

# *Kutanda botso* [self-shaming]: A suffering-related therapeutic ritual in Shona society

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The concept of human suffering forms an integral part of almost all world religions. In the African Indigenous Religion, the focus of this article, suffering is considered an unordinary mundane experience. As such, the sufferer and his or her significant others often ask: Why this suffering? Why is it happening to me? What or who caused it? What should I do to alleviate it? These questions point to the idea that in the African Indigenous Religion, suffering has a cause and an antidote. This article, therefore, seeks to add voice to discourses on religio-cultural approaches to suffering, a subject matter that has so far been scantily addressed in African Indigenous Religion related literature. We explore one of the most dreaded forms of spiritualised suffering, *kutanda botso* [self-shaming], its perceived causes, manifestations and remedies. The argument advanced in this article is that when suffering is moralised and spiritualised, it tends to be perceived as unusual; hence, actions that require appeasement and/or redressive therapeutic rituals are brought to the fore.

**Contribution:** This study adds voice to the existing body of literature on the nexus between African Indigenous Religion and suffering. In particular, it explores *kutanda botso*-related suffering as one of the most feared extreme forms of suffering among the Shona followers of the indigenous religion in Zimbabwe. The ritualisation of suffering and the grounding of *kutanda botso* as a therapeutic ritual are knowledge insights that the article seeks to add to the extant literature.

**Keywords:** African Indigenous Religion; *kutanda botso*; therapeutic ritual; conflict; suffering; justice.

## Introduction

Suffering is a reality that characterises human existence, and its occurrence differs in terms of form and magnitude. It occurs at the individual (micro) and at the collective (macro) levels. It is felt, experienced and interpreted differently by different Shona traditional believers. Similar to any other socio-economic phenomenon, suffering is often viewed from a spiritual perspective. Thus, Mbiti (1969) is right in pointing out that:

Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it [ ... ] Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned. (p. 1)

Spiritualisation of suffering (a practice that resonates with the tenets of the vital force theory) entails perceiving suffering as a divine retribution. As such, beliefs about suffering form part of the traditional Shona people's indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs), which represent collective epistemology and wisdom on human existence that has evolved through generations. The most dreaded form of suffering in traditional Shona culture relates to avenging spirits. Hence, Bourdillon (1987:233–235), Gelfand (1999:60–61) and Chivasa (2019:161) write about the Shona people's belief and manifestation of the avenging spirit [*ngozi*] as the worst form of suffering that manifests through life-threatening sickness, mysterious deaths and inexplicable psycho-social pain. An avenging spirit is the spirit of a person who dies with grievances and returns to seek justice (Chivasa 2019:161; Rwafa, Mushore & Vhutuza 2014:27). One of the most dreaded types of avenging spirit is the one that results from the ill-treatment of a mother by her biological children. This kind of a maternal spirit is believed to be terrifying; it makes harsh and unexpected attacks on the guilty individual or family, causing a great deal of physical harm and psychosocial suffering (Nhemachena 2024:547). However, Chivasa (2019:163–164) posits that retribution is not the end in the living child(ren) versus the dead-avenging mother matrix. Purification, appeasement and redressive rituals, in particular

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*kutanda botso*, the core of this article, function as an antidote to spiritualised suffering. Spiritualisation of suffering through belief systems, such as *kutanda botso*, can be perceived as a religio-cultural tradition aimed at protecting some of the most vulnerable members (mothers) within a family setup. The ritual, therefore, contradicts the dominant African patriarchal ideologies that place women in a precarious position, increasing their susceptibility to intimate and non-intimate physical, psycho-social and emotional abuse (Tatira & Tatira 2025:111–112). In intimate relationships, the suffering motif that forms the nerve centre of the *kutanda botso* religio-cultural ritual serves to protect and safeguard mothers (especially when they are old, frail and defenceless) against all forms of abuse from their children. Extreme and life-threatening suffering (be it physical, psycho-social or emotional) usually invokes and precedes the ritual performance of *kutanda botso*. In light of these observations, this article explores not only the suffering motif but also the suffering-related therapeutic function of the *kutanda botso* ritual.

## Methods and theories

The data utilised in this desktop qualitative study were collected from the available literature on Shona cosmology, rituals, ritual functions and *kutanda botso*. Data collection was limited to library and online resources that focused on the nexus between the African Indigenous Religion (AIR), the *kutanda botso* ritual and suffering. Theoretically, the study relied on the vital force theory because it feeds well into alternative models of understanding and explaining suffering, which we may call the suffering myth or the folk theories of suffering. We define suffering myths as beliefs about suffering that run parallel to scientific models but which believers consider true and are collectively constructed, transmitted and adapted. In his classic *Bantu Philosophy* (1959), Placide Tempels (the scholar credited for originating the vital force concept), quoted in Nel (2008:40), defines the vital force as a cardinal value in African thought upon which all animate and inanimate objects are founded. Metz (2020:119) opines that the vital force or life force has been conceived as being an imperceptible energy that has come from God and that inheres in everything in the universe in varying degrees and complexities. For Metz, this vital force can also be known as ‘liveness’ or ‘creative power’, which acts as the creative force behind all human and non-human actions. The vital force forms the epicentre of Africa’s ontology (the nature of being), and this notion of being shapes human thought and behaviour. Human interaction with the spiritual beings and other sentient and non-sentient beings revolves around the vital force. To this end, Metz (2012:67) argues that while the presence or adequacy of the vital force is viewed ‘in terms of health, strength, growth, reproduction, creativity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage and confidence’, its deficiency denotes ‘[ ... ] disease, weakness, decay, barrenness, destruction [ ... ]’. This resonates with Tempels’ (1959:47) contention that when a person is content with life, the vital force is strong, while suffering is a sign of the opposite.

Although all sentient and non-sentient beings are perceived as being filled with the vital force, Ngangah (2019:49–50) parses that the presence of the vital force in all animate and inanimate objects is hierarchical in that it is more concentrated in descending order from the Supreme Deity down to non-sentient beings. In the same way that there is a hierarchy of forces in the universe, there is also a hierarchy of forces in families and communities that serve to establish order. In communities and families, mothers occupy the apex of the spiritual order, which is imbued with the vital force because of their creative, generative and protective qualities. The moral and religious order in the universe is enforced through a variety of taboos, symbols, values and customs that prohibit behaviours that contravene moral injunctions. Any breach of communal taboos, values and customs is believed to have life-limiting repercussions. This implies that the human moral imperative radiates from the presence of this vital force. Any immoral behaviour, in this case ill-treating one’s mother through actions such as insults, assaults or neglect, results in divine retribution; hence, the *kutanda botso* ritual can better be understood from the theoretical presupposition that recognises the reality of the vital force.

## The aetiology, meaning and forms of suffering

Defining suffering in the context of traditional Shona culture is not an easy task. The interchangeable use of the word ‘suffering’ with terms such as evil, pain, misfortune and affliction compounds any attempt to arrive at a universally acceptable definition. Thus, to have a better understanding of the word ‘suffering’, there is a need to trace it from its etymological roots. According to Onongha (2013:127), suffering derives from the word ‘sub’, which means ‘under’ and ‘ferre’, meaning ‘to bear’. Suffering, therefore, means to bear under something. While this definition is sound, we recognise its inadequacy as it also implies pain, misfortune and affliction. The inadequacy stems from the fact that in the traditional Shona religion and folk use, suffering goes beyond pain, misfortune or affliction. As such, this article relies on the connotative (suggestive) and not the denotative (exact and obvious) principle of defining words. Connotatively, we contend that suffering involves an awareness of disharmony – be it internal (intra-disharmony) or external (inter-disharmony). Suffering conjures feelings of alienation, abandonment and loss. Those suffering feel the absence of wholeness known to characterise human existence. Thus, in this article, suffering points to damaged relationships with the living, with the living-dead and with the larger universe. It is a disruption of the cosmic order. This tripartite dislocation of relationships is by and large because of human aberration; hence, suffering is perceived as a consequence of human (in)action. This argument resonates with Magesa’s (1997:54) contention that ‘moral culpability is always on the shoulders of humanity’.

Dire suffering creates feelings of guilt, shame, defilement and dissonance. These feelings compel the sufferer to recognise the need for reparative, redressive, conciliatory, purification, appeasement, redemptive and transformative rituals, which might be sacred or mundane in outlook. The argument that dreadful suffering is a precipitatory factor for ritual

performance augurs well with Malinowski's contention cited in Museka (2018:28) that when human beings find themselves in a hiatus, they tend to gravitate towards religious rituals. This implies that suffering is not meaningless and that no suffering is beyond human repair. The fact that suffering is experienced individually and collectively, meaning that the suffering of one person impacts those around him or her, his or her families and the community, makes rituals such as *kutanda botso* possible and participatory. The significant others act as the existential enablers and existential nurturers. While existential enablers denote the availability, accessibility, acceptability and affordability of traditionally available community resources for mitigatory health decisions and actions (such as *kutanda botso*), existential nurturers point to the influence of significant others and community contexts in making health decisions and choices that are in line with the dictates of traditional values, customs, worldviews and practices (Airhihenbuwa & Webster 2004:11).

While the traditional Shona society, like all African societies, is 'notoriously religious', to use Mbiti's (1969:1) words, it is important to note that not all forms of suffering are interpreted in metaphysical terms. Similar to diseases, suffering among the traditional Shona believers can be dichotomised as proximate and ultimate with regard to its origins or causation. Aguwa (1995:21–22), Liddell, Barrett and Bydowell (2005:692) and Dickinson (2014:28) concur that proximate cause accounts for *how* suffering occurs. Under the proximate model, suffering is considered a normal existential occurrence. As such, suffering is attributed to, inter alia, an individual's or group's lack of intellect, laziness, politics, deindustrialisation, economic policies, natural disasters, epidemics, regional and international forces, licentious lifestyles, hedonistic tendencies and drug and substance abuse (Mutapuri & Mazengwa 2013:5; Zachrisson 2007:37). The proximate causes of suffering radiate from a Eurocentric Cartesian rationality that thrives on logic and strict rules of evidence and is, however, averse to subjectivities and other truths based on indigenous knowledge and spirituality (Goduka cited in Museka & Madondo 2012:261; Nhemachena 2024:539–541). In the context of this study, Cartesian-oriented explanations of suffering are common in industrialised and urbanised communities; hence, it is not uncommon to hear urban dwellers, in particular the youth, saying *ndiri kutanda botso* [I am performing a self-shaming ritual to appease my late mother's spirit] in an attempt to give a vivid picturesque description of the socio-economic challenges they are facing. The use of a traditional concept, in this case the *kutanda botso* religio-cultural ritual, to explain rational suffering is an indication of the youths' innovative suffering representation that accommodates new contexts and new suffering epistemologies. However, this model is often criticised for proffering a narrow, compartmentalised, static and instrumental view of reason and its disdain over other ways of knowing and meaning making (Museka & Madondo 2012:261–262; Mutapuri & Mazengwa 2013:5). While the traditional Shona people do not disavow the techno-scientific factors as usual or normal or natural causes of suffering, they

attribute extreme suffering, often targeted, bewildering and life-threatening to the ultimate (distant) causes.

Ultimate or distal causes account for *why* suffering, be it physical, emotional, psychosocial, existential or spiritual, occurs to person or family A and not B (Chavunduka 1994:69; Dickinson 2014:28; Mutapuri & Mazengwa 2013:2; Nyamwaya 1995:33; Shoko 2007:44). Thus, when believers are operating within the ultimate frame of mind, their primary concern is to establish *who* or *what* caused this suffering. This question often leads to the moralisation and/or spiritualisation of suffering, meaning attributing suffering to moral pitfalls and spiritual displeasure or retribution. This supernaturalistic or socio-moral and religious understanding of suffering resonates well with the vital force theory. The moral and spiritual causes of suffering range, inter alia, from witchcraft and ancestral vengeance to the breach of taboos (Zachrisson 2007:36–37). Suffering is usually perceived as normal (natural) if it is fleeting in nature and is often taken casually. However, if it persists and becomes life-threatening, it is reassessed and reinterpreted. This usually leads to the abnormal (supernatural) paradigm, thereby compelling the sufferer and the significant others to seek deep-seated explanatory causes, which diviners readily and eagerly provide. As opposed to the Eurocentric Cartesian rationality, this traditional African-Shona branch of 'science' focuses more on the interrogation of the spiritual world than the world of matter (Nhemachena 2024:541). To the outsiders, the ecosystem of beliefs and practices that constitute this branch of science appears fascinating and irrational. It is within this spiritual realm that the *kutanda botso* ritual takes place opposing Rwafa et al.'s (2014:23) contention that it is performative drama.

### From soul-searching to cycles of divination

There is a general scholarly consensus regarding the meaning of *kutanda botso*. Drawing insights from Mutapuri and Mazengwa (2013:5), Rwafa et al. (2014:33), Chavasa (2021:475) and Tatira and Tatira (2025:111–112), we define *kutanda botso* as a Shona traditional religio-cultural sacred ritual intended to cleanse, purify, redress and appease an aggrieved spirit of a transgressor's biological mother. The transgression might have been verbal abuse, ill treatment, neglect, assault, etc. The aggrieved mother seeks justice posthumously if she passes on before the dislocated relations between her and her biological child(ren) have been resolved and irrespective of whether her demise is directly linked to the child(ren)'s transgressions or not. The primary objective of the *kutanda botso* ritual is to reconcile the offending adult child and the aggrieved spirit of the deceased biological mother, the maternal relatives and the entire community (Chavasa 2021:476; Tatira & Tatira 2025:112), hence our contention that *kutanda botso* is by and large a therapeutic ritual.

In terms of the procedure, extraordinary events such as inexplicable misfortunes, mysterious deaths, dire suffering and afflictions precede *kutanda botso* ritual enactment (Mutapuri & Mazengwa 2013:5). Thus, when an individual is

faced with suffering generally considered to be life-limiting but does not conform to Western rationality, he or she self-introspects. This means that inconceivable suffering compels individuals into soul searching. Who is behind this suffering? This question calls for deep-seated explanations. While he or she might be suspicious of the causes, divination is a necessary ritual to ascertain and confirm the suspicions; hence, Chavunduka (1994:72) avers that 'the divinatory procedure has the effect of stamping with a mark of legitimacy a particular decision'.

Divination simply means consulting a diviner(s) regarding the causes and possible remedies to the existential suffering (Bourdillon 1990:101; Museka 2018). It is carried out by diviners, who, in the context of this study, foretell the possible cause(s) of suffering 'through the art of throwing and interpreting divining bones, dices or lots' (Museka 2018). The general trend is that initially the sufferer solitarily seeks the services of diviners to get to the root cause of his or her suffering. However, because remedies aimed at redressing suffering are usually group related and participatory, he or she relays his or her problem to the immediate family members. A family gathering to deliberate the reported affliction follows. In order to ascertain and confirm the afflicted individual's notions regarding his or her suffering, the family further seeks the services of a diviner(s) (Chavasa 2021:478). Once the family is satisfied with the diviners' theories pertaining to the causes of a member's suffering, they send emissaries to the transgressor's maternal relatives to inform them about the suffering afflicting their relative. This may trigger another cycle of divination comprising the paternal and maternal relatives of the transgressor. When both parties are satisfied with the divination results, the ritual process of *kutanda botso* commences (Chavasa 2021:478).

However, lived experience shows that suffering-related redressive, conciliatory and therapeutic rituals are not a monopoly for diviners. In situations where the transgressor's unbecoming behaviour towards his or her mother is a public secret to the community and paternal and maternal relatives, divination might be considered an unnecessary ritual adventure. The three parties, that is, the suffering individual, paternal relatives and maternal relatives, meet to discuss *kutanda botso* ritual procedures. More often than not, they get guidance from a therapist who is not a diviner but a sacred practitioner with vast knowledge of herbs or rituals that he or she prescribes to mitigate suffering.

Plans to conduct the *kutanda botso* ritual are relayed to the village head, who will in turn inform other village heads, village elders, the surrounding communities, the sub-chiefs and the paramount chief (Chavasa 2021:478–479). These elders and sacred practitioners are informed so that they plead with their subjects to help the cause of the transgressor by participating in the *kutanda botso* ritual, particularly through donations. After the plans to perform the *kutanda botso* ritual have been disseminated, the transgressor,

according to Chavasa (2021:479; Tatira & Tatira 2025:112), is dressed in rags and sacks and then banished into the 'wilderness' (unfamiliar geo-cultural spaces). The transgressor moves from house to house, village to village and chiefdom to chiefdom begging for grains, which will be used to brew traditional beer for his or her cleansing ritual (Nhemachena 2024:547).

Ascetic tendencies characterise this arduous ritual journey. The ritual journey is ascetic in that the transgressor is not supposed to indulge. He or she should shun social company but remains a solitary lone ranger, with sartorial elegance and pleasurable activities such as alcohol, parties and sexual intercourse. The general others participate in the ritual by donating, shaming, mocking and insulting the transgressor (Chavasa 2021:478–479; Nhemachena 2024:547). These harassments are considered necessary antecedent purification rites; hence, it is taboo for the transgressor to retaliate. After the transgressor has collected adequate grains, he or she takes them to his or her paternal relatives, who will relay them to the family of the deceased mother. Maternal relatives brew beer, and the transgressor provides the sacrifices and offerings in the form of a beast (usually a cow, sheep or goat), foodstuff and beverages to be consumed. Beer, snuff and a portion of meat from the slaughtered animal are presented to the aggrieved spirit and the entire family or clan spirits not as a bribe but as a sacrifice and offering to pacify and appease the aggrieved spirit and to curry favour for forgiveness. The transgressor and his or her paternal relatives are not allowed to partake in the feast. After the feast, the transgressor is then allowed to take a ritual bath and is disrobed of the rags, marking and signifying the end of his isolation, asceticism and suffering (Chavasa 2021:479; Rwafa et al. 2014:33). The pollutants and the stigma are reversed. This symbolises rebirth, a new beginning and an end to suffering. As such, we agree with Ray's (1976:17) assertion that, 'every African ritual is a salvation event in which human experience is re-created and renewed [...]'.

### Divination-suffering nexus

The traditional Shona people believe that life-limiting suffering is closely tied to the spiritual world. This spiritual world is believed to be the abode of both benevolent and malevolent spiritual agents. These spiritual agents interfere with everyday human existence in positive and negative ways. While benevolent spiritual agents are largely life-promoting as long as they are not aggrieved, malevolent spirits are to a very large extent life-limiting and life-threatening (Machingura & Museka 2022:154). Thus, in the context of suffering, efforts are made to understand the relational equilibrium between these spiritual agents and the sufferer. For Museka (2018:133), understanding this interactive balance invokes questions of causation: Why is the person suffering? Who is responsible for this suffering? The questions of mechanisation also arise, for example: How is the person suffering? These questions comprise psychological stressors that require explanations that hinge on divination and not on Western rationality. The stress emerges from the fact that persistent life-limiting suffering

cannot be logically accounted for; hence, it creates a great deal of anxiety not only for the sufferer but also for his or her family and community members.

Thus, to dispel suffering-related anxieties, divination becomes the only culturally available and accessible therapeutic resource and response avenue; hence, Radcliffe-Brown, cited in Museka (2018:134), is right in positing that anxiety is felt when a ritual, in this case divination, is not performed. Failure to perform a divination ritual may actually cause serious mental unrest; hence, Malinowski, cited in Museka (2018:134), views the primary function of a ritual as the alleviation of anxiety. Thus, when individuals and families are surrounded by life-limiting situations (in this case, suffering) where human knowledge is deficient, divination has the potential to alleviate anxiety and dispel feelings of helplessness.

To the traditional Shona, divination is a key ritual to unlock the hidden and to access esoteric knowledge that answers the questions, Why? Who? What? How? (Museka 2018:134). The divination ritual is, therefore, an investigation into and of the spiritual world more than the world of matter. What in the West might be considered fiction, among the traditional Shona, is believed as fact; hence, our utilisation of the vital force theory to have an understanding of the implication for sustaining the delicate relational balance between and among the living and between the living and the 'living dead'. Divination shows that in the traditional Shona logic, suffering does not just happen but is often attributed to specific malevolent forces (Zachrisson 2007:42). In the context of this study, the aggrieved spirit of the transgressor's late mother is the malevolent force. To appease the malevolent forces and liberate the sufferer, a shameful, humiliating, painful and ascetic therapeutic ritual journey for the transgressor follows divination.

### The centrality of suffering in the *kutanda botso* ritual

Suffering is the hallmark of the *kutanda botso* ritual; hence, it is our conviction that, though performative, this ritual is not a mere dramatisation that has more to do with entertainment, as Rwafa et al. (2014:23) postulate. The suffering emanates from breaching taboos relating to the obligation towards one's mother. In the Shona traditional religion, the mother-child(ren) relationship is a highly tabooed equation in which the children are not allowed to ill-treat, neglect, insult or assault their mother (Mawere 2010:215; Tatira & Tatira 2025:111–112). This means that mothers are tabooed (set apart) beings that should not be riled and abused. Ill-treating one's mother constitutes a serious breach of traditional Shona taboos and is believed to have grave mundane and post-mortem consequences. Because of socialisation, a breach of taboos relating to the well-being of one's mother conjures feelings of guilt, shame, defilement and dissonance (psycho-social imbalance) (Chidester 1987:69). These feelings denote an extreme kind of suffering often attributed to spiritual or ultimate causes. The spiritualisation of suffering often leads

to self-introspection. Self-introspection awakens the transgressor into realising how and when he or she breached a set of taboos. This realisation causes a great deal of untold psycho-social suffering that requires therapy.

The centrality of suffering in the *kutanda botso* ritual comes out clearly if the ritual is analysed from the perspective of van Gennep's (1960:vii) three-tier ritual structure comprising separation, transition and (re)integration. Once the cause of suffering has been confirmed, the transgressor is separated from the agnate and cognate family as well as the entire community (separation stage). He or she is dressed in sacks and rags and condemned into the wilderness, meaning banished (both physically and socially) from the community (Tatira & Tatira 2025:111–112). This stage marks the beginning of intense suffering. Banishment and the wilderness experience denote lack and vulnerability. The transgressor is thrown deep into life-threatening circumstances where security (both physical and psycho-social) is compromised. The transition stage, which is rather lengthy and more arduous, follows. Dressed in rags, which symbolise nakedness, the transgressor roams around villages and publicly confesses his or her misdeeds and hence, the idea of self-shaming (Tatira & Tatira 2025:112). He or she begs for grains to be used for beer brewing during the integration rites. At transition, a transgressor is considered contagiously defiled and stigmatised that nobody interacts with him or her. The transgressor resembles a mentally disturbed ascetic vagabond. His or her senses of guilt, shame and defilement are publicly displayed. The emotional stress and trauma resulting from begging, 'nakedness', physical and social isolation, communal judgement, stigma, insults, condemnation, shaming, assaults and carrying a heavy load of grains together with other financial costs depict and symbolise suffering of the highest order.

During the transition, a transgressor is at the margins. To use Turner's words, quoted in Museka (2018:25), he or she is 'between and betwixt'. He or she is neither here nor there but in a state of 'sacred poverty'. He or she is no longer banished, nor has he or she been integrated back into his or her family and community. He or she is neither clean nor unclean. Feelings of dissonance, a sense of emotional uneasiness, disturbance and turmoil resulting from actions that conflict with moral obligation continue to afflict the transgressor (Chidester 1987:69). This ordeal period is perceived as the most important stage that marks the climax of any ritual (Van Gennep 1960:vii). The transition period can be likened to a blast furnace in which bad habits and anti-social behaviours are burnt to ashes to produce a polished, socially and morally responsible character.

Suffering, which reaches its peak during the transition period, serves as a means to an end, that is, therapy. Suffering is, therefore, critical in that it fosters self-introspection and acknowledgement of moral misdemeanours. Through suffering and the subsequent therapeutic rituals, perpetrators of emotional distress and violence against their mothers have

an opportunity to take responsibility for the wrongs they would have committed. This, in turn, facilitates healing given that victims heal faster when transgressors acknowledge wrongdoing (Heal Zimbabwe Trust & Zimbabwe Civic Education Trust 2016). In addition, suffering has the potential to deter future violence and abuse of parents by children. The ordeals that transgressors go through in the *kutanda botso* ritual have the potential to frighten and dissuade witnesses as well as immediate and distant ritual participants from abusing and breaching mother-related taboos.

The transition phase ushers in yet another suffering stage known as reintegration. At this stage, the transgressor is brought face to face with the victim's relatives and the whole community. He asks for forgiveness. Sacrifices and offerings are made as maternal relatives plead with the aggrieved spirit to forgive the transgressor. Sacrifices and offerings are, however, different in that while the former involves the shedding of animal blood; the latter is limited to libations such as snuff and traditional beer (Mbiti 1991:172). The transgressor is disrobed of the rags and allowed to bathe. The merrymaking and feasting mark the end of the reintegration phase. Ray (1976:17) is therefore right in pointing out that 'every sacrifice is a re-creation of the group's solidarity, every rite of passage a re-creating of the corporate life'. As the maternal relatives feast, the transgressor and his or her relatives are barred from partaking in the feast, probably as a further penalty for breaching the unwritten but folk- and traditionally regulated sacred code of conduct that exists between mothers and their children.

The *kutanda botso* ritual is, therefore, a seven-dimensional ritual with reparative, redressive, conciliatory, purification, appeasement, redemptive and transformative thrusts (Heal Zimbabwe Trust & Zimbabwe Civic Education Trust 2016). It purifies the transgressor from impurities and pollutants emanating from breaching taboos relating to the mother's care. It is redressive in that it restores relations after the aggrieved parties have been appeased. The appeasement of the aggrieved parties leads to the liberation of the transgressor from suffering. Not only is justice achieved for all the parties concerned, but the transgressor is transformed (born anew), and the cosmic order is repaired and restored (Rwafa et al. 2014:33–34). In the end, the transgressor is reconciled with the aggrieved spirits, family and community. In the final analysis, the ritual shows that suffering of whatever magnitude has a solution. The ritual places more emphasis on rehabilitation rather than punishment and reconciliation and reparation rather than retribution. The ritual is by and large therapeutic. Thus, in the final stage of the *kutanda botso* ritual, the transgressor is reconciled with his or her family, maternal relatives and the entire community. Reconciliation, however, cannot be achieved through lip service and does not come on a silver plate. Instead, it is informed and embedded in justice and, therefore, costly?

### Justice-informed and justice-embedded reconciliation

The theme of justice and reconciliation runs like a silver code in the *kutanda botso* ritual. Of important note is the emphasis

on reconciliation rooted in justice. To this end, Moon (2009:343–346), Rwafa et al. (2014:33) and the Heal Zimbabwe Trust and the Zimbabwe Civic Education Trust (2016:14–16) are right in pointing out that reconciliation without justice is not only superficial but also futile. In actual fact, reconciliation and justice are two sides of the same coin to the extent that none of them can be achieved without the other. There is no reconciliation without justice. Thus, in the context of this article, a ritualised justice ordeal precedes conciliatory rites aimed at alleviating *kutanda botso* related suffering. The elements of justice embodied in the *kutanda botso* ritual are not distributive (determining who gets what), nor are they procedural (focusing on how fairly the transgressor has been treated). Instead, the outstanding forms of justice in the *kutanda botso* ritual are retributive and restorative justice. The thrust of retributive justice is to punish the transgressor (Mangena 2012:51). Indeed, in the *kutanda botso* ritual, the transgressor is subjected to ridicule, begging, public confession, isolation, insults and assaults. He or she also bears the financial costs for the ritual performance. The ritual is oriented towards severely punishing the wrongdoers. This kind of justice, we agree with Rwafa et al. (2014:26), is victim-oriented. Most victims prefer compensation for the wrongs they suffered because it helps them to heal and recoup their dignity.

However, retribution is not the end; rather, restoration is the end and the seal in the *kutanda botso* ritual. Contrary to retributive justice, restorative justice seeks to repair, restore and mend relationships (Mangena 2012:78). In the context of *kutanda botso*, once the transgressor has confessed and performed all the necessary rites, he or she is cleansed and transformed into a new person (born again). Thereafter, relations with the 'living dead', aggrieved spirits, significant and general others are restored. Thus, in the Shona traditional religion, transgression is not synonymous with a death sentence. To this end, we posit that apart from being victim-oriented, *kutanda botso* is also transgressor-oriented. This is because the honour is on the transgressor to acknowledge, confess, ask for forgiveness and perform the shameful, costly and tedious rites. He or she takes responsibility and initiates the ritual. The coming together of the victims and transgressors on this conciliatory occasion shows the sincerity of the transgressor and therefore helps to restore and repair damaged relations.

### Gender insights

*Kutanda botso* is a domain of mothers and their biological children; hence, the popular Shona saying that *baba hawana ngozi* means the aggrieved spirit of a father is not avenging in nature. Only aggrieved mothers seek retribution if they die before the dislocated relations with their children have been resolved (Chavasa 2021:478). This belief seems to stem from the bloodline tradition (Museka & Machingura 2014:134). Traditionally, children are thought to share the same blood with their fathers and not with their mothers. In traditional usage and sense, blood, we surmise, symbolises lineage, ancestry and totem and not necessarily the biological organ, as is the case in Western science. This explains why children

are given their fathers' ancestral or family name and totem. Their genealogy is also patrilineal and not matrilineal. As such, mothers are ordinarily treated as 'outsiders or aliens' [*vatorwa*]. The 'outsider or 'alien' tag, together with their gender-perceived frailty, renders them vulnerable to all forms of abuse and mistreatment within a family setup. In this context, *kutanda botso* could be a tradition aimed at protecting the perceived 'weaker outsiders' from children's emotional excesses. In this regard, we contend that *kutanda botso* is a typical example of a female-friendly ritual intended to counter patriarchy.

The vulnerability of mothers within a family setup dates back to antiquity and continues unabated in the present age. While there are no accurate statistical figures on mother-child conflicts, reported cases of biological children-perpetrated conflicts and violence against their mothers seem to be on the rise. Nzenza (2012) reported the case of a 31-year-old man who slapped his mother for negligence after his goats were eaten by a hyena. Chavasa (2021:474) summarises the following media reports as pointers to the increasing cases of children abusing and assaulting their mothers. A 19-year-old girl was reported in 2013 to have stabbed her widowed mother 13 times and burnt her corpse following a heated argument. In 2015, a 19-year-old man stabbed his mother to death for refusing to give him the car keys to go out with his friends. In January 2020, a middle-aged Rusape man killed his 77-year-old mother for serving him a less sumptuous meal. These cases are just the tip of the iceberg with regard to the vulnerability of mothers within a family setup. Thus, the severe suffering that the *kutanda botso* ritual revolves around serves to frighten and deter children from maltreating their mothers. Chavasa (2021:481) succinctly captures this notion when he posits that *kutanda botso* serves '[ ... ] to deter biological children from committing acts of violence against their biological mothers'. In this regard, we consider *kutanda botso*-related suffering as a negative reinforcement aimed at safeguarding mothers against their children's violent behaviours and emotional excesses.

### Enduring belief, swerved suffering

No cultural tradition is static. Thus, traditional rituals as subsets of the traditional culture are bound to change with time and context, and the *kutanda botso* ritual is not immune to cultural dynamics. Such changes, we surmise, are suffering related in that they revolve around the intention and the desire to alleviate suffering. These changes could be the reason why the traditional performance of *kutanda botso* (as described above) seems to have become an anachronism. This, however, does not mean that the *kutanda botso* ritual has become relict cultural debris. Given that the traditional *kutanda botso* ritual is immersed in shame and suffering, transgressors are believed to perform counter rituals aimed at swerving suffering towards immediate family members. In local parlance, such negative rituals are known as *kurasirira*, generally interpreted as scapegoating. Scapegoating occurs when an aggrieved spirit tormenting a transgressor is ritually diverted or redirected towards innocent family members

(Zachrisson 2007:44). Believers attribute most family conflicts and family disintegrations to such rituals. Scapegoating usually happens with the aid of diviners or prophets, especially prophets from African-Initiated Churches. These sacred practitioners are believed to have the power to redirect an aggrieved spirit to innocent individuals related to the transgressor. The bloodline (referred to in the preceding sections) that the transgressor and the innocent victim share is believed to make this possible. Such selfish rituals result in innocent individuals suffering on behalf of the transgressor.

Apart from scapegoating, it is also believed that, with the help of diviners and prophets, transgressors perform pacification rituals known in the vernacular as *kutsipika* (putting an aggrieved spirit to sleep). Pacification rituals, which are generally magical in nature, serve to pacify the aggrieved spirit so that it gets into deep slumber, thereby de-energising it to the extent that it does not torment the transgressor (Mbiti 1991:166–167). In some instances, warding-off rituals are performed to keep the aggrieved spirit at bay. It is believed that transgressors sometimes use charms, medicated water or oils to create a buffer zone between them and an aggrieved spirit, thereby keeping them 'safe' from suffering. Selfish and irresponsible practices such as scapegoating, pacification and warding-off rituals, which Zachrisson (2007:42) rightfully labels the 'witchcraft of protection', seem to have overshadowed and masked the traditional *kutanda botso* ritual. These anti-social suffering and swerving practices can be better understood if looked at from the point of view of the agenda perspective.

An individual sufferer's agenda, which can be announced or concealed, determines his or her course of action; that is, the suffering response strategy. If the sufferer is operating within the announced agenda framework, he or she discloses his or her suffering to the significant others and the community (as described under the section 'From soul searching to cycles of divination'). Suffering and the perceived therapeutic rituals become participatory, involving the nuclei and extended family, community and sacred practitioners such as diviners and ritual therapists. The social group largely determines the therapy-seeking behaviour. However, where the sufferer is operating within the frame of the concealed agenda, largely because of stigma, fear of humiliation as well as other social and financial costs, self-centred and self-serving rituals such as scapegoating, pacification and warding-off prevail. It is largely because of family disintegration and egoistic tendencies that for novices who are not well versed in anti-social rituals aimed at swerving suffering, it would appear as if the *kutanda botso* ritual is now defunct.

There is, however, a need to reiterate that the overriding belief among the Shona people is that self-centred rituals such as scapegoating, pacification and warding-off offer a temporary relief to a mother's aggrieved spirit-related suffering. Hamutyinei (2003:14–15) buttresses this argument when he says that the redress or appeasement ritual is the

only remedy for an avenging spirit. The real remedy to this kind of suffering lies in the traditional *kutanda botso* appeasement ritual, which is reconciliatory, restorative, reparative and redemptive.

## Conclusion

The intention of this article was to examine not only the suffering motif but also the suffering-related therapeutic function of the *kutanda botso* ritual among the Shona people of Zimbabwe from the perspective of the vital force theory. The central argument this article advances is that in the African Indigenous Religion, as is the case with almost all world religions, suffering is an everyday existential reality. In light of the vital force theory, which emphasises the inseparability of the natural and supernatural worlds, any form of suffering, for example economic, political and psycho-social, is by and large mystified, moralised and spiritualised. In the Shona worldview, *kutanda botso*, which implies spiritual anger and vengeance, is generally considered an extreme form of suffering. While suffering is indispensable, it is believed to be transient and reversible if the requisite redressive rituals are properly performed. This means, in the Shona worldview, suffering is not an end. Instead, it provides a platform for the wrongdoer to acknowledge his or her moral pitfalls, thereby paving the way for conciliatory and reparative justice. Once conciliation and reparation have been achieved, the aggrieved parties are healed, and hence our argument that *kutanda botso* related suffering is to a very large extent therapeutic. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the article. Firstly, the *kutanda botso* ritual is a public humiliation ceremony that leads to the acknowledgement of and truth telling about the offence committed. Secondly, the ritual provides a platform for appeasement, redress, conciliation and transformation. In other words, the ritual provides a way through which relations between the departed mother, the maternal and the paternal families, as well as the ancestral world, are mended, re-created and renewed. Thirdly, the belief in *kutanda botso* endures in contemporary Shona society, albeit with some modifications that might be aggrandising and immoral in outlook. Future research, though, needs to establish how the *kutanda botso* ritual finds new meaning and changes form, particularly in urban contexts.

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### Authors' contributions

G.M. conceptualised the study, did the formal analysis, methodology, searched for resources and wrote the original draft. M.M. wrote the other part of the methodology, provided resources, curated the data review and edited the article in supervisory role.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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