

Ritual Authority in Transition: Funeral Politics and Changing Mourning Practices in Okongo, Northern Namibia

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ABSTRACT:

Funerals are public and relational arenas in which kinship, spiritual responsibility, belonging and political authority are negotiated. This study examined changing mourning practices in Okongo, northern Namibia, with specific attention to lineage-based fire rituals, candle-lighting vigils and the increasingly visible designation of politically or socially prominent persons as 'chief mourners'. A qualitative ethnographic case-study design was used over six months, combining participant observation at 12 funerals, 25 semi-structured interviews, four focus-group discussions and documentary analysis. Data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis informed by decolonial thought, relational approaches to mourning and the concept of thanatopolitics. Four interrelated findings emerged: the continuing moral authority of paternal-lineage elders; generational disagreement over the meaning and legitimacy of candle lighting; the construction of a new ceremonial hierarchy through the chief-mourner role; and concern that state ceremonial power can displace family decision-making. The 2025–2026 litigation concerning the burial of former Zambian president Edgar Lungu is treated only as a contextual legal case illustrating comparable family–state tensions. The study argues that change is better understood as contested ritual translation than as a simple opposition between authentic tradition and foreign modernity. It concludes that culturally plural, consent-based funeral protocols can protect family agency while allowing negotiated religious, customary and public forms to coexist.

Keywords: Aawambo, funerals, Namibia, ritual authority, thanatopolitics.

1. Introduction

Mourning practices organise more than emotion. They assign responsibilities, make kinship publicly visible, connect the living with the deceased and establish who may interpret and represent a death. Comparative scholarship shows that funeral rituals can regulate emotion, sustain social bonds and redistribute obligations among survivors, while also becoming arenas in which status, belonging and political legitimacy

are negotiated (Hobson et al., 2018; Shimane, 2018; Silverman et al., 2021; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2023). Recent African scholarship has sharpened this relational perspective by showing that the aftermath of death cannot be adequately understood through universalised Euro-American models of individual grief alone. Instead, death is embedded in plural ontologies, kinship obligations, religious traditions, material practices and political histories (Freerks, 2024;

Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al., 2025; Pentaris et al., 2026).

This article investigates these negotiations in Okongo, in Namibia's Ohangwena Region. Participants described a funerary order in which the deceased's paternal lineage carries specific ritual responsibilities, including the lighting and maintenance of a fire understood as a link among the deceased, the living and the ancestors. They contrasted this lineage-based practice with candle-lighting vigils, often associated with churches, towns, broadcast media and social media, and with the title 'chief mourner', increasingly attached to prominent political or social figures at public funerals. The central analytical issue is not whether one form is intrinsically traditional and another intrinsically modern, but how each form authorises particular actors, places, symbols and meanings.

1.1 Relational mourning, ritual change and cultural plurality

Ritual scholarship explains why funerals have effects beyond symbolic display. Repetition, shared attention, socially recognised sequences and material signs can create emotional regulation and group connection, but outcomes are never uniform across all mourners (Hobson et al., 2018; Burrell & Selman, 2022). Relational approaches further shift analysis from grief as a private psychological possession towards the reorganisation of family and social life after death (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2023). This is especially relevant in settings where the deceased continues to occupy a moral, ancestral or kinship position. Häberlein's (2024) ethnography in rural Togo, for example, shows that funeral decision-making can redistribute responsibility and social adulthood among descendants. Freeks (2024) similarly emphasises that many African philosophical accounts connect personhood with enduring relations between the living, the past and ancestors, while cautioning against any singular 'African conception' of death.

This caution is important for the present study. Foundational African religious scholarship located death within relations among the living,

the deceased and ancestors (Mbiti, 1969), yet later research demonstrates substantial variation in funeral economies, denominational practices, gendered responsibilities, kinship organisation and political authority (Jindra & Noret, 2011; Nnabuihe, 2023; Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al., 2025). Recent work on Kenya and South Africa also documents how contemporary funerals combine inherited forms with Christian, commercial and political influences, but it warns that decolonisation should not be reduced to the recovery of a supposedly uncontested precolonial template (Baloyi & Musili, 2025). These studies collectively support an analysis of continuity and change without generalising one local practice to 'Africa' as a whole.

1.2 Material forms, mobility and changing funeral publics

Funerary change is historically connected to urbanisation, labour migration, Christianity, commercial funeral services, changing household economies and media circulation. Material forms such as coffins, posters, clothing, photographs, fires, candles and grave orientations are not merely decorative; they can embody claims about identity, kinship and authority. Adotey (2018) demonstrates how funeral posters in Ghana and Togo become sites for negotiating chiefly and kinship relations, while Nnabuihe (2023) shows how funeral materiality in Nigerian cities helps reproduce belonging and ownership. In South Africa, mobility and funeral entrepreneurship have long connected rural and urban deathscapes (Lee, 2011), and pandemic-era restrictions made visible how state rules can interrupt gathering, burial timing and customary responsibilities (Bank & Sharpley, 2020). The common insight is that new forms should be analysed through the relationships they enable, displace or re-rank rather than categorised automatically as authentic or inauthentic.

Namibian scholarship on Aawambo mourning remains limited. Mbenzi (2017) documents coexistence between Oshiwambo and Western-influenced funeral practices and notes the growing association of mourning with prestige and economic status. The present study extends

that discussion by examining mechanisms through which ritual authority is redistributed: control over the lineage fire, the social ownership of candle-lighting events, the public designation of a chief mourner, and the interaction between family authority and state ceremonial power.

1.3 Decolonising death studies without essentialising culture

Decolonial scholarship asks whose concepts become universal, whose knowledge is marginalised and which actors are authorised to name a practice legitimate, civilised or customary (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, 2021). Recent death studies make the same intervention more specifically. Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al. (2025) argue that decolonising death studies does not mean returning to a pure precolonial past; it means recognising plural ontologies and the power embedded in all claims about death and bereavement. The 2026 edited volume *Decolonising Death Studies* similarly foregrounds cultural plurality and critiques the continued dominance of Western assumptions in the production of knowledge about dying, ritual and mourning (Pentaris et al., 2026). Read together, these works imply that decolonial analysis must resist epistemic erasure without turning elders, men, traditional authorities, churches or political actors into sole custodians of an uncontested culture.

Ubuntu offers an important language of relational personhood, care and mutual obligation, but it also requires critical use. Chisale (2018) demonstrates that appeals to communal care may conceal gendered labour and unequal authority. This study therefore treats relationality and Ubuntu as sensitising concepts rather than proof that all participants share one worldview. The analytical questions are whose labour sustains mourning, whose interpretation becomes authoritative, which ritual forms gain public visibility, and whose preferred forms are marginalised.

1.4 Funeral politics, the state and ritual authority

The death of a public figure can intensify struggles over national memory, bodily custody and political legitimacy. Adebani (2021) describes the burial of Nnamdi Azikiwe as a cultural crisis in which material and immaterial relations across past, present and future were contested. Nnabuihe (2023) similarly shows that funerals can enact political claims to belonging and place. State funerals therefore do more than honour the deceased: they stage a relationship among the state, the public, kin and historical memory.

The 2025–2026 litigation following the death of former Zambian president Edgar Lungu provides a recent legal illustration. In August 2025, the Gauteng High Court authorised repatriation for a state funeral after finding that an agreement existed between the family and the Zambian Government (*Government of the Republic of Zambia v Lungu & Others*, 2025). On 23 June 2026, however, the Supreme Court of Appeal set that order aside, holding that the Government had not established a binding agreement or another lawful basis to override the family's burial decision (*Esther Lungu & Others v Government of the Republic of Zambia & Others*, 2026). The dispute is not treated as evidence of Aawambo custom or as part of the Okongo sample. It is used only to illuminate a broader thanatopolitical question: under what conditions may public authority regulate the treatment, location and meaning of the dead?

1.5 Conceptual framework and research questions

The analysis combines three complementary lenses. Decoloniality directs attention to epistemic authority and to the power to classify practices as legitimate or backward (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al., 2025). Relational mourning directs attention to the redistribution of obligations and social positions after death (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2023; Häberlein, 2024). Thanatopolitics directs attention to institutional claims over bodies,

burial sites, public ceremony and collective memory. From their intersection, ritual authority is defined here as the socially recognised capacity to prescribe, perform or validate acts through which a death is made meaningful.

Ritual authority has four analytically separable dimensions: genealogical authority derived from kinship and lineage; spiritual authority grounded in recognised knowledge of ancestors and ritual sequence; institutional authority exercised by churches, traditional authorities and the state; and representational authority exercised by persons who speak publicly for the bereaved. The study develops the concept of contested ritual translation to describe the process through which a form entering a local ritual field is assigned new meanings while changing the distribution of these authorities. Translation is contested because adoption does not produce a shared interpretation: the same candle may signify imported imitation, Christian hope, public solidarity or personal remembrance depending on who introduces it, where it is used and whether the family consents.

Accordingly, the study addresses three questions: (1) How do participants in Okongo describe lineage-based responsibilities and authority in mourning rituals? (2) How are candle-lighting vigils and the chief-mourner designation interpreted across generations and social positions? (3) What do these disputes reveal about the relationship among family authority, community practice and state ceremonial power?

2. Methodology

2.1 Design and study setting

The study adopted a qualitative ethnographic case-study design to examine meanings, practices and authority relations in their social setting. Okongo is a settlement in the Ohangwena Region of northern Namibia whose residents participate in overlapping rural, urban, Christian, customary and state institutions. Treating Okongo as a bounded case enabled contextual depth while avoiding any claim that one locality statistically or culturally represents all Aawambo communities or Namibia as a whole.

Fieldwork took place over six months. Participant observation was conducted at 12 funerals and focused on ritual sequence, material symbols, division of responsibilities, public speech and interactions among kin, religious representatives, political figures and other mourners. Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with lineage elders, women elders, younger community members and community leaders. Four focus-group discussions, each involving approximately eight to ten participants, explored areas of agreement and disagreement concerning ritual change. Documentary materials were used to contextualise public discourse. The Lungu judgments were added later as contextual legal texts and were not treated as ethnographic data from Okongo.

2.2 Sampling, instruments and procedure

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants positioned differently within the ritual field. Elders were included because of their knowledge of lineage practice; women were included because mourning depends on substantial gendered care and organisational labour; younger participants were included to examine generational interpretation; and community leaders were included because they mediate public and customary authority. Sampling sought analytic variation rather than numerical representativeness.

Data-generation instruments consisted of an observation guide, a semi-structured interview guide and focus-group prompts. Observation notes distinguished direct description from researcher interpretation. Interview questions addressed funeral responsibilities, the meaning of fire and candles, the chief-mourner designation, perceived changes across generations and acceptable limits to state involvement. Focus groups were used not merely to collect consensus but also to observe how claims about culture were affirmed, qualified or challenged in collective discussion. Participants were not required to disclose sacred or restricted knowledge that they considered inappropriate for research or publication.

2.3 Documentary and legal materials

Documentary analysis served two purposes. First, Namibian public statements and media discussions were used to position the Okongo debates within a wider national conversation. Second, the High Court and Supreme Court of Appeal judgments in the Lungu dispute were read as public legal texts and coded for claims about agreement, family decision-making, state interest, dignity and legal authority. News reports were used only to clarify chronology or public discourse; they were not treated as equivalent to court findings or ethnographic testimony.

2.4 Data analysis and research quality

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The researchers read field notes and transcripts repeatedly, generated initial codes and compared patterns across observations, interviews and focus groups. Deductive codes derived from the conceptual framework included lineage authority, institutional authority, representation and family–state conflict. Inductive codes included beauty, imitation, generational difference, spectacle, spiritual efficacy and consent. Candidate themes were refined by actively searching for negative or divergent cases, especially younger participants' positive accounts of candle lighting, and by checking whether central claims were supported by more than one data source.

Credibility was strengthened through method triangulation and explicit attention to disagreement rather than consensus alone. Dependability was supported through an audit trail linking codes, theme revisions and illustrative extracts. Reflexivity was treated as essential because the researchers' relationships to Aawambo culture, religion, age, gender and institutional authority could influence access and interpretation. For this reason, claims are attributed to participants and the bounded case rather than presented as unmediated descriptions of an entire culture.

2.5 Ethics

The study followed informed-consent, voluntary-participation, confidentiality and culturally

appropriate research protocols. Permission to conduct the study in Okongo was obtained from the Okongo village headman before data collection commenced. Pseudonymous descriptors were used for participant quotations, and identifying details of individual funerals were withheld. Observation procedures differentiated between public ceremonial events and private interactions. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw without penalty and the intended use of anonymised quotations. Informed consent was obtained before interviews, focus-group discussions and relevant observations. Participants retained the right to restrict sacred, family or culturally sensitive knowledge from transcription and publication.

3. Results

3.1 Lineage fire as responsibility, continuity and care

Participants commonly described the paternal lineage as carrying primary responsibility for specific funeral acts. The fire was not described merely as a practical source of heat; participants linked it to ancestral continuity, correct ritual sequence and the moral obligations of specified relatives. A 72-year-old male elder explained:

'When a person dies, it is the paternal lineage who must light the fire. The fire is not for warmth; it is the torch of the ancestors. The paternal lineage must keep it burning. If it goes out before the burial, the spirit of the deceased cannot find its way to the ancestors. This is our tradition, passed from our fathers and their fathers before them.'

A 92-year-old woman similarly connected lineage responsibility with knowledge of burial procedure:

'The deceased's paternal lineage knows the rituals. They know where to dig the grave, which way to face the body, and when to speak to the ancestors. If they do not do this correctly, the spirit will wander. This is why the paternal lineage must be in control.'

Across interviews and observations, lineage authority was described as both knowledge and duty. At the same time, women's extensive participation in care, food preparation and

mourning organisation did not always translate into equal public authority to define ritual meaning. This distinction between visible ritual authority and less visible care labour recurred across the dataset.

3.2 Candle lighting as a disputed mourning practice

Participants did not assign a single meaning to candle lighting. Several elders contrasted commercially purchased candles with a lineage fire whose legitimacy, in their view, derived from ancestral continuity and the identity of those authorised to maintain it. One elder stated:

'Candles are for churches, not for our dead. The fire we light is from the same fire that has been burning in our lineage for generations. When the paternal family members light it, they are connecting the deceased to the ancestors. A candle is just a candle; it has no spirit.'

Some participants objected particularly when friends, social groups or public figures organised candle-lighting vigils without family leadership. Their concern centred on who had authority to organise a visible mourning event and whether that visibility could be interpreted as taking representational ownership of grief.

Younger participants, however, often described candles as supplementary rather than substitutive. One younger participant explained:

'For many of us, lighting a candle is simply a way of expressing our grief, showing love and standing with the bereaved family. It helps us remember the person we have lost.'

The difference between these accounts concerned not only the physical object but also the organiser, location, timing and relation to family consent. Participants therefore distinguished, in practice, between a family-led vigil that supplements other rites and a public event perceived to displace or overshadow family authority.

3.3 The chief mourner and ceremonial hierarchy

Participants described the chief-mourner designation as an unfamiliar layer added to family

roles that were already socially recognised. A focus-group participant observed:

'In the past, the eldest son would speak for the family. He would thank the mourners and represent the family. Now, they invite the councillor or someone from the government to be chief mourner. They make a speech, they take pictures, but they do not know the rituals. They do not know the deceased. It is not our way.'

Criticism was strongest when a politically prominent person became the public face of mourning despite limited genealogical connection or ritual knowledge. However, participants did not claim that every prominent guest or ceremonial role was illegitimate. Some acknowledged that public figures could provide valued recognition, material support or a formal tribute. The dispute arose when public prominence appeared to override or absorb roles that participants associated with family responsibility.

3.4 State ceremonial power and family consent

Participants frequently used the language of family belonging when objecting to state control over funeral arrangements. One participant stated, 'A person belongs to their family. The government does not give birth to children; the family does. How can they say a person belongs to the nation?' Another elder referred to the risk of an official funeral becoming a 'show' for cameras rather than an event centred on lineage obligations.

These accounts asserted moral standing based on histories of care and kinship. At the same time, participants recognised that prominent persons may have public histories that communities and states legitimately wish to commemorate. The recurring point was procedural: public commemoration was viewed as more acceptable when the family was consulted, ritual functions were clearly allocated and customary or religious responsibilities were not displaced without consent.

4. Discussion

4.1 From cultural erosion to contested ritual translation

The findings do not support a simple cultural-erosion narrative. An erosion model assumes a one-directional process in which an intact tradition is replaced by an external practice. The Okongo evidence is more complex: elders defend inherited authority; younger participants attach locally intelligible meanings to portable forms such as candles; churches and political institutions provide additional ritual vocabularies; and families accept, modify or reject different combinations. This pattern aligns with scholarship showing that funeral forms move through migration, media, religious change and political institutions while remaining embedded in struggles over kinship and belonging (Lee, 2011; Adotey, 2018; Nnabuihe, 2023). It also corresponds with recent African work that treats funeral change as historically layered rather than as a simple transition from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ (Baloyi & Musili, 2025).

The concept of contested ritual translation captures this layered process. It retains the critical force of decolonial analysis by asking whose knowledge and authority are displaced, but it also avoids treating tradition as outside history. Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al. (2025) argue that decolonising death studies requires plural ontologies rather than the substitution of one universal model for another, while Pentaris et al. (2026) extend this critique by centring culturally diverse knowledge across death, ritual and end-of-life practices. The Okongo findings add a grounded case in which epistemic plurality is visible within one community: an elder, a younger mourner, a church leader and a family representative may interpret the same symbolic act differently without any one perspective automatically exhausting the meaning of culture.

4.2 Material symbols redistribute authority

The contrast between lineage fire and candle lighting demonstrates that objects acquire ritual force through social relations. The lineage fire condenses ancestry, prescribed responsibility and

continuity; the candle can condense portability, Christian resonance, visual publicness and translocal solidarity. Neither meaning resides in flame alone. Ritual scholarship shows that patterned actions can organise emotion and affiliation (Hobson et al., 2018), while ethnographic work demonstrates that material forms can become sites for negotiating recognition and belonging (Adotey, 2018; Silverman et al., 2021; Nnabuihe, 2023). In Okongo, disputes about objects are therefore also disputes about authorised persons and appropriate publics.

This finding has practical significance. A protocol that merely lists permitted or prohibited objects would miss the relational issue at stake. A culturally responsive approach should ask whether the family was consulted, whether recognised lineage responsibilities can still be performed, whether participation is voluntary and whether a public act crowds out private or restricted rites. Such an approach is consistent with the broader decolonial argument that cultural plurality should be negotiated rather than administratively flattened (Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al., 2025; Pentaris et al., 2026).

4.3 The public hierarchy of mourning

The chief-mourner designation can convert public visibility into ceremonial rank. It may be administratively useful in a funeral programme, yet participants objected when the title implied that political standing authorised representation of the bereaved. This finding resonates with Adebaniwa's (2021) analysis of elite burial as a site of cultural crisis and political legitimacy, and with Nnabuihe's (2023) account of funerals as public performances of belonging. The Okongo case adds a more specific explanation of resistance: a new representational office may compete with positions already constituted by kinship and ritual knowledge.

The implication is not that all public ceremonial roles should be abolished. Instead, organisers can differentiate functions. A family spokesperson may communicate family decisions; an officiant may conduct a religious service; lineage elders

may retain customary responsibilities; and a state representative may deliver a tribute. Precise naming reduces the risk that a single title absorbs genealogical, spiritual, institutional and representational authority at once.

4.4 Gender, generation and internal cultural debate

The study also shows why claims about paternal-lineage authority should not be presented as self-validating cultural facts. Participants described lineage roles as important, but women often carried substantial care and organisational labour that was less publicly recognised. Chisale's (2018) critique of gendered Ubuntu is relevant here: communal care can sustain social life while distributing labour and decision-making unequally. A decolonial account must therefore protect indigenous knowledge from erasure while still asking whose interpretation of that knowledge gains authority.

Generational disagreement is equally important. Younger participants' positive interpretations of candle lighting do not necessarily indicate cultural detachment. They show that younger people participate actively in cultural production and may adapt mourning to mobility, church membership, digital communication and dispersed family networks. This interpretation is compatible with Häberlein's (2024) finding that funeral decision-making can become a site where generations renegotiate responsibility and social position, and with Baloyi and Musili's (2025) argument that contemporary African funeral change requires inclusive engagement rather than a rigid opposition between inherited and emergent practice.

4.5 Family authority and the limits of state commemoration

The findings favour neither absolute family sovereignty nor unrestricted state control. The death of a national leader can generate legitimate public interests, but public commemoration and control of funeral arrangements are analytically distinct. The Lungu litigation makes this distinction visible. The 2025 High Court treated the alleged state-funeral agreement and public

policy as sufficient to authorise repatriation, whereas the 2026 Supreme Court of Appeal concluded that the Government had not established a binding agreement or another lawful basis to displace the family's decision (Government of the Republic of Zambia v Lungu & Others, 2025; Esther Lungu & Others v Government of the Republic of Zambia & Others, 2026). The appellate ruling does not create a universal Namibian rule and does not validate any specific Aawambo custom; its relevance lies in showing that political significance alone does not automatically extinguish family decision-making.

The Okongo accounts add a cultural reason for procedural restraint. Imposed ceremony may interrupt obligations through which families maintain relations with the deceased. A consent-based model would begin with the deceased's lawful wishes where known, followed by meaningful consultation with authorised family representatives and, where relevant, customary and religious actors. Public tributes can be distinguished from restricted family rites, and mediation can be used before litigation where law and circumstances permit. This approach treats cultural plurality as a matter of negotiated coexistence rather than ceremonial domination.

4.6 Implications for theory, practice and policy

Theoretically, the study contributes the concept of contested ritual translation. It explains how mobile ritual forms acquire local meanings while simultaneously altering who may speak, act and decide. This concept is useful because it avoids two analytical extremes: an essentialist model in which culture is unchanged and singular, and a frictionless hybridity model in which all combinations are treated as equally consensual. Contested translation keeps questions of authority, consent and social position at the centre of analysis.

For practice and policy, the findings support four principles. First, state-funeral protocols should require early consultation with lawful family representatives and should record agreement on

burial location, programme, speakers and customary or religious rites. Second, funeral programmes should distinguish family, religious, lineage and state functions rather than concentrating them in an undefined chief-mourner title. Third, traditional authorities, churches and families should create space for negotiated coexistence when new practices supplement inherited responsibilities. Fourth, community-led documentation of funeral knowledge should protect restricted knowledge and recognise women, younger people and less visible care workers as knowledge holders.

4.7 Limitations and future research

This is a single-site qualitative case study and does not represent all Aawambo communities, Namibian ethnic groups or African funeral systems. Observation at 12 funerals provided contextual depth but may have been shaped by access, season and the social positions of the researchers. Focus groups may also privilege publicly acceptable cultural claims, while sensitive or dissenting views remain unspoken. The available study record does not yet provide a complete demographic table, detailed fieldwork chronology, translation procedure; these should be finalised before submission.

Future studies should compare multiple Namibian communities, examine differences among Christian denominations and customary authorities, and analyse gendered labour and ritual authority in greater depth. Longitudinal and digital ethnography would be particularly valuable for examining how livestreaming, social media and translocal family networks reshape who can participate in mourning, who controls public representation and how locally meaningful forms travel across distance.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how changing funeral practices redistribute ritual authority in Okongo, northern Namibia. Participants described the lineage fire as a material and moral practice through which paternal relatives assume responsibility for the deceased. Candle lighting divided opinion: some participants interpreted it

as an unauthorised substitution, whereas others understood it as remembrance, Christian symbolism or solidarity. The chief-mourner designation was criticised when political prominence became a basis for representing grief or overriding kinship roles. Concerns about state funerals extended this critique to institutional power over family decisions.

The principal conceptual contribution is contested ritual translation. The concept captures how mobile forms acquire local meanings while altering who may act, speak and decide. It replaces the binary of authentic tradition versus foreign modernity with a more precise analysis of authority, consent and coexistence. The study therefore recommends culturally plural funeral governance in which family participation is meaningful, customary and religious roles are negotiated rather than presumed, and public commemoration does not extinguish intimate or restricted rites.

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7. Author Declaration

Originality: The authors declare that the manuscript is original, has not been published previously and is not under consideration elsewhere.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Permission to conduct the study in Okongo was obtained from the Okongo village headman before data collection commenced. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews, focus-group discussions and relevant observations were conducted. Participants also consented to the use of anonymised quotations in research outputs. The study respected local

cultural protocols and avoided the collection or publication of culturally restricted information without permission.

Consent for publication: Participants consented to the publication of anonymised quotations. The authors should verify that the consent documentation explicitly covers verbatim quotation and observation-based description.

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Data availability: De-identified data are not publicly deposited because funeral accounts may contain culturally restricted and indirectly

identifying information. Any future controlled-access arrangement should protect participant confidentiality and respect the cultural permissions under which the data were collected.

Author contributions: Josephine Mwasheka Nghikefelwa: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, and Writing - original draft. Isidor Haufiku: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing - review & editing, and Supervision. Immanuel Nghitotelwa Nakambale: Formal analysis, Validation, Writing - review & editing, and Resources. Hilya Tulipomwene Shuulinawa Nghitoolwa: Formal analysis, Validation, Writing - review & editing, and Visualization. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for the work.

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