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Exploring the intricate link between harmful cultural practices, the abuse of women and Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS)

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ABSTRACT

Cultural practices in many African communities mirror their belief systems and values. While many of these practices promote good values that are informed by Ubuntu, some are detrimental to society, particularly women and the girl child. This paper discusses some African cultural practices that are harmful to society and their impact on women and children. In particular, it explores the link between harmful cultural practices, abuse of women and the potential spread of Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS). This paper builds on the body of literature on cultural practices in Sub-Saharan Africa and its aim is to deliberate and raise awareness on the intersection between harmful cultural practices and HIV/AIDS. Findings demonstrate that the following practices are a source of women abuse and significant contributors to the transmission of HIV/AIDS in SSA: kusasa fumbi by a fisi (the sexual cleansing of girls by a 'hyena'); tero chi liel/pita-kufa (sexual cleansing of widows); sleeping with a virgin to treat HIV/AIDS and 'ukukhipha ifutha' - penis testing and sexual cleansing after ulwaluko (male circumcision). The study employs Ubuntu as a theoretical framework that encourages humane relationships to curb abuse of women (including the girl child) and avert the spread of HIV/AIDS.

KEY TERMS: abuse, African communities, cultural practices, HIV/AIDS, Ubuntu, women's rights

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INTRODUCTION

Culture is a way of life that distinguishes a group of people from another. It includes their ethics, values, beliefs, social norms, attitudes, behaviours and practices. It also involves unique and specific attributes, qualities, and characteristics of particular groups, their taboos – including beliefs about what is right and wrong. This paper makes use of Ubuntu as a theoretical framework to examine the link between certain cultural practices, the violation of women rights and HIV/AIDS. This literature review study juxtaposes certain cultural practices that violate women's rights, their role in HIV/AIDS transmission and how it fairs against Ubuntu. Practices such as *kusasa fumbi* (in Malawi), which is the sexual cleansing of girls/passage into womanhood using a 'hyena'; sex with virgins as treatment of HIV/AIDS; penis testing after *ulwaluko*, are some of the practices explored in this study. These cultural practices are harmful and abusive to women and expose them to HIV/AIDS. The study concludes that certain cultural practices such as the ones discussed in this study, are against the values of Ubuntu and recommend that there is need to strengthen the values of Ubuntu.

BACKGROUND

African cultural heritage, encompasses every part of African life, including history, philosophy, psychology, science, medicine, health care, and numerous arms of the traditional government, ethics, and economic, social activities, education among others. While some African values promote Ubuntu which is grounded on respect, social cohesion, humanity, concern for others, social interdependence, among other values which are deeply rooted in our communities, it has been argued that there exist some practices which have come under attack from the church, civil society and governments for their harmful effect on society. Awoniyi (2015) buttresses this argument and notes that African cultural heritage has been labelled by some as barbaric, primitive and unprogressive. The reality is that some African cultural practices are detrimental to society, however, women and children are particularly and mostly affected. Not only do some practices violate women and children's rights, but they also expose them to HIV/AIDS. Though some of these practices have disproportionately affected girls' rights, they however seem to either have been legitimised, ignored, or normalised.

Against this background, this paper explores the link between harmful African cultural practices, women's abuse and HIV/AIDS. It is important to note that African culture has both positive and negative influences on health behaviours. However, this paper particularly discusses some of the negative practices that have disproportionately affected women and children, exposing them to HIV/AIDS. This paper is primarily conceptual and builds on literature concerning culture and HIV/AIDS in Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was a desktop research drawing from existing literature, including peer-reviewed journals, books and other relevant electronic sources as indicated in Table 1 below. Peer reviewed literature was prioritised in this study so as to arrive at credible and dependable findings. To ensure that the study findings talk to the research topic, African literature on and by African authors were prioritised for analysis. The study focused on literature on the subject matter, i.e., African cultural practices that can be perceived harmful or abusive to women and girls, including the implications of such practices on the spread of HIV. Chimakonam (2015) reminds us that, as researchers, our insights are employed to "critically and creatively engage" the thoughts of other scholars and the issue at hand. Using Ubuntu as its theoretical framework, the study discusses four main cultural practices that violate women and have a potential to spread HIV, i.e: cleansing of girls by a 'hyena'; cleansing of widows; sex with virgin to treat HIV; cleansing and penis testing after *ulwaluko*.

The selection of sources prioritised publications focused on the core research topic. After conducting a comprehensive search across various academic databases, including African Journals Online (AJOL), Sabinet African Journals, Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, EBSCO, the study discusses the perceived benefits and the unintended negative implications of the cultural practices through the following research questions:

1. What African cultural practices are done in Sub-Saharan Africa in relation to abuse of women?
2. How do the identified cultural practices link with abuse of women and the spread of HIV/AIDS?

Table 1: Literature Summary

Author(s)	Title	Source
Awoniyi (2015)	African cultural values: The past, present and future.	Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa (Online – Google Scholar)
Banda & Kunkeyani (2015)	Renegotiating cultural practices as a result of HIV in the eastern region of Malawi	An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care (Online – Google Scholar)
Birdthistle et al. (2011)	Child sexual abuse and links to HIV and orphanhood in urban Zimbabwe	Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (Online -Google Scholar)
Chimakonam (2015)	Transforming the African philosophical place through conversations: An inquiry into the Global Expansion of Thought (GET).	South African Journal of Philosophy (Online – Google Scholar)
Matolino (2020)	Ubuntu: a traditional virtue ethics contribution to economic and social development in Southern Africa.	African virtue ethics traditions for business and management. (Book) (Online – Google Scholar)
Sambala et al. (2020)	Ubuntu as a framework for ethical decision making in Africa: Responding to epidemics.	Ethics & Behaviour (Journal) (Online – Google Scholar)
Metz (2017)	“An Overview on African Ethics.”	Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy. (Book)
Segobye (2016)	“Cultural Practices that affect Children’s Health must be Revisited	The Conversation https://theconversation.com/cultural-practices-that-affect-childrens-health-must-be-revisited-63787
Klaas (2017)	The role of culture and gender in the spread of HIV and AIDS and strategies for the reduction of HIV and AIDS among farm workers in South Africa (Doctoral dissertation).	University of South Africa – Repository (Online)
Kiunguyu (2019)	“Sexual cleansing’ and the Hyena Men of Malawi,”	This is Africa https://thisisafrica.me/politics-and-society/sexual-cleansing-hyena-men-malawi/
Warria (2018)	Girls' innocence and futures stolen: The cultural practice of sexual cleansing in Malawi.	Children and Youth Services Review (Online – Google Scholar)
Perry et al. (2014)	Widow cleansing and inheritance among the Luo in Kenya: the need for additional women-centred HIV prevention options.	Journal of the International AIDS Society (Online – Google Scholar)
Saguti (2017)	Alternative rituals of widow cleansing in relation to women’s sexual rights in Zambia (Doctoral dissertation)	University of KwaZulu Natal – Repository (Online)
Cruz et al. (2018)	“HIV Prevention: Mapping Mozambican People’s Views on the Acceptability of the Widow’s Sexual Cleansing Ritual called Pita-kufa,”	BMC International Health Human Rights (Online – Google Scholar)
Leclerc-Madlala et al. (2009)	The Sociocultural Aspects of HIV/AIDS in South Africa.	Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) - Repository
Leclerc-Madlala (2002)	On the virgin cleansing myth: gendered bodies, AIDS and ethnomedicine	African Journal of AIDS Research (Online – Google Scholar)
Ndhlovu (2020)	“Youth and Gang Violence in South Africa: An Intended and Unintended Outcome of Institutional Systems,”	University of Fort Hare – Repository Library
Maluleke (2012)	Culture, tradition, custom, law and gender equality.	Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal (Online – Google Scholar)

Theoretical framework – Ubuntu

A Nguni word – Ubuntu – is a philosophy with many theories under it. Barnard Matolino captures this when he quips that “The concept of Ubuntu has been explored and given several definitions and explanations for the purposes of research” (Matolino, 2020, p.12). Literature on the concept and theory of Ubuntu is abounded, and many Southern African scholars have contributed immensely to developing this theoretical framework and applying it to several intellectual fields and other existential issues. For instance, in the South African context it has been applied to address racial division and past injustices and encouraging the practice of forgiveness. Hence in this case, the notion of Ubuntu is employed to grounding human rights in South Africa. Ubuntu is also seen as a philosophy and ethics that could be used to ground gender equity. Matolino (2020) engages Ubuntu as virtue ethics that should undergird business, economic and social development.

Although Ubuntu is a Nguni word, it is an ideology, philosophy, and multidimensional concept found in several other parts of SSA. Some of the different forms of the expressions of the concept of Ubuntu in other parts of SSA include *bomoto* (in Bhangi, Democratic Republic of Congo; giKwese, Angola), *bumuntu* (in kiSukwama and kiHaya, Tanzania), *umundu* (in Kikuyu, Kenya), *umuntu* (in Kmeru, Kenya), *vumuntu* (shiTsonga and shiTowa, Mozambique), etc (Sambala, Cooper & Manderson, 2020). In other words, Ubuntu has to do with relationality and humanity in this case, and relational ethics are central in defining our humanity. What this means is that Ubuntu emphasises and affirms our humanity through our relationship with others in the community. It is in this way that we are human beings and humane.

Ubuntu brings out the idea that we share our humanity with others who also share their humanity with us. Thus, the community is an epitome of the supreme good and it is in the community that we enter humane relationships with each other and derive our humanity. In this way, our humanness and humanity are brought to the fore and in this case, we can agree that Ubuntu depicts humanness or being humane since it leads to treating others as humans who deserve our care and respect. Ubuntu enhances and promotes the principles of communion (harmony), life (vitality) and the common good (Metz, 2017). The first principle states that “actions are right insofar as they promote (or prize) communion or harmony” (Metz, 2017, p.67). The second principle holds that “actions are right insofar as they promote vitality” (ibid). Finally, the third principle asserts that “actions are right insofar as they promote the common good without treating people’s dignity disrespectfully in the process” (Metz, 2017, p.68). These principles undergird human life and lead to communal and harmonious coexistence, brotherhood, care, love, concern, friendship, empathy, respect, sympathy, solidarity, etc. The view here is that an appreciation of social harmony, interconnectedness, compassion, and respect for others resonate with the values of Ubuntu and enable such communities to thrive.

Thus, Ubuntu is a suitable theoretical framework in this paper because: 1) it defines what makes us humane, and 2) it highlights practices that should be encouraged and those that must be discouraged. Using this Ubuntu theory, we shall contend that cultural practices and beliefs that perpetuate the abuse of women and girls and promote the spread of HIV/AIDS must be seen as dehumanising, discouraged, and stopped. Also, we shall argue that values such as love, caring, compassion, concern, empathy, friendship, sympathy, generosity, respect, solidarity, etc should be encouraged and practiced since it promotes human dignity and rights. The discussions that follow, dwell on examples of some of deeply held cultural practices that are inconsistent with Ubuntu.

RESULTS

The interplay between culture, women’s rights and HIV

Decades of HIV/AIDS and broader public health research indicates that the interconnection between harmful cultural practices and human health and development is palpable. There is need to examine the significant role of culture in Africa, in order to unpack the conspicuous features of the practices that contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Segobye (2016) stresses how research has repeatedly shown the role of cultural practices in the spread of HIV/AIDS and how they hinder efforts to address the epidemic in southern Africa. Most of these practices are detrimental to girls and women, putting them at risk of infection. Some cultural beliefs and values on sexual networking, sexual orientation, and gender and marital relation norms have been linked to HIV/AIDS in Africa. According to Klaas (2017) some cultural values impact the sexual behaviour of men and boys, they are allowed to be sexually liberal, have many sexual partners and encouraged to experiment sexually before marriage. While many African communities value these traditions, it is clear that they serve the needs of men and impinge on women’s rights and increase their risk of HIV/AIDS infection – compromising the attainment of sustainable development goals (SDG 3 and SDG 5 in particular).

Sexual cleansing of girls by a ‘hyena’

Sexual cleansing is a popular cultural practice in many African countries, including Angola, Congo, Ivory Coast,

Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia (Kiunguyu, 2019). In this cultural practice, after her first period, a girl is required by custom to engage in sex with a *fisi* ('hyena') – a practice known as *kusasa fumbi* in Malawi. *Kusasa fumbi* means shaking off dust, and a hyena is called *fisi* in Malawi's Cewa language. In some remote areas of the south and eastern parts of Malawi, girls are culturally required to have sex with a 'hyena' once they reach puberty. Even though some of the girls are underage, this normalized practice is not seen as rape. Instead, it is seen as a justified cleansing ritual that sees teenage girls being made to have sex over three days to mark their passage into womanhood. Girls are forced to undergo this tradition, which infringes on their rights and exposes them to HIV/AIDS. This practice violates the girls' rights and impedes on their right to education and health, particularly in cases where they contract HIV/AIDS. In this context, communities that adhere to this practice believe that a failure to do this ritual exposes their families to disease, death, or misfortune. Warria (2018) adds that this practice is still normalised in some rural and isolated areas of Malawi and this violates girls' rights, exposing them to HIV and impacting on their growth and development.

Sexual cleansing of widows

Widow cleansing is another cultural practice that is prevalent in Africa, and it is practised in Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique. Among other countries (Cruz, Mateus & Dlamini, 2018; Saguti, 2017; Perry et al., 2014). While Ubuntu articulates justice, humanity, and respect for others, being a widow in some remote rural areas one is of little value and considered impure until they are cleansed. The culture in these areas demand that they should be cleansed of their husbands' deaths and it is believed cleansing will chase away demons, and in such instances women are required to have sexual intercourse with a relative or a complete stranger without protection – a practice known as *tero chi liel* amongst the Luo people in Kenya (Perry et al., 2014). Unpacking the culture of widow cleansing, it is indicated that this ritual demands a widow to have sex with a man, her brothers in law in most cases, to allow the spirit of the dead husband to rest in peace (Saguti, 2017). It is further noted and believed that if a woman is uncleansed, the dead husband's spirit will continue to recognise her as his wife, which might interfere with the widow's future relationship. What the practitioners of this cultural practice do not acknowledge is that it exposes them to contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

It can be argued that the practice of sexual cleansing of widows increases the chances of contracting HIV, amongst other STIs since some of these 'cleansers' are HIV positive and do not use condoms, which exposes widows to HIV/AIDS. In Malawi where the practice is also rife, they call it *kulowa kufa*. Similarly, in Mozambique, a widow is required to undergo *pita-kufa* – a practice which entails numerous sessions of unprotected sex with her brother-in-law (Cruz et al., 2018). Monitored by a traditional healer, the ritual involves three consecutive days of unprotected sex for two or three times a day between a widow and a purifier. Protection is not used because it is believed that the hot sexual fluids get rid of the impurity caused by the death of a husband, however, this ritual exposes the widow to HIV/AIDS (Cruz et al., 2018).

Sleeping with a virgin to treat HIV/AIDS

Another way of sexual cleansing entails cleansing from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. In their paper on 'Child sexual abuse and links to HIV and orphanhood in urban Zimbabwe', Birdthistle, Floyd, Mwanasa, Nyagadza, Gwiza and Glynn (2011) link the increase in sexual exploitation of young people to the AIDS pandemic. The authors specifically highlight "... myths that sex with a virgin can cure AIDS or bring luck in business and life" (Birdthistle et al., 2011, p.1075) – evidenced in the percentage of children who tested HIV positive after rape. Leclerc-Madlala, Simbayi and Cloete (2009) further add that, in some instances, some traditional healers advise their clients to have sex with virgins as a way of cleansing themselves from HIV/AIDS and other STIs. Studies further reveal that some healers engage in sexual intercourse with their clients to treat various ailments like depressions and infertility (Leclerc-Madlala et al., 2009). These findings are consistent with earlier studies by Leclerc-Madlala (2002) who records the historical belief, in some sections of society, in the ideology that sex with a virgin cure other disease as well. Such beliefs and cultural practices are no doubt detrimental to society and violate women and girls as they become victims of abuse as highlighted in studies by Birdthistle et al (2011).

Penis testing and sexual cleansing after *ulwaluko*

Ulwaluko is a cultural initiation process and practice amongst the Xhosa people in South Africa involving passage of boys into manhood. Teachings during this process which is not only performed by the Xhosa people, have always been about promoting the values of Ubuntu. However, of late, the practice has been tainted with instances of inhuman behaviour and immorality where young men are taught to have sex with women after circumcision as a way of cleansing themselves – through '*ukukhipha ifutha*' (Vincent, 2008). In Malawi they also have their own variation of *ukukhipha ifutha* and they call it *kutaya mafuta* (Banda & Kunkeyani, 2015). Initiation, which was a

platform for the cultural teachings and sexual socialisation of young men, now records instances of moral decay where young men are no longer taught about sexual responsibility and restraint but taught that initiation gives men the unlimited rights to sex hence, they are encouraged to engage in sex with a woman they do not intend to marry. Other studies note that some traditional guardians introduce inhuman teachings to the initiates, for example, teaching them that after graduation, they must sleep with women who are not their girlfriends to get rid of the back luck acquired during *ulwaluko*. In this context, young men from *entabeni* (place of initiation) are taught to have sex with a woman who is not their partner in cleansing their penis (*ukukhipha ifutha*) and test if it is working and this increases exposure to HIV infection and other STIs. A study by Ndhlovu (2020) also found that in the Vaal area (Gauteng, South Africa), some initiates from *entabeni* engage in rape and gang-raping women, which increases the initiates and the women's exposure to HIV. Buttressing this argument, Maluleke (2012) records the complaints made by civil society organisations in the South African provinces of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu Natal and Limpopo about the ritual of cleansing that sees initiates finding women, even widows and gang-raping them to cleanse themselves after initiation.

DISCUSSION

Ubuntu puts emphasis on the view that humans are connected to/with and dependent on each other. This leads to care, compassion, concern, and respect for one another. Hence, Ubuntu brings our humanness to play since it encourages communal coexistence and mutual respect. In other words, Ubuntu "encourages the individual to apply the traits and practice of humanity with fellow humans regardless of social stratification and class differentiation." (Matolino, 2020, p.12). This enables individuals to coexist, enhance their well-being, and foster the common good of all in the community. Therefore, African cultural practices and beliefs such as the sexual cleansing of girls by a 'hyena', sexual cleansing of widows, sleeping with virgins to treat HIV/AIDS, penis testing and sexual cleansing after cultural initiation are against the values of Ubuntu. Besides violation of women and girls' rights, these practices are no longer prised due to the presence and prevalence of HIV/AIDS that is ravaging Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, their negative impact on women and children can no longer be ignored. We shall clarify this remark in the paragraphs that follow. For instance, the practice of sexual cleansing of girls by a 'hyena' does not bring out the ideals of Ubuntu. Instead, it is against the values that Ubuntu depicts and promotes. The fact that the 'hyena' are employed to defile girls as young as 11years old is inconsistent with the values of Ubuntu as (Kiunguyu, 2019) as such practices are essentially sexual abuse of children. With the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, the *kusasa fumba* practice enhances its spread, compromising the health of both the 'cleanser' and the 'cleansed'.

Also, the sexual cleansing of widows is devoid of Ubuntu, although it is an age-long practice in some African societies, in practice, it dictates that widows need to have sex with cleansers with the belief that the process will grant rest to the spirit of their deceased husbands (Perry et al., 2014). This act does not bring out or promote Ubuntu because it is often done against the widows' consent. It is an abuse of their humanity, which Ubuntu entails. It further weakens their humanity when this act or practice leads to them being infected by the deadly HIV/AIDS, leading to their deteriorating health and possible death. Furthermore, having sex with a virgin as an act and means of healing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS (Leclerc-Madlala et al., 2009) is antithetical to Ubuntu's goals and ideals as many of them are underage and there are chances of them getting infected. Thus, the ideals of Ubuntu are not served because these virgins' humanity is denied, and their life put in jeopardy since some of the cleansers are HIV positive from cleansing multiple girls and widows.

The same applies to penis testing and sexual cleansing after *ulwaluko*, the practice does not espouse the values of Ubuntu, such as respect, promoting life and the common good, especially in cases where it results in rape. However, the promotion of penis testing and cleansing promotes abuse of girls and women. This practice jeopardizes the lives of these girls and women as it often leads to infection with HIV and emotional damage to those that are raped. It is germane to note that the practices and beliefs are against the principle of communion or harmony, and they bifurcate and polarise society and absolutize men on the one hand and debase women on the other hand. They deny the girl-child and women their right to freedom, health and life.

Thus, Ubuntu is not served in the above-discussed African practices and beliefs because each of these practices do not conform to the common values of Ubuntu, such as care, love, compassion, etc. Instead, the practices depict and promote hate, anger, unforgiveness, etc, towards the perpetrators by the victims. It also leads to regret, depression, emotional, mental, and psychological imbalance. Furthermore, these practices and beliefs victims are sometimes infected with HIV/AIDS. Worst is that most victims become withdrawn from society and see themselves as outcasts, rejected by society with some even end up committing suicide. In essence, the discussed African cultural practices and beliefs do not promote Ubuntu and its ideals. Therefore, any practices that do not promote human dignity and rights in and for both men and women, boys and girls, ought to be declared anathema and tabooed. Also, since Ubuntu bestows and promotes human dignity, any harmful cultural practices and beliefs should be declared obsolete and irrelevant. This is because they are anti-Ubuntu and dehumanise members of society.

African scholars such as Sambala, Cooper and Manderson (2020), have argued that Ubuntu has facilitated

positive attitudinal health change concerning HIV/AIDS in Uganda. For them, Ubuntu's values such as solidarity, respect, care, sharing, human rights, and social cohesion have been employed to lessen the spread of HIV. This is because of the idea of inclusivity and the value of respect. Both men and women see themselves as inclusive members of society that must be respected, loved, and cared for. Thus, they developed a communal or communocentric ethics that considers the community as above the individual. The lesson is that Ubuntu can help us militate against the spread of HIV/AIDS if its ideals and values are imbibed and practiced enhancing communion, life, and the common good. This is possible when there is sexual security for both girls and women birthed by Ubuntu's principles and values. Ubuntu grants rights to all and sundry without gender bias.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussions above and the health implications of the discussed cultural practices, which are inconsistent with the values of Ubuntu and harmful to society, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. Ubuntu be employed to articulate universal ethics to guide African communal life
2. The principles and values of Ubuntu be taught and practiced by all and sundry in Africa
3. Ubuntu's ethics, principles, and values should inform and guide the drawing of sex ethics and policies.
4. Children should be introduced to Ubuntu's ethics, principles, and values earlier in life to live them out easily as they grow up.

CONCLUSION

In summation, this study concludes that some African cultural practices and beliefs are harmful to society and antithetical to Ubuntu and its values. Practices such as the sexual cleansing of girls by a 'hyena', sexual cleansing of widows, sleeping with virgins to treat HIV/AIDS, penis testing, and sexual cleansing after *uhwaluko* have contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS in SSA. But, on the other hand, we have also argued that Ubuntu's principles and values can help curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS if the values of common good, respect and harmony are imbibed and practiced by all and sundry in African societies.

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