

FOLKLORE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON HOMOPHOBIC BEHAVIOUR IN THE ZULU CULTURE: A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF *UMAMBA KAMAQUBA*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that South African society is not receptive to gays and lesbians, although South Africa is regarded as the country with the most liberal constitution, especially when it comes to gay and lesbian rights. The rejection could be ascribed to various factors, amongst which is the socialisation of individuals. Young boys and girls are raised to understand that their destiny is to get married and bear children. In Zulu society, unmarried people are stigmatised by name-calling. Much research has been undertaken on homosexuality and lesbianism: Mkasi (2013) discusses homosexuality amongst *izangoma*, while Ngcobo (2007) describes the difficulties faced by homosexual students, in terms of their perception and understanding of social discrimination. Socio-cultural theory has been applied here to reinforce the argument that folklore in the form of folktales is used as a conduit to socialise growing minds to accept that everyone is destined to marry and bear children, therefore anybody who

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deviates from this set of norms should be ostracised and punished. Such deep-rooted perceptions contribute to homophobia and violence against gays and lesbians.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's constitution is a shining example among the constitutions of the world. It is exemplary in that it protects the rights of every group in the country. Despite this, there are growing concerns amongst certain groupings that some South Africans are homophobic, despite the country being acknowledged and praised for its progressive constitution. In theory, the rights of minorities are protected by various legislations, but in practice there seem to be a growing number of homophobic incidents (and even insults) which clearly show that gays and lesbians are not experiencing or living the reality of the freedoms and rights outlined in this country's constitution. In the recent past, gays and lesbians have been killed, humiliated, scorned and ostracised in South Africa. Females who love other females have been raped in what is oddly called 'corrective rape'. Sadly, in some instances those who commit these crimes come off lightly. And to justify such inhumane acts of violence, some perpetrators hide behind their 'culture'. Many perpetrators and would-be perpetrators go so far as to claim that 'being gay is un-African'. It would therefore appear that the bigots suggest that homosexuals disrespect the norms and values of society, and should be humiliated because of their sexual orientation.

Much has been done by government to protect the dignity of homosexuals, culminating with the legalisation of gay marriage in 2006. In Africa, South Africa became the first country to legalise same-sex marriage – a huge legislative step which has led to a number of successful unions being solemnised. An example is the much-celebrated traditional gay wedding between Tshepo Modisane and Thoba Sithole, who became the first gay men in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) to celebrate their nuptials with a traditional, rural marriage on Saturday, April 6, 2013. Having invited the entire town to come and celebrate with them, the nuptials took place in KwaDukuza (formerly Stanger), where a memorial of Shaka stands proudly. Ironically, KwaDukuza was the palace of the late King Shaka, the unifier of the Zulu nation. Poignantly, there is no known recorded history of King Shaka being married or having children of his own.

Although same-sex marriages may no longer be a big deal in the cities, in rural areas it is largely frowned upon. In an eNCA interview (2013), Sithole said he was expecting a lot of negativity because the couple comes from KZN, and the community believed homosexuality is something which black people adopted from Western cultures. In his view, they have not accepted it due to a lack of knowledge. Despite its members' African upbringing and socialisation, which promote heterosexual relationships, in the end the community proved to be open-minded and receptive to the marriage.

Despite this welcoming effort, there are still many challenges facing homosexuals. This article will argue that folklore, in the form of folktales and proverbs, influences and shapes people's world views and inculcates general principles and attitudes through socialisation, by transmitting and reinforcing messages associated with central values (Oosthuizen 1977, 41–43).

DISCUSSION

Debates on homosexual and lesbian issues are ongoing as researchers try to unravel various reasons why these individuals are regarded as 'other' in most African societies. That has ignited widespread and often virulent discussions regarding the authenticity of homosexuality within the African cultural context. Studies conducted by scholars in southern Africa confirm that society is indeed homophobic. Ngcobo (2007), for instance, describes the difficulties facing homosexual students, and their perception and understanding of social discrimination. The participants in Ngcobo's study were registered students at the University of Zululand in KwaDlangezwa, in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The findings show individual variations in terms of difficulties relating to gay and lesbian students' sexuality. In particular, the following themes emerged: homophobia, discrimination, difficulties in the process of coming out of the closet, lack of respect for diversity, violation of their constitutional rights, labelling and the need for workshops geared towards educating fellow students to understand diversity, to celebrate difference and to challenge biased, heterosexist culture through education.

In an example of alleged homophobia, the University of Venda in Limpopo is accused of allowing ongoing discrimination against LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual and intersex) students on its campus. In modern use, the acronym relates to the diversity of gay culture (see Wikipedia). It has come to light that the university's Student Representative Council (SRC) has, for at least two years, refused to recognise an LGBTI student organisation, and the university's administration is said to have done nothing to stop its illegal action. This blatant discrimination was exposed in a recent Facebook post by last year's SRC president, Mathelemusa Andisani Mushavhi, who had no qualms about proudly proclaiming that he had personally ensured that the organisation, Univen LGBTI, would be barred from operating on campus. This was confirmed by an LGBTI student who told Mambaonline that the university's traditional Venda 'values' are behind the repeated rejection of the group's applications. A member of the LGBTI group explained that they cannot do anything or operate as an organisation on campus unless they are recognised by the SRC. To contravene this would be to violate the code of conduct and could lead to expulsion (see mambaonline).

Although one would expect tertiary educational institutions to fly the flag of tolerance and play a role in upholding the constitution this is not the case, as the

above research suggests. Such attitudes are fuelled by state leaders who put forward the notion that homosexuality is a Western import, and is therefore considered foreign and destructive to African culture. Hartline (2013, 1) argues that such homophobic rhetoric has flourished within southern Africa, and that the resulting attitudes have manifested in a highly heteronormative system of shared ideologies. In response, scholars on African gender and sexuality have been recently made considerable strides in unearthing evidence that same-sex sexual desire and behaviour have always existed in African cultures, thereby debunking the notion that homosexuality is intrinsically alien to Africa (see Hartline 2013, 1). These researchers have succeeded in presenting – at least in the academic realm – an alternative image of precolonial Africa in which same-sex sexuality was in fact present, though often in covert ways. To substantiate this, they explain that because homosexuality as an exclusionary and individuating identity is in itself a Western construct, same-sex desire and behaviour in precolonial Africa must be regarded as contextually situated if it is to be understood. In other words, searching for modern constructs of homosexuality within precolonial Africa will inevitably bring little or no success, therefore scholarship which clarifies this differentiation has proven invaluable in endeavours to disprove such homophobic ideas (Hartline 2013, 1).

The preceding paragraph identifies the perceptions of dogmatics who are adamant about protecting culture at all costs. Their arguments, which extend to folktales and some proverbs, contribute towards entrenching certain African values which have been passed down from one generation to the next. Such behaviour is rationalised by Lev Vygotsky who, in his seminal work (Vygotsky 1997), explains how culture and society contribute towards moulding an individual. Vygotsky formulated socio-cultural theory, which argues that parents, caregivers, peers and culture at large are responsible for the development of higher-order functions. Sociocultural theory is an acceptable theory. The theory stresses the interaction between developing people and the culture in which they live. Every function in a child's cultural development appears twice: 1) on a social level, and later on an individual level; and 2) between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, logical memory and the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. Each culture, however, provides what he (Scott 2013) refers to as 'tools of intellectual adaptation'. These tools allow children to use their basic mental abilities in a way that is adaptive to the culture in which they live. While one culture might emphasise memorisation strategies like note-taking, another might utilise tools like reminders or memorisation, for example (see psychology.about.com).

Kuykendal et al. (2007, 40–41) are of the opinion that the cultural norms which are represented in stories play a large part in the socialisation processes of the child who reads them. Contained within these cultural norms are the shared beliefs about gender roles, as held by the child's society. The development of a gender identity is

integral to a child's self-perception. Additionally, such norms affect the way children are treated by peers and adults alike, and they influence future behaviour expectations. As children grow, they use information from their parents, peers, school, literature and the media, to form theories of how men and women are supposed to behave. In this capacity, stories can be powerful cultural agents, 'telling' the child reader how to behave with regard to gender. Stories or fairy tales reflect a society's shared beliefs about gender roles, however, shared beliefs can and frequently do take another form – the oversimplified gender role stereotype. Literature in general, and fairy tales in particular, gender children, as explicated in the field of gender studies. The characters depicted in such stories help children determine what it means to be male or female, as this applies to behaviour, traits or occupations within the child's culture.

It can be argued that the arguments of Vygotsky, Kuykendal and others are applicable to Zulu culture. Parents socialise their young to observe specific cultural practices, so that when the children are older, those mores will become part of them. For example, from an early age children are socialised to understand the respective roles of boys and girls in society. Similarly, children are prepared for marriage by using proverbs and folktales to inculcate the importance of heterosexual relationships. African societies shun unmarried men and women, and it is for this reason that in Zulu society there are derogatory names for spinsters and bachelors. An unmarried Zulu woman may be labelled with unpleasant names such as *umjendevu* (spinster), *ukuba umgod i onganukwanja* ('a hole which is not sniffed even by a dog'), *uzendazamshiya* ('the one who was left marriageless') or *isaliwakazi* ('the one who is nobody's envy, i.e., refused by everyone'). Men, on the other hand, are also on the receiving end of derogatory names. They are sometimes called *impohlo*, *isigwadi* or *ishimane* (bachelor). Such tasteless name-calling clearly indicates how African societies resent non-conformity to prescribed societal mores.

The question of marriage is a matter of life and death for most Africans. It would be a rhetorical question to ask why this is the case. Gyekye (1996, 77) correctly asserts that a man is encouraged to wed because the responsibility associated with marriage elevates him to a respectable social status. As a respected individual, a Zulu man is constantly called upon and engaged by the younger members of the lineage/group for advice or asked to settle disputes, etcetera. This strengthens the widely held idea among staunch Zulus and culturists that a man must marry 'a woman to be called a man'.

Women in African societies are obliged to marry. In fact, an unmarried woman is almost an anomaly. Marriage is a requirement of society, an obligation every woman and man must fulfil, a drama of life in which every man and woman must participate. It is a special prize for a man if he finds a good wife, a woman of good character, who is obedient, hard-working and generally well respected in the community (Gyekye 1996, 82).

Mbiti (1975, 133–134) argues that for African people, marriage is the focus of their existence. It is the point at which all members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress, not just a spectator. Therefore marriage is a duty, a requirement for maintaining the rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Those who fail to do so are deemed a curse to the community, they are rebels and law breakers who are viewed not only as abnormal, but as ‘less than human’. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society, and society rejects him/her in return. Heterosexual marriage plays a major role in African societies, because it is regarded as a *rite of passage* for the couple concerned. Both partners are transferred from the group of the unmarried to that of the married, but for the girl it is a double transition – she has to be removed from her own group and incorporated into that of her husband, for life.

In days gone by, teaching was often effected through storytelling and proverbs, wisdom passed on from generation to generation. As a result, the same folktale often tends to reverberate across different cultures. An example of such a tale is that featuring a snake and a woman. In Zulu society, the folktale *UMamba kaMaquba* (‘Mamba, the son of Maquba’) has been used to entrench the importance and social acceptability of heterosexual marriage. This folktale will be used to further the present discussion.

UMAMBA KAMAQUBA

The folktale *UMamba kaMaquba* (Msimang 1986, 259–262) is about two sisters who go to a river to draw water. The elder sister’s calabash breaks and she sets off to find a husband after the younger sister deceives her into believing she cannot return home. The elder sister obediently assists two old women on her journey by licking the discharge from the eyes of one and lifting the load of the other. In return for her kindness, she is promised marriage. She arrives at Mamba’s homestead, and while he is out herding cattle she obediently grinds the sorghum to a fine powder. When Mamba returns, she fearlessly allows him to wrap himself around her, even after discovering he is a snake. She later gives birth to a child. One day she returns home to her own family with her baby, whereupon the younger sister jealously decides to also marry Mamba. The younger sister encounters the same two old women but rudely refuses to assist them. She is reprimanded and told there will be no marriage for her. On arriving at Mamba’s homestead she grinds the sorghum coarsely, contrary to custom. She shrieks in fear and repulsion at the sight of Mamba, the snake. She is chased home where Mamba is killed and burnt. However, his ashes are collected by the elder sister and he is magically retransformed into a human being. Mamba, the elder sister and their child leave to establish their own home.

The above folktale reflects many aspects of Zulu society. Its ideologies condition the view that whatever is deemed proper (like marriage for girls) must be secured at all costs. The folktale also reveals the importance of respect for, and obedience to, the wisdom of the aged. The emphasis here is on the role of the wife as submissive to her husband. Selfish, jealous, rude and intolerant attitudes are unacceptable in Zulu society, whilst courage, obedience, humility and tolerance of others are shown as desirable. Marriage and childbirth are highlighted as being of central importance in the lives of traditional women.

In *UMamba kaMaquba*, the eldest sister is determined to be married: marriage is so important to her that she will do anything to achieve it, even at the cost of being humiliated. On the one hand, the elder sister is an example of the ideal wife. She behaves in a comforting and non-aggressive way, to make life manageable for her husband and child. She is also a dutiful and faithful wife. Owing to the fact that she is tolerant and accepting of her husband's shortcomings, she is rewarded for her moral excellence, i.e., she is rewarded with a human husband (Msimang 1986).

On the other hand, the younger sister is the direct opposite of the elder sister. She is insubordinate and does not abide by society's rules, i.e., she is not obedient or submissive to her husband, and from her unusual behaviour one can deduce that she is a non-conformist. Child-bearing is not one of her priorities. Generally, in society childless, domineering or assertive/insubordinate women are despised and stigmatised. Women sometimes have to pass an acid test before marrying the men of their dreams. A woman stands to lose an eligible marriage partner if she fails to display certain basic attributes such as kindness, humility and self-sacrifice. Incidentally, a version of this folktale is found in almost all African languages spoken in South Africa. For an analysis of the importance of marriage in xiTsonga culture, see Bill (1995, 130–137).

The above Zulu folktale endorses the importance of socialisation and of grooming young minds so that children behave in socially acceptable ways as adults. Marriage and procreation are some of the cultural values that should be adhered to, if one is to be accepted by society. Anything contrary to these values is seen as an abomination.

... procreation is a means for the continual survival of the ancestors in the community and beliefs in the supremacy of the male in society as demonstrated in the killing of lesbians are the major reasons for the rejection of same sex relationships in African societies. (Mkasi 2013, 1)

Certain individuals' rejection of homosexuals and lesbians stems from their socialisation, which was handed down across generations, and its effects are still felt in the 21st century. Changing such ingrained beliefs will require tolerance on the part of purists.

Maiese (2003) attests that, in general, conflicts over intolerable moral differences tend to be intractable and long-lasting. Substantive issues are often a matter of rigidly held moral beliefs, based on fundamental assumptions that cannot be proven wrong. These fundamental moral, religious and personal values are not easily changed, and people who adhere to a particular ideology may very well be unwilling to compromise their world view. In addition, because parties to such conflicts often have great difficulty in describing substantive issues in shared terms, they find it difficult to reach some sort of compromise, even if they are willing to consider that option (ibid.).

Such conflicts tend to result from a clash between differing world views. One group's most fundamental and cherished assumptions about the best way to live may, for instance, differ radically from the values held by another group. Parties may have different standards of correctness and goodness, and may give fundamentally different answers to serious moral questions. When groups have divergent ideas about what makes a 'good life', they may stress the importance of different things, and may develop radically diverse or incompatible goals. In some cases, one group may regard the beliefs and actions of another group as so fundamentally evil that they exceed the bounds of tolerance and require active, committed opposition. Because values and morals tend to be quite stable, people are often unwilling to negotiate or compromise in this regard. Indeed, if the basic substantive issues of the conflict are deeply embedded in the participants' moral orders, the issues are likely to be non-negotiable. Parties to such conflicts tend to have great difficulty imagining a win-win resolution (ibid.).

Those involved in moral conflict may even regard a perpetuation of the conflict as virtuous or necessary. They may derive part of their identity from being warriors or opponents of their 'enemy' and may have an interest in continuing the conflict, as it provides them with a highly desirable role. In addition, because struggles over values often involve claims to status and power, parties may have a significant stake in neutralising, injuring or eliminating their so-called rivals. They may view any compromise regarding their most cherished values as a threat to their basic human needs or their sense of identity. In intractable conflicts, the continuation of a conflict may seem preferable to what would have to be given up in order to accommodate the other party (ibid.).

Maiese's argument is apt, particularly when the focus shifts to South Africa. Some refuse to acknowledge the existence of homosexuals and lesbians on the unfounded and untested grounds that this phenomenon never existed in precolonial Africa, and that it is therefore their given right to protect their culture at the expense of 'other' people. There is no documentary proof to support such serious assertions. Perhaps the only answer to this would be that these individuals are homophobic who are intolerant of others, hiding behind culture and other unacceptable homophobic excuses to justify their point of view.

CONCLUSION

A close analysis of *uMamba kaMaquba* reveals that women and men are invariably destined for heterosexual marriage. They are expected to get married at a certain stage, as it is a sign of maturity and a way of honouring one's parents. The cultural norms represented in folktales play a large part in the socialisation processes of the child who listens to or reads them. As children grow, they use information from their parents, peers, school, literature and the media, to form theories on how men and women are supposed to behave. This view is supported by socio-cultural theory. In a democratic society like South Africa, men and women may choose not to get married, as this is part of their freedom of choice.

Some men simply love other men, while some women love other women. They were born this way and, in many instances, die this way. There is no amount of cultural talk or 'corrective rape' that will change this. Our beautiful constitution protects these minorities. Respect for individual rights and individuals' sexual orientation takes precedence. Tolerance and rigorous discussions around sensitive issues of sexuality should be accommodated. Perhaps this might change some of the belief systems which have been practised for decades. The marriage between Tshepo Modisane and Thoba Sithole is a positive step towards tolerance. It must, however, be mentioned that the two lovebirds have since filed for divorce, but their case is still a shining light for other homosexuals since an example has been set. This is a huge stride towards an acceptance of individual rights and the freedom to choose whom to marry.

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