

AN ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSE OF TRADITIONAL CULTURAL LEADERS TO THE APPEARANCE OF HOMOSEXUALITY AS A PUBLIC TOPIC IN ZIMBABWE

Vincent Mabvurira

Department of Social Work, Bindura University of Science Education, Bindura, Zimbabwe

Abel Blessing Matsika

School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, Kopje Harare, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

This study sought to analyse the views of traditional leaders in Zimbabwe on the surfacing of homosexuality as a public topic. Data were collected from chiefs, village heads, traditional healers and a spirit medium in the Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe. The data were collected through in-depth interviews. It was found that most of the respondents refute the existence of homosexuality in their communities. Most of the respondents agreed that homosexual people should be heavily punished because in their view they cause misfortunes such as droughts and infertility of the soil. They argued that homosexuality did not exist in traditional Zimbabwe but was brought by the whites and that it is against African Traditional Religion.

Key words: Homosexuality, politics, law, leaders, gay rights, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The famous “worse than dogs and pigs speech” by President Robert Mugabe at the 1995 Zimbabwe International Book Fair in reference to homosexual persons epitomised, Zimbabwe as a brutal abuser of human rights. In yet another related statement, Chibanda (1996) reiterated that gays and lesbians are atoms of chaos being unleashed on Planet Earth by the profane society which is endeavouring to unseat governments of the developing world and replace them with fiefdoms (through conglomerates and multinational companies) in the name of “human rights”. These two ‘hot’ statements show how the gay issue is so contentious in Zimbabwe. Although the term homosexual was coined in the 19th century, homosexual practices, relationships and

marriages are not new to humanity. Gramick (1983) is of the view that homosexuality existed and still exists in all societies and at all times. There are even suggestions that it exists among the animal kingdom. Chemhuru (2012) opined that, although the term is fairly new, philosophical discussions and practices of homosexuality can be traced back to the ancient or classical period, where it is established that even the most celebrated philosophers like Plato, Alexander the Great, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alfred Jules Ayer and Michael Foucault among others, have been linked to homosexual practices. If scholars agree that homosexuality is almost as old as humanity, why then has it of late become such a scorching political issue in Zimbabwe often appearing on newspaper headlines? How are other African countries handling this social phenomenon?

A historical analysis of the Zimbabwean debate on same sex conduct has demonstrated widespread agreement that homosexual persons do exist in Zimbabwe and have been in existence for much longer than many Zimbabweans are willing to admit. Scholars such as Epprecht (2004) have documented the existence of homosexuality in pre-colonial Zimbabwe. Goddard (2004) argued that one of the greatest strengths of anti-gay lobby in Africa has been the absence of proper historical record of same-sex conduct before the coming of the whites. A historian Mark Epprecht (1999) notes that anthropological records of homosexuality prior to the coming of the whites are vague and flawed by the moral prejudices of the past but the fact remains that homosexuality occurred in Africa well before the coming of the whites. The onus therefore remains on politicians and other anti-gay activists in Zimbabwe to prove that gays are aping western pervasion as purported.

Though many academics and gay rights activists would argue that the debate in Zimbabwe is about the origins of homosexuality, Gunda (2011) has argued that the debate is centred on the acceptability or unacceptability of homosexuality or homosexual persons within Zimbabwean communities. Most African countries, Zimbabwe included are trapped in a cultural dilemma and face the hard choice of choosing between monadic Western cultural heritages upon which the modern state is based or dyadic pre-colonial cultural heritage whose survival is attested to in many practices in contemporary Zimbabwe and to which some aspire to return (Gunda, 2011).

The interface between the Bible and homosexuality has initiated political, cultural, religious and social storms in Zimbabwe for more than a decade. While gay persons have called the Zimbabwean society to honour individual sexual rights and have asked to be tolerated and not to be hated, many legislators have classified homosexual practices as a criminal offence and have threatened to send homosexual persons to jail. From a varied angle, traditional leaders have branded homosexuality un-African and a clear example of Western cultural imperialism. According to the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, marriage is specifically for procreation and any sexual act for any other reason is considered absurd. One of Zimbabwe's early historians, Michael Gelfand observed that the information supplied by his informants, showed that "before the coming of the white people, there were no unmarried men". This supports Mabvurira et al's (2012) argument that chances are high that gays have been forced by circumstances to enter into and endure heterosexual unions even if they did not enjoy it. Some scholars have been coerced by this belief to argue that there were no male homosexuals in Zimbabwe before the coming of the whites.

There are documented cases where gays have been disowned by their families because of their sexual orientations and had partners of the opposite sex organized for them. In Zimbabwe, being gay brings shame to the family to the extent that some homosexuals have opted to cross the border to neighboring South Africa where their voices are better heard (Mabvurira and Motsi, 2011). One challenge troubling authorities today is that the traditional Shona societies had none of these problems associated with homosexuality in present day Zimbabwe. This might strengthen Epprecht (1999)'s argument that what has been imported into Zimbabwe is not homosexuality itself like what most politicians believe but homophobia. If history points to the fact that homosexuality has existed in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, why then has it become a national agenda in the 21st century? One might blame it on the importation of foreign religions like Christianity and Islam.

Homosexual practices in pre-colonial states in Zimbabwe.

According to Garlake (1995), Africans knew, practiced and in some cases even blessed sexual relations between members of the same sex. Epprecht (2004) noted that it can be deduced from Khoisan (Bushmen) rock paintings in Zimbabwe that homosexuality existed in pre-colonial Africa. Some preindustrial communities in Zimbabwe believed that homosexuality had a medicinal effect. It was believed to cure impotence, mental illness and other ailments. It is suggested that there exists a belief among many Bantu speaking groups that very strong medicinal concoctions require some weird ingredients and it is generally accepted that the most powerful Mutapa King was involved in an incestuous sexual relationship with his sister Nehanda. Out in the bush herding cattle, homosexual play with each other was actually expected at the age of puberty among boys. According to Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) (2008), among girls certain kinds of sex play were considered normal and an enviable phase that helped set up them for marriage. There was a practice called *kusenga* in which girls could spend time stretching their *labia majora*. However adult men who were seen engaging in same-sex acts were seen as having been bewitched or being witches themselves.

Goddard (2004) noted that traditional institutions in Zimbabwe where a spirit medium may sometimes be possessed by a spirit of the opposite sex has given rise to theories that this was one way in which homosexuals were able to fit in the society and gain acceptance. Oral testimony suggests that ritual male-male sexual acts continued to be practiced by ambitious individuals long after the disappearance of Zimbabwe's large medieval states (Epprecht, 2004). However, homosexual activities may not have been socially sanctioned but early court records suggest that under customary law it was considered a lesser offence than adultery. For example Epprecht (1999) noted that early court records at Bindura Magistrate Court show that homosexuality attracted a fine of one piece of cattle while adultery attracted six pieces of cattle. However in the case of consensual same sex acts it was difficult for the Chief to decide who should be paid the damages (Goddard, 2004).

Contemporary oral evidence supports the early 20th century view that homosexual relationships were common in Zimbabwe. Informants in a research conducted by Epprecht (1999) estimated that 70 to 80 % of men at the mines took male sexual partners. Garlake (1995) also noted that

homosexual activity in Southern Africa has always been common in prisons and among migrant mine workers. Goddard (2004) also argued that the most effective Ndebele healers and diviners were men with the most exaggerated feminine behaviour and dress. Also battle preparations among African warriors entailed male sex. This was prevalent among the Ndebele warriors of Zimbabwe, Azande warriors of Sudan/DRC, Nupe warriors of Nigeria and the Tutsi warriors of Rwanda and Burundi. The warriors were supposed to stay eight or more miles from their families ahead of wars (Epprecht, 1999, Garlake, 1995).

However although some researchers have documented the existence of ritual same sex practices, Gunda (2011) argued that these rituals were never a permanent feature of an individual's life and in some cases such rituals were a once in a lifetime practice and can therefore never be relied upon as providing the barometer for measuring the existence of homosexuality in these communities. It is averesly believed among historians and anthropologists that there were a number of traditional healers who used homosexual practices as part of prescriptions for people seeking material wealth. It is also supposed that some of the traditional healers also practiced homosexuality to enhance their own mastery of the spirit world. GALZ (2008) believed that the best traditional healers among the Ndebele people practiced homosexuality.

Homosexuality, politics and the law in Zimbabwe

Homosexuality is not acceptable in most African countries. It is often regarded as rottenness of culture and an abomination. Prominent African leaders like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya have at some point threatened homosexuals (Jacques, 2000). GALZ (2008) notes that such threats have contributed to a climate where gays have experience blackmail, police harassment, shunning by families and even mob violence. For some politicians, homosexuality is one of the instruments used to unseat the governments of third world countries. Chibanda (1996) observed that homosexuality is being imported into Zimbabwe from outside to serve the purposes and interests of these multinational companies, especially destabilizing governments.

In Zimbabwe, homosexuality is “illegal” and is “criminalized” under the ‘sodomy’ laws. Under

Zimbabwe's *Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (Chapter 9: 23)*, Section 73 Sub-section (1): "Any male person who, with the consent of another male person, knowingly performs with that other person anal sexual intercourse, shall be guilty of sodomy..."

The subject of homosexuality is encircled by a definition row. Some schools of thought believe that what is criminalized in Zimbabwe is sodomy and not homosexuality. They argue that homosexuality is not about sex but love and some homosexuals may never exhibit their erotic behaviours due to sanctions imposed on them by society (Mondimore, 1996). Gramick (1983) also believes that some gay people may develop overt homophobia as a defense mechanism.

What is of interest is the call by the international community and gay lobby organisations that Zimbabwe is violating human rights by not recognizing gay rights. Are gay rights human rights? Few academicians have tried to answer the question from a Zimbabwean context.

Some libertarian philosophers for example Rachels and Rachels (2008: 222) believe that "the only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it". According to Chemhuru (2012), libertarian thinkers find it possible to justify acts of homosexuality using the harm principle because if homosexual individuals are given equal rights and treatment, provided it harms no one else, then for them, there seem to be no problem at all hence society should not be seen to impose formal or informal sanctions or social pressure on individuals with homosexual orientation.

One other instrument that has been used to strangle gay rights in most African countries is that, it is against the law of nature. Some scholars argue that it is against nature, but there seems to be no obvious reasons to believe so. Those who believe so argue that there is no procreation therefore it is not natural. It is also believed in certain circles that it contradicts African cultures where marriages have always been between a male and a female and mainly for procreation. On the other hand, conservative thinkers such as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, John M. Finnis and Burton M. Leiser and others, believed that homosexuality remains contrary to the law of nature and hence it should be immoral and not be part of any human positive law.

According to Mbiti (1969) for Africans marriage is the focus for existence, it is the point where all the members of a given community meet, the departed, the living and those yet to be born. Gay unions therefore do battle with this state of existence. According to GALZ (2008) a common belief among many Shona men is that an orgasm without the intention of making children is meaningless. It also argued that many women also understand the need to receive sperm vaginally on a regular basis as a crucial part of maintaining their physical and emotional good health. All these are curtailed by same sex marriages.

It is a common fact that homosexuality has been politicised in Zimbabwe. Why? Since the 'Book Fair' crisis, homosexuality has been placed on the political agenda by *the then* ruling party Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). At some point E.S Chigwedere, a former parliamentarian echoed that gays are a festering finger that can endanger the whole body. The Anglican crisis in Zimbabwe also centred on homosexuality to the extent that the church split. The popular opposition political party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has not taken a clear position on homosexuality.

Whether homosexuality is African or *un*African, natural or unnatural, Godly or pervert, why has it remained a political issue in Zimbabwe for over two decades? How has Zimbabwe been treating the issue before the Book Fair Crisis of August, 1995? How did the Rhodesian government manage to contain it? Why are other African countries not making noise about it? All these questions leave a lot to be desired. While this study focuses on the response of traditional cultural leaders to the appearance of homosexuality as a public subject in Zimbabwe, most of the questions will remain unanswered.

Methodology

The study targeted traditional cultural leaders in Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe. These included Chiefs, village heads, spirit mediums and traditional healers. These have been chosen because they were thought to be the custodians of cultural beliefs and practices. The target group was very difficult to consult due to the sensitivity of the topic and limited resources. Therefore five Chiefs, ten village heads and four traditional healers and one spirit medium were interviewed based on availability and willingness to discuss the topic. The study area is

occupied by *Shona* tribes mainly the *Korekore* speaking people as opposed to the *Ndebele* people who occupy the far west of Zimbabwe. It is important to note that the researchers purposefully ignored urban, semi-urban and resettlement areas within the province. In-depth interviews were conducted by the researchers.

Presentation and discussion of results

The total number of respondents was fifteen and of these only two were female that is, one traditional healer and the spirit medium. Twelve respondents vehemently denied the occurrence of homosexuality in their areas. Most of them said that it is a phenomenon that is common in urban areas where young people are influenced by whites and given money for practicing it. Two traditional healers and one spirit medium admitted that homosexuality could be occurring in their territories. One major reason for their argument was the persistence of consecutive droughts that they blame on homosexuality that brings misfortune. One traditional healer indicated that with rural urban integration it might be difficult to deny the presence of homosexual acts. “*makuna kuna haarambirwe*” (loosely translated to mean that one cannot confidently deny the occurrence of abominations), reiterated one of the traditional healers. The spirit medium also sighted the occurrence of misfortunes such as siltation of the Mazowe dam, HIV and AIDS, fatal road accidents, economic hardships, infertility of the soil as punishment from ancestors for homosexuality, incest and bestiality. The fact that most of the respondents refuted the presence of homosexuality in their territories can be supported by the fact that among the *Shona* people, talking publicly about sex is a taboo. This is further buttressed by GALZ (2008) which argued that sexual acts that were forbidden or shameful in theory could take place in practice as long as they remained a secret. Therefore the fact that some leaders denied occurrence of homosexuality in their territories can hold water to a limited extent.

All the five Chiefs and village heads indicated that they have never presided over an issue to do with homosexual behavior. However they confided that this might not be justification that it is not happening in their areas. Sex is a sacred act done in secrecy among the *Shona* people, so if homosexuality is done, it is done in secrecy mainly due to fear of criticism and prosecution. The leaders indicated that they can only know about it when reported, if it goes unreported then it can never come to their attention.

All the respondents indicated that homosexuality was brought by whites who are trying to influence the cultures of African countries. One Chief further indicated that he first heard about it by people who used to go and work in South African mines during the colonial period. However one village head confided that where it happened, it was normally done by witches or *varombi*. One Chief also confided that before the coming of the whites, homosexuality was a shameful thing that was associated with mental problems, abnormality and such people were expelled from the community. The same observation was made by GALZ (2008) which noted that many Africans today believe that the whites introduced homosexuality to the continent during colonialism, abusing their power and wealth to corrupt the African way of life.

The fifteen respondents highlighted that there was totally nothing to appreciate about homosexuality and they sighted the following bad things about it;

- It is unnatural
- Against African culture
- Unproductive
- Responsible for misfortunes in society
- Causes diseases
- Part of the initiation process of witches
- Associated with charms and goblins
- Satanic

The criticism of homosexuality in Zimbabwe is well documented especially from the Christian community. Mudavanhu (2010) and Gunda (2012) observed that the Bible has been quoted to discriminate against gay people in Zimbabwe. GALZ (2008) argued that homosexuality was seen to be against having many descendents which is key among the Shona people. Among the Shona people, the most popular and powerful spirits (*mhondoro*) were those ancestors who would have left the largest number of descendants. This was not achievable through same sex conduct. Homosexuality is said to be totally against the culture and traditional practices of black Zimbabweans. It is said to cause bad omen on a community if permitted.

The respondents failed to link the relationship between homosexuality and politics. They just said leaders have the responsibility of protecting territorial integrity and avoiding imperialism

what so ever. However one Chief explicitly mentioned the Movement Democratic Change (MDC) a political party in Zimbabwe as trying to impose gay rights in Zimbabwe.

Most of the respondents (N=13) denied that there are Zimbabweans who are gay by nature but have been influenced by some whites to follow the gay culture. As such they indicated that those who are found trying to promote the interests of the western countries should face the following punishments:

- Life imprisonment
- Imprisonment
- Expelled from their communities
- Face the death sentence

Most of the leaders indicated that Zimbabwe is most vocal on gay issues compared to other African countries because it is one of the few countries in Africa that are able to defend their national sovereignty. One respondent went on to praise President Robert Mugabe for firmly defending the culture of Zimbabwe and refusing to tolerate British and American pressure. The Daily Mirror (2004) observed that in a keynote address to the 4th ZANU-PF National People's Congress, Mugabe argued that the acceptance of homosexuality showed the West had reached its nadir culturally. The West had become morally decadent.

All the Chiefs and village heads (N=10) argued that homosexuality is against African Traditional Religion (ATR). On the contrary, the four traditional healers and one spirit medium concurred that in some sub cultures they have heard that it occurred and Chiefs could punish the perpetrators. In line with the responses by the traditional leaders, no study has so far confirmed the acceptance of homosexuality in any Shona tribe of Zimbabwe though historians have argued in favour of its presence. Both historical and documented evidence suggests that people of gay orientation have always been punished.

Conclusion

This study examined the responses of traditional cultural leaders to homosexuality in Zimbabwe. It was found that most of the traditional leaders deny the African roots of homosexuality but argue that it is an imported phenomenon. Most of the leaders were found to be homophobic and antigay. It can therefore be noted that like most Zimbabweans, traditional cultural leaders in Zimbabwe believe that homosexuality is un-African and against the Shona culture. What this means is that such leaders can impose heavy punishments on gays if they happen to preside over their cases.

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