


# 'Sharon's' blood through Judges 11:31–40: The sacrificial lambs in African women's lenses

**Author:**Dorcas C. Juma<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Pwani University, Kilifi, Kenya

**Corresponding author:**

Dorcas Juma,  
jumadorcas@hotmail.com

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The rate at which women and girls have been 'butchered' in Africa before and during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that violence against women in patriarchal settings is more tolerable. According to Exodus 21:12, Leviticus 24:17, Deuteronomy 12:31, 2 Kings 17:31 and Isaiah 66:3, murder and human sacrifice are an abomination and defile the land. Unfortunately, it is heartbreaking to note how the murder of women finds justification, as shown in Judges 11:31–40. Ironically, in Genesis 22:13, the sacrifice of Isaac is prevented through the provision of a sacrificial lamb. In this conversational platform, an African women's hermeneutical lens to Judges 11:31–40 enables one to reimagine female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon. It is proposed that 'Sharon's blood' presents murdered women as Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs of Africa, whose lives do not go unnoticed by God. Reimagining female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon arguably enables the voices of murdered women to cry for justice from beyond the grave. If 'the Sharons' and their unborn babies do not receive justice, the ground continues to be defiled by human blood and remains 'cursed' (Mi 6:15). We will plant but not harvest; hence, there is a direct relationship between female bodies, motherhood and Mother Earth. One therefore asks: can scholarly conversational platforms enable murdered women of African descent to cry for justice from beyond the grave, allowing for life to flourish 'again'?

**Contribution:** This article contributed new knowledge to feminist studies by presenting murdered female victims of gender-based violence (GBV) as the sacrificial lambs of Mother Africa, whose innocent blood continues to cry for justice from beyond the grave. From an African hermeneutical lens, this research article reimaged female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon in order to arguably enable the voices of murdered women to cry for justice from beyond the grave.

**Keywords:** Sharon's blood; sacrificial lambs; Mother Earth; African women's theologies; theological phenomenon.

## Introduction

Sharon is a young Kenyan female victim of murder whose killers have never been prosecuted to help her soul and that of her innocent unborn baby find justice. She is used in this conversational platform as an embodiment of African women who have been murdered, the killers never brought to justice and their voices silenced by the grave. It has been pointed out that 'early western feminists regarded embodiment with suspicion, choosing instead to stress the rational powers' (Lennon n.d.). This point of view was seen as endorsing dualism between mind and body (Lennon n.d.). When it comes to the experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) and the murder of women, it is difficult to separate the bodies and minds of the victims of violence. The murder of African women is a life-altering experience that impacts every aspect of the African society. It is from this point of view that one sees the need to unmute the voices of female victims of murder in Africa. Speaking about voices from beyond the grave opens up a conversational platform that allows for one to reimagine women's bodies as a theological phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Sharon Otieno, a 26-year-old second-year student at Rongo University, located in western Kenya, was 7 months pregnant when she was murdered on 03 September 2018. Preliminary investigations

1.The concept 'women's bodies as a theological phenomenon' will be explained later in this conversational platform.

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show that she was raped and 'butchered' so viciously that even her unborn child had been stabbed. A torn condom wrapper, two used condoms, an alcohol wrapper and a bottle top were some of the items an investigative office recovered from the 'crime scene' (Ogemba 2021). The main suspect in her murder is Okoth Obado.<sup>2</sup> Some of the Kenyan newspaper headlines that covered the murder of Sharon include: 'Murder trial: Used condoms found at Sharon murder scene, possibility of rape', (Muhindi 2021); 'Obado "did not use" condom found at Sharon murder scene' (Wangui 2021); 'Kenyan governor Okoth Obado charged over Otieno murder' (BBC News 2018); and 'The Murder Of A Pregnant Woman In Kenya Has Put Sugar Daddy Culture Under The Spotlight' (Griffin 2018). In some of the headlines, one sees the possibility of a suggestion that some female victims of murder 'deserved' it for flirting with sugar daddies just for money (Roth 2004:17). In fact, it is sad to see how suspects of murder are walking freely in society. The socio-economic, political and religious status of many murder suspects has made it possible for them to walk freely in society and possibly continue committing similar crimes. This way, African women have continued to be targets of extreme violence and subsequent murder (Von Robertson & Chaney 2019:125).

In other news making headlines around the world, the lifeless body of Tshogofatso, a heavily pregnant woman, was found hanging from a tree on 05 June 2020 in Durban, South Africa (Myeni 2021). Unfortunately, this is the story of many families in African homes, who are bombarded with pictures and videos of the gruesome scenes on social media by people trying to help the deceased be located by their loved ones whenever their daughter or mother goes missing for days.<sup>3</sup> One can only imagine the pain and trauma that the families of murdered victims experience when they accidentally encounter stories of their murdered loved ones on social media. No one has prepared them for the bad news, and no one is there to support them through the grieving process. A report by the United Nations (UN) shows that 'Africa remains the region with the highest rate of killings of women and girls by an intimate partner or a family member with 2.7 victims per 100 000 inhabitants'.<sup>4</sup> With the amount of African women's blood being shed on a daily basis, one asks: have women of African descent become Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs? If so, why murder expectant women, and what is the blood of murdered female victims being used to atone for? In their silenced voices in the graves, can they still cry for justice from beyond their graves so that Mother Earth can be cleansed from the abomination?

2. His Excellency the Governor of Migori County, Kenya – for more detail see – viewed 28 January 2022, from <https://ke.linkedin.com › hon-zachary-okoth-obado-ba7a...>

3. Adediran, I., October 3 2020, '11-Year-Old Girl Raped to Death', Viewed 13 March 2023, from <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-west/418235-11-year-old-girl-raped-to-death.html>; Kimani, M., July 2007, 'Taking on violence against women in Africa', viewed 13 March 2023, from <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2007/taking-violence-against-women-africa>; Omoro, J., 2023, 'Duo linked to rape and murder of Homa Bay teen arrested', viewed 13 March 2023, from <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/kenya/article/2001409691/duo-linked-to-rape-and-murder-of-homa-bay-teen-arrested>.

4. The Premium Times Nigeria., November 25 2021, '47,000 Women, Girls Killed by Partners, Family Members in 2020; Africa Tops List – UN', viewed 18 January 2022, from <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/497268-47000-women-girls-killed-by-partners-family-members-in-2020-africa-tops-list-un.html?>

Blood in Old Testament society is very symbolic and closely connected with sacrifice. In fact, even if blood is associated with sacrifice, the blood was only confined within the altar and specifically animal blood and not human blood. Numbers 35:33–34 states that the shedding of the blood of an innocent person pollutes the land. In fact, there is no atonement that can be made for the land on which blood has been shed except by the blood of the one who shed it. Charles points out that:

[T]he main purpose of blood sacrifice in the Old Testament could range from offering a gift, having communion, making propitiation, cleansing, averting evils or failures to providing nourishment for Yahweh. (Allison 2016:46–60)

When Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as he had supposedly vowed, each year the young women of Israel would go out for 4 days and weep to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite (Jdg 11:38–40). Thus, it is possible to say that even though Jephthah sacrificed his only daughter in the name of God, the young women were not comfortable with the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter. Notably, the Old Testament has clear 'legal' sanctions against murder and also laws that forbid human sacrifice. However, women were still 'butchered' and sacrificed, and sometimes their deaths were justified by any means. Speaking about a troubling legacy of violence against women in the Old Testament, Seibert (2012) points out that we should 'retell the stories in order to learn from them and do everything in our powers to keep them from happening again' (p. 143).

In African traditional society, 'murder was considered a crime against society as well as a violation of divine law, as all life comes from God' (Nhlapo 2017:1–34). Thus, there were legal, religious and customary laws that ensured accountability. This way, the killer was made to account for his or her act, a matter that highly minimised cases of murder (Nhlapo 2017:1–34). Even so, just as in the Old Testament, contemporary African society continues to witness the murder of women at an alarming rate. Africa's Mother Earth continues to be stained with the blood of women, some of whom are pregnant. Notably, in traditional African society, a pregnant woman was highly protected. In fact, it was the obligation of the entire community to ensure that a pregnant woman was safe from all harm, including 'bad eyes'. It is disheartening to note how the murder of women in Africa continues to take up diverse and dynamic dimensions, including ritual killings, yet efforts to curb the vice seem not to bear much fruit. According to Nwakanma and Abu, 'violence against women, unfortunately, is disturbingly widespread and has assumed critical dimensions including forced marriage, trafficking in women, rape, acid baths and the killing of women for ritual purposes' (Nwakanma & Abu 2020:15447–15457). It is from this context that one sees the importance of putting Sharon's blood in dialogue with Judges 11:31–40 in order to reimagine women's bodies and motherhood in Africa as Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs. This way, it will be possible to enable the voices of innocently murdered victims to cry for justice beyond the graves.

Furthermore, it paves the way for locating women's bodies and motherhood within an African women's hermeneutical lens in order to re-emphasise the fact that women's lives matter because they are created in the image and likeness of God, as in Genesis 1:27 (Elizabeth 2010:24).

## Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs: An African women's hermeneutical lens

[I]f you refer to someone as a sacrificial lamb, you mean that they have been blamed unfairly for something they did not do, usually in order to protect another more powerful person or group.<sup>5</sup>

From the context of this conversational platform, Sharon is presented as an embodiment of many African women who have been murdered in order to protect the image of someone, the patrilineal family, 'a certain family', someone's marriage, religion, the inheritance or while persevering in abusive relationships in the name of one's children. On the other hand, an African women's hermeneutical lens to Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs seeks to deconstruct the social construction that seems to tolerate the murder of women, therefore normalising the interaction of murder suspects with the rest of the society. An African women's hermeneutical lens to Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs allows for one to name, expose and criticise in order to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies that dehumanise women of African descent, thereby presenting them as passive recipients of brutal murder. This way, it will be possible to deactivate self-consciousness in women of African descent who have been socialised to objectify themselves (Jennie 2011:38). Many victims of murder have been brought up in cultural settings that have made them believe that it is a divine command for women to live for others. In the Song of Songs 1:5–6, for example, we encounter the voice of a woman who is complaining about the sons of her mother who made her a keeper of their vineyards, a matter that prevented her from taking care of herself. In fact, it seems that the female voice in the Song of Songs neglected herself to the extent that the daughters of Jerusalem were looking down upon her (Glickman 2004:89).

In an African women's hermeneutical lens to Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs, one finds the opportunity to destabilise the status quo that continues to socialise women of African descent to interpret their bodies from a colonised and racial point of view. Black theology has produced great scholarly discussions on the affirmation of black power (Roberts 2008:17). In the process, men of African descent reawakened to the consciousness of black self-determination, cultural affirmation, political empowerment and racial pride (Roberts 2008:17). African theology, on the other hand, has criticised the influence of Western forms of Christianity brought about by European colonisation, championing instead the

5. Collins English Dictionary, 'Definition of sacrificial lamb', viewed 20 January 2022, from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>.

indigenisation of the Christian message (Anderson 2001:226). It is worth underscoring the fact that the two Afrocentric theologies celebrate the dignity of people of African descent as equally created in the image of God, as in Genesis 1:27. However, the two theologies do not address the dynamics underlying the fundamental gendered, raced and sexual relationships that were created under colonialism and exist in the same form in contemporary African patriarchy (Conradie 2011:54). Arguably, the gendered, raced and sexual relationships have continued to be the fertile grounds that influence women of African descent to interpret their bodies from a colonised and racial perspective (Conradie 2011:54). It is hard to imagine how the hypersexualisation and historical exploitation of African women's bodies for profit continue to be normalised (Conradie 2011:54). Without the necessary hermeneutical lens emerging from the experiences of African women on matters of sexual and racial exploitation, it becomes difficult to destabilise the status quo.

An African women's hermeneutical lens seeks to equip women of African descent with liberating biblical hermeneutical tools that empower women to continue reading the scriptures from a liberating point of view. In many African Christian settings, some biblical texts are used to influence women who live with abusive partners to believe that they can 'save' their abusers by repaying evil with good deeds. Instead of the perpetrators changing, it is the victims who end up being killed in the name of Jesus. Women in abusive relationships are encouraged to persevere, just the way Christ persevered to the point of death on the cross. Africa being a patriarchal setting, the pastoral ministry and leadership positions are predominantly male. This means that the Scripture is mostly interpreted by men in ways that continue to give men power to dominate and silence women in the name of God. Thus, women in abusive relationships are constantly taught to be better wives to their husbands and try to win them for Christ by 'behaving well' towards their husbands (Elizabeth, Gathogo & Gitome 2020:241). In fact, it has continued to be very difficult for some to understand why some male pastors place the lives of women in danger by using the Bible to convince women to stay in abusive relationships (Elizabeth et al. 2020:241). Patriarchal influence over the lives and bodies of women of African descent has continued to influence many to confuse submissiveness to abuse with being 'good wives'. In the stories of many murdered victims, it is possible to see a close relationship between the interpretations of texts and progressive violence against women that eventually leads to murder (Anderson 2006:113).

It is important to empower women of African descent with the necessary biblical hermeneutical lens in patriarchal settings. This way, it will be possible for women of African descent to identify men's limitations in the interpretation of women's bodies that continue to lead to increased cases of female murders. According to Onditi and Odera, it seems men in patriarchal settings define their identity based on their capacity to impregnate women and the control they

exercise over women's bodies through sex (Onditi & Odera 2021:166). Thus, African women's hermeneutical lens to Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs opens up conversational platforms for contemporary hermeneutical tools of resistance against the misrepresentation of female bodies. Women of African descent continue to find the Bible meaningful because quite often, women transform themselves into characters in the Bible in order to tell their own stories from a liberating point of view (Miller 2005:103). The murder and sacrifice of women in the Old Testament and contemporary African society is disturbing, although inspiring when one views it from the perspective that Mother Earth is watching and will bear witness. Through African women's hermeneutical lens to Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs, it is possible to demonstrate both what is wrong with the world and what is right in presenting female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon.

## The cry of 'Sharon's' blood through Judges 11:31–40

While reading the Book of Judges, one may get the impression that bloodshed and possibly 'the murder of women' is justified by showing that the 'current generation' had forsaken God and were worshipping idols. Readers are informed that the Israelites were serving Baal and Astaroth. Thus, the anger of God was kindled against Israel, and he delivered them to 'depraved minds' so that everyone did as they pleased and were also terrorised by their enemies (Jdg 2:10–14) (Parisien 2010:26). In fact, there are divergent views that try to explain the amount of bloodshed in the Book of Judges. According to Cogan and Weiss, 'there were no stronger leaders like Moses and Joshua to guide the people of Israel. Thus, they repeatedly failed to honour the covenant with God' (Lainie & Judy 2002:20). Dinger (2015), on the other hand, points out that 'God wanted to take care of the Israelites but they refused. They wanted to have a King like other nations' (p. 108). When one reads the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, it is difficult to reconcile her sacrifice with the failed state of leadership in Israel. The fact that Jephthah was able to defeat the enemies of Israel shows that he was a strong leader and a mighty warrior of that time. Furthermore, judges seems to have had a stable judicial and legal system and military command, for example, as in the person of Deborah (Jdg 4 and 5). By analogy, reading the story of Jephthah's daughter in contemporary African society, where daily news is marred by the murder of women, raises even more questions. Africa seems to have a stronger leadership as compared to the period of judges. It has been noted that 'accountability and demand for democracy seems to drive leadership changes in Africa'.<sup>6</sup>

For one who is familiar with the story of Sharon, it is possible to say that the very opening verses of Judges 11 arguably prepare one for the plight of Jephthah's daughter. Readers are informed that Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty

warrior whose father was Gilead and his mother a prostitute. Is there any significance for being notified that Jephthah's mother was a prostitute before we are told about the birth of the brothers of Jephthah? Doesn't the identity of Jephthah as the son of a prostitute already profile Jephthah and his seed (daughter) as the unwanted generation in Israel? Following the identity of Jephthah as the seed of prostitution, we are told that Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. It seems that as a seed of promiscuity, he had no right to inheritance (James 1975:137). Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him. Does this imply that Jephthah was an outcast, and therefore his seed or generation deserved to be extinct? While this is not immediately clear from the text, the narrative seems to reassure the readers that Jephthah was an innocent victim of the hate of his brothers, innocently driven out of his father's house (Jdg 11:7). Thus, the elders of Gilead reassure Jephthah that upon his return, he will be made the head over all of those who live in Gilead. Even so, the plight of Jephthah's daughter is introduced through Jephthah's answer to the elders: 'Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me, will I really be your head' (Jdg 11:8–9)? This way, the narrator arguably prepares the readership for the justification of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, so that the text appeals more to the emotions of the readers without leaving room for a critical reading of the text. Locating the plight of Jephthah's daughter within the context of a possible murder of an innocent woman, Miller points out that 'it seems that with the death of Jephthah's daughter, Jephthah's inheritance is lost and the land possibly reverts to his half-brothers who initially drove him out because of inheritance' (Miller 2005:10).

In the same way, the different news headlines on the death of Sharon prepared the recipients for the possible justification of the murder of an 'innocent' pregnant woman. DNA analysis showed that the 7-month-old baby Sharon was carrying was indeed Obado's.<sup>7</sup> Governor Obado was then arrested by detectives on 24 September 2018 after establishing enough evidence linking him to the murder of Sharon Otieno (Miller 2005). Governor Obado is a married man with two 'legitimate' children and heirs to his inheritance. He is also a politician with a public image to protect. Sharon Otieno, on the other hand, was a young girl who came from a humble background. Available information shows that she was also the provider for her mother and siblings.<sup>8</sup> In the wake of the news about the murder of Sharon, 'two woman representatives asked girls to accept their humble backgrounds and focus on education rather than sponsors'. The headline of one of the digital newspapers speaks volumes about the justification and normalisation of the murder of women in patriarchal contexts. 'SLAY QUEENS, SOCIALITES AND SPONSORS': The normalisation of transactional sex and sexual violence in

6. Signé, L., 14 June 2018. 'Accountability and demand for democracy drive leadership changes in Africa', viewed 21 January 2022, from <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/accountability-...>

7. Ogemba, P., July 14 2021, 'DNA test proves Governor Okoth Obado was the father of Sharon Otieno's unborn baby', viewed 27 January 2022, from <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001418283/dna-test-proves-governor-obado-was-the-father-of-sharons-unborn-baby>.

8. Mutavi, L., 5 September 2018, 'State Pledges Thorough Probe into Sharon Otieno's Murder', viewed 18 January 2022, from <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018-09-05-state-pledges-thorough-probe-into-sharon-otienos-murder/>.

Kenyan society'.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of the murder, Obado confessed to having an affair with 26-year-old Sharon in a press conference at a Nairobi hotel, where he also introduced his family to the public for the first time. He also informed the public that the family was aware of the relationship (Miller 2005). After the burial of Sharon, her voice has remained as silent as the voice of Tshegofatso, Jephthah's daughter and other victims of murder in many African societies.

Even so, what about:

- the voice of Jephthah's daughter that requested her father to give her 2 months to roam the mountains and weep with her girlfriends because she will never marry and bear children again
- the voices of the young women of Israel who go out for 4 days every year to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite
- the voice of Sharon before she was murdered, when she was pleading with her tormentors in her state of pregnancy
- the silenced voice of Sharon's 7-month-old child, who died as a result of stab wounds
- the fact that Sharon's unborn baby boy was given a girl's name by Sharon's father<sup>10</sup>
- Sharon's body that was recovered in the forest in Oyugis in a pool of blood (Miller 2005)
- the voice of Tshegofatso and the silenced voices of many female victims of murder whose blood cry from the ground for justice beyond the graves?

Does God hear the voices of these women? Do these voices offer contemporary scholars an opportunity to reimagine female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon and a conversational platform for an African women's hermeneutical lens to Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs? The voice(s) of Jephthah's daughter, her 'girlfriends' in the mountains, that of Sharon and her unborn baby in the Oyugis forest and many other female victims of murder in the mountains, the valleys and plains are voices of protest. They are voices that neither fear nor desire death (Tailor 2009:68). While patriarchal settings have silenced the voices of female victims of murder, are silent and do not listen to the voices of murdered victims, Mother Earth and nature are listening (Pablo 1991:214). Notably, it is very significant that Jephthah's daughter went to wail in the mountains with her girlfriends while Sharon's body was discovered in the forest in a pool of blood, and the lifeless body of Tshegofatso, a heavily pregnant woman in Durban, South Africa, was found hanging from a tree. The murderers may hide from the law of the land, but Mother Earth and the law of nature are the witness to the silenced voices of innocent Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs.

9.Pala, O., 2023, 'SLAY QUEENS, SOCIALITES AND SPONSORS: The Normalisation of Transactional Sex and Sexual Violence in Kenyan Society', viewed 27 January 2022, from <https://www.coursehero.com/file/slay-queens-socialites...>

10.Standard Digital., September 21 2018, 'Why Sharon Otieno's Unborn Baby Boy was Given a Girl's Name', viewed 27 January 2022, from <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/entertainment/county-nairobi/article/2001296371/why-sharon-otienos-unborn-baby-boy-was-given-a-girls-name>.

## Female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon

A presentation of female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon argues that women are a sacred symbol of God's glory. Daniel 3:1 shows that it was culturally normative for rulers of huge empires in the Old Testament to erect their images in places where they were not physically present. This way, their subjects would feel the presence of their ruler's power and authority. In the same way, God creates men and women in God's own image so that human beings can be God's image-bearers and represent God on Earth. That is why God gives both men and women authority to exercise dominion over creeping creatures of the Earth (Gn 1:26). Why, then, do men dominate women, even exercising excessive power that leads to the murder of women? A presentation of female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon has critical consequences for practice regarding human dignity.<sup>11</sup> Women are fully equal to men, as they are equally created in the image and likeness of God, as in Genesis 1:27. In the same way that God provided a sacrificial lamb to prevent Isaac from being sacrificed in Genesis 22:7–14, God also uses the voices of women in Judges 11:31–40 to mourn the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter.

The overwhelming research and studies on female bodies and motherhood have continued to emphasise the need to dignify African womanhood (Zimudzi 2004:499–517). However, the question of how remains diverse and dynamic. In this conversational platform, the female bodies and motherhood are presented as a theological phenomenon in order to negotiate for women's safe spaces, regardless of space and time. According to Coly, 'women of African descent can only be in position to negotiate [safety] and respectability by shying away from the sexual female body' (Ayo 2019:62). In this argument, it is possible to see a possible separation of the female body from motherhood. In this understanding, one possibly gets the impression that female bodies and motherhood are difficult to understand, comprehend or explain fully. But why should one want to understand, fully comprehend or explain women's bodies and motherhood? Is it about understanding, comprehending, knowing or encountering female bodies and motherhood through women's experiences as individuals? In analysing female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon, one comes to realise how power and powerlessness are embodied in female bodies and motherhood in patriarchal contexts.

[W]omen negotiate their daily lives in and through their bodies and reproductive system, as well as in social relations, social circumstances, and meaning systems shaped by gender, race and class. (Bonnie & Elena 2015:670–693)

The more conversations are steered on female bodies and motherhood, the more the world wakes up to continued cases of the murder of women. Coronavirus disease 2019

11.Johnson, A. E., 2010, 'Female Symbols for God: The Apophatic Tradition and Social Justice', *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 1:2 (2010) 40, 40-57, viewed 02 February 2022, from <https://orthodox-theology.com/PDF/IJOT2-2010>.

(COVID-19) exacerbated the murder of women. However, the murder of women of African descent was already raising concern on international platforms even before COVID-19. Does this raise the question of whether newsrooms and social media should stop sharing information about such issues? Should scholars stop researching issues related to GBV and female murders? Presenting female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon is important in understanding the relationship between the murders of African women, their unborn babies, gender, theology and male power. Thus, an African women's hermeneutical lens offers one an 'insider's' view of many women who are caught between the transcendence of motherhood and the immanent reality of being in an abusive relationship that can lead to death. Arguably, presenting female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon can offer a useful starting point for exploring the historical development of GBV in relationships that lead to murder. This way, it is possible to theologise female bodies and motherhood, opening up conversational platforms that affirm life and create safe spaces for women's lives to flourish.

While analysing female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon, it is possible to see the relationship between women's bodies, culture, religion and gender. This is very significant, particularly when it comes to women's sexuality. It empowers women with a self-understanding of their bodies, hence questioning the extent to which women can persevere in abusive relationships. The impact of the murder of women on children and immediate family cannot be underestimated. Additionally, the relationship between the murder of women and life sustainability from a theological point of view shows that God and Mother Earth both care about women. It seems that religion and particularly Christianity have not been kind to motherhood in terms of childbearing and female bodies.<sup>12</sup> However, in Genesis 1:27, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Thus, women have the right to live life in its fullness, as in John 10:10. This creates the urgency to locate the murder of women within the context of female bodies and motherhood, as a theological phenomenon builds on the existing interpretations of the different experiences of women in patriarchal settings that have tended to undervalue women's bodies and motherhood. Patriarchal settings have continued to enable the interpretation of male bodies as sacred, while women are taught that their bodies and especially sexualities are profane. Thus, male bodies have continued to be valued at the expense of female bodies. It is from this perspective that even motherhood is at risk, as even pregnant women are murdered alongside their unborn babies. Virgins are sacrificed and a generation brought to an end (Feldman 2007:379–415).

## Observations

The frequent murder of women of African descent seems to suggest the vice is tolerable in patriarchal settings. Peering

12. Pedrucci, G., 2020, 'The Entanglement of Mothers and Religions: An Introduction', the Journal Open Theology, viewed 02 February 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1515/othp-2020-0016>.

through the African women's hermeneutical lens, while gazing at Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs, one has the opportunity to ask: does God tolerate the murder and sacrifices of women of African descent? Patriarchal societies have socialised women to believe that female bodies and motherhood are a burden and problematic. Thus, many women believe that there is a need to do something about their femininity, bodies and motherhood. But does the Old Testament agree with this? By analogy, does traditional African society agree with this too? In Genesis 3:20, 'Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.' Implicit in this is the fact that if a woman is murdered, the life of the whole society has been shuttered. That is why in African traditional society, an expectant woman was highly protected. Is this a great lesson to contemporary matriarchs? Women of African descent have made numerous sacrifices that have changed history and the course of history. Women have a powerful influence on their children, nature and future generations. In the same spirit, Sharon's blood has created a possibility of a rereading of Judges 11:31–40 from an African women's hermeneutical lens for Mother Earth's sacrificial lambs. This has offered a new opportunity to present female bodies and motherhood as a theological phenomenon. The question remains: should women of African descent continue to lay down their lives in the name of womanhood and motherhood? Is it not time to build on existing conversations that continue to open up safe spaces that can allow women's life to flourish? Is God watching, and Mother Earth too?

## Conclusion and recommendation

Unmuting the voices of women remains central in the context of the escalating cases of the murder of women in patriarchal contexts. In the Old Testament, in Exodus 21:12, Leviticus 24:17, Deuteronomy 12:31, 2 Kings 17:31 and Isaiah 66:3, murder and human sacrifice are an abomination and defile the land. That is why it is made clear in Micah 6:15 that when the land is defiled through the shedding of innocent blood, God's people will plant, but they will not harvest. In the same way, it is an abomination in African society to shed innocent blood. What remains shocking is the rate at which the daily news continues to be decorated with the murder of innocent women and girls. It is therefore recommended that there is need to:

- equip women of African descent with the necessary hermeneutical tools that will empower women to see how religious communities and institutions convey values and belief systems to their members through texts, traditions, teachings and doctrine
- empower the voices of women of African descent to use religious texts and teachings to serve as resources to assist those who have experienced abuse to find safety and begin the process of healing
- sensitise women of African descent to name the murder of innocent women as a justice issue and thereby seek legal assistance for the voices of their murdered loved ones from beyond the grave.

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