



Witchcraft and witchcraft-related violence in AmaZizi chiefdom of kwaZangashe, Eastern Cape



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This article explores witchcraft-related violence against elderly women in the AmaZizi chiefdom of kwaZangashe in Eastern Cape, South Africa. The potential causes that have promoted such violence form the central subject of the study. The study includes a research design that combines questionnaires, focus groups and follow-on interviews. The findings have revealed a prevalence of witchcraft beliefs in the region and have pointed to elderly women as the likely victims of witchcraft violence. This has resulted in AmaZizi's elderly women being socially isolated, verbally abused and at risk of physical violence and even murder. This study concludes with several interventions organised to combat future witchcraft-related violence and to support the elderly women in the chiefdom.

Contribution: By giving voice to the lives and stories of a community of people rendered invisible in the wider public sphere, this article introduces accounts on witchcraft and healthcare that might otherwise have gone unarticulated.

Keywords: witchcraft; ageing; violence; women; health.

Introduction

Witchcraft-related violence continues to plague rural areas of Eastern Cape, South Africa (Gwegwe 2021), which regularly targets elderly women.¹ The violence these women experience ranges from physical to psychological abuse. Regularly ridiculed and verbally abused, they are pushed into social isolation by members from their communities, living in constant fear of being beaten, maimed or even murdered because of witchcraft accusations.

Some of the villages in Eastern Cape, including AmaZizi chiefdom (located in the north-eastern region of the province),² are regarded as witchcraft-murder hotspots by the Department of Social Development (2021). As a result, many of the older women in these villages, the department indicated in a recent media statement, 'are living in fear and others are no longer sleeping in their houses' (Department of Social Development 2021). They generally 'sleep in groups under one roof so that they may protect one another' (Department of Social Development 2021). While some of these elderly women may have little choice but to stay in the area, many others, author Gwegwe (2021) wrote, have made the difficult decision to 'relocate[e] to other parts of the province'. 'It is not easy being an old woman these days', explains one AmaZizi elder (Interview 2019).

This article investigates witchcraft and witchcraft-related violence against the elderly women in the AmaZizi chiefdom. We explore potential causes for these witchcraft accusations and subsequent acts of violence and consider critical reasons why the elderly women have become most susceptible to this violence. Finally, we indicate possible interventions to better safeguard AmaZizi's elderly population against future witchcraft accusations and related violence.

Research methodology

The data for this article were collected in the AmaZizi chiefdom during a 2-year period. The decision by the authors to research witchcraft emerged out of discussions they had with a focus group, which met in kwaZangashe in early May 2019. Comprising some 30 people, men, women,

1. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Global Challenges Urgency Research Fund (AH/T012986/1) and by Newcastle University's Global Challenges Academy.

2. Members of the AmaZizi chiefdom define themselves as a main branch of the *Dlamini Stock Race*, which has branches across Southern Africa (including the royal ruling family of the Kingdom of Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland). Those who have settled in present-day kwaZangashe (in Eastern Cape) migrated from the former Natal region in c1819. kwaZangashe literally means 'The Place of Zangashe', Zangashe being a former chief of the AmaZizi, who begot Chief Menziwa (c1772 – c1887) and later Chief Pokwana (c1819 – c1889). Today, the ruling AmaZizi of kwaZangashe are using Menziwa, Pokwana or both Menziwa Pokwana as their surname.

Note: Special Collection: Social Memory Studies, sub-edited by Christina Landman (University of South Africa) and Sekgothe Mokgoatšana (University of Limpopo).

teenagers and elderly, this focus group discussed topics rarely debated in the community. The discussion, from its very start, was grounded around the issues of gender-based violence, with both the women and the men of the chiefdom complaining of the serious toll violence against women has taken on them and their villages, holding it responsible for breaking down family structures that were already made fragile from years of apartheid.

At first, the focus group discussion revolved around younger women and their traumatic experiences of violence, as experienced at the hands of boyfriends, dates or acquaintances from school. The elderly women in attendance initially sat quietly, rendered almost invisible by the rest of us – until one older woman bravely spoke up. ‘The older women are not free from violence, either’, she claimed (2019):

[O]lder women are being murdered in their homes. They are being attacked while walking to the shops. Life is not safe for a woman who is accused of being a witch.’

Following this confession, more women and men joined the conversation, each sharing stories of a grandmother, aunt or neighbour who was viciously attacked (or killed) because of witchcraft-related violence. Without question, witchcraft has undermined the dignity, security and sovereignty of AmaZizi’s elderly women. Yet, despite the devastation it imposes, witchcraft has remained hidden through a culture of silence. ‘It’s something that affects all of us, but is something no one speaks about’, a man later explained (Interview 2019). Following the lead from the focus group, the authors made the decision to focus on witchcraft-related violence, scouting out reasons for the deep-seated prejudices against AmaZizi’s elderly women and uncovering what possible interventions could help combat future violence.

Semi-structured interviews (conducted in English and Xhosa) with individual focus group members were conducted during the final three weeks of May 2019. Their responses were organised into pertinent themes around witchcraft and witchcraft-related violence. The authors, then, created a template questionnaire around these specific themes.

Our finished questionnaire was then used to aid discussions around witchcraft during 30 home visits, which occurred from 01 June 2019 to 30 July 2019. This data collection was led by the authors and completed with assistance from a research team of six AmaZizi youths.³ These youths were selected to join the project after a series of detailed interviews. The research team received two 1-day training workshops on the specifics of this research project, study procedures, quality control skills, interview techniques and the protocol for obtaining informed consent.

All persons who participated in the home visit surveys were briefed on the project and provided the authors and research team written and oral consent. Considerations of ethical and

3. Particular thanks is owed to the research team leader Alungile Jongimpahla Twayise, who has been instrumental in coordinating continued focus groups and interviews.

confidentiality factors remained central, both as ends in themselves and in service of reliable and maximal data collection. An informed consent form was used to reassure interviewees of anonymity and facilitate full and safe disclosure. Confidentiality and privacy of participants have been maintained: names were changed in this publication. Assurances that authors would use pseudonyms were discussed with participants and their families prior to the interviews and home visits and at the start of focus group discussions. The University of Newcastle approved the study protocol, including ethics.

From 01 December 2020 to 30 June 2021, the authors, again with assistance from the local research team, held individual interviews in person and over the phone with an additional 20 AmaZizi residents. The authors also met with Ngcobo law enforcement,⁴ members of the Eastern Cape AIDS Council, the Department of Social Development and kwaZangashe medical staff to acquire a wider understanding of witchcraft, to share with these groups our data findings and to discuss ways in which we might pull together to combat future witchcraft-related violence.

Witchcraft in AmaZizi chiefdom: An overview

In South Africa, witchcraft is generally based around a doctrine that ancestral spirits are either good or evil, capable of providing support to the living world or inflicting harm (Motshekga 1988:150). Through rituals of remembrance, however, deceased ancestors can assume roles of protector (Mutwa 2003:61–62). On the contrary, should the deceased not be provided these necessary rituals of remembrance, they are left angry, unable or unwilling to protect and bless the family. This leaves family members susceptible to attacks from witches.

The ability of so-called witches in kwaZangashe to harness evil powers from discontented spirits is acquired through either inheritance (usually from the mother) or the teachings of other recognised witches (this is supported by the early research of Gelfand 1965:34–35). Through that skill, presumed witches can harm communities in mysterious and covert ways, with sorcery and incantations used to ‘bewitch’ unsuspected members of the community, who are thence coerced into joining the witches on any number of malevolent actions.

Witches, too, are believed to have the talent to change shape and transform from human to animal, insect or even plant. This gift enables them to easily hide in the village or sneak unnoticed into homes, where they could capture souls of neighbours while they sleep. With their ability to shapeshift, these so-called witches straddle both the human world and world of nature, which enables them to move unrestricted in the night while living unnoticed during the daytime.

4. Ngcobo is the main town of the Engcobo Local Municipality, which includes the AmaZizi chiefdom.

Given the extraordinary supernatural powers that witches are believed to possess, it is unsurprising that they would be held responsible for causing any difficulties that the AmaZizi may face. From a farmer's mediocre crop harvest to road accidents, from loss of employment to the untimely death of a loved one, witchcraft provides the AmaZizi community with a rationalisation for individual or community hardships – it offers answers to what is the unsolvable. As one AmaZizi woman explained it, 'AIDS might be *how* someone died, but witchcraft explains *why*' (Interview 2019).

Problems of infertility are often equated with witchcraft. As Chief Jongisilo confirms, his cousin and his cousin's wife were having difficulties conceiving a child. As often happens in the chieftom when such troubles occur, witchcraft was identified as the cause. Children bestow upon their parents a certain position of prosperity and respect in the community. Mothers are lauded as capable women, a ranking that increases with each child she may have. Comparatively, infertility is viewed as a curse: it dishonours the family, rendering the wife weak while emasculating the husband. As some interviewees commented, witches are known for stealing the wombs of women, thereby leaving them infertile. The only remedy to the dilemma is to kill the suspected witch. The chief's cousin believed that his mother – the chief's aunt – was responsible for their misfortune, accusing her of using witchcraft and casting evil spells that, in turn, made it impossible for them to conceive. To return honour to his family and to break the evil spell, the man felt it his duty to murder his mother. '[My aunt] ran all the way from her village to my home for safety', the chief recalls, where she several days while the elders intervened:

'[T]his occurrence was so painful to us because [witchcraft] was now real; we see it from of our eyes and it was not just a story being told from a distance. It's over 20 years now but this memory lives fresh in my mind. He, my cousin, was convinced that his mother was a witch and he was prepared to kill her with a machete.'

It is commonly believed in AmaZizi that these perceived witches work mostly at night, travelling clandestinely to isolated sites where they meet with and greet other witches for purposes of targeting unaware relatives and imposing physical and psychological injury. One such location in the region believed to be a common meeting place for so-called witches is eGwadana, a small but dense bush situated some 50 km away from kwaZangashe. Although named after the village of eGwadana, which has no particular reputation for witchcraft, the bush area nearby 'is thought to be the physical meeting point for most witches' (Jongisilo interview 2019). As one eGwadana resident remembers:

'[T]he bush was used as a playground before. Children used to play there. They played there until sunset... and there was no problem. There was nothing wrong happening in the bush.' (Magoda, interview, *Daily SunTV* 2014)

Today, however, explains another resident, eGwadana 'is a place that most people are afraid of' (Mlanjana, interview, *Daily SunTV* 2014).

It is the older women of AmaZizi community who are most often accused of practicing witchcraft. It is their physical features – wrinkled skin, thinning hair, excess of facial hair, drooping breasts, yellowing eyes, missing teeth and hunched posturing – that, although common to ageing, are equated with 'being a witch'. Those women who may exhibit anti-social behaviours – such as those that accompany dementia or Alzheimer's – are at particular risk of being targeted as witches.

As our research concludes, attacking older women as witches comes from AmaZizi's long-standing mistrust of the ageing and a misinterpretation of the physical changes that come with growing old. An older AmaZizi woman confessed that when she was young, she – like her friends and the community at large – chastised the elderly women in the villages for being witches. 'But now that I have become old', she complained, 'it is I who the children today chase and call a witch' (2019). One youth explained his rationale for fearing the elderly: 'Of course, it is the old women who are witches', he said. 'The way they look; the way they act; even the way they smell – it isn't normal' (2020).

Research findings and results

Although witchcraft is still believed to be widespread within the AmaZizi community, it remains shrouded in secrecy. The elderly women are not apt to discuss it either in private or in public, which makes the discussions shared for this article evermore impressive. To uncover reasons for the women's silence we must view their relationship with violence more closely. 'Witchcraft is a rather muted topic', one woman clarifies at the meeting. To speak up against witchcraft, she continues, 'poses [a risk] for us as women [that] is unsurmountable' (Interview 2019). She shares a story from 1993, when her village prepared for a funeral:

'A bus full of young men and women from Johannesburg arrived. On the eve of the funeral, a man in his 30s had been shot and killed in Johannesburg for political activism, killed by the South African police. That same evening these young men [from Johannesburg] shot a 16-year-old girl by mistake but they then said the shooting was an indicator that her mother had played a role in the killing of the dead man. The following day, as the funeral procession was about to leave for the graveyard, the men and women from Johannesburg took out guns and instructed all the women [from AmaZizi] to go back into the round huts and tent, and men who freely left by the kraal were heard saying "babulaleni zisozeka abanye", which loosely means 'kill those women; we will marry new ones'. This is the heightened scale of how things can get, our fears of not freely discussing things are informed by these kinds of stories.'

Few elderly women in kwaZangashe speak out against witchcraft assaults. Rather, they remain silent to 'protect their family from harm' (Interview 2019). Continuing, the woman explains, 'Speaking up against witchcraft might

turn into a convenient way for others to hurt my family, maybe even accuse them of being witches' (Interview 2019). Says another:

'[I]n order to take care of a witch you must kill her, destroy her and all her belongings. What will stop them from also killing my family? Especially if they think killing me *and* my family will stop the witchcraft.'

As noble as their refusal to speak may be, their silence has left them under a cloud of 'shameful silence', which further marginalises and isolates (Richie 1996:152).

Patterns of violence encountered by South African women historically have remained concealed or hidden, first under colonial rule, then under apartheid and today under fears of witchcraft-related violence. During both colonialism and apartheid, South African women faced unprecedented acts of social exclusion and inequality. Being omitted from positions of power and education opportunities made them further vulnerable as targets of witchcraft, thus fuelling an environment where witchcraft-related crimes could go unnoticed or, at the very least, ignored. To borrow from Beth Richie, 'This is how they were set up; left with no good, safe way to avoid' accusations of witchcraft. 'I call this set-up – this extreme situation – gender entrapment' (Richie 1996:3). With regard to the AmaZizi chiefdom, the more routine witchcraft-related violence has become, the more hidden and invisible the elderly women have become, entrapping them further within contexts of quieted violence. This, the authors conclude, has had the impact of legitimising both gender-based violence and claims of witchcraft within AmaZizi (see Kgatla 2020).

Yet, the taboo against the women of AmaZizi from speaking up against witchcraft-related violence goes even more deeply. South Africa's colonial and apartheid history was dominated by racialised violence and brutality, as showcased in 'The Truth and Reconciliation Commission' hearings of 1996. Included by the Commission were three all-women hearings, where South African women shared their own stories of human rights violations. Their experiences of being assaulted at the hands of white men were shared alongside accounts of abuse black African men also experienced at the hands of whites. A narrative of victimisation emerged within the AmaZizi – as elsewhere in South Africa – that was framed around white violence against black Africans. This, the elderly AmaZizi women explain, has also impacted their decision to stay quiet. One woman explains that implicating black men, who are the dominant aggressors in witchcraft assaults, challenges a historically based narrative that demands a particular strength and self-confidence that many women lack. 'We're dealing with a lot of things from the past here', she says. 'We had to learn to forget and move on after apartheid. Why would this be different?' (Interview 2019).

While the woman's continued silence around witchcraft accusations has significantly contributed to the rise in

witchcraft-related assaults within the AmaZizi community, another factor, our research suggests, lays with the tensions that exist in the region between customary (traditional) and state-sanctioned laws. In the new era of democracy, South Africa and its constitution have formally recognised customary law as a legal system that should run alongside and in parity with the government-run common law legal system. In reality, however, the two legal systems exist not in tandem but at odds.

As historical context, South Africa's colonialists and the successive white governments acknowledged customary law early on, but not for the new democracy-led reasons of accepting cultural difference. Rather, their recognition of customary law stemmed from a need to maintain power: they introduced customary law as a privilege to the indigenous population that could be bestowed or taken away at colonialists' whim. As such, it made an effective tool of colonial control (South African Law Commission 1999:76, 1.3.2). Even so, the application of customary law remained limited to concerns considered 'of marginal significance to the colonial regime, namely marriage, succession, delict and land tenure' (South African Law Commission 1999:13, 1.3.10).

When the territories of South Africa united in 1910, the white government continued to acknowledge customary law – and even increased a perceived acceptance of traditional leadership authority. However, again, these actions were executed only as vehicles for controlling possible threats from the indigenous population (Ludsin 2003:66). In 1927, South Africa passed the Native Administration Act, which eventually became the Black Administration Act 38 of 1927. Under the guise of safeguarding African tradition, this Act established segregation throughout society, while also consolidating colonial laws within the territories (Diwan 2004:355). The Law of Evidence Amendment Act 45 of 1988 further saw the white government assume jurisdiction over customary law matters, securing customary law's subordinate position in the country.

Although the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 finally recognised customary law on a more formal scale, it interpreted customary law through Western belief systems. Understandably, this has led to yet further complications. Customary law was meant to maintain social order and harmony in the community, with traditional leaders expected to mediate localised conflicts. To assume usefulness, customary law was necessarily 'dynamic, flexible and practical', able to change and evolve with the needs of the community. Because the 1996 Act removed this inherent flexibility, it took away the very strengths that enabled customary law to serve the community most effectively. A casualty of this biased interpretation of customary law has been witchcraft, which, caught between customary and State-sanctioned law, has been allowed to thrive across all provinces in South Africa.

Traditionally, it has been the traditional healer or diviner in the village who would help people deal with the misfortunes of witchcraft. Under a strict division of services, diviners determine the causes of disease or misfortune, determining more specifically if it resulted from the anger of the ancestors or from the evils of witchcraft. Traditional healers, on the other hand, were sought to treat any medical problems resulting from the ancestors or witchcraft (Gelfand 1965:34). If a diviner determined witchcraft was involved, that diviner would bring the matter to the traditional leader, whose court, under customary law, would set the punishment. Should the traditional leader determine the dispute was unrelated to witchcraft, that Chief or King would then mediate with all parties to find a solution.

Whereas the Western world may perceive such a belief system as peculiar and supernatural, traditional cultures consider connections with the ancestral and spirit worlds to be part of their natural, everyday world (Mutwa 2003:62) – and herein lies a major complexity: how to coordinate a dualist legal system when the two systems in question represent such different forms of social ordering within society. After colonisation, when ‘the foreign law became the general law’ (Banda 2005:110), witchcraft became a particular point of controversy. The Western government viewed witchcraft as being inconsistent with European values and therefore deemed it ‘invalid’ and ‘intolerable’ (Quarmyne 2010:486). In rewriting customary law (through the Act of 1996), the Western government eliminated witchcraft from all documents. Unfortunately, simply removing the word from formal documents could not eliminate witchcraft as a belief system. Ironically, because witchcraft continued to flourish – now underground and more covert and subversive – across South Africa, the Act of 1996 actually had the knock-on effect of removing any procedural protection for accused witches. Although customary law had its flaws, it did ascribe certain procedural mechanisms meant to protect against witch hunts and possible abuse. ‘Without the support and structure for handling witchcraft accusations’ in customary law, writes Ludsin (2003:88), ‘community members [have] resorted to informal trials’ as well as witch-killings. Within the AmaZizi tribe, at the heart of this conflict are the elderly women, who today live in persistent fear and anxiety of falling victim to witchcraft-related violence.

Recommended interventions

This article provides first-time data on witchcraft-related violence in the AmaZizi chieftdom and, as such, comprises a substantial amount of data that could help pilot a change in the region with regard to future witchcraft-related violence. The authors have devised a complex series of interventions, which recently have been implemented. Analysis of their impact will take place during the next several months, which will be recorded in a follow-up article for later publication.

Several of the interventions organised by the authors were aimed at raising awareness in the general kwaZangashe community about the ageing process and its inevitable effect

on the body. As the authors argue, the physical conditions common to ageing must be demystified, and the most effective way to accomplish that goal is to develop educational programmes that help the public realise, for example, how yellowing of the eyes may come with having cataracts; how a hunched back often accompanies diagnoses of osteoporosis; and how hormonal changes in women can bring about the thinning of hair or the growth of facial hair. Sharing this information can, the authors further claim, significantly help change local attitudes and perceptions about the elderly, which, in turn, could curb the threat of future witchcraft accusations in the region.

One of the first of such education-focussed interventions organised by the authors in AmaZizi was the Women’s Collective, which, formed in March 2020, served as a forum for AmaZizi women – young and old – to meet and network. Through the decades, there emerged a structural barrier dividing the younger and older women in the chieftdom, with little opportunity for the generations to interact. As such, witchcraft-related violence was allowed to perpetuate decade after decade. By connecting the younger and older women together through the Women’s Collective, however, the authors aim to end that cycle. Because ageism enabled witchcraft-related violence to continue generation after generation, the Women’s Collective, in allowing younger and older women to intermix, provides opportunities for the elderly women to explain to the younger members the ageing process and to share personal experiences and hardships of witchcraft-related violence. It should be observed that an outside facilitator, trained in community activism, was appointed to help kick-start the Women’s Collective at the beginning. However, by the second meeting, an elderly woman from the group assumed leadership, and, through monthly meetings, has guided members on local issues of gender inequality and the mechanics behind and impact of gender-based violence, including witchcraft-related violence, as it occurs within the chieftdom (using data gleaned from this project to steer those discussions).

In addition to the Women’s Collective, the authors also organised a Men’s Forum (formed in April 2020). This follows the recommendation of other researchers, which argues that, if violence is to cease, the men must be integrated with efforts to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) (Graaff & Heineken 2017; Lwambo 2013; Tolman, Walsh & Nieves 2017). The AmaZizi Men’s Forum has provided a space for the men to receive information on gender-based violence and to discuss strategies for combatting future violence. While Chief Jongisilo led the Men’s Forum meetings, specialist support was provided to those men who had served or are working as migrant labourers – the migrant labour system is noticed for destabilising family life and gender relations across South Africa, and therefore became an integral point of reference at the Men’s Forum (see Denis 2003; Knijn & Patel 2018; Murray 1981). ‘The impact of this labour system on black families, and the sexual economies it promoted, are immeasurable’, wrote Belinda Beresford, Schneider and Sember (2010:203).

Yet, because it has been rarely discussed in AmaZizi, the men in the region have been left to deal with their experiences of physical and sexual violence at hostels (which were common, see Waetjen 2004) in silence and isolation. Until that past finds resolution, Chief Jongisilo argues, violence in the region will continue to gain momentum. The men working as migrant labourers return to AmaZizi, the chief claims, with a hyper-sense of masculinity. 'They come back needing to prove they are "a man,"' and, as such, often present with excessive aggression towards their wives and girlfriends. Only by 'healing these men' can the chieftom 'finally eliminate violence against women, including accusations of witchcraft against the elderly' (Jongisilo interview 2019).

As part of the authors' commitment to institute educational programme in the region, a music-based intervention, too, was organised for the elderly women. A singing group was organised as a way for the women to connect with and support one another. Singing is perhaps the most accessible medium of art and healing: its capacity for relieving stress and counteracting anxiety are well known (see Chong 2010; Laurence 2017). Singing also builds community among the participants: it's a team building activity. If you sing alone, nerves or self-consciousness can arise. Yet, collective singing generates this almost magical sense of self-confidence, among both the performers and listeners. As one group member explains, 'The whole community gets involved when we perform. They don't sit and watch. Everyone participates... Our music is inclusive' (Interview 2021).

In the light of concerns voiced by the elderly women regarding the sense of loneliness and isolation they encounter because of witchcraft accusations, this singing intervention also has been key to members acquiring a stronger sense of self-assurance and social well-being. 'Music is food for the soul', expresses one participant (Interview 2021). Singing is pinpointed as the remedy to the emotional and social estrangement she has experienced. 'We sing in happiness and we sing in misery' (Interview 2021).

Yet, song also has the added ability to communicate messages, direct or veiled, which, in turn, can generate social change. To that end, the singing group performs songs that deal with issues specific to their lives as older women. They sing about respecting the elders: being older means that they have acquired a wealth of knowledge and experiences, which can benefit the entire chieftom. Their songs remind the community that their lives are not superfluous, but rather are essential to the chieftom. They also sing about the urgency to end violence against women and efforts to stop GBV, including witchcraft-related violence, must take precedence in the region. Because the singing group today is being invited to perform at various events across the villages, their performances are public reminders of the critical and revered position elderly women hold in the AmaZizi chieftom, with their songs educating the public about ageing and the need to end gendered violence. One woman (interview 2021) speaks about the newfound commitment she now embraces because of the singing group:

[M]usic has the power to provide a lasting message in society, so with music we are able to provide support and advice to the women going through hardships and challenges in their marriages, such as GBV.'

Another mediation instigated as a result of this research revolves around relying more heavily on international human rights officers to enact change. Years ago, treatment of communities was considered a domestic affair: to be handled within the country or region of the said community. However, this is not the case today. The field of international human rights has developed as such that states have increasingly come to believe that it is their obligation and that of the entire international community to protect the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of all people. From that standpoint, the authors argue that the norms found in international human rights law could be more effectively employed by AmaZizi people to protect the elderly women against human rights violations. Towards that end, the authors suggest that the AmaZizi develop closer contact with international human rights officers, which could help transform perspectives on witchcraft assaults. Armed with the data collected from this research, Chief Jongisilo is presently looking to collaborate with the human rights law organisation, Legal Resource Centre, located in Makhanda (formerly known as Grahamstown), during the upcoming months. By working with the Legal Resource Centre, the Chief hopes to submit a statement to the United Nation's Human Rights Council that will urge the Government of South Africa to ensure more effective protection of elderly people from future witchcraft killings and assaults in the AmaZizi chieftom. Once the intervention is launched, its impact will be collated by the authors in future publications.

Another intervention invoked by this study involves revisions to how the chieftom works with law enforcement on issues of witchcraft-related violence. On the domestic level, the rights of women in the chieftom can be protected, first and foremost, through the use of local laws. Witchcraft accusations and their devastating effect on the older women within AmaZizi chieftom would certainly seem to fall under such domestic protection. Although there are constitutional provisions and laws for the protection of women in this region, they are not being fully utilised at present, largely because police stations are located a far distance away and, more generally, because police authority, since apartheid, has struggled to gain community trust (Onishi 2016). To resolve both claims, the authors established Equity Officers (from July 2020 – August 2021) to serve as intermediaries between the traditional leadership and police enforcement (the Equity Officers were from the AmaZizi chieftom and were selected by Chief Jongisilo and law enforcement officials through a series of interviews; additionally, they were trained on the issues surrounding gender-based violence by the Red Cross). The best answer for protecting the elderly AmaZizi women against accusations of witchcraft is through joint enforcement mechanisms by government and traditional authority (see Naa-Adjety 1995:1353, 1372). By basing the offices of the Equity Officers near Chief Jongisilo's royal homestead and

by ensuring their community role was overseen by law enforcement, the Equity Officers were able to ensure stronger cooperation between government and traditional authorities. Although the impact of this intervention is yet to be fully realised, early data suggest it has helped to develop regional capacity in combatting witchcraft-related crimes.

Conclusions

This is the first study to examine witchcraft and witchcraft-related violence in AmaZizi chiefdom. With the data collected, the authors offer significant insights into some of the social and cultural forces that have enabled beliefs in witchcraft to flourish in the region. Our analyses advance a clearer understanding into why witchcraft-related violence has been directed primarily at the women in the region: their physical features, albeit common to the ageing process, have become associated with demonic intercessions. The women, as a result, are left marginalised in society. Their vulnerability is evident in their many stories of shame and discrimination. 'I am cast aside, thrown away like my life is worth nothing', one woman poignantly explains (Interview 2021).

To combat future witchcraft-related violence, the authors suggest a series of complex interventions. The information gleaned from interviews, house-visits and focus groups has shown that the less the public knows about old age, the more negative their behaviour towards the elderly women and the higher the women's risk of witchcraft-related violence become. Given the widespread ageism presented in kwaZangashe, it has been reasonable for the authors to assume that if the public is to gain a better knowledge of the ageing process, they need to assume more positive attitudes towards the elderly women in the region. Only then, can there be a decrease in witchcraft-related violence.

The interventions organised around educating the public about ageing, although still in their early stages, have already reaped certain benefits. From the data obtained from feedback interviews, the elderly women have gained a stronger sense of belonging in the community because of our interventions; and the community is, albeit slowly, acquiring a clearer understanding of the ageing process. 'Many elderly women are being accused of witchcraft here and once you are [accused of witchcraft], your life changes', one older woman explained.

[Y]ou have to be cautious of possible attacks and some of us we don't have transport to travel to places like clinic or to relatives in distant villages. Since the arrival of Professor De Jong with this research and awareness programmes, our lives have changed for the better.' (Interview 2020)

Other interventions instigated by the authors have been organised around the law. Our research has shown that relying more heavily on international human rights law could initiate stronger laws of protection for victims of witchcraft-related violence. The research has also pointed to the need for traditional leadership and police enforcement to work more closely together. Current discord between them,

the authors argue, has thus far undermined efforts to combat witchcraft-related violence. The introduction of Equity Officers was made as one example of how traditional leadership and police enforcement could more effectively connect, and early data have suggested that stronger trust is being built between the AmaZizi community and local law enforcement as a result of the intervention. This is having the broader effect of elderly women feeling their concerns regarding witchcraft are being heard and taken seriously. In turn, more women are speaking out against witchcraft-related violence.

In practical terms, the results of this study suggest that a variety of interventions will benefit rural communities in combatting witchcraft-related violence. This includes both educating the public around ageism and strengthening legal measures to protect elderly women from witchcraft-related violence. 'Being old shouldn't mean being frightened of being called a witch', one elder shares. 'Change – change seems to be coming...finally' (2021).

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

This article was conceived jointly by Nanette de Jong and Chief Jongisilo, who held and led a focus group in kwaZangashe about the nature of HIV and violence against women. From that focus group, it became clear that witchcraft-related violence directed towards the elderly women in kwaZangashe demanded immediate attention. Together, De Jong and Jongisilo organised questionnaires that were distributed via house-to-house survey. Together, De Jong and Jongisilo analysed the data and established the primary research question for this article. De Jong wrote the initial draft, which De Jong and Jongisilo participated in a series of some ten revisions. The final article is the final product of their collaboration.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research.

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Data availability

The data for this article are available at the Vuziwe Foundation and will be stored at the foundation headquarters.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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