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# **What to Wear to a Contemporary UK Funeral: The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Mourning Dress**

**Kevin Almond and Judith Simpson**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores contemporary mourning dress in the UK. There is considerable research about the decline of traditional mourning wear however, there is much less material available on what is worn to funerals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What literature exists appears to suggest that contemporary funeral outfits are shaped by the intersecting influences of multiculturalism and personalisation. The city of Leeds in the UK is home to over 160 nationalities representing many different faiths and cultural groups. It therefore seemed valuable to explore what people are currently wearing to funerals in the city as a case study. The research is based on a pilot study involving a small focus group, which drew participants from diverse cultural clusters. All participants reported changes in the practices of their own group, but these did not appear to be solely the result of multiculturalism. It became apparent that the rise of individualism had also become associated with personalised and themed funerals, where mourners could be asked to wear bright colours, or outfits with special relevance to the deceased. The paper will discuss the results of this pilot study in relation to a literature review and an analysis of the cultural diversity of contemporary mourning dress. It addresses a significant gap in literature related to cultural diversity in mourning dress in 21<sup>st</sup> century UK and serves as a catalyst for new thinking and global research in this area.

**Key Words:** Mourning Dress; Contemporary; Funeral; Cultural Diversity; Multiculturalism; Personalisation

## **Introduction**

In 1923, The Leeds Mourning Warehouse closed its doors for the last time. This shop, which had been run by the Forster family since 1849, boasted a ‘magnificent variety of everything requisite for mourning’ (Leeds Mercury 1912: 1), and ‘the newest and latest styles in mourning bonnets, caps, jackets, costumes and jerseys’ (Otley News 1886: 2). By 1963, when Geoffrey Gorer (1977) conducted his landmark study of grief and mourning in Britain, the market for mourning clothing had almost disappeared. In contemporary UK the clothing etiquette, which directed people to wear black or somber clothes to a funeral, is also in decline. This paper considers what people wear to funerals in 21<sup>st</sup> century, multi-cultural, Britain and attempts to explain the changes in contemporary mourning dress practice.

Frederic Forster’s shop flourished in a period when black mourning wear was ubiquitous, and strict mourning etiquette dictated everything from the hue and trim of women’s dresses to the width of a gentleman’s hatband (Cunnington and Lucas 1972). In this context, the most appropriate clothes were determined by age, class, gender, the relationship to the deceased and the time that had elapsed since the death. Leeds Museums and Galleries have many such mourning clothes in their collection, and the garments shown in Figure 1, include items from Forster’s shop.



Figure 1. Detail of black mourning clothes at the Discovery Centre, Leeds Museums and Galleries. Photograph courtesy of Andrew Lord.

By the 1920s, however, elaborate mourning dress was falling from favour and, by the 1950s, sober clothes had replaced bespoke mourning wear (Daily Mirror, 1952). When George VI died in 1952, the Earl Marshall's office announced, 'It is not expected that everybody should put himself into deepest black, at perhaps considerable expense, but that everybody should try to dress as soberly as possible. Anybody who does possess black clothes should wear them' (Daily Mirror 1952: 6). At family funerals the obligation to wear black was gradually replaced by the requirement to dress smartly (Naylor 1989), then from the 1990s, there was a move towards personalised, celebratory, or themed funerals.

At celebratory or themed funerals, mourners may be asked to wear bright colours, or outfits which reflect the personality of the deceased. The coffins of Ben and Arron Peake, who were killed by a drunk driver in 2008, were carried by men wearing Manchester United shirts, which reflected the passion of the deceased for the football club (Simpson 2019). Mourners attending a vigil for teenage cancer victim Stephen Sutton in 2014, were asked not to wear black (Gibbons 2014), and the majority wore yellow accessories in an attempt to 'put the fun into funeral' (Liverpool Echo 2014: n.pag). Mourners wore fancy dress to the funeral of Laura Johnson in 2015 as seen in Figure 2, while Figure 3 shows punk fashion worn to the funeral of Malcolm McLaren (one of the pioneers of punk rock) in 2010. In terms of costume and visual effect, the funerals we see today are very different from those catered for by Frederic Forster in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Figure 2. Figure Co-op Funeral care employee dressed as the Star Wars Darth Vader character, for the Halloween theme of Lorna Johnson held at Luton Crematorium in Bedfordshire, UK. Contributor: PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo. Photographer Steve Parsons.



Figure 3. Figure: Punks waiting for the horse drawn funeral cortege of Malcolm McLaren in London, 2020. Photograph by Oli Scarf via Getty Images.

An earlier investigation by the authors into the decline of traditional black mourning wear noted that one of the issues raised frequently by focus groups was barely mentioned in the literature (Almond and Simpson 2023). This was the matter of demographic change. One of the participants summed up the argument by suggesting that Victorian Britain had been a monoculture, which is to say that Victorian mourning etiquette addressed the needs of a white, British, Christian society that was also hierarchical and patriarchal (Wolffe 2000; Taylor 2009; Gittings 2023), whereas 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain is multicultural. The city of Leeds, for instance, is home to over 160 nationalities representing many different faiths and cultural groups (Leeds City Council 2021). There are also several subcultures (including punks, goths, and the LGBTQ+ community) which have their own communal values and dress codes. It does seem credible that the emergence of multiculturalism could have changed ideas about what can be worn to a contemporary funeral. As very little has been written on this subject, this paper discusses the findings from a focus group convened to make a preliminary exploration of the topic.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review briefly considers the reasons for the longstanding association between death and black clothing. This is followed by a summary of the existing debates on the new clothing practices emerging at UK funerals.

### ***Traditional Black Mourning Wear***

The tradition of wearing black for mourning is often interpreted as an externalisation of grief and sorrow. St Cyprian, writing around 250AD, clearly acknowledged that black clothing expressed sadness when he urged Christian mourners to set it aside: ‘Our brothers should not be mourned, when they have been liberated from the world at the Lord's summons...nor should we put on black garb here when they have already taken up white clothing there’ (St Cyprian, cited in Scourfield 1996: 17). However, treating black clothing as a material expression of grief is an oversimplification. The expression of sadness is only one of the meanings of black mourning clothes.

Black emerged as the colour of British mourning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and the reasons for its emergence are complex (Cunnington and Lucas 1972). Ariès (1981) argues that participants in the mediaeval funeral procession wore black to represent the robes of clerics who help people into the afterlife (1981). In a similar way, Cunnington and Lucas (1972) see the dark figures accompanying the coffin as participants in a piece of religious theatre, intended to move witnesses to pray for the soul of the deceased. In other words, this form of black clothing does not express the mood of the mourners but benefits the dead by reducing the time spent in Purgatory. The wearing of black for a prescribed period after the funeral has both theological and sociological roots. Theologically, black clothing is associated with penitence and – especially after the Reformation – mourners were encouraged to treat their loss as a reminder of their own mortality, don penitential robes and prepare for their own judgement (Phillippy 2002). Protestant Reformers appear to have repurposed black mourning wear: transforming garments that once served as a reminder to pray for the dead into a means of disciplining the mourner.

Sociologically, black clothing is associated with the identity transformations that Van Gennep characterised as ‘rites of passage’ (2019: 146ff). Jastrow argues that clothing provides ‘a metaphor for society’ (1900: 24f): therefore, if anyone is to change their role in society, their accustomed clothing must be set aside. Before a wife can become a widow, or a son an heir, the signs of their previous status need to be erased, and they must spend time in a liminal state, without any status at all. Black or undyed cloth was historically associated with the poor who, by definition, lacked status (Hope 2013; Planché 2024). Thus, the black uniform of a mourner, and the social restrictions that accompanied this, symbolised and perhaps even enforced liminality. When the black robes of mourning were removed, the individual would step into the clothes associated with their new role.

Once black clothing became part of British court mourning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century it also became a way of demonstrating social status (Cunnington and Lucas 1972). Thereafter, the black clothing of the mourner carried a range of (not entirely consistent) associations. These included respectability, conformity, religiosity and romance (Simpson 2019). Black clothing could also create a bond between mourners, emphasizing group identity and shared experience. As Cecil put it, the black clothing donned by a family in mourning, ‘was like the tartan of a Highland clan; it symbolised solidarity’ (1991: 17). Some people also appear to have believed that black clothing constituted a defense against spiritual danger. Some traditions assert that the devil cannot see black (Oliver 2009) and the Victorian anthropologist J.G. Frazer (1886) even speculated that black mourning clothing might have been intended to hide the living relative from the ghost of the deceased. Whatever their origins, the black clothes associated with respectable mourning represented a good living for businesses such as the Leeds Mourning Warehouse and played a significant role in the Victorian commercialisation of grief (Scholz 2022).

### ***The Decline of Black Mourning Wear***

The elaborate mourning etiquette developed by the Victorians collapsed for a variety of reasons. Improved life expectancy certainly contributed. When death visited less frequently, consolatory practices became less important and the complex rituals and symbolic dress of mourning were called into question (Jacobs 1899; Kellehear 2007). The National Funeral and Mourning Reform Association (founded 1875) and the Church of England Burial, Funeral, and Mourning Reform Association (founded 1880), lobbied for simpler, more affordable mourning rituals. This was alongside a growing recognition that the ‘money which has clothed the widow in useless yards of crape and wrapped even young children in the deepest black’ could have been better used to support living family members (Western Daily Press 1878: 7). The involvement of the Church of England in this campaign clearly indicates that, for the Protestant Church at least, black clothing no longer carried religious significance.

In practical terms, opportunities to display black mourning clothing had diminished by the early twentieth century. The development of extramural cemeteries had ended the tradition of the costumed procession to the grave (Naylor 1989; Parsons 2014). As women increasingly accepted work outside the home, the time they could spend in mourning dress reduced (Whitmore 2018). A few other contributing factors might also be noted, including the decline of organised religion (Walter 2002) and a proto-feminist recognition that, ‘The widow’s dress positively amounts to a mild form of suttee’ (Harberton 1889: 419) and a general relaxation in the formality of all dress

codes (Naylor 1989). However, Taylor (2009), and an array of other dress historians, argue that it was the shocking impact of World War I that spelt the end of the 'inky cloak and customary suit of solemn black' (Western Daily Press 1878: 7).

During the First World War, it was impossible to continue the normal practices of mourning. Undertakers had been called up to the armed services, the death toll was shockingly high and soldiers' bodies were rarely repatriated (Parsons 2014). Austerity and the need to contribute to the war effort made it difficult for widows to fulfil the sartorial expectations of mourning (Whitmore 2018). However, as several writers point out, this may have been no bad thing. If all the women entitled to wear widows' weeds had donned them, the impact on national morale could have been disastrous (Gorer 1977; Jalland 1999). The prescribed mourning wardrobe detailed so carefully by the previous generation of fashion writers was suddenly unsustainable. Instead, commentators started to suggest that the bereaved wore either an armband, or whatever clothing they felt appropriate. Mourning had become, as Lucy Whitmore points out, 'a matter of individual taste and feeling' (2018: 585). After the war, formal mourning etiquette was not reinstated. Austerity may have been partly to blame for this, but it is also significant that the First World War ushered in a period when Western society sought to deny or sequester death (Becker 1973; Ariès 2000; Walter 2002). This rendered the entire subject taboo (Gorer 1955). In such a context, any public display of bereavement was unwelcome.

### ***New British Mourning Wear Practices***

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new forms of mourning wear have emerged. Mourning jewelry, including items containing cremains is growing in popularity (Albin Dyer 2003; McCormick 2015). Furthermore, a wide range of wearable tokens, including t-shirts bearing the name of the deceased, are offered for sale (Simpson 2019). There have also been significant changes in what is deemed appropriate for funeral wear. Mourners are frequently asked to wear colourful or celebratory clothing and it has become increasingly common to personalise the funeral using clothing that symbolises the interests of the deceased (Albin Dyer 2003). A survey for the British Funeral Service Journal in 2011 found that, 'Almost half ... [of funeral consumers] are keen for their funeral to reflect their favourite hobby, colour, football team or music' (cited by Sanders, 2012: 266). The website for Dignity Funeral Directors (2024), a company with branches all over the United Kingdom, even suggests 'these types of funerals have become the norm, with families increasingly opting to plan funerals that reflect the life, hobbies and interests of their loved one' (2024: n.pag).

Funeral director Jan Tury describes a funeral where mourners wore, 'Hawaiian shirts, shorts and sandals' in remembrance of holidays spent with the deceased, and another where mourners wore, 'Blues Brothers fashion – smart suit, fedora hat and ...sunglasses' (Tury 2011: 840). For Tury, the personalised funeral is a way of consolidating family memories and making new ones. Ramshaw (2010) suggests that such memory making is therapeutic for the bereaved community and creates a safe space within which mourners who have never met before can share their stories. She further argues that personalised funerals are the most inclusive format when the assembled mourners share nothing beyond their familiarity with the deceased.

Sharing stories and memories is a crucial element of the personalised funeral. Indeed, the sociologist Tony Walter maintains that this is one of the most important ways in which mourners now adapt to their loss. By remembering what was distinctive about the person who has died, mourners construct a 'durable biography' of the deceased which they can 'integrate into their ongoing lives' (Walter 1996: 7). Sanders (2012) develops this idea, suggesting that commemorating the most distinctive characteristics of the deceased also installs them in an affinity network, a kind of imagined community, through which they remain connected to those who mourn them and those who share their enthusiasms. These social networks are given material form when the mourners wear outfits that represent a culture or subculture. For example, in football-themed funerals the mourners wear team shirts or scarves and, in Leeds at least, the ongoing connection between the deceased and team is often symbolised by depositing funeral flowers and symbolic garments at the Leeds United football ground (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Funeral flowers at the Billy Bremner statue, Leeds United football ground (2014). Photograph by Judith Simpson

### ***Multicultural Inspirations***

In discussing personalised funerals, Ramshaw (2010) touches upon one of the impacts of multiculturalism. She argues that where the mourners who gather at funerals do not share a faith or a culture, there is a need for new, inclusive content. However, the

converse is also true; the very varied backgrounds of the mourners may bring new content and new insights, to the British funeral.

Traditional approaches to mourning dress differ across global societies. While Westerners wear black to ‘show respect for the deceased’ (Loran 2020: n.pag), Chinese mourners wear white (Waters 1991; Zhou 2015). This is also the case in South Asia, (**Error! Reference source not found.**) where white is associated with asceticism and death, and white clothes ‘[connote] detachment from worldly pleasures and happiness’ (Azhar 2020: 9). Yellow has been associated with mourning in Egypt, and Ghanaians mourn in red (Loran 2020). Differences go deeper than colour, however. Some countries approach death with somber sadness, but Mexico’s Day of the Dead is marked with ‘parades....face paint and colourful outfits’ (Tetrault 2022: n.pag). Similarly, African funerals are often ‘colourful, lively, and elaborate affairs’ (Krystyna 2022, n.pag). There is also a more restrained middle ground. In Hindu tradition, mourners avoid ‘excessive lamentation .... [which] is thought to direct negative emotional energy toward the dead’ and aim for restrained but positive remembrance (Bhuvanewar and Stern 2013: 82).

Across the world, however, mourning clothing is understood to have both ritual and symbolic power. Ritual clothing transfigures the wearer (Chira 2023). It evokes the myths through which a community makes sense of the world, and allows the wearer to participate in them. Myths reassure mourners that what has happened is not meaningless, but accords with some divine or natural law (Campbell and Moyers, 2011). Symbolic clothing addresses the onlooker, presenting a visible token of an invisible reality (Schaff 1912) and offering the viewer second hand access to the myths being activated. In multicultural (and largely secular) Britain there is no single shared mythology of death to evoke. There is, however, a rich palette of insights and signifying practices from which mourners can create their own funeral practice. This paper seeks to establish whether this is, in fact, happening.



Figure 5. Female mourners wear shades of white and cream at a traditional Sikh funeral in the West Midlands in 2007. Contributor: David Bagnall / Alamy Stock Photo.

## **Methodology**

This study examined socially constructed phenomena in the hope of generating explanatory theory; therefore a qualitative approach was appropriate (Bryman 2008). Qualitative research 'is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour, and interactions' (Pathak, Jena, and Kalra 2013: 192). It can also expose the dynamics of human behaviour by revealing patterns, social conventions and cultural norms (Tseëlon 2001).

A focus group was chosen as a preliminary data collection method, partly to avoid the significant ethical problems arising from direct observation of personal or religious rituals, but also because it seemed likely that by including multiple voices at the beginning of the research, the most appropriate directions for future research would reveal themselves. Focus group research involves the gathering of a small group of people to discuss a topic of interest to them. A facilitator guides the conversation, but the interactions between members are of great interest. Participants can foreground the issues that are important to them and challenge, or support, the points made by others. In short, 'the focus group offers the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon' (Bryman 2008: 476).

Six participants from a variety of backgrounds were recruited through the combined networks of the researchers. Leeds was selected for this study as it is the workplace of the authors and is a large multicultural city (Global Leeds, 2024). Given the number of different communities in Leeds, it was impossible to be fully representative. However, despite the limited size of the group, participants represented members of the Indian, African, Goth, LGBTQ, Southeast Asian, Mixed Race, and Catholic and Protestant communities. The focus group was hybrid with some participants attending in person and others joining online. This made it possible to record the meeting digitally and generate a transcript for analysis. Participants were asked to talk about their own experiences of attending funerals, particularly where these had included more than one cultural group. They were also asked to reflect more generally on whether the multicultural heritage of Leeds appears to have affected the clothing worn to funerals.

The transcript was examined using thematic analysis, one of the most frequently used qualitative analysis techniques (Bryman 2008). In this research it helped to generate new insights through the identification of patterns within the data (Naeem et al. 2023). The researchers coded separately before comparing findings, following the procedural steps outlined by Naeem et al. (2023). Firstly, the dataset was reduced by focussing on the most relevant sections of text and keywords were identified. In the third step, 'short phrases or words, known as codes, ...[were] assigned to segments of data that capture[d] the data's core message, significance, or theme' (Naeem et al. 2023: 4). In the fourth step, the codes were grouped into themes. In the fifth, diagrams were sketched to understand how the themes might relate to each other. Then, in the sixth and final stage, a conceptual model was derived by relating the findings to the research question and to existing theory.

### **Findings from the Focus Group**

This section presents the findings from the focus group conversations. The activities began with a general introduction by the facilitators who emphasised that the reflections and ideas of all participants were of value as this was a research area with little expert knowledge. A series of conversation prompts were used throughout, designed to ensure the conversation flowed. In the text that follows, the quotations from participants have no citation to preserve anonymity but are presented in quotation marks.

#### ***The Themes***

The first set of themes to emerge related to distinctive mourning traditions (coded as British tradition, Asian tradition, and African tradition) and their gradual erosion over time. The reasons for change were coded as:

- Family choice
- Religious decline
- Casualisation
- Cost of living
- Multiculturalism

The theme of family choice stood out, not only because it came up frequently, but also because participants discussed it with passion. When the group debated their experiences of attending funerals, they explained the shift away from wearing funeral black (British tradition) towards the wearing of light and bright colours in terms of family choice. Family choice was further linked to the following codes:

- Personalised funerals (which focus on the unique identity of the deceased)
- Celebrating the life well lived
- Social connectedness
- Expressing hope
- Seeking consolation

The other themes that arose in conversation were

- The impossibility of a sad celebration
- Respect for the deceased
- Clothing as a semiotic vocabulary
- Shame
- The need for inclusivity

#### ***Mourning Traditions and Reasons for Change***

Three participants (British, Asian, and African) described the traditional mourning practices of their own communities and offered their opinion on why these had changed. The clothing associated with the British tradition was described as understated but dark, 'The man pulls out his dark suit – if it still fits – and the woman just finds something sombre and black'. This tradition was considered appropriate to symbolise the emotional state of the mourner, but it was being challenged. The most significant contest came from the family's wish to bring the celebratory aspects of the funeral (previously confined to the reception or wake) into the service itself. There

were also challenges from casualisation as participants considered the idea of wearing traditional dark clothes for a funeral is now less common. One participant commented, 'I feel like it is not so formal anymore'. Religious decline was also discussed as it was observed that people are not as devout as they used to be.

The Asian tradition involved wearing white clothes. One participant commented, 'It does not matter whether you are a Bollywood celebrity or a peasant, it is white and it is a sign of respect'. Clothing in Asian funerals, however, is much less important than the ritual content of the ceremony. 'I have yet to go to an Indian funeral where dress trumps the actual ceremony: the ceremony is sacred. It doesn't matter what the wishes of the deceased are... [they must be] cremated [and] the right things said. If you're born in a Hindu family and those things are not said, there might be a problem with the soul'. The subordinate role of clothing in Asian funerals has meant that younger people are allowed more licence over what they wear. White clothing might be replaced by, 'Pale things...[like] a nice pale pashmina...but whatever you wear, you must be smart'. The fading of Asian tradition is generational but seems to be associated with casualisation (in the sense that dress codes are becoming less rigid). It may also be associated with religious decline or pluralism, as it was noted that culture and tradition are passed down through the generations becoming diluted with each transmission. The fact that funerals often included mourners from different cultures was acknowledged as a diluting factor. 'The elderly will probably still follow their traditions and come in pale clothing but the rest of us, including those from different cultural backgrounds will try to respect their traditions but at the same time, we respect the different cultural and religious boundaries'.

The African tradition was discussed at some length, as this approach was unfamiliar to the rest of the group. In the traditions described, the elders of the tribe, or senior members of the bereaved family, tell the mourners what they must wear; effectively personalising the broader tradition so that it symbolises the biography of the deceased. This community takes black as the predominant colour of mourning, but red and white may also be worn, depending on the age of the deceased and family preference. The black cloth used is not always plain, it could be printed or may include black or red accents of colour, 'The family agrees [on a fabric, which says something about the death] ...or maybe the person's personality. They will choose something ... in that black cloth just to personalise the person'. This personalised choice of fabric means that new mourning clothes need to be purchased for each funeral and made up from the cloth chosen by the family. The African participant explained, 'So, if this family – like Sims family – they've lost someone: they pick a particular design of the black cloth. Then, in two months' time, someone else loses someone. They also pick black, but maybe with the red in that cloth. So, you cannot use Sims' black for this person's black'. An example of this can be seen in the image of mourners at the African-born labour politician, Bernie Grant's funeral in London in 2000 (Figure 6). The specialist printed black and red fabric has been made into the garments, headwear and scarf worn by his widow, Sharon Grant and sister, Rosamund Grant. This tradition was noted to be declining, and the decline was associated with the cost of living. People could not afford to buy a new outfit each time somebody died so the community had started to accept any type of black clothing at funerals, 'That's encouraged me to

attend people's funerals ... I don't have the money to be picking new clothing every time'.



Figure 6. Sharon and Rosamund Grant attending the funeral of politician, Bernie Grant wearing specialist, printed fabric. Contributor: PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo.

When discussing the erosion of former mourning traditions, participants rarely referred to multiculturalism. Nobody spoke about recognising an inspiring or practical idea in an adjacent culture and adopting it. Multiculturalism was recognised to be diluting the Asian tradition, but the group did not recognise cross-fertilisation of ideas. It is possible that the recent acceptance of any black clothing at African funerals represents the adoption of the British tradition of sober clothes just as much as it reflects economic pressures. However, if cross-fertilisation occurs, it seems to happen at a subconscious level. Perhaps, as one participant put it, 'We're all becoming the same because many ideas are becoming universal'.

### ***The Nature and Impact of Family Choice***

The growing impact of family choice on the dress code for British funerals was one of the strongest themes to emerge. The most distinctive aspect is the wish to use the ceremony to confirm and celebrate the identity of the person who has died. One participant said, 'I've gone to a few humanists' ceremonies and eco funerals and then it was all about the person and their life and there was no core ceremony'. Another commented, 'I have been to several funerals... where they have said come in a colour.... that was their favourite colour or associated with their favourite football

team'. A further participant noted this was a particularly common response to the death of children. 'We have had three children's deaths in 10 years, within my family and colour has come into those funerals and it's been bright colours. It has always been the child's favourite colour. So, like one was purple, one was green, and one was pink... It's what the child loved, and it seemed appropriate'.

The group also shared experiences of requests to wear particular colours, or garments for adult funerals. Examples included:

- A Leeds United themed funeral
- A funeral where members of a band the deceased had played in turned up in band uniform.
- The use of green clothing to celebrate an Irish heritage.
- A request to wear feather boas and string-lights.
- A request to wear yellow ribbons.

All participants recognized that wearing a distinctive colour or outfit gave a sense of unity to attendees from different communities.

Participants reflected on mourners who wore an outfit associated with the social life of the deceased. This simultaneously celebrated the past social connections of the deceased and created a new group identity that connected the mourners to each other, as well as to the person who has died. One participant described attending a funeral for someone who had been a cross dresser. She explained that guests were asked to wear bright feather boas and strings of fluorescent lights. The deceased had always dressed up extravagantly to go out and their partner had asked attendees to pay homage to this distinctive style. 'I think it is what they would have wanted, and it was a joyous thing. There was a lot of laughing and I think it helped the family and the partner, because it was like a celebration rather than a dour, miserable morning'. This example draws together all the themes associated with family choice. The individuality of the deceased is confirmed, their life is celebrated, and their clothing unites the mourners. In this case, the clothing was exuberant and humorous. The colours, lights and humour are all associated with hope and joy, and together give consolation to the bereaved. There are echoes here of the celebratory tone of African funerals, as seen at the funeral of Bernie Grant where the Reverend Kwaku Frimpong and other mourners followed the politician's hearse dressed in colourful clothes (Figure 7). Again, however, the British community seem unaware of potential cross-fertilisation.



Figure 7. Reverend Kwaku Frimpong-Manson and fellow mourners follow the hearse carrying the coffin of the late Labour MP for Tottenham in London wearing bright and festive clothes. Contributor: PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo.

### ***The Impossibility of a Sad Celebration***

The group discussed several funerals where the family's wishes had been problematic and had caused distress to some of the attendees. For some participants, the family's insistence on celebrating the life of the deceased was irreconcilable with their own need to mourn. One declared, 'It's not right going to go to a funeral all dressed up as if it was a festival because it's a mourning'. These participants did not feel ready to celebrate or able to focus attention on their own appearance. Traditional sober clothes, which expressed sadness and had an anonymity about them, felt much more appropriate. One participant noted he was 'A bit uncomfortable [with] a celebration of life'. He had attended funerals where guests were asked to wear rainbow colours but felt more at ease wearing a black suit and tie. 'Sometimes you have to be quite bold to say to somebody - Sorry, I'm not wearing orange or I'm not going, I don't feel I'm ready to do that. This is because I am still in my own personal grief for the loss of that person'. The group acknowledged how challenging it could be to create a ritual that was both celebratory and sad and recognised the different emotional states of all attendees.

### ***Respect for the Deceased***

All participants emphasised that their key aim in dressing for a funeral was to convey their respect for the deceased. One noted, 'You might have people dressed very differently to each other, but that's how they wanted to pay their respect'. There was also discussion about the tension between choosing an outfit that conveyed personal feelings of loss, and one that would meet the expectations of the rest of the funeral party. Several talked about conducting a significant amount of research before attending the funeral of someone from a different culture. They had asked friends for

advice and looked up what to wear on the Internet. It was clear that lack of clarity about how to convey respect was accompanied by a very real fear of getting it wrong.

### ***Clothing as a Semiotic Vocabulary***

Participants recognised that garments carried social meaning that was culturally symbolic. They also acknowledged that the meanings they attributed to garments might not match those attributed by others. The meanings attached to fabrics, styles and colours differed between cultures in the contexts of different funerals. White was for solemn mourning in the Asian tradition, but an expression of hope in the West. Green was an expression of Irish heritage at some funerals, and a favourite colour at others. Multiculturalism had made a wider range of potential meanings available, but this could be navigated with the help of friends and the Internet. Individual families had the opportunity to create a unique clothing vocabulary for a specific funeral, but it was recognised that caused anxiety for some mourners, who feared choosing inappropriate garments.

### ***Shame***

One of the most emotionally resonant sections of the focus group discussion was when participants shared stories of wearing what they or others perceived as the wrong clothes to a funeral. Not only were some of the storytellers still upset after several years, but the rest of the group clearly felt bad on their behalf. One participant shared an experience of arriving at a funeral and finding that everyone else was more formally dressed, 'At my auntie's [funeral] a few years ago, I didn't feel I had dressed quite the way the others had, and I went away with a bad feeling, and felt really bad for a week or two'. The African participant described having a dress made up for a funeral using a fabric chosen by the family. However, when she arrived, she was chastised because the neckline was rather low. A woman called her aside and said, 'Show some respect! That thing is a bit low'. She described how uncomfortable she felt for the rest of the ceremony and thought everyone was judging her based on her dress. The focus group were collectively shocked by the reprimand and felt it inappropriate that someone would speak to the participant like that at such a sensitive time.

Another group member shared a story of a being publicly rebuked for his attire. In this case, he had attended a themed funeral with no prior knowledge of the dress code. He went to the funeral of somebody he had worked with and had not realized that everybody had been asked to wear something to do with Leeds United football club, 'So blue or yellow and white or a scarf or something like that. I turned up in a suit and a black tie, and everybody else was in their football shirts, football scarves, or football hats. And I felt very... uncomfortable'. Somebody asked where his Leeds United shirt was, 'I said, I'm sorry, I didn't know about it, and I don't have one anyway. And they said to me - It's about dressing for respect. I felt awful because I thought I had dressed for respect by being in a suit and black tie'. Again, the group were shocked that a mourner could be addressed in such a humiliating way and argued that, as mourners cannot change their attire after arriving at a funeral other attendees should show tolerance and keep their opinions to themselves.

It was notable that in all the cases where shame was experienced, the mourners were of the same culture, therefore it was assumed that they would find it easy to comply with expectations. This was clearly not the case. The African mourner who had

employed an African dressmaker to sew African fabric into a funeral dress, failed to predict that others would think her neckline disrespectfully low. Equally, the man who attended the Leeds United themed funeral in a suit also considered he had chosen an appropriate outfit. The group agreed that sometimes family expectations were not communicated well and identified difficulties associated with this. One participant commented, 'It's so important that dress codes are communicated to everyone that's going to attend the funeral and not just the inner circle of people that are around, because at a funeral, it's not just the close family. You might find people that [the deceased] worked with 20 years ago ... would like to come and pay their respects. So, you can't jolly well expect everyone to get the memo'.

### ***The Need for Inclusivity***

The participants confirmed that funeral attendees are often diverse groups sharing nothing but a relationship to the deceased. Diverse groups of mourners, however, require consciously inclusive practices. Some attendees had encountered such practices. These were usually at funerals, planned in the knowledge that mourners from different cultures and communities would be attending. Inclusive practices were of two sorts: in the first mourners were encouraged to - *come as you are* - or wear whatever felt appropriate, so any clothing was acceptable. In the second, the family bestowed badges of inclusion in dress.

One participant described attending an Indian funeral in traditional British black mourning rather than in Asian white. She was made very welcome and felt that because she had dressed in a plain and understated way; her clothing was communicating a similar somber and respectful attitude to that conveyed by the pale clothing of her hosts. Another participant described attending a multicultural funeral of a man who was of Caribbean descent, 'It was the most diverse funeral and the most diverse group of people because he was such a character who knew everybody. There were people dressed from every spectrum you could possibly get'. The family members of the deceased wore colourful, flamboyant clothing, but 'Other people... had come wearing black or wearing suits [and others] ... had come in their building clothes, because this man worked in construction...people had literally turned up, you know, off the site, in building clothes'. The participant noted that people were looking at each other but there was not a hint of judgment because everyone knew they were there to mourn the loss and celebrate the life of someone they had loved. In this funeral, the family appear to have understood that the mourner's attendance was confirmation of their respect and affection for the deceased and regarded their clothing as irrelevant.

One participant offered two examples of mourners being given something to wear that marked them as appropriately dressed for the funeral they were attending – giving them a badge of inclusion. In the first example, a westerner attending an Indian funeral was offered a pale pashmina to wear over her dark suit, so that she was compliant with the norms of both Western and Eastern mourning. In the second, the family of the deceased gave mourners pink flowers to pin on their lapel. This both personalized the funeral by reflecting the tastes of the deceased, and ensured that all mourners felt welcome and included. Other focus group members received these examples with great enthusiasm. One participant declared, 'What a wonderful idea,

right? Because you're then making sure that everyone's included and not going to go away feeling .... horrible'!

## Discussion

This section considers the different themes discussed by the focus group participants and relates these to the wider literature in order to create a conceptual model which explains the ongoing symbolic and ritual power of funeral clothing in a multicultural world

The participants all saw evidence that traditional mourning dress codes, which were defined by historical etiquette and implicitly associated with religious beliefs were declining. Younger generations were less likely to adhere to these traditions than their parents were. Multiculturalism was one of the causes identified, along with religious decline and casualisation of dress. However, multiculturalism was considered as a factor that weakens old traditions rather than creating new ones. The spread of ideas from one community to another thus remains a probable, but unproven, hypothesis.

When the group discussed changes in British funeral practice, they attached the greatest importance to family choice (Figure 8). Family choice often leads to funerals that are personalised or themed, with mourners being asked to wear clothing or accessories that symbolise the personality or interests of the deceased. The fact that clothing codes have become more liberal, and that religious tradition no longer dictates what should be worn to a funeral, were recognised to be enabling factors.

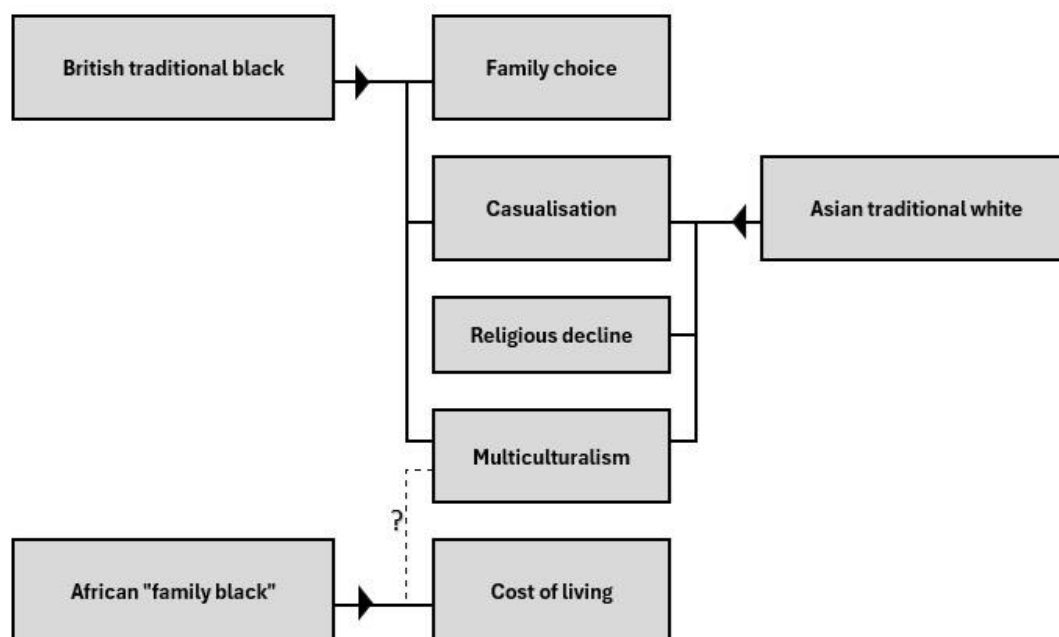


Figure 8. Reasons given for the decline of traditional mourning wear.

Participants agreed that the personalised funeral has several distinct aims (Figure 9). First, it celebrates the unique personality of the deceased and declares that their life was well lived. The longstanding practice of eulogising the deceased (originally done with words) has been extended so that the clothing of the mourners also testifies to the

value or virtue of the life of the person who has died. A eulogy traditionally positions the deceased as an exemplar of the values and aspirations of the community (Shelton 1998). This helps to create, ‘an enduring biography of the deceased’ (Walter 1996: 7) but also inspires the bereaved and ‘mitigate[s] death related distress’ (Hayes 2016: 375). In this context funeral dress exerts symbolic power by communicating the identity of the deceased to the wider community. Additionally, in altering social reality, by creating a persistent biography for the deceased and imbuing the death with positive meanings, it has a ritual effect.

The role accorded to clothing at a personalised funeral is clearly anything but trivial, indeed the use of clothing to foreground social identity and community at times of loss has a long-established history. For instance, the group discussed the construction worker mourned by men in building gear, and the cross dresser mourned in symbolic drag. Such instances are pre-figured by historical examples such as 18<sup>th</sup> century accounts of a cook’s coffin being carried by men in aprons (Cunnington and Lucas 1972), the coffins of young girls being carried by their school friends (Spriggs, 1982), and – of course – by the military funeral, where a deceased soldier is carried in a procession of his peers (J.H.L 1925)

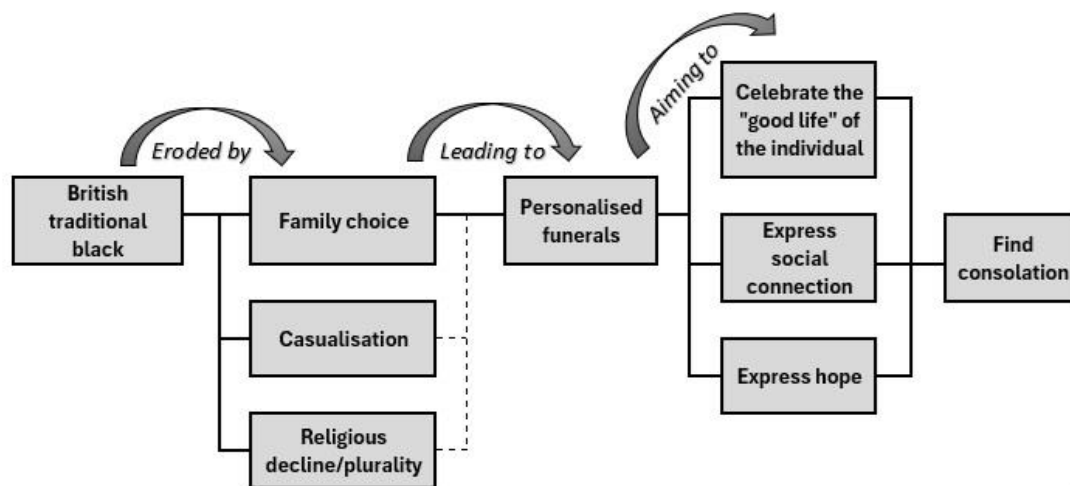


Figure 9. Personalised funerals, causes and effects.

Historically, the use of clothing to assert the social identity of the deceased and link them to surviving peers has been viewed as a defiant statement of communal resilience (Gittings 1999); an insistence that while death may remove a person, it is powerless to destroy communal life. Sanders (2012) has suggested that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the communal life, which endures, is that of affinity networks rather than embodied communities. In this argument, the outfits, which connect the deceased to their living peers, declare the vigour of the imagined communities to which the deceased belonged and assert that death does not annul their membership. Although the focus group talked clearly about group membership, they discussed consolation

rather than social continuity, so, in the context of this study, the theories of Gittings and Sanders remain an unsubstantiated aside.

Focus group conversations stressed that the personalised funeral often expresses hope (being joyous rather than dour). Here, funeral dress was felt to console the bereaved by bringing together three things: an atmosphere of hope, the celebration of the life well lived and the material representation of social connections. Although the group were generally positive about moves to personalise funerals, they also recognised the significant risk of excluding some of the mourners. Some people could be excluded because they never - *got the memo* - and simply did not know what had been planned and what to wear in relation to this. Others were excluded because a celebratory mood was dissonant with their emotional state. Certain mourners may experience shame because they did not understand the semiotic vocabulary at play in the funeral and made mistakes (Figure 10). That is to say, that, having failed to adopt the distinctive mourning wear that, ‘symbolise[s] solidarity’ (Cecil; 1991: 17) they found themselves somewhat ostracised. The group discussed the pain and humiliation of being isolated from other mourners because they arrived in what they perceived to be the wrong clothes, and they discussed strategies for avoiding this. It was important to all participants that clothing should connect, rather than divide, the mourners and they all agreed that funeral hosts should either accept all forms of clothing or provide their own badges of inclusion.

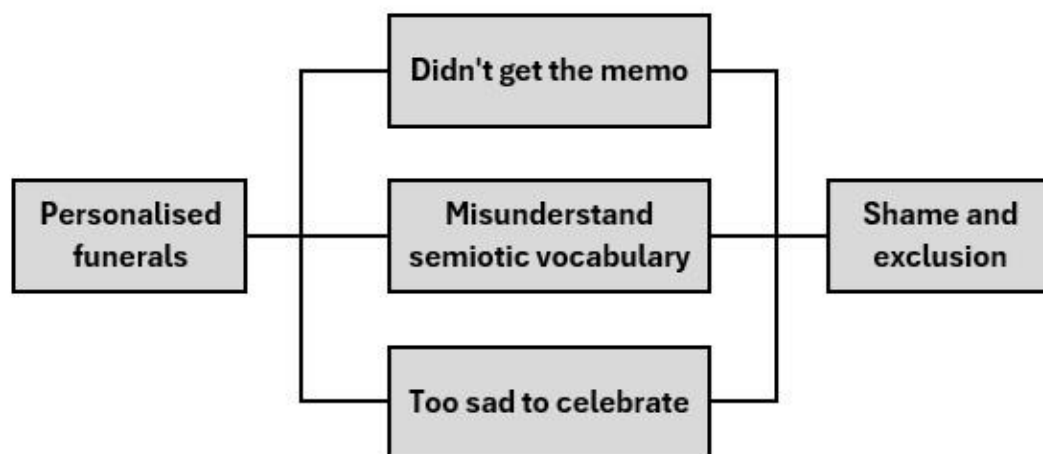


Figure 10. Problems arising from personalised funerals.

Unbeknown to the focus group, the idea of badges of inclusion also mirrors another very old mourning tradition. The mourners who took part in a mediaeval funeral parade had their cloak provided for them by the family (Cunnington and Lucas 1972). Those invited to an 18<sup>th</sup> century funeral in Britain would receive a mourning ring (Houlbrooke 2020) and the Victorian mourner would be offered a sash and gloves (Davey 2020; Schofield 2018; Taylor 2009). In each case the gift confirmed the mourner’s status as part of the funeral party and provided a keepsake that would encourage them to remember (or pray for) the deceased. The fact that clothing strategies described or recommended by the group often seemed to be reanimations of older traditions was somewhat surprising. Either the past is a palette from which

inspiration can be drawn, or the ageless problems associated with what to wear at a funeral have been resolved in similar ways by communities separated by centuries.

## **Conclusion**

The discussions throughout the focus group workshop suggested that multiculturalism has helped to dilute traditional expectations about what should be worn to a funeral and increased uncertainty about how other people might interpret choices of funeral wear. However, while the different funeral traditions of diverse communities might theoretically seem to offer a wider semiotic vocabulary from which mourners can draw, the research identified no evidence of ideas being consciously appropriated,

Family choice represents the greatest force for change in what is worn to UK funerals. Family choice leads to personalised funerals which use clothing to support a range of recuperative strategies. These include expressing hope, reaffirming the value of the life now ended and celebrating social ties. Relating these clothing strategies to historical precedents and existing theory suggests that the clothes worn to personalised funerals still use ritual and symbolism to evoke and communicate mythological understandings of death. The myths may now be secular rather than religious but they continue to offer reassurance that the death complies with natural or divine law, to reinvigorate the bereaved community and to install the deceased in communal memory. However, personalised funerals also make it harder for mourners to work out what the right clothes for this funeral might be. As wearing the wrong clothes to a funeral is associated with shame and long-term distress it is incumbent upon the funeral organisers to manage this risk – either by welcoming mourners whatever they wear, or by providing some wearable token symbolic of inclusion.

One of the hopes of this project was that an initial focus group would help identify directions for future study. In this sense, it was successful. The discussion of shame at wearing the wrong clothes to a funeral suggested that it might be possible to uncover the unwritten rules of funeral wear by focusing on cases where the rules had been transgressed. The researchers were shocked to find that two of the participants had been publicly rebuked for their attire and sensed that a deeper exploration of similar cases through the convening of further focus groups could reveal a greater depth of revelations related to this theme. It was also recognised that the research was limited by reflections of funeral attire from participants in the city of Leeds and its environs. Further exploration could convene focus groups from different locations in the UK. This would permit the researchers to identify if similar themes existed and to measure their gravity and complexity in a wider national context. The paper, however, presents a significant contribution to the literature related to cultural diversity in mourning attire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and can therefore be viewed as a catalyst for new thinking and paradigms in global research.

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