

Some Perspectives on the Impacts of Ritual Murders in the Vhembe District of South Africa: An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach

A.E. Rannditsheni¹, M.A. Masoga² and A.H. Mavhandu-Mudzusi³

School of Human and Social Sciences, University of Venda, South Africa
E-mail: ¹<rannditsheniae@gmail.com>, ²<alpheus.masoga@univen.ac.za>

KEYWORDS Church. Killings. Perpetrators. Spirituality. Victims

ABSTRACT Many communities inside and outside South Africa, such as the Vhembe District Municipality in the Limpopo Province are affected by ritual murders. The purpose of the study was to investigate ritual murders in the Vhembe District Municipality with the focus of developing a contextual and relevant training manual to address these murders. The methodology used for the study was interpretative phenomenological and data was collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions. The findings concluded that pastors, businessmen, traditional healers and leaders are involved in ritual murders. The practice was motivated by cultural beliefs, excessive love for money, power and greed. The acts of ritual murder regardless of the motive, whether for self-enrichment or to appease the ancestors for protection of the community at large were condemned by the majority of the participants.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a plethora of condemnations by various groups and key community stakeholders within the Vhembe District Municipality increasingly cases of ritual murders remain a challenge. In fact, ritual murders can be regarded as ‘pandemic’ that is, perennially affecting the social welfare of most communities within the District. The Vhembe District Municipality forms part of the Limpopo Provincial structures in South Africa. Since the dawn of the South African democracy about 117 cases of ritual murders have been reported as having taken place in the Vhembe District. This study aimed to investigate the impact of ritual murders within the Vhembe District Municipality. Additionally, this research study explored possibilities of developing a contextual and relevant training manual to address ritual murder challenges. The researchers note that although it is reported in various literature that ritual murders are unacceptable in many nations in the world, the practice continues in the Vhembe District. In view of this it is regrettable that currently, there is a paucity of available literature on ritual murders, in particular for the Southern African region.

The study was conducted in two phases. Firstly, the situational analysis focusing on investigation of ritual murders in the Vhembe District using an interpretative phenomenological design was conducted. During this phase, indi-

vidual interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with participants who met the set criteria. Following an analysis of the data, four super-ordinate themes emerged, that is, *motives for ritual murders in the Vhembe District, factors which make the District an attractive area for ritual murders, the impact of ritual murders in the Vhembe District and current interventions to address these ritual murders*. Secondly, the findings from phase one were integrated with the super-ordinate themes from literature review and theoretical framework to develop a training manual to address ritual murder challenges in the Vhembe District. The development of the structure and content of the training manual was guided by community change process. Broadly, the study aimed at exploring motives and impact of ritual murders in the District and at designing a manual to address the challenges of these murders.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature, and in addition the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was used to explore the impact of ritual murders in the Vhembe District. Finlay and Ballinger (2006) describe IPA as a ‘variant of phenomenology’ that aims to explore individual’s perceptions and experiences. One reason for opting for this approach was to understand participants’ lived experiences, and hence make

sense of their personal experiences when faced with the challenge of ritual murder in their respective communities, either as families or as survival victims of attempted ritual murders.

Data Collection

The research used two main data collection methods, namely, individual face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. Face-to-face interviews were considered convenient as well as purposive and purposeful non-probability sampling technique was deemed appropriate to obtain in-depth information on ritual murders from participants in the Vhembe District. Through this, the research managed to draw participants from various groups, males and females of different age groups with the purpose of obtaining quality data from the chosen participants on matters of ritual murders in the Vhembe District. In choosing the participants, the following criteria were considered, that is either they must have an experience of ritual murders in one way or another, or they are survivors of attempted ritual murders in the Vhembe District. Thirdly, they are family members of victim of ritual murders in the Vhembe District, or someone who has been accused of ritual murders in the Vhembe District.

The IPA for data analysis offered an adaptable and accessible approach to phenomenological research intended to give a complete and in-depth account (Smith 2007). This approach assisted during this stage as it enabled the researchers to reach out, hear and understand the experiences of participants with regards to ritual murders in the Vhembe District. The IPA was used for both the face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. It should be noted that the IPA be allowed for total immersion of the researchers to ensure both a pure and a thorough description of the phenomenon (Creswell 2009). In accordance with any descriptive phenomenological inquiry, the data was read and reread, both the individual face-to-face and focus group discussion transcripts, in order to get a comprehensive sense of the whole picture. This approach was also used in reading the transcripts many times for the purpose of immersing ourselves in the data collected.

The first descriptive data on the interview transcript was described to construct the content of the data. Key phrases were then identi-

fied, then explanations, descriptions, and emotional responses from the participants were provided. Attention was given to aspects like, quotations, pronoun use, pauses, laughter, and functional aspects of language, repetition, and metaphor use. After completing an IPA on each participant's responses, the research then looked for emerging themes across all participants by examining distinct sections of the transcripts and simultaneously recalling what they (participants) had narrated as they shared their stories on ritual murders in the Vhembe District. This process was done solely to divide the data into meaningful super-ordinates and subthemes as IPA emphasizes descriptions to further root the analysis using direct words from participants. In this respect, IPA aims to go beyond a 'standard thematic analysis' (Brocki and Wearden 2006).

Smith (2005) suggests that themes might be carried forward from the first participant account to be built on or be added to with subsequent accounts. This then led to an elaboration process of the findings from the participants on their personal experiences and knowledge on ritual murders in Vhembe District. This phase of the research led to a revalidation of the raw data descriptions collected from the field in order to justify the interpretations of both the essential meanings and the general structure. This was done to substantiate the accuracy of all findings by constant reference to the raw data. By following this process, the research ensured that detailed descriptions have been obtained from the participants, that a phenomenological reduction has been maintained throughout the analysis, that the essential meanings have been discovered, that a structure has been articulated, and that the raw data have verified the results. It should also be noted that the research protocols for this study were ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Venda. Consent from all the participants of the study was sought and granted accordingly.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate ritual murders and their impact on the Vhembe District Municipality with a secondary focus of developing a contextual and relevant training manual to address ritual murders. The methodology used for the study was an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach. Data was collect-

ed through individual interviews and focus group discussion. Below are the findings, which basically concluded that pastors, businessmen, traditional healers and leaders are all involved in ritual murders. The practice was motivated by cultural beliefs, excessive love for money, power and greed. The acts of ritual murders, regardless of the motive, whether for self-enrichment or to appease the ancestors for protection of the community at large were condemned by the majority of the participants.

The Impact of Attempted Ritual Murder on the Survivor and Individual

Results show that it is not easy to ascertain the impact of ritual murders on individuals, besides death, as most of them end up dead. There were some people however, who for some reason or another, end up surviving the process of ritual murder. These are the ones who were able to relate the impacts of attempted ritual murders, which were both emotional and physical. One participant who was a survivor of ritual murders said during a face-to-face interview, *"I thank God that I am alive today. In 2006 I became a victim of ritual murders attempt, but through the miracle of God, I survived the ordeal. The person that I saw on that day is one of the religious leaders who come from this village. He attacked me at the back and hit me on the head. I collapsed and became unconscious. I do not know what has happened after that until I saw myself at the Donald Fraser Hospital with a nurse beside my bed, and that I was transferred to George Mukhari Hospital in Ga-Rankuwa to get further treatment. As you see me, I have covered my mouth with this handkerchief because this religious leader from my village cut off my lips and I am now deformed. I am really not myself. I am tortured mentally and physically as you see me. When it is hot, I sweat a lot because my mouth is always covered by this handkerchief. My friends also deserted me because they feel the ordeal that I have experienced will be passed on them. One other thing is that, this bishop that I call a religious man is someone that I fear most. I do not want to meet him, but unfortunately, he was not sentenced and I happen to meet him as I walk around. I feel unsafe whenever I meet him on the way. I don't trust him at all. I am terribly afraid of him because he may come and finish me up. I am still traumatized by this ordeal. I don't hate*

him but my life is always at stake whenever I hear about his name."

Another example is of a woman who also shared her ordeal of surviving a ritual murder in the Vhembe District when she boarded a taxi from Makhado to Thohoyandou through a face-to-face interview. She said, *"I boarded the last taxi from Makhado to Thohoyandou. I told the taxi driver that I would get off at the taxi rank. To my surprise, the taxi did not stop at the taxi rank, but headed away using the Punda Maria road on the Kruger National Park way. Hardly after 15 km from Thohoyandou, the driver stopped his taxi and began to call his people by cell phone that they need to rush to one of the bushes with the sharp knives and axes because he has a woman that should be ritually murdered that evening. At that time, he roped me around the chairs and I screamed aloud begging for assistance. For me it was the end of me. I released all what I could from my body because of the fear. Fortunately, a passerby came to my rescue by whistling some community members to rush where we were. At that time, I managed to untie myself and fell down. The taxi driver ran away. I was taken to the police station but nothing was done so far. I am even afraid to use our public transport because one is also not safe. If I am very far from home, I am afraid to use a taxi because it always remind me about my experience where I was nearly ritually murdered. I have this constant fear in me. I am so restless because I now do not trust anybody, especially the taxi drivers. I just feel all of them may come and finish me as one of them nearly finished me off. I am really tortured emotionally and more often when I hear that someone was found ritually murdered with some body parts missing, makes me to have nightmares because it makes me feel sick and traumatized."*

The study has shown that there are cases in the Vhembe District where victims of attempted ritual murders survived the ordeal. There is physical trauma experienced by the survivors if certain parts of their bodies were removed and emotional trauma daily basis.

One of the participants, who survived an attempted ritual murder although the ritual murderers managed to cut-off her lips, is living in fear daily. She is also unable to interact with people, as she is ashamed of her appearance. She always covers her mouth so that people cannot see her missing uncovered teeth.

There is also a financial impact, as survivors have to spend money to undergo treatment,

which may include repairing the wounded body areas, as well as seeking help from the psychotherapists. These treatments are often costly and most of the survivors cannot afford them, due to their socioeconomic conditions. The incidences of surviving ritual murders are rare and seem to be unique only to this study. In most cases of ritual murders, the victims are left to die alone (see Rawa 2005; Rimoldi 2005; Rotimi 2006; Douglas 2009; Setsiba 2012).

The findings indicated that there is a huge impact on the family members of the victims of ritual murders. This study shows that family members experience emotional trauma, fear and sometimes guilt and self-blame. It was reported by a participant, who is a relative of a ritually murdered family member that the whole family is living in fear that the murderer may even murder another person in the family, especially the young children. In most cases, the murderers, although known, are not arrested or are released shortly after arrest due to lack of evidence.

There is also a financial cost to the families. After discovering the body, they still have to arrange for the burial of the body, consult religious leaders or traditional healers and perform other rituals, which are financially draining. Financial pressures experienced by the families of ritually murdered victims are also documented by Kasooha (2009). Apart from immediate financial constraints directly related to the ritually murdered individual, it appears that the financial situation of the family may be so severe that children may fail to continue with their schooling, as they now lack money to pay for their educational expenses, especially if the victim was a breadwinner. Both Ramita (2009) and Dlamini (2011) indicate that it becomes hard to raise children if the victim of a ritual murder was a breadwinner.

In some instances, the family members are doubly traumatized, as they may be suspected of contributing or participating in the ritual murders. In this case, family members may be blamed and stigmatized for being ritual murderers of their relatives (Hall 2011; Gerhard 2011). One of the participants, a business owner who was related to a ritually murdered individual, reported that his business was closed down because the community was accusing him of the ritual murder of a relative. Douglas (2009) also reports on businesses that are closed down due to owners being accused of ritual murder. Such actions lead to more financial constraints on the family of the

business people accused of ritual murders. In addition, the closing of local businesses not only affects the family of the ritually murdered person, but also other members of the community who need the services of these businesses.

The Impact of Ritual Murder on Family

In addition to the impact on survivors of ritual murders these murders also have negative effects on the family. Findings show that most families experience social and emotional challenges.

“My nephew was ritually murdered five years ago. The day he left, we thought we would see him alive again. So far we don’t believe that he was ritually murdered. We always think he will come walking to us and telling us where he was after so many years. We always walk with a stigma attached to us by some community members. We are always given some names such as ‘that family with a lost son who was found murdered, eyes gorged out, lips cut off’ or ‘the family that have sold a son for money and the child was found next to his home with eyes gorged out, lips cut off’. We feel unsafe in this community because some community members blame us for his death. It makes our children not play with others because they are excluded in taking part in some activities by other children in the community. Even at school, our children are not performing well because even some teachers are even afraid to mark their scripts at school. We are even thinking to leave this community and stay very far away because we feel not safe even at night when others are asleep. We did not participate in the death of our nephew. We are really suffering. This is really torturing us so deeply”, said a family member through a face-to-face interview.

Ritual murders have brought many challenges to different families. Results also show that these murders have also caused *mental and trauma* to many families in the Vhembe District.

“My daughter was ritually murdered by my neighbor who runs a small business, with the help of one of the civic leaders in my community. The case was opened with the local police station, but people who are involved in ritually murdering my daughter were taken by the police to make community members powerless and to silence them. My problem is that the Task Team of specialized police dealing with ritual murders in the Province keeps on chang-

ing its officials dealing with this case. At night I see things like a mad person. Sometimes I see my daughter crying for help with no one assisting her. When I woke up, I cry like a baby. I don't see the reason of appreciating life any longer. I find myself alone and I feel so isolated to such an extent of refusing to eat. I no longer feel hungry. I always see my neighbors almost every day. I still have little children and I am always afraid that they may come and ritually murder them as they did to one of my children. The behavior of this police is always torturing me. I need help. I want to see all the accomplices behind the bars of prison. My family is not safe in the presence of these murderers. We feel justice is not served yet," said a family member of the victim of a ritual murder through a face-to-face interview.

Besides the social and emotional challenges, results also show that family members of the victims of ritual murders find themselves with financial constraints.

Another family member shared, "My brother was last seen in November 2012 when he left for work and never came back alive. We used our cell phones to call relatives and friends to find if he came to their places. We paid money to some neighbors for transporting us from one place to another seeking our brother. At the end, we finally found him with hands cut off, eyes removed, one leg missing some toes. Then we had to arrange for his funeral, although he was working, he did not have any insurance or burial society where he was contributing towards his funeral. We had to collect money as family members and relatives to bury in a dignified manner. We still owe some people, and we do not know how to pay back the money because he has left children who still need to go to school."

Ritual murders do not only cause financial constraints, results shows that they also worsen poverty in the families of the victims of ritual murders. Another family member shared, "My cousin grew up suffering a lot. After his university graduation, he was employed and we were all happy that he would support us as the family. He loved his family and extended families. He would bring us together with the purpose to know one another. Where families were experiencing hardships such as getting a bag of maize or taking children to school, he was always there for us. He became a breadwinner indeed. Now we have lost him. They ritually murdered him. We thought we would go far, now that he is gone, we are back to square one. We do not

have food any longer. No one is working in our family. Our children have left schooling because we do not have money to pay for them. At the university where his younger sister and a nephew were studying refused to give them the bursary because they couldn't perform well in secondary education. We see poverty coming to us and we cannot stop it. My cousin died a cruel death. Whoever ritually murdered him brought poverty to our family. We pray that God should make the ritual murderers not to enjoy this life. We are suffering because of these ritual murderers. We are also aware that these ritual murderers want to end poverty in their families through this practice of ritually murdering our family members. They want to end their poverty through our body tissues. It is really unfair, a human being feeding himself by our own flesh and blood. No, no, oh no."

It is ideal for many communities to live together harmoniously, but the results show that there are families that have been expelled from their communities, both directly and indirectly, as a result of ritual murders that have taken place in many communities.

A Christian family member shared, "We are a Christian family since our great grandparents. We were never exposed to a situation similar to the one we are now in. The community members met at the chief's place and agreed that every community household should contribute R40.00 to pay the traditional healer so that he point out who the ritual murderers are in our community. As our background does not allow us to serve two masters, we refused to pay that amount, not because we do not have it, but because we do not want to compromise our faith. As a result of this, we are forced to vacate the village because the villagers are threatening to burn our house, cars, and other properties indicating that those who refuse to pay have collaborated with the ritual murderers. We are in deep pain thinking about the money we spent on building our houses, now we are to leave this place unceremoniously."

The Impact of Ritual Murder on the Community

Although these ritual murders impact more the families of the victims of ritually murdered persons, results also show that whole communities are affected.

A businessman stated, "I am not involved in any ritual murders since I know that parts ex-

tracted from human beings do not make anyone prosper, but my business is affected because the person who was found murdered in the neighboring community is believed to have been murdered by a business person. People are no longer coming to buy from my shops because the whole community is associating business with ritual murders. One person told me that people are afraid to come to my shops in the evening because of what happened with other business people who were making money out of human body parts that have been retrieved from their business areas. Now the goods in my shops will expire and it has a bearing impact on my business."

Ritual murders have impacted communities differently. In some communities, *riots have erupted* as a result. The study therefore reveals that ritual murders cause *instability and damages in different communities* and left infrastructure, such as roads in poor condition and therefore making it difficult to travel.

A pastor shared, *"The people in our community are poor but practice different religious faiths. Some community leaders have divided our community because some people wanted us to contribute money for the funeral service of the victim of ritual murder, while some were accusing the traditional healers and business people in the area that they are involved in the ritual murders of our man. People who do not have money to contribute towards the burial of our community member are labeled as sell-outs, and they are threatened to be buried alive if they do not consider that... I happened to be in a place where community members were forced to get a lawyer to litigate on their behalf after one victim of ritual murders' was said to have been eaten by rats, and the courts had to get many witnesses to give evidence of what they know about the case, but unfortunately, the case has been thrown out because of lack of enough evidence to link the alleged ritual murder's perpetrator."*

Ritual murders in addition to bringing instability to many communities *also impacted tourism negatively.*"

A businessman states, *"People as far as Britain, America, Germany and those from our neighboring African countries are no longer visiting our areas like before. The number of tourists has gone down and it is affecting our business very negatively. Even the local people from other municipalities are no longer coming because routes to the heritage sites or parks*

have been damaged by people who demanded the arrests of the culprits of ritual murders in our area."

As reported in this study, ritual murders in the community lead to the communities going on the rampage and *toy-toying* (that is, protesting) against the alleged ritual murderers. During the rampage, the communities blocked roads with big stones, and burnt tires in the road. These types of community riots have also been reported by several authors (see Kellaway 2003; Caplan 1995; Gerhard 2011), and they end up negatively affecting other sectors. For example, learners cannot go to school and workers are prevented from going to work during such community unrests. These findings are in line with Saralyn (2012) who mentions that ritual murder incidents have a disruptive effect on the community.

CONCLUSION

This research used a qualitative research methodology. It followed in addition, the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to explore the motives for ritual murders in the Vhembe District. Part of the reason for using this approach was to understand participants' lived experiences, how they make sense of their personal experiences when faced with the challenge of ritual murders in their respective communities, as families or as surviving victims of attempted ritual murder. The majority of the research participants condemned acts of ritual murder regardless of whether the purpose was for personal gain or to appease the ancestors for protection of the community at large. Research participants mentioned that the practice was mainly motivated by excessive cultural beliefs, love for money and greed. The findings also showed that belief in ancestral worship had motivated some perpetrators to commit many ritual murders, in order to gain wealth and properties.

One participant however, indicated that traditional leaders are involved in ritual murders not for their own selfish gains, but for the benefit of the entire community they lead. It was indicated that when a traditional leader commits ritual murders, the acts could not be blamed on him, but the whole community, as benefits are meant for the whole community under his care. The research concluded that there was no legal or cultural basis for committing ritual murders, as perpetrators of ritual murders violate people's right to life as embedded in the Constitution of

South Africa since 1996. The constitution of the country supersedes all the laws, rituals and cultural practices. Based on the fact that the Vhembe District is continuously in the media in relation to ritual murder cases, it is apparent that apart from the motives alluded in the above discussions that further research is necessary to deepen understanding of factors associated with ritual murders in Vhembe District.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study focused on the impact of ritual murders. Discussions clearly indicate that ritual murders have caused trauma to different members of the communities in the Vhembe District. This trauma affects individuals who are survivors of attempted ritual murders, families of the victims of ritual murders and communities where victims of ritual murders come from. One may assume that ritual murders at the Vhembe District will only affect that District, however, the findings of this study indicated that it has a global impact. It is reported that people from other countries, who know about the scourge of ritual murder in the Vhembe District are reluctant to visit the District. This has a negative impact not only on the tourist industry, but also on people from other countries who aspire to set up businesses in the area. People are reluctant and scared that their businesses may be burned, including the shops of people from other countries. In order to respond to ritual murder and in attempting to avert further ritual murders and their devastating impacts, the Vhembe District community has resorted to several interventions, which include developing a manual for awareness to assist communities in understanding and dealing with the challenges of ritual murders. Currently there is no such basic manual. Finally, there is a need to have a robust marketing strategy to attract potential tourists to the Vhembe District.

NOTES

- 1 Completed his doctoral on 'Investigation into ritual murder' cases in the Vhembe District Municipality in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The research was done through the University of Venda, School of Human and Social Sciences.
- 2 Research Professor and Study Promoter of Dr AE Rannditsheni. He is based at the University of Venda in the School of Human and Social Sciences.

- 3 Associate Professor in Nursing and Co-promoter of Dr AE Rannditsheni. She is based at the University of South Africa in the Nursing Department.

REFERENCES

- Brocki JM, Wearden AJ 2006. A critical evaluation of the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in health psychology. *Psychology and Health*, 21(1): 87-108.
- Caplan P 1995. Foreign Affairs Committee of The National Council of Resistance of Iran, Women, Islam & Equality. From <http://www.iran-e-azad.org/english/book_on_women/chapter2.html> (Retrieved on 7 March 2014)
- Creswell JW 2009. *Research Design: Qualitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 3rd Edition. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Dlamini P 2011. Muti Killer Gets Life Sentence. *Sowetan*, June 7. Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Douglas M 2009. *Witchcraft, Confession and Accusations*. Reprint Edition. Tavistock, London: Routledge.
- Finlay L, Ballinger C 2006. *Qualitative Research for Allied Health Professionals: Challenging Choices*. Chichester: W. Publishers.
- Gerhard A 2011. "Testifying about Uncivilized Events". *Problematic Representations of Africa in the Trial against Charles Taylor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall E 2011. *Murders Inquiry Highlights Trade in body Parts*. San Diego. Academic Press.
- Kasooha I 2009. Girl beheaded in ritual murder. *New Vision*, 16: 52-59.
- Kellaway J 2003. *The History of Torture and Execution: From Early Civilization through Mediaeval Times to the Present*. Canada: Lyons Press.
- Ramita N 2009. Killing for Honour. From <<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/unreported-world/episode-guide/series-2009/episode-3>> (Retrieved on 10 June 2014).
- Rawa O 2005. An Afghan Woman was Stoned to Death for Adultery. From <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/4477003.stm> (Retrieved on 1 June 2014).
- Rimoldi E 2005. Human sacrifice and the loss of transformative power. *Social Analysis*, 49: 94-108.
- Rotimi W 2006. *Human Sacrifice: Priest Kills Son to Appease Gods*. South Africa: Durban Westville Press.
- Saralyn S 2012. *The Practice of Ritual Killings and Human Sacrifice in Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Setsiba TH 2012. *Mourning Rituals and Practices in Contemporary South African Townships: A Phenomenological Study*. Durban: University of Natal Press.
- Smith HW 2005. The vanishing point of German history: An essay. *History and Memory*, 17(1/2): 269-295.
- Smith HW 2007. *Anti-Semitic Violence as Reenactment: An Essay in Cultural History*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Paper received for publication on November 2015
Paper accepted for publication on August 2016