



I41 A South African Case Study Illustrating an Intimate Partner Murder Staged as a “Muti” (Ritual) Murder

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of intimate partner murder and muti murder and how it can be established whether an intimate partner murder scene was staged to look like a different crime.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how law enforcement officers, psychologists, and profilers will have a better understanding of intimate partner murders, muti murders, and staging of a crime scene.

Intimate partner murders are often referred to as domestic murders or spousal homicide. This occurs when one person is murdered by their current, or ex-, intimate or romantic partner. Motives for such crimes typically include an element of jealousy, which may be due to real or feared abandonment by the victim. While some such perpetrators have a history of physical abuse towards their partner, a significant number of offenders have no history of violence towards their partners, and often there is no escalation of violence preceding the murder.

A crime scene can be staged by an offender in an attempt to delay the identification of the body and to delay the investigation. Staging a crime scene is a high-risk behavior, because it implies that the offender is spending more time than is necessary with the body and thus risks discovery. While the offender makes these changes, he is revealing a lot about himself and is likely to provide investigators with more evidence than he is aware of, because he may be under great stress. Comparing injuries to the crime committed, or comparing the scene and forensic reports to witness statements, can help indicate staging.

The word “muti” is a Zulu word meaning medicine. Muti murder happens when human body parts are gathered for use in traditional African medicine and the person dies as a result of the wounds inflicted. The motivation for the use of muti is usually to improve an individual’s or community’s circumstances. The reason for using human body parts is that they are considered to be more powerful than the usual ingredients like roots, herbs, other plant material, animal parts, and seawater. Characteristically the traditional healer would consult the ancestors to determine the cause of the problem and then prescribe the treatment. The death of the individual is usually secondary to the injuries inflicted while removing the body parts. The victim must be alive when the body parts are removed as this is believed to increase the power of the muti.

The following case study will be presented to illustrate how one person committed an intimate partner murder, and staged the crime scene to look like a muti murder.

Early one morning the naked body of an adult black female was discovered in an open area. The body was lying on its back and the head, breasts, and external parts of the vagina had been removed postmortem. There were bullet wounds in the torso and left forearm. The victim’s clothes were not on the scene. It was clear that the body recovery site was a secondary crime scene. Since the hands of the victim were intact, her fingerprints were taken to establish her identity. The home of the deceased was inspected and the missing body parts were found in the bathroom. When her boyfriend was interviewed he confessed that they had a fight the previous night, during which she ended their relationship. He shot her and removed the body parts in an attempt to stage it as a muti murder.

Intimate Partner Murder, Staging, Muti Murder