Features and Investigative Implications of Muti Murder in South Africa

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Abstract

Drawing upon anthropological, legal and forensic publications, an interview with a South African Zulu traditional healer and direct information gained during homicide investigations, the nature of Muti murder is discussed. Muti murder is defined as a murder in which body parts are removed from a live victim for the sole purpose of using the victim's body parts medicinally. These body parts are then often mixed with other ingredients or used alone to make a medicine called muti. Muti is a Zulu (umuthi) word meaning medicine. The victim usually dies as a result of blood loss from the wounds. While muti murders have occurred throughout history in South African culture, little is known about them and little research exists on the phenomenon. The term muti murder has been used interchangeably with the term ritual or sacrificial murder, often adding to confusion in terminology and definitions regarding these types of cases. This paper provides an overview of muti murder, explains the context in which these types of murder occur, defines the offenders and victims involved, and provides guidelines for investigating these types of murders. Two cases where muti murder was suspected are discussed. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: muti murder; investigative psychology; profiling; homicide; cross-cultural; murder typology; criminal mutilation; South African Police Service

INTRODUCTION

A number of anthropological, legal and forensic reports (Ashton, 1943; Chavunduka, 2001; Minnaar, 1998; Minnaar, 2001; Minnaar, Offringa & Payze, 1991; Nel, Verschoor, Calitz & van Rensburg, 1992; Ngubane, 1986; Prinsloo & Du Plessis, 1989; Schapera, 1952; Scholtz, Phillips & Knobel, 1997) indicate that muti murder has been practiced as part of a subculture of traditional African beliefs for centuries. With the arrival of western criminal justice systems and beliefs, such practices have become illegal. Because little is known about muti murder, modern law enforcement agencies lack guidance in investigating these

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cases. A few studies of muti murder were conducted earlier in the twentieth century (Ashton, 1943; Grové, 1950; Schapera, 1952), but many questions have been left unanswered especially with regard to appropriate strategies for the investigation of muti murder. Scholtz, Phillips and Knobel (1997) have argued that political issues are partly responsible for there being little empirical literature available. Scholtz et al. (1997) state that there are persistent rumours linking top political and law enforcement officials with such practices, making the topic considered by some to be too politically sensitive to investigate, yet they do not elaborate on their sources for these rumours.

For law enforcement agencies it is imperative to be able to distinguish between muti murders, cult related murders, sadistic murders, serial murders and other typologies of murder that may involve mutilation, but which may require different approaches when conducting an investigation. Each one of these crimes has a different context, some are group related, such as a cult murder, others part of a broader belief system, such as muti murder, and others are unique to the offender’s own psyche, such as a sadistic murder. People not knowledgeable about muti murders could launch an inappropriate investigative process which would be focused on the incorrect type of offender. Investigative psychologists or behavioural investigative analysts in such circumstances might make signature interpretations, compile offender profiles or give investigative inputs which could prove to be extremely misleading for investigators (cf. Keppel & Birnes, 2003).

INFORMATION ON MUTI MURDER

The information for this article comes from three sources. First, is the small amount of academic literature existing on the topic of muti murder. This literature is from anthropological, legal and forensic journals. These are few in number and are not focused directly on investigative aspects. Second, is an interview with Mr Credo Mutwa one of South Africa’s most well known traditional healers. Mr Mutwa has published several books and articles in journals on traditional healing. He has also spoken at international conferences on the topic of traditional healers. Mr Mutwa has also regularly provided input to the South African Police Service (SAPS) in its understanding of the belief systems involved in muti murder and was one of the traditional healers that assisted Scotland Yard in the investigation of the ‘Adam’ murder case described later. The third source of information used to understand muti murder is the author’s experience in such investigations. As commander of the SAPS’ Investigative Psychology Unit the author is responsible for providing investigative support and investigator training for muti murders and other ‘psychologically motivated crimes’ such as serial murder, serial rape, sexual murders and the investigation of paedophiles. As an officer in the Serious and Violent Crime component of the detective service the author has access to the police case docket and its contents, which includes the investigation diary, statements, confessions, crime scene and autopsy photographs and autopsy reports. The author also has access to suspects for interview purposes. To date the author has been involved in over 30 muti murder investigations.

DEFINING MUTI MURDER

The word ‘muti’ is a Zulu word meaning medicine. It is therefore a mistake to assume that when the word muti is used, crime is involved. Muti murder may be loosely defined as a murder where the intention is to gather human body parts for use in traditional African
Muti murder

The purpose is usually to improve an individual’s or a community’s circumstances. A traditional healer usually advocates it after having been consulted by a client. A third party carries out the actual murder. The traditional healer, as a rule, is never involved in the murder. The reason for using human body parts is that they are considered to be more powerful than the usual ingredients or methods used by the traditional healer as they contain the person’s ‘life essence’. These ‘usual’ ingredients may include, but are not limited to, roots, herbs, other plant material, animal parts and seawater. Characteristically the traditional healer would consult the ancestors to determine the cause of the problem, and then would prescribe the treatment. The death of the victim usually occurs after the injuries have been inflicted whilst removing the body parts. Traditionally the victim must be alive when the body parts are removed as this increases the ‘power’ of the muti because the body parts then retain the person’s life essence.

RITUAL/ SACRIFICIAL MURDER OR MUTI MURDER?

There are important differences between muti murder and other types of ritualistic/sacrificial murder. Whilst the muti murder may be ritualised in that it is done in a certain way, it is not, in itself, a sacrificial act in the sense of appeasing a god or deity. The aim is solely to obtain body parts for ingredients. A ritual murder, a term often used by lay-people synonymously with sacrificial murder, which can occur in a wide variety of belief systems such as Satanism, voodoo, or other African beliefs, is intended as a sacrifice (Minnaar, 1998; Olivier, 1990; Prinsloo & Du Plessis, 1989). In other words, the aim is to offer the life of an individual to appease or win favour with a deity. For example, a ritual murder in the South African context might include the myths referring to Venda virgins who were sacrificed to the crocodiles in the Fundudzi Lake or thrown into the Tshatshingo Whirlpools as offerings to ancestral spirits for the good of the community (Minnaar, 1998; Prinsloo & Du Plessis, 1989). Others even feel that to use the term ‘murder’ is incorrect since it is ‘... far from just an act of wanton wickedness’ (Ngubane, 1986, p. 191) and the death of the victim is not the intention.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In traditional African beliefs it is assumed that there is only a certain amount of luck in society. Each individual receives a portion of that luck. It is therefore believed that if another person is successful, then they have obtained an extra portion of luck via devious means, usually with the intervention of the supernatural. It is also traditionally believed that setbacks or calamities, such as drought or illness, are signs that the natural and social order have been disturbed (Minnaar, 2001). One means of obtaining this extra portion of luck or restoring the natural order is through the use of strong muti. It is with this strong muti that muti murders are often associated. Muti made from human body parts is considered to be exceptionally powerful. Which body parts are used will be guided by the aims of the ‘client’ who approaches the traditional healer. The traditional healer will then determine which specific body parts are necessary.

It should however, not be assumed that in modern times such practices are sanctioned by the larger community. The majority of Africans and traditional healers do not condone such behaviour and associate it more with charlatans and ‘evil’ traditional healers. Despite this reluctance, there are times when such murders are more prevalent.
Currently crime statistics in South Africa only record muti murder within the general category of murder. It is therefore difficult to determine the extent of such crimes. It has been estimated as occurring between 15 and 300 times each year (Jonker, personal communication, 2002). Times of political unrest, periods of competition for resources, and conditions of a power vacuum have all been associated with increased incidence of muti murder. The Limpopo Province, previously known as the Northern Province, in South Africa tends to have a high record of muti related crime, yet instances of muti murder have occurred all over South Africa in rural areas, and in urban areas such as Soweto, near Johannesburg.

However, most often these murders occur in rural areas, and may go unreported to the police. Also, with the high temperatures in South Africa, bodies rapidly decompose, making it difficult to determine precisely what insults to the body were inflicted. Furthermore, animal predator activity leads to the damaging or complete destruction of wound sites, thereby making it difficult to determine the original cause of the wound. The timing of a wound is also important, muti mutilation is typically pre-mortem therefore the wound site shows an indication of a vital reaction and bleeding. While it is often possible to see if there was a vital reaction by looking at the wound at the crime scene, the forensic pathologist’s report should clarify any uncertainty.

Police may also not recognize the bodily insults to be muti in origin and may assume them to be the actions of a ‘crazed’ killer. Serial murder victims sometimes have mutilated bodies or removed body parts. For example, Stewart Wilken in South Africa cut off the nipples of one of his black victims. Samuel Jacques Coetzee removed the penis and scrotum of one his black male victims, and the Cape Town Serial Killer disemboweled one of his female victims (authors files). Additionally, sadistic murderers may inflict seemingly comparable wounds to their victims pre-mortem.

Some law enforcement officers may adhere to more traditional belief systems, and thus be unwilling to define a murder as being a muti murder for fear of retribution from the traditional healer involved. Also, since it is a rumour that certain high-ranking politicians, business people, and other civil servants have participated in such dealings, some police officers may be cautious about their involvement in such cases. Consequently, media, community, and politics all play a part in the investigation of these cases.

The author has experienced at least four cases in which grave robbing and thefts from mortuaries have occurred in order to obtain body parts. Other authors (Chavunduka, 2001; Minnaar, 2001; Schapera, 1952) report similar incidents. Such crimes can be considered the work of ‘less honest’ participants in muti murder since the body parts are supposed to be removed while the victim is still alive. For investigative purposes, it may be interesting to note that people who commit this type of crime are likely to be less devout practitioners of the belief system. It may be helpful to consider what these types of cadaver body part stealers believe and whether their objectives are solely financial.

**THE OFFENDERS**

In muti murder there are at least three people involved in perpetuating the crime. These include the client, the traditional healer, and the murderer(s).
The client

The client who approaches the traditional healer is usually someone who wants to achieve a measure of personal gain. This may include financial gain for a business person, fertility problems, power for a politician, or protection for a criminal. The author has a record of over 10 instances where cash in transit van robberies were foiled and the suspects apprehended all had muti on their persons. They had first consulted with a traditional healer with regards to their criminal intention and the traditional healer had provided them with muti for purposes such as making them bullet-proof, invisible and to prevent arrest by the police, other investigators of similar crimes have reported similar features. Clients may be male or female.

Large sums of money are involved for muti involving human body parts. Prices for body parts can vary depending on which part and on the traditional healer. A traditional healer reported that a human body part for muti, such as a head, can cost up to approximately $1000. The client is not involved in the murder and would only approach the traditional healer to explain his need, provide the money, and collect the muti once prepared. It would not usually be the client himself who suggests the use of human body parts, as is discussed in the next section, the traditional healer is the one that decides what ingredients would be necessary to meet the client's needs. This makes it difficult to convict the client in instances of muti murder, as it is difficult to prove that he knew he was paying for muti that would eventually require the murder of an individual.

The traditional healer

According to Mr Credo Mutwa, a traditional healer in South Africa (Mutwa, personal communication, 2002), during an interview with the author, the traditional healers who make such muti would most likely not be known by the community to be a traditional healer. He terms them 'secret sangomas'. He emphasizes that these traditional healers are not part of the mainstream traditional healers and such practices are rejected by other healers. It is the author's experience that in cases where traditional healers have been linked to these crimes, they were at least known by the community to be traditional healers. It is therefore unclear how clients would know which traditional healers make use of such muti, or even, as mentioned earlier, if they would necessarily know that their muti contained a human body part as an ingredient.

Once approached by the client, the traditional healer would decide whether the request from the client would require herbs and roots, animal body parts or human body parts. He would then instruct a third person, the murderer(s), to collect specific body parts and in how to carry out the removal of those body parts. The traditional healer is, as a rule, not typically involved in the removal of the body parts. Once the body parts are obtained they are often mixed with herbs, roots and even animal parts to make the final muti. Depending on the client's need, he would be instructed on how to use the muti. A businessman may be instructed to bury a hand under or near the front door of his business, as a hand is symbolically what attracts customers and takes their money, or he may be instructed to smear a small amount of the muti on the products he sells. A criminal might be instructed to smear some of the muti on his weapon or bullets to help him in his criminal endeavours, such as to make him bullet-proof, invisible, or to prevent the police from arresting him. The body parts are usually obtained on request when there is a need and not 'stock-piled' for future use.
The murderer

The murderer is approached, usually by the traditional healer, to obtain the body parts. The author has only had one instance where a suspect had acted on his own initiative to obtain a human head and then seek a buyer. This led to an informer contacting the police who then, with the aid of a local traditional healer, set up a trap pretending to be interested in purchasing the head which led to the suspect’s arrest.

The murderer is carefully instructed in how to remove the body parts, and told that the victim must be alive when they are removed. The murderer will then take the body parts directly to the traditional healer. This is the only apparent role the murderer has. The murderer must also make sure that the victim has the necessary qualities that the client needs and therefore he may know the victim to a greater or lesser degree. For example if the client’s need was to be more lucky at gambling, then the murderer might be instructed to seek out a victim who is known to be a ‘lucky person’. It is even rumoured that the murderer may select victims from within his own family. There are no specific categories of individuals who commit the actual murder. It may be a person who still honours the old traditions, or one who seeks the financial reward offered for the body parts, or one who is bribed to become an accomplice (Minnaar, 2001). It is the author’s experience that the murderer can also be a trainee of the traditional healer making the muti. Furthermore, there seems to be an increase in grave robbing where the body parts removed are similar to those used in muti. Also, theft or sale of body parts from hospitals and mortuaries has occurred. It is uncertain whether or not the traditional healer would be able to tell if a body part is removed pre- or post-mortem.

The weapons used tend to be everyday items such as pocket-knives, sharp kitchen knives or even in one instance a sharpened putty-spatula used for tiling and inserting panes of glass. The author has not come across any instances in over 30 cases where ‘surgical’ instruments have been used to remove body parts.

The victims tend to be selected because they fulfill the criteria required for the necessary body parts (Nel, Verschoor, Calitz, & van Rensburg, 1992). Victims tend to be healthy (Minnaar, Offringa, & Payze, 1991) and in many instances young black males, however it has been the author’s experience that females are often victims of muti murder. The victim (Scholtz et al., 1997) may be known to the murderer, perhaps a friend or relative, the author has case details where a father who was a traditional healer used his infant son for muti purposes. According to Scholtz et al. (1997), a stranger or enemy is never chosen, yet Scholtz et al. (1997) do not specify on what basis they make this statement. In the author’s experience from his cases that stranger victims tend to be the majority in muti murders. Victims can range in age from a new born infant to adult. It is not completely clear what makes one person become a victim in preference of another, but obviously if the traditional healer needs a penis then the victim would have to be male. The elderly are perhaps the only age group who are not targeted in muti murder, presumably because any muti made from an older person would be considered weak and ineffective. The author is not aware from his experience or that of others, of instances where elderly victims have been targeted.

Although the three perpetrator roles are usually taken by different people two cases are known in which an individual decided on his own to use muti made of human body parts.
Table 1. Body parts and their meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body part</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breast</td>
<td>A source of ‘mother luck.’ If you want to attract women for your business, you will use breasts. Breasts contain fat, which is considered very lucky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitals</td>
<td>‘Luck’ resides in the genitals of a man and woman. Often used for virility purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throat</td>
<td>Blood is an important ingredient and may be collected by cutting the throat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlas bone</td>
<td>Considered quite powerful, since the belief is that the circulatory system and nervous system run through the bone, and it is the pivotal link between mind and body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands</td>
<td>Used to attract business, hand symbolically beckons customers and takes money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscles</td>
<td>Bicep or thigh is removed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Taken from stomach, or area of kidneys, considered lucky. Often a staple ingredients in muti. Used to ensure a good harvest in Venda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urine</td>
<td>Considered to bring luck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sperm</td>
<td>Considered to bring luck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limbs</td>
<td>May be stolen from a hospital after an amputation. A leg can be sold for $500 in Lesotho.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skull</td>
<td>Protects members of one tribe from another tribe by burying enemy victim’s head in village. Brains may be used to improve intelligence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongue</td>
<td>Used to smooth the path to a girl’s heart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>Supposed to give far sightedness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adams apple</td>
<td>Used to silence a witness intending to testify against the client.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(oral healer role), harvested the parts (murderer role), and used the body parts (client role). In both cases the offender was diagnosed as psychotic. This suggests that as in other areas of psychosis, individuals can absorb beliefs from their culture and internalise them. There is thus a question in these two cases of whether they should really be considered muti murders or an aspect of psychosis.

**BODY PARTS AND THEIR USES**

Experience and literature indicates that typically the genitalia and certain other body parts are removed, but any body part can potentially be used depending on the muti required (see Table 1). The stomach may be slit open from sternum down to the hip region, and it is not uncommon for the head to be removed. The author has been involved in at least 10 instances where the head was removed from a muti victim. As mentioned, for the muti to be effective the body parts must be removed while the victim is still alive (Nel et al., 1992; Scholtz et al., 1997). Scholtz et al. (1997) state that the body parts may be wrapped in specifically coloured material, with red and white being associated with ‘good’ medicine and blue and black being associated with ‘evil’ medicine. The body is usually not buried and is often left near running water. Nel et al. (1992) state that the body is characteristically not hidden or buried because the discovery of the body contributes to the efficacy of the medicine. There have been a few reported incidents where the victims of such muti motivated attacks have survived after certain body parts, such as breasts or the scrotum, have been removed. This highlights the difference between muti attacks and ritual/sacrificial murders: the goal of the ritual/sacrificial murder is the death of the individual, yet in muti attacks the goal is to obtain body parts.

It must be pointed out, however, that people who commit muti murders, or the traditional healers that advocate such murders, do not all work from the same 'textbook'. These beliefs are passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth and in secrecy. Therefore the finer details, such as which body parts are used for what purposes, and the process involved in the removal of the body parts, may differ from traditional healer to traditional healer and region to region. Therefore no hard and fast assumptions can be made about which missing body parts will be significant in any given murder.

CRIMINAL MUTILATION OF THE HUMAN BODY

Human mutilation has a history outside Africa as well. Ritual mutilation associated with religious sacrifice has been connected with many forms of religion, and has occurred amongst all Indo-European people (Rajs, Lundtröm, Broberg, Lidberg, & Lindquist, 1998). In certain strict Islamic countries the dismemberment of a thief’s hand for stealing is an accepted practice. In other countries the removal of body parts for cosmetic purposes, as in breast reduction, is widely practiced and accepted, and certain cells from foetuses are used for medicinal purposes in western medicine. However, self-mutilation and mutilation sanctioned by a judicial authority differs qualitatively from criminal mutilation.

Several researchers have written on the classification of criminal mutilation (Karger, Rand & Brinkman, 2000; Krauland, Schneider, Smerling & Ludwig, 1980; Orsos, 1940; Püschel & Koops, 1987; Rajs et al., 1998; Ziemke, 1918) and most seem to differentiate between at least two types of criminal mutilation: defensive and offensive mutilation. Others use criminal mutilation as a way of classifying the offender, usually by means of the organised/ disorganized typology (Douglas et al., 1992). However, this use of criminal mutilation to classify offenders has come under research-based criticism (Canter, Alison, Alison, & Wentink, in press).

Rajs et al. (1998) describe four types of criminal mutilation determined by the purpose for the mutilation, based on a 30-year study of criminal mutilation of the human body in Sweden. These types are defensive mutilation, aggressive mutilation, offensive mutilation, and necromanic mutilation. The reasons for each of these types of mutilation murder is as follows:

1. **Defensive mutilation:** Not to be confused with defensive wounds that a victim may suffer while attempting to thwart an attack from an offender, the objective of this type is to get rid of the body and/or to make identification difficult. This is also known as dismemberment.

   An example would be the torso of a young white girl which was found in a river in Holland. It turned out that the girl had died of exposure due to the neglect and abuse of her parents, and that her step-father had decapitated and dismembered her body before placing it in the river with the aim of delaying identification (Van der Meer, personal communication, 2002).

2. **Aggressive mutilation:** This occurs where the act of killing is brought about by a state of rage, and the mutilation of the body occurs during this enraged state. This may involve the face and genital region. For example, the victim might be known to the murderer, who is trying to dehumanise the victim by mutilating the face. Conversely, the victim could be a stranger, but represent something to the murderer (i.e. sexuality, or femininity), so he tries to eradicate these traits symbolically.
(3) **Offensive mutilation:** This type is commonly found in lust murders and necrosadistic murders. Here either (a) a necrophile has an urge to kill and carry out sexual activities with a corpse, with prior or subsequent mutilation; or (b) a sexual sadist has a need to engage in sexual activities while inflicting pain, humiliation, or death on the victim. The mutilation usually begins while the person is alive and can continue after death, or may only be commenced after death.

(4) **Necromanic mutilation:** This type is carried out on a corpse. This practice is sometimes seen in necrophilia, i.e. sexual attraction to or sexual contact with a dead body, or with the purpose of using a body part or parts as a trophy, symbol or fetish.

The purpose of muti murders, as has been argued, is rather different from any of the above categories. The mutilation that occurs in muti murder, which may include dismemberment or decapitation, is not done with the intention of delaying identification, nor is the mutilation brought about by a fit of rage, as the murder is carefully planned and a victim selected, nor is there any sexual activity or fantasy involved in the mutilation. Finally, in muti murder the body parts must be removed while the victim is alive, thus excluding necromantic mutilation.

Even in circumstances where the mutilation for muti purposes occurred after death by means of grave robbing or theft from a hospital mortuary, it does not fit neatly into any of these categories. A proper classification of muti murder requires knowledge of belief systems and purposes that are unfamiliar to western societies. Investigators and researchers need to understand the context and place that such crimes hold in traditional belief systems. Criminal actions may be misinterpreted when proper understanding of the psychological context is not present.

**CASE STUDIES**

**Mistaken muti?: The case of Adam**

In September of 2001 the torso of a young black boy, approximately 5 years old, christened ‘Adam’ by the London Metropolitan Police, was discovered floating in the Thames River near Tower Bridge. His head and neck had been removed along with both his arms and legs. He had died from massive blood loss. The skin and underlying tissue had been carefully cut with a sharp instrument and both his femurs and humerus bones had been bisected with an instrument similar to a cleaver or machete. Approximately 24 hours after death a pair of bright orange shorts had been placed on him, and approximately 24 hours later his body was placed in the river. His arms, legs and head were never discovered. No one reported a child of that age missing and no one has come forward with information as to his identity. Nelson Mandela was even approached to use his status as a public figure to advertise the appeal for information to assist with the investigation. Candles and a white sheet with an African name on it were also found nearby and this aroused initial fears that Adam had been the victim of an African ritual. Police later showed that these items were not connected to Adam’s case (O’Reilly, personal communication, 2002).

Forensic tests revealed that Adam’s stomach contents indicated meals similar to those prepared in Western Africa, and the pollen spores on the food were also indicative of a West African origin. Tests revealed that Adam had been given a cough linctus approximately 24 hours prior to his death and that he appeared to have been in good health prior to his attack.
Initially muti murder was suspected. Detectives from the London Metropolitan Police Service contacted the Investigative Psychology Unit of the South African Police Service (SAPS) for assistance. This unit assists in the investigation of crimes such as serial murder, serial rape, muti murder and murders with bizarre circumstances. The Unit provided the investigation team with information from their own experience with muti murders and also consulted a traditional healer, Mr Credo Mutwa, for further advice on the nature of the murder. The information was passed on to the London Met investigation team. The Investigative Psychology Unit felt that Adam was not the victim of a muti murder as defined by the author. The reasons for this were the following:

1. It is not common for all limbs to be removed in muti murder. It may occur that a hand or forearm is removed.
2. Usually the genitals of the victim are removed. Adam’s were intact.
3. Usually the stomach is opened, and certain organs removed. Adam’s stomach was intact.
4. Adam died of massive blood loss from a cut to the throat, prior to decapitation and dismemberment, this is more indicative of a sacrificial murder.

Further information from the traditional healer indicated that the orange shorts were meaningful in that the colour indicates resurrection. The intention of putting them on Adam was so that his soul could be resurrected. Also, dressing the victim can indicate a sense of respect for the body. The traditional healer suggested that based on the information available, the circumstances appeared to be similar to a ritual practised in Western Africa called ‘Obeh’ (Mutwa, personal communication, 2002). It should also be pointed out that Adam might have died as a result of a sacrifice or ritual, yet the dismemberment and decapitation might still have been of the type intended to delay identification or to help with disposal of his body.

Prototypical muti: The case of Tsepo

On Sunday, 30 May 1999, 11-year old Tsepo Molemohi left his mother’s house at approximately 1:00pm to play soccer nearby. By 6:00pm he had not returned and his mother sent boys from the neighbourhood to try to locate him. Shortly thereafter, it was reported that the body of a small boy was found in a nearby field. The body was identified to be that of Tsepo.

Tsepo had been decapitated and his scrotum and penis had been removed by a sharp implement. He was fully clothed, with only the area around his genitals exposed. The following day his head was found in a plastic bag on top of the roof of a building at a nearby tennis court. Within four days a suspect had been arrested. Seventeen-year-old Jimmy Bongani Mokolobate was identified as having been seen walking with a bloody knife, and with blood on his clothing on the day in question. After having been apprehended, he admitted to police that he had killed the young boy.

Jimmy’s account of events in a confession before a magistrate indicated that two days prior to the murder he had been approached by two Sangomas (a type of traditional healer), one male and one female, who had offered him money to obtain a male head, tongue, eyes and genitals. His first attempt to find a suitable victim was unsuccessful on the Saturday. On Sunday he found Tsepo whom he decapitated and removed his genitals. He took the genitals with him but placed the head on top of a roof to be collected the next day. He used an ‘okapi’ knife, which is a simple folding pocket-knife, with a blade about 13 cm long.
long and a wooden handle. On Monday he took the genitals to the Sangomas after hearing that the head had been discovered. The Sangomas were disappointed that he had failed to bring the other parts and asked if he would be able to try again to obtain those parts from another victim. Jimmy claims that at the time of the murder he had been smoking a mixture of marijuana and crushed Mandrax (methaqualone) tablets, a practice which appears to be unique to South Africa. Jimmy was found fit to stand trial and was subsequently found guilty. The two Sangomas were also charged but later had the charges withdrawn once Jimmy refused to testify against the Sangomas for fear of retribution. The scrotum and penis he handed over to the Sangomas were never found (author’s files).

This case has many of the common characteristics found in a muti murder. The offender was not the traditional healer but had been approached to obtain the body parts for a fee. The traditional healers had specified which body parts were to be obtained (head, tongue, eyes and genitals) and the type of victim (male). The victim was a stranger to the offender. The victim was left clothed with only the genitals being exposed, and there was no evidence of sexual activity or rape. The victim’s body was not hidden but left where the murder took place. There were also few wounds. The victim had been stabbed in the neck three times, and the head and the genitals were removed. There was no fantasy expressed by the offender, concerning the murder. Finally, the body parts were not found in the offender’s possession nor where he lived with his parents. Those that were found (the head) were discovered at the nearby tennis-court, and those that were not found by the police were handed over to the two Sangomas according to the confession made by the offender.

GUIDELINES FOR INVESTIGATORS AND THOSE WHO MAY ADVISE THEM

Muti murders are often difficult to investigate. The shroud of secrecy surrounding the actual crime and the possible reluctance of some police officers to investigate (due to their own traditional beliefs) is problematic. Many individuals fear reprisal from the traditional healer for coming forward with information.

Differences between other crimes involving mutilation and muti murder

Since there is no direct link between the murderer and the victim, the murder may appear motiveless. It is therefore important to try and differentiate between a mutilation murder, as may occur in a sadistic sexual murder, and a muti murder.

Characteristically, the sadistic murder would have evidence of torture, wounds that would be extremely painful but not necessarily life-threatening. In muti murder the wounds are functional, to remove the body part, whereas in sadistic murder the infliction of pain is the aim of the wound (see Table 2). Also, sadistic murders usually have a sexual theme and the victim might have been raped vaginally or anally. Traces of semen would most likely be present at the crime scene. With serial murder, many of the points for sadistic murder apply with the addition of more victims.

In a serial murder, body parts are often removed post-mortem and are kept as souvenirs of the occasion. Jeffrey Dahmer, for example, kept the heads of some of his victims (Geberth, 2003). Samuel Jacques Coetzee in South Africa kept the penis and scrotum of one of his victims (author’s files). Stewart Wilken another South African serial murderer
Table 2. Sadistic mutilation versus muti mutilation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sadistic mutilation</th>
<th>Muti mutilation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many wounds, less severe</td>
<td>Few wounds, more functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim is to inflict pain &amp; suffering</td>
<td>Aim is to remove body part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual theme: rape, semen, etc</td>
<td>No sexual theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy being played out on scene, guides mutilation</td>
<td>No fantasy guides removal of body parts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Serial murder versus muti murder

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial murder</th>
<th>Muti murder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than one victim</td>
<td>Often isolated incident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar mutilation on bodies</td>
<td>Body parts are ordered and therefore mutilation would be unique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy may guide actions</td>
<td>No fantasy guides actions, upon instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body parts may be kept as souvenirs</td>
<td>Body parts are given to traditional healer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

removed the nipples and external genitalia of one of his victims and ate them at the crime scene after raping and murdering the victim (author’s files). Again, a sexual theme is often present in serial murders and such evidence will be present at the crime scene (see Table 3).

Inferring the characteristics of the offender in muti murder is difficult. The crime is committed on the instruction of the traditional healer, thus is not the result of the any psychological fantasy as may be the case with a serial or sadistic murderer. In other words, the muti murderer is not acting according to an inner ‘script’ which may be played out at the crime scene.

It is imperative for investigators to distinguish whether the mutilation was part of the actual intention of the crime, and therefore useful as a source of information for offender profiling, or whether it was secondary to the actual crime (employed, for example, to hide the body or to delay identification).

A potentially misleading case with investigative implications

Karger et al. (2000) reported a case of criminal mutilation that appears to be very similar to muti murder mutilation. In their case the body of a 32-year-old woman was found undressed, in her apartment, in an advanced state of decomposition. The victim was lying on her back, both hands had been amputated at the wrists and the external parts of the genitals were removed. The body parts had been removed post-mortem and the cause of death was manual strangulation. The body parts were not found at the crime scene. There was no clear indication that any sexual activity had taken place.

This case has certain similarities with a muti-murder. First, body parts were missing. Removal of the external parts of the genitals is quite characteristic of muti-murders and so is the removal of one or more hands. Second, the victim is a 32-year-old female, as mentioned muti-murder victims are never elderly. Third, the victim’s head was left in place, thus one might assume that delaying victim identification was not the motive for the muti-
Muti murder mutilation, and also the victim was found in her home. Fourth, there was no indication from the autopsy that sexual activity had taken place.

In considering the indicators mentioned there were certain pointers to this not being muti murder mutilation. First, the victim was found completely naked, in muti murder the victim is almost never completely naked and clothes are usually only removed just enough to gain access to the desired body parts. Second, the cause of death was strangulation. In muti murder the victims usually die as a result of the wounds received from the removal of the body part(s). Third, the body parts were removed post-mortem, as mentioned, in muti murder experience and literature indicates that the body parts are typically removed while the victim is alive. Fourth, the victim was found inside her home, typically muti murder victims are found outside and often near water. The author is not aware from experience or literature of a case where a victim was murdered inside a structure.

One month after the murder a suspect was arrested and confessed to the murder. He confessed that he had strangled the victim and engaged in post-mortem vaginal sex with the body. He took police to the site where he had buried a bag containing the hands, the external genitals, a kitchen knife used to removed the body parts, the clothing of the victim and several pieces of cloth used to wipe the body. His reason for the removal of the body parts was to get rid of epithelial cells under the victim’s fingernails and semen from the vagina, which he stated he knew could be used for DNA comparison to a potential suspect. No DNA from semen was discovered in the remaining parts of the vagina, the mouth or anus of the victim during the autopsy, possibly due to the advanced state of decomposition (Karger et al., 2000). He even anticipated future scientific developments which led to him wiping the dead body with a piece of cloth to remove any other potential physical evidence, and as Karger et al. (2000) report, subsequently successful individualization of DNA transferred to the neck of a victim during manual strangulation has been reported.

Staging in muti murder, a case example

Staging is briefly defined as when a crime scene is altered to make it look as if the crime had another motive (Geberth, 2003; Ressler, Douglas, Burgess & Burgess, 1992). There may be two objectives for this to occur, firstly, to mislead police, for example, a husband who murders his wife may attempt to make it look like a burglary or an attempted vehicle-hijacking. Secondly, to protect the victim’s name or victim’s family reputation, for example in the case of an autoerotic fatality the family members may first redress the victim and remove any sexually ‘incriminating’ objects such as pornographic magazines, sex toys, and bondage equipment.

The following case is an example of a domestic murder that was staged to look like a muti murder to mislead investigators. Fortunately a member of the Investigative Psychology Unit attended the scene and was able to give immediate feedback to the investigating officer.

In August of 2003 the body of an adult black female was discovered on an open piece of ground in Mabopane north-west of Pretoria, South Africa. The victim was completely naked and her clothes were not at the scene. Her head, breasts and external parts of her vagina had been removed post-mortem. In addition there were bullet wounds in her torso and left forearm. There was no indication that the scene where the body was found was the scene where the murder had taken place. It was initially thought that the motive could be muti murder.
There were certain commonalities with a muti murder, such as breasts, head and external parts of the vagina had been removed and were missing. Second, the victim appeared to be a healthy adult black female. Third, the victim was found outside and no attempt was made to hide the body.

However, there were also numerous factors that placed doubt as to the possibility that it was muti murder. Firstly, the victim was completely naked and the clothing was not found at the scene. Secondly, there were several bullet wounds in the victim. Muti murder victims typically die as a result of their wounds. The author has never been involved in a confirmed muti murder case where a firearm was used, nor has literature ever reported such a case. Thirdly, the body parts were removed post-mortem. Fourthly, the victim appeared to have been moved to the site where the body was found, muti murders have usually occurred where the body is found. These concerns were expressed to the investigating officer at the scene.

Within two days, once the victim was identified, the boyfriend of the victim was arrested and confessed to the murder. In the home of the victim, where the murder occurred, the body parts were found in a plastic container. Several bullet holes were discovered in the bed and in the headboard of the bed. The boyfriend confessed to having had an argument with the victim, shooting her several times, and then later removing the body parts and moving the body to another scene in an attempt to mislead the police into thinking it was a muti murder. This again highlights the need of investigators, especially in the South African context, to be aware of the characteristics of muti murders.

**General investigative considerations**

Because the relationship between murderer and victim is so difficult to determine (if indeed, one exists at all) devoting large amounts of time to identifying the victim of muti murder (if their identity is unknown) may not be as fruitful as it would be in other murder investigations where the identity of the victim usually helps to create a list of suspects and possible reasons for the crime. A useful point for further research would be to examine distance correlates between crime scene and place of residence of the suspect to see if geographical profiling can be used successfully in muti murder cases.

Hypotheses can be made based on missing body parts as to the need of the client, but body parts may have a different symbolism to different traditional healers. In South Africa it is useful to consult with local traditional healers as to the known use of certain body parts. One assumption that can be made about all muti murder is that the client is motivated by greed, whether it be financial gain or power gain, and is prepared to part with a large sum of money to achieve his or her goals.

Contacting traditional pharmacies to enquire what natural ingredients had been purchased recently, and by whom, might provide investigators with possible leads. Certain ingredients are more commonly used in muti requiring human body parts. Elephant trunk is one such ingredient, and the yellow bark of the ‘Guku’ tree is another. Since the majority of traditional healers do not condone murder it is often useful to contact known traditional healers in the local area for information and assistance. Unfortunately, one of the only ways to link a traditional healer to a muti murder is by taking DNA samples of substances in a traditional healer’s practice. This has led to situations where animosity has been created between local traditional healers and the police. It is therefore suggested that only traditional healers who are regarded as suspects be approached for DNA samples of items in their practice.
It is also necessary to link any recovered body parts to the body by means of DNA analysis. According to South African criminal law, failure to link the body parts to the body means that an offender can only be charged with transgressing the Human Tissue Act which prohibits any individual from being in possession of human body parts, except organisations such as hospitals and other medical facilities.

Minnaar (2001) suggests that during the trial proceedings it is recommended that people with a knowledge of African culture and beliefs be appointed as assessors in cases involving killings for muti and witch-purging crimes. Muti murder, as is the case with Satanism or being under the influence of alcohol while committing a crime, is not seen as a mitigating factor by South African courts, but rather as an exacerbating factor when it comes to sentencing. Distinguishing false claims of muti murder from genuine claims is therefore imperative. The South African Police Service, by means of the Investigative Psychology Unit and the Occult Related Crimes Unit, trains detectives in the investigation of muti murders, however, this is a slow process, and not all detectives receive such training.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of muti is a part of some mainstream traditional African beliefs. In many respects traditional African muti is no different from herbal or naturopathic remedies used by people throughout the world. The use of human body parts as an ingredient for medicines or potions, however, is practiced by a minority of individuals (but is rejected by the majority of traditional healers and members of society).

Bodily mutilation can occur for various reasons other than the desire to obtain human body parts for use in traditional African medicines. Determining the reason for the mutilation is an important step when analysing the crime scene. An experienced forensic pathologist is instrumental in helping determine the process by which the mutilation occurred. This can then help to generate hypotheses regarding the motive and ultimately the suspect. The designation of a crime as a muti murder will have a significant impact on how the investigator will approach the investigation.

While not a new phenomenon, little empirical research has investigated this type of crime. This paper aims to be a starting point in the scientific discussion of muti murder in the field of investigative psychology. Suspending one's own belief system and attempting to understand another is imperative for any person trying to solve such crimes. This is often the most difficult hurdle to overcome.

REFERENCES


Olivier, F. (1990). In Venda is jy skuldig as die mense so se. *Vrye Weekblad*, 4 May.


