

A VIRTUAL BROWN BAG

UNPACKING AFRICAN CULTURE IN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

DATE: 21/10/2021

TIME: 4:00-5:30 PM (EAT)

VENUE: ZOOM

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Introduction

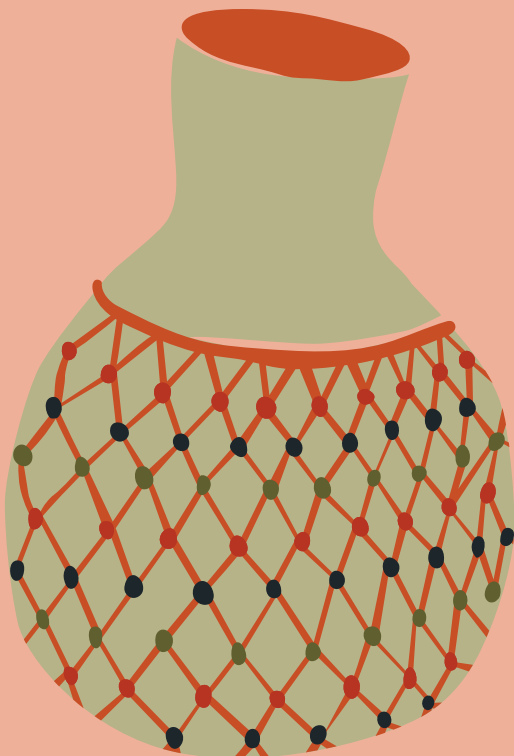
When it comes to sexuality, African Culture for centuries has been viewed as being conservative and that there is no indigenous knowledge on sexuality. In the women's movements and mostly the right-wing opposition it has always been easier to be hesitant to accept concepts of sexuality and the whole sexual and reproductive health because of culture and it has been a very consistent response that African culture does not allow or have indigenous knowledge on sex, sexuality and the whole human body. But how has it been easier to fall back on this notion about culture being so retrogressive and conservative and who benefits from the perpetuation of this notion? In interrogating these questions, we take time to have conversations around culture and what it stands for in an African setting at the same time shedding light on how culture has always supported diverse notions of sexuality.



It is against this background that Zamara Foundation in partnership with Strategic Issues and Research Council convened a conversation titled, “A Virtual Brown Bag: Unpacking African Culture in Sexual and Reproductive Health”, on Thursday, 21 October 2021 at 4:00 pm (EAT) on zoom. The objectives of the 90-minute conversation which was attended by 63 people representing different countries were to; create an understanding of the links between culture and sexuality; demystify myths and misconceptions of culture and sexuality in the African setting, and deepen the understanding of indigenous knowledge and its contribution to sexuality. The following is a report summarizing the key highlights from speakers’ presentations, the plenary questions asked and answered as well as some comments from the chat.

Summary of proceedings

The conversation was started by Esther Wambui the founder of Zamara Foundation. In her opening remarks, she stated that the Zamara foundation is anchored on radical bold perspectives of choice, bodily autonomy and intersectional feminist leadership for young women and girls. She then set the pace for the conversation by stating that the phrase “African Culture” has been weaponized as a tool to push back against rights and stated that for the context of the conversation sexual reproductive health and rights as well as rights of sexual minorities. She hoped that the conversation guided by the speakers would answer the questions and cause a reflection on “What really is African culture and is African culture homogeneous?” and “Where does culture place women’s sexual reproductive health and rights? She quoted Professor She ended her opening remarks on a welcome note for the moderator- Tabitha Saoyo Griffith, a human rights lawyer and PhD candidate at Cardiff University.



The moderator in introducing herself quoted author Lorna Eaglin by saying, “I am perfectly what you’d call a girl of two worlds”. She shared about her contrasting heritage being the daughter of an American father whom she calls by his first name and with whom a greeting is as simple as a handshake and where there is no judgement in her choice of clothes on one hand and a Masai mother, whom she would never dream of calling by her name and where she does not know how a handshake from her uncles feels as she greets them with her head bowed for a spit and a blessing.

The moderator went on to emphasize that it was a conversation around unpacking African culture and if indeed there is something known as African culture. She introduced the first speaker, Professor Charles Ngwena whom she referred to as “an academic activist- a professor of law at the Center for Human Rights at the University Pretoria with a vast teaching career that spans over 30 years who has taught in schools, in many countries across the globe, including Swaziland, South Africa, United Kingdom, the US, Canada, who has published at the intersection of health, human rights, as well as disability law. She invited him to unpack what “Africanness” is and its connection to sexual reproductive health and rights.

In his presentation, he picked up from Esther Wambui’s reference in her opening remarks to Professor Bennett by stating that it is true that that culture is never static but is contested, at any given point in time. He continued to say, “it is possible to see homogeneity within culture but at the same time, those homogeneities cannot obscure the difference and contestations within the culture”. He stated that he was going to answer the questions posed to him through a theoretical framework he called, “the Analytics of Africanness” instead of answering them individually.

Professor Ngwena in presentation highlighted the following:



Identity is not homogenous but rather as a social construct and that while identity can be a process of self-identification it can also be about how others identify you.

When we think about Africa we cannot say we are a homogenous community. We speak so many languages across the 54 countries and therefore cannot claim Africanness through language. "It is really a complex, and the mountable genealogy, that we partake of, as we describe ourselves as Africa. And as we describe ourselves as Africans So, in other words, my brothers and sisters identities are complex formations, and so is African identity, and so is African culture within that identity, we can find arguments for suggesting that there is something homogenous about being but we can also find that identity is socially constructed such that, being African is not an as tainted phenomenon."

The naming of Africa and claiming of Africanness is steeped in understanding the colonial context and the shared struggle from racial discrimination. "African as is really the archetype of a very complex identity, and very diverse identity, what connects us on the African continent, is a very good question. Our historical background of the legacy of colonialism, in particular, is what really connects us as Africans in my view.... through the experience of racial discrimination. So it is not important, in itself, but it is a way of organizing ourselves against a long sleeve, solid terroristic lines because we have experienced the legacy of colour, discrimination".

Insisting on homogeneity is what perpetuates harmful assertions of heteronormativity which creates minorities and discriminations in sexuality and patriarchal dominance. "It is almost, given that, if you descend from heteronormativity, then you constitute a minority, you are a threat to the existence and place that is the perception. You are a threat to the existence of a particular culture that is made from a history of the dominance of men, and the dominance of heterosexuality, so that explains if you like, intersex. if you like same-sex, transgender, we are grappling with a heteronormative conviction that translates into binary congruence. The human rights framework becomes important, not because it is trying to introduce something alien to, but simply trying to remind diverse society, he is reminding us how important it is and not preoccupy ourselves, but by what constitutes African identity, but by what constitutes respect of human dignity.

Professor Ngwena in presentation highlighted the following:

African identity is not a thing in itself. There is no immutable identity called African. African is an identity, only in relation to something else.



The most persuasive explanation about being African is that of the common experience of living on the African continent being on the receiving end of colonialism that made us aware of our identity as Africans.

Identify with the cause of freedom, people should be less concerned about the names used but rather providing dignity and protection because what matters about identity, any identity is whether it is fully respectful of human dignity of life.

Many ethnic groups have names for same-sex sexualities but globalization has provided new language and names.

Equally, if we only see that there is one type of sexuality, we create an erasure of a good component of the African population, "historically, we have women wanting to terminate the pregnancy, we have same-sex relationships, we have intersex, we have transgender persons anthropological evidence suggests that, yes, we've always had people that are diverse, on the continent"

Before inviting the second speaker the moderator summarized Professor Ngwena's presentation for participants' who had just joined by stating that the long and short answer of the question of if there is such a thing as African culture is yes and no.

Dr Charles Muga at this point was invited to unpack culture in Kenya's context. In summary, the following reflections;



Culture revolves around human survival and what makes culture dynamic is not just time and change, but interaction with other human beings.



There is a need to retire harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and, widow inheritance because they perpetuate harm and serve no purpose.

The moderator further nudged Dr, Muga to share about the wall of cultural resistance in his work advocating for male circumcision and how to change negative cultural perspectives



Dr Muga responded by stating that in Africa everything that is not understood tends to be reduced to Tendency to reduce everything that is not understood to spirituality and this did not differ from how people reacted to the enigma of HIV/AIDS but taking a multi-pronged approach of listening, learning, research over a long period of time is how a culture shift was created.

Plenary

When the conversation was opened for plenary the following questions were asked and answered.

- Professor Ngwena was asked whether Africa's shared history of colonization and oppression gives Africa's identity and if so how that African identity can be utilized within the context of nation state.
- In response Professor Ngwena stated that Sub-Saharan Africans were treated as a one because they looked the same and differently because their skin color was different from North Africans. He stated that utilization of that identity can come from building alliances and common bonds with other global south countries such as Asia and Latin America because there is value in coming together.
- Dr Muga was asked to speak to how young people can address the older generation without sounding disrespectful? The moderator expanded and reframed the question to include how young women and other socially discriminated people can challenge and speak truth to power in a patriarchal heteronormative society but the question remained mostly unanswered.
- Another question was posed to the speakers about if in terms of sexual and reproductive rights, any positive cultural practices could be given as examples of instances where women were actually been protected by culture. To this the speakers stated that there was so much to celebrate about African culture for example; the fact that Africa has great religious tolerance for all sects and the promotion of consensual sexual interaction.

“So yes, there are challenges that we need to address but at the same time, we are not a dysfunctional continent, where there is just so much to celebrate about African humanity, and how impacted, we are on stories, and have a minimalistic we are these positive values about African culture”-

Professor Charles Ngwena

Some comments worth noting from participants the chat section of the meeting room;

During the pre-colonial period, history has portrayed that each tribe within African countries had various spiritual and cultural beliefs. Post-colonial period, we witnessed a shift towards either Christianity or Islam depending on the colonizers. So basically we lost our traditionalism and adopted the Western God. And even then religion and spirituality have remained relative.

As we discuss the flow of culture, let us remember that the so-called 'oreo cookies' exist and are increasing, and they are no less African. They frequently live double lives, depending on the situation. Black African on the outside, elements of white on the inside

Conclusion

The conversation was concluded by the moderator- Tabitha Saoyo Griffith who promised that if participants want to engage with the speakers further and unpack singular issues, the organizers would be happy to connect them and ended the meeting on an appreciative note to the panellists for allowing their wisdom to be tapped into and the participants for making time to attend.