

## Türkiye’de Depremden Sağ Kalan Bireylerde Kişisel ve Kültürel Yas Ritüelleri\*

### Personal and Cultural Grief Rituals among Earthquake Survivors in Türkiye

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#### ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the grief ritual experiences of individuals who lost one or more loved ones in the February 6, 2023 earthquake in Türkiye, based on Continuing Bonds Theory. The sample consisted of ten adults (7 women, 3 men; aged 20-51) who experienced the disaster in Kahramanmaraş, its epicenter. Data were collected through semi-structured interview questions and analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. Our findings indicated that participants engaged in grief rituals that were either rooted in cultural traditions or constructed according to their personal preferences. Both personal and culturally grounded rituals were found to serve key functions in supporting emotional regulation, maintaining ongoing connections with the deceased, providing opportunities for social support, and facilitating the acceptance of loss. However, our findings also revealed that guilt may arise when individuals do not adhere to expected grief rituals. All findings were discussed in light of the relevant literature.

#### ÖZ

Bu fenomenolojik araştırma, 6 Şubat 2023’te Türkiye’de meydana gelen deprem sonrasında bir veya birden fazla yakını kaybeden bireylerin yas ritüellerine ilişkin deneyimlerini Devam Eden Bağlar Yaklaşımı temelinde incelemektedir. Katılımcı grubunu, depremin merkez üssü olan Kahramanmaraş’ta afeti yaşamış 10 yetişkin (7 kadın, 3 erkek; 20 ile 51 yaş aralığı) oluşturmaktadır. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme soruları aracılığıyla toplanmış ve Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz yaklaşımı doğrultusunda değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, katılımcıların hem kültürel geleneklere dayanan hem de kişisel tercihler doğrultusunda şekillenen yas ritüellerini yerine getirdiklerini göstermiştir. Katılımcılar yas ritüellerinin; duygusal düzenlemeyi destekleme, ölen kişiyle sürdürülen bağları güçlendirme, sosyal destek olanakları sunma ve kaybın kabullenilmesini kolaylaştırma gibi işlevlerine vurgu yapmışlardır. Bununla birlikte, ritüellerin yerine getirilememesi durumunda katılımcıların suçluluk duygusu yaşayabildiği de saptanmıştır. Tüm bulgular ilgili alan yazını ışığında tartışılmıştır.

#### Anahtar kelimeler:

Yas, yas ritüelleri, depremden sağ kalanlar, fenomenolojik çalışma

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## **Introduction**

Devastating earthquakes, with magnitudes of 7.7 and 7.6, struck Türkiye on February 6, 2023. This disaster was catastrophic not only due to its magnitude but also because of the widespread loss of life, destruction of property, and severe economic and social consequences across multiple cities and provinces in Türkiye. According to the Disaster and Emergency Aid Management Directorate of Türkiye (AFAD, 2024), the earthquake affected approximately 14 million people and resulted in over fifty thousand fatalities. These extensive losses have led to profound grief responses at both the individual and community levels.

Grief following an earthquake can be more intense and severe than in typical circumstances due to the unique stressors and challenges associated with disaster-related loss. For instance, sudden death, the inability to say a final goodbye to the deceased, the perception that a loved one's death resulted from negligence or insensitivity, and exposure to highly traumatic scenes during the disaster all exacerbate grief reactions (Kristensen & Pereira Franco, 2011). Studies have shown that disaster-related loss increases the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Eisma et al., 2023) and prolonged grief disorder (Djelantik et al., 2020; Dönmez et al., 2025). Prolonged grief disorder has also been found to be a risk factor for depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Janshen & Eisma, 2024).

To date, research has suggested that factors such as social support, problem-focused coping, spirituality (e.g., Ashai & O'Brien, 2021; Parro-Jiménez et al., 2021), resilience, self-efficacy, and positive childhood memories (Ime et al., 2025) may aid in coping with disaster-related loss. However, while these factors have been explored to some extent, the role of grief rituals in shaping psychological outcomes remains largely unexplored, presenting a significant gap in the literature. Given the diverse ways grief is experienced, it is essential to investigate the grief rituals individuals engage in to better understand their lived experiences.

Although research on grief rituals is still in its early stages, some studies have begun to examine their significance in coping with loss. Empirical evidence suggests that rituals such as visiting cemeteries, praying, offering food, or making donations, which reflect ongoing bonds with the deceased, can support emotional regulation and help individuals come to terms with their loss (Hsu & Palitsky, 2023; Klass, 2006; Şimşek Arslan & Buldukoğlu, 2023). To provide a holistic understanding of grief rituals, a study conducted with Turkish women aged 25-59 examined participants' experiences with religious beliefs and rituals (Aksöz-Efe et al., 2018). The researchers found that rituals help individuals gain social support and maintain family ties; however, when rituals fail to meet the grieving person's needs, they can be counterproductive. For instance, in that study, women from low socioeconomic backgrounds reported feeling pressured to perform rituals, even when these practices were perceived as unhelpful (Aksöz-Efe et al., 2018). Other research on grief rituals has primarily focused on the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Hekimoğlu et al., 2022). These studies highlighted that the inability to hold large funeral ceremonies, share condolences, and engage in traditional rituals exacerbated emotional pain (Bucuka, 2021; Mas'amah et al., 2023; Savaş, 2020). Furthermore, some previous studies reported that grief rituals were not associated with grief reactions (e.g., Mitima-Verloop et al., 2021). As such, rituals can influence individuals experiencing grief in both positive and negative ways. This finding highlights the need for a more holistic and in-depth

qualitative understanding of grief rituals.

Although several studies have examined grief rituals in Türkiye, the majority were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when individuals were unable to perform cultural grief rituals. To our knowledge, only one study was conducted prior to the pandemic, and it included only female participants (Aksöz-Efe et al., 2018). There is a need to investigate grief rituals in a variety of contexts in Türkiye, including for example, the context of an earthquake, a comparatively common occurrence in this country given its geolocation along several fault lines.

### **Theoretical Framework: Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass et al., 1996)**

Grief literature offers several theoretical perspectives (e.g., Kübler-Ross's Five-Stage Grief Theory; Kübler-Ross, 1969/2003; Four Tasks of Mourning; Worden, 2001). Among these, the Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass et al., 1996) offers a valuable framework for understanding grief rituals. Contrary to models that emphasize detachment from the deceased, the Continuing Bonds perspective argues that maintaining an ongoing, symbolic relationship with the lost loved one may be adaptive (Klass et al., 1996). A recent systematic review highlights several potential positive outcomes of maintaining such connections, including emotional relief, support for meaning reconstruction, the transformation of self-identity, and the affirmation of spiritual or existential beliefs (Hewson et al., 2024).

Many grief rituals described in the literature closely reflect the behaviors emphasized in Continuing Bonds. Rituals such as looking at photographs of the deceased, sharing memories with others, watching television programs that evoke memories, and wearing the belongings of the deceased, as exemplified by Vale-Taylor (2009), function as ways of maintaining a meaningful connection. Vale-Taylor (2009) highlights that such rituals can serve multiple psychological and social functions, including emotional regulation, providing comfort, facilitating social support, and strengthening the continued bond with the deceased.

A key principle of the Continuing Bonds framework is that post-loss connections are inherently individualized and highly personal. The theory emphasizes that there is no single “correct” way to maintain a bond with the deceased; rather, these connections emerge in diverse forms shaped by the bereaved person’s unique needs, memories, cultural background, and relational history (Klass et al., 1996). This individual specificity closely parallels the nature of grief rituals, which are shaped by the bereaved individual’s needs, cultural context, and personal creativity (Lewis & Hoy, 2022). Importantly, even the same ritual may hold different meanings for different individuals. Given these parallels, we adopted the Continuing Bonds framework as a lens for understanding grief rituals in this study.

Furthermore, research on the Continuing Bonds framework does not present a fully consistent picture regarding its benefits. While many forms of continuing bonds can be adaptive, certain externalized expressions, such as sensory experiences or hallucination-like perceptions of the deceased, may indicate psychological distress. For this reason, examining grief rituals through the lens of the Continuing Bonds theory can provide a clearer understanding of when such practices support healthy adjustment and when they may signal underlying difficulties. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of individuals

bereaved by the 2023 Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye earthquake, specifically regarding their experiences of grief rituals based on the Continuing Bonds perspective. Accordingly, the central research question is: “How do individuals bereaved by an earthquake-related disaster experience and engage in grief rituals?”

## Method

### Research Design

This study is based on a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research aims to explore participants’ lived experiences and the meanings they assign to a specific phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

### Participants

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling and a criterion-based case selection strategy. Snowball sampling was employed to identify participants, as the study focused on a population affected by both disaster and bereavement. Inclusion criteria required individuals to have experienced the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake on February 6, 2023, and to have lost at least one loved one as a result. Those criteria and the purpose of the study were announced on social media. Individuals who met these criteria and agreed to participate were then asked to refer others within their social circles who also met the inclusion criteria. This snowball process continued until data saturation was achieved. It is also important to note that while IPA does not prescribe a fixed sample size, a small number of participants, usually ranging from 4 to 12, is generally recommended (Finlay, 2014). Furthermore, all potential participants received the same invitation text, which clearly outlined the purpose of the study, interview procedures and voluntary participation.

The participant group consisted of ten adults who experienced the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş. Of the ten participants, seven were female and three were male. The age of the participants ranged between 20 and 51 years ( $M= 31.7$ ;  $SD = 11.7$ ). All participants except one experienced multiple losses of loved ones due to the disaster. The characteristics of the participants are provided in Table 1. To protect participant confidentiality, all names presented in the table are pseudonyms.

**Table 1.** *Participant Characteristics*

Code of Participants	Sex	Age (Years)	Loss Experienced
Merve (P1)	Female	24	Aunt, aunt’s husband, and their children
Nurten (P2)	Female	45	Sister and her sister’s family (including four members)
Ali (P3)	Male	22	Mother and father
Sibel (P4)	Female	35	Aunt, brother-in-law, and nephews

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Esra (P5)	Female	38	3-year-old son, sister, brother-in-law, best friend
Mert (P6)	Male	22	Best friend
Asya (P7)	Female	38	Uncle, aunt, cousins
Ayşe (P8)	Female	22	Aunt, uncle, and cousins
Emel (P9)	Female	20	Aunt, uncle, and cousins
Yusuf (P10)	Male	51	Aunt and cousins

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## Tools

A semi-structured interview protocol was employed in the study, comprising an informed consent form, a demographic information form, and a set of interview questions. The interview questions were designed to explore individuals' grief rituals. In the development process, the initial version of the questions was drafted by the first author and reviewed by the second co-author. Subsequently, two experts in counseling reviewed the interview protocol and provided professional feedback, after which the necessary revisions were made. To assess the clarity and functionality of the questions, a pilot interview was conducted with one participant. No negative situations were encountered regarding the questions prepared during the interview, and no feedback was received from the participant indicating that the questions were unclear. Therefore, no changes were made to the questions after the pilot interview. Based on the feedback gathered throughout this process, the final version of the interview protocol was finalized. Sample questions included "Which rituals did you perform in response to your loss?" and "How did performing these rituals influence your experience?"

## Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The necessary ethical permissions (Decision No: 2023-20; Date: 12.08.2023) from the Human Research Ethics Committee were obtained. Eight months after the earthquake, in the fall of 2023, the study was announced on social media. To broaden its reach, individuals who met the inclusion criteria, having directly experienced the February 6, 2023 earthquake and lost at least one loved one, were encouraged to share the announcement with others who also met these criteria, in accordance with the snowball sampling method. Eligible participants were then provided with comprehensive information about the study, and the content of the informed consent form was explained both verbally and in writing. Those who voluntarily agreed to participate signed the form and submitted it to the researcher. To minimize the risk of retraumatization during the interviews, participants were reminded that they were free to discontinue the interview or withdraw from the study at any point, without having to provide a reason and without any negative consequences. Additionally, all participants were informed

about the availability of free psychological support services, which they could access if needed. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom between December 2023 and February 2024, and each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. All records, including consent forms and interview transcripts, were maintained securely and were accessible only to the researchers via password-protected files. Additionally, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants for ethical purposes.

Data analysis was performed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith et al., 2021). The data analysis was performed using the MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021) data analysis software program. All transcripts were reviewed by the authors independently and made detailed descriptive and conceptual notes on what was said. Authors met regularly to discuss the themes, treating each case individually before identifying patterns across cases, in line with the principles of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2021). Expert opinions were also obtained to finalize the results.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria; credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were followed. Credibility was supported through purposive sampling, informed consent, and member checking with three participants who approved their transcripts. Dependability was enhanced via regular discussions to reach consensus. Confirmability was strengthened through expert feedback on interview questions, a pilot interview to ensure clarity and comprehension, and triangulation through an independent review of transcripts and codes. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed account of the sampling strategy and research context, facilitating potential applicability to similar settings.

Additionally, Throughout the research process, we were attentive to the ways in which the researchers' positions and perspectives shaped the study. In this context, the first researcher, having experienced the February 6 earthquake, recognized that this personal experience could enhance sensitivity toward the participants. The second researcher, with expertise in studies on grief and trauma, contributed further insight into ensuring a sensitive and unbiased approach to the research process.

### **Results**

The results are presented under two themes as grief rituals and the role of grief rituals. These themes encompassed several related sub-themes, all of which are presented in the Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Themes and Sub-themes*

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Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1. Grief Rituals	Cultural Grief Rituals

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Personal Grief Rituals

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Theme 2. The Role of Grief Rituals    Acceptance of Loss and Fulfillment of Final Duties  
Continuing Bonds

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Feelings of Connection and Support  
Emotional Relief and Calm

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Emotional Conflict Arising from Ritual Adherence

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### Theme 1: Grief Rituals

In this study, the theme of grief rituals refers to the practices which individuals engaged in following the loss of loved ones due to the earthquake. According to our findings, grief rituals were categorized into two themes: (1) Cultural Grief Rituals and (2) Personal Grief Rituals.

#### Cultural Grief Rituals

Grief rituals are shaped by cultural factors typically including funeral ceremonies and burial traditions. In the current study, nearly all participants highlighted the chaos they experienced during the earthquake, where traditional funeral rituals became nearly impossible. Under these circumstances, some of them expressed that finding the bodies of their loved ones and having a place to bury them had become something they were 'thankful' for. The participants expressed a sense of gratitude, not in the traditional sense, but as a response to the dire circumstances they faced. As Nurten (P2) and Sibel (P4) pointed out:

Nurten (P2). In that chaos, it was as if we experienced the apocalypse. When we found our dead in the apocalypse, we were thankful; we were thankful that we found a place to bury our deceased...”

Sibel (P4). We couldn't hold the funeral ceremony. It's a shortcoming, but we just couldn't get [the body] out on the first day due to insufficient equipment. And we took it out ourselves; we took it out with our own hands... At least we hoped that they could be properly shrouded so they could be buried in their white shrouds, and for that, we began to be thankful.

Despite these challenges, some participants shared that, after some time had passed, they were able to engage in alternative or delayed rituals—such as cooking and distributing food in memory of the deceased or organizing a 40<sup>th</sup>-day memorial service (a traditional prayer gathering held on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after death). For instance, Emel (P9) noted that there was no funeral due to the mass nature of the loss, and both Emel (P9) and Yusuf (P10) described engaging in alternative mourning practices, such as organizing Quran readings (recitations from

the Islamic holy book) and organizing a 40<sup>th</sup>-day memorial service.

### **Personal Grief Rituals**

Personal grief rituals refer to rituals performed in a specific and unique manner by the bereaved, directed toward the deceased. According to our findings, all participants ( $n=10$ ) stated that they performed personal grief rituals. For instance, Esra (P5) noted, “he [referring to her 13-year-old son] loved blue lollipops and candy. When I see a child on the street or in the market, I buy them candy.” The following quotes include other examples:

Merve (P1). I approach her [referring to her deceased aunt’s daughter] daily with the same attitude my aunt and uncle have toward her. I believe I’ve created my biggest ritual with her; I can say that for sure. This is an individual ritual. I care for her every night by kissing her good night, and when she wants something, I feel better.

Mert (P6). We made a playlist of his favorite songs with our mutual friend, and I listen to it all the time. When I visit his grave with our mutual friend, we listen to those songs together. Listening to the playlist brings him to mind. I try to do the things he liked and visit the places he would have wanted to go.

In addition, our findings indicated that performing an act on special days of the deceased is evaluated as a personal grief ritual by some. As Sibel (P4) noted: “As part of the individual ritual, we would do this on birthdays. We would say, 'Let's at least buy a cake and make one child happy in a poor family.' Cakes were then bought and distributed to poor families or individuals in our community.” Various participants also mentioned that they have created personal grief rituals, such as wearing or carrying something that belonged to the deceased.

Ayşe (P8). I keep certain things from them, like my cousin's sweater. I make sure to wear it at least once a week. It makes me feel like they are with me. There’s also a bracelet, which originally belonged to my cousin. I enjoy wearing it because it feels like they are right here with me.

Some participants integrated their personal grief rituals with religious beliefs. One of the participants described charitable acts, such as offering financial support, as a personal ritual rooted in spiritual meaning. As another example, Nurten (P2) pointed out:

Nurten (P2). I visited the graves of my deceased loved ones and planted flowers there. For me, this is a kind of ritual — as long as there is something green growing on a grave, it symbolizes both life and remembrance. In line with my belief, plants, flowers, trees, and even birds are constantly in remembrance of the divine. So, I planted flowers on each of their graves, believing that as long as the greenery lives, it will continue that remembrance and bring benefit.

Lastly, all but one participant mentioned visiting the grave as a ritual. Although it is difficult to categorize this practice strictly as an individual or cultural ritual, our findings suggest that it is best understood as a spirituality-based personal grief ritual.

## **Theme 2: The Role of Grief Rituals**

Rituals can influence individuals experiencing grief in various ways. According to our findings, the role of grief rituals was organized into five themes: (1) Acceptance of Loss and Final Duties; (2) Continuing Bonds: “I Always Remember You”; (3) Feelings of Connection and Support; (4) Providing Emotional Relief and Calm; (5) Emotional Conflict in the Context of Grief Ritual Adherence.

### **Acceptance of Loss and Final Duties**

Most of the participants emphasized the role of the funeral ceremony in accepting the loss and carrying out final responsibilities to the deceased. One participant explained that having a grave for the deceased provided a meaningful way to say goodbye. The participant emphasized that, in the context of loss, not seeing a person buried creates a mental disconnect, but having a grave to regularly visit fosters closure and acceptance. As Esra (P5) and Asya (P7) mentioned:

Esra (P5). So, in loss, not seeing a person buried and loss create the same thing in your mind but seeing that the body is there and being in the same grave in the same place when you go there regularly makes it a little more, saying goodbye, disappearing, etc., all of them are fully accepted.

Asya (P7). Not being able to perform these rituals — not having the opportunity — affects a person deeply. After the earthquake, even finding the bodies of the deceased was difficult. Let alone washing them, they had to bury them in plastic bags. Not being able to do these things truly causes pain. It's a person's right. Just like when someone visits your home, you try to send them off with respect and a smile. Likewise, you want to bid farewell to a loved one with feeling and sincerity. But when you're unable to do that, it's incredibly painful. It's very distressing — it's like there's a dark cloud stuck inside us that won't go away. Facing reality becomes more difficult. Right now, it still feels like they never left, because there was no final goodbye. It's as if they're still here. If we had been able to hold a proper funeral, maybe that feeling wouldn't be there. We would still know they had died, but something inside us would have been released. But now, it still feels as though they're alive."

Most of the participants highlighted the role of funeral rituals in terms of acceptance and fulfilling final duties for the deceased; however, one participant, a male, stated that the funeral ceremony held no meaning for him. Lastly, one participant focused on the relief she experienced by foregoing traditional cultural funeral practices, expressed in her own words as follows: I felt more at ease by not having to serve food at my sister's funeral.

### **Continuing Bonds: “I Always Remember You”**

Rituals are understood to play a role in maintaining bonds with the deceased. Participants described them as symbols that the deceased is not forgotten. Performing a ritual not only expresses "I do not forget you," but also reinforces continuing bonds with the deceased.

Nurten (P2) explained "...She would also be very happy when she fed the hungry people there. Now, when I get it done there seeing those orphans get fed makes me so happy that I wanted it anyway, I feel so happy that it's like I'm making my sister happy like this." Esra (P5) also mentioned, "Grief rituals allow us to maintain a connection with the deceased. For example, we engage in activities they enjoyed or reflect on what would have made them happy... Rituals are meaningful as they are acts of remembrance, preserving the positive behaviors and connections we had with those we lost." One of the participants (Merve, P1), who lost her aunt, uncle, and cousins, expressed this situation and the role of the ritual she performed in her life with the following words:

Merve (P1). Actually, no matter how much it is, people also take action out of conscience. How should I explain? I want to find this word, the right word. I feel more loyal; when I do something for her [referring to her deceased aunt's daughter], I know that we do not forget them, and I act in a way that will please them. I feel like they are also happy with it, and it strengthens me. It keeps my bond with them more alive.

### **Feelings of Connection and Support**

Our findings indicate that conducting collective or cultural grief rituals helped participants feel less alone. Sharing pain was described as facilitating recovery. Additionally, participants noted that performing these rituals within the earthquake city (Kahramanmaraş) was especially meaningful, as they felt that individuals who had not experienced the disaster could neither share their pain nor fully understand them. For instance, Merve (P1) stated that:

Merve (P1). At first, we experienced our grief together through cultural rituals rather than individually. If we hadn't experienced it together, I think I would have had a much harder time overcoming it. Grief is experienced collectively; I believe it is overcome collectively as well. The biggest difference came when I went alone outside the city. Even though the people there tried to share the pain, something was missing because they hadn't experienced the earthquake or seen the aftermath of the chaos. Grief is easier to describe when it's lived. It's something that can be explained in one way or another. Here, when we step outside, you can even see it in the way people look at you. People who have come together—our grocer, our neighbor. Each of them has experienced this pain, so you feel safer, and you can get through it collectively. I believe it is more difficult when you are far away and when you close yourself off..."

### **Providing Emotional Relief and Calm**

Participants frequently described the calming and restorative impact of ritual practices. Ali (P3), for instance, spoke of feeling comfortable and peaceful, as well as experiencing a sense of relief in his conscience. Sibel (P4) similarly reported a feeling of peace while performing both personal and culturally rooted rituals, adding, "I think my deceased relatives also feel better." Esra (P5) emphasized the soothing effect of prayer, stating: "I feel anxiety and agitation inside, but performing these rituals and praying for them helps calm me down, easing the tension in my heart and replacing the darkness with a sense of peace."

For some participants, emotional relief was also found in the personal or shared rituals of praying, remembering, or engaging in conversations with others who had experienced a similar loss. Ayşe (P8), for example, explained that speaking with a close friend who had also lost a parent helped them feel lighter. These conversations reminded them that their overwhelming sorrow might not bring peace to the deceased, and that allowing themselves moments of happiness could, in fact, be a way of honoring their loved ones. These shared moments of reflection functioned as informal, yet meaningful rituals that provided comfort for the participants.

Although nearly all participants reported feeling a sense of relief or calmness when engaging in grief rituals, several participants expressed mixed emotions. Mert (P6), who keeps his best friend's memory alive by doing the things his friend had once wished to do, similarly described experiencing both sadness and relief. He explained, "I feel sad because he couldn't do it, and I am doing it now — there is an unfinished life left behind. Many things feel difficult, but they also make me feel good." Emel (P9) emphasized that performing these practices did not only bring emotional comfort, as they also served as poignant reminders of the loss. Nonetheless, the act of fulfilling these rituals provided a sense of relief. Her words were as follows:

Emel (P9). Honestly, doing all these things upsets me. I wish they were still here and I didn't have to do any of this. But at the same time, I feel relieved in my conscience because I believe in the religious meaning behind it. Death is a reality, and I believe that they continue to exist in the afterlife. I do this hoping they'll be happier there, and that they're glad I'm doing it. At least, I hope they are.

### **Emotional Conflict in the Context of Grief Ritual Adherence**

Participants expressed a strong sense of loyalty toward the deceased, often manifested through the performance of culturally or personally meaningful rituals. While these practices were described as offering emotional relief or a sense of peace, for a few participants they also generated feelings of guilt when not performed. This internal conflict suggests that rituals, while potentially comforting, may become psychologically burdensome. As Merve (P1) pointed out:

"...When I stay distant—when I can't pray for her or when daily worldly concerns get in the way—I feel like I'm upsetting her, like I'm being unfaithful or ungrateful. How can I put it? I feel like I've forgotten her too quickly, too easily. Like someone who has already adapted to a new life. And that hurts me deeply."

For a few participants, the inability to carry out expected rituals led to emotional distress about whether they had sufficiently honored the deceased. As Sibel (P4) pointed out:

Sibel (P4): "It's always on our minds—I don't know, maybe it's just me, but I wonder what others think. We keep replaying everything in our heads, even dreaming about it."

We question whether we have properly fulfilled the funeral or personal rituals that we believe should be performed after death. Did we forget something? Was there a duty we didn't fulfill? Were our prayers enough? Did we truly do everything we could?"

### **Discussion**

In analyzing the experiences of individuals bereaved by the Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye (2023) earthquake, specifically regarding their perceived grief rituals from the Continuing Bonds perspective, it was found that participants engaged in both cultural and personal grief rituals, such as visiting cemeteries, praying, and making donations, to maintain a transformed bond with the deceased. This finding aligns with the Continuing Bonds Theory, which emphasizes that grief does not require severing ties with the deceased and that rituals help sustain an ongoing connection (Klass et al., 1996). Furthermore, rituals were observed to serve functions for participants, including facilitating the acceptance of loss, providing emotional relief, and fostering feelings of connection. These findings illustrate how rituals operate in ways consistent with the concept of continuing bonds by facilitating social support, promoting meaning reconstruction, and affirming spiritual or existential beliefs (Black et al., 2022). The following analysis discusses each theme and its subthemes in relation to the relevant literature and the Continuing Bonds perspective.

Regarding cultural rituals, our findings indicated that the immediate chaos and disruption caused by the earthquake often prevented participants from engaging in funeral ceremonies or condolence gatherings. However, as time passed, many participants found alternative ways to perform cultural rituals such as cooking and distributing food in memory of the deceased and organizing Quran readings (recitations from the Islamic holy book). These culturally based rituals appeared to be primarily grounded in religious or spiritual traditions, in line with the literature (Aksöz-Efe et al., 2018; Doğanay, 2023; Şimşek-Arslan et al., 2021).

Personal grief rituals serve as highly personal expressions of grief (Martin, 2022). In our study, nearly all participants created unique personal grief rituals, each distinctly different from the others. For instance, one mother distributed her late son's favorite candy to neighborhood children, while a friend listened to a playlist they had shared with the deceased at the gravesite. This phenomenon aligns with the 'fingerprint' metaphor in the grief literature (Kessler, 2019), which emphasizes the unique nature of each grief experience. This phenomenon can be understood by considering that one of the greatest benefits of personal grief rituals is their capacity to be tailored to the individual's unique psychological needs during mourning (Fiese et al., 2002; Vale-Taylor, 2009). Additionally, the findings on personal grief rituals align with the Continuing Bonds framework, which emphasizes that bonds with the deceased take diverse forms shaped by the bereaved individual's needs, memories, culture, and relational history (Klass et al., 1996). The creation of personal grief rituals does not necessarily imply a complete rejection of cultural traditions (Martin, 2022). Indeed, our findings suggest that some personal grief practices may align with elements of Muslim culture. For example, Yasien-Esmael and Rubin (2005) noted that Muslims often seek to honor the deceased through acts of kindness and charitable giving.

Interviews revealed that personal and cultural rituals influence bereaved individuals in different ways. First, according to participants, cultural rituals may help facilitate the acceptance of loss and the fulfillment of perceived final duties. Participants reported that the inability to perform traditional funeral ceremonies disrupted their grieving process and hindered their ability to say goodbye. This aligns with the literature on ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief (Savaş, 2020; Şimşek-Arslan et al., 2021). The suddenness and magnitude of the disaster echoed grief experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which many individuals were similarly deprived of traditional mourning practices (Bucuka, 2021; Hekimoğlu et al., 2022; Mas'amah et al., 2023). Participants emphasized that the inability to hold funeral ceremonies or distribute food, as is customary, exacerbated feelings of incompleteness. In parallel, several participants highlighted how the retrieval of the deceased from the rubble and their burial in a designated grave helped affirm the reality of death and support the process of acceptance. This finding supports Savaş's (2020) assertion that rituals help individuals attribute meaning to death and navigate grief more adaptively. While cultural rituals often served as shared platforms for expressing grief and receiving social support, not all participants experienced them positively. Some expressed relief that certain rituals, such as funeral meals or dessert offerings, could not be performed due to the disaster. Their perspectives suggest that not all culturally imposed practices align with the emotional needs of the bereaved. Nurten (P2), for instance, stated that she felt more at ease not having to serve food at her sister's funeral. This ambivalence aligns with the findings of Aksöz-Efe et al. (2018), who noted that cultural rituals do not always meet the grieving individual's psychological needs. Furthermore, the absence of these rituals may, in some cases, offer space for more authentic emotional expression and reflection, rather than the performative obligations often associated with cultural expectations.

Second, personal grief rituals reflected the unique relational bonds between the bereaved and the deceased. Participants personalized their mourning by transforming shared experiences into symbolic acts via personal grief rituals. According to our findings, personal ritual acts represent an effort to maintain a continuing bond, which aligns with the Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass et al., 1996, 2006). This theory posits that maintaining a symbolic relationship with the deceased is a natural and adaptive part of the grieving process. Rather than severing emotional ties, individuals may sustain bonds through memory, inner dialogue, or ritual practices (Klass et al., 1996). Similarly, our findings highlighted the positive aspects of maintaining a symbolic relationship with the deceased. Accordingly, personal grief rituals, serving as a means for participants to uphold the memory and emotional presence of their loved ones, foster emotional closeness and alleviate anxiety. Similarly, the literature suggests that rituals serve to alleviate guilt and negative energy, which can be considered consistent with our findings (Daniel, 2023).

Third, the study highlighted the importance of connection and mutual support, particularly as these were fostered through shared grief experiences in the aftermath of the disaster. Consistent with prior grief literature underscoring the importance of social support in coping with disaster-related loss (e.g., Ashai & O'Brien, 2021; Parro-Jiménez et al., 2021), participants in our study described grief rituals as mechanisms that foster interpersonal connection. When individual needs align with culturally embedded expressions of grief, these

rituals may offer a comforting and pain-relieving function (Aksöz-Efe et al., 2018; Bonsu & DeBerry-Spence, 2008; Martin, 2022). For example, some participants emphasized that engaging in grief rituals while remaining in the earthquake-affected city (Kahramanmaraş) was more meaningful than doing so elsewhere. They expressed that individuals who had not shared the same traumatic experience often struggled to understand or relate to their pain, making it difficult to achieve the same sense of connection and emotional relief outside the disaster context.

A further point emerging from the interviews is the role of rituals in providing participants with emotional relief and a sense of calm, consistent with previous research. For instance, cultural grief rituals are identified as a means of expressing emotions (Aadil & Shahzaib, 2024). Although cultural rituals may offer emotional catharsis, personal grief rituals, by contrast, enable individuals to engage in self-chosen activities imbued with personal meaning, providing an opportunity to express emotions related to the loss at a time and place of their own choosing (Martin, 2022). In line with this, our findings indicate that through personal grief rituals, participants engaged in their grief in an active, flexible, and constructive manner.

Lastly, our findings indicate that a few participants experienced emotional conflict in the context of grief ritual adherence: when they were able to complete their rituals, they reported feelings of peace, whereas failing to do so elicited guilt. Previous research has linked guilt to psychopathologies and maladaptive coping strategies (Carmassi et al., 2017). Although our findings do not directly confirm these associations, they emphasize the need to evaluate grief rituals carefully in clinical practice. At the same time, such evaluations should recognize that not all repetitive or structured practices are inherently maladaptive (Martin, 2022).

In conclusion, this study reveals that grief rituals, whether culturally embedded or individually created, play a multifaceted role in the grieving process of individuals who experience loss due to earthquake. They may facilitate emotional regulation, foster continued bonds with the deceased, provide opportunities for social support, and aid in the acceptance of loss. At the same time, the results indicate the need to approach grief rituals with culturally inclusive and individual flexibility, acknowledging that not all traditional practices meet the emotional needs of every bereaved individual. In an increasingly diverse world, understanding grief rituals and their effects is essential for providing culturally inclusive psychological counseling/therapy. For mental health practitioners, understanding grief rituals especially in disaster contexts is essential to provide culturally inclusive support. Visiting the affected area, observing local mourning practices, and acknowledging culturally meaningful rituals can guide interventions, foster trust, and help individuals process loss (Kristensen & Franco, 2011). Practitioners should also consider the heightened risk of psychological health in disaster-affected populations, particularly when opportunities to say goodbye or perform customary rituals are limited. These insights contribute to a growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of personalized, meaningful, and context-sensitive approaches to grief support in post-disaster interventions.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was conducted in Kahramanmaraş, and its findings are closely tied to the cultural and social dynamics of the region. While this contextual specificity enriches the depth and authenticity of the analysis, readers should consider the extent of contextual similarities when evaluating the transferability of these findings to other settings. Cultural norms and rituals strongly shape how individuals cope with loss, and in immigrant populations, missing or conflicting rituals may hinder effective adaptation to grief (Wojtkowiak et al., 2021). Therefore, future researchers might consider replicating this study with more diverse populations, for example immigrant groups or individuals from different religious backgrounds, to provide a broader understanding of how cultural and personal grief rituals are experienced. Furthermore, this study focused exclusively on the loss of loved ones, excluding other important forms of loss such as those related to pets, health, finances, cultural heritage, or identity. Although efforts were made to minimize any risk of retraumatization, such as informing participants that they could withdraw at any time and providing information about free counseling services, researching sensitive topics always carries some inherent ethical considerations. Additionally, data were collected via Zoom, which may have limited non-verbal communication cues. Although not experimental in nature, our findings provide insights into the therapeutic role of rituals, suggesting that rituals may be incorporated into therapeutic practice, as highlighted in a recent scoping review on rituals in therapy (Wojtkowiak et al., 2021). Future research could extend these findings by examining diverse types of loss and systematically testing the therapeutic application of rituals in clinical settings.

### **Ethics Declarations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the TED University Human Research Ethics Committee for the Social and Human Sciences.

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## Genişletilmiş Öz

### Giriş

6 Şubat 2023 tarihinde, büyüklükleri 7.7 ve 7.6 olan yıkıcı depremler Türkiye'yi sarsmıştır. Bu afet, yalnızca depremlerin büyüklüğü nedeniyle değil; aynı zamanda çok sayıda can kaybına yol açması, geniş çaplı maddi yıkım yaratması ve Türkiye'nin birçok il ve ilçesinde ciddi ekonomik ve toplumsal sonuçlar doğurması nedeniyle de son derece yıkıcı olmuştur. Deprem sonrasında yaşanan yas süreci, afet kaynaklı zorluklar nedeniyle olağan koşullarda yaşanan yasa kıyasla daha yoğun ve daha ağır seyredebilmektedir.

Yas ritüellerinin, bireylerin kayıpla başa çıkma süreçlerinde koruyucu ve düzenleyici bir işleve sahip olduğuna işaret eden çalışmalar olmakla birlikte (örn., Aksöz-Efe et al., 2018), deprem sonrası yaşanan kayıpların ardından gerçekleştirilen yas ritüellerine ilişkin alanyazının sınırlı olduğu görülmektedir. Yasın bireyler tarafından farklı biçimlerde deneyimlendiği göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, bireylerin hangi yas ritüellerine başvurduklarının incelenmesi, onların yas ritüellerine ilişkin yaşantılarını ve anlamlandırma süreçlerini daha derinlemesine anlayabilmek açısından büyük önem taşımaktadır.

Bu çalışmada, Devam Eden Bağlar Yaklaşımının (Klass vd., 1996) yas ritüellerini anlamada değerli bir kuramsal çerçeve sunduğu düşünülmektedir. Bu kuram, yas sürecinde yaşamını yitiren kişiyle sembolik bir ilişkinin sürdürülmesinin, doğal ve uyum sağlayıcı bir süreç olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bu yaklaşıma göre bireylerin, yas sürecinde ölen kişi ile duygusal bağlarını tamamen koparması beklenmez; aksine bireyler, anılar, içsel konuşmalar ve çeşitli ritüel uygulamalar aracılığıyla yaşamını yitiren kişiyle olan bağlarını sürdürmeye devam edebilirler (Klass et al., 1996). Bu doğrultuda bu fenomenolojik araştırmanın amacı, 6 Şubat 2023'te Türkiye'de meydana gelen deprem sonrasında bir veya birden fazla yakını kaybeden bireylerin yas ritüellerine ilişkin deneyimlerini Devam Eden Bağlar Yaklaşımı temelinde incelemektir.

### Yöntem

Bu çalışma, deprem sonrası sevilen birinin kaybının ardından gerçekleştirilen yas ritüellerinin derinlemesine anlamayı amaçlayan nitel bir fenomenolojik araştırma deseni çerçevesinde tasarlanmıştır. Katılımcı grubunu, depremin merkez üssü olan Kahramanmaraş'ta afeti yaşamış 10 yetişkin (7 kadın, 3 erkek; yaşları 20 ile 51 yaş aralığı) oluşturmaktadır. Katılımcılardan her biri en az bir veya daha fazla sevdiği yakını deprem dolayısıyla kaybetmiştir. Araştırma verileri, katılımcılar ile gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme soruları aracılığıyla toplanmış ve cevaplar ses kaydına alındıktan sonra transkripsiyona dökülerek Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz yaklaşımı doğrultusunda değerlendirilmiştir. Görüşmeler gönüllülük esasına dayalı olarak gerçekleştirilmiş ve katılımcıların duygusal iyilik hali ön planda tutulmuştur. Katılımcılara 'Kaybınıza yönelik hangi ritüelleri gerçekleştirdiniz?', 'Bu ritüelleri gerçekleştirmek sizi nasıl etkiledi?' gibi sorular yöneltilmiştir. Tüm veriler, Aralık 2023 ile Şubat 2024 arasında gerçekleştirilen çevrimiçi görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplanmış olup, her bir görüşme yaklaşık 40 dakika sürmüştür.

### Bulgular

Analiz sonucunda iki ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır: (1) Yas Ritüelleri ve (2) Yas Ritüellerinin Rolü. Yas Ritüelleri teması, kültürel yas ritüelleri ve kişisel yas ritüelleri olmak

üzere iki alt tema içermektedir. Yas ritüellerinin rolü temasında ise kaybın kabullenilmesi ve son görevlerin yerine getirilmesi, devam eden bağlar, aidiyet ve sosyal destek, duygusal rahatlama ve dinginlik ile ritüellere uyum sürecinde yaşanan duygusal çatışma olmak üzere beş alt tema belirlenmiştir.

Araştırma bulgularının ilk teması olan yas ritüelleri; kültürel ritüeller ve bireysel ritüeller alt temaları ile ele alınmıştır. Katılımcıların neredeyse tamamı, kültürel yas ritüelleri bağlamında cenaze töreni gibi uygulamaların, afet sonrasında yaşanan kaos ve koşulların elverişsizliği nedeniyle gerçekleştirilemediklerini ifade etmişlerdir. Katılımcılar cenaze töreni ritüelinin kedileri için ölen kişiye karşı ‘son görevi yerine getirme’ anlamı taşıdığını belirtmişlerdir. Bu ritüelin gerçekleştirilememiş olmasının ise kaybedilen kişiye son kez veda edememe hissini oluşturduğunu da belirtilmiştir. Bireysel ritüeller ise kişilerin sevdikleri yakınları ile olan özel bağlarına işaret etmektedir. Kaybedilen kişinin sevdiği şarkıları dinlemek, geride kalan çocuklarını mutlu etmeye çalışmak, vefat eden kişinin kıyafetini giymek gibi ritüeller katılımcılar tarafından ifade edilen bireysel ritüellere örnek olarak verilebilir.

Araştırma bulgularının ikinci teması olan yas ritüellerinin rolü yukarıda belirttiği üzere beş alt temada incelenmiştir. Buna göre, katılımcılar yas ritüellerinin; duygusal düzenlemeyi destekleme, ölen kişiyle sürdürülen bağları güçlendirme, sosyal destek olanakları sunma ve kaybın kabullenilmesini kolaylaştırma gibi işlevlerine vurgu yapmışlardır. Cenaze töreni gerçekleştirmek, kaybı fiziksel anlamda kabul etmeyi kolaylaştırma ve son vedayı gerçekleştirmede önemli rol sahibidir. Kaybedilen kişinin rutinlerini sürdürmek, o kişi adına bağış yapmak gibi davranışlar ritüellerin vefat eden kişiyle olan bağı sürdürmedeki işlevini ön plana çıkarmaktadır. Bireylerin gerçekleştirdiği ritüellerden bazıları kişinin duygularını paylaşmasını sağlayarak acısını hafifletmede rol oynamaktadır.

### **Sonuç**

Türkiye’de 2023 yılında Kahramanmaraş merkez üssünde gerçekleşen depremde yakınlarını kaybeden bireylerin yas ritüellerini Devam Eden Bağlar perspektifinden incelerken katılımcıların, kaybettikleri kişiler ile bağlarını sürdürmek adına hem kültürel hem de bireysel ritüellere başvurduklarına dair bilgiler edinilmiştir. Bu bulgular, yasın ölen kişiyle bağları koparmayı gerektirmediğini ve ritüellerin devam eden bir bağlantıyı sürdürmeye yardımcı olduğunu vurgulayan Devam Eden Bağlar Teorisi (Klass vd., 1996) ile uyumlu olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Kültürel ritüellerle ilgili olarak bulgularımız literatür ile uyumlu olarak kültürel temelli ritüellerin öncelikle dini veya manevi geleneklere dayandığını göstermektedir (Aksöz-Efe vd., 2018; Doğanay, 2023; Şimşek-Arslan vd., 2021). Bireysel yas ritüelleri ise yasın özel bir formunu göstermektedir. Her biri kişiye özel olan ve benzersiz bir bağı ifade eden bireysel yas ritüelleri, yas literatüründe her yas deneyiminin benzersiz olduğunu vurgulayan ‘parmak izi’ metaforuyla (Kessler, 2019) örtüşmektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma yas ritüellerinin kayıp yaşayan bireyler için tek tip bir işlevden ziyade, bireysel, kültürel ve bağlamsal farklılıklara bağlı olarak çok boyutlu roller üstlendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, her bireyin yas sürecindeki gereksinimlerinin farklılaşabileceğini göz önünde bulundurarak, tüm geleneksel ritüellerin herkes için işlevsel olmayabileceğini ve bu nedenle yas ritüellerine yönelik bireysel farklılıkları dikkate alan kültürel açıdan kapsayıcı yaklaşımların önemini vurgulamaktadır.