



# ***Huzuni na Hadithi: Grief and Stories in Southern Tanzania***

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*This article focuses on grief narratives in Songea Rural, Tanzania, as stories that connect people to each other and to the land. Short-term narratives in particular act as rites of incorporation: storytellers initiate others into a shared community and show survivors grappling to ground their experiences with death, representing a form of control over chaos as they repeatedly narrate events. The mourning process that follows, which includes a secondary funeral ritual and year-long restricted practices, transforms grief and memory, and therefore the narratives themselves. Collected stories provide the structure of this essay, marking shifts in my experience and understanding of the grief process in Peramiho and its surrounding villages.*

They told me we were going to Liganga. I had been living in Tanzania for over a month and had never heard of Liganga. All I knew was what my host father, Baba Sadaka, told me as I waited for the car with his wife, Mama Sadaka, and family friend Mama Sikujua: “It is much like my village,” he said. “The houses there are made of trees.”

With these few words, he meant to orient me to what he considered a slightly less developed place and way of life. Peramiho, where we lived, was halfway between Liganga and the nearest town, Songea. Liganga and Peramiho, as well as Baba Sadaka’s village, fall into the Songea Rural district of southern Tanzania, an area populated primarily by three main ethnic groups: WaNgoni, WaNdendeule, and WaMatengo. Songea Town, the bustling capital of the region, harbors offices, markets, and opportunities for growing businesses, entrepreneurial efforts, and national trade. In Peramiho, though a regional hospital draws patients from populations across the south, homes were without electricity and running water during my first two visits to the country, and expansion of those services would only begin in

2012. In Liganga, apparently, homes were built from trees.

The red clay road to Liganga was twisted and pitted. As Mama Sikujua and I were jostled around in the backseat, houses became scarce, and the land opened up to reveal mountains in the distance and flat red brushland all around us. We drove for an hour before structures began to appear again at the edge of a village. I did not see any houses made of trees. As in Peramiho, homes were built from red clay bricks—the difference was that in Liganga these were more often exposed. Not only was Liganga less dense, with no paved road or clear village center, there was also no plaster to cover their bricks, let alone paint to cover plaster.

The little cement people could afford was reserved for the floor, upon which a bamboo mat, or *mkeka*, was spread. When a middle-aged man led us into a house by the roadside, this *mkeka* was where we sat. Our hosts left us there alone for a while before beginning to come in one by one to greet us. The first, a woman with white and blue wax print fabrics wrapped around her waist and shoulder, sat next to Mama Sikujua. Mama

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Sadaka approached the woman on her knees and took her hand in hers, saying, “*Pole sana*—I am very sorry”. She was gentle but direct.

“*Asante sana*,” the woman replied—“thank you.” They exchanged typical greetings before Mama Sikujua also offered her sympathy, and so did I. The woman thanked us as well, then two others entered individually and we repeated ourselves:

“*Pole sana*.”

“*Asante sana*.”

“*Pole sana*.”

“*Asante sana*,” to each.

Then two men, elders, entered the room and sat on wooden chairs near the edge of the bamboo mat. Both wore long-sleeved button-down shirts that nearly reached their knees, their mouths framed by deep wrinkles. We sat down after greeting them, and immediately one of the men began to lead us in prayer.

They began with a “Glory Be” and “Our Father,” then together they said two decades of “Hail Marys”—a segment of the Catholic Rosary—before reaching a series of prayers I did not recognize, and then the process repeated itself. Caught in the rhythm and repetition of a language I was only beginning to understand, and words I knew by heart, I sat and tried to process the scene—why were we offering sympathy? Who were these people to us?

After the prayer there was a moment of silence, then, unprompted, the same elder began to speak; he was listing events that had occurred. I did not understand much, just days of the week and the word “hospital”: “On Monday, something happened. On Tuesday, something happened. We went to the hospital. On Thursday, something happened. *Alifariki*”—another word I recognized: “He died.” “Who died?” I thought. At the end of this litany of days, the man answered my question. “My brother,” he said. Several people in the room cleared their throats, and the other man seemed to curl into himself, with his hands between his knees and his head bowed. I was struck by how small he seemed, and by how much felt left unsaid in their non-verbal additions to the soundscape.

After a few more minutes of silence, we were introduced. I was the *mzungu*—white, foreign—student who had joined the family to do research. The older man who led us in prayer was the father of my host sister’s fiancé, Adelin. The second was Adelin’s *baba mdogo*—his father’s younger brother. The much younger man who initially led us into the house was one of Adelin’s nine siblings, and one of the women, whose huge eyes I later learned to recognize on all of her children, was his mother. The other two women were not introduced, but they too were Baba and Mama Sadaka’s in-laws.

Following these prayers and introductions, our hosts led us through the large housing complex, pointing out their homes to us as we went. We walked a short distance and passed the church to reach a small cemetery. Most of the graves were worn down by time and had settled together into uneven ground. Some of the letters on wooden cross markers were completely weathered away by the elements, lost and anonymous amidst the wild flowers and red dust, while other names, in varying degrees of fresher paint, were followed by dates of birth and death.

Filing between these crosses, we reached a clearly delineated mound of clay: a much more recent grave. Lying across it were several silver wreath-like decorations, faded and flattened and no longer new. Adelin’s *baba mdogo* led us in another set of prayers, and then, one by one, we tossed water from a glass soda bottle onto the grave. As we left the cemetery, the elders pointed out the graves of other deceased family members, including their parents.

We returned to the house, where we were served a meal of chicken, rice, and *ugali*, a stiff corn porridge. Our hosts left us alone to eat; this was initially counterintuitive to me, but I learned that this was the typical WaNgoni practice and was meant to show respect to guests. As we ate, I asked questions to gain a sense of orientation.

Mama Sadaka, like her husband, often patiently helped me to grasp a better understanding of situations I found unclear. “Who died?” I asked.

“Adelin’s *baba mdogo*,” she answered. This meant that Adelin’s father, the elder who had led us in prayers, had at least two younger brothers, one of whom I had met, and the other recently deceased.

“And whose house is this?” I asked, having noted that all of our hosts’ homes had been pointed out to us on our walk to the cemetery.

“This is the house of Adelin’s *baba mdogo*,” she said.

“The one who died?”

She nodded in response.

“Was he sick?”

“No. There was an accident, with donkeys. He was on a bicycle. The donkeys and their cart did not stop.” She and Mama Sikujua continued to eat as I looked around the home, where a picture of a man resembling the other elders hung on the brick wall. Above our heads, whole tree beams stretched above us to provide support for the thatched roof—a house made from trees.

I was not entirely surprised at the stoicism in her answer. I had been living in Peramiho for over a month at this point, and had often noted how private and seemingly emotionally closed-off my interlocutors were. Even the facts of the death, when narrated, had a stilted, structured feel. Having traveled to Tanzania particularly to attempt to understand and mediate personal grief through a cross-cultural lens, I wondered how this narrative reflected the experience of death for the family.

### **Death and Mourning Traditions in Songea Rural**

My research began in June and July of 2010, when I lived in Peramiho with a Tanzanian family—Baba and Mama Sadaka and their children—and conducted ethnographic fieldwork for my undergraduate thesis. Motivated by what I perceived as a lack of grief support in the United States, I focused primarily on the network of support structures—both economic and social—that exist in Peramiho, especially following personal or community loss. On a previous visit to Peramiho, I noted the overwhelming strength of social networks within the village, and I wondered

how these would manifest differently in the grief process than the more individualistic culture I came from. I wanted to make sense of the ways in which coping mechanisms in Peramiho differed from my own home in the southern United States.

Participant-observation was key for daily interactions. I also attended family and community meetings, and traveled to neighboring towns and villages with the family to visit and attend ceremonies, particularly those in Liganga and in Baba Sadaka’s birth village, Mpandagindo. I focused my initial paper on informal material and economic support systems, which are more prominent than explicit displays or discussions of emotion in Songea Rural.

When I returned to Peramiho from September 2011 to November 2012, further observations of the mourning process more clearly foregrounded the importance of narratives. One loss in particular, that of Baba Sadaka’s mother, hit especially close to home, bringing me back to the site of one of the stories discussed in this paper, and adding another layer to the already thick memory of the landscape. My understanding of the mourning rituals and structures in place served to further contextualize these narratives.

The experience of my “family” in Peramiho, as they described and as I often witnessed, fit into a structure similar to those commonly cited in anthropological literature. Rituals delineate clear mourning periods based on the passage of time. Only days after a death, family and friends gather at the family’s housing compound, usually within walking distance of the village church and cemetery. Overnight, men gather, drink, and tell stories around campfires, while women prepare food and local beer, catching up on family happenings.

Visitors to funerary rituals in Peramiho arrive with whatever they can afford to bring—often rice, corn flour, or chickens. Those traveling from urban areas more literally “pay” their respects, providing cash to the family of the deceased to contribute to the cost of the gathering. Although the bereaved technically host these events, guests take on the key responsibilities of building fires, cooking, brewing beer, and even

greeting newcomers. This leaves the closest family members space to isolate themselves or, more commonly, to tend to higher organizational matters, such as arranging the church, situating the guests, paying the priest and choir, and other tasks necessary to facilitate a proper funeral.

In the morning, more guests arrive, and Catholic funeral rites precede the burial (in this case, the effect of a German mission in their proximity). Graveside displays were the only expression of raw emotion I saw in my experience with mourning rituals in Songea Rural; women wept at the foot of the grave, their voices blending together in spontaneous harmony, creating a rhythm in the chaos as men wiped their faces and cleared their throats in the background.

Following the ceremony, the family serves enough food, unseasoned to respect the dead, for the multitude at hand, which for a village elder can easily reach a few hundred attendees. For the closest family members, the mourning period begins here. They complete a week of intense grieving before returning, to some extent, to their everyday lives. Restrictions on clothing, celebrations, and sexual behaviors apply for the following weeks. On my first visit to Liganga, we arrived during this liminal time before the secondary funeral.

Forty days after the burial, the larger group of funeral-goers reconvenes for the *arobaini* (literally, “forty”), which is nearly identical in structure to the previous gathering. At the end of this two-day event, the family replaces the temporary grave marker with a permanent one; women take off their white headscarves, and people feast on the food of celebration. Having attended the *arobaini* of Adelin’s *baba mdogo*, I noted that spirits were noticeably higher than they had been on my first visit, though many relatives wept at the grave. The *arobaini* marks the end of the formal mourning period. Afterward, life generally returns to normal for the bereaved, with the exception of place-based restrictions on celebratory rites and parties. These restrictions continue for the rest of the year, even if a wedding or anniversary had been planned in that area prior to the death. At the end of the formal mourning

period, grief often does not come to a complete close, as anniversaries and other tragedies can provoke memories and emotions later in life (Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson, 1976). However, the specific mourning framework in Songea Rural shapes the experience of death and mourning in ways that continue throughout the survivors’ lives.

### Literature and Theoretical Framework

When I asked Baba Sadaka how funerary and mourning customs in Songea Rural help surviving members of the family to grieve, he told me that I was thinking about the issue in the wrong way, saying, “It isn’t important what the custom does for us, for the people who are still living.” He was adamant about this: “For a whole year after a death, you shouldn’t plan celebrations, host large numbers of people, dance *ngoma*, because that time is for remembering the one who died, and how can you remember if you are doing those things?” He used the phrase *onyesha upendo*, or showing love, and made it clear that it was disrespectful to the memory of the deceased to move on too quickly in the place where he or she lived. Local understandings of mourning ceremonies and time or place-based restrictions following a death therefore prioritize respect of the deceased rather than the needs of the bereaved who remain.

While I respected what Baba Sadaka said regarding the importance of the deceased, his explanation minimized the experience of grief and loss for individuals and families; I looked to cross-cultural work for a fuller answer. Much of the literature suggests that funerary and mourning rituals serve the needs of survivors, for whom the effects are material, symbolic, and psychological in nature. Specific ritual elements take the form of burial rites (Conklin, 1995; Connor, 1995; Corr, 2008; Hollimon, 2001), short-term rules and restrictions (Kracke, 1981; Woodrick, 1995), weeping and wailing (Shepard, 2002), songs and narratives (Abu-Lughod, 1985; Maschio, 1992), and some long-term grieving and memorializing rituals (Hegland, 1998; Leavitt, 1995; O’Rourke, 2007). Survey texts represent attempts to search

for universal trends in these rituals and to ascribe meaning to them (Bloch & Parry, 1982; Huntington & Metcalf, 1979; Rosenblatt et al., 1976). Rosenblatt and colleagues (1976) in particular suggest that Freud's concept of psychological work lies at the core of all funeral practices, and that survivors use it to "address pan-human needs" and to adjust to the loss mentally and emotionally. This can involve addressing memories, grief, and feelings of guilt (Conklin, 1995; Metcalf & Huntington, 1979; Woodrick, 1995).

Funerary rituals are also used to address larger questions regarding the meaning of death, as well as the meaning of life. For example, Huntington and Metcalf (1979) cite Wilson's (1939) work among the Nya Kyusa in present-day southern Tanzania, which depicts dancing as the confrontation of death with the continuation of life. In her work in South America, Corr (2008) notes the use of dice games at funerals to show the relationship between religion and games of chance, and between death and uncertainty. Jindra and Noret (2011a) situate these ideas within a specifically African worldview:

Beliefs and practices surrounding death get at the core of our critical sense of human destiny and purpose. In Africa, however, they go even further, being intimately involved with social structure, group identity, and even politics. Religious traditions, kin groups, and social relationships in general play a stronger role in funerals than in the West (p. 5).

With this understanding, the funeral and *arobaini* ceremonies in Songea Rural highlight the importance of community support systems in reassembling relatives from across the region and the country, and the overwhelming material and social support. Social interactions and reconnections, as well as the preparation of space and meals for numerous guests, drive the experience of a funeral there, much as Jindra and Noret (2011a) outline.

Mourning rites also often provide a forum for the reorganization of continuing social and economic systems. Families and communities redistribute material items such as land and money soon after a funeral, and many power-centric relationships and social bonds are addressed during and through funerary rituals (Conklin, 1995; Corr, 2008; Hollimon, 2001; Metcalf & Huntington, 1979). Social bonds are also strengthened merely by attendance at the funeral, where people reconnect to reaffirm relationships and beliefs (Metcalf & Huntington, 1979); Jindra and Noret (2011a) in particular argue that "funerals are major occasions for the (re)production and the (un)making of both solidarities and hierarchies, both alliances and conflicts" (p. 2), and focus on the changing ways in which this occurs. Droz (2011) explains how, among the Kikuyu in Kenya,

The body of the deceased only rarely belongs to its prior owner. It is the family--and even more broadly, the community--that reclaims the deceased. A funeral still remains the indicator for assessing the deceased's life and deeds: in choosing the form and the location of the burial, the group reclaims the individual and renders its judgment upon him (p. 84).

Funerals and burials thus mark the status of the deceased and serve as sites at which surviving community members can reorient themselves in both explicit and implicit ways. In Liganga particularly, these conversations began at the *arobaini*. On the morning of the second day, when Adelin approached his fiancée to greet her, he told us that he had been awake all night. Adelina kept me up giggling and trying to remember a poem she had learned in school, something about a corrupt landlord and his tenants, but Adelin had been around the fire with the men of his family trying to determine how the property and responsibilities of his uncle would be distributed amongst them. In this way, those who might attempt to avoid the financial and social

obligations of a funeral would lose a say in the family's future interests.

Financial and social obligations for family members are large, but by participating in ceremonies and dividing up tasks and expenses, funeral-goers make these aspects more manageable. In most cultures studied, funerals draw large extended families together from large distances, and communities are responsible for burying the deceased respectfully and for comforting the bereaved (Conklin, 1995; Hollimon, 2001; Metcalf & Huntington, 1979; Wolseth, 2008; Woodrick, 1995). As I saw in Songea Rural, guests arrive bearing gifts with which they support the needs of the group. Gyekye (1996) explains this in terms of the communal values common to African peoples: "The burial and funeral expenses of a member of the group are the responsibility of the group. If one wants to live a lonely life, then one has to think about and arrange all such matters oneself" (p. 45). The maintenance of social ties throughout one's life allows for a proper and dignified burial, such that in some urban and migrant communities, individuals form groups and associations to handle these issues (Ranger, 2011). This encourages participation in family and community events: short-term obligations provide long-term security.

Short-term grief and mourning rituals in particular, characterized by specific amounts of time set aside for restricted behavior or the allowance of particular emotions, can last from three days in the Peruvian Amazon (Shepard, 2002), to several months among the Brazilian Wari and those of Southwestern New Britain (Conklin, 1995; Maschio, 1992). In many cases, the bereaved are removed from social situations for a certain amount of time, until the mourning period is considered over; the amount of time "necessary" to express and overcome grief differs depending on the culture (Conklin, 1995; Maschio, 1992; Woodrick, 1995). Jindra and Noret (2011b) explain:

These events can mark the end of mourning, the transition of the deceased to the world of

the ancestors, the succession of a new family head or ruler, the dedication of a tombstone, or a simple Christian commemoration or memorial" (p. 30).

The *arobaini*, or fortieth day, secondary burial in Songea Rural fits into this category: it consists of a second Catholic mass in honor of the deceased, a procession to the grave to replace the temporary cross marker with a more intricate one, and the end of clothing, cooking, and sexual restrictions for the closest family members. The *arobaini* clearly marks the end of mourning and promotes a return to social norms.

Since I was particularly interested in how the bereaved provided and received emotional support, I paid close attention to the ways in which the expression of emotions is ritualized within funerals, other ceremonies, and longer-term grief structures. While crying is common in many contexts surrounding death, a few cultures utilize weeping or wailing in a particularly organized, ceremonial fashion (Conklin, 1995; Shepard, 2002; Wolseth, 2008). In its simplest form, wailing is described as mainly wordless, but it sometimes transitions into singing with the inclusion of words, such as kinship terms or related ideas (Conklin, 1995). In a number of cultures, weeping takes an even more structured form: for these groups, singing is an important part of the funerary ritual, expressing feelings of loss, isolation, and confusion (Brison, 1998), or including complex metaphors relating to the concept of death, which are used to remember, mourn, and heal after a death (Maschio, 1992). During funerary rituals among the people of Southwestern New Britain, forty songs are sung following a vague structure (Maschio, 1992). These songs address the grief of the bereaved but also the sadness and nostalgia of the deceased for their lives. Among the Awlad Ali Bedouins of the Egyptian desert, Abu-Lughod (1985) noted that poetry was used to express feelings of grief and sorrow that could not be acceptably expressed in plain speech.

In Songea Rural, while my family and their friends rarely talked about their emotions, wailing

and song were both used to express these feelings, presumably because this was more socially acceptable in a society where individual hardship was deemphasized. In particular, when mourners took buses together to funerals in remote areas, a few women would lead the group in the singing of hymns and traditional songs, with each voice finding a niche in the loop of sound. This singing would continue from the kitchens through the night as most of the guests went to sleep, soft songs I could not understand, but which made me shiver nonetheless. Around the grave, mourners were more likely to weep, with women especially down on the ground, reaching across the red earth mound and calling out. These displays were quickly over, however, and cheerful faces would share meals before leaving the housing compound for their respective homes.

Multiple times, however, I found myself in the grips of narratives like the one that opens this article, wherein the structured description of a death scene seems to evoke emotions just as potent as those expressed at the grave. Myerhoff (1984) analyzes a similar phenomenon in the stories told about the death of an elder, Jacob, in a Jewish community in California. Her analysis focuses not on emotions so much as the interpretation and even glorification of the death event. After Jacob's seemingly preordained death at his birthday party, stories circulated that "made a myth of a historical episode and found messages of continuity, human potency, and freedom amid threats of individual and social obliteration" (Myerhoff, 1984, p. 394). Myerhoff (1984) argues that these stories have a clear purpose in the community, marking Jacob's as a "good" death and making death seem a little more controllable. Myerhoff's (1984) analysis provides a clear framework for interpreting the purpose of the stories as emotional and social structures that build and restore narratives of life. In this context, grief narratives in Songea Rural are deliberate connections of people to each other and to the land. Short-term narratives in particular act as rites of incorporation: storytellers initiate others into a shared community of loss and support. The mourning process, which includes the arobaini

ritual and year-long restrictions, then transforms grief and memory, and therefore the narratives themselves, into more general lessons about life and living.

### **"On the first day...": Short-term Grief Narratives**

One day, my host sister and I were walking home around five or five-thirty, at the time when, walking past the cemetery in the direction of the setting sun, we could see the orange flowers backlit, their petals intersected by tiny dark veins and seeming to glow against the silhouettes of crosses and weeds. "My friend's parents are buried there," Adelina said, jutting her head toward the graves by the side of the road.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Do you mind if we go visit their graves?"

We went. She was not exactly sure where they were buried, but she knew the general location, and we found them easily—two long, thin cement rectangles sharing a wall. An empty plastic water bottle sat between their names: if family members were to visit they would fill this bottle, and each guest would sprinkle water across the graves as I had witnessed in Liganga. With no family around, however, the bottle would remain empty, easily misconstrued by a foreigner like myself as a piece of trash.

"Do you mind if I pray a little prayer?" Adelina asked.

"No, go ahead."

We bowed our heads as she muttered a quick "Our Father" and "Hail Mary."

"Okay, let's go home." We started walking again, taking a different path than usual: across the main road and through the market. It was a longer route. She wanted to talk.

"You know, they were like second parents to me. Sophia and I were always together and I was always staying over at her house. I loved them very much."

"They were young when they died," I said, having noted the dates on the grave markers.

"Yeah. Sophia and I were still in primary school when her father died, and maybe Form 2 or

Form 3 for her mother.” She had probably been sixteen years old.

“Were they sick?”

“Yes.” Long pauses between sentence fragments. “HIV/AIDS.” She went on to tell me what she remembered of them, how sad she had been when they died.

When we returned to the house, we had visitors. Three young women, between the ages of maybe 11 and 20, were nursing bottles of orange Fanta on a couch in the sitting room. Both of Adelina’s parents were sitting across from them, leaning forward, their elbows on their knees. Adelina greeted them warmly and they exchanged news of school before heading home in the increasing dark.

“Those are the children of my close friend, the eye doctor,” Baba Sadaka said. “He died last year, nine months ago. Those children, those children you saw sitting there, they have no father. He went to work every day that week and was completely fine. He went to work that day and was completely fine. When he got home, he sat down, like he always did, to relax. He was feeling hot, so he opened a window.” As he spoke, I was reminded of Adelin’s father speaking about his younger brother’s death. He, too, had begun his story before the action, with reiterations that his brother had been fine, and everything had been normal. Only a few weeks later, with an increased Swahili vocabulary and a familiar voice narrating, I more ably pieced together the events that went with the passage of time. “He felt tense, in his chest, and could barely breathe. He moved to the bedroom, put on a t-shirt and shorts, and laid down to wait for the pain to stop.

“Soon after, his wife called me on the phone. She asked me to come see him, and to be quick about it. I was eating dinner, so I began to eat faster. She called again. ‘Really, you must come quickly. You must come now.’ So I didn’t finish eating. I went straight to his house. He doesn’t live far. When I got there, his children were silent and still in the sitting room.” He pantomimed their stances, hunched over, hands twisted between knees. “I asked them what was wrong. ‘Baba is sick.’ I asked where he was: they pointed to his

room. I saw him and called a car from the hospital, but he died soon after he arrived there. It was his heart, a problem with his heart.

“*Maisha magumu*,” he said, finishing his story, —“life is difficult.” I did not really understand why he told me this, but I sensed that it was more for his benefit than it was for mine. The repetition of phrases, the recitation of the last days, had sounded almost cathartic, especially this second time I heard such a narrative in progress. I initially interpreted this as a way of verbally working through emotions, of processing. In the context of the cultural importance of storytelling and narration, however, in addition to his focus on respecting the deceased as primary to his own grief, Baba Sadaka would probably interpret the story differently. A deeper engagement with theories of ritual helped me to form a richer understanding of this process.

### Stories as Rites of Incorporation

Analysis of these stories as a form of psychological work—“addressing pan-human needs” and confronting existential questions—suggests that we frame them within a larger theoretical framework regarding the purpose of ritual. Van Gennep (1960) classifies rites of passage like funerals as consisting of, and serving as, rites of separation, transition, and incorporation, functioning to “reduce the harmful effects” of society and the individual’s “changes of condition” (p.13). These rites provide a fairly straightforward analysis of mourning ceremonies and structures in Songea Rural. Van Gennep (1960) notes that rites of separation do not hold primary significance in the context of a death. Instead, transition and incorporation become particularly valuable for the bereaved. In Songea Rural these rites manifest themselves as religious and spiritual acts, such as the bathing of the corpse almost immediately after the death. These are extremely private matters, not open to the general community.

The time between death and the end of the mourning cycle are marked by delineated periods of transition back into social life. Turner (1969) argues that, more aware of their vulnerability and



impermanence, survivors make use of these rites in “giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond” (p. 97). The extended liminality between the burial and the secondary ritual of *arobaini* creates a heightened sense of *communitas* as the community gathers, sharing resources, cooking and eating together, and practicing ritual processes that are fluid and second-nature to all but the youngest generation. These rites strengthen social bonds between the members of the group as they reconnect with far-flung relations and more formally discuss changing responsibilities along kinship lines.

If formal mourning structures serve as a forum in which my interlocutors are able to experience liminality and *communitas*, their methods of storytelling then serve as rites of incorporation. The literal structure of the stories I heard exhibit a marked difference from the more expected spontaneity of the liminal state, as they have a repetitive, formulaic format. Understood broadly, these narratives show the reincorporation of the bereaved back into society:

There is a dialectic here, for the immediacy of *communitas* gives way to the mediacy of structure, while, in rites de passage, men are released from their structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas* (Turner, 1969, p.129).

The stories that Adelin’s father and Baba Sadaka told focused on specific details of the events leading up to the death. These highly structured grief narratives show survivors grounding their experiences with death in these factual accounts, representing a form of control over chaos as they repeatedly narrate events.

Both Eliade (1961) and Turner (1969) argue that humans create and recreate as an attempt to make meaning from the mysteries of the cosmos: myth, religion, art, and stories explain our origins. “To tell how things came into existence,” Eliade (1961) states, “is to explain them and at the same time indirectly to answer another question: why did they come into existence?” (p. 97). Similarly,

to speak the how of a death implies a hope of more deeply understanding the why as well, or at least of coming to terms with it. This argument illuminates these purely factual accounts as active attempts to make sense of the existential crisis of death. By breaking a death event into its chronological steps, storytellers and their audiences can restructure the loss into a more digestible form. The stories could help to normalize the death, as the spoken words become natural through repetition, or they might serve as a means to reorient deeper questions as the bereaved transition back into their regular lives.

Turner’s (1969) argument for *communitas* provides an even more compelling explanation for such repeated storytelling: “What [the bereaved] seek is a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person’s being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared” (p. 138). These stories serve not only to express the events of the death but also to incorporate the listener into the grieving process. The teller narrates the death scene to each new set of visitors, providing an invitation, and initiation, into the larger mourning community.

This explanation fits most clearly in the Tanzanian context. Having grown up in an inclusive community- and village-based culture, my interlocutors in Songea Rural prioritized community involvement and action. Rarely driven by individual decisions, family gatherings and committee meetings mediated even personally motivated developments like marrying, building a home, and pursuing an education or a career change. Thus individuals also share the experience of grief and mourning, initiating newcomers to the scene, as if to say, “This is what happened; now you can understand.” Only at this point can visitors to the family compound follow their hosts to the place of burial to mourn.

### **Hieronimus Luambano and Long-term Grief**

Adelina’s compulsion to visit her friend’s parents’ graves on our way home one day, despite the decade that had passed since their deaths, allowed me insight into a very different experience with grief narratives. Soon after, I

learned even more. We went to Mpandagindo, the village where Baba Sadaka grew up, on my last weekend in Peramiho because his mother, Bibi, had invited me weeks before. Baba Sadaka kept putting it off, blaming transportation difficulties and local committee meetings, but I wanted to see the place he so often compared to Peramiho and Liganga, and Adelina wanted to see her grandmother. So eventually, when there was hardly any time left, he hired a driver, a friend of the family who only required money for fuel. When we visited Mpandagindo, we also visited Hieronimus Luambano, his father, at his grave.

After greeting one another and sharing a meal, we went to the grave. Under an old tree there was a clearing, and there the great patriarch rested, alone, in a neat concrete structure, rectangular, and maybe a foot off the ground. We took off our shoes to stand in the dust at his feet, eleven of us in all: his widow, three of his children, five of his grandchildren, a daughter-in-law, and me. Baba Sadaka led us in a few minutes of prayer, and then the adults used branches to sweep the entire area clean. I stood out of the way with Bibi and the youngest children as the others pulled stray weeds from the clearing, more clearly delineated the edges of the space, and brushed the dirt into the familiar half-circles of sweeping. We prayed again, and then took turns sprinkling water from an old bottle onto the grave.

“From the top to the bottom,” Mama Sadaka told Adelina as she handed her the bottle, and Adelina nodded, her expression very serious. Adelina awkwardly doused the grave with water, and then returned the bottle to the head of the grave. As the rest of us were walking away, Bibi called her over and had her place a hand on either side of the cross. She spoke to her granddaughter in low tones, and Adelina nodded a few times.

We walked back to the house, passing under trees heavy with oranges and lemons. Baba Sadaka and his brother used a rake to pull the fruit down from the highest branches, and the children raced to pick them up as they fell. “My father took care of all of these trees,” Baba Sadaka told me. “He planted them, helped them to grow, good and strong and healthy. Since he died, no one takes

care of them. They still bear fruit, but so much less.”

We ate, chins and hands sticky and shiny from the juice, and made the two-hour drive back to Peramiho. From where I was sitting in the rented car, I could see Baba Sadaka in the rearview mirror. His expression was difficult to read. When we got home, he busied himself with cutting his nails, then with fastidiously cleaning the table where we had eaten breakfast before leaving. I was sitting alone in the courtyard when he decided he wanted to talk.

“Erin? Now you’ve seen the village where my mother lives, you’ve seen what life there is like—*shida sana*—so many worries, and now that you have seen it, I will tell you, I hate going there. I hate going to that house, I hate seeing my father’s grave; I hate seeing my mother there. I would like for her to come here. My life is here. There, that is not life, it is just... remembering. And it hurts to remember. It hurts me.” We sat there for a minute just looking at each other, then he said, “I loved my father very much,” and went into the house. It had been five years, but still the sight of his father’s tomb, his father’s home, his father’s trees, exhausted him enough that he went to bed early, without dinner.

### **Incorporation and Place**

After visiting his father’s grave, I finally understood Baba Sadaka’s explanation of local grieving rituals as serving the needs of the deceased rather than those of survivors. The process of visiting and maintaining the site clearly served to preserve and respect Hieronimus’ memory and continuing social role as patriarch. While there was an implicit sense of support around the grave, the family did not interact with one another much and focused solely on praying, sweeping, and walking off silently in groups of two or three. Hieronimus’ death was not discussed amongst them, though its effects reverberated on the family structure and on the landscape itself.

A key similarity between the first year after a death and the long-term mourning that follows is a sense that place matters. Ceremonies and one-year restrictions rooted in place initiate the

incorporation of a person's memory with a physical location, and long-term grief continues to be tied there. In this way, Mpandagindo holds potent memories that Baba Sadaka does not have to face when he is not there, a compartmentalization of grief that he leaves behind in his everyday life.

Basso (1996) explores the connection of memory to place among the White Mountain Apache. He focuses specifically on the use of storied place-names in the teaching of moral behavior. Lessons present in the Tanzanian landscape are both moral and social, emphasized through stories told and feelings expressed in their time. Burial sites begin as venues for funerary ceremonies, drawing communities together and strengthening bonds. Following these rituals, the place of burial and the home of the deceased continue to be sacred spaces, protected by restrictions meant to honor the dead.

Gravesites become steeped in memory, which later resonates in descendants' stories. Elders are linked irrevocably to the land; however, movement away from family land becomes a metaphor for lost traditions and changing responsibilities for the next generation. Gyekye (1996) explains:

The notion of ancestorship becomes more intelligible when it is broadly conceived and associated with that of tradition. So that when one talks about the ancestors, what comes to mind is tradition--tradition that the ancestors established, or at least took part in establishing (p.164).

How Hieronimus Luambano died is no longer crucial to the story. Instead, Baba Sadaka wove his father's life and land into a story of past values and continued development: while his father lived, the land remained rich, but with his passing without an heir willing to tend the ground, the family's roots shifted toward town.

Two very different connections to land emerged during my time in Peramiho. In Liganga and Mpandagindo, the deceased are buried on family land to a certain extent: Liganga's

cemetery holds Adelin's family for generations, whereas Hieronimus' gravesite in Mpandagindo begins a new family plot. In Peramiho, however, a more general cemetery holds many community members, even those of different origins and ethnic backgrounds. While these burial sites remain within walking distance for residents, the landscape does not specifically recall their family histories, and therefore their social histories, moral values, and traditions. According to Droz (2011), the Kikuyu of Kenya "considered burial in a cemetery as the unavoidable consequences of the lack of land" (p. 78). The lack of land for burial reflects increased urbanization, but does not carry the social repercussions of an improper burial. Young people like Adelina refer to the *arobaini* and community involvement in funerals as a waste of resources that could be used for surviving family, an opinion her father fears is spreading.

Gathering communities share more than the resources necessary to put on a respectable funeral. By sharing the experience of mourning rituals, survivors strengthen social bonds and honor the greater human struggle. Grief narratives provide a key entry into these relationships. "*Maisha magumu*," Baba would say to close his stories. "*Shida sana* – life is difficult," he was telling me. "So many worries." Those who could not attend the funeral or *arobaini* were invited to enter with the family into the liminality of grief: they could pray with the family, hear of the death, and visit the grave. Stories were the threads that collapsed space and time into the universal process of suffering and healing, and as specific memories faded with time, individuals and values remained. As Myerhoff's (1984) interlocutors infused the death of elder Jacob with meaning and made him a mythic hero through their words, ancestors in Songea Rural remain potent presences throughout time. This resonated with my own experiences with loss: with time and retelling, the pain lessened, but it never went away. I went to Tanzania because I wanted to learn how to grieve, and I found that all I knew how to do was speak, and listen. Years of searching, research, and reflection finally suggest

that these phatic forms of communication are enough.

In the summer of 2012, Baba Sadaka's mother passed away after a brief sickness. As the family prepared to return to Mpandagindo for her burial, I heard my host father tell guest after guest the events that led up to her death. This time, I could not misunderstand his detailed retellings, or the guilt he felt that his mother fell and grew ill so far from the Peramiho hospital.

Hundreds gathered for her burial in the village. Bibi's became the second grave next to her husband's under the tree in the clearing, and following the ceremony, her children gathered from across the country to determine the next steps for the land and home that remained. Those who still resided in Mpandagindo saw their mother's death as a chance to move permanently to town; the elder siblings, like Baba Sadaka, were intent on maintaining the land, despite its distance from the benefits of Songea, or even Peramiho. The fate of family land shifts as later generations seek their futures in more urban areas. Connections of the land to ancestors, traditions, and values make these choices even more potent, as narratives serving to maintain both social ties and moral lessons increasingly lose (literal) ground. However, a deeply rooted urge to share experiences along common themes means that these traditions will be preserved as more formal rituals change.

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