

# Interrogating Myths Surrounding Sex Education in Zimbabwean Schools: Lessons to be Learned from Ndebele Traditional Literature/Oral Traditions

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## Abstract

Sex education is one of the most divisive aspects of the school curriculum in Zimbabwe. It is shrouded in myths and controversies—with some parents, culturists and religious groups asserting that it can contribute to immorality among learners. Others even go to an extent of claiming that sex education in primary and secondary schools should not be allowed as culturally it is a taboo to discuss issues of sex with teenagers. However, an analysis of traditional Ndebele literature seems to tell a different story. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to deliberate on these so-called taboos and claims, and to establish where the Ndebele culture stands with regards to sex education. The article critiques the Ndebele traditional literature/oral traditions, which boasts riddles, folktales, proverbs and wise sayings and even praise poetry, which are so rich in sex education.

**Keywords:** folktales; Ndebele oral traditions; Ndebele praise poetry; proverbs; riddles; sex education

## Introduction

The challenge for postcolonial Africa, as Mungwini (2011, 1) argues, is

how to salvage traditional ideas and institutions that are waning in the face of modernity while simultaneously demonstrating the validity and efficacy of these ideas and institutions in the context of developments within contemporary society.

African societies, the Ndebele society included, are replete with different forms of traditional literature, which were not only used as pastime as some may claim but were



used in raising children to be responsible adults. Most, if not all of these traditional ideas are didactic in nature, and are meant to inculcate certain virtues to individuals and discourage some vices abhorrent in societies. These traditional ideas embodied in Ndebele traditional literature cover every aspect of their life such as religion, economic condition, political and social activities, including guidelines on sexual behaviour. Sex is one of the most natural energies endowed to mankind that can potentially create life and nations. At the same time, it can destroy the same nations. It is likely that it is on this premise that almost all societies prior to postmodernism had revered guidelines on how to deal with sexual energies.

The traditional literature of the Ndebele people cuts across every aspect of their life. It reflects their culture, beliefs, and customs. It gives us profound insight into not only how society is structured, but also the ties that bind it. In other words, Ndebele traditional literature is an embodiment of the socio-economic and political aspects of their life. Maraca (1994, 74) echoes the same sentiments by stating that “proverbs are a summary of a people’s philosophy of life, developed over generations and fluctuations. They act as mirrors through which we glance at the society, its attitudes and thought processes.”

In Ndebele society the recognition of that sexual power in an individual happens soon after the birth of a child. Parents normally poured milk over the private parts of both male and female children immediately after birth. This was informed by the belief that this ritual will reduce their sexual drive to normal levels accepted by society. The upbringing of girls was even stricter. Those who could not sit properly were lambasted. So the girl-child grew up attaching value to her body, safely guarding it from male sexual “predators.”

It was considered a disgrace for teenagers to engage in sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse was reserved for the married. Virginity was espoused as a virtue among Ndebele girls. It is however, interesting that the Ndebele society noted that sexual games among teenagers could help delay the onset of sexual activity. One of these games is known as *ukusomisa* in Ndebele. In this game girls would only allow boys between their thighs for both to relieve themselves sexually. Kenyata (as quoted by Matolino 2011, 76) has this to say about sex among teenagers:

It was something that was restricted to the confines of a family man and woman. Although teenagers were allowed to play some games that can be seen as romantic/sex games, the actual sex never took place. One waited until she was married.

The concept of individualism was not tolerated in the Ndebele society, and this extended to matters of sex. No one could say “it’s my body I can therefore do whatever I want with it.” People existed as a whole community. Mbiti (as quoted by Matolino 2011, 73) states that whatever happened to the individual would affect the whole group and

whatever happened to the whole group would affect the individual. The individual can only say: “I am because we are; and since we are therefore I am. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.” Matolino (2011, 73) then adds that the

interests that the individual pursues must be in harmony with the community and they must seek to foster the harmony and cordial existence of all her fellows. She is barred from pursuing interests that may prove to be injurious to the interests of the community.

This also applies to sex, where an individual is expected to behave in a certain manner. Kenyatta (as quoted by Matolino 2011, 76) maintains that ethics of sex among the Gikuyu limits sexual intercourse to married heterosexual couples—and that even certain sexual positions were not allowed when having sex. These views show that in an African traditional setup sex was viewed in a communal sense and was practised according to certain norms and guidelines. Matolini (2011, 76) asserts that

So the idea of even having sex, which is such an intimate thing, was held to be in the interests of the community. If one was failing to fulfil what the community expected of him, then the community would come to his aid.

Elaborating further on this statement Matolino (2011, 76) cites the following example from the Shona culture:

The primary purpose of sex is to procreate so that the family is expanded and the individual has a duty to contribute to the growth of the family and the community. Failure to procreate and add to the growth of the community is seen in a very bad light. Sex can never primarily be engaged in for the purpose of giving oneself some or other possible pleasures, but is done for a specific purpose. Among the Shona people it was common that if it was discovered that a man was incapable of producing children, his brother or other relative would take his place and help him get his wife pregnant. The whole thing was done in a very surreptitious manner.

That is how important sex was in Ndebele and Shona traditional societies. Sex was not meant to be a one-night-stand encounter or to happen in an office, car or any other place. The importance given to sex is also evident in the Shona and Ndebele proverbs, sayings and riddles.

## **Sex Education in Contemporary Zimbabwean Schools**

Sex education in Zimbabwe has always been a contentious issue. Even as early as 1978 Geraty outlined that “the policy on sex education is that it should be limited to aspects included in the biology syllabus and sociological topics concerned with relationships, of a general nature, with members of the opposite sex” (Geraty 1978, 163). Geraty (1978, 166) further argues that:

the sexual role is still a ‘hot potato’ in educational circles...Controversy still exists about the ethics of including moral education in the school curriculum, although the inclusion of human reproduction in the biology syllabus is rarely disputed.

The issue of sex education is still problematic to this day. In 2013 there was a public outcry from both the public and the government when it was reported that some school pupils were receiving contraceptives as part of the life skills education. The debate was finally concluded by the minister of education, Dr Dokora when he decreed that condoms would not be made available to school children.

Therefore, it can be noted that education relating to life skills has a long history in Zimbabwe. In 1993 the Ministry of Education passed the Chief Education Officers Circular Minute Number 16 of 1993 that made HIV/AIDS education compulsory through the AIDS Action Programme for schools. Banda (2012, 41) also talks of Zimbabwean schools having sex education through guidance and counseling subject, also known as life skills. Also, in 2013 Reza Hossaini, UNICEF representative, launched the Lifeskills, Sexuality and HIV and AIDS Education Strategic Plan 2012–2015. Unfortunately, all these endeavours, as observed by Banda (2012, 41) emphasise sexual abstinence over everything else and are very silent on the use of contraceptives. Sometimes learners are even shown gory pictures of genitalia ravaged by venereal diseases so as to try and scare them away from sexual activities.

While the debate is raging on regarding whether to provide contraceptives or comprehensive sex education to pupils or not, Chimhete, Mbanje and Chibaya (2013, 1–3) disclosed that an alarming number of girls in Zimbabwe, some as young as 12, were already engaging in sex, resulting in high incidences of adolescent pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, as most of them lacked the knowledge of sexual reproductive health issues. However, the Standard newspaper of 29 September to 5 October 2013 quotes the Minister of Health, Dr Parirenyatwa as saying that the average age of sexual debut in Zimbabwe was 15 years and nine months, but sexual and reproductive health specialist, Caroline Maposhere said girls generally become sexually active between the ages of 15 and 16, but that anecdotally, they could engage in sex as early as 12 years. These statistics clearly show that whereas the Government, United Nations, Educationists, parents and other concerned stakeholders are doing their best to impart life skills to pupils, more still needs to be done.

It is against this background that the author advocates for the wholesome approach to the problem by blending Western knowledge on sex with what can be learned from traditional African schools with their traditional literature, which comprises proverbs, riddles, folktales and praise poetry.

## Proverbs Addressing Sexual Incest

Sexual incest is one of the sexual vices discouraged and shunned by the Ndebele community. This is reflected in the following proverbs: *Inkukhu idla amaqanda ayo* (“the hen is eating its own eggs”) and *Isende limba umgodi kwalo* (“the testicle is digging its own hole within”). Therefore, through these proverbs, one notices that among the Ndebele sexual relationships between brothers and sisters and cousins are prohibited. This taboo is not confined to immediate family, but applies to all people with the same surname or clan name (Nyembezi 1954). To break such rule of social order was unheard of, and indeed constituted an anathema. Emmanuel Fru Doh (2009, 159) observes that:

Incest is a very serious offense in African world view and so it is taboo. A person might grow and die and never hear of a single occurrence. Such offenders are usually ostracized from society by being driven out of the village, which in the past was their world, so to say.

The conclusion drawn by Emmanuel Fru Doh (2009, 148–159) is that incest was not common in African cultures as it was considered an abomination. In addition to this, Emmanuel Fru Doh appreciates the concept behind taboos by stating that:

In a society where there was no police, taboos served as a guardian of moral values. To a certain extent, they were better than modern law enforcing agencies, because in most cases, breaking of a taboo was associated with an automatic punishment. One did not have to be caught to be punished (2009, 159).

Such moral benefits of observing taboos can come handy to contemporary society, which is grappling with incidents of incestuous behaviour in its midst.

In the Ndebele traditional society an elderly person or parent was respected by all, whether biologically related or not. Nwoye (n.d., 58) shares such sentiments:

In the traditional religious social ethic (in most parts of Africa), an emphasis is placed on age and seniority, and because of that elders are respected. Junior siblings are taught to respect their senior siblings, uncles, aunties and neighbours. However, seniors are not to exert authority on the juniors needlessly, but also to protect and support them.

The respect given to elders, guardians, and parents by the children is supposed to be reciprocated. Therefore, the sexual abuse of minors by those in positions of responsibility was therefore, strongly condemned—hence the proverb, *uthango ludla amakhomane*, which means that while the fence is supposed to protect plants inside the farmland it does the opposite, by devouring those plants. The sexual abuse of members of society by those in positions of responsibility is prevalent in our contemporary

society. It cuts across all spectrums of life, but teacher-pupil sexual relationships come to mind. A study carried out by Nhundu and Shumba (2001) revealed that:

the problem of teacher perpetrated child sexual abuse is not uncommon among rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. The study has shown that the perpetrators of child sexual abuse in rural primary schools are generally male teachers.

This means that the *loco parentis* (Latin for ‘in the place of a parent’’) role of the teachers is no longer adhered to, a situation which is regarded as anti-social in both traditional and contemporary Ndebele societies.

Sex in the traditional sense was not an individual affair but a whole community affair, usually done within the confines of marriage. With such kinship values eroded in this modern society the new values of individualism, human rights, capitalism, and hedonism mean that deviant social behaviour is taking root—hence sex is now just being used for pleasure, resulting in harm to the other members of society, such as children.

### **Proverbs on Sexual Promiscuity**

Sexual promiscuity was perceived differently for men and women. It appears like sexual promiscuity was indirectly encouraged in men, while it was shunned and vehemently discouraged in women. The following Ndebele proverbs portray these variations: *Indoda libhetshu lomziki* and *Ibele lendlela alivuthwa*. The first proverb means that men can have as many women as they want, whereas the second one suggests that women who are promiscuous will never get married. Thus, the proverb admonish women who have multiple sex partners.

These proverbs present marriage as a respected institution—therefore, every woman is expected to strive to get married and make the marriage work. There are many proverbs and sayings that encourage women to get married and behave in a proper manner in such an institution. For example, an Ndebele saying goes *umcaba owasala emasini* (“sower cream left in the milk”). This saying is used to denigrate women who are not married. Another proverb goes *akukho ntombi yagana inyamazana* (“no woman will ever marry an animal”). This proverb means that even if a woman can turn down marriage proposals from different suitors in the end she has to get married to a man.

The Ndebele proverbs discussed above show that the institution of marriage was respected. Nwoye (n.d: 57) observes that:

One of the unique characteristics of African religious heritage is the respect it accords to marriage and family life. Accompanying this emphasis is the related attention that is given to the importance of procreation, considered in many ethnic groups in Africa as the main purpose of marriage.

Mbiti (as quoted by Nyathi 2001, 110) has this to say about marriage:

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All the dimensions of time meet here and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalised.

The discussion above shows how important marriage was among Ndebele people, such that those who violated this institution were despised, scorned and even killed, especially adulterous women. Prostitution and adultery were considered serious crimes in Ndebele traditional society. This is outlined by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2004, 116) who maintains that:

In the Ndebele state *amacala* (criminal cases) were basically divided into two categories, that is *amacala amancane* (minor crimes). The serious crimes included *ukubulala* (murder), *ubuthakathi/ukuloya* (witchcraft), *amacala ezombuso* (political crimes) and *ubufebe* (prostitution and adultery).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2004, 121) also narrates that Robert Moffat reported during his visit to the Ndebele state in 1992 how a man was executed by being made to drown when he was found to have committed adultery with one of Mzilikazi's wife. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2004, 121) further tells of the case of "Mhlaba Khumalo and Sidlodlo who were executed in June 1892 having been accused for possession of medicines bequeathed on them by Mncumbatha enabling them to overpower Lobengula's queens for purposes of rape."

Violating the sexual moral code among Ndebele people was considered a serious crime that was ranked with murder, treason, and witchcraft. The consequences were far worse for women than for men. Even the Ndebele terminology used to describe promiscuous and adulterous women puts this bias in the clear. For example, heavy-laden vulgar words such as *unondindwa* (mother of sex) and *ipenteka* (Ndebele vulgarised word derived from the English word for undergarments) are used to denigrate promiscuous women.

Therefore, it doesn't come as a surprise that the Ndebele culture is heavily pregnant with elaborate rites in which boys and girls were taught how to conduct themselves in sexual matters. These rites are still being practised in some areas, although westernisation is increasingly eroding these values. Nyathi (2001, 100), in his discussion of ceremonies held for girls who have reached puberty (*indunduzelo*) points out that "the girl was given lessons on a number of issues including how to become a good wife, how to care for children, acceptable behaviour towards men, sex education, home economics." Nyathi (2001, 102) further adds that:

With regard to sex she was told that under no circumstances could she engage in sex. However she and her boyfriend could engage in safe sex that is without penetration. This was done on the girl's thighs....More instructions were given to her. When sweeping she must never give her back to men. When giving food to adults she must kneel. The proper way of sitting was emphasised. She must never crouch, *ukuqutha*, like boys and men. She must never sit cross legged. Even when she falls her priority is to hold her dress so as not to expose her private parts. The belief was strong that the nakedness of one woman was the nakedness of all women.

It was during the initiation ceremony at puberty that girls were asked to remove their girlhood dress (*imbikiza*), in exchange for a longer dress (*ingcubula*), which went up just above the knees (Nyathi 2001, 102).

These rite of passages clearly demystify the misconception that sex was never a subject of discussion in Ndebele public life. Sex education for boys and girls has always been taught. Therefore, statements by Emmanuel Fru Doh (2009, 148) that in the past children were not exposed to sex talk are not at all true. Even some parents in this "modern" era are against sex education in "modern" schools, on the premise that it goes against the African value system—but perhaps the argument should be about the manner in which sex education is now being presented in schools, not that it goes against African culture. Recently, the media has been awash with contestations among different stakeholders, on whether school children should be given condoms. It would be advisable to go back to our roots in order to answer that question.

## **Folktales on the Sanctity of Marriage**

Folktales have long been used as repositories and vehicles for the transmission of culture. Viriri (2013) postulates that African literature, including folklore, has, therefore, ensured the transmission of African cultural values with all their historical sensitivities in vogue since time immemorial. Folktales address socio-political and psycho-cultural problems by virtue of their didacticism. Nyathi (2009, 8), in his critique of Ndebele folktales observes that:

They are an integral part of orature, which embraces, among other genres, poetry, riddles, songs and proverbs...There are thus forms of transmitting, preserving and documenting people's heritage. At the same time, they are a source of moral values and repository of a people's thought philosophy, beliefs and world view.

One Ndebele folktale, the Royal Princess and *Mbulumakhasana*, the big lizard, expounds on the values of marriage and how it was conducted in Ndebele society. The folktale begins with Buhlaluse, a beautiful girl who is asked by her parents to marry a certain man. As the story unfolds the marriage preparations are described in detail. However, she is cheated by Mbulumakhasana, the big lizard who takes her husband. But as time goes on Mbulumakhasana is caught and the tale ends with the following



words: “The royal princess and the prince married and lived happily ever after.” From this tale, Buhlaluse will be the envy of children, who have the hope that they will also get married and live happily ever after in their marriages than be home wreckers, like Mbulumakhasana, the big lizard.

However, with the rise of feminism in contemporary society, some people have come out guns blazing, arguing that the Ndebele way of life is oppressive to women. For instance, women were expected to be virgins at marriage. A case in point is a practise where men would display the blood of virgin women on the white sheet after having sex on the night of the marriage. McFadden (1992, 157), an outspoken feminist has described such sexual rituals as not only self-serving but also cruel:

As a means through which men can reproduce themselves and the patriarchal system, but it is also a central means of appropriating women’s bodies and women fertility. For centuries, women’s reproductive (and productive) abilities have been appropriated by men for purposes of their self-realisation as men. Penetrating a ‘virgin’ and providing proof of this conquest – either by exhibiting a bloody sheet or finger, has been a male expression of virility and manhood for all the centuries of patriarchal social domination.

McFadden (1992, 176) further states that even such institutions as marriage and the payment of dowry, which strip women of their power, are just devious ploys by men to sexually oppress women and appropriate their bodies. McFadden (1992, 179) further bemoans the sexual positions as being figurative symbols of the subordination of women by men by arguing that:

The sex act is invariably posed as empowering to the male and degrading to the women, and positions in the sexual act reinforce male power over the female. A careful scrutiny of the more conventional sex position adopted in heterosexual sex speak to the gendered nature of the sexual act. The so-called “missionary” position reflects most explicitly the definition of the male as superior, in charge and active, while the female is placed in a vulnerable position (on her back), passive and receptive. Sex is therefore a means of controlling women, of keeping them in line.

While it may be true to a certain extent that women in traditional set-ups do not have economic or political power, they however, have power in their backyards. That is why there is an English phrase “feminine power.” Power comes in different ways, and that is why the Ndebele people recognise that in regard to women—hence the proverb, *umfazi kalankosi* (“the woman is powerful than the king”). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2004, 109) argues that such generalisations about women in Ndebele traditional set-ups being oppressed constitute a western discourse, allied with Christianity when he elaborates thus:

It must also be noted that white missionaries and other whites who were frustrated by the existence of Ndebele state as an independent entity and by the refusal of the Ndebele

to embrace Christianity, tended to use women as a means to an end. They portrayed them as victims of male savagery in order to solicit and justify the destruction and colonization of the Ndebele state. The whites went to the extent of pointing out that the position of women in traditional Ndebele society was no little better than that of a slave. Pre-arranged marriages were also over-emphasized by the white commentators to give impression that marriage in the Ndebele society diminished the status of women. The payment of *lobola* as part and parcel of the marriage process in the Ndebele state was vulgarized by the whites into a system of selling and buying of women.

The sanctity of marriage in Ndebele society is also reflected in the folktale Nyambiridzana, the naughty girl and *Simemelwana* and her naughty mother. Both these folktales reveal the polygamous nature of the Ndebele society, as male characters in these folktales have two wives. Because of the naughtiness of Nyambiridzana, mother and daughter are moved to a far place from the husband's homestead as punishment. In their new homestead they are victimised by the *amazimu*, the man-eaters. Such folktales warn and prepare girl-children of the challenges they will face in polygamous marriages. They are also warned against intermarriages. The song, which Nyambiridzana sings, which goes *Ja, Ja, Ja, Nyambiridzana mwanangu, Nyambiridzana* ("Nyambiridzana, even her name does not sound Ndebele", suggests that such miscegenation relations were thought to dilute the culture and language of Ndebele people.

While the article acknowledges that men in traditional Ndebele society had multiple sexual partners, as reflected in the folktales analysed, what is notable is that this practice was formalised and happened in the context of marriage. Unfortunately, westernisation and Christianity have tended to demonise such polygamous marriage institutions. In their place in Ndebele contemporary society a new westernised form of polygamy—that of having mistresses, popularly known as "small houses", adopted from white people, has emerged. Such informal and unregulated sexual relations are now even reflected in Ndebele folklore—for example, there is now a modern Ndebele proverb which goes, *umfazi womuntu litshukela* ("A married woman is sugary").

Lessons drawn from contemporary Ndebele society on the menace of the "small houses" concept is that the demonisation of the African way of life, which has led to the adoption of western values may be paradoxical in the sense that the adopted values may be worse than traditional value systems. The question is, *is it not better to have a formally-recognised second or third wife than have multiple secretive sexual partners who are free to also have multiple sexual partners?* It is convenient at this juncture to borrow the analysis of Mungwini (2011, 2) who argues that:

In contemporary society there is a popular position that tradition is dying or disappearing...For some, the death or demise of tradition is emancipatory. It must be celebrated because it makes possible styles of life, modes of existence and forms of artistic and cultural expressions that were practically impossible in traditional societies. To this group, on one hand, tradition represents a force that hinders originality and

freedoms of thought and expressions and its demise must be hastened for it delays human progress and the full realisation of modernity and its values. On the other hand, others feel that equating tradition with the dead weight of the past that needs to be thrown away as a prerequisite to the full realisation of freedom is a serious mistake. To them the withering away of tradition is indeed a disaster because without tradition society is thrown into spiritual and moral decay; people become rootless as they lose touch with their history. Without tradition society could be analogised to a ship without a radar, as the society is blown around by whatever fashions, fads and ideologies that dominate the social scene with nothing to hold on to, to revitalise, recover and restore tradition as much as possible.

## Sex Education through Riddles

Riddles are games of wits and intellect. They demand a fierce display of philosophical wisdom. The nature of riddle creation reveals a fundamental value of respecting wisdom and creativity in spite of age. Riddles are also part of the family of traditional African literature. Mapara (2009, 145) asserts that:

The other means that the Blacks used to teach their youngsters included among others proverbs, riddles, folktales, songs, legends and myths...Riddles were also used to foster quick thinking on the part of the youngsters. Riddles have proven that IKS are not something that is static, but a form of education and entertainment, that some people today call edutainment, that is a combination of education and entertainment.

Riddles enable children to speak the unspeakable. Sex education in Ndebele society is not regarded as taboo. It starts early in the life of children, especially during children's games, where parent role playing is done—that is having some children acting as fathers, others as children, others as mothers. Through throwing riddles children can refer clearly to sexual activities. This prevents children from experimenting with the unknown. Riddles with sexual connotations are a form of initiation into sexuality—for example, *khweza isidwaba ntombi ngikholise* (raise your skirt lady so that I enjoy), the answer being *umumbu* (maize cob or banana).

Finnegan (2012, 424) describes another feature of riddles as that of the sexual and obscene references, which are so common. Fortune (as quoted by Finnegan 2012, 424) mentions again that the Lamba too have many obscene riddles, while the Shona language is pregnant with riddles which are suggestive, to which the real answers are always in fact innocent. The following Ndebele riddles all have sexual connotations:

*Ngikulibha ngomgigo wami ogiga ukudla okumnandi*  
("I riddle you with my grinding stick that grinds good food").

*Ngikulibha ngomfana wami ongena eqinile aphume esethambile*  
("I riddle you with my boy who enters you when he is hard but when he gets out he is soft").

*Ngomlomo wami ongelamazinyo kodwa uhlafuna ilunga elingange ngalo*  
("I riddle you with my mouth that chews a strong stick the size of the hand").

*Ngikulibha ngenfe engelamsebenzi nxa ingelamhluzi*  
("I riddle you with sweet millet that is useless if it does not have juice").

Children were not only expected to solve these riddles at surface level with literal answers but to delve deeper and discover their deeper meaning, especially the meaning attached by society. For example, with the last riddle about sweet millet that does not have juice, there may be more than one direct answer, and one of the answers can be chewing gum. However, the deeper meaning may refer to semen. Thus, without semen children know that they are not men. This concept is also emphasised during the initiation ceremony of Ndebele boys, which is usually held when the boy experiences wet dreams. Nyathi (2001, 107) has this to say about the initiation of Ndebele boys; that after wet dreams:

Then came the formal teaching when it was explained to the boy what had happened. He was told that now he was grown up, but was not yet someone's husband. It was emphasised to him that he should control his sexual desires. If, however, the urge was uncontrollable, he could resort to masturbation. Grown-up boys did sometimes indulge in competitive masturbation... This was usually done on the edge of a pool of water and the boys would inspect whether their semen sank or floated on the water, Good semen sinks in water. If it floated, there was cause for concern and corrective measures were taken. More medicines were given to the boy whose semen that floated.

Therefore, it can be argued that riddles and other forms of traditional Ndebele literature are not stand-alone forms of communication, but are part of the whole traditional system of Ndebele culture. Finnegan (2012, 419) asserts that in African societies "some riddles differ from ordinary ones in that they are in a form of action songs accompanying a dance and have a didactic purpose closely connected with initiation rituals." The discussion about the initiation passages of Ndebele boys (*ukuthomba*), which is indirectly seen in some riddles as an important rite in the evolution of the Ndebele army is explained by Cobbing (1976, 84), who states that at puberty, an initiation ceremony, the *tomba* was performed—where some kind of medicine, *izembe* was burnt, blown into the boy's mouth through a reed, and official adulthood was reached. The youth would not, however, make the next transition—that of entering into an *ibutho* ("army"), until he had fully engaged in sex—otherwise the protective medicines (*intelezi*) of the *izanusu* (doctors) would not work.

## **Lessons from the Ndebele Praise Poetry**

Praise poems in Southern Africa come in different forms. There are praise poems for kings, commoners, clans, and children. There are also praise poems for specific events.

For example, Pongweni (1996) mentions praise poems which were mainly recited only after sexual intercourse. Grunewald (2001, 31) states that:

praise poems in Southern Africa can be found anywhere from the private bedroom to the public political meeting, from the family occasion to the trade union gathering and on subjects from toddlers to recently deceased elders

Praise poems have an ancient history as Chapman (as quoted by Groenewald 2001, 31) outlines that the

praise poem is in fact Southern Africa's most characteristic form of literary expression which, prior to its written recordings in the nineteenth century, has been observed as early as the seventeenth century at the court of a Shona King.

Praise poetry serves many functions. It serves as national history textbook for the nation. For example, some of the former Ndebele King, Lobengula's praises say *uNgwalongwalo kaMatshobana*—when referring to his signing of the Rudd Concession in 1888. Praise poems can be used again to teach the youth about personal characteristics to cultivate, which will bring them respect in the community. Respected personal characteristics in Ndebele society for men, boys, women and girls as listed by Nyathi (2000, 12) below:

***Amadoda* (“Men and boys”)**

*Ubungwazi*  
 (“ability to use the spear”)

*Amandla aqavileyo*  
 (“physical strength”)

*Ukujwaqa komzimba*  
 (“physical strength”)

*Ukuhwanqa lokwesabeka*  
 (“frowning and to be feared”)

*Isibindi, iziqwanga*  
 (“valour and strong legs”)

*Ukuhlakanipha*  
 (“cleverness”)

*Ubungqavithi, ubugagu*  
 (“wit”)

*Ubumnyama*  
 (Black complexion)

***Abafazi* (“women and girls”)**

*Ukukhuthala*  
 (“active in domestic chores”)

*Ubumnene*  
 (“compassion”)

*Ukubekwezela*  
 (“patience”)

*Ubuhle lobuncwaba*  
 (“beauty”)

*Ubutshelezi*  
 (“skin smoothness”)

*Izitho ezibumbekileyo, amabele  
 aqinileyo, amathangazi angelaqhwalala*  
 (“properly shaped body parts, firm  
 breasts, properly shaped thighs”)

*Izibunu ezigwelelo, izinqe  
 ezicolekileyo*  
 (“well-shaped buttocks”)

*Ububomvu obukhangayo*  
 (“attractive light skin”)

In the personal characteristics listed above, which are usually desirable in individuals, women were encouraged to cultivate their femininity while men were encouraged to cultivate their masculinity. Therefore, with such characterisations there was no room for other forms of sexuality.

Praise poetry was used to celebrate sexual prowess as it was believed that such characteristics were the ingredients of a successful marriage. For example, some of the Bhebhe clan who are found in Mashonaland have the following praise poem verses, quoted by Nyathi (2010, 50):

*Bepe*

*The big loosely swaying ones (testes)*

*Thank you Bepe*

*Thank you Moyo*

*The one with big dangling ones (penis, testes)*

*Eternal small stream*

*Where girls come to fetch water*

*The big village of Tumbare*

*Thank you Chisiya*

*Thank you Netombo*

Praise poetry was sometimes used as injunctions to certain unwanted sexual behaviours. For example, Groenewald (2001, 32) shows how a certain lady named Nomisa was ridiculed in the following verses:

*Uvovo liyavuz*

("Strainer is leaking").

*Kadlulwa zindaba*

("No news passes her by").

*Kadlulwa bhulukwe*

("No trousers pass her by").

*Umathanga akahlangani*

("Lady Thighs they don't meet, [=she doesn't sit discreetly"].

*Uyazivulekela uma ebona ibhulukwe*

("She just opens when she sees trousers").

Such praise poetry was used to encourage children to shun anti-social sexual tendencies and to embarrass those who exhibit such tendencies.

## **Recommendations**

The time has come for information specialists such as archivists, educationists, and librarians to go beyond their sworn duties of documenting, archiving, classifying and cataloguing indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) to providing innovative ways of how such oral traditions such as rich IKS can be used to address pressing contemporary issues. It is even paradoxical for archivists to be speaking of documenting IKS and for librarians to claim that repositories of IKS are now available and to dish it out to the patrons, because IKS is out there within the people, lest we forget that IKS was passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. IKS is a community-owned knowledge resource. It is very unfortunate that with the advent of western knowledge systems, with their tendency to rely on bibliographic and reference systems, authors are now having the audacity to claim royalties from community IKS. Such individualistic and capitalistic tendencies, while contributing some bit of documentation to IKS, have

on a large scale, only relegated the discourse of IKS to just documentation, archiving, classifying and cataloguing.

This article is not nostalgic—neither does it constitute romanticism of yesteryears, which advocates for the Ndebele people to discard the values of “modern” life and go back to the “traditional” way of life. That will be folly, as Mungwini (2011, 2) bemoans that to be the advocate of any of the two extremes (modernism and traditionalism), which he describes as two lifeless extremes, is not feasible because “neither a wholesale rejection of the past nor a return to the past is desirable for modern society.”

What is needed is for Ndebele people to salvage their IKS related to sexual matters and use it where applicable with western knowledge systems. While Ndebele IKS is somehow incorporated into the subject curriculum of students from pre-school to university, the important aspect is how IKS should be taught so that the values embodied in this genre are properly imparted to learners. For example, pre-school to secondary pupils can undertake trips to rural areas, where old people who are well versed in Ndebele IKS are available to teach them.

Western forms of entertainment have taken root in our society. These structures can be used to impart Ndebele IKS relating to the sexual education of children and teens. For example, children are so fond of Disney cartoons—and instead of just importing these forms of entertainment from Western countries, changes can be made so that they incorporate didactic characters from the folktale genre.

Christianity is now one of the major religions followed by Ndebele people. A close study of this religion reveals that there are many aspects of it, which tend to be similar to Ndebele way of life—especially with regards to sexual purity. If symbiotic relationships are formed between these two, Ndebele IKS can be imparted to the populace, using Christianity as a vehicle of transmission. Antagonistic relations between these cultures should come to an end as they are just retrogressive.

## **Conclusion**

The war cry of archivists and other information specialists in this contemporary Ndebele society and other information specialists should be seeking innovative ways of packaging IKS or oral traditions, and using it with western knowledge systems to solve contemporary problems such as the sexual abuse of minors, early teen pregnancies, rape and the transmission of venereal diseases.



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