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## ***Gender, Dress and Self-Empowerment: Women and Burial Societies in Botswana***

### **Abstract**

*One measure of relative poverty, humiliation and indignity among Batswana is wearing tattered clothes (makatana). Literally, a dress (seaparo) means to adorn oneself. Particular kinds of clothes have multiple meanings and authorise and legitimise participation of certain social groups in given situations in society. This paper focuses on specific ways in which women in local institutions known as burial societies (diswaeti in everyday Tswana discourse), ceremonially and ritualistically empower themselves through an event known as kapeso – to be garbed, enrobed or dressed. Empowerment embodies a sense of competence, mastery, strength, and ability to effect change. The event incorporates biblical knowledge associated with Christian religious ceremonies of dedication or devotion and Tswana funeral ritual symbols. Given the extraordinary context of the AIDS crisis in Botswana, taking up specific intervention roles of providing emergency financial relief to households in distress demands some sort of public authentication. Women in burial societies adopt a particular dress code as ritual object of social power to perform gendered social roles that closely conform to status obligations to self, family, kin, community and society. Their dress code enables them to dramatise social action (that is, the ability to understand what they do and to use that understanding as part of their performance) in ways that redefine gender relations, practices of spirituality across denominational affiliation and Tswana humanism (botho).*

### **Introduction**

In Tswana society, a dress, *seaparo* (pl. *diaparo*) has multiple social meanings. At a personal level, *seaparo* is an article of clothing, a garment,<sup>1</sup> and *go apara* is a verb meaning to dress up smartly or garnish oneself while *kapeso* is to be 'enrobed'. A given dress code thus either accentuates or plays down social agency<sup>2</sup> of individuals or groups in a given societal context. At the social level of everyday life, what individuals and groups wear has structural dimensions. The opposite of adorning oneself is to be in tatters (*makatana*), an embodiment of humiliation and indignity. Wearing worn out clothes is usually regarded as a public display of poverty due to limited access to resources and opportunities. At the cultural level, a particular kind of clothing or garment gives backing to

perceived gender and status differences between women and men in society. At political and religious levels, when an individual is garbed to take up office, they are authorised to assume a new institutional role. An elaborate ceremonial event is usually organised in which the neophyte is garbed in some ritual object of social power such as a leopard skin, plumes and feathers of particular birds, custom made and colour coded robes and so on.

This paper focuses analysis on a symbolic-expressive event known as *kapeso* – to be garbed, enrobed or dressed. The ceremony is organised by women who belong to local social institutions in Botswana known as burial societies (*diswaeti* in everyday Tswana discourse). Burial societies organise and disburse emergency financial relief to members' households in distress due to the social affliction of death. The majority of members in these groups are women. They take on a particular dress code as ritual object of social power to perform gendered social roles that closely conform to status obligations to self, family, kin and community in a particular funeral context of ever increasing AIDS deaths. The concept of power applied in this paper is not in terms of agency over others but, rather, power is seen as the transforming capacity of organised social action (in this case the collective power of women in burial societies to influence the course of events in their lives). Social power in this context is understood not in terms of agency over others, but rather, as the transforming capacity of organised action. Social actors derive social power through the transformation process.

On the one hand, gendered role play in everyday life events is based on perceived differences between sexes and on the other gender relations in everyday interaction are also a primary way of signifying unequal power relationships between women and men. In any given society, social arenas and forms of ritualistic display of gendered roles and power differences between women and men are multiple. These include, but are not limited to gender hierarchies (sexism) embedded in language, cultural and religious ideologies, the media, advances in technology and skills acquisition, social institutions, sexuality and so on.

Given the extraordinary context of the AIDS crisis in Botswana, taking up specific gendered roles of providing emergency financial relief to households in distress demands some sort of public authentication. In this paper, the significance of *kapeso* in burial societies lies in ways in which women in these groups first, affirm a gendered role performance of disbursing financial relief, second, social agency and third, self-empowerment through interfacing specific forms of religious and cultural knowledge and adopting a particular dress code in carrying out their publicly stated duties outside the group. Rappaport (1985:17) suggests that personal empowerment embodies a sense of competence, mastery, strength, and ability to effect change. Self-empowerment through *kapeso* can be seen as a multifaceted process on various levels. Women rede-

fine gendered roles and responsibilities in relation to their shifting positions and socio-cultural contexts.

For Goffman (1986) and Geertz (1973), social life is like a theatre. Social roles emerge out of specific encounters and involve situated performances. For Bourdieu (1977), social practices include the manipulation of strategic resources. What appears trivial and uninteresting is fraught with social implications. Smallness of micro practices therefore also speaks to larger processes of social transformations.

In this paper, Goffmanian and Geertzian dramaturgical approaches to cultural processes and social structure are applied to emphasise the significance of creative performances of self-empowerment and gender display of social roles by women in burial societies. Both as individuals and as a group, women are seen as dramatising social action (that is, the ability to understand what they do and to use that understanding as part of their performance) in a way that redefines gender relations, everyday discourses and practices of spirituality across denominational affiliation and Tswana humanism (*botho*).

During 1998 (January to July), I did ethnographic research on three *kapeso* events organised by women in burial societies in Gaborone, the capital city, and the villages of Ramotswa, Molepolole and Mochudi. The value of ethnographic methods (Spardely, 1980) is first, to give highly textured accounts of how things are interrelated; second, to show how culture is relevant to our understanding of the unfolding social processes in given contexts of social practice, and third, participant observation provides knowledge of the local contexts and cultural experience. The event is highly performative and dramatises multiple social issues and ideological matrices through song, prose, poetry, dance, and music. I videotaped the process to capture intricate symbolic-expressive features of the event, and these audio-visual tapes were then used for cultural analysis (Wuthnow et al. 1993).

The paper is divided into five parts. The first part gives the cultural and theoretical context of social affliction in Botswana. The second part discusses the institutional framework of burial societies in contemporary Botswana. The third part focuses on the practicalities of institutionalising the dress code in burial societies. The fourth part discusses the processes and meanings of self-empowerment through *seaparo* and *kapeso*. The fifth part examines the practical implication of *seaparo* on gender relations, assertion of women's social power and Tswana humanism. The paper ends with a summary and conclusion.

## 1. Theoretical and Cultural Contexts of Social Affliction

Death, as a biological event, in and of itself has no intrinsic value. However, the event has specific meanings when placed in a given socio-cultural, political, economic and historical context. Particularly in Botswana, death cannot be

divorced from post independence economic transformations and the cultural conditions surrounding the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Briefly, between 1970 and 1990, the country experienced drastic forms of social transformation particularly through state sanctioned development programmes and the policies of five year National Development Plans. Individually and collectively the various forms of government intervention have had a phenomenal impact, materially expressed in unequal gendered access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. In 1985, the first HIV/AIDS case was reported, and the rate of infection has been increasing at an alarming rate ever since. Particular uncertainties (of hope and despair, unity and disarray, compassion and heartlessness, caring and social neglect; risk and safety; guilt and innocence and so on) are fore-grounded by gendered meta-narratives of death that permeate everyday Tswana social life. As such, unequal access to public goods and services invariably intersects with the tenacity of AIDS-related deaths and other forms of social victimisation (murder, road accidents, suicide and so on) and suggests a perfect menu for prophets of doom and gloom. However, in everyday Tswana social life, seeing, touching, and smelling dying or dead bodies is not inevitably disastrous. Particularly since the human body, dead or alive, as a cultural symbol, is appropriated and given multiple meanings and social locations by social actors in different contexts (Csordas, 1994; Featherstone et al., 1991; Foltyn, 1996; Hallam et al. 1999; Hockey, 1990; Howarth & Jupp, 1996; Martin, 1989; Searle, 1998; Prior, 1989). As Turner (1967) has pointed out, cultural symbols may have many meanings, but their meanings emerge out of the context in which they are used as well as from the aims of the users.

In contemporary Tswana society, cultural meanings define what and who has been lost. Concern is with not only the social contours of social affliction (age, gender, status, occupation and so on of the dying and the dead), but also connective tendencies among surviving people and potential use of available resources. In the context of the AIDS pandemic, the focus of individual and group emergency intervention tends to move back and forth between the region of various meta-narratives such as misfortune and opportunity, unity and disunity, compassion and heartlessness, caring and social neglect and so on. This is not surprising since in African societies, death evokes a web of cultural meanings that brings about realignment of personal, kinship and institutional relationships. A situation of contradictions thus emerges from living conditions characterised by fear and uncertainties. Conversely, the situation demands flexibility and creative imagination in order to ease the material and non-material burden of those affected by the omnipresence of death. Therefore research on societal impact and institutional responses to the AIDS pandemic has to pay attention not only to the macro-structural context of death, but also to situated micro-practices around death and disposal. Specific consideration has to be given to the significance of nuanced social dramas and gendered interac-

tions that characterise funeral resource mobilising collaborations in rural and urban social settings. These social exchanges not only affect the redistribution of resources between social groups, but also effectively redefine individual and group obligation or commitment to family and kin welfare including gendered accountability to others in society.

Death, regardless of its causes, calls into question the most fundamental assumptions upon which social and religious life is built. Those remaining behind struggle to re-establish a sense of identity, meaning, and purpose. The omnipresence of dying and death in Botswana presents first, the danger of being overwhelmed, and, second, a particular moral problem and threat of ethical disorder or chaos that would render a given cultural order meaningless. As such, social actors in every cultural system must accept the reality of death and go on with daily life with some sense of purpose and meaning. Culture, according to Geertz (1973), may be taken as both a model *of* and a model *for* reality. As a model *of* reality, cultural patterns constitute the perceived world of human actors and define the significance of their behaviours and institutions.<sup>3</sup> As context, culture is part of the shared background against which, and in terms of which, social life is carried out. As models *for* reality, cultural patterns offer entry into the moral world of actors and allow an analysis of the sense of obligation people feel based on their shared experience. Morality is a component of culture. The word moral here is used to imply some kind of internalised disposition towards a shared notion of social good.<sup>4</sup> As a moral order, culture implies that certain relations can be counted on or even taken for granted.

In addition to the social, moral, and economic crisis, death also precipitates a religious crisis that demands specific responses reflected in intense feelings of community. Religion allows social relations to be redefined in many different ways. In the context of African societies, everything is interdependent, and in the end, everything has religious value. Conceptions of death, and its relationship to the totality of life, are not only experienced in, but also generated through, specific social institutions that enable social actors to manage death and loss (Hockey, 1990:8).

Tswana women and men respond to the pervasiveness of death in various ways. For the majority of Tswana women, the formation of local institutions in Botswana known as burial societies constitutes one way of 'bracketing out' the potential threat of existential meaninglessness and to face up to existential challenges of perpetual conditions of uncertainty. A burial society is a relatively autonomous, historically distinct, local mutual aid institution, which may be occupational or gender based, and whose goal is to provide social relief and support (material and non-material) to a member or member's family/kin experiencing conditions of distress due to death. Burial societies embody some basic features of social organisation. They are concerned with structure, organised action, unpredictable changes in sources of livelihood and conspicuous

consumption in urban and rural households, uncertainties and possibilities in living conditions.

In most African societies, women and men experience and interpret death differently. In Botswana the existing literature suggests that women constitute the majority of members in burial societies (Brown 1982; Molutsi, 1995). In a random sample of registered burial societies in Gaborone and Ramotswa, Ngwenya (2000) found that, on average, women constitute 78 percent and men 22 percent of the total population of active members of burial societies. Other studies in southern Africa concur that burial societies are women-centred local institutions (Bozzoli, 1991; Leliveld 1994; Matobo, 1993).

In order to live through vulnerabilities everyday livelihood challenges (production, reproductive, religious and political responsibilities), ample literature suggests that most African women situate themselves in wide social support networks (Wipper, 1995;). Personal and community networks avail women with different resources and opportunities and engage different power structures. They are able to produce forms of reciprocity and exert social power and influence through these at household and community level. While analysis of macro changes provides a broader picture of conditions of social affliction in Botswana, a focus on micro-practices through burial societies provides insights into a rich gendered cultural history of the response of local institutions to an impending social crisis.

Furthermore, macro analysis of social change is overly biased towards economic assumptions of women's agency. Existing research on burial societies in southern Africa tends to over-emphasise their utilitarian (such as the sharing of funeral costs and labour), psychological, and therapeutic functions (emotional support for the bereaved family) to individuals and families. Without a doubt, the significance of material benefits burial societies render to individual members and members' families is unquestionable. Nonetheless, the viability of women's groups seems to depend on their ability to fuse both instrumental and expressive activities, public and domestic roles, community work, and family life, between leaders and members, and between generations and social status. As a social group, women are able to gain a foothold in, and remain accountable to, multiple spheres of social, economic, moral, religious, cultural, spiritual and ethical life.

The literature suggests that death rituals and funeral practices in Botswana, as elsewhere in Africa, impose cultural constraints on women (Bloch, 1994; Potash, 1986). During the funeral process, women and men observe specific protocols with regard to the dress code of the living and gendered roles of 'dressing' a dead body.<sup>5</sup> Dress brings order as a culturally defined process to the world of the living and to that of the dead. Body adornment is the basis for social action and the human body, dead or alive, is both a socio-cultural and biological entity. In fact, as Geertz (1973) has pointed out, there is no such thing as human nature that is independent of culture. Individuals become human

under the guidance of historically created systems of meaning, which give form, order, and direction to social life.

Thus, cultural analysis of women's agency in burial societies pays attention to the enabling capacity of dressing up living women's bodies in order to interact with dead bodies in a way that is linked, but not limited to, their reproductive and productive gender roles. Generally, women's dress code in the context of social affliction has been analysed from a woman's social victim standpoint rather than in terms of their capability as community interlocutors and social agents who individually and collectively respond to, and learn from, a changing socio-cultural environment. Since the omnipresence of death cannot be sequestered from public view, the focus of social participation in burial societies is to maintain social bonds in everyday interactions. By forming burial societies, it is clear that death demands massive mobilisation of resources (human and non-human) to give a dignified burial to a loved one. The scale of events in contemporary Botswana therefore has different consequences for women's participation in creating social spaces that enable them to change with a changing environment. As such, access is not just to material resources, but also to a broader cultural and social space within which women situate themselves. Research has to explore the non-material, human-centered religious and moral dimensions of institutionalised responses to social affliction by paying attention to ways in which Tswana women participate in funeral events and processes and recast gendered roles and responsibilities.

Ordinary Batswana women transform knowledge of mortality through human activity from futile to meaningful survival and resiliency. In this context, death is transformed from despair to anticipation. Women in Botswana also make use of possibilities derived from funeral events to carve out 'enabling niches' that is, organised or institutionalised support networks from which participation makes it possible for individuals *to find a place in the community*. In other words, while death and loss pose risk factors to individuals and families, conversely, protective factors also emerge that allow people to develop resiliency<sup>6</sup> against odds. Women in these groups become known in their communities for what they do and what they have rather than what they lack and enables members to become more adept in establishing relationships that are significant to their social identity. We therefore have to assess the extent to which local institutions such as burial societies create opportunities for women to participate meaningfully and make significant contributions that shape the course of their lives as well as the moral, religious and civic life of a community.

## 2. Institutional Framework of Burial Societies in Botswana

### a) Legal framework

In order to obtain official legitimacy, burial societies, like other civic associations, have to be officially registered with the Registrar of Societies (Societies Act Cap. 18:01) with the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs in Gaborone. Ambivalence permeates the paternalistic relationship between burial societies as a community of interest and the Registrar of Societies for several reasons. Under official eyes, burial societies are classified as cultural-cum-social welfare groups. This classification qualifies them to be registered as voluntary associations. However, unlike strictly voluntary social groups, burial societies are different in that they handle and disburse an assured liquid capital at their disposal. However, the amount of money they handle is not considered large enough to qualify them for registration as co-operatives (consumer or marketing). The latter groups are regulated by the Central Bank of Botswana.

As such, within the non-governmental organisations' sector, apart from the sports and recreation and church clubs, burial societies are among the few cultural cum welfare grassroots groups (these include mutual aid associations such as *metshelo*, *mahodisano*, savings and loans, *stokvels*) that are required by law to be registered. Olson (1993) classifies these as 'apolitical' welfarist groups since they tend to be more inward looking and less engaged in policy issues.<sup>7</sup> However, Olson acknowledges, and Molutsi (1995) and Brown (1982) concur, that although women's grassroots organisations such as burial societies have been omitted from the Directory of NGOs (1995), they constitute a significant aspect of the social infrastructure that enhances Botswana's participatory democracy.

As legally registered groups, on the one hand, burial societies' legitimacy rests on legal authority. However, on the other hand, women leaders, usually determined by age and experience, commit themselves to promoting community participation through collaborative efforts by creating a space for individuals with similar concerns to mobilise, coordinate, and dispense financial relief resources around death and disposal as a cultural process. Some see the prototypical burial society as a 'family', and in so doing these women translate accepted gender roles of wives and mothers to create a new ethos of caring and compassion to help a neighbour, co-worker or relative experiencing the death of a loved one. The formative group expands when new recruits are brought in through existing personal networks. Criteria for claim eligibility and personal responsibilities to the group are spelt out to new members. As the group enlarges, individual problems are redefined as collective ones. Members engage in long debates regarding what must be considered acceptable or unacceptable funeral protocols. These agreements are formalised through the burial society's constitution (*molao motheo*), subject to approval by the Registrar of Societies and rules and procedures (*melawana*) which are context specific,



subject to approval by all subscribing members. Together, *molao motheo* and *melawana* constitute a social contract (*ditumalano*). *Melawana* are formulated to allow flexibility in addressing emerging day-to-day problems (such as late-coming and absenteeism, dress code, fundraising, and financial management).

In a nutshell, a social space is created where local women in urban and rural settings, both form ties with each other and develop as individuals while working collectively for the betterment of the whole community. Multiple layers of networks are thus created through burial societies, such as those of local residents with each other, and ties between local residents and leaders of the groups.

As a general rule, for some burial societies, registration with the Registrar of Societies is often viewed as a satisfactory means of acknowledging a gendered public role of providing financial relief in a funeral process. However, burial societies, especially those in the villages, endeavour to find a place in the public arena by institutionalising a particular dress code which they see as similar and different from other uniformed occupations or professions such as the police, the army, nurses, and churches.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Institutionalising the Dress Code in Burial Societies – the Event and Processes

A group's resolution to have *seaparo* does not occur overnight. It is a lengthy process that is characterised by intense debates whose outcomes usually depend on a constellation of factors. First, the group usually toys with the idea once it deems itself relatively stable socially (in terms of subscribing members) and financially (in terms of meeting its emergency relief goals). Also, some groups assert that, if a group considers itself 'known' (in the local community generally and among its peers), then it is time to make that distinction accessible to the public, and to become common knowledge through circulation of ideas in everyday discourse, social networks, and direct encounters in funerary events (pre-burial and post burial events). *Seaparo* debates take place during monthly meetings and could last from several months to a year or even longer before final consensus is reached.

Women raise specific questions during these meetings. These centre around substantive arguments, for instance regarding the significance of the colour of cloth (red, blue, green, white, black, and so on); suitability of style of outfit, a dress or a two-piece costume, and the colour of the blouse including the length of its sleeves! If the group settles for a dress, what style would be appropriate, including the colour of the head gear (beret or head-scarf), shoulder throw (cape), and colour of shoes? Should there be men in the group, a matching suit and tie for them is discussed. It is important that they look more 'honorable' and less unkempt. In general, men in burial societies are not expected to wear a hat (akin to, for example, to when they attend a customary court (*kgotla*) meeting).

In other words, a hat is part of ordinary male dress code, and thus has not been made part of the extraordinary activities of funeral process. Colour code and style of dress thus mediate relations couched within the decorum of respectability and strict observation of funeral protocols.

Also discussed at length is the colour and design of the logo, emblem or banner the burial society must adopt if they so choose, and whether or not the society's emblem should be printed or pinned on *seaparo*. If so, exactly where? Should it be on the back of the shoulder cape or in front? And what method of display would be appropriate; should the print be circular or rectangular? The group then goes on to purchase a barrel of cloth and selects an ad hoc committee to coordinate finalisation of payment within a given time frame.<sup>9</sup> A seamstress is contacted. She is summoned to meet the group, take appropriate measurements, and make trial samples, after which, if they are satisfactory, she is given the permission to go ahead. If not, alterations are suggested and a deadline is set for the completion of the task.

From the above discussion, it is obvious that groups expend an enormous amount of time and pay attention to finer detail. Typically, *seaparo* consist of a skirt, a blouse, headgear, black shoes and a shoulder throw (which may or may not have the name of the burial society emblem or logo printed on the back or front). Some burial societies design their *seaparo* such that it encompasses variations to reflect the need for flexibility; for instance with regard to what would be more appropriate for funeral attendances, monthly meetings, and for other less formalised events (such as serving food or washing dishes during the funeral process). Other burial societies, for instance, have three funeral attires. The funeral attire consists of a matching grey skirt, jacket, a cloak and beret, a white blouse, and black shoes. The second combination is worn when attending monthly meetings, and is comprised of a grey skirt, beret, and a white blouse. The third set, is a grey beret and a shoulder throw of any colour worn when attending pre-funeral evening prayers or post burial ceremonials (washing of the deceased person's clothes) that take place in the bereaved household's *lolwapa*. Unlike a burial event, post burial events are more often than not relaxed small gatherings of close kin and friends.

Dramatic dress code colour is thus central to the public display of what the burial society does, with whom, and for what purpose. There are common colours that are considered appropriate. By and large, these include different shades of blue, green, purple, gold, yellow, white, black, and grey. Some colours are disqualified for one reason or another as inappropriate. Women certainly do not embrace colours that are, in their view, most likely to spark controversy. These include colours that are associated with labour unions or partisan politics.<sup>10</sup> Other colours, such as black, are deliberately appropriated as the dominant ritual colour imposed on women's mourning garb. Furthermore, it is women who usually dress the corpse in black and white.<sup>11</sup>

Historically, black is linked to missionary inspired church denominations (such as the Anglican and Catholic churches). In fact, it appears that women choose black precisely to re-assert their relative autonomy from social, cultural, and institutional constraints, whether they are associated with African independent churches and missionary-inspired denominations or gendered mourning rituals that force women to wear black. The paradox, of course, is, while black is culturally constraining for women through mourning rituals, black and white colours dominate mainstream Protestant churches. In fact, since burial societies see themselves as officially recognised groups by law, they do not envisage any contradictions in assimilating colours used by officially recognised churches. Furthermore, a corpse is usually shrouded in white in addition to other colours. The bottom line is to avoid matching black with specific colours, such as red with black, for instance, to recreate a dress code that is associated with the ruling Botswana Democratic Party.

The colours together evoke a sense of fluidity in the social process; a sense of social regeneration is animated through a flow of active qualities imparted to women's bodies and by these bodies when these colours are worn.<sup>12</sup> Some burial societies have come up with obligatory, but nevertheless imaginative, ways of bolstering the group's corporate identity in addition to *seaparo*. This may include using social artifacts such as carefully designed membership cards, T-shirts stamped with the group's logo or message, and the use of emblems such as buttons or pins. Emphasis is on the power of physical presence and body adornment to bolster a particular public image, respectability, social commitment and gender accountability.

Once the sewing of *seaparo* is complete or near completion, a date and venue for the event is determined. Invitations are sent, in writing, at least two to three months in advance, to other communal burial societies. It is mostly burial societies with *seaparo* already that are likely to be invited to a *kapeso* event. Also groups intending to have *seaparo* in the near future may be invited to the occasion. Additionally invited to attend *kapeso* are dignitaries, such as members of parliament, council representatives, chiefs of police, social workers, and the village chiefs<sup>13</sup> or their representatives. From among those invited burial societies, one group which meets specific criteria<sup>14</sup> is nominated to officiate *kapeso*.

As the agreed date for the event draws nearer, invited groups are informed about the venue, either through the mail or a radio announcement. Depending on the organisational and resource capacity of the hosting group, between ten to thirty groups are invited (that is, about two hundred or over a thousand people participate in the *kapeso*). Groups come from different villages such as Molepolole, Kanye, Molapowabojang, and towns such as Lobatse, Gaborone, and Jwaneng. Each group rents a mini-bus for travel, and dresses up in their own *seaparo* to stand out as a group and yet become part of the colourful community of participants. The hosting group draws up a programme of activi-

ties and makes copies for distribution to invited participants. *Kapeso* is usually conducted in a school hall, city hall or other convenient public place.

The hosting group has a master of ceremonies (MC) and is supported by an auxiliary welcoming committee to usher in each group to the ceremonial site. The hosting group is aware that its performance will be subject to social commentary, and as such, the skill of the master of ceremonies (who could be either a woman or a man) and, the quick thinking of his/her aides remains crucial throughout the process. Again, we see that attention to detail is key, and requires a lot of thought, organising and planning skills, leadership acumen, and strategic mobilisation of resources (human and material). Every group arrival unleashes pomp and pageantry that is punctuated by ululation, song, poetry, idioms, salutation, and dance (*mmino*).

After welcoming guests, the MC introduces the goals of the event, and gives a brief history of the group, its trials, tribulations, and milestones. After taking care of general business and other affairs pertinent to the event, the empowering ceremonial process begins.

#### 4. Self-Empowerment through *Kapeso*

The process of *kapeso* can be divided into two parts as follows:

##### a) *Authenticating the symbolic-expressive message*

The novices come in their ordinary, everyday clothes and bring their new *seaparo* individually in their bags. They are all asked to put their new garb in one pile on a table. A pastor may be asked to bless the new *seaparo*, but on most occasions, women do the blessings themselves. Following the blessing of the garb, then the neophytes are then instructed to change from ordinary to the blessed *seaparo* after which they return to occupy the front stage, kneel in a circle, and listen to the 'message' (*molaetsa*) delivered to them by a 'team of experts in the field' that is, three or four women selected by the officiating burial society who are deemed knowledgeable, both biblically and culturally, about funeral protocols in general, and burial societies' rules, procedures, and regulations in particular. The central role of the Bible is unify divergence (of religious voices, social background and idiosyncrasies, cultural values) and recreate a common ground for social practice (the organisation and delivery of emergency relief).

The group works as a team and may or may not supplicate the expertise of others present to affirm and conclude the ritual process. The dancing that follows takes the centre stage in a circle. The dancing and singing movements and gestures coalesce a potpourri of Tswana folk songs, chorals, funeral dirges, wedding songs, inter-denominational hymns, idioms, and poetry. The circle represents the etiology of inclusion (social and religious), solidarity of purpose,

and the infusion of changing patterns of past, present and future practices and events.

The 'message' invariably includes, but is not limited to, explicating circumstances and conditions that are deemed appropriate for women to put on *seaparo* and those which do not warrant it. The novices are persuaded to comprehend *seaparo* as indicative of social responsibility and accountability (*boikarabelo*) to the group and to the public (*sechaba*). The novices are also urged to be aware that *seaparo* stands for the work of the burial society (*tiro ya swaeti*), and has to be taken off once the task it was meant for has been accomplished. The 'rookies' are also warned to take heed that *seaparo* is neither about individual aggrandisement nor for a 'fashion show' and that they should neither wear *seaparo* and go to outrageous places such as parties, bars, and nightclubs, nor become embroiled in community social scandals. Any self-indulgence that brings dishonour, betrayal or disgrace, especially to the group, and generally tarnishes the good name of the novitiating group, should not go unpunished (*kwathlao*). Because of these stringent social protocols associated with *seaparo*, it is not surprising that some burial societies have instituted a 'police' committee to police civility and propriety.<sup>15</sup>

Women argue that death constitutes a respectable moment, and that it is common sense to acknowledge that certain practices during sombre events will be acceptable and appropriate, while others would be shunned as inappropriate and unbecoming. *Mapodisi* are there to police civility and to protect the burial society from falling prey to whims of individual aggrandisement.

However, substantive authority to protect and empower women to do what they set out to do is derived from the Bible. Women draw insights from Protestant eschatology that split, especially the dead body, as temporal and subject to decay, and exalt the soul as pure with the virtues of eternal life.

The next section looks at the biblically informed aspects of *kapeso* in the context of the overall religious atmosphere of the burial society community and public funeral rituals. Here I refer to it as 'civil ecumenism'.

#### b) 'Civil Ecumenism' and Authority from the Bible

As in any community of interest, burial societies are built around a basic shared framework of meanings, norms, values or symbols that are not arbitrarily chosen, but which arise or are born out of a particular crisis of living with the dying and the dead. Members assert that burial societies belong to all religious people, especially Christians, though not exclusively. Asked how it is that burial societies remain at ease with a medley of religious beliefs women asserted 'we are all believers and very religious and spiritual people' (Ngwenya, forthcoming).

The groups bring together women from diverse religious beliefs to work collaboratively as 'believers' for a common cause. The religious atmosphere that is produced in funeral gatherings generally, and in the burial society

community in particular, does not proselytise participants. Emphasis is on integrating social, cultural, spiritual, and economic needs at community level, and on sustaining connections between people and these needs.

Overall, members of burial societies are Protestant Christians, Catholics, Spiritualists and those that subscribe to indigenous African religions. Others remain uncommitted to any particular religious affiliation, whether indigenous or Christian. These tend to participate spontaneously in religiously inspired rituals at their disposal. The response tends to be temporal and situation specific. Information from unstructured interviews suggests that it is not unusual for individuals to be subject to numerous religious influences. Sometimes varying religious practices are held simultaneously and at other times consecutively. An individual could profess Catholicism and an indigenous religion concurrently, or be a Spiritualist at one point and a traditionalist at another in their life cycle. In both scenarios, the individual may feel no contradiction in upholding a mixture of two or more religious traditions. As such, regardless of the source of overt funeral rituals, burial societies immerse their intervention in a confluence of indigenous African and Christian religious practices. Both claim a universal appeal to a higher authority in the form of God. Burial societies, therefore, promote and are at home with a medley of religious beliefs.

In burial societies some members are devotees of formal Christian religions, and demonstrate zeal and commitment that contributes to their identity and offers a sense security. Other members' appropriate religious ritual symbols 'of the moment', whatever the source of authority. The situational admixture of the committed, with varying degrees of theological depth,<sup>16</sup> transcends parochial religious boundaries. For lack of a better term, the writer will refer to this intersection of a medley of religious beliefs and participation in culturally defined funeral ritual across social setting as accessible and culturally embedded 'civil ecumenism' (as opposed to practices across major world religions, for example Christianity and Islam) (Ngwenya forthcoming).

Arguably, there is some affinity with the notion of ecumenical spirituality in the conservative sense. According to Wakefield (1989:125-126) ecumenical spirituality expresses the common life shared by Christians regardless of separation of their churches. It is recognition that in baptism and commitment to Christ, Christians are brought into membership of the church. Here Christian religions seem to be included while indigenous African religions are excluded. Hence the writer emphasises the complementarity of both.

The notion of 'ecumenism' is thus applied in the strict and broadest sense since it is inclusive of those devoted and committed to the theological depth of particular religions and those who hold instantaneous or consecutive religious beliefs constantly at their disposal as they move from one funeral gathering to another. This salient attribute of the burial society community cannot be ignored. In the context of this paper, the concept is used in a very wide sense, firstly, to bring together traditional religions, African independent churches,

and diverse traditional Christian religions. Secondly, the concept is used in the broader context of multiple sources of distress in contemporary Tswana society. Third, as has already been alluded to, crisis in living conditions in general reflects the crisis of economic development and in particular a moral crisis of death and social deprivation (poverty, hunger, ill-health). Given the complexity of death, burial societies thus endeavour to reconstitute institutional and social relations with pastors from various churches, with individual households and community leaders, and by participating in other civic religious groups (church related welfare committees and women's church groups such as church choirs, prayer groups, mother's unions, and so on) (Ngwenya forthcoming).

What is apparent in the context of burial society 'civil ecumenism' is a sense first, of heightened awareness that the very social fibre of Tswana wellness is in a precarious state and with increasing vulnerability to gratuitous loss of human life. Second, that contrary to 'compassion fatigue' (avoidance of confrontation with reality) in which people have stopped caring for themselves and for others, burial societies have provided a common practice arena that seems to prompt an ethos of caring and more, not less, social engagement to ease the burden of loss. In this sense, human life is seen as less of a 'throwaway' and as more dignified and indispensable.

In the context of everyday/every-night experiences of multiple sources of distress (HIV/AIDS being but one among many) and religious pluralism, women in burial societies deploy and translate the 'Word' (*lefoko*) of God from the Holy Bible to make justificatory claims regarding what they do in order to empower themselves. *Seaparo* is thus seen as a constant source of courage, which enables the bearer to confront tasks and challenges without hesitation or fear of danger (Psalm 91 and 121, Hebrews 13: 5,6 and Ephesians 6: 10-18). *Seaparo* stands as a personified armour of God that empowers (*nonotsha*) and a shield (*thebe*) of protection against adversaries (Isaiah 52:1 or Isaiah 41: 10). Women see themselves as providers of necessary relief in time of affliction (II Corinthians 12: 8-10; and Hebrew 12: 3-13), and as a source of comfort (*gomotsa*) and compassion during times of distress and loneliness (Hebrews 13:5-6 and Isaiah 41:10). Furthermore, *seaparo* transforms the dis-empowering ugliness and hopelessness of death and beautifully bestows power and authority of deliverance and hope upon the messenger. In a nutshell, as a ritual artifact, *seaparo* not only empowers, but is also a garb that socially transforms and differentiates the mundane from the extra-ordinary, those with authority from those without, bravery from cowardice, courage from fear, strength from weakness, sheep from wolves, responsibility from callousness and so on. By the end of the *kapeso* ceremony, women have been subjected to an elaborate process of transformation from ordinary everyday women to extra-ordinary 'women of the cloth' (*basadi ba seaparo*) authorised to carry

out a specific civic duty of delivering a specific public good in a given cultural context.

In general, various sources give contradictory statistical information regarding what proportion of the population adheres to different forms of religious affiliations in Botswana. Amanze (1994) suggests that only 30 percent of the population is Christian (including African Independent Churches). Some Internet sources suggest that only 15 percent of Botswana are Christian and the remaining 85 percent adhere to traditional religions, others split the population equally as 50 percent Christian and 50 percent indigenous. It is not within the scope of this paper to delve into this seeming ambivalence at a societal level, but there is an apparent overlap between Christian and indigenous African religions which has been documented in other studies. In Africa, spiritual churches combine Protestant Christian beliefs and indigenous African religious practices such as rituals of healing. The processes of blending Christian beliefs and African religions have been invariably referred to as 'enculturation' (Hillman 1993; Parratt 1991, 1995; Paris, 1993). In South Africa, Thomas's (1999, 1994) study of St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission in Cape Town, for example, suggests that members of this church incorporate rituals of healing in African religions and Protestant Christianity. The rituals of healing blend worldviews to form a cosmology that helps people live and counteract negative effects of everyday challenges of poverty, unemployment, violence, and many other social stressors in a supportive community.

However, while it may be that a significant proportion of Botswana subscribe to indigenous African religious beliefs, it is important to note that several state-sanctioned practices tend to buttress the portrayal of a view that Christianity is the 'dominant' religion in Botswana. Officially, Botswana follows a Christian calendar, the Gregorian calendar to be specific, which allows observances of Christian holidays (although there is no public holiday to commemorate indigenous religions). Also, Christian symbols are found in public places, such as the display of the cross in schools, government buildings, and graveyards. In fact, the Botswana Government invariably funds religious institutions especially in the field of health and education, and initiates legislation affecting particular religious and moral teachings (seen as rights of individuals to free assembly, worship, and expression). Official business often starts with a Christian prayer. However, officialised Christianity only partially accounts for religious plurality in Botswana and obscures, rather than clarifies, the medley of religious practices in the country.

Overall, regardless of official status of any given religion in Botswana, the cultural context in which death predominates dictates collaborative effort across religious affiliations. Implicitly or explicitly, burial societies have incorporated officially sanctioned Christian expectations in their practices without necessarily subscribing to any specific belief system. By appropriating the religious context of death in general and Protestant eschatology in particular,



women empower themselves to carry what they perceive as a public service to their respective communities.

The concept of power, as already indicated in the introduction of this paper, is seen as the transforming capacity of organised social action (in this case the collective power of women in burial societies to influence the course of events in their lives) and self-empowerment as a multifaceted process on various levels. At a personal level, *seaparo* enables individual women to gain a sense of control over their lives; the process makes each person feel worthy by being able to make a difference in other peoples lives. As the writer alluded in the introduction, personal empowerment embodies a sense of competence, mastery, strength, and ability to effect change.

At the structural level, *seaparo* enables women in burial societies to have access to resources and opportunities and to expand competencies (organisational, oratory performance, leadership, networking, and referral skills). While in some contexts, *seaparo* could be perceived as a badge of oppression, under conditions of social affliction, *seaparo* marks women's advancement towards enlisting community resources and redefining gendered social responsibility, community building and participation, assertion of dignity, and resistance to dehumanising institutional power relations. Since clothes are imbued with cultural and political meanings, women's *seaparo* is not peripheral to gender struggles for recognition of a public service rendered within asymmetrical power relations.

At the level of process, the ceremonial activities that mark the event unleash a process of self-empowerment in that women build up and put into action organised responses to a particular crisis in living conditions that affects their lives. Here the process of *kapeso* gives us a perspective on social realities of living with the dead and dying every day. The process connects women in burial societies and in so doing they are able to challenge gender relations. Gendered experiences between women and men vary and both genders are aware of the changing world around them and act on the basis of this awareness.

On the one hand, burial societies see themselves as groups officially recognised by law. They are thus concerned with the normative aspects of the law that impinge upon women's creativity. *Seaparo* reconstitutes this dynamism in the sense that the process brings together multiple voices of women (and men) to a participatory social process. The diverse voices, on some issues, often collide, and on others strike a compromise. The event illustrates the subtle ways in which burial societies mark themselves as a distinct community and, conversely how the groups are being made to recreate new group identities for themselves.

From the discussion in the above section, it is clear that *kapeso* is gendered socio-cultural process that produces gendered consciousness as manifest in a choice of ritual object of power and a particular dress code for public presentation. Through the process, women in burial societies carve out an 'enabling

niche' in the public arena to dispense emergency financial relief to avert the detrimental consequences of social affliction. Furthermore, the gendered construction of symbolic images through *kapeso* process expresses, reinforces or sometimes opposes divisions between women and men.

The gendered symbolic-expressive event and processes of *kapeso* enlist different sources of power (colour coded dress, bible, song, dance, gestures and so on) for women in ways that have practical implications for gender relations outside practices of a burial society. The last section looks at specific ways in which the redefines gender relations and Tswana humanism, *botho*.

## 5. Social Practice Implications: Redefining Gender Relations and Tswana Humanism (*botho*)

### a) *Challenging the authority of pastors and redefining institutional and gender relations*

Gender is the production of gendered social structures (in this case the burial society as a social institution), interactions between women and men, between women and women, and between men and men. During these gendered encounters, women take advantage of the opportunity to organise and mobilise resources for purposes chosen by them, and to work out strategies they deem appropriate to authorise the disbursement of these resources to households in need. Conceptions of gender relations thus must explore tensions and possibilities among social and institutional relations among women, and between women and men, as necessary aspect of social practice. As Jane Flax (1990: 44) writes:

Gender relations as an analytical category is meant to capture a complex set of social processes. Gender, both as an analytic category and as a social process, is relational. That is, gender relations are complex and unstable processes constituted by and through inter-related parts. These parts are interdependent, that is, each part can have no meaning or existence without the others.

Thus gender, as social relations, can be understood in complex ways. It refers to the content of the relationships and the manner in which they are constructed. That is, meanings of gender are maintained and challenged through social practices of social actors who engage with each other and the institutions in which they are involved. In other words, the content of gender relations is a lived experience that is arrived at through everyday life activities of authentic people working within actual historical circumstances.

During the process of *kapeso*, women find new positions (among themselves and between themselves and men), which they actively utilise and to which they give new meanings. *Kapeso*, implicitly or explicitly, poses a challenge among women on the one hand, and between women and men on the other regarding who is authorised to proclaim the Word of God, to whom, where, when, and for what purpose. Context and appropriateness of religious

and cultural practices in a given social setting are thus paramount during *kapeso*. Through *seaparo*, women contest the authority of priests as sole purveyors of a moral social order. *Seaparo* gives them a moral high ground and proves women to be adept at translating and contextualising Protestant Christian and indigenous religious symbols and practices in ways that fortify a 'newly' marked sense of social identity and gendered role performance.

During *kapeso*, women juxtapose themselves as women of the garb (*bomme ba seaparo*) vis-à-vis pastors, *men of the cloth*. They contend that the role of pastors, as men of the cloth, is the care of the *soul of a dead body* and that of women of the garb in burial societies is to care for the 'exposed' flesh of the *dead body* by 'dressing it' and protecting it from public humiliation. In practical terms this implies providing both material and non-material support in ways that restore dignity and humanity to the deceased and their bereaved families.

Women do not conceive *seaparo* as inciting animosity among churches because, unlike churches, they say that burial societies have no bounded constituencies and territorial claims to make or protect. Emergency relief is not about religious patronage, but a service to a more open household audience that does not necessarily contest the goals of burial societies. Burial societies feed the hungry gathered at a funeral; pastors cannot feed the hungry with the 'Word' from the Bible. The *kapeso* event and processes make burial societies 'well known in the community' and acknowledged as a force to be reckoned with.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that Judeo-Christian rituals are redeployed for elaborating new sensibilities. Pastors are forced to acknowledge and accommodate the emerging and tenuous authority women have imposed on them. Women also derive the high moral ground from the social power of sheer numbers. Pastors, they argue, are aware of the centrality of women at all levels of the funeral processes. Clearly, the concept of 'woman' defines a network of cultural and social relations and particular social positions that are relative to constantly shifting contexts (economic, cultural, and political). Through *kapeso*, women use their positions to straddle shifting contexts of living with the dying and dead and authorise new gendered social roles and identities. As such the ritual processes of *kapeso* are not merely a reproduction of existing order, but also the reinvention of religious and cultural beliefs in everyday life. What the church perceives as important for priests, the burial societies see as important for women.

#### b) *Asserting Women's Social Power in Everyday Life*

During unstructured interviews, female respondents contended that Tswana women have multiple roles to which they are accountable, and that, in any given community event, women constitute the majority (in civic organisations, as church goers, and as care-givers of the aged, children, the sick, the dying, and

the dead). They further pointed out that with so many people dying, pastors are unable to cope with the demand to conduct funeral services; as such, it was not uncommon to find a funeral service run by women from burial societies. Furthermore, these women conduct sermons during pre-burial prayers, they lead singing and dramatise the art of public speaking when eulogising or preaching during the funeral vigil (*tebelelo*). They also display acute organisational and leadership skills in mobilising and deploying resources from a range of sources, and exhibit competency in persuasion and bargaining with various institutions.

Women's confidence in explicating biblical knowledge during *kapeso* therefore cannot be divorced from the assertion of their social power in other public domains of caring labour (for example, feeding the healthy, sick and dying and cleaning dead bodies), task maintenance in religious worship and funeral resource mobilisation. Social power in this context is understood not in terms of agency over others but, rather, as the transforming capacity of organised action. In the process of transforming organised action, women empower themselves as a legitimate force to be reckoned with.

Women also see themselves as having the ability, through *seaparo*, to bring order to a chaotic situation in funerals. As one respondent in Ramotswa pointed out, the styles of dress in funerals have become 'too bizarre' since mourners come dressed in elaborate regalia like 'peacocks' on a catwalk. It is common sense, some women say, to figure out what are acceptable and unacceptable ways of dressing for social occasions. They contend that the hat a person wears says a lot about what they do and how they do it. Disagreeable colours thus offend the sombre mood of the funeral process and cause public embarrassment. Funerals, they contend, must epitomise order, discipline, sobriety, dignity, coordination, and respect. *Seaparo* serves as a corrective that differentiates the orderly conduct and dignity of a funeral from the intemperate behavior of mourners.

Other members of burial societies argue that, to be taken seriously in society as a women's movement (*mokgatho*), their members have to take themselves seriously. Their physical appearance in the provision of direct financial relief affirms their commitment to achieving stated goals and facilitates creation of reciprocal working relations with key institutions (such as family-kin, religion groups, and chiefs). Formation of loose alliances between burial societies and bereaved households, for instance, is demonstrated when the latter are invited by the former to participate in post-burial ceremonials such as 'unveiling' of a tombstone or 'washing clothes' of the deceased. These post-burial events are intimate moments (which are more relaxed and friendly and less conflict ridden and tense) and are not open to the public. The holistic view of cultural, moral, and spiritual dimensions of the provision of emergency relief, and the ethos of solidarity and reciprocity, become evident. This includes working with contradictions as well as concurrence to generate enabling niches.

*Kapeso* brings together multiple voices into a participatory social process of webs of power linked to the nation-state, the civil society and the wider world. The cooperative endeavour between these institutions presupposes gendered cues between the actors that identify the roles that they play in the funeral process. Dress and other cultural symbols may have many meanings, but meanings emerge out of the context in which they are used, and have both intended and unintended outcomes for those that are clothed for the occasion and those that are not.

At a personal level, *seaparo* confers human dignity between the individual self and the dead body. At community and institutional level, the process promotes strong community bonds and solidarity across religious denominations and traditional institutions such as chiefs and households. In this situation, all those with a stake in the process strive to achieve what is feasible and vouched for as acceptable standards of civility. It is therefore not surprising that in the villages, chiefs constantly urge villagers to join burial societies since these groups embody concrete values of compassion, primacy of human dignity, and Tswana humanism (*botho*).

### c) *Practice of Tswana Humanism – ‘Botho’*

For most African societies, *botho* (for Sotho-Tswana) and *ubuntu* (for Nguni speaking) peoples of southern Africa, serve as a spiritual foundation that has a unifying worldview or vision. Botswana’s development principles espouse the notion of *botho* (Government of Botswana, Vision 2016), and the country’s democratic principles are captured in the maxim that kgosi *ke kgosi ka batho*, ‘a king is a king through people’. Both permeate social interactions in daily life in that *motho ke motho ka batho* (‘a person is a person through other persons’).

However, it has been pointed out that, for a Westerner, the notion that ‘a person is a person through other persons’ has no obvious religious connotations, but rather points to a general appeal to treat others with respect (Prinsloo, 1995, 1997). In the African context, the maxim has a deeply religious meaning and is key to understanding the Tswana sense of *spirituality* that accords basic respect, human dignity, dialogue and compassion to others. On the other hand, Western Humanism tends to underestimate or even denies the importance of religious beliefs (Ndaba; 1994, Brookryk, 1995). African humanism or *botho* implies a deep respect and regard for religious beliefs and practices (Teffo, 1994). The aphorism can be interpreted as both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It describes a human being as ‘being-with others’ and prescribes what ‘being-with-others’ entails.

Social groups such as burial societies adopt a humanist approach to social affliction. Humanity in the African context is basically family and community, with a strong emphasis on religion and its symbolic union with the daily practical needs of people and spiritual entities in the metaphysical world (Oosthuisen, 1991). The etiology of dance circles during *kapeso*, therefore,

could be seen as communicating a powerful message of togetherness and for people to pay attention to what they do, since how they do what they do could either humanise or dehumanise society.

Without a doubt, a very complex synthesis of African and Christian spirituality is apparent during *kapeso*. Burial society intervention simultaneously heals conditions of social affliction and renews mutual relationships expressed as a newness of life in Christ. The very practicality of 'civil ecumenism' shapes the role of individuals and social groups to live up to social obligation to kin and family. In practice, a humanist approach to spirituality is checked against moral obligation to kin and family rather than parochial commitment to some religious sect. Social affliction thus cultivates resiliency, that is, the capacity to survive, transform debilitating relationships, and perform some reciprocal societal functions against all odds. *Botho* translates social relations from despair and isolation to caring and solidarity in the face of adversity. As one respondent in Ramotswa succinctly pointed out, 'when women sing and dance in *seaparo*, they look nice and feel good, and that, in the shadow of death, brings life to people'.

By adopting a specific dress code as a mechanism through which to carve out a niche and sustain that advantage, women's burial societies pursue a less confrontational course of social action with moderate but achievable objectives (provision of timely financial relief to households in distress). In practice, their strategy is less likely to be considered a threat to formal institutions (especially religion and the state). The choice of balancing, on the one hand, agency and autonomy, and, on the other, social change and resiliency, is political. The approach makes it difficult for the ideological powers in these institutions to co-opt or curtail their activities.

### Summary and Conclusion

Death coalesces macro and micro processes of social change and has different consequences for social participation for women and men. In Botswana, as elsewhere in Africa, funerals serve as markers of social inequalities in society, in terms of access to resources, social participation, and gendered roles. In the micro world of Goffman (1959), all roles involve situated performances. Roles emerge in the encounters, and are neither exhaustive nor necessarily the same. Social drama brings in actual processes of creating a relatively independent or emergent cultural form, although they may describe meaning as something imposed.

Although burial societies may not have an autonomous impact on redefining gender relations, their practices can serve to legitimise, shape, redefine and reinforce prevailing understanding of these relations. Through *kapeso*, burial societies produce their own legitimising practices, and adopt a pragmatic stance of how things should be done, which symbols are invoked, in what context, and how these symbols are interpreted. The cultural analysis of organ-

ised activities of burial societies thus has to focus on transient or loose social and institutional relations. The redefinition of these relations within the framework of burial societies practices gives us insight into the modes of everyday activity that are implicated in broad patterns of gender and institutional relations.

*Kapeso* process embodies the pragmatism of values of civil ecumenism, compassion, and humanism (*botho*). During the process, women create their own common understandings around death, regardless of imposed constraints in the larger political economy. Through the social process of organising emergency relief, new ideas, experiences, meanings, and situated gender roles emerge in the specific social encounters in which burial societies find themselves involved.

## Notes

1. Matumo, 1997. *Setswana/English Dictionary*.
2. Meaning their capacity to do things, to influence social events, mediate social situations, and learn from specific arenas of social practice.
3. Cultural models are not necessarily in the consciousness of actors. Rather, they form a background against which actors live and act out their everyday lives.
4. Douglas (1966), following Durkheim, stresses the moral aspects of culture (as opposed to psychological functioning of individuals) especially the necessity of having predictable behaviour in order for social interaction is to be possible.
5. Dressing the dead among the Tswana also includes making the grave a domicile by providing the dead with comforts (ornaments, flowers, pots, 'shades') to ease their transition to another world. Also, it is presumed that some parts of the soul remain in the cadaver.
6. Seen here as the capacity to function and use survival skills to perform well in some contexts. This also includes the capacity to transform dysfunctional relationships or terrible experiences into something that has meaning for self and others.
7. Such classification, however, is unwarranted. Studies in women's grassroots organisations elsewhere suggest that women's welfare associations contribute differently to increasing community participation, strengthening local democracy. They promote new systems of morality, integrate and connect economic and social needs, and can also easily move from the personal to the political, or from specific practical needs to general practice goals of social justice (Ackelsberg, 1988; Gittel & Vidal, 1998; Naples, 1998; Gittel, et al, 2000).
8. Government industrial class workers have uniforms which are supplied to them by the employers, most as protective clothing. Government also issues uniforms to the police and the army. In both cases, the recipients have no voice in the selection of colour, design, and emblems that go with the uniforms. These variations have to do with hierarchy and rank in the bureaucratic structures. On the other hand, private and parastatal institutions such as Botswana Telecommunications, Debswana, Botswana Diamond Valuation, commercial banks, and so on supply

their employees with uniforms. They buy the uniforms for the workers, but management selects the design. The reasons for 'uniforming' the workers vary from security reasons (such as in the case of the diamond industry), to subtle ways of discouraging certain styles of dress (such as wearing of pants in public places) without evoking protest from women; and, for individual workers, a uniform is a way of minimising the ever-increasing expenditure on clothing.

9. The financial cost of having *seaparo* is seen as an additional cost that is not included in monthly subscriptions to the emergency relief fund.
10. They are careful not to choose colours that could be associated with any political party. For example, they avoid red and black because they are associated with the Botswana Democratic Party (the political party in power). They also avoid mixing mustard and green, which are associated with the official opposition party, the Botswana National Front, and other colours that may be associated with trade unions. Within the burial society community itself, some members are active participants in these groups and are nonetheless eager to keep partisan politics out of burial societies.
11. Mortuaries in Gaborone have also appropriated these colours. In an interview with a manager of one mortuary, for instance, I found that it was women who did the tailoring of the funeral garb, while men did the 'receiving, cleaning and storage' of the corpse.
12. Colours, blue and green in southern Africa, appear to be linked with regenerative powers; blue (*budutu*) is associated with development and maturation, and is the colour of the rain; green (*botala*) indicates points of growth, and grey is something ripened. Freshness and growth connote vegetable fecundity, and socially, the power to 'grow others' (Comaroff, 1985).
13. Although there are government appointed chiefs and *kgotla* in urban settings, burial societies hardly ever involve them in their undertakings. Chiefs from respective villages are most likely to be invited.
14. The criteria for selection include a proven track record of the group, location, familiarity with management style, respectability in the community, assessment of knowledge and competency in burial society concerns, leadership astuteness, and so on.
15. Some groups institute *mapodisi* (police) for purposes of keeping an eye on the unbecoming behaviors of members. Depending on the size of each group, about three to four members are appointed as police officers for the group. In some villages such as Molepolole, *mapodisi* have their own specially designed *seaparo* with appropriate differentiating emblems of rank and seniority. Generally, the duty of *mapodisi* is to enforce 'law and order' by monitoring appropriate behaviour for example, to ensure that the dress code is adhered to during monthly meetings, prayer meetings, funeral wakes and burials, fundraising drives. They also to impose fines on late comers, unexcused absences, keep an eye on the treasurer (*motshara madi*) and secretary (*mokwaledi*) to prevent financial mismanagement.
16. A Weberian (1963) outlook on religion suggests three levels. The theological doctrine (which provides guidance for living a moral life consistent with religious conceptualisation); the practical religion (as a product of its time – of a social



group with its own social needs, the interaction between the founding doctrine and the political, economic and socio-cultural conditions) and the practical religion of the converted (as religion spreads it interacts with the cultural life of the new community, and people transform it to meet their needs and demands as they are being influenced by contemporary social conditions). All three levels exist simultaneously and symbols that are created take their own life even if the influencing socio-economic conditions are gone. Weberian religious values are static since they are transferred in like form from one economic and political milieu to another and his approach has since been revised wherein religious values are seen as points of conversation which are debated (see Laitin, 1986).

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