Belief systems and the experience of spousal grief: A study of widowed individuals in Siaya County, Kenya

Otunga Elly Okoth[1]
Ntabo Michael Mabururu[2]

eotunga@rongovarsity.ac.ke (+254719521072)

Rongo University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Belief systems comprising religious affiliation, levels of religiosity, and cultural traditions are essential in shaping individual experiences of grief. They guide social practices and psychosocial responses. This study explored the influence of belief systems on spousal grief among widowed individuals in Siaya County, Kenya. The selected county has the highest national proportion of widowed persons. The study was guided by Social Constructionism Theory. A convergent mixed-method approach and a descriptive design were adopted to investigate the interplay between belief systems and spousal grief. Data were collected through questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. A sample size of 399 respondents was derived from an estimated population of 114,216 widowed individuals in Siaya County using Cochran formula, and selected through multi-stage cluster sampling. On the other hand, key informants were purposively sampled. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency counts, percentage counts, mean, and standard deviation. Inferentially, regression was used to establish the relationship between belief systems and spousal grief. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data. Compliance with ethical considerations was ensured throughout the study. From the findings, it emerged that belief systems were both supportive and had negative impacts on spousal grief ($p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.20$). Having strong religious affiliation and high levels of religiosity were linked with psychosocial consolation and community support for widowed individuals. The study recommends that the Ministry of Public Service, Gender and Affirmative Action should upscale targeted interventions to challenge and transform adverse socio-cultural practices associated with widowhood in Siaya County.

Keywords: Belief systems; grief; Kenya; religiosity; religious affiliation; Siaya County; social constructionism; spousal grief; widowhood; widowed individuals.

I. INTRODUCTION

Grief as a natural response to loss is one of the key global experiences which is highly influenced by cultural and ideological contexts (UN Women, 2022). While biological and psychosocial aspects of grief are acknowledged widely, the meanings attached to loss and how individuals cope with it are influenced by the societal contexts (Edino, 2025). The loss of a spouse not only disrupts an individual's psychosocial stability but also alters their social roles, responsibilities, and community identity (Skritskaya et al., 2020). Spousal grief is influenced by belief systems that provide frameworks on how individuals interpret death (Burr, 2015). Similarly, religious affiliation and levels of religiosity determine how individuals conceptualize death and the continuing bond with the deceased. As pointed out by Vaughn (2024), some Christian widowed individuals resort to reading scriptures, prayers, and church-based support groups as sources of comfort, while those rooted in African traditional religion may find meaning in ancestral rituals and symbolic practices that honour the deceased person.

According to Kamau and Balongo (2023), cultural traditions prescribe specific mourning rites, such as widow inheritance, cleansing rituals, and communal mourning practices that influence how widowed individuals experience psychosocial pain and reintegrate into society. Despite these practices possibly being supportive, they could become avenues of tension when cultural expectations are not in agreement with personal beliefs and modern rights-based discourses. Spousal grief in Kenya is psychosocially draining. A situation which is worse in Siaya County because it has one of the highest national proportions of widowed individuals, at 11.5%, second only to Turkana County at 12.1% (Omondi et al., 2025). It is marked by strongly held belief systems, which are a key aspect of rural life in major parts of the county. This reality makes the county a significant site for exploring how cultural beliefs and religious traditions shape the grieving process. The study investigated the influence of belief systems on spousal grief, with a focus on the lived experiences of widowed individuals in Siaya County. It situated spousal grief within a cultural and religious framework, emphasizing that mourning is not just about sorrow but also fulfilling social expectations, negotiating communal identities, and reconciling with spiritual worldviews (Mulemi, 2020).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although spousal loss is globally recognised as a disruptive life event with long-term psychosocial and health effects, spousal grief does not occur uniformly across individuals, as its expression, duration, and resolution are influenced by cultural contexts. In Siaya County, Kenya, sociocultural values such as cultural beliefs and practices, shifting familial responsibilities, and evolving gender roles strongly influence how widows and widowers process grief (Umberson & Montez, 2010). These sociocultural influences may lead to unequal grieving outcomes, whereby some individuals achieve relatively healthy adjustment while others experience unhealthy outcomes, thereby limiting healthy adaptation and reinforcing disparities in spousal grief experiences, an aspect which this study sought to investigate. The problem, therefore, lies in the sociocultural norms that contribute to differential grieving, thereby constraining healthy adaptation and reinforcing unequal experiences of spousal grief (Ionescu, 2020).

1.2 Research Objective

To investigate the influence of belief systems on spousal grief among the widowed individuals in Siaya County.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study was guided by Social Constructionism Theory as propounded by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. It posits that individuals do not merely passively experience reality; rather, they actively construct their understanding of reality through their interactions, language, and cultural context (Burr, 2015). This theory highlights the significant role of cultural and social factors in shaping how individuals experience and express grief (Young & Colin, 2004). In which case, experience of loss and spousal grief are not universal but are constructed within the socio-cultural norms and practices. The theory allows for an exploration of how different ethnic groups, families, and communities construct grief differently, influenced by their socio-cultural norms. The theory underscores that reality is not an objective phenomenon that exists independent of human interpretation. It is shaped through social interaction and shared meanings (McCullough et al., 2020). Thus, understanding mourning is both an internal psychosocial response and a social experience. That is, widowed individuals adapt to loss by incorporating religious teachings, cultural narratives, and social expectations into their coping strategies. Grieving widowed individuals may assimilate their experience into religious frameworks by perceiving the loss as part of a deity's plan. At the same time, they accommodate cultural rituals that provide community recognition of their new social status.

In Siaya County, mourning songs, ritualised expressions of grief, and symbolic acts of remembrance function as cultural tools that shape how widowed individuals experience and express loss. These practices provide structure to the grieving process, making it intelligible within a broader social framework (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Mourning journey, therefore, cannot be fully understood without reference to the belief systems that mediate their experiences.

Situating spousal grief within the lens of social constructionism provides rich insights into the culturally embedded meanings of mourning (Young & Colin, 2004). It reveals how widowed individuals draw on religious narratives, cultural rituals, and community expectations to interpret loss and reshape their identities. This enhances understanding of grief, beyond the sociocultural and spiritual dimensions of human life (Burr, 2015). This includes how cultural practices, rituals, and traditions are conveyed and how they influence the expression and experience of grief. According to Liu et al. (2019), belief systems provide a foundation for understanding reality, guiding behaviour, and forming judgments about various aspects of life. It captures aspects such as religiousness, religious affiliation, and religious doctrines, which are essential in helping individuals and communities to interpret and make sense of grief. Social constructionism also encourages the deconstruction of socio-cultural norms and practices. The study underscored the existence of multiple realities of grief as experienced by different individuals and communities. Thus, recognizing them as valid within their respective socio-cultural contexts. For instance, after-death rituals, the ability of the bereaved spouses to shape those rituals and say goodbye in a meaningful way (Burrell & Selman, 2022), can define how one learns to swim in the stream of universal sorrow or joy. Thus, reflecting healthy and unhealthy spousal grief. However, the outcome may be affected by certain sociocultural norms and governmental policies, such as COVID-19 containment measures, which may be an obstacle.

2.2 Empirical Review

Cultural beliefs and practices surrounding death vary considerably in various societies, and are a key influence on individual experiences, impacting grief, adjustment, and support needs. A study by Ayebare et al. (2021) revealed that kinship and social support helped parents to cope with the loss and grief due to stillbirth among bereaved parents and health workers in urban and rural settings in Kenya and Uganda. It emerged that while conforming to cultural practices, some beliefs and practices triggered stress, fear, stigma and anxiety, especially for women. This could be

attributable to conflict between addressing their own needs and complying with community norms. Hence affecting parents' grief and adjustment. While this study focused on parental grief due to childbirth, this study sought to explore the relationship between widowhood and grief.

Killikelly et al. (2025) outlined diagnostic criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), emphasizing the need for clinical identification and treatment. However, it was observed that there was a need for cultural contextualization, especially in African societies, where expressions of grief are often communal and ritualized to avoid pathologizing normal expressions of grief. Similarly, Wittkowski (2024) provided insights into understanding grief beyond traditional detachment models to maintain emotional connections with the deceased. However, their perspectives were Western-centric, hence they hardly addressed how cultural scripts influence ongoing bonds in the context of African widowhood.

A study by Senyah (2023) revealed socio-economic challenges and culturally embedded methods of coping with psychological distress among young widows in Ghana. These were restated by Oyekan and Sanusi (2025) who examined grief management among older adults in Lagos, highlighting the dual challenges of ageing and widowhood, including a lack of support. However, their exclusive focus on young widows and older adults, respectively, neglects a comparative perspective that includes different age groups or male widowers. This hardly helps in understanding how grief evolves throughout the widowhood lifespan. Therefore, there was a need for further investigation into how gender, age, and economic dependency intersect in the experiences of widowhood. A similar lapse was observed in a study by Wekesa (2021), who investigated psychological impacts of traditional Ababukusu widowhood rites on widows. However, while it offered culturally grounded insight into mourning rituals and their social consequences, its limited focus on one ethnic group affected its comparative and intersectional analysis for generalizability.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A convergent mixed-method approach was adopted with a descriptive research design to capture the complexity of spousal grief as shaped by belief systems (Søraa, 2023). Combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques thus enabled the study to obtain richer insights about the lived experiences of widowed individuals. That is, by obtaining a structured way of assessing various religious and cultural practices, as well as the meanings attached to these practices.

3.2 Study Area

This study was conducted in Siaya County in Kenya's Nyanza region, selected due to its high proportion of widowed persons (11.5%), second only to Turkana County at 12.1%. Although Turkana had the highest rate. However, safety concerns, as it is marred with frequent banditry, made it unsuitable in line with the Social Research Association (2003) guidelines prioritizing safety and accessibility (Diener et al., 2018; Hammersley & Traianou, 2012).

3.3 Target Population

The target population comprised widowed individuals in the study area as the main respondents because of their experiential knowledge of spousal grief. Specific focus was on those participants who were willing to share their experiences and who had diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and connections within the community.

3.4 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A sample size of 399 respondents was derived from an estimated population of 114,216 widowed individuals in Siaya County with a desired margin of error of 5% using the Cochran formula, which is recommended for finite populations (Stamatopoulos, 2022). Main respondents were selected using a multi-stage cluster sampling to ensure fair representation across different categories, such as gender, age, religious affiliation, and rural-urban. This enabled the study to capture diverse experiences of the respondents, given that the population of Siaya County is heterogeneous. On the other hand, purposive sampling was used to select the key informants who comprised religious leaders, cultural elders, chiefs, and assistant chiefs because of their expert knowledge on beliefs, traditions, and legal frameworks, as well as how they relate to spousal grief.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Quantitative data were collected by administering closed-ended questionnaires to the main respondents, who were widowed individuals in the study area. On the other hand, for qualitative data, the open-ended section allowed the respondents to share their experiences freely as recommended by Tobi et al. (2019). This was backed by in-depth interviews conducted using interview guides with the key informants. Additionally, focus group discussions

(FGDs) were also done to shed more light on some of the aspects that required more clarity, as pointed out by Sim and Waterfield (2019). All the expected participants were met and participated (100% participation).

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were descriptively analysed using frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviations. Inferentially, regression was used to enable the study to quantify and predict how different norms contribute to variations in grief experiences, thereby establishing whether sociocultural factors significantly affect spousal grief outcomes in Siaya County (Sarstedt & Mooi, 2018). For the case of qualitative data, thematic analysis was done.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

Since bereavement is a sensitive phenomenon, caution was taken to protect the dignity and rights of participants, as recommended by Woolford et al. (2020). The study gave respondents informed consent letters, which they read and signed to show their acceptance to participate. They were informed of the purpose of the study, as well as their freedom to participate voluntarily and exit at will. Confidentiality was ensured by ensuring that the responses were anonymous and that no details could identify them. This was also ensured by assigning the instruments random codes. The study also ensured professional conduct in all interactions with participants.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondents' Religious and Faith-Based Practices

Data on the religious affiliation of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Respondents' Religious and Faith-Based Practices

Item statement	Rating in Percentage					Mean	Standard deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
Religious attendance and participation							
I attend religious services regularly	6.4	11.3	25.1	29.6	27.6	3.72	1.09
I actively participate in religious rituals or activities	9.0	12.9	26.4	28.3	23.5	3.58	1.14
I participate in religious rituals or attend services to manage grief	8.0	12.9	27.3	26.4	25.4	3.59	1.15
Private religious and spiritual practices							
I pray or meditate daily to cope with life challenges	5.8	10.3	25.7	29.6	28.6	3.81	1.04
I read or reflect on religious texts to seek guidance	7.1	10.9	25.1	30.2	26.7	3.74	1.08
I rely on personal prayer or spiritual practices to cope with the loss of my spouse	5.8	10.3	25.7	29.6	28.6	3.81	1.04
I interpret my spouse's death through a spiritual or religious lens	6.4	10.9	25.1	30.2	27.3	3.70	1.11
Perceived support from religious community							
I receive emotional support from my religious community during grief	8.0	12.2	26.4	29.9	23.5	3.59	1.13
My religious community helped me navigate bereavement practices	9.0	12.9	25.7	28.9	23.5	3.57	1.14
I feel comforted when others in my faith community pray or perform rituals on my behalf	7.1	11.6	26.4	29.6	25.4	3.61	1.12
I seek guidance or support from religious leaders or groups	9.0	12.2	28.9	27.3	22.5	3.46	1.17
Faith and mourning decisions							
My faith guided how I mourned and remembered my late spouse	6.4	11.6	25.7	29.6	26.7	3.70	1.09
Religious rituals help me manage grief effectively	7.1	12.2	26.4	28.9	25.4	3.63	1.11
Religious leaders in my community actively supported me during my bereavement	7.7	11.6	27.0	28.3	25.4	3.61	1.10
I followed advice from religious leaders regarding mourning practices	8.4	12.2	26.4	28.3	24.8	3.58	1.11
My faith influences decisions about mourning, such as the timing of returning to normal social activities	7.7	12.2	25.7	28.9	25.4	3.60	1.13
I consider religion central to my daily life	6.4	10.3	25.7	29.6	28.0	3.75	1.06
I rely on faith to make important decisions during mourning	7.1	10.9	25.1	28.9	28.0	3.72	1.08
I believe in the afterlife as a source of comfort	4.8	9.6	28.3	30.5	26.7	3.77	1.02

Note: 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree

Table 1 indicates that attending and participating in religious activities were moderately high, with respondents reporting that they regularly attended religious services (M = 3.72, SD = 1.09) and actively engaged in rituals or activities such as choir, committees, or counselling (M = 3.58, SD = 1.14). This suggests that religiosity and religious coping may explain how widowed individuals manage grief. At the same time, participating in religious rituals to manage grief was moderate (M = 3.59, SD = 1.15). This implies that religious rituals may be a vital means of coping with spousal grief. This was also restated by the observation that daily prayers were used to cope with life challenges (M = 3.81, SD = 1.04). This could imply that respondents had some conviction in the benefits of prayers as a way of coping with bereavement. Concerning reflection on religious texts for guidance, as shown in Table 1, respondents reported that it was used for coping with spousal grief (M = 3.74, SD = 1.08), suggesting that guidance from religious texts provides relief for widowed individuals in coping with grief. This was also evident when respondents indicated that they interpreted spousal death through spiritual methods (M = 3.70, SD = 1.11). This implies that having perceiving grief based on religious context could be used to cope with spousal grief.

Table 1 shows that relying on personal prayers and other spiritual practices helped the respondents to cope with spousal loss (M = 3.81, SD = 1.04). This suggests that having personal prayers engaging in spiritual practices was a key coping strategy for many widowed individuals. Respondents also reported that they received emotional support from their religious faith community during bereavement (M = 3.59, SD = 1.13). This suggests that religious community help in reinforcing grief management. Respondents, as shown in Table 1, indicate that the religious community helped them navigate mourning practices (M = 3.57, SD = 1.14). This implies that they had consensus on the benefits gotten from the religious community.

As indicated in Table 1, respondents reported that they felt comforted when others performed rituals or prayers on their behalf (M = 3.61, SD = 1.12). The response to this construct suggests the emotional comfort respondents felt from others' intervening behaviours. This could be attributed to the concern these actions evoke. Respondents also indicated that seeking guidance from religious leaders helped them to cope with spousal grief (M = 3.46, SD = 1.17). This could be attributed to feelings of comfort resulting from spiritual nourishment and guidance gotten from religious leaders. This emphasizes the importance of social support from religious contexts.

As indicated in Table 1, respondents indicated that faith guided how they mourned and remembered their late spouse (M = 3.70, SD = 1.09). This points out the role of faith in how the bereaved person interpreted the loss. Table 1 shows that religious rituals helped them manage grief effectively (M = 3.63, SD = 1.11). This suggests that religious rituals were considered as effective measures when one lost a spouse. As reported by the respondents, religious leaders actively supported them during bereavement (M = 3.61, SD = 1.10). This high mean rating complemented with a low mean rating implies a consensus by the respondents that the religious showed concern and were in solidarity with the bereaved persons.

As shown in Table 1, respondents reported that they frequently followed advice from religious leaders regarding mourning practices (M = 3.58, SD = 1.11). The high mean rating and low standard deviation suggest that there was a consensus among respondents concerning following advice from religious leaders about mourning practices. This behaviour could have been as a result of previous positive experiences or positive sentiments from persons who had been in similar situations. Respondents also agreed that they frequently allowed faith to shape their decisions about returning to normal social activities (M = 3.60, SD = 1.13). The high mean rating and low standard deviations implies that the respondents had positive views with regard to this construct. This could be attributable to their previous good experiences after they had relied on faith to overcome adversities. This was also evident when respondents agreed that they believed in the afterlife as a source of comfort (M = 3.77, SD = 1.02). The high mean rating and low standard deviation suggest that religion was perceived to be an essential measure when one was bereaved. This could be because the belief in the afterlife was viewed as a source of comfort, as it provided both psychosocial support and a framework for understanding loss. Concerning cultural and spiritual practices, the data collected were presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Respondents' Cultural and Spiritual Practices

Item statement	Rating in Percentage					Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
I performed rituals for the deceased	7.1	12.9	25.1	28.9	26.0	3.69	1.11
I followed cultural timelines for remarriage or sexual abstinence	14.5	17.7	24.1	20.9	22.8	3.20	1.35
I engaged in spiritual cleansing practices	9.6	12.2	26.4	28.3	23.5	3.50	1.18
I avoided laughing or appearing happy during the mourning period	9.0	10.9	25.7	28.0	26.4	3.50	1.16
I performed symbolic acts to honour the deceased	8.0	11.6	25.1	28.9	26.4	3.60	1.15
I adhered to family or community expectations for mourning	10.3	12.9	24.1	27.3	25.4	3.53	1.20

As shown in Table 2, respondents strongly agreed that they observed traditional mourning rituals such as wearing mourning clothes or seclusion. This was evident in the high mean rating and low standard deviation, which implies that there was consensus regarding the possible value of this construct. This could be attributed to the meaning attached to observance of such rituals, as well as previous good experiences. As captured in Table 2, both traditional and cultural mourning practices are an integral part of grief management among widowed individuals, with respondents engaging in different rituals and symbolic acts. It also emerged that most of the respondents reported observing traditional mourning practices, which included wearing mourning clothes and observing periods of seclusion. This was supported by a mean rating of 3.77 and a standard deviation of 1.09. This suggests that there was consensus among the respondents who conformed to visible expressions of grief, which serve both to signal bereavement to the community and to structure the mourning period emotionally and socially. Seclusion may not only allow the bereaved person time to process loss privately but also fulfil sociocultural expectations of respect for the deceased person. As shown in Table 2, most of the respondents indicated that they performed rituals for the deceased person. This was supported by a mean rating by mean rating of 3.69 and a standard deviation of 1.11. These practices may suggest that the bereaved person has healed, allowing the bereaved person to participate in honouring the memory of the spouse.

At the same time, as evident in Table 2, respondents reported frequently performing symbolic acts such as burning personal items or placing belongings on the grave. This was supported by a mean rating of 3.60 and a standard deviation of 1.15. This indicates consensus with the construct, thus highlighting the ritualized management of grief and the culturally sanctioned methods of releasing attachment to the deceased. Table 2 shows that spiritual cleansing practices, such as bathing with herbs and performing symbolic acts, scored moderately high. This was supported by a mean rating of 3.50 and a standard deviation of 1.18. This suggests that respondents engage in both physical and symbolic purification to overcome psychosocial and spiritual dimensions of loss. As shown in Table 2, a majority of the respondents reported avoiding laughter and expressions of happiness during the mourning period. This was supported by a mean rating of 3.50 and a standard deviation of 1.16. This reflects moral and psychosocial norms that guide bereavement behaviours and reinforce expectations in the community for showing respect and seriousness in mourning. Table 2 showed that a majority of the respondents agreed that adherence to cultural timelines for remarriage and sexual abstinence was somewhat lower. This was supported by a mean rating of 3.20 and a low standard deviation of 1.35. This suggests that there were mixed reactions in compliance with the beliefs and social norms. This may reflect tension between traditional expectations and personal circumstances as well as modern interpretations of mourning practices. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of the respondents still followed these timelines, thus demonstrating the continued relevance of cultural rules in structuring post-bereavement decisions. Table 2 shows that a majority of the respondents reported that they frequently followed family and community expectations during mourning. This includes periods of seclusion, participation in wailing, and attending memorial ceremonies. This was supported by a mean rating of 3.53 and a standard deviation of 1.20. This indicates that pressures resulting from the family still guide mourning behaviours among individuals. This highlights the interplay between personal grief and collective cultural norms.

4.2 Regression Analysis of the Influence of Belief Systems on Spousal Grief

This study examined the influence of belief systems on spousal grief among widowed individuals in Siaya County. The study conducted a multiple linear regression analysis to determine the extent to which engagement in religious and cultural practices predicted variations in the outcomes of grieving.

4.2.1 Diagnostic Tests for Regression Analysis

The study tested and met the assumptions for regression, such as normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Normality of residuals was assessed using histograms, Q-Q plots, and the Shapiro-Wilk test. The histogram of standardized residuals approximated a normal distribution; on the other hand, the Q-Q plot showed points closely following the 45° reference line, indicating that residuals were approximately normally distributed. The Shapiro-Wilk test yielded $W = 0.988$, $p = 0.142$, confirming that there was no significant deviation from normality. The study also evaluated linearity between each predictor and the dependent variable using scatterplots of the predictors against residuals and partial regression plots. However, no systematic patterns were observed in the plots, as shown in Figure 1. This indicates that the relationships between predictors and spousal grief are linear.

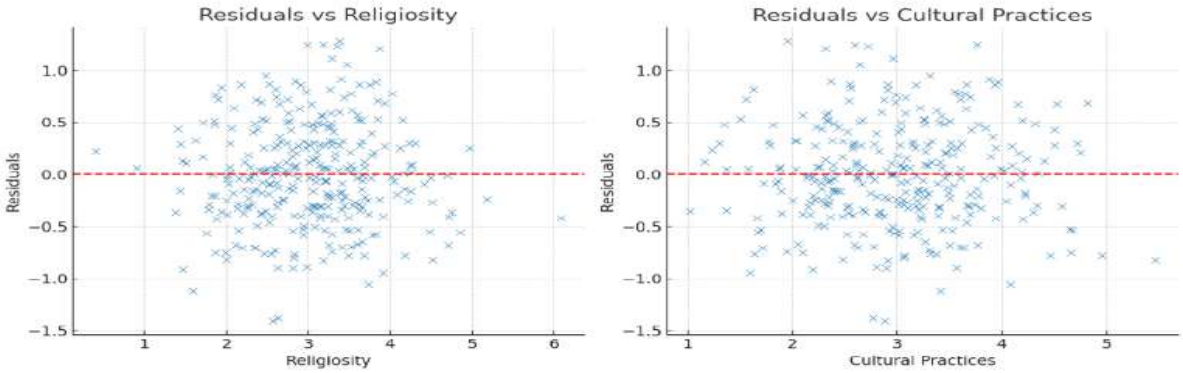

Figure 1
Scatterplots of Standardized Residuals

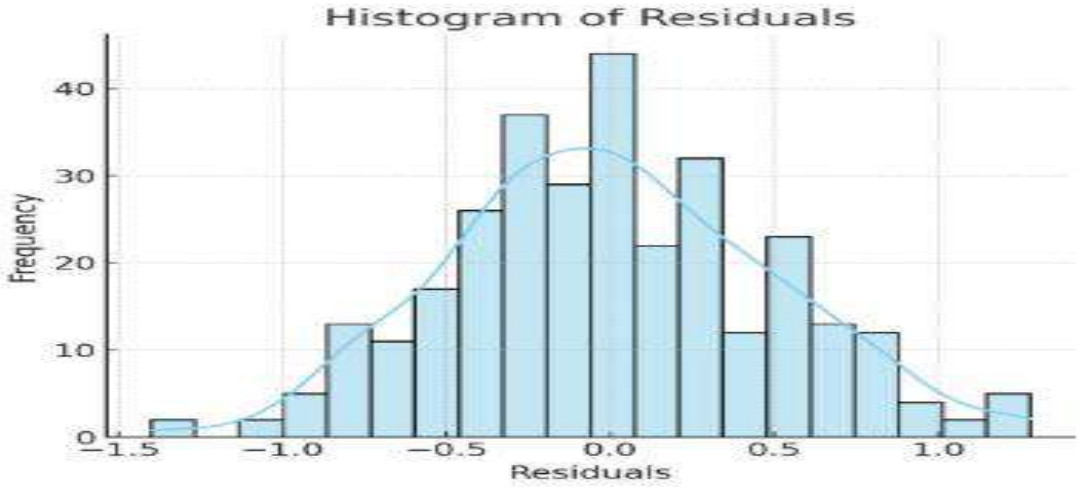

Figure 2
Histogram of Standardized Residuals

Homoscedasticity was assessed through a plot of standardized residuals versus standardized predicted values. The scatterplot illustrated in Figure 3, shows a random distribution of points, with no funnelling or clustering. This suggests that the assumption of constant variance of residuals was met.

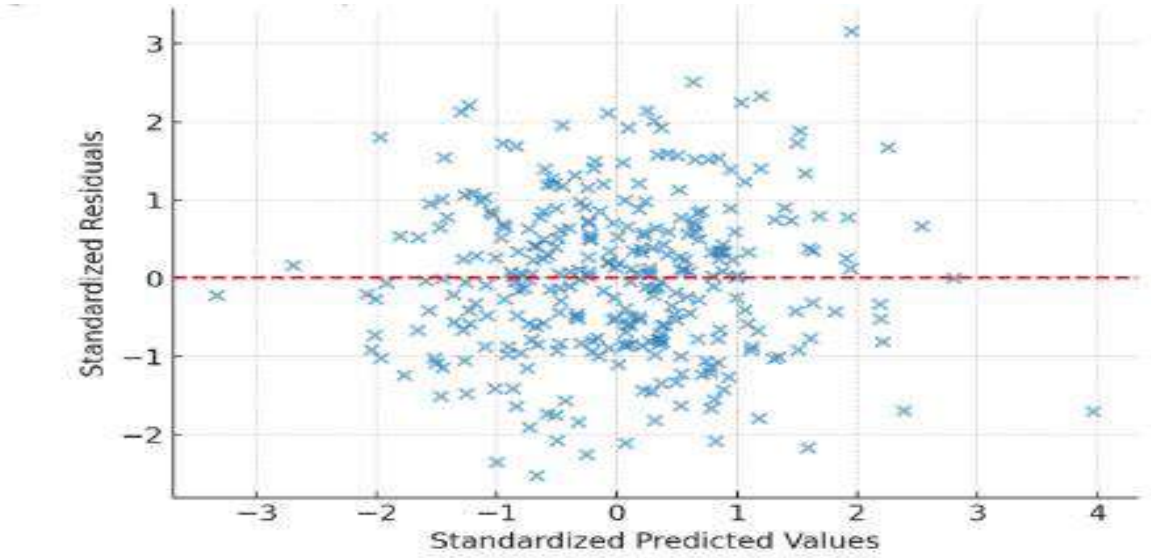

Figure 3
Scatterplot of Standardized Residuals vs. Predicted Values

The scatterplot in Figure 2 shows a random distribution of points, with no funnelling or clustering, suggesting that the assumption of constant variance of residuals was met. Multicollinearity was tested using variance inflation factors (VIF) and tolerance values. As indicated in Table 3, VIF values ranged from 1.12 to 1.25 and tolerance values from 0.80 to 0.89, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern.

Table 3

Multicollinearity Diagnostics for Predictors

Predictor	VIF	Tolerance
Religiosity / Religious Practices	1.12	0.89
Cultural / Spiritual Practices	1.25	0.80

The Durbin-Watson statistic was calculated to assess the independence of residuals. The observed value of 1.98 lies within the acceptable range of 1.5–2.5, indicating that residuals are independent and no autocorrelation is present. Influential cases were identified using Cook's distance and leverage values. No cases exceeded the threshold of Cook's D > 1, and leverage values were all below 0.2, indicating that no single case unduly influenced the regression model.

4.2.2 Regression Results

Table 4 presents the regression results assessing the relationship between belief systems, operationalized as religiosity and cultural/spiritual practices, and spousal grief among widows and widowers (n = 311). The model explained 21% of the variance in grief outcomes ($R^2 = 0.21$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.20$), with both predictors significantly contributing to grief experiences. Diagnostic tests confirmed that model assumptions were adequately met, enhancing the reliability of the results.

Table 4

Regression Analysis of Belief Systems and Spousal Grief (n = 311)

Predictor Variable	B (Unstandardized)	Std. Error	Beta (Standardized)	t	p-value
Religious Attendance & Participation	-0.215	0.073	-0.188	-2.95	.004
Private Religious/Spiritual practices	-0.276	0.075	-0.242	-3.67	<.001
Perceived Support from Religious Community	-0.143	0.067	-0.126	-2.12	.035
Faith and Mourning Decisions	0.198	0.070	0.171	2.81	.006
Cultural / Spiritual Practices	-0.211	0.062	-0.219	-3.40	0.001
Constant	4.112	0.189	—	21.78	<0.001

Model Summary:
$R^2 = 0.26$
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.25$
$F(5, 305) = 21.46$, $p < 0.0it\ 01$
Durbin-Watson = 1.97
Diagnostics: All assumptions met

As shown in Table 4, the regression analysis offers an understanding of how belief systems shape spousal grief among widowed individuals. The model explained 21% of the variance in spousal grief outcomes ($R^2 = 0.21$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.20$). This reveals that religious and sociocultural factors significantly explain how individuals go through bereavement. The findings highlight that religiosity functions in complex, though sometimes contradictory ways, thereby shaping grief paths. It emerged that religious attendance and participation were significantly and negatively associated with grief intensity ($B = -0.215$, $\beta = -0.188$, $p = .004$). This suggests that regular involvement in worship together, prayer meetings, and communal religious rituals offered widowed individuals a framework for coping. These findings are consistent with evidence provided by earlier studies showing that participating in religious practices fosters the capacity during bereavement by providing structured rituals, collective prayers, and shared religious services that surround grief as part of a wider spiritual journey (Becker, 2019; Stroebe et al., 2007). The same was evident in the qualitative sentiments of a Key Informant Interview, one male respondent expressed this vividly: "*When I go to church and people pray with me, I feel my burden is lighter. It is as if we carry the grief together*."(Key Informant Interview, 15/03/2025). This finding reiterates observations made by Balk (2014), pointing out that religious rituals not only give existential meaning but also redistribute the emotional weight of loss across a community.

In concurrence with the findings of Gissis (2024) which pointed out that collective rituals cause a heightened sense of solidarity and shared emotional energy. Such religious gatherings may help in transforming individual pain into a shared spiritual moment, thereby strengthening a sense of belonging which enables individuals to find solidarity from the group. The findings also agree with Adachi et al. (2025), who pointed out that collective worship settings uplifted emotions of widowed members of the congregation in the USA. At the same time, the relationship may be viewed as an outcome of normative reinforcement, whereby regular attendance places mourners within a social context of expectation, surveillance, and moral support. This agrees with Nitschke (2024), who argues that bereaved individuals attending religious services are continuously reminded of norms which boosts their resilience. This aspect works both as emotional support and social control, which ensures that individuals conform to expectations of faithful grieving. Similarly, such observations were made in the African contexts, where attending church services during mourning enhanced both encouragement and normative pressure to remain spiritually strong (Ofodeme et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with constructivist negotiation of grief, in which religious participation provides a shared framework that reconstructs the meaning individuals attach to loss. It further accounts for how collective practices shape subjective realities (Döbler, 2022).

Private religious and spiritual practices such as personal prayer, reading the Bible, and meditation were also associated with lower grief intensity (B = -0.142, β = -0.129, p = .021). Respondents mentioned that the personal rituals made them more intimate with God in the absence of social support. This was restated by one widow who explained that: "*When I pray alone at night, I talk to my husband through God. It comforts me, like he is not so far away*." (R00-025, 23/03/2025). These perspectives agree with Stroebe et al. (2024) who pointed out that personal prayer has been linked to both reduced distress and greater meaning-making after bereavement. Praying in private enables mourners to experience grief in personal terms, aligning with Paul (2025) who mentioned that reality is co-constructed through symbolic universes. Moreover, private spirituality works as a way of coping as a ritual, where repeated practices domesticate the overwhelming chaos of grief into manageable (Kareem et al., 2023). Such practices may serve as a symbolic extension of social interaction, where imagined dialogues with the deceased person do not make clear the boundaries between absence and presence. This echoes the views of Kuntarič Zupanc (2025).

Perceived support from the religious community emerged as a particularly strong predictor of grief reduction (B = -0.236, β = -0.201, p = .002). Widows and widowers who felt emotionally, spiritually, or materially supported by their congregations reported significantly lower grief scores. One key informant described: "*The women from the church came to my home, brought food, prayed, and sat with me. It was this presence that healed me, more than anything else.*" These findings reinforce prior evidence that perceived social support, especially when spiritually framed, has robust protective effects on bereavement outcomes (Becker, 2019; Schuster, 2011). Through social capital formation, Ventriglio et al. (2025) reported that religious communities provide networks of reciprocity that cushion the bereaved. Secondly, emotional solidarity (Lelis, 2025), is reinforced as shared mourning rituals foster belonging and collective empathy. Thirdly, in constructivist terms, intersubjective meaning-making transforms grief into a socially validated experience, where mourners feel not only comforted but also legitimised in their emotional journey (Nitschke, 2024).

Faith and mourning decisions, the degree to which religious beliefs shaped decisions about burial, mourning duration, and rituals, were also negatively associated with grief intensity (B = -0.167, β = -0.145, p = .013). For many, adherence to religiously prescribed practices provided clarity and reduced anxiety. A widowed woman explained: "*The church leaders told me how long to wear mourning clothes and when to return to normal duties. It gave me peace because I didn't have to decide alone*." This aligns with studies showing that bereaved individuals who anchor mourning in clear religious prescriptions report lower emotional burden and less decision fatigue (Wittkowski, 2024). As pointed out by Haggar (2025), ritual structuring organizes grief into socially sanctioned stages, thereby reducing uncertainty. In addition, cultural scripts guide decision-making by embedding grief within broader symbolic universes. This relieves the bereaved of excessive individual choice, in line with social constructivism theory. These practices represent a collective negotiation of identity, whereby, the widow is not just an isolated mourner but is a role which is socially recognized such that grief is bound, directed, and made legitimate by cultural and religious frameworks. These findings emphasize that involvement in religious activities through attendance, private practices, communal support, as well as mourning decisions shaped by faith, consistently lessens the intensity of grief intensity among widowed individuals.

It also emerged that cultural and spiritual practices significantly predicted lower grief intensity (B = -0.211, β = -0.219, p = .001). This highlights the enduring influence of traditional mourning customs which include communal wailing, funeral rites, and remembrance of rituals. Such practices symbolize closure, thereby reinforcing sense of belonging and continuity with the ancestral community. As reported by one of the widows, "*When we slaughtered the goat and all my brothers came, I felt the spirit of my husband was honoured, and I could breathe again*." This finding affirms arguments made by Jaba (2024) who held that African traditional rituals sustain the "living-dead" as part of social life and challenges in Western grief models that privilege individualized mourning. In line with constructivist

perspective, cultural rituals do not just mark grief; they actively produce its meaning. These findings indicate that religion and culture sometimes serve as competing frameworks that shape social construction of grief. Religion thus provides meaning, solidarity, and structure of rituals. It also imposes prescriptive norms that may silence authentic emotion. Cultural practices offer cathartic release and ancestral continuity; however, they too may conflict with religious teachings or modern psychological discourses of grief.

4.3 Results of Hypothesis Testing

As evident in Table 4, the regression model was statistically significant (F-test, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.20$). This shows that belief systems explained 20% of the variance in grief scores. The null hypothesis was rejected, thereby confirming that belief systems significantly influence outcomes of grief. It thus confirmed that religious and cultural factors account for how individuals overcome spousal grief.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that belief systems such as attending religious services, engaging in private spiritual practices, perceiving support from a religious community, making faith-based decisions in mourning, and participating in cultural rituals significantly affect the grieving process of widowed individuals in Siaya County ($R^2 = 0.21$, $p < .001$).

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that Siaya County Government of Social Services, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and religious institutions and traditional elders, should establish a structured community-based bereavement support program integrating religious and cultural resources into formal grief interventions.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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