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**The discourse of visibility: Paradoxes and possibilities for lesbian identifying women in Zimbabwe**

**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree**

**LLM/MPHIL (Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Africa)**

**by**

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## Declaration

I **RUDO CHIGUDU** certify that this dissertation is my original work; it is an honest and true effort of my personal research. I certify that the work has not been presented anywhere else before for any other thesis.

**Signed:**.....

**Date:**.....30/09/16.....

This dissertation was submitted for examination with my approval as the University Supervisor

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**Signed:**.....

**Date:**.....



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I am deeply grateful to my comrades and the brave women whose stories and experiences are the basis of this dissertation.

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## Summary

A discussion on visibility of lesbian women creates an opportunity to understand what it means to Zimbabwean lesbian identifying women to be 'lesbian' and how that identity is visibilised or invisibilised depending on resulting benefit or possible detriment. The study investigates the experiences of lesbian women in Zimbabwe which have been subsumed in a 'homosexual' visibility discourse. Placing the focus of lesbian identity on the visibility locus helps foreground the possibilities and paradoxes of how visibility of an identity impacts personal experience.

The intention of this study is to make lesbian identity more visible, bringing it out of the shadows where it has been concealed by a homosexuality discourse that revolves largely around gay men. The study also seeks to understand when visibility matters, for what purpose and when it may be problematic. My approach does not assume that there are ahistorical, transcultural truths about lesbian identity. Instead my question tracks the production of a lesbian identity in Zimbabwe, how it operates and how best its prevailing operation can be described. How is lesbian identity in/visibilised? What is the social and political consequence of in/visibility on the experiences of lesbian identifying women in Zimbabwe? Does a human rights framework positively impact visibility?

### Keywords

**In/visibility** – refers to the state of being seen or not being seen by others in both individual and structural ways

**Cisgender** – refers to a person whose gender identity is the same as the sex assigned to them at birth.

**Gender identity** – this refers to an individual's internal sense of their gender, it is about how they perceive themselves as being male, female or something else.

**Outed** – refers to instances where a lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans person's sexual orientation or gender identity is disclosed to another person without their consent.

**Queer** – a term that has been reclaimed by person's particularly those who do not identify with traditional categories around gender identity and sexual orientation

**Trans** – an umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.



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## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

*'I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.'* **Audre Lorde**<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Background

Homosexuality contemporarily is a highly contested subject that is regulated in many countries across the world. According to an International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) report there are 72 countries in the world where same-sex sexual acts are illegal and 33 of these are in Africa and in 24 countries the laws apply to women.<sup>2</sup> The term homosexuality though sometimes used to encompass same-sex sexual orientation as expressed by men and by women, it is largely used to refer to gay men particularly in law and public health. The experiences of lesbian women have often been lost in the broad narrative of homosexuality and this study seeks to examine the experiences of women in Zimbabwe who identify as lesbian. Surfacing the legal, political and social context in which lesbian women in Zimbabwe exist and problematising visibility within that context.

'UnAfrican' and unnatural are the two most common dismissals to the subject of homosexuality in Africa. Among the many myths created about Africa, the belief that homosexuality is absent in Africa or incidental is one of the oldest and most enduring. The very use of the term 'unAfrican' is problematic in that it alludes to the existence of an African way of being from which same-sex sexual relations deviate. Given the diversity of people, cultures, traditions and practices of societies in Africa one could not possibly speak of Africaness or unAfricaness. As Wright aptly put it,

It is both a daunting and potentially frustrating task to attempt to discuss African identity. It is daunting because African identity is an expansive and nebulous category that can be contextualised in and approached from a bewildering array of ideological and disciplinary positions.<sup>3</sup>

African leaders, historians, anthropologists, clergyman, authors, and contemporary citizens of the varied societies in African alike have denied or overlooked the existence of homosexualities and persistently claimed that such patterns were introduced by Europeans.<sup>4</sup> Historical and ethnographical studies have challenged the idea that same-sex sexual relations did not exist in any

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<sup>1</sup> A Lorde 'The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism.' *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (1984) 124-133.

<sup>2</sup> A Carroll International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) 'State sponsored homophobia 2016: A world survey of sexual orientation laws, criminalisation, protection and recognition 35.

<sup>3</sup> HK Wright 'Editorial: Notes on the (Im)Possibility of Articulating Continental African Identity' (2002) *16 Critical arts* 1.

<sup>4</sup> J Rukweza 'Is homosexuality really "UnAfrican"?' (2006) 247 *Pambazuka News*, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/32974>.

communities or societies on the African continent prior to colonialism. Though same-sex sexual relations existed historically, same-sex sexual identities are arguably a ‘newer’ phenomenon. This study attempts to surface the production of the identity in Zimbabwe and its relative usefulness to those who hold the identity.

### **1.1 Law, politics and social attitudes**

At law Zimbabwe does not criminalise lesbian identity or sex between women. The reasons for this are most likely rooted in Victorian phallogocentric views of sex. What is criminal in Zimbabwe is articulated in section 73 (1) of the criminal code which reads as follows:

Any male person who, with the consent of another male person, knowingly performs with that other person anal sexual intercourse, or any act involving physical contact other than anal sexual intercourse that would be regarded by a reasonable person to be an indecent act, shall be guilty of sodomy and liable to a fine up to or exceeding level fourteen or imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year or both.<sup>5</sup>

In the political domain the 1990s saw a rise in public discussion on same-sex sexual activity. This was influenced largely by the combination of public derogation by government officials and the assertion of a social identity by persons involved in same-sex sexual behaviour. Phillips suggests that a global process took place during which there was a homogenisation of same-sex sexual behaviours under the ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ rubric.<sup>6</sup> He goes further to propose that the formation of these identities is not fixed in the places where the terms originated but evolved in different contexts through a merging with local histories to produce hybrid identities that facilitate collective claim to international human rights. This challenges the idea of same-sex sexuality as a form of cultural imperialism given that the identity construction is not foreign but propelled from the ground up by local individuals the world over.

A hegemonic sexuality discourse that prioritises same-sex identity recognition as a mark of civilisation and modernism has surfaced in many human rights spaces. It however is problematic and stinks of cultural imperialism. This form of imposition is different from identity appropriation by individuals within a society as a means of affirming rights which leads to recognition of the identity. The key is always in who is driving the agenda and whether there is agency in assuming the identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Criminal law (Codification and reform) Act 9:23 of 2004 Section 73 (1).

<sup>6</sup> O Phillips ‘Constituting the global gay: Individual subjectivity and Sexuality in Southern Africa’ in C Stychin & D Herman (eds) *Sexuality in the legal arena* (2000).





## 1.2 The object of interrogation

Same-sex sexual behaviour has historically existed all over the world. The production of identity based on same-sex sexual behaviour however is a more recent conception, one that has been supported by human rights frameworks and international law. Within this arena same-sex practice of men has been central with gay identity discourse taking centre stage. Where are the women involved in same-sex practice in Zimbabwe? How did those who name themselves as lesbian come to name themselves as such? What does it mean to them to be 'lesbian' and what are their lived experiences of carrying such an identity?

I question what visibility means in light of varied identities that are often lumped together. Most importantly I seek out lesbian Zimbabwean women in an attempt to better understand the possibilities and paradoxes of visibility and the ways in which they seek to assert a public presence and stake a claim to equality. There is a gap in literature on how Zimbabwean lesbian women might negotiate, interpret and experience visibility in a manner that builds their power and agency as well as an analysis of the utility of a human rights framework.

## 1.3 Research Design

### 1.3.1 Aim of the study

In this study, I explore how a transnational LGBT discourse is evinced in Zimbabwe. I focus on lesbian women's navigation of visibility and the character and extent of their assertion of an identity. This assertion surfaces both theoretical and empirical questions about the ways in which lesbian women create spaces for themselves in a society that rejects them and how they assert a public presence and stake claims to equality and citizenship in a manner that empowers them. Equally I explore the ways in which silences and covering may be used as tools for survival. My foundational research question in this exploration is:

*What are the possibilities and paradoxes inherent in the visibility of lesbian identifying women in Zimbabwe?*

The objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the historical production of a lesbian identity in Zimbabwe
- To examine how a lesbian identity operates in the Zimbabwean context
- To explore the experiences of in/visibility of lesbian women
- To assess the social and political impact of in/visibility on lesbian women in Zimbabwe
- To evaluate whether a human rights framework has a positive impact on visibility



### 1.3.2 Research questions

This study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. Are lesbian identities in Zimbabwe distinct from western framings of lesbian identity?
2. Are there specific ways in which lesbian identity operates within the Zimbabwean context?
3. What are the in/visibility experiences of lesbian women?
4. What is the social and political impact of visibility on the lives of lesbian women?
5. Does a human rights framework have a positive impact on visibility?

### 1.3.3 Conceptual framework

I will draw heavily on poststructuralist approaches to development, particularly the idea that power functions through language, discourse and institutions<sup>7</sup> and the idea that individuals shift constantly between states of powerful and powerless such that no person is a permanent victim of a situation nor a permanent victor. This approach allows for the conceptualisation of lesbian women's agency in an often violent and repressive society. I will explore the ways in which lesbian women construct ideas, narratives and practices that render the world meaningful and actionable to them. 'Even as I turn to poststructuralism, I am guided by Soyinka's admonishment that Africans not simply embrace western ideologies and theoretical frameworks so fully and enthusiastically that we not even stop to consider whether the messages of such ideologies might already be present in African gnosis and worldviews.'<sup>8</sup> I adhere to Wright's approach<sup>9</sup> as I seek here to explore how lesbianism is culturally understood and lived by the cultures, classes, ethnicities we find in Zimbabwe and to understand the effect of in/visibility on the lives of lesbian women? I will also turn to feminist grounded theory that centralises lived experiences.

### 1.3.4 Methodology

Given that the purpose of this study was to explore the evolution of lesbian identities and the ways in which lesbian women in Zimbabwe navigate a visibility discourse my research was largely qualitative. I utilised an ethnographic approach given that ethnography takes the position that the ways in which people construct and derive meaning of the world will vary and be locally specific. Ethnography also emphasises the need to discover the actions taken by people as well as the reasons for those actions prior to assigning interpretations based on personal or professional experience.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A Agrawal 'Poststructuralist Approaches to Development: Some Critical Reflections' (1996) 21(4) *Peace & Change* 464–477.

<sup>8</sup> NG Wright 'Uganda: History From 1971' in J. Middleton (ed) *Encyclopaedia of Africa South of the Sahara* (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Wright (n 8 above).

<sup>10</sup> MD LeCompte & LL Schensul *Designing and conducting ethnographic research* (1999).

I conducted interviews with 10 lesbian women to develop a sense of what the ‘lesbian’ identity means to women who carry it and what their experiences of the identity are. I also sought to better understand how lesbian women interact with in/visibility and the effect of this on asserting a public presence and staking a claim to equality. My aim was to arrive at an understanding of how an appropriated identity is vernacularised by local people to produce a hybridised identity and how this ‘new’ identity is negotiated in the context. Finally I explored whether a human rights framework has a positive impact on visibility.

### ***Oral history***

Histographers noted the value of oral history to augment the deficiencies or complete absence of phenomena in official documentation.<sup>11</sup> Highlighting the reasons for this Samuel states as follows,

it is remarkable how much history has been written from the vantage point of those who have had the charge of running or attempting to run other people’s lives, and how little from the real life experiences of people themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Here Samuel reiterates the popular proverb, ‘until lions start writing down their own stories, the hunters will always be the heroes’<sup>13</sup>, making the point that written narratives often reflects only part of history. Griffith compounds this idea by emphasising the importance of first person accounts in understanding the subjectivity of a group that has otherwise been silenced or eliminated in official records.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons this study also draws on oral histories albeit cautiously given that oral history can present highly contestable claims as observed with oral history narratives about same-sex sexuality in various African cultures and societies. Oral histories were collected through interviews and will be used mainly in chapters three, four and five to exemplify how identity is produced, how lesbian women navigate visibility and in examining the utility of human rights for lesbian women in Zimbabwe.

### ***Language***

In this study I make reference to the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality which illustrate the binary view of same sex and opposite sex sexualities. I attempt to use them in a broader sense that recognises the range of identities included within and between these two terms.

I make use of the terms lesbian and gay as my interest lies largely in lesbian identity and experience. This is by no means an attempt to limit same-sex sexuality to just gay and lesbian

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<sup>11</sup> R Samuel ‘Local history and oral history’ in R G. Burgess (ed) *Field Research: A sourcebook and field manual* (1991) 136-145.

<sup>12</sup> R Samuel *Village Life and Labour* (1975) 19.

<sup>13</sup> African proverb of the month April 2016 <http://www.afriprov.org/afican-proverb-of-the-month/322006proverbs/224-april-2006-proverb-quntil-the-lion-has-his-or-her-own-storyteller-the-hunter-will-always-have-the-best-part-of-the-storyq-ewe-mina-benin-ghana-and-togo-.html> (accessed 20 June 2016).

<sup>14</sup> E Griffith *In Her Own Right: The life of Elizabeth Cody Santon* (1984).

identity. The definition of the term lesbian will be drawn from the individual definitions of Zimbabwean women who claim this identity. The term LGBT is often used in describing non-heterosexual persons however it leaves out other non-heterosexual identities and is sometimes replaced with sexual and gender minorities which encompasses not just non-heterosexual identities but non-cis gendered<sup>15</sup> ones too.

### ***Ethics Statement***

The Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria law faculty gave ethical clearance for this study. During the research the aims and objectives of the study were explained to each participant and written or verbal informed consent was obtained before beginning each interview.

This research posed complex ethical questions about the security of both the researcher and the researched however I referred to Sieber who poignantly states that sensitive topics must not be discarded simply because they pose complex questions. In fact shying away from a subject merely because it is controversial can be in itself avoidance of responsibility.<sup>16</sup> This is not at all to suggest that ethical responsibility towards interviewees must be neglected in the process it is merely an affirmation of the value of such research.

In an attempt to conceal the identities of interviewees and social spaces frequented by lesbian women no real names will be used for both people and places. All my interviewees stated names by which they wished to be identified in the study such that each interview is thus coded by their chosen name. As per the requirements agreed upon with the University of Pretoria law review board for conducting this research, the transcripts and notes were anonymised. Identifying information including names, locations, and organisations (except organisation that were willing to be named), were edited out and replaced with pseudonyms.

### **1.3.5 Limitations of the study**

As with any study particularly one involving policed issues of sexualities there are risks as well as limitations. As a member of the lesbian activist community access to other lesbian was not a challenge. In this ethnographic study the intention was to have free flowing, open-ended conversations as a means of gaining most insight as opposed to rigid structured interviews. It would have been ideal to pay adequate attention to the intersectionality of characteristics such as race, class, age, ethnicity however with the limited time and scope of this study this will not be possible.

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<sup>15</sup> Definition of cis-gender on page iv.

<sup>16</sup> JE Sieber & B Stanley *Ethical and Professional Dimensions of Socially Sensitive Research* (1988) 55.



## 1.4 Literature review

### 1.4.1 Lesbian as an identity category

Political theory has unearthed varied ways of understanding identity some of which embrace identity as a legitimate category of analysis and action with emancipatory potential and others that reject it as essentialist, oppressive, monolithic and divisive. Hall suggests that identity is a subject under erasure such that it is no longer useful as a way of thinking in the way it was originally constructed however it cannot be done away with in the absence of an alternative concept thus suggesting that it must continue to be used albeit in a deconstructed form.<sup>17</sup> Brubaker and Cooper also problematise identity as being framed in a sameness discourse that excludes difference and they offer alternative, less limiting terms. Crenshaw suggests that the problem with identity is not its inability to transcend difference as suggested by many but quite the opposite, that it often conflates or ignores differences within groups.<sup>18</sup>

In this study I will make use of identity in its deconstructed form as suggested by Hall. I attempt to steer away from constructions of identity that are overly homogenising, essentialist, reductive or simplistic. Alcoff argues that it is not identity politics that is divisive but the 'refusal to acknowledge the importance of the differences in our identities that has led to distrust, miscommunication, and thus disunity.'<sup>19</sup> The study explores the varied constructions of lesbian identity/identities in Zimbabwe, its production and its operationalisation in a homophobic and repressive context. Furthermore it seeks to explore lesbian identity in a manner that does not obscure same-sex identities that were locally accommodated in Zimbabwean cultures. I seek to find how local histories of same-sex identity of women augment and help constitute the 'lesbian' identity rather than become hidden by it.

### 1.4.2 Exploring African sexualities and same-sex sexual orientation

One cannot discuss a lesbian identity without engaging a sexuality discourse and identity constructions in the social, economic and political context. Post-colonial nationalist leaders have successfully constructed a dominant heterosexual identity. According to Ndjio this ideology has legitimised the establishment of phallographic, patriarchal and heterosexist sexual structures encouraging assertion of masculinity by Africa men that subordinates women.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> S Hall 'Who needs Identity' in P du Gay & P Redman (eds) *Identity: A reader* (2000) 15.

<sup>18</sup> K Crenshaw 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of colour' (1991) 43 *Stanford Law Review* 1242.

<sup>19</sup> LM Alcoff *Visible identities: Race, gender and the self* (2006) 6.

<sup>20</sup> B Ndjio 'Sexuality and nationalist ideologies in post-colonial Cameroon' in Wieringa et al (eds) *The sexual history of the global south: sexual politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (2013) 121-122.

There are continuous and widespread attempts to ‘Africanise’ the sexuality of a complex continent and its diverse populations. This is done through the enactment of a homogenous and uniform African cultural unity that focuses on the reconstruction of an authentic African selfhood thought to have been perverted by colonialism. The tools of this reconstruction include glorification of procreation and reproductive sexuality, essentialisation and racialisation of sexuality of native Africans, the segregation and othering of homosexuals and the criminalisation and demonisation of homoerotic practices.

Homosexual identities entered public consciousness and debate in Zimbabwe in the 1990s profited by the President Robert Mugabe who labelled it a ‘white man’s disease’. Gay and lesbian Zimbabweans emerged to identify themselves in a challenge to this assertion thus visibilising same-sex identities in Zimbabwe.<sup>21</sup>

In contesting expression of same-sex desire the public was inadvertently forced to confront different-sex desire and to develop a sexual self-consciousness. Suddenly homosexual and heterosexual practice was emerging as a publicly recognised and acknowledged identity marker. That which was previously fluid became fixed in a binary of homo/heterosexuality.

Whether it was the celebration of heterosexuality and the recognition of related rights or the demonisation of same-sex sexuality and denial of rights the result of both these scenarios is that sexuality became elevated to a marker of identity and citizenship.

### ***The shift from same-sex sexual practice to lesbian identity in Zimbabwe***

While homosexuality has been traced back historically in many different societies, the phenomenon of sexuality being expressed as an identity is a much newer and culturally specific development. Rao discusses how LGBT rights in the global North have evolved into a marker of modernity and civilisation creating a hierarchy of states based on the extent to which they recognise LGBT rights.<sup>22</sup> Those that do not honour the rights related to sexuality are labelled as backward and uncivilised. This development is highly problematic and demonstrates that geo-political power is also at play in the formulation of identities and in their affirmation and recognition.

A genealogical assessment of institutionalised homophobia particularly in the global South does not quite seem to point to pre-existing local attitudes. Instead it points to what Epprecht refers to as Christian missionary propaganda, among other reasons. Massad in (Massad, 2007) locates same-sex sexuality at the interface of power, geopolitics, culture and knowledge production

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<sup>21</sup> Phillips (n 6 above) 31.

<sup>22</sup> R Rao ‘Queer questions’ (2014) *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 2.

asserting that a shift from sexual behaviour to sexual identity driven from the global North is not necessarily a liberating move. Instead he names it as a form of cultural imperialism designed to destroy sexual subjectivity. While there may be some truth in Massads analysis caution must be taken to not dismiss a rights discourse merely because of its genealogical origins. Massad leans too heavily on cultural imperialism in a manner that negates the agency of local people in the places he suggests are affected by this cultural imperialism. He fails to acknowledge the ways in which cultures evolve and hybridise due to globalisation and the ways in which concepts can be appropriated, redefined and owned by those acquiring them. What is imperative is an understanding of the ways in which ‘new’ identities are formed and how they operate within that context.

### ***Law and international human rights instruments***

In a country like Zimbabwe where the law provides no protection for the rights of lesbian women and criminalisation of ‘unnatural offences’ can be interpreted to include same-sex behaviour between women lesbian women find themselves in a precarious position. The mere threat of criminalisation is enough to repress expression and induce fear. Protection of rights of lesbian women relies on international human rights frameworks in the absence of community and national level protection.

### **1.5 Significance of the study**

It is my intention to explore the experiences of lesbian women in Zimbabwe and their ideas of the ways in which identity politics and the accent of visibility either serves their needs or detracts from them. As reflected in public conversation and the structuring of LGBT organisations in Zimbabwe there is a fixation on gay men, as they are at risk of criminalisation and at higher risk of HIV infection by an infected partner. These vulnerabilities are tied to why most LGBT programming work has focused mainly on gay men to the exclusion of other groups represented in the LGBT category. Lesbian activism is present and some literature on this exists however there is a gap in understanding lesbian identity as both a product of Western identity politics as well as local indigenous histories. This research places visibility at the centre, questioning whether it is helpful to the lives of lesbian women, if so in what moments and if not how do lesbian women in Zimbabwe navigate visibility in the ways most useful to them.

This study will generate narratives of lesbian women in Zimbabwe in relation to how identity is influenced positively or negatively by a transnational politics. Lesbian women in Zimbabwe are diverse based on race, class, age, religion, location and political consciousness amongst other

criteria. This study acknowledges this diversity and seeks to avoid reducing all lesbian women in Zimbabwe to a solitary and fixed identity.

### **1.6 Dissertation outline**

The structure of this study is as follows. The first chapter sets the scene for the discursive construction of visibility and identity. The second chapter investigates the two discourses of identity and sexuality in Africa through an exploration of the silences, multiplicities and complications that relate to African sexuality. The third chapter delves more specifically into the production of a lesbian identity in Zimbabwe. It explores same-sex sexuality in Zimbabwe including legal, social and political regulation through the experiences of lesbian women.

Chapter four of this study then explores visibility as it relates to lesbian women by unearthing the intentional ways in which they in/visibilise themselves and the ways in which they are recognised and misrecognised. Chapter five proceeds to investigate how human rights have been used in advancing the rights of sexual minorities globally and finally it reflects on whether human rights have positively impacted in/visibility of lesbian women in Zimbabwe. The sixth and final chapter briefly discusses the findings of the study and concludes with ideas of how lesbian women in Zimbabwe can meet their social and political needs.



## CHAPTER TWO: Identities and Sexualities in Africa

*'The pages of history drip with bloodshed over invented identities.'* Paul Zeleza<sup>23</sup>

### 2 Introduction

Post-independent resistance towards same-sex sexuality has emerged largely from the idea of its 'unAfricanness'. The last chapter began challenging the idea of 'unAfricaness' by hinting at the existence of a diversity of sexualities in Africa. In this chapter I will investigate the two discourses of identity and sexuality in Africa through an exploration of the silences, multiplicities and complications that relate to African sexuality.

In this process I will historicise the present and the reasons for this are two-fold. The first is that historicisation offers an opportunity for questioning the narratives of contemporary nationalist governments who argue that same-sex sexualities are a Western import and a white man's disease. Secondly this approach avoids the pitfalls of periodising history according to the schema of colonialism. McClintock discusses the problem with centralisation of colonialism when she suggests that terms such as postcolonial bestow the prestige of history proper on colonialism.<sup>24</sup> She warns of the reduction of other cultures to a prepositional relationship to a Eurocentric epoch that has either not begun (pre) or is over (post). In the process multiple cultures are subordinated and retrospectively related to linear European time instead of being recognised in their uniqueness. It is challenging to excavate the histories of African sexualities without reifying the importance of the colonial encounter and therefore when exploring African sexualities and identities this study will take the approach of historicising the present.

Identity as a politics has been much debated. In this study I draw on Hall's post-Cartesian view of identity as a concept under erasure that cannot be done away with in the absence of an alternative. In its traditional meaning identity is the result of markings of similarity and exclusion of what is perceived as 'other' while a poststructuralist view sees identity as an ongoing constructive process. Hall advances identities that are not unified, not singular but multiply constructed across overlapping and contradictory discourses.<sup>25</sup> Butler acknowledges the problems inherent in advancing identity based discourse but at the same time celebrates what strategic and non-essentialist views of identity can offer for individuals that are marginalised, repressed or

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<sup>23</sup> P Zeleza 'The inventions of African identities and languages: The discursive and developmental implications' in Arasanyin, OF & Pemberton, MA (2006) Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics 14-26.

<sup>24</sup> A McClintock 'The angel of progress: Pitfalls of the term post-colonialism' (1992) *Social text* 86.

<sup>25</sup> Hall (n 17 above) 17.

invisibilised in their ‘otherness’.<sup>26</sup> Spivak<sup>27</sup> takes this further arguing in favour of ‘strategic essentialism’ believing that the risk of essentialism may be worth taking, from the vantage point of a dominated subject position. However Bran<sup>28</sup> sees this as problematic particularly if challenging one’s oppression leads to the oppression of another. The exploration of identity in this chapter is thus informed by a poststructural view as represented by Hall.

An understanding of identities aids analysis of how sexual identities have been produced in Africa. I refer as a starting point to Rao’s<sup>29</sup> observation that discourses travel and are subsequently selectively appropriated, rejected, subverted, ignored, modified and redefined by both the elite and subaltern<sup>30</sup>. In reflecting on the cultural production of sexual identities I seek to identify possible contributing factors to the production of lesbian identity. Bhabha suggests that there is a space in-between designations of identity (liminal space) and that this interstitial space that exists between fixed identifications creates space for cultural hybridity that is not necessarily hierarchical.<sup>31</sup>

The liminal space is that moment when the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet taken shape and though this space is a restless one it is also an expanded site for experience and empowerment. I will reflect on contemporary sexual identities in Zimbabwe as existing in this liminal space. I suggest that searching for a pure African identity negates the reality of Africa as a colonial invention serving colonial interests. Mutua agrees that Africa is a colonial invention whose artificial boundaries bundled Africa into ahistorical units, however instead of discarding it he suggests redefining it.<sup>32</sup> Poststructuralism and cultural hybridity form the theoretical bases for the exploration in this chapter that seeks out identity and sexuality histories in Africa and lays the groundwork for exploring the production of lesbian identity in Zimbabwe.

Before delving into identities and sexualities I will begin by identifying the challenges of defining ‘Africa’ as this has implications on how I recognise and analyse African identities and sexualities.<sup>33</sup> Africa is difficult to define given its many genealogies and meanings. Much of what is said about Africa is an extrapolation of individual cultures, identities, nationalities and sexualities. Mudimbe popularised the idea of Africa as an invention in his book ‘The invention of

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<sup>26</sup> J Butler ‘Imitation and gender insubordination’ in D Fuss (ed) *Inside/Out: Lesbian theories, gay theories* (1991) 14.

<sup>27</sup> Spivak is an Indian literary critic who developed the concept of strategic essentialism in postcolonial theory in the 1980’s.

<sup>28</sup> A Bran ‘Race, culture and difference’ in J Donald & A Rattansi (eds) *Difference, diversity and differentiation* (1992) 144.

<sup>29</sup> R Rao (n 22 above) 4.

<sup>30</sup> The term subaltern is loosely defined by Guha (1982) as all non-elite groups and classes that fall outside of hegemonic power. Spivak in her paper, ‘Can the subaltern speak’ however cautions against the appropriation of the term through assuming cultural solidarity among heterogeneous people. The subaltern here refers only to those outside of heteronormative hegemonic power.

<sup>31</sup> H Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (1994).

<sup>32</sup> M Mutua ‘Why Redraw the Map of Africa: a Moral and Legal Inquiry’ (1995) *Journal of International Law* 1113.

<sup>33</sup> Zeleza (n 23 above) 15.

Africa'.<sup>34</sup> Other scholars have enhanced this idea by suggesting that Africa is as much a reality as it is a construction whose geographical, historical, cultural and representational boundaries have shifted based on dominant ideas and organisation of global racial identities, power, African nationalism and Pan-Africanism.<sup>35</sup> Invented or not however, once in existence identities cannot be ignored. How then can they be redefined to reflect agency of those carrying the identity without alienating or marginalising those that fall outside of the identities?

## 2.1 'Africanness' and Nationalism

The fluidity of identity has not yet pervaded the social, political and popular consciousness of black Africans on the continent. A great many still believe in a pure African identity even in the current globalised and continually globalising world.<sup>36</sup> According to Prinsloo the desire and search for African epistemologies, culture and a pure African identity is not outrageous instead it can be understood for three reasons.<sup>37</sup> Firstly it can be viewed as an endeavour to construct a counter-narrative that offsets Western epistemological and ontological canons and representations of African identity. Secondly it may be a desire for a prototypical African identity and culture that provides a sense of belonging. Finally the idea may not be to deconstruct an originary identity but explore identity as a dynamic construction that is fluid and pronounced by various subject positions. Kalua puts forward that the search for an African cultural and political identity is further fuelled by the geographical landmass that has been named Africa, by the debates about the vast majority of peoples on the continent being black and who in instances share cultures and tradition.<sup>38</sup> Appiah however argues that peoples on the continent have less in common than what is believed.<sup>39</sup> He attempts to demolish essentialising notions of Africa and the belief of a racial and cultural homogeneity among peoples on the continent. Appiah's assertions find resonance in this study alongside Mutua's proposition of reimagining and redefining the colonial construction that is Africa.

Theoretical reflection on Africa surfaces several questions including, who is African, what is Africa, where is Africa, how did Africa come to be? Adibe asks how the African identity has been constructed given the diverse identities carried by persons of African ancestry living on the continent.<sup>40</sup> The controversies around identity in Africa have pitted two concepts against each other,

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<sup>34</sup> VY Mudimbe *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge* (1988).

<sup>35</sup> Zeleza (n 23 above) 15.

<sup>36</sup> F Kalua 'Homi Bhabha's third space and African identity' (2009) 21 *Journal of African cultural studies* 25.

<sup>37</sup> P Prinsloo 'Being an African: some queer remarks from the margins' in M Kearny (ed) *From conflict to recognition: Moving multiculturalism forward* (2012) 141-158.

<sup>38</sup> F Kalua (n 36 above) 26.

<sup>39</sup> KA Appiah *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture* (1992) 17.

<sup>40</sup> J Adibe *Who is an African? Identity, citizenship and the making of the African nation* (2006) 16.

Afrocentricity and Euro-centricity in which the Afrocentric contention confronts imperialism and pursues decolonisation in the hope of finding an essential cultural purity, while the Eurocentric refers to the foisting of western thought and cultural realities and perspectives on Africans.<sup>41</sup> Several scholars have noted the biases in the singular classification of Africa based on race, geography or consciousness. Kalua credits both Bhabha and Hall for their awareness that attempting to return to an uncontaminated cultural origin obscures the impact of transculturation that has taken place over the extended colonial period.<sup>42</sup> In this process both the coloniser and colonised are implicated in each other's discourse thus complicating the idea of origins.

The assertions for African identity have been propelled alongside a nationalist discourse. The nationalist project is constructed in two ways, the first is a convergence along the lines of common origin and the second is common symbolic heritage in the way of religion, customs, language or traditions.<sup>43</sup> The nation is highly gendered and built on what Anderson refers to as an imagined community of horizontal comradeship of the fraternity.<sup>44</sup> The words of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe in his Independence Day speech affirms this,

henceforth you and I must strive to adopt ourselves, intellectually and spiritually to the reality of our political change and to relate to each other as brothers bound one to the other by the bond of comradeship.<sup>45</sup>

While the nation citizen is male the nation itself is widely viewed as female. When under threat 'she' the nation is embodied by a woman that requires protection from violators seeking to intrude and penetrate her, both in the physical sense of her borders and the metaphorical sense of ideological imposition.<sup>46</sup> Women are tasked with the role of reproducing the nation both biologically and symbolically, constructing women more as instruments of the nation than citizens of it. As such in the context of the nation men and women have never been accorded equal entitlement.<sup>47</sup> The woman's body is constructed in a manner that idealises motherhood and excludes women who are not mothers along with those bearing sexualities that are not reproductively oriented.

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<sup>41</sup> JC Chukwuokolo Afrocentrism or eurocentrism: The dilemma of African development (2009) *OGIRISI: a New Journal of African Studies* 29.

<sup>42</sup> Kalua (n 36 above) 25.

<sup>43</sup> N Yuval-Davis *Gender and nation* (1997) 43.

<sup>44</sup> B Anderson 'Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism (1983) 49.

<sup>45</sup> SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni 'The Nativist Revolution and Development Conundrums in Zimbabwe' (2006) 1 *ACCORD Occasional Paper Series* 1-40.

<sup>46</sup> G Thaiss 'The conceptualization of social change through metaphors' (1978) *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 6.

<sup>47</sup> M Aarmo 'How homosexuality became unAfrican: the case of Zimbabwe' (1999) *Female desires: Same-sex relations and transgender practices across cultures* 256.

Nationalism in its attempt to construct a unified hegemonic national identity leads to the alienation of those that fall outside of this unified identity. Construction of the post-colonial nation state has produced the respectable sexual citizen. One that is ‘moral’ and ‘traditional’ free of Western perversions. This construction creates a hierarchy that treasures particular characteristics and demonises others. Rubin<sup>48</sup> refers to a sexual hierarchy constructed by nations in marking their identities and defining model sexual citizens of the nation. A contextual application of Rubin’s sexual hierarchy is explored in chapter four when reflecting on the experiences of lesbian women.<sup>49</sup> The conception of the respectable sexual citizen is a deliberate effort to create an exclusive African sexual identity that centralises and naturalises heteronormativity. National identities thus manifest themselves heavily in the bodily experiences of both the recognised and marginalised members of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation.

## 2.2 Gender and Africa

The manner in which national identity and other identities are marked on the bodies of persons necessitates focus on sexuality in Africa. The body has evolved into a site of reclaiming ‘Africanness’. This is not really a surprise given how political the body is, particularly the female body and the ways it is regulated, controlled, violated or protected. It is often celebrated when in



service of the collective by violently regulated when women autonomously enter public spaces.

Mcfadden discusses the re-domestication of women following the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe in a battle to assert a national culture of subservience of women and ways in which the women’s movement was the first space that allowed the assertion of an autonomous identity by women.<sup>50</sup> Women who went to battle and contributed in various ways to the liberation struggle were pushed back into domestic space. The representation of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Zimbabwe in figure 1 shows two male soldiers and a female one. The female soldier is

**Figure 1:** Tomb of the unknown soldier at the Zimbabwe national heroes acre wearing a dress and civilian shoes while her male

<sup>48</sup> GS Rubin ‘Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality’ in H Ablove et al (eds) *The lesbian and gay studies reader* (1984) (1993) 3-44.

<sup>49</sup> Further explored in chapter four.

<sup>50</sup> P Mcfadden ‘Becoming postcolonial: African women changing the meaning of citizenship’ (2005) 6 *Meridians Feminism, race and transnationalism* 9.

counterparts are in army uniform and combat boots which female soldiers also wore in combat. This symbol may be viewed as a post struggle attempt at re-domestication of women.

What is interesting about the sexual governmentality in post-independent Africa is how the sexual citizen's construction demonstrates not a liberation from colonial shackles but continuities in the use of Christianity and the law in regulating sexuality. These two brutal tools of colonialism have been appropriated by post-independence nationalist leaders and are now being used for the oppression and marginalisation of different groups in society. A historical reflection on sexualities in Africa may help illuminate contemporary regulation of sexuality. In this reflection it is not merely time and space that influences discourse but also power relations.

Contemporary African sexualities and identities are continually contested and negotiated. These sexualities and identities can be thought about in relation to how contemporary social, political, and legal realities are informed by or mirrored by events in the past. Having looked at the evolution of the model African sexual citizen, I now turn to the strong African woman stereotype.

The contemporary African woman carries multiple complex and sometimes contradictory identities. She is the impoverished, disease burdened, illiterate woman in a village. In other spaces she is the essentialised urban Nubian queen draped in exotic jewellery and many things in between. The most popular construction of citizenship and identity of the African woman however is that of the strong African woman. This strong woman sustains the family even in poverty. She nurtures and cares for the family while carrying unimaginable burdens. She is viewed as uniquely indestructible, a 'rock' as observed in the famous resistance song of 1956 in South Africa where women protested the introduction of passes, 'Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo' (you strike the women, you strike the rock).<sup>51</sup> This resistance song has become a symbol of the strength of African women.

What then can we learn from the past about this present-day stereotypical strong black woman? The African woman was certainly not the passive agent of colonial rule.<sup>52</sup> During the colonial period some African women were shaping the content of their lives through various adaptive ways. In instances, they converted to Christianity, engaged in temporary interracial relationships, resisted domination by maintaining distant relationships with colonial authorities all in a bid to survive brutal colonial realities. These negotiations have certainly contributed to the strong African woman narrative. While this strong African woman may appear to be a positive

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<sup>51</sup> 'History of women's struggle in South Africa | South African History Online.' Black Women's Federation. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/1956-womens-march-pretoria-9-august> (accessed 27 July 2016).

<sup>52</sup> DN Lwanga 'Women in African colonial histories' (2003) 58 *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 118.

affirmation of African women it is a source of neglect, violation and misrecognition. Where African women are entitled to services, support and protection by their states, the idea that they are strong and indestructible as well as the mothers of the nation means they are constantly left to harness this so called strength not only for their survival but also in holding up the nation.

The economic crisis in Zimbabwe presents a perfect example in which women's labour sustained families, communities and the nation. The degrading work that women were known to do in order to supplement household income prior to the economic crisis, such as buying and selling became the dominate means of survival in which a range of trade and quick return transactions known as *kukiya-kiya* proliferated and Jones explores this in depth in his writing.<sup>53</sup> In Kenya the green belt movement initiated by women whose energy needs were not being met by the state and whose agricultural produce was suffering due to environmental depletion took matters into its own hands.<sup>54</sup> In Liberia it was women who placed their bodies on the line in brokering elusive peace.<sup>55</sup> It is clear that the idea of women as mothers, nurturers and their reputation for making a way where there is none has contributed to the strong African woman narrative. This however cannot be allowed to be an excuse for state failure to deliver services to citizens while women carry the load.

State initiated clean-up operations in Zimbabwean cities such as '*Chipo chiroorwa*' ('Chipo, it is time to get married', compelling women to get married and occupy only domestic spaces) are a common response to women entering public spaces for personal not public interest. In this process women's mobility is heavily regulated. Arbitrary arrests of women moving unaccompanied at night are not infrequent, however such actions are not new. Colonial cities were the domain for white residents and black migrant workers (largely male) which left women as unrecognised in cities. This regulation observed in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Kenya also illuminated how white colonial officers collaborated with African male elders to control women's mobility.<sup>56</sup> Women who left rural villages were labelled as unrespectable as these women escaped the regulation of family elders and gained full control of their earnings in cities.<sup>57</sup> This resulted in stronger regulation of women's sexuality. It is no surprise therefore that same-sex sexual identities are considered unrespectable as they threaten male power and erase the financial benefit of bride wealth for male custodians.

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<sup>53</sup> J Jones 'Nothing is straight in Zimbabwe': The rise of the *kukiya-kiya* economy 2000–2008' (2010) 36 *Journal of Southern African Studies* 291.

<sup>54</sup> CM Allen Engendering Agency: Literacies, Social Action, And Wangari Maathai S Green Belt Movement.

<sup>55</sup> MK McCarthy 'Women's Participation in Peacebuilding: A Missing Piece of the Puzzle?' College of Arts and Sciences (2011).

<sup>56</sup> C Hungwe 'Putting them in their place: "respectable" and "unrespectable" women in Zimbabwean gender struggles' (19) 6 *Feminist Africa* 37.

<sup>57</sup> C Obbo *African women: their struggle for economic independence* (1986) 122.



### 2.3 Identities

This study begins from viewing identities as multiple, fluid and intersecting. Identities will be viewed as both based on material reality as well as heavily influenced by power dynamics. While identities are based on how individuals view themselves and make sense of the world around them, they are however also impacted by the ways in which an individual is perceived by others on the basis of that identity. Misrecognition is what arises when one's view of themselves is at odds with the way one is perceived by others. Misrecognition as well as recognition are based on the interplay between visible and invisible identities. As a result of misrecognition a person may compartmentalise parts of themselves in a bid to conceal their identity. They may also tilt and bend to try and fit the social perceptions of others despite this being potentially damaging to their emotional and mental wellbeing.

What is most troubling about identities is the manner in which many paradoxes are embodied in them particularly in relation to the way they emphasise commonalities and differences between people. Identities are equally paradoxical in how one manifests a sense of self, their recognition of others and the contradictions emergent from conflicting belongings. While identities separate others they can also be a basis for collective action for social change. Alcoff suggests that it is not difference that is divisive but the refusal to accept differences.

When I refuse to listen to how you are different from me, I am refusing to know who you are. But without understanding fully who you are, I will never be able to appreciate precisely how we are more alike than I might have originally supposed.

In examining movements based on identity politics Calhoun views such movements as progressive based on their ability to reject imposed and damaging identities.<sup>58</sup> He further posits that the politics of difference alone does not facilitate a going beyond the limitations of identity politics. Instead he suggests that both the claiming of identities and their deconstruction will perpetually coexist and impact each other. Said captures this when he writes,

Gone are the binary oppositions of the nationalist and imperialist enterprise. Instead we begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> CJ Calhoun *Social theory and the politics of identity* (1994) 21.

<sup>59</sup> EW Said *Culture and imperialism* (1993) xxvii.





## 2.4 Conclusion

Scholars like Mama<sup>60</sup> warn against the oversimplification and essentialisation of the discourses and practices of sexualities in Africa and instead promote that they be understood in their multiplicity and with sensitivity to context.<sup>61</sup> Reflecting on identities and sexualities in Africa sets the framework for understanding the ways in which lesbian identities have been produced in Zimbabwe. Observing Zimbabwe and drawing some parallels with South Africa we see how sexuality has become integral to citizenship. This chapter explored sexuality, identities and citizenship laying the foundation for the exploration of how lesbian identities have been and continue to be produced in Zimbabwe.

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<sup>60</sup> A Mama 'Is it ethical to study Africa? Preliminary thoughts on scholarship and freedom' (2007) 50 *African Studies Review* 1–26.

<sup>61</sup> S Tamale 'Researching and theorising sexualities in Africa' in S Tamale (ed) *African sexualities: A reader* (2011) 17.

## CHAPTER THREE: Production of lesbian identities in Zimbabwe

*'African "homosexualities" can never be comfortably slotted within identity politics carved out of Western "gay" and "lesbian" liberation struggles.....'* **Chantal Zabus**<sup>62</sup>

### 3 Introduction

Having engaged the ideas of Africanness, explored sexualities in Africa and the production and maintenance of identities, this chapter delves more specifically into the production of a lesbian identity in Zimbabwe. It will explore same-sex sexuality in Zimbabwe and the experiences of black lesbian women in Zimbabwe in an attempt to respond to the political and not just personal question of what it means to be non-heterosexual, woman and Zimbabwean.<sup>63</sup> In this process the chapter presents some of the findings from the 10 interviews conducted with lesbian identifying women in Harare. Struggles for recognition are the core of human identity as well as national identity as we will see in the ways lesbian women in Zimbabwe embody these struggles. In reflecting on the experiences of lesbian women we gain insight into how those sitting at societal margins hunger and strive for recognition.

The issue of same-sex activity in Zimbabwe is entwined in a complex highly layered socio-cultural history.<sup>64</sup> It consists of a history that in its complexity is also self-contradictory in various moments. The evidentiary pool for the existence of same-sex sexual practice is very shallow. As Bennet suggests, very little is known about the lives of our ancestors though there are hints that remain in language, art and the writings of colonial anthropologists. Colonialism entailed a great deal of movement, warfare, deprivation and loss that makes accurate tracing of a sexual history near impossible.<sup>65</sup> According to Mbembe, from about the fifteenth century it is not possible to construct distinctive historicity of societies on the continent as they are embedded in rhythms deeply conditioned by European domination.<sup>66</sup> In this statement Mbembe affirms that identities require a thinking at the margins as proposed by Hall particularly as the African continent slowly integrates with the postmodern and globalised world. The reality that African identity is not fixed creates room for a liminal view of the continent whose various identities constantly shift in and out of ontological focus both intra and internationally.<sup>67</sup> Through grounding contemporary realities in liminality Bhabha contextualises perplexing realities and creates a new point from which to reflect on identity.

<sup>62</sup> C Zabus *Out in Africa: Same-Sex Desire in Sub-Saharan Literatures & Cultures* (2013).

<sup>63</sup> MV Harris-Perry *Sister citizen: Shame stereotypes, and black women in America* (2011) 4.

<sup>64</sup> Unpublished: J Mudavanhu 'Attitude of the Methodist church in Zimbabwe to Homosexuality: Towards a socio-sexological theological investigation', unpublished Phd thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> J Bennet 'Subversion and Resistance: activist initiatives' *African sexualities: A reader* (2011).

<sup>66</sup> A Mbembe *On the postcolony* (2001) 9.

<sup>67</sup> F Kalua (n 36 above) 30.

While I do not subscribe to the notion of an essential lesbian identity I find instructive value in focusing on self-identified lesbians. In this exploration I foreground lesbian women rather than homosexual persons more generally as a means to visibilise what appears to be a lesbian disappearing act that has taken place within sexual and gender minority organising in Zimbabwe.<sup>68</sup>

### 3.1 Same-sex sexuality in Zimbabwe

The oldest evidence of same-sex activity in Zimbabwe lies in a cave near Guruve in Mashonaland Central province. Archaeologist Peter Garlake is credited with finding the painting of what appear to be ancestors of the modern day Khoisan which depicts what looks like several males engaging in sexual acts together.<sup>69</sup> The painting is thought to be at least 1000 years old but is potentially much older. The predecessors of the Khoisan were hunter-gathers and thus prone to famine by virtue of their lifestyle and had much to lose in being highly reproductive. Consequently they are believed to have regulated reproduction through non-procreative sex. The women are said to have had sex with other women using make-shift penises while the men masturbated each other or had anal sex.<sup>70</sup> These practices are believed to have been eliminated following intermarriages with Bantu speakers who were a labour reliant people involved in practices such as agriculture, making tools, pottery and keeping livestock.<sup>71</sup> The need for large volumes of labour made procreation a highly valued exercise among the Bantu and non-procreative sex was thus seen as wasteful and drew contempt.

It is important to state that Zimbabwe is not homogeneous contemporarily and neither were its historical communities and societies. Zimbabwe consists of various ethnicities with different cultures, beliefs and practices. Such variations are similarly reflected in relation to sexuality and particularly same-sex sexual practice. A senior male in the 1970s was interviewed about same-sex practice between women and he related a story about *VaNyemba* an 18<sup>th</sup> century intersexed woman whose sexual relations were with women. Among the Chihota<sup>72</sup> she is revered as both *mamuna* (husband/man) and *mbonga*.<sup>73</sup> *Mbonga* is a shona ritual attendant who brews beer for ancestral spirits at national and regional functions and does not marry.<sup>74</sup>

One must concede that oral history forms a major part of how information has been passed on, however it would be reckless to not acknowledge the challenges of oral history. Same-sex sexual

<sup>68</sup> T Myrdahl Lesbian visibility and the politics of covering in women's basketball game spaces (2011) 30 *Leisure Studies* 141.

<sup>69</sup> GALZ *Unspoken facts: A history of homosexualities in Africa* (2008) 24.

<sup>70</sup> M Epprecht *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (2004) 26.

<sup>71</sup> Epprecht (n 70 above) 27.

<sup>72</sup> The Chihota people come from Chihota village, a rural community in Marondera district in Mashonaland East province of Zimbabwe.

<sup>73</sup> Epprecht (n 70 above) 28.

<sup>74</sup> T Shoko 'Teaching African traditional religion at the University of Zimbabwe' in A Adogame et al (eds) *African tradition in the study of religion in Africa* (2012) 61.

practice is reported in numerous societies across the continent. Falk refers to same-sex sexual practice among the Khoi in Namibia and Angola.<sup>75</sup>

Though there is no evidence of same-sex practice between women as a way of life, many practices in different Zimbabwean cultures demonstrate that this practice was neither unheard of nor demonised in the way it grew to be with colonialism. In some communities female husbands were not an uncommon practice. Older women of high economic standing were allowed to marry and the women they married could inherit from them. Women who were unable to conceive could also marry a woman who would have children that were considered to be the older woman's children.<sup>76</sup>

The suggestion that homosexual acts are against 'African culture' is a misrepresentation of Africa as being static and monocultural with a unitary conception of desire. They have been constructed in contemporary Zimbabwe as a product of colonialism and therefore seen as not just unAfrican or unZimbabwean but really as antiAfrican and antiZimbabwean.<sup>77</sup> Not only has same-sex practice in Zimbabwe been marked as foreign it has increasingly become associated with imperial forces that finance same-sex behaviour as a means to pervert Zimbabwean morality. Homophobia has thus emerged as a site of displaced resistance to an imagined interference with nationalism wherein globalisation is thought to be threatening African Nationalism.<sup>78</sup>

The first black gay and lesbian association called 'Ngoni Chaidzo' was formed in 1994.<sup>79</sup> A turning point in Zimbabwean history in relation to homosexuality is the famous incident at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF) themed 'Human rights and justice', where the gays and lesbians association of Zimbabwe (GALZ) was ejected and the president proceeded to make a statement that gays and lesbians were worse than pigs and dogs.<sup>80</sup>

A malignant spirit of homophobia pervaded the nation following the book fair. Member of Parliament Chigwedere was among the homophobes, claiming that homosexuals are like a festering finger that must be cut off to preserve the rest of the body.<sup>81</sup> This statement by the Honourable Chigwedere is consistent with the idea that homophobia and criminalisation of same-sex sexual practice is about preservation of a 'traditional' national identity that is at risk of contamination. A

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<sup>75</sup> K Falk 'Homosexuality among natives of southwest Africa' in SO Murray & W Roscoe (eds) *Boy wives and female husbands: Studies of African homosexualities* (1998) 190.

<sup>76</sup> S O Murray & J M Carrier 'Woman-woman marriage in Africa' in (eds) S O Murray & W Roscoe *Boy wives and female husbands: Studies in African homosexualities* (1998) 256.

<sup>77</sup> O Phillips (n 6 above) 31.

<sup>78</sup> N Hoad *African Intimacies: Race Homosexuality and globalisation* (2007) 77.

<sup>79</sup> Epprecht (n 70 above) 178.

<sup>80</sup> C Dunto and M Palmberg *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa* (1996) 18.

<sup>81</sup> A Chigwedere 'Motion: The evil iniquitous practice of homosexualism and lesbianism' Hansard 28 September 1995.

statement by President Mugabe cements this idea, ‘we have our own culture and we must rededicate ourselves to our traditional values that make us human beings.’<sup>82</sup> While some have suggested that the attacks on lesbian and gay persons serves as a political tool by government to detract attention from the country’s political and economic challenges Phillips believes there is a more sinister intention. An intention to marginalise a minority group as a way to reinforce the idea of a hegemonic national identity.<sup>83</sup> This view by Phillips explains why other marginal groups such as sex workers, youth, squatters, unionists are similarly despised, vilified, monitored and harshly regulated by the state, because they sit outside the hegemonic identity.

### 3.1.1 Lesbian identities in Zimbabwe

Most African countries are marked by a dominant heterosexual identity. State sponsored homophobia is normative and strong identity assertions by people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered are on the increase.<sup>84</sup> The ‘homosexual problem’ is not merely about morality and culture. In many ways it is a historical issue concerned with a combination of the ways in which indigenous ethnic groups, colonial discourse and contemporary political identity assertions have contributed to the production of the homo and hetero-sexual identities.<sup>85</sup> It is only a historically grounded approach of complex historical development that can shed light on the dynamics and contours of same-sex identities and the ways in which they are recreated and reconstructed in contemporary Zimbabwe. The problem with the thesis of same-sex sexuality as a colonial invention is its denial of agency of homosexual persons who constantly produce their identities.

Lesbian and gay identities are invented, that is not in dispute, what is challenged is the insistence that homosexual Africans are the product of colonial corruption. Looking at Zimbabwe for example, I argue that it is not solely global LGBT movements that are driving appropriation of same-sex identities instead it is exclusion and marginalisation within the country that is driving appropriation. As a means of survival lesbian as well as gay persons are often forced to either be on the defensive asserting their identity or invisibilise themselves. Though sexuality is often a cultural and moral issue, lesbianism is much larger. It is both old and new, it is both historical and political given that it is an issue about the existence of illegitimate persons within a nation.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The Citizen 12 August 1995 (in press).

<sup>83</sup> Phillips (n 6 above) 89.

<sup>84</sup> Phillips (n 6 above) 89.

<sup>85</sup> SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni ‘For the nation to live the tribe must die: The politics of Ndebele identity and belonging in Zimbabwe’ in B Zewde (ed) *Society, state and identity in African History* (2008) 167.

<sup>86</sup> Ndlovu-Gatsheni (n 85 above) 191.

Homosexuality in Zimbabwe is gendered and racially contoured such that silences about black women lesbians creates an awareness of the discursive intersections of class, race, gender and sexuality.<sup>87</sup> This study recognises this and to the extent possible given the small scale of the research these intersections will be factored to the extent possible. Given that Zimbabwean criminal codes do not criminalise same-sex activity between women or the identity of lesbian there is very little to refer to in law in terms of the subject. That is not to say lesbian women do not have their fair share of run-ins with the state and law enforcement, it is that such incidents are more about harassment and intimidation than prosecution.

Who then is a ‘lesbian Zimbabwean woman’? I will explore recognition as it relates to lesbian women and then proceed to demonstrate the intentional ways in which lesbian women are misrecognised. There is no singular definition or construction of the Zimbabwean lesbian. Lesbian women in Zimbabwe are heterogeneous, the construction of their varied identities also influences their experiences of the identity. Some lesbian women identify as butch<sup>88</sup>, others as femme<sup>89</sup> while others merely as lesbian. When exploring the constructions of identities such as ‘butch’ that are more visibly marked this potentially displaces those women who do not necessarily look like what they are from the gaze of those who intend to represent their needs. This centralises the idea of the visible lesbian versus the non-visible lesbian.

In the LGBT movement gay men take centre stage to the neglect of other identities. Even within marginalised groups further marginalisation exists thus demonstrating that what is seen or visibilised is prioritised. In exploring lesbian identity attention will be paid both to what has been visible and non-visible. Those who look like what they are and those who could ‘pass’ for being other than what they are.

In order to understand what it means to be a lesbian identifying woman in Zimbabwe we must explore the concepts of sameness and difference. These concepts allow perspectives on identity that are complimentary in that sameness brings together individuals that see themselves as alike while difference separates people based on their unlikeness.<sup>90</sup> This can be overly simplistic if we fail to acknowledge the integral role that power plays in these constructions of identity and how sameness and difference become organised in a hierarchical manner in social contexts. Power influences which identities are normalised, visibilised and prioritised as well as which one’s are stigmatised or invisibilised.

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<sup>87</sup> O Phillips ‘Zimbabwean law and production of White man’s disease’ (1997) 6 *Social and legal studies* 471-491.

<sup>88</sup> This refers to the masculine gender identity of a lesbian woman.

<sup>89</sup> This refers to the feminine gender identity of a lesbian woman.

<sup>90</sup> M Bucholz & K Hall ‘Language and identity’ (2004) *ResearchGate* 369.

It therefore is crucial to pay close attention to the ways in which individuals understand their own identities. There is much to be gained from understanding how individuals experience their identity and not just how they are perceived by others particularly given the likelihood of misrecognition. The driving force when individuals come together and organise into a group is not a pre-existing, recognisable similarity but agency and power.<sup>91</sup> The production of lesbian identities in Zimbabwe may be seen as such an act of agency and collective claiming of power by individuals constructed as other. This is observed in creation of spaces by lesbian women in Zimbabwe. The Action Agenda<sup>92</sup> for example is one such example of an informal space created by and for non-heterosexual women and gender non-conforming individuals where the priority is described by a member as:

to live out our feminism, we just needed a space where it was ok to be all that we are and not only that but also take action against social injustices. The action is key in the name of our collective.<sup>93</sup>

Although identity work often consists of obscuring differences among individuals with a shared identity it paradoxically serves to reify differences between in-group members and those outside the group given that similarity is inherently premised on otherness. In a sense the assertion of the Zimbabwean woman as heterosexual is partly responsible for the production of the lesbian identity. Independence in 1980 ushered in excitement and hope for recognition. Diverse citizens of Zimbabwe were keen to assert their liberated status and hoped for treatment as full citizens.

The first lesbian collective in Zimbabwe called the Monday Night group was formed in 1982 as a support group of lesbian women.<sup>94</sup> The Monday Night group consisted of a small group of white women that grew over a couple of years and disintegrated in 1984. In 1988 a new club was formed, the Women's Cultural Club (WCC) which then faded away a few years later. 1988 is also the year in which the GALZ was formed to provide a social space for gay and lesbian people.<sup>95</sup>

At this time the HIV/AIDS pandemic was at a height and the recognition of men who have sex with men (msm) increased. This contributed to the dominance of msm/gay men as a 'priority population' in combating HIV. Even within the GALZ space women began to take a back seat. Lesbian women were out of the spotlight. In some ways this meant they could live private lives without fear of state/public harassment. However in the private spaces, violence, be it sexual, emotional or physical was taking place alongside limited access to information and services such as

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<sup>91</sup> Bucholz & Hall (n 90 above) 371.

<sup>92</sup> Pseudonym for a Zimbabwean lesbian feminist collective.

<sup>93</sup> Debbie, interview 27 July 2016.

<sup>94</sup> B Clark 'Unspoken rules' in IGLHRC Book Zimbabwe (2003) 231.

<sup>95</sup> Clark (n 94 above) 231-232.

health services. What lesbian women benefited from not being publicly visibilised, they lost in terms of recognition and protection. The stereotypes about women as nurturing carers also obscured intimate partner violence in lesbian relationships.

### 3.2 Personal answers to political questions

Tsitsi Tiripano is the alias of Poliyana Mangwi, the first black woman to join GALZ. The story of Tsitsi Tiripano offers insights into the political operations of power, hierarchy, oppression and liberation. It shows the ways in which lesbian women have to navigate derogatory assumptions about their nature and identity. In an interview with 'Off our backs' a feminist news journal Tsitsi relates her early experiences of a sexuality she practiced without having a name for. She had no idea that there was a name given to women like her. She had relationships with women for years before she joined GALZ where she learnt of the word lesbian.<sup>96</sup>

It was in 1979 during the liberation war when I met a female comrade. We used to share the same blanket in the bush. After three days of sharing the blanket we started kissing. She was my first lover and that was before I knew there was a word "lesbian". I just thought it was a game. I found out that I had feelings for girls rather than for men. I got jealous when I saw this comrade friend of mine talking to other girls.<sup>97</sup>

Tsitsi's story tells of desire and expression that existed outside of an identity. Many lesbian women share similar experiences of desire and expression that was not associated with an identity. For some women though the identity is key to who they are and how they then navigate desire and expression.

I think actually identifying and relating to the term lesbian came a bit later in my life when I felt and understood the politics of sexuality and identities and claimed it, but before that, from the time I was young especially starting high school I loved girls, I loved women and my first sexual experience was with my classmate, a girl.<sup>98</sup>

Non-heterosexual women in Zimbabwe identify in various ways including queer, bisexual and lesbian. In using the term lesbian I remain cognisant of the varied experiences of lesbian women as impacted not only by their sexual orientation but also by their gender expression. There are numerous other factors that impact experience however limitations of this study necessitate that I look particularly at gender expression as it relates to visibility.

I was beaten up by some boys from the neighbourhood who thought I was trying to be a man. I was angry and hurt but could not go to the police. I feared that once the issue of my sexual orientation came up, it would be me in the police cells and not the boys who had violated me.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> T Tiripano & J Smith 'Fighting for lesbian and gay rights in Zimbabwe' 30 *Off our backs* (2000) 6.

<sup>97</sup> Tiripano (n 96 above) 6.

<sup>98</sup> Patience, interview 27 July 2016.



Max's experience draws light to identity as it is constructed by others. Failure to perform gender in the ways stereotypically defined as female marked Max visibly as transgressing gender norms and also as lesbian. This is largely because a gender 'inverted' woman is the stereotypical mark of a lesbian woman. Whether they are lesbian or not, they will still be perceived as such. In this case one's identity is generated largely through perception. For some women once marked as lesbian they attempt to fit themselves into the identity, modifying their appearance and behaviour to suit the dominant ideas of that identity. An example of this is Sibó a lesbian woman living in the Avenues area of Harare city centre who recalls the first day she walked into the GALZ offices in the early 2000s.

I liked girls and one of my friends knew this because she too liked girls. She invited me to attend a social event at GALZ where a regular member told me that I was supposed to be the man in my relationships because of my appearance and that I should never allow a 'girl' to hit on me, remove my clothes or touch certain parts of my body. I was the one to do those things to her. "*Mukapusa munokwirwa tsano*", (if you are not careful you will be sexually dominated by a femme) were her exact words.' Then she proceeded to undo my dreadlocks that were styled 'too pretty' for a '*tsano*'<sup>100</sup>. From then on I began to behave in more masculine ways and assumed the role of a man in my relationships.<sup>101</sup>

Sibó is one of many women whose identities were co-constructed through both the influence of others and her own subsequent appropriation based on the privileges the newly constructed identity awarded her. What is apparent from this experience is that there are strong external influences in how individual lesbian identities were and are being produced. The context in which these identities were emerging was predominantly heteronormative such that many lesbian women felt compelled to identify as either butch or femme. It was not conceivable to just be.

There is much to be explored about the binaries that manifest in lesbian identities. The idea of the 'proper' (stereotypical) lesbian still persists, the gender invert who has never consensually had sex with a man, has no children and would never become pregnant, additionally she is the provider and protector in a relationship. As problematic as this construction is, many try to fit into it. This 'proper' identity and the idea of any other proper identities is like being forced to stand upright in a crooked room. Cis-gender lesbians are looked on not as lesbians but as women who date lesbians. They are not lesbians in their own right. In an interview with Patience this came up,

Within the lesbian circles it is assumed there should be clear roles and identities in terms of butch and femme, who plays man and who plays woman or who is top and who is bottom. That heteronormative way of thinking is

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<sup>99</sup> Max interview 28 July 2016.

<sup>100</sup> *Tsano* is a Shona word that means brother in law. It is sometimes used by butch identifying lesbians to address each other.

<sup>101</sup> Sibó interview 29 July 2016.



very dominant. It has influenced a lot in my own personal relationships and even the work that I do. It has been difficult to even express how I feel to a woman of my choice as I am labelled within the community as femme and my dating a femme is viewed as confusion.<sup>102</sup>

When identities whether chosen or imposed create limitations on how one can fully express and live out their desires as is described by Patience their value becomes questionable. Identities are helpful when they facilitate recognition, expression and equal distribution of resources. The moment they become confining and oppressive to those that bear the identity and those that fall outside of it then they not only lose their usefulness but become a tool for oppression themselves.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Lesbian identities in Zimbabwe originated from Northern sexual identity discourse which came through donor funding to aid organising by sexual and gender minorities. Globalisation and the travel of ideas also aided this production but most importantly nationalist rejection of homosexuality and assertions of heterosexuality pushed non-heterosexual women to affirm their sexual identities. Oppression and repression have also led to identity appropriation as an act of resistance. In this process these identities have been helpful in building solidarities and community but in many ways they have remained trapped in heteronormativity. This is observed largely in the language of the women interviewed and their ideas of butch and femme. Lesbian identities have emerged from diverse experiences and are continuously evolving. As asserted by Dank ‘the development of a sexual identity is dependent on the meanings that the actor attaches to the concepts of homosexual and homosexuality’.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Patience interview 27 July 2016.

<sup>103</sup> BM Dank ‘Coming out in the Gay World,’ in MP Levine (ed) Gay men: The sociology of male homosexuality (1979) 130.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Visibility

*Visibility is a trap – Michel Foucault*<sup>104</sup>

### 4 Introduction

The few experiences of lesbian women highlighted in the last chapter begin to surface the subject of visibility and invisibility. This chapter first explores visibility and the recognition theory as it relates to lesbian women before exploring the intentional ways in which lesbian women in/visibilise themselves and the ways in which they are recognised and misrecognised.

This study occasionally highlights the convergence between a global/Western lesbian visibility discourse and more localised views and experiences of visibility as conveyed through the narratives of lesbian women in Zimbabwe. This study commits to demonstrating the capacity of lesbian women in Zimbabwe to create their own images and carve their own social space. Using a context specific modification of Rubin's sexual hierarchy as an analytic device for explaining social and political attitudes as well as the experiences of lesbian women in Zimbabwe I will revisit some of the narratives in the preceding chapter. In this process unearthing the impact of in/visibility on the lives of lesbian women in Zimbabwe.

#### 4.1 Understanding in/visibility

A focus on visibility and invisibility of an identity allows reflection on the ways in which a person sees herself as well as the manner in which she is perceived by others. These perceivers may include the state, the dominant or 'normative' group as well as others belonging to the same identity group. One is therefore unable to engage the issue of in/visibility without raising the question of gaze. Gaze complicates the issue of in/visibility in that it holds the possibility of recognising or ignoring identity markers.

Samuels highlights that invisibility is often used interchangeably with non-visibility however there is a slight distinction between the two terms where 'invisible' surfaces an oppressive and marginal reality while non-visible is more descriptive of an unmarked social identity that is not easily perceivable.<sup>105</sup> There however is an overlap between the two which blurs the distinction. For example a cis-gender lesbian tends to remain invisible since lesbian is non-visible in the absence of performance. Invisible in this study will therefore be used to refer to both invisibility and non-visibility bearing in mind the marginal tone of invisibility.

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<sup>104</sup> M Foucault *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) 200.

<sup>105</sup> EJ Samuels 'My body, my closet: Invisible disability and the limits of coming-out discourse' (2003) 9 *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 233-255.



Visibility itself emerged historically from the production of visible differences on the body and the scrutinising of the bodies of minorities through science and medicine. In this process comparative anatomy was used as a means to try and mark the bodies of black people, women, sex workers (prostitutes as they were derogatorily referred to) and homosexual persons among other marginalised groups.<sup>106</sup> This process turned the body into a site of marking identity and difference.

Alcoff offers an explanation for the importance of exploring in/visibility when she states that ‘in our excessively materialist society, only what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth.’<sup>107</sup> What she highlights here is that in/visibility is constantly at play in daily life and that it is problematic to overlook this. If one begins from Alcoff’s idea that only the visible gains the privilege of acceptance as truth then when one does not look like what they are or one looks like what they are not, a complication emerges.<sup>108</sup> It is out of this complication that the ‘passing’<sup>109</sup> subject is born. Whether through deliberate effort ‘covering’<sup>110</sup>, not carrying recognisable identity markers or carrying a misread marker an individual can pass for what they are not. Attention has turned to this passing subject as critical theorists have started viewing social visibility not simply in relation to social recognition and visible performance of difference but also as a site for political agency with the capacity to deconstruct foundational categories of identity like race, gender and desire. Tied to this deconstruction is a surfacing of an ‘us’ or ‘we’ discourse to which one either belongs or is excluded from.<sup>111</sup> This idea is deceptive in that people do not fit neatly into categories of identity.

Visibility is both a means of segregating and oppressing human groups and the means of manifesting unity and resistance.<sup>112</sup> For those bearing disparaged identities the skilful practice of concealing them is not uncommon. Through visibility, lesbian women in Zimbabwe choose to carry their own burdens rather than having the burdens of others heaped on their backs. In carving out the lives that suit them, lesbian women resist conformity to limiting and often oppressive expectations of others.<sup>113</sup> Yoshino adheres to Brown’s assertion that the idea of ‘covering’ is not denial or hiding

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<sup>106</sup> L Walker *Looking like what you are: sexual style, race, and lesbian identity* (2001) 2.

<sup>107</sup> Alcoff (n 19 above) 6.

<sup>108</sup> Walker (n 106 above) 8.

<sup>109</sup> Passing refers to possessing traits that could lead to the assumption that one fits the normative or dominant identity.

<sup>110</sup> Covering refers to actively seeking to disguise one’s identity.

<sup>111</sup> Unpublished: N Sevinc ‘In/visibility of identities and identities and identity politics: The case of invisible disabilities’ unpublished MA dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2013.

<sup>112</sup> L Alcoff (n 19 above) 7.

<sup>113</sup> T Myrdahl (n 69 above) 141.

of sexual identity instead it is the determined silencing of performative identity spatially and temporally for tactical reasons.<sup>114</sup>

What is essential to this study is the realisation that for people with stigmatising differences visibility can be a response to silence and erasure, it can be symbolic of a desire for justice as well as a reclaiming and celebration of what has been condemned in them. In this process individuals reject the cultural imperative to assimilate and perhaps even disappear completely.<sup>115</sup> This is largely true in the American context from which Walker writes however there are also exceptions to this.

In contexts where visibility creates the risk of individual and structural violence or even the threat of death, invisibility can become a form of passive resistance protecting an individual from hostility. This challenges the idea that visibility is always positive, progressive, necessary or even desirable.<sup>116</sup> In the process of individual negotiations of in/visibility it is evident that invisibility can represent security and privacy for an individual while unfortunately holding larger social hierarchies firmly in place. Seemingly private acts carry with them moral as well as political tensions.

## 4.2 Theoretical framework

Some theoretical perspectives are necessary in understanding how lesbian women in Zimbabwe both develop and deploy strategies of visibility and invisibility. I will draw on postcolonial feminist theories in exploring the disruption of divisive colonial constructs that were employed to control indigenous Africans. I will reflect on heterosexism within African feminist theorising and how it demonstrates the visibility politics negotiated by African feminists through the ways they either include or exclude lesbian women along with other sexual and gender minorities. Additionally I will review questions of visibility and invisibility of lesbian women within queer theorising. In these reflections I question the assumption that LGBT movement ideologies, identities and ways of organising are appropriated from a ‘more developed’ global North to an ‘underdeveloped’ global South. The scarcity of research on lesbian identity and organising has more to do with political repression, homophobia and limited resources than with a so-called ‘underdevelopment’ of Africa.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> K Yoshino *Covering: The hidden assault on our civil rights* (2006).

<sup>115</sup> L Walker (n 106 above) 7.

<sup>116</sup> L Schlossberg ‘Rites of passing’ in MC Sanchez & L Schlossberg *Passing: Identity and interpretation in sexuality, race and religion* (2001) 3.

<sup>117</sup> M Ungar ‘State Violence and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Rights. (2000) 22 *New Political Science* 61-75.

#### 4.2.1 Postcolonial feminist theories

Spivak points out that silence is analogous to invisibility in that historical narratives omit women and by extension sexual and gender minorities in colonial and ‘postcolonial’ societies as publicly visible subjects.<sup>118</sup> This omission of women is present even in postcolonial scholarship however some postcolonial feminists such as McClintock and Mcfadden challenge the masculinist bias present in some postcolonial thought. In the way that postcolonial feminists engage gender bias they also engage ethnocentric biases in the theorising by Northern feminists which asserts a singular category of ‘women’ in a bogus universalisation that does not distinguish differences in histories and power imbalances among women.<sup>119</sup>

Western feminist theory is also criticised by postcolonial feminist theorising for the establishment of homogenised women’s experiences of victimisation and subjugation.<sup>120</sup> Mohanty adheres to this thinking in her questioning of the appropriateness of the category of ‘women’ as a homogenising category that robs women in the global South of their history and political agency.<sup>121</sup> Black women in different contexts face a variety of connected oppressions which must be recognised when attempting to visibilise their experiences and in recognising women as having agency and having influenced history in their own right. A restoration of women’s agency can be done in various ways one of which according to Nhongo-Simbanegavi is examining the participation of women in anticolonial and nationalist struggles.<sup>122</sup>

In recognising women as not just collateral damage but deliberate targets of colonialism and nationalist discourses postcolonial feminists begin to tease out how the agency of women including lesbian women in post-independent states can challenge persisting colonial inequalities. In exploring visibility and invisibility as negotiated by lesbian women in Zimbabwe I bear in mind Alexander’s assertion that in examining social movements there is great importance in understanding the socio-political context in which they originate and as such I utilise theories cautiously recognising their origins are different from the context in which they are being applied.

#### 4.2.2 African feminisms

African feminisms have done well to point out nationalist, patriarchal and colonialist systems that have invisibilised women. Surprisingly though, sexual and gender minorities within African feminisms remain invisible. Attempts to preserve an acceptable image of feminism that is

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<sup>118</sup> GC Spivak *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1988) 311.

<sup>119</sup> McClintock (n 24 above) 86.

<sup>120</sup> C Bulbeck *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women’s Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (1998) 14.

<sup>121</sup> CT Mohanty *Feminism without Borders: Decolonising Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003) 333-334.

<sup>122</sup> J Nhongo-Simbanegavi *For Better or Worse? Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle* (2006).

consistent with African nationalisms might be partly responsible for this distancing. Such apologetic stances lead to a neutralisation of gender in struggles for liberation and explains the relegation of women's issues to a subordinate role after independence. A strong women's movement emerged in Zimbabwe following independence in response to attempts to re-domesticate women. This is not unique to Zimbabwe as similar trends are observed in the region for example in South Africa.<sup>123</sup> While this energy may have been sustained in South Africa, Zimbabwe records some demobilisation which in my opinion is rooted in the states appropriation of women's rights discourse and national attempts to mainstream gender in a manner that has depoliticised women's rights.

An aspect of sexuality and gender identity that African feminists have neglected is homosexuality.<sup>124</sup> This is made apparent by the ways in which heterosexism and heteronormativity goes unquestioned in some African feminist theorising which subsequently invisibilises non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming African women. An example is Amadiume's argument that woman-to-woman marriages never involved same-sex sexual contact and how this has not been engaged as a potentially heterosexist claim.<sup>125</sup> For some African feminists homosexuality among African women is not a reality such that they see taking a stance on sexual and gender identity related rights as unnecessarily threatening the reputation and successes that feminism has earned. Some African feminists however are critiquing heterosexism and are supporting LGBT organising.<sup>126</sup> Here African feminism provides a means for understanding how heterosexism influences visibility of lesbian women.

### 4.2.3 Queer theory

Queer theory has engaged with visibility for years and positions visibility and invisibility as mutually dependent. Using queer theory I reflect on how visibility and invisibility operate differently for individuals and for collective political organising. I will also bear in mind Bourdieu who looks closely at not just visibility but recognition which he refers to as 'visible invisibility' in which one seeks to be recognised as but not reduced entirely to a particular identity. Bourdieu thus questions whether the assertion by sexual and gender minorities to be awarded the same rights as heterosexuals does not take sexual and gender minorities into public invisibility, a position from which he fears fighting homophobia, intolerance and discrimination might be challenging.

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<sup>123</sup> Mcfadden (n 50 above) 9.

<sup>124</sup> A Ampofo et al 'Women's and Gender Studies in English-Speaking Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of Research in the Social Sciences' (2004) 18 *Gender and society* 685-714.

<sup>125</sup> WN Njambi & WE O'Brien 'Revisiting 'Woman-Woman Marriage': Notes on Gikuyu Women.'(2000) *NWSA Journal* 1-23.

<sup>126</sup> M Machera 'Opening a Can of Worms: A Debate on Female Sexuality in the Lecture Theatre' in S Arnfred (ed) *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa* (2004) 157-170.



### 4.3 Lesbian experiences of recognition and misrecognition

In a country, citizens require and desire more than fair distribution of resources. They also need their humanity and uniqueness to be acknowledged in meaningful ways and often people make a great many sacrifices to gain that recognition.<sup>127</sup> Fraser suggests that recognition of race, gender identity and sexual identity goes beyond the self-actualisation of an individual into distributive justice politics where misrecognition illuminates institutionalised patterns of cultural value that hinder equal participation in social life.<sup>128</sup> The realities of lesbian women in Zimbabwe demonstrate this. They exemplify a contextualised understanding of Rubin's sexual hierarchy that resonates largely with the normalisation and privileging of 'heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, bodies only and vanilla'. Some variations of this 'charmed circle' exist in various contexts in Africa and these include the presence of polygyny and not monogamy within the privilege and normalised sphere that Rubin calls the charmed circle. Non-monogamous relations that benefit community through facilitating reproduction where monogamous unions have not resulted in children are also sanctioned though they are kept secret. Additionally cross generational sex consisting of an older man and a younger woman would also exist in the charmed circle. Tamale critiques Rubin's hierarchy suggesting that it does not adequately address the nuances of the charmed and outer circle for example, the ways in which those belonging to the inner circle could still be subject to discrimination and violation without justice as exemplified by attitudes towards marital rape.<sup>129</sup>

Lesbian women fall far outside the charmed circle for numerous reasons. Kudzi describes her engagement with Rubin's sexual hierarchy in family conversations on marriage and procreating,

I have been called names for being a lesbian by my mother who would rather not know anything about that part of my life. Other family members who do not know I am a lesbian treat me normally constantly asking when I will get married in the same way that they ask all my heterosexual cousins. It makes me feel like life is easier when people do not know. That way they treat you normally.<sup>130</sup>

Kudzi's mother's frustration comes from the fear that Kudzi will not have children as homosexuals are thought to be averse to procreating.

My mother's biggest worry is that I will not give her grandchildren. Even if I did not get married but had a child she would be happy. She despises my sexuality because to her it is what stands between her and a grandchild.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> M Harris-Perry (n 63 above) 36.

<sup>128</sup> N Fraser 'Social Justice in the age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation' (1996) 17 *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict and World Order* 38.

<sup>129</sup> Tamale (n 61 above) 17.

<sup>130</sup> Kudzi interview 28 July 2016.

<sup>131</sup> Tino interview 28 July 2016.



Homosexual persons are also seen as promiscuous and as commercial sex workers based on the belief that it is a practice African persons only engage in for financial benefit, though this is truer for gay men than lesbian women. Ndai shared the following,

People think we have sex with other women for money. I have friends that do that kind of thing but not all lesbians are ‘prostitutes’ (sex workers). For femme’s like me you get called *hure*<sup>132</sup> all the time especially by butch lesbians who think we are also sleeping with men.<sup>133</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, the visible existence of same-sex couples creates discomfort and falls outside the charmed circle because it surfaces in the minds of many, questions about sexual practice and the mechanics of sex which is usually shrouded in societal silence.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

In/visibility in the ways it manifests as passing and recognition demonstrates the instability of identities. However in the absence of alternative ways in which to make sense of oneself and the world identity continues to be a functional category that can be used as a concept under erasure. While we refer to identity as unstable the experiences of individuals based on their claimed, imposed or perceived identities demonstrated that this construction is in fact a reality, albeit a problematic one.

Visibility has the ability to assure and affirm while at the same time it can destabilise threaten and destroy an individual. Invisibility through passing has the potential to provide protection as well as access while invisibility that result from misrecognition can eliminate individuals from cultural consciousness and deny them the ability to participate fully in social life as equals. In/visibility also carries the additional nuance of location and context which greatly influence how both invisibility and visibility are experienced by a person carrying a marginalised identity.

Postcolonial feminist theory presented a helpful tool for analysis in exploring how visibility and invisibility can be utilised as a means of challenging power for example through ‘invisible’ micro-level protest. On the other hand it demonstrates how invisibility of black lesbian women in Zimbabwe occurs through their denial of access to social and political rights institutions. It also became apparent that marginalised groups can use visibility and invisibility to advance their desired personal and political agendas in strategic moments.

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<sup>132</sup> Shona word meaning slut or promiscuous. It is also commonly used as a derogatory term to refer to sex workers.

<sup>133</sup> Ndai interview 27 July 2016.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Lesbian identity and human rights

*'To deny people their human rights is to challenge their humanity'* Nelson Mandela<sup>134</sup>

### 5 Introduction

This chapter sets out to inquire whether human rights have contributed to the visibility of lesbians and lesbian identity in Zimbabwe. Additionally it will reflect on whether homosexual men and homosexual identity has been visibilised much more than lesbian women and lesbian identity. The chapter will start out by briefly exploring human rights contribution to lesbian women and lesbian identity elsewhere in the world.

This exploration is necessitated by the role that human rights have taken in sexual minority rights particularly in regard to sexual orientation and gender identity. Human rights violations based on people's real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity continue to take place the world over in various political, cultural and religious contexts. These violations are the product of individual actions as well as structural and systemic violence that manifests in discriminatory laws and practices in many countries where criminalisation of expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity continues. As Ngwena and Durojaye aptly put it 'despite drawing sustenance from international human rights jurisprudence the realisation of sexual and reproductive rights in the African region is often precarious'.<sup>135</sup> This is tied to on-going debate about the nature of human rights which has led to the formation of a pair of dichotomies, these being universalism/relativism and individualist/collectivist. Where countries in the region lean in relation to these dichotomies has greatly influenced the position of sexual and reproductive rights in that context with most African states pushing for relativism and collectivism.

#### 5.1 International human rights

When you presume, you are not treating me as the person I am; when you do not presume, you are treating me as the person I am in a minimal sense; when you recognise and respond to the person I am, you are treating me as the person I am in a maximal sense.<sup>136</sup>

This statement by Spellman summarises the struggle for recognition by LGBT activists the world over. It implies the value of recognising individuals through understanding how they see themselves and what needs they have as opposed to treating people based on assumptions or stereotypes about groups of people. This is the same kind of recognition that Harris-Perry describes

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<sup>134</sup> N Mandela 'The Mandela visit: Excerpts from Mandela speech to joint meeting of congress' 27 June 1990 *The New York Times*.

<sup>135</sup> C Ngwena & E Durojaye 'An introduction' in N Ngwena & E Durojaye (eds) *Strengthening the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the African region through human rights* (2014).

<sup>136</sup> E Spellman 'On Treating Persons as Persons' (1978) 88(2) *Ethics* 160.

in her book *Sister Citizen*. Harris-Perry describes how recognition emphasises the interconnections between individuals and groups and how individuals from marginalised groups desire recognition of their group but also seek to assert their distinctiveness from the group. Chido highlights this when she says

as a lesbian I want to be understood as lesbian because I cannot escape the realities of being a lesbian in a country like Zimbabwe but at the same time I am more than my sexual identity and do not want to be seen only as lesbian.<sup>137</sup>

In this sense recognition means neither being blind to nor blinded by identity differences.<sup>138</sup> This is also key in engaging a human rights discourse to assert rights for sexual minorities.

Human rights took root between 1945 and 1966 during which period the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Universal Declaration)<sup>139</sup> came into being. They were further elaborated in the adoption of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>140</sup> and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)<sup>141</sup>. These three instruments were foundational to human rights discourse such that together with the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR<sup>142</sup> they became known as the ‘International Bill of Rights’.<sup>143</sup>

In this period Europe put into place a regional human rights system while African nations were increasingly acquiring independence and as they gained independence they joined the United Nations (UN) as an affirmation of independence. This process was marked by a preoccupation with what Viljoen refers to as ‘seat independence’ which reified colonial borders. The absence of reconfiguration following independence favoured the West who were also in control of international law. Mutua suggests that the human rights frame may be well-intentioned however it is Eurocentric in that the norms and cultures to which Non-western states are called to participate are European and either imposed or assimilated in a continuation of the colonial project.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Chido interview 29 July 2016.

<sup>138</sup> M Harris-Perry (n 63 above) 39.

<sup>139</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III) (10 December 1948).

<sup>140</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI), UN Document A/6316 (16 December 1966) entered into force on 3 January 1976.

<sup>141</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI), UN Document A/6316 (16 December 1966) entered into force on 3 January 1976.

<sup>142</sup> Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

<sup>143</sup> F Viljoen ‘Africa’s contribution to the development of international human rights and humanitarian law’ (2001) 1 *African Human Rights Law Journal* 19.

<sup>144</sup> M Mutua ‘Savages, Victims and Saviours: The metaphor of human rights’ (2001) 42 *Harvard International Law Journal* 204.

Viljoen on the other hand believes that Africa has contributed to the development of human rights and humanitarian law. In his assertion Viljoen refers particularly to the African Charter<sup>145</sup> as disrupting the dichotomies inherent in the human rights frame of individual v collective, rights v duties, enforceable v un-enforceable, first generation v second and third generation rights.<sup>146</sup> The inclusion of individual's and peoples' in the language of the African charter disrupts the dichotomies that have marked human rights since the 1970s alongside the parallel articulation of first, second and third generation rights.

While there is merit in Viljoen's assertion it is more apparent to me that what African states succeeded in doing was developing a framework that better suited their needs and desires based on the cultures and practices of the region. The African Charter does not shift the international human rights frame instead it adapts it. In spite of this African states are still held to the standards of the international human rights instruments that they have ratified and which remain stuck in the binaries challenged by the African charter.

## 5.2 Universality v relativism

In closely knit communities, as they existed in what is now Africa, the mutual respect and value of another's life was taken for granted and did not require formal determination because members of the society were socialised into their roles.<sup>147</sup> Deviation carried the risk of exclusion and isolation from one's group to which identities was largely tied. This mechanism is such that there was no need for an articulation of rights and responsibilities in the form of rights. As such it is evident that principles such as human dignity existed in African societies long before they were articulated as human rights. Here I do not seek to privilege these indigenous arrangements as being superior to contemporary constructions of human rights nor do I seek to glorify contemporary human rights as the ideal. Instead like Cobbah I ask whether given the Western biases of international human rights instruments they can meaningfully be applied to people of diverse non-Western cultures.<sup>148</sup>

Experiences of sexuality can become essentialised by a universal human rights approach which may limit the rights of the most marginalised within the sexual and gender minority community.<sup>149</sup> A major obstacle to the incorporation of sexual rights into international rights has been the challenge to the validity of human rights particularly contestation related to the universality of

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<sup>145</sup> African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted 27 June 1981, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982) entered into force 21 Oct 1986

<sup>146</sup> F Viljoen (n 143 above) 20.

<sup>147</sup> F Viljoen *International human rights law in Africa* (2007) 5.

<sup>148</sup> JA Cobbah 'African values and the human rights debate: An African perspective' (1987) 310 *Human Rights Quarterly* 9.

<sup>149</sup> Unpublished: JS Dillon 'Ugandan sexualities: Queering identity, human rights, and conflict resolution' *unpublished MA dissertation, American University, 2013.*

human rights. This is exemplified by the language of cultural relativism and neo-colonialism employed by nationalist states in denouncing homosexuality. Cmeil however then suggests that if human rights language is not easily communicated across cultures then its strength lies in its communication within cultures.<sup>150</sup> In this statement Cmeil promotes vernacularisation of human rights in which human rights are pursued through indigenous cultural perspectives.

Cultural relativism is problematic in its own multiple ways, here I provide only two examples, the first being that it ignores the evolution of cultures and the effects of globalisation. The second is that it often essentialises cultures treating them as homogenous without paying attention to the ways in which cultures are heterogeneous, changing and contested. A compromise between the essentialisms created by both universalism and relativism is therefore necessary.

### 5.3 Milestones for same-sex sexualities

A huge debt is owed to brave activists the world over who in challenging and dangerous contexts continued to articulate claims for equality, justice, non-discrimination and citizenship among other rights for the betterment of the lives of sexual minorities.<sup>151</sup> There is also evidence of increased academic and judicial interpretations of human rights in relation to sexuality. This is noted through published academic work and progressive decisions made by national courts and regional human rights bodies such as the European Union. While there are successes to celebrate I will also note some of the resultant setbacks.

March 1994 was epochal with the ground-breaking decision by the Human Rights Committee (HRC)<sup>152</sup> in *Toonen v Australia* in which Tasmanian laws criminalising all sexual relations between men were held to be in breach of the ICCPR.<sup>153</sup> The non-discrimination provision of the ICCPR was interpreted as including sexual orientation. One of the key articles in question Article 26 reads:

All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origins, property, birth, or other status.<sup>154</sup>

In the decision, sexual orientation was not read as being included in 'other status' instead it was qualified as being included in the definition of sex which is enumerated in the provision. This

<sup>150</sup> K Cmeil 'The Recent History of Human Rights.' (2004) 109 *The American Historical Review* 117-135.

<sup>151</sup> CF Stychin 'Same-Sex Sexualities and the Globalisation of Human Rights Discourse' (2004) 49 *Mcgill Law Journal* 953.

<sup>152</sup> Human Rights Committee General Assembly Resolution 60/251.

<sup>153</sup> Communication 488/1992, *Toonen v Australia*, UNHR Committee (31 March 1994) para 8.7.

<sup>154</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI), UN Document A/6316 (16 December 1966) entered into force on 3 January 1976 Article 6.

decision marked the first universal level recognition of gay rights and provided authoritative reference for future cases. A range of successful cases followed after *Toonen v Australia* however sexual orientation and gender identity continue to be contentious sites of struggle in many countries and even within treaty governing bodies.

The African Union is one such example, where granting observer status to the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) took seven years and even after it was granted objections within the Commission still exist. On the other hand the United Nations Human Rights Committee, (CESCR) and Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)<sup>155</sup> bodies have repeatedly and consistently called for the repeal of laws that criminalise homosexuality globally. An example of this is the concluding observations of the HRC on the death penalty and other inhuman and degrading treatments in Sudan.<sup>156</sup> Treaty bodies have pushed the agenda beyond criminalisation to tackle the challenges of violence and killings of sexual minorities and the impunity that surrounds it particularly the HRC.<sup>157</sup>

An extensive body of case law and authoritative comment by treaty bodies has helped illuminate human rights violations relating to sexual orientation and gender identity which had not previously been included in the ambit of human rights protections. While this has led to progress elsewhere examining Zimbabwe closely we see that *Toonen v Australia* a profound victory took place in 1994 while in 1995 in Zimbabwe we observe state verbalisation and resistance to sexual orientation as a human rights cause in the famous ZIBF incident. A question of interest is therefore what impact have human rights had on visibility of lesbian women in Zimbabwe.

#### **5.4 Impact of human rights on visibility**

While the *Toonen case* inspired many positive changes in different countries by bringing a human rights approach to previously pathologised and criminalised sexual orientations and gender identities I reflect on whether a similar pattern is observed in Africa. Looking at Zimbabwe and its close neighbour South Africa one observes the embracing of sexual diversity through broadening citizenship in South Africa to include diverse sexualities while in Zimbabwe non-normative sexualities are locked out of the post-independent frame of entitlement and belonging awarded to citizens. This juxtaposition shows how sexuality is now integral to citizenship in independent Africa. Phillips proposes that this integral role of sexuality in defining national belonging is rooted

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<sup>155</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women General Assembly 34/180 (18 December 1979) entered into force on 3 September 1981.

<sup>156</sup> Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee: Sudan, CCPR/C/79/Add 85 (1997) para 8.

<sup>157</sup> I Saiz 'Bracketing sexuality: Human rights and sexual orientation- A decade of development and denial at the UN in S Gruskin et al (eds) 7 Health and human rights an international journal (2004) 52.



in more than sexual orientation, behaviour or identity and is rooted more deeply in gender relations. Therefore in reflecting on the impact of human rights on visibility of lesbians close attention is paid to human rights as they relate to sexual orientation with the added nuance of gender.

A case that visibilised same-sex sexuality in Zimbabwe is that of *State v Banana*<sup>158</sup> in which sodomy charges were lodged against the former president of the country (Canaan Banana in 1997). This case highlighted the existence of homosexual behaviours among indigenous African persons.<sup>159</sup> In the judgment of the Supreme Court in response to whether criminalisation of sodomy between consenting male adults constitutes Constitutional discrimination Justice McNally's reading for the majority stated among other reasons,

that Zimbabwe is a conservative society on questions of sexual morality and the Court should not strain to interpret provisions in the Constitution which were not designed to put Zimbabwe among the front-runners of liberal democracy in sexual matters.<sup>160</sup>

In this instance traditional morality was considered as sufficient justification for legal moralism. In the dissent, authored by Chief Justice Gubbay he foregrounded the argument among others that the offence of sodomy was based on gender discrimination because sexual acts between females were not criminalised, therefore such discrimination was not reasonably justified in a democratic society. Additionally he stated that even the criminal law desire to discourage conduct regarded as 'immoral, shameful, reprehensible and against the order of nature' in this instance was not so important as to justify outweighing protection against discrimination.

It may well be that the majority of people, who have normal heterosexual relationships, find acts of sodomy morally unacceptable. This does not mean, however, that today in our pluralistic society that moral values alone can justify making an activity criminal. If it could one immediately has to ask, 'By whose moral values is the state guided?'<sup>161</sup>

This statement by Justice Gubbay is indicative of a progressive view that challenges the legal moralism applied by the majority in their decision. What is most significant about this case however is that this was a case about sexual violence, about a man who abused his power and sexually violated other men. It was not a case about consensual sex between men yet it is the stamp of homosexuality in the Zimbabwean psyche.

<sup>158</sup> *State v Banana* 2000 (1) ZLR 607 (S) 644.

<sup>159</sup> M Epprecht 'The "Unsayings" of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity' (1998) 24 (4) *Journal of Southern African Studies* 631.

<sup>160</sup> *State v Banana* (n 158 above).

<sup>161</sup> *Banana case* (n 158 above) 645.

While lesbian women are not criminalised by sodomy laws they too carry the stigma of sexual perversion associated with homosexuality. However their invisibility in human rights spaces means human rights discourse offers them little if any protection at all. Diana reflects as follows on human rights for lesbian women.

When looking at human rights in the context of Zimbabwe, they exclude lesbian women. Human rights are not helpful to Zimbabwean [lesbian] women and they are a challenge even broadly speaking so they are not helpful.<sup>162</sup>

While Patience agrees with Diana about actualisation of rights in Zimbabwe for lesbian women and any other citizens, Patience still believes in the potential of human rights discourse if applied correctly.

There needs to be an analysis and reframing of human rights first before we can talk about human rights for lesbians, but I believe if there is a holistic approach to human rights they are important for lesbian women. There needs to be an analysis of the way they [human rights] are framed and what they mean not just for lesbian women but for Zimbabwean citizens.<sup>163</sup>

Some interviewees like Chido have developed a stronger sense of self from understanding their humanity through human rights while others like Diana feel human rights are for those privileged enough to be seen as human in Zimbabwe and that presently that is not how the vast majority of Zimbabweans are viewed. From observing the impact of the *Banana case* it appears human rights discourse visibilised homosexuality in a negative way through support by international human rights movements of a gay man who was sexually violating his subordinates. This reinforced the social idea that homosexuality was about the rich and powerful sexually exploiting vulnerable men and boys.

What is evident is that neither visibility nor invisibility is the saviour of lesbian women in Zimbabwe. There is a way in which lesbian Zimbabwean women have learnt to navigate both visibility and invisibility in strategic ways. Concealing themselves when it provides security and serves the need for privacy and visibilising themselves for political gain or to gain resources for activist work.

## 5.5 Conclusion

A human rights framework has allowed for conversation in contemporary societies about same-sex sexualities. In this process it has created tensions and resistance based on the idea of universality of human rights. Through visibilising issues of sexuality particularly same-sex sexualities human

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<sup>162</sup> Diana interview 27 July 2016.

<sup>163</sup> Tracy interview 29 July 2016.



rights have facilitated platforms for dialogue solidarity and collective organising. At the same time human rights have demonstrated global power dynamics in terms of who is setting the agenda for what is ‘progress’ or morally right in the articulation of human rights. While some suggest that human rights are indicative of neo-colonialism and imperialism others have argued that the global South has played an active role in framing human rights discourses.

While UN conferences and international treaty bodies have engaged in human rights conversations and debates the manifestations in the lived experiences of sexual and gender minorities have been diverse. It has created agency and resistance to homophobia and injustice in some places, it has cost lives in other spaces and has created greater surveillance and repression in others. It is difficult to say conclusively whether human rights have benefited or endangered lesbian women through the visibility it creates as there is evidence of both reflected in women’s experiences. It is also clear from jurisprudence that homosexual men and homosexual identity has been visibilised much more than lesbian women and lesbian identity.

## CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion and Discussion

*'Change is not made up of absolute victories, but rather of a series of partial gains, transformations in consciousness and incremental steps backward and forward.'* Ali Tripp<sup>164</sup>

### 6 Discussion

While the scope of this study did not allow for a complete reflection of the impact of in/visibility on lesbian women it created room for further analysis. There are however some emergent ideas from the brief exploration in this study particularly that experiences of recognition and misrecognition are influenced by a multiplicity of factors in addition to sexual identity. Among these factors are sex, gender, gender expression and identity.

As attempts to explore sexualities among the ethnicities of the continent continue it is necessary to concede that this is being done using Western frameworks thus creating some limitations. Lorde asks the question of what it means to use the tools of a racist patriarchy to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy.<sup>165</sup> Though this study yielded the advice of Tamale to not reinvent the wheel but instead revisit and reconstruct western theories and adapt them to different cultural contexts also carried the question raised by Lorde. It is apparent that it is still necessary to explore and pursue the possibility of new frames altogether.

The convergence of nationalism and same-sex sexuality in this study demonstrates the complexity of African states. Their colonial inventedness and its continuation after independence has meant that states have been governed largely in accordance with the frameworks of their inventors which has not been transformative for indigenous persons inhabiting the continent. At the same time a fetishising and romanticisation of historic sexualities and ways of living has contributed to fantasies about reclaiming what was lost during colonialism. This study attempted to challenge that thinking and instead suggests starting from recognition and equitable distribution of resources for all people in their diversity as a basis for reconstructing new ways of collective being.

### 6.1 Conclusion

I began this dissertation by posing the question of what it means to be a lesbian identifying woman in Zimbabwe and how in/visibility influences that experience. Asking this question enabled me to trace the meanings and usefulness of identities broadly. It also allowed a revisiting of the past in attempting to understand the emergence of African nation states and the impact of these states on the experiences of same-sex sexualities by women.

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<sup>164</sup> AM Tripp *Women and Politics in Uganda* (2000) 239.

<sup>165</sup> A Lorde 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' (1984) in A Lorde (ed) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (2007) 110-114.

I attempted to show how contemporary sexual identities originated from Western particularly American ideas of sexual identity but have come to be reconstructed and redefined by Zimbabwean women. In this process Zimbabwean lesbian identifying women adapted the identities to their context in a manner that enables them to challenge patriarchy and heteronormativity in a culturally unique way. One of the interviewees describes feeling that her lesbian identity is even more political in the Zimbabwean context as it far more abrasive and forces uncomfortable but necessary engagement with sexuality which is generally a taboo subject central to human existence. In the process I unearthed the agency of lesbian women in Zimbabwe whose existence is largely at societal margins because of how gender and sexuality interact on their bodies yet they have and continue to carve out space that enables survival.

The experiences of lesbian identifying women were framed in a politics of visibility and invisibility and the manner in which each can create both benefit and detriment. The impact of visibility and invisibility was explored using three theoretical frameworks namely, postcolonial theories, African feminist theories and queer theory.

Many of the women involved in this study are still angry and traumatised by the stigmatisation, homophobia and violence which they continue to experience. Some of them speak of ‘brokenness’ resulting from the pain, trauma and violence experienced due to one’s sexual identity. The trauma, pain and violence is often carried into other relationships including intimate partner relationships creating toxicity in these relationships. Other women however described intimate relationships as sanctuaries from the violence and negativity of the world. Another source of sanctuary is the spaces carved by women for conversation and social connection which help meet some needs including affirmation, love, solidarity and companionship.

Lastly this study engaged human rights and their impact on in/visibility of lesbian women. It reflected on how and whether human rights might be able to positively impact the lives of lesbian women in Zimbabwe. A complexity about human rights is that they are the entitlement of all humans meaning one must first be perceived as human in order to access these rights. In the case of Zimbabwe the state made it clear that same-sex sexuality was not a practice associated with humans and therefore appeals for human rights recognition of persons the state does not perceive as human is challenging.

The experiences of lesbian identifying women in Zimbabwe are multiple and diverse and for very long have been kept in the shadows while same-sex sexuality and identities of men have been significantly visibilised. The invisibility of lesbian women has provided its benefits like escaping



criminalisation however this has also meant an absence of recognition in order to access services or dignity through being seen and acknowledged as human and citizen. Lesbian women are here, they have carved their space and continue to shape their identities and lives and the world needs to know that. They strategically learn to move in and out of visibility in navigating personal and political interests in powerful and frightening ways.

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## Appendix one: Interview questions

### Semi-structured interview questions used in building narratives of lesbian women's experiences of in/visibility

Category	Questions
Lesbian identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do you identify as lesbian?</li><li>• What does lesbian mean to you?</li><li>• When did you begin to identify as lesbian?</li><li>• What if anything caused you to identify as lesbian?</li><li>• What is your response to the belief that homosexuality/lesbianism is 'unAfrican'?</li></ul>
Interactions and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is your lesbian identity known to those close to you?</li><li>• What is their response to it/what do you think their response would be?</li><li>• What stereotypes about lesbians do you know?</li><li>• Have these stereotypes influenced you in any way?</li></ul>
In/visibility experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are lesbians visible in your community?</li><li>• How do you feel about that in/visibility?</li><li>• Can you share your experience of in/visibility?</li><li>• Do you intentionally make yourself in/visible?</li></ul>
In/visibility and human rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is your understanding of human rights?</li><li>• Do you think human rights help/can help lesbian women in Zimbabwe</li><li>• What does Zimbabwean law say about being lesbian women</li><li>• What is the effect of the law and human rights on lesbian women in Zimbabwe?</li></ul>

## Appendix two: Interviewee summaries

Overview of participants involved in building narratives of lesbian women's experiences of in/visibility in Zimbabwe. The table below contains basic information about interviewees.

Name	Age	Brief background	Interview date
Debbie	24	Debbie describes her identity as a journey. Having assumed various identities to express how she saw herself as well as her relationships with others particularly female intimacies both sexual and non-sexual she eventually came to define herself as lesbian. Drawn by the abrasive nature of the label and its unpalatability in Zimbabwe she values meeting the rejection of who she is with resistance. She explains her experiences with structural power and demanding equal force as a response. For her lesbian is not just about relational intimacies but also embodies gender identity. Her lesbian identity is known among friends and in her activist circles but not by parents and relatives. Debbie works with a lesbian activist organisation.	27 July 2016
Max	30	Maxine (Max) identifies as butch. She sees lesbian as just a word that confirms who she is as a non-heterosexual. She has experienced a great deal of confrontation and violence from men accusing her of trying to be a man. She feels she is constantly being stared at by people who are trying to figure out whether she is a man or a woman. Her family is aware of her lesbian identity and her Christian mother believe she is demon possessed while her father is accepting of her and believes she is possessed by the spirit of an ancestral great grandfather.	28 July 2016
Diana	28	Diana is lesbian identifying woman whose close family and friends are aware of her intimate and sexual relations and attraction to women. She struggled with self-acceptance for many years attempting to cure herself through religion and when that did not work she took to heavy drinking. When she came to accept herself she began to identify herself as lesbian as for her this label represented her sexual desires and practices. She works in the corporate sector in a middle income job. She is also an activist and member of lesbian and LGBT collectives.	27 July 2016
Tino	21	Tino is lesbian identifying though she explains she is going through a period of trying to figure out her identity. She works with an LGBT collective and speaks openly about her lesbian identity. She wanted the whole world to know her she was lesbian but is less keen now given her uncertainties about whether she is a butch identifying lesbian or trans.	28 July 2016
Kudzi	34	Kudzi is a gender non-conforming lesbian identifying	28 July 2016

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		woman. She believes she is visibilised by her non-conformity to gender stereotypes and has experienced violence as a result of it. She has not 'come-out' to family but believes that her family suspects she is lesbian though it is never discussed. She does not believe there is any point in stirring up what feels like a comfortable life by talking about being a lesbian	
Patience	38	Patience is a LGBT rights activist concerned primarily with lesbian and bisexual women's lives and experiences. Her family is aware of her lesbian identity largely because of her work though they prefer not to talk about it. She sees her lesbian identity as conscious identity that she chose to take on as a means to express her attractions and relations to people of the same sex as herself.	27 July 2016
Ndai	22	Ndai identifies as lesbian and is frustrated by constantly being referred to as a femme in lesbian circles. She has a very supportive mother whose presence provides confidence and stability in her lesbian identity. She is a final year university student and does not feel threatened by the idea of people knowing she is lesbian. She jokes about how she is the last person people would suspect of being a lesbian and how she is treated normally in her daily life. Her challenges are among lesbian women where she is constantly disrespected and told she is not quite a lesbian and is not taken seriously, her identity is seen as a phase and her partners often assume she is or will cheat with a man.	27 July 2016
Chido	29	Chido is a talented artist whose experiences have been complicated by the intersections of her identity. As a female artist her family disapproved of her involvement in music and theatre based on their beliefs that those spaces were not ideal for a young woman. Every time she worked late at night she was suspected of being out having sex with boys. Over time the family realised she did not seem to be romantically involved with the men and boys she was around and stopped asking questions. Whenever she has a girlfriend she introduces her to the family as a friend and she feels her father in particular is knowingly silent about the real nature of the friendships and welcomes the so-called friend warmly into the family.	29 July 2016
Tracy	19	Tracy's older sister is lesbian and she lived with her sister and the sister's female partner. Seeing a lesbian couple living what to her was a normal, healthy family life together made her own acceptance of her attraction to women easier. She started to identify as lesbian when she met and fell in love with a girl she was in school with. Her fear was that her older sister whose lesbian identity was known to the family would be	29 July 2016

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blamed for her own attraction and identity. She has tried to conceal her own identity from the family for fear of both being condemned and of her sister being blamed as having set a bad example and perhaps even being accused of having coached her younger sister into lesbianism. She feels she would have had an easier time coming out to her family if she was the only lesbian but worries that her parents would be devastated about having two lesbian daughters.

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Sibo	30	Sibo is an only child raised by her grandmother. She realised early on as a child that she was drawn to her female best friend and often felt jealous about her friend having other friends. It was not until she was 14years old that she realised her feelings towards her friend where about more than just friendship. Two years later when they were about sixteen and playing at her friend's house Sibbo kissed her friend. The friend was upset and subsequently withdrew from the friendship. From that day Sibbo lived in fear that her friend would tell someone about what had happened. The shame and rejection made Sibbo feel there was something terribly wrong with her. Only years later when she made a friend who was also attracted to women did she realise she was not alone. She prefers not to be visible for fear of upsetting her grandmother who single-handedly worked very hard to raise her.	29 July 2016
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## Appendix three: Ethical clearance



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
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MS RUDO CHIGUDU  
15378064  
FACULTY OF LAW UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
PRETORIA  
0002

15 July 2016

Dear Ms Chigudu


### **ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE**

The Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law at the University of Pretoria has reviewed your application for ethics clearance entitled "The discourse of visibility: Paradoxes and possibilities for lesbian identifying women in Zimbabwe" and granted ethics approval for your project.

Please note that you need to keep to the protocol you were granted approval on – should your research protocol be amended in due course, you will need to submit the amended version to us.

Please also note that this clearance is valid for one year from 31 July 2016. We wish you success in your research project.

Yours faithfully



**(PROF) A G NIENABER**  
**CHAIR: RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (FACULTY OF LAW)**