

SETSWANA CULTURAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY

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Abstract: In this paper, we wish to address the issue of homosexuality and Setswana traditional attitudes towards the practice. We will look at the Setswana traditional culture and inquire whether there were homosexual practices among traditional Batswana. If there were homosexual practices among the traditional Batswana, what was the attitude towards the practices? We will also look at present-day Botswana and ask the same questions. Even though there has been a "softening" of attitudes towards homosexuality in Botswana, they are still largely negative.

I. Introduction

We start by arguing that the prevalence of homosexual practices among the traditional Batswana has not been well investigated, if at all there has been such an attempt. The reasons could be the lack of documentation and the fact that Setswana traditional cultures do not easily lend themselves to examination, mainly when such examination or investigation involves sexual matters.¹ However, we can glean the attitudes of traditional Batswana towards homosexuality from an essential medium of the culture—language (Setswana). There is no Setswana word for homosexuality. It suggests that the practice was not known, or at least it was not prevalent. There could be another reason, though, for the practice being prohibited. Present-day Botswana rejects homosexuality—homosexual practices are punishable by criminal law.² Society generally does not accept it. This rejection does not mean there are no practicing homosexuals in the country. The law and the negative

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¹ Mmolai, S.K.: *Religion and Ethics in Modern Secondary Education: A Case Study of Botswana*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, 1999. Mmolai says: "... among Batswana, issues such as sexuality, human reproduction and unmarried parenthood are usually viewed strongly as sensitive and belonging to the private domain." P.69.

² The Penal Code of Botswana states under sections 164, 165 & 167: "Any person who—(a) has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; (b) has carnal knowledge of an animal; or (c) permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, is guilty of an offence and is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding seven years. In 2016 the Court of Appeal effectively decriminalized homosexuality when it ruled that LEGAGIBO could be registered (Law Library of Congress March 29 2016). Any person who attempts to commit any of the offences specified in section 164 is guilty of an offence and is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years. Any male person who, whether in public or private, commits any act of gross indecency with another male person, or procures another male person to commit any act of gross indecency with him, or attempts to procure the commission of any such act by any male person with himself or with another male person, whether in public or private, is guilty of an offence." Republic of Botswana: Penal Code Chapter 08:01. Gaborone: Government Printer, 1964. (amendments)

attitudes of Batswana towards homosexuality make it difficult to determine the extent of its prevalence. We suggest that the few known practicing homosexuals seem to have some external influence, which reinforces the suggestion that the practice was not part of the traditional culture of Botswana, hence a cultural conflict between the Setswana and the external one. We also suggest that present-day Batswana reject homosexuality mainly because of their traditional culture, whether they accept it as their reason.

If homosexuality occurs naturally among a certain percentage of every human population, as some have suggested,³ the said percentage was probably suppressed because of cultural considerations and practices, as is indeed the case with present-day Botswana. If it is the case that homosexuality was suppressed among the traditional Batswana, the issue that arises is the moral status of homosexuality itself—is homosexuality morally acceptable or not? If it is morally acceptable, then there is a need for a moral justification of its suppression by both the traditional and present Batswana.

The acceptance or non-acceptance of homosexuality seems mainly generated by cultural attitudes—in one culture, it is acceptable; in another, it is not acceptable. That being the case, there is a need to determine the moral importance of cultural belief systems. Thus, if there is a conflict of cultures, which one should have moral precedence? Our sense tells us that a more consistent culture with universal moral principles must have precedence. It calls for establishing those universal moral principles if there are any.

We suggest that, in principle, there is nothing morally wrong with homosexuality. However, there is a need to observe the fact that an act is not morally wrong in itself. It does not mean it can be carried out anywhere, anytime, without negative moral implications. The moral importance of culture has implications for the moral assessment of homosexual practices in intolerant cultures.

1. *Methodology*

This research is, first and foremost, intended to add to the literature on homosexuality in Botswana. The views presented in the paper are a culmination of research views of Batswana students studying abroad in an email group discussion on the issue of homosexuality which is the primary source of study. What is interesting is whether the views expressed then are still prevalent today. The study also uses the authors of the discussion with different individuals. The study does not seek to generalize about Botswana but to give an aspect of attitudes towards homosexuality in Botswana as captured and demonstrated through a selected group of Batswana studying abroad.

2. *The importance of homosexuality in Botswana*

³ A. Thatcher, in *Liberating Sex. A Christian Sexual Theology* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1993) says, for example, “Same-sex attraction, to some degree, is diffused throughout half of the whole populations.” P.128.

One may ask why we should be discussing the question of homosexuality and Botswana's attitudes to it or the importance of discussing the issue at hand. As we will show, there is a negative attitude to homosexuality in Botswana. The law forbids the practice of homosexuality. Homosexuals are faced with the difficult situation of having to justify their existence. In some cases, they face outright persecution.⁴ This situation is not peculiar to Botswana. For example, Barcalow says:

Many people in the United States today have a strong aversion to homosexuality and to homosexuals. Many people condemn homosexuals and homosexual acts as immoral. Homosexuals have been discriminated against in a variety of ways, perhaps most obviously in government employment. Homosexuals have been forbidden to serve in the United States military and have been unwelcome in certain branches of the federal government such as the Defence Department, FBI, State Department, and Secret Service. Openly acknowledging that a person is a homosexual can jeopardize his or her career in many areas of employment. Then, too, homosexuals or people suspected of being homosexuals can become the targets of animosity and violence. People have been verbally harassed, abused, and assaulted solely because they are or are thought to be homosexuals. (Barcalow, 1998, 262)

There is also a general campaign in the Southern African region for the acceptance of homosexuality. Homosexuality is not a problem in South Africa in the same way

⁴ Zimbabwean President Mugabe's outbursts against homosexuals and his Namibian counterpart, Sam Nujoma, are evidence for this position. "Zimbabwe outlaws sodomy and sex between consenting males and Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe two years ago launched an angry anti-gay crusade in which he declared they were 'worse than dogs and pigs' and urged vigilante action against them." See, for example, <http://www.umn.edu/mhec/gopher.mhec.umn.edu:11163>; Baral S, Trapence G, Motimedi F, Umar E, Ipinge S, et al. (2009) HIV Prevalence, Risks for HIV Infection, and Human Rights among Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in Malawi, Namibia, and Botswana. PLoS ONE 4(3): e4997. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0004997 pp.4 &9; Ehlers V.J, Zuyderduin, A. & Oosthuizen, M.J. (2001) Journal of Advanced Nursing 35(6), 848±856 The well-being of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in Botswana; Baral S, Trapence G, Motimedi F, Umar E, Ipinge S, et al. (2009) HIV Prevalence, Risks for HIV Infection, and Human Rights among Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in Malawi, Namibia, and Botswana. PLoS ONE 4(3): e4997. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0004997 MSM reported being afraid to walk down streets in their community most commonly in Botswana" p.4; Monica Tabengwa with Nancy Nicol (2013) The development of sexual rights and the LGBT movement in Botswana Sexual Orientation Gender Identity and Human Rights p. 340; Morekwe Selemogwe Ph.D. Candidate & Dale White Ph.D. (2013) An Overview of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues in Botswana, Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 17:4, 406-414, DOI: 10.1080/19359705.2013.793223 pp. 406 & 408; Marian Nell and Janet Shapiro (2013) Resilience Amidst Adversity: Being Gay and African in the New Century (website) p.9; Zahn R, Grosso A, Scheibe A, Bekker L-G, Ketende S, Dausab F, et al. (2016) Human Rights Violations among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Southern Africa: Comparisons between Legal Contexts. PLoS ONE 11(1): e0147156. Doi: 10.1371/ journal.pone.0147156 p.2; Madigele, T.J. (2017) Informed by Heterosexual Moral Norms? Raising Some Moral Questions for the Traditional Leaders, Lawyers and General Public in Botswana" (BJTRP Vol 4. 3 p 197). Serai Rakgoasi & Mpho Keetile 2016, "They are less worthy than us, but they are better than women...." (Attitudes towards homosexuals and MSM in Botswana African Population Studies, Vol. 30, No (Supp) p.2916).

as it is in Southern African states because the constitution there allows for its existence. So, problems could have nothing to do with South African law. However, in Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, homosexuality is illegal. It has resulted in some campaigns to have it legalized in these countries. In the case of Botswana, Ditshwanelo, The Botswana Centre for Human Rights, and BONELA (Botswana Network on Ethics and Law) is actively campaigning for its legalization. There are similar organizations in Zimbabwe and Zambia (Motswapong, 2010). It is essential to consider the issue of attitudes toward homosexuality. Thus, a moral justification is necessary if the status quo, both in the social and legal spheres, is to be maintained concerning homosexuality. On the other hand, the sort of change called for by the campaigners for homosexuality needs justification if there is nothing morally wrong with the status quo.

3. *Setswana Traditional Culture*

In this part, we will argue that there seems to be no evidence to show that homosexuality was practiced in Botswana as part of the cultural tradition. The lacuna in the Setswana language regarding homosexuality seems to back this argument. A woman interviewee confirmed this lack of Setswana words. (McAllister, 2013, 92) It would not necessarily mean that there were no incidents of homosexual practice. We argue that understanding the Setswana cultural tradition would show why homosexuality would be rejected. The concept of *Bothodi*, which arises from the Setswana traditional worldview, would apply to this practice. Before delving into discussing the issues relating to Setswana's traditional culture and attitude towards homosexuality, we think it is proper to note that Setswana's traditional culture is not completely homogeneous, as there are many subcultures within the main culture. Batswana are divided into peoples (tribes) who range from Bapedi, Bakgatla, Batlokwa, Batalaote, Babirwa, and others. This tribal heterogeneity might suggest a cultural/subcultural difference in attitudes towards homosexuality. We confidently suggest, however, that those differences might be reflected in the attitudes toward homosexuality.

In order to understand the attitude of traditional Batswana to homosexuality, one must look at their traditional culture. However, what is culture? It is a way of life that involves or is based on a worldview, or what may be called cosmology. The worldview determines a culture's epistemology, ethical and metaphysical ideas.

4. *Metaphysics*

By metaphysics, we refer to the view of what reality there is or what exists in the order of being. For the traditional Setswana culture, the world is made up of material and spiritual entities that interact at different levels and for different reasons. The relational experiences of those material and spiritual entities rule social interaction. Reality is made up of the Supreme Being at the top of the hierarchy called "Modimo." This being can be identified with the Judeo-Christian concept of God. Modimo cannot be directly approached by the physical entities called human beings. Just like the social structure of the Batswana, communication between high and lower-ranking beings cannot be direct. It has to be through intermediary media (Mmolai, 1999, 194) —his young son, for example, does not easily approach a father in a household on matters of serious concern. The son has to go through the

uncle or mother. It makes Modimo a somewhat distant being in terms of influencing events and behavior of the people on earth. The Modimo, who is Supreme Being, does not have a plural form for his name.

Under Modimo are some spiritual beings called *badimo*. They are the spirits of departed ancestors of the people. The word “badimo” is plural of “modimo.” However, reference is never made to a single *modimo* regarding an ancestral spirit. It is always said that “badimo” want something. They act as a community. These minor deities are the intermediaries between the *Modimo* and human beings. Old age is essential because the ancestors are ranked according to age. This culture views all the departed as continuing to exist as spirits who can be displeased or pleased by what the living descendants do or omit to do.⁵ For example, a young man of thirty years of age would not usually be considered an ancestral spirit even if he died, leaving some descendants. The ancestors are generally understood to be benevolent and protective of their descendants except in cases of disobedience when they inflict harm on the family as a moral reminder.

There are other spiritual forces that people can be evoked for help. These spiritual forces can be destructive. It is against them that the ancestral spirits have to protect their descendants. The witches (“baloi”), who can be countered by the traditional doctors (“ngaka”) using divination, usually use these forces.

5. *Ethics*

The Setswana traditional culture has the concept of moral wrong. Just like in most cultures, murder is conceived as a moral wrong. However, moral wrong in the context of Setswana culture is peculiar because it has negative implications for the family. The nation—moral wrongdoing brings bad luck to the individual and others. Moral wrong determines that the ancestors in the spirit world are displeased.

Moral wrongdoing can be a result of malice on the part of an agent, or it can be a result of the influence of destructive spiritual forces. In the case of the latter being the cause, it would be a curse from way back in the person’s ancestral line, or it can also be a result of witchcraft. It is the use of spiritual power in a malicious way by people who are living in the physical sphere.

6. *Bothodi*

Bothodi is a noun with a meaning that needs to be clarified. Our analysis is that it comes from the verb “thola,” which means “create.” Behaving in specific ways creates phenomena—death, drought, and other misfortunes. Acts that are usually categorized as *bothodi* are what in the western world would be called unusual or bizarre, such as cannibalism, incest, bestiality, and necrophilia. It is, therefore, incumbent not only upon the individual but the society as a whole to ensure that such acts are not carried out. It would appear that homosexuality can be classified under this topic as well. When an individual behaves in any of the above ways, it

⁵ In *The Soul of the Bantu: A Sympathetic Study of Magico-Religious Practices and beliefs of the Bantu tribes of Africa* (N.Y.: J&J Harper Edition, Harper & Row Publishers, 1969, p.96), W.C Willoughby points out that “anything out of the usual run of things, whether personal illness or tribal disaster, indicates that some spirit is provoked to assert himself in unpleasant ways.”

could be either malicious, mischievous, or suffering from a curse from the ancestral world. The other cause could be the activity of the witches. It is up to the parents and relatives of the individual to determine the cause of such behavior. If the cause were mischief, the individual would have to be punished accordingly. In that case, the individual would take moral responsibility. Suppose the cause is either a curse or witchcraft. In that case, the individual is not usually held morally responsible for the activity. Whatever the cause may be, it would have to be established through the traditional means of divination, which takes us to the next topic of epistemology.

7. Epistemology

In Setswana's traditional culture, it is believed that people can and do know the phenomena that are presented to them through the senses. Logic, analysis, and synthesis are also means of attaining valid knowledge. Here we are talking about knowledge of the material and the non-material phenomena that include spiritual forces. In some cases, however, knowledge is attained through divination, especially knowledge of and about spiritual entities.

II. SETSWANA TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

In this section, we argue that the lack of a Setswana word for homosexuality suggests that the practice was not prevalent in the traditional culture. It could be that the practice, if present, was suppressed because of traditional beliefs. There are two candidate words for the practice. The word *maotwana* was used by boys amongst themselves, which would suggest the presence of some form of homosexual practice. The boys would probably engage in homosexual acts due to sexual deprivation. The word *matanyola* is not of Setswana origin. It would suggest a foreign element to the traditional culture. Again, it would suggest a situation of sexual deprivation if it originates from the South African mines. It would seem to point to the fact that even if homosexual practices are traceable in the Setswana culture, they are mainly restricted to deprivation rather than sexual preference.

Language is an essential reservoir of culture. Language reflects the culture and the belief system of a people. In the Setswana culture, for example, the attitude towards certain phenomena is reflected in the Setswana language itself. Taking two examples will help. The traditional Setswana society was oriented towards agriculture is reflected in the names of essential phenomena for agriculture. Botswana was heavily dependent upon rain for its agricultural prosperity. It is reflected in the language where they have names and word usage associated with rain. The Setswana word for rain is "pula." The word is used to welcome somebody or to accept what has been done or said. *Goroga ka pula* means "come with rain." The speaker would be welcoming somebody by so saying. *Tsamaya ka pula/pula e go nele tseleng* means "go with rain" or "let your paths be covered by rain." It means one should have a good journey. This attitude reflects the fact that rain is conceived to be a good thing. When relatives of a prospective daughter-in-law accept a marriage proposal, they usually say *re nesa pula*, meaning literally, "let there be rain."

Another example of the importance of language in its reflection of a culture is the Setswana attitude towards cattle. Batswana were traditional cattle farmers. It is reflected by the names they give to cattle. A cow is called *modimo oo nko e metsi*. It

means "a wet-nosed god." It reflects the belief that a cow is so vital that it is like/comparable to a god—ancestors or minor deities are responsible for the wellbeing of their descendants. What the Batswana got from the cow is as essential as provisions from the gods or ancestors.

From the above, one would expect that the language would have a name for homosexuality if it were prevalent in the culture. It could be that homosexuality was abhorred and, therefore, would not have a name in the language. It, however, is highly improbable because even unwanted practices have names. For example, a rapist is called *sebeteledi/sethubetsi*. We, therefore, suggest that homosexuality/homosexual, heterosexual, lesbian, paedophile, zoophile, and bestiality do not have Setswana words. As for homosexuality, two words have found their way into the linguistic culture of Botswana. We would insist, however, that this development is recent—most probably in the late nineteenth hundreds. The first word is *maotwana*. It means either wheels or small legs. It can also refer to the supporting poles of a traditional hut.⁶

The word *maotwana*, concerning homosexual practice, is not part of the formal Setswana vocabulary. We think we have an explanation for that fact. We suggest that the word was used by boys amongst themselves without the sanction of society as a whole. If that is the case, it is significant in that at least some form of homosexual practice was prevalent among Batswana boys to the extent that they would have an informal name for it. This is most probable because boys used to stay at the cattle post where there were no girls.⁷ Even in places where there was contact with girls, the traditional culture was strict in controlling sexual promiscuity, (Mmolai, 1999, 156-7) a situation that created sexual deprivation.

The second word that has come up is *matanyola*. The word does not seem to be of Setswana origin. It is formed with two words—*tla* and *nyola*. *Mata* is derived from *tla*, meaning "come" in Setswana. The verb in Setswana can be used to form a noun like in *matladiile*—one who comes when they have gone. (*Matla* + *di ile*). In the case of *matanyola* the first part is Setswana. *Nyola*, however, is not Setswana. The word does not appear in the Setswana-English Dictionary. Its origins are in South Africa, where miners called a certain soup *nyola*.⁸ The story is that the dish and homosexual practice were connected because, during meal times, the miners courted their prospective male partners and offered the *nyola* as an enticement. So the name *matanyola*, meaning "when *nyola* comes" was born. If the above is true, we believe it reasonable to argue that even though homosexuality was practiced in the South African mines. Probably the Batswana miners could have been practicing

⁶ In *Setswana English Setswana Dictionary*, 4th Ed., Gaborone: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1974), Z.I. Matumo renders the word as "maotwana... pl of *leotwana*, or *lekotwana*, wheels; supports of a roof of a Setswana hut, dug into the ground. Maoto pl of *leoto*, or *lekoto*, legs; wheels, which are frequently called *maotwana*."

⁷ It agrees with one of the contributors to the debate of whether or not gay literature should be posted to the "Botswana Net," an e-mail discussion forum for Botswana students, especially those in British, American, and Australian universities.

⁸ One of us asked a few former mine workers in South Africa, including two uncles and a cousin. They have confirmed that they used to call a certain dish *nyola*. One confirms that homosexuality used to be practiced in the South African mines. This rendering of the word seems consistent with A. Mabile and H. Dieterlen reclassified, revised, and enlarged by P.A. Paroz in *Southern Sotho-English Dictionary* (8th ed., Morija: Morija Sesutu Book Depot, 1974): "Nyola, n., mixture of samp, beans and vegetables. [mine slang]."

homosexuals; still, it is a sexual deprivation causing the practice rather than choice. It is well understood that the conditions in the mines were not conducive to heterosexual conduct. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the mining companies were not prepared to allow workers to have women in their compounds. Secondly, many Batswana miners left their spouses back home. Therefore they could not afford to keep other women in the mines. It would naturally point to a situation of sexual deprivation.

Having argued that there is no Setswana word for homosexuality, we want to look at how the traditional culture views the practice. We argue that the traditional Setswana setup would not have room for homosexuality. Every individual Motswana was *made* to conceive of himself as an integral part of a community and, in turn, a society that determines who and what he is. It is true in a sense conveyed by Roger Scruton when he says:

The human person is a human artefact, the product of the social interaction which he also produces. He can only exist in those conditions which permit the emergence of a first-person perspective—in other words, only when he is attached to the public linguistic practices which give sense to the concept of self. He is by nature, therefore, a social being, not merely in the sense of being made for society, but in the stronger sense of being made *by* society. (Scruton, 1986, 288-289)

The socialization of an individual begins when he is still a young child. He is taught to avoid using certain words; in the Setswana tradition, he is taught not to say "anus" (*sebono*), "penis" (*polo/ntsutswane*), and so on. These are insults. If he has to refer to them, it is by substitution with "milder" terms. Anus (*sebono*) is "bottom" (*marago*). The child would say, for example, "I have swallowed some fruit seeds. Now I am unable to go out/to the bush (defecate) and my **bottom** (anus) is painful." If an ant bit him on his penis, he would say he has been bitten on his **tobacco** (penis). A child caught playing with his genitals would be summarily punished. The same goes for sex games. Boys were socialized into aspiring grown-up men with wives and children of their own. It was provided through modeling and active coaching—the boys, usually helped their fathers and uncles to do certain chores. The traditional colleges of *bogwera* and *bojale*⁹ were means by which girls and boys were taught to be future wives and husbands. It necessarily excluded homosexual practices. If a boy exhibited homosexual tendencies at the initiation school, the most likely reaction would be sanction; if it failed to deter the boy, traditional doctors would be called in to determine what makes the boy behave "unusual." It is consistent with the study's findings that some men believe homosexuals lack something or are not fully men¹⁰. It means measures intended to "heal" the individual would be taken. In short, homosexuality would not be accepted in this tradition because it was not consistent with the idea that every member of society should contribute to its growth by founding a family consisting of husband, wife, and children, which was what the ancestors wanted.

⁹ *Bogwera* refers to the initiation of boys, while *mojale* refers to that of girls. The traditional school was where young women were socialized into women and boys into men.

¹⁰ According to Serai Rakgoasi & Mpho Keetile (2016), "They are less worthy than us, but they are better than women..." ("Attitudes towards homosexuals and MSM in Botswana," *African Population Studies*, Vol. 30).

It cannot be over-emphasized that homosexuality would be seen as strange. Any inexplicable behavior would be considered a curse from the ancestors or the work of witches if such behavior were perceived as bad. A Motswana would not understand how and why a young man would forsake his traditional societal roles for homosexual practices. Any persistent homosexual behavior would be met with severe sanctions, maybe stopping short of outright persecution. A Mokgatla kgosi is reported to have said that homosexuals used to be put on the front line during dangerous hunting expeditions. In many cases, they never returned.

1. Present attitudes towards Homosexuality¹¹

By “present,” the authors of this paper would like to understand the society in this generation. It is the period that may be called contemporary, at least the 1970s to 2000. In this section, the authors argue that the attitude of Batswana towards homosexuality shows a lack of understanding. It also reflects intolerance, rejection, and outright hostility. We are also suggesting that this attitude is symptomatic of the remnants of the traditional Setswana culture. It is not surprising that at the age of thirty-nine, Gaie did not know- personally, a person who was gay. However, there would be rumors pointing to some gentleman who is gay. He even associated with this person for over five years. Of the people asked if they know of any gay person, about ninety percent would claim that they do not know a gay person.¹² It is essential to note here that this apparent ignorance does not necessarily mean there are no Batswana gay people.¹³ Given that homosexuality is criminalized in

¹¹ This section is mainly based on the discussions held in an e-mail-based discussion group of Botswana students studying in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and Botswana from 1996-1999. The authors of this paper have also asked some people to shed light on their views on homosexuality, including a church minister. We also sent a questionnaire to the e-mail discussion group on the issue. Despite all the vehemence with which the issue was discussed, only two people responded to the authors' request to have the questionnaire answered. They said they did not have time to answer it fully and promised to return it to the authors later. They never did. The names the authors give to individuals to protect their identities are letters such as VGM. The authors then give the date of the e-mail.

¹² JS, for example, says, “I have never come across any gay person ko – Huks yo ke boleletsweng ke bannabagolo gore o tshotswe a na le go kgatlegela banna kontle ga makgarejwana.” (at Huks –meaning Hukuntsi, a town in Botswana—there is no person I was told by the old men that he was a born homosexual—having an interest in men rather than young women.) 4/12/97.

¹³ GTA has argued in response to someone who claimed to have told his interviewers that there are no gays in Botswana: “I think you bear a heavy burden of prove to show gore (that) being Gay is a misrepresentation of Botswana unless if you have told the community of people you live with that, there is no homosexuality in Botswana. Ha o dirile jalo, (if you have done that) that was wrong.” 5/12/97. BGA, on the other hand, argues: “Pardon me if I’m wrong but for the sake of my argument.....there are NO gay people in Botswana o.k? BUT gayism or more specifically homosexuality has been practised (in the form of anal intercourse) before most of us were born. However it appears to ME this was just a practice i.e. they did not necessarily consider themselves gay and most were either married or had girlfriends. Therefore, I guess I wouldn’t be wrong, hopefully, to label them if you like bi-sexual. Given that such practices as homosexuality (and lesbianism) are considered taboo in our country (correct me if I’m in error) those who end up caught between hetero- and homosexuality. It is my opinion that

Botswana and cultural attitudes are hostile, there is a high probability that gays may suffer in silence.¹⁴ The idea we are highlighting above is that there is much ignorance regarding homosexuality. Even the enlightened people who lived in Europe for some times still do not understand homosexuality. It is suggested by one VGM who once said:

Your concept of sexual relations is truly different Tom. I take it that you do not mind me asking further questions to seek clarification on matters that arise as you come to your defence.

In a normal relationship, especially in the author's culture, one is married, and the other is marrying. The author is aware, for starters, that in European cultures, both parties marry each other. However, in the standard setting, one plays the role of Husband and the other Wife. One is tough, and the other gentle. In one's future relations with her husband (or should I say wife?), who will be a wife and a husband in that setting? In the context of a normal relationship. In other words, will one be a husband, or will one be a wife? Does one have some vocabulary he or she uses for such settlements?¹⁵

One tolerant or reasoning participant suggested that the issue of homosexuality should be discussed. However, all the same, he believes it is a disease. He asks those against discussing the issue: "isn't it best fa one o ka kopa data ka bolwetse jwa teng (if you could ask for data about the disease) before you start firing di (the) gay. Maybe all those insults you are hurling are due to lack of info." (NM 25/11/97) One member thinks that homosexuality is nothing but a matter of sexual fantasies, an issue that should not be taken seriously as there are more important things to discuss: "we are really a sick nation, sorry if I offend anybody but lenna (even I) I can't help it. Of the past days I have been reading the messages and keeping my opinions to myself hoping this gay thing will stop but neh! I cannot believe how our sexual fantasies tend to impair our thinking sometimes... People compare football to gay matters. ..." (OTL 6/12/97) Tom, the Canadian gay who stayed in Botswana for some time, was open about his sexuality. He appeared determined to advance the discussion of gay issues in Botswana to a higher level by trying to provide information and some explanations. One of the responses was:

If we are not to take up issues with him (Tom), he should proudly come out in the open and proof to the entire netters what it is he wanted to proof. If by whatever carelessness the information that invited this uncalled discussion of gayism happened to "leak" then let us do away with this nonsense of gayism. How can somebody so mature enough chose to become gay, don't tell me it wasn't by choice that he/she is gay because it can never be a mistake and if it is not by mistake perhaps you can help me clear whatever confusion or misconception I have regarding the entity. (JET 3/12/97)

this has led to biased epidemiological data regarding the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in terms of sexual orientation." 5/12/97.

¹⁴ Ibid. "... gone ke mang yo o itseng bangwe ba rona (anyway, who knows, maybe some of us) hide behind the hetero identity while they do this thin' ka re a bo re sa ba bone (because we do not see them)."

¹⁵ VGM is one of the people who wanted to ask Tom, the known gay member of the discussion group, about gays. E-mail of 9 Dec 1997.

In many of our interviews, people usually find it difficult to talk about gays and conceive of the concept. They usually ask us how a man can have a sexual relationship with another man before they try to answer our questions. We argue that it reflects the level and understanding people have of homosexuality.

It is also evident that homosexuality has been met with intolerance, rejection, and hostility by many Batswana of this day. IS expresses it, for example, which is more tolerant of gays (IS 24/11/97): "Batswana are evr (ever) going to demand that gays be destroyed, to them being homosexual is a serious abhorance (abhorrence), punishable by words, brimstone and burning sulphur raining from all the heavens and emanating from the crust of the earth!"¹⁶ There are many incidents of hostility and intolerance a sample of views demonstrates this:

Le nna wa mma batho bao ba mpherusa sebetse ga ke iste gore e kare dintsa le dikolobe di itse their mates why can't human being be human beings? Go lo moo go isa setho ko tlase fela thata. Ke dumelana le botlhe ba nnete baba kgalang bolwetse joo! Ga re batle go re nnete e ka bonwa e direse diwa boatla joo. Ene Tom yoo a re iketlele thata ga mmogo le di agents tsa gagwe. Rona re tloga ba re tshabisa nnete (EN 25/11/97). (Those people sicken me too. Why, dogs and pigs know their (sex) mates, why can't human beings be human? (by being heterosexual). That thing (homosexuality) reduces the status of human beings very much. I agree with all members of the net who criticize this sickness! We do not want the net to be seen being used for this abomination. That Tom and his agents must leave us alone. They will end up making us afraid of the net.).

Two questions were raised—why some people hate gays and why the issue of homosexuality should not be discussed:

The answer to question 1- the idea of gayism rona batswana (we Batswana) find it disgusting to tolerate/ *ke botlholdi gore banna/basadi ba ratane/robalane* (it is an abomination for men/women to love/sleep with each other.

No! You cannot discuss it freely on this net. We are not interested in knowing about gay activities. The authors will rather remain uneducated in that field if it is all that important. Please wena (you) Kathleen do not start on this please do not; if you feel that since you are in the UK, you can start making noise about issues that you know that even your parents will not tolerate, then you are making a big mistake. Just come back home and present your case before you allow your mind to be manipulated by people who do not have a slight idea about your culture. (LM 2/12/97) In response to the same question, CC argued: "so you have a gay friend and you want to share those Gayish theory from your friend with us. No we are not interested my man!!. If the administrators recommend this gayish issue to be discussed I ask them to disconnect me immediately. I will be better cut off..." (CC 3/12/97). The other discussant argued, "I see you people like this topic so much 'GAYISM.' I'm suggesting we discuss it then but basing our opinion on how to send them 'gays and their friend' to another planet say Mars or to the Sun for good." (TOJr 4/12/97)

Yet one of the most vehemently opposed to the idea of homosexuality holds:

¹⁶ *ibid.* she says that she will talk or relate to gay people, "Well nna ke tla buisa batho ba ba gay, as long as we don't cross each other's lines personally."

Nna tota ga gona se ke ka se buang ka batho ba ba sa amogelesegeng (There is nothing really I can say about these people who are not acceptable) in a normal society. *Ke dilo tsa go tlhoka ngwao, Kana tautona wa rona, ebile e le kgosi ya rona, o ne a bua gore* (this shows lack of culture, by the way our president and chief once said); "... a nation without culture is a lost nation..."

It is simple: *ba dira dile tse di sa tlwaelesegang, dilo tsa bahaladi* (they (gays) are doing unusual things, things done by foreigners). *Kana fa dilo dine di itira, ke batho ba ba tshwanetsweng ke go lathelwa mo legageng lwa ga Kobokwe...ba dira bothodi...* (If things could do themselves, they are the people who should be thrown into Kobokwe's cave¹⁷...they do abominable things).

A Kalo (that is all)
Ka kutwelo bothoko (mercifully) (TKM 4/12/97)

Another member wrote:

It is really shocking and surprising to see how Batswana are promoting and campaigning strongly to introduce evil practices to the peaceful country of Botswana. Certain Batswana, Botswana gay catalyst has choosen to support in all possible angles the existence of the so-called gay Botswana.

The author failed to understand how a true Motswana from Botswana can choose to support the use of his country name to promote a so-called gay club in Canada or anywhere. Baetshe (compatriots), our late president Buile said, "*tshaba ee senang ngwao ke tshaba ee suleng* (a nation without culture is a dead nation)." If you come to England, the USA, etc., please be an ambassador and reflect the true picture of your country. Let us learn how to avoid sensitive issues reflecting Botswana's bad image. Some allegations should be digested with reservation. Allegations like the one published in the other book, "Boys at the cattle post use to have sex with goats, donkeys, other boys, etc.," are highly sensitive allegations with no historical proof. It is not worth taking to books, "*bogolo jang buka ee tla balwang ke*" (especially the book that will be read by people of this world.)

There will be the following three questions:

- 1) Is the nation of Botswana aware that there is this so-called gay Botswana in Canada?
- 2) Is the Botswana High Commission in the USA aware of the popular (highly rated by gay Botswana catalyst) Same-sex Botswana?
- 3) How many Batswana belong to this club? Can they please list their names and their original places here so we can know them?

Weno ka kutlo bothoko (yours with sadness) (MMM 5/12/97)

The other says, "just like T, I hate gays because under normal ordinary pedestrian ethics... what there do is immoral." (GH 24/11/97) OD (9/2/98) adds, "I still maintain that if they (gays) can come out into the open "*ba betswe*" (let them be lashed). *Thupa ga e bolae e bolaya peba*" (the stick does not kill, it only kills a rat).

¹⁷ Kobokwe's cave is in the Kweneng District of Botswana, not very far away from the capital, Gaborone. It is believed that witches and murderers were punished in the cave.

Botswana music can be said to be a catalyst for the negative attitudes of Batswana towards homosexuality. The song that comes to mind is “Robete” from Sereetsi and the Natives. It is a song about a gentleman who wants to marry his partner, but the family is totally against it. The lyrics are as follows:

Abuti Rankokwanyane (Brother Rankokonyane).
 O re tletse motho Gauteng. (He has brought s someone from Johannesburg)
 Motho o theka lesesanyane. (He has a very slim waist)
 Lo kile lwa se bona kae ngwetsi e bidiwa Robete. (Where have you ever heard of
 daughter in law called Robete – Robert)
 Mme are ga se mosadi; (My mum says he is not a wife)
 Nkoko are se ke bothodi. Bothodi jwa nta ya tlhogo. (My grandma says this is
 an abomination!)

In the song, the lyrics distance themselves from homosexuality as a Setswana cultural practice and view it as a foreign concept; in this case, homosexuality is imported from Gauteng – Johannesburg, South Africa. Therefore, it is not surprising that the family, when confronted with the so-called “shocking scenario,” see this union or marriage as a non-starter because it is “an abomination.” However, “Abuti Rankokwanyane ...o lela a ikgagolaka” (Brother Rankokwanyane is a man in love because He is crying uncontrollably), because the lyrics continue “A re Robete ke wa gagwe” (He says Robert belongs to him). Therefore, “A re ga a thethe o tsetswe jalo...” (He says (Robete) is not faking it because he is for real). Songs like Robete captures the attitude of Batswana towards homosexuality.

Let us reiterate that homosexuality is a criminal offense in Botswana. On the 16th of April 1998, the Botswana National Assembly passed a law that strived for sensitivity to gender equality by making the law prohibiting homosexuality gender-neutral, thereby criminalizing lesbian activity as well, which up to that point was not criminal—assuming that the principle that absence of prohibition implies permission applies. (Government Printer, op. cit.) It means homosexual activities will be punishable by law. Therefore, the law enforcers will not necessarily be friendly to homosexuals—if they know they engage in homosexual activities. The general population in Botswana is also hostile to homosexuals. It, however, does not mean there have not been some Batswana who are homosexual. It does not mean that no people are sympathetic, empathic, tolerant, friendly, and understanding to homosexuals. We would venture to say that Batswana's intolerance, resistance, and rejection of homosexuality is based on the traditional culture, whether they perceive it to be so or not. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the culture if one were to make an informed moral assessment of their attitude.

Modernization, Western-type education, and religion have not necessarily changed how Batswana think. Some scholars have pointed out that morality in traditional African society is sanctioned by religion. As Africans, Batswana share many of the African values and institutions. It agrees with Willoughby when he says, “Bantu life is essentially religious. The relation of the individual to the family, the clan, and the tribe, —politics, ethics, law, war, status, social amenities, festivals, —all that is good and much that is bad in Bantu life is grounded in Bantu religion.”

religion, he holds, “is the basis of their political institutions, the pre-supposition of their law and ethics, and key to an understanding of their social life.”¹⁸

Conclusion

In this paper, the authors have addressed the issue of homosexuality and Setswana’s traditional attitudes toward the practice. In addition, we established homosexual practices among traditional Batswana. Even though they tend to distance themselves from the practice by associating it with foreign influence or as imported from neighboring countries or cultures, there are homosexual practices among the traditional Batswana. However, the attitude expressed is mainly hostility, intolerance, disassociation, and indifference toward the practices. In addition, these attitudes are also prevalent in modern Botswana culture; for some of these Batswana, homosexuality violates cultural norms. As such, homosexuals must be punished. Notwithstanding, there has been a “softening” of attitudes towards homosexuality in Botswana; to a more significant extent, they are still negative. It is because, as Magesa holds regarding African Religion, the essential principles that determine the system of ethics revolve around the purpose or goal of human life. Within this horizon, African communities shape and direct their manner of living in terms of what is or is not acceptable to them. Human experience and responsibility are judged in light of this goal, which does not change. From the dialectic between the established goal of human responsibility to realize it existentially and experientially arises values and norms of behavior, what Africans would generally call “customs,” in the most morally-laden sense of the word. (Ibid., 31)

It would seem to suggest that Batswana see the practice of homosexuality as contrary to human life’s goals—marriage, fatherhood, and so on. If so, it brings about the fact that the rejection or acceptance of homosexuality has cultural implications. The Setswana traditional culture influences the present generation. Their resistance to homosexuality can be seen as resistance to a foreign culture. Nevertheless, the question remains how foreign is this foreign culture?

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¹⁸ Willoughby, op. cit., p.1. This view is held by Magesa, who also argues that “... in so far as Africa and Africans themselves are concerned, this suppression (of traditional religion) has truly been minimal, more apparent than real.... Mbiti has clearly seen that acceptance of Christianity or Islam in Africa means that Africans ‘come out of African religion but they don’t take off their traditional religiosity. They come as they are. They come as a people whose world view is shaped according to African religion. ... Much as they might want to deny it at times, this dual thought-system (Western-African) noted by scholars still influences many Western-“educated” Africans, who show their true African religious face particularly in times of crisis.” Magesa, L.: *African Religion. The moral traditions of Abundant Life*. N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997, pp. 5-7.

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