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Biblical Moral Inquest into Tradition of Suspicion of Treachery on African Women upon Husband's Death

By Magezi Elijah Baloyi¹

Abstract

The 16 days which South Africa dedicates to the fight against the abuse of women and children every December is a reminder of the effects of gender inequalities in this country. Even though this suspicion is inferred to other family members like parents, brothers or other relatives, this study confines itself to the suspicion towards wives when their husbands have died. This has resulted in widows being targeted in many African communities. Harmful traditional practices are part of the plights that widows are compelled to undergo if 'suspected' to prove their innocence. It is therefore the intention of this article to investigate and discuss by way of research, the causes, impact and outcomes of this kind of suspicion towards women. It is argued that gender activists in general are objectively engaged with the battle of equality between the genders and that both men and women should thus be guided towards achieving harmony in the country. This article will investigate whether the tradition of suspecting women of killing their husbands is warranted and will also make suggestions on what can be done to deal with such beliefs.

Keywords: Gender imbalance, African women, suspicion, death, moral decay, widows, South Africa

Introduction

According to (Manyedi, Koen and Greef, 2003, p. 78), "The in-laws can frustrate you, they have a lot to say and according to our belief, when the husband dies the wife has contributed, but when the wife dies no, it is normal." The quotation above is just one example in which only the in-laws are mentioned, but there are many instances in which even the extended family members are involved in suspecting widows. Not only does this quotation confirm that in some instances African² widows are suspected of killing their husbands, it also indicates an attitude that is likely to be very frustrating for any widow facing it. In the section below entitled "Arguments that supports the suspicion," some of the factors leading to the suspicion will be discussed. Although not many cases of this kind are recorded, the headline "Accused of killing my husband" helps to illustrate the kind of pain that women in this position may feel. There is one case study of a certain Deborah Ditibane of Dobsonville in Soweto who was barred from taking part in her husband's funeral because his family claimed that she had killed him (Luhanga, 2015, p. 4). She, however, claimed that they had been happily married for many years, right up until the time of his death at

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²An "African" in this study will be used to refer to "Black people", mostly in South Africa.

the Leratong Hospital. Incidents of suspecting women of treachery have a long history in Africa, and in South Africa in particular—especially among Black people. According to a study (Impact lab, 2006), one of the ten reasons why some men do not commit to marriage is that they feel that their financial assets are better protected when they cohabit than when they marry. This is although in most African societies men are respected as far as they are married as well as the fact that generally, children born within wedlock are entitled to an inheritance. For example, women will often fight with their husbands to legalise their marriage long after the traditional wedding. Amongst some urbanized South Africans the husband may continue in his refusal to register the marriage as he believes that the moment his wife becomes the beneficiary of his wealth, she will kill him. Even though the culture originally did not allow women to be beneficiaries of their husbands' wealth, in democratic South Africa, women are benefiting from the wealth of their deceased husbands. I agree with Manyedi, Koen and Greef (2003, p. 78) who argue that whenever a husband dies there is the suspicion that the wife has contributed to his death, but when the wife dies, then her death is seen as “normal”. It is the intention of this article to unveil how traditional African people argue to support the notion that women should be suspected of killing their husbands. The article also suggests some ways in which this kind of thinking can be counteracted.

Problem Statement and Focus of the Study

The suspicion of women being killers of their own husbands in some African contexts such as amongst the Tsonga speaking people of Northern part of South Africa, is not only an old thing, but it is still influencing some gender inequality amongst the people today. Some evidences of that are indicated by the research by Koons and Anthony (1991, p. 129) and De Paulo (2006, p. 147). Manyedi, Koen and Greef's (2003) research also indicates that suspecting women as killers of their husband is still a concern that deserve more research attention. Amongst other consequences of this challenge, Baloyi (2014) indicates the escalation of cohabitation, which is mostly criticized by some African scholars like Okyre Manu (2015). This is because the fear to commit into marriage for some leaves them with the option of living with a partner without being married, which is very common amongst South Africans today. It is for this reason that the researcher agrees with Steyn and Masango (2011, p. 1) that practical theology has a role to ensure that human needs are interpreted and attended to. In other words biblical moral teachings cannot continue to turn a blind eye to this problem, hence the problem deserves this research. Although in some cases the husband's killing will be mentioned as fact, the focus of this study is on the suspicion thereof.

Historical Survey

The tradition among many African tribes of blaming and suspecting the wife when the husband dies has been a long one. Among the Tsonga-speaking people of South Africa, some widows are disowned by their husbands' families while others are persecuted by their in-laws and even lose their property as a result of this suspicion. Since widowhood related issues are part of this study, the following quotations from affected widows may help to indicate the suffering that such women undergo as a result of this kind of suspicion:

“I am accused of being a witch who killed her husband.” (Terezinha, Zambezia Province, Mozambique, 1997)

“My husband died of AIDS and slept with many women, I am now dying, but his family blames me for his death.” (Isabel, 1996, quoted by United Nations, 2000, p. 2)

These experiences are very common among African widows, even when their husbands have died from natural causes. The questions are why are wives the primary suspects when their husbands die? How can this situation be changed? Our society is moulded and guided by the idioms and sayings that we have inherited from our ancestors, and these idioms play a role in informing our behaviour and lifestyles. Thus, African idioms and sayings have played a pivotal role in promoting negative depictions of women.

Most of the cultural traditions which still dominate and shape African lives are transmitted from generation to generation in the form of unwritten tales, idioms, proverbs and sayings. It should be understood that this article does not seek to discredit every African saying, but to point out how some of our sayings and idioms have paved the way for African patriarchy to gain a strong foothold in society leading to the oppression of women. Some idioms are listed below and reflect this point:

**He who marries a real beauty is seeking trouble. (Ghanaian proverb)*

**The woman finds an empty house, she doesn't find riches. (DRC Proverb, Etyang, 4)*

**Ku teka nsati I ku hoxa nyoka enkwameni (Tsonga). To marry is to put a snake in one's handbag. (Junod, 1990, p. 181)*

**Wansati u fana na xigalana emirhini (Tsonga). The wife is like a tick in the body, meaning that marriage brings trouble. (Junod, 1990, p. 186)*

These proverbs reflect nothing good about women (wives in particular) and in fact promote the idea that women cannot be trusted. Thus, in the first example, snakes are always unpredictable and anyone who is equated to a snake must lead a bad life and can always be suspected of anything—treachery included. In the last example above, a tick will never live independently from its host. If a woman is likened to a tick, it means that she is an opportunist who is just waiting for the husband to die before she grabs whatever she wants. This can thus justify the belief that a wife can be suspected of playing a role in her husband's death since there are few reasons to support that, for instance, when the husband's infidelity becomes dangerous to the woman or for inheritance. Even though according to Tsonga culture the family of the deceased and the children should inherit his property, within the current democracy this is contested, and most women are found winning because of the rights of women.

This article examines the idea that Tsonga women are suspected of killing their husbands. There are, however, a few cases where husbands were indeed killed by their wives and these cases will be examined too. By mentioning such cases, the intention is not to use these cases to support the notion that suspecting the wife of killing her husband may be justified, but rather to argue that although such cases do occur, they cannot be used to justify this suspicion. In other words, it is important to examine this matter with an open mind and not to use the exception to prove a point. South African history indicates that the first woman to have been officially executed after being

found guilty of murdering her husband was Emily China on 18 November 1904 (Goldstone 2014). Although the same were to apply if a man killed his wife, for the sake of this study the focus is on women suspected for killing their husbands. Unfortunately, apart from the fact that she was white (not a Black African), she did not intend to kill, but was defending herself against an abusive husband. One of the most remarkable cases in the past is the story of Margaret Rheeder who, throughout her trial, denied having poisoned her husband but then confessed to the crime as she was being taken from the cell to the gallows on 6 May 1958. A more current example is reported by Estelle (2001): "President Thabo Mbeki has been asked to reduce the sentences of five women jailed for killing their abusive husbands." The lightest sentence among the five was a 15-year jail sentence, while the other four were sentenced to 21 years in jail each. According to Singh (2009, p. 2), "Some women take steps to escape from an abusive environment, but others stay in the relationship and fight back where they sometimes even kill their abusers in self-defense." The issue becomes easier to understand when the following practical examples are considered. It is acknowledged that many men had killed their wives which may probably be the cause women turned the tables against men in these instances, but the argument for this article maintains that the suspicion of women being killers for most husbands who died is a concern.

A woman was suspected of killing her husband, whose body was found in Polla Park Springs in Johannesburg (Masipa and Monama, 2014, p. 4). According to the Department of Correctional Services, 163 women were incarcerated in South African prisons in 2004 for the murder of their partners (Department of Correctional Services, personal communication, March 18, 2004). There was another high-profile case in the Cape in which Thandi Maqubela was charged with being involved in the death of her husband (Judge Patric Maqubela) on 5 November 2009 (SAPA, 2014). In his book entitled *Wives who Kill Husbands* (1994) Alan M. Dershowitz's intention was not to fuel the suspicion that wives kill their husbands, but to explore why the focus of discussion had been on wives as perpetrators, but not much is said when husbands kill wives.

In 1984, a wealthy Gugulethu businessman named Victor Mangaliso was stabbed to death in his home by two people said to have been hired by his wife Mangaliso, 1984, p. 17). This kind of assassination is very uncommon among Black Africans because most of them are not wealthy enough to hire an assassin. This case is an isolated one and cannot be used to justify the idea that women should be suspected every time the husband dies before the wife. In Mahikeng in the North-West, police arrested three men and a woman on suspicion of murder after the woman's 35-year-old husband was shot. They later appeared in the Phokeng Magistrate's Court (SAPA, 2014). Again the few examples mentioned here are not intended to support this suspicion, but indicate how their arguments cannot hold water. These are just few incidents that do not justify the suspicion of every widow being a killer.

Arguments that support the Suspicion

The conceptualisation of "death" in an African context is often a problematic that can easily lead to suspecting other people of having played a role in someone's death. Maboea (2002, p. 108) argues that besides death being a terrible blow to the family, it is also considered the biggest enemy of human beings. John Mbiti (1991, p. 117-118) lists the following causes of death among Black Africans: sorcery, spirits, curses, and natural causes. We can infer from this that Black Africans will usually think about death as something that is caused by external factors which can be summed up as "witchcraft". The fact that, when someone gets sick, the first action is to seek the cause through consulting diviners strengthens the suspicion that death is usually caused by witches and

can be prevented (Mbiti, 1969, p. 149). The tragic and sudden death in particular is likely to cause both suspicion and lead to investigation of the possible cause, which in most cases would be wizardry (Maboea, 2002, p. 110). A troubled relationship between husband and wife where conflict or fights are rife can often be used to fuel this suspicion that a wife is responsible for the death of her husband. The wife will be suspected of eliminating her husband in order to deal with the problems caused by her husband.

According to Baloyi (2014), although both men and women can be suspected of witchcraft, in the majority of cases women are suspected. According to Carstens (1986, p. 5), "Women are accused more often than men of practicing witchcraft." Harries (2010, p. 142) similarly states, "Older women are most likely to be accused of being witches." Witchcraft is also often used to widen gender disparities in many African societies.

Another example of a wife being accused of the death of a husband is the case of Mojapelo's death. His sister indicated her discomfort about the brother's secret marriage and claimed that her brother was "emotionally abused" by his wife (Ferguson, 2015). Even though, fights, quarrels, and abuse that take place in the home always give witnesses license to killing of either wife or husband, the focus is on suspicion the wife of killing the husband—be it in self-defense or to get rid of a problem husband. In other words this study does not disagree that from family quarrels, violence and abuse the killing of either the husband or wife may result, but for now the focus is on the women killing. Singh (2009) shows that it is understandable why some women kill their husbands or partners in self-defense after having been battered and abused on several occasions.

Although Pretorius and Botha (2006 p.1) cite researchers such as Adinkrah (2000), Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, and Daly (1992), Nathoo (1997), O'Keefe (1998) and Walker and Browne (1985) who all agree that husband killings can take place due to violent acts committed against the wives, violence cannot always be used as a reason (or proof) for the suspicion. There are different ways to deal with family-based violence. Another reason for suspecting women of killing their husbands is when the wives are suspected of trying to gain the wealth of their husbands. There are cases like this, for example the killing of Albert Mojapelo on the West Rand (SAPA, 2012), the death of Taliep Petersen (Blanco, 2009, p. 1) and the death of Maqubela (News24, 2015, p. 1). It is important to mention these isolated crimes which were caused by jealousy and greed rather than by so-called witchcraft.

Moral decay has manifested itself in many forms, including lack of trust between husband and wife. When there is no trust between spouses, this kind of suspicion can easily manifest. Issues such as self-hatred, the raping of women and children, abuse, serial killings, and the breakdown of discipline in families are serious problems (Guma and Milton, 1997, p. 67). These challenges cannot specifically be used to justify the notion that women should automatically be suspected of killing their husbands. There is a strong call for moral regeneration in South Africa. While Masingoaneng (2009, p. 1) argues, with specific reference to family life, that the country is experiencing a serious moral breakdown and growing promiscuity, Devenish (2012, p. 1) believes that moral decay has prompted senior religious leaders to warn President Jacob Zuma that if political leaders do not stop the moral decay, the church will mobilise civil society to bring about a healthy democracy. Bathembu (2009, p. 1), in the meeting of the National Regeneration Movement held in Boksburg, quoted Deputy President Motlanthe, emphasizing that all forms of moral decay should be eradicated from our society. The respect that African people used to have for marriage and for life should be retained. Thus, moral decay is another reason for those who support the notion that wives should be suspected of their husband's death.

The Downside (Consequences) of the Suspicion

Widowhood presents a stressful time for women in Africa and South Africa. Being suspected of killing one's husband adds more stress and pain. In addition to being stressed by the loss of a loved one, when it is the male breadwinner, additional stress is placed on widows when they are expected to prove their innocence to both their families and the in-laws. Part of the problem is that one woman cannot stand against an entire family, especially as they have been disempowered by a patriarchal system. It is for this reason that many widows unconditionally submit to unimaginable rituals and processes as a sign of respect (Manyedi, Koen and Greef, 2003, p. 78). Maintaining peace and harmony will, at times, be at the widow's expense because any refusal on her part to bow to the wishes of the family and community will be used to show that she is guilty. This is why some widows accept and allow conditions to be placed on them even if these are against their faith—all for the sake of keeping the family dignity intact (Manyedi, Koen and Greef, 2003, p. 78). This pathology is also reinforced by the fact that most women in Africa are generally dependent on the family and rely on their in-laws for their survival after the death of their husbands. Marriage, which should serve as the backbone of society, is affected by the trend to cohabit rather than to marry, and will be discussed next.

Traditionally, in the African context, every person is expected to grow up and get married one day, but this tradition is fading away due to a fear of commitment as well as western influences. Even though cohabitation with a stranger is foreign in most African traditions, the South African urban context in informal settlements indicate that some men are staying with women without being legally married to them. It has been observed that this happens in spite of the fact that for Africans, marriage is aimed at procreation within the marriage. Although it is not the focus of this study to list these reasons, what emerges from their study is that there are increasing numbers of men and women who no longer wish to enter into marriage. Rather, they prefer to stay away from the risks of marriage, either by cohabiting or by finding other ways to meet their sexual needs. As a result, women are reduced to sexual objects (Baloyi 2010). Mansfield (no year) argues that men believe that marriage spells the end of their freedom, and also may lead to the possibility of an untimely death. Some women are afraid to commit to marriage because they fear that should the husband be the first to die, then they will be in trouble. For that reason, practices like cohabitation and living together as husband and wife without being officially married³ are gaining ground. In his article entitled "Paying lobola when my wife dies: an African pastoral study about the practice of forcing people to pay lobola after their wives passed away," Baloyi (2014) indicates the dangers and challenges that such informal unions bring to the husbands and families in times of grief. Although this is not the focus of this study, it is important to mention that the fear of committing (for any reason, including fear of suspicion of treachery) to a marriage may also have its own unintended aftereffects. The "*vat-en-sit*"⁴ kind of relationship never had a place in African communities. The loss of inheritance by both the widow and the children who were born within wedlock is very likely when this suspicion creeps into the family, which presents another challenge to be faced.

³ "Officially married" in most African tribes refers to unions which are accepted through the Lobolo negotiations and agreements.

⁴ "Vat-en-sit" is an African term meaning "take and sit". This is used to refer to unions when the couple decides to stay together without being married through African customs, according to which the two families reach an agreement.

In in most African societies the decision about the distribution of the inheritance of the deceased person used to be a family affair (Zimbabwean Neria film as an example: Neria is a personal name for the widow in this film). This is why Baloyi (2014:26) argues: "Here certain widows lose what belongs to them if a jealous family does not support the widow for some reason." This implies that if, during the time when the belongings of the deceased are confiscated (mourning period), jealous family members may point at the widow as a killer, and this would immediately affect the decisions regarding the distribution of wealth when the mourning period is over. The collective decisions of the family at the close of the mourning period are often influenced by these kinds of suspicions, and thus many widows are left with nothing with which to raise their children or with which to pay for their education after the death of the husband. While some widows lose their husbands' investments, others may be even evicted from the houses their husbands built while they were still alive. There are thus all these factors that come into play when a wealthy African man dies in the home. Besides the loss of inheritance, gender inequality, which is against the democratic constitution in South Africa, is under attack, as will be discussed below.

It is both inhuman and insensitive to subject women to this kind of suspicion, while it is uncommon for men to be suspected when their wives die. The article entitled "The use of *Imago Dei* as a pastoral healing vision against women killings in the South African context" argues that women were created in the image of God just like men; hence, they deserve equal treatment (Baloyi, 2012). Even Jesus showed compassion to women. He went beyond Jewish tradition of the time, which barred men to speak to women in public when he spoke to the Samaritan woman in the well, which surprised even his traditionally-bound disciples (John 4:27, NIV). Thus, humiliating women by suspecting them of murder of their husbands, shows that women are still treated as unequal to men. Not only are widows suspected of having had a hand in the death of their husbands, but children of the widows also suffer the same ignominy.

Research indicates that children who have been exposed to different forms of violence while growing up are negatively impacted in many ways. Some of these effects, according to Rossman, Hughes and Rosenberg (2009, p. 91), include trauma-related, behavioural, emotional, and cognitive effects, as well as negative school functioning. Children need not only food, clothes, and resources to grow into stable, responsible citizens, but they also need a secure and safe home in which peace and harmony are evident between their parents. Sifo and Masango (2014, p. 4) argue that the negative experiences that young people are faced with may be carried into adulthood and that in this way violence is perpetuated within the community and families, and may continue for generations to come. Reports about aggressive and self-destructive children are indicative of their dysfunctional environments. According to Nasimiyu-Wasike (2005, p. 130), the experience of shock is always evident in the faces of children whose parents have been attacked. Additional consequences of spousal brutality affecting children are listed by Netswera (2004, p. 28) as disobedience, passivity, withdrawal, maladjusted conduct, and stress.

The Church's Role as Guidelines and Way Forward

Firstly, from a theological point of view the church has a role to play in eliminating this problem. Some Pentecostal pastors use arguments of seeing visions to accuse women. On many occasions the church has condemned the families of victims rather than supporting and helping them. It is important for the church to identify those people who are involved and who are affected by the killing of a husband. These would be, for example, the family of the deceased, his children and the alleged killer herself. The church must be accommodative and helpful to all these groups.

The motivation for this accommodative idea is derived from Genesis 1:27 (NIV) where everybody, including the killer, is made in the image of God. The challenge of the church is to redeem and recover the wholeness in the image and likeness of God in these different persons. The brokenness and woundedness of all the parties affected by such killings needs a healing ministry which will bring the promised life back to the people—life in abundance, as it is expressed in John 10:10 (NIV). It is this promise of Jesus that the church must heed when doing everything to assist the affected parties. A sacred space must be created for the victimized members of the community where they can share their stories in a safe, non-judgmental and non-threatening environment. It is the loving care of the church which will help the killer and all affected to realize the love of God. The church needs to educate not only those involved in the crimes discussed, but society at large. Abuse and killing, regardless of whether it for revenge or not, is both unconstitutional and an offence punishable by South African law. This is what Sifo and Masango (2013, p. 5) are referring to when they say that the church must speak prophetically against violence and abuse within families and community.

The issue of being suspected of witchcraft is not only corruptive in our societies, but it is also dangerous, particularly because it cannot always be proven. In South Africa, everyone is innocent until proven otherwise. People must start learning that acting on rumors without proof is not the way to deal with sensitive issues like this. It may be very difficult to prove someone is a witch, just as it is very difficult to prove that someone is not a witch. The community, however, must learn not to take the law into its own hands whether it has proof or not. The community must be taught that those traditional beliefs that entrench the view that women derive enjoyment from abuse, or that they feel a need to be punished, are not acceptable.⁵ The church, through its teachings, must advocate for peace and proper ways of solving differences between partners. It is also critical that husbands should be taught to avoid all forms of abuse towards women and children.

It is the duty of all, including the government, NGOs, and the church, to educate people in understanding death in a different way than it has been traditionally understood, with respect to this problem. The notion that the death of a husband is always caused by the wife or someone else needs to be tackled and ultimately put an end to. Death often occurs without being caused by another and all peoples need to know this. African people have always enjoyed communal life and this means that anything bad that affects one person affects the whole community. Likewise, when dealing with African challenges and problems, care must be taken not to isolate or individualize these issues. It is partly the duty of the community, NGOs, the church, and governments to ensure that community gatherings such as *indabas* and funerals are used to redress the stereotype of women being responsible for the deaths of their husbands. In other words, these organizations should work hand-in-hand with community forums and other stakeholders to ensure that they involve the entire community in preventing this type of thinking from continuing.

Conclusion

The suspicion that, when a man dies, his wife is likely to have played a part in his death has been a growing trend in South Africa. This is worrying, firstly because when a woman dies, there cannot always be proof for the suspicion. (Davids, 2017). Many women are also victimized by the husband's family as a result of such suspicions. The unfortunate thing is that, although

⁵ Such a position simply breeds women who are likely to kill their husbands according to Walker and Browne (1985, quoted by Pretorius and Botha 2006, p.15)

there are cases where some women have been found guilty by courts of law for having had a hand in their husband's death, there is no proof that every husband who dies was killed by his wife. It is therefore partly the duty of the Christian church, through its pastoral services, to ensure that the church plays a role in eliminating this kind of injustice—an injustice which also entrenches the very gender inequalities that our Constitution speaks against.

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