

Utilising Indigenous Knowledge or Crime against Humanity?: A Critical Engagement with the Debate Generated by Alick Macheso's Use of Manhood to Treat *Nhova* (Sunken Fontanelle)

Charles Tembo

Midlands State University
tembo.charles7@gmail.com

Allan Maganga

University of South Africa
allantmaganga@gmail.com

Dewah Peterson

University of KwaZulu-Natal
peterson.dewah@nust.ac.zw

Abstract

This article presents various points of view regarding the treatment of sunken fontanelle by various communities as ignited by the controversial practice of *kutara* (a practice that involves the father of a child sliding his penis from the lower part of the left and right cheeks to the top of the head, as well as from the lower part of the face to the top of the head, and from the lower back part of the head to the top). The story of Alick Macheso's use of his manhood to treat *nhova* (sunken fontanelle) opened a Pandora's box. The story not only attracted the attention of critics from diverse cultural and ethical backgrounds, but revealed multi-ethnic positions. That is, reactions were steeped in a multiplicity of intellectual, religious and even cultural grounding. Reactions ranged from accusations of backwardness and absurdity, through to medical and Christian orientations toward the treatment of *nhova*. The overarching idea is that there is a general tendency to dismiss the age-old practice of *kutara*, coupled with an uncritical celebration of certain positions. The debate that ensued following publication of the story seemed to revolve around ethical considerations. The school of thought that dismisses *kutara* with disdain regards it as unethical and unimaginable in the present-day world—it is redolent with insinuations of absurdity on the part of those that live and celebrate it. We contend that the raging debate that followed the publication of the story can best be conceptualised within the context of African ethics. We note that *kutara* has relevance to the spirituality, ethical values, privacy, and protection of children's rights, among other ethical issues. It is hoped that the article will stir further debate



and encourage more research among information practitioners, scholars and researchers into the ethical issues surrounding the treatment of sunken fontanelle in various African communities. It argues for an Afrocentric conceptualisation of phenomena in order to contribute to debates on the renaissance of African cultures, and stresses that it is imperative to harness the life-furthering age-old traditions in African ontological existence.

Keywords: African ethics; human rights; indigenous knowledge; Indigenous Knowledge System; sunken fontanelle; *kutara*

Introduction

Musicians, like any other prominent personalities the world over, are highly celebrated and influential for their musical prowess and for their social roles and actions in their respective societies—hence they are emulated as role models by their admirers. However, in their respective journeys to stardom, they often generate controversies, and, in some cases, their alleged actions have been problematic and deemed unethical. In such cases, they have seen their fan base dwindle and their musical careers nosedive, and, in turn, they have interpreted their downfalls as effects of character assassination. Among international prominent artists, Michael Jackson was one artist who hogged the limelight with controversies even up to his death. Among the allegations he had to face were accusations of molesting young boys at his Neverland Ranch, and questions that still hover on how he got his skin lightened. In Zimbabwe, of late, Alick Macheso (Cheso) is one musician who has attracted both controversy and fame in Zimbabwean music circles for treating his child's *nhova* (sunken fontanelle) using his manhood, a cultural practice popularly referred to as *kutara*.

Tawanda Marwizi, *The Herald* journalist, defines *kutara* from the musician's perspective:

Macheso said he used a method known as 'kutara' for treating the sunken fontanelle on the child. 'Kutara' involves a father sliding his manhood [penis] from the face, left ear, right ear and the back of the head to the middle of the head. (*The Herald* Online 2014)

Just as in any saga or scandal, Macheso's utilisation of the above-mentioned cultural practice has also received wide media coverage—both print and electronic. In the light of the foregoing, this article makes a clinical dissection of the conflicting perceptions generated by Alick Macheso's *nhova* story as expressed in *The Herald* newspaper, against the backdrop that the daily publication has a wider readership compared to other daily publications. Against this background, it has been adopted as the primary source for this critical engagement. Furthermore, this is based on the perception that the media form an influential cultural institution responsible for agenda setting and for identity deconstruction and reconstruction. In this article we pursue the online comments on the story, "Cheso Admits Using Manhood on Child" (*The Herald* Online 2014). We are of the opinion that the readers' comments exhibit self-loathing, which Asante (2007, 5) construes to be self-hatred, defining it as:

a particular orientation of African people, or any people, who have been so destabilized by being “off-center” and “out of location” within their own culture that they have lost all sense of direction.

The dominant voices emanating from the discourse are of protest against the cultural practice. The commentators reveal an unreservedly and unapologetically Eurocentric bias that carries an agenda to discredit and dismiss African cultural practices. It is an attempt at discrediting the practice of *kutara* and creates an impression that it is high time *kutara* and even other practices are dumped for the sake of moving with the times. Methodologically, the readers’ comments have been sampled into two thematic concerns, as elaborated in the subsequent sections. The dominant raving and ranting voices emanating from the readership are of the view that Macheso’s utilisation of ancient education values is primitive, and as such, he is construed to be a violator of children’s rights—“a criminal.” We aver that the musician tackled the fontanelle problem from a centred position, unique to a particular society and culture, and as such, his cultural actions exhibit that he is conscious of his responsibility as “father.” Guided and oriented by African traditions rather than Western science, we submit that Alick Macheso consciously engaged the Sankofa philosophico-cultural approach vis-à-vis the child’s sunken fontanelle. On Sankofa, Stewart (2004, 3) stresses its philosophical underpinnings and also concurs that it is not a taboo to go back and fetch life-giving aspects from tradition:

Sankofa teaches us that we must go back to our roots in order to move forward. That is we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can be reclaimed, revived, preserved and perpetuated. Sankofa embodies the concepts of self-identity, redefinition and vision. It symbolises an understanding of one’s destiny and collective identity of the larger cultural group.

In view of the above exegesis, we boldly assert that Alick Macheso is not only a musical legend, but a cultural hero. The following section enunciates an Afrocentric conception of worldviews—multiculturalism as both a discourse and practice to be utilised as a trampoline for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Karenga (1993, 46) conceives multiculturalism as an Afrocentric conception countering the hegemonic role of European culture. As both a philosophy and a practice, it adheres to certain commitments. Reproduced below and expatiated in this ongoing analysis are some of the extrapolated basic commitments of multiculturalism as espoused by Karenga (1993, 46).

1. Mutual respect for each people and culture—regardless of difference in social status, creed, colour, cultural and multi-ethnic backgrounds: humanity has an obligation to honour, revere and be non-judgemental towards other people’s way

of living and practices. Ethnocentricity and cultural prejudice have no place within the confines of a multicultural perspective for it propagates cultural hegemony.

2. Common recognition that human diversity is human richness, and that the challenge is not simply to tolerate it but to embrace and build on it—inimitability of certain cultural practices should not be misconstrued as supremacy but rather adopted, adjusted and taken on board for cultural sustainability.
3. Mutual recognition that neither US society nor the world is a finished white product, but rather an ongoing multicultural *project* and that each people has both the right and responsibility to speak its own special truth and make its own unique contribution to the forward flow of social and human history—America and Europe should not be used as frames of reference for non-American and non-European matters for that not only warps reality but also advances and fosters a false sense of superiority and an arrogant mentality that hinges on mythical viewpoints. Furthermore, space, voice, and authority should be given to any cultural group for the good of humanity. For every people speaks from its experiences, culture, and history.

As opposed to the commitments of multiculturalism, as illustrated above, the following section makes a critical appraisal of views that adjudicate Macheso's stance as uncouth and also primitive.

Macheso and the Cultural Practice of Kutara—both primitive and barbaric

Reacting to Alick Macheso's admission to using his manhood to treat *nhova*, various readers on *The Herald's* online platform are of the opinion that the musician is not socially in sync with cultural expectations of the 21st century. He is cast as someone whose *locus standi* is debilitatingly fixated in the distant past, and he has to be "educated" in order to catch up with realities in the 21st century. In fact, a reading of the comments reminds one of the so-called civilising mission, which early European colonisers setting foot in Africa, erroneously harboured. The readers are of the view that both the musician and the *kutara* practice are primitive, barbaric and uncivilised. Extrapolated below are viewpoints that echo such sentiments of what some readers perceive to be extreme brutality and barbarism. Readers "Berto" and "NightTrain" belligerently remark:

Berto: Flabbergasting, Archaic, Notorious, Unpalatable, Diabolic in the worst degree to Macheso's way of treating *nhova*, *nhova* is a result of shortage of fluids in the child's body, just suckling the baby and giving clean warm water prevents *nhova* for good. In the name of civilization, Macheso's and those who support him, pliz, Jesus is available 24/7 for you to save you.

NightTrain: Ignorant savages. No one does this except idiots in Africa, it's things like this that really set you apart from other backwards people around the world. ... Backwards? Oh, yes. Very much so. I would even say, "Stone Age," and yet you people defending this insanity are actually using computers and the internet. Do yourselves a favor and start using the internet to research medical problems and use legitimate American sites. I guarantee that you won't be waving penis or ejaculating on children's heads (or in their mouths) any more, and will instead start pulling yourselves out of the Stone Age. You have the technology to find real answers, start using it. I still can't believe that people actually have to tell you that it's wrong to do this—and some of you are defending it! Absolutely bizarre.

Berto and NightTrain are befuddled that in this modern era of globalisation and internationalism, a musician of Alick Macheso's calibre still uses *kutara* as a panacea for sunken fontanelle problems. They are of the view that the problem is simply and squarely dehydration and as such, Berto recommends clean warm water as the remedy to the sunken fontanelle. Berto further admonishes those who also subscribe to the cultural practice of *kutara* to seek divine intervention. NightTrain sees this as simply and squarely a problem with Africans—hence he refers to the musician as an ignorant savage. Not to be outdone is "Jotham," who concurs with the aforementioned commentators:

Jotham: Alick Macheso is a very uncivilised fool this country has ever witnessed. I wonder whether Macheso is not a witch. All along we have been made to believe that Tafadzwa was unfaithful—Macheso must repent, the man is an outright satanist. So his popularity in Music is based on witchcraft. This man is very barbaric indeed. I am at loss for words. *Kudyisa mwana svina yako*. This is the 1st Degree in child abuse. I hope all child protection groups will take this monster to the police and let the law sentence Macheso to a very long period of incarceration.

Jotham raves and rants on the online platform, using derogatory diction such as "uncivilised" and "barbaric." He sees such a cultural practice and those who religiously follow it as witches and also satanic—hence he advocates for Macheso's repentance, or else the musician should be jailed. "Cecil" also feels that the *kutara* cultural practice is despicable for he laments:

Cecil: Macheso please! How could you use that to treat your child in this age and time?
Nda nyara hagu ini.

To Jotham and Cecil, the practice is not only just pagan and barbaric, but a marker of primitiveness and a crime against humanity; hence he campaigns for retributive justice to be effected for what they deem to be a shameful act. Manifesting or packaged in their remarks, consciously or unconsciously, are undertones of cultural hegemony. The mouthpieces these voices represent seem to be those of European empires. It is apparent in some of the comments that there is an attempt to see reality from one centre, namely, the European modes and codes of understanding the sunken fontanelle. Suffice to indicate that *kutara* transcends dehydration to invoke spiritual connotations to the whole exercise. It is

deeper than that. The commentators fail to understand the metalanguage of the people. Soyinka (as quoted in Harrison 1989, xi) reminds such characters that:

When you go into any culture, I don't care what the culture is, you have to go with some humility. You have to understand the language, and by that I do not mean what we speak, you have got to understand the language, the interior language of the people. You have got to be able to enter their philosophy, their world view. You've got to speak both the spoken language and the metalanguage of the people.

While the preceding voices are constitutionally exercising the freedom of speech as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe, we are of the view that their viewpoints concerning Alick Macheso and the cultural practice of *kutara* are not only warped but also laden with Eurocentric narcissism. Their idealistic comprehension of “civilisation is thus attributed to the high performance of the ever-developing brain rather than to crucial human needs” (Chiwome 2002, 117). Inasmuch as these commentators believe that they are reacting to the story, “Cheso Admits Using Manhood on Child,” we contend that their discourse refuses to recognise the relevance of multiculturalism, hence we construe the voices as a direct attack on classical and traditional African cultural practices of combating life-threatening ailments such as sunken fontanelle, rather than on Alick Macheso, since Ousmane (1979) rightly teaches us that man himself is culture. Paradoxically, the commentators revel in the fact that they fail to speak the metalanguage of the people. Therefore, their very comments manifest lack of tolerance, not for Alick Macheso, but for Africa's intangible cultural heritage; they conceptualise this cultural practice as a mere act devoid of any cultural frameworks. In the contemporary era, where globalisation and the global village have become buzzwords, concepts take no stock of the difference in social status, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We are of the view that the entire citizenry has an obligation to honour, revere and be non-judgemental towards other people's sustainable cultural practices. It is that which guarantees their continued survival, and hence does not warrant biased understanding that borders on academic debate. It presents a case of commenting on cultural practice that one has not understood. Ethnocentricity and cultural prejudice, therefore, have no place in a culturally diverse environment for they propagate cultural hegemony. What these commentators choose to ignore is the basic multiculturalism commitment that posits that “common recognition that human diversity is human richness and that the challenge is not simply to tolerate it but to embrace and build on it” (Karenga 1993, 46). Their challenge seems to be in recognising *kutara* as an authentic and pragmatic African cultural practice in the face of illness; hence we expect them to tolerate and adopt it in the face of such challenges and for posterity. We dismiss ungrounded criticism of the practice with all the impunity that it deserves.

The seemingly Eurocentric appreciation of the practice, epitomised by Berto, NightTrain, Jotham and Cecil, is symptomatic of a colonised consciousness that breeds self-loathing and can only be construed within the bold and engaging assertions of Chinweizu (1987, xii), who aptly diagnoses for us the genesis of this self-hatred (and which Asante (2007, 5, also sees as a regrettable and painful dislocation):

It was a miseducation [colonial education] which, under the mystique of ‘modernizing’ [us] into some ‘civilized’ condition, had worked to infect [us] with intellectual meningitis that would twist [our] cultural spine, and rivet [our] admiring gaze upon Europe and the West. It was a miseducation which sought to withhold from [us] the memory of our true African past. ... It was a miseducation which, by encouraging [us] to glorify all things European, and by teaching [us] a low self-esteem for and negative attitudes towards things African, sought to cultivate in [us] that kind of inferiority complex which drives a perfectly fine right foot to strive to mutilate itself into a left foot. ... it sought to train [us] to automatically uphold and habitually employ the colonizers’ viewpoints in all matters.

In view of Chinweizu’s above exposition, we contend that there is an imperative for a re-education of their colonised consciousness. In fact, the commentators are “duly committed foot soldiers in the Fifth Column (a group of secret sympathisers or supporters of any enemy) in the struggle against their own liberation” (Ephraim 2003, 440). Their sentiments reveal that they echo the notion that they are mouthpieces of cultural imperialism. “[They] need something like a communal mental bath, one in which [they] shall scrub the crud off [each other’s] backs, especially from those corners which [their] own hands cannot thoroughly scour” (Chinweizu 1987, xiii). They choose to ignore the fact that Alick Macheso’s admission that he used his manhood to treat *nhova* is an unapologetic and unashamed commitment to one’s roots. He is a cultural hero. Ani (1980, 32) holds that:

the [cultural] experience described above would be interpreted as an extreme example of ‘primitive emotionalism,’ common to all people at a ‘low’ stage of intellectual and cultural development. From an [A]frocentric perspective, however, in terms of the African world-view, it represents a valued form of behavior which is highly developed in people of African descent.

It is in the light of the above that we further advance that this “valued form of behaviour,” expressed through *kutara*, can be practised proudly and unreservedly, and also tolerated and unequivocally embraced by only people who have revised an understanding of their own history, of which they are products. Such a standpoint is clearly visible from the observation of “Don Wezhira”:

Don Wezhira: Imi maCdes musatukana (“Comrades, do not insult each other”), cultures are so diverse yu will be shocked. In 1998 in Bavaria, Germany I witnessed a young mother squeezing her milk onto the bare head of her infant. She would then gently rub the droplets into the scalp, kunyanya panhongonya (“especially the top of the head”), repeating that, so I was told, until the hair grows. Out of respect I didn’t ask why.

In the light of Don Wezhira’s testimony in Europe, we advance that “our history has been falsified to suit a certain cause that our traditions have been misrepresented and our culture ridiculed in order to arrange our allegiance to the wishes of the different European countries” (Diop 1996, 138). This is unacceptable. Furthermore, we hold that indigenous knowledge is not only unique to African cultural practices, but epistemological codes and modes unique to a particular society and culture, be it the Eskimos, Red-Indians, Shona, or

Chewa people of Zimbabwe. It is our humble submission that each African people celebrates its sacred history and culture. Achebe (1975, 44) is more to the point when he argues that our “past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered [us].” The next section interrogates viewpoints that construe Macheso as a violator of child rights.

***Kutara* as an Abusive Cultural Practice**

Various misconceptions about *kutara* as a cultural practice manifest in the readers’ comments, with some debating it from a layman’s perspective, while others accuse Macheso of going to the extreme by abusing both the practice and the child. Their deliberations reveal that the readers are of the view that the biggest loser is the child; hence they see the musician as a child molester and a ritualist who is after his own success at the expense of the sibling. It also reveals that the metalanguage of the “accused” and his society is too complex for the minds of the commentators. Some of the comments extrapolated from *The Herald* Online published below, aptly sum up the readers’ perspectives:

Jambanja: Macheso must be charged with child molesting and sexual abuse. I’m shocked how ignorant he is to such a heinous crime. He should be locked up.

Me more tose: Macheso should face jail, child abuse, child rape and many more.

Pasi namacheso: This is gross child abuse. There is no justification for this kind of stupid practice. This behaviour being perpetrated by a public icon and for him to publicly admit to such is just appalling. Murume mukuru kuita art mumusoro memwana nemhengo yake here. Ndini ndega here kana kuti ndohumbwa hweku pedzisira. Nhova *yacho hapana anogona kuitsananunga futi*. Medically mwana anenge aita dehydration due to vomiting or diarrhoea. *Zvinorapwa nema* oral or intravenous fluids depending on the severity of the dehydration. Kushaya chikoro kwakafanana nekufa.

The viewpoints above are some of the dominant public opinion perspectives vis-à-vis Macheso and the cultural practice of *kutara*. A reader, “Jambanja,” sees it as a heinous crime worthy of imprisonment, while the other “pasi namacheso” is of the view that the musician is a child abuser who hides behind what he calls a “stupid practice.” Furthermore, he holds that “this kind of ignorance” is a product of lack of sound education. These comments are made within the context of the musician’s clarification of the misconceptions surrounding the practice itself, and how he did it:

Macheso said he used a method known as ‘kutara’ for treating the sunken fontanelle on the child. ‘Kutara’ involves a father sliding his manhood from the face, left ear, right ear and the back of the head to the middle of the head. (*The Herald* Online 2014)

In tandem with this understanding, readers, such as “Tigeress,” seem to be of a different opinion for she rhetorically asks:

Tigeress: Is kutara abuse? No.

Tigeress seems to be of the view that following a certain cultural practice does not constitute abuse, but rather exhibits cultural conservatism. *Kutara* is one of the other ways of treating *nhova*, and adopting or side-lining it has to be construed within a cultural location. In the light of such verbal internecine fights where readers are of different conflicting opinions, we note that:

One difference of paramount importance is that between the European and African modes of thought and expression. The European mind is literal while African conceptions are expressed symbolically. African culture is replete with symbols and symbolic behavior that reflect as a 'religious' world view. If these symbols are approached literally, African behavior makes no sense and we become 'primitives' who 'act like children' (because they do not understand the nature of the real world. (Ani 1980, 10)

It is in the light of Ani's (1980) exposition that the comments of Jambanja and the like-minded are better construed for they fail to see that the *kutara* cultural practice has a logical basis since the "[Africans] regard children as assets rather than liabilities [hence] ... evidence of their love lies in the desperate efforts by parents ... to reduce [death] rate" Chiwome (2002, 117). The symbolic expressions Macheso outlines in the *kutara* cultural practice processes can only be understood in the context of attributing actions or practices to crucial human needs rather than to a philosophy or culture. Using another worldview, which is European for Africans, gives a warped perspective, interpreting *kutara* as child abuse, rather than a survival strategy employed to reduce children's mortality rates. We further advance that in the African society, "the mother is the primary carer but the infant has access to many caretakers from siblings, to rivals, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, fathers, grandfathers, uncles and brothers" (Dove 2007, 170). Hence p'Bitek (1986, 19) posits that: "man has a bundle of *duties* which are expected from him by society, as well as a bundle of rights and *privileges* that the society owes him." It therefore becomes logical that Macheso's adoption of the *kutara* cultural practice in response to the sunken fontanelle is well in sync with the expectations of fatherhood and the critical development of a family as a fundamental institution. Muhwati (2005, 1) warns the commentators against "a very narrow perspective of viewing family and cultural realities." Conceptualising Macheso's actions as unethical and an infringement on children's rights is not only detrimental to the development of a family as a life-sustaining institution, but also to humanity as a whole. Stewart (2004, 4) advises us that:

Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can be reclaimed, revived, preserved and perpetuated. Sankofa embodies the concepts of self-identity, redefinition and vision. It symbolises an understanding of one's destiny and collective identity of the larger cultural group.

We, therefore, advance that Macheso's actions and cultural practices can only be comprehended within the confines of Sankofa. Therefore, grasping *kutara* as an abuse of

children's rights is an infringement on the welfare of the family as a life-sustaining unit. The comments as portrayed in the sampled media discourse portray it as an inhuman practice; hence the reply of "Observer" to Cecil is critical and worth quoting for the argument being proffered in this article:

Did you take time to ask yourself how many children die in hospitals as a result of 'nhova' and why people have continued to prefer the traditional methods?

Failing to comprehend the cultural practice of *kutara* within the basic commitments of multiculturalism, which holds that "each people has both the right and responsibility to speak its own special truth and make its own unique contribution to the forward flow of social and human history" (Karenga 1993, 46). Chiwome concurs, also perceiving it as a superficial portrayal of African cultural practices:

The given [*kutara* cultural practice] is [attacked] in touristic terms. Scarcity of details [against it] makes the practice ... much more irrational than it [is]. The lack of detail makes the custom susceptible to misinterpretation. ... The rationale behind the [practice would have] help[ed] the reader to form enlightened opinions about [it] ... appreciate the complexity of the practice. (Chiwome 2002, 116)

This, we argue, would make it feasible for the mutual and common recognition of *kutara* as a "special truth" and a sustainable cultural practice that reverberates that "human diversity is human richness and that the challenge is not simply to tolerate it but to embrace and build on it" (Karenga 1993, 46).

Conclusion

This article critically engaged the debate generated from Alick Macheso's use of his manhood to treat *nhova* as portrayed in *The Herald* Online story of May 6, 2014, "Cheso Admits Using Manhood on Child." Comments explicated from the online platform ranged from those who are of the view that Macheso, as evidenced by his utilisation of *kutara*, is primitive, uneducated and abusive. The common thread permeating their views is that Alick Macheso is uncivilised and that the use of *kutara* is unethical. We emphasise that, by insisting and hammering on both Macheso and the cultural practice as uncivilised and primitive, the commentators are failing to recognise multiculturalism, which recognises among other commitments:

mutual respect for each people and culture, human diversity is human richness as well as mutual recognition that neither US society nor the world is a finished white product, but rather an ongoing multicultural product and that each people has both the right and responsibility to speak its own special cultural truth and make its unique contribution to the forward flow of social and human history. (Karenga 1993, 46)

The readership's conception of *kutara*, we conclude, is warped and deformed, and this problem has been traced back to the subtle mechanisms of "colonial miseducation" that the

readership received, and also to other European frames of reference that they cherish and steadfastly cling to. Succinctly put, condemning the practice of *kutara* without properly situating it in its cultural context is unashamedly perpetuating cultural hegemony. It is easy to say that passing judgement on a cultural practice is imperative, but such criticism must be based on a proper and informed appreciation of what the practice stands for. The metalanguage of the society in question must be understood. That is indispensable.

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