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DISCUSSION PAPER:
AFRICAN CULTURE AND HOMOSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Introduction

There is not a one view of African culture but rather African cultures. Having said that, there are a number of things that African cultures have in common, and primary to those is the understanding of *ubuntu* as an African philosophy of being and what it means to live among other people. I have tried to research on this subject as much I could through reading and consulting with other people. I must say that I have not found much in terms of written work on this subject. I guess the reason behind this unavailability of written work on the subject of sexuality as a whole and the subject of homosexuality in particular is that sexuality is not spoken about openly in most African cultures, it is a private matter that is sometimes taught at various schools of the rites of passage, and that most of the things that are taught in these schools are in some ways secrets that must remain in these schools and are meant for the initiates. In Xhosa for an instance *izinto zamadoda azithethwa namamkhwenkwe* (things that are of men are not spoken about among boys).

Let me also confess that I come to this topic informed by my own Xhosa culture, which is mostly based in a township context of Port Elizabeth and the years that I spent in Peddie a rural place in the Eastern Cape. It is in Peddie mostly where some of the cultural practices were observed to the latter.

As a way forward, I will seek to address some characteristics of African culture and spirituality, in particular those have to do with humanity. I am doing this so that when I address the subject of homosexuality from the African culture viewpoint, we will begin to understand as to why African cultures hold these views. I am also going to use culture and spirituality interchangeably because in my own understanding spirituality is all

encompassing. One cannot speak of culture that is devoid of spirituality. I am aware of the fact that culture is not static but dynamic, that even African cultures have been affected and changed from time to time by influences of colonization, also the fact that we now live in a global village and therefore open to new technological developments. These have in some ways affected some African cultures as is the case with other traditional cultures of the world.

Understanding African Culture and Spirituality

In African culture, spirituality is not directed by a book. It is far more than "*a believing way of life*", or "*an approach to life*" directed by some religion in a form of a book. It is a way of life or life itself, where a distinction or separation is not made between religion and other areas of human existence. In African culture, religion is quite literally life and life is religion. There is no concept of conversion, so that one can then be received into full membership rather people are recognized according to their community status, age group and their specific roles in a community, e.g. a traditional healer. One cannot be converted into African religion, but is born into it. It is not so much what you believe as who you belong to. It is a lineage, kinship and family that really matter. Its role is to express who or what a person is in community, that he/she has interconnectedness.

African spirituality can be defined as a basis for understanding life or fashioning life on grounds beyond material and physical experiences:

- It shapes and conditions the way that we perceive reality and the way that we make sense of particles of human living.
- It is not a diversion in life in order to get into it.
- It is about being immersed in life.

Characteristics of African Spirituality

- 1) **Wholistic:** Life is seen as one whole and therefore not as something private, but it is often ours. It does not make distinction between things profane and sacred, or material and spiritual. It is not simple an issue between as individual and God. African culture recognizes the personhood of all things in creation and therefore

deeply respects nature. People are rooted in nature and therefore live a life of reciprocal dependence with the rest of creation. The clan names reveal that there is a link between people and the created order, e.g. Majola (snake); Ndlovu (elephant); Kubu (Hippopotamus). All existence is spiritual.

- 2) **Ubuntu and Community Oriented:** African spirituality is a spirituality of belonging. People belong to the soil. People belong to one another. People and ancestors belong together. Without this sense of belonging, a human is more than half dead. African spirituality is not individualistic, it is not privatized but is a shared experience in which everyone participates. Community is a mutual society, members of community act always to fulfill a human need, i.e. their own and that of the others. Co-operation is the strength of the members and therefore the only effective way of supplying the need. *Ubuntu* means to participate in a common humanity. In African culture, a person is identified by his or her interrelationship and not primarily by individualistic properties. The community identifies the person and not the person the community. In other words, it is a matter of “*I participate, therefore I belong*”.

To be human is to participate in life and respect the conditions that make it possible. African society is an accepting society thus offering support particularly to its weaker members, i.e. the old, the widowers and the physically challenged. These are given a special place in most places of gatherings. This is one of the greatest values of African spirituality and community living, the support of others, going through things together. African based societies are organic rather than collectivist. Collectivist societies inevitably emphasize individuals and their needs. African societies emphasize the group rather than the individual, solidarity rather than activity and communion of the persons rather than autonomy.

- 3) **Inclusiveness:** Another remarkable characteristic of the African spirituality is its inclusiveness, i.e. an inclusive society which means that responsibility is shared very widely, e.g. education and discipline of the young was a responsibility of the whole village. A child belongs to all parents of the village and every parent is a

parent of every child. Education in traditional African society is aimed at producing persons who uphold the society to remain integrated. At initiating schools for an instance, values of peace and harmony, respect of authority and fear of supernatural realities are taught. Since a society is defined by the kind of individuals who constitute it, education is also aimed at inculcating personality values which help the individual to be integrated in themselves. Personality values are such moral values as honesty and reliability, generosity, courage, temperance, humility and justice.

Sex and sexuality

As I have already indicated in my introductory remarks, sex is not a subject of public discourse in African culture, rather it is something that is introduced to boys and girls at various levels of life. For a young boy in Xhosa culture in particular *umalume* (uncle) would be the one who speaks about sexual matters to the young boy. When *umalume* does this he looks for various signs as to whether the boy is attracted to girls or other boys. Likewise a girl would be looked after by *oodadabawo* (aunties) who will observe her, teaching her how to behave and making sure that the private sexual parts are hidden at all times. Young girls and boys were always taught not to engage into sexual practices until they are married. Rituals like *ukuhlola* (checking or inspecting) were performed and are still performed in some African societies where young girls would be checked as to whether they have been engaged in penetrative sex. There were other ways of engaging in sexual activities that were accepted, but penetration before marriage was condemned at all cost. If a girl was discovered as having been engaged in penetrative sex, she would have to say who the boy or man was. In Peddie for an instance a ritual of *isihewula* would be instigated against the young man where a group of women and girls would march in a group to the guilty young man's home with young girls naked. A goat or a cow would be demanded from the young man's parents and would be slaughtered on the field and be eaten only by women. Young girls in particular were taught that their private genital organs were *iinkomo zekhaya* (kettle produced by a young man as *lobola* when a girl is to be married).

The understanding of what constitutes a marriage in African culture has always been a union between a man and a woman, be it polygamous, polyandrous or monogamous. A question of a marriage between two persons of the same sex has never been an issue for debate because a same sex relationship was always viewed as a deviant from what is natural. Having said that, I need to mention that there have always been people with same sex tendencies and they were given names like any other situation in Africa societies. In isiXhosa they are called *iitalasi*. I grew up understanding that this term was referred to boys who showed female tendencies or persons who were believed to have both sexual organs.

People with the same sex tendencies were never treated as outcasts, they also were incorporated in the community through various rites of passage, boys were circumcised, and young girls would go through *intonjana* (similar to boys' circumcision). In some instances they would be married the 'normal' way and bear children, but some would remain unmarried as is the case with those with heterosexual tendencies.

Marriage

We need to understand that *umtshato* (marriage) in African culture was never just a matter between two people, nor was it just a family matter but it was a village or a community matter. The nucleus family of a young man would begin by finding a suitable young girl for their son, and then *oonozakuzaku* (the negotiators) would be appointed by the family of the bridegroom. The negotiators need not be family members but could also be members of the community. From this arrangement one could see how difficult it would have been if the similar process for the same sex couple was carried out. Let me explain what I mean by this difficulty for the same sex couples. In isiXhosa, during the actual wedding ceremony the bride is referred to as *umendi* in the process of *ukwenda*. The two words mean the same thing, the former is a noun and the latter is a verb. In simple terms it means, like the roots of a tree hold fast and expand, something similar to Gen.1:28 which reads "*be fruitful and increase in number...*", and so for the same sex couple the same could not be said. We could not refer to them as *abendi*. The expansion of a family is very important in an African society, a marriage without children has

always been viewed with suspicion, such that African people would devise other means, albeit secretive, to ensure that the couple have children. There is a Xhosa saying: "*ukwanda kwaliwa ngumthakathi*", it simply means non expansion is as the result of witchcraft. With this understanding in mind and because in a same sex marriage it would be practically impossible for a couple to bear children, the practice of allowing same sex couples to marry would also fall under this category, a work of witchcraft.

There are some issues in African culture that were never brought into public discourse, same sex, incest and rape of the young ones by the elderly have been some of them. What these have in common is that, they were understood to be works of the evil spirit in that people with these tendencies needed to be helped through traditional healing practices to appease the ancestors. All these processes and procedures would be treated secretly so as to avoid corrupting a moral fibre of the society. I can say that, although these were unacceptable as is the case with sex before marriage, they were practiced but condemned.

Another important factor that could have led to the same sex relationship as an unacceptable entity is that men and women had specific roles and responsibilities which held societies together, as a result given specific identities for both males and females. The question that is often asked ever since the debate on same sex marriages arose, that who would be called father or mother by the children seems to be relevant in this regard as far as African culture is concerned.

Conclusion

May I conclude by stating that, the issue of whether same sex tendencies were by choice or that some people are simply born with these tendencies was never explored in African societies. It has simply been treated as deviant to what is natural, a work of the evil spirits. The characteristics of African spirituality as stated in this paper have sought to show that people with same sex tendencies were never treated differently from others in the society. They had all the community rights that everyone else had. They were as much human beings as any other person. They could take part in community activities, some were respected as having a particular status in the community. They could be

iinkosi, traditional healers, midwives, praise singers etc. Their sexual practices were kept secret by those who knew, after all sex life is a private matter in African societies.

