



The burial of the husband as an opportunity for the introduction of his children, born outside of wedlock - An African pastoral study

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ABSTRACT

African funerals have been an occasion to send off the departing person in a dignified way, but they also served as a communal affair where relatives could meet and mend their relationships. For the purpose of this study, funerals have also become a situation where unknown and even unaccepted children of the male deceased who were born outside marriage would be introduced into a family or clan. There would not be any guarantee that such practices would end up adding peace into the family, depending on the reactions and suspicions that the formal wife (or wives) and her (their) children to such incidents. Even though the contestations would follow on the trustworthiness of the deceased to his household, a few questions would arise, especially if there is some inheritance left by the deceased. This article used the conceptualisation analysis of the secondary sources via desktop findings to unveil some of the traditional reasons as well as repercussions of such practices. Without ignoring the African traditions towards the handling of cheating between husbands and wives, the study, by way of discussion, made recommendations to resolve this tendency as a way forward before making concluding remarks. The study contributes to the stability of African marriage, which is, amongst others safeguarded by ensuring that while cheating is discouraged, children of the deceased must also receive justice in terms of relating to their family and clan.

Keywords: African Marriage, Unfaithfulness, Children Outside Marriage, African Funeral, Household, African Traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, black South African marriage and families were challenged in accepting the children who were born outside of wedlock, ¹ whether it is from a wife or husband. The kind of challenges often lead either to a divorce or hiding those children from the family, especially the married wife. It should be noted that a married wife in the African context is the one whose *lobolo* was given, and she is accepted through the customs and the rituals of the particular family. Although this kind of challenge was also touched upon by the South African President of South Africa, Honourable Cyril Ramaphosa, in

¹ The concept of “outside wedlock” in this article will be referring to the extramarital context in which the formally or legally married woman at home is usually not aware of. It will not be used to refer to just an ordinary situation where a child is simply born to unmarried people.

attempting to seek remedies for the fatherless children around the country, the issue itself remains less researched from an academic point of view, hence very few academic resources are available to address this.² For the sake of this study, it has been evidenced that the problem has sometimes led to the unexpected appearance of children born out of wedlock at the funeral of their absent father. This unexpected appearance would often cause unwanted situations which would sometimes disturb the decency of the funeral as expected by the family, depending on the reaction of the wife, her children and other family members.³

Surprises that are brought by having new family members upon the death of the husband are not only making women (wives) lose their benefits, but they have also become a business for young girls, which often traumatise these married women during the mourning of their husbands. Mtshede's *Sunday News* report has the opening words:

I cannot even imagine the hurt, pain and disappointment one experiences when they find out their husband has been unfaithful and has fathered a child outside of the marriage. It is one thing to cheat on your partner, but it is something else when a child is born as a result of infidelity.⁴

This kind of betrayal is something that most women would hate to experience, though it may often only be revealed to the widow when the husband is dead. The anger and the hurt that widows go through because of this act of betrayal seem to be downplayed in most African communities, though it may have unintended repercussions for the widow's health and life. It is the norm in African culture that children should be born within a traditionally recognised marriage. This view is confirmed by Guilbert and Marazyan, who agree with Dial that, in most African countries, just like in Senegal, marriage is the only arena of child production, regardless of whether the couple is urban or rural.⁵ In line with African patriarchal tradition, it is important to protect one's marriage by avoiding, at all costs, mentioning or acknowledging children who were born outside of the marriage or introducing them to the family. Many issues would be raised whenever the family becomes aware of a child born from an extramarital relationship, one of which will be the inheritance, as reported in an extensive study on this subject, conducted by Cooper.⁶ Harold Ayondo, in his blog, said:

A section of society criticises clandestine lovers, who spill the beans, for allegedly embarrassing 'first' families in times of grief. Some of the affected women emerge, with clandestine babies, after the deaths of prominent personalities. Some, who appear at funerals with babies born out of extra-marital affairs, often demand acceptance to guarantee property inheritance. Does the law protect such children?⁷

This quotation is just an example of what is happening to many families, and the tone of the quotation indicates that something is unusual and problematic about the practice. On 23 July 2025, between 12h00 and 15h00, UNISARF hosted an information session for the invited Unisa employees on issues relevant to retiring and benefits thereof. One of the burning questions was around the benefits that unknown children who are born between the deceased husband appear to be part of the claimants in the deceased's estate or wealth. It was observed that this centred most of the problems that the estates of deceased are faced with and are grappling to sort out, while delaying the release of the benefits until every beneficiary is on board. It was also indicated that it has become a common challenge that men or deceased's hidden children outside of the wedlock usually surface during or immediately after death, while the representatives of the estates will leave no stone unturned to find out the reality, even if it

² Flux, "Disconnected Dads," April 30, 2024, www.fluxtrends.com.

³ Magezi E Baloyi, "Distance No Impediment for Funerals: Death as a Uniting Ritual for African People-A Pastoral Study," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 1 (2014): 1-7.

⁴ B. Mtshede, "When Hubby Fathers Child out of Wedlock," *Sunday News*, August 21, 2016, www.sundaynews.co.zw.

⁵ Nathalie Guilbert and Karine Marazyan, "Being Born Out-of-Wedlock Does It Affect a Child's Survival Chance? An Empirical Investigation for Senegal," 2013; Fatou Binetou Dial, *Mariage et Divorce à Dakar: Itinéraires Féminins* (KARTHALA Editions, 2008).

⁶ Elizabeth Cooper, "Inheritance Practices and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty in Africa," *Available at SSRN 1538942*, 2010.

⁷ H. Ayondo, "Children Born out of Wedlock Entitled to Father's Wealth," November 14, 2023, www.tnx.africa.

demands paternity or DNA tests.⁸ It is even worse for working wives who are in a community of property with their husbands, because if there is not enough left by their husbands, there can be ways of taking from the working wife to support the estranged new family stepchild.

The main question of this research is: Is it a good practise for people who have children outside of marriage, to only introduce such children to the family when their father is buried? This conundrum is what motivated me to write this article. On 01 September 2024, between 24h00 and 03h00, Munghana Lonene FM, a radio station that belongs to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, was discussing the topic: “How do you feel about fathers who are under stress related to the challenges of having a child outside wedlock?” The programme formed the central point of this research.

According to Richter and Panday, South Africa has the lowest marriage rate on the African continent; yet, there are many children born annually; thus, the implication is that the majority of South African children are not fortunate enough to be raised by their two biological parents, in a bond of marriage.⁹ After South Africa, Namibia is the country with second highest rate of absent fathers in Africa.¹⁰ In African families, it is especially the relationship between the widow, her children and the family that is negatively affected whenever a third party, who had been involved in an extramarital relationship with the departed father/husband, shows up at the funeral. It would be understood that, in a family where disputes were peacefully resolved, it would be shocking for the family members, especially the widow of the deceased and her children, to hear of unknown children of her husband. This would be a sign that the family was living with a hidden agenda, which would be used to cause more instability, as and when such new revelations come out. In some cases, children born outside marriage are used by some in-laws as pawns in the fight against the wife or wives of the deceased. In one court case, Nolili Nkombombini, who was the mother of the deceased, used the case of the children that were born outside marriage to attempt to deny Grace Mahala, the traditionally married wife, the authority to bury her husband. This mother (the mother-in-law) of the deceased wanted to bury her own son, without the involvement of his wife. This case was addressed in a court of law, and the argument forwarded stated, verbatim, that:

The applicant declares that during the marriage, the deceased had two extra-marital sons, namely Nsimolela David Mazone and Luba Balwo. The deceased, further, had a son, who was born prior to her marriage to the deceased, namely Lindile Makwane. In addition, she states that one Mzondesi Alfred Kobese claims to be the son of the deceased, born prior to the marriage (Judge Erasmus - Date delivered: 9 December 2005).

According to Baloyi, there are challenges that the family, particularly the widow and her children, would face if children, from extramarital affairs, were presented only upon the passing of the father, and this is the problem that this article intends to grapple with.¹¹ For Richter et al. and Van Onselen, migrant labour, urbanisation, colonisation and other civil developments cannot be isolated from the challenge of absent fathers in most African countries.¹² For the context of this article, this statement assists the reader to understand that the separation of husband and wife due to migrant working and other related factors opens a door for some men to have extra marital affairs, in which some children were born. It should be noted that not the majority of men would afford to stay a long time, like a year or months, far away from their wives, while not having other women to keep them company.

⁸ University of South Africa Retirement Fund (UNISARF), “Reminder of Employee Benefits Sessions,” *Information Session Held by UNISARF at WMM Building Exam Hall 2, Muckleneuck Campus, Pretoria*, 2025.

⁹ L. Richter and S. Panday, “Youth Conceptions of the Transition to Adulthood in South Africa: Barriers and Opportunities,” *Sexuality in Africa* 3 (2006): 1–4.

¹⁰ Dorrit Posel and Richard Devey, “The Demographics of Fathers in South Africa: An Analysis of Survey Data, 1993–2002,” *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*, 2006, 38–52; Linda Richter, Jeremiah Chikovore, and Tawanda Makusha, “The Status of Fatherhood and Fathering in South Africa,” *Childhood Education* 86, no. 6 (September 2010): 360–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2010.10523170>.

¹¹ Baloyi, “Distance No Impediment for Funerals: Death as a Uniting Ritual for African People-A Pastoral Study.”

¹² Richter, Chikovore, and Makusha, “The Status of Fatherhood and Fathering in South Africa”; C. Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia 1910-1933* (Pluto Press: London, 1976).

It has been found that young South African girls today are targeting older men, who are thought to be close to retirement and even death, to impregnate them, so that after their death, they can make claims from the estates of these men to support themselves. Attending one of the UNISARF engagements was an eye-opener to see this. They popularly call it a syndicate which targets men unaware, since the law and pension schemes in South Africa, through estates, are kept busy to prove by DNA and other research means if the deceased indeed has such children outside wedlock. Most of the estates' forces schemes to make such long-term investigations, whereas their actual wives and children would be starving or even dying waiting for such estates to bring out their judgements.¹³

There have been few publications on the issue of whether the children born outside of wedlock should be allowed to inherit their father's wealth or not.¹⁴ But the discussion about bringing the children, born outside of wedlock, to the funeral, as a surprise to the family, has received much attention. Baloyi seems to be the only one who touched on it, but in just a section of the article.¹⁵ The reality is that this is a gap in research that demands some investigation in the form of an article. Research has shown that children born outside of marriage have been and are still identified as illegitimate children. The condition of having a child before or outside of marriage lessens the happiness and the future stability of the marriage, and the situation will likely be challenging for the children, who may want to know more about their biological father as they grow older. The children who were born outside marriage have complicated challenges when seeking their right to access their fathers.¹⁶

This kind of behaviour has been and will remain an indication that some family members who will be supporting the bringing of children who were born outside marriage have a hidden agenda, which includes hurting the immediate wife and children of the deceased.¹⁷

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a conceptual framework in which the existing literature in different forms, like books and articles, was synthesised and analysed. Inclusion of media sources like radio, TV, newspapers and other forms of summit reports was done, especially because this is one of the practices which not much has been written or published about. It results from developments which are enhanced by the need to belong as well as inheritance possibilities within the recent democratic dispensation. The reading and analysis of the existing sources is a research method used by scholars like Pieterse, who called it a scientific-theoretical approach.¹⁸

DISCUSSION

Short background

According to the records, only 31% of black children are staying with their biological fathers, compared to 51% of coloured, 86% of Indian or Asian, and 80% white children. This statistic was unveiled when President Cyril Ramaphosa indicated that only a third of South African children live with both parents in his tweet dated 29 August 2023.¹⁹ He was emphasising the importance of using cultural means, like *lobolo*, to help reduce the number of disconnected fathers, which has become a concern in many ways. The challenges associated with children who grow up with one or no parent are varied, and the intention of this article is not to address that, but to focus on how funerals have become the platform used to introduce the children, born from extramarital relationships, sometimes accompanied by their mothers.

¹³ Obonye Jonas and Patrick Gunda, "Children Born out of Wedlock and Their Right to Inherit from Their Fathers under Customary Law in Botswana-Baone Kealeboga & Anor v Tidimalo Mercy Kehumile & Anor," *Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa* 48, no. 1 (2015): 97–98.

¹⁴ Obonye Jonas, "Extra-Marital Children and Their Right to Inherit from Their Fathers in Botswana," *Eur. JL Reform* 17 (2015): 93; Cooper, "Inheritance Practices and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty in Africa."

¹⁵ Baloyi, "Distance No Impediment for Funerals: Death as a Uniting Ritual for African People-A Pastoral Study."

¹⁶ A. Mohamed, "Children Born out of Wedlock. Their Right to Legitimacy and Justice for Natural Fathers," *De Rebus*, November 1998, www.journals.co.za.

¹⁷ Baloyi, "Distance No Impediment for Funerals: Death as a Uniting Ritual for African People-A Pastoral Study."

¹⁸ HJC Pieterse, "Scientific-Theoretical Research Approach to Practical Theology in South Africa: A Contemporary Overview.," *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017): 1–9.

¹⁹ F. Trend, "Disconnected Dads," April 30, 2024, www.fluxtrends.com.

East Africa Magazine reported a story about the pain that one young man went through when he heard of the death of his absent father; to summarise, utter confusion and shock prevailed.²⁰ Annor et al. discussed parental absence in the life of a child as another form of abuse, which can be associated with mental health problems, substance abuse and even suicide in some observed cases.²¹ Unfortunately, the void left by an absent father and the impact this has on a child can be crippling; unless a miracle happens, and the child meets his/her father. This implies that a failure to meet their absent fathers in their lifetime may even force them to want closure by coming to their funerals. It should be remembered that for many Africans, closure between people, even those who have not met or spoken, makes it important to come to the funeral of the other. Baloyi indicated that people, not even close relatives, would drive long distances to attend a funeral of someone they did not have good relationships with, for the sake of closure.²² Thus, such closure would mean even more for the child who was abandoned for some reason. It should also be noted that children who were born out of wedlock would not have had some of the traditional cultural birth rites performed on them, since they were regarded as illegitimate, and the family from the father's side would take responsibility to ensure that this is done. One example of the birth rite that should be performed with the involvement of the biological father is that of naming the child.²³

What are some of the causes for hiding the children who are born outside of marriage?

According to Biney et al. in a survey conducted in 2016, a significant number of South African women - six in 10 - were not married, nor ever lived a married life.²⁴ Nonetheless, looking at the number of childbirths, the suggestion would be that active childbearing does not necessarily only happen within the context of marriage. They went on to argue:

A significant proportion of childbearing may be occurring outside of socially recognised marital unions. Given the low prevalence of marriage in South Africa, it is an expectation to find the proportion of women who have never been married but have children to be quite high compared to cohabiting or married women.²⁵

The argument above confirms the correctness of the fact that many children are born outside of wedlock, and it can be presumed that some of them would be eager to get to know the other parent, even to the extent that they would attend the funeral when he dies. Some are eager to seek out the other parent, while others are forced to, due to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Chamie reports that, out of the 140 million births in 2016, about 15% or 21 million were children born outside of marriage or wedlock.²⁶ Malherbe indicated in his book, "Born into Bastardy", that the practice of children being born outside marriage has been witnessed even during early Victorian Cape Town.²⁷ It is believed that such births can potentially stigmatise the child and each of the parents, separately. From the African perspective of preferring a male child, it was found that, in many instances, men whose wives did not bear male children would try to have a male child outside of wedlock, for the sake of the continuity of the lineage. This was if they wanted to avoid having to take a second wife or being polygamous. Unfortunately, because of the stigma of having a child outside of marriage, many women, in particular young girls, who had children before they were married, are ashamed. In this regard, Johnson-Hanks comments:

²⁰ East African Magazine, "Short Story: Death of an Absent Father," February 10, 2017, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/magazine/short-story-death-of-an-absent-father--1361688>.

²¹ Francis B Annor et al., "Parental Absence as an Adverse Childhood Experience among Young Adults in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 150 (2024): 106556.

²² Baloyi, "Distance No Impediment for Funerals: Death as a Uniting Ritual for African People-A Pastoral Study."

²³ N. A. Etim, "Burial Rites in African Society: The Ibibio Perspective," *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies* 5, no. 1 (2022): 369–77.

²⁴ Elizabeth Biney, Acheampong Amoateng, and Olusegun Ewemooje, "Patterns of Fertility in Contemporary South Africa: Prevalence and Associated Factors," *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2020.1858575>.

²⁵ Biney, Amoateng, and Ewemooje, "Patterns of Fertility in Contemporary South Africa: Prevalence and Associated Factors."

²⁶ Joseph Chamie, "Out-of-Wedlock Births Rise Worldwide," *YaleGlobal Online*, 2017, 1–13.

²⁷ Vertrees C Malherbe, "Born into Bastardy: The out-of-Wedlock Child in Early Victorian Cape Town," *Journal of Family History* 32, no. 1 (2007): 21–44.

You see, when you are a student, and you conceive, when your friends leave for school, you are ashamed. You are obligated to hide yourself. Even when you give birth, you go to the village. You go to give birth in the village, so your friends don't see you, because you are so ashamed. Insofar as babies born in the village face higher infant mortality rates, this shame itself is a risk factor for infant death.²⁸

There is a stigma directed at both the mother and the child, and sometimes even to the father, when a child is born outside of marriage. There is an agreement among some African scholars that some marriages suffer because of the pressure to have a male child, with some men even being willing to have a male child outside of the marriage if the wife fails to bear him a son.²⁹ Often, these children would be hidden or concealed from a part of the family, for fear that it would ruin the marriage. It must be noted that African people in olden days used to respect and value marriage; hence, there was no tolerance for relationships that may cause the breakup of the marriage. The terms, *xigangu* (Tsonga), *mufarakanu* (Venda) and *nyatsi in Sotho* (girlfriend), to someone who is married, were a very serious threat, not only to that marriage, but to the community. This is because the women in this category would be suspected of poaching other women's husbands, and an extramarital relationship is rendered as a big enemy of marriage. Therefore, such hatred of the practice would inflict a lot of hatred even on the child who is born from that kind of relationship. According to Possa-Mogoera, even the naming of children born outside marriage can be derogatory; for instance, *matlakala* (fallen leaves), *mohlabaneng* (the bush), *dihlahleng* (in the bush), *masimang* (in the fields), etc.³⁰ These names imply that the child was not conceived in the home, but outside or in the bushes; some names would even make reference to the child being conceived in the streets. This is an indication of how the naming of a child is so important in Africa; it connects the person to a situation or certain circumstances. Having a child out of wedlock, for the Basotho, both in Lesotho and South Africa, is still regarded as a serious taboo.³¹ Sennott et al., in a study conducted in UKZN, indicated that many of the young, unmarried mothers agreed that it was a mistake to have a child when they were so young, i.e., teenagers. However, the children, whose existence is hidden, are also born to adult men and adult women who have extra-marital affairs.³² It is not easy to study these causes separately, since the end of the article is intended to examine the impact on the family when such children arrive at their father's funeral as a surprise.

Another cause for the high percentage of children not living with both biological parents is the high number of parents making the decision not to marry or live together.³³ Baloyi also noted that the devaluing of marriage for young men and women made them prefer to only have children, without being married or cohabiting.³⁴

The meaning and position of out-of-wedlock children in the African context

Bearing a child outside of marriage affects the developmental trajectory and health of the child, as is commonly evidenced in some sub-Saharan African countries.³⁵ Cochrane and Farid have pointed out that most young African women postpone marriage due to financial constraints and to take advantage of

²⁸ J. Johnson-Hanks, "Sexual Stigma and Infant Mortality in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Paper Presented at the 2005 Meeting of the IUSSP, Tours*, 2005, 18.

²⁹ J. Mayuya, "Kenya: Male Child Syndrome – The African Girlchild's Nightmare," *The Star*, September 8, 2012, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201209080620.html>; D. Kanokanga, *More Love, Less Stress* (Central Milton Keynes: Author House, 2010); Magezi E Baloyi, "Gendered Character of Barrenness in an African Context: An African Pastoral Study," *In Die Skriflig* 51, no. 1 (2017): 1–7.

³⁰ Rethabile Possa-Mogoera, "Naming Children Born out of Wedlock among the Basotho in Lesotho and South Africa: A Critical Discourse Analysis," *Nomina Africana: Journal of African Onomastics* 37, no. 1 (2023): 73–85.

³¹ Alessia Valongo, "Children Born Out of Wedlock: The End Of an Anachronistic Discrimination," *Italian LJ* 1 (2015): 83.

³² Christie Sennott et al., "Premarital Births and Union Formation in Rural South Africa," *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 42, no. 4 (2016): 187.

³³ Philip Ahiaku and Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani, "Single Parenting in South African Context: Causes and Effects on Child Welfare and Development," *E-BANGI* 19, no. 4 (2022): 171–83; Matlakala Frans Koketso et al., "Perspectives Of Single Mothers On The Socio-Emotional And Economic Influence Of absent Fathers' in Child's Life: A Case Study Of Rural Community In South Africa.," *E-BANGI Journal* 16, no. 4 (2019).

³⁴ M. E. Baloyi, "African Theological Pastoral Perspective," *Phronimon* 17, no. 2 (2016): 1–16.

³⁵ Gary Knaul Barker and Susan Rich, "Influences on Adolescent Sexuality in Nigeria and Kenya: Findings from Recent Focus-Group Discussions," *Studies in Family Planning* 23, no. 3 (1992): 199–210.

educational opportunities;³⁶ hence, the delay results in children being born outside of marriage.³⁷ Wildsmith et al. use the concept, ‘nonmarital childbearing’, to describe this phenomenon of having children outside of marriage.³⁸

Both families, that of the woman and of the man, would usually experience some difficulties in accommodating a child born outside of wedlock. According to most African traditions, when a child is born, some rituals, to acknowledge the birth of the child, are supposed to be performed by the ‘in-laws’ of the pregnant woman; however, since there is no marriage, it would mean the first step in claiming and initiating the child into the family is lost. Nasimiyu-Wasike mentions that, on the birth of a child, to wish the child well, an African ritual is performed by the mother and father-in-law, which is conducted in the strictest privacy and confined to the family.³⁹

This brings the issue of how the children born outside wedlock, especially in an extramarital affair, are called. According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the word “bastard” would be employed to refer to such children, meaning: “a child born to parents who are not married to each other”; however, this term is viewed as offensive.

Matswaneng discusses the pain and agony of many children who continue to search for their fathers, who have disconnected ties with the mother and the child, wanting to know who their biological fathers are.⁴⁰ According to his analysis, the Gauteng Department of Social Development has been trying to track down the fathers of over 6000 children, who have abandoned their children and no longer honour their paternal responsibility of supporting the children. It has been emphasised that, even though some fathers run away from their responsibility, others may not even be aware that they have children; the child could be the result of casual sexual intercourse or a one-time sexual encounter, also called a “one-night stand”, or even a case of sexual assault or rape, which may or may not have been reported. Such scenarios are depicted by Nathani Taulela and Nduna, who report that:

For some children, unknown and undisclosed paternal identity can be a source of distress, family disharmony and identity confusion. In some cases, where children do not know their biological fathers, this is due to insurmountable factors such as stranger-rape or the unknown whereabouts of the putative father; however, in other cases, the father and his whereabouts are known to the mother, the maternal family and others, but concealed from the child.⁴¹

This gives the impression that, in an African context, it was unacceptable, culturally and traditionally, that a child should be born outside of marriage; hence, the child would be faced with challenges from the moment they are conceived. In some cases, such children would be slain to avoid any forthcoming unseen problems to the stability of the family, as attested to by Ahmad (2014), who reports on such accounts in an Afghan Muslim context. Moseson et al. also report on cases of infanticide in Senegal, where some children were killed because of unwanted pregnancies, which would cause families to be in confronting situations.⁴²

³⁶ Susan Hill Cochrane and Samir M Farid, “Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa: Analysis and Explanation,” 1989.

³⁷ Ron J Lesthaeghe, Georg Kaufmann, and Dominique Meekers, *The Nuptiality Regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium, 1986); Anne-Emmanuele Calves, *Youth and Fertility in Cameroon: Changing Patterns of Family Formation* (The Pennsylvania State University, 1996).

³⁸ E. Wildsmith, J. Malove, and E. Cook, “Dramatic Increase in the Proportion of Births Outside Marriage in the United States of America from 1990-2016,” *Research Brief*, 2018, www.childtrends.org.

³⁹ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Christianity and the African Rituals of Birth and Naming,” 2006.

⁴⁰ K. Matswaneng, “State’s Sad Roll Call of Children Trying to Find Their Dads,” Timeslive blog, October 31, 2017, www.timeslive.co.za.

⁴¹ Motlalepule Nathane-Taulela and Mzikazi Nduna, “Young Women’s Experiences Following Discovering a Biological Father in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa,” *Open Family Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (2014): 62–68.

⁴² Heidi Moseson et al., “Infanticide in Senegal: Results from an Exploratory Mixed-Methods Study,” *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 27, no. 1 (2019): 203–14.

Legitimisation of parenthood for children born out of wedlock

It has been found that many societies have arrangements to make it obligatory for the father to take care of and support his child, who was conceived outside of wedlock.⁴³ This would entail an arrangement to ensure that men take responsibility for their misdeeds, but it does not force them to marry or take the child into their home. This means the child will still have to grapple with the problem of wanting legitimate status and carrying the paternal surname.

Although it is not the focus of this article, it will be helpful to have a brief understanding of how the issue of children outside marriage is handled by the legal fraternity, since, very often, people within a particular culture are expected to act in accordance with the law of the country regarding a particular issue. South African law, like other countries, prescribes how children who are born outside of marriage should be taken care of or socialised. It is incumbent for any nation to prioritise the care and well-being of children, which is regarded as an investment in the future. Since the democratisation of South Africa, the Constitution has enshrined the rights of all citizens and those who reside in the country, including children. This brings in the principle of non-discrimination against children and ensuring that they have equal rights under the law.

The need for children to find their biological fathers in South Africa

Identity reasons

Mothers of children who are born outside of wedlock often face challenges as children who want to know their family identity and relationships as they grow up. This normally becomes a serious problem since they may be faced with a situation whereby the father of the child, for peace reasons, would not like the child to be known by his own immediate family, especially the spouse. Nathane-Ndudlela and Nduna report on a case study, where, because of a lack of money, the father did not pay *inhlawulo*, which resulted in misunderstandings between him and the mother of the child and, in turn, him not being allowed to have a relationship with his child.⁴⁴ But then, when the child grew up, she sought to connect with the father, because of the issue of identity; she wanted access to her real surname, which is her identity. In South Africa, many estranged children find themselves in this dire situation. In the psychosocial sciences, the self of the child is negatively affected if there is a lack of family connection, and it is difficult for the child to develop self-confidence, since children want to have a sense of belonging. This kind of unresolved relationship brings conflict and feelings of betrayal, which destroy the child's self-concept. The pain and anger that engulf a child in this context may cause him/her to force themselves onto the family whenever an opportunity arises, such as a funeral, where anyone can attend.⁴⁵

Social reasons

Most African communities did not accept well children who were born out of wedlock. This was because marriage was highly regarded to an extent that anything that seemed to disturb the marriage was regarded as an outcast. Bastards, as some were called, are children whose fathers are unknown, and such children are likely to grow up in rejection by many family members. There will always be a difference between the life of the child who grew up under a single mother and the one who grew up under the shelter of both parents. This would be regardless of whether both children with fathers and those with absent fathers grow up together, attending the same schools and playing together or not.⁴⁶ The self-esteem of the child, whose father is absent, can always be challenged when the other mentions their fathers. A lot of children may feel unaccepted, and that can also play a negative role in their school performance.

⁴³ Anne Louw, "The Constitutionality of a Biological Father's Recognition as a Parent," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 13, no. 3 (2010): 155–206.

⁴⁴ Nathane-Taulela and Nduna, "Young Women's Experiences Following Discovering a Biological Father in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa."

⁴⁵ Gift Khumalo and Edmarie Pretorius, "Perceptions of Grade 10 to 12 Adolescents on Contextual Situations That Contribute to Their Psychosocial Development Challenges," *South African Journal of Education* 45, no. 1 (February 28, 2025): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v45n1a2453>.

⁴⁶ Kersi Chavda and Vinyas Nisarga, "Single Parenting: Impact on Child's Development," *Journal of Indian Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 19, no. 1 (2023): 14–20.

The radio programme, *Munghana Lonene Gongomela*, by the SABC, discussed the topic of absent fathers and the challenges such situations create for their children. There were numerous callers who commented on the topic, with most of them indicating their compassion for those men, who are often not allowed to see their children, while others mentioned situations where men are forced to take responsibility for children whose paternity has not yet been determined. Some indicated that these things happen as a scam, to destroy men who are well-to-do, since the women can then access the maintenance. Many other aspects in this regard were mentioned that confirm that men having children outside of wedlock is a serious problem in South African society; hence, some children just decide to turn up at the funeral of their father for closure, though they know it will be a challenge for the widow and the family members.

Richter and Morell identified that approximately 50 percent of the fathers in South Africa do not have daily contact with their children.⁴⁷ It is unfair for fathers not to own up when they have messed around. For the author, owning up means accepting the child first, though it does not imply also accepting their mother. Thereafter, the father should seek ways in which the child, born out of wedlock, can be introduced and known to his family. This would avoid the situation of the family being surprised when the father is gone. That is where I support the view of the President, who requests that “people must seek ways, might it be traditional through *inhlawulo* (paying the damage) or *lobolo*” or whatever the families deem necessary, so that the child is not deprived of having a father. This, of course, has nothing to do with inheritance or succession plans, but is intended to ensure that children are left part of the families as and when their fathers depart. An opportunity for the wife to know about her stepchildren, conceived outside of their marriage, will not automatically mean she accepts what the husband did behind her back, but this may bring peace for those remaining, which is necessary.

Even though some people may think it is a good thing to bring the child to the funeral, this may not be the case for other bereaved people, who were not aware that there were children outside marriage, especially the wife of the deceased; it can be shocking and disturbing news. Nkhwashu mentions a case where the widow, Reneilwe, reports her experience, saying: “The family even produced two kids they say belonged to Magezi, who should share the money (*inheritance*)”.⁴⁸ It should not be expected that a woman, who is still mourning her husband, should be introduced to unknown people and learn that they are her stepchildren at the funeral. Unfortunately, in Reneilwe’s case, the issue of inheritance was also immediately mentioned. At some funerals, it becomes a serious shock, since no mention or suspicion of inheritance would be made, but later interdicts, court cases and estate blocking would follow. In his research, Omotol unveiled an example of such a case, where two widows spent much of their time in courts, instead of mourning their departed husbands.⁴⁹ Because of poverty, it is often suspected that children who are just arriving during the death and burial of their father are opportunistically targeting to get some of their father’s wealth, especially in cases where fathers died being rich.

Destruction of relationships

It should be noted that having the child(ren) of the deceased at the funeral, a child/child who was never introduced to the family, is an act of betrayal by the deceased, because he should have brought them to the family when he was alive, if it was his wish to make them part of this immediate family. But this will not only be problematic for the widow and her children, but it will also be problematic for some family members, especially those who want peace and unity in the family. It can be understood that whoever is involved in inviting or bringing this child or these children to the funeral would be contributing to destroying the trust of the immediate and extended family, and, as such, the relationship will be negatively affected. The response and the tone of Reneilwe, in Nkhwashu’s study, about this kind

⁴⁷ M. Hunter, “Fathers without Amandla: Zulu Speaking Men and Fatherhood,” in *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*, ed. L. Richter and R. Morrell (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006), 99–107.

⁴⁸ G. Nkhwashu, “Culture Shock for Rich Widow,” *Daily Sun*, July 25, 2012.

⁴⁹ Jelili A Omotola, “Primogeniture and Illegitimacy in African Customary Law: The Battle for Survival of Culture,” *Ind. Int’l & Compar. L. Rev.* 15 (2004): 115.

of practice, indicate unhappiness and feelings of betrayal, although there has been no mention of names.⁵⁰

According to Mphahlele, it is a cultural betrayal in many African communities, even to allow the deceased's *nyatsi* (girlfriend or concubine or lover) to attend the funeral, which is the territory of the wife or widow.⁵¹ Therefore, since every woman who is not married, according to African custom, would not qualify to be a wife, nor even attend the funeral. This leaves the children of a lover in a difficult position regarding the attendance of the funeral of their so-called father. It was also the belief that bringing such people to the funeral would bring bad luck to the family. This is linked to what Baloyi and Mushwana have indicated in arguing as to who the real wife is in accordance with African tradition.⁵² In this research, they indicated that most African tribes accept the union as marriage only if the bridal arrangements, like *lobolo* negotiations, have been done; any relationship without having passed through that is unacceptable.

Some children are innocently coming to make a closure, but complex as this may be, it may be difficult for some who may be suspicious. Funerals in Africa give people a chance to get closure by being part of the funeral. The intentional act of the children coming in late to the funeral ceremony might signal upcoming battles over whatever failure the deceased had failed the mother and child outside the marriage. Perhaps it is the timing that is bad, and the advice should be that children and fathers should seek reconciliation or a relationship while he is still alive. This would mean that some cultural prescripts that force fathers or families not to acknowledge the children conceived outside of marriage should be revised. Closure is an important issue for most black people and cannot easily be dismissed. For instance, the return to South Africa of the exhumed bodies of the political heroes, who were buried in Zimbabwe and Zambia, is aimed at bringing closure to all their loved ones.⁵³

RECOMMENDATIONS AND THEOLOGICAL PASTORAL GUIDELINES

It is important that the family treats every case on its own merit because the purpose of the children's coming outside wedlock may not be one, but different. There will be those who genuinely want closure with their parent, while others may seek to ensure that they are part of the family burial rituals. One example is that a young man did not attend to his parent's funeral, but then later when he got sick he believed he will never heal if he did not visit home, where the burial was performed in his absence, hence he asked the hospital pastor to request for a break to go home and will come back to continue with the medication and treatment.⁵⁴ This kind of after effects often happens to many black people who believe that if they did not make a good closure during the send off, things will not work for them. This brings us to the next point, which is the theological responsibilities of the pastoral caregivers in the community.

There is a need for pastors to understand the context of the communities from which they serve so that their work helps the communities. One of the issues is that, as much as Theology teaches that children are gifts from God, who gives those that He purposed to give, there is an element of not undermining the Biblical teachings on the relationship between marriage and children, at least in the African context. The truth of the Bible is that God planned for children to be born within wedlock; that is the undeniable truth. That is why the Bible say: "No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD. (Deut 23:2). But if children are born outside marriage, then it is not their problem, but the parents' problem. Children cannot be judged for being born outside of wedlock.

⁵⁰ Nkhwashu, "Culture Shock for Rich Widow."

⁵¹ M. Mphahlele, "Funeral Attendance up to Families- Cultural Beliefs. Deceased Have Had Plans to Marry," August 19, 2018, https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/sunday-world-8839/20180819/281552291704357?srltid=AfmBOoo6Xde0uVWITVOG_MgWQPVu0lqLMVgBRsGnVrTOe42HX6_wuk.

⁵² Magezi Elijah Baloyi and Arnold Mushwana, "Ku Susa Vukoloni Eka Nhlamuselo Ya Rito 'Nsati' Na 'Nuna' Eka Xitsonga – Dyondzo Ya Nsusavukoloni," *South African Journal of African Languages* 44, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2023.2248871>.

⁵³ N. Sibiyi, "SA to Repatriate Remains of 49 Liberation Fighters from Zimbabwe and Zambia," News24 blog, 2024; J. Maromo, "Ministers McKenzie and Motshekga to Receive Remains of SA Activists from Zimbabwe and Zambia," 2024.

⁵⁴ V. V. Msomi, *Ubuntu Contextual African Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Pretoria: CB Powell, 2008).

Pastors must then play community leaders and moral teachers in such communities. This connects with the need that theology must be able to address people within their own situations; if it fails to do so, it must cease to exist.⁵⁵ There must be a counselling section planned for the widow and her children, as well as the counselling for the children coming from outside wedlock. The aim of the counselling will not be to unite them primarily, but to ensure that they understand that their being born separately is not their mistake, and they should not use it to destroy themselves. Pastoral counselling must be out of the box, beginning with premarital counselling, marriage counselling and even post-marriage counselling where widowhood comes in. It will also be a good thing for pastors to journey with the family, and if psychological needs appear, referrals can be made. They have to teach strongly about the importance of the institution of marriage as well as living a faithful life between husband and wife. Although the promotion of polygamy was found in most African communities, there is nothing condoning the extra-marital affair, which usually ends up producing children outside of wedlock. There is also a traditional belief that when one dies, he/she becomes an ancestor, but it can still be argued that not everyone is qualified to become an ancestor. Having unknown children irresponsibly outside marriage is not sanctioned by either the theological teachings or the traditional teachings.

When children are born, pastors have a duty to teach about and to protect the children from being called names like bastards and so on. They need to ensure that stigmatization of children because of being borne outside marriage is discouraged and those who seek to pay last respects to their absent fathers should have a way to be allowed to be part of that funeral, though the other issues that can be raised from that may be addressed on their own merits.⁵⁶

Lastly, there is a need for elderly people in rural areas as custodians of culture to seek to understand whether the children coming to the funeral of their absent father are coming in peace or are being used to cause unnecessary conflicts. This kind of wisdom will avoid unnecessary judgments as well as help those who are solely coming to make their final respects and bid farewell to their parent. In a nutshell, the elderly wisdom will ascertain that each case is handled on its own merit and get rid of generalisations. Above all, theology must not forget to teach that the Bible forbids mistreating fatherless children (Exodus 22:22).

CONCLUSION

It is not unusual for children to be born outside of wedlock. This research has indicated that, within the African context, such children have been rejected and are often regarded as baggage for the families, in accordance with their different understandings of African customs. A child without a correct surname, which identifies them as tied to a particular family or clan, can also experience psychosocial problems, in particular, anger and resentment. However, there is no guarantee that the abandoned mother and child will be happy when they meet the family, and, hence, it becomes more suspicious when either a child or the estranged mother attends the funeral. An issue of revenge or closure cannot be ruled out; hence, this article advises that fathers with children outside of marriage should seek ways to mend the relationship before they pass away.

Limitation of the study

This research did not intend to make ethical judgements - whether it is a wrong thing or not to have children outside of wedlock- but it confined itself to check if it is traditionally and ethically appropriate to suddenly bring the unknown child to the family of the deceased upon burial. This has nothing to do with the deceased, who is no longer alive and, therefore, cannot defend himself against the practice. This practice must be measured by how it impacts each member of the family, i.e., whether it was helpful or

⁵⁵ James H Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Orbis Books, 1997).

⁵⁶ Carol M. Ciotto and Amy G. Gagnon, "Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in Physical Education," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 89, no. 4 (May 4, 2018): 27–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2018.1430625>.

not for everyone involved. Although the author acknowledges the studies regarding the legitimacy of children outside of wedlock,⁵⁷ the legitimacy of the child was not discussed in this space.

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⁵⁷ Shanuga Cherayi, Justin P Jose, and Sreejith Sudhakar, "Children of Tribal Unwed Mothers and Their Non-Legitimate Origin: A Social Exclusion Perspective," *SAGE Open* 9, no. 2 (2019): 2158244019850041.

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