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Toxic Roots: The Remnants of White Minority Rule in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Honorable Mention for Best Work of Criticism 2018 Northwest Undergraduate Conference in the Humanities
This paper discusses the complex history of the intersection of sexuality and gender within Zimbabwe, specifically the chiShona tribe. It builds on the work of Zimbabwean anthropologist Josiah Taru, and African Studies scholar Tabona Shoko to uncover queer tribal identities and their position within precolonial chiShona tradition. This challenges efforts to naturalize homophobia in Zimbabwe in its current context. In relation, the role of colonial masculinity, power, and how it is interconnected in current political discourse is examined, problematized and complicated. Finally, the ways in which lesbian chiShona women challenge this discourse and lesbian invisibility is highlighted through the work of Tinashe Mupedzapasi. Colonization has left toxic roots within chiShona masculinity, sexuality, power dynamics, and gender identity reinforcing hierarchical understandings within chiShona culture. Yet non-normative identities persist. Thus, this project also addresses the critical question: can this discourse be decolonized?
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Linda Heidenreich-Zuñiga

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

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This paper discusses the complex history of the intersection of sexuality and gender within Zimbabwe, specifically the chiShona tribe. It builds on the work of Zimbabwean anthropologist Josiah Taru, and African Studies scholar Tabona Shoko to uncover queer tribal identities and their position within precolonial chiShona tradition. This challenges efforts to naturalize homophobia in Zimbabwe in its current context. In relation, the role of colonial masculinity, power, and how it is interconnected in current political discourse is examined, problematized and complicated. Finally, the ways in which lesbian chiShona women challenge this discourse and lesbian invisibility is highlighted through the work of Tinashe Mupedzapasi. Colonization has left toxic roots within chiShona masculinity, sexuality, power dynamics, and gender identity reinforcing hierarchical understandings within chiShona culture. Yet non-normative identities persist. Thus, this project also addresses the critical question: can this discourse be decolonized?

Keywords

LGBTQIA+, queer, decolonial, chiShona, Zimbabwe, Postcolonial Studies

Cecil Rhodes was a traveler searching for gold in throughout the African continent; in Zimbabwe he created a treaty with Ndebele King Lobengula allowing him to take minerals from the nation. His goal, however, included not only wealth, but power, and in 1889 Rhodes became the first white ruler under the Royal Charter of the British South Africa Company. While they were not successful in retrieving gold the British company left, white settlers had begun to live there, and it became a colony self-titled after Rhodes (Zvobgo 11). Zimbabwe was colonized by way of white minority rule with a smaller white to black ratio than South Africa 1:20, 1:5, respectively (Epprecht 103). Settler rule comes with the colonization of culture and sexuality, which would last until the liberation movement in the 1980s. Zimbabwe has made significant shifts since colonization however, residue of homophobia has taken root within the chiShona tribe. Zimbabwean lesbian women are radically creating poetry in direct opposition to homophobia.

Inspired by independence movements throughout the continent in the late 1950s, the Rhodesian Bush war was the people's first attempt at fighting white minority rule. The war lasted 15 years and concluded when the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU), led by Robert Mugabe, threatened to execute the British Prime Minister should he dare to travel to their land. Another militant organization, Zimbabwean African People's Union (ZAPU), founded by Joshua Nkomo worked alongside ZANU to gain freedom from colonization (Martin, Johnson 19). During the last part of the struggle for freedom, Chimurenga music was central to the success of the movement because it revived pre-colonial practices of war cries, checks and balances, and protest (Chiwome 242). Specifically, the songs were said to remind the people of pivotal ancestors, who they

believe guided them. Such pivotal ancestors included Chaminuka, "the symbol of revival and liberation, guidance and [intercession] and Nehanda who foretold the second Chimurenga and said *mapfupa achamuka* (bones will reincarnate)" (Chiwome 243). Reviving traditional songs and precolonial history made critical steps toward a future of decolonization and liberation. Unfortunately, those steps did not include rejecting colonial masculinity and homophobia.

This paper discusses the complex history of sexuality within Zimbabwe, but centrally the chiShona tribe and its importance to Zimbabwe. The contrast between traditional chiShona practices and customs will be compared to current ideologies that perpetuate homophobia. In relation, the role of colonial masculinity, power, and how it is integrated with current chiShona practices will be addressed. Finally, lesbian chiShona women will be centralized, and made visible through the work of Tinashe Mupedzapasi. Colonization has left toxic roots within chiShona masculinity, sexuality, power dynamics, and gender identity that reinforce hierarchical understandings within Zimbabwean culture. Yet non-normative identities persist. Thus, this project also addresses the critical question: can this discourse be decolonized?

TRIBAL RECOLECTION

Many chiShona elders claim to have not heard of homosexuality before colonizers entered Zimbabwe (Taru 2). Within precolonial chiShona culture, sex was not openly talked about, however. As a result, many of conversations about sex happened in people's homes (Shoko 637). Sex was not a topic that was openly discussed within the chiShona, and silence allowed for violence. Specifically, silence allows for ill treatment toward gay and lesbian Zimbabwean bodies because there is no public discourse.

Structures cannot be put into place to protect people within the community if sex is not talked about. Silence communicates complacency and leads to violence and exclusivity (Lorde 41).

PRE-COLONIAL GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In “Rethinking the Illegality of Homosexuality in Zimbabwe, A Riposte to Chemhuru,” Josiah Taru, a Zimbabwean Cultural Anthropologist, disputes the validity Chemhuru’s argument. Chemhuru, who was a PhD candidate at University of Johannesburg, South Africa, when he wrote his initial article, believes the popular narrative that homosexuality was brought by colonization. Taru points out differing pre-colonial cultural identities such as the *nkhonshana*, *n’angas*, and *nkabinde* which problematize Chemhuru’s assertions.

Josiah Taru reveals how other anthropologists have documented the existence of homosexuality, and rituals that integrated differing sexual practices. These included the *nkhonsthana* (boywife) into the chiShona life. *Nkhonsthana* is a person who would take on the role of a wife when men and young boys were working mines or farms away from their wives (Taru 3). The loss of the tradition of *nkhonsthana*, or even its memory, is an example of how cultural practices or roles get lost through generations due to colonization. Attempts at decolonization do not always restore the culture of the precolonial society.

Marc Epprecht considers how *n’angas* (traditional healers) explained the occurrence of various actions that were outside of cultural norms and some of the ramifications. When young men experiment sexually with the “same-sex” or participate in bestiality they are expected to grow out of it (Epprecht 73). The *n’angas* recognized that if actions were persistent the elders of the tribe would have a stern conversation

with the young men. Under the *Ubuntu* tradition within Southern African means “I am who I am as a consequence of my relationships with other people” (Epprecht 66). A certain amount of fluidity was allowed for and referred to as “accidents” when they did occur.

Young girls culturally go through *kusenga* which is a practice where the labia majora is manually stretched by a godmother and a close friend (Epprecht 73). During this cultural practice, at no point was it acceptable or considered normal for sexual interactions between women to occur. If young girls did build intimate relationships amongst one another, the feelings were expected to wither away. If the intimate friendships continued discreetly “the prevailing homosociality of the village life would have made such relationships largely invisible” (Epprecht 74). The structure of the chiShona culture allowed for invisibility of same sex attraction for women and men until a certain point.

Finally, another traditional understanding was *Nkabinde*, which is when a “male spirit occupied a female body would show himself in increasingly masculine characteristics in the woman even to the point of insisting that she wears men’s attire”; such people were often they were trusted in arts of divination and healing (Epprecht 74). The same applied for male bodied people but they were called *n’anga*. In postcolonial Zimbabwe, queerness has been erased largely by the colonization but also political leaders. The erasure of this complex traditional culture has allowed homophobia to flourish in a previously diverse culture through gender and sexuality.

“POST”-COLONIAL

Today, overt homophobia is reinforced by social and political leaders such as former President Mugabe, who openly denied

humans rights to gay and lesbian people, and said they were “worse than dogs and pigs and should be hounded out of society” (Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa 13). His rhetoric set the tone for how homosexuality would be perceived in Zimbabwe. Bev Clark, an activist with the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), asserts that the “anti-gay statements by President Mugabe have directly encouraged violence against gays in Zimbabwe” his words as the leader of Zimbabwe are not neutral and have detrimental implications for gay and lesbian people in Zimbabwe (Clark 31). Additionally, Mugabe questions the validity of gay and lesbian people’s African-ness because he believes “homosexuality is alien to African culture” (Clark 32). His statements ostracize Zimbabwean queer people from being Zimbabwean,” placing gay and lesbian people outside of the scope of normalcy for the country. Taru argues that if we bring a Marxist lens to Zimbabwe, we can see how the political leaders impact the climate of the nation.

Society controls the information that people have access to, and how that creates not only class hierarchies, but educational and other social hierarchies (Taru 8). In postcolonial societies, this includes how cultural sexuality is, still not decolonized. Essentially, hegemonic structures control not only how structures function in societies, but also the intellectual capital that people consume, especially if you are in a lower socio-economic status where the pursuit of knowledge is limited. Institutions such as church, school, media, and police enforce what is acceptable in society. Historically, in dominant Western narratives there is a clear dichotomy of right and wrong, where homosexuality is understood as unnatural, and heterosexuality is understood as normative. The actions of homosexual people are made visible and reinforced as

deviant. Yet, people around the world, involved in decolonization projects, are addressing the violence toward gay and lesbian bodies by postcolonial institutions. Queer Jamaican discourse is an example of this.

GLOBAL DECOLONAL CONNECTION

Thomas Glave is a Jamaican American writer who focuses specifically on the Black Queer experience. In an interview with Gene Jarret, Glave recalls the organic amalgamation of the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals (JFLAG). In 1988, after meeting a few people in the community during his visit home they founded an organization that would combat homophobia in Jamaica. Glave noted they were motivated by “the violence against gays and lesbians in Jamaica, against which victims still have little legal recourse-so many gay people [had] been killed, burned, shot, stoned, run out of their homes, evicted” (Jarrett, Glave, 1236).

In the midst of violent hate crimes during the late 1980s, South African fight for freedom from apartheid gave them hope and courage (Jarrett, Glave, 1236). The global connection between liberation for South Africa and Jamaica was tied together through similar roots left behind by colonization, but in this case was able to serve as encouragement toward Jamaican people for overcoming colonization. Not only were they drawn together to encourage one other in time of adversity, but they also faced similar struggles because their fight against homophobia occurred after colonization. Glave mobilized art in a moral imagination where, the words moral and imagine in conjunction had a political connotation, “in a morally centered universe—one external or internal, focused on the well-being of all humanity and all living things with which we share the

world,” pushing people to imagine a better world while rooted in the history of the past (27). Glave reminds us that history can be used to remember where people have come from and to serve as a reminder that more work can be done and change is possible.

HOMOPHOBIA AND COLONIAL MASCULINITY

As mapped above, people who have power in institutions create and perpetuate ideologies that shape their larger society. Decolonization reached another turning point in 1980. After the second Chimurenga (Zimbabwean Liberation) unfortunately, followed the path of countries such as Jamaica in their pursuit of nationhood, and used homophobia as a tool for unification. Specifically, “Homophobia is utilized in the battle of cultural, religious and national purity. [Was] assumed that homophobic stances [preserved] the indigenes of the locals” (Taru, 6). What was known about homosexuality was demonized even though it had a place within the chiShona culture prior to colonization. Since the chiShona precolonial culture was homosocial lesbians were rendered invisible. In Zimbabwe, the remnants of colonial masculinity are clear, heaving weaved themselves insidiously to make the difference between colonization and culture unclear. Homophobia within the chiShona tribe created a narrow understanding of masculinity. According to Epprecht, “masculinity and assertion of social manhood that was taken from African men forced them to disassociate themselves from anything that emasculates them. Homosexuality did not only emasculate men but also feminized them,” given the way that masculinity is often placed in opposition to femininity homosexuality was not an option for African men (30). Additionally, “male homosexuality was discouraged not because it was believed to be evil or immoral, but because of how it impacted the patriarchal

principle of the importance of male sexuality for purposes of procreation” since homosexual sex does not produce children, it was ostracized from the realm of identity (Shoko 638). Within discourses of sexuality, women were often not talked about because their sexuality was often not considered. Women were understood to be “sexually inferior,” meaning their purpose was for reproduction, not pleasure (639).

WHERE ARE BLACK LESBIANS?

Since women were not essential to the conduct of colonial masculinity, chiShona women were not included in conversations about sexuality. Thus, lesbian women are not highlighted within the discourse about queer identities. Today, in yet another turn in decolonization, Zimbabwean lesbians are insisting on their voice and visibility. Poet Tinashe Mupedzapasi has written about her experience as a lesbian Zimbabwean woman. Her work and words echo these of Angelina Weld Grimke who, “was a triply disenfranchised. Black, woman, Lesbian, there was no space in which she could move” (Hull 79). Gloria T. Hull illustrates how Angelina Weld Grimke struggled while trying to get published when she wanted to talk about race, sexuality, and gender. In a time when she could not voice these three, she used nature as a way to create compelling images. However, censoring and concealing her words caused her to stop writing which made her feel like an essential part of her was dying (Hull 81). While Hull, who was triply oppressed was condemned to silence, Mupedsapasi as part of a larger legacy of Queer Black decolonized voices who insist on voice. Mupedzapasi wrote, in her poem “My Queen,” her appreciation for a woman:

I am a Romeo
Only if you are a Juliet
I am a King

Only if you are a Queen...
 On which i [sic] have planted the
 plant of love

I need you my Queen (ll. 1–11)

Often the question is asked “where are Black lesbians?” which further demonstrates the invisibility of Black lesbian women in Zimbabwe and the unsafe environment that does not support their intersecting identities (Clark 32). Mupedzapasi’s work is essential to the conversation on sexuality because Zimbabwean lesbian voices are not highlighted but are vital to the discourse within the chiShona tribe. In her writing she openly showcases her affection for women. Her poetry is significant because she has found space online to make her experience visible. Zimbabwean lesbian women are often targeted within Zimbabwe, and Mupudzipasi’s radical push for poetry, and the visibility of diverse sexualities was not an act without consequences. Rather, her work is purposely radical because, despite the consequences, Mupudzipasi continues. For example, Bev Clark activist within Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe asserts the direct singling out of gay and lesbian people in Zimbabwe through house searches that often result in property being taken and the threat of job insecurity. Clark argues “homosexuals and lesbians live under oppressive conditions in this country” and more so Black lesbian women are subject to a plethora of oppressive rules (31). The importance of creating art that challenges the understandings of institutions through poetry as Grimke, and Mupedzapasi have done is essential to the development and continuation of the queer movement around the world. Many of the same conversations are being had around the globe, however, specifically Jamaica about the importance of creative tactics to dismantle institutions.

MORAL IMAGINATION TO FORMULATE A QUEER FUTURE

Glave argues people must “focus on the well-being of all humanity and all living creatures with which we share the world...each decision that one considers, bears political, moral, and often if not always ethical import,” everyone’s action have repercussions (27). Glave urges people to recognize that they have the power to imagine a world were all humanity is celebrated, and where everyone has a part in making utopia reality. A moral imagination is manifesting the things that have not come yet, and believing marginalized people deserve space, position, autonomy, and voices that are heard. Fire and ink have been used against communities of color, but they have been harnessed to create visibility for queer people of color, as well. Claiming ink communicates the presence of queer people of color. Voices like Tinashe Mupedzapasi can fuel within discourse about the lesbian and gay African community. Her work creates space for other Zimbabwean lesbians to see themselves.

Colonization functioned to erase the culture of Zimbabwean people including their discourse of human sexuality. This paper discussed the disjointed history of sexuality within Zimbabwe, with an emphasis on the chiShona tribe. A brief excavation of precolonial chiShona traditions, demonstrated that colonial power planted seeds of homophobia within Zimbabwe. Colonial masculinity was discussed as a tool that further perpetuated homophobia.

The poetry of Tinashe Mupedzapasi provides hope for new liberation. The institutions which the chiShona tribe participates in remain shaped by colonization, however, people such as Tinashe Mupedzapasi are creating spaces

where queer decolonized voices can be heard.

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