Holding on or letting go? The resolution of grief in relation to two Xhosa rituals in South Africa.

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Abstract

The dominant emphasis in Western models of bereavement is on the breaking of bonds with the deceased in order for healing to occur. Failure to let go often leads to a diagnosis of 'pathological grief'. This paper challenges the assumption that death invariably means that the bonds with the deceased have to be severed. Situating Western models of bereavement in a modernist context not only challenges the 'truth' claims of these models, but also facilitates a deconstruction of the elements that contribute to the emphasis on letting go. In contrast to these theories, two Xhosa rituals (*umkhapho* and *umbuyiso*) that seek to sustain the bond with the deceased person will be examined. Such rituals demonstrate that it is possible to both maintain the bond and for the bereaved person to move on with their lives. Despite different contexts, it will be argued that these Xhosa bereavement rituals have a contribution to make to Western models of bereavement and some implications for therapy will be explored.

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Introduction

Contemporary models of grief are largely informed by what White (1989) calls the 'saying goodbye' metaphor, with its emphasis on the breaking of the bonds with the deceased in order to release emotional energy to form new attachments (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987; Walter, 1996). According to such orientations, one has to 'deal with' the loss of the deceased and do one's 'grief work', the assumption being that there are normative stages or tasks that need to be worked through. When the emotional ties with the deceased have been severed, the deceased is removed from the survivor's life story and assigned a place in the past. Failure to undergo and/or complete this 'grief work' generally leads to a diagnosis of 'pathological grief' (Parkes, 1986; White, 1989; Worden, 1991).

This article will not enter into the debate about the necessity of 'grief work'. Instead, the assumption that death invariably means that the bonds with the deceased have to be severed will be challenged. By comparing Western models of bereavement with two Xhosa rituals, it will be argued that it is possible to both maintain the bond with the deceased and for the bereaved person to move on with their lives. This will be done in the following way. First, a description of the research process will be provided. Second, for readers not familiar with the South African context, the research will briefly be placed in context. Third, an overview of contemporary models of grief will be presented. Fourth, these will be critiqued from a social constructionist perspective. Fifth, some worldviews that support the active maintenance of bonds with the deceased will be explored. In contrast to contemporary theories, two Xhosa

rituals (*umkhapho* and *umbuyiso*) that seek to nurture or sustain the bond with the deceased person will then be examined. Finally, despite different contexts, it will be argued that these Xhosa bereavement rituals have a contribution to make to contemporary models of bereavement and some implications for therapy will be explored.

A description of the research process

As an intern psychologist and a minister of religion, I have been involved in working with grief/bereavement in the South African context for a number of years. This paper arises out of a serendipitous coming together of a narrative therapeutic technique and an African bereavement ritual. As a minister on a retreat, I heard Professor Gabriel Setiloane speak repeatedly about the continuing bond with the ancestors. As a psychologist in training I had been exposed to Michael White's work with the bereaved and the narrative techniques associated with the 'saying hullo again' practices. While the two narratives appear to be worlds apart, the juxtaposition of the two provided a fertility that facilitated a very unexpected dialogue and provided the spark for this research. Working in two different contexts, the experience of the one started speaking to the other and this dialogue will be explored. Operating from within a social constructionist framework, the issue of how death and bereavement were constructed in these contexts was interesting.

For this research contemporary bereavement literature was consulted and deconstructed using theoretical discourses arising out of a narrative paradigm. In terms of the two Xhosa rituals, the limited available texts were consulted. Mostly I had to gather oral resources of the two rituals. From 8 to 10 September 1999, I attended a church retreat at which Professor Gabriel

Setiloane presented five lectures on African Spirituality. Gabriel Setiloane is a retired Methodist minister and was Professor of African Theology at the University of Cape Town. All five lectures were video taped and transcribed. In addition I interviewed three people with a special interest in and knowledge of Xhosa rituals. On 4 April 2001 I had a conversation with Professor Peter Mtuze, head of the Department of African Languages and Deputy Director at Rhodes University, East London. Next, on 21 May 2001, I interviewed Rev. Andile Mbete, Bishop of the Queenstown District of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Finally, on 21 June 2001 I interviewed Dr. Manton Hurst, a diviner and curator of the Amathole Museum in King William's Town. The last two interviews were recorded on a tape recorder and subsequently transcribed. Off this base I then consulted other literature to illuminate it more in terms of archival information.

There are few formal texts about the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals. Despite the poverty of written literature, however, there is a rich, living oral tradition about them. The rituals are widely practiced in a variety of different contexts and in the interviews I got the impression that they are dynamic and living rituals. I have tried to explore the rituals as explained by the three men to assist me in understanding a different construction of grief. Given that they are dynamic, given that they are not well documented, given their 'everydayness', I make no attempt to freeze them or to present one version. As a non-Xhosa speaking South African, my intention is certainly not to present an objective account of these rituals. I have listened to stories, attempted to enrich them with theory, with reflexivity, so that they can form a new kind of knowledge, that is imaginable, rather than totally foreign. One of my motivations for this research is to open up what may seem to be unimaginable to be imaginable.

Context for this research

For those unfamiliar with the South African situation, the so-called 'Xhosa-speaking people' consist of several tribes, all of which speak the same language. The Xhosa-speaking people designate a linguistic rather than ethnic category, but there is a general picture of cultural uniformity. They are second in number only to Zulu-speaking people, but there are a number of social and cultural similarities between them (Hurst, 2000). Xhosa-speakers live primarily in the Eastern Cape, the second largest province in South Africa, where they constitute 83.8% (in excess of 5.2 million) of the population of the Eastern Cape (Statistics South Africa, 1998). Today the Xhosa-speaking people are predominantly Christian, but the Christianity is increasingly one that accommodates various forms of ancestor and traditional rituals (Hurst, 2000).

Contemporary views on bereavement

The dominant emphasis in Western models of bereavement is on the importance of severing the bonds with the deceased. Freud's seminal article, '*Mourning and Melancholia*' (1917/1984), laid the foundation for much of the work on grieving and bereavement that was to follow. He wrote:

> Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition...people never willingly abandon a libidinal position....Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once....The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again (Freud, 1917/1984, p. 253).

The withdrawal of the libido invested in the deceased person (which Freud termed cathexis) and the displacement of this onto a new person was seen as the goal of healthy grieving (1917/1984, p. 257). Where it was not possible to withdraw these cathectic energies, a transference neuroses called 'anticathexes' resulted (1917/1984, p. 262). While Freud acknowledged that attachments to the dead do exist, he believed these needed to be discarded for healing to occur. What exactly these attachments are and what breaking them means is not clear. After the untimely death of his daughter and grandson, Freud admitted that he was unable to make new attachments, but these personal experiences were not integrated into his writings on grief (Walter, 1999).

Perhaps Freud's concept of 'internalization' best describes the attachments that he alluded to, as some in the psychoanalytic tradition (e.g. Bowlby, 1971, Bowlby, 1980) have used this concept to argue that the aim of healthy grieving is not to sever ties with the deceased, but to incorporate aspects of the deceased person into their own being (Walter, 1999). While 'internalization' essentially refers to the child internalising the parental voice, the obvious question is why this should stop after the death of the parent. While many in the psychoanalytic tradition write of internalization as something more than a temporary state, psychoanalytic theorists tend to emphasise the importance of letting go and reinvesting energy in new relationships. People unable to withdraw this energy are labelled as suffering from 'pathological grieving'.

Whereas psychoanalytic models emphasise the process of breaking cathected bonds, Bowlby's approach was slightly different. His attachment theories viewed grief as the attempt to maintain these bonds until the bereaved realised that this was impossible (Marwit & Klass, 1995). In observing young children being separated from their mothers, Bowlby noticed how

the children protested initially, then despaired and ultimately detached themselves from their mothers. Bowlby (1979) conceptualised the grief process as a form of separation anxiety and on the basis of this work he argued that all forms of mourning lead to detachment. In this sense he agreed with Freud (1917/1984) and Lindemann (1944) that the bonds with the deceased need to be broken for the bereaved to adjust and to recover. He later changed his mind, however, acknowledging that many retain a 'strong sense of the continuing presence' of the deceased. Bowlby even viewed this bond as 'a common feature of healthy mourning' (1980, p. 100).

Parkes (1986) developed Bowlby's attachment theory and applied it more specifically to grieving. Efforts to maintain the bonds are viewed as a coping mechanism, an attempt to avoid the reality of the loss. Parkes and Weiss (1983) outline three distinct grief-related tasks, namely: the intellectual acceptance of the loss; the emotional acceptance of the loss; the establishing of a new identity. They describe in some detail how this new identity is developed in the altered situation where the deceased is no longer present. Besides assuming this new identity, Parkes believes it is necessary to give up the old one.

As opposed to the stages or phases of mourning that Bowlby and Parkes suggest, Worden (1991) outlines four tasks of mourning to assist the bereaved to reach the acceptance that 'reunion is impossible' (1991, p. 11). The final task is 'to emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life' (1991, p. 17). The ability to think of the deceased without pain is a sign for Worden that this task has been completed. Withdrawing emotional energy from the deceased and reinvesting it in another relationship is another sign that the tasks have been successfully negotiated. Worden points out, however, that one never loses memories of a significant relationship. While Worden (1991) also believes that emotional energy needs to

be withdrawn from the deceased, this does not necessarily entail a letting go of the relationship with the deceased. 'Withdrawing emotional energy' for Worden (1991) seems to be dealing with past attachments in as far as they prevent the bereaved from forming new ones. He believes it is important for the bereaved to 'find an appropriate place for the dead in their emotional lives' (Worden, 1991, p. 17).

While the dominant emphasis in contemporary bereavement literature is on the need for the bereaved to sever their ties with the deceased, this is not a straightforward issue. As has been pointed out, there are allusions in this literature to the possibility that some ties are not easily severed. Maintaining the polarity between the 'holding on verses letting go' distinction is thus not always helpful, as this ignores the references within contemporary literature to holding on and disregards a multiplicity of meanings of what holding on and letting go entails.

The social constructionist challenge: a critique of contemporary bereavement literature

According to Gergen (1985), social constructionist inquiry is primarily concerned with unmasking the processes by which people come to account for, describe and explain the world in which they live. It invites a critical stance towards commonly accepted assumptions or truths, challenging the notions that knowledge can be unproblematically attained through unbiased, objective observation. Furthermore, knowledge is viewed as the product of a specific historical and cultural context, constructed and sustained by social processes, rather than the 'truth' of the understanding (Gergen, 1985). Applied to the contemporary theories of grief, a social constructionist critique would contest the 'truth' status of these models, seeing the knowledge that they generate as specific to cultural and historical contexts.

Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen & Stroebe (1992) do this, situating the letting go emphasis so dominant in contemporary models of grief in a context dominated by modernistic assumptions. Among the principal features of modernism are an emphasis on reason and observation and the belief in constant progress (Gergen, 1991). Related to human functioning, this translates into the ongoing pursuit of efficiency and effectiveness that leads to progress. Applied to grief, this view suggests that grief is a 'debilitating emotional response', an interruption to normal functioning, that needs to be dealt with as quickly as possible (Stroebe et al., 1992). Reducing the focus on the deceased is seen as imperative and healing is measured by the extent to which the bereaved has been able to sever their ties with the deceased. Stroebe et al. (1992) then take a step back, situating modernism itself in a specific context, viewing it as a reaction to the romanticism of the Nineteenth Century.

> Within the romanticist context the concept of grief was far different from the modern one....To grieve was to signal the significance of the relationship, and the depth of one's spirit. Dissolving bonds with the deceased would not only define the relationship as superficial, but would deny as well one's own sense of profundity and self-worth....In contrast with the breaking bonds orientation of modernism, romanticism valor was found in sustaining these bonds, despite a 'broken heart' (1992, p. 1208).

Contemporary models of grief can thus be seen as a rejection of earlier, equally valid, romanticist notions of maintaining bonds with the deceased.

Situating contemporary models of bereavement in a modernist context not only challenges the 'truth' claims of these models, but also facilitates a deconstruction of the elements that contribute to the emphasis on letting go. The emphasis on the individual rather than social practices as the unit of analysis is one such element. Individuals rather than the relationships between them are seen as the building blocks of society. Such an exalted view of the independent individual has a profound impact on the understanding of grieving.

> The function of grieving, according to most western psychology, is to enable me to move through this stage of clinging, to the point where I can admit deep down that truly [the deceased person] is no more and that I am once again in the basic human condition – alone....In this western view of grief, the goal is the recreation of the unattached individual (Walter, 1991, p. 4).

Klass (1996) takes the modernist notion of the all importance of the individual in western society further. He believes this desire to sever bonds in western theories of grief is strongly influenced by the dominance of the nuclear family and serial monogamy that characterises the modern family system.

> We wish to cut the bonds with the dead in the same way we wish to cut the bonds with our family of origin in order to found our own family....We sever the bonds with a spouse after both death and divorce so we can enter a new monogamous pair bond (1996, p. 282).

A social constructionist critique takes issue with the view of the individual as an isolated entity and the knowledge that is generated by such a view. Knowledge is believed to be constructed and sustained by social processes, generated by what people do together, rather than what people possess in their heads (Gergen, 1985). The knowledge generated in these 'community of persons' is inextricably bound to social practices in that community. White (1992), for instance, refers to a person's 'self' as social, maintaining that an individual's personhood is 'negotiated and distributed within a community of persons' (Epston & White, 1992, p. 29).

Viewing individual autonomy and independence as normative, Klass (1996, p. 284) believes western psychology considers any attempt at sustaining the bond with the deceased as a sign of 'dependence', one of the defining conditions of 'pathological grief'. Stroebe et al. (1992) and Romanoff & Terenzio (1998) indicate, however, that such understandings of 'pathological grief' arise from culturally prescribed models of grieving rather than from empirical observation.

Modernist theories of grief are given universal truth status by professionals, as if there is no other way of grieving. But do people let go? There is an increasing body of evidence that suggests that even in Western cultures, the bereaved seldom sever the bonds with the deceased (Klass, 1996). Despite the injunctions of theory, people clearly find ways of holding on, of remembering and celebrating the deceased. Modernist grand narratives tend to marginalize these 'holding on' stories, however.

Another element that contributes to the emphasis on letting go in modernist bereavement literature is the assumption that life and death can be clearly divided from each other. Howarth (2000) claims that this boundary has never been more than a social construction that is now coming to be recognized as blurred and indistinct. Questions are being raised about such a dualistic understanding of life and death and once seemingly obvious distinctions are now less obvious. Perhaps it would be useful to make the distinction between physiological existence on the one hand and identity or personhood on the other. This distinction is depicted well by White.

> A person's personhood is not extinguished by physical death. We know that this personhood can and does live on in the lives of those who were significant to them....And we know that this personhood can be very enriching of the lives of others in that community (Epston & White, 1992, p. 30, 31).

While professionals often employ modernist bereavement theory as if universal, comparisons with grieving in different cultural contexts reveal just how context specific such theory is. In sharp contrast with the breaking bonds orientation of modernist theories, the maintenance of ties with the deceased is accepted and celebrated by the two Xhosa rituals *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso*. Before describing these rituals they need to be set in context.

On being a person: views on life, death and life after death

Setiloane (1976, 1986; personal communication, September 8-10, 1999) believes that the African concept of what it means to be human emanates from the energy that is exuded from all people. He calls this *seriti* (Sotho) or *isithunzi* (Xhosa). While often translated as 'dignity' or 'personality', Setiloane claims it is derived from the word stem that means 'shadow' or 'shade'.

> While physically its seat is understood to be inside the human body, in the blood, its source is beyond and outside of the human physical body...its very existence seems to be calculated to promote and participate in relationship (1986, p. 13,14).

As the 'aura' that surrounds a person, it mingles with others and makes relationships between people possible. Setiloane (personal communication, September 8-10, 1999) sees this *seriti* or *isithunzi* as the source of life and believes that it is indestructible and that it continues to live even when we die.

Because of *seriti* or *isithunzi*, the essence of being is participation and people are intrinsically connected with one another. Unlike dominant western views, relationships rather than individuality defines the self. To depict this, Mbiti (1975) modifies the Descartian dictum to 'I belong, therefore I am'. The Xhosa saying, '*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*' (which translates 'A person is a person because of others'), captures Mbiti's sentiments and the notion that it is the relationship rather than the individual that is the basic unit of existence.

The interaction of one's *seriti* or *isithunzi* with those of other people in the community does not terminate with death. Even after death 'the vital participation' of the deceased is

experienced in the community in general and in the home and clan in particular (Setiloane, 1976, 1986). Hence Mbiti (1975) refers to the ancestors as the 'living dead'. According to Mbiti, the 'living dead' are the spirits of those who have died recently and they are considered to be still part of their families. They are believed to live close to their homes.

Hurst (personal communication, June 21, 2001) and Setiloane depict the relationship with the ancestors as a parental one in that it is 'protective, corrective and aimed at the welfare of the whole group' (Setiloane, 1976, p. 65). Like parents, if not obeyed, the ancestors get angry and afflict the living. A certain amount of fear and love are thus appropriate. Fear, because if the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals are not performed 'properly', any misfortune that befalls the family will be attributed to the ancestors, and love, because the ancestors take delight in protecting, nurturing and blessing the clan. If one honours one's ancestors, they continue to subsist together with one and one is never parted from them. Mayer & Mayer (1971) summarise this relationship succinctly:

> As will be seen, however, the spirits are ethically as well as ritually fastidious, growing offended not only by omission of sacrifice but by lapses from morality in daily behaviour (1971, p. 151).

In return they expect service. Some of the early literature refers to the rituals as 'ancestor worship' (Junod, 1938; Schapera, 1966; Elliot, 1970; Broster, 1981), but Setiloane believes this is a particularly misleading representation of these rituals. Setiloane (personal communication, September 8-10, 1999) is adamant that the missionaries were wrong in claiming that Africans worship their ancestors. He maintains that Africans 'serve' the ancestors, the 'service' that is rendered being similar to that rendered to one's parents while still alive.

Setiloane cautions against stripping the ancestors of their divinity. Ancestors are 'charged with divinity', as indeed every living person is, but perhaps because ancestors are no longer limited by the flesh, they become more 'other' (1986, p. 20). Mtuze (personal communication, April 4, 2001), too, emphasises this 'otherness', believing them to have special powers to heal, protect, guide and nurture. As such they have a healing effect on people.

A communal worldview that believes implicitly in the reality of an afterlife is clearly very different from the largely individualistic, increasingly secular western view that tends to minimise or discard thoughts of an afterlife. Viewed from such different vantage points, death and dying will obviously be perceived very differently and this will impact on the function and goal of bereavement practices. Outlining the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals will highlight some striking differences between Xhosa and western bereavement practices, but also indicate some similarities in what is considered the healthy resolution of grief.

The *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals

In Xhosa culture, death marks the beginning of a new phase of family membership. Death does not mean extinction, as the dead become ancestors. They take on different roles in the family than when they were living.

> The living-dead occupy the ontological position between the spirits and men and between God and men. They in effect speak a bilingual language of human beings whom they recently 'left' or of God to whom they are now nearer than they were in their physical life (Mbiti, 1975, p. 69).

The departed ancestors are always close by and have direct communication with the living and can be contacted (Soga, 1931). The living dead have to be mandated by the living to act on their behalf (Mtuze, 1999). Hence when the head of a household dies, the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals are performed. Because of this belief in an afterlife, sorrow over the death of someone is combined with the belief that the departed continues to live in the hereafter. This is not to deny the pain caused by the physical separation that death brings, however. A number of rituals draw attention to the permanence of the separation.

I will now examine the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals in more detail. Following the death of a grandparent, parent or sibling, the *umkhapho* ritual is performed to accompany (*ukukhapha*) the spirit of the deceased to the ancestors (M. Hurst, personal communication, June 21, 2000; A. Mbete, personal communication, May 21, 2001). The rites are performed under the auspices of the local clan (*isiduko*) by the male household head or his proxy (M. Hurst, personal communication, June 21, 2001). The *umkhapho* ritual is intended to help facilitate the movement beyond so that the ancestor can return later. The initial motivation is one of wanting to keep the ties with the deceased person (P. Mtuze, personal communication, April 4, 2001).

Choosing a beast for the *umkhapho* ritual depends on the importance of the person being buried. A beast may be slaughtered for a very important person or a goat could be slaughtered for others. Assuming a goat is to be slaughtered, a white goat without blemish is appropriate. Before it is slaughtered in the byre (in the townships a makeshift byre is very often made for that purpose) the officiator or proxy calls on the ancestors of the agnatic group or clan by name. After the goat is killed (by cutting its throat) and the blood collected in a dish, a special portion of meat, a thin strip called *intsonyama*, is cut from the inside muscle of the right

foreleg and lightly roasted on the fire in the byre. No salt should be used on the meat. Then, male kin followed by the female kin, in order of seniority, each eat a small portion (a small square about the size of a large coat button) of the meat in the cattle byre. This is one of those rare ritual occasions that women are permitted to enter the byre. The general feasting will only take place after the *intsonyama* has been consumed. This is a very sombre occasion. No fermented sorghum beer is consumed and there will be no dancing, although some singing of traditional songs - for example Ndlambe's funeral song is sometimes a popular choice - may take place. It is also common for the family and friends of the deceased to contribute a small sum of money which is collected together and presented to the domestic group of the deceased and can be used to offset expenses of the funeral/burial (details of the *umkhapho* ritual supplied by M. Hurst, personal communication, June 21, 2001).

As life in the Xhosa tradition is 'communal', grieving is also a communal activity (Mbete, personal communication, May 21, 2001). For a period of around two weeks, people sit with the bereaved and share the person's pain. Mourning may continue until the performance of the *umbuyiso* ritual. If more money needs to be saved before the ritual can take place, a small pot of beer may be brewed to bring the mourning to an end. The *umbuyiso* ritual literally means to bring the spirit of the ancestor back home. This usually happens within the first year. The *umbuyiso* ritual is often prompted by dreams (*amathongo*, *amaphupha*) in which the deceased person appears to a member of the family and says that s/he is hungry or cold. Setiloane (personal communication, September 8-10, 1999) says the family members do not say 'I dreamt about my father', but 'I saw my father'. This is interpreted as a sign to perform the *umbuyiso* ritual.

In the *umbuyiso*, a beast - an ox for a male and a cow for a female - is slaughtered after having the white foam of *ubulawu* (medicinal roots containing toxic saponins that induce vivid dreams of the ancestors) rubbed on its head and back by kinsmen and women of the deceased in the byre. The *intsonyama* is again cut from the muscle of the right foreleg and consumed in the same way as in the *umkhapho* above. Unlike the *umkhapho*, the *umbuyiso* is a celebratory event and therefore includes libations of fermented sorghum beer made to the ancestors and singing, handclapping and dancing. In the latter, the whole beast must be consumed on the same day it is slaughtered and any by-passer can enter the homestead and rightly claim a share of the meat and the beer. To turn anyone away would bring bad luck/misfortune (*ilishwa*) to the homestead.

According to Mbete (personal communication, May 21, 2001), *umbuyiso* is something that can be done over and over. Although the *umbuyiso* ritual is performed after a year, *umbuyiso* can be done at any time to celebrate or give thanks. As the ancestors still care for the living and share in their joys and positive achievements, maintaining the connectedness with one's spirits is important not only to be assisted in the travails of life but also to acknowledge or give credit for achievements. In this way one maintains the link with the deceased person, 'because if you are cut off from the influence of your ancestors, you might as well be dead' (Mbete, personal communication, May 21, 2001).

Burying the person 'well' or performing *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* 'properly' can be very healing.

> It is healing because the focus is not just on the beast that is slaughtered, but the focus is that as a family or clan. You gather there for two days and in the course of the gathering there is talk, there is team building, and when the following day the neighbourhood arrives, elderly people and wise women stand up and address you, and they sort of praise you by being grateful to those who made you who you are. In that sense the spirit of the ancestor is honoured and

> you feel encouraged and strengthened. Even the poor will benefit out of the meal and the ancestor will smile, wherever they are, because they will see their son enjoys people. I think that is the philosophy behind it (A. Mbete, personal communication, May 21, 2001).

The emphasis by Hurst (personal communication, June 21, 2001), Mbete (personal communication, May 21, 2001) and Mtuze (personal communication, April 4, 2001) on performing the rituals 'properly' is interesting. The implication is that there is a right way, the way, of performing these rituals. Mbiti's (1989) view that meticulous care is taken to fulfil bereavement rituals in order not to cause any offence to the deceased seems to support this view. The picture that this conjures up is of a formal ritual that needs to be applied rigidly. Mbete and Mtuze refute this, however. By 'proper' they mean 'not holding back' and 'taking it seriously'. If you do not perform the rituals 'properly' in this sense, Mbete says you may anger your ancestors for 'being stingy'. Setiloane (personal communication, September 8-10, 1999) believes that the emphasis on the 'proper' performance of these rituals is partly a legacy of the emphasis of the missionaries on the fear and superstition that accompanied the performance of the rituals.

While there is a structure to the rituals, Setiloane (personal communication, September 8-10, 1999) believes the informality of the ritual is very confusing to the outsider. Mbete (personal communication, May 21, 2001) describes the rituals as 'informal but structured'. It is informal in that there is talk, laughter, crying and remembering 'as if the person were right there'. People speak to the ancestors, calling them by their clan names, asking them to look after their families. 'It is a conversation with the ancestors – simple and straight forward, in the lingo of the people' (G. Setiloane, personal communication, September 8-10, 1999).

Despite some very significant changes in the South African context over the last generation and particularly in the last decade, Mtuze (personal communication, April 4, 2001) maintains that these rituals are still observed in many Xhosa families. A conversation with a diviner (M. Hurst, personal communication, June 21, 2001) revealed some very interesting changes to the rituals over the years. These days the beast that is slaughtered is said to accompany the deceased to the other world, but originally the *ukukhapha* beast was for the men who accompanied the deceased to the grave and performed the burial (M. Hurst, personal communication, June 21, 2001). Because none of the men (according to the diviner this is men's work in Xhosa custom) would have eaten from the time they heard of the death until the burial was complete, the *ukukhapha* beast was intended to break the fast of the men. Another difference is that in early times a small head of cattle were often left at the site of the grave with a custodian, who remained at the grave until the remains of the dead had decomposed. This would take a few months. The spirit was then believed to have left for the spiritual world. The person was left there to protect the remains of the dead and would only leave the grave after the *umbuyiso* ritual had taken place.

Where the *umkhapho* ritual should take place is a matter of debate. Mayer & Mayer (1971) claim that while the spirit of the ancestors are always with one, loyalty to the spirits and sacrifice in the 'proper manner' entail that the ritual be performed at the rural homestead rather than in the cities. Mbete (personal communication, May 21, 2001) asserts that younger generations want to bury their dead and perform the rituals in towns, which they regard as home, while older people prefer to bury their dead and perform the rituals at the rural homestead, 'where the fathers and forefathers are'. Mbiti also refers to this tension.

> Sometimes the spirits of those who died away from their homes, or those who were not properly buried, may demand ritual transfer to their home compound or reburial of their remains. For this reason, even in modern life, Africans who

> die in the cities and towns are often taken to their original homesteads for burial (1975, p. 120).

The diviner claims that in his experience, many people don't know how to do these rituals anymore. He sometimes performs the rituals for the families at their homes in order to educate them (M. Hurst, personal communication, June 21, 2001). Another difference today is with the issue of abstaining. The word for mourn, in Xhosa, is *ukuzila*, which means 'to abstain' - from routine social life, meat, sex, and even alcoholic beverages and tobacco. Although some people still abstain from these activities today, Hurst (personal communication, June 21, 2001) believes this happens much less than in the past.

It thus seems the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals are changing and being reinterpreted and adapted. Ancestor veneration, with the rituals that accompany it, still appears to occupy a very important place in the lives of Xhosa-speaking people. This demonstrates that it is possible to maintain the bond with the deceased and for the bereaved to move on with their lives.

By engaging in these rituals, people attempt to come to terms with the agonies, sorrows and disruptions resulting from the death of a loved one. According to Mbete (personal communication, May 21, 2001), ritualising death has a dual purpose, helping to maintain the bond with the ancestor and to provide a social context especially for the expression of grief.

After a period of four or five generations the living dead are finally forgotten because those who knew them have died. Their spirits are consequently lost to human memory.

> Although the spirit is still a human spirit, it is no longer a living dead...it has no personal interest in any human family. Nobody remembers it at meal times or during offerings and sacrifices. It really withdraws from human activities and becomes fully a member of the spirit beings (Mbiti, 1975, p. 121).

The contribution of the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals to modernist models of bereavement and some implications for therapy

The *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals present a profound challenge to conventional models of bereavement and herein lies much of their contribution. Contemporary models of grief tend to establish a blue print of what 'normal' or 'healthy' grieving is. According to these models, pathology is defined as a difficulty in letting go of the dead person. The *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals highlight how culturally bound such definitions of pathology are. To many Xhosa-speaking South Africans, these rituals of connection are important and healthy components of grieving. Even though modernist theories of grief are accorded universal truth status, the practice of these rituals demonstrate the power of local knowledge and its ability to resist being marginalized by professional discourses.

The *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals challenge the watertight definitions of contemporary bereavement theories of what normal or healthy grieving is. McLaren (1998) believes modernist bereavement theories place enormous pressure on mourners to 'get over' their loss, adding immeasurably to the existing stress of their loss. By their very existence these rituals constitute a protest to accepted ways of being in the world and the stark contrast they present to contemporary models invites a greater questioning of conventional wisdom. Are the bereaved incapable of forming new attachments while immersed in their grief? Is it not in the holding on rather than in the letting go that some bereaved people are able to find some renewed purpose in life?

Central to modernist bereavement theories is the assumption that life and death can be clearly divided from each other. The worldview on which the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals are based and the rituals themselves challenge this neat divide however, highlighting the 'constructedness' or artificiality of the divide. Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) believe there is an increasing awareness that relationships continue beyond death. Furthermore, Howarth (2000) sees the bond as a two-way phenomenon in which the dead encourage the living to retain the bond. Such views suggest a growing awareness of the blurring of boundaries between life and death.

The *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals also challenge what seems to be an implicit directive in western societies not to talk about the dead. While the bereaved may want to speak about the deceased, people do often not know what to say and hence keep quiet. This is certainly not the case at the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals. At these rituals, especially the latter, there are elaborate speech making, remembering, laughing, crying and celebrating. The deceased is spoken of as an ordinary member of the community and their personhood is celebrated. Furthermore, in the week leading up to the funeral, family members of the deceased will sit on the floor in a room of their home and friends, neighbours and relatives will come and visit, sharing the pain of the loss by talking, laughing, crying, praying and eating with the family members.

The challenges offered by the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals are not isolated challenges. White (1989), Stroebe et al. (1992), Marwit and Klass (1995) and Klass and Goss (1999) all write of continuing attachment as normal and healthy. Howarth (2000) argues that these continuing attachments are not a new phenomenon, but that

these have been marginalized and silenced by the professional discourses of 'proper' mourning. Klass (1996) believes there is an emerging consensus among scholars that the bereaved seldom sever the bonds with the deceased. Research by Klass (1996) about ancestor worship in Japan, and Walter (1991) about Shona funeral rituals in Zimbabwe, provide two examples of cultural practices that celebrate and encourage holding on as normal and healthy. There are many others. Religious rituals offer the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the ongoing connection at special services such as the Catholic Anniversary Mass, the Jewish Yizkor, All Saints Day in Protestant churches, or other more informal services to remember the dead. So, too, the placing of bouquets of flowers in churches on the anniversary of the death of a loved one provides a way of continuing the attachment with the deceased. Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) suggest that 'rituals of connection' do exist in the west, but these are usually privately enacted, demonstrating the power of professional discourses on grief.

Such rituals of connection cannot be limited to the private realms, however, as they tend to arise spontaneously. We remember anniversaries of the deaths of loved ones, we call them into being by our conversations, we plant trees to remember, we place flowers at accident scenes, we piece a quilt, make memory boxes and so on. These are just some of the ways in which the deceased are deliberately integrated into our lives and carried with us in continued dynamic relationships. Such practices enrich our lives and demonstrate the resilience of local knowledges.

This growing awareness that relationships continue beyond death is reflected in new therapeutic practices, notably some narrative practices. The *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals are not dissimilar to Myerhoff's (1982) notion of 're-membering', which also

challenges the notion that the mourning process requires a letting go of deceased members. 'Re-membering' is

> a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness' (Myerhoff, 1982, p. 111).

Myerhoff dismisses the notion of letting go as healing. In her work with elderly Jewish immigrants, many of whom had experienced the Holocaust, Myerhoff observes that

> full recovery from mourning may restore what has been lost, maintaining it through incorporation into the present. Full recollection and retention may be as vital to recovery and well being as forfeiting memories (1982, p. 110).

Based on Myerhoff's notion of membered lives, White (1989, 1997) developed the 'club' metaphor, suggesting that people can revise the membership of their club of life. These re-membering practices make it possible to honour or elevate the membership of certain members or down grade the membership of others. Applied to bereavement, White (1997) suggests that such practices assist the bereaved to experience the fuller presence of the deceased in their day-to-day lives. In his work with people diagnosed with 'pathological mourning', White (1989) developed 'saying hullo again' conversations which endeavour to help people to reclaim the relationship with the lost loved one. In these conversations, the personhood of the deceased is evoked to facilitate him/her living on in the lives of the bereaved (Epston & White, 1992).

There are distinct similarities between these narrative therapeutic practices and the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals. The notion of the club metaphor picks up the Xhosa emphasis on relationships rather than the individual as the basic unit of existence. Re-membering practices and the recognition and honouring of deceased members are at the heart of the *umkhapho* and

umbuyiso rituals. There is also resonance between the 'saying hullo again' conversations and the invitation of the spirit to come home in the *umbuyiso* ritual. David Epston's (1992) account of the rituals around the 'saying hullo again' metaphor sound remarkably similar to a description of the *umbuyiso* ritual.

> At a particular point in time after the ritualised goodbye to the dead body, the relatives of the bereaved assemble again, this time to take on the virtues of the deceased, or, if you like, the spirit of the deceased. Perhaps we could say that, at this time, the spirit of the deceased is regained (Epston & White, 1992, p. 29).

The 'saying hullo again' metaphor in no way seeks to minimize the impact of the loss. White (1989) acknowledges that in grief there is much to say goodbye to, such as the physical presence of the person, the hopes and expectations. He thus views the grief process as a 'saying goodbye and then saying hullo' phenomenon (1989, p. 36). In a study of ancestor worship in Japan, Klass (1996, p. 300) makes a similar observation. Whereas in the west grief tends to be defined as either letting go or holding on ('either/or'), Klass suggests that in Japan there is holding on and letting go ('both/and'). In terms of the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals, White's 'saying goodbye and then saying hullo' phenomenon and Klass's 'both/and' description would apply. The *umkhapho* ritual provides the social context to 'say goodbye' while the *umbuyiso* ritual presents the opportunity to 'say hullo again'. Both aspects are vital. As Romanoff & Terenzio point out:

> If bereavement is only treated as a leave taking or a saying goodbye activity, then the connection between the deceased and the bereaved individual will not be addressed, which may well lead to an inability or resistance on the part of the bereaved individual to move toward any type of resolution for fear of losing the deceased altogether (1998, p. 705).

While the contexts in which they are practiced and the intention for practicing them differ, both the Xhosa rituals and the narrative therapeutic practices seek to acknowledge the contribution of the deceased, to evoke the personhood of these figures, and to affirm that the

influence of the deceased person will be ongoing. In doing this, both represent a protest against the totalizing stories of modernist bereavement theories, challenging the global truth claims of professional discourses and what counts as legitimate knowledge. They emphasise local or folk knowledges that have been marginalized by these professional discourses.

Conclusions

Embedded in contemporary models of grief are the modernist assumptions that life and death can be clearly separated and that healing occurs when the mourner is able to let go and get on with life as an unattached individual. The *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals contradict these assumptions. They view the boundary between life and death as permeable and accept that while healing involves accepting the reality of the physical loss of the person, it also involves celebrating the homecoming of the spirit of the ancestor and hence their continued presence.

From research cited above, it seems that grieving people in western societies are increasingly likely to continue relationships with deceased partners, friends or relatives. Rituals such as the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals contribute towards the de-pathologising of these continued relationships, giving the bereaved permission to hold on in the face of pressure to let go. It may be that it is in the holding on rather than in the letting go that some bereaved people may be able to find renewed purpose in life.

Perhaps it is the 'otherness' of the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals that challenges us to become aware of the great variety of responses that exist in dealing with grief. Their contribution lies not in their insistence that every grieving person needs to go back to the

Xhosa tradition and slaughter a white goat or wait a year before welcoming the spirit of a loved one home. Their contribution lies instead in their presenting another voice, local knowledge that refutes the prescriptive dominant discourses about what 'proper' grieving is. With White (1989) I would argue that any metaphor or therapeutic ritual 'is only helpful to the extent that it recognizes and facilitates the expression of this uniqueness, and doesn't subject persons to normative specifications' (1989, p. 36). To this end, therapeutic rituals need to be co-created with bereaved people and a dialogue should be opened with them about a preferred way of being in a changed world.

A closing challenge from two local cultural rituals on the southern tip of Africa. To borrow Howarth's words, if the *umkhapho* and *umbuyiso* rituals have a contribution to make, perhaps it is to encourage the amplification of 'the whispered communication across the boundary between the living and the dead that has hitherto been muffled by the noisy, dominant discourse and prescriptive professional rituals of modernity' (Howarth, 2000, p. 138).

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