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Fanisa Baloyi

Jabulani Owen Nene

Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi

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## Vatsonga Cultural Practices and their Impact on the Health of Widows and Significant Others

Fanisa Baloyi,<sup>1</sup> Jabulani Owen Nene<sup>2</sup> and Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

This paper presents the Vatsonga cultural practices regarding widowhood and how those practices impact personal health. The purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how the Vatsonga manages widowhood and how those practices affect the management of HIV/AIDS. This ethnographic study was conducted in Bushbuckridge and is grounded in Leininger's theory of Culture Care Diversity and Universality. Data was collected from participants using individual face-to-face interviews and observation. In addition, ethnographic content analysis was utilized for data analysis. Results indicate that there are practices such as widow cleansing and widow inheritance that the Vatsonga people practice following the death of an individual's husband. These practices impact physical, social, psychological, spiritual, emotional, and economic well-being and affect the bereaved women and the significant others in the community. To address these practices, the authors recommend the application of the process of preservation, accommodation, and re-patterning of practices based on the impact of such practices on health.

*Keywords:* cleansing ritual, culture, ethnographic design, the impact of widowhood, widow inheritance

### Introduction and Background

The authors believe that most people nowadays have mixed feelings and an understanding of culture. Some consider culture as something that has been attenuated by religion. Some people wholeheartedly adhere to cultural practices, while others, such as feminists and womanists, are skeptical about cultural practices as they believe culture is a tool to oppress women and benefit men (Lako, 2004). This leads us to the question, "*What is culture?*" This issue has dwelled in the minds of many people, and different authors define it differently. Community ToolBox (n.d.) defines culture as a group of people or communities that share a common experience that looks at how they view the world. On the other hand, Adams and Markus (2004, cited in Hamedani & Markus, 2019, p. 1) defined culture as an

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Lynette Fanisa Baloyi is a Professional nurse. She has worked as a Community Health Nurse and Nurse Educator. She obtained her Ph.D. in Nursing, focusing on VaTsonga cultural practices and HIV, in 2020 at the University of South Africa. In 2006, Lynette was inducted as a member of Sigma Theta Tau International Honour Society of Nursing. She received Special Recognition for Service Excellence, awarded by the CEO of Tintswalo Hospital in 2018. She is passionate about education and poverty alleviation within the community and participates in various outreach programs.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Jabulani Owen Nene heads up the isiZulu section, which is part of the African Languages Department; he is a lecturer and researcher at the University of South Africa. He holds a DLitt et Phil qualification, exploring issues related to ODeL and culture. His ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7521-8862>

<sup>3</sup> Prof Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi is an NRF C rated researcher working at the University of South Africa. She holds a PhD in Public Management, Master's degree in nursing, and Honours in psychology and Nursing. Email: [mmudza@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mmudza@unisa.ac.za). ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6916-8472>

aspect that consists of both “explicit and implicit patterns of historically-derived and selected ideas and their embodiment in institutions, practices, and artifacts. Cultural patterns may, on the one hand, be considered as products of actions, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action”. Further, the Oxford South African Pocket Dictionary (2018, p. 213) defines culture as the “arts, customs, and ideas of people as a group”. The above definitions lead the authors to agree that culture is an idea that guides people’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior. African people have a wide range of cultural practices. Some of those practices are known by many, while some are unknown and understood only by those who practice them. Baloyi (2019) argued that some of those cultural practices affect the management of HIV/AIDS. While some authors such as Chitlango and Balcomb (2004) believe that some cultural practices oppress women, and among the known cultural practices that oppress women, widowhood is one of them.

UN Women (2021) explains a widow’s experience of grief, loss, and trauma due to the loss of their spouse. It further elaborates that some widows experience discrimination, stigmatization, and even unusual or “harmful traditional practices.” African countries are no exception to the above treatment, exposing widows to such inhuman practices. Those practices include considering a widow to be part of the property of the husband and/or the late husband’s family, which needs to be inherited by family members (Buthelezi & Ngema, 2021; Sulumba-Kapuma, 2018; Manala, 2015). The widow is usually handed over to the brother or any male relative of the late husband, depending on the decision of the older members of the family. It must be noted that the widow has no say or even choice whether they want to be inherited or not, as they are expected to be submissive (Buthelezi & Ngema, 2021; Madiba & Ngwenya, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2021; Nyangweso, 2017; Sulumba-Kapuma 2018). According to Chitlango and Balcomb (2004), cleansing rituals among the Batsonga in Mozambique are performed by forcing the female to engage in sexual practices with a stranger or a traditional healer known as a cleanser in the community. Widow cleansing occurs regardless of the high risk of contracting or spreading HIV (van Dyk, 2012; Baloyi, 2019). Chitlango and Balcomb (2004) went on to say that some Tsonga in Mozambique expect a widow to have sex with all her brothers-in-law and her father-in-law on the same night after her husband dies to cleanse herself.

The negative treatment of widows is experienced in their homes and extends to other institutions such as churches. Saluun et al. (2019) highlighted that some widows in Africa, even among Christians, are humiliated, discriminated against, disregarded, and ostracized. Recently, a study conducted in the Northern KwaZulu-Natal, indicated that some Christian widows and widowers who lost their spouses due to COVID-19-related deaths have experienced stigmatization, discrimination, and alienation from their fellow congregants (Buthelezi & Ngema, 2021). This is happening despite researchers such as Baloyi (2016), who highlighted that those rituals performed for African widows’ conflict with biblical principles of showing love and support. Sekgobela et al. (2018) recommended that theologians should empower and support widows who experience pain due to the loss of their husbands and all the accompanying rituals, which may increase their risk of being infected by HIV. Unfortunately, there seems to be very limited support for the widows.

Within the South African context, the cultural practices of those who grew up in rural areas may differ from those who grew up in urban areas. For example, Rosenblatt and Nkosi (2007, p. 68) elaborated on the difference between Zulu people from rural areas and those from urban areas, saying that those in their homelands tend to “maintain their language, culture, and social practices” more than those in urban areas. This then further indicates that even other South African cultures follow suit in performing certain cultural rituals. Among other practices that are significantly adhered to in homesteads rather than urban areas is how they view the issue of health-seeking behavior and their belief within the aspect of traditional

healing. Nene (2014, p. 359) expounded that several people in the rural homesteads prefer to use traditional healers for numerous reasons, such as “against evil and to help alleviate people’s life,” as African people believe that illness is mostly caused by supernatural beings and/or witchcraft. Thus, Traditional healers are the only ones who can counteract the above.

On the issue pertaining to widows’ inheritance within the South African milieu, Zulu, Venda, and Northern Sotho people are among the cultures that still practice widow inheritance though they follow different practices (Mogotlane et al., 2007; Mulaudzi, 2005; Manala, 2015). Madinginye (2017) indicated that The Constitution of South Africa should always guide us in our behavior. Section 9 of the constitution promotes equality between people and discourages discrimination. The question, however, remains, “*are traditionalists following the constitution or not?*”.

There was the further debate in the past on the issue and/or the origins of the oppression of women, as Engels (1988), elaborated that, historically, there was no clear indication of women being oppressed, especially when one looks at different literature. According to African literature, most of the sources discuss female unity and the roles of males, females, the elderly, and children in society. then indicates oppression of women being a debatable concept at that time and/or a new concept. Gibbs and Martin (2013, cited in Madinginye, 2017, p. 13), agree concerning this notion, as they indicated that “the question of the origin of women’s oppression is rarely taken seriously. Women’s oppression is one of many forms of oppression-including racism, homophobia, and sexism that are created by a society based upon the class exploitation of the many for the profit of the few”. Previously, as indicated in Engels (1988, cited in Madinginye, 2017), in times called ‘primitive communism’, demonstrated that tribes used to work together to meet their basic needs, such as women taking care of children and food production close to homes, children of a certain age helping their parents, and men hunting far from home. The split of work did not make women inferior to men, rather, it was a way of protecting human offspring and working together as a team. Through the introduction of the Neolithic revolution, there was also a distinction between class society, which led to men being at the forefront of profit-making (Madinginye, 2017). This could be one reason for the distinctive classification of women and the placing of women in society, as well as how some, including widows, are treated.

There is also the issue of *lobola* practice, which some people believe is losing its cultural value with the changes occurring over the years. Parker (2015) consequently believes this practice can promote the spread of HIV and/or sexually transmitted diseases, as most African people tend to take multiple wives, especially when they know they can afford *lobola*. Parker (2015) demonstrated that the payment of *Lobola* in African culture was a mere demonstration by a man that he could take care of that woman and a gesture of appreciation to the family. Within African society, people believe in interconnectedness, which goes as far as when a woman gets married, she is introduced to her husband’s family, both living and dead, so that she can be welcomed and protected by them. In her study, Parker (2015) argued that in the South African context, people who are educated or not view *lobola* as a way of lifting themselves in society. However, there are people nowadays who understand *lobola* practice as a payment or as a method of buying a woman and having certain rights over her, which might be contrary to the initial concept behind *lobola*. That is why certain people’s treatment of widows aligns with the same mentality of entitlement.

Widows are among the people considered vulnerable to HIV by the South African National Strategic Plan because of their exposure to harmful social and cultural practices, beliefs, and laws that disempower them (Department of Health 2017, p. 109). Though several studies have highlighted the experiences of widows in African countries, there is a scarcity of studies that focus specifically on Vatsonga cultural practices regarding widowhood and their impact on the health of widows and significant others in the Bushbuckridge area. Therefore,

this paper presents Vatsonga's cultural practices regarding widowhood and the health impacts of such practices on widows and significant others. The study was guided by Leininger's theory of Culture Care Diversity and Universality.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Leininger's Theory of Culture Care Diversity and Universality was developed by Madeleine Leininger around 1966, and its evaluation can be traced to 1978 (McFarland & Wehbe-Alamah, 2019). This theory is also known as the Culture Care Theory, based on the changing world (McFarland & Wehbe-Alamah, 2019). McFarland and Wehbe-Alamah (2019) further elaborated that this theory is to assist new researchers and health care professionals such as nurses in finding new ways of practicing cultural care and understanding how to take care of individuals, families, or groups of people from different cultures. The development of this theory is due to the understanding that different cultures have their caring behaviors, health, illness, values, and belief systems that are to be understood before any diagnostic evaluation can be considered. Within this theory, we have focused on culturally congruent care, preservation, accommodation, and repatterning elements. These three elements guide us to understand how we can maintain, negotiate, and restructure how people perceive other cultural elements.

### **Methods**

The researchers used an ethnographic design (Grove et al., 2015), which looks at how culture affects the lives of a group. According to Jones and Smith (2017), ethnography is concerned with learning about people through immersion into their real world to discover and describe the complexities and shared cultural expressions of their natural environment. Ethnographic design is more relevant as it focuses on understanding cultural practices and beliefs. In this study, practices and beliefs focus on rituals after the death of a husband.

In-depth individual interviews were conducted using the Tsonga language as the interviewees were Tsonga-speaking people so that the participants could speak freely and understand the questions. This was important to allow the participants to express themselves freely without any language breakdown. Therefore, the question posed was more about finding out about widowhood, the process, and the participants' feelings about the whole process.

The study was conducted in the Bushbuckridge sub-district, within the Ehlanzeni district of Mpumalanga Province in South Africa. The dominant ethnic group is Vatsonga, with approximately 140 villages and locations. The census of 2016 elaborated on the population of people living there as being 546 216 at that time (Waziman, 2016). Baloyi (2019) reports three hospitals, five mobile health services, and thirty-eight fully functional primary health care providers. The Integrated Development Plan (2016, cited in Baloyi, 2019), indicates that the Bushbuckridge municipality's main health challenge is the number of people infected by HIV. The infection rate was 29% for men and women between the ages of 14-40 at that time.

The study population was all Vatsonga adults aged 21-85 years, with knowledge of Vatsonga cultural practice, and residing in the Bushbuckridge area. The researchers used the snowballing technique, as per Hays and Singh (2012, cited in Nene, 2016). This is a straightforward way for a researcher to have access to a required population. Kirchherr and Charles (2018) concurred that many researchers prefer this method as it allows one interviewee to introduce or provide the details of another person that might be interested and/or have the potential to be interviewed. Thus, the snowball sampling was implemented through possible key people knowledgeable of Vatsonga cultural practices regarding widowhood or being exposed to those cultural practices within the Bushbuckridge area.

In-depth individual interviews were conducted using the Tsonga language as the principal investigator, and the participants fully understood the language. This was also important as some of the cultural practices are known to be specific to that cultural group. The following grand tour question was used: “Kindly share with me the Vatsonga cultural practices followed when a woman’s husband has passed on”. In addition to the main question, probing and non-verbal cues were used to get more information from the participants.

Since qualitative research involves in-depth explanations, data should be transcribed verbatim, and a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts numerous times with observation notes to categorize and identify superordinate themes and subthemes. An independent coder was involved, and this reached a point of agreement for a final integrated table of themes. Content analysis guided the process.

**Table 1.** Demographic data of participants

<b>Participants (KI) no.</b>	<b>Educational status</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital status</b>
KI 1	Honours	Educator	Female	34yrs	Single
KI 2	Grade 12	Unemployed	Female	28yrs	Single
KI 3	Matric	Unemployed	Female	21yrs	Single
KI 4	Grade 11	Unemployed	Female	26yrs	Married
KI 5	Standard 3	Unemployed	Female	58yrs	Married
KI 6	Grade 11	Unemployed	Female	32yrs	Married
KI 7	MBChB, Degree	Medical doctor	Male	54yrs	Married
KI 8	Traditional healer, standard 5	Traditional healer	Female	54yrs	Married
KI 9	Diploma (Admin work)	Admin clerk	Female	40	Married
KI 10	Matric	Secretary of traditional Healers	Female	49yrs	Married
KI 11	Master’s Degree	Retired teacher school manager	Male	68yrs	Married
KI 12	Degree In nursing	Retired nurse (Community PHC nurse)	Female	62yrs	Married
KI 13	Degree In nursing	Retired nurse (Nurse Educator)	Female	75yrs	Widow
KI 14	Masters	Retired school manager, The writer of Tsonga books.	Male	74yrs	Married

KI 15	Degree in nursing	Nurse and unit manager	Female	62yrs	Married
KI 16	Diploma	Administrator	Male	48yrs	Married
KI 17	Masters	Lecturer	Male	54yrs	Married
KI 18	Standard 3	Pensioner	Female	85yrs	Widow
KI 19	Grade 12, HIV counseling	HIV Counsellor	Female	38yrs	Married

## Ethics

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa (HSHDC322-2014) and the Mpumalanga Provincial Health Research Ethics Committee (MP-2015RP16-810) to collect the data on public health care in Bushbuckridge Sub-district. Before the interview session, participants were provided with relevant information regarding the study, issues of voluntary participation, and a letter of withdrawal to obtain written consent from the participants. It was further explained that their identity would not be revealed nor be given access by anyone other than for the study purpose. It must also be noted that during the interview, the participants were treated with respect, and all matters discussed were treated with confidentiality as per the guidelines. To anonymize the findings, researchers used codes.

## Findings

The results of the study revealed two main themes, which are: cultural rituals that occur when women are widowed and the impact of such rituals on the health of the widow and significant others.

### 1. Widow Cleansing

Widow cleansing is a procedure performed to decontaminate a woman or women in case of polygamous marriage after the husband's death (Baloyi, 2019). The study findings indicate that Vatsonga women are involved in widow cleansing, as indicated by the following excerpt:

I would say that what makes people, especially women, here among the Shangaan [Vatsonga] speaking people in Bushbuckridge, have a high prevalence of HIV is the fact that when a woman's husband has died, she must undergo the cleansing rituals. The woman is expected to go to male X, who is designated to cleanse the widows. The cleansing process involves sexual engagement with the cleanser. As the cleanser is known in the village, almost all the widows, will be referred to as that very same cleanser. There are people today who live through widow cleansing because they are paid to do so. KI 9

Participant KI 9 above confirmed that this practice is still common among the Vatsonga people of Bushbuckridge. Participant KI 7 then further elaborated that:

There are times when the widows must have sex for a cleansing ritual. For example, when a woman has lost her husband, following the formal removal of the black mourning clothes, she must have sex with a traditional healer for at least seven days. This is done to cleanse the woman from the dead husband's spirit so that, when she engages sexually with a new husband, he [the new husband] should not die. The person known to cleanse the ritual is mostly a traditional healer who specializes in cleansing for seven days without using a condom.

As indicated by the participant KI 7, the process of cleansing should be having sex with someone for seven days without the use of a condom. This can cause trauma in the widow's genital tract and may exhaust her as it follows one year of total sexual abstinence (Baloyi, 2019). Unfortunately, it seems the family members of the deceased husband choose a possible cleanser and some widows are afraid to refuse to undergo cleansing because it is believed they are dirty. Therefore, the cleansing ritual is important for them. This invades the widow's privacy and affects her dignity physically, emotionally, psychologically, and socially. The following quotes reflect the beliefs, understanding, and feelings of others about the ritual.

They say a woman must be cleansed after the death of her husband as you are dirty, and I do not understand why they say a woman is "dirty" and must be cleansed. (KI 12)

The tone of participant KI 12's voice indicates dissatisfaction with this ritual as to why a woman is considered dirty. However, the above ritual is not the only ritual that is followed within the Vatsonga culture; widow inheritance is another one.

## **2. Widow Inheritance**

Widow inheritance is defined as a way of marriage where a brother is allowed to inherit the widow of his late brother to prevent the family's disintegration and make sure that the widow is protected and supported (Saluun et al., 2019). Participant KI 12 further shared some light on this regard:

[...] and again, in our Tsonga culture, a man is allowed to inherit his late brothers' wives because the widows are not allowed to start new relationships with other men outside the late husband's family. On the day when the rituals are performed for a woman so that she can take off the mourning clothes, what happens is that, the woman is given beer. They say men or family members, even the brothers of her husband, will be there. Hence, she has to give the beer to one of the men that are lining up there, and some of those men are her brothers-in-law, meaning that if she chooses to give it to one of those men, even if that man is married; he has to do the cleansing for that woman.

The above quote of participant KI 12 indicated the process that Vatsonga follows on the widow's inheritance. Participant KI 11 elaborated that the inheritance of cultural practice came from a good intention, as she indicated:

According to my understanding, in the olden days, it was the elders' way of preventing the widow from getting married to someone else, and it was their way of saying, "we do not want to lose you as a family," but instead she had to choose one male who was a family member to continue taking care of her since her husband had passed on.

Participant KI 13 added additional information to the above quote:

The woman must remain and stay in the family and under the surname where she was married and continue with the husband's younger brother or older brother. There won't be any loss of cattle (paid for marriage); thus, she cannot get married somewhere else.

## **The Impact of Rituals related to Widowhood**

Some of the participants stated the precise steps for cleansing a widow following sexual abstinence for a year, which clearly shows how the body of a widow can be intensely involved for seven days without any intervals. The widows will suffer trauma, especially in the genital tract, thus becoming highly predisposed to HIV or other sexually transmitted infections as the cleanser does not use condoms. At the same time, the cleanser's job is only to conduct a ritual of cleansing and not to take them as their wife. Participant KI 12 stated



that she feels “[...] that is not a good practice according to how I see it”. Participant KI 17 further elaborated that:

Then this practice is done when someone has lost their partner. The elders take that particular person to the river or the stream, and they do some brutal things to that woman, and in the process, the woman can have wounds in her body.

The above participant KI 17 describes some of the procedures conducted as “brutal” to women, which it may cause Tetanus as there are no precautionary measures taken, nor the safety of the instruments used. Moreover, participant KI 9 raised a concern about

What is it that is cleaned or removed in that cleansing ritual, because it increases the number of new infections here in Bushbuckridge? That is why, rather than because of the cleansing ritual, many people become infected with HIV. So those people are at risk because the cause of their deaths of those people is not known.

The above participant considers these rituals to be one of the reasons why there is an increase in HIV infections in the Bushbuckridge region. She believes that the widow or the person conducting the cleansing may contract HIV as no one does a test before the cleansing ceremony to identify if the cleanser or the person being cleaned is HIV positive, even if the death of the spouse was related to HIV or not. The above is confirmed by the participant KI 13, who stated the following:

There has been a case that we saw in Bushbuckridge. A woman lost her husband, who was HIV positive, and she also tested HIV positive. When she was cleansed, the cleansing ritual was done by a mentally retarded [intellectually disabled] person who eventually died of HIV infection contracted from this woman’s husband, then herself, and the innocent retarded [intellectually disabled] person.

It must be noted that not all Vatsonga women agree with these cultural procedures. Some want to refuse but fear stigmatization within the family and/or community, as indicated by participant KI 12:

If they can refuse, you may find that the relatives may tell the woman’s mother or a sister who is present that she has refused to do the cleansing, which means she does not want to stay in that family.

As is sometimes the case, women are the ones who work to keep this cultural practice going.

### **1. Psychological Impact**

Within African Epistemology, the belief is that death or being sick does not occur without a reason. Death and illness are always caused by something, either by a person (dead or alive) or supernatural (Nene, 2014). Within Vatsonga, or any African culture when a person dies, they question his or her death. Participant KI 11 elaborated that, usually when a man dies, you as a wife become a suspect because “they used to believe that a man does not just die; it means the wife is the one who killed him.” That kind of accusation may bring tension within the family and affect the others’ psychologically.

Another psychological effect of the cleansing process is that when an individual does not want to follow and/or do the ceremony, it may create anxiety within the individual. Participant KI 11 elaborated that when one negates this process, the community and the family consider that talk as foul talk, particularly when we say, “Like when we talk about the issue of the cleansing rituals and that they should stop, it will be considered taboo for a widow [...]”. The widow may experience anxiety and stress because of being rejected or

forced to do something she does not want to do. Furthermore, the anticipation of the unknown may also bring trauma and depression.

## 2. Spiritual Impact

Another aspect of widowhood is how women deal with the debate of religion versus culture, as some cultural practices may contradict biblical beliefs. Looking at the issue of sex before marriage, 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 forbids having sex before marriage. For women to follow this principle may indicate otherwise. Participant KI17 had this to say on the issue of doing things that they do not want to participate in:

People are encouraged to stay in marriages even if they are not happy, “**Vukati va kandza hi mbilu**” means that a woman has to persevere through whatever comes across in her marriage. She must face the challenges that come her way because she is married.

This marriage negates the constitution of South Africa about freedom of choice.

## Emotional Impact

Dealing with the loss of someone you care about and being asked to move on by remarrying a relative of your husband, a decision that is detrimental to your emotional well-being and was unplanned, can have a psychological and/or emotional impact. Participant KI 15 had this to say:

[...] on the issue of the widows mourning their husbands for a very long time and, in the end, having to remarry within the late husband’s family, women should be vocal about it and be assertive that they marry a man that they love, not their late husband’s brother. Women need to be very vocal about it because it does not make sense, and in the end, they are caught up in a loveless marriage, and marriage is [must be] based on mutual love.

The above quote indicates that participant KI 15 would prefer to be given the choice to choose her partner at the time she is ready to, rather than being dictated to.

## 3. Economic Impact

Participant KI 14 elaborated on the emotion of some who comply wholeheartedly with the cultural dictate, as she particularized:

[...] when a woman has lost her husband and one of her late husband’s brothers has to inherit her as a wife (loko munhu a loveriwile a ngheniwa), A brother has to marry her to inherit the wealth.

This quote indicates that to some people it is not for the love of the culture but rather for the benefit of keeping the wealth within the family. This can lead to the newlywed husband of the widow misusing the funds as they have worked for them. Participant KI 14 further described that:

[...] the only focus is “what is my gain now”. Actually, I think that there are three things that men want on this planet, money, and fame, and through money, they will become famous, and with fame, they will easily lure many women. So those are the three things that are important to men.

This indicates that when the community and family members are aware of the inheritance left by the late husband, the widow might have many men showing interest in her so that she can choose one of them during the inheritance ceremony. They will use the notion “[...] continue

looking after me in the absence of my husband” KI 9, which insinuates claiming to look after someone for their benefit.

## Discussion

The results of this article revealed that certain Tsonga cultural practices following the death of a husband can end up benefiting or, in most cases, intensifying the anguish of having lost a husband, leaving the bereaved widow and significant others with a seriously negative bearing on their lives. In this study, the two Vatsonga cultural practices of widow cleansing and widow inheritance emerged undoubtedly as the two most detrimental cultural practices during widowhood, which did not only hinder the management of HIV and AIDS but could result in physical, social, psychological, spiritual, emotional, and economic impact on the widow and significant others. This paper concurs with Nnodim et al. (2017), who disclose that widows worldwide face challenges that may affect their lives. Nyangweso (2017) found that widows experience social, economic, and religious challenges. In the Vatsonga culture, several things happen during widowhood within a short space of time while a widow is still battling with the pain of losing a husband and trying to heal. These rituals not only violate the rights of widows, but also make them more likely to do things that are cruel and have bad consequences.

This study revealed the initial intention of widow inheritance, as indicated above, was for the greater good of everyone involved. Especially when a widow was not financially stable. The elders of the house will make provision for the widow/s and the children left behind to be taken care of by arranging for the women to remarry within the family or for another person with the same surname to take care of them. Some practices have evolved, and among other places, Bushbuckridge is among them.

The biggest concern about how the widows' cleansing and ritual is done in Bushbuckridge is the effect that this has had beyond the cultural practice of abuse, namely of widows sexually and financially, and the high possibility of spreading HIV in the community. As indicated above, the cleanser moves from one woman to another in terms of cleansing, and as such, it will either increase the rate of HIV and/or leave the widow with an unplanned child, which will affect her psychologically, financially, spiritually, and emotionally.

The authors' argument in this article is not about whether to have a cleansing ceremony or not. The authors are arguing for the public to relook at the application of certain cultural practices nowadays. According to Leininger's theory, one needs to *preserve*, *accommodate*, and *re-pattern* practices based on the impact of such practices on the health of widows and significant others. Widow inheritance in South Africa is contravening the sexual rights of a widow as stipulated in the National Strategic Plan. Like any person, a woman/widow has a right to be free from coercion, enjoy respect for her bodily integrity, choose a partner and decide to be sexually active or not, and give consent for sexual relations and engage in marriage, including to determine whether (and when) to have a baby (Department of Health 2017:107). This shows that the loss of a husband causes a great magnitude of anguish to a widow. From a Christian perspective, Zechariah 7:9-10 elaborates on the need to be compassionate to one another and not oppress the widows and fatherless. If most of the society is Christian, they need to relook at that aspect.

This study found that there is no explanation in the Vatsonga culture about what happens to a widow when she is taken to the river for secret rituals. The widow may be scared and worried about what will happen to her when she is in the hands of some female elders who are all looking at her while some give her instructions. This also relates to what Baloyi (2017) said: that mostly women enforce the implementation of cultural practices, and many African women promote widowhood rituals. Some widows who become accused of having killed their husbands may anticipate future problems and ask themselves a question,

what if the inheritor can also die? This may lead to the widow not healing but feeling angry at the situation and the cultural practice. In line with this, Saluun et al. (2019) say that some widows in Nigeria suffer psychological effects due to discrimination and dehumanizing treatment. They were miserable when they saw their children being isolated, abused physically, and not inheriting their property. According to Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2020, p. 33), from her grandmother's stories and history, she was told about "how everything her children had worked for was taken away when her husband died" and had to relocate. This shows how African women have been losing property in different ways throughout history.

### Recommendations

It must be noted that the authors of this paper believe in culture, and cultural practices and they are aware that certain cultural practices are evolving. Thus, one needs to go back to the initial foundation of the culture and understand the reason why and how certain cultural practices were done. This way, one will have a better understanding and respect for cultural practices and omit to abuse situations in the name of culture. The authors recommend the application of the process of *preservation*, *accommodation*, and *re-patterning* of practices based on the impact of such practices on the health of the widow and significant others according to Leininger's theory. According to Leininger's theory, the processes of Cultural care *preservation*, Cultural care *accommodation*, and Cultural care *re-patterning* enable the provision of culturally congruent nursing care (Nashwan & Mansour, 2013). Since there is evidence that rituals and other cultural beliefs and practices in widowhood among the Vatsonga may result in serious consequences, health care workers and related sectors can conduct awareness to enable all stakeholders and the community at large to have some dialogue on which cultural beliefs and practices they should preserve and/or maintain, which ones to accommodate and negotiate for change, and the need to refrain from such harmful cultural practices to re-pattern and or restructure how to be culturally relevant when empowering and dealing with the Vatsonga cultural group.

### Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to illustrate the fact that while culture is passed on from one generation to the other, the cultural practices and beliefs regarding widow cleansing and widow inheritance need to be reviewed as they were not intended to harm widows. In this era, they pose a serious risk of spreading HIV in the community of Bushbuckridge and other deplorable situations. In addition, even though it is not all Vatsonga widows who undergo these rituals, it was evident from the participants that these two rituals are still dominant and are done by some widows for reasons such as 'taboos', patriarchy, pressure from the husband's family, dependency, and myths about misfortune befalling the widow and her children if they do not undertake these rituals, such as becoming mentally ill. Widow inheritance nowadays is done at times due to the greediness of the husband's family towards the property, payment of bride price (*ku lovola/ lobola*) and socialization of a girl child to persevere in whatever situation one experiences in marriage. Vatsonga people or other cultural groups with similar practices need to undergo behavior change, preserve safe practices only, and adopt and maintain healthy behaviors concerning the two detrimental practices of widows, which predispose women to inhumane situations and affect their general well-being.

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