


# Patriarchal nature of mourning from an African perspective

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It is common in African culture for a widow to wear black or navy clothes as a sign of mourning her husband upon his death. Widows in Africa are expected to mourn for a certain period. In South Africa, most African ethnic groups expect them to mourn for a period of 12 months. Vows in the western culture state 'until death do us part', but this is not the case in the African traditions. A widow is still considered married even after the death of her husband. She must undergo mourning rituals as a widow to mourn her husband. The article extensively analysed the general processes that African families undergo after the death of a family member. It is important to note that most African traditions surrounding death are stricter for women than for men. This is because women undergo many rituals before they are considered clean enough to re-marry. This is the opposite for men as they have a shorter mourning period with less rituals. In this regard, the mourning process in African countries is governed significantly by patriarchal ideologies.

**Contribution:** The main aim of this article is to effectively analyse the mourning process in most African countries and how all the processes are evidently a by-product of the patriarchal nature of the societies.

**Keywords:** Africans; widows; rituals; mourning; practical; men; practices; period.

## Introduction

Mourning the deceased is a worldwide practice. Even though mourning differs from culture to culture and from one ethnic group to another, there are similarities in the way Africans mourn the dead. Mourning is facilitated religiously and culturally in different civilisations, and usually, it involves the fundamentals of certain beliefs and customs, spiritual practices and an expectation of certain conduct that symbolises mourning (George 2012:5). Kotze (2012:1) argues that ritual recognises the potency disorder that 'In the disorder of the mind, in dreams, faints and frenzies, ritual expects to find powers and truths which cannot be reached by conscious effort'.

According to Manala (2015:1), challenges faced by widows are not given sufficient attention. Manala (2015:1) further argues that contemporary scholarship seems reluctant when reflecting on African widowhood rites and the consequences attached to them. Mourning rituals are not new in Africa; it has been part of the African culture throughout history. In her PhD thesis titled *Liturgical Inculturation for Tsonga Widows*, the researcher studied Tsonga mourning rituals. During her study, she discovered the similarities between African traditions (Khosha-Nkatini 2020). Matthew (2015:137) asserts that there is a close link between how Africa values women and how Africans view marriage. Culture in Africa has always been male-dominated and continues to oppress women, especially widows who are mistreated by their own in-laws in the name of honouring and observing tradition.

## Background of widowhood in Africa

According to Olukayode (2015:68), the travails of a widow begin immediately when her husband is declared dead; she is immediately made to go through various traditional rites, disregarding her pain and process of grieving. Africans argue that those rituals are meant to protect widows and not to harm them; however, some of these practices and beliefs are wicked and dehumanise the very essence of their womanhood. During this period, the woman is isolated from the outside world and her mobile phone is immediately given to a close relative who will answer her mobile phone on her behalf.

**Note:** Special Collection: Women Theologies, sub-edited by Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Tanya van Wyk (University of Pretoria).

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The woman is considered as being unclean after the death of her husband. Women who have had their partners pass away are victimised in most African cultures (Yama 2010). In the Igbo culture, a woman whose husband recently passed away is not allowed to interact with other people. She is instructed not to speak to anyone except with other fellow widows. She is not supposed to respond even when she is greeted as she is viewed as still intricately linked to her husband's spirit. She is also not expected to leave the room where her deceased husband's body is in while funeral arrangements are made. They provide her with a stick to chase away the flies from her husband's body. The widow will stay in the room until the day of her husband's burial (Elliott 2011:9).

Baloyi (2014:7) states that when her husband dies, the widow is expected to cry loudly for the community to hear her. In contrast, the husband is not expected to be seen crying. The mourning period is also much shorter for the widower. The widows are expected to mourn for a year while the husband mourns only for 28 days. The husband can proceed with his life after these 28 days, even proceeding to go to work. However, the woman is not expected to work or touch any crops until a year has passed (Kotzé 2012:22). This shows significantly how the mourning process in Africa is designed to benefit men, while the women are oppressed as a direct result of their gender.

According to Fasoranti (2014:3), widowhood is the result of the death of a husband followed by grieving. Fasoranti (2014:13) defines grief as a complex emotional reaction that arises from losing a spouse and the attendant difficulties and distress that come with the loss. Olukayode (2015:67) adds that when a spouse dies, the surviving partner is given a new status; if a woman loses her husband, she takes the status of a widow; and if she dies, her husband becomes a widower. The loss of a loved one is a traumatic experience for most people; losing a partner is an experience better imagined than lived. Some argue that it is downgrading when widows are subjected to untold hardship and maltreated by their in-laws and by society in general. Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2015:71) argues that cultural prejudices and prejudices against women are deep-rooted.

Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2015:71) referred to the prejudices among widowhood practices that have consistently impinged on the dignity and rights of women in diverse cultures in Africa. Throughout the years, some scholars have viewed African mourning rituals as dehumanising. In the West, a woman who has lost her spouse is referred to as a widow; but in the African culture, she is viewed as a widow who requires protection while she grieves for her husband. According to Bazeley (2013:30), who supports this claim, widows are seen as cursed and unlucky, and every avoidance behaviour is undertaken to prevent others from being 'touched' by death. In Ghana, the traditional purification of widows may include having sex with predetermined people who may be a stranger one meets on the road. To prevent any damage to the widowed person's or widower's sexual organs, this is done. When a man loses his wife, he is not expected to go through the

cleansing ritual of having a woman identified to have sex with him to purify him.

## Ethnography and literature review methodology

The research method that was adopted by the researcher is the qualitative research methodology. To collect data for qualitative research, the researcher may use participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, natural environment recordings, documents, case studies and artefacts (Manala 2015:8). Most of the data are not numerical. Ethnography, grounded theory, discourse analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis are examples of qualitative approaches. Sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, social work and educational research have all employed qualitative research methodologies. Researchers that use qualitative methods examine how people perceive their social world. The researcher used literature relating to their area of interest for this study. It is important to note that the occurrences in most of the articles are related to the researcher's own subjective experiences (Elliott 2011:12). This created an easier interpretation of events as the researcher has witnessed most of the activities within their own communities.

Even though the researcher has never been a widow, she is an African woman with more than 10 years of experience as a minister of the Word and has cared for widows, whether as a minister or an African woman in an African community. Subjective experiences played a significant role in the researcher's choice of study. According to Bazeley (2013:4), researchers have an influence on readers and tend to have an impact on others based on how they interpret what they see, hear and read. According to Matthew (2015:17), it is crucial that a step in the auto-ethnography approach allows an understanding of the target culture for both those who are a part of it and those who are not. For this study, the researcher combined ethnography with a literature review. When conducting auto-ethnography, researchers choose what to write about in hindsight, according to Ellis (2011:8). Epiphanies result from or are made feasible by belonging to a certain culture or having a specific cultural identity. According to Durojaye (2013:128–129), the literature is pertinent to this study because it aims to summarise existing information and address the following questions: '[t]o generate and refine one's ideas; and [t]o provide a critical review which demonstrates awareness of the current state of knowledge in the subject [and which] shows the strength and limitation, mission, and bias.'

Therefore, this provides a critical review with demonstrations of the African perspective on mourning within the contents of the literature review.

## Practical theology as a critical theory for African widows

According to Van Akol (2011:85), theories and facts interact with one another and change one another. Grimes (2014:85)

adduces that if practical theology is to have any impact on social practice, it must be a critical philosophy of religion. To support this, Wepener (2014:6) contends that a particular concept of liturgical inculturation is required in sub-Saharan Africa. With the knowledge that it must be pertinent to the context when confronting African cultural realities, a uniquely African worldview, and challenging socio-political liberation challenges, this requirement may be met.

According to Ntuli (2012:25), religion is just one facet of life on Earth, along with politics, economics and society. The religious dimensions of these things are the focus of theology. Despite theology's focus on religious matters, the research contended that it cannot disregard other factors that relate to a person's beliefs and behaviours, in this case, cultural ritual practices. Therefore, the goal of practical theology should be to aid in understanding human experiences so that persons can be cared for. These points are in the direction of a need for a contextual approach in practical theology.

Yama (2010:58) claims that it is crucial for a person to be buried properly in African culture. To enter the spiritual realm properly, all funeral rites must be conducted. The deceased's 'passing' from one stage of life to another is influenced by the immediate and extended family. When someone passes away, it is thought that they have joined those family members who died before them. There is not only a spiritual connection, but also a grave link. It is crucial that people get interred close to their ancestors. In Zulu culture, an ox or a goat may be sacrificed following a ceremonial burial, depending on the family's financial situation to 'cleanse the hands' of those who had helped with the burial and to clear them of contamination. According to Ntuli (2012), neighbours and friends are incredibly supportive during the period of bereavement.

They welcome friends and family who have travelled great distances to pay their last respects inside their homes. Most of the time, those close to the bereaved family get along well with one another. Neighbours spend days with the grieving, assisting them with tasks like caring for those who came to the funeral, cooking and welcoming mourners (Ntuli 2012). Idialu (2012:74) notes that death is viewed in Zulu culture as a highly heightened kind of contamination that arises from the body itself and is associated with hazards, safety measures and burial ceremonies. Relatives of the dead are thought to be not only in a position of danger themselves and in need for unification but also a source of contamination to outsiders.

One cannot simply transport African rituals to Europe, or vice versa. To affirm this, Senn (2016:17) argues the following about culture:

- 'Cultural is not the opposite of nature; one does not have the natural man first and then the cultural man.
- Human beings create culture, but the opposite is also true: human beings are created as humans by culture.

- No one culture has absolute value, and every culture is only relative.
- Symbols play a decisive role in culture.
- Every culture is exposed to the danger of becoming manipulative, this danger is related to the question of how power is distributed.'

According to Barnard, Cilliers and Wepener et al. (2014:39), it is important to examine liturgical rituals in the context of their dual-cultural and anthropological contexts, as well as their radical a-center ways. Culture is the direct and broader contexts in which liturgical rituals are performed, on the one hand, and people, that is, the participants or performers of that ritual, on the other hand, condition the performance, its shape, its look and its sound, according to Barnard et al. (2014:39).

## Death rituals in the African context

The researcher's observations suggest that funeral and mourning rituals in African culture are intended to purify mourners rather than do harm. To a Westerner, this could appear strange or fictitious, but to the African community, it holds immense importance. According to Olasinde, whereas funerals are often a private family matter in the West following a death, they are a big societal event in Nigeria, especially for funerals of elders (2012:2). Not only Nigeria but all of Africa is covered by this. For most Africans, if not all, funerals are important occasions, and a huge audience is essential. Olasinde (2012:2) defines bereavement as an emotional reaction to the passing on of a relative or a friend.

In the African culture, a widow's hair is frequently shaved off as a sign of her grieving. Several people claim that this is done to make the widow appear unappealing to men. However, others contend that a widow's decision to shave her hair is an indication of how deeply she is mourning her late spouse. According to Setsiba (2012:3), these mourning practices in most Farina cultures involve, among other things, purification, funeral ceremonies, hair removal, animal killing, use of black clothing and a time limit on social activities.

It is significant to mention that the deceased are respected in Africa, where they are believed to guard the family in the hereafter, according to Grimes (2014:8). In this sense, the families are responsible for making sure that all procedures are followed appropriately when a loved one passes away. This is done to prevent the deceased from becoming wandering spirits and to guarantee that they can rest in peace. The wife of a deceased husband is supposed to tie a cloth over him in the Igbo culture as a sign that her period of grieving has begun. The oldest ladies in the community wash and dry the deceased three times. This demonstrates how tightly connected all rites are in African civilisation after death with the women (Bazeley 2013:14). The widows are viewed as unclean and must partake in a mourning period which is up to 12 months. In this given period, they are viewed as unclean and a danger to other men in the society.

George (2012:15) explains that the deceased's furniture, chairs and home are stored until all the ceremonies are complete among the Ashanti ethnic group of Ghana. After being stored, the deceased's clothes are only dispersed after the funeral. After some time has passed, a cleaning ceremony is performed on the home and the family members to clear any potential negative energy. However, it is crucial to remember that in African society, women are subject to tougher demands. According to widely held belief, a lady who becomes a widow is dirty and must undergo a washing ritual. The men, however, are not expected to mourn for long and they can remarry a few months after, Ntuli (2012:5).

## African family rituals after death

Families often bury the deceased soon after death in the northern African nations. This region has a major Islamic impact on their burial customs. According to Elliott (2011:7), it is customary in most African nations to view the deceased one last time before burial. The society does not allow anybody to view or open the casket once the burial commences. Additionally, they will not allow an autopsy or a cremation unless it is essential to prepare the body for the afterlife. The African cultures, values, customs and indigenous faiths influence significantly burial and death ceremonies. They practise the African philosophy of life after death which alludes to the importance and function of the departed ancestor. The introduction of Christianity, Islam and some contemporary developments resulted in the evolution of rituals. It is believed that a departed person's spirit may remain within the realm of the living and create trouble if their body is not properly buried. Witches, sorcerers and those who are undeserving of it may also not have a decent funeral (Manala 2015:4). They are, therefore, denied the honour of belonging to the ancestors' community, a location that is highly treasured in African traditions.

The African continent has many ethnic groups or ethnic groupings. The continent has numerous countries and indigenous faiths that have their variants of funeral rites and procedures (George 2012:9). However, because of common traditional beliefs towards the deceased and respect for the ancestors, the procedures practised on the continent are mostly similar. The first step after death in Africa is to prepare the home for guests who arrive to offer their condolences as soon as a person passes away. Home rituals frequently involve the following, according to the Macmillan Encyclopaedia of Death and Dying reference:

- Making sure that all images are facing the wall and concealing any windows, mirrors or other reflective surfaces to prevent the deceased from seeing themselves. The windows in South Africa are covered in ash.
- Taking the deceased person's bed out of the bedroom.
- Organising a vigil at the family's residence, to which the entire neighbourhood is invited.

According to Yama (2010:7), there may be loud, unique sobbing as a display of sorrow alongside the family throughout the time leading up to the burial when community

mourners arrive at the residence. According to a Zambian experience, this may be audible at a distance. In addition, food and other materials are gathered, meals are prepared and duties are assigned in order to be ready for the burial.

## African widows and religious praxis

Mourning rituals have been part of African culture throughout history. The origin of these practices are uncertain, so is the sound of the emotions that these widows go through while participating in these historical rituals. Cultures have their perspectives on mourning loved ones. Akol (2011:6) argues that mourning rituals impact on women more than they do on men the world over. African widows are expected to cry for their late husband as a sign of grieving and innocence in the death of her husband. The opposite is expected of men who have lost their wives. They are not expected to cry; as African men, they are expected not to express their grief. If a widow is not seen crying for her husband, she is accused of having a hand in his death or happy that her husband is no more; but, when a man cries for his wife, it is seen as a sign of weakness. Kotzé's (2012:1) observation is that most ministers are not trained in how to support and pastorally care for women who have lost their partners. Kotzé (2012:1) further argues that some do not even know how and where to begin to confront cultural practices such as mourning rituals that are discriminating against widows.

After the funeral, the widows are not allowed to sing, greet anyone in church or even come forward to receive Holy Communion. It is easy to identify widows in most African communities because of the black or navy garment. These views create tension between Christianity and Africanism. One of the challenges in this is giving a critical view without saying one is better than the other or deciding for individuals between what is right and what is wrong based on a researcher's view or belief. According to Durojaye (2013:11), women who are wearing mourning garments are constrained on the bases of traditional laws that confine them in public places, including the church. In fact, in some churches, they are denied access to communion or even occupying the front seats.

As argued by Baloyi (2014:125), rituals are the primary expression of religious praxis. In this regard, it has always offered a normative significance for the reflection of the faith. Ntuli (2012:127) argues that liturgy is a ritual behaviour that is meaningful, and reconstruction of that meaning is a primary goal of liturgical studies. According to Idialu (2012:47), praxis is only reflective in action, and it should not only seek to achieve the ends of such action to assist the validity of both in the light of its guiding vision. Praxis is theory-laden between its included theories as a virtual constituent. It is not just reflective action but also reflective action that is laden with belief.

## African perspective on mourning

According to Senn (2016:16), the general perception of mourning within the African context is that the widow must



follow all the necessary processes. African culture is, therefore, more lenient towards men. In this respect, women are expected to mourn for up to 12 months while only wearing dark-coloured clothing. In this given period, the women are not allowed to pursue a sexual relationship with any man as she is viewed as being unclean. The men in most African societies mourn for an average of about 30 days after which they undergo a ritual and are considered clean thereafter. This is a clear indication of how women practise the mourning process more effectively than men. The general perception is that widows must mourn their husbands as much as possible so that they will not be shunned by society as being responsible for their husband's death (Kotzé 2012:17).

When a man dies, his wife does not only take the status of a widow but also considered to be contaminated from contact with the dead. In most African cultures, there is purification at the end of the mourning period (Manala 2015:9). This involves the widow being washed in a nearby river and having sex with a man identified by her in-laws. This practice in the 21st century does come with risks such as STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and unwanted pregnancy. In addition to the rules she will be given, a widow is not allowed to participate nor contribute anything to any social activities or public gatherings such as weddings, funerals, parties and church services, as they are believed to be contaminated. According to Rosenblatt and Idialu (2012:78), while practising *Ukuzila* [mourning], a widow is not allowed to attend weddings during her mourning period. If she insists on going to such events, she might be suspected of practising witchcraft; guests might also not be comfortable with her presence, so people always avoid her.

Matthew (2015:78), in a study on the experience of widowhood of the Batswana people, quotes a widow: 'The in-laws can frustrate you; they have a lot to say according to our belief the blacks, when the husband dies the wife has contributed, but when the wife dies no, it's normal. If something bad happens to the neighbour, they are accused of it because they are believed to be surrounded by bad luck until the mourning period is officially over and all rituals are done and correctly so'. Some deaths in African culture are not considered to be of natural causes but rather the result of witchcraft; such beliefs might lead to anger and a desire for vengeance. The widow is always the first suspect when her husband dies regardless of the cause of his death. She is often accused of witchcraft and that may cause a gap in a relationship with her in-laws and her sense of safety becomes questionable. She might also be feared by her community as someone who practices witchcraft, and that makes it harder for her to receive support from her in-laws and her own community (Kotzé 2012).

According to Ntuli (2012:136), there is an assumption that witchcraft derives from a particular misfortune, from the intent of someone known to cause suffering and misfortune

to the next person. In this regard, some widows in African cultures participate in mourning rituals to clear their names and to prove their innocence. The burial rituals are considered a necessity to prevent the spirits of the deceased from intruding (Durojaye 2013:8). According to Durojaye (2013:6), widowhood practices are not only for her protection but also to ensure that the link between the dead and the living remains intact. Thus, the period of mourning is accompanied by a series of life events and activities as a sign of respect for the soul of the departed husband. George (2012:192) argues that even though widowhood practices are cultural, some obnoxious rites should be excluded because they are traumatic and devalue women emotionally and psychologically.

Elliott (2011:440) argues that a widow's life is invariably dependent on the decisions of others, particularly the decisions of men, and has proven to create tensions and contradictions in the newly emerging state in the continent. These tensions exist between tradition and modernity, between the individual's autonomy and group solidarity, and between an individual's rights and duties. In certain African cultures, there is a belief that the dead still lives among them; hence, some would use the term 'he has passed on' rather than 'he is dead'. It is believed that only an animal dies but a human being passes on to the land of the ancestors. The relationship between the dead and the living cannot be ended (Yama 2010).

According to Durojaye (2013), African culture is centred on a belief that the dead becomes the ancestor of those that they leave behind. Therefore, they must ensure that all the processes are conducted correctly so that the spirit of the deceased will not wander. In some cultures, all the mirrors in the house are covered so that the dead will not see themselves or find their way back. The property within the house that the deceased lived is removed until all the funeral procedures are finished accordingly. The men will open a hole in the house where the body is expected to depart from the house instead of using the conventional door. This is in a bid to confuse the deceased to not wander back after they are buried (Baloyi 2014). They also travel from the house in a zigzag motion. African culture is centred on a belief in the afterlife which is why it is important for all the processes stated above to be conducted as effectively as possible.

## Patriarchy and mourning

According to Durojaye (2013:2), culture is said to be a significant contributing factor towards the discrimination of women. This is evident by cultural practices such as widow cleaning, son preference and female genital mutilation which are said to instil gender inequality. In this regard, these customs continue to raise an alarm within African nations where women are discriminated against, and men are treated differently. According to Akol (2011:32), it is important to consider certain human rights that can be helpful with regard to women's participation within cultural traditions. When

those rights are recognised, they should be put into action to combat gender-related injustices.

Grimes (2014:36) states that this is a common occurrence for many countries and is not limited to just one in particular. In retrospect, a woman's most unsafe location is often her own house rather than the streets. This means to advance women's rights, one must be willing to take part in changing aspects of life that are typically seen as private. Bazeley (2013) claims that in the Igbo culture of Nigeria, women are forced to lie next to their husbands' body. They also consume the water used to bathe their husbands' dead bodies. In some instances, the widows are blamed and accused of being witches and seen as bad omens. The family assets and homes are destroyed, leaving them destitute. Thereafter, following their husband's passing, the ladies are made to participate in these ruthless rituals as a means of demonstrating their innocence in their husband's death.

According to the general comparison, the woman's suffering after her husband's death serves as proof that she did not curse him. The Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria forbids a woman from working for a year after the death of her spouse. This is because throughout her 12-month period of grieving she is depicted as being unclean (Bazeley 2013:17). They also believe that any crop she touches will not yield a good harvest. If the woman's husband was not wealthy, she would be prone to experiencing much misery during her mourning period. Becoming a widow is a common life experience that most women go through. For most African widows, the death of a husband not only is a time for emotional grieving but also means severe torture and humiliation from family members and in-laws.

According to Ewelukwa (2012:444), burial and mourning customs are believed to be appropriate for several reasons, especially the need to show respect for the deceased. Burial and mourning customs are believed to shield the widow from demonic attacks, and hopefully to inspire the living to conduct good actions. In Yama (2010:22), Keene and Reder state that grief is a person's reaction towards the loss of a loved one or whatever they treasure. Death in this regard unites the past, present, and future which are the three aspects of time. People grieve in diverse ways. This means that even if a given tribe has its own set of rites and ceremonies, there are still grieving stages. In some instances, a funeral might be seen as a theatre where the dead are placated by the living to safeguard the future. According to Akol (2011:6), mourning rituals have a more global influence on women than they do on men.

As a display of sorrow and innocence in her husband's death, African widows are required to grieve for their deceased husbands. Men who have lost their spouses are supposed to behave in the other way Ntuli (2012:15). As African men, they are expected to be tough rather than weep. When a man sobs for his wife, it is viewed as a show of weakness;

meanwhile, if a widow is not seen sobbing for her husband, she is either suspected of having a role in his death or is delighted that he is no longer alive.

## Conclusion

According to Grimes (2014:9), death is a common occurrence globally and how people manage grief is a direct result of their cultural beliefs. It is downgrading when widows are subjected to untold hardship and maltreated by their in-laws and by society in general. The situation can be quite awful; they are mistreated by the people who are supposed to care for them. There might be a set of rites and rituals set for a group of a particular tribe, but there are still mourning processes that individuals go through. Burial can be referred to as a theatre where ancient burial rituals and ceremonies are enacted by the living by appeasing the dead, and this is to ensure the future (Elliott 2011:7). The traumatic experience that widows might face in their cultural practices and the expectation of the community might not always be visible to the caregiver (minister of the Word).

An enculturated liturgy for widows during the mourning period can be a guideline for caregivers. These cultural practices are not always limited to emotional trauma. Sometimes these practices can harm the widow physically (sexual cleansing ritual) and cause her financial harm (expense of the funeral and costs of the unveiling of the tombstone). Baloyi (2017:4) contends that even though the aspects of culture relating to widows' mourning rituals have been part of most African traditions and have long been perceived as an 'integral' part of the lives of most African women, it does not mean that they have dominance over the lives of every person; it is not an incontrovertible gift from God. Therefore, this article argues that even though theology is concerned with the religious aspects, it cannot ignore other aspects that involve a person's beliefs and practices, in this context, African widow cultural ritual practices.

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H.P.K.N. is the sole author of this article.

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## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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