

Emplacing the Dead, Sustaining the Lineage: Semiotic Resources in Nandi Mortuary Practice

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Abstract

This study examines how spatial, temporal, material, and embodied semiotic resources construct meanings around death, burial and lineage continuity among the Nandi of Kenya. The signs used in Nandi mortuary practice have been documented and their meanings recorded, but what they accomplish, and how they work upon one another across the days between a death and its completion, has not been examined. The study employs a qualitative secondary-analysis design, re-examining the mortuary material documented in Chemis (2020) and summarised in Chemis et al. (2020), whose data were generated through semi-structured interviews with twelve Nandi speakers and participant observation at funerals in Megun Ward, Uasin Gishu County. Eight categories of resources were analysed through social semiotics and multimodality, supported by rites-of-passage theory. The placement of the body within the house and of the grave within the homestead inscribes the deceased's position in the domestic and kinship order into the compound itself; temporal resources regulate the passage from death to interment, and certain deaths are excluded from the standard timing; and material and embodied resources communicate that the relationship with the deceased continues rather than ends. The study concludes that Nandi mortuary resources do not terminate that relationship but relocate it spatially, temporally and socially. Its significance lies in showing that documented signs operate as a coordinated system; comparative work across Kalenjin communities is recommended.

Key terms: Lineage continuity; multimodality; mortuary practice; Nandi; social semiotics.

INTRODUCTION

The signs used in Nandi mortuary practice are already documented. Before burial, a body lies at the centre of the house through the night, and the family sleeps in the room with it. A grave is dug to the right of the main house if the dead is a man and to the left if she is a woman. Interment waits for the afternoon and must be finished before the sun goes down, and for as long as mourning lasts, a fire burns outside the house through every night; what each of these means has been recorded (Chemis et al., 2020). What they accomplish, and how they work upon one another across the days between a death and its completion, has not. That is the problem this article addresses.

What remains insufficiently examined is how the documented Nandi mortuary resources function as a socially organised system of communication. Existing scholarship establishes several relevant points. African mortuary practice is a socially productive process through which relationships are reorganised and cultural expectations transmitted (Jindra & Noret, 2011; Nyaoko, 2024). Material, temporal, and spatial resources play a role in the performance of mortuary actions rather than merely expressing beliefs about death (Hove, 2024; Salakpi, 2025). Where the dead are placed in relation to the living is historically variable and socially consequential (Droz, 2011). Nandi social organisation has historically been structured through kinship classification, patrilineal authority, and the household compound (Ng'etich, 2024; Oboler, 1985). The existing Nandi semiotic study documents a repertoire of culturally meaningful mortuary signs (Chemis et al., 2020).

Three gaps follow. First, the earlier Nandi analysis treated mortuary signs largely in isolation. Less attention was given to the sequence in which they occur and to the relationships among them. This leaves unexamined how the placement of the body, the timing of interment, the maintenance of the fire, and the offering of milk operate together across the mortuary process. Second, the spatial and temporal organisation of Nandi mortuary practice has not been analysed as a communicative system. The siting of graves by gender, the placement of the body at the centre of the house, the requirement that interment occur in the afternoon before sunset, and the exclusion of certain deaths from that requirement are not

incidental arrangements. They may be resources through which kinship position, household authority, and the status of the death itself are made visible. Third, the relationship between mortuary signification and social continuity requires further elaboration. Milk, fire, and flowers have documented cultural meanings, but the question of what their use communicates about the ongoing relationship between the living and the deceased has not been addressed.

Posing this problem requires a vocabulary, and three terms carry most of the weight. Social semiotics understands communication as the situated use of whatever resources a community has learned to communicate with, and asks not what a form stands for in the abstract but what a person accomplishes by using it here, before these participants. A semiotic resource is accordingly any action, material, or artefact that a community uses communicatively, together with the conventions governing its use, which admits substances, objects, bodily conduct, and the arrangement of space alongside speech and gesture. Multimodality is the observation that meaning is ordinarily made by several such resources at once, so that what a substance signifies may depend on who introduces it, at what moment, and alongside what else. Section 2 develops each of these more fully.

A fourth term comes from the material rather than from theory. Participants describe the fire kept alight through the nights of mourning as showing that the lineage of the deceased will continue. Lineage continuity is used in this article in that sense: the persistence of a descent line beyond the death of one of its members, which the survivors are required to do something to affirm rather than being able to take for granted.

The practices described above are doing more than disposing of a body. When a person dies, the surviving community must establish where the deceased belongs, determine how the survivors should conduct themselves, reorganise the relationships that the death has disturbed, and make each of these matters recognisable to everyone present. Much of that work is accomplished without explicit statement. It is performed through where the body is placed, when particular actions occur, who is authorised to carry them out, and what materials are used. Comparative

scholarship on African funerals has established that mortuary practice is socially productive rather than terminal and that a funeral is accordingly not the closing of a relationship but its reorganisation (Jindra & Noret, 2011; Nyaoko, 2024).

Understanding mortuary practice as a process directs attention to how participants recognise its stages. The announcement of a death, the period of mourning preceding burial, the interment itself, and the actions performed afterwards are distinguishable phases, and participants must be able to tell them apart. Speech contributes to this, but it does not accomplish it alone. The position of the body, the maintenance of a fire, the timing of the interment, the substances offered at the grave, and the bodily conduct of mourners all participate in marking where the process has reached and what remains to be done. The treatment of the dead also communicates something about the living. Where a grave is placed, who is permitted to perform particular actions, and how grief may properly be displayed express the social order of the surviving community. Mortuary practice therefore offers an unusually direct view of how a community understands authority, kinship, and belonging, because these matters must be settled visibly at the moment a member is removed from the group.

The present study addresses these gaps through a qualitative secondary analysis of the mortuary material from the original research. It does not seek to document previously unrecorded signs, generate new field data, or present previously published material as original data. Its contribution lies in re-analysing the documented resources through social semiotics, multimodality, and selected concepts from ritual theory and the anthropology of classification. The study sets out to determine what work material objects, bodily conduct, the regulation of time, and the ordering of space perform as communicative resources within Nandi mortuary practice. It has three specific objectives: to examine how spatial resources locate the deceased within the household and the kinship order; to analyse how temporal resources regulate the passage from death to completed burial and how that regulation applies to deaths that fall outside the standard sequence; and to investigate how material and embodied resources communicate continuing relations between the living and the dead.

The study accordingly asks how spatial resources locate the deceased within the household and the kinship order; how temporal resources regulate the passage from death to completed burial, and how that regulation is applied to deaths that fall outside the standard sequence; and how material and embodied resources communicate continuing relations between the living and the dead. Answering them makes three contributions. For scholarship on the Nandi, it supplies a sequential account of mortuary communication where only an inventory of signs has so far been available. For African mortuary studies, it adds a Southern Nilotic instance to a comparative literature drawn largely from Bantu and West African settings and records a transformation in the placement of the dead comparable to one traced elsewhere in Kenya. For semiotic and multimodal analysis, it shows that the regulation of space and time operates as a communicative resource in its own right, rather than as the setting within which communication takes place. The article proceeds from a review of what is known of material, spatial, and temporal resources in African mortuary practice and the framework applied here, through an account of the corpus and of the procedure by which it was re-analysed, to the findings, which are presented under each of the three questions in turn and then drawn together in a discussion of what the repertoire accomplishes as a whole and of how it has changed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Material, Embodied, Temporal, and Spatial Resources in African Mortuary Practice

Communication in mortuary contexts is multimodal. It combines speech with objects, substances, bodily conduct, the regulation of time, and the organisation of space. These resources do not operate as separate channels but function together within the unfolding event.

That funerals do social work beyond the disposal of a body is long established. Van Gennep's (1960) account of rites of passage showed that ceremonies marking a change of status proceed by separating the person undergoing it, holding them for a time outside ordinary categories, and reincorporating them on new terms, and that account has organised comparative work on mortuary ceremony since. Jindra and Noret (2011) show that funerals in contemporary Africa have grown

rather than diminished in social importance, and are occasions on which standing, obligation and belonging are asserted and, at times, contested. What this literature establishes is that a funeral is socially consequential. What it leaves largely unexamined is how that consequence is produced—through which resources, in what order, and by whom—because the analysis characteristically proceeds at the level of the ceremony rather than of the acts that compose it.

Research across African settings supports this position, though it does not present a single picture. Hove (2024) shows that in postcolonial burial practice in Limpopo, South Africa, questions of who handles the corpse, who leads the proceedings, and how ceremonial time is managed have become sites of negotiation between Christian and indigenous authorities. What is notable in that account is that the arrangements are contested: the material, spatial and temporal dimensions of a funeral are consequential there precisely because rival authorities claim the right to determine them. Elsewhere the same dimensions appear settled rather than disputed, and the contrast is worth holding on to, since a community may stand at either point at a given moment.

Salakpi (2025) describes a settled order of that kind among the Anlo Ewe of Ghana. Mortuary sequences there prescribe intervals—how long a body may remain unburied, at what hour interment should occur, and how long mourning should continue—and because the intervals are prescribed rather than incidental, departures from them carry meaning. Certain categories of death, including suicides and the deaths of first-born children, are removed from the standard sequence and handled with abbreviated or nocturnal rites. Where a community maintains a rule of that kind, the hour at which a burial is held, and the deaths exempted from it belong to the organisation of the mortuary sequence itself. How that sequence is regulated in the Nandi case, and how the regulation applies to deaths falling outside it, is the second question this study poses.

Space carries particular weight in mortuary contexts because burial fixes a person's location permanently. Droz (2011) traces a transformation among the Kikuyu of Kenya from the practice of leaving the dying and the dead in the bush to the construction of tombs within

the family compound, and argues that this relocation of the dead from outside to inside the homestead reorganised the relationship between the living, the deceased, and the land itself. Where the dead are placed is therefore not only a practical question but a statement about whether and how they remain part of the household; how the placement of a body and the siting of a grave position the deceased within the Nandi household and the kinship order is the first question this study puts.

What follows burial has drawn less attention in this literature than what precedes it, but it is not absent. Nyaoko (2024) shows that among the Abagusii mortuary ritual works upon the living as much as upon the dead, transmitting expectations of conduct to those who remain and binding them to obligations that outlast the ceremony. What this opens for any particular case is what the living understand themselves to owe the dead once burial is complete, and whether the deceased are figured as having departed or as having been relocated within the community's relations. Those continuing relations are the third of this study's questions.

Across these studies, a common finding emerges: the material, spatial and temporal arrangements of a funeral are consequential, and they are neither fixed nor incidental. The studies do not agree on how stable such repertoires are. Droz (2011) and Hove (2024) describe substantial transformation under colonial and Christian influence, while Nyaoko (2024) and Salakpi (2025) emphasise what is transmitted intact across generations. What none of them settles is how the arrangements communicate within a single mortuary sequence: which resource does what, at which point, and for whom; and what one resource makes possible for the next. The Nandi material bears on both matters. It records continuity and change at once, since burial within the homestead and the placing of flowers are recent adoptions, whereas the meanings attached to fire and to milk are presented by participants as long-established; and because its repertoire has already been documented resource by resource, it permits the second question to be put directly.

The Nandi and Previous Semiotic Study of Nandi Social Events

The Nandi are one of the larger Kalenjin-speaking communities of Kenya. Historically, their social organisation has been structured through clan and kinship classification, age-set membership, livestock ownership, and household relations (Ng'etich, 2024; Oboler, 1985). Oboler's (1985) ethnographic account describes a society in which household authority, property, and descent were organised patrilineally and in which the household compound was the principal unit of social and economic life. These arrangements provide specific content for the first question of this study. To ask how a Nandi grave positions the deceased within the household and the kinship order is to ask how the patrilineal arrangements Oboler describes are given material form at the moment of death, when burial within the homestead situates the deceased permanently within that domestic order.

The most directly relevant semiotic study is that of Chemis et al. (2020), which examined signs used in Nandi social events, principally marriage and mourning ceremonies. That study identified the signs in use, explained their culturally recognised meanings, and classified the relationship between each sign and what it signified using Saussurean and Peircean models. Its mourning findings documented the placement of the body at the centre of the living room, the gendered positioning of graves, the role of the sun in determining the time of interment, gestures and facial expressions of grief, the placing of flowers, the pouring of milk on the grave, and the maintenance of a fire throughout the mourning period.

That study made an important contribution by documenting a repertoire of culturally meaningful resources and establishing that their interpretation depends on knowledge of Nandi cultural practice. Its analytical ambition, however, was taxonomic. The questions it put to the data were which signs occurred, what each referred to, and how the sign-referent relation should be classified under Peirce's tripartite scheme. Questions of a different order went unasked: how the resources operated in sequence, how their deployment ordered the relations among those present, and what each accomplished at the point in the mortuary process where it appeared.

This is not a deficiency in the earlier study but an indication of a further level of analysis. Classifying the pouring of milk on a grave as symbolic identifies the relationship between the resource and its meaning. It does not account for why the offering is made after burial rather than before, why it is performed under the direction of elders, or what the practice implies about the relationship the survivors understand themselves still to have with the deceased. Establishing that fire signifies continuity of the lineage describes what the resource means. It does not explain why the fire must be maintained every night of the mourning period, why responsibility for it falls to younger family members, or what the nightly gathering around it accomplishes.

What separates the present study from that one is not its evidence but its question. Chemis et al. (2020) asked what each sign stood for and how the relation between sign and referent should be classified. This study asks what the use of a resource accomplishes at the point in the sequence where it appears, and how resources occurring together bear upon one another. What it adds to the earlier account is therefore an analysis of the mortuary repertoire as a sequence: which resource opens which phase of the process, what each makes possible for the next, and what the ensemble accomplishes that no single sign does alone. Both studies draw on the same corpus; they differ in what they take the unit of analysis to be. Putting the question in that form requires an account of meaning that treats communicative resources as socially made and situationally deployed rather than as fixed pairings of sign and referent, and an account of transition that specifies what a mortuary sequence is doing to the person and the household moving through it. The framework set out below is assembled from those two requirements.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided primarily by social semiotics as developed by van Leeuwen (2005) and Kress (2010). This is supported by Van Gennep's (1960) rites-of-passage model and Bell's (1992) concept of ritualisation. Social semiotics explains how culturally available resources are used to make meaning, while the supporting concepts assist in interpreting mortuary transition, ceremonial authority, and spatial organisation.

Social Semiotics

Social semiotics holds that meaning is created, not transmitted, by people using cultural resources. The analytical question is consequently not what a given form stands for in the abstract, but what someone accomplishes by deploying it here, now, before these participants. Context, participants, and occasion are constitutive of meaning rather than incidental to it.

On van Leeuwen's (2005) account, a semiotic resource is any action, material, or artefact that a community has learned to use communicatively, along with the conventions it has developed to govern that use. The category is deliberately broad: speech and gesture qualify, but so do substances, objects, bodily conduct, and the organisation of space. What makes any of them a resource is a history of communicative use within a particular community, not any property they possess independently.

The concept of meaning potential is central. A resource does not carry a single universal meaning that remains constant across contexts. Its meaning potential derives from its material affordances, its cultural associations, and its history of social use (van Leeuwen, 2005). The specific meaning realised on a given occasion depends on how, when, and by whom the resource is used. This concept prevents the analysis from assuming that comparable objects carry comparable meanings across communities, and it accounts for the fact that a single substance may perform different social work in different ceremonial settings.

Multimodality

Kress's (2010) multimodal social semiotics holds that meaning is typically made through configurations of modes rather than through any one mode alone. An ensemble may combine speech, gesture, material substance, bodily movement, and spatial and temporal arrangement. Each mode contributes according to its own affordances, and the meaning of the whole is not reducible to any single component.

This is particularly relevant to mortuary practice, where the significance of a resource frequently depends on its position within a sequence and on the actions accompanying it. Milk poured on a grave under the direction of elders after interment is not simply a substance with a cultural meaning; it is a substance, an

action, a set of authorised performers, and a moment in a sequence, operating together.

Transition And Ritualisation

Van Gennep (1960) analyses rites accompanying changes of social status as comprising phases of separation, transition, and incorporation. Mortuary rites are among his principal examples: the deceased is separated from the community of the living, passes through a liminal period, and is incorporated into a new status, while the survivors undergo a parallel movement. The model is useful here because mortuary sequences commonly exhibit a comparable structure, marked by an interval between death and interment during which particular obligations fall on the bereaved household.

Bell (1992) argues that ritualisation is a strategic way of acting that distinguishes certain activities from everyday conduct and thereby invests them with authority. This is helpful in accounting for why particular mortuary actions are performed under the direction of elders and why departures from prescribed conduct are treated as consequential.

Application of the Framework

The framework is applied by examining each documented resource in terms of five questions:

- What material, verbal, embodied, temporal, or spatial form does the resource take?
- Who introduces, performs, receives, or interprets it?
- At what point in the mortuary process does it occur?
- What culturally recognised meaning was assigned to it in the original data?
- What social action or relationship does its use help to communicate or accomplish?

The resources are then considered in relation to three social functions: locating the deceased within the household and kinship order; regulating the passage from death to completed burial; and communicating continuing relations between the living and the dead.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative secondary analysis design. Heaton (2004) identifies three warrants for returning to existing qualitative material: a question

the original study did not pose, an aspect of the data it did not pursue, and a theoretical perspective it did not apply. All three are present here. The questions this study asks concern how resources operate in sequence and in combination, and answering them requires a corpus in which the resources, their contexts of use, and their reported meanings have already been systematically documented. That documentation exists in the original study, and generating a fresh corpus would duplicate it without improving the analysis.

The material analysed here is drawn from two sources. The primary source is Chemis (2020), an unpublished master's thesis submitted to The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, which contains the full descriptive record of the signs documented, the participant testimony supporting them, and the meanings attributed to them. The secondary source is Chemis, Ochieng and Achieng (2020), the published article summarising that thesis. Where the two differ in detail, the thesis is followed, since it carries the fuller record. No analysis was conducted on original audio recordings or field notes, which were not available for re-examination; this constitutes a limitation and is noted as such in the concluding section.

The original study employed a descriptive qualitative design. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, the latter including attendance at funerals in the study area. Its purpose was to identify the signs used in Nandi social events, explain their culturally recognised meanings, and classify the relationship between each sign and its referent using Saussurean and Peircean models. The sample consisted of twelve Nandi speakers, men and women aged between 40 and 60, resident in Megun Ward, Kapseret Constituency, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. Half were community members recognised locally as well-informed about Nandi cultural practices, a quarter were cultural experts and historians, and the remainder fell into other categories. Selection was purposive and turned on demonstrated familiarity with the practices under investigation.

This sample belongs to the original study. It was recruited for that study's purposes, and no part of it was recruited, approached, or re-contacted for the present analysis. The number of funerals attended during the original observation is not separately

reported in the source and is therefore not stated here. Using a sample recruited for another purpose requires justification, and two considerations support it here. The original selection criterion was demonstrated familiarity with Nandi cultural signs and the practices in which they occur, and that is the competence the present questions require: they concern practices and their culturally recognised meanings rather than individual experience or personal biography. The material such a sample produced is therefore of the right kind, even though it was gathered to answer a different question. The corresponding limitation is that these participants were never asked what the present study asks, and where their accounts do not reach, the analysis says so rather than inferring beyond them.

The mortuary subset of the original corpus was identified by reading the findings chapters in full and extracting every passage whose reported use concerned the announcement of a death, the conduct of mourning, the preparation or timing of burial, the placement of the deceased, or actions performed at or after interment. This yielded eight categories of resource: the placement of the body at the centre of the sitting room together with the overnight vigil; the position of the grave; the position of the sun as a determinant of the time of interment; the exclusion of certain categories of death from that timing; the fire maintained outside the house; milk poured on the grave and given to grave diggers; flowers placed on the grave; and gestures and facial expressions of grief. Material documented as belonging exclusively to marriage ceremonies was excluded and is analysed separately. Relevance to the present research questions was determined by a single criterion applied uniformly: whether the original study recorded both a context of use and an attributed meaning for the resource. Resources named in the original study without an attributed meaning were not carried forward. Table 1 sets out the resources so identified, together with the modes each combines, its position in the mortuary sequence, and the meaning the original study documents for it.

Extracted passages were first sorted by resource and by the circumstances of use reported for each. Each resource was then interrogated using five questions derived from the framework set out in 2.7: what form the resource takes; who introduces, performs, or

interprets it; at what point in the mortuary process it occurs; what meaning the original study records participants as attributing to it; and what social action its use accomplishes. Van Leeuwen's (2005) concept of meaning potential was applied by asking, for each resource, what its material affordances and history of use make available and which of those possibilities the documented occasion realises. Kress's (2010) account of the multimodal ensemble was applied by examining which resources co-occur and what each contributes that the others do not. Van Gennep's (1960) phases were used to locate resources within the movement from death to completed burial. Resources performing related social functions were then grouped, producing the three themes that organise the findings. These correspond to the three research questions.

Two safeguards governed the interpretive work. The first was evidential: no reading was advanced that could not be traced to a resource and a meaning

recorded in the original study, and no meaning was attributed to a resource that participants had not themselves reported. The second was a consistent separation, sustained throughout the findings, between what participants said a resource meant and what the present analysis concludes it accomplishes. Where the record would not bear a stronger claim, the weaker claim was retained and the shortfall identified.

This study recruited, interviewed, and observed no one. It worked exclusively with material already gathered and adds no detail by which any participant might be identified. Testimony given for the original study has been read in light of the purposes for which it was offered and the cultural setting in which it was given. Because bereavement and the handling of the dead are the subject matter, participants' accounts are reproduced without evaluative comment on the practices they describe.

Table 1: Semiotic Resources Analysed, With the Modes Each Combines, Its Position in the Mortuary Sequence, and the Meaning Documented in the Original Study

Resource	Mode(s)	Point in the sequence	Documented meaning	Theme
Body at the center of the sitting room; overnight vigil	Spatial; temporal; embodied co-presence	Night before burial	Love; the central position occupied by the deceased; respect and honour	4.1
Position of the grave (man right, woman left; husband sited to wife's right)	Spatial	Site selected before burial	Power and authority held at the homestead; extension of the living order "even in death"	4.1
Position of the sun	Temporal	Interment	Time of interment; must conclude before sunset; elders responsible	4.2
Exclusion of infants and suicide deaths from the standard timing	Temporal	Interment	Basis not explained by participants; reported as a documented exception and identified as a question for further enquiry	4.2
Fire outside the main house	Material; temporal; spatial	Every night of the mourning period	Continuity of the lineage of the deceased	4.2, 4.3
Milk poured on the grave; milk given to grave diggers	Material; embodied	After burial; morning of burial	Appeasing the spirits of the deceased; preventing torment of the living	4.3
Flowers placed, and sometimes planted, on the grave	Material	Immediately after interment	Love and remembrance; documented as recently borrowed	4.3
Gestures and facial expressions of grief	Embodied; visual	From announcement of death to burial	Sorrow, calibrated by age of the deceased and manner of death	4.3

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emplacing the Dead: Space, Gender, and the Domestic Order

The first research question asks how spatial resources locate the deceased within the household and the kinship order. Two resources answer it: the placement of the body at the centre of the sitting room during the pre-burial vigil, and the siting of the grave in relation to the main house according to the gender and marital position of the deceased. Together they move the deceased from occupying a position within the household to being permanently inscribed in its physical arrangement.

The Body at the Centre of the House

Before burial, the body of the deceased is placed at the centre of the sitting room for an overnight vigil, and family members are expected to sleep in the room. One participant explained that families "place the coffin of the deceased at the center of the living room a night before the funeral," describing this as "an important gesture to show that the deceased occupied an important position in the hearts of the family members" and as "a form of respect and honor." The original study recorded that the practice applies to elders, women, youth, and children alike (Chemis, 2020).

What participants report is a meaning: the centre of the room expresses the standing the deceased held, and its use is a form of respect and honour. The present analysis reads a further point from the same material. The centre of the house is not a neutral place to put a body; it is the part of the dwelling around which household life is organised, so placing the deceased there for a final night states that the position held in life is retained for that night. The requirement that the family sleep in the same room extends this: on this reading the household does not withdraw from the deceased but gathers around them a last time, and it is collective co-presence rather than the location alone that communicates continuing attachment. Participants did not describe it in these terms, and the reading is offered as an interpretation of what they reported.

From a social-semiotic perspective, the meaning potential of central placement derives from the cultural significance of the domestic centre and from the conventions governing who may be placed there (van Leeuwen, 2005). Its realisation on this occasion depends on timing. The same location on any other night carries no such meaning; it is the conjunction of place, moment, and collective presence that communicates the standing of the deceased. The arrangement is also multimodal in Kress's (2010) sense, combining a spatial position, a temporal interval, and the bodily co-presence of the household into a single ensemble.

The vigil additionally marks a deliberate interval. The original data record shows that the delay between death and burial is understood to indicate that the deceased "is still needed" and that there is "no need to rush into burial the same day the person dies" (Chemis, 2020). That much is documented. What the present analysis draws from it is that withholding immediate burial is itself communicative: the interval is not an administrative necessity but a statement about attachment, and its length participates in expressing the relationship the survivors claim with the deceased.

The Position of the Grave

The siting of the grave communicates a different and more durable set of relations. In all funerals observed in the original study, men were buried on the right-hand side of the main house and women on the left.

The burial site is selected by close family members, and both the gender of the deceased and the location of previous graves are taken into account. Where a wife has died before her husband, the site is chosen so that the husband will subsequently be buried on her right (Chemis, 2020).

Participants explained this arrangement explicitly in terms of authority. One stated: "We the Nandi, men are in charge of their family and are the ones with full authority. Also in our culture, women should not cross the right-hand side of men so it should be even in death. Therefore, the man of the house must be buried on the right side of the house." The original study established that the right side is understood among the Nandi of Megun Ward to signify power and that burial on the right therefore signifies the authority the man held and is understood to continue holding, at the homestead (Chemis, 2020).

Three observations follow from a social-semiotic reading. First, the resource is relational rather than absolute. The right side means what it means only in relation to the left, and the position of a husband's grave is determined by the position of his wife's. The system therefore does not simply mark individuals; it maps a relationship between them onto the ground.

Second, the arrangement converts a social principle into a permanent material fact. The rule that women should not cross to the right of men is a norm governing conduct among the living. Its application to burial extends that norm beyond the lifetime of those it governs and fixes it in a form that cannot be renegotiated. The homestead thereby becomes a durable record of the household's authority structure, legible to anyone who knows the convention.

Third, the phrase "even in death" is analytically significant. It indicates that participants themselves understand the arrangement as an extension of the living order rather than as a separate mortuary code. The grave does not describe a new status; it perpetuates an existing one.

Van Leeuwen (2008) argues that social space is not a neutral container for practice but is produced through the framing of practices and the positioning of bodies within them. The Nandi grave system illustrates this

directly. The compound does not merely happen to contain graves arranged in a particular way; the arrangement constitutes the compound as a space in which a specific distribution of authority is continuously asserted. Because the positions are fixed and publicly visible, the claim they make requires no restatement and admits no revision.

Set against previous scholarship, the Nandi evidence extends rather than merely repeats. It confirms Oboler's (1985) account of patrilineal household organisation, in which authority, property, and descent were structured through the male line and the compound formed the principal unit of social life, and it gives that organisation a material form he does not describe: the compound records the household's authority structure in the ground. Salakpi (2025) documents prescribed placement among the Anlo Ewe, where the corpse is oriented so that the dead may see the rising sun. The Nandi case shows the same principle of prescribed placement operating through a different variable, since here the site is fixed by the gender of the deceased and by the position of a spouse's grave rather than by a cardinal direction. What the two cases share is that placement is rule-governed; what the Nandi material adds is that such a rule may encode a relation between two people rather than a relation between a body and the world.

From Expulsion to Emplacement

The original data also record a historical transformation of considerable analytical interest. One participant stated: "We did not bury our dead... we threw them to the bush. We cannot stay with the dead near our homes. Any way time have changed we bury them behind our houses." Another explained that the Nandi historically "fear death and they perceive it as an evil spirit that is why they let the hyenas feed on dead bodies," and that "when death occurred, the family shifted to another location to run away from a bad omen, curse and from death" (Chemis, 2020).

The earlier practice and the current one are spatial opposites. Formerly the dead were removed from the homestead and the living relocated away from the site of death; presently the dead are installed within the homestead in positions that express their household standing. What was avoided has become what is inscribed.

Droz (2011) documents a closely comparable transformation among the Kikuyu of Kenya, from the practice of leaving the dying and the dead in the bush to the construction of tombs within the family compound, and argues that this relocation reconfigured relations between the living, the deceased, and the land. The Nandi material describes a parallel movement in a different language family: Droz's case is Bantu; this one is Southern Nilotic. The Nandi evidence therefore extends his argument beyond the setting in which it was made and indicates that the transformation is not confined to a single cultural bloc. Its significance for the present analysis is that the entire spatial system described above, including the gendered siting of graves, is comparatively recent. The resources through which Nandi mortuary practice now expresses household authority did not exist in this form within living cultural memory.

This has an important implication. The gendered grave positions are not the survival of an ancient practice but the application of an existing social principle to a newly available resource. When burial within the homestead became the norm, the pre-existing rule about right and left was extended to it. The repertoire changed; the logic organising it did not.

Regulating the Passage: Time, Vigil, and the Limits of the Standard Sequence

The second research question concerns how temporal resources regulate the passage from death to completed burial and how that regulation applies to deaths that fall outside the standard sequence. Three resources regulate the passage: the vigil interval discussed above, the use of the sun's position to determine the time of interment, and the fire maintained outside the house on every night of the mourning period. A fourth element, the exclusion of particular categories of death from that timing, is reported below as a documented feature whose basis the original data do not establish.

The Sun and the Time of Interment

The original study established that the position of the sun determined the time at which the body was laid in the grave. Interment must take place in the afternoon and must be completed before sunset, and it is the responsibility of the elders to ensure that the

ceremony does not continue past sundown. This applies irrespective of the gender of the deceased and across all ages. Elders explained the practice with reference to the understanding that the sun's movement carries time forward (Chemis, 2020).

What the original data establish is the rule and who enforces it. The present analysis reads the choice of resource as consequential. The sun is a publicly available timekeeper. Unlike a clock, it is visible to every participant simultaneously and is not subject to dispute. Its use means that the correct timing of the interment is something all present can verify, which in turn makes any departure from the prescribed timing visible to everyone. The resource therefore does not merely indicate when to act; it makes compliance collectively observable.

The rule also assigns responsibility. Elders are answerable for ensuring the ceremony concludes before sunset, which locates ceremonial authority in a specific category of participant and gives that authority a definite and assessable task. In Bell's (1992) terms, this is a mechanism of ritualisation: the ordinary passage of an afternoon is distinguished from ordinary time by being made the object of supervised obligation.

The requirement that burial be completed before dark bounds the mortuary sequence. Death may occur at any hour, but interment may not. The sequence must therefore be fitted to a prescribed window, and the interval between death and burial is shaped accordingly. Read alongside the vigil, the two resources produce a structured passage: a marked delay, a night of collective presence, and then a completion that must occur within defined limits.

The Mourning Fire

Throughout the mourning period, a fire is lit outside the main house of the deceased and must be kept alight through the night. Responsibility falls to younger members of the family, who ensure it does not die out, while youth and elders gather around it through the night to discuss experiences shared with the deceased. The fire is lit irrespective of the age or gender of the deceased. Participants explained that it is maintained "to show that the lineage of the deceased will continue," and that "the mourners sit round the fire

recounting their experiences and the life of the deceased" (Chemis, 2020).

Participants state what the fire signifies; what follows is the present analysis's account of how it does so. The fire operates simultaneously on two levels. As a material resource, it produces light, warmth, and a gathering point, and its maintenance requires continuous human attention. As a semiotic resource, it signifies the continuity of the deceased's lineage. The connection between these levels is not arbitrary: a fire that must be actively prevented from going out is an unusually apt vehicle for the idea of a line that must be actively continued. Kress (2010) argues that the material properties of a resource contribute to its meaning potential, and this case illustrates the point. The affordance that makes the fire meaningful is precisely its vulnerability to extinction.

The allocation of responsibility reinforces the meaning. It is the younger members of the family who must keep the fire alive, which is to say that those who embody the continuation of the lineage are charged with performing its continuation. The task and the thing signified are aligned.

The nightly gathering adds a further dimension. What occurs around the fire is the collective recounting of the deceased's life. The fire thus assembles the participants, provides the occasion, and supplies the interpretive frame within which the recounting takes place. It marks a defined period, distinct from ordinary household routine, during which the community's relation to the deceased is actively worked through. This corresponds closely to the transitional phase in van Gennep's (1960) analysis: a bounded interval, marked by distinctive obligations, between the separation effected by death and the incorporation completed at burial.

Deaths Excluded from the Standard Timing

The temporal rules described above admit an explicit exception. Participants stated that "final interment must be done afternoon, except for those who have committed suicide or that of an infant," and that Nandi funeral and burial rites "take a similar pattern (except for cases of persons who have committed suicide)." The original study further recorded that the requirement of afternoon burial applies to all ages

“from the young (except infants) to the old” (Chemis, 2020).

Two categories of death are therefore removed from the standard timing: infants and those who have died by suicide. The original data establish that the exception exists and identify the categories to which it applies. They do not record how participants account for it, since the interviews did not pursue the question.

Several readings remain open on this evidence. The exception may reflect a distinction of the kind Douglas (1966) describes, in which deaths that do not fit the categories the ordinary sequence presupposes are handled separately; the ordinary sequence does presuppose a deceased with an established household position and a lineage that can be affirmed as continuing, and neither category satisfies that description straightforwardly. Equally, the difference may rest on practical considerations, on distinct beliefs concerning particular manners of death, or on grounds not represented in the material at all. The present data do not permit a choice among these.

The exception is accordingly reported here as a documented feature of Nandi mortuary practice whose basis is not established, and as a specific question for further enquiry rather than a finding of the present study.

Comparable patterns are documented elsewhere in Africa. Salakpi (2025) reports that among the Anlo Ewe, deaths by suicide receive abbreviated rites and are taken directly for burial with little said; deaths of first-born children are marked by low-key ceremony and the suppression of open grief, and certain other categories of death are buried at night. Against Salakpi's account, the Nandi evidence qualifies rather than confirms: the categories excluded are similar, but the differentiation is far more restrained, amounting to a change of timing rather than to abbreviated or nocturnal rites. The comparison is therefore suggestive rather than demonstrative. It establishes that differentiated treatment of these categories of death is attested elsewhere in the region, which makes the Nandi exception worth pursuing, but it cannot establish that the two cases share an underlying rationale. That would require the participant accounts the present material lacks.

A limitation must be acknowledged. The original interviews recorded the exception but did not explore participants' own explanations of it. The interpretation offered here is therefore advanced as the reading best supported by the available material rather than as a documented participant account, and it identifies a specific question for future research.

Sustaining Relations Across Death: Appeasement, Continuity, And Calibrated Grief

The third research question concerns what relationship survives the burial and how material and embodied resources communicate it. Nandi mortuary practice does not represent death as terminating the relationship between the living and the deceased. Milk offered at the grave, the fire signifying lineage continuity, flowers placed and sometimes planted on the grave, and the calibrated display of grief all indicate a relationship that continues in an altered form and towards which the living retain obligations.

Milk and the Management of the Ongoing Relationship

Milk is poured on the grave as a sign of appeasing the spirits of the deceased. The practice is performed after burial under the guidance of village elders, and is carried out whenever the family considers that there is a need to build peace with the deceased. Participants explained that milk is offered “so that the spirit of the dead would not come back to torment the living.” In addition, the grave diggers, who complete their work on the morning of the burial, are given milk to drink. One participant explained: “In our culture graves are dug in the morning of the burial by energetic youth in the village. Once they are done, it's a must that they drink the milk. This is done to appease the deceased so that his/her spirit does not come after the grave diggers” (Chemis, 2020).

The analytical significance of this practice lies in what it presupposes. An offering intended to prevent the deceased from returning to torment the living presupposes a deceased who is capable of acting upon the living. The relationship is therefore not understood to have ended at death; it has become a relationship with a party who is absent but still consequential, and who must be actively managed.

The practice is also conditional and repeatable rather than fixed to a single moment. Milk is offered “whenever the family feels there is need to build peace,” which indicates a relationship requiring ongoing maintenance rather than a single act of closure. The performance of the offering under the direction of elders locates the authority to manage this relationship in a specific category of persons, consistent with the allocation of responsibility observed in the regulation of interment timing.

The treatment of the grave diggers extends the logic further. Those who have handled the grave are understood to have entered into a relation with the deceased that requires its own resolution, and the same substance is used to resolve it. This indicates that the risk being managed attaches to proximity and action rather than to kinship alone: the offering addresses what a person has done in relation to the deceased, not only who they are.

That milk should serve this function is not incidental. Nandi social and economic organisation has historically been structured around livestock (Ng’etich, 2024; Oboler, 1985), and milk is accordingly a substance of daily sustenance rather than a ceremonial rarity. Offering it to the dead extends to the deceased a substance that sustains the living. The resource’s meaning potential draws directly on this everyday significance (van Leeuwen, 2005). This extends Ng’etich (2024) and Oboler (1985), who establish the centrality of livestock to Nandi economic and household life without following it into mortuary practice: the present material shows the same pastoral economy supplying the substance through which relations with the dead are managed.

Fire, Flowers, and the Forms of Continuity

The fire discussed in relation to temporal regulation also belongs to this theme, since what it signifies is continuity of the lineage. Its meaning is directed forward: it asserts that the death has not ended the line to which the deceased belonged. The nightly recounting of the deceased’s life around it performs a complementary function, transferring what the deceased was into the shared account held by those who remain.

Flowers operate differently and have a different history. The original study established that relatives and close friends place flowers on the grave immediately after the body is laid to rest and the grave is covered, that this is done chiefly by those understood to have loved the deceased most, that the flowers are bought by the family and distributed by the family’s youth towards the end of the ceremony, and that they signify love and remembrance. Participants noted that flowers are sometimes planted so as to grow on the grave “as a sign of remembrance and love.” The original study also recorded explicitly that this practice “was not there among the Nandi of Megun Ward, Kapseret constituency in the past, but has recently been borrowed from other speech communities” (Chemis, 2020).

The planting of flowers that will grow on the grave is of particular interest. A planted flower differs from a placed one in requiring time and continuing to develop after the ceremony has ended. It thus commits the relationship to a future rather than marking only the moment of burial, and in this respect its temporal structure resembles that of the fire: both express continuity through something that persists and grows rather than through a single completed act.

Grief as a Calibrated Resource

The original study documented an extensive repertoire of grief displays: wailing; falling and lying on the ground, on a couch, or on a bed; weeping; placing the hands on the head while facing down; holding the chin with a saddened face; and deep silence. Participants reported that women in particular “scream, run up and down,” that some “wail so loud while rolling on the ground,” and that men are often found “holding their chins wearing very sad faces” (Chemis, 2020).

Two features of this material are analytically significant. First, the announcement of a death is itself managed. Participants explained that the announcement is made by religious leaders or by an elder accompanied by a delegation of village members or relatives, that immediate family members are assembled before the news is broken, and that this is done “in an orderly manner... in a bid to manage reactions that may cause too much trouble” (Chemis, 2020). The community anticipates the grief display, prepares for it, and structures the setting in which it will occur. Grief is

therefore not treated as a purely involuntary reaction but as an expected response for which the appropriate conditions must be arranged, and the composition of the announcing delegation confers authority on the announcement.

Second, the intensity of mourning is explicitly calibrated to the circumstances of the death. Participants reported that “sadness depends on the age of the deceased and the manner of death,” that “an aged person is celebrated in his/her death rather than mourned,” that “a younger person is mourned so much,” that the death of someone long ill “is somehow welcomed because sometimes it is seen as a relief though still sad,” and that “the death of a victim of a road accident is sadly received” (Chemis, 2020).

This calibration means that the degree of grief displayed communicates information about the death. A restrained or celebratory response signals a life completed; an intense response signals a life interrupted. The display is therefore a semiotic resource with graded meaning potential and not simply an expression of private feeling. The same distinction — between deaths that complete a life and deaths that do not — appears both in the regulation of mourning conduct and in the categories excluded from the standard interment timing, though the original data do not establish how participants relate the two.

Discussion

Taken together, the three sets of findings return one answer to the question with which the study began. Spatial resources place the deceased within the household and the kinship order. Temporal resources regulate the passage from death to completed burial and mark the deaths that fall outside the standard sequence. Material and embodied resources state that relations with the dead continue and grade the intensity with which a particular death is felt. What the three have in common is that none of them operates by naming what it conveys. The right side of the house is not described as a statement about authority, the afternoon burial is not announced as a claim about a completed life, and the fire is not explained to those who see it burning. In each case the meaning is carried by a regulated choice—this side of the house rather than that one, this hour rather than another, a

substance offered rather than withheld—made where the community can see the choice being made.

The resources are also positioned in relation to one another. The night at the centre of the house is possible only while the body remains in the household and precedes everything that follows. The grave receives the deceased at a site the household has already assigned by gender, and interment must be completed before the sun goes down. The fire is lit after the death and maintained through every night of the pre-burial mourning period. It is kept alight until the final night before burial and is no longer maintained after interment, and the flowers, planted so that they grow on the grave, remain after mourning ends. Each resource occupies a place in a sequence, and what it accomplishes depends on that place: the centre of the house states a standing that has not yet been relinquished, the grave fixes that standing in the ground, and the fire and the flowers address the deceased once fixed there. Read in order, the resources describe a movement from a person still held within the household to a person permanently sited within it and addressed there by the living. Emplacement and continuing relation are therefore accomplished across the sequence rather than at any point in it, which is why an inventory of signs, however complete, cannot show what the practice does.

A second relation runs across the modes rather than along the sequence. The same social distinctions are stated more than once, in different resources and at different moments. Gender determines the side of the house on which a grave is dug and also the forms in which grief may properly be displayed. The distinction between a life that has been completed and a life that has been interrupted appears in the calibration of mourning, where an aged person is celebrated rather than mourned and a younger person is mourned intensely, and it appears again in the categories of death removed from the standard interment timing. A distinction made in one mode is thus available to be made again in another, and no single resource carries a social distinction alone. The original data do not establish that participants themselves connect these occurrences, and the correspondence is offered here as an observation about the repertoire rather than as an account of participants’ reasoning. What can be said is that a person present for only part of a funeral still

meets the distinction, because it has been stated in more than one place.

What follows for social semiotics is that regulation can itself be a semiotic resource. Analyses of multimodal meaning-making have concentrated on resources that are produced: a gesture made, an object displayed, an utterance spoken. The Nandi material shows meaning carried equally by restriction — the hour before which interment must be finished, the side of the house on which a grave may not be dug, the delay between death and burial that may not be shortened. Constraints of this kind are ordinarily treated as the setting within which communication takes place. Here they are what communicates, and the clearest evidence for this is the exception: because the timing rule is fixed, exempting a category of death from it is legible as a statement about that death. A resource that could be used freely could not do this work.

For the comparative study of African mortuary practice, the case stands in a definite relation to what is already known. It confirms Oboler's (1985) account of Nandi patrilineal household organisation and shows that organisation is recorded in the ground rather than only in the distribution of authority and property. It extends Droz's (2011) account of a movement from expulsion to emplacement beyond the Bantu setting in which it was described to a Southern Nilotic community, which indicates that the transformation is not confined to a single cultural bloc. And it qualifies Salakpi's (2025) account of excluded deaths, since the categories set apart are comparable while the differentiation is far more restrained, amounting to a change of timing rather than to abbreviated or nocturnal rites. A comparative literature drawn largely from Bantu and West African settings gains a Southern Nilotic instance that neither simply repeats it nor stands apart from it.

The mortuary repertoire is not static. The original data document three changes within living cultural memory. Burial within the homestead replaced the practice of leaving the dead in the bush and relocating the household. The placing of flowers on graves was borrowed from other communities and was formerly absent. Christianity and, in participants' terms, Western civilisation transformed attitudes and practices surrounding death, with religious leaders now

participating in the announcement of a death, while, as participants noted, "there is still great superstition, fear and sadness when death occurs" (Chemis, 2020).

These changes have not produced a repertoire without organising principles. The gendered siting of graves applied an existing rule about right and left to a newly adopted practice. Flowers were absorbed into a ceremony that already possessed resources for expressing attachment, and the local elaboration of planting them so that they grow on the grave aligns them with the forward-directed continuity that the fire also expresses. Religious leaders were incorporated into an announcement procedure whose existing purpose was the ordered management of grief.

The pattern is therefore one of absorption rather than replacement. New resources entered the repertoire and were assigned functions within a logic that was already in place. This finding speaks to the concerns raised by Hove (2024) regarding negotiation between Christian and indigenous authority in African burial practice and suggests that in the Nandi case the accommodation has operated principally by incorporating new resources into existing social functions. It also indicates that any account of Nandi mortuary semiotics must be historically situated, since the repertoire documented here is demonstrably a product of change. The organising logic that absorbed these resources is the one the preceding sections have described: a repertoire that assigns each new element a position in the sequence and a social function within it. That the logic survived a change as fundamental as the movement of the dead from the bush to the homestead is the strongest indication that what operates here is a system of communication and not an accumulation of separate customs.

Limitations

The study is limited by its reliance on data not originally generated to answer the present research question. Participants' own explanations of several matters central to the analysis, in particular the reasoning behind the exclusion of infant and suicide deaths from the standard interment timing, were not explored in the original interviews. The number of funerals observed is not separately reported in the original study, and the findings are confined to the practices documented in Megun Ward and should not

be generalised to all contemporary Nandi mortuary practices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study examined how semiotic resources locate the deceased within the Nandi household and kinship order, regulate the passage from death to completed burial, and communicate continuing relations between the living and the dead. It concludes that these resources constitute a socially organized system of communication rather than a set of isolated signs. Their significance depends on culturally established conventions, on the participants authorised to use them, on their combination with other modes, and on their position within the mortuary sequence, and much of what they convey is carried not by what is done but by the regulation governing when, where, and by whom it may be done.

Taken together, these findings support a single conclusion. Nandi mortuary resources do not terminate the relationship between the living and the dead. They relocate it spatially into the homestead, temporally into a regulated sequence, and socially into a continuing exchange with the deceased. The original study from which this corpus is drawn documented marriage alongside mourning (Chemis et al., 2020), and the two bodies of material differ in exactly this respect. Marriage resources bring a relationship into being where none previously existed; mortuary resources

take a relationship that already exists and establish the terms on which it will continue.

The study additionally establishes that the mortuary repertoire is historically dynamic. Burial within the homestead, the gendered siting of graves, and the placing of flowers are all comparatively recent, and each was absorbed into an existing cultural logic rather than displacing it. Accounts of Nandi mortuary semiotics must therefore be historically situated, and the persistence of that logic through so substantial a change is itself evidence that the resources are organised as a system.

Recommendations: Research conducted on contemporary funerals, rather than on an existing corpus, would address the limitations set out above. Participants' own accounts of the exempted deaths would establish the basis of the exception, which the present data record but do not explain. Comparative work across Kalenjin communities would establish how far the spatial and temporal system described here is shared. And research attending to how Christian and indigenous mortuary authority are currently negotiated would extend the analysis of change begun in this study, and would establish whether the pattern of absorption identified here continues to hold where the two authorities are in open contention, as Hove (2024) reports elsewhere in the region.

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