

Theological Reflections on Sex as a Cleansing Ritual for African Widows

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Abstract

Violence against women is deeply rooted in human history. The patriarchal gender inequalities, culture, religion and tradition have been vehicles by means of which these structured stereotypes were entrenched. In trying to keep the widow in the family as well as forcing her to prove her innocence, certain rituals were introduced, one of them being the sex cleansing ritual. Besides being both oppressive and abusive, the sex cleansing ritual can also be an instrument of sex-related sicknesses such as HIV and AIDS. Although some widows are willing to undergo this ritual, others succumb because they fear dispossession or expulsion from home, thereby forfeiting the right to inherit their late husbands' possessions. It is the aim of this study to unveil by way of research how African widows are subjected to this extremely abusive ritual and exposed to HIV and AIDS. Their vulnerability will be examined from a theological point of view and guidelines will be given. The article will highlight how humiliating and unchristian such a ritual is for defenceless widows and their children.

Keywords: Sex cleansing, ritual, widow, inheritance, sex cleansers, oppression.

Introduction

According to Afoloyan (2004:185), it is widely believed amongst Africans that the demise of a husband does not mean the end of a marriage. The author intends to introduce the problem at hand with a quotation from LeFraniere (2005: 1) which states:

I cried, remembering my husband. When he was finished [with the sexual intercourse], I went outside and washed myself because I was very afraid. I was so worried I would contract AIDS and die and leave my children to suffer.

These are the words of a woman who was forced to perform a sexual cleansing ritual after her husband had passed away. This practice is part of the rituals that widows undergo as part of the mourning process and entry into widowhood in many African tribes. Although this issue has been touched on in my previous work, it did not receive much attention as it was not the focus of the study. The author realised that the issue of sexual cleansing in itself deserves some research.

Traditionally, widows have been expected to uncritically accept this ritual as a way of completing the mourning period and reintroducing herself into normal life. It is the aim of this article to unveil how the ritual of sexual cleansing dehumanises and subjects widows to unconditional subordination and oppression. It is also the intention to argue that theology has a role to play in eliminating this kind of pathology which degrades and humiliates women. Besides the humiliation, this practice involves unprotected sex, which increases the chances of HIV infection (Curnow & Watts 2013:1).

Relevance and Method of the Research

The passing of a husband amongst some groups of black people is followed by several rituals. It is the author's opinion that one of the most horrific rituals in this context is that of sexual cleansing, where the widow is expected to have sexual relations with a cleanser. Widows who rejected the practice were disowned by their families or stripped of their husband's inheritance. It is unacceptable that theology (particularly the black and liberation theologies) turns a blind eye to the plight of widows in this regard. Modise (2016:5) is correct in arguing that the struggle against oppression, poverty, hunger and death is at the heart of the theology of liberation.

Practical theology cannot be indifferent to the plight of grieving widows who face this kind of oppression. It is unfair to relegate the responsibility of correcting gender imbalances among African people to the Commission for Gender Equality. The number of legal battles against traditional leadership continues to rise since what is traditionally accepted

about these ‘sexual cleansing’ rituals is often contrary to the democratic constitutions of many African countries. For example, in Zambia a 79-year-old widow went to court because she refused to submit to this practice (Hambuba 2006:1).

The research will be theoretical and, therefore, the perusal of books, articles, newspaper reports as well as other media sources will be critical. The theoretical framework will look at the definition before examining the possible reasons for this practice. This will be followed by the outcomes or consequences of the practice and a theological evaluation and concluding remarks will be given after that. The humiliation, gender inequality and health threat that this practice causes women is the subject of this research. Though it is not practiced by all African clans and tribes, the mere fact that it happens in South Africa, calls for research. Although the focus will be on the Tsonga-speaking people of South Africa, African people have much in common. During this research I will often refer to ‘some Africans’ thereby indicating that Tsonga people live among other African tribes.

What is ‘Sexual Cleansing’ and How is it Performed?

In the African context the transition period between the death of a husband and the reinstatement of his widow in normal life is regarded as an abnormal and extremely dangerous time for both the widow and other people (Ayikukwei, Ngare, Sidle, Uyuku, Baladdawa & Greene 2007:35). Therefore, for the protection of both the individual and society, ritual cleansing is necessary. A widow is not allowed to have sexual relations with anyone before undergoing a cleansing ritual involving some herbs and a healer (Bala2014:34). Gunga (2009:170) is of the opinion that there is agreement among many African scholars that sex is central to the cleansing ritual (e.g. Kunda 1995. Butlerys *et al.* 1994; Landry & Mathui 2005).

In Tanzania a widow was declared an outcast after the death of her husband because she refused to be inherited by her brother-in-law through the practice of sexual cleansing (Makoye 2013:1). According to Makoye’s report, the widow was supposed to undergo the cleansing sexual ritual with her brother-in-law, not an outsider. Another example is a widow who was forced to undergo the cleansing ritual with her late husband’s younger brother. When her family started to pressurise her to marry this younger man, she decided to flee from her home in Giyani (Nkhwashu 2012:2).

The question about who is eligible to perform the ritual cleansing can be answered in one of two ways. The first is that in some African countries, every village has professional cleansers. According to White (in Curnow & Watts 2013:1) widows' families pay these so-called cleansers for their services. Cleansing is considered as their employment and whenever a woman becomes a widow, these men are called upon to perform the ritual. The Global Widows Report (GWR 2015:111) indicates that most of these sex cleansers are social outcasts (GWR 2015:111). In a Human Rights Watch interview held on 2 November 2002, a widow indicated that her family paid a herdsman to, against her will, have sex with her without using a condom. In Malawi, a mentally unstable, ostracised man is often identified to perform this ritual. The role of this person is to have sexual intercourse with the widow to chase away or 'cleanse' the cause of the death in the family. The practice is called *kupita kufa* or *kochotsa fumbi* and the cleanser is paid for these services. The whole process is usually arranged by the widow's in-laws without consulting her or seeking her consent (Kapuma 2011:3-4). According to Gunga (2009:170) there are two kinds of professional cleansers: the first is a member of the family or clan (called a *jatiek kwera*) and the second is somebody from outside the clan (called a *jakowiny*). Kimani (2004) and Ocholla A. Ayayo (1996:4) agree that only someone who is sexually perverse or a psychopath is capable of doing what normal human beings cannot do. In other words, a mentally disturbed person is considered the ideal person to sever the cord between a widow and her deceased husband. An outsider is preferred because, similar to a sacrificial lamb, he assumes the contamination or uncleanness.

Another form of cleansing involves the brother or a close relative of the deceased. Sometimes a widow is forced to have sex with her late husband's brother, as in the case study of Reneilwe. In some Zambian contexts the relative of the deceased, accompanied by family members, goes to the widow's house and hosts a party during which he is ushered into her house. The relative is then left behind for the night to perform the ritual. If, a few days later, the relative decides to marry the widow, the usual rituals follow and the families of both gather to bless the new marriage (Kalinda & Tembo 2010:1).

According to Mulango (2001:376), there is another form of sexual cleansing called thigh brushing or *kucuta*. This requires the brother of the deceased to rub his genitals against that of the widow without having sex. The author assumes that it is a later version of cleansing which came about as a result of HIV and AIDS. Apparently the cousins and siblings of the deceased

cover the widow in a long cloth called a *chitenge* so that there is no nudity when the widow slides or thigh-brushes against the man enveloped in the same cloth (Mulango 2001:373).

The Reasons for Sexual Cleansing

Death is one of the most feared and most universal occurrences. Many Africans are of the opinion that this mystery deserves a ritual to explain it and avert bad luck (Tjibeba 1997:19). It is believed that if death is not removed through certain rituals, it can either bring bad *xinyama* or *setshila* (bad luck) or wipe out the whole family (Baloyi 2015:247; Wade & Eguchi 1984:113). According to Baloyi (2014:6) Africans believe death can be stopped or confined by performing certain rituals.

According to the online *Encyclopaedia of death and dying*, the cleansing ritual is thought to exorcise the evil spirits associated with death and if a widow refuses the ritual, it is believed that her children will come to harm. It is understandable that the fear of misfortune befalling her children could impel the widow to assent to the ritual. Hambuba (2006:1) indicates: ‘Sexual cleansing is a traditional African custom for some African tribes in which a widow is inherited by her in-laws after she has sex with one of her dead husband’s male relatives’. According to the traditional beliefs of many Tonga – who live in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia – the ritual frees a widow from her husband’s ghost. There is a belief that when the husband dies, he immediately becomes a ghost who follows his wife wherever she goes and tries to prevent her from remarrying. Wade and Eguchi (1984:113) state that the sexual ritual called ‘*kugaana*’ (a word from one of the Zambian languages) is performed by a witch doctor and the widow outside the homestead.

This view was echoed by a woman living in the Chilala community in Zambia. ‘Sexual cleansing is important in our culture’, said Mable Cheelo, a middle-aged woman from a village in the Chikuni area near Chilala. ‘It is done to drive away ghosts from a widow because immediately after a husband dies, the wife carries a ghost. If not sexually cleansed, one can die early or even run mad’ (Hambuba 2006:2). According to the Global Widows Report (GWR 2015), those who support the ritual argue that it breaks the supernatural or spiritual bond between the widow and her husband’s spirit. It is also believed that if the practice is not performed, the husband’s spirit will cause a range of negative outcomes for the widow’s community (GRW 2015:110). This

indicates the stereotype internalisation of the ritual by women who end up contracting sexually transmitted diseases like HIV.

Another motivation, according to Awuor (2007:1), is that the cleansing provides protection for the widow, her children and the whole village. Although Awuor does not go into detail about what kind of protection and against what or whom it is needed, the author thinks that the protection against their husband's families. This is because many widows are disowned by their husbands' families if they refuse to undergo the ritual. Furthermore, the immediate family and parents of the widow may also turn against her. It should be understood that because of the communal way of life that many Africans have, disownment by one's family means that one is rejected by the community or village. This terrible destiny is feared by all widows.

Many African ethnic groups are of the view that the reason behind all mourning rituals, including sexual cleansing, is the belief that the entire family of the deceased is contaminated or polluted because of their contact with death. That is why Baloyi (2015:256) argues that the 'removal of death in the family' is one of the reasons for these rituals. They result in a spiritual reunion between the family of the deceased and society (Ngubane 1977). Gunga (2009:170) uses the term 're-incorporation into society' when he refers to one of the purposes of this ritual. Setsiba (2012:20) states that rituals form part of the taboos when there is death in the family. Widows are also made to believe that there will be a curse on them if they do not adhere to this practice. One woman was quoted saying: 'I don't want to die, I don't want a curse to come from my husband' (Curnow & Watts 2013:1). According to Idialu (2011:9) this ritual, amongst others, demonstrates that the widow is not complicit in her husband's death and, moreover, it protects her and her family. In other words, when the widow complies with this ritual, it is an indication of her loyalty to the family and that she did not have a hand in her husband's death. This kind of pathology needs to be eradicated. The author agrees with Nwachuku (1992:61) that instead of suffering emotional and physical violence, a widow deserves to be pitied and helped. There is no denial that widowhood in Africa reveals the reality of violence against and abuse of women (Martey 2009:222).

The Side Effects of the Ritual

Psychological Effects on the Widow and her Children

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Death and Dying* (online), despite clear

indications of the brutal impact on the widows' children – some children are forced into child marriage and prostitution and others fall victim to child labour and human trafficking – the public displays an astonishing ignorance and lack of concern. Discussions about African widowhood usually centre on women, family and other adult relatives, but scant attention is paid to the fate of the deceased's children. Sengendo and Nambi (1997:2) maintain:

Unfortunately, adults do not seem to appreciate that children are also adversely affected by bereavement even though they may not have an adult's understanding of death. Little attention is therefore given to children's emotions. Children are not given the required support and encouragement to express their emotions nor are they guided to deal with them. For example, children are not always talked to, nor listened to, and therefore their emotions are not understood.

This introduces us to the challenges that many orphaned children face. While some drop out of school because of the death of a breadwinner, others are forced into early marriage or have to seek employment at a relatively early age to support their mothers. Helping children to go on with life without their fathers is very difficult for most widows. Kapuma (2011:6) indicates that her daughter used to cry whenever her schoolmates were fetched by their fathers, because her own father had recently died. Besides being depressed, some children's performance at school is affected when they see how their mothers are mistreated and disrespected by family and community members. According to Mulaudzi (2007:35), these rituals are said to be intended for the protection of both the widow and her children, but the opposite is accomplished instead.

Martey (2009:223) is correct in arguing that some widows commit suicide when they realise that their husbands' family, on whom they have always relied on, have suddenly turned against them and maltreat them. According to Trivedi (2009:2), the psychological problems widows have to contend with include loneliness, loss of self-esteem and considerable grief, as well as depression and anxiety. A loss of personal contact is often the result of withdrawal. According to Trivedi, several scholars agree that widowhood has an adverse impact on the psychological well-being of women (e.g. Davar 1999; Reddy 2004; and Thompson *et al.* 1989). The insecurity and violence that widows endure usually have psychological after-effects. The truth, according

to Martey (2009:219), is that besides the spiritual violence, African widows also suffer emotional as well as psychological trauma.

HIV and AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases

It has been proven that sexual intercourse is not the only way HIV is transmitted and that the majority of HIV and AIDS related cases result from multiple sexual relationships. For the sake of this research it is important to indicate that one of the dreadful things which can happen when widows are forced to undergo sexual cleansing is infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. In some countries the use of a condom during sexual cleansing is not allowed (Curnow & Watts 2013:1).

Hambuba (2006:2) indicates that because of the campaign to curb and eliminate HIV/AIDS, many countries try to abolish the sexual cleansing ritual. In some areas where it is still practiced, it has been modified and called *kucuta*, and a man merely rubs his private parts against that of the widow without penetrating her (as has been described above). A high percentage of orphans as well as street children on the African continent are orphaned as a result of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Kapuma (2011:3) emphasises that the biggest danger attached to sexual cleansing is the transmission of HIV and AIDS. Sexual cleansers have cleansed countless other widows and are most probably carriers of the virus. One Malawian widow cleanser who acknowledged that he might have infected a lot of women indicated that widows would not be cleansed properly if a condom is used. In other words, only unsafe sex will cleanse them (Ethics, Gender, Human Rights 2009:1).

Degrading of Women's Status in the Family and Community

Kapuma (2011:2) maintains: 'I realized that my status had changed from married to widowed. My identity changed without me having any choice or say in the matter. I realized that the stigma attached to widowhood will now be attached to me as well'. These are statements of sorrow coupled with the realisation of the relegation or degradation that one faces in African widowhood. The pride taken in being a 'Mrs So-and-so' or being under the protection of 'Mr So-and-so' disappears and all the widow faces is a forceful subordination. The author is completely against this ritual because it targets widows only, whereas widowers are untouched.

It is true that gender inequality perpetrates violence against women. One widow cleanser indicated that Malawian tribal custom dictates that he first sleeps with the widow, then with all his wives, and then once again with the widow – all in one night (Kalinda & Tembo 2010:9). For the author such enslavement of women is unimaginable in this day and age. It confirms that women are still treated as mere objects and that men dictate down to their sex lives. Although African people respect marriage and sexual intercourse and regard them as important aspects of life (Kalinda & Tembo 2010:10), the ritual of ‘sexual cleansing’ is humiliating and a violation of women’s rights as human beings. Women’s rights must be understood in the context of human rights. Although Nomvula Makgotlho argued that the issue of female transformation is a sensitive one, the discrimination and devaluation found on the continent, particularly in rural areas, are nonetheless unbearable (Nyamunda 2015:1).

Theological Reflection as a Way Forward

A patriarchal mindset uses sex as a means of domination in many African ethnic groups. African widowhood usually forces widows to perform certain rituals which run counter to biblical faith and Christian principles (Martey 2009:219). These rituals conflict with the biblical principles of love and support that the Bible teaches with regards to widows. This makes theology responsible for addressing the widowhood situation. Liberation theology calls for the contextualisation of theology in the circumstances and situation of the people. Besides that, God is a liberating God; theology must wage war against any form of discrimination regardless of sex or gender. After all, both men and women are created in the image of God. Ratele (2008) is correct in arguing that it is impossible to create gender equality in Africa if the daily experiences of men are not considered. This confirms that theology cannot claim to liberate women unless it starts changing men’s ideology about women. The oppressive man must be reprimanded and discouraged. Chitando and Chirongoma (2012), Morrell (2007) and Van Klinken (2011) agree on male mentoring programmes that can be initiated by either government or NGOs to help men to become agents of change for the reconstruction of masculinity. This would encourage men to make better choices and decisions and to contribute to a more gender-equitable society. It is unfortunate that, although the issue of gender equality is one of the major topics discussed throughout the world, few men address the

domination of women. I am in full agreement with Van der Walt (1994:154) that the liberation of women will not take place without the cooperation of men. In many African ethnic groups, it is still men who debate and take decisions that affect the whole group or clan. It is for this reason that theology should target men at their indabas and other communal gatherings. Pastoral caregivers and preachers can use this opportunity to get involved in their communities to end violence against widows.

Theology and the church must seek ways of protecting the rights and dignity of women in society. The truth is that many churches end their support when the deceased is buried, which leaves room for his family to humiliate his widow. Although it has been indicated many times that a funeral is a family matter, the mere fact that the church is invited to conduct the burial opens an opportunity, not only to evangelise the family, but also to stand firmly on the side of the widow. The fact that Jesus wept and grieved alongside Mary in John 11:35 is an indication of the compassion He had for the loss of her brother. The Greek word for 'weep' has a connotation of silently bursting into tears in contrast to the loud lament of the group. According to Beyer (2007:206), 'The servant's life was marked by sorrow and emotional pain, and he knew suffering and grief well. The church do(es) not have an option, but to emulate Jesus in its compassion to the widows'. The church as God's representative on earth must, amongst other things, be characterised by 'mourning with those who mourn, and rejoice with those who rejoice' (Romans 12:15). This is the calling of the Christian church who intends to serve God faithfully. Banda (2008:51) is correct to blame the church: 'It is not only the patriarchy's legal system and political structures which are a problem, but also its social and cultural institutions (especially the family and church)'.

Since many congregations still have male pastors, these pastors have to train women in their congregations to stand up for each other. This will help to change the negative perception that many families have of pastors who support widows. Some have been said to inherit from or to be in love with the widows and so on. Theologians and pastors need to make the Bible as relevant as possible to the plight of widows and their families. Cone (1975:17) is correct in surmising that human experience should be the source of theology.

While some children of widows are forced to drop out of school at an early age in order to help their mothers, others are obliged to relocate and make many adjustments. Therefore, their maltreatment is wide ranging (Idialu 2010:9). In Malachi 3:5 we read:

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So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me, says the LORD Almighty.

The oppression of widows in this context may include forcing widows to undergo the humiliating ritual of sexual cleansing. It should be advised that a negative practice such as the sexual cleansing of widows must be discouraged in the strongest terms (Phillip *et al.* 2015:57). Widows' vulnerability due to their economic dependency needs theology to come up with empowerment strategies to help widows to regain their status and dignity in their communities.

According to Kapuma (2011:8) women need a theological ear to listen to their untold stories and she continues: 'Telling your story of obedience to a higher goal is a liberating act'. Pastoral caregivers, ministers and preachers need to give widows a platform and listen to them when they tell of their experiences. Pastoral counselling as well as emotional support should be available to help them to heal and redirect their lives. It is also the duty of theologians and pastors to prepare married women for the possibility of becoming a widow one day. This will prepare them to stand up against cultural practices that discriminate against them.

Another challenge that theology is confronted with is the fact that the practice of widow cleansing has its roots in tradition, not the Bible. Although sexual cleansing is connected to wife inheritance, there is a realisation that both inheritance and sexual cleansing are not biblically founded (Mulango 2001:378). Ntozi (1997:125) is of the opinion that although widowhood is influenced by both culture and religion, it is imperative that religion helps to reverse humiliating widowhood rituals, including sexual cleansing.

Although I distance myself from the unfounded view which connects HIV and AIDS (held by Van der Walt 2004; Douma, 1987; and Clifford 2004) with God's judgement, it is important to note that theology cannot dissociate itself from pointing out how immoral it is to force someone to have sexual intercourse as part of a cleansing ritual. In his article entitled 'Towards a Theology of HIV/AIDS' Van Wyngaard (2006) indicates how negatively the discussion of sex and sexuality affect people in the context of HIV and AIDS.

The liberation of women would be incomplete without their economic

liberation. The stereotypes owing to their dependency invite theologians to think about helping vulnerable, uneducated and unemployed widows. The economic emancipation and empowerment of women should not only concentrate on the government's BEE and AA programmes (specifically in SA), but the church must think of more projects that will ensure that widows and women in general are economically empowered. Theology cannot avoid addressing the issue of poverty, which plays a role in subjecting women to sexual violence in the name of 'cleansing'. If women are not economically liberated, their dependency will expose them to severe harassment by those who financially support them. Lastly, theology must find a way, through its pastoral services and preaching, to encourage widows to discard the policy of silence and voice their feelings and concern about their families (Akujobi 2009:14).

Conclusion

The research clarified that widowhood in the African context entails a change in lifestyle, social status, identity and role. It is painful when, after the loss of her husband, a widow is also forced into rituals such as sexual cleansing. As if the pain of her loss is not enough, the dreadful rituals that can infect her with sexually transmitted diseases, are forcefully performed on her. Although many widows try to resist these practices, their refusal to comply is often answered with physical and sexual violence. The role of poverty and unemployment in subjugating widows is also noted and, therefore, the empowerment of widows should include the economic challenges they have to contend with. Widowhood affects the children of widows in different ways and theology should acknowledge the importance of assisting fatherless children as well.

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