Costumes and Mourning Rituals in Widowhood Practices as Grief Management Strategies Mitigating Mortality Salience in Ondo Kingdom Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explored the role of costumes and mourning rituals in widowhood practices in Nigeria, and how these practices serve as strategies for grief management mitigating mortality salience (MS). The terror management theory (TMT) was used to explain the application of both proximal and distal defenses to mitigate the anxiety of death caused by the demise of a relation. Mourning rituals and widowhood practices among the Ondo people of southwestern Nigeria among others include a proper announcement of the death of the husband, sleeping and sitting on the bare floor for seven days, mandatory spiritual bath as a form of cleansing and washing off the connections with spirit of the dead and subsequent adornment with facial makeup and bright costumes and use of incense to bid a deceased husband farewell are cultural strategies of the terror management theory. In mitigating the motility salience, mourning rituals help bereaved individuals acknowledge the reality of the death, embrace the pain of the loss, offer the opportunity for a remembrance of the deceased and shift the relationship shared with the deceased from physical to memory. Also, these rituals help bereaved people develop of new self-identity, provide an avenue to search for meaning in life and death, and serve as a means to receive social support.

Keywords: Costumes, mourning rituals, grief management, mortality salience, widowhood practices, Ondo Nigeria

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Introduction

Mortality Salience (MS), according to APA (2023), is being aware of one's impending death. MS is explained by terror management theory (TMT). The mortality salience paradigm is the main focus of research on terror management theory (Wojtkowiak et al., 2011; Gordillo et al., 2017). TMT is described as a variety of behaviours intended to defend oneself or one's social group when threatened driven by mortality salience and death dread (APA, 2023). Mortality salience explores the tension that arises between individuals' innate desire to entirely avoid death and their rational understanding that doing so is ultimately pointless.

According to the terror management theory, when people start to think about their mortality and vulnerability to death, they start to feel terrified because they wish to prevent their impending death (Whitley et al. 2010). The Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) states that all human behaviour is driven by the fear of dying, which results in a state of anxiety when we have to balance the need to survive with our awareness of our mortality (MS: Mortality Salience). Through thought control processes like proximal and distal defences, MS activation reduces the anxiety it causes (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

Mortality Salience, or when the notion of death first enters our mind, activates proximal defences. They are rational and help us avoid having such thoughts by diverting our attention to other things, decreasing the amount of time we spend thinking about ourselves, or downplaying how easily we can die (Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004; Pyszczynski et al., 1999). This can be done, for instance, by enhancing our views of our lifespan (Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000) or by making a conscious effort to engage in healthier activities (Arndt, Schimel, & Goldenberg, 2003; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Findler, 2005).

Though they remain accessible subconsciously, proximal defenses keep ideas of death from lingering in our awareness. Distal defenses come into effect at this point and after proximal defenses have been

put up; these enable thoughts of death to be banished for a longer period. These distal defenses include the cultural frameworks that support and give significance to our life (such as politics and religion) as well as self-esteem, which makes a person feel important and special to the extent that this is the case in accordance with cultural values (Rodriguez & Osorio, 2014).

Different techniques can be used to activate MS and the proximal defenses that follow. In particular, participants in experiments may be asked to write about their expectations for their own deaths and how they feel about it (Kashima, Halloran, Yuki, & Kashima, 2004). Another option is the use of visual media, including subliminal messages (e.g., Arndt, Cook, Goldenberg, & Cox, 2007), films, or photographs (e.g., Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). Bringing other people's mortality into one's consciousness (e.g., through accidents, wars, or terrorism) is another way to activate MS and the proximal defences that follow (e.g., Arndt et al., 2007; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003).

According to Kashima et al. (2004), the MS that develops when we become aware of the mortality of others causes worry in a similar way to the anxiety caused by becoming aware of our own mortality, but it also gives the individual the impression that the world is unpredictable and hazardous.A wide range of human behaviours, including pro-social behaviour, aggression, self-esteem, sexual attitudes, the propensity to take risks, the management of close relationships, group conflicts, political attitudes (Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008), and peace processes (Niesta, Fritsche, & Jonas, 2008), are affected by the tendency to reduce anxiety elicited by awareness of death.

Anaki, Brezniak, and Shalom (2012), as well as Goldenberg and Arndt (2008), have highlighted its impacts on a variety of psychological processes, including the perception of facial expressions and decision-making in health-related concerns. The proximal defences employed to lessen the fear of death, however, are thought to have minimal known effects on how perceptions are formed (Gordillo et al., 2017).

Religious people and religious and cultural practices and beliefs have been proven to be less susceptible to manipulations of mortality salience (*Wojtkowiak et al., 2011*). According to the theory of terror management, society's major role and the driving force behind people's actions is to regulate their fear of dying. As a result, people are motivated to maintain faith in the unquestionable validity of the cultural worldviews (i.e., beliefs and values) that give their lives meaning and to believe that they are living up to those standards

when they are aware of the inevitable nature of death (mortality salience). This leads to them developing a sense of personal value or self-esteem that protects them from the frightful realisation of their own mortality (APA, 2023).

Among others, cultural practices for deceased relations particularly widowhood funeral costume rituals among the Yoruba people in the Ondo kingdom offer some therapy for grief and act as some sort of proximal defense against mortality salience. Death is a certainty that brings tears and wailings in most cultures. Adebowale (2019), emphasized that the issue of death and what happens to man after death has been of great concern to humanity in general. People of different religions and cultural affinities have sought to understand the purpose of human existence and what comes about when someone dies. As a kind of proximal as well as distal defence the practices of funeral rites among the Yoruba people of Nigeria are greatly influenced by the belief in the afterlife (Adebowale 2019).

In line with the terror management theory, there is a Yoruba traditional belief that death is not the end of life; rather, it is regarded as a transition from one form of existence to another or a journey to the ancestral world (Adebowale 2019). Death is viewed as the beginning of another journey, and it is also believed that a proper burial must be performed by the living to guarantee a smooth journey in the afterlife. According to Adebowale (2019), there is a common belief among the Yoruba people that for a deceased to be able to enter into the ancestral world or even become an ancestor, necessary funerary rituals must be performed. In most instances, these rituals/ rites are performed by the family of the deceased, especially the wife and children.

The Yoruba people as is the case with other cultures, express different concepts about the afterlife and immortality; however, the circumstance behind the death of a person dictates how the idea is expressed. Those who qualify to enter or pass to the realm of the afterlife are later referred to as ancestors. In other words, it is not all the dead that are eligible to enter into the ancestral land. For a qualified soul to enter into the ancestral land of the Yoruba certain funeral rites must be performed. The funeral rites for a deceased must be done to certify the ancestral place of the deceased and also to guarantee that the living will be given a befitting burial too. These practices both reduce death anxieties (proximal defense) and help in grief management thus reducing psychological distress associated with the loss of a loved one.

Particular costumes as associated with funeral practices in various cultures. Among the Ondo people, widows of the deceased are by culture expected to be adorned in these costumes to mourn their dead for some time. Kwakye-Opong and Adinku (2013), submit that costume is one of the most formidable and versatile cultural agents for the transmission of knowledge and values across ethnic, national and international boundaries. It can be exhibited in the political, social, religious and the day-to-day activities of the people. The type of costume people wear can also be used to determine their identity. For instance, Africans, believe and live their culture for which clothing and adornment are not an exception.

Among Nigerians, many important moments of life are accompanied by the wearing of ritual costumes prescribed by custom in each culture (Oyeniyi, 2012). As noted by Tortora and Eubank (1989) affirmed that clothing tells the observer something about the organisation of society. Oyeniyi (2012) asserts that costume is a collection of modifications and/or complements to the human body. Considered in this manner, costume consists of, but is not limited to coiffed hair, coloured skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewellery, accessories, and other extras added to the body as complements. Among the Yoruba, costume includes cloth and clothing traditions, beads, facial marking, jewellery, hair-dressing, and barbing.

Akinbileje and Igbaro (2010), suggest that the Yoruba people take huge pride in their attire made from processed cotton by traditional weavers, for which they are well recognized. They believe that the type of clothes worn by a man depicts his personality and social status and that different occasions require different clothing outfits. Commonly, the Yoruba have a very wide range of materials used to make clothing, the most basic being the *Aṣo-Oke*, which is a hand-loomed cloth of different patterns and colours sewn into various styles which comes in many different colours and patterns (Akinbileje & Igbaro, 2010). Turner (1957), argues that social order depended on rituals and ceremonial performances. Ritual represents an institutional project for ordering and sustaining patterns of belief and conduct in its adherents. According to Turner (1957), people do not devise rituals, rather they remain the preserve of the societal authority.

The use of grief rituals across cultures has been extensively documented by anthropologists (Souza, 2017). Ademiluka (2009) states that the principal stages in the grief ritual of mourning an aged person include the announcement of the death, preparation of the corpse for burial, the lying in state, the interment, and the rituals,

feasting and ceremonies of the days following the burial. However, in the cases of suspicion that the deceased was killed by his widow, another rite to clear the widow as innocent was done.

The widowhood practice among Ondo people recorded in this review are summaries of accounts of some elderly Ondo women who shared both their experiences and legends surrounding the practices. There are two issues involved in the performances of rites by widows in Ondo. First, there is the issue of the widow's mandatory performance of funeral rites by the family. If the husband paid the bride price, then the widow must engage in the full performance of the rites. It is believed that refusal to perform the widowhood rites could result in the manifestation of some severe psychosis by the bereaved widow. However, if the woman's bride price was not paid by the husband, then such widows are not bound by the law to perform the rites. Again, if the bride price was not paid and there are child (ren) had for the deceased, the widow may mourn her husband for seven days after which she is free of the bound.

The second issue is the process of the performance which includes the costumes in the process of the rites. For a woman that the bride price was paid, she must perform the rites starting with the announcement of the death of her husband. There is however a slight change in the ways people conduct the practice several years ago compared to the present times. In the past, for widows whose bride price was paid before the husband became deceased, after the burial of the husband, the widow was required by tradition to sleep and sit on the bare floor for eight days. However, in present times she only stays indoors for eight days. On the eighth day, the family of the deceased will gather to share the properties/ debts of the deceased. Afterwards, the widow of the deceased would be spiritually purified through the process of being bathed by spiritualists at night for the first time in eight days. The bath popularly called *wiwefo* was mandatory. On the same night hair on the head and pubic were shaved. She was required to cut her fingernails and toenails before the bath. The costume also required that the grieving widow adorn her face with "*tiro*" (eyelid) and admire herself as she look into a mirror. While "admiring" herself she will be asked why she was looking into the mirror at midnight. She would reply that because her husband is dead, then the person who is with her will pray and console her.

After the first rite of spiritual bath, the widow would be adorned with a white cloth that same night. Subsequently, all the adornments she put on for the eight days before the bath would be burnt. Next while being adorned with the white cloth, she would carry incense and with

it enter all the rooms in her house and around the house. The ritual was supposed to rid the house of the spirit of the dead. Any room she failed to enter with the incense that night would be forbidden to her after the funeral rites. Finally, the widow must be awake all night.

In summary, participating in these rites gives the widows peace of mind and an opportunity for a fresh start as it is believed that the bond between the dead and the living had been broken. In consonance with the terror management theory, these rites both activate motility salience and are believed to give honour and respite to the deceased and reduce fear of death (proximal defense). Literature shows that activities and practices for spiritual, moral, or religious mourning may be seen as beneficial in coping with the loss, particularly in addressing guilt emotions (Cacciatore & DeFrain 2015; Hinton et al., 2013).

At present times the rituals are slightly modified due to the influence of the orthodox religious practices of the Ondo people. Except for not bathing for eight days, once the bride price was paid, some widowhood rituals must be observed to prevent stigmatization and for fear of the supposed manifestation of some psychosis as a consequence of refusal. Myth has it that after the ninth day, the widow would be adorned with whites for three lunar months (about two and half months). After the first two full moons the widow must not see the crescent of the fourth moon in that same house she had been staying for three lunar months. She was required to go to her father's place the night that the crescent was to appear and remain there. After the appearance of the crescent, the family of her late husband would send for her to return home if they affirmed their love for her and wanted her back. At the dawn of the first day of return, the practice requires that the widow should go to the market and purchase ingredients for soup and foodstuff without price bargaining for whatever she bought. She will then return home to prepare the meal for the family. Afterwards, those present at the meal would pray for her. Afterwards, the widow would replace the white costumes with blue ones or black linen clothes. Wearing black or blue coloured materials was to elicit sympathy and unsolicited help from people who came in contact with them.

As aligned with the terror management theory these widowhood funeral ritual practices were believed to mitigate serious traumatizing consequences attached to the refusal to observe them. For instance, legend has it that the deceased husband of a defaulting widow might often appear to her. To date, it is affirmed that the woman might be afflicted with some psychosis. Again, she would be criticised,

suspected of having a hand in the death of her husband and thus face stigmatization and possibly excommunication. The fear of these consequences acts as a perpetuating factor of these widowhood ritual practices even till the present time. (Details of this practice were given by some elderly Ondo women who had all performed the rituals).

Mourning rituals, grief management and mortality salience: The synergy

A key function of death-related rituals is to provide structured ways to mourn and express grief (Smid, et al., 2018). The mourning rituals among widows in Ondo is a culturally accepted activity that equally serves as grief management. Mourning and the different funeral rites including the costumes and practices aforementioned have psychological roles they play on individuals, families, friends and communities of the deceased. Mourning in itself is therapeutic, and is seen as a way to say a good farewell to a loved one and help the bereaved come to terms with the loss (Cacciatore & DeFrain, 2015; Lensing, 2001). A brief review of the needs/role of mourning rituals as opined by Wolfelt (2016) is herein discussed.

First, authentic mourning helps the bereaved acknowledge the reality of the death. This activity in itself activates the mortality salience on the bereaved. Wolfelt (2016) suggests that for the bereaved to move forward with the grief, open acknowledgement of the reality as well as the finality of the death is necessary. Mourning rituals such as those described among the Ondo people can serve as points of departure for the intellectual understanding of the death of loved ones. In the sense that intellectually, funerals communicate that a loved one is deceased. However up until the funeral, the bereaved might still be at the denial stage of the grief process (Tyrrell et al., 2019). The funeral rituals and activities such as contacting the funeral home, setting of time for the funeral service, the plan the ceremony, viewing the body, perhaps even choosing the clothing and jewelry for the body, and lowering the casket into the ground, the bereaved finally acknowledges that the person has died (Irion, 1991; Wolfelt, 2016).

The second thing mourning rituals do is help the bereaved embrace the pain of the loss (Wolfelt, 2016). For healing to take place there is a need to move from an intellectual understanding of the death of a loved one to a heart understanding. This role is linked to the acceptance stage of grief posited by Kubler-Ross (Tyrrell et al., 2019). Healthy grief implies expressing our painful thoughts and feelings, and culturally accepted funeral rituals. People sob, cry and wail at funerals

because funerals compel attendees to concentrate on the fact of the death and their feelings. Funeral rituals and ceremonies provide people with an accepted venue for expressing painful feelings (Fulton, 1995).

The third role of the grief ritual in mitigating mortality salience is that it helps the bereaved remember the person who died. To heal in grief, there needs to be a shift in the relationship shared with the deceased from physical to one of memory. Funeral rituals and ceremonies help and encourage this shift. More importantly, this shift acts as thought control offering proximal and distal defenses in the short and long term. In other words, the shifting of a deceased to memory is a strategy of the terror management theory which is therapeutic to the death anxiety of the mortality salience. The shift of the deceased to memory is done as the mourning rituals provide a natural time and place for concerned individuals to think about the good and bad moments shared with the deceased. Like no other time before or after the death, the funeral such as that of the Ondo people invites participants to focus on their past relationship with lost loved ones and to share those memories with others. During and even after traditional funerals, the eulogy attempts to highlight the major events in the life of the deceased and the characteristics that he or she most prominently displayed. This is helpful to mourners, for it tends to prompt more intimate, individualized memories. Throughout the grief journey shared stories of the memories of the person who died teach about the life of the deceased and help mourners to reconcile their grief. This glimpse into the life of the dead person is cherished forever, and might help to maintain a meaningful bond with the deceased (Mroz & Bluck, 2018; Possick et al., 2007; Vale-Taylor, 2009),

Another important role of grief rituals in mitigating mortality salience is that they help in the development of a new self-identity (Wolfelt, 2016). The denial stage of grief (Tyrrell et al., 2019) states that at this stage the bereaved feels it is not possible to move on without the lost relative. As social beings people's lives are given meaning about the life of others around us. For instance, a deceased might be a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a friend etc., hence when someone close dies the self-identity as defined by these positions changes. In line with the terror management theory mourning rituals help people begin this difficult process of developing a new self-identity because it provides a social venue for public acknowledgement of our new roles. If for instance, the dead person is a husband and a father, the new self-identity of widowhood and fatherless to the wife and child respectively is developed. In a sense, according to Norton & Gino,

(2014), mourning rituals might help gain control over the changes and uncertainties brought about by the loss of a loved one.

The fifth therapeutic role of funeral rites in mitigating mortality salience is that of giving the bereaved an avenue to search for meaning in life and death (Wolfelt, 2016). People naturally ask questions about the meaning of life and death at the loss of a loved one. Some cultures affirm the concept of reincarnation and life after death (Cacciatore & DeFrain 2015; Hinton et al 2013; Eisenbruch, 1990). Among the Ondo people, the mourning ritual practices are also believed to permanently escort the deceased to the place of the ancestors. As a terror management theory strategy, the thought controls that emanate from such belief that the deceased is resting in the afterlife equally mitigate mortality salience and hence fortify the belief of a bereaved that death is not final.Often there are questions such as "Why did this person die? Why now? Why this way? Why does it have to hurt so much? What happens after death? These questions help in the healing process. As such questions help answer why we should continue living and how to do this without the deceased. Thus, the funeral helps us search for meaning in the life and death of the person who died as well as in our own lives and impending deaths. Each funeral we attend serves as a sort of dress rehearsal for our own. Funerals play the role of enabling individuals and communities to convey their beliefs and values about life and death. They show that death is important to people.

Lastly, death-related and grief rituals serve as means to receive ongoing support from others (Wolfelt, 2016). Funeral activities imply a solicitation to the society to come and help the bereaved. The inability to undertake culturally expected mourning practices could lead to some guilt feelings on the bereaved. Mourning rituals as observed among the Ondo people give communities and friends opportunities to demonstrate their support. This physical show of support is therapeutic. It reduces the anxieties associated with mortality salience and associated perceived guilt based on the belief that a deceased is in a dire spiritual state and requires the mourning rituals for proper placement in the afterlife (Hinton, 2013). Social supports thus enable the ability to give a befitting burial in honour of the dead through which the bereaved settle accounts or convey apologies or gratitude to the deceased (Smid et al., 2018).

Recommendations

A careful examination of the performances of funeral rites as terror management theory strategies in Ondo Kingdom is embedded with

certain hygienic issues. First, the grieving women sit and lay on the floor and are not allowed to bathe for the first seven days of mourning. This aspect of the mourning practice should be discouraged as this might affect their physical and mental health. Being made to lay and sit on the floor for seven days is demeaning and does not give basic human dignity. Secondly, the woman in most cases put on one costume for seven days. This practice is not also hygienic. Wearing the same dirty clothes in an unwashed body could expose the grieving women to diseases. This aspect of the practice should also be discouraged. Again, the fingernails are left unkempt for seven days without washing as a sign of mourning. The same hands are used by the grieving widows to eat. Again, this practice poses a huge health risk and should be discouraged.

Finally, this study recommends modifications in the mourning rituals among Ondo widows. This includes allowing grieving women to take their baths at least once a day to avoid the health risk of disease infection, Secondly, widows should be allowed to use body adornment of clothes within the days of mourning. This will enable them to remain healthy and good-looking even in the mourning process. Lastly mourning widows should be regularly adorned including the manicure and pedicure.

Conclusion

Mortality salience is innate to humans. It implies that bereaved people think about their mortality and vulnerability to death hence activating the terror management theory of preventing the impending death. Different cultural practices are adopted to provide both proximal and distal defenses to mitigate the anxiety of death caused by the demise of a relation. Mourning rituals and widowhood practices among the Ondo people of southwestern Nigeria among others include a proper announcement of the death of the husband, sleeping and sitting on the bare floor for seven days, mandatory spiritual bath as a form of cleansing and washing off the connections with spirit of the dead and subsequent adornment with facial makeup and bright costumes and use of incense to bid a deceased husband farewell are cultural strategies of the terror management theory.

In mitigating the motility salience and perceived vulnerability to death these mourning rituals play such roles as helping the bereaved acknowledge the reality of the death and embracing the pain of the loss. Also, it offers the opportunity for a remembrance of the deceased and a subsequent shift in the relationship shared with the deceased from physical to one of memory. Furthermore, grief rituals

help the bereaved develop of new self-identity, give the bereaved an avenue to search for meaning in life and death, and serve as a means to receive ongoing support from others to enable giving a befitting burial in honour of the dead through which the bereaved settle accounts or convey apologies or gratitude to the deceased.

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