

The 'Unsay' of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity

MARC Epprecht
(Department of History, University of Zimbabwe)¹

Many black Zimbabweans believe that homosexuality was introduced to the country by white settlers and is now mainly propagated by 'the -West'. The denial of indigenous homosexual behaviours and identities is often so strong that critics have been quick with accusations of homophobia. Yet those critics unfairly impose a rather crude and ultimately unhelpful analysis. Without denying that violent forms of homophobia do exist in Zimbabwe, the invisibility of indigenous homosexualities has more complex origins. This article examines the many, overlapping discourses that are constructed into the dominant ideology of masculinity and that contrive to 'unsay' indigenous male-to-male sexualities. It seeks in that way to gain insight into the overdetermination of assertively masculinist behaviour among Zimbabwean men today. It also draws lessons for researchers on the importance of interrogating the silences around masculinity.

Sexually intimate relations between males can be attested in Zimbabwe from time immemorial, notably in one explicit Bushman painting but also in oral traditions about customary 'cures' and punishments². Such relations were disapproved, at least beyond the age adolescence, and constrained by the imperatives of the pre-modern policultural economy. During the colonial era, however, homosexual behaviours among African men flourished in some contexts. While still disapproved, pederastic 'marriages' known as *ngotshana* had already become 'common' or 'prevalent' in some of the developing cities and labour camps as early as 1907³. Other expressions of male-to-male sexuality that were known in the first decades of colonial rule included affectionate, reciprocal love affairs, prostitution, rape, blackmail attempts and sexual assault while the victim slept.

No one at the time blamed whites for these behaviours. Nor did the issue of 'unnatural vice' among black Africans attract the kind of attention that it did in analogous circumstances in South Africa⁴. Indeed, homosexual behaviours among black Zimbabwean men remained deep in the closet (secret, compartmentalised, unmentionable) until the late 1980s. Only then did openly gay identities begin to be expressed through events such as the 'Jacaranda Queen' contest (now showcasing mostly black drag queens). Gays and Lesbians Zimbabwe (GALZ, established in 1990) and other local solidarity groups have meanwhile emerged with the goal of educating Zimbabweans about the

¹ I would like to thank Keith Goddard, Oliver Philips, Wolfram Hartmann, Suzie Bruce, Tina Machinda, Tim Burke, William Beinart, Liz Gunner Allison Goebel, Knox Chitiyo, Ken manungo, Josephin enhongo-Simbanegavi and Davied Beach for their assistance, encouragement and helpful comments along the way. Robert Morrell deserves special mention for his patient and commendably diplomatic work as my editor; and the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS) for financial support in the later stages of preparation. I would also like to draw attention to the fact that this research is part of an on-going 'Gay oral' History Project' being conducted by Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), who welcome correspondence (Private Bag A6131, Avondale, Harare, galz@samara.co.zw).

² See Marc Epprecht, "'Good God Almighty, What's This!': Homosexual 'Crime' in Early Colonial Zimbabwe", in Stephen O. Murray and William Roscoe (Eds), *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1998). Evidence attesting to pre-colonial homosexualities elsewhere in Africa is also analysed in Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behaviour outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918* (New York, New York University Press, 1995); Rober M. Baum 'Homosexuality in the Traditional Religions of the Americas and Africa', in Arlene Swindler (ed), *Homosexuality and World Religions* (valley Forge, PA, Trinity Press, 1995), pp. 1-46; Deborah P. Amory, "'Homosexuality' in Africa: Issues and Debates", *Issues*, XXV, 1 (1997), pp. 5-10; and M. Epprecht, 'Pre-Modern and early Colonial Sub Saharan Africa', IN George E. Haggerty (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (New York, Garland Press, Forthcoming 1998)

³ National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) D3/6/42 criminal court case 995 of 22 April 1907; Charles Bullock [a Native Commissioner in Gwanda District in the 1920s], *The Mashona and the Matabele* (Cape Town, Juta, 1950), p. 254. Precisely what 'common' meant in terms of actual numbers can never be established. Literature from South Africa - where male homosexual behaviours were described as 'regular' or 'an addiction' in similar contexts - offers a potential comparative perspective. See in particular Henri Junod, 'Unnatural Vice in the Johannesburg Compounds', *The Life of a South African Tribe*, vol. 1 (New York, University Hooks, 1962 [originally published in 1916]) and T. Dunbar Moodie with Vivienne Ndatshé, *Going for Gold: Men's Lives on the Mines* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994).

⁴ So-called unnatural vice among African men was the subject of a commission of enquiry by the Chamber of Mines and Department of Native Affairs in 1906-1907, was the target of a public campaign by white missionaries on the Rand in 1915, was raised again by Mpondo chiefs in the Transkei Territories General Council in the 1930s, and appears in a number of literary accounts of life on the Rand through to the 1950s. For analysis of these accounts, see in particular Moodie, *Going For Gold*; Keith Breckenridge, 'Migrancy, Crime, and Faction-fighting; the Role of the *Isitshozi* in the Development of Ethnic Organisations in the Compounds', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16, 1 (1990), pp.55-78; Patrick Harries, 'Symbols and Sexuality: Culture and Identity on the Early Witwatersrand Gold Mines', *Gender and History*, 11, 3 (1990), pp. 318-336; and Zackie Achmat, 'Apostles of Civilised Vice; "Immoral Practices" and "Unnatural Vice" in South African Prisons and Compounds, 1890-1920', *Social Dynamics*, 19, 2 (1993), pp. 92-110.

nature of homosexual orientation and the humanity of people so inclined. GALZ's attempts to display its educational material at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair (1995 and 1996) and the lodging of sodomy charges against the former president of the country (Canaan Banana in 1997), brought the existence of homosexual behaviours among indigenous blacks even more forcefully to public attention⁵.

Despite these developments, many black Zimbabweans maintain that homosexual behaviour is 'un-African', a foreign 'disease' that was introduced by white settlers and that is now principally spread by foreign tourists and ambassadors. This belief underlies recent state and church rhetoric about expunging homosexuals from the body politic and returning 'traditional' family values. Such rhetoric has typically been so crude that critics have tended to denounce it as homophobia⁶. But can Zimbabweans in general be labelled homophobic when many have only the vaguest notion of what homosexuality is? Moreover, without denying that homophobia does exist in Zimbabwe, even GALZ members readily agree that in day to day life gay-bashing is rarely as violent or pervasive as it is in many Western countries. Many Zimbabweans actually seemed to be sincerely baffled by the 'anti-homo' campaign of 1995 and have, since then, responded with a curiosity and essential tolerance that belies the homophobic label. Denial of, ignorance about, or blindness toward indigenous homosexualities thus appears to have more complex origins and subtle manifestations than critics have allowed.

In fairness to Zimbabweans, then, that blindness deserves attention as historical in its own right. How have indigenous homosexualities been discoursed into invisibility or 'unsaid' by specific cultural, historical practices? How have these unsayings been related to the construction of new ideals or performances of masculinity? Can the emergence of new masculine identities and sexualities be linked to broader questions of social conflicts such as men's violence against women and children? Can reflecting on silences in the historical record increase sensitivity to our own subjectivities as researchers and activists?

In mapping the creation of this blindspot through history, I shall draw heavily upon 'queer theory'. Queer theory is a distillation of subaltern studies and postmodern feminist thought which makes explicit the connections between sexuality, discourse and the political economy⁷. Those connections may be implicit but are often overlooked in more conventional Marxist and feminist analysis. By posing difficult questions about masculine identity, queer theory also tends to blur the distinctions between researcher and researched. I hope, by way of conclusion, to demonstrate that such a blurriness can be salutary.

The Political Economy of Heterosexuality

African cultures in Zimbabwe have traditionally tended to place great importance upon the maintenance of proper outward appearances. Toward that end, actively hiding or denying unpleasant realities or divergence from ideals was a positive social good. As is common in societies throughout the world, the African peoples of Zimbabwe developed

⁵ To follow the 'coming out' of Zimbabwe's gays in the past few years, see various issues of the quarterly GALZ Newsletter; Mike Coutinho, 'Black Gay Life in Zimbabwe', *BGM*, 6 (1991); GALZ, *Sahwira: Being Gay and Lesbian in Zimbabwe* (Harare, GALZ, 1995), and Hev Clark, 'Zimbabwe', in Rachel Rosenblum (ed), *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights* (San Francisco, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 1995), pp.237-242. The allegations of sodomy and apparently systematic homosexual predation by Banana first broke in Zimbabwe's state-controlled daily, *The Herald*, 25 February 1997.

⁶ See for example Iden Wetherell, 'No Sex Please, It's Subversive', *African Agenda*, 1, 7 (1995), pp. 23-24 and *idem*, 'Mugabe's Unholy War', *Southern Africa Report*, 11, 4 (July 1996), pp. 13-14; as well as coverage and commentary on the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in *The Zimbabwe Independent* (particularly 2 August 1996). Mugabe was far from alone in the region in expressing such views and in fact the ruling party in Namibia seemed poised in 1997 to outdo him in ugly rhetoric. For a regional perspective, see Chris Duntun and Mai Palmberg, *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996), as well as Marc Epprecht, 'Culture, History and Homophobia', *Southern Africa Political Economy Monthly*, 9, 3 (March 1996), pp. 33-38; Oliver Phillips, 'Zimbabwean Law and the Production of a White Man's Disease', *Social and Legal Studies*, 6,4 (1997), pp. 471-491; *idem*, 'Zimbabwe', in D. West and R. Green (eds), *Socio-Legal Control of Homosexuality: A Multi-national Comparison* (New York, Plenum, 1997), pp. 43-56; and Edward P. Antonio, 'Homosexuality and African Culture' in Paul Germond and Steve de Guchy (eds) *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1997), pp. 295-315

⁷ Key works in my theorisation of homosexuality, homophobia and heterosexism are Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1990); R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987) and *idem*, *Masculinities* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1995); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990); Warren J. Blumenfeld (ed), *Homophobia: How We All th Price* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992); Rosemary Hennessy, 'Incorporating Queer Theory on the Left', in Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg and Carole Biewener (eds), *Marxism in the Postmodern Age: Confronting the New World Order* (New York, Guilford Press, 1995), pp. 266-275; and Esther D. Rothblum and Lynne A. Bond, *Preventing Heterosexism and Homophobia* (Beverly Hills, Sage, 1996). Also useful for ideas about historical research methods was John D. Wrathall, 'Provenance as Text: Reading the Silences around Sexuality in Manuscripts Collections', *Journal of American History*, 79, 1 (1992), pp. 165-178; and on masculinity, David Gutterman, 'Postmodernism and the Interrogation of Masculinity', in H. Brod and M. Kaufmann (eds), *Theorising Masculinities* (Beverly Hills, Sage, 1994), pp. 219-238. Queer theory applied to specific southern African case studies include Achmat, 'Apostles', Kendall, 'Women in Lesotho and the (Western) Construction of Homophobia' in Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa (eds), *Culture, Identity and Sexuality: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Women's Same-Sex Erotic Friendships* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), and Donald L. Donham 'Freeing South Africa: the Modernisation" of Male-Male Sexuality in Soweto', *Cultural Anthropology*, 13,1 (1998), pp. 3-21. These works all make the crucial distinction between homosexuality as an identity or condition that is publicly acknowledged, and discrete same-sex acts or behaviours that do not necessarily connote a sense of identity different from the norm.

certain customs and social fictions which enabled them to avert their eyes from issues that might compel a literal, destabilising naming of fact⁸.

The appearance of fertility was one of the most important elements in a proper marriage and in the social definition of adulthood for both men and women. As Bullock phrased it, a married person who remained for long without producing the visible evidence of maturity was 'an object of ridicule and disgrace among the Mashona. He [sic] is not doing his primary duty to the nation, which is to marry and have children.'⁹ Some men, invariably, could not meet this expectation, whether from impotence or from a lack of sexual interest in their wife. Custom provided a way to avoid shame in such cases by preserving appearances. The custom of *kupindira* or *kusikira rudzi* ('raising seed'), notably, allowed the husband to make a secret arrangement with a trusted friend or relative to impregnate his wife. All could rejoice thereafter in 'his' offspring. Even if the wife took a lover on her own initiative to solve the problem of a husband's lack of sexual attention (that is, committed adultery) she would be blamed but not necessarily all that much. The custom of *lobola* or *roora* ensured that children born through adulterous relations still belonged to the husband's family. Men who felt sexually attracted to males did not need to fear that this feeling would compromise the socially-necessary performance of heterosexual virility.

If marital propriety in traditional cultures demanded fecundity, so too did the material circumstances of peasant life. Having children justified the acquisition of fields by a young man. Children's labour was subsequently vital to the production process, including weeding, fetching water, herding, and gathering firewood. Grown children, moreover, were the main guarantor of security in the parents' (and grandparents') old age. In the case of girls, they were a direct source of 'income' in the form of bridewealth. Of course we should assume that Zimbabweans of yore also enjoyed sex for its 'recreational' and emotional aspects. They will have done so, however, only in the knowledge that failure to have children would result in economic and social catastrophe. This 'functionalist' approach to sex is still reflected today in a profound inability among many Zimbabweans to conceive the point of homosex. A sense of apparently sincere bafflement comes through strongly, for example, in some of the speeches of Zimbabwe's parliamentarians:

We have asked these men whether they have been able to get pregnant. They have not been able to answer such questions. Even the women who are engaging in lesbian activities, we have asked them what they have got from such practices and no one has been able to answer.¹⁰

The coercive powers of the extended family should not be underestimated in enforcing conformity to heterosexual norms. With girls, the customary expectation/obligation to submit to male desire was so strong that a girl who refused could in the eyes of the community legitimately be kidnapped or 'eloped', not uncommonly with the connivance and even active participation of family members. Cases of forced and violent sexual intercourse with recalcitrant girls which were in effect condoned by family or community can also be found in the historical record.¹¹ For young men, the extended family watched closely and could intervene in cases where they failed to fulfil their duty to provide children for the lineage. The family could, for example, demand that a son divorce, provide a second wife if the first appeared infertile, or even arrange *kupindira*, with or without his knowledge.¹² The highly gerontocratic nature of African societies meant that the young had to obey the old in these and other demands. From the court records of homosexual 'crime' in the early colonial period, for example, a consistent theme emerges that victims of abusive relationships were effectively silenced by the coercion of senior men and by the boys' strong sense of deference to age and authority"

The customary imperative to reproduce was significantly abetted by the advent of colonial rule. The waning of the traditional function of chiefs as redistributors of wealth, for example, increased the need for children who could support the family in times of economic hardship. Capitalist-minded male peasants, meanwhile, were given market

⁸ Among the most sensitive discussions of customs surrounding proper gender relations among the Shona, Zimbabwe's dominant ethnic group and the principal focus of this article, are J. F. Holleman, *Shona Customary Law* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1969); Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939* (Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 1992); M. F. C. Bourdillon, *Where are the Ancestors? Changing Culture in Zimbabwe* (Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1995); Angela Cheater, 'The Role and Position of Women in Pre-colonial and Colonial Zimbabwe', *Zambezia*, 13, ii (1986), pp. 65-80, and for a rare introspection upon Shona masculinity, Chenjerai Shire, 'Men Don't Go to the Moon: Language, Space and Masculinities in Zimbabwe', in Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne (eds), *Dislocating Masculinities: Comparative Ethnographies* (London, Routledge, 1994), pp. 147-158. See Wallace Bozongwana, *Ndebele Religion and Customs* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1983) for a description of the traditional culture of Zimbabwe's second major ethnic group.

⁹ Charles Bullock, *Mashona Laws and Customs* (Cape Town, Juta, 1912), p. 12.

¹⁰ Mr. B. Gezi, *Zimbabwean Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 22/38 (6 September 1995), p. 2518. I take this point up again below, but would also like to refer readers to Kendall's eloquent exploration of what is 'sex' in a different southern African setting -Kendal!, 'Women in Lesotho'.

¹¹ Tina Machida, 1997, 'My Coming Out Story' (unpubl. document, GALZ archives) and, for an early example of this type of incident (family involvement in a girl's rape), criminal court case 3604 of 1936, NAZ S 1679 (Fort Victoria)"

¹² 'Mai Tokozile', interviewed by the author with Suzie Bruce translating, Odzi, 8 December 1997. This and subsequent interviews were conducted as part of the ongoing Gay Oral History Project, the informants being identified by GALZ researchers. Here, as below, I have invented a pseudonym to protect informant privacy.

incentives to increase the labour available to them through polygyny.¹³ Many wives gave them access to additional fields, while many young children could work the lands for profit. Adult children could earn cash in town to provide inputs for agricultural improvements. Ironically, even the practice of *ngotshana* among migrant sons may have abetted the reproductive capacity of the rural homestead. By enabling migrant men to conserve their health and resources against the temptations of town women, *ngotshana* strengthened their ability to shore up proper, fecund marriages (*kumusha* back home).¹⁴

Voluntarily to abstain from large families was thus, both by ancient custom and in the racial capitalist context, economically self-destructive and nonsensical no matter how strong one's feelings of sexual orientation may have been. This remains true to a significant degree even today, despite the fact that the costs of having children have risen steeply in recent years. In the absence of effective social welfare provisions, children who survive to adulthood remain the key to most individuals' long-term economic and health security. Reflective of this, even Zimbabwean gays and lesbians who have 'come out, still continue to marry, have families, and appear 'normal'. Zimbabweans who identify with gay orientation are thus often very difficult to discern by people who are not attuned to the nuances of gay argot. The many Zimbabwean men who marry and consider themselves 'normal, but nonetheless seek out casual homosexual contacts are even, it seems, invisible to themselves.

Cultures of Discretion

The appearance of conformity to a fecund heterosexual norm has historically been protected by a deeply embedded culture of discretion -don't ask, don't tell. In particular, the dominant African cultures in Zimbabwe placed a strong taboo upon the open discussion of sexual matters ('open' meaning other than ribald humour, ritual performance or confined to same-sex or same-age discussion groups). Were it to become known, for example, that family members were having incestuous relations or that a patriarch was abusing a child, a curtain of silence would descend to prevent the shame from becoming public. Purification rituals would be conducted in secrecy. The sense of shame about sexual matters also extended to discussion of the mechanics of sex between men and women. A wife was not even supposed to look at her husband's genitals, nor a man to express curiosity about his partner's. As graphically described by Linda in Soweto, South Africa, and as confirmed by some of my own informants, this culture of discretion makes it surprisingly easy for even well-hung queens to cruise (seduce) straight men who do not notice (or can plausibly deny noticing) that the 'women' they are mounting have penises.¹⁵

As for the possibility of homosexual preferences existing behind the façade of a wife, children, and proper manly behaviour, this simply could not be admitted except as a case of spirit possession or witchcraft. Spirit possession was 'not necessarily regarded as evil' but 'in any case, what the person did sexually was not talked about. That was a family secret'.¹⁶ Revelation would only bring disruption of the moral universe closer to home. In the words of one straight informant (after several beers had loosened his tongue):

Yes, traditionally it [homosexual orientation] was there but it was never talked about. Never! As a child you would be told to stay away from the hut of a man who was known by the elders to be that way. But you were never told why. Only after you were grown and you gave those same elders much beer, perhaps, they might be coaxed to say something. But it took a lot of beer.¹⁷

Echoes of this attitude, which seems to me to represent a *de facto* tolerance for sexual eccentricities, could be heard even in a parliament which was otherwise eager to curry favour with President Mugabe. As Mr B. Gezi expressed it, his rural constituents 'hear that there is homosexuality and lesbianism going on. They have asked us and said that this is not a good practice. They say that if homosexuality and lesbianism is to go on, it *should* be done privately'.¹⁸

¹³ A.K.H. Weinrich, *Women and Racial Discrimination in Rhodesia* (Paris, UNESCO, 1979); Angela Cheater, *Idioms of Accumulation: Rural Development and Class Formation among Freeholders in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1984)

¹⁴ As argued by Moodie with Ndatshe, *Going for Gold* and Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity* (Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 1994), both reviewed in M. Epprecht, 'Manliness on the Mines', *The Zimbabwean Review*, 3,3 (July 1997), pp. 20-22. Please note that attributing a function to *ngotshana* does not preclude the possibility of real affection developing or even inspiring homosexual marriages, as I argue did indeed happen in some cases (Epprecht, 'Good God!').

¹⁵ Hugh McLcan and Linda Ngcobo, , Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi (Those Who Fuck Me Say I'm Tasty)' in Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron (eds), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (Johannesburg Ravan Press, 1994), p. 172. On social conventions surrounding sex-talk in Shona culture, see in particular the weekly columns by Ruth Gabi and Andrew Mutandwa in *The Sunday Mail* and *The Herald*, respectively, as well as the novels of Yvonne Vera, particularly (on the theme of incest), *Under the Tongue* (Harare, Baobab, 1996). This 'culture of discretion' is widely accepted as common knowledge. My own experience as a researcher, however, tells me that this is an area where culture -as a 'national' attribute -may actually be a projection of a masculine ideal, not a universal. Can reticence to talk about sex really be considered 'national' when women seem so much more open to talk than men? Perhaps mine has been an idiosyncratic experience in this regard.

¹⁶ 'Gogo Nguni', (a gay male n'anga or traditional healer), interviewed by author, translated by Tina Machida, Epworth, 19 June 1997.

¹⁷ 'Baba Itai', interviewed by author, Magamba village, Wedza district, 8 December 1996

Indigenous spoken languages also removed the problem from sight, as it were. There are no explicit terms for homosexuality or discrete homosexual acts in Shona. Rather, and much as 'confirmed bachelor' and 'spinster' once averted delicate Victorian sensibilities from homosexual possibilities in England, the possibility of same-sex sexual attraction among the Shona was subsumed within (or covered up by) respectable words like *tsvimborume* (meaning one who does not marry or, literally, one who possesses a knobkerrie, that is, phallus, but has nowhere to put it) and *sahwira* (an intimate male comrade). These words emphatically did not imply anything untoward. However, they have been co-opted by the gay and lesbian community today in recognition of their historical role of allowing relations to take place without drawing community attention.¹⁹

The narrowness of the dominant conception of what is sex worked in a similar way. One of the most common 'defences' of African men charged with sodomy or indecent assault in the early colonial era was they were only 'playing'. In other words, a physical activity involving two people and friction on the penis that resulted in orgasm was not sex at all, so what was all the fuss about? This conceptual narrowness means that a man who is married, but 'plays' with boys (or even female prostitutes) would rarely consider himself homo- or bisexual, let alone unfaithful to his marriage vows.²⁰

Words that made homosexual behaviour explicit were only adopted in the late nineteenth century from other languages. *Ngotshana* (or *ngochani* in contemporary usage), for example, appears to derive from Zulu or Shangaan, while *mantanyero* came from the Chewa spoken by Malawian migrants. The bulk of words used today which name homosexual acts and identities come from the West. Among indigenous blacks who engaged in homosexual relationships, meanwhile, an elaborate secret language of euphemism made their sexual desires and practices invisible to the heterosexual majority. There appears to be no word in Zimbabwe that names this secret and ever-changing argot, known in South Africa by a derivation from Zulu (*isingqumo*).²¹ It has an effect, however, like that of foreign terminology, of 'proving' that local people cannot conceive let alone engage in homosexual feelings and practices except when taught by corrupt foreigners.

Zimbabwe's indigenous cultures of discretion were almost certainly condoned and probably enhanced by over a century of Christian missionary propaganda. To many missionaries, talking about sex of any kind seems to have been considered equivalent to advocating it outside of marriage - a sin in all the Christian dogmas. Moreover, trying to convince their African charges to give up the more obvious forms of 'immorality' was a daunting enough challenge. It appears that some missionaries then purposefully avoided making themselves aware of and talking about homosexual improprieties. David and Charles Livingstone allude to this - a tacit conspiracy between missionaries and 'Natives' not to probe too deeply into such matters - in their account of the Kololo (BaLozi) people in the neighbouring territory. The Livingstones wrote:

By pointed enquiries, and laying oneself out for that kind of knowledge, one might be able to say much more; but if one behaves as he must do among the civilised and abstains from asking questions, no improper hints ever will be given by any of the native[s] ...²²

¹⁸ My emphasis, *Zimbabwe Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 22/38, p. 2517. Women who had strong homo-erotic feelings, it should be noted, also had means to express them in ways that were not perceived as sexual. Principally this involved claiming possession by a male spirit such as a *svikro* or *tokoloshi*. A woman so possessed could take multiple female 'wives', or refuse to be married, without challenging the dogma of heterosexual appearances. In really suspicious cases, especially in recent years as awareness has grown of the existence of lesbian love, a woman claiming to have a male spirit could be exposed by another diviner. The risk of shame upon the family in doing so, however, was strong enough that in most cases people would prefer to keep their doubts to themselves. The suspected witch or lesbian would instead literally be removed from sight, for example, by putting her hut in a forest somewhere just beyond the village - 'Wadzanai', recalling the experience of an elderly female relative, interviewed by author, Harare, 25 March 1997.

¹⁹ 'Gogo Nguni' interviewed by author, translated by Tjnia Machida, Epworth, 19 June 1997. See also GALZ, *Sahwira and idem*, 'Homosexuality is not African', unpubl. press statement, 1997. Lack of explicit terms may also explain the lack of differentiation between different types of homosexual acts which Posselt noted, F.W.T. Posselt, *Facts and Fiction: a Short Account of the Natives of Southern Rhodesia* (no publication details except 1935, p. 59).

²⁰ There may be parallels here with the experience of African-Americans: 'Bisexuality is black America's best kept secret. It is a larger closet than homosexuality' in the words of Sylvia and Thom Rhue, 'Reducing Homophobia in African-American Communities', in Blumenfeld, *Homophobia*, pp. 117-130. See also Kendal! Thomas, "'Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing": Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality and the Jargon of Authenticity', in Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham (eds) *Representing Black Men* (New York, Routledge, 1996), pp. 55-69. This volume explores issues of 'unmaning' and 'ritual silencing' of black homosexualities in America. For the first-ever fictional (and highly unflattering) account of a bisexual man in contemporary Zimbabwe see Charles Mungoshi, *Walking Still* (Harare, Baobab, 1997).

²¹ 'Robert' interviewed by author, Harare, 20 August 1997. A sample of *isingqumo* is provided by McLean and Ngcobo, 'Abangibhamayo', pp. 182-185.

²² David and Charles Livingstone, *Narrative of the Expedition to the Zambezi* (London, John Murray, 1865), p. 284. Even in South Africa, the one place in the region where missionaries did draw the state's attention to homosexual behaviour among African men, missionary reluctance to broach the topic is evident. It was only after a campaign led by white working class men against alleged 'catamites' among Chinese labourers that the Director of the South African Compounds and Interior Mission felt obligated to write to the Secretary for Native Affairs about far more widespread and long-standing 'immorality' among African workers (Transvaal Archives, NTS 10203 11422, A. W. Baker to Lord Selbourne, 13 December 1906).

The missionaries were certainly not alone in keeping their eyes averted and their mouths shut about homosexual practices. Victorian sensibilities around the topic seem to have been strong throughout the white community and lingered well into the twentieth century. Certainly when compared to the ethnographies and travel literature produced by Europeans elsewhere in Africa, the Rhodesians were notably discreet. Descriptions of homosexual behaviours in 'traditional' settings comprise precisely two paragraphs in the entire voluminous body of published works in and about colonial Zimbabwe between 1890 and 1979.²³ Discretion even triumphed over market farces to the extent that newspaper editors throughout the colonial era did not run stories about even the most salacious homosexual scandals. A striking example of such restraint was in the case of James Noble, the superintendent of Thabas Induna mission school. Noble was charged with nineteen counts of indecent assault against a teacher and pupils.²⁴ Despite the sensational nature of the accusations and the fact that the case resulted in Noble's imprisonment, the case was not reported in the *Bulawayo Chronicle* (nor even, tellingly, in the annual report of the British South African Police). The first published report of a homosexual incident in then Rhodesia that I have been able to find was not until four decades later, in *The Chronicle* (8 January 1969, p.2); the first official police comment on homosexual-related crime was not until 1972 (one sentence in the annual report).²⁵ Such restraint makes a telling contrast with sensationalised accounts of 'Black Peril' cases (black men having sex with white women) and may be linked to the creation of a sense of Rhodesianness (see below under homophobia).

This century-long mix of traditional and modern discomforts about homosexual behaviours may partially explain why officials in the present Zimbabwean government shielded Canaan Banana for so many years, keeping secret 'numerous intelligence reports' of his alleged criminal acts from 'many parts of the country' long after he had retired from the political scene.²⁶ Fear of naming homosexuality among blacks -even to denounce it - is also reflected in the 1995 parliamentary debate on 'homosexuality and lesbianism'. One MP actually moved that the debate be stopped on the grounds that:

If this was to be talked about in rural areas where we hold our meetings people will run away from such meetings. It is really disgusting and humiliating. ...Even in this hon. House no hon. member will dare go out and tell his constituency that they have been discussing about homosexuality and lesbianism. ...Even if we are to stand up and discuss such sexual indulgences, we will not be taken as people in their proper senses.²⁷

Judicial Biases

The court records provide the only substantial documentary evidence of homosexual behaviour among blacks in Zimbabwe -over 400 cases between 1892 and 1932 alone. Yet the judicial system as it was created and evolved in colonial Zimbabwe concealed homosexual behaviour among indigenous Africans in several ways. Judicial biases have abetted the impression that homosexual behaviour was predominantly practiced by whites and migrant labourers from outside Zimbabwe.²⁸

First, as in most of their African possessions, the British in Southern Rhodesia erected a dual legal system that differentiated between 'civilised' people on the one hand (Europeans, Asians, so-called Coloureds, and Africans who lived in town) and 'natives' on the other. Roman-Dutch law applied to the former while codified versions of 'customary law' applied to the latter. The urban-based magistrates' courts that administered Roman-Dutch law generated large and detailed records of their proceedings, preserving an archive of the seedier side of 'civilised' life. In the reserves, however (or tribal trust lands as they were later called), the records that have been preserved are more patchy. A white man, the Native Commissioner or NC, was ultimately responsible for seeing justice done in cases of native law. However, the NC was typically so overloaded with other administrative duties that criminal offences that did not

²³ These are Posselt, *Facts and Fiction*, p. 59 and Bullock, *The Mashona and the Matabele*, p. 254. Michael Gelfand broke the silence with his skimpy, 'The Infrequency of Homosexuality in Traditional Shona Society'. *Central African Journal of Medicine*, 25, 9 (1979), pp. 201-202, discussed further below.

²⁴ NAZ D3161161, case 5094 of 2 December 1929.

²⁵ NAZ RG 31BRI 41, B SAP Departmental Report of 1972, p. 25.

²⁶ According to the testimony of ex-senior assistant commissioner of the police, John Chadamana (*The Herald* 25 February 1997). Banana's sexual preferences were widely rumoured even from as early as the liberation war days.

²⁷ Mr Matura, Zimbabwe Parliamentary Debates, vol. 22/38 (6 September 1995), p. 2520

²⁸ Phillips, 'White Man's Disease', specifically addresses this bias with a detailed analysis of High and Supreme court cases in the 1970s to 1990s. See also Terence Ranger, 'Tales of the Wild West: Gold-diggers and Rustlers in South West Zimbabwe, 1898-1949. An Essay in the Use of Criminal Court Records for Social History', *South African Historical Journal* 28 (1993).

involve violence or property tended to be left to the chiefs and local headmen. At that level (at least according to F. W. T. Posselt, supposedly one of the more liberal-minded NCs), invisibility was fostered by the ease with which men accused of homosexual assault were excused from criminal liability. All they had to do was plead that the act had been done during sleep for the complaint against them to be dismissed. '[C]ognizance will, therefore, in practice, only be taken where direct force has been applied.'²⁹

Cases of indecent assault and sodomy among 'tribal' Africans thus only came to NC or police attention in exceptional circumstances and have consequently not left a documentary trail.³⁰ The rare exception to the rule of invisibility of 'tribal' homosexual behaviour in court documents is suggestive. In 1926, for example, a headman from Chiweshe reserve brought a case of indecent assault to the magistrate's court in Mazoe. The details were fairly typical of those occurring in 'European' areas of the country. What makes this case unusual is that the headman, Gatsi, admitted his inability to deal with it in his own court. The issue was not the unique horror of the crime but that the accused was refusing to pay compensation. As Gatsi explained, 'At no time did accused come before me so [the] matter was reported to police'. In other words, had the accused conceded to 'dreaming' and paid up the modest amount that was expected, this case too would have remained invisible.³¹ Similarly, the headman Mbata from the Bindura area indicated a familiarity with homosexual indiscretions among young men in the reserves which belied the silence of the NCs' and ethnographers' records:

In native custom we should require a beast if a native attempted sodomy. If however it was done while sleeping we would still require reparation but only there was nothing deliberate about the act.³²

Fortunately for historians, the father of the victim in this case lenient attitude. This case came to the magistrate's court record -only because the father actively sought out European justice.

While understating indigenous sexual peccadilloes, the dual legal system also tended to overstate the propensity of foreigners for homosexual behaviour. In deed, the courts that produced the best records served populations that were disproportionately foreign. Salisbury's population, for example, was over one-third European from 1897 to 1921. This fact contextualises the other fact that whites were involved in less than 10 per cent of all homosexual crimes. Similarly, 'alien natives' (Africans coming mostly from Portuguese East Africa, Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia) actually constituted the majority of the African population right up until the 1950s. The fact that as early as 1921 they did *not* comprise the majority of accused homosexuals -the Shona minority in urban and industrial centres did -is remarkable.³³

The way accusations and appeals were lodged further exacerbated the courts' urban foreign bias. In the vast majority of cases, a docket was open to the police by the 'victim' against the accused. Some of these 'victims' in fact seemed to have learned that the homophobic eyes of the magistrate were fairly easy to fool and that lodging false accusations was a relatively easy way to extort money from or to exact revenge upon superiors at work. Whites, Asians and Coloureds were disproportionately represented among the boss and later the tourist classes and hence they were the most favoured targets of blackmail attempts, a fact that remains true to this day. No Africans and whites in particular also tended to have the wherewithal to appeal in the High Court against an unfavourable decision in a lower court. As a result, while the accused in the lower courts were almost 90 per cent African men and boys, the accused in High Court cases were almost entirely white. Anyone who restricted their review of cases to the High Court alone (as has tended to be the case in the press) would therefore gain a very erroneous impression of who was doing what to whom.

The nature of court translations further skews our understanding of the content of the relationships revealed in those cases. Notably, where testimony by Africans were translated using euphemism and delicate language, the untranslated testimony of white creates an impression that the latter were indeed more perverse than blacks. To illustrate, the African man accused in such cases was typically described as having 'had connexion' or 'achieved his purpose', whereas whites 'fucked' and 'buggered'.³⁴

²⁹ Posselt, *Fact and Fiction*, p. 59. This presumption of innocence contrasts sharply with attitudes toward heterosexual rape, where the man was presumed guilty and the word of the victim (who was not expected to resist physically), was given greater weight than the testimony of the accused rapist (Posselt, *Fact and Fiction*, p. 52).

³⁰ Gelfand in 'The Infrequency of Homosexuality' reviewed eleven years of local court records in four reserves and found not one single case of homosexuality. My own spot checks of the records of NC courts and correspondence are similarly bereft of any references to homosexual behaviour.

³¹ NAZ D3/15/9 (Mazoe) case 107 of 25 February 1926.

³² NAZ D3/10/2 case 179 of 8 September 1921.

³³ Refer to Epprecht, 'Good God', for a statistical breakdown of the demographics of unnatural offence. These figures are taken with a grain of salt because court records by definition exclude the vast majority of consenting relationships.

³⁴ The role of stenographers in creating this archival record could be of interest. There is no evidence from Zimbabwe that they purposely tampered with or censored the language used in the course of trials. In South Africa, however, correspondence relating to the investigation of 'unnatural crime' suggests that this may indeed have been a factor. Unmarried female typists were transferred from the office carrying out one such investigation in 1916 (Transvaal Archives, JUS 193, 1/419/12). The comment of one Native Inspector could also represent the tip of an iceberg of destroyed or non-

Finally, the way that homosexual crime was conceived and prosecuted entirely obscured intimate sexual relations between women. The two main charges that could be laid against homosexual offenders were sodomy and indecent assault. Sodomy involved actual anal penetration of one man by another, obviously ruling out women. Indecent assault primarily involved cases of non-penetrative, between-the-thighs sex. The complainants in indecent assault cases could be male or female but the charge implied that the accused had to have a penis -and an erect one at that. Guilt (that is, 'lascivious intent') could not otherwise be established. Lesbian-like affairs between women could thus well have taken place but remained invisible to the people who kept the records and who commented on such matters.

Nationalist Politics

Colonial rule and racial capitalism emasculated African men in the sense that they undermined Africans' ability to attain the signifiers of social manhood. This emasculation occurred both as a result of economic change and of ideologies which infantilise or pathologised African men and their sexuality. Notably, in colonial discourse an African male outside his traditional milieu was a perpetual 'boy' irrespective of his age or marital status. Boys as such were subject to innumerable indignities, including, at least in the early years, white men helping themselves sexually to African men's female 'property'. Averting their eyes from their own transgressions, meanwhile, white men assumed for themselves power to talk about, define, and legislate black sexuality as if blacks were another, decidedly inferior species. For example, as Diana Jeater has richly documented, colonial debates about African sexuality centred around whether Africans were 'immoral' (by nature) or 'perverse' (by choice). The possibility of a shared humanity was in this way discoursed almost out of existence. A whole host of pseudo-scientific studies right up to the 1970s purported to explain the intrinsic childishness or animalism of the African male at least some of this, it seems, was internalised by African *mabhoyi* ('boys') themselves.³⁵

Notwithstanding efforts by colonial states throughout the region to buttress the legal powers of African men *vis-à-vis* women, the discursive unmaning of African men by whites was progressively abetted by the destruction of the material base of traditional African masculinity. By the 1920s, it took many years of 'boyhood' for a biological man to earn the wherewithal to become a social man (that is, pay *lobola*, acquire a submissive and fertile wife, get land and support a growing family). The chances of acquiring all or even any of these traditional signifiers of masculinity declined over time. Land shortage declining real wages, and the interference of colonial bureaucrats in daily life all combined to extend the period of social boyhood for some men to a permanent condition. Assertive town women often added to the insult by exercising a degree of independence from men, including the ability to control and deploy their sexuality, which mocked customary expectations of masculinity.³⁶

African men in this era of rapidly changing gender relations did devise new way signifying or performing social manhood, including through sports, clothes, faction fighting, gangs, ostentatious consumption of European products (liquor, notably), more conspicuous exercise of power over (and sexual consumption of) women, and achievement in the white man's terms (school, church, police, master farming, hygiene and so on). Yet racially-coded discourses served to define African men's achievements as necessarily inferior, imitative or childish. By the early 1950s, respectable avenues to social manliness were also being closed down in more direct ways. The Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 and population control exercises, in particular, were perceived by many Africans as an intolerable assault on the rural and sexual base of indigenous masculinity. This assault sparked the first stirrings of anti-colonial rebellion in the countryside since 1897, stirrings which nationalist leaders sought to harness to their own emergent agenda.³⁷

Not surprisingly, terms such as 'emasculating' and 'impotent' infused the rhetoric of the early mass nationalist struggle. This rhetoric elided quickly into an overt misogyny in some cases, particularly where African women were

verbal correspondence: 'I have addressed this Report [in handwriting] to you in order that these highly-flavoured remarks may not, inadvertently be opened by, or fall into the hands of your Lady Typists (Transvaal Archives. GNLB, 229, 583/15/145).

³⁵ Shire, 'Men Don't Go to the Moon', p. 149; Diana Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1920* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993). For an overview, historiography around the psychology of African men in the colonial era, see William Beinart, 'Political and Collective Violence in Southern African Historiography,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1 pp. 455-486, as well as articles in this volume. A seminal study of the process of internalisation of European values and tastes among black Zimbabweans - with a specific focus on body odour and hygiene - can be found in Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham NC, Duke University Press, 1996). For the record, two of the more egregious examples of such 'scientific' discourse are John P. Ritchie, *The African as Suckling and as Adult: a Psychological Study* (Livingstone, Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1943), and R. B. Symington, 'Sexual Behaviour of Rhodesian Africans', *Journal of Biological Science* 4 (1972), pp. 263-275.

³⁶ See, for example, Theresa Barnes, "'Am I a Man?': Gender and the Pass Laws in Urban Colonial Zimbabwe" *African Studies Review*, 40, 1 (April 1997), pp. 59-81 and T. Barnes and Everjoice Win, *To Live a Better Life* (Harare, Baobab, 1992).

³⁷ Works in progress which explore these two issues are Guy Thompson, 'Cultivating Conf Husbandry Act in Colonial Zimbabwe' (PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, forthcoming) and Amy Kaler, 'Fertility, Gender, and War: the "Culture of Contraception" in Rhodesia, 1957-1980' (PhD Minnesota, forthcoming).

perceived to be benefiting from or exploiting African men's humiliation. Although this could be argued from as early as the 1920s in the case of the Watch Tower movement at Wankie colliery,³⁸ never was it more dramatically demonstrated than with the mass rape of young women in Harare's female hostel in 1956, an atrocity that was tacitly pardoned by nationalist leaders at the time (viz. the women deserved it for refusing to participate in the male leaders' ill-conceived bus boycott).³⁹ More generally, the period of nationalist struggle witnessed an enormous jump in rape statistics. The numbers of reported rapes shot up by a third in the single year of 1965, while by the end of the war of liberation in 1979 the number of arrests for rape and attempted rape was nearly triple that of 1964 (923 to 343). The police attributed this directly to 'the general lawlessness that arose amongst the young thug element recruited and incited by nationalist elements'.⁴⁰

The aggressive expression of African masculinity as a counter to white racism and political violence was also implicit in the symbolism of the two main nationalist parties in the 1960s and 1970s, the cock and the bull. In the racially-charged context of nationalist struggle, where the need for black men to maintain or project 'manly' appearances was enhanced, the social space for tacitly admitting and tolerating sexual ambiguities such as 'mine marriages'⁴¹ was reduced.⁴¹ As one of Ghinodya's characters flatly states (taking pity on his soon-to-be killed bachelor white boss), 'A man is not a man unless he has a wife to sleep with him at night'.⁴² At least one nationalist leader who allegedly did not conform to that virile stereotype appears to have had his image actively protected by his peers.⁴³

Yet ironically, nationalist discourses around African male virility were in important ways undermined by the actual practices of nationalist struggle. During the war of liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, young men with guns and with scant respect for the niceties of the old patriarchal order daily heaped humiliations upon the majority peasant population. Young girls took advantage of the presence of guerrillas and Rhodesian soldiers alike to escape patriarchal controls and to flout tradition.⁴⁴ To a lesser extent, they also took advantage of the propaganda of the liberation forces about women's equality. The 'comrades,' at least, were enjoined to respect that propaganda, to submit to tough female commanders and to keep their hands off peasant girls – on pain of execution in some cases. No one has yet claimed that this enforced homosocial environment resulted in homosexual ties. A new generation of fictional and autobiographical accounts of the war does, however, portray the comrades in intensely confused, fearful and shaming sexual situations. Chinodya, for example, has portrayed masturbation among the guerrillas that we must assume was at least somewhat destabilising to the virility myth.⁴⁵ Numerous others corroborate what the film *Flame* and female war veterans have said in recent years – rape was endemic on and behind the front.⁴⁶ Even the military violence of the war is depicted in

³⁸ Ian Phimister and Charles van Onselen, 'The Labour Movement in Zimbabwe: 1900-1945', in Brian Ratopoulos and Ian Phimister (eds), *Keep on Knocking: a History of the Labour Movement in Zimbabwe, 1900-97* (Harare, Baobab, 1997), pp. 15-16.

³⁹ This incident is discussed in both Teresa Barnes, "'We Women Worked So Hard": Gender Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956' (PhD thesis, University of Zimbabwe, 1993); Timothy M. Scamecchia, 'The Politics of Gender and Class in the Creation of African Communities, Salisbury, Rhodesia 1937-1957' (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1994), and Brian Raftopoulos, 'Gender, Nationalist Politics and the Struggle for the City: Harare, 1940-1950s', *Southern African Feminist Review*, 1, 2 (1995), pp. 30-45. See the nationalist apologia in Nathan Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia* (New York, Transatlantic Arts, 1966), p. 43, and Maurice Nyagumbo, *With the People: an Autobiography from the Zimbabwe Struggle* (London, Allison and Busby, 1980), pp. 104-105.

⁴⁰ NAZ Ra 3/BRI 41, B SAP, Departmental Report of 1965 (Salisbury, 1966), p. 25.

⁴¹ Making this point in South Africa (that is, relating the rise of politicised trade unions and anti-apartheid struggles in the townships to the demise of homosexual mine 'marriages') is Moadie with Ndatshe. *Going for Gold. A pan-African perspective of nationalist silencing of alternative sexualities* is given by Chris Dunton, "'Whyeing Be Dat?" The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature', *Research In African Literature*, 20, 3 (1989), pp. 422-448

⁴² Shimmer Chinodya, *Harvest of Thorns* (Portsmouth NH, Heinemann Educational Books, 1990), p. 142. This attitude seems to be reflected as well in Symington's amusing survey of 1972. In the latter, African men reportedly claimed to have sexual intercourse on average from 2.1 (married men) to five times a day (soldiers) for an average of five minutes each time ('Sexual Behaviour', p. 273).

⁴³ Revelations on the cover-up of Banana's alleged homosexual behaviour are expected to come out during the course of his trial, scheduled for June 1998.

⁴⁴ Mike Kesby, 'Arenas for Control, Terrains of Gender Contestation: Guerrilla Struggle and Counter-Insurgency Warfare in Zimbabwe, 1972-1980', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 4 (1996), pp. 561-584. According to one recent case study, the guerrillas actually beat up men in the village who were accused by their wives of mistreating them- Hector Tinashe Chirova, 'The Role of Gender, Generational, and Intra-class Tensions in the Political Mobilisation Process in Wedza District during Zimbabwe's Liberation War, 1975-1980', (BA Honours thesis, Department of History, University of Zimbabwe, 1997), p. 23. See also Heike Schmidt, 'Healing the Wounds of War: Memories of Violence and the Making of History in Zimbabwe's Most Recent Past', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23, 1 (1997), pp. 301-310. Schmidt provides an entry into the growing body of scholarship that raises questions about the social conflicts generated by the liberation struggle.

⁴⁵ Chinodya, *Harvest of Thorns*, p. 206.

⁴⁶ The destabilisation of nationalist myths is the subject of much current scholarship and debate in the popular media. For the latter, see in particular Ingrid Sinclair (dir), *Flame* (Harare, Bright Productions, 1996); Paul Hotz, *Muzukuru* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1990); Alexander Kanengoni, *Echoing Silences* (Harare, Baobab, 1997); Charles Samupindi, *Pawns* (Harare, Baobab, 1992); Peter Godwin, *Mukiwa* (London, MacMillan, 1996) and Mxolisi R. Sibanyoni, "'The Fading Songs of the Chimurenga": Chenjerai Hove and the Subversion of Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwean Literature', *African Studies*, 54, 1 (1995), pp. 52-72. Studies from South Africa that make suggestive comparisons about the 'crisis' in African masculinity arising

this literature as far more shaming and sordid than heroic or humanising in the Fanonesque sense. Along with forcing a negotiated transition to black rule, it created innumerable 'avenging spirits' (*vangozi*) which haunt Zimbabwe to this day. According to traditional religion, *vangozi* are the main 'cause' of incurable sexual identity problems.⁴⁷

Independence briefly restored confidence in a black masculinist/nationalist identity in Zimbabwe. This has proved to be short-lived, however, undermined on many fronts. As early as 1983, the new government's shameful treatment of alleged prostitutes evoked dismay.⁴⁸ Men's economic disempowerment under the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) since 1990 has also undercut one of the principal stays of masculinity in Zimbabwe - the ability to provide for a wife and children. Tens of thousands of employees have been retrenched while land redistribution has stalled and/or been bungled.

Moreover Zimbabwe, once the darling of the liberal left in the West, has since 1994 been replaced by South Africa as a beacon of hope for economic and democratic development in the region, even in the eyes of Zimbabweans cynical about their own aging and often corrupt leadership. Feminists' critiques of patriarchal masculinities have become more vocal and effective, while African women have made rapid advances into public sphere politics and employment, at men's expense in the eyes of many. Along with the horrifying progress of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe, these developments have all undermined confidence in the African nationalist paradigm of gender relations.⁴⁹

The coincidence of President Mugabe's anti-gay and presidential re-election campaigns of 1995 is thus quite striking. Both Mugabe and his supporters characterised homosexuality as a threat to an idealised patriarchal culture and national values, frequently and explicitly linked to Western imperialism and 'reactionary forces'. This construction allowed Mugabe's supporters to portray him as 'brave' and to flatter anti-gay vigilantes as 'heroic' in a nationalist sense. Zimbabweans who are members of the ruling party or who are dependent upon ruling party patronage put their career ambitions at severe risk if they spoke out directly against such views. Some, like 'Leonard Chaza', publicly ventured expressions of tolerance only under a pseudonym out of fear of victimisation.⁵⁰ Conversely, jumping on the nationalist, 'anti-homo' bandwagon was a clear route to curry favour with the nationalist old guard.

Nationalist discourse since the 1995 election has continued to deny indigenous gays and lesbians in various ways, crude and subtle. First, the government-controlled press systemically refuses to publish letters or commentary that is sympathetic to gay rights or which contradicts the 'white man's disease' party line. GALZ has not been permitted to place a discreet, paid announcement of its counselling services, while ZBC Television refused to broadcast a panel discussion on violence against women after it learned that one of the panellists was a GALZ member. The reaction of government press organs to the Banana story is also revealing. The Herald, for example, did not express indignation at Banana's alleged 'indiscretions' [sic]. Rather, its editorial on the topic railed against the 'establishment media across the Limpopo', implicitly accusing the liberal press in South Africa of racism and an anti-Zimbabwe agenda for picking up the story with such alacrity.⁵¹ *The Sunday Mail*, meanwhile, did not even bother to report this sensational scandal but has stoically maintained its usual occidentalist fare: shallow, exotic, negative stereotypes about life in the deprived West. Indeed, pundits like Ken Mufuka in his weekly 'letter from America' energetically foster the belief that 'sodomites' are politically powerful in Washington, are socially visible in every nook and cranny of that nation, and seek to export their perversions throughout the world. In parliament, even more extreme expressions of this view received vigorous applause. Mr Mudariki's sneer against 'Pseudo Nobel Peace Prize winners' (Desmond Tutu and

from the anti-apartheid struggle include Thokozani Xaba, 'Masculinity in a Transitional Society: The Rise and Fall of "The Young Lions,"' and David Hemson, 'The Embrace of Comradeship: Masculinity and Resistance in KwaZulu-Natal', (papers presented at the Colloquium on Masculinities in Southern Africa, University of Natal, Durban, 2-4 July 1997); and Catherine Campbell, 'Learning To Kill? Masculinity, the Family and Violence in Natal', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18,3 (1992), pp. 614-628.

⁴⁷ 'Sekuru Manyame', interviewed by author, translated by Suzie Bruce, Odzi, 12 February 1998. See also Schmidt, 'Healing' and *idem*, 'Love and Healing in Forced Communities: Borderlands in Zimbabwe's War of Liberation', in A.I. Asiwaju and P. Nugent (eds), *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities* (London, 1966), pp. 183-204. Although she does not discuss homosexuality, Schmidt does posit that Chimurenga-related *vangozi* (or *chikwambo*) may be linked to new forms of sexually daring behaviour. Possession is both a means and an opportunity to re-negotiate gender relations.

⁴⁸ One columnist protested that as a result of the behaviour of the police, 'My manhood has been defleated'. (Zingizi, *The Sunday Mail*, 20 November 1983). The anti-'prostitute' campaign is discussed -and linked to a culture of misogyny - in Zimbabwe Women's Action Group with Rudo Gaidzanwa, 'Operation Clean-up', in Miranda Davies (compiler), *Third World, Second Sex* (London, Zed Books, 1987), pp. 225-228

⁴⁹ Virtually any of the popular media make this point on a regular and insistent basis. Tinaye Garande, for example, gets straight to the point in 'Zimbabwe men are a terrible lot', *The Sunday Mail* (2 November 1997). Of course one treats such articles with caution, not least of all since many of the attributes of masculinity that Garande and other Zimbabwean feminists excoriate are common worldwide. In fairness to 'Zim-men' let me also note that they are often under intense pressure from women to conform to masculinist stereotypes. Powerful women such as mothers-in-law are formidable champions of masculinist 'tradition', helping, for example, to drive the extraordinary inflation rate of *lobola*. Few groups, meanwhile, have been as stridently and vocally homophobic as the ruling party's Women's League. Exploring some of the tensions around gender relations and sexuality in the contemporary context, see Patricia McFadden, 'Sex, Sexuality, and the Problem of AIDS in Africa', in Ruth Meena (ed), *Gender in Southern Africa* (Harare, SAPES, 1992), pp. 157-195, and Zimbabwe Women's Research Centre and Network, *WomanPlus, passim*.

⁵⁰ Leonard Chaza, 'It's A Gay Thing!', Mahogany, (July/August 1995), pp. 8-9; personal communication.

⁵¹ The Herald, 27 February 1997,

Nelson Mandela) implied that African blacks who call for tolerance in this issue are not really African at all but stooges and puppets of the Sodom-friendly West.⁵²

Homophobia

The African cultures of Zimbabwe unquestionably disapproved of openhomosexual behaviour. They were, however, prepared to tolerate or turn a blind eye to discreet eccentric or 'accidental' homosexual acts provided the proper compensations and social fictions were maintained. The colonisers of Zimbabwe, by contrast, mostly came from countries where homosexuality tended to be understood as a life-long personality or moral disorder (rather than a temporary aberration). A long tradition of exceedingly harsh punishments was one reflection of this, a tradition that may actually have been harsher in the colonies than in the metropole. There on the frontier, homosexual relations across racial lines implied, at least potentially, a mutual humanity that was incompatible with imperial power considerations. Hence, as late as 1868 a teenager in Natal was hanged for committing 'that detestable and abominable crime of buggery (not to be named among Christians)'.⁵³ Sentences of 10-15 years and a hundred lashes with the cat-of-nine-tails were not uncommon on the eve of Zimbabwe's colonialisation.

Punishment of this nature was actually being tempered in the 1870s in the mother country and in the colony which extended its Roman-Dutch legal system to Zimbabwe, the Cape. Yet even as magistrates noted how the law's 'ancient severity [had] fallen into desuetude', new homophobic discourses emerged to pathologies and contain homosexual desire. Distinctions were introduced between homosexual acts that implied a precise gradation of criminality or sickness. An appearance of scientific respectability gleaned from a wealth of dubious studies also helped to make 'The Homosexual' (as a type) common knowledge by the end of the nineteenth century. That knowledge tended to serve Europe's larger imperial interests. Rudi Bleys has shown, for example, that it was European ethnographers, not Africans, who first insisted that homosexual behaviour was exotic to the continent. Why? The stereotype of Africa lying within a sodomy-free 'Sotadic zone' was useful to preparing public opinion for abolition of the slave trade (Africans are moral and so deserving of protection), and was useful in buttressing negative attitudes towards homosexuality in Europe (viz. even black savages do not this thing so why do you, you beast).⁵⁴

A more generalised culture of intolerance against homosexuality may also have intensified over time with the rise of Rhodesian nationalism and its need to project an untarnished image of settler manliness.⁵⁵ Part of that image may be conceived as a muscular Christianity in opposition to socialism, feminism, and the 'wimpish' liberalism that as early as the 1930s was thought to be sapping the morale (and manliness) of the West. By the 1960s, the imperative to create a distinct white Rhodesian nationalism was almost an obsession of cultural and political elites. One means to foster that sense of Rhodesianness was through an exaggerated stigma of effeminate, supposedly homosexual behaviour that was internalised in white children from a very young age. This was policed, usually by peers and often with ruthlessness, at school and through the 'manly' sports that flourished in Rhodesia.⁵⁶

The militarisation of white society in the late 1960s only made Rhodesian culture less able than ever to accommodate alternative masculinities such as openly gay men. Indeed, while the police, doctors and judges evinced sometimes strikingly liberal attitudes toward 'the problem', popular culture seemed to be narrowing the parameters of acceptable levels of intimacy between males. The ultimate expression of this occurred in 1972 when two white men hunted out and beat to death an alleged homosexual (also white) for no other reason than his apparent queerness.⁵⁷ The commissioner of police almost expressed sympathy toward homosexuals so victimised and promised to protect them from juvenile extortionists.⁵⁸

⁵² Mr Mudariki, Zimbabwe Parliamentary Debates, vol. 22/38 (6 September 1996), p. 2516. Blacks who write for the independent press in Zimbabwe are exposed to the same dismissal on the grounds that almost all of the independent weekly papers and monthly magazines are owned and/or edited by whites.

⁵³ Natal State Archives, AGO 1/1/31, Regina v. Hogoza, case 58 of 12 February

⁵⁴ Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion*.

⁵⁵ On the period from 1965 to 1980, see Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock, *Rhodesians Never Die: The impact of War and Political Change on White Rhodesia* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993), GALZ, *Sahwira*, and Nathan Shamuyarira's ruminations on the Rhodesian 'cowboy' culture, *Crisis in Rhodesia*, ch. 12

⁵⁶ No critical study has yet been done on the construction of white Rhodesian masculinity; however, Robert Morrell's work in a settler colony with many similar features (Natal) offers suggestive insights. Robert Morrell, 'Boys, Gangs, and the Making of Masculinity in the White Secondary Schools of Natal, 1880-1930', *Masculinities*, 2,2 (1994), pp. 56-82; *idem.*, "'Synonymous With Gentlemen?'" White Farmers, Schools, and Labor in Natal, c. 1880-1920', in Alan H. Jeeves and Jonathan Crush (eds), *White Farms, Slack Labor: the State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910-1950* (Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 1997), pp. 172-191

⁵⁷ Roland Hawkins, 'They Killed a Man They Didn't Even Know', *Illustrated Life Rhodesia* (week ending 16 May 1973), pp. 6-8.

⁵⁸ NAZ RG 3/BRI 41, B SAP, Departmental Report of 1973, pp. 17-18.

The attitudes of white Rhodesian society inevitably affected black society as well. Jeater has made a compelling case of this cultural trickle down effect with regard to European discourses around both 'morality' and 'development'.⁵⁹ The hegemony of modern values was not merely achieved by incessant propaganda but, she argues, more insidiously and more enduringly, by the penetration and co-optation of indigenous languages. The subtleties of 'Deep Shona' that once allowed the language to maintain certain social fictions or to embrace empirically contradictory evidence were lost in missionary translations that imposed the literalist, positivist values of the golden age of colonialism. Jeater does not specifically address European fears about homosexual 'perversion'. But there is every reason to believe that those fears were communicated through language (including silences) and institutions like boarding schools in much the same way. Shimmer Chinodya's description of a boys' boarding school in the 1960s is highly suggestive in that respect, fraught as it is with homo-erotic tension.⁶⁰

Living spaces were also restructured over the course of colonial rule according to European sensibilities that conveyed strong messages about sexual propriety. Where, for example, it had been considered entirely normal, non-sexual, and non-threatening for African men to sleep together under the same blanket in the nude in the early days of urban development (as had been the case in pre-colonial days), by the 1950s almost all institutions and public housing provided for separate sleeping arrangements. This was never explicitly done to save men from perdition; however, the notion of homosexuality as a contagious thing was strongly implicit. The first explicit recorded statement of such fears of contagion by a black Zimbabwean occurred in 1952. At that time, Charles Mzingeli of the Reformed Industrial and Commercial Union was leading a protest against police attempts to clear the Salisbury townships of suspected female prostitutes. 'Do you want the men to be homosexuals?', he is purported to have said to municipal officials as an argument in favour of allowing the freer entry of women into town.⁶¹

Very little was said about homosexuality in the mass media prior to 1994. Nonetheless, negative attitudes toward homosexual behaviour seem to have become hegemonic in the black urban population by the early 1980s. That fear and loathing of a homosexual type was becoming common knowledge is certainly suggested by the first article ever to appear on the topic in the state-controlled press - 'Homosexuals break through barriers' (*The Sunday Mail Magazine*, 29 May 1983). Here, readers were urged not to be hostile towards or fearful of homosexuals since they were probably born that way.⁶² Tellingly, however, the same paper at about the same time blatantly pandered to homophobic sentiment with a cartoon depicting a feminised Joshua Nkomo (the 'father' of the nationalist struggle and a rival with Mugabe for political power) in drag. This cartoon, with Nkomo's panties exposed to heighten the mockery and his disgrace, is suggestive evidence of a politicised (mass) homophobic sentiment.⁶³

However one interprets these sparse references to homosexuality in the 1980s, the fact is that the most vocal defenders of 'African traditions' in the 1990s have tended to be Christian, university-educated, often professionals, and often with years of living in the West under their belts. President Mugabe himself is a devout Roman Catholic of the conservative school, while Christian church leaders were at the forefront of the demonstrations in support of his stance. The 1997 'crusade against rapists and homosexuals' was announced by stalwart Bible-thumper Michael Mawema. His call for castration, public whippings and stoning to death of convicted 'perverts' were all justified by reference to Corinthians, Leviticus and spurious 'scientific studies' from the West. The leader of the vigilantes who came to destroy the GALZ exhibit in 1996 was a senior crown prosecutor. *The Sunday Mail's* almost weekly diatribes against homosexuals and feminists (often conflated) are authored by Ken Mufuka, a self-described Christian 'saint' with a PhD in history and nearly three decades of living in the American Bible Belt. Among the general population, some of the fastest growing 'churches' are fundamentalist sects that propagate both anti-feminist and explicitly homophobic translations of the Bible imported from the United States.

This emergence of an indigenous violent homophobia cannot be explained as simply the internalisation of Western values or as the contrivance of political or Christian elites. The sudden upsurge of invented homophobic 'traditions' has in fact resonated among the wider population, particularly among those people most threatened by the rapid changes in gender relations. These changes are real and frightening. AIDS now kills an estimated 800 people every week while at least a quarter of the sexually active population is infected with HIV. This alone has contributed to the emergence of radically dangerous sexual behaviours including women's and men's predation upon younger and younger children supposedly to avoid HIV but also, in the case of men at least, to assert the power to refuse to wear a condom), rape of virgins (to cure the disease), and a fatalistic sexual consumerism (we are all going to die anyway, so why not indulge in the most conquests possible?). In addition, longstanding fears about 'uppity women' now manifest

⁵⁹ Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion and Power and idem.*, "'The Way you Tel! Them": Language, Ideology and Development Policy in Southern Rhodesia', *African Studies*, 54, 2 (1995), pp. 1-15.

⁶⁰ Chinodya, *Harvest of Thorns*, pp. 89-93. Interestingly, this is one of the few novels with explicit sex content that is taught in high school in contemporary Zimbabwe.

⁶¹ Charles Mzingeli, recalled in Barnes, 'We Women Worked so Hard', p. 418.

⁶² The barrier to naming black homosexuals, however, clearly remained: all the cases described in the article were whites

⁶³ *The Sunday Mail*, 13 March 1983.

themselves in a virulent misogyny expressed, for example, in public strippings of women in short skirts.⁶⁴ Men's anxieties about women's ability to escape their control (or even to assert control over men) are expressed in articles about women 'raping' men and in whispered fears about *mupfuhwira* -husband-taming herbs.⁶⁵

Imported stereotypes of gays and lesbians are seductive in this context precisely because of their power to give cathartic focus to a heterosexual society in crisis: gay men spread disease (not us), they prey on small children, they sell sex to the highest bidder, they mock patriarchal dignity, and so on. To people hungry for certainties, homophobia is clearly attractive at a much deeper level than nationalist politicking. And the resultant upsurge of intolerance and violence against both open and suspected homosexuals then feeds back to the concealment of black homosexualities. Many black gays and lesbians, particularly those who live in the townships, have been terrorised back into the closet or compelled to leave their home towns/townships for refuge in the cities. As a result, the activist, visible face of the gay rights movements in Zimbabwe remains disproportionately white and foreign.

Heterosexism

Few intellectuals in Zimbabwe have publicly embraced the kind of homophobia articulated by political and church elites. Many in fact have quietly rued the 'anti-homo' campaign as a national embarrassment. Yet scholars have also contributed to the unsaying or pathologisation of African homosexualities by a subtle, pervasive set of assumptions that has been termed heterosexism.⁶⁶

Heterosexism is to homophobia as Eurocentrism is to racism or androcentrism is to sexism. Rather than an active bigotry it is the passive acceptance of a conceit, that is, that exclusive, reproduction-oriented sex is the ideal, the norm, the nature, and the proper function of human sexuality. In its crudest form, heterosexism renders non-reproduction-oriented sex inconceivable or blameworthy. But heterosexism is also evident in scholarship which simply does not see or which chooses not to see that which lies before its eyes - feelings or struggles that exist outside exclusively heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Hence, no one has ever drawn attention or to my knowledge even footnoted an oral tradition that identifies a 'lesbian' in the founding of the Chihota dynasty, ca 1750.⁶⁷ Hence, Ian Phimister's important 'social and economic history' of Zimbabwe's mining industry has nothing whatsoever to say about mine marriage.⁶⁸ Other urban social historians, including those with a central interest in gender, have also noticeably failed to consider the emergence of new expressions of homosexual practice and identity. Bisexual or homo-erotic behaviours (such as contact sports and 'tribal dances') are uncritically attributed to some other purportedly rational cause, rather than admitting and investigating the possibility of non-heterosexual sensuality. Homophobic violence is ignored or simply accepted as understandable and legitimate, despite the arguably central role it has had in shaping nationalist cultures of masculinity. Gender is conflated with 'Women, matters pertaining to'.

Heterosexism does not imply moral shortcomings or evil intent. Rather, it is an intellectual blind spot that can affect even the most sensitive researchers. Terence Ranger, for example, failed to consider evidence of homosexual behaviour that passed before his eyes in preparing his article 'Tales of the Wild West' and an unpublished companion essay 'Murder, rape and witchcraft: criminal court data for gender relations in colonial Matabele-land'. In the latter, Ranger explicitly announces his intention to investigate gender relations through magistrates' court records in Matobo and Gwanda. Yet he fails to comment upon no less than seven (by my count) cases of homosexual crime in those records. At least one of those cases sheds very interesting light on social life at the mines, and supports my earlier point about the 'culture of discretion'. In it, twelve-year old Njaleli attested that the accused 'came to me *at my mother's hut in the compound* and asked me to come and sleep with him ...I did not understand that there was to be anything indecent take place' (my emphasis). Njaleli did not at first report the indecency. In fact, he kept quiet in expectation of 'compensation' that never came: 'if he had [paid] I would not have complained', the boy conceded.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ This type of incident has been reported regularly in the daily press and is discussed along with other aspects of male violence against women in Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network, *WomanPlus: Women and Rape*, 2,2 (December 1997). The number of rapes reported nationwide in the first six months of 1997 was 1,770, that is, approximately four times the rate as at the eve of independence.

⁶⁵ On the latter, see Allison Goebel, "'No Spirits Control the Trees": History, Culture, and Gender in the Social Forest in a Zimbabwean Resettlement Area', (PhD thesis, University of Alberta, 1997) and *idem*, 'Witches, Bitches, and Healers: Gendered Power in "Husband-taming Herbs" in Rural Zimbabwe', (paper to be presented at the Canadian Association for Studies in International Development, Ottawa, June 1998).

⁶⁶ See in particular D. L. Steinberg, D. Epstein and R. Johnson (eds) *Border Patrols: Policing the Boundaries of Heterosexuality* (London, Cassell, 1997); as well as citations in footnote 6 above.

⁶⁷ NAZ AOH/40, pp. 29-30. I am attempting to track this legend down myself but as yet can say little more than her name, Nyemba, and the fact that she hung herself after being raped by the headman who was responsible for her protection

⁶⁸ Ian Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle, 1890-1948* (London, Longman, 1988). Even in his review of two books that explicitly discuss the phenomenon in South Africa, Phimister's silent-see 'Men, Mines, and Death', *The Zimbabwean Review*, 2, 1 (1996), pp. 12-14. My questioning of that silence (Epprecht, 'Manliness on the Mines') elicited a highly aggressive response that I believe vindicates my critique. See 'Prom Ian Phimister', *The Zimbabwean Review*, 3, 4 (1997), p. 31.

⁶⁹ Case 186 of 7 June 1921, NAZ 03/34/1.

A typical defence against accusations of heterosexism is that historians have not talked about homosexual behaviour among black Africans because homosexuals were so numerically insignificant. At one level, this is of course correct. There was no such thing as a homosexual identity until recently (Zimbabwe's first black lesbian only came out in 1993, for example). Even today, open gays and lesbians probably number no more than several hundred in a country of twelve or more million. Homosexual crimes never numbered more than a few dozen in any given year out of thousands of criminal court cases. Who then can blame scholars for not deeming homosexuality to be worthy of attention?

Yet some scholars have at least tacitly conceded that the numbers argument is fundamentally misleading, and that homosexual acts did take place with sufficient frequency, visibility and implications for our understanding of masculinity to warrant comment. Charles van Onselen's *Chibaro* was the first and most influential study in this respect. Even here, however, heterosexist assumptions led him to propose explanations for what he clearly perceived as essentially sick or unseemly behaviour. Thus, while van Onselen conceded that African men did have sex with African men and boys in the mining compounds from at least the 1910s, they did so, he opined, for the same reasons and with the same frequency that they did bestiality (a crime of implicitly identical perversion).⁷⁰ That perversion was 'forced' upon the men by the conditions they faced in the mining compounds -crowded housing, poverty, shared blankets and a justifiable fear of poxy prostitutes.⁷¹ Without denying that important truths lie within this analysis, it closes the intellectual door to consideration of sensual, sexual preference of some men for other males.

The anthropologist Michael Gelfand's attempt to explain the infrequency of homosexual behaviour in Shona culture similarly reifies heterosexist assumptions about the basic pathology of homosexuality.⁷² Part of this stems straight from his method and part from his obvious political agenda. On method, Gelfand relies principally upon the testimony of a very small number of chiefs rather than seeking out gay people's perspectives or even *n'angas* who specialised in 'cures'. He seems unaware that his informants had an obvious vested interest in denying embarrassing facts about Shona men's sexual habits, especially in the late Rhodesian context. He seems unconcerned that his vocabulary, above all the word 'homosexuality', imposes Western constructs which presuppose, indeed necessitate negative responses from his informants. And he implies the timeless tradition/corrupting modernity dichotomy when he alludes to homosexual practices in modern settings but suggests that these are an entirely different issue from real Shona custom. His ruminations upon African sexuality in general amount to a homily in the tradition of nineteenth century humanist ethnography: Africans are quite moral and well-adjusted about sex and the West should learn from them.⁷³

Subsequent scholarship that has engaged with homosexuality and masculinity, rare as it is, has tended to accept many of the fundamentals of this misleading analysis. Diana Jeater's study, for example, although specifically focused upon changing sexualities in an urban context, relegates male homosexuality to a single paragraph that basically reiterates van Onselen's views.⁷⁴ More recently, Timothy Scarnecchia's study of colonial Highfields carries on this historiographic tradition using scanty evidence. The practices of the *magube* ('those who stayed too long?' 'tricksters'?) were, he suggests, essentially alien and confined to the migrant hostels.⁷⁵ But how can one make this assertion based on -apparently -two interviews with elderly heterosexual Shona men?

Whatever the reasons for such *de facto* denial, the fact remains that it helps to perpetuate the dangerous myth that Zimbabwean Africans are exclusively heterosexual by nature. Discussing, let alone investigating, alternative sexualities, is by implication a perverse and prurient intellectual sideshow of no real concern either to Zimbabweans or to real historians.

Finally, heterosexism can generate an inversion of itself among scholars and activists sympathetic to gay rights, notably through assertions of a universal, a historical homosexual being. Evidence mustered to support the existence of such a being is often exceedingly weak, a clutching at straws. Typically, ethnographers and scientific racists whose other comments on African culture can only be regarded as imperialist propaganda are cited as gospel when it comes to their lurid discussions of weird sex. A continuum of sexual experiences and feelings is bifurcated into hetero- and homosexuality. Isolated or ritual instances of transvestism are interpreted as proof of homosexuality or

⁷⁰ See Charles Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933* (London, Pluto Press, 1976), pp. 175-176 and footnote 91, p. 307.

⁷¹ Van Onselen later applied the same analysis to the Ninevites, a gang in the Rand area reputed for both their violence and their fondness for homosex. C. Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand: New Nineveh* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1984), p. 198. In *idem.*, *The Small Matter of a Horse: the Life of 'Nongoloza' Mathebula, 1867-1948* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1984), P. 15, he maintains that the gang's pervasive homosexuality directly emanated from 'a startling decree' issued by its leader in 1895.

⁷² Gelfand. 'The Infrequency of Homosexuality'.

⁷³ This is most clearly expressed in his earlier and resolutely heterosexist article, 'The Shona Attitude to Sex Behaviour', NADA, 9, 4 (1967), pp. 61-64.

⁷⁴ Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion. and Power*, pp. 194-195.

⁷⁵ Scarnecchia, 'African Communities', pp. 65-78.

homo-friendly cultures, and so on.⁷⁶ The effect of such scholarship, for all its good intentions, is to mirror many of the same essentialising tendencies that are ostensibly under attack. The 'gay machismo' that results ultimately reinforces blindness to the diversity and historical nature of human sexuality.

Conclusion

Debate in recent years on issues relating to homosexuality in Zimbabwe has tended to be highly emotional, with insulting and sometimes violent rhetoric coming from both sides. On the one hand, protagonists of the view that homosexual behaviour or orientation did not exist in Africa prior to their introduction by decadent foreigners often forget that it is incumbent upon them to prove their improbable case. Neither repeated, vehement assertion nor negative evidence alone can do so. On the contrary, the fact that the usual historical sources are largely silent on the matter only demonstrates an impressive and over-determined denial. Over-determination implies a history of struggle, negotiation, and invention which calls for attention as these play out in contemporary politics. Indeed, the emergence of modern unsayings like homophobia can be linked to the fact that the traditional unsayings of homosexual behaviour are diminishing in power. As homosexuals, like feminists, come out of the closet to challenge conventional ideals of masculinity, expressions of homophobia are likely to surface with ever more violence (as indeed has happened in many parts of the West). It therefore surely behoves people who care about democracy, human rights, and good scholarship to sensitise themselves to the complexity of the historical denials of indigenous homosexualities.

On the other hand, advocates of the homosexuality-is-everywhere school of thought typically accuse their opponents of homophobia and bigotry. Clearly this overstates the case and incites defensive reaction or further denial. Critics of official homophobia in Zimbabwe could therefore strengthen their case by showing greater respect for the real sensitivities and well-founded anxieties among Zimbabweans about rapid changes in gender relations. This would include recognising that calm argument backed by rigorous research may advance the cause of tolerance rather more than accusation, confrontation, or the uncritical extrapolation of Western ideals.

Happily, and for all its over-determined invisibility, knowledge about the history of homosexualities in Zimbabwe is accessible through fairly conventional historical methods including painstaking archival work, linguistics, close and comparative textual analysis, and sensitive interviewing. Queer theory as such does therefore not entail the wholesale abandonment of tried and tested historical methods. Rather, it involves subjecting those methods, and ourselves as researchers, to new and sometimes painful questions. Circumstances in Zimbabwe and the region today are favourable for doing such research.

Marc Epprecht

Department of History, University of Zimbabwe, POB MP 167, Mount Pleasant, Harare

⁷⁶ Rudi Bleys, whom I have cited favourably in this article, is guilty of most of the above in the Africa sections of his *The Geography of Perversion*. Many of his footnotes, for example, do not support his empirical claims (although his thesis remains intuitively persuasive). And Oliver Phillips, whose work speaks powerfully to many of the issues I have described, uncritically quotes the dubious sexologist Boris de Rachewiltz as a 'proof' of African homosexualities. Alas, I suspect that lapses along these lines may be true of my own work in some instances, hopefully not this one.