African Cultural Burial Rituals and Complicated Grief among Orphans: A case of the Luo Ethnic Group in Siaya County, Kenya.

Maureen O. Ngesa, Ph.D. Candidate in Clinical Psychology; Sylvia Tuikong, Ph.D; & Kennedy Ongaro, Ph.D., Daystar University.

Abstract

From an African cultural perspective, death is a transition from physical existence to a spiritual existence. Among the Luo ethnic group in Kenya, a structured mourning process and burial rituals are believed to aid the transition of the deceased into the spiritual form. The aim of this study was to establish if exposure to the intense Luo cultural burial practices could predispose a bereaved child to develop complicated grief. This study was conducted in Siaya County, Kenya, an area predominantly occupied by the Luo ethnic community. Multistage sampling consisting of cluster sampling, purposive, and simple random sampling techniques were used. The 241 participants used in this study were orphans enrolled in 12 public primary schools in Siaya County. Data was collected using the Brief Grief Questionnaire to screen for high grief scores. Participants who scored 50% on BGQ responded to the Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG) and a socio-demographic questionnaire capturing common burial practices among the Luo ethnic group. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to check frequencies at which the participants indicated whether the individual factors bothered them; ANOVA test of variance was done to assess mean differences between those who said they were bothered by these cultural practices compared to those who indicated that the rituals did not bother them. Finally, a bivariate correlation was conducted between the cultural factors index and the complicated grief scores at baseline to test for linear relationships between the cultural practices and mean grief scores. The results showed that there was no significant difference observed in means of complicated grief (CG) against the individual cultural factors (p values>0.05). Similarly, there was no statistical significance in the correlation between cultural factors even when the factors were combined as a composite index ($r=0.011$, $p=0.867$). These results confirmed that even when participants were subjected to the majority of the cultural practices, no risk of developing CG was established. Based on the above results, it was concluded that the Luo burial rites did not predispose the bereaved children to maladaptive grief, but instead, the participants had psychologically adapted to these practices and therefore were not bothered or traumatized by the practices. With this knowledge, grief therapists need to have a culturally sensitive and adaptive approach to grief counseling with the cultural practices of the bereaved put into context.

Key words: complicated grief, Luo cultural practices, mourning and bereavement, and Africa burial rites.

Introduction and Background

As presented by Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014), the study of psychology in general and particularly death studies, have been dominated by Western approaches and paradigms. Western psychology conforms to the universal applicability of theories, models, and realities which, more often than not, "is limited and excludes other realities such as those of Africans whose conceptions of death are different in interpretation, representation and meaning" (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014, pp 232). In this connection, Mbiti (1990) defined African philosophy as the understanding of logic, attitude of mind, and perceptions that influence the way Africans think, act, and speak in various situations of life. In the context of this study, the understanding of death and dying from an African perspective must take into consideration perceptions and attitudes behind how the bereaved think and act during this traumatizing grieving period.

Spiritual connectedness between the living and the dead and the cycle of life from an African perspective happens in phases; from spirits to the body and back to the spirit world, hence a state of immortality (Mbiti, 1990). In whatever state of the life cycle of phases, the African worldview of life and death presents human life as continuing even in death and none of the stages can be considered autonomous (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014). Based on this understanding, researchers on concepts of death among African culture have called for the need to understand death not based on western experiences but authentic and interpreted within the context of Africa's lived experiences and the African culture.

As described by Shiino (1997), in Africa, many cultural traditions consider death as a rite of passage and believe that the dead take up other forms and continue to live within the community and among the living. The idea of the living dead and ancestors has been a prominent theme in understanding the African context of death. Similarly, there is a particular obsession with giving the dead a proper burial, and, in some communities when these rites are not observed, the deceased is believed to turn into a ghost that becomes a menace to the living (Bondi, 2015). Many African communities also believe that the dead have some supernatural powers that can harm the living, hence giving a proper burial ceremony is usually a form of protection for the living and a way to appease the dead (Bondi, 2015). It is also believed that the rites are important in strengthening social, local, and psychological ties (Shiino, 1997).

Burial Rituals among the Luo Ethnic Group

The Luo ethnic group is a Nilotic tribe living in the shores of Lake Victoria. The Luos believe in the afterlife, and although many of the Luo clans have distinct traditions, the tribe shares certain rites that accompany the death of a family member (Obura, 2019; Mboya, 2001; Shiino, 1997). The structured mourning process is a series of events and it is believed that if not done then the transition of the deceased into an ancestor is interrupted (Ogola, 2015). The customary belief that death is not the end is evident in the Luo belief on ancestors and the element of a spiritual transformation (Mboya, 2001). As seen in Table 1, burial rites associated with the Luo ethnic group are systematic and each of the stages carries some cultural meaning to it.

Table 1: The Luo Burial Rituals and Practices

Local Name	Translation	Description
	Death announcement	Announced through the deafening women's long, quivering wail,
(budho)	Vigil	Close relatives sit in all day and night in the compound of the deceased. The nights are full of feasts and dancing and consumption of local brews.
(kunyo)	Gravedigging	Within the community, gravediggers are identified. Usually, they are intoxicated before they begin the digging and the grave is dug at night.
(iko)	Burial	If the body is in a mortuary, it arrives the day before the burial and spends the night in the house so that people can view it all night. The surviving family budget for those who attend the burial.
(tero buru matin)	Accompanying the spirit	The night after the burial there is the heavy dancing and feasting to accompany the spirit of the deceased. Two weeks after the burial the *tero buru* happens and more dancing and crying happens. The procession becomes longer and noisier as people sing and play and cry.
(liedo)	Shaving	In some areas, shaving is done four days after the burial.
(kee)	Mourner's departure for their homes	Mourners leave the bereaved home.
(keyo nyinyo)	Dividing articles left by the deceased	The property of the deceased especially if a man is shared out
(rapar)	Remembrance	Happens one year after the burial

Source: Ogola (2015)

As seen in Table 1, the Luos announce death through quivering, deafening wails, screams, and lamentation mostly from the women (Ogolla, 2015; Shiino 1997). The public mourning through screams is meant to get the attention of the community who will join the crying and groaning to mourn the deceased (Shiino, 1997). Although the list provided above contains the rituals practiced

and their meaning, it should be noted that decisions on which ritual to person depends on the gender, age, and status of the deceased in the community. This means that some of the rituals may be omitted, for example, in the death of a woman or child, and as such, *tero buru, liedo, kee, keyo nyinyo* may not be performed (Ogolla, 2015; Shiino, 1997).

Following the announcement of death, the vigils start on the same day beginning with mourners gathering at the home of the deceased home. The vigils are usually characterized by cooking, feasting, and night dancing referred to as *disco matanga* (Njue et al., 2009). According Njue et al., the aim of *disco matanga* (disco at a funeral) was to raise money to cover funeral expenses. Zolnikov (2014) determined that *disco matanga* would continue for several days from the day of death announcement to the day after the burial ceremony. After the burial, other common practices may include the *tero buru* (heavy dancing to chase away the spirits) and *keyo nyiyo* (sharing of properties of the deceased).

In light of this cultural context in mourning and burial practices, this study sought to determine if exposing bereaved children to some of the rituals and practices (through observation or participation) would increase their chances of developing complicated grief.

Methodology

Area of Study

Geographically, Siaya County is located approximately between latitudes 0º 26′ South to 0º 18′ North and between longitudes 33º 58′ and 34º 33′ East (County of Siaya, 2017). Further, the county is subdivided into six sub-counties, namely Alego-Usonga, Bondo, Gem, Rarieda, Ugenya, and Ugunja (Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, 2012), as depicted in Figure 1.

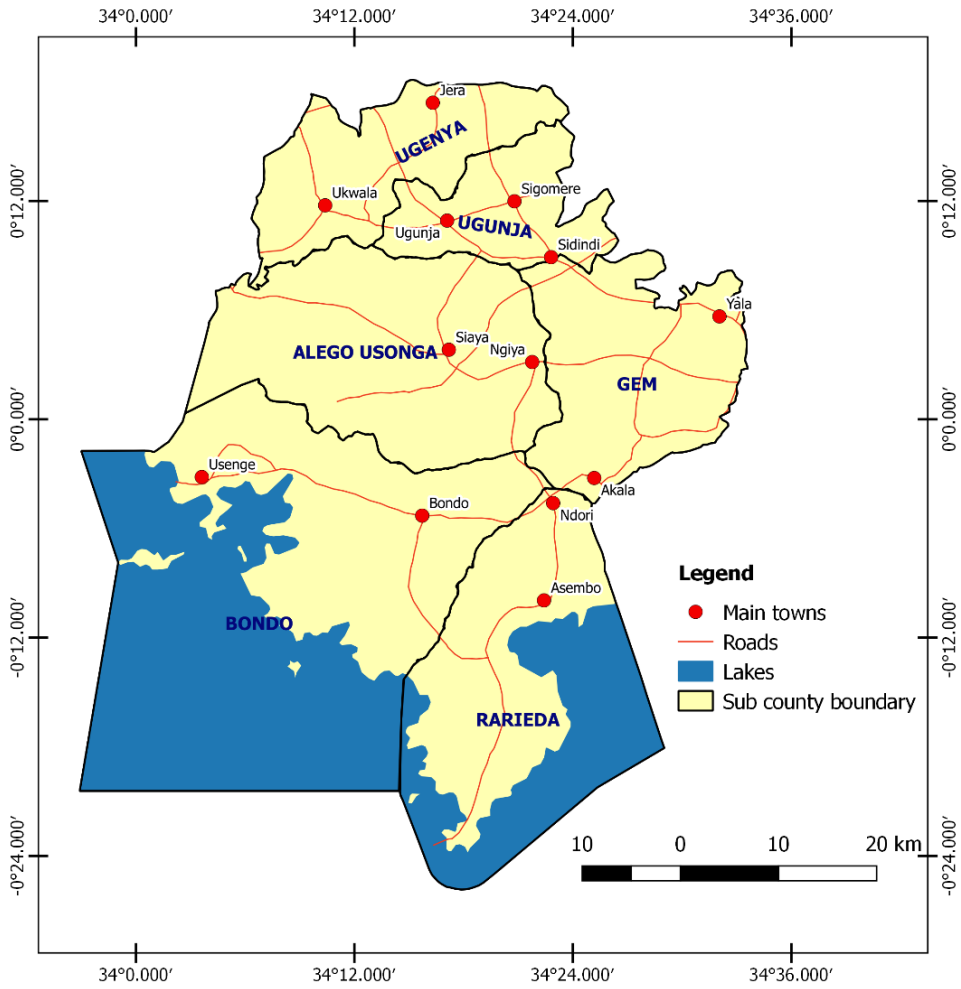

Figure 1: Map of Siaya County
Source: Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (2012)

In 2014, the population of Siaya County was projected to be approximately 941,724 with roughly 446,921 males, 494,803 females, and 126,637 children aged 10-15 comprising 64,778 males and 61,859 females. In 2016, "the rate of orphanhood was estimated at 16.0%, translating to approximate 519,000 orphans under the age of 18" (KNBS, 2018, pp. 25-26). Orphans aged 0-14 were about 12.5% or roughly 430,000 (KNBS, 2018, pp. 27-28).

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of orphans aged 10-15 years all of whom were enrolled in public primary schools in Siaya County. The orphans were screened using the brief grief questionnaire (BGQ), and only those who scored 5/10 (50%) were prequalified for the study. The ones prequalified were then subjected to the inventory of complicated grief (ICG) for baseline clinical assessment. The requirement was that the participants had to have lost one parent or both at

least six months before the commencement of the study. Only students in classes three to seven were included in the study, as they fell within the age group desired for the study and were assumed to have a good enough understanding of the English language.

Sampling Procedure

A multistage sampling procedure was done. First, cluster sampling was used to group the population based on the geographical boundaries of Siaya County. The targeted population was clustered based on the respective sub-counties in Siaya County as follows: Gem, Alego, Ugunja, Ugenya, Rarieda, and Bondo. In the second stage, purposive sampling was done to select 12 public primary schools from each of the six sub-counties. At this stage, 18 schools were identified through referrals out of which 12 were selected based on accessibility and willingness of the administration to participate in the study.

Data Collection Procedure

Initially, the teachers provided a list of all the orphans enrolled in each of the classes. At this stage, a list of 766 orphans was provided. Based on the exclusion criteria of age and year of death of the parent, this sample was reduced to 457 aged 10-15 years who also had lost a parent at least six months before the commencement of the study and not exceeding two years. On the day of screening using the BGQ, only 426 participants were present. Out of the 426 participants screened using the BGQ, 397 responses were valid with 34% (*n=134*) scoring less than 5 points while 66% (*n=263*) scored 5 points and above, a sign of significantly elevated grief symptoms. The 263 participants who scored 50% and above were administered with the ICG tool to determine the clinical levels of grief at baseline and a socio-demographic questionnaire that captured, among other things, the cultural rituals the participants were exposed to. Out of these numbers, 241 responses were considered valid, having met the criteria for complicated grief (scored 25 points and above). This group formed the sample for this study.

Results

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to check frequencies at which the participants indicated whether the individual factors bothered them, ANOVA test of variance was done to assess mean differences between those who said they were bothered by these cultural practices compared to those who indicated the rituals did not bother them, and finally bivariate correlation was conducted

between the cultural factors index and the complicated grief scores at baseline to test for linear relationships between the cultural practices and mean grief scores.

The participants were asked if they had been directly informed that their parents had died. At least 56% (n=167) indicated that they had been informed of the death of their parents as compared to 44% (n=74) who indicated that nobody told them that their parents had died. Of those who indicated that they had been informed of the death of their parents (n=167), the source of information was mainly the surviving parents at 53% (n=88) followed by other relatives 27% (n=45) and from siblings at 20% (n= 34). These results show that generally, death in Luo culture is made public and that the child is not shielded from knowing that the parent had passed on.

The participants were asked how they learned of their parents' death. According to the results, the majority of participants, 61% (n=45), who said they were not informed of the death of their parents indicated that they heard and saw people wailing and screaming to announce a death within their compounds. The remaining 39% (n=29) indicated that they had seen or witnessed their parents dying meaning that they were present with the parents at the time of death. These results confirm that a majority of the participants who had not directly been informed of the death of their parents knew about the death through the screams and wails, which is the Luo cultural practice of announcing a death within the family.

Specific items on the socio-demographic questionnaire (SDQ) inquired on cultural burial rites associated with the Luo culture such as viewing of the body, having the coffin containing the body of the deceased in the house on the eve of the burial, wailing and screaming, eating, dancing, and sharing of the deceased personal belongings after the burial. The nine items particularly targeted specific rituals/ practices as observed in the Luo culture in preparation for burials and after the burial has taken place. As seen in Table 2, the participants, to a large extent, experienced several cultural practices associated with Luo burial ceremonies. This could be largely because, within the Luo culture, mourning rituals is a public matter and it is done systematically.

Table 2: Frequencies of Luo Cultural Burial Practices Experienced by Participants

		N	% of Total N
Did you view the body in the coffin?	No	62	25.7%
	Yes	179	74.3%
Did screams/wails and cries bother you?	No	54	22.7%
	Yes	184	77.3%
Did many people in your home, cooking and eating bother you?	No	211	88.7%
	Yes	27	11.3%
Did the night dancing/music bother you?	No	205	86.1%
	Yes	33	13.9%
Did having the body in the house bother you?	No	127	53.4%
	Yes	111	46.6%
Did viewing the body bother you?	No	138	77.1%
	Yes	41	22.9%
After the burial, did night dancing bother you?	No	184	77.0%
	Yes	55	23.0%
After the burial, did the empty compound bother you?	No	123	51.9%
	Yes	114	48.1%
Did relatives coming to share your parents' belongings bother you?	No	177	74.7%
	Yes	60	25.3%

As seen in Table 2, the majority of the participants indicated that they had been bothered by the screams and wails at 77% (*n=184*), while only 23% (*n=54*) said that this did not bother them. These results indicated that the wailing and screaming to announce the death of their parent had bothered them emotionally. During follow-up sessions, some of the participants indicated that they still remember the screaming and wailing.

The night vigils during the mourning processes, are characterized by cooking, feasting, and night dancing (*disco matanga*). As seen in Table 2, these activities did not seem to bother the participants, as the majority of them reported that they were not bothered by the cooking and eating 89% (n= 211) compared to those who indicated that it had bothered them 11% (n=27). The night dancing during the vigils did not also seem to bother the participants at 86% (n=205) in comparison to those who indicated that the night dancing had bothered them 24% (n=33).

As seen in the results in Table 2, 53.4% (*n=127*) of the participants were not bothered by the fact that the bodies of their deceased parents were placed in the houses overnight on the eve of the burial, while 46.6% (*n=111*) indicated that this did bother them. A majority of the participants also indicated that they had viewed the bodies of their deceased parents in coffins at 74% (*n = 179*) while only 26% (*n=62*) indicated that they did not view the bodies of their deceased parents inside coffins. These results confirm that viewing the body in the coffin is an acceptable practice within the Luo culture and that the children were generally not shielded from viewing the dead bodies in coffin.

To confirm if viewing the bodies bothered the participants, those who viewed the bodies (*n=179*) also responded to the item on whether viewing of the bodies bothered them. A higher percentage of the participants said that they were not bothered by the viewing of the bodies 77% (*n=138*), compared to 23% (*n=41*) who mentioned that this bothered them. This could mean that the participants had psychologically adapted to this cultural practice and engaging in it did not seem to bother them at all.

As seen in Table 2, the majority of the participants 77% (n=184) were not bothered by the night dancing after the burial. Similarly, the participants indicated that they were not bothered by the empty compounds after the death of their parents and even when relatives came to share the belongings of the parents after the burial ceremonies: 51.9% (n=123 and 74.9% (n=177) respectively. In follow-up discussions with the participants, one of them stated that ‘my aunty came and collected my mother’s best dress after my mum was buried.”

In summary and based on the results presented in Table 2, it was noted that most of the participants participated or observed the cultural practices associated with burial ceremonies but most of them were not bothered by these practices. The fact that there was no significant risk when exposed to these cultural practices, could only mean that the bereaved have accepted the practices as a cultural norm or expectation and have adapted to them, hence no psychological harm was experienced. To determine if individually these cultural factors contributed to the levels of grief among the participants, ANOVA test of variance was conducted against each of the variables. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (Individual Cultural Factors) and CG

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	473.613[a]	10	47.361	.698	.726
Intercept	19591.334	1	19591.334	288.696	.000
c24_view_body	13.142	1	13.142	.194	.660
c25a_screams_wails	3.634	1	3.634	.054	.817
c25b_cooking_eating	123.412	1	123.412	1.819	.179
c25c_preburial_night_dancing	27.278	1	27.278	.402	.527
c25d_body_in_house	1.795	1	1.795	.026	.871
c25e_view_body_bother	.715	1	.715	.011	.918
c26a_postburial_dancing	91.038	1	91.038	1.342	.248
c26b empty_compound	44.857	1	44.857	.661	.417
c26c sharing_belongings	54.805	1	54.805	.808	.370
Error	15336.699	226	67.862		
Total	259780.000	237			
Corrected Total	15810.312	236			

a. R Squared = .030 (Adjusted R Squared = -.013)

As seen in Table 3, there was no significant difference observed in means of CG against the individual cultural factors (p values>0.05). As explained earlier, there was a possibility that the cultural practices have been largely accepted in the community and participants have adapted to them, and therefore no significant influence on grief resolution.

To determine if the individual factors combined would bring any significant risks in the development of grief, a composite index of cultural factors was computed from all the binary (Yes/No) questions on the cultural practices surrounding the death of a parent. A bivariate correlation was then computed between the cultural factors index and the grief scores at baseline to determine if there were any linear relationships between the two variables, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlations between Cultural Factors and ICG Score at Baseline

Correlations

		Cultural factors Index	ICG total score at baseline
Cultural factors Index	Pearson Correlation	1	.011
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.867
	N	241	241
ICG total score at baseline	Pearson Correlation	.011	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.867	
	N	241	241

As seen in Table 4, there was no statistical significance in the correlation between cultural factors even when the factors were combined as a composite index (r=0.011, p =0.867). These results further confirm that even when participants were subjected to the majority of the cultural practices, there was no risk of developing CG since no relationship was established between these factors and CG.

Discussion

This study investigated how the orphaned children received the news of the death of their parents. To begin with, the source of information about the death of the parents was investigated. The results indicated that some participants learned of their parents' death through the surviving parents or relatives. The majority of those who were not told directly learned of the death through screams and wails announcing the death at 61% (n=45). These results confirm the findings of other researchers such as Shiino (1997) and Ogola (2015) who discussed the systematic process of death and burial rites among the Luo. In their findings, the researchers stated that the death announcement in the Luo ethnic group is characterized by quivering wails and cries done in public to alert the village on the death of a family member.

The results also showed that although many of the participants may have indicated that these screaming and wailing had bothered them at 77% (*n=184*). The ANOVA test of variance confirmed that experiencing wailing and screaming did not contribute to levels of complicated grief and hence not a risk factor. This evidence was replicated in other findings as well. For example, in determining whether the activities in the vigils such as cooking and feasting and the night dancing affected the participants, it was found that these activities did not seem to bother the participants, given that the majority reported that they were not bothered by the cooking and eating 89% (n= 211) or the night dancing at 86% (n=205). Further, ANOVA tests of variance also confirmed that none of these factors

contributed to levels of grief. These particular findings support the argument by Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014) who stated that African culture and the African people have their cultural practices that guide the way they have adapted to the culture and which guide them in different life situations.

In the Luo culture, the body of the deceased arrives from the morgue the day before the burial date. This allows for the mourners to pay their final respects and to spend final moments with the deceased before he or she is buried. The participants were not bothered by the fact that the bodies of the deceased parents were in the houses overnight on the eve of the burial 53% (*n=127*). The majority of participants also indicated that they had viewed the bodies of their deceased parents in coffins at 74% (*n = 179*). These results confirm that viewing the body in the coffin is an acceptable practice within the Luo culture and that the children were generally not shielded from viewing dead bodies in coffins. Similarly, several rituals are conducted after the burial of the deceased. To investigate if these practices bothered the participants, the participants were asked if the night dancing after the burial, the empty compounds as people departed (*kee)* and the sharing of the deceased property after the burial (*keyo nyinyo*) bothered them. Results indicate that these factors did not bother the majority of the participants. These results complement findings that have shown that some of the cultural practices in the African traditions help in mourning and grieving processes and therefore can prevent the development of pathological grief. In the African context, the mode of mourning is culturally based and the duration of mourning is predetermined by specific cultural practices and rituals (Drenth et al., 2013; Nwoye, 2005).

The Luo burial rites have been known for structured, intense, and extensive mourning processes (Obura, 2019; Ojijo, 2015). This was confirmed in the present study with results showing that the participants, to a large extent, experienced several cultural practices associated with Luo burial ceremonies such as screams and wails, having the bodies in the houses overnight, cooking and dancing celebrations, body viewing, and the dancing ceremony after the burial, among other cultural practices. These results also proved the findings by Obura (2019) and Ogolla (2015) who observed, experienced, and systematically described the Luo cultural burial rites. The results confirm that across the whole region, the Luo burial rituals and practices have been upheld and continue to be practiced to date. Interestingly, these activities did not seem to bother the participants in this study with the majority of them reporting that they were not bothered by the cooking and eating 88.7%(n=211), and night dancing during the burial preparations 86.1%(n=205), and even the night dancing after the burial 77%(n=184). This implies that the majority of the participants participated or observed the cultural practices associated with burial ceremonies.

To determine if these burial/cultural rites within the Luo culture increased chances of CG for the orphans, a bivariate correlation was computed between the cultural factors index and the ICG scores at baseline. The results showed that activities such as viewing of the bodies, having the bodies in coffins put in the houses, wailing and screaming, eating, dancing, and sharing of deceased personal belongings after the burial, did not show any significant effect on the mean grief scores ($r=0.011$, $p=0.867$).

In 2005, Nwoye took issue with the westernized approach of pathological grief patterns when dealing with African clients. The researcher further argued that the very rituals and experiences that accompany the mourning process help in healing the clients and that intervention for grief in the African context should be seen within this spectrum and not through clinical settings (Nwoye, 2005). Perhaps, of most importance is the understanding of grief as presented by Nwoye (2005) in which the mourning and burial rights become a pattern and a series of predetermined activities that lead to the healing of psychological wounds. Nwoye's arguments are also supported in this study since the majority of the participants admitted to having viewed the bodies and participated in most of the rituals, yet when the correlation of participating in these activities and CG was done, there was no statistically significant difference between those who participated in the practices and those who did not.

Conclusion

The results from this study bring evidence that Luo burial rituals did not predispose the bereaved child to maladaptive grief. The participants in this study were guided by the cultural practices and have adapted to these practices as the norm in mourning and burying a loved one. These results complement studies and arguments by African authors who have called for the need for mental health and mental health disorders to be investigated and addressed within cultural contexts and not on a universal fit for all approaches. With this knowledge, grief therapists need to have a culturally sensitive and adaptive approach to grief counseling with the cultural practices of the bereaved put into context. This study was limited to the extent that it only studied orphans' reaction to Luo cultural burial rituals and therefore there may be need to study bereaved children under other cultural contexts in Kenya. Similarly, the items in the sociodemographic questionnaire were largely closed-ended, hence inclined to quantitative analysis. It was discovered that the participants also provided additional information during the administration of the questionnaire. In the future, it would be important to conduct a qualitative study to get a broader understanding of these experiences and to better understand the culture of the Luo community when it comes to death and bereavement.

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