

Did muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders happen only in the Dark Medieval Ages of South Africa? Think twice!

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Abstract

Background

Muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders seem to be inherent pathologies of a certain section of the South African population. Various determinants contribute to the generation and endurance of such behaviour. These murders are part of a bigger picture in which constantly created fear as well as ancient embedded fear, insecurity and poverty play a strong role.

Aims

The aim is to determine if muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders are still committed in present-day South Africa.

Methods

The exploratory and descriptive approach was used to obtain and to present the research findings and objective conclusions. This method afforded an excellent way to build new viewpoints as research developed. The findings were offered in narrative form.

Results

It seems that various determinants are the causes for the muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders. Rather than witchcraft on its own, material greed and pre-modern selfish customs constitute motivations to commit or to instigate these murders. Efforts to control and to fight it over the years have been largely unsuccessful.

Conclusions

The traditional healer seems to be a prominent role player in muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders. It is clear that the lifestyles of some South Africans still contain pre-modern remnants of the Dark Ages. The issue of witchcraft-related murders is very controversial, given that the finger is also pointing to the possible involvement of politicians as well as governmental officials.

What this study adds

1. What is known about the subject?

There exists a lack of trustworthy information on the matter.

2. What new information is offered by this study?

The study has successfully integrated various findings and facts pertaining to the subject into a single

informative description.

3. What are the implications for research, policy, or practice?

It seems that muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders are more frequent in South Africa than the information reflected in the daily news and other media reporting.

Background

The existence of muthi, ritual and witchcraft-related murders is confirmed by various research findings and court cases in South Africa. Court cases (especially within the post-1994 dispensation), are sparse, but since the 1980s until now muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders have still been widely practised in South Africa. Role players are traditional healers, priests, politicians, tribal leaders and even police officers; indeed, the scapegoat “witch” is far from being the culprit. Evidence suggests that this kind of murder activity is on the increase, especially in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces. [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#) [11](#) [12](#) [13](#) [14](#) [15](#) [16](#)

Gumede¹⁷ and Vincent¹⁸ said that, owing to the aura of fear of revenge, witnesses do not come forward to report on muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders. In the end, due to a lack of evidence, the perpetrators go free and the phenomenon does not elicit any real interest from the authorities or the media. Gumede¹⁹ mentioned that what surfaces in these cases is usually the tip of the iceberg with an unreported factor of 95%. In Venda in the 1980s it was estimated that at least 75 muthi murders were committed every year, but that only one to two prosecutions resulted. It is not only murders for muthi that play a central role here, but also the gruesome summary executions of persons, not always muthi-related, after being smelt out as “bewitched” by traditional healers and witch finders. These “smelling-outs” are often the result of complainants having a personal score to settle or suffer from jealousy in relation to the innocent victim, or because of an interest in the human body parts trade, which is also tied up with witchcraft. [20](#) [21](#) [22](#) [23](#) [24](#) [25](#)

Methods

This research used the exploratory and descriptive method. The emphasis was on contemporary research matter, like newspapers and other documentation to obtain new argumentation, information and viewpoints as the research process developed. These outcomes allowed the researchers to make conclusions applicable to the past and present, as well as to put the future of muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders in perspective. The contents were offered in the narrative form. [26](#) [27](#)

Results

The counties Venda (Limpopo) and Mpumalanga are South Africa’s main battlegrounds for witchcraft-related crimes

The extent to which muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders occur in the regions Venda, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, South Africa, has been well-documented by various research and legal publications since 1996 alone. There was a *Commission of Enquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders* (Ralushai Commission), in 1996, as well as the *National Conference on Witchcraft Violence* (The Thohoyandou Declaration on Ending Witchcraft Violence) in 1998. A workshop of the South African Council of Churches at Thohoyandou took place in 2006. [28](#) [29](#) [30](#) [31](#) [32](#) [33](#) [34](#) [35](#) [36](#) [37](#)

Furthermore, there was the *Mpumalanga Witchcraft Suppression Bill of 2007* (this Bill was withdrawn in 2008 after opposition to it by the pagan healers and traditional healers). Also, three Ritual Murder Summits were held in the Limpopo province, namely in 2000, 2006 and 2014, to plan some action to stop ritual murders. Although it is a widely-held opinion that muthi and ritual murders are rural phenomena, it is also observed, to a limited extent, in urban areas. In 2000 a commission of inquiry into witchcraft, violence and ritual murders was set up after a spate of murders in Soweto of young boys. [38](#) [39](#) [40](#) [41](#) [42](#) [43](#) [44](#) [45](#) [46](#) [47](#) [48](#)

Incomplete statistics

Reliable figures on muthi and ritual murders are elusive because the SAPS does not officially register these types of murders separately to the other homicides. Further, South Africa's 47 murders per day also make the recognition of these types of murders difficult. Separate guidelines must be used to get a picture. In Limpopo, for instance, six muthi-related murders were reported between April 2013 and June 2014. Fifty murders had been reported in Limpopo for the period 2010 to 2013. But these statistics are only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, hardly a week passes in South Africa without a report related to muthi murders. Dr Gerard Labuschagne of the SAPS's Investigative Psychology Unit estimates that muthi murders total about 300 per year in South Africa (meaning just less than one person per day or 2,12% of the total daily murders).^{49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56}

Regarding the trade in human body parts, research by the Mozambique Human Rights League and Childline South Africa indicates that one out of five people in rural South Africa has had first-hand experience of human body parts harvesting involving a family member after a muthi murder, while in 2010 more than 1 000 families countrywide reported the harvesting of a family member's body parts, either by grave robbing or stealing/buying from hospitals or mortuaries. In addition, 350 cadavers in Limpopo and 210 cadavers in Mpumalanga have been mutilated for parts.^{57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66}

Human body parts are a lucrative commodity

With reference to these muthi murders, two lecturers from the University of Venda (Univen), Prof. Vohani Netshandama and Dr Tsoaledi Thobejane, have emphasised that the main aim is the harvesting of human body parts, believed to give supernatural powers. These parts are sold for between R50 000 and R100 000 (in 2006 it was reported that a set of female genitalia could fetch up to R30 000). The trade in human body parts has clearly become a lucrative commodity, with parts much higher on the price list than rhino horns. It is scary to note that over 32 years the unit price of a hand rises annually with R1 450, from R500 in March 1983 to R 50 000 in July 2014 (a 10 000% increase).^{67 68 69 70}

About the use of specific human parts in muthi to obtain specific outcomes, Radford⁷¹, par 5 writes: "Just as different ingredients in a recipe are used for different purposes, certain body parts are used for particular goals. For example, eyes may be stolen and used in a magic ritual to help restore a client's failing eyesight, whereas severed hands are used to assure business success, and genitals are believed to attract luck".

Some of the uses of body parts Holland⁷² emphasises are still in existence today, notwithstanding the post-1994 so-called socio-political progress and various governmental interventions since 1996 to combat muthi and ritual murders.

The two academics of Univen write about the use of body parts:⁷³, p. 5

“Hands: it is believed that burying a hand on the doorstep of a business can miraculously bring in customers in large numbers.

Eyes: they hold supernatural powers to see where the money is.

Noses: can smell where the money is.

Lips: enable good communication with the ancestors for success.

Human fat: can improve image, esteem and reputation if smeared on the body.”

Elaborating on the above, Vincent⁷⁴ writes that it is common for human skulls to be buried in the foundations of new buildings to ensure that business conducted there thrives, or for body parts to be buried on farms to ensure good harvests and for severed hands to be built into shop entrances to beckon to prospective clients. A human head is sometimes prescribed for a failing business.

The traditional healer a prominent role player in human body parts harvesting

About the specific role of the traditional healer in this barbaric harvesting, Holland⁷⁵, p. 13 reports: “The herbalist coordinates the crime, identifying the body parts required as well as the type of victim whose flesh will yield the best results.”

The above coordinating role or link of the traditional healer to muthi murders and the obtention of human body parts for the making of “strong” muthi is confirmed by Vincent.⁷⁶ He wrote that the traditional healer will place an “order” with a killer to harvest specific human parts. Vincent is of the opinion that murder gangs specialise in muthi murders, specific to the traditional healer’s orders.

Vincent^{77, 78, 79},

Role of the Witchcraft Suppression Act No 3 (1957) in preventing witchcraft-related murders

These findings and indications show clearly the necessity for a law such as the Witchcraft Suppression Act (No 3, 1957) which has existed since 1957 in South Africa to combat witchcraft-related crimes and regulate the chief associate in these crimes, the traditional healer. Guarantees by traditional-healing umbrella movements, like the SADC Unified Ancestors Traditional Practitioners’ Association and the Traditional Healers Organization (THO), that their members are not involved in muthi-related crimes or that they combat these types of crimes, are not legally enforceable and mean nothing. Other constructive legal interventions and action by the South African Police Services (SAPS) and the National Prosecution Authority (NPA), based on Act No 3 (1957), are needed. To repeal the Act will be a mistake.^{80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85}

The Act (No 3, 1957) on combating witchcraft and related practices is not un-African as suggested by some, neither can it be allowed that the traditional healer and the traditional leader together with traditional courts, become the sole adjudicator of African issues like witchcraft allegations in the community, under the auspices of “African justice”. It is tantamount to “bush and street law”. The issue of witchcraft allegations and crimes can only be dealt with by proper legislation and courts, specifically in terms of criminal laws like Act No 3 (1957).^{86, 87, 88, 89}

Misdoings resulting from Act No 22 (2007) in the future may be plentiful

But the key to the capacity for misconduct in the future by some traditional healers and other criminally-minded individuals may not only be attributed to the Traditional Health Practitioners Act (Act No 22, 2007) that recklessly bestows almost unlimited legal power on the traditional healer to practise a religious dogma as medicine. It is also emanates from the opportunity the Act affords the traditional healer in his newly-privileged position to make unscrupulous money out of uneducated people in awe of the supernatural.

Holland⁹⁰, p.227 illustrates this very well: “Belief in witchcraft obviously relied on a parallel acceptance of traditional healers and magic. The victim of misfortune sought the aid of a diviner in formulating an accusation, and a self-fulfilling prophecy ensued. It was in the diviner’s interest to identify a suspect because he or she had a near-monopoly of witchcraft remedies, and made a living by dispensing them. Since the diviner’s reputation relied on a diagnosis plausible to the victim, confirmation of the suspicions already present in the client’s mind produced the best results.”

The role of South Africa’s greed culture in murders

Vincent⁹¹ is of the opinion that the traditional healer’s intention to make money at all times, can be seen in the present “greed culture” of South Africans, starting in 1994. Muthi murders became a prominent feature of the present period of free-wheeling “capitalism”, exemplified by various forms of money-making, ranging from pyramid schemes, cadre appointments, tenders and contracts, prosperity gospels

that pledge to deliver immense immediate wealth, to supernatural means, like strong muthi, to bring this prosperity. The pre-1994 anti-capitalism of the so-called liberation movements has been replaced by economic empowerment bringing wealth and success for a select few. Those trapped in mass unemployment, poverty, poor health and educational prowess, homelessness and inequality, witness the splendour of the elite, which reinforces their belief that bad magic and supernatural means may correct their shortcomings. It follows that muthi murders and witchcraft-related crime became a logical outcome of the present economic structure in South Africa which favours a politically connected elite. To fight it with interventions like Act No 3 of 1957 is thus not a wayward throwback to a dark and savage past, but a necessary intervention within the new reality. Witchcraft and the supernatural offer hope to the unlucky and unsuccessful individual on the one hand, and on the other, the opportunity for the traditional healer to make profit out of the travails and gullibility of the believer in the supernatural.^{92 93 94}

Muthi murdering goes deeper: it is not only limited to so-called community or acceptable murdering, or the individual side-lined by the post-1994 economicopolitical system where insecurity in daily life, revenge, jealousy, etc. are drivers, but it becomes a commercial way of life. Stripped of any supernatural beliefs by the killer, greed becomes the ultimate driver, or to make money out of the existing murderous system. This greed intention in muthi murders has been confirmed by the study of Roelofse⁹⁵ that found that out of 138 cases, only one was driven by revenge; the other 137 (99,2%) cases were solely driven by money-making in a system wherein the life of the individual counts little and where victims are easily available (specifically the poor, the elderly, the female, the child). The fact that in South Africa the prosecution of serious crimes is very low, makes muthi murdering a very attractive business opportunity for the criminal, knowing he can mostly get off scot-free.^{96 97}

Two mutually supportive forces are thus active here: a group of people still believing that the supernatural and witchcraft can bring prosperity for them and the willingness to buy muthi for this purpose, in addition to a group of cold-blooded criminals (without real belief in the supernatural and the working of muthi on life-outcomes) who use the system to meet the believers' needs for supernatural intervention, in turn fulfilling their own financial needs through muthi killings and the trade in human body parts.

A strong contributor to the growth in muthi murders seems to be the well-off. Vincent⁹⁸ found that many muthi murders are ordered and paid for by individual businessmen, syndicates and political hopefuls seeking their own individual success, people who are still convinced of the efficacy of magical cults. The individuals, mostly male and from the older generation with strong "traditional" inclinations and beliefs in the supernatural, are already prosperous and powerful and often formally educated, as Vincent⁹⁹, p. 46 describes: "They straddle both realms of knowledge – educated enough to be economically successful and able to command or pay for labour including killing and knowledgeable enough in the sphere of witchcraft to deal in muthi."

The role of the traditional healer, either as a direct killer or the initiator of such a killing for human muthi parts or the indirect buyer of human parts, is obvious here, notwithstanding Act No 22 (2007)'s noble profile of the traditional healer as a person with "clean" hands.

Vincent¹⁰⁰ and Holland¹⁰¹ stated already very well the money-making intentions of the traditional healer in today's setup, supported by Act No 22 (2007)'s impact. Vincent¹⁰², p.52 writes as follows about the traditional healer's business skills and intentions in the muthi trade: "Sangomas are business people: they buy and sell commodities and their trade is much facilitated by the use of the postal services, motor vehicles and cellphones. Their instrument of choice is the scalpel rather than the spear. Among their most prized clientele are themselves business people seeking advantage over competitors, success in new ventures or a widening of their customer base. Muthi murders in common with many other features of South Africa's occult economy can thus be understood as an attempt to re-create a sense of orderliness and predictability in an unruly post-apartheid, late capitalist world of rapidly changing markers of identity, failed political expectations, massive economic deprivation amidst the sudden and conspicuous

How extremely high the incomes of traditional healers can be, is well-illustrated by the case of the “herbalist,” “Michael” of KwaZulu-Natal. He claims to make between R15 000 and R20 000 per day from his concoctions (R450 000 to R600 000 per month). His randela outfit is pinned with R100 and R200 notes. He is so financially successful in his practice that he employs several bodyguards, a person to pin the money onto his clothes, six people to help with the products as well as entertainers.¹⁰³

This incitement to make money goes much deeper; namely the superficial maintenance of a self-fulfilling reputation of evil-diagnosis and treatment by the traditional healer, solely for the upkeep of more moneymaking. Thus, the role of the “good” traditional healer that Act No 22 (2007) tries so hard to profess, can very easily and very fast change from a person who endorses morality and doing kind¹⁰⁴, p. 5 “to a charismatic charlatan, coercing others through clever manipulation of his esoteric knowledge granted inappropriate worth by a credulous and anxiety-ridden people”.

This money-making intention – above morality and integrity – and resorting to criminality, were well illustrated recently by the actions of a group of traditional healers in Swaziland when a Christian church was burnt down because it lured away their clients and thus income. Jabu Ndwandwe, a traditional healer, obfuscated the criminality of traditional healers as follows:¹⁰⁵, p. 1 “We were losing customers because the people are flocking to be cured with the miracle power of the prophetess instead of relying on our magical potions. Our magic is (founded) on the ancestors and is tried and true. But people always like new things. We had to destroy that church to save our practices.”

Discussion

In the foreground here, we find an established belief system in witchcraft and superstition, with members of some South African ethnic groups indoctrinated from early childhood into believing in the so-called causes of bewitching and remedies for alleged bewitching. It reflects a pre-modern form of socialisation where there is still an absence of scientific education and socio-economic upliftment against the presence of politically misleading doctrines and unstable cultural and religious leadership. In this pre-modern thinking and living environment where the traditional healer has a free pass as a priest to practise supernatural actions, customs and other witchcraft-related behaviours, Act No 22 (2007) brings the traditional healer and his doubtful medical practice inside the ambit of official healthcare. This intensifies the practice of witchcraft, sorcery, wizardry, quackery, witch-hunting, murders and the trade in human body parts.

Strength and limitations

This research successfully incorporated and summarised various findings on the practising of muthi, ritual and witchcraft murders, and the causes of it, in South Africa.

The failure since the 1950s to mobilise governmental and social intervention to erase muthi and related occult murders and criminality, creates some doubt if this study will attract attention from the law-makers drafting laws on traditional healing. Also, the formal recognition of the traditional healer in the future healthcare sector makes any criticism of him unacceptable.

Conclusion

A certain section of the South African population has never progressed from what might be termed the Dark Ages; it seems as if for this section of the population the insatiable barbaric bond to murder and horror is unbreakable, also between their present and their past. This country is emotionally, socially, politically, economically and culturally much more complex than what it appears on the surface. Muthi,

ritual and witchcraft murders can only be understood and combated in this context. This is exactly what the South African authorities have been doing since 1957 with the Witchcraft Suppression Act (Act No 22, 1957). However, it seems as if this Act was promulgated in vain with the creation of Act No 22 (2007) which contradicts it in various respects and has conferred the imprimatur of respectability on the traditional healer.