersonalisation of the African and paganisation of its values.

Nonetheless, the Old Testament's mourning rituals and practices are greatly logical, intertwined with an intricate moral structure that cements

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<sup>5</sup> Zodwa Gcingca-Ndolo, *Amasiko Nezithethe Neendlela Zokuziphatha KwaXhosa* (Unpublished MA Diss; UNISA) [cited 26 December 2024]. Online: chrome extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2627/dissertation\_gcingca\_ndolo\_%20z.pdf. It should be noted that the English translation provided here is my own work, derived from the application of my linguistic expertise and translation skills. It reflects my interpretation of the original isiXhosa text.

<sup>6</sup> Of note, various scholars distinguish Western and biblical theologies concerning death, resurrection and the afterlife. Biblical theology views death, resurrection and the afterlife through the Hebrew-Christian standpoint, which emphasises bodily resurrection and God's historical, salvific intervention. Western theology, influenced by Greco-Roman philosophical traditions such as Platonism, Stoicism and Epicureanism, shifts the focus towards the immortality of the soul, metaphysical dualism and abstract speculation about life after death. Thus, even though Paul engages the Greek audience in Acts 17 using their philosophical categories, his pronouncement of Christ's resurrection remains grounded in a distinctly biblical (not Western philosophical) understanding of God's triumph over death. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008); James Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003); Nicholas T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Benson Igboin, "Colonialism and African Cultural Values," *African Journal of History and Culture* 3/6 (2011): 96–103.

accountability and reverence. Take, for instance, King David's mourning of Absalom (2 Sam 18:33). His grief, while paternal in nature, simultaneously operates as a political statement that mirrors the turmoil engulfing his kingdom. Similarly, amaXhosa mourning rituals and practices are profoundly rooted in logic and communal necessity. The use of ritual purification, for example, serves physical and spiritual health, affirming that the living is shielded from contamination, both literal materialism and metaphysical spiritualism.<sup>8</sup> These traditional parallels draw attention to a concerted human logic—mourning is a structured means of confronting death and restoring balance. Nonetheless, misguided colonial attempts to erase amaXhosa mourning practices and rituals lacked such logic, driven instead by naked imperial violence. This implies that colonial efforts to erase amaXhosa mourning practices and rituals were fuelled by a blend of cultural arrogance and a desire to impose Western systems, dismissing indigenous traditions, including death and mourning rituals. This erasure was prescribed through coercive measures, including Christianisation, legal restrictions and the systemic devaluation of amaXhosa cosmological belief systems.<sup>9</sup> As I argue elsewhere, the distortion of these indigenous cultural expressions under the guise of "civilisation" mirrors the worst kind of hypocrisy. While Western powers clung to their own mourning traditions with sanctimonious dedication, they sought to dismantle those of amaXhosa, calling them to be "paganistic."<sup>10</sup> This duplicity underscores the colonial project as an illogical force, thriving not on cultural evidence but on coercive power.

As continually observable in some Old Testament interpretations, to suggest that mourning rituals and practices in the Old Testament are inherently superior to those of the amaXhosa is to traffic in intellectual myopia.<sup>11</sup> Both traditions are intricate tapestries woven from the same thread of human

<sup>8</sup> Mookgo S. Kgatle and Puleng Segalo, "Grieving During a Pandemic: A Psycho-Theological Response," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42/1 (2021): 1–6.

<sup>9</sup> Christina M. Puchalski and Edward O'Donnell, "Religious and Spiritual Beliefs in End of Life Care: How Major Religions View Death and Dying," *Techniques in Regional Anesthesia and Pain Management* 9/3 (2005): 114–121; Christopher K. Mukuka, "Funeral Rituals and Practices: The Quest for Missiological Approaches of Witnessing to Mwami Church Members in Zambia," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 16/1 (2020): 108–121.

<sup>10</sup> See also Ezra Chitando, "Deathly Concern: African Christians and Cremation in Zimbabwe," *Missionalia* 27/1 (1999): 10–19; Luvuyo Ntombana, "The Trajectories of Christianity and African Ritual Practices: The Public Silence and the Dilemma of Mainline or Mission Churches," *Acta Theologica* 35/2 (2015): 104–119.

<sup>11</sup> Luvuyo Ntombana, "The Trajectories of Christianity and African Ritual Practices: The Public Silence and the Dilemma of Mainline or Mission Churches," *Acta Theologica* 35/2 (2015): 104–119; Juliana L. Claassens, "Reading for the Dignity of All: Overcoming the Troubling Legacy of the Old Testament," *STJ* 1/2 (2015): 155–174; Richard M. Davidson, "Death and Ancestors in Light of the Old Testament," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 16/1 (2020): 1–28.

existential inquiry. The Old Testament's rituals, grounded in a theological covenant, do not negate the validity of amaXhosa's ancestral cosmology. Rather, they provoke humanity to recognise that sacred mourning, whether Hebraic or African, is a universal language of human resilience. Therefore, pitting one against the other is not an act of fair interpretation but an endorsement of colonial arrogance masquerading as theological orthodoxy. Against these observations, I propose that African scholars reject the colonial deception that African traditions were deprived of "civilised" mourning practices. Instead, they should decolonise their scholarly methodologies, dismantling the insidious biases that continue to privilege Western paradigms over African traditions. The acceleration of such biases is no less than an intellectual apartheid, an unforgivable betrayal of African epistemologies.

Bearing this contextual background in mind, this article has two goals. The first is to explore and critically probe the mourning practices and rituals outlined in the Old Testament, with particular attention to their ritualistic and symbolic dimensions. By examining key Old Testament texts, such as Gen 23:2, 2 Sam 12:16–17, Job 2:12–13, Jer 9:17–22 and Zech 12:10, this article will uncover the complex ways in which mourning rituals and practices operate within the theological, social and cultural contexts of the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> The second is to examine the mourning practices of the amaXhosa, specifically focusing on the symbolism and rituals that govern their interactions with death and the afterlife and contrast these with those of the Old Testament. It will explore how these rituals, which include the wearing of mourning garments, offerings to ancestors and purification ceremonies, serve as cultural expressions of identity, continuity and spiritual connection with the dead. To address these two aims, I apply symbolic interactionism as a theory (explained below), interpreting and discussing these practices as social rituals that transcend mere emotional expression to become performances of communal solidarity and spiritual participation.

The overarching research question guiding the interpretation and discussion is: How do the mourning practices and symbolic rituals of the Old Testament and those of amaXhosa compare and contrast as culturally situated systems of meaning that negotiate grief, identity and spiritual continuity within their respective theological, communal, traditional and social contexts? In so doing, this article offers a scholarly contribution by unmasking how mourning rituals exert influence as dynamic semiotic systems across generations, by foregrounding the chemistry of ritualism and cultural symbolism to influence collective meanings. Let us now turn to the definitions of the selected theory in the next section.

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that only biblical texts directly quoted in this work are taken from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, published in 2011.

## **B SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AS A THEORY**

Symbolic interactionism is grounded in the idea that human beings create and interpret meaning through their interactions with others.<sup>13</sup> This theory asserts that verbal, non-verbal or cultural symbols serve as the building blocks of human communication and discernment. These symbols are not fixed. They are constantly redefined through social and cultural interaction, influencing and being influenced by the active participants in these exchanges. At its best, symbolic interactionism contends that reality is constructed through concerted meanings, which are negotiated and discerned in the context of everyday social engagements.<sup>14</sup> Just as a painter's brush strokes bring a canvas to life, individuals in society paint their social and cultural worlds with symbolic meanings, constantly revising their brushwork in response to new interactions, developments and experiences. This theory, as expanded by Tatiana Belousova, challenges traditional objectivist theories, focusing instead on the fluidity and dynamism of social reality.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, symbolic interactionism as a theory was chiefly developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, with Mead laying the foundational concepts in his exploration of the self and social behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Blumer, a student of Mead, further crystallised this theory by articulating three core premises: first, that humans behave towards things based on the meanings those things have for them; second, that these meanings emerge from social interaction; and third, that meanings are modified through an interpretive process.<sup>17</sup> Symbolic

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<sup>13</sup> Manford H. Kuhn, "Major Trends in Symbolic Interaction Theory in the Past Twenty-Five Years," *The Sociological Quarterly* 5/1 (1964): 61–84; Ronald W. Smith and Valerie Bugni, "Symbolic Interaction Theory and Architecture," *Symbolic Interaction* 29/2 (2006): 123–155; Nilgun Aksan et al., "Symbolic Interaction Theory," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 1/1 (2009): 902–904; Jennifer O'Neill, "Symbolic Interactionism, Role-Identities, and Delinquency: Examining the Moderating Role of Social Rewards," *Journal of Crime and Justice* 46/5 (2023): 627–646; Atiyat B. Al-Gabry, Mohamed Mahmood Kamal Eldin, and Ebtsam Mostafa Moselhy, "Symbolic Interaction Theory in Designing Social Media Advertisements," *International Design Journal* 14/5 (2024): 511–520.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Gabry, Mohamed and Ebtsam, "Symbolic Interaction Theory," 511–520.

<sup>15</sup> Tatiana Belousova, "Understanding the Dynamics of the South Africa–Russia Relations through the Constructivist Concept of 'State's Identity,'" *African and Asian Studies* 1/1 (2024): 1–31. Concerning this claim, social constructs are continually evolving, formed by active interactions and contexts rather than objective, unchanging truths.

<sup>16</sup> George H. Mead, "The Genesis of the Self and Social Control," *The International Journal of Ethics* 35/3 (1925): 251–277; Mead, George Herbert, *Mind, Self & Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Blumer, "Sociological Implications of the Thought of George Herbert Mead," *American Journal of Sociology* 71/5 (1966): 535–544; Herbert Blumer,

interactionism, then, draws attention to the participatory role of individuals in forming their social worlds, with meaning surfacing from the chemistry of societal structures and personal interpretations. Under these circumstances, this theory serves as an incisive perspective for unravelling the intricate layers of cultural rituals, including mourning practices. It uncovers the dynamic processes through which symbols and rituals are constructed, sustained and re-interpreted in the flux of socio-cultural interactions. In illuminating the interface between individual agency and collective meaning-making, symbolic interactionism offers a notable perspective for comprehending the evolving needlework of ritualistic expressions within cultural contexts.<sup>18</sup> Since symbolic interactionism has now been explained, the next section focuses on the interpretation and discussion in a bid to address the two aims of this scholarly discourse.

## C INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Addressing mourning practices and rituals in the Old Testament and amaXhosa tradition requires exceptional meticulousness due to the delicate nature of grief, which is like walking on holy ground. These rituals and practices are intertwined with people's identities, belief systems and sensibilities, akin to the roots of a tree anchoring a community's worldview and wisdom. Furthermore, I remain cognisant that Old Testament texts possess their own historical, theological and socio-cultural contexts, which, ideally, should be clearly signalled in writing to circumvent the risk of reading them anachronistically or out of context. At the same time, the exposition here deliberately positions these biblical texts in dialogue with contemporary amaXhosa mourning practices, not to collapse their contexts, but to elucidate how distinct theological ethos and symbolic grammars of grief resonate, diverge and interact across temporal and cultural boundaries within the framework of my topic. In any event, the next sub-section interprets and discusses the Old Testament's mourning practices as well as associated rituals.

### 1 The Old Testament's mourning practices and rituals

Mourning practices and rituals in the Old Testament offer an impactful window into the socio-religious life of ancient Israel, where grief was expressed as a collective and symbolic process, rather than just an individual emotional

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*Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (California: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> Note also that symbolic interactionism is applicable in scholarly debates on death and mourning since it emphasises how individuals create and negotiate meanings through social and cultural interactions, which are central to understanding ethnologically specific mourning practices and rituals. This theory highlights how symbols, such as gestures, language and rituals, model the collective experience of grief and the societal understanding of death.

outpouring imbued with sacred significance.<sup>19</sup> Within this context, the death of a loved one triggered a cascade of ritual performances, each laden with meaning, exemplifying the intricate interface between societal ethos and individual agency. This interaction aligns seamlessly with the theoretical tenets of symbolic interactionism. In the Old Testament context, these practices and rituals were more than expressions of despair. They served as symbolic scripts, moulded and reinterpreted within the community's collective consciousness. For instance, Gen 50:10 narrates the mourning of Jacob by Joseph and the Egyptians as follows: "They lamented loudly and bitterly, and there Joseph observed a seven-day period of mourning for his father" (וַיִּסְפְּדוּ-לּוֹ סִפְדָּה גְדוֹלָה וַעֲצָבָה וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף לְשֹׁפֵת (אֶת-אָבִיו וְשָׂבַע-תְּיָמִים)).

Here, the seven-day period is a temporal symbol, reiterating the godly rhythm through which grief is socially and theologically structured. In view of this factor, I need to remind the reader that the number seven holds substantial symbolic significance. It continually represents completeness or divine hierarchy in biblical traditions.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the seven-day mourning period for Jacob in this context, as observed by Joseph and the Egyptians, mirrors a godly rhythm that connects with human grief with theological constructs of wholeness and sanctity. This structured duration brings to the fore the chemistry between celestial patterns and communal expressions of loss, which anchors mourning within a cosmological setting. By the same token, a closer scrutiny of the symbolic system surrounding the seven-day mourning period reveals how temporal markers, ritual actions and sacred objects not only echo the divine rhythm of grief but also embody notions of renewal, healing and ancestral continuity. This, then, depicts a movement towards communal restoration and symphony within the cosmological and social space of mourning. Of note, a significant exegetical discourse on mourning practices of the Old Testament supports the assertions:

- i. The community-based dimension of mourning in ancient Israel was central. It provided emotional support for the bereaved and validated the collective distinctiveness of the community through shared ritual undertakings.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Obiorah Jerome and Favour Uroko, "Tearing of Clothes: A Study of an Ancient Practice in the Old Testament," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39/1 (2018): 1–8; Jeanette Mathews, "Led through Grief—Old Testament Responses to Crisis," *STJ* 5/3 (2019): 621–642.

<sup>20</sup> See also Mikeal Parsons, "Exegesis 'by the Numbers': Numerology and the New Testament," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 35/1 (2008): 25–43; Peter J. Gentry, "The Text of the Old Testament," *JETS* 52/1 (2009): 19.

<sup>21</sup> Margi Abeles and Jeanne Samson Katz, "A Time to Mourn: Reflections on Jewish Bereavement Practices," *Bereavement Care* 29/1 (2010): 19–22; Simon S. Rubin, "Loss and Mourning in the Jewish Tradition," *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying* 70/1 (2014): 79–98.

- ii. Mourning in the Old Testament surpassed an emotional response. It served as a highly ritualised and communal process that reflected the social and religious cohesion of ancient Israelite society.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to these scholarly assertions, the ritualistic tearing of garments, a hallmark of mourning, evocatively exemplifies how symbols operate within these practices. For example, following the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, it is stated in 2 Sam 1:11-12 that, "David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening" (וַיִּתְפֹּשׁ דָּוִד וְכָל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־אִתּוֹ אֶת־בְּגָדֵיהֶם וַיִּקְרְעוּ אוֹתָם. וַיִּסְפְּדוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ וַיִּצְמוּ עַד־הָעֶרֶב).<sup>23</sup> In this case, the process of tearing clothing is a powerful visual metaphor, an interruption in the social structure symbolising the disruption caused by death. Through the theory of symbolic interactionism, this process shows a concerted understanding of grief that binds individuals to the community while also allowing personal expressions of loss. However, these practices were never fixed; they evolved through interactions and re-interpretations, proving the dynamic nature of symbols as transport modes for meaning-making. Consequently, a closer reading suggests that the ritualistic tearing of garments goes far beyond and far beneath performativity to constitute a concentrated semiotic system, which enacts grief while mediating communal cohesion and personal loss. Viewed through symbolic interactionism, this dynamic practice encodes notions of rebirth and renewal, which highlight the evolving meanings of symbols within social and cosmological structures.<sup>24</sup> In support of this view, Jastrow Morris notes that:

Clothing, in ritual contexts such as mourning, becomes more than mere attire. It transforms into a symbol of social cohesion and disruption. In biblical mourning rituals, the tearing of garments acts as a metaphor for the rupture of the individual's relationship with the deceased and the collective society, symbolising both a personal and communal experience of loss.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, I argue that insofar as the mourning practices in the Old Testament are characterised by profound symbolic significance, contemporary African believers have adapted and blended these rituals into their own mourning traditions, seeing them as a link between the living and the spiritual kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets as Performers: Biblical Performance Criticism and Israel's Prophets* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1917. [cited 13 December 2024]. Online: chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcglcfindmkaj/https://jps.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Tanakh1917.pdf.

<sup>24</sup> Jerome and Uroko, "Tearing of Clothes," 1–8.

<sup>25</sup> Morris Jastrow, "The Tearing of Garments as a Symbol of Mourning, with Especial Reference to the Customs of the Ancient Hebrews," *JAOS* 21 (1900): 23–39..

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Ezenweke and Ikechukwu Kanu, "Perspectives of Syncretism and Its Modern Trend: A Case of Christian and African Traditions," *UJAH: Unizik Journal of*

One example of this blending of Old Testament mourning rituals with contemporary African religious traditions is found in some African Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.<sup>27</sup> While adhering to biblical doctrines, these churches frequently integrate traditional African practices such as the use of incense, indigenous music, recognition of ancestors, indigenous dancing and communal feasting during mourning ceremonies.<sup>28</sup> Even more intriguing, in some African countries such as Nigeria and South Africa, it is common not only for mourners to participate in biblical prayers and scripture reading but also perform symbolic behaviours like tearing garments or wearing specific colours. This reflects biblical mourning practices and indigenous cultural expressions of grief.<sup>29</sup> Just as the tear in a garment signifies the rupture between life and death, so too do these blended practices represent a symbolic fissure between indigenous traditions and the imposed religious systems of colonialism and modernity.<sup>30</sup>

However, this synthesis or blend has not been without negative criticism. Some detractors argue that the blended practices blur sacred traditions with foreign influences, creating a hybrid that is regarded as a dilution of legitimate spiritual expression.<sup>31</sup> The blending of ancient and contemporary rituals is thus viewed by some as a double-edged sword, as the communal rituals intended to bring comfort now carry the crushing weight of cultural sabotage, making them a battleground for religious and cultural identity crisis. It is also my view that the ritualistic tearing of garments, as depicted in 2 Sam 1:11-12, is a poignant visual metaphor, a rupture in the social fabric that not only signals the shattering of personal loss but also the collective rupture of the community's shared sense of

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*Arts and Humanities* 13/2 (2012): 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v13i2.4>; Nweke I. Ogbona and Shien Agaba, "Syncretism in Relation to African Traditional Religion: Why the Uproar," *IJRAS* 8/6 (2021): 87–92; Mangaliso Matshobane, "New Prophetic Churches and Syncretism: A Critical View," *Religions* 14/11 (2023): 1383.

<sup>27</sup> Mookgo S. Kgatle, "The Newer Non-denominational Pentecostal Churches in South Africa: A Critical Approach to Non-denominationalism in Pentecostalism," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 49/3 (2023): 1–14.

<sup>28</sup> Mookgo S. Kgatle and Thinandavha D. Mashau, "A Decolonial Perspective on the Practice of Unveiling Tombstones in Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in South Africa," *Religions* 14/3 (2023): 288.

Allan Anderson, "New African Initiated Pentecostalism and Charismatics in South Africa," *JRA* 35/1 (2005): 66–92; Jonathan Kangwa, "The Role of the Theology of Retribution in the Growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in Africa," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37/1 (2016): 1–9; Daniel Orogun and Jerry Pillay, "Between African and American Neo-Pentecostalism: An Examination of the Link, Influence, Merits and Demerits," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47/3 (2021): 1–18.

<sup>30</sup> This means that much like a torn garment symbolises the divide between life and death, these blended practices serve as a metaphorical fracture, illustrating the interplay between indigenous traditions and the religious models introduced by colonialism and modernity.

<sup>31</sup> John Magbadelo, "Pentecostalism in Nigeria: Exploiting or Edifying the Masses?" *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie* 8/2 (2004): 15–29.

hierarchy. Through the theory of symbolic interactionism, this behaviour becomes a dynamic ritual in which the tearing of clothes weaves individuals into the communal tapestry of grief while simultaneously allowing personal threads of sorrow to emerge, evolving in meaning through re-interpretation and interaction within the cultural context.

Nevertheless, a post-colonial reflection compels one to recognise that Christian missionary rejection of indigenous African mourning rites imposed extrinsic frameworks that disregarded local epistemologies and ritual knowledge.<sup>32</sup> The imposition disrupted communal practices and systematically reduced the continuity of Old Testament ritual traditions. Indeed, this is a profound cultural and theological impoverishment. The oppression of these rites constitutes more than cultural loss; it actively manipulates communal expressions of grief, revealing the tension between imposed Christianity and the preservation of ancestral and biblical practices.

Similarly, fasting as a mourning practice further underscores the Old Testament's highly significant orientation with symbolic action. In 2 Sam 12:16-17, David fasts for the life of his dying child, refusing food in an act of profound intercession. In this biblical occurrence, it is stated that "David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground" (וַיִּבְקֶשׂ דָּוִד אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים בְּעַד הַנֶּעֱרַר וַיֵּצִיֵם דָּוִד צוֹם וַיָּבֵא וְלֵן וְשָׁכַב אַרְצָה). Fasting, in this context, transcends physical deprivation. It is a symbol of vulnerability and supplication. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this behaviour proves an individual's attempt to renegotiate their relationship with the divine in the face of irreversible loss, outlining how ritualistic mourning cements personal independence and collective resonance. David Lambert is unequivocal about this point, suggesting that "fasting and mourning go hand in hand, and when the fast ends so does any hope for the child."<sup>33</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that Dimitri Oikonomou classifies fasting in the Bible into four basic categories: that is, as an act of mourning the dead, as an act of penitence, as an auxiliary to prayer and as a means of seeking divine intervention.<sup>34</sup> Thus, I support these assertions and argue that fasting as a ritual performative dimension is not just a symbol or a metaphor for some other-worldly activity. It is an experience of concrete and symbolic meaning. In sharing the same sentiments, Zodwa Gcingca-Ndolo asserts: "*Ukuzila ukudla kuyindlela yokubonakalisa usizi, intlungu, kunye nokuphendukela kuThixo ngexesha lokulahlekelwa,*" which directly translates to,

<sup>32</sup> Mlamli Diko, "Revisiting the Debate on Christian Missionary Imperialism in South Africa: Its Role in Oppressing the IsiXhosa Language and Culture," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 51/1 (2025): 1–23..

<sup>33</sup> David Lambert, "Fasting as a Penitential Rite: A Biblical Phenomenon?" *Harvard Theological Review* 96/4 (2003): 477–512.

<sup>34</sup> Dimitri Oikonomou, "Christian Fasting," *Mozaik* 10/2 (2002): 16–18.

"Fasting is a way of expressing sorrow, pain, and turning to God in times of loss."<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, the Old Testament mourning rituals also uncover the tension between *prescribed rituals* and *individual grief*. For instance, Ezek 24:16-18 offers a poignant counter-narrative in which God instructs Ezekiel not to mourn his wife's death in the traditional manner. It reads: "Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears" (אֶת־מְחַמַּד עֵינֶיךָ בְּמַגֵּפָה וְלֹא תִסְפַּד וְלֹא תִבְכֶּה וְלֹא תִשָּׂא דִמְעָתְךָ: (תְּבַכֶּה וְלֹא־תִבּוֹא דִמְעָתְךָ). This spiritual command questions the cultural norms of mourning, revealing how symbols and rituals may be politically and theologically contested. Symbolic interactionism, in this case, elucidates how rituals are both adopted and subverted, creating a site where traditionalism confronts revisionism and opens space for opposition and redefinition.

These mourning rituals and practices are not simply enacted because of social obligation but because they mirror an *expansive* theological understanding of life and death. By the same token, I contend that when Ezekiel is forbidden to mourn, it subverts the normative practices of mourning and the emotional realities of grief, offering a stark reminder of the, sometimes, paradoxical relationship between spiritual command and human sorrow. However, it should be noted that the refusal to mourn does not erase Ezekiel's grief; it rather underlines how rituals are *reinterpreted* and *redefined* by spiritual desire, outlining a form of symbolic subversion that contests accepted norms. In contemporary contexts, such a philosophy could be observed in instances where religious communities or individuals adjust mourning practices, such as through altered funeral rites that were observed during the Covid-19 lockdown, secular rituals or personal spiritual expressions, in ways that contest or reinterpret traditional ethos. This mirrors the notion that while rituals are powerful symbols that bind communities together, they also provide a platform for personal agency and individual redefinition, allowing for a dynamic and evolving process of grieving. Therefore, a rigorous scrutiny of the symbolic system underlying these rites is indispensable, for it is precisely these layered symbols—rather than the rituals alone—that authoritatively structure communal grief, regulate theological meaning and ultimately determine how individuals and communities contest, negotiate or redefine the very heartbeat of mourning.

This dynamic re-interpretation is imperative when juxtaposed with the cultural annihilation wrought by colonialism on African mourning rituals, including those of amaXhosa. One would recall that colonial ideologies silenced

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<sup>35</sup> Zodwa Gcingca-Ndolo, *Amasiko Nezithethe Neendlela Zokuziphatha KwaXhosa*. The English translation provided here is my own work, derived through the application of my linguistic expertise and translation skills. It reflects my interpretation of the original isiXhosa text.

indigenous rituals as "paganistic," stripping them of their symbolic profundity.<sup>36</sup> By comparison, the Old Testament rituals, steeped in symbolic interaction, expose the hypocrisy of these colonial mentalities, challenging the Western epistemologies that sought to delegitimise non-Western traditions. For example, the symbolic behaviour of sprinkling ashes on one's head, as depicted in Job 2:12-13, "...they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads" (וַיִּקְרְעוּ אִישׁ מְעָלוֹ וַיִּזְרוּ עָפָר עַל רִאשֵׁיהֶם)—shares parallels with African rituals involving symbolic undertakings of purification and grief. Consequently, the symbolic undertaking of sprinkling ashes on one's head in Job 2:12-13, which signifies mourning and repentance, parallels African mourning rituals that similarly use symbolic acts, such as the application of ashes or dust, to signify purification, grief and a collective connection to the divine and ancestral spirits. These parallels demand a critique of the colonial distortion of African mourning rituals and practices, which were as profoundly symbolic and meaningful as their biblical counterparts.

Politically, the Old Testament's communal mourning rituals, such as the gathering of mourners, depict the societal acknowledgement of grief as a collective burden. Amos 5:16 declares that "There will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square" (עַל-כֵּן פֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת) (בְּפִתְחֵם בְּחֻצְרוֹתֵיכֶם וְהִיָּתָה אֶבֶל בְּרַחוּבוֹת וּבְכִי בְּכָעַב בְּפְרוּבוֹת). Within this framework, mourning extends far beyond familial boundaries, encompassing the wider community. This collective dimension rebukes the colonial individualisation of grief, which sought to fragment African communal mourning practices, thus, distorting the social cohesion they cement. Given these factors, I submit that this colonial disjointed method, designed to isolate individuals, failed to acknowledge the powerful collective healing that the communal nature of mourning provides, thus, embarrassing the colonial notion that grief could or should be experienced in isolation. In fact, symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical backbone for understanding how these rituals solidify communal identity while permitting space for individual grief, a balance that colonial ideology intended to disrupt.

Of further interest, the Old Testament mourning rituals frequently integrate symbols of optimism and continuity, dismounting death's finality. The burial practices in Gen 50:24-25, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place" (וַיִּשָּׁבַע יוֹסֵף אֶת-בְּנָי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר) (אֱלֹהִים פְּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֶתְכֶם, וְהֶעֱלֵתֶם אֶת-עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה), symbolise the connection between the living and the dead. Consequently, burial becomes a ritual of remembrance and a revalidation of spiritual covenants. Similarly, amaXhosa mourning rituals

<sup>36</sup> See Elmarie Kotzé, Lishje Els, and Ntsiki Rajuili-Masilo, "Women... Mourn and Men Carry On": African Women Storying Mourning Practices: A South African Example," *Death Studies* 36/8 (2012): 742–766; Magezi E. Baloyi, "A Critical Evaluation of the Impact of Religious Belief (Christianity) within Post-colonial African Burial Rites: A South African Perspective," *Religions* 15/2 (2024): 248..

involve symbolic rituals that guarantee the continued presence of ancestors in the lives of the living and the unborn. This challenges the colonial expulsion of African cosmologies as primitive. The Old Testament's reverence for the dead, mirrored in such African practices, demands a reckoning with the colonial epistemologies that intended to delink these connections. Olusola Solomon Ademiluka opines that in the Old Testament, burial rituals transcend the finality of death, serving as a connection between life and death, with rituals confirming the connection between the living, the unborn and the dead.<sup>37</sup> On the grounds of these philosophies, I contend that the practice of burial in the Old Testament is not solely a disposal of the dead human body (flesh and bones) but a profound process of sustaining permanence, a symbolic gesture to keep the deceased alive in the community's historical consciousness and memory.<sup>38</sup>

While some may contend that the Old Testament rituals were spiritually ordained and thus distinct, symbolic interactionism reveals that even spiritual mandates are interpreted and enacted within cultural contexts. This is because mourning practices, influenced by Israel's socio-religious context, underline how cultural and spiritual symbols coil to produce rituals. This dynamic mirrors the amaXhosa's integration of spirituality and cultural symbolism in their mourning practices, offering fertile ground for comparative interdisciplinary discourse. In support of these claims, Leslie Bank suggests that even religious rituals are greatly influenced by the cultural backgrounds in which they occur.<sup>39</sup> These rituals become instruments for expressing spiritual and communal symbols, which reflect a community's philosophy and its interaction with the divine.

Therefore, I draw attention to the fact that mourning rituals in the Old Testament, while prescribed as spiritual commands, should be comprehended as performative dimensions implanted in the cultural and social milieu of ancient Israel. These practices, heavily driven by the socio-religious background,

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<sup>37</sup> Olusola S. Ademiluka, "The Sociological Functions of Funeral Mourning: Illustrations from the Old Testament and Africa," *OTE* 22/1 (2009): 9–20.

<sup>38</sup> Historical consciousness and memory in the African context are vastly interwoven in oral traditions, where the past is preserved through storytelling, rituals and ancestral reverence, guaranteeing that history remains a living component of the present. This collective memory intensifies a sense of identity and continuity, enabling communities to navigate the complexities of modernity while honouring ancestral wisdom and defiance against colonial distortion. See also Amos Funkenstein, "Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness," *History and Memory* 1/1 (1989): 5–26; Zhan T. Toshchenko, "Historical Consciousness and Historical Memory: An Analysis of the Current Situation," *Russian Studies in History* 49/1 (2010): 37–52; Hans Ruin, "The Claim of the Past—Historical Consciousness as Memory, Haunting, and Responsibility in Nietzsche and Beyond," *JCS* 51/6 (2019): 798–813.

<sup>39</sup> Leslie Bank, "Life after Plastic-Wrapped Bodies: COVID, the State and the Crisis of Social Reproduction in Rural South Africa," *Anthropological Quarterly* 97/3 (2024): 449–480.

unmask how religious mandates are interpreted and enacted within specific cultural philosophies. In closing this subsection, mourning practices in the Old Testament, unmasked through the theory of symbolic interactionism, demonstrate a rich tapestry of symbols, rituals, and meanings that navigate the personal, communal and divine dimensions of grief. These practices contest colonialist reductions of non-Western rituals, which underline the universality of mourning as a symbolic task rooted in cultural and spiritual contexts. Given that the mourning practices and rituals of the Old Testament have now been considered, it is important to focus on the amaXhosa mourning practices and rituals, hence, the next sub-section.

## 2 The mourning practices and rituals of amaXhosa

The mourning practices and rituals of the amaXhosa, an indigenous South African community with entrenched traditions, customs and spiritual connections to their ancestors, are a collective and personal expression of grief. These rituals are a means to navigate grief while concurrently cementing cultural, spiritual and social cohesion. Central to these amaXhosa practices are the symbols of mourning, such as wearing specific attire, which is usually black, navy blue or green, engaging in ritualistic purification and performing sacrificial offerings to ancestors (*iminikelo*). The mourning attires, as Rebecca Mitchell proffers, symbolise a visible manifestation of loss and a state of transition, marking the mourner's connection to the deceased while signalling their participation in grief.<sup>40</sup>

It is worth observing that these mourning attires also function as communicative signs among the amaXhosa, visually signalling the mourner's social status and emotional state. They solidify an atmosphere of jointly experienced empathy and cultural advancement while reaffirming the commonly held recognition of life's cyclical nature. Similarly, the attire's colours carry spiritual connotations.<sup>41</sup> For instance, black is commonly associated with ancestral presence, while green symbolises renewal and optimism, bridging the distance between grief and eventual healing. In the context of death, black is a symbol of mourning, loss and the solemnity of the spiritual transition from life to death. Across various traditions, including African traditions such as those of amaXhosa, black signifies the presence of ancestral spirits and the unifying force between the living, the unborn and the deceased. It represents the weight of grief, respect for the departed and the recognition of death as a fundamental component of the human life cycle. On the one hand, black may also signify the sacred and

<sup>40</sup> Rebecca Mitchell, "Death Becomes Her: On the Progressive Potential of Victorian Mourning," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41/4 (2013): 595–620.

<sup>41</sup> Morris Jastrow, "Dust, Earth, and Ashes as Symbols of Mourning among the Ancient Hebrews," *JAOS* 20 (1899): 133–150; Athena Athanasiou, "Reflections on the Politics of Mourning: Feminist Ethics and Politics in the Age of Empire," *Historein* 5 (2005): 40–57.

mysterious nature of death, serving as a protective colour that honours the spiritual journey of the deceased.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, these traditional practices are not just performances of emotional release. They are impactful symbols of continuity, illustrating how the living maintain a connection with the dead. Symbolic interactionism provides a valuable theoretical view through which one could understand the practices as dynamic, meaning-making rituals, unceasingly reconstructed through ongoing social and cultural interaction. Each tear, each ritual gesture, is a social performance imbued with collective meaning, continually passed down and modified through generations, defying colonial distortion and asserting the independence of amaXhosa's cultural narrative.<sup>43</sup> For these reasons, I contend that culture is the web of meanings in which individuals are suspended and rituals are the means by which they navigate these webs, thread by thread. Victor Turner's view aligns with these claims, suggesting that meanings are not inherent but emerge out of socio-cultural interaction and are modified through interpretation.<sup>44</sup> This means that the rituals of mourning in African societies mirror a greatly meaningful interaction between the breathing, the becoming and the leaving.

In the face of colonialism in South Africa, which intended to dismantle and dehumanise indigenous practices, the amaXhosa mourning rituals stand as a defiant act of cultural preservation and resistance. The wearing of mourning attire, the ritualistic slaughter of animals and the pouring of libations are greatly symbolic actions. They connect with the dead but also the continued spiritual presence of ancestors among the living.<sup>45</sup> And with special reference to covering

<sup>42</sup> Fred T. Smith, "Death, Ritual, and Art in Africa," *African Arts* 21/1 (1987): 28–84; Ramphele, "Political Widowhood in South Africa," 99–117; Casey Golomski, "Wearing Memories: Clothing and the Global Lives of Mourning in Swaziland," *Material Religion* 11/3 (2015): 303–327.

<sup>43</sup> Nicola Graham et al., "Traditional Healers' Views of the Required Processes for a 'Good Death' among Xhosa Patients Pre- and Post-Death," *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 46/3 (2013): 386–394.

<sup>44</sup> Victor Turner, "Symbolic Studies," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 4 (1975): 145–161.

<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that in the context of amaXhosa mourning rituals, it is essential to approach the slaughtering of a big animal, such as a cow, with cultural sensitivity and an understanding of its profound importance. When an elderly person or an individual considered spiritually significant passes away, this act of slaughtering a big animal surpasses the mere provision of meat for rituals. The slaughtering symbolises honour and respect, guaranteeing that the deceased is properly accompanied into the ancestral kingdom by a highly valued animal. For instance, when the head of the family departs, the expectation is that cattle are to be sacrificed, reflecting their status and spiritual value. This practice should not be viewed as a mere tradition but as a fundamental element of cultural continuity and reverence, greatly interwoven in amaXhosa cosmology. Cf. Annette Yoshiko Reed, "From Sacrifice to the

heads during mourning, the task of wearing a *doek* or headscarf, along with the ritual of *ukukhumbula* (remembering), where mourners call upon ancestors for guidance, signifies that mourning is a personal experience as well as a community-wide responsibility.<sup>46</sup> This process of collective mourning is established in the understanding that the deceased are still *present*, religiously interacting with the living in the form of spiritual influence. The practice of remembering is, therefore, not one of isolation but a reiteration of the communal links that are central to amaXhosa life. These practices, as seen through a symbolic interactionist theory, are filled with symbols of seamless continuation, symbols that are persistently adapted to depict the social and political realities of the community. Just as an artist reworks a canvas, the amaXhosa rework their mourning rituals to meet the demands of their evolving society while remaining rooted in their ancestral legacy.

When exploring the chemistry between the living and the deceased in amaXhosa mourning rituals, one cannot overlook the symbolic power of ancestral worship and the invocation of spirits. In the words of the Bible, one sees a similar representation of mourning that entails the spiritual dimension. For example, 2 Sam 1:11-12 speaks of David and his men tearing their clothes and fasting in mourning for Saul and Jonathan: "They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the army of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword" (וַיִּכְרֹךְ וַיִּצְוֹמוּ עַד-). From this biblical example, the traditional performance of tearing clothes can be regarded as a visual symbol of the breakage between life and death, a motif that surfaces in the mourning practices of the amaXhosa. AmaXhosa mourning rituals do not solely entail the heart of life but the progressive negotiation with death through ancestral communication. In this way, death is not a definitive end but a shift into another mode of existence, a reality where the dead continue to actively participate in the affairs of the living, demanding attention and respect. Thus, it was stated earlier that amaXhosa have defied colonial definitions of death, refusing to accept the Western dichotomy of life versus death. In amaXhosa

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Slaughterhouse: Ancient and Modern Approaches to Meat, Animals, and Civilization," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 26/2 (2014): 111–158; Katie A. Rask, "Etruscan Animal Bones and Their Implications for Sacrificial Studies," *History of Religions* 53/3 (2014): 269–312.

<sup>46</sup> Regarding gender specificities, the wearing of a *doek* or headscarf is traditionally associated with women in many African traditions, including that of the amaXhosa. This gendered aspect depicts broader societal roles in which women are considered as the bearers of cultural and spiritual practices. However, men may also observe specific mourning symbols, such as covering the head with a hat or other attire, depending on the traditions of the family or community, as one may recall that they vary according to context.

thought, death is a passage, not an end, and mourning is a process of continuous interaction with the dead (*abangasekhoyo*).

In the Old Testament, as previously noted, the tearing of garments and fasting emerge as powerful symbols, as also reflected in the mourning practices of the amaXhosa. In the biblical text, 1 Sam 31:13 reads as follows: "Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days" (וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת-עַצְמוֹתַיָּהוֹן וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתָם תַּחַת-אֵלֶּה בִּיבֶשׁ וַיִּצְוּמוּ שִׁבְעַת-יָמִים). Fasting here signifies the spiritual task of purification and a collective expression of grief. The AmaXhosa, too, actively participate in practices of purification, such as ritual cleansing following death, which is understood as a way to restore balance and order in the community. Symbolic interactionism, therefore, helps one to appreciate that these rituals are not only rituals for the mere sake of existence, but are performances characterised with notable meaning that connect the active participants to what was, what is and what becomes.

Thus, the purification process is a way to communicate with the spirits of the dead, re-establishing the balance that is disrupted by death. In a (post)colonial context, unfortunately, these rituals are recurrently regarded as "primitive" or "backward," but they remain a meaningful and resilient form of cultural counter-action. The colonial imposition of Western values sought to strip the amaXhosa of their spiritual practices, but these practices have endured, proving that even in the face of systemic violence, cultural memory and consciousness may never be fully wiped out. As Jessica Martin contends, the Bible uses outward actions, such as the tearing of garments, to represent inward grief.<sup>47</sup> In view of this indication, fasting is another action that signals a spiritual and emotional state. It underscores dependence on God or expressing great sorrow. In the same vein, Harriet Ngubane holds similar ideologies, implying that among the amaZulu and related groups, including the amaXhosa, purification rituals following death are a heartbeat of human existence. These traditional practices are not rigidly about hygiene. They carry significant symbolic meaning, seeking to restore the spiritual harmony that the death of a community member may have unsettled.<sup>48</sup>

Beyond these scholarly discourses, the symbolic performances in amaXhosa mourning rituals are significantly tied to communal memory.<sup>49</sup> As the living interact with the dead through ritual, they are simultaneously validating their identities as a people connected to a multi-collaborative history and worldview. Just as the Old Testament experiences reify mourning as a

<sup>47</sup> Jessica Martin, *Walton's Lives: Conformist Commemorations and the Rise of Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Harriet Ngubane, "Some Notions of 'Purity' and 'Impurity' among the Zulu," *Africa* 46/3 (1976): 274–284.

<sup>49</sup> Harriet Ngubane, "Aspects of Clinical Practice and Traditional Organization of Indigenous Healers in South Africa," *Social Science & Medicine. Part B: Medical Anthropology* 15/3 (1981): 361–365..

community-based endeavour, amaXhosa mourning practices validate the collective memory of the community, confirming that each individual's loss is not isolated but is interwoven with the broader context of the people. Having said this, I argue also that the burial of a person, the final act of mourning, is not solely a return to the earth but a recognition of the ongoing spiritual chemistry between the living, the unborn and the dead. This, too, is observable in the Old Testament practice of community-based mourning, as seen in Ezekiel 24:16-18, where God commands Ezekiel not to mourn publicly but to keep his grief private: "Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears" (בְּיֹאֲדָם הַנְּגִי לִקְחַם מִמֶּךָ אֶת- (מִחֶמְד עֵינֶיךָ בְּמַגֵּפָה וְלֹא תִסְפֹּד וְלֹא תִבְכֶּה וְלֹא-תִבּוֹא דְמַעְתָּךְ). This scripture juxtaposes the public mourning of the community with the private sorrow of the individual. In contrast, however, amaXhosa mourning practices are a public, collective act that rejects the individualistic ideology imposed by colonial systems and instead affirms the mutual bond of all.

In this comparative interdisciplinary discourse, it is fundamental also to confront the colonial silencing of indigenous mourning rituals, especially in the context of the amaXhosa. Colonial authorities, in their ruthless pursuit of assimilation, aimed to strip the amaXhosa of their spiritual and cultural legacy, deeming their mourning practices "barbaric" and "uncivilised."<sup>50</sup> However, in their determination, the amaXhosa were at odds with these misguided attempts to distort their ways of mourning and remembering. The colonial government's misguided attempt to redefine grief and even dictate the terms of mourning for many indigenous Africans could not distort the power of ancestral memory, cemented in rituals. The physical markers of mourning, such as ritual attire, ceremonial offerings and ancestral invocations, continue to serve as a form of radical opposition to colonial powers that aimed to flatten the complexity of amaXhosa cultural practices into a monolithic, Westernised version of grief. It is not surprising that John Mbiti notes that African communities are intensely fixated on the collective memory, consciousness and ritual practices that defy colonial distortion, with mourning processes particularly playing a central role in conserving ties with the ancestors and establishing certainty concerning cultural continuity despite external pressures.<sup>51</sup>

Symbolic interactionism, as a theory, demonstrates that these mourning practices are much more than outward rituals; they represent how meaning is continuously negotiated, revalidated and transformed. Just as, historically, the amaXhosa have resisted colonial attempts to obliterate their cultural practices, they continue to rework and redefine their mourning rituals in response to contemporary realities, such as blending modern forms of communication

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Porter, "Cultural Imperialism' and Protestant Missionary Enterprise, 1780–1914," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 25/3 (1997): 367–391.

<sup>51</sup> John Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion," *Christian Century* 97/27 (1980): 817–820.

including social media into their rituals. For example, during a funeral, it is now common for family members to share updates, messages of grief and ancestral invocations through WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, X (formerly known as Twitter) and many other social networks, allowing for a mutually beneficial mourning experience that surpasses physical boundaries, while adhering to traditional practices of remembrance and respect for the deceased. These rituals are not motionless but are continually influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they occur. In a country like South Africa, where the aftermath of colonial violence still lingers, mourning becomes a personal expression of grief and a collective assertion of cultural concepts and political defiance. In this sense, the amaXhosa mourning rituals are a progressive dialogue, an intersection of past, present and future, where the dead speak to the living, constructively guiding them towards spiritual and social regeneration. Building on the scholarly debates regarding the mourning rituals and practices of the amaXhosa, the next section explores a comparative interdisciplinary nexus between the mourning practices in the Old Testament and those of the amaXhosa.

#### **D DRAWING A COMPARATIVE INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTION BETWEEN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND AMAXHOSA MOURNING RITUALS**

The comparative interdisciplinary connection between mourning rituals in the Old Testament and amaXhosa tradition is a powerful narrative of grief and remembrance. It uncovers the remarkable impact of symbolic interactions on the construction of community-based identities and spiritual ties. As indicated in previous sections, the mourning rituals in both traditions are not isolated phenomena but intricate performances where symbols, such as tears, garments or actions, are filled with layered and nuanced cultural meanings. Far beneath the Old Testament, these mourning rituals act in the service of emotional expression. They are potent rites through which the community negotiates its connection with the spiritual kingdom or *ilizwe lemimoya* (spiritual world). For example, in 2 Sam 1:11-12, after the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, we read: "Then David and his men took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the army of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword" (וַיֹּאקֵז דָּוִד וַאֲנָשָׁיו בִּבְגָדֵיהֶם וַיִּקְרְעוּ אוֹתָם. וַיִּסְפְּדוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ וַיִּצְמוּ עַד הָעֶרֶב עַל שָׂאוּל וְעַל יְהוֹנָתָן בְּנוֹ וְעַל צָבָא (יְהוָה וּבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי נָפְלוּ בַחֶרֶב). In these circumstances, the act of tearing one's clothes is a symbol of rupture, a break between the seen and the unseen; yet it instantaneously reaffirms the links that bind the community together, as both a sign of grief and a collective ritual that solidifies group identity in the face of death. In this regard, symbolic interactionism posits that these actions are reactions to death shaped by socio-cultural practice. They are also rituals intensified by a history of interaction, where meaning is negotiated in real time through community-based engagements with the dead body, symbols and the divine.

In amaXhosa tradition, similar mourning rituals manifest through symbolic actions that elucidate the continuity of life and the profound importance of ancestral connection. The symbolic undertaking of mourning among the amaXhosa is a public display of grief that draws on extensively ingrained cultural meanings. Like their Old Testament counterparts, the amaXhosa mourning rituals are articulations of personal loss expressed through culturally structured practice. They also function as societal behaviours that reaffirm and safeguard the amaXhosa's spiritual and moral virtue. Here, the acts of wearing mourning attire, slaughtering livestock for rituals and offering prayers to the ancestors are all symbolic activities that articulate a desire to restore balance and invoke spiritual protection. These rituals, established in a philosophy that regards the living and the dead as part of a continuous circle, are a clear testimony to the amaXhosa philosophy of the interconnectedness of life and death. Through symbolic interactionism, these performances are seen not as isolated or individualistic but as part of an ongoing dance with the ancestors in which each ritual serves to bridge the distance between past, present and future generations.

In essence, these similarities underline a multi-collaborative understanding of death as a communal occurrence, one that transcends individual grief and extends into the social and spiritual kingdom. Regrettably, colonial history in South Africa has frequently obscured or distorted this understanding, positioning indigenous mourning practices as primitive while elevating Western religious rituals to a higher moral and spiritual ground. Against this reality, the colonial ideology should be forcefully rejected, as it reduces the depth and intricacy of the mourning rituals of indigenous African cultures. Given the distortion, it is central to reiterate that the mourning rituals of amaXhosa, like those in the Old Testament, are impactfully meaningful and delicate socio-cultural performances. Colonialism, in its desire to impose its misguided interpretation of "civilisation," has consistently belittled the rich tapestry of African traditions, branding them as "paganistic." In this article, I unravel this questionable ideology, offering a re-evaluation of amaXhosa mourning rituals as fundamental to a robust cultural and spiritual tradition, one that represents the holiness of mourning rituals found in the biblical text. At the same time, I need to indicate that the (post)colonial government should feel a profound sense of shame for driving a colonial legacy that trivialises indigenous mourning rituals, thus, disconnecting the intricate threads of cultural individuality and spiritual continuity. Like a tree uprooted from its native soil, these rituals are deprived of the sustenance they require to thrive in the contemporary world, which leaves indigenous communities disoriented and spiritually bereft, becoming strangers in their own land. Having said this, by failing to protect and elevate the mourning rituals of amaXhosa—rich, nuanced performances of communal and ancestral connection—the contemporary government contributes to the distortion of a heritage that, much like the sacred rituals of the Old Testament, symbolises profound socio-cultural wisdom.

Above everything else, both the Old Testament and amaXhosa mourning rituals emphasise the symbolic importance of the dead human body in mourning. As noted earlier, in 2 Sam 12:16-17, King David's fasting and lying on the ground during the illness of his son serve as a powerful symbol of humility and spiritual desperation: "David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground" (וַיִּבְקֹשׁ דָּוִד אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים בְּעַד-הַנֶּעֱר, וַיִּצְם) (דָּוִד צוֹם, וַיָּבֵא וַשְׂכָב אַרְצָה—וַלְיָהּ). The physical body, in its prostration in this context, becomes a site of personal suffering and communal prayer, signalling the desperate desire for spiritual intervention. In the same way, the amaXhosa actively engage in human bodily expressions of mourning that involve communal actions such as weeping, wailing and the communal washing of the body of the deceased. These physical acts, laden with symbolic meanings, signify not only the individual's grief but also the collective accountability to confirm the deceased's peaceful passage to the ancestral kingdom. It is also fundamental to recognise that mourning rituals in both traditions operate as a form of opposition to societal decay.<sup>52</sup> In the Old Testament, mourning rituals emerge in the aftermath of national calamities, such as war or spiritual judgment, where rituals serve as a form of societal recalibration. In Zech 12:10, for example, mourning is described as a collective action: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son" (וַשְׂפֹכְתִי עַל-בֵּית דָּוִד וְעַל-יֹשְׁבֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם רִיחַ חֵן וְתַחֲנוּנִים; וְהִבִּיטוּ אֵלַי אֶת אֶשְׁר-דָּקְרוּ, וְסָפְדוּ עָלַי כְּמִסְפַּד עַל-הַבְּכוֹר (עַל-הַיְחִיד, וְהִמַּר עָלַי כְּהִמַּר עַל-הַבְּכוֹר). This philosophy of mourning is constructed as a form of national repentance, a purification that restores the spiritual and moral hierarchy of the community. Similarly, in amaXhosa tradition, mourning rituals, especially in the wake of social or political upheaval, serve as a symbolic defiance of colonial domination. Thus, the uninvited erasure of indigenous mourning rituals under colonial rule was not simply a loss of tradition but a process of spiritual violence, as the colonial powers sought to dislocate the ancestral connection that was central to amaXhosa philosophy and ways of knowing.

## E CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, this comparative interdisciplinary discourse has critically elucidated the intricate mourning practices and rituals of the Old Testament and of the amaXhosa, demonstrating their multi-collaborative trust in symbolic activities to navigate the complexities of grief, community, ancestry and spirituality. Guided by symbolic interactionism as a theory, the article shows how mourning transcends individual sorrow to serve as a communal language that

<sup>52</sup> For the purposes and scope of this scholarly debate, societal decay refers to the gradual deterioration of social, moral and cultural values within a community, manifesting in increased cultural oppression, inequality and disintegration of social structures. This decline continually results from economic instability, political and religious corruption, or the erosion of traditional ethos and institutions.

binds societies, cements cultural continuity and negotiates relationships between the living, the unborn and the dead. As noted above, the Old Testament practices and rituals, such as fasting, wearing sackcloth and abstaining from vocal lamentation, mirror spiritual instruction and collective repentance and greatly symbolise the covenantal relationship with God. On the other hand, amaXhosa practices and rituals, vastly established in ancestral veneration and cyclical cosmology, foreground the role of the living in honouring and maintaining connections with the spiritual world. Despite the oppressive weight of colonial elimination, amaXhosa mourning practices and rituals persist as acts of defiance, regenerating cultural independence and ancestral memory. Finally, this scholarly discourse is dedicated to the resolute souls of amaXhosa and their enduring cultural legacy, which thrives despite historical and systemic oppression. May this intellectual debate honour the wisdom of amaXhosa ancestors and inspire the preservation of indigenous knowledge for future generations.

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